“From now on, you’re dead, okay?”

As a young energetic prince, all Nishinoya Yuu wants is some space to stretch his wings and fly wild—and perhaps be excused from having to write dreary essays for his tutor. But when tragedy befalls the royal palace, he is forced to flee. Now on the run with his bodyguards, Noya must find a way to survive out there in the real world, as well as to ‘make amends’, whatever THAT means. Along the way, he forges new bonds and strengthens the ones he already has, discovers the dark secret of his kingdom’s past that continues to haunt the kingdom like a vengeful ghost, and ultimately learns that a person’s greatest strength doesn’t
always have to be a sword or a set of cool, flashy tattoos.

Notes

hi all, welcome to my first multi-chaptered haikyuu!! fic :-) enjoy!!
getaway

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is a story about some of the worst of humanity. Some of the most needlessly cruel acts of humanity. The people who build up walls. The people who give up when the going gets tough. The people who shatter, whose shards pierce those who come too close. The people who are tired and want everything to end.

But this is also a story about some of the best of humanity. Some of the most selflessly loving acts of humanity. The people who climb over the walls anyway and build a bridge whilst walking on it. The people who refuse to give up when the going gets tough, and the ones who are brave enough to come back even after they do. The people who hold the shattered tight, knowing they could hurt themselves too, to squeeze the broken shards back together. The people who are tired and want everything to end, but keep going because they want to draw their own finishing line.

This is a story about love, and the optimism to believe in love in a world of hate. And love is, ultimately, Nishinoya Yuu’s greatest strength.

Part I: i am broken

As the prince of his kingdom, Nishinoya Yuu knows he has responsibilities. For example, he knows he has several essays he has to write for his tutor. Like that case study on the whole military operation thing that happened in Kitagawa Daiichi (a really tiny island to the south of the kingdom). And that one about Political Science. And that one about Memory Alteration Magic and the code of ethics for using it. He doesn’t know why he is supposed to know about Memory Alteration Magic, since he’s not a sorcerer or anything like that. Though, he grudgingly admits, there might be some value in studying military operations and Political Science. He just doesn’t want to. He hates sitting still in his study, surrounded by four walls (that he insisted were painted orange and black, ‘cause it makes them look cool!) and just reading. And writing. Especially writing essays. Ugh.

His tutor would probably have his head if he continues to procrastinate completing his Operation Kitagawa Daiichi essay. But, he decides, as he unceremoniously shoves his chair back, hell if he cares. He’s bored, and he can’t stop fidgeting. He is itching to get out for some fresh air, run around and maybe play some pickup volleyball with whichever guards he’s able to convince to desert their posts. Noya can be very persuasive when he puts his mind to it. It makes up for his lack of attention span and academic aptitude.

There are guards outside his door, this he’s aware of. The guards outside are friendly enough (if a bit smarmy and plenty punch-able, in one’s case); but Noya’s willing to take on the challenge of sneaking out. He stealthily sneaks out of the floor-to-ceiling window that leads to the balcony. After making sure to shut the window quietly, he pauses his mission for a while, just to enjoy the feeling of the cool April air against his face.

But he mustn’t linger. Freedom is yet to be. Pushing off on the balls of his feet, he easily leaps onto a nearby low-hanging branch and shimmies down the tree.
Look left, look right. There doesn’t seem to be any guards nearby, but Noya knows better than to let his own guard down. His parents are familiar with his antics, so they’re likely to have stationed hidden guards around (as he found out the hard way a while back). He sticks close to shadows and bushes as he makes his stealthy way to… Well, he hadn’t thought that far ahead. His primary concern was to successfully escape his prison study room. Now that that’s been done…

He hears the familiar sound of a ball striking off a palm and then landing on hard ground with a satisfying thud. A grin springs on his face. He recognises the activity and the person engaging in the activity, just by sound alone. With newfound purpose, he bounds like an excited puppy towards the sound, cautiousness be damned.

The only thing his brain registers is the ball sailing over the net and towards the ground, before he goes on autopilot. He tosses his jacket off and dives to the ground, arm outstretched to knock the ball back up into the air in a neat arc. Satisfied with his work, he pushes himself off the ground and dusts himself off. He turns to greet the person on the other side of the net.

“Yo, Asahi!”

“P-prince Noya!”

Noya doesn’t know why Asahi looks so stunned, like a deer in spotlights. Or whatever the idiom is. Really, Asahi should be used to his prince popping up from nowhere to receive his serves.

“No need to address me so formally, Asahi; it’s just me,” Noya replies, grinning.

Asahi’s shoulders relax slightly. As Noya’s long-suffering bodyguard, he has all the cautiousness in the world to compensate for Noya’s impulsiveness. As such, it took him three months before he finally managed to call Noya by just his nickname without having a nervous breakdown ("What if someone has super hearing and hears me from the other end of the palace? What if they have a magic chime that goes off every time I call you just ‘Noya’? What if—” ). The other three didn’t have such issues, thankfully. Noya has his hands full enough, what with one bodyguard who frets much more than his intimidating appearance should suggest.

“Wait.” Asahi narrows his eyes suspiciously. “It’s a Tuesday afternoon. I’m having my break now, which means you… you—"

“Uh, come on, Asahi! Throw all the best serves you got at me! I’ll receive them all!”

Once upon a time, two years ago, Azumane Asahi would have fallen for the distraction. Or at least timidly acquiesced. Unfortunately for Noya, two years have been plenty of time for Asahi to get used to Noya’s tricks.

“Don’t change the subject.” The long-haired bodyguard shakes his head disapprovingly. “You know I can’t let you play when you haven’t done your work yet.”

“Hey, I’ve done some work!”

“But did you complete them?”

Noya pouts, being sure to widen his eyes to achieve the sad puppy effect. That’s one weakness Asahi hasn’t been able to get rid of yet, and it sure as hell is working; Noya can practically see Asahi’s resolve crumble.

“Please, please?” Noya wheedles, using the most pitiful tone he can muster. ‘I’ve been so lonely and bored sitting in that stupid room for two hours, and it’s all so boring. You know I can’t stand sitting
in the same spot. Just today, please, Asahiii! I promise to complete my work tomorrow! Just let me
receive your serves, please!”

Asahi chews his lower lip, spinning the ball in his hands nervously.

A familiar singsong voice startles Asahi out of his nervous contemplation.

“Noya-chan~! You’re lucky Dai-chan isn’t on guard duty outside your room today, or you wouldn’t
have even made it past your balcony.”

Oikawa Tooru and Hinata Shouyou – Noya’s other two bodyguards – pop up from behind the wall.
Tooru saunters towards them, tossing his own jacket off to join Noya’s on the ground. Shouyou
imitates Tooru and adds his own jacket to the pile.

“Noya-san!” Shouyou all but squeals. “That was so cool! Teach me how to receive like that too!”

Noya has given up trying to convince Shouyou to drop the honourific. He is too in awe of Noya’s
receiving skills and the fact that *wow Noya-san is a PRINCE!* That's, like, *all kinds of WOW and
BAZAM!* to do that.

(As for Tooru, he adds *chan* to everyone’s names, so Noya is not all too concerned about that.)

“See, Asahi?” Noya says proudly. “Now I can’t exactly go back to doing my homework, since
Shouyou wants tips on receiving.”

“And for the record, the only reason why I’m letting you off the hook this time is ‘cause you got me
milk bread yesterday,” Tooru adds. He’s on the ground, stretching his legs. Clearly, he is in the
mood for some volleyball too. And since Shouyou is never *not* in the mood for volleyball, it’s clear
that Noya has won.

“Hey Asahi, sorry I’m late – *what are the rest of you doing here?*”

Sawamura Daichi appears right behind Shouyou, causing the poor redhead to shriek and leap several
feet in the air. His arms are crossed over his chest, a stern glower plastered on his face.

“Ah, speak of the devil,” Tooru mutters.

“Great!” Noya exclaims, choosing to ignore Daichi’s evident displeasure at their gathering. “Now all
the members of the Blue Crows are here!”

“Noya-chan, I’ve told you a million times: that name is lame as hell.”

“Well, I think it’s cool as hell, so deal with it!”

Much to the chagrin and annoyance of his bodyguards (except for Shouyou, who adores the name),
Noya has named them the Blue Crows. *Blue* because Tooru’s from the *Ao*ba Johsai district, and
crows because Daichi, Shouyou and Asahi are from the *Karasu*no district. Noya is very proud of this
name, and until the rest can think of something cooler the name is gonna stick.

“Ah, Captain…” Poor Asahi seems to wilt under Daichi’s glare. “I… I tried telling him that he can’t
play, but he won’t – he refuses to… Y-you know what Noya’s like!” He wrings his available hand
wildly in an attempt to illustrate what exactly Noya is like.

“I do, and I also know what *you’re* like, Glass Heart. You’ve known him the longest out of all of us;
one would think *you’d* be the most resistant to his begging.”
Asahi blushes and nearly drops the volleyball he’s holding.

“I’ll do my work tomorrow!” Noya vows, bounding over to Daichi to shake his arm excitedly. “C’mon, we’re all here, let’s play volleyball!”

Daichi wrenches his arm back from Noya’s grip. “Fine, but I’ll hold you to that promise.”

Noya beams. Daichi-san is nice, after all, despite his scary glare earlier saying otherwise.

“I’m on duty tomorrow, so I’ll make sure you do your work,” he continues. “I’ll stand behind you and watch you if I have to.”

Noya flinches, but he is not one to change his mind after making a commitment, so he stands his ground.

“And you two — Oikawa, Hinata. We’re going to have a talk later.”

Shouyou lets out a squeak of terror — not that Noya can blame him — and scurries to hide behind Tooru, fistng the back of the taller man’s shirt like a shield.

Tooru just flashes his usual cocky smirk. “Yes, whatever you say, Captain. Just get warmed up already.”

“Just because you’re second-in-command doesn’t mean you get to tell me what to do. You’re still in trouble.” But Daichi settles down on the ground of the outdoor sports court anyway and joins them in their stretching.

“But there are only five of us,” Shouyou deduces, puzzled. “How’s a volleyball match gonna work with just five players?”

“Then Chika-chan will join you! That’ll make six! And I’ll referee, of course.”

Noya perks up. “Nee-chan!”

Noya firmly believes that he has the coolest big sister in the world, and no one will ever convince him otherwise. Princess Nishinoya Haruka is small for her age, just like Noya, but her assertiveness, grace and sheer coolness makes her one of the tallest people in the world, in his eyes. Hand on her hip and grinning, there’s no way she wouldn’t exude confidence.

“Princess,” Ennoshita Chikara, her bodyguard, says exasperatedly. “You just recovered from a cold; you shouldn’t be exerting yourself so much.”

“It’s cute you worry so much! But don’t worry, I’m feeling good as new. Besides, refereeing isn’t a particularly tiring activity — I’ll be fine!”

Noya hears Asahi let out a quiet sigh that sounds like resignation. He probably just wanted some quiet time to practise his serves, and now the princess pops up and pretty much declares a three-on-three match. And they all know that in their small circle, her word is law. Oh well. He gave up his right to quiet time when he took on the duty of bodyguarding Noya.

“Perfect!” Noya crows. He ducks under the net to join Asahi on the other side of the court. “Chikara! Join me and Asahi! Let’s crush the other three!”

Chikara lets out a sigh of defeat too, probably recognising that he can’t override his princess’s will. He bends down to pick up the pile of jackets and shift them to a nearby bench, adding his own to the
small mountain.

“Oh no, you won’t,” Tooru says, a dangerous glint gleaming in his brown eyes. “We’ll pummel you to the ground, right, Shou-chan, Dai-chan?”

“Right, senpai!”

“Let’s all do our best.”

Noya takes his place behind Asahi. He notices that the back of Asahi’s white shirt is pretty damp with sweat, and he can just barely make out the curve of toned muscles underneath. Well, it’s not like that is a surprise. He is a trained warrior, not to mention an athlete when off duty — of course he is fit. And those volleyball shorts… Noya knows that volleyball shorts are supposed to be short, yet they look even shorter on Asahi.

It must be because he’s a giant, Noya decides, conflicted between admiration and envy.

Tooru insists on getting the first serve — not that Noya minds. Receiving his serves are always good practice.

And with one hell of a jump serve, the impromptu match kicks off. As expected, Tooru’s serve is powerful and precisely aimed at a spot far from potential receivers. Noya thanks his lucky stars that he practically operates on instinct and has the speed to act on those on those instincts. With a battle cry of "ROLLING THUNDER!!", he dives, rolls and thrusts his arms out just in time to send the ball back up into the air. It soars towards Chikara, who usually plays wing spiker but now is Noya and Asahi’s setter (we really should get a second setter on the Blue Crows, if only Tooru wouldn’t bitch about having ‘competition’, Noya muses). He sets the ball in a high arc towards the Ace of the Blue Crows, who spikes it down with a satisfying thwack. The ball ricochets off Shouyou’s arms and tumbles beyond the boundary line, thus earning Noya’s team the first point of the match.

“Nice, Ace!” Noya cheers, slapping Asahi’s back.

“Don’t mind, Hinata!”

“Yeah, let’s get the next one, Shou-chan!”

At the end of three sets, Noya’s team barely scrapes a 2-1 win. They had to fight through a persistent deuce in the third set to get to that two-point margin, but the feeling of victory, especially victory against a smug bastard like Tooru, is satisfying nonetheless.

“Thank you for the game!” the six players chorus in unison, bowing at the waist.

“That was a good game,” Haruka compliments. “Just watching it made me wanna play too. Yuu, you gotta teach me how to do your cool receives! Like that— what’s it called again? Rolling Thunder?”

Noya beams. This is why he adores her so much – she remembers the name of his signature move and thinks it’s cool (unlike everyone else who isn’t Shouyou; but Shouyou thinks everything he does is cool so he doesn’t count). And she wants to learn it! Noya’s heart could burst any moment from pride and an overwhelming amount of affection.

“You sprained your wrist the last time you tried that,” Chikara reminds her.

“Aww, you worry too much, Chika-chan! I promise to be careful.” She smiles sweetly up at him and pats his bicep, as if to hammer in the reassurance.
Chikara’s cheeks flood with pink as he mutters, “Well, I am paid to worry about you…”

Oh? Noya can feel a smirk curl on his lips.

Tooru seems to follow the same pattern of thought as him. He slings an arm around Chikara’s shoulders and pinches his cheek teasingly. “Yes, Chika-chan, you are paid very well to worry about your princess, aren’t you?”

To his credit, Chikara manages to shrug off Tooru with dignity, the only evidence of embarrassment being his flushed face. If it were Noya, he’d have elbowed Tooru in the gut without the same consideration.

Daichi claps his hands twice, getting their attention. “Okay, volleyball time is over. Noya, go wash up. It’s about to be dinnertime soon, and the king will throw a fit if you enter the dining hall all sweaty and gross. Oikawa, Hinata, a word.”

Noya’s good mood promptly sours. Yes, indeed the king would throw a fit, and that would make Noya himself want to throw a fit, too. His nagging gets on his nerves so much, once Noya broke a plate. And a prized vase. Both in the span of one meal. That stunt got him grounded for a month – not that it mattered. Noya has never been allowed to step out of the palace anyway, and Haruka only got her freedom when she turned eighteen and became eligible to consider suitors.

Grudgingly, he yanks his jacket out from under the pile and tosses it over his shoulder. He feels Asahi’s worried gaze on the back of his head, but he ignores it. After the reminder of dinner, and hence his father, he really doesn’t feel like talking.

People keep quiet when preparing for battle, right?

“Yuu, don’t slouch,” his father reprimands sharply, not even looking up from his dinner bowl. “It looks bad.”

Noya glares at the man across the table. “I’m not even slouching. You’d know that if you, you know, actually bothered to look at me.”

He is not a liar — his back is as straight as a rod.

That cheeky remark gets his father to look up, a scowl on his face. It figures that attitude, of all things, would be what gets his father’s attention.

“Watch your mouth, Yuu. Behave yourself.”

The only thing that stops Noya from retorting is Haruka’s hand on his knee, hidden under the table. She shoots him a warning look, like, Don’t anger the beast. It’ll only end badly for you.

(It’s probably a good thing Noya has his nee-chan. She’s probably the only reason why he hasn’t gotten himself murdered by his father.)

Noya glares at his bowl of rice, salmon and potatoes. He was ravenous after the impromptu volleyball game, but now he just feels like throwing up. Or throwing something. Preferably at his father’s face.
“Come on, Yuu, eat up,” his mother cajoles, her tone as meek and quiet as ever. There is no force behind her words, like they are something she has to say rather than wants to say. Having been married to the king for twenty-two years must have had something to do with that.

He nods, despite his lack of appetite. His mother isn't the one he has anything against, even if she’s kinda really distant, so he should listen to her.

“Oto-sama, Sensei has reviewed my recent argumentative paper,” Haruka says. “He said that—"

“I am aware,” the king cuts in brusquely, returning his gaze back to his food. “I’m the first person your tutor reports your academic progress to. I took a look at your paper this afternoon, and I regret to say that I was rather disappointed. There were quite a few holes in logic in your second body paragraph. The rest of your argument is nothing to write home about, either. Any layman can rip your points apart. I expect you to do better next time.”

Rage boils in Noya’s core. How dare he speak so poorly of Haruka’s work? Does he not know how much effort she puts into all her assignments? She is able to finish a two-thousand-word paper in one sitting, something Noya knows he can’t do. Worse, this isn’t anything new. For every piece of work Haruka turns in, their father always has something to criticise, without giving her the credit she deserves, or at least some constructive feedback. The way his father treats his sister makes him sick.

But Haruka, cool as ever, doesn’t bat an eye. Her polite smile remains in place, but there’s a dangerous undercurrent to it, like a tiger biding her time, waiting to pounce on her prey. “Then you should also be aware that that was my first draft, which Sensei submitted to you three weeks ago for reviewing. According to Sensei, my final piece was excellent — he even awarded me an A-plus. Sensei said my analysis blew his expectations out of the park and that I brought up some excellent points he hadn’t considered before. I believe he asked Chika-chan to pass it to you this morning.”

A flash of irritation crosses the king’s face, his lip curling sourly. Noya can’t help but smirk — he knows how much his father hates being one-upped, especially by Haruka.

“Hmph. I’ll see about that later,” the king says, as though whether or not Haruka really got an A-plus is a decision that rests solely on him. “I hope Ennoshita put it somewhere where it can be easily found. I have many things.”

And because I have many things, I’m too busy to bother checking if the essay I criticised was even the right draft, his tone implies, all dismissive and condescending and snide and what Noya wouldn’t give to break his plate.

“Thank you, Oto-sama.”

Seeing that he was unable to strike Haruka down, the king turns to Noya, who instinctively stiffens in his seat. Looks like round two for the evening has begun.

“And you. I have yet to see your essay on Operation Kitagawa Daiichi. Would it be reasonable for me to expect to see it by this weekend, or do you need more time to sort out your attention span issues?”

Noya grinds his teeth together, willing himself not to lose his temper. He has had a pretty good day — playing with Asahi and the rest is always a good time — and he’s not about to let this bastard ruin it

See, Daichi, I can control myself. I’ve gotten better at it.

“Yeah, very reasonable. Oto-san,” Noya adds as an afterthought.
“Then I expect it to see it in my office by Saturday evening, or I’m revoking your volleyball privileges. You are seventeen and a prince; your lack of self-discipline and responsibility is appalling.” He scowls. “Surely I raised you better than this. Has Haruka been encouraging your bad behaviour?”

At the mention of his sister, Noya sees red. He barely even registers throwing his chopsticks down, the ivory chopsticks clacking against porcelain a distant sound.

“Oh, cut the crap!” Noya shouts, rising to his feet. “Look, you can criticise me all you want; I really couldn’t give less fucks. But don’t you dare treat nee-chan like that, like — like she’s not even worth you sparing a glance. ‘Cause she’s worth more than all your prized pottery and heirlooms and all the other stupid crap you keep.”

“Yuu! Please don’t do this,” Haruka hisses, grabbing his hand and trying to tug him back down, but he roughly pulls away from her grasp.

The queen stares at her lap, like she can pretend this isn’t occurring if she doesn’t see it.

The king’s eyes flashes dangerously. He sets his chopsticks down and leans back, crossing his arms over his chest. “Sit. Down. Now.”

“Oh, now you’ve gone and done it,” Haruka mutters, sliding an exasperated hand over her face.

“And what if I don’t want to?” Noya challenges.

“I am your father. You are my son, so you will listen to me!”

“To hell with that! Don’t give me that bullshit! As far as I’m concerned, I’m only your son by birth. For a man who’s supposed to be my father, you’re doing a piss poor job at making me feel like you really are my father!”

“No one cares about how you feel. I don’t care about how you feel. The only thing I care about is your obedience. That is all. Now, sit down, shut up and eat your food.”

Hot, angry tears prick at the corners of Noya’s eyes. *Fuck.* He shouldn’t be surprised—he already knows the king doesn’t love him, so why does he feel like a straight-up punch in the gut or a volleyball in the face would hurt much less?

“Oto-sama!” Haruka gasps, scandalised. “Surely you don’t mean that!”

“Don’t presume you know what I do and don’t mean, young lady. If you’re going to take Yuu’s side, then we agree to disagree. Make of that what you will. I don’t really care how you feel either, as long as you understand my meaning.”

A feral growl escapes the back of Noya’s throat, his temper finally bursting at the seams. He picks up the first thing his hand finds — his chopsticks — and flings them at his father’s head. To his credit, he dodges, and the chopsticks sail over his head and smashes into the vase behind him. It falls off the table and shatters on the ground, water, flowers and shards of glass spraying everywhere.

“Yuu!”

Haruka’s eyes are wide, their father looks livid, and their mother has her hand clasped over her mouth, as if to hold back a cry.

But Noya isn't done with his temper tantrum. He yells another string of curse words, smashing his
fist on the table which causes his glass of water to topple over. He picks up the glass, frustrated that it hasn’t broken yet, and slams it so hard on the dining table it shatters in his hand. Fragments of glass pierce his skin, but fuck if he cares about the blood. He’s never liked the pristine white of the tablecloth anyway.

“Yuu, stop this ridiculous tantrum now! Sit down. I will teach you some manners!”

“Screw off already!” Noya bellows.

He kicks his chair back, sending it careening into the wall behind him and consequently dislodging a wall portrait from its position. Storming to the double doors and kicking away bits of broken glass and ceramic, he ignores his father’s shouts and wrenches the doors open. The guards outside look startled at the sudden appearance of their belligerent young prince. But they now are accustomed to his bursts of temper caused by fights with his father, so they quietly step out of his way.

When he reaches his room, he sinks to the floor, stupid pathetic tears rolling down his face. He punches the wall so hard and so many times, the skin on his knuckles tear and bleed. He pauses to watch the blood trickle down his wrist and drip, drip, drip onto his carpet. The fight leaves his body, and now he just feels incredibly exhausted. Throwing a hissy fit sure took something out of him.

He closes his eyes. Images of his father’s stony-turned-enraged face swim in and out of focus, of his mother’s wilted expression, of Haruka’s shock. With a jolt, he remembers that the last time he exploded in a fit of rage at his father as bad as he did earlier, he made his sister cry. She hates it when he and their father fight. And she especially hates it when Noya hurts himself in a fight.

Guilt replaces the burning anger in his core, and more tears fall down his face. Even when he’s being an impulsive, destructive little brat, she still cares about him.

Haruka is the best sister he could ever ask for, and he would never ask for anything more.

And Noya feels like the world’s shittiest brother, ever.

Noya doesn’t get to lie in his bed and brood for long, though, thanks to three knocks on his door snapping him out of his self-blaming monologue. His entire body tenses, as if preparing for a fistfight.

I swear, if that bastard’s come to lecture me, so help me—

“Yuu! It’s me,” Haruka calls. “Asahi is with me.”

He rolls over onto his bed, sighing partly in relief. “Come in.”

Asahi lets the princess in first, then shuts the door behind him. The gentle giant’s holding a first-aid box in his hands. His eyebrows crease when he sees Noya’s bleeding and bruised hands, but thankfully he doesn’t comment on them. Noya really doesn’t need a lecture now. Asahi takes Noya’s injured hands into his larger ones, assessing the extent of his wounds. Asahi’s hands are rough and calloused, most likely from warrior training (and volleyball), but warm. He then reaches for the box and begins to treat Noya’s injuries. Noya winces and hisses when the cold disinfecting alcohol stings his open wounds. He begins to regret his earlier tantrum.

“Sorry,” Asahi whispers, looking more distressed than usual. “Just stay still, okay? The pain will go away, I promise.”

The three sit in silence for the next few minutes. Noya nibbles on his lower lip, hissing softly every time the alcohol-soaked cotton pad touches his hands. Haruka strokes his hair with gentle
movements, something that soothes Noya instantly. His shoulders slump down, and the sting of the alcohol suddenly doesn’t seem so bad. Asahi’s eyes are focused on the task at hand (ha, who said Noya can’t pun?), as he wraps Noya’s hands in gauze. The warmth from his hands has spread down Noya’s wrists, up his arms, across his shoulders and surging up his neck to take up permanent residence in his cheeks. Good lord, Noya hopes the others haven’t noticed his blush — especially Asahi. He’s so close and so warm, it’s unfair. And his eyelashes are so pretty too. Unfair.

Asahi finishes wrapping Noya’s hand too soon. He packs the medical stuff back into the box, then gets up.

“Well, uh.” He rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. “I’ll, uh — I’ll just go. Yeah. See you.”

“Thank you, Asahi,” Haruka says, her tone warm. “I can write a killer paper, but I still have much to learn about the art of first-aid. You really came in clutch for us.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s something we had to learn at Training Academy. I’m just glad to help.” His eyes flicker from Noya to Haruka and back to Noya, before he clears his throat and shuffles towards the door. “Well, I won't take up any more of your time. Have a good night, Princess Nishinoya, Noya.”

“Night, Asahi!” Noya waves a bandaged hand at the retreating figure of his bodyguard.

Once the door clicks shut behind Asahi, Noya turns to his sister. He has a sinking feeling — he can guess what she’s here for. If she just wanted his injuries dressed she would have just sent Asahi up on his own. The only person whose lectures he actually takes seriously is Haruka’s (and occasionally Daichi’s, if his glare is frightening enough), so he braces himself.

“That was really brave of you, Yuu.”

“Huh?”

Well, that certainly isn't what he was expecting.

She rolls her eyes. “You. Brave. But also kinda dumb. Seriously, if you were gonna break a vase, at least don't break my favourite one.”

“Oh.” Noya looks down sheepishly. If he knew he would have chosen an uglier vase to vent on. He feels like he should say more, but he doesn’t know quite what to say. This is an odd occurrence, as he prides himself on his natural chattiness (though it does cause him to run his mouth too fast before his brain can catch up).

“I’ve always admired your courage,” she continues, her voice soft. “You had the balls to stand up to oto-sama, yell at him and call him out on his BS. I’ve always wanted to say everything you told him, but I — I could never bring myself to do it, you know? I was – I still am – scared of what he’d say. Of how he would cut me down, until I felt like the smallest speck of dirt in the whole world.”

Anger courses through Noya’s veins, partly because his sister deserves better than to feel like a tiny insignificant speck of dirt, and partly because what she said hit pretty close to how he felt when his father was all like, Oh well, fuck your feelings. Noya is already small for his age; he doesn’t need to feel any smaller.

“But you’re smarter than me, nee-chan. It’s not like you wilted when confronting him – you sniped at him, took subtle digs, while staying polite. You were pretty savage yourself, too, so don't do yourself like that.”
Haruka lets out a humourless laugh. “Okaa-sama already wilts enough under him, we don’t need any more wilters. We gotta shoot our shots whenever we can, right?”

“Shoot our shots,” Noya repeats, finding that he likes the sound of that very much. “That’s so cool, nee-chan!”

Haruka giggles, dissipating the tension and unhappiness in the room with that one light-hearted sound. She wraps her arms around him, and he buries his face against her shoulder. Her perfume is light and citrusy – a smell he’s come to associate with love and safety. His arms circle her slender shoulders. They stay like that for a moment, in which Noya allows himself to feel safe, to feel vulnerable. He has been so tense for the past half hour or so, he just needs to relax and not worry about the next emotional attack his father had in his arsenal of emotional attacks.

Haruka pulls away from the embrace. “Get some sleep, Yuu. C’mon, I’ll tuck you in.”

“Don’t baby me, nee-chan,” he whines but lets her tuck him in anyway.

“Goodnight, Yuu. Sweet dreams.”

“G’night.”

The light flicks off, and his world drifts into black.

In the afternoon, as per what he promised yesterday, Daichi hovers behind Noya while the latter tries to muster up the motivation to work on his essay. Tooru is busy lounging on a beanbag, wearing his half-frame glasses and reading a novel.

Noya grumbles as he twirls his pen around. “I don’t see why I have to do this. It’s not like I’m heir to the throne or anything – not that I wanna be one anyway.”

(In the kingdom, the first-born child — regardless of sex — is heir to the throne. Noya thinks the system in other kingdoms are outdated and stupid, partly because he’d be heir if his kingdom followed that system.)

“Well, I believe you’ll still have a part to play in the running of this kingdom, even if you’re not the monarch,” Daichi answers wearily. This is the third time he has had to answer the same question, though Noya doesn’t really care for an answer. He just wants to bitch about something.

“We don’t know,” Tooru snaps. “We’re just here to make sure you do your work, alright? Now shut up and write your essay — you’re interrupting my reading, and I’m about to find out who the murderer is.”

Noya scowls at his half-written essay.

Half an hour and (only) two complaints later, Noya’s train of thought is interrupted by his mother wanting to see him.

“O-Okaa-san!” Noya says, surprised. His mother rarely comes to see him during the day. In fact, the only time he sees her is during dinner, and even then she doesn’t talk to him much.

She glances at Tooru and Daichi wordlessly, and they seem to get what she’s not saying.
“By your leave, your Majesty, we’ll leave the room to you two!” Tooru sings, folding his book and tucking it under his arm. “Holler if you need us. We’ll be outside!”

The reticent queen nods at the two bodyguards, who take their leave hurriedly. Noya can guess what they will be up to outside — Tooru will attempt to eavesdrop, and Daichi will scold him for being a busybody.

She takes the seat that Daichi vacated. Noya turns to face her, a knot of apprehension winding around his stomach.

“Okaa-san?”

“Yuu…” She folds her hands in her lap, clearing her throat nervously. “I’ll just — I’ll get straight to the point. Yuu, I know it’s hard for you and your father to get along—"

_Understatement of the year._

“But I… I just thought you should know that deep down, er, _really_ deep down, he does care about you and Haruka.”

Noya glares at the spot of carpet next to her foot. “Did he send you here to tell me this?”

"No, I came of my own will. In fact, he cautioned me against seeing you, but… I figured that you needed to hear this, especially since you must have — I mean, what your father said last night — it must have stung a bit.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

She lets out a small, imperceptible sigh. “Your father — he has his own, sometimes misguided way of showing his care, but he does care. We care about you so much, Yuu. That’s why we push you so hard, because we know you can do better.”

Noya scowls. He doesn't want to hear this. He appreciates his mother voluntarily coming to see him, but he is not in the mood for this crap. He isn't an idiot — his mother may be sincere about caring for him, but all that fluff about his father caring is obviously empty. Just empty words. The only words a man like that could ever mean are ones to tear others down and apart.

“I don’t wanna hear anymore about him.”

“Okay, as long as you understand.” The queen’s gaze falls on the half-complete essay on Noya’s desk. “Yuu, what are you working on?”

“Just an essay about Operation Kitagawa Daiichi,” he mutters.

At the mention of the military operation, Noya swears what little colour in his mother’s face drains away. Her eyes widen, her knuckles tensing in her lap.

“That—" She clears her throat. “That’s wonderful.”

“Uh…” Noya is starting to feel weirded out. His mother has never really taken much of an interest in his work, and now when she does she's acting all strange about it. “Is something wrong?”

“Hm? No, not at all.” Her smile looks forced. “Just that… I think you should know that everything your father and I have done as rulers of this kingdom, it was done in what we believed was the best interest of the kingdom. Please don't ever forget that, no matter what you hear.”
Noya, now feeling more than a little freaked out, only nods. He has no idea what she is talking about, or where that even came from. Military operations aren’t an uncommon occurrence, right? He’s not so naive — he knows that to protect the kingdom some people have to die. So for what purpose she is trying to, uh, **reassure** him, he doesn’t understand.

She stands and pets his hair. “I’ll leave you to do your work now. See you at dinner.”

“Mhm.”

**What the hell?**

---

Dinner is a relatively quiet affair. The king refuses to say anything, which is fine by Noya. He notices that the vase he broke last night has been replaced by an uglier one.

After that, Noya retreats to his room, not in the mood for another fight. He doesn't want to worry Asahi with having to attend to fresh injuries again. He lies in bed, unable to shake the uneasy feeling that has taken residence in his stomach. He rolls over on his side in an attempt to get comfortable. Then that position gets uncomfortable, so he turns over on to his other side. Then he lies on his back. Then on his stomach, his face smushed into his soft pillow.

It’s no use; he is too on edge to fall asleep. He rolls out of bed, pulls on a shirt and makes his way out of his room. Maybe a jog around the palace grounds will help to wear him out. And maybe some receive practices. He has been meaning to work on his block follow-ups. Then he remembers he needs someone else to spike the balls for him to receive. Maybe he’ll get one of the guards on night duty to join him.

He bends over to stretch his muscles, but before he can make his way out to the outdoor sports court, a shrill, awful, blood-curdling scream rings out from the floor above. Noya’s heart leaps into his throat, and he instinctively throws his arms over his head. The screaming continues, and other unfamiliar yells join in, making a terrible cacophony that causes Noya’s brain to smash repeatedly into his skull. He feels like his head will split open — the pain, the shock, the fear: it’s too much, too overwhelmingly much.

Then everything disturbingly goes silent.

He hears the thundering of footsteps down the hall, probably the guards rushing to check out what caused the scream. Panicked, he scampers to the staircase and takes the stairs two at a time up. He knows it is a dumb idea, but he isn’t exactly known for doing the most rational thing in any given situation. He acts on pure instinct, be it volleyball, an argument or even his homework.

Blindly, he stumbles towards his parents’ bedroom, because that’s the only room he knows is occupied on this floor. He wrenches the door open.

What he sees next rips a scream from his own throat.

His parents. Lying face-down on the floor. The floor that is stained in something red, *something that should not look so much like blood*. Three people wearing masks that cover the lower half of their faces stand around them. All of them are holding red-stained swords.

It can't be… It’s a joke, right? Someone is just fucking around. Someone with a terrible, cruel sense
of humour. Someone he really ought to punch for pulling this prank. Bile rises in his throat, and the world sways under his feet. Try as he might, he just can't stop screaming, even though he knows it's attracting the attention of the three strangers standing over his parents.

“Oi, get him to shut up,” stranger A growls. “We can't risk attracting any more attention.”

“On it,” stranger B says, saluting before he lifts his sword.

Stranger C looks up, alarmed. “Oi, don’t — he’s not—"

Faster than Noya’s brain can register, stranger B is charging towards him, sharp point of the sword pointed right at his chest. Noya wills himself to move — *move, dammit, move!* *You're about to fucking die, don't just stand around!* — but he remains frozen to the spot. The image of his immobile parents just a few feet away from him keeps flashing in the forefront of his brain, interspersed with the image of the stranger with the sword about to stab him and *fuck fuck FUCK why isn’t he moving*

A blur hurtles towards the sword with so much force it flies out of stranger B’s grasp.

“Stay away from my baby brother!” Haruka roars. Even though her hair is a mess, her nightgown is rumpled and she’s clutching a *high heel* of all things, the fierce glower on her face makes her infinitely more terrifying than the three strangers. Noya is glad she’s on his side.

“Nee-chan!” he practically sobs out, but he still can’t move.

Haruka’s stare is fixed on stranger B. She reaches under her skirt and pulls out something vaguely sharp and metallic — Noya can’t tell, because she moves too fast, plunging the vaguely sharp and metallic whatever into B’s gut. B chokes and crumples to the ground.

“Nee-chan…?” Noya asks weakly.

Haruka removes the object — now that she’s closer, he can tell that it’s a knife — from B’s gut. She turns to face him and cups his face gently, wiping away stray tears he didn't know he shed until that moment.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” she murmurs. “Stay here, okay? Asahi is on his way up to get you. Let your nee-chan take care of this mess, alright? I’ll be right back.”

And he just stands there, watching as his big sister strides into the room, her aura murderous with rage. He almost doesn’t register Asahi popping up and trying to pull him away from the scene of the crime.

“C’mon, Noya,” Asahi pleads. “Nothing good will come from lingering here.”

But Noya, true to his nature despite everything he has witnessed, shakes his head stubbornly. “No, I can’t… Not when nee-chan is still there…”

Asahi seems to get that he won’t be able to change the obstinate prince’s mind, so he settles for wrapping his arms around Noya’s chest. The warmth and sturdiness of his broad chest pressing against Noya’s back helps to ground him in reality. He takes small, deep breaths, and his eyes focus on the scene unfolding in front of him.

“Princess Haruka,” stranger A greets, bowing to her in a fashion that can be called mocking. “How nice to finally meet you.”
“Firstly, fuck you,” Haruka spits. “Secondly, what do you want? You have five seconds to start talking, or you can join your pal outside in hell.”

“Eloquent. But, unfortunately for you, we’re already on our way there.” Stranger A shoves a piece of parchment into Haruka’s trembling hands.

Then, in unison and without any warning, he and C stab each other straight through the chest. Their eyes crinkle in what seems to be a final grin, before they crumple and collapse to the ground.

“Oh, what the fuck?” Haruka shouts, falling to her knees next to them. She frantically yanks the swords out and tries to stem the flow of blood, but to no avail. Frustrated, she shakes their limp bodies back and forth. “Don't die on me — I still have questions!”

They don’t say anything.

Chikara appears from seemingly nowhere and races past Noya and Asahi. He pulls the bloodstained princess to her feet, wrapping a steady arm around her shaking shoulders.

“Let’s go, Princess,” he coaxes softly.

“No,” she whispers. “I can’t — I still have questions—"

“That you won’t find answers to by staying in a room of dead people. Please, just this once, listen to me, Princess.” Chikara’s voice shakes towards the end of his sentence.

Together, they stumble out of the room. Asahi removes one arm from around Noya to shut the door behind them. Panting and trembling, Haruka crumples against Chikara. She drops her bloodstained knife and presses her cheek against his chest, as though to ground herself. Noya doesn't miss how his grip around her tightens. His expression is grim, like he is holding himself together for her sake.

With trembling hands, she opens the parchment. Her lips thin and her eyebrows furrow with confusion. Chikara lowers his head to get a good look at whatever’s written on the paper, and he mirrors her puzzled expression.

“What—” Noya’s voice is embarrassingly hoarse, so he clears his throat and tries again. “What does it say? Is it bad?”

“I — I don't know,” Haruka admits. “All it says is, ‘Traverse through all eight districts. Make amends. You have one year.’"

Noya doesn't understand. He hasn't been able to understand anything that has happened in the past half hour or so. The adrenaline that was pumping through him drains away, replaced by numbness. He feels like he’s witnessing everything through the lens of a stranger.

“‘Make amends?’” Asahi echoes, voicing Noya’s thoughts for him — the thoughts he wasn't even aware he had until Asahi spoke up. “Make amends for what?”

Haruka runs a weary hand down her weary face. “Don’t know. Could be many things. Who knows what oto-sama and okaa-sama did to piss people off so much they’d attempt assassination?”

Noya feels Asahi flinch behind him. He feels like he should flinch too, but he can't find it in him to do so. There are probably many things he should be feeling and doing. He doesn't know what, is the problem. So he settles for feeling and doing nothing.

“In any case, Yuu—"
(Noya wants to say “nee-chan”. And maybe ask if everything’s gonna be okay. Because if nee-chan says it’s gonna be fine, then it will be. But his mouth betrays him by staying silent.)

“—you can’t stay here. You have to leave the palace. It’s not safe for you to stay here. They probably have allies, and I don't want you to get hurt.”

“Huh?” he blurts out, surprising himself. “But then, what — how are you gonna… what about you, nee-chan? You’re coming too, right?”

*You’re not gonna leave me alone, right?*

But Haruka shakes her head, and betrayal washes over Noya. “I can’t. Now that our parents are dead, someone has to take charge of running this kingdom.”

*No no no.* This can’t be happening. Noya and Haruka; Noya and his nee-chan, they’ve never been apart. Even when they're not in the same room, he has always taken comfort in knowing that she is in the same palace as he is. They *can’t* be separated! She has always been a pillar of support, an abundant wealth of unconditional love and acceptance for him, in a family where the only other thing he is certain of is that his parents are too busy being monarchs to love him. It’s always been them against the world – how’s he supposed to face the outside world without his nee-chan?

Chikara nods. “The others heard what happened. Oikawa-san went to get Noya-sama’s things, and Hinata-kun and Sawamura-san should be at the gates by now. They have the other stuff prepared.”

“Huh? That bastard’s looking through my shit?” Noya doesn't understand why that is the first thing he says, when there are so many other things he should be saying.

Asahi takes the smaller boy’s arm and guides him down the stairs. Chikara and Haruka walk behind them, discussing something or another in low urgent voices. Even if they were within earshot Noya wouldn’t be able to pay attention anyway. Some of the numbness has been replaced by a dull ache in his head. All he wants is to curl up somewhere warm and safe and fall asleep, then wake up the next morning and find that everything has been one frightfully realistic nightmare and that he and his nee-chan are safe and they can stay together.

They reach the tall metal gates in front of the palace, where Daichi, Shouyou, Tooru and several other guards are waiting. They’re carrying bags and wearing matching somber expressions — even Shouyou, whom Noya has only ever seen with a sunny grin on and the occasional child-like pout in the several months he’s known him.

“Yuu.” Haruka places a hand on his shoulder, turning him around to face her. Her other hand gently, lovingly ruffles the mess of dark hair on his head. “From now on, you’re dead, okay?”

“What? Why? Am I?” he stammers, startled and beyond bewildered. He doesn't feel very dead, whatever ‘dead’ is supposed to feel like.

“Princess, perhaps a more delicate and less direct approach would be better,” Chikara suggests exasperatedly. “If you could add more details, that would probably help Noya-sama’s understanding of the situation.”

“Ah yes. What I mean to say is — tomorrow morning when I make the announcement that, you know… that our parents were assassinated, I’ll also announce that you were assassinated along with them.”

“What, why?”
“Like I said earlier, those assassins probably weren’t working alone, and they probably have others like them outside, or even in this palace,” Haruka explains. “If they hear you’re alive, they might come after you. I can’t have that. That’s why we’re gonna fake your death, okay?”

Noya’s throat feels too dry for him to talk, so he settles for nodding.

“But, your Highness, what if something happens to you?” Tooru asks, frowning. “You said the threat may be in the palace, so what if you get hurt, or worse?”

At the thought of some faceless bastards hurting his big sister, the way they did to the king and queen, Noya’s fists tense at his side. Asahi notices this and takes Noya’s hands into his own, slowly prising his fingers apart.

“If something bad happens to you and the public thinks Noya-chan is dead, he can’t exactly waltz back to the throne and be like, ‘Hey guys, turns out I was alive the entire time haha sike,’” Tooru elaborates.

Haruka’s smile is tense. “Then I just have to make sure I don’t die. I’ll be fine. As I discovered tonight, I am quite proficient with the knife and a pair of high heels. I also have Chika-chan guarding me, too, so please don’t worry about me. Just take care of Yuu for me, alright?”

Daichi nods to her. “We shall carry out your wishes, Nishinoya-sama.”

“Thank you.”

One of the guards, whose name Noya doesn’t recall, steps forward. He holds a pendant out to the young prince. “Prince Nishinoya? This is for you, a good luck charm to keep you safe on your journey. It was from my late grandmother, but I think you need it more. So, um, here.”

Noya takes the pendant from the guard and stares blankly at it. It’s black and in the shape of a crow. Haruka reaches for it and clasps it around his neck, smiling sadly. Her fingers are soft against his clammy neck.

“Uh, thanks,” he mutters, figuring it is something he should say. It was a nice thing of the guard to do, after all.

“Good, now you have your guards and a good luck charm to keep you safe,” Haruka says. She leans forward and wraps Noya in a final embrace, which he returns. Being in her arms is warm and safe, everything he wants right now, and he doesn’t want to go. He wants to stay with her. He doesn’t want to pretend to be dead and wander aimlessly around the kingdom, trying to make amends for who the hell knows what.

But reality is bitterly cold. Haruka pulls away and plants a kiss on his sweaty forehead.

“Stay safe, Yuu. I love you, I always have and will always do.”

Noya’s vision blurs. He manages a choked-up “yeah, you too” before he has to duck his head to hide his tears.

Asahi takes his arm and gently guides him away from his warmth and safety. Shouyou takes the spot on his other side, while Daichi and Tooru bring up the rear. All of their expressions are grim, as if they knew a night like this would eventually come to pass.

Noya turns back one last time, but Haruka is already walking back to the palace.
He hasn't even left the palace grounds yet, and his nee-chan already feels so far away.

Chapter End Notes

tbh, i don't know how graphic "graphic depictions of violence" is supposed to be. like, i suppose getting stabbed is pretty darn graphic, but it's also not like i was super detailed like "he stabbed the person and the sword punctured his spleen and it exploded and blood spurted everywhere for miles lolz". but just to be safe i decided to rate it graphic.

rambling aside, i hope you liked the 1st chapter of this AU fic! thanks for reading

check out my tumblr :D
Oikawa knew what he was getting himself into when he applied to be Prince Nishinoya Yuu’s bodyguard last year. He always knew, at the back of his mind, of the possibility of an assassination. It was extremely slim, considering the tight security of the palace, but there was no such thing as a 0 percent probability. Maybe 0.001, but definitely not 0. The only thing that’s impossible is impossibility — just thinking about that made his head hurt.

The others knew what he knew. That’s why they reacted so quickly to prepare for an escape — it was all part of their training. They also knew, in theory, a little about trauma and how to deal with it, because they figured if they had to flee from the palace in the first place then something horrible and out of the ordinary must have happened.

Putting theory into practice, however, is another story, as Oikawa is beginning to discover. He is a warrior and bodyguard, not a shrink. He is reputed to have impeccable people skills — when it comes to reading what others are thinking and charming (or manipulating; choose your poison) people into doing what he wants, he has the art down to the finest point. But that’s only when he has something to get out of it, and he’s rarely sincere about his charm. When faced with his young, traumatised and uncharacteristically silent prince, everything he knows about people and how to wind them around his pinky falls apart.

“Hey, do you think Noya-san’s gonna be okay?” Hinata tugs on Oikawa’s sleeve and whispers, tiptoeing to reach his ear.

He sighs. “Well, he did see his parents murdered. Even if there’s no love lost, just seeing someone you know, or anyone for that matter, in that state… It’s scarring.” (He would know. He once watched as friends and comrades bled out and died in his arms, feeling hopeless and useless. The incident was a little over a year ago, but some wounds never truly close over.) “Then he himself nearly gets killed, and then all but kicked out of his home by his sister.”

Hinata scowls, plopping back on his feet. “‘Kay fine, I get it, Mr Optimistic.”

“I didn’t say he would never get better. It’s just gonna take some time. Maybe more than some. Maybe weeks, months, hell, even years.”

“Yeaaaahs? Man, that’s such a long time to be sad.”

Of course Hinata wouldn’t know. Out of all of them (Oikawa refuses to call them the Blue Crows, because that would mean acknowledging Noya’s stupid nickname for them and thus admitting defeat), Hinata is the least experienced warrior. Back in the Training Academy, Oikawa heard a rumour that he wanted to get into the Elite Squad but didn’t make the cut. Shame. He would have benefited from the field experience, and he would perhaps also learn that trauma wasn’t something people just bounced back from overnight. Some of the best warriors Oikawa knew never recovered.
Speaking of the Training Academy, Oikawa should probably explain exactly what it is. You see, the Training Academy is a kingdom-wide school (with a ‘branch’ in each district) for young aspiring warriors, from thirteen to nineteen years of age, to learn how exactly to become warriors. Each warrior takes up to six classes — such as Theory of Weapons, Theory of War, Basic Fighting Skills, Advanced Fighting Skills etc — and most of them are split into cohorts based on age. The exception is the Elite Squad (which Oikawa was once a part of) — a group of particularly talented and/or skilled warriors who are split into units based on ability and personal characteristics instead of age. They are often deployed on missions that the formal military can't carry out because it would garner too much unwanted attention. (Of course, there are dissenters who are against the military using teenagers in war, which is where the term “dogs of the military” used to describe the Elite Squad came from.) Upon graduation, warriors will usually go into one of three fields. Some become royal guards, others join the formal military (which Elite Squad members automatically have a ticket into), and others become teachers or mentors at the Academy.

Ahead of the group, Daichi is leading the way, shining a flashlight to illuminate the area in front of them. A few steps behind him, Noya grips Asahi’s arm so hard Oikawa figures it must hurt. If he were closer, he might even see crescent-shaped grooves in the skin of Asahi’s arm from Noya’s nails digging into it. He should have encouraged Nishinoya to cultivate the habit of filing his nails when he still had the chance.

Oikawa marvels at the stark difference between Asahi and Nishinoya. Asahi is the tallest among them, standing at a proud height of 186 cm, and physically the strongest. He can do the most bench presses (not that Oikawa is jealous or anything, nuh uh), his shoulders are broad and toned, and his arms are like tree trunks — long, thick and strong. In contrast, Noya is the shortest, at about 159 cm, with narrow shoulders and thin wiry arms. If the situation wasn't quite so serious, Oikawa would have found the image of them juxtaposed like that rather amusing.

On an ordinary day back at the palace, Oikawa continues to muse, Noya would be laughing and talking in his loud boisterous tone, making sure everyone in the vicinity was aware of his larger-than-life presence; on the other hand, Asahi would be wilting, either under Noya’s intensity, Daichi’s knife-sharp criticisms or Oikawa’s teasing.

But today isn’t an ordinary day at the palace. Now, Noya is more fragile than Oikawa has ever seen him, clinging to the strength and sturdiness of his Ace. For once, Noya’s demeanour matches his size. Something aches in the corner of Oikawa’s heart. Sure, his prince may be a loud pain in the ass, but he sure as hell would do anything to restore Noya’s usual cheer and energy back. And, damn it, he is his bodyguard, yet the one time it truly mattered he couldn’t protect his small, fragile, innocent prince. Now Noya has to pay the price for Oikawa’s ineptitude, his uselessness.

A crash startles Oikawa out of his self-loathing thoughts.

“What happened?” he demands. He rushes forward, with Hinata hot on his heels, to where he can vaguely make out Asahi crouching on the floor, next to Noya’s bent-over form.

Daichi pivots sharply and shines his flashlight at them. Noya is sprawled on the ground, the white bandages on his hands stained dirty with soil and grass.

“Fuck, Daichi, do you have to shine that right in my eyes?” Noya curses, ducking his head to avoid the glaring yellowish-white light.

“Sorry.” Daichi turns his flashlight away from Noya’s dirty face.

“I’m so sorry,” Asahi says frantically. He wraps an arm around Noya’s midriff and hoists him to his feet without much exertion. “I should’ve been more careful. I should’ve seen the stupid root and
warned you, or carried you over, or something.”

“I’m fine, stop worrying.”

“Are you sure?” Asahi persists, grabbing Noya’s hands and examining them. “Are you hurt anywhere? Your hands? Your feet? Do they hurt?”

“I said, I’m fine!” Noya shouts, wrenching his hands away from him. His eyes are wide and wild, like a feral animal that has been cornered.

Hinata shuffles towards Noya and places a small, gentle hand on his shoulder. “Noya-san, please don’t be angry. Asahi-san is just concerned. We all are.”

“It’s my fault, too,” Daichi says. “We’ve been walking non-stop for about two hours now; I should have called for a break earlier. No wonder you tripped — you must be exhausted. Come, we’ll stop here for the night. Hinata, Oikawa, set up camp. Asahi, change Noya’s bandages and make sure he isn’t injured anywhere else. I’ll scout the area to make sure it’s all clear and look for some firewood.”

They obey the captain without objections. Asahi ushers Noya to sit on a rock, while Oikawa and Hinata unpack their supplies and work on pitching their tents. He figures they should set up two tents, a smaller one for Nishinoya and Hinata and a bigger one for the rest of them. Once they are done with their task, Hinata digs out several cans of food from his bag. He’s clearly hungry from their trek.

Daichi soon returns, his arms filled with logs and sticks. He drops them in the center of their makeshift camp.

“Come on, light us up, Oikawa-san!” Hinata says, bouncing up and down excitedly on the grass.

“Don’t say it like that — it makes it sound like we’re taking a smoke break or something,” Oikawa mutters, but he pulls on his right glove anyway. You see, he possesses a pair of magic gloves. The right one produces fire, and the left conjures water (and ice, by extension). Even normal humans can produce and manipulate magic, with the limitation of needing a medium in order to perform said magic. He snaps his gloved fingers, causing the stack of wood to catch fire and burn a brilliant shade of reddish-orange. He rubs his finger with his thumb to adjust the intensity of the flame, until he is satisfied with the soothing crackling of the fire.

“Uwaaah!” Hinata exclaims, his brown eyes wide with admiration. “That’s so cool, Oikawa-senpai! You’re so cool! You just snapped, and the wood just guwoosh!” He tosses his arms high into the air, as if mimicking the height of the flames.

Hinata only calls people senpai when he is particularly impressed with them. Oikawa’s chest puffs up with pride.

Daichi rolls his eyes, though not without a hint of fondness. “Don’t get too impressed, Hinata. We still need to make sure Oikawa doesn't poison us with his cooking.”

“Hmph!” Oikawa sniffs, folding his arms across his chest. “I never said anything about cooking for you plebeians. I’ve done my part in starting a fire, so someone else has to do the cooking.”

“I’ll cook, I’ll cook!” Hinata volunteers. He really is far too energetic and excited for someone who has had to flee after his rulers had been assassinated and trek through a forest for two straight hours. Then again, his stamina is amazing. He can probably go another three hours before even remotely feeling tired.
Noya and Asahi return from their rock to join them around the fire. Noya’s left pant leg is rolled up, revealing a bandage around his knee. His face is pale, and Oikawa can see his small shoulders trembling ever so slightly. Asahi’s face is taut with worry.

“He just sustained some scrapes on his legs and hands,” Asahi reports. “Nothing permanent.”

Daichi nods. “That’s good to hear. Eat something, then go to sleep. I’ll take first watch.”

“Dibs on second,” Oikawa cuts in before Hinata can say anything.

Hinata glares at Oikawa and sticks his tongue out. “Fine, then I’ll take third!”

“Then I’ll—"

“It’s okay, Asahi, you just rest,” Daichi says firmly. “Three watches should be enough until morning. You can take first watch tomorrow night, if we haven't come across any form of civilisation by then.”

“Oh, um, okay. Yes, Captain.”

A few minutes later, the food is sufficiently cooked, and the group of exhausted teenagers tuck into their — whatever this meal is supposed to be (it’s too late to call it supper and too early for breakfast).

Well, all of them, except for Noya.

“Come on, Noya, you gotta eat something,” Asahi implores, pushing the can of food closer to Noya.

Noya scowls at it. He doesn’t make any move to take it. “Not hungry.”

“You’ll go hungry later if you don't eat anything,” Daichi warns. “Breakfast isn't for another five or six hours.”

“I won’t go hungry,” Nishinoya insists.

Daichi and Asahi turn to the two other bodyguards, their eyes pleading for help.

“Noya-chan~” Oikawa says. “Shou-chan was the one who cooked the food, and I was the one who prepared the fire in the first place. If you don't eat your food, we’ll both be very, very sad. You don’t want to make us sad, do you?”

Noya spears Oikawa with a dirty look. “… Fine, but only for Shouyou.”

Oikawa rolls his eyes, but he’ll take a victory in any form he can get.

Hinata’s face lights up at Nishinoya’s pronouncement, and he goes on about how Noya-san wouldn't be disappointed in the food he prepared because he made it with love, so would Noya-san please enjoy his food and be happy again because it would make him really happy to see Noya-san happy and— [cut for length].

After their meal, Daichi ushers them off to sleep. Oikawa watches as his captain takes his place under a tree with his collapsible staff resting under his arm. His eyes, though tired, are alert and determined to keep them safe. Oikawa may not always see eye to eye with him about everything, but one thing they can definitely agree on is that they would both do anything to keep their prince safe.

Then acute fatigue overpowers his body and thoughts. Yawning, he ducks under the flap of the large
tent, rolls out his sleeping mat, and then he crashes fast asleep.

Oikawa’s left arm bled where an arrow had struck it. Watari sat next to him, groaning as he yanked an arrow out from his own thigh. More blood spurted out from the wound, trickling down his leg and leaving an angry red trail behind. They were hiding behind a wall, where the military medics were attending to their injuries.

Behind them, Oikawa could hear the battle raging on. Kuroo, just several feet away from their sanctuary, was fighting a man dressed in dark green. He smoothly transformed into a large panther-like black cat and swiped at his opponent with razor-sharp claws. Then he was back to being a human, slicing at the man with his dagger. His tactic was working — clearly, the other man hadn’t had much experience fighting a shapeshifter. He was disoriented and missing Kuroo with each wild thrust of his sword.

But even so, the scene swam blurrily back and forth in front of Oikawa’s eyes. He blinked several times in rapid succession, but he couldn’t get rid of the black spots dancing in his vision. What was this? Too much blood loss? He could barely hear Watari’s voice, murmuring something, even though he was sure he could make out what the other boy was saying just moments ago. What had Watari been talking about, anyway?

The red-haired medic attending to Oikawa was saying something, he could tell that much. Her lips were moving, forming words, but for the life of him he couldn’t guess what she was saying. It wasn’t like he had lost his hearing or something; it was more like the words were going right over his head and he couldn’t make sense of the incoming information. He felt like someone was messing around with his head.

Watari tugged on Oikawa’s sleeve, looking like he wanted to say something.

“Yes, what is it?” Oikawa said, surprised he could hear himself.

“Oika...” Watari licked his dry lips. “Oikawa-san... I can’t—”

Then Oikawa wakes up with a start. His heart races a million kilometers per hour, and he can feel his hair stick to his sweaty forehead. Groggily, he pushes himself up to a sitting position. He stays like that for a few breaths, trying to collect himself and make sense of what the hell just happened.

That incident was over a year ago. He hasn’t had a nightmare like that in four months. He thought he has made progress in dealing with the PTSD, only to be plunged right back into another terrible flashback like someone dunked his head into ice cold water without warning.

Then he remembers what his psychologist told him to do when waking up from a nightmare/flashback. First, he takes inventory of everything he can see, smell, hear and touch. He sees the blue cloth of the tent surrounding him, as well as Daichi asleep next to him. He smells the fresh air of being in the forest and the more immediate aroma of sweat of two teenaged boys sharing a tent. He hears the chirping of birds outside, his breathing, the soft snores of his friend. He spreads his fingers, touching the soft material of his blanket, the ground underneath him, the cool smooth walls of the tent. Then he repeats to himself silently, My name is Oikawa Tooru. I am in a tent, surrounded by my friends who care about me. That incident was horrible, but it’s over now and I am safe.
He is safe — or at least, as safe as he can be when he's out in the wilderness. He closes his eyes, feeling his heart rate settle back into its usual pace. Still, he feels fidgety and not like going back to sleep. He rummages through his bag, looking for a shirt to put on. Now that they are on the run, he no longer has his royal guard uniform (a dark blue two-piece suit, a black tie and sometimes a fancy cape if the occasion called for it). Instead, the clothes he has with him now are ordinary street clothes. He fishes out a teal sweatshirt and slips it over his head. Once dressed, he crawls out of the tent, careful not to wake Daichi up.

He spots Hinata under a tree, and to his surprise, Noya lying with his head in Hinata’s lap. Oikawa pauses where he is when he hears Noya say something.

“It’s just… I-I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel.” Nishinoya’s voice, once loud and brazen, is now thin and on the verge of shattering. “My parents were… they — they were killed. Murdered. I saw the blood, Shouyou. There was a shit ton of blood. It was… it was everywhere. I saw their faces, lifeless and cold. E-even if we were never close, and never — you know, got along, I think I’m supposed to feel sad. Or at least… something. I mean, they are — they were still my parents. Isn’t that what a son’s supposed to do? Grieve, I mean. Grieve his dead parents. But me… Am I — am I fucked up, Shouyou? I don't feel… I can't feel anything. I can’t, I just can’t, bring myself to feel anything.”

To his credit, Hinata remains uncharacteristically quiet. He sits there, back against the tree and the prince in his lap, just listening to Noya and stroking his hair.

“Shouyou, do you — do you think that… does that make me bad? Am I a bad person?”

Hinata remains silent for several beats. Then he says, “Noya-san, I don't think it's possible for you to be a bad person. And I don't know much about — you know — psychology and the brain and stuff. But I know about grief, and how it feels to lose your parents. I think…” He trails off, seeming to be thinking hard. “I think different people grieve differently. When I…” His voice wobbles with emotion. “When I heard my parents died, it was like my whole world shattered. My sister, Natsu — she couldn't stop crying. But it took me three days before I could cry too. And my grandparents — they were there for us. They didn't cry in front of us, they must have held it all in, but I could hear them crying at night when Natsu and I were supposed to be asleep. My point is… I don't think there’s any right way to grieve someone who’s died, you know? You may not feel like you're grieving, but you probably are, and maybe you just haven't realised it yet.”

Noya doesn't stir from his position. Oikawa has sharp eyes, so even from this distance he can see the glistening of tears on Noya’s face.

“And maybe your parents aren’t the ones you’re grieving. Your relationship with them was… er, different. I understand if you never really loved them, or felt close enough to them to feel like you could grieve them. Maybe there’s something else you’re grieving, like the separation from Haruksama, or having to escape from your home 'cause it’s not safe anymore. And, um, whatever it is you’re grieving or not grieving, I don't think any of it makes you bad. I like you, Noya-san, and the people I like are never bad.”

Hinata’s logic is so simple and childlike, it should make Oikawa want to pinch his forehead in exasperation, but instead his heart warms. Hinata Shouyou really is the human embodiment of a beam of sunshine, casting his light on the pain that Nishinoya must be feeling and wrapping the broken boy in his warm, loving embrace. The Blue Crows are truly lucky to have someone like Hinata with them.

(Argh, damn it, did Oikawa really just call them the Blue Crows? Noya must never know about this mistake, or he would never live it down.)
“Noya-chan, whatever it is you’re feeling, just let yourself feel it,” Oikawa adds, sauntering over. “Don't think too much. You might hurt your head.”

Noya glares at Oikawa, but the effect is somewhat ruined by the fact that he’s draped upside-down on Hinata’s lap. “Shut up, you’re terrible.”

“Oh no, I’m terrible? I’ve been called shitty, a gaudy asshole, but how will I ever deal with being called terrible?”

Nishinoya rises to his feet, pointedly ignoring his sarcasm. “Oi, Tooru, did you pack my hair gel?”

“Yeah, that was the first thing I packed.”


Then the small boy marches off to his bag, presumably to do his hair up in their usual spikes. It’s nice to see that not everything has changed, even if it is just Noya’s hair routine.

Daichi and Asahi wake from their slumber. Daichi has bags under his eyes, but he is quick to instruct them on what to do. He delegates Oikawa and Asahi to breakfast duty (but not before giving Oikawa an earful about taking responsibility when Daichi isn’t awake to tell them what to do), and he helps Hinata take down their camp. Noya sits in his corner, gelling his hair up and watching them silently.

After a breakfast consisting of cheese crackers and canned food, they continue their journey through the winding forest. Daichi leads the way, Asahi sticks close by Noya’s side and Hinata bounds along beside Oikawa, the same way they did yesterday. This morning, Noya seems to want his own space. He is not clinging to Asahi the way he did last night (or this morning, depending on how you see it), instead keeping his hands in the pockets of his sweater.

To keep his brain occupied on the otherwise quiet and monotonous trek, Oikawa reflects on how fortunate they are for the royal-children-aren’t-allowed-out-of-the-palace-until-they’re-eighteen rule. This means no one outside the palace knows what the prince looks like and, hence, they don’t have to worry about disguising Noya and coming up with a fake identity for him. That would seem like an awful lot of trouble. He reflects on other things, too, like whatever ‘amends’ Noya is supposed to make to appease the assassins, as well as the fact that having to travel through all the districts to make these ‘amends’ means he can visit his home district. The thought sends a jolt of delight through him. He hasn’t been to Seijoh in a year ever since he became Nishinoya Yuu’s bodyguard, and that has been one heck of a full-time job. He wonders how his friends are doing – whether his boyfriend Iwa-chan is still as grumpy as ever, whether Mattsun and Makki are still pulling their pranks. He hopes things won’t be awkward between them when he does eventually return to Seijoh. He has kept in touch with Iwa-chan via letters, but they’re both always so busy and letters take forever to get sent to the addressed party.

Oikawa continues to think about his friends and home when they stop in a shady area by a lake for lunch. Presumably to keep Noya’s mind off last night, Hinata regales him with stories about Natsu. Asahi, seated next to Noya, watches him out of the corner of his eye. Out of all of them, he is the closest to Noya, having been his bodyguard the longest. He is probably the most worried about Noya right now. It really is cute how much Asahi cares about Noya — it’s too bad they are both just so hopelessly clueless about the other’s feelings.

But their lunch takes a turn for the worse when several bandits dressed in black appear.

(Seriously, what is it with bad guys and dressing in black?)
“Oi, you’re crowding our turf,” their leader growls. “Get lost, brats.”

Daichi, their trusty captain and PR delegate, stands to face him. “I apologise for our intrusion. We’re almost done with our lunch. I request that you spare us just a few more minutes to finish up, then I promise we’ll be out of your turf, no strings attached.”

But the bandits don't seem up for diplomacy. The leader bares his teeth, like a canine ready to strike, and the rest draw their weapons. Oikawa does a quick head count. There are about ten of them, and only four others on his side. Well, three, since Noya can’t fight.

“No can do, kid. You’re in our territory, so we’re calling the shots, not you, you get it? Now fuck off.”

Oikawa decides to, for once, actually fulfill his role as vice-captain. He rises to his feet and pulls on his gloves, then joins Daichi in staring down the bandits. He goes for a disarmingly sweet tone — one that is laced with poisonous undertones. Like a cake filled with snake venom. Or something like that. “Hello, bandit-chan. You must be mistaken. This is a forest, and we didn't see any markings that declared that this specific spot of forest belonged to anyone. I believe this means that this area is free for anyone to use, and so you are in no position to be telling us where to go.” He smiles, baring his own teeth back.

The leader growls, louder this time. “I’m done talking. I hate mouthy brats, so I guess we’ll just have to kill you.”

The bandits close in on them, waving their weapons threateningly. Before Oikawa realises what is going on, one of the bandits rush for Noya, his sword out and poised to kill. Noya yelps and executes a perfect libero dive to escape.

“Going for the smallest member of our team? Now that’s just dirty,” Oikawa mutters.

Asahi draws his polearm and positions himself between Noya and the bandit. On his face is the scariest, most incandescent expression Oikawa has ever seen the gentle giant wear. All traces of the weak-willed, timid bodyguard are gone, replaced by the focused and determined Ace that only appears on the volleyball court and when Nishinoya is threatened.

“Asahi! Take Noya and get out of here!” Daichi commands, pulling out his collapsible staff from his pocket and drawing it out to its full length. “We’ll hold them back!”

Asahi doesn’t hesitate. He pulls Noya up from the ground, pushing the smaller boy in front of him. Two bandits give chase, but Asahi fends them off, all the while covering Noya.

Oikawa doesn’t get to watch Asahi and Nishinoya for long. He has his own battle to fight. He snaps his left fingers, conjuring ice shards and sending them sailing into the thighs of the three bandits surrounding him. With his right hand, he creates a high wall of blue fire between Asahi and Noya and the rest of the bandits. Now if they want to go after his friends, they’ll have to burn to death first.

Otherwise, he tries to avoid killing the bandits. They aren’t a huge threat, just some annoying territorial assholes. He heard of the rising number of bandits in the kingdom from his correspondence with Iwa-chan. They mainly attack people for supplies and can be extremely territorial of whatever space they deem theirs, as they just demonstrated. But it’s hard to hold back when his war-hardened instincts practically scream at him to kill them so they can't bother anyone anymore. Yet, a small part of him (probably his conscience) quietly urges him not to take any more unnecessary lives, if it can be helped. So he listens to that small part. He holds back against the bandits just enough to keep them alive. He uses ice shards to incapacitate them and fire to deal out some first-degree burns as a
warning.

Iwaizumi also informed Oikawa that these bandits talk big, but lack the skills to walk their talk. Hence, even outnumbered, three trained warriors are more than capable of taking down the remaining eight bandits without much trouble. Although Oikawa was too caught up in his battle to watch the others, he can guess how they fought — Daichi’s fighting style is well-rounded and versatile, with a specialty in defense, so he most likely used his staff to block the bandits he was dealing with from getting to Oikawa or Hinata, and dealt out some harsh blows of his own too. Hinata is physically the weakest out of them, but he more than makes up for it with his speed and reflexes. While one blow from him probably wouldn’t elicit more than a surprised gasp, with his speed he can land many blows in rapid-fire succession, all the while using his reflexes to dodge most of his opponents’ attacks. Moreover, he also has his ridiculously high jump, and there are many ways to utilise a skill like that outside of the volleyball court.

With some sturdy rope Daichi brought along, they tie the bandits to several trees. The bound bandits glare daggers at the three warriors and make death threats. None of that bothers Oikawa, since he knows he and his friends can just kick their asses again if they try to act on those threats. Instead, he just smirks at them and shoots a peace sign, something he knows aggravates those on the receiving end of it.

“Well then,” Daichi says, dusting his hands off. “Now that that’s taken care of, shall we catch up with Noya and Asahi?”

Once they regroup with the other two members of the Not Blue Crows, Asahi grabs Daichi by the arm and whispers something urgently to him.

In the meanwhile, Hinata excitedly describes his battle to Noya.

“There were three dudes surrounding me, and they were all growly like gyaaaaah, but I wasn’t scared! They charged at me like swoooosh and hung onto a tree branch! They collided with each other like wa-POWWW and then Captain-san tied them up like they were — like they were—” He waves his hands in the air with great vigour in an attempt to illustrate his point.

“Wow, you must've been super cool, Shouyou!” Noya says, but his tone lacks his usual enthusiasm when it comes to anything Hinata-related.

Hinata’s grin falters. “Noya-san, are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, I’m peachy, don’t worry!”

Asahi approaches Oikawa, looking somber. “He’s not okay,” he says in a low tone, confirming Oikawa’s suspicions.

“What happened? Did he get hurt?”

“No; other than the injuries he already had before this he’s unharmed, thankfully. It’s just…” Asahi pauses, chewing on his lower lip. “You know how the assassins at the palace had swords? He… he kinda, I’m not sure, but I think the sight of a sword makes him freak out. Some of the bandits fought us with swords. He just — he went really pale and froze where he was. He couldn’t move on his own even after I dealt with the bandits. I had to drag him here before he snapped out of… whatever
“Swords probably trigger bad memories of what happened last night,” Oikawa says. “I think he has come to subconsciously associate swords, not wrongly, with violence, as well as death, abandonment, separation and so on; seeing so many swords near him probably triggered a flashback.”

He knows what he is talking about. For three months, he couldn't go near a quiver of arrows without having a violent flashback of how he and Kunimi had nearly been killed by arrows on their mission, even if he can't remember who fired the arrows or his other comrades who had actually been killed by said arrows.

Asahi’s face is ashen, his mouth curling to form a small horrified O-shape. “How… how can we help him get better? I don’t want him to suffer any more flashbacks. I just want him to go back to the way he was.”

Oikawa completely empathises. Seeing Noya so fragile, so scared, so broken, is a completely 180 degree personality change from who he was just yesterday afternoon. It is a bitter mix of disconcerting and heartbreaking.

“It will take time,” he says. “It was just yesterday; we can't expect him to bounce back so soon. It’s gonna take some time before he’s back to normal — and even then he may not completely revert back to who he was. But…”

Asahi raises his eyebrows. “But?”

“Time heals all wounds. That’s what I believe. He will get better. While — like I said — he may not go back to being 100 percent who he was before all this, he will be stronger. Tougher. Braver. And I think that's the best we can all hope for.”

Chapter End Notes

the "dog of the military" thing and Oikawa's fire glove were inspired by Fullmetal Alchemist. I'm such FMA and FMAB trash I couldn't help but insert a reference :")

originally, it was Kunimi with Oikawa in the flashback, but I decided to change Kunimi to Watari in light of, er, things in a future flashback.

in the next chapter, Daichi will reconnect with an old friend and Hinata will make a new one — mostly a light-hearted chapter to take a breather from all the death and trauma and angst of the past 2 chapters.

as usual, thank you for reading!

check out my tumblr :D
Two weeks have passed since that fateful night at the palace. Other than several small independent towns they passed by to stock up on supplies and spend the night at, the Blue Crows have mostly stuck to trekking through forests and mountains. By Daichi’s estimations, they should arrive at the Karasuno district by sunset today.

Daichi knows the others are weary of constantly being on the road, constantly sleeping on the hard ground of the wilderness with only a thin mat for comfort, as well as with one eye open to ensure their safety, especially that of Nishinoya. Although he has been humouring Hinata’s ramblings, all of them can tell his heart isn't in it. Daichi appreciates Hinata for trying to cheer the moody prince up anyway. Noya’s mood has been erratic and unpredictable — one moment it would seem like he’s back to his old self, joking and chatting boisterously, then the smallest thing would cause his mood to change on a dime. He lashed out at Oikawa when Oikawa was teasing him about the copious amounts of hair gel he used to style his hair, at Asahi for ‘babying’ him, and at Daichi for telling him off. It seems like Hinata, so far, is the only one immune to Noya’s nasty mood — it must be the perk of being the baby of the bunch.

Daichi is trying to be understanding. He knows Noya is terribly traumatised and he doesn’t actually mean what he says, so he tries not to take it personally. But all that on top of having to lead his team through the wilderness alive — the stress is taking its toll on him. He’s only eighteen, for goodness’ sake; he is too young to be having frown lines and grey hair (not that he has any yet, but at this rate that would seem like a very likely and soon-to-come future for him). Luckily, he knows a place in his home district where they can go and relax — heaven knows he needs just one day to unwind after months of putting up with Nishinoya and the rest of the Blue Crows. Don't get him wrong — he loves his new family, but he feels too much like a stressed young father.

“Look, look!” rings Hinata’s exuberant voice. “That’s Karasuno! We’re home!” He bounds up to Daichi, latches onto his arm and bounces up and down. “Daichi-san! Do you think I can go visit Natsu and my grandparents? Can I, can I? I haven't seen them in so long, and Natsu must’ve gotten really big by now!”

Daichi chuckles. He uses his other arm to firmly plant Hinata to the ground, because if he keeps jumping like that he might take Daichi’s captured arm with him. “Sure, but another day, alright? It’s late, so our first priority should be to find a place to stay at.”

“Yeah, where are we staying?” Oikawa pipes up from the back of the group.

“My place,” Daichi says. “It’s pretty close to the entrance of the district, so we can crash there.”

“Your parents won’t mind?” Nishinoya asks.

Daichi stiffens and replies shortly, “My father passed away a while back, and I never knew my
mother.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry.”

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago.”

He doesn’t like talking about his parents, because even the circumstances of how he came to exist were less than pleasant. According to his grandparents, his mother… forced herself on his father when they were in school together. Then when she got pregnant, she panicked and dumped baby Daichi on his father. His father never reported the incident to the authorities, because — let’s be real — who would believe a man who claimed to have had sex forced on him by a woman? According to him, no one would believe he didn’t consent to it, and it would be humiliating if others knew he couldn’t stand up to a woman.

The whole sordid tale has left a bitter taste in Daichi’s mouth. He hates it when people say that children are born of the love between man and woman, because he was born of the violation of his father’s bodily autonomy. Sometimes, when he has time to himself, he wonders if he even deserves to live. The only reasons why he’s still alive are because the Blue Crows, especially Nishinoya, need him, and also for his childhood friend. He would hate to make his friend cry.

To his credit, Daichi’s father did try to take care of him, but seeing Daichi must have been a constant horrible reminder of the incident. Eventually, he turned to alcohol to drown his sorrows when Daichi was six and died from alcohol poisoning a few years ago. From a young age, he has had to be self-sufficient since he couldn’t rely on his father to take care of him. Thankfully, the woman next door was kind enough to take care of him when his father couldn’t, and her son was diligent in ensuring Daichi was never alone. Even in unfortunate situations, kindness and love are present in every corner.

Daichi hasn’t been home in ages, so he is a little self-conscious about the state it must be in when he invites his friends in. The air is musty. Dust covers every available surface, and the stench of spoiled food wafts from the kitchen.

“Er, sorry about this,” he says, gesturing to the mess of his house. “It’s been a while, so I haven’t had the chance to do much housekeeping.”

“Don’t mind, Daichi-san!” Hinata chirps. “We’re just happy that you’re willing to share your home with us. Hey, we should help you clean up as thanks for letting us stay!”

“Eh? That won’t be — you’re my—”

“I call dibs on dusting! And the Grand King gets to clear the stinky food from the kitchen!”

“Shou-chan, don’t delegate menial tasks to your vice-captain!” Oikawa protests, chasing after the redhead ball of energy.

Daichi sighs and presses his face into his palms. They’re a wild bunch to take care of, but he will never regret letting them into his life. If he were to continue with the young father analogy, he would be a stressed, completely-done-with-everyone’s-bullshit but, deep down, a satisfied and happy young father.

Then the smell of burning rotten food assaults his senses. He exchanges an alarmed glance with Asahi and Noya.

“Oi, Oikawa! Don’t burn the spoiled food, you moron!”
The next day, the Blue Crows decide to split up. Oikawa and Asahi volunteer to purchase more supplies, and Daichi takes Noya to a spa-healthcare place that will hopefully speed up his healing process. Hinata chooses to latch onto Daichi and Noya, out of curiosity. Oikawa and Asahi are fine with missing out on spa day — Asahi because he is too shy to visit a spa, and Oikawa because he had an embarrassing situation at a spa once. He refuses to elaborate beyond that, no matter how much Hinata whines and begs.

“Where are we going?” Noya grouses. He is grumpy because Daichi refused to let him stay alone at his home to brood and stew in his thoughts and destroy the whole place.

“You’ll see.”

“Thanks for the details. You’re a stellar captain.”

Daichi ignores the sullen remark. He leads them through the streets of Karasuno, grateful for the fact that the morning crowd has dispersed.

They arrive outside a small teal building. The sign at the entrance reads, *Yousei Services*.

“*Yousei Services*?” Noya repeats, a hint of skepticism in his tone. “What’s this, a brothel?”

Daichi smacks the back of his head. “No, I told you, it’s a spa-healthcare place. To be honest, I’m not all that sure about the details either, so I’ll let the staff inside explain.”

He pulls Noya along with him, who’s still being stubborn and moody, into the building. Hinata trots along, flanking Daichi’s other side. He *ooh*’s and *aah*’s at the shiny polished floor, the warm lighting, the candles. That kid is really easily impressed, like a child; Daichi finds it hard to remember that Hinata is only two years younger than him.

Leaning against the receptionist counter is a familiar face. Daichi can’t help the grin that spreads across his face — besides for bringing Noya here for some therapy and wanting some relaxation himself, his other motive has been to visit his childhood friend.

“Suga!” he greets, waving at the other man.

There are many things people should know about Sugawara Koushi — he is possibly the kindest and sweetest person to ever grace the earth and very possibly an angel in disguise. He is also a part-fairy, which explains his delicate and pretty features. (Delicate and pretty features are the defining physical trait of part-fairies, which is why people constantly mistake Oikawa for a part-fairy, even though he is 100% human and an additional 200% annoying.) Fairies have been extinct for about a century now, so Suga’s fairy abilities are quite dampened by five generations of human blood. Daichi takes this to be a good thing, only because he doesn't think he could handle it if Suga possessed the beauty of a full-fledged fairy.

Suga’s face lights up with a smile that never fails to make Daichi’s heart race. “Daichi!”

He hurries forward, as if afraid Daichi would disappear if he doesn't get to him fast enough. Daichi rushes to meet him in the middle, excitement and elation pumping through him. The two friends wrap the other in a tight, warm embrace. In that moment, Daichi briefly forgets about Hinata and Noya standing behind him, about his worries, about the uncertainties of the journey ahead of him and
his friends. All that matters is that Suga, his dearest, most precious friend, is in his arms and is as delighted to see Daichi as Daichi is to see him. Suga giggles and presses his face into Daichi’s shoulder. Daichi squeezes him closer to him.

A few heartbeats and an eternity later, they pull away from the embrace, still grinning at each other.

“Daichi, it’s so good to see you,” Suga greets, his voice as smooth and sweet as Daichi remembers, albeit a little lower than what it was about a year and a half ago. “What brings you all the way to Karasuno, to my humble little business?”

“Ah…” Daichi rubs the back of his neck. “It’s, uh, a long story.”

“Oh, you royal guards and your long stories,” Suga teases, lightly karate-chopping Daichi’s side. He doubles over, coughing and wheezing. “Anyway, I see you brought friends. Hello, Daichi’s friends!”

“Ah!” He has forgotten about them. Noya and Hinata shuffle forward, and Daichi quickly introduces them to each other. “Suga, this is Noya and Hinata. Noya and Hinata, this is Sugawara.”

“But just call me Suga. I understand that ‘Sugawara’ is quite a mouthful.”

“Yo,” Noya says. “So, uh, what does this place do? Daichi told me off when I asked if this was a brothel.”

“Because it’s not!”

Suga laughs, a light tinkling sound. “That’s a good idea, actually. Maybe if I feel like starting my own business one day, it’ll be a brothel. Thanks for the idea, Noya-kun.”

Noya looks down at his shoes. “Just Noya.”

“So what is it you do here, Suga-san?” Hinata asks, buzzing with curiosity and wonder.

“Ah, I’m glad you asked. Here at Yousei Services, we provide two types of services. The first is healing services, run by part-fairies. It’s where I usually work at, since I descended from a race of fairies who specialised in healing magic. The other is a spa, run by humans, so you can go there to get a massage, a full-body scrub, a facial and so on.”

Hinata’s eyes light up with understanding. “So you assign who does what based on whether they’re part-fairy or human?”

Suga’s warm smile wavers ever so slightly. “Well, that’s the idea. We could do that ‘cause we had the resources — we are a healthcare service, after all. But we lost funding from the government, when the former king and queen, may their souls rest in peace, decided to pool more money into the military—”

Daichi doesn’t miss the way Noya stiffens at the mention of his late parents.

“—and as a result, we’ve had to let go of some staff members. We’re a little understaffed now, so some of us have to work double duties.”

That is when Daichi notices the weariness in Suga’s face. Even though he doesn't have eyebags, because of his part-fairy beauty (it’s highly unfair), the exhaustion is still evident to someone who has known him for most of his life.
Suga smiles and claps his hands together. “Well, that’s quite enough of me! How can I help you three today? Are any of you in need of healing? Or do you perhaps just want to be pampered and have a spa day?”

“Ooh, I’d like a spa, please!” Hinata requests, beaming. “I’ve never been to a spa before, so I’m really excited!”

“Okay, one spa coming up for Hinata-kun. Yachi!” Suga calls over his shoulder to a petite blonde girl, who is peeking out from behind the staff room door. At the sound of her name, she squeaks, drops whatever she is holding and scampers to join them in the main foyer.

“Y-yes, Suga-san?” she asks. She folds her hands in front of her, eyeing them apprehensively as though terrified they might attack her.

“Hinata-kun here will be your guest today,” Suga explains, his tone gentle and encouraging. “Please show him to a room and take care of him.”

“Eh, me?! But I’m not — I mean, I’m just an intern, and I don’t—”

“Hello, Yachi-san!” Hinata says, approaching the small girl with his usual energy. “Don’t worry, I won’t bite. C’mon, let’s go, let’s go!” He grabs her hand and leads her down the hallway, like he is the one working here and not her. She splutters and stammers as Hinata drags her away. Poor girl. Hinata is a good guy, but Daichi hopes he doesn’t overwhelm her.

“Shimizu,” Suga says, turning to a gorgeous dark-haired girl who Daichi somehow didn’t notice. “Will you take care of Noya, please?”

She nods and beckons to Noya to follow her. His face is flushed at the sight of such a pretty girl, and he seems too tongue-tied to say anything. Daichi figures she must be part-fairy, too.

“And that leaves you with me!” Suga announces, turning back to Daichi. “Wow, would you look at all the coincidences that led to this very coincidence!”

Daichi grins. Under Suga’s smiling and friendly demeanour lies a cunning brain that enables him to get what he wants the way he wants it. It’s a good thing he is only interested in running a healing/spa service — and a possible brothel in the future — and not world domination.

“Are you even allowed to give treatment to a friend?” he asks. “Like, uh, I know healthcare and spa services have some sort of code of ethics to follow, to rule out, like, ulterior motives or something…”

“What, do you want me to have an ulterior motive for wanting to give you a massage?” Suga grins. There is something about his tone that makes Daichi’s face blush furiously.

“J-just show me to the spa room, pretty boy.”

Suga giggles again and shoots Daichi a wink. “Well, don’t worry about codes of ethics. What the boss doesn’t know won’t kill him.”

The blush doesn’t quite leave Daichi’s face for the next few hours.

Yachi Hitoka is a good girl. She comes to work on time, she works her assistant role well and she
listens to her supervisors without fail. As a student intern, her main role is to assist her mentor, Shimizu Kiyoko, in treating the customers and sometimes running errands for her.

Then she gets assigned to take care of a lively chatty boy, all on her own. Can you fault her for panicking? What if she messes up? What if he asks for a herbal wrap and she gives him a mud wrap instead? He would complain to Suga-san, and Suga-san — who has been nothing but kind and patient with her so far — would decide she is not worth keeping around no matter how understaffed they are and fire her, and then she’d have to write a 2500-word report to her sensei detailing why she was fired from her internship, and that would stay on her records. She can imagine an employer looking at her pitiful 2500-word report and throwing it right back at her face, being all like, “We don’t hire losers who can’t even keep a simple internship position at a healthcare-cum-spa business!” Her mother would definitely disown her, and poor Yachi would have to live off scraps found in dustbins and maybe even have to resort to selling her organs just to survive.

“Yachi-san!” Hinata sings. He is still holding her hand in that tight grip, which she supposes is a good thing; if he lets go she might just collapse from the anxiety wracking her body. “You’re an intern here, right?”

She manages a weak nod. “Y-yes! So I, um — I apologise in advance if my service isn’t up to your expectations. This is my first time, you know, handling a customer on my own, you see. Ah, not that it’s an excuse, of course! If I — I mean, I will take full responsibility if my service isn’t satisfactory!”

“Hey, don’t sweat it! I’m sure you’ll be great. Besides, this is my first time too, so I don’t have any prior experience to compare to.”

*This is like a romance novel, except the guy isn’t usually this energetic. We sound like a couple talking about— no, bad Yachi! she scolds herself. Stay professional! You can do this! Even Intern B can give a satisfactory spa experience! And besides, you don’t even like guys like that!*

“Hey, so uh, which room are we supposed to go to?” he asks, grinning sheepishly.

“Oh, here.”

Yachi directs him into a dim room and switches on the light. The warm orange light reflects off the polished oakwood floor. A bed — fitted with crisp white sheets — stands in the center of the room, with a pot of peace lilies beside it. A ways in front of the bed is a wooden cupboard, which she knows is stocked with essential oils, towels, scrubs and other equipment, and a small counter. Two doors at the opposite end of the room lead to the sauna and bathroom respectively, should a customer want a sauna or a shower after a scrub.

“Would you like some music, Hinata-kun?” Yachi asks. “We have classical.”

“That would be great, thanks!” Hinata chirps.

Yachi switches on the radio, then fetches the menu from the counter and hands it to Hinata. “Um, here. Menu. So you can, you know, choose what treatment you want.” She must sound like an idiot and nothing like the professional Kiyoko is.

Hinata’s eyes light up as he peruses the menu. “Wow, so many items to choose from! I wonder how loaded Daichi-san is…”

She smiles and leans back against the wall. Since he has been so patient with her, putting up with her inexperience, she figures she can be patient and wait for him to pick what he wants.

Eventually, after much *ooh*-ing and wondering how much money his friend Daichi has, Hinata
requests for an aromatherapy massage. Classic choice. She nods and instructs him to undress.

“Okay!” He cheerily tosses his shirt off and shrugs off his pants.

Yachi has worked at Yousei for three months now, so she has become used to customers undressing with various degrees of shamelessness in front of her (though normally she tries to leave the room first before they strip to give them some privacy). She can do this, she reminds herself. She can’t keep hiding behind Kiyoko-san. She will eventually have to take care of a customer on her own anyway, so better sooner than later. She’s lucky that her first customer is someone as nice as Hinata, even if he is quite loud and overwhelmingly energetic. She can do this. She is relaxed now, she knows what to do, she is trained for this—

It’s only when Hinata’s hands tug on the hem of his briefs that she panics again.

“Wait, no! Not that! Everything but that!”

“So, let me get this straight,” Suga says, pausing in the middle of massaging Daichi’s back. “The assassins didn’t kill the prince, and in fact you’ve been travelling with him for the past two weeks, you and your friends were attacked by bandits, and Hinata-kun can jump so high he can reach a tree branch with no problem?”

“Uh, the Hinata part was an extraneous detail,” Daichi mutters. He tries to ignore the warmth of Suga’s still palms seeping into his bare back. “But yeah, that’s the gist of it.”

“No wonder I thought you looked more banged up more than usual. Do you have a healer on your — what did you call your team again?” Suga’s voice breaks into a fit of rather unprofessional giggles.

Daichi turns his head to glare at him. “The Blue Crows,” he says through gritted teeth. “Noya’s idea of a nickname for us.”

“Sorry, I don't mean to mock you or him. It’s a cute name, really! Um, what was I saying before I sidetracked?”

“Whether there’s a healer on the Blue Crows — stop laughing. And to answer your question, if you’re talking about your kind of magic healing then no. But Asahi’s pretty proficient with the first-aid kit.”

Suga clucks his tongue, resuming the massage. “That won’t do. There's only so much a first-aid kit can do, especially for someone as reckless as the prince apparently is.”

Daichi sighs. He lets his head flop back down on the mattress. “Tell me about it. I’m supposed to protect him from external threats, yet it’s like the biggest threat to his safety is himself, you know?”

Suga hums an affirmative noise, then falls silent. Daichi has known him long enough to recognise this as a sign that he is thinking deeply about something. He closes his eyes, taking the moment to enjoy the gentle massage and silence.

“I’ll tell you what,” Suga finally says. His hands travel down to Daichi’s spine, sending shivers up his back. He has always been sensitive there.
“Y-yeah?”

“I’ll join you Blue Crows on your journey.”

Daichi is so stunned by the announcement he forgets to scold Suga for snickering at the name. “Wait, huh? You — what?”

“C’mon, Daichi, I didn't think you were this dense. You heard me right: I’m joining you and the prince and the rest of you on your journey around the kingdom – or should I call it a soon-to-be queendom now?”

Daichi sits up, twisting his body around to face Suga. “What, no! You can’t! It’s not like I hate having you around — I actually enjoy your company very much — but you have your job here. You said this place is understaffed. You can’t just up and leave them when they need you.”

“But you need me too.” Suga smiles. He reaches out and gently cups the side of Daichi’s face. “Besides, I wasn't asking you for permission, Captain. I was just informing you about my plan.”

“B-but, this place…” Daichi protests weakly.

“Don't worry about that, leave it to me. Just give me a week at most to make the necessary arrangements, alright?”

Daichi sighs again. As a warrior, he has learned to recognise battles he can’t win and find the smartest, most cost-efficient way to concede defeat. He may be the captain of the Blue Crows and a natural-born leader, yet the one person he will defer to is Suga.

“Oh, fine, you win. But one condition: you take over as vice-captain. Oikawa is kinda shit as a vice-captain.”

(He guesses it’s because Oikawa wants to be captain, too. Oh well, we can't always have nice things.)

“You have yourself a deal, Captain-san.”

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“Yachi-san?”

“Y-yes? And just Yachi is fine. What’s the matter? Am I pressing too hard?”

“No, the massage is fine,” Hinata reassures her. “I just wanted to ask — why did you decide to intern here?”

The memory of how she was recruited causes her ears to burn in embarrassment. She reaches for the bottle of oil, stalling for time to collect her thoughts.

“Um, so there was a career fest at my school, Karasuno Academy,” Yachi explains. “It’s for us to decide if we want to do an internship instead of an exam to make up our final grade, as well as the type of internship we want. There were talks and booths and all that stuff. I didn't know what I wanted, so I was kinda just wandering around, looking around, reading brochures.”

Yachi is that student — the kind of student who works hard and gets good grades for the sake of it,
not because she has a particular goal in mind she is working towards. Sometimes she feels like a loose leaf just floating through the air, letting the wind push her where it wishes her to be, never making her own decisions, never taking her own stand. Not that she tells Hinata any of this, to save some face.

“Kiyoko-san, the one who’s with your friend, approached me at the fest and asked me if I was interested in an internship position at Yousei Services.”

Yachi deliberately omits the part where she was so in awe of Kiyoko’s beauty that she zoned out while Kiyoko was talking and panicked and automatically said yes when Kiyoko asked whether she was up for it. This is a secret she shall take to the grave with her.

“Whoa, that’s cool!” Hinata says. “Your parents must be proud of you for landing an internship position.”

She pauses in the middle of the massage. Her fingers curl towards her palms, scraping lightly against Hinata’s narrow but toned shoulders.

“Yachi? Did I say something wrong?”

She shakes her head, then stupidly remembers he can’t see her. “Oh, no, you didn’t. It’s just — my mother. She, um, she didn’t really approve. Of the internship, I mean.”

If she could see his face, Hinata would most likely be frowning.

“Huh, why? Isn’t an internship a good thing? ” he asks blankly. ”You get job experience and money. Seems like a sweet deal to me.”

Yachi lowers her head, letting her short blonde hair curtain her face. “She didn’t approve because, um, because of what I’m like.” Sensing his confusion, she rushes to add, “Uh, this is kinda embarrassing, but she thinks I’d just give up halfway through my internship and sort of just drift around aimlessly.”

“That’s not nice of her.”

“But she’s not wrong. In school, I was too timid to join extracurricular activities. And when I did, I just dropped out shortly after joining.”

(Her record is three weeks as the manager of the boys’ volleyball team. Then she quit because the boys were quite intimidating, all tall and muscular and broad.)

“As this year’s my final year at school — oh yeah, I’m sixteen but I skipped two years. Er, as I was saying, it’s my final year so there’s a lot of pressure to decide what I want to do with my life. Like whether I wanna find work first or go to a university after graduation. But—” She pauses, willing away the lump forming in her throat. When she deems it safe, she continues, “—I don’t know what I want to do with my life. A-and my mother, she wants me to have it all sorted out, but I don’t and she’s really disappointed and I-I was just Student B, and now I’m just Intern B. Is this all I’ll ever amount to? I can’t—”

She can’t stop the tears from flowing down her face and landing on Hinata’s back. Startled, he sits up and turns to face her. She swipes her forearm across her wet face, but she can’t stop crying.

Great job, Yachi Hitoka, she imagines her mother saying. Your first time attending to a customer on your own, and you cry in front of him? And it’s not even about the job. Can’t you ever do anything right?
If Hinata wasn’t going to complain about her sloppy massage job earlier, he is definitely going to complain about his masseuse sobbing all over him.

That’s it, she thinks morosely to herself. You’re not welcome back here. The only way to survive from now on is through organ marketing—

A pair of warm hands cover hers and pull them away from her face. Hinata sits in front of her, his smile kind and earnest. He squeezes her hands comfortingly.

“Hey, don’t sweat it,” he says, face bright and glowing like the sun. “Different people take different amounts of time to find out what they wanna do with their lives — that doesn’t mean you won’t get there. So don’t worry about it and just keep doing what you’re doing, ‘cause it’ll come to you eventually. Please don’t be sad anymore, Yachi!”

She sniffs, but she can’t help the smile that is slowly but surely spreading across her face.

“Thank you, Hinata-kun,” she says. “That was very kind of you.”

“Just Hinata! Or Shouyou — that’s my given name. I’m not picky about what people call me, so call me whatever!”

Yachi decides to stick to Hinata, for now. “Okay, Hinata. Um, can we talk about something else that’s not me? Hmm… What about you? What do you do?”

Hinata turns over on his stomach, allowing her to continue with the massage. She pours more essential oil on his back and massages it into his skin, listening to his story.

“Back when I was training in the Karasuno branch of the Training Academy, I wanted to join the Elite Squad, ‘cause there was this super cool guy there. He’s small like me, but he’s a superb fighter! He’s practically a legend! So they call him the Tiny Giant. I wanted to fight beside him, that’s why I wanted to join the Elite Squad. Besides, the squad itself is really cool! Like, wa-ping! And ka-pow! They get sent on military operations, sometimes alongside the official military, sometimes independently, like on Operation Kitagawa Daiichi! You’ve heard of Operation KD, right?”

“Er, somewhat.” Yachi has read some headlines, but that’s all the knowledge she has about the military side of things in the kingdom.

“So from what I heard, the emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi threatened to invade the kingdom, ‘cause they wanted to expand their territory or something. Since KD’s a small island, the king and queen — ex king and queen — didn’t take his threat seriously. Then KD’s military blew up some part of the Dateko district with some magic explosive spell. That’s when the king and queen recognised that as a declaration of war, so they got the Elite Squad to deal with the threat. And the media called it Operation Kitagawa Daiichi ‘cause — I don’t know. To make it sound cool, I guess?”

Yachi blanches. She definitely heard about the tragedy that befell Dateko. She hopes the citizens there are doing better now.

“It’s a good thing the emperor eventually surrendered,” Hinata continues. “Cause apparently around that time there was this epidemic that was spreading around. Many civilians died from the epidemic, on top of the, uh, the colla— colle—”

“Collateral damage?” Yachi assists.

“Yeah, what you said! And…” Hinata’s expression falls. “My parents — they were military medics, and they were sent on Operation KD too, to attend to the injured warriors. But… they — I was told
they passed away there. Apparently, they caught the disease that was going around and didn't survive.”

Yachi clamps a hand over her mouth, disregarding the oil on her hands. “That’s horrible. I’m so sorry, Hinata.”

“Don’t be, it’s not your fault,” he reassures her. "Anyway, it’s a miracle none of our kingdom's warriors caught the disease, though, considering how long they were in Kitagawa Daiichi.”

Hinata pauses, as though thinking about a distant memory. Yachi wonders if it has anything to do with Operation KD.

“Anyway, I had to fight this grumpy growly guy for a spot in the Elite Squad.” Hinata’s voice takes on a sullen tone. “He’s all mean and scary, like grr, like a saber-toothed tiger! Then…”

“Did you win?” Yachi asks hopefully. She can’t believe this guy — she’s only known him for maybe half an hour, and he has managed to charm her into rooting for him. Worse, it seems like he had no intention to do so; he’s just that charismatic.

“… No. I lost. Badly. So I’ve decided!” Hinata sits up suddenly, pumping his fist in the air and giving poor Yachi a heart attack. “One of my life goals is to have a rematch with him and win!”

Boys...

“That’s, um, that’s nice. I hope that goes well.”

“Thanks! But for now, I’m focusing on my job as a royal guard! I became one to support my little sister, Natsu. She’s six and really cute! You see, um, since my parents passed away, someone’s gotta make money and support the family. ’Cause we can’t rely on the money my parents left behind for ever, even if it's a lot of money, I decided to join the royal guards. I’m in charge of guarding Prince Noya-san! So those are my other goals in life — to provide for Natsu and protect Prince Noya-san!”

Yachi smiles. “That’s really sweet of you, Hinata.”

Then she realises something about his last two statements doesn’t make sense.

“Wait, ‘protect Prince Noya-san’?” she repeats, puzzled. "Isn't Noya-kun the other boy who was with you and Daichi-san? And wasn't the prince assassinated two weeks ago?”

Hinata freezes. “Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit. I, er, shit. I mean, the other Prince Noya-san. Secret twin, you know? Ha… ha. Shit, am I a bad liar or what?”

Yachi is about to cover her mouth to mask her giggles, before remembering her hands are oily. “Hey, don’t sweat it. I won’t tell anyone, cross my heart and hope to die.”

He tilts his head like a confused puppy. “That’s a complicated way of saying you promise, right?”

“Yep, your secret is safe with me. No questions asked.”

(Even though she can feel the questions burning inside her, she decides to respect Hinata’s secret. That's the least she can do for him.)

A relieved smile replaces his worried frown. “Okay, that’s good. Thanks!”

Then Hinata is back to chatting with her. Yachi offered to play music earlier so that the room wouldn't be awkwardly quiet, but she should have guessed there would be no need. Hinata’s
talkativeness is more than enough to fill all the awkward silences in the whole building.

An hour later, she concludes the massage. She turns around to give Hinata some privacy while he gets dressed. She busies herself with packing away the bottles of oil and tidying up the bed. Once they are both done, she walks him to the foyer.

“Hey, Hinata,” she says. “I’m, um… I’m really glad we met!”

“Yeah, me too! You’re really cool and good at massages!”

A blush of pride takes over her face. “Thank you, that’s so kind of you. Before this, I — it wasn’t like I hated working here or anything. But after meeting you, I decided that I really like working here if it means I get to meet more people like you. And… I know the future isn’t set in stone or anything, and that things can change, but maybe… maybe working here is what I’m supposed to do. Maybe my purpose in life is to make people feel good and to provide a listening ear. Perhaps my destiny isn’t rooted here specifically in Yousei Services, but I have a feeling that my true destiny is similar to what I’m doing here. So I just want to thank you for everything. For encouraging me, opening my eyes, listening to me — just for being here with me.”

“Aww, you give me too much credit!” But Hinata’s smile is pleased. “I’m glad you feel that way. You know what that means?”

The gleam in his honey brown eyes makes her unsure if she wants to know.

“Um, what?”

“We gotta find your mother and tell her! Show her that Intern B can do great things!”

“Eh? There’s no—”

But, as she has come to realise, when Hinata puts his mind to something there is no convincing him otherwise. He grabs her hand for the third time that day and drags her out of her workplace.

“W-wait, Hinata—”

“C’mon, let’s go!”

“But who — who’s gonna pay? You can’t just run out without paying!”

“Daichi-san will take care of it! He’s the captain! Where’s your mother?”

“Eeeeeh?!”

Chapter End Notes

PSA: all survivors of rape/non-con are equally valid regardless of gender (and when i say gender i mean ALL gender identities)!! no one survivor's experience is more or less valid and authentic than another's!!

on a lighter note, I realise the Hinata x Yachi here seems kinda romantic but I swear I wrote them with the intention of them being platonic — but hey if you ship Hinata and Yachi no one’s stopping you from donning shipping goggles!
thanks as always for reading :D

drop by my tumblr!
Chapter Notes

I recommend that you listen to Photograph by Ed Sheeran when reading this chapter for maximum feels, for no particular reason other than the fact that Photograph gives all the feels.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Noya feels self-conscious about undressing in front of women, especially in front of such an attractive woman. He is small and wiry, without the chiseled muscles that other guys — like, say, Asahi — has. His hands hesitate at the hem of his shirt.

“Please don’t feel self-conscious, Noya-san,” Shimizu says. She turns away, busying herself with removing towels and bottles from a cupboard. “This is a strictly professional place. You are safe here.”

“Uh, there — um, you can drop the san,” Noya mumbles. Why isn't he more smooth talking to girls, damn it?

She pauses. Her stoic demeanour makes it difficult to tell if she is startled or offended, or whatever other emotion she might be feeling. “Would it make you comfortable if I simply addressed you as ‘Noya’?”

He nods. “Please.”

“Okay. Noya, it is.”

Since she isn't looking, he hurriedly takes his clothes off. Face burning with embarrassment (he wishes he has Tooru’s charisma when it comes to interacting with women), he lies down on the bed and burrows himself under the blanket.

He doesn’t know what treatment he wants, overwhelmed by all the choices available on the menu. Shimizu suggests a herbal full-body massage. He agrees, though he has no idea what that is, just wanting to get this spa thing over and done with.

Despite his initial apprehension, he relaxes under Shimizu’s professional and gentle touch. Her hands unknot the kinks in his shoulders and aches in his back. She pops the joints in his fingers, loosening the stiffness in them. In no time, Noya’s body feels all mushy and loose and unwound. He presses his face against the bed, allowing his eyes to drift shut.

But while his body feels good, his emotions are still a mess. No matter how relaxed his body becomes, his heart remains a bundle of anxiety, anger, guilt and sadness. In that moment, he hates Daichi for dragging him out here, when all he wants is to curl up in bed and sleep. Noya never thought it possible, but he wants to be alone. He has never really wanted to be alone before — he always felt his best when surrounded by his friends. But now having his friends crowd around him, fussing over him — he hates it. It acts a constant reminder of what he lost when he was forced to leave the palace; he has almost everyone he loves with him, except the one who matters the most. Worse, she is all alone in the palace, where other assassins could be lurking hidden, and it’s all his
fault. If only he were stronger, if only he could protect the both of them. But he’s weak. He is small, short, dumb and weak, and that was why he had to abandon her — or why she had to abandon him.

And now he is a burden to his friends. They left their friends and families behind to protect him at the palace, and then they had to leave the safety and comfort of the palace to protect him. They couldn’t get a full night’s sleep when they were out on the road, because they had to take turns keeping watch to keep him safe. They all did their best to make him feel better, despite their own discomfort. Shouyou tried to cheer him up with tales about Natsu and his days in the Training Academy, Tooru attempted to get him back to his usual feisty self by teasing him, Asahi always made sure he had something to eat before taking food for himself, and Daichi went through the trouble of dragging him out of bed and to this spa in hopes of improving his spirits.

And all he has done is snap at and take his anger out on them.

Noya squeezes his eyes tighter, willing his tears to stay hidden. But because he is so incredibly weak, they spill out anyway. Then he can’t stop the next wave of sobs that wrack his body. He trembles, he shakes, he weeps and he whimpers, the pain at last causing him to fully crack.

He vaguely hears Shimizu getting up and wiping her hands on a towel. Then he hears her voice, soft and kind, asking him to sit up. He listens, but he keeps his head lowered to hide his tear-stained face. Shame courses through him. Of course he had to cry and completely break down in front of such a gorgeous woman. There is no way to salvage his dignity now.

She remains quiet, adjusting his body so he sits with his back facing her. He’s relieved – at least now she can’t see him cry.

Her fingers, long and slender, run through his hair. She rubs his head in small, soothing circles. She doesn’t say anything or ask any questions; she just continues to stroke his hair and massage his head. The familiarity of the action slowly uncoils the tight bundle of pain in his heart. He gasps, another lump forming in his throat, when he realises that this is exactly what his nee-chan did to comfort him when he was upset. The thought of his beloved nee-chan reduces him to another puddle of tears, full of nostalgia and grief. He misses her terribly, yet it is like she never truly left him. If she were here, she would say something like, “The people who love you are never far, no matter the countries and oceans and continents that separate you. There’s always a part of me that you’ll keep with you, Yuu, and that’s my love. It won’t leave you behind no matter what.”

There’s something refreshing about this bout of crying, he finds. It is different from previously, when he cried out of self-loathing. Now the tears are releasing the pent-up pain he has been carrying around with him for the past two weeks. Gradually, his weeping turns into soft sobbing; then soft sobbing turns into the occasional hiccup and sniffle.

He shudders at the last sniffle. While his heart still aches, it does feel ten times lighter than it did before.

“Are you feeling better now, Noya?” she asks.

He turns around to face her and nods. “Yeah, thanks, Shimizu-san.” His voice is raw from crying. “I just wanna know — how did you know a head massage would calm me down?”

Because something about the way she stroked his hair didn’t seem like she had just guessed.

She smiles, a sight that sends flames spurtling across his cheeks. “I’m part-fairy. We have increased levels of empathy, so I could just sense that what you needed was a head massage. I’m glad to know it made you feel better. Shall we resume the massage?”
He rolls over back on to his stomach, and her hands position themselves on his back again.

He might not have had the ‘healing magic’ thing that Suga mentioned performed on him, yet he feels like he is on the path to recovery anyway.

After his massage, Noya meets up with Daichi and Suga, though Shouyou and Yachi are mysteriously absent. The receptionist, a bemused young man named Narita Kazuhito, informs them that Shouyou disappeared off with Yachi after shouting something about Yachi’s mother, a phantom person named Intern B, and how Daichi-san was apparently going to pay for all of their massages. He also expresses his hopes that Shouyou would return Yachi to Yousei soon, or the boss wouldn’t be happy at losing his dependable intern. Exasperated, Daichi pulls out several notes and coins from his wallet, muttering about his wallet seemed to be getting thinner and thinner with every day. Well, Noya doesn’t think he is in any position to be complaining since it was his idea to come here in the first place.

Meals at Daichi’s home are wonderful, because after two weeks of surviving on canned food and other non-perishables, they finally get to enjoy warm home-cooked food. That evening, Noya makes it a point to personally thank Shouyou and Daichi for preparing dinner. When Asahi and Tooru return from their shopping trip, he bows and thanks them for buying him more hair gel, and his favourite brand too. Asahi blushes in his adorable manner, mumbling about how it’s no big deal, while Tooru fake-cries in an exaggerated manner at Noya’s display of gratitude.

“Can it, you’re still an ass.” But even Noya’s jabs lack their usual sharpness and are instead coated with fondness.

Tooru, Asahi and Shouyou insist on keeping him occupied for the next few days, not that Noya minds. He’s happy to spend time with his friends. In the mornings, they play volleyball (though a voice at the back of his mind nags at him to think about the ‘amends’ he’s supposed to be making — but he elects not to think too much about it yet). In the afternoons, they show him around the districts and buy stuff for him. One afternoon, they visit Shouyou’s family. After meeting Natsu, Noya can’t believe how jealous he is of Shouyou for having such an adorable little sister. He loves his big sister, but now he wants a little nee-chan too. Then in the evenings, they play volleyball again.

Daichi, however, seems too busy to join them. He claims he has “stuff” to attend to with his buddy Suga.

“I bet he just wants to tap that,” Tooru snickers, bouncing the volleyball up and down.

The four of them are in Daichi’s backyard, once again playing volleyball. It is the only sport they enjoy. In the middle is a bizarre set-up of chairs, boxes and moth-eaten curtains. It’s supposed to function as a net, except it keeps getting knocked down by stray spikes and serves.

“Oikawa, please don't be vulgar,” Asahi says weakly. His face is red with embarrassment.

“Nah, Tooru’s totally right.” Noya chimes in, grinning. He crouches down into receive position, then beckons towards Tooru to call him to serve.

“Tap what?” Shouyou asks. His face is the picture of innocence, just waiting to be corrupted by whatever’s going on in Tooru and Noya’s minds.
Tooru and Noya exchange knowing looks the best they can with the ‘net’ blocking them.

“Well, young Shou-chan, when two people love each other very much—”

“Oh, I know!” Shouyou interjects, raising his hand like a student in class eager to answer his teacher’s question. “They have sex, right?”

“I can not believe you all,” Asahi moans, burying his face in his hands.

Noya laughs, his first genuine laugh in what feels like a long time. “Ten points to Shouyou! And zero to Asahi for being a spoilsport.” He blows his Ace a cheeky raspberry.

“I second Noya-chan’s motion.” Tooru serves a brilliant jump serve that never fails to get Noya’s blood pumping. Noya dives to receive the ball, but he trips and falls on his face when he hears Shouyou’s next question.

“But how does it work when it’s two guys? Like Daichi-san and Suga-san.” Shouyou frowns, like this is the most perplexing conundrum that he has ever encountered. “Sex ed at school only talked about what happens when it’s a guy and a girl.”

Noya and Tooru look at one another. Then they turn to Asahi.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” he protests, looking away. His face is still beet red, which Noya thinks is a good look on him. “It was your idea to bring this up, not mine. You explain it to him.”

Recognising that as a lost cause, Noya and Tooru turn back to face each other.

“Well, Noya-chan—”

“No, Tooru, you’re older and probably more experienced than I am about this. You should explain this to dear Shouyou.”

“More experienced?” Shouyou asks. “Does Oikawa-san have a boyfriend, too?”

“Excuse me—”

“Oh, just spill it already. Who’s Iwa-chan, huh?”

“My boyfriend, not that it’s any of your business, bratty prince,” Tooru huffs. He adjusts his collar, and he shifts from flustered back to his usual cocky demeanour. “You know what, Shou-chan? I think this is a matter you should take to our dearest captain.”

Shouyou tilts his head, really nailing the confused puppy look. “Daichi-san? Does he have experience?”

“Dai-chan is the wisest and most mature out of all your senpai — a true fount of knowledge of many different subject matters, so he would be able to explain it better to you—”

“Explain what exactly, Oikawa?”

Daichi stands at the door, his arms folded disapprovingly. Behind him is Suga, a serene smile on his face. Daichi’s expression suggests that he has been listening to their conversation for a while now, and he’s not pleased with their choice of topic.

“Ooh, Daichi-san! How do two guys—”
Asahi frantically clamps a hand over Shouyou’s mouth. “It’s nothing to worry about, Captain! Oikawa will explain it to him later!”

Tooru glares at Asahi. “Wow, way to throw your buddy under the bus, Ace-chan! Hmph, see if I’ll help you when you want to snare the man of your dreams!”

“Who said I wanted your help…”

(Noya can’t help but wonder about Asahi’s apparent man of his dreams. An odd feeling boils in the pit of his stomach, one he can’t quite place.)

“Hey Suga, you can change your mind any time,” Daichi says, pinching his forehead. “They’re a wild bunch, I know — I know all too well.”

Suga laughs, and Noya notices the almost-imperceptible flush that tints Daichi’s cheeks and ears. “No, fret not. I can take wild. I like wild.”

Noya doesn't get to wonder about what Daichi means — change his mind? About what? — because he realises there are six of them and that means—

Noya jogs over to pick up the forgotten volleyball. “Hey, let’s play three-on-three!” He brandishes the stray ball high above his head like a prized weapon. “Volleyball!”

Shouyou cheers, Asahi perks up, Tooru smirks in his smug way, Daichi rolls up his sleeves resolutely, and Suga smiles delightedly.

“Yes, please! I’ll play setter for one side, if there are no objections.”

Tooru raises his eyebrows. “Seriously, Dai-chan, of all the people you wanna bring home, it had to be another setter.” He straightens his back. “But, hear my words, fairy boy, I won’t lose.”

Suga’s polite smile remains in place, but there is something sly lurking under it. “Neither will I.”

“Oh yeah, Oikawa.” Daichi says, a dark glint entering his eyes. “From here on out you’re no longer vice-cap. Suga will be taking over your duties.”

“Eh?! Replacing me with your fairy boy — that’s mean, even for you, Dai-chan!”

The six of them have lunch together after the three-on-three. Daichi announces that Suga would join them and they would set off for Seijoh the day after tomorrow. Tooru seems rather miffed at having his vice-captain position usurped by a guy who has just joined them (or, as Tooru dubbed him after their match, “Mr Refreshing”) but accepted it with surprising graciousness — for a guy like Tooru, anyway, so the bar isn’t all that high.

After lunch, Noya manages to sneak out of the house. As much as he’s beginning to enjoy his friends’ company again, he wants to explore the streets of Karasuno on his own.

So that’s what he does. His feet lead him to what looks like a magical supplies store, Store Sakanoshita. The stuff on display look interesting, so he decides to take a peek inside to see what’s in store (see, who says Noya can't pun?).
The shelves are chock full of some of the most bizarre things he has ever seen. Bottles of some weird blue fungus-looking thing, pots of neon orange plants, hot pink gauntlets and a whole bunch of other stuff that hurts his eyes just to look at them. The stuff on display looked normal enough, but this — this is just overwhelming, even for Noya’s tastes.

“Kid, you really shouldn't wander around on your own. The bandits out there are ruthless, and they would hurt a child.”

Noya whirls around to face a tall man with dyed blond hair, pierced ears and a cigarette in his mouth. He’s wearing an orange apron, a pair of silver bracelets — one on each wrist — and a name tag that reads Ukai Keishin.

“Oh, first things first — uh, Ukai-san,” Noya says, puffing up like an indignant penguin, “I'm not a kid. I'm seventeen, which means I can already consent to sex and can drink next year. Second things first — er, second, I mean — are you even allowed to smoke indoors?”

“I haven't lit it up yet.”

Noya dutifully notes the yet.

“Anyway, you gonna buy something or you just gonna stand there and gawk? Don't waste my time, kid, I haven't got all day.”

“Gee calm down, gramps, I just got here. Give a dude some time to look at what you got to offer,” Noya huffs.

“Well, if you need me I’ll be at the counter.” The irritable man shuffles back to his spot, at last leaving Noya alone.

He continues browsing the shelves (thank god it was just that one shelf that was full of eyesores) but his mind lingers on the silver bracelets Ukai was wearing. They look really cool, even if the wearer is a smoking grump. He wonders if there are any on sale or if they're just Ukai’s personal accessories. He decides to just ask the man directly, and so he bounds over to the counter.

“You don't have anything you wanna pay for,” Ukai says, his tone gruff. He is sitting behind the counter, his legs propped up on it. His cigarette is lit, causing Noya to blanch and step away to avoid secondhand smoke.

“Yeah, I know, I just wanted to ask—”

Ukai stands up, cutting Noya off. “Hold the thought, kid, and get behind here.”

“What, why?”

“Just do as I say!”

With more strength than Noya would have expected, the man practically hoists him over the counter and plonks him down behind it.

“Keep low, alright?”


The word alone sends a shiver of disgust through Noya. He remembers their encounter with bandits
on their second day, the way they targeted him first because he was the smallest, the swords. Noya never wants to see a fucking sword ever again. Neither does he ever want to see a fucking bandit ever again.

Ukai must have seen the expression on Noya’s face. His hand pats Noya’s head firmly. “I know they’re scary, but don’t worry about it. I’ll handle them. I’m used to bandits trying to stir hell in my store.”

Noya thinks about how shitty living and working here must be, with the threat of bandits looming over one’s head. But Ukai’s face is resolute, if a bit exasperated.

The bandit slams the butt of his sword (fucking swords again) against the door, causing the glass to shatter. Seeming satisfied with his handiwork, he steps over the shards of glass and saunters in like he owns the place.

“That’s the third time this month you’ve broken my door down, asshole,” Ukai snaps. “I should start charging you compensation. I barely make enough on my own to constantly cover the repair costs.”

“Sorry to hear that, Ukai-san,” replies Asshole (which is what Noya decides to call him in his mind). “That is the proper honourific, right? I know I keep asking this every time I come by, but I can’t remember.”

“What the hell — just get out of here already! I’m sick of seeing your ass around here.”

“Hey, hey, it’s nothing personal. I just wanna stock up on supplies, like any other good citizen!”

“But any other good citizen would actually pay for it and go the extra mile of not breaking the store’s door,” Noya, unable to restrain himself, snarls. His fists clench by his sides. He is sick of standing back and watching others fight to protect him. He wants to be able to protect himself and others.

“Oi, stay out of this,” Ukai mutters, turning his head to glare at Noya.

“Hey, aren’t you the pipsqueak we met in the forest the other time?” Asshole says. “Man, give my regards to your leader — you know, the frowny growly one. Do you have any idea how long it took us to get out of those ropes?”

“You’re working alone now?” Noya asks Asshole, forcing all the bravado he can muster into those five words. “Where are your friends? They abandoned your stupid ass?”

Asshole’s smirk sours. “They’re still recovering from the damage your friends did to them, especially the pretty boy with the fire and ice gloves. It’s been a while since I’ve met a part-fairy.”

“He’s not, but don’t let him hear you. His head doesn’t need to get any bigger.”

Asshole laughs, a horrible grating noise that makes Noya cringe, and turns back to Ukai. “Well, as fun as it is to chat with this young firecracker here, you and I got business, Ukai-san. We can do this the easy way: just give me what I want and in return I’ll go, or we can do this the hard way.”

Ukai folds his arms and stares down at the bandit, whom Noya notices is a satisfying few inches shorter than Ukai. “We could do it the easy way, I agree. But it wouldn’t be good for business if I did things the easy way. Like I said, I’m barely making enough to cover the damage your punk ass causes every time you drop by for a visit.”

Asshole scowls. He unsheathes his sword, and Noya takes a few involuntary steps back. Ukai steps in front of Noya, his sleeves rolled up and arms spread out in what Noya has come to recognise as a
“I feel merciful today, Ukai-san. One last time — do you want to do this the easy way or not?!”

Ukai spits at the bandit. “Fuck your easy way. Get out my store!”

Asshole growls and charges at Ukai, his sword aimed right at the store owner’s chest. In one fluid motion, Ukai’s arm swings, knocking the sword away with his bracelet. The sound of metal clanking against metal rings sharply throughout the store. The force from the collision causes the bandit to stumble back, fumbling with his sword like it is a slippery bar of soap.

“I see you brought a new toy with you,” Asshole says, panting. “Well-played. But I will get my way, just you watch!”

“Please, you haven’t been able to get your way the past two times you tried, and I didn’t even have my new toy with me then.”

Once again, Asshole lunges towards Ukai. And once again, Ukai deflects him with a flick of his bracelets.

“What the hell is up with those bracelets?” Asshole growls, his smirk slipping off. “They aren’t even that big. I should have managed to get even just a cut on you.”

“Go home already,” Ukai says, sounding mockingly weary. “And eat a good meal. Maybe that’ll give you the strength the next time you’re stupid enough to challenge me again.”

“Yeah, how about no?!”

Like an idiot who doesn't know when to quit, Asshole rushes towards Ukai for the third time. This time, Ukai smashes his bracelets together, creating a blow-back force so powerful it knocks Asshole clean off his feet. The bracelets begin to glow and fizzle with silver energy. Noya blinks a few times, just to make sure he isn't seeing things.

(In hindsight, he doesn't get what he’s so surprised by — he knows part-fairies and magic gloves exist, so a pair of magical defensive bracelets shouldn’t be that far a stretch.)

“If I can’t beat you in a fight,” Asshole says, getting up again and dusting himself off. Then, faster than Noya’s distracted brain can register, he leaps over the counter, knocks Ukai aside and grabs Noya in a headlock, his sword just a few centimeters from Noya’s throat. “Then it looks like I gotta use a kid as leverage. What a shame, Ukai-san, that you’ve forced me to hurt a child just ‘cause you won’t cooperate.”

The sight of a sword so near him makes his head spin and bitter bile rise up his throat. His chest constricts. He suddenly finds it hard to breathe.

Ukai’s shoulders shake with barely concealed rage. “Don’t you dare, you son of a bitch! Stay away from my kid!”

Noya’s eyes widen. In that moment, Ukai’s eyes gloss over, like he’s reliving a distant memory. Noya has a feeling that the last sentence isn’t in reference to him.

“So, what’s it gonna be, Ukai-san? Gonna give me my way, or do you want a kid to die because of you?”

Ukai’s face twists up in conflict and… heartache? His shoulders, previously tensed from the
anticipation of a fight, now slumps down with the air of a cornered rabbit. His arms, raised in
defense, begin to lower to his sides.

And Noya decides that, no, he won't have this.

Using the speed he’s acquired from receiving Asahi’s serves, he slams his elbow back into Asshole’s
gut, ramming the wind out from his lungs. He knocks the sword away from him and winces when
the sharp tip catches his wrist.

“Ukai-san!” he shouts, turning to the older man who is frozen in shock. “Don’t you dare give up!
What you did just now was really badass, so don't you dare let me down with that half-assed
surrendering! Stand up and fight!”

“Damn brat, get out of my way!”

Noya briefly registers the tip of his sword pointing between his eyes. Then a stretch of metallic silver
emerges before his eyes, ramming the sword with so much force it flies backwards into the wall.
Ukai’s fist comes rushing down, and it collides with the side of the bandit’s head. He chokes and
slumps to the ground, passed out. With a sigh, Ukai picks up the unconscious bandit and tosses him
out of his store. Noya notices Ukai doesn't return the bandit his sword.

Noya blinks, also noticing that the bracelets on Ukai’s wrists are apparently now what look like arm
guards, like the type archers use.

“Whoa!” he exclaims, immensely impressed. “They can do that?”

Ukai nods. “Yeah, they can. But I usually keep them as bracelets so they’re less conspicuous.”

Noya grins. “Hey, that reminds me. I came here ‘cause I wanted to ask if you sold those bracelets
here. They look super cool.”

Ukai returns the grin. “Ah, a man after my own heart. I do, in fact, sell these bracelets here. They
come in silver, black, gold and red. Choose your poison.”

“Black!”

Noya loves the colour black, and he especially likes that colour on blazers. He makes a mental note
to scout the rest of the district to find a store that sells black blazers. A black blazer and a pair of
black bracelets that can transform into arm guards would look awesome as hell together.

“Hold on, I’ll fetch ‘em for you, wait here.”

Noya watches Ukai bustle off to the other end of the store. He pats his pockets, sheepishly realising
that he didn't bring along any money with him. He forgot that when one goes shopping, bringing
money would be a wise idea. He wonders how loud he would have to shout for Daichi to hear him
and come running.

“Here, kid.” Ukai brandishes a pair of glossy black bracelets at him.

“Er, about that. I, um, didn't bring any cash. But!” he adds hurriedly, catching the shift in Ukai’s
expression. “I have a friend who has money. He’s in this district. I’ll shout for him! O-or—” He
thinks about how far Daichi’s house is. He doubts that even his lungs can help him yell that loud.
“Or I can run back and fetch him and his wallet! Yeah, you can wait here, I’ll be right back—”

“Shut up and just take them,” Ukai interrupts. He snatches Noya’s thin arms and shoves the bracelets
up his wrists. “Free of charge. Just stay safe, kid. That guy’s not the only bandit around, so you ought to have something to defend yourself with.”

“What?! No, I can’t! I don’t — it’s not right. You yourself said you’re barely making enough money to pay for damages! And that asshole did plenty of damage!”

“Look, kid.” Ukai grabs his shoulders, looking earnestly at him. His eyes tell a tale of grief that continues to haunt the man to this very day, this very moment. “I had a niece. She was six. I wanted to give her a pair of these, because she wanted them. She wanted a black one, just like you. I figured I might as well, since it could keep her safe from bandits too. But her mother refused to let her have them, and she got mad at me — accused me of teaching her precious daughter to be paranoid, for sullying her innocence and a bunch of other stuff.”

“Yeah?” Then Noya pauses. “Wait, you had a niece?”

“Y-yeah, I was getting to that.” His voice trembles. “It happened when she was outside her school. She was waiting for her mother to pick her up. According to eyewitnesses, three bandits approached her, a-and they——”

Noya’s heart falls to his feet. Six. Ukai’s niece was six.

“My sister was never the same after that. Wouldn’t stop crying at the funeral. I had to give the eulogy she had prepared ‘cause she was crying too much. If only I had insisted more, or snuck those bracelets to her when my sister wasn’t looking, or — I don’t know, something, anything to have prevented what happened to my niece.”

Pieces of shit. Scum. Pieces of fucking scum. The world is full of them. Noya doesn’t know whether he wants to tear his hair out and scream or break down on the floor and never get back up again.

“I’m so sorry, Ukai-san,” he choked out.

“I’m sorry too. And that — that’s why I’m giving you the bracelets for free. I can make money to pay for damages to my store, but no amount of money I can make in my entire lifetime and the next can bring a dead kid back to life. I won’t have the death of another kid on my conscience, not when I could have done something to protect them. So this is kind of my way of making amends. So please, just take the bracelets.”

Noya brushes a tear he didn’t realise he shed from his face. He lowers his head, tilting his wrists to examine his newfound bracelets. Initially he wanted them because they looked cool, but now he is wearing them to honour Ukai, and to alleviate the guilt and heartache weighing his heart down. He will wear them with pride, but also with solemnity, remembering the strength and the pain of Ukai Keishin.

“Thank you, Ukai-san” is all he says, and is all Ukai seems to need to hear.

Chapter End Notes

Kiyoko: “This is a strictly professional place.”
Me: *thinks of all the crazy stuff that Yachi & Hinata and Suga & Daichi got up to in the previous chapter* *laughs*
also, while the citizens in this kingdom (which I am doing massive backflips to avoid naming :p) can legally consent to sex (and marriage by extension, I suppose) at 16, Princess Haruka only became eligible to consider suitors at 18 bc, well, the royal family is different \_(_υ)_/\

thank you so much for reading :D

give my tumblr some love
Noya walks out of Ukai’s store, his heart heavy. His general disposition was just starting to look up, only to be bogged down again by the reminder that not everyone in the world is as wonderful and moral as his friends. Stupid — he shouldn’t be so naive. He knows there is plenty of bad in the world, so he really shouldn’t be so surprised. Just another ugly stain in a world of ugly stains. What's the difference, right?

“So this is kind of my way of making amends.”

Ukai wanted to make amends; hence, he gave Noya the bracelets for free. Come to think of it, the letter from the assassins ordered him to travel around the kingdom and “make amends”. He doesn’t have a clue as to how to make these “amends”, or why he’s supposed to make these “amends” in the first place. He stayed in the palace his whole life up to a few weeks prior and mostly minded his own business; what wrong has he done?

Then he thinks about the ugly stains he has seen in the world outside the palace. Healthcare services losing funding (and from what Noya knew, the military was pretty damn loaded even before funding for healthcare was pulled). Bandits roaming free in the streets and forests, pillaging harmless store owners’ stores and killing children as they please. Assassins with swords forcing his sister to commit murder and separating him from the only family he has ever loved.

He pauses to think deeper about that last statement. It hurt his head — he is not the kind of guy to think too much, after all. He just acts based on fleeting instincts. But he figures this is something he ought to think about, so think he does.

With the danger of bandits roaming around, people must be afraid, paranoid, suspicious. And from what Ukai said, it seems reasonable to assume that the bandits have been around for longer than just two weeks. Noya wonders if his parents took any action to deal with the issue of bandits when they were, y’know, still reigning. Surely if they could stop an external military threat, dealing with a bunch of petty bandits shouldn’t be that hard, right? Noya doesn’t remember much about what he learned about the military and law enforcement, but he thinks it’s reasonable to assume stopping a military threat would be a hell lot harder than just some bandits.

So that leaves Noya with one conclusion: his parents either weren’t aware of the threat of bandits (unlikely, he believes), their measures didn’t work… or they didn’t bother taking action at all.

(Okay, that was three conclusions, but who’s keeping score?)

Well, either way the people would be unhappy. If Noya were them he would be pissed, so pissed he’d—

Resort to assassination? a sneaky voice at the back of his mind whispers.
His blood turns to ice. Of course, it made horribly perfect sense. Of course it would make sense that some citizens would be so unhappy with their monarchs’ rule that they would murder them. Noya doesn’t approve of murder, obviously, but in a way he can sympathise with them — anger at authority figures, not knowing if you can trust them, feeling too helpless to do anything to stand up to said authority figures and hence resorting to extreme violent ways to express his anger. Admittedly, their situations are very different, and Noya’s violence wasn’t quite as extreme as the assassins’, but the sentiment is still there.

Then, maybe the assassins want him to make amends to the citizens that his parents let down. Maybe that’s why he has to travel through all the districts to make these amends; maybe citizens in all the districts are suffering in some way ’cause of his parents’ rule, and as their son it’s his duty to right their wrongs.

Personally, he finds the whole idea of children having to atone for their parents’ sins complete bullshit. What the parents did is their own fault, so why should the children have to pay for it, right? But he doesn’t think he has a choice. He only has a year to travel through all the districts — Karasuno, Seijoh, Dateko, Nekoma, Tokonami, Johzenji, Fukurodani and Shiratorizawa — to right the wrong of his parents; if not… they might murder his sister next? The letter didn't specify, but Noya doesn't want to take that risk. He shall atone for the wrongs of his parents and he will improve the lives of his people by—

What can he do? He barely remembers anything about politics and governance that Takeda-sensei tried to drill into his head. He’s not even strong or a good fighter. The only thing he can do is break things in a fit of anger and yell — and neither of those seems particularly helpful to the citizens.

Frustrated, he stalks down the street. Just when he had a breakthrough, he just had to run into another insurmountable wall. And he hates walls that loom down like that; they make him feel smaller than he already is.

The sharp cries of children snap him out of his thoughts.

“Please! Please go away!”

“Yeah, stay away from my little bro, ugly bandit!”

Noya finds himself racing down in the direction of the cries before he can think of what he is gonna do against a bandit who’s probably gonna be armed. His pendant, tucked under his shirt, bounces against his chest.

He rounds the corner and spots two school children huddled together, backed against a brick wall. Three men and a woman stand in front of them, each of them carrying some form of weapon: chains, clubs, knives. They don't look like the bandits Noya and the Blue Crows met the other day, though it’s hard to tell with the masks on.

“What do you want with our parents? You're not gonna hurt them, right?”

“We won't have to, if they cooperate,” a masked man wielding a club pipes up from behind the woman. “That means you should cooperate too.”

“The bandits out there are ruthless, and they would hurt a child.”
Noya doesn't pause to think. He storms forward and places himself between the bandits and the children, just like how Ukai placed himself between Noya and the other bandit at the store.

“"The hell do you want?” the club man demands. “Wanna tell us where your parents are, too, huh? Get in line, then, and stay out of our way!”

“I don't think I’ll do any of that,” Noya growls, spreading his feet far from each other. Using his shoulder he nudges the girl to move her further behind him. The more distance between the bandits and the children, the better. “And my parents are dead, thanks for asking.”

“Oh boohoo,” the woman scoffs. “What do you want with us? Got some fucked up sense of morality? Wanna stick up for some weak pitiful kids? Or you just got a bone to pick with us?”

“I want you to stop harassing people and mind your own business.”

“Or what?”

Noya is tempted to, for once, use his authority as a prince to make them fall to their knees, or tuck their tail between their legs and scamper away. Then he remembers Prince Yuu is supposed to be dead.

He chooses not to answer, and he continues to glare at them. He hopes the fierceness of his expression masks his fear. While they aren't armed with swords, thank god, the sight of so many weapons makes him uneasy.

“You were so mouthy earlier, and now you don't wanna talk?” The woman sighs like a weary teacher dealing with a class of bratty students. Then her expression morphs into something dangerous and predatory. “Well, if you're just gonna stand in our way we're gonna have to cut you down. That's the way of the bandits.”

She whips her chain back and whirls it around like a lasso. Then she flicks her wrist, bringing the metal chain sailing down. Noya instinctively thrusts his wrists and deflects the chain with his newly-acquired bracelet. The chain bounces off the bracelet and lurches back, as though repelled, smacking the woman in her face. His forearm bruises where the chain hit him.

“The hell?” she curses. She is sporting a bloody nose, a cut lip and a bruise on her cheekbone, yet she manages to look terrifying.

“Stand back, we’ll deal with him!” the club-wielding man declares, moving to stand in front of the woman.

Crap. Noya forgot there were three other guys with the woman, and they’re all armed with clubs and knives.

Club Man rushes at him from the center, the other two taking the left and right respectively. In a haze of panic, he smashes the bracelets together. He feels a rush of power so overwhelming it nearly masks the jolt of pain from slamming metal on his wrists together. A black bubble-like force knocks them backwards, and they fall on their butts, staring up at Noya in bewilderment. For the first time, he feels a flurry of satisfaction at having people physically look up at him, after spending his whole life being looked down upon.

Then a yelp followed by a fifth masked bandit collapsing next to him jolts him out of his self-satisfaction.

“What the fu—’
Behind the fallen man stands a group comprising of a blonde woman and six men. They all sport matching black bandannas with the emblem of an orange crow on each one. Noya’s first thought is, *Wow, that looks awesome! I wonder if I can get a bandanna too.*

“Hey kid, good job there… whatever that was,” the blonde woman addresses him. “Those dirty bandits had another guy hiding behind the wall, prob’ly as back-up.”

Noya ran past the wall earlier and didn't see anyone, so he chalks it up to his adrenaline and panic blinding him to the presence of the fifth bandit.

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll take it from here,” a guy with a shaved head and an intimidating grin announces.

Noya deflates. Whoever they are, they seem nice enough, but he hates being shuffled off to the sidelines like that. He wants to fight, to protect himself and others around him. Defending the children was a job he took upon himself, and he doesn’t want others to take his job just so he can stay safe and sound in the background. He didn't accept the bracelets just for others to fight his battles for him.

A tall blond man with broad shoulders notices his dejected expression. He claps Noya’s shoulder and smiles at him. “You wanna fight too, huh? Aspiring to be a vigilante too?”

Noya stared blankly up at him. “Huh? Vigilante?”

“Oh, you didn't know about—”

“Fill in him later, Akiteru!” the blonde woman, who seems to be their leader, commands. “Kid, those bracelets of yours have defensive properties, right?”

Noya nods, eager to be of use. At least, that’s what he hopes is her reason for speaking to him.

“Good. Make yourself useful and guard our backs while we take care of these damned bandits.”

“Saeko-chan, I don't think you should be talking to a kid like that,” the blond man, Akiteru, chides in a gentle tone.

“I’m not a kid! Jeez, I know I’m short but I’m actually seventeen!” Noya snaps.

“Oh!” Akiteru’s eyes widen. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise—”

“Hey, Tsukishima!” a dark-haired man calls out. He’s restraining the bandit with the club, but it’s clear he won't be able to hold on for much longer. “Help me out here!”

“Got it!” Akiteru rushes off to aid the other man.

Noya surveys his surroundings, feeling a sort of surrealism. The woman named Saeko is going toe-to-toe with the woman bandit. Both women are fighting with tooth and nail, chain whipping against dagger. Neither gives the other room to breathe. The other three guy bandits are struggling against the bandanna-wearing guys, clearly outnumbered two to one.

Noya waits with rare patience for his chance to help out. It’s odd — normally he would already be in the fray of things, but at the same time he isn't a complete idiot. He knows his limits. He may have cool magic bracelets but he still doesn't know how to hold himself in a proper fight.

A flurry of movement out of the corner of his eye catches his attention. A sixth masked person is
perched up on a tree, a bow and an arrow nocked. Noya’s world slows down when the person releases the arrow. He follows the direction it’s flying in—

*Bald guy.*

With a flick of his wrists, his bracelets turn into arm guards, glowing an ethereal shade of black. He dives forward, his arms outstretched like he’s just receiving a volleyball and not an arrow that is clearly aimed to kill. The tip of the arrow collides with his arm guards, and he jerks his wrists. A resounding booming sound follows as the arrow is forcefully repelled. It suspends in mid-air for barely a split second, before bursting in a shower of broken wood and severed feathers. The splintered bits of arrow fall to the ground like ash after a volcanic eruption.

When Noya’s heart rate returns to a reasonable speed, he becomes acutely aware of everyone’s bewildered stares fixed on him. He blushes and rubs the back of his neck.

“Uh, I didn’t know I could do that,” he mumbles.

“Dude,” the buzzcut guy says in a hushed voice, his eyes wide and starry. “Dude… that was totally the most *kickass* way to save a guy from an arrow! Seriously, I owe you one!”

“We sure do,” Saeko says. She finishes up tying the last knot of rope around the woman bandit’s wrists, then approaches Noya. She ruffles his hair affectionately, like she has known him her whole life. “Hey, the rest of you! You done tying up the bandits?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the dark-haired guy replies, saluting.

“Good.” Saeko grins, and her cheeriness is infectious. Noya’s lips quirk up into a grin too. “This kid here saved one of our own, which means we owe him a big one.”

The six men gather around her. They listen to her with reverence and nod solemnly at her suggestion.

“How about it? Drinks are on me!”

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Noya isn’t sure how this is his life, but hey he gets to hang out with a bunch of cool badass people at a tavern, so you won’t find him complaining. He is sandwiched between Buzzcut and a tall guy with dirty blond hair and dark sideburns. They have menus laid in front of them, but none of them make any move to read the menu. Instead, the men are looking expectantly at Saeko, as if waiting for her to say something.

“So kid, what should we call you?” she asks, leaning forward. Her collar dips slightly, and Noya blushes, averting his eyes.

“Noya’s good! Not to be rude, ‘cause I really appreciate you guys saving me back there, but who are you guys?”

“We’re the Karasuno Vigilantes!” Saeko proclaims with pride, pointing at her chest with her thumb. “With the rising number of bandits around these parts and the increasing shittiness of the district law enforcement, we’ve decided to take things into our hands. We patrol the streets and fight bandits! Name’s Tanaka Saeko. Boys, introduce yourselves to our new friend.”
“Name’s Tanaka Ryuuunosuke,” Buzzcut says. “I’m Saeko-nee-san’s younger but awesomer brother. Great to meet you!”

“But just address us by our given names,” Saeko interjects. “It would get confusing if you call Tanaka and the both of us respond.”

Once the others introduce themselves, Saeko all but shoves a menu at Noya and asks him to pick a drink.

Noya quickly scans through the list. “It’s… it’s all alcoholic.”

“Yeah, we’re at a tavern. That might explain it.”

“I’m underage. Seventeen.”

“Bah!” Saeko waves her hand dismissively. “Seventeen’s close enough to eighteen. Ryuu’s the same age as you and he drinks!” she declares like that’s an apt justification for encouraging underage drinking.

“Er…”

“If you don’t know what to get, get a shochu,” Ryuu recommends, grinning his shark-like grin. “This place does the best shochu, I swear.”

Noya nods, even though he doesn’t know what the hell a shochu is. Saeko summons a waiter and rattles off their orders rapid-fire. The vigilantes must be regulars around here, because the waiter takes down their orders and repeats it verbatim with no trouble at all.

“So,” Noya says when the waiter disappears off with their orders. “Are you guys, like, warriors or something?”

“Most of us aren’t formally trained warriors,” the dark-haired guy, Shimada, answers. “I learned how to fight through experience. I know Saeko-chan learned from the streets and then taught Ryuu-kun.”

“I used to be a warrior,” Akiteru says, a sad smile on his face. “I used to train at the Karasuno branch of the Training Academy with my younger brother, though we were in separate classes, of course.”

Noya perks up. “Oh, cool! I know some guys from the Training Academy. They’re my bod—er, friends!” (He hopes no one notices his stumble.) “Yeah, and they’re really good fighters! What was your experience like at the Training Academy? Was it as tough as my friends said it was, or were they just trying to sound cool?”

“I, er, I was on the Elite Squad, actually—”

“Whoa, for real?! Did you get to fight in Operation Kitagawa Daiichi?”

Akiteru shakes his head somberly. “No, I was — there was a guy, a year younger than me. He was small but a prodigy when it came to fighting. The Tiny Giant, that’s what they called him. He applied for the Elite Squad and then outperformed me in a spar. It was many kinds of humiliating, believe me. The higher-ups decided he was enough and I wasn’t needed anymore, so I was taken off the squad.”

“Oh. That sucks, I’m sorry. Err, what about your brother, then?”

“My brother, Kei, he — he’s such a sweet boy, y’know? He really looked up to me and was really
impressed when I told him I made the Elite Squad. He even told me I was his hero.” Akiteru chuckles, but it sounds bitter. “I — I didn't want to let him down, and maybe it’s also 'cause I was too proud, so I continued to entertain him with fake stories about my days in the squad.

“Then, a few years later, he made the squad, ‘cause he wanted to fight beside me. But when he found out I wasn't there, and hadn’t been for years, well, he was — he was crushed. He didn't shout or cry or rage — ‘cause he’s the type to bottle everything up and act cool on the outside — but his whole demeanour just… he changed. He started spending more time at the Academy and less time at home. He avoided me when we bumped into each other at school. I eventually lost my passion for being a warrior, so I dropped out.”


“No, Noya-kun, I don’t—” Takinoue begins, but Akiteru cuts him off.

“It’s fine. It’s not really a secret, anyway. To answer your question, Kei’s no longer living with me. Something really traumatising must have happened in Kitagawa Daiichi, though he refuses to say what, ‘cause he dropped out of the Academy and moved all the way to Nekoma with some war buddies and a friend from elementary school. I heard he’s doing some flashy showbiz thing with them now.”

Halfway through Akiteru’s story, their drinks arrived, but now Noya doesn't feel like drinking his shochu anymore. He feels like if he tries to drink anything, his stomach would revolt.

War. Bandits. Military threats. Assassins. Children being murdered. He hates it all. He hates the idea of suffering, especially innocent people suffering. His hands on the table clench into fists, his nails digging painfully into his palms.

“Yo, Noya, why the long face?” Ryuu asks.

“It’s just—” He breaks off, struggling to find the words to describe what he’s feeling. “It’s just — I feel like for every good thing that happens to me, something else bad happens, or I hear about another bad thing happening. And I… am I allowed — is anyone allowed to just live in peace without suffering??” he bursts out. He grips his glass of shochu tightly, like it’s his anchor to reality.

(He realises how crap he must be feeling if he’s relying on a glass of booze to keep him in reality.)

“Wha— what makes you say that?” Ryuu asks, startled by the sudden outburst. When Noya doesn't respond, he adds, “Hey, if it makes you feel better, we won't ask any questions. Promise.”

“Yeah!” Saeko agrees exuberantly. Her face is beginning to look a little flushed from the alcohol. “Whatever’s said here stays here!”

Noya really can't believe this is his life, that he is pouring his heart out to a group of bandanna-wearing vigilantes he just met half an hour ago while not drinking his shochu despite many encouragements from said bandanna-wearing vigilantes. He does take an unusual amount of care to avoid mentioning that he is actually the dead prince, though.

“—and sometimes I wonder, is it really all worth it? I’m travelling around the kingdom ‘cause I wanna help out the people — reach out, find out what their problems are and help solve them, y’know? But… but I feel like I’m stuck at the second step. ‘Cause I hear about the shit they go through, and I — I just feel so… so…”

“Helpless?” Saeko suggests, her voice soft.
Noya nods vigorously, relieved that someone is able to get what he’s trying to say. “Yeah, helpless. And what can I do? There’s too much bad in the world that even if I had the power to do anything, it wouldn’t change anything! I — we saved two kids earlier, but so what? There are probably a hundred other kids out there getting beaten up and killed by bandits. There are so many people suffering, living in fear, hiding in pain, and I — I don’t know if what I wanna do is worth it. I don’t even know what I can do; I’m small, weak and I don’t know how to fight the way you guys and my friends can. And even if I had the power to do so, I can’t — it’s impossible for me to reach everyone, not when there’s so many bad things happening and bad people making them happen.”

And once again, he is crying. Jeez, when did he become such a crybaby? He furiously swipes the tears away with the back of his hand.

Ryuu speaks up first. “Yo, I’m not the most poetic person, but er – just hear me out, okay? Yeah, Noya, you’re right. There’s no shortage of crapass people in the world who do crapass things. They’re like, er, things that keep coming back no matter how many times you destroy them or chase them away. What’s the word I’m looking for?”

“Weeds?” Mori supplies.

“A Hydra?” Akiteru chimes in.

“Shut up, Akiteru, you’re the only nerd here who cares about Greek mythology,” Shimada banters good-naturedly.

“Yeah, like a weed-infested Hydra!” Ryuu says. “Or Hydra-infested weeds.”

“Those are mental images no one needs, Ryuu-kun,” Uchizawa deadpans.

“Yeah, as I was saying, like a weed-infested Hydra and a bunch of Hydra-infested weeds, bad things keep happening over and over again. But people like you and us and your friends — we’re the proof we need that there’s still good in the world. Our job is to make our presence so, uh, present that the bad can never overshadow the good.”

“His analogy needs work, but Ryuu’s right,” Saeko adds, earning a glare from her younger brother. “Of course, we need to be aware of the bad that’s out there, but we must not forget about the goodness of humanity. You understand that, right, Noya?”

Noya nods silently.

“And to address your other concern: you think you can’t do anything? You believe that you’re too powerless to do anything about the bad in the world?”

He nods again.

Saeko smiles at him, gentle, kind and loving, just like Haruka. “The thing is, you can do something. The power you want is already inside you — love, that's your strength. It's the love you have for people, and your desire to manifest your love into care and protection, that makes you strong. You have a purpose, Noya, don't let the bad of the world disillusion you. Don’t sell yourself short before you even try.”

He smiles back at her and wipes away the last of his tears. “Thanks. I needed, really needed to hear that. So, thank you.”

“Just glad to help.”
“Yeah, so chin up, bro!” Ryuu says. “And drink your shochu, or I’m having it.”

But Noya barely gets to taste his drink before an exclamation of his name catches his attention, as well as that of the rest of the tavern.

“Noya!”

Asahi is standing outside the tavern, hands on his hips and looking worried.

“Ah, that’s my cue,” Noya says sheepishly. He passes his glass of shochu to Ryuu. “I gotta run, but thanks for today. Thanks for the drink, Saeko-san!”

“No problem! See ya around, kid!”

“Hey, Noya, before you go,” Akiteru pipes up. “Will you do me a favour?”

“Yeah, sure!”

“You’re gonna travel to all the districts, right? If you meet my brother in Nekoma… tell him that I’m sorry, I love him and I really wanna catch one of his performances, if he’s cool with it.”

“Got it! You can count on me!”

After saying his final goodbyes to the Karasuno Vigilantes, he capers out to meet Asahi.

“I’m glad to see you’re mostly unharmed, but please don’t sneak off like that again,” Asahi pleads. “And what were you doing in a tavern anyway? Aren't you too young to be drinking?”

Noya just grins up at him. “Seventeen’s close enough to eighteen!”

“Noya!”

He laughs, grabs Asahi’s arm and skips forward, dragging the larger man behind him. “I think I figured it out, Asahi!”

“Huh? Figured what out?”

Noya looks up at the blue sky and smiles. “How to make amends. And what my strength is. I think… I think I can handle everything else that’s out there, as long as you’re there with me, Ace!”

“That’s good to hear.” The relief is evident in Asahi’s voice, but it morphs into something more serious when he adds, “As happy as I am for you, we need to hurry back. Daichi isn't happy you ran off, and there’s only so much Suga can do to calm him down.”

Noya cringes. Okay, maybe he can handle everything that’s out there, except for Daichi-san’s imminent wrath.

Noya convinces Daichi that they should stay in Karasuno for just a little longer. He explains the amends he realised he needs to make, and Daichi acquiesces on the condition that he needs to have at least one bodyguard with him when out in the streets.
So make amends, he does. He helps in whatever ways he can find: he helps old ladies carry their groceries, runs some errands for Ukai, surreptitiously interviews people about their views regarding the running of the country, and teaches children volleyball, among other things.

A few weeks later, Daichi reminds him that they have a tight schedule of one year they're running on. So now they are back on the road, this time with a new member and vice-captain. (Tooru still sulks about it sometimes.) Daichi, as usual, leads the way with a map in hand. Suga walks beside him, presumably to help him navigate.

“No no, Daichi, we should have gone left instead. It’s faster. Didn't warrior school teach you how to estimate distance on a map?”

“Don’t be a backseat driver, Suga. I know perfectly well how to read a map, thanks.”

“If you did we wouldn’t be lost now, would we? Maybe we should stop and ask a kind passerby for directions.”

“We are not lost and we are not asking a kind passerby for directions.”

“Would you rather ask a mean passerby instead?”

“I’d rather not ask any passerby.”

Suga lets out a long-suffering sigh, though not without an undertone of affection. “God, Daichi, you’re acting like such a stereotypical man. Stop it, you’re making me look bad as a fellow man.” He playfully whacks Daichi’s chest, eliciting a cross between a gasp and a yelp from him.

“I am not a stereotypical man,” Daichi insists stubbornly. "If you think we’re lost, why don’t you navigate instead?”

“I tried, but it’s not like you’d listen.”

“‘Cause all your suggestions can be summed up as: ‘let’s ask for directions’! Why don't you demonstrate your clearly superior map-reading distance-estimation skills then?”

“Why, I thought you’d never ask!”

“We’re lost, right?” Shouyou whispers to Noya, tugging on his sleeve.

“They are so married,” Tooru snickers. “That makes me feel a little better about losing my hard-earned vice-captain position to Mr Refreshing.”

“You’re never gonna let that go, are you?” Asahi says wearily.

“Since you’re so salty about losing your position, why don't you help them navigate us to Seijoh?” Noya suggests. “Surely you know how to travel to your own home district.”

Tooru puffs up. “Of course, dearest Noya-chan! In fact, I used to have to brave the mountainous trek between Karasuno and Seijoh as part of my survival training.”

“If you know the way so well why didn't you say anything?!” Daichi demands, whirling around to glare daggers at Tooru.

“Cause it was entertaining to watch you two bicker over directions like an old married couple. And I didn’t think you’d care about what I would have to say, since I’m not — you know — vice-captain anymore.”
Daichi’s eyebrow twitches with irritation while Suga chuckles.

“Fine then, ex vice-captain, why don't you navigate us to Seijoh?” Daichi asks through gritted teeth.

Tooru perks up. “Do I get my old position back?”

“Dream on.”

He scowls. “Then what's in it for me, huh?”

“You’re willing to let all of us wander around the mountains like lost sheep — and that includes yourself — just ‘cause you want back a title?!”

“Yeah, what part of ‘what’s in it for me’ did you not get?!”

“There, there, Oikawa,” Suga interjects before Daichi can explode. He reaches out to pat Tooru’s arm. “How does not getting murdered in your sleep by our captain sound?”

“Mind you, I’m a trained warrior just like you,” Daichi threatens. “They’ll never find your body.”

“Not that I’d wanna anyway!” Noya sings.

“How does not getting murdered in your sleep by our captain sound?”

“Whichever side doesn't get me murdered by Daichi-san!”

“A smart choice, for once,” Asahi mumbles under his breath, while Suga chuckles something about “chaotic neutral”.

“Ugh, fine,” Tooru snaps, snatching the map from Daichi. “I’ll show you plebeians how it’s done, no need for kind passersby!”

“And you’ll live to see another day — what a wonderful win-win decision you’ve made!” Suga hums, patting Tooru’s arm. Noya isn’t sure whether he is being genuine or sarcastic. When it comes to Sugawara Koushi, it’s hard to distinguish between the two.

With Tooru’s admittedly expert directions, they arrive in Seijoh after three and a half weeks of travelling and squabbling.

“So this is the Aoba Johsai district!” Shouyou exclaims, starry-eyed. “Wow, it’s so… blue?”

He sounds puzzled by the overwhelming presence of that particular colour. Noya isn’t sure where the confusion comes from. As far as he’s concerned, Aoba Johsai certainly lives up to the ao aspect of its name. Blue are the streets, blue are many of the buildings and blue are the streetlamps. Noya swears he spots some some blue bushes too. Blue da ba dee da ba dye.

“Talk about overdoing things.” Daichi grimaces.

“Oi, don’t ask for my directions to my home district just to insult its colour scheme!” Tooru says indignantly. “I don’t even want the vice-captain position back if you’re not gonna show the colour blue the proper respect it deserves!”

A new voice cuts into their argument.

“Man, you really do kick up a fuss everywhere you go, don’t you, Shittykawa?”
Noya has never seen Tooru’s expression shift so swiftly from irritation to pure, unadulterated joy. Tooru bounds like an excited golden retriever to the owner of the voice — a muscular guy with spiky dark hair and an annoyed scowl on his face. Tooru pulls him into a tight clingy embrace and bounces up and down. The other man remains firmly and decidedly on the ground.

“Iwa-chan! It’s you, Iwa-chan!”

“Shut up, I know who I am.”

“But I’m so happy to see you! It’s been so long, Iwa-chan, aren’t you happy to see me too?”

“But particularly.”

“But you’re my boyfriend! And even before that, we’ve been friends forever, so how can you not be happy to see me?” Tooru demands. Noya can practically hear the pout in his voice.

“Eh. Being your boyfriend is a status I bear with apathy and much suffering.”

“So mean, Iwa-chan!”

(Noya notices that Iwa-chan doesn’t deny being with Tooru.)

Noya chuckles. “So this is who Iwa-chan is. About time we met him, right, Shouyou?”

He turns to his favourite ray of sunshine, only to find that Shouyou currently looks nothing like a ray of sunshine, but rather like someone has told him that the sun would not be allowed to shine ever again.

“Shouyou? What’s wrong? Shouyou!”

Shouyou continues to gape at something, or someone, behind Iwa-chan. Tooru, as if sensing the same presence as Shouyou, looks up from his boyfriend’s shoulder — and even from this distance, Noya can see the shock and resentment that override the previously elated expression on his face.

“Tobio-chan?! What are you doing here?!”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure what the legal drinking age in Japan is. I searched it up and just got more confused by what I read. But since this is an AU and this is a fantasy kingdom that’s not Japan, I make up my own rules.

get nice things on my tumblr

Thank you for reading :D
instances of affection

Chapter Notes

I hope you're ready for some *kissing*

also, I apologise if it seems like part I is taking a REALLY long time to get going. it's a lil slow now bc I'm still introducing the characters and world and stuff, but trust me when the story gets going it REALLY gets going, and part II is way better IMHO, but also darker and angstier, so you best enjoy the (relatively) lighter and fluffier tone of part I while it lasts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hinata never thought he’d bump into Kageyama Tobio outside of Training Academy, especially in Seijoh of all places. He doesn't even live here, so what the hell is he doing just lurking behind Oikawa’s boyfriend? And their reunion is every bit awkward as Hinata would imagine, if he could have predicted that they would meet again, especially after what happened on Kitagawa Daiichi.

(Yes, Hinata was there too, despite not making the Elite Squad; but that's another story for another time.)

“Hinata dumbass!” Kageyama says. “What are you doing here?!”

“That’s the first thing you say to me after we haven't seen each other in over a year?!” Hinata bristles. “And I could ask you the same thing! Aren't you supposed to be at the Karasuno branch?”

“Tch. I don't see why I have to justify anything to you.”

“Hmph, I should have guessed you’re just as mean as you were before!”

“Kageyama was transferred from the Karasuno branch of the Academy to my care,” Oikawa’s boyfriend, Iwa-chan, says. “Name’s Iwaizumi by the way.”

“Your care?!” Oikawa screeches, pulling his face away from Iwaizumi’s shoulder to stare at him with wide eyes, as though that’s the most horrifying thing he has ever heard.

“Yes, Shittykawa. In case you forgot, I’m now working as a mentor at the Training Academy. I’m mentoring Kageyama’s further training and studies.”

*Further training?* Hinata thinks, alarmed. *How good has he gotten?! Will I ever catch up to him?*

“Sorry to break up your happy reunion,” Daichi interjects, catching everyone’s attention. “But we’re starting to catch a lot of attention, so how about we take this somewhere else?”

Iwaizumi nods in agreement. “Good idea. There’s a restaurant nearby where we can get a private room.”

Iwaizumi leads them to a cosy-looking restaurant, and true to his word, they manage to get a private room for the eight of them at the back of the restaurant. After placing their orders, they sit around the table and eye each other in an uncomfortable silence.
Noya is the one to break the silence. “So, you’re all old friends!” He grins, which for once Hinata doesn’t feel like returning. The fact that Kageyama is glaring across the table at him may have something to do with that.

“Well, yes, Iwa-chan and I are,” Oikawa says. “Calling Tobio-chan an old friend might be quite a stretch, though.”

“I didn’t know you knew Bakageyama, Oikawa-san,” Hinata says. “How do you know him?”

“Wanna compare notes, Shou-chan? Tobio-chan and I were on the Elite Squad. We… Tobio-chan and I—”

“We were deployed on Operation Kitagawa Daiichi,” Kageyama interrupts abruptly. “We were assigned to different units, though.”

“Iwa-chan, don’t you teach your students not to interrupt their senpai?”

“It’s fine if you’re the senpai being interrupted.”

Hinata gapes at Oikawa. “I didn’t know you were on Operation KD! Why didn’t you say anything?!”

Oikawa, for the first time Hinata has known him, seems uncomfortable and not at all like his usual cool smug self. “Look, Shou-chan, Operation KD isn’t some kind of badge of honour I wear, despite how the other Elite Squad members may act. Terrible things happened at Kitagawa Daiichi, things I’d rather leave behind in the past.”

Hinata knows that, of course. He got a small glimpse of it during the small window of time he was on the island. But he gets the feeling that Oikawa saw and experienced things far more terrible than Hinata did. He notices the worried look Iwaizumi sends Oikawa’s way, and he decides not to interrogate any further. (See, even Hinata can have a filter!)

“Tobio-chan~” Oikawa’s signature singsong tone holds undertones of malice, which Hinata finds odd. He knows Oikawa is petty, arrogant and sometimes even childish, but he has never witnessed his senpai being malicious before. Oikawa takes a sip of his tea, spearing Kageyama with a dark look. “I heard about your behaviour from Kindaichi-chan. Are you still being — hmm, what were they calling you again? The King of the Battlefield? Or has Iwa-chan taught you to be a team player?”

Kageyama stiffens. He grips his teacup so tightly it might just shatter in his hands.

“No now, Oikawa,” Suga starts in a gentle but reproachful tone, but Iwaizumi interrupts him.

“Oi, Crappykawa, stop antagonising my student,” Iwaizumi snaps.

“Hmph! At least I’m a team player.”

“Yeah, and maybe Kageyama may have been one if you bothered to teach him properly, instead of running off and sulking.”

“It’s fine, Iwaizumi-senpai,” Kageyama mutters, staring resolutely at the tablecloth. “It’s not like Oikawa-san is lying or anything.”

Oikawa puffs up with satisfaction. “See, Iwa-chan? Let me give him a piece of my mind—”

“Oikawa, I think that’s enough,” Daichi says, his tone firm.
Another uneasy silence befalls what’s turning out to be the most awkward table gathering in all sixteen years of Hinata’s life. He stares at his bowl of food, without a trace of an appetite. Across him, Kageyama’s face is hardened, but traces of hurt and past betrayal linger in his dark eyes. As much as Hinata can’t stand the guy, seeing the aloof and strong Kageyama suddenly appear so fragile, like one more blow and he’ll just clink-clink-ker-SMASH, bothers him.

This time, Iwaizumi breaks the silence. “So you, uh—” He breaks off, looking expectantly at Suga.


Iwaizumi nods. “Guessed as much — er, the fairy part, that is. I just wanted to ask — wait. Oi, Shittykawa, give me your gloves.”

Oikawa obediently hands Iwaizumi his magic gloves. Iwaizumi displays them to Suga, who looks politely intrigued.

“Those are a lovely pair of gloves,” Suga comments.

“I wanted to ask — how do they work? Y’know what they can do, right?”

“Yes, the right one was quite useful for starting campfires and the left one helped to keep the lemonade I made cool. Oikawa is very proficient in wielding elemental magic.”

Oikawa swells up with pride. Iwaizumi reminds him not to let it get to his head.

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted to ask,” Iwaizumi continues. “How do these gloves work? I’ve never really understood how magic works, and Oikawa isn’t too clear on the details either.”

Suga’s eyes light up. “You asked the right person! You see, before Oikawa received them, they were enchanted with Potential Magic. It’s a latent form of magic that can be converted into many forms of useful magic, like Hydrokinesis and Pyrokinesis. Of course, magical weapons only respond to a user who truly believes in their convictions — so I bet that when Oikawa received his gloves, he was told to concentrate very hard on the magic he wanted to wield, am I right?”

Oikawa nods. “Yep, spot on. It was a surprisingly tiring process.”

“Whoa, I wish you taught me the theory behind magic, Suga-san!” Nishinoya exclaims, impressed. He fiddles with the good luck pendant around his neck. “It would’ve been real useful for my essay on Memory Alteration Magic.”

Iwaizumi stares quizzically at Noya. “Are you a sorcerer or something?”

“Huh?!” Then Noya realises what he let slip. He laughs nervously and waves his hand. “No, of course not! Just an ordinary guy, yeah! With super cool bracelets!”

“Yeah, Noya-san’s bracelets are super cool!” Hinata echoes, bouncing up and down. “They can deflect weapons and arrows and other projectiles like WHAM and BAM! And they can turn into these really cool black arm guard thingies! And those deflect attacks like KA-POW! Noya-san is really good at using them, ‘cause he’s super cool!”

“Is ‘cool’ the only word in your vocabulary?” Kageyama grumbles.

“Shut up, you’re just jealous that you aren’t as cool as Noya-san!”
Noya’s face is pink. “Ah, Shouyou, I, er — I really appreciate the thought, but you flatter me too much. I mean, yeah, the bracelets are cool and all, but I’m still not all that good in a fight…”

“So? You defended us from the bandits in the mountains. That was really awesome! You’re like… you’re like our guardian deity!”

Noya blushes even more, and Hinata can see the flustered drops of sweat flying from his forehead.

“Stop it, Hinata, our young prince will burst into flames at the rate you’re going,” Suga teases, his light brown eyes gleaming. Hinata has come to recognise this look in the weeks he has gotten to know Suga — he's up to something.

“Prince?” Iwaizumi asks. He arches a eyebrow, clearly confused.

“Is that a nickname?” Kageyama adds, just as perplexed as his mentor.

“Yeah—” Daichi begins, but Suga cheerfully stuffs a roll of sushi in his mouth, shutting him up.

“Oh oops, looks like the cat’s out of the bag!” Suga says, his tone too airy to not be suspicious. “Since the secret that Noya’s actually the prince whom everyone believes to be dead is out, looks like you two have no choice but to accompany us on our journey around the kingdom! We wouldn't want word getting out — don't know who we can trust with our super-secret secret and all that. How wonderful! We’ll set off for the next district when Noya is done making ‘amends’ here in Seijoh.” He appears incredibly pleased with himself.

Iwaizumi and Kageyama exchange nonplussed looks.

“Suga!” Daichi hisses after he painfully swallows the sushi. “You can't just spill stuff like that and whisk people we’ve just met on our journey!”

Suga simply blinks in a too-innocent fashion. “Sure I can. You don't hear our new friends objecting, do you?”

Iwaizumi sighs, resigned. “Yeah, I was about to offer to tag along, anyway. I’ll just make arrangements with the Academy for Kageyama and me.”

Oikawa gapes at him. “But you had no way of knowing we’re on a journey!”

“I have something called the power of deduction, Stupidkawa. It wasn't that hard to guess that you’re travelling with these guys. It would do you good to acquire this skill too.”

“Hmph, I so can deduce, Iwa-chan! I’ll deduce you any time of the day!”

“I’ll come along too,” Kageyama says. “Someone has to keep that redheaded dumbass in check. And we have something we need to work on, too.”

Hinata glares at him. “I don't need you to keep me in check!”

(But inside, he glows at the mention of the Thing they gotta work on.)

“Yeah, you wanna bet?”

“Suga, you and I are gonna have a chat about your power as vice-captain,” Daichi mutters, running a hand down his face.

“Sure thing! Now, shall we discuss where we’ll be staying?”
After their bizarre dinner, during which they bring Iwaizumi and Kageyama up to speed on everything that has happened, they head off to their lodgings for the next few weeks. They wave Kageyama off at the Academy, where he’s staying in a dorm, then continue down the street to where Oikawa and Iwaizumi stay. Since Oikawa’s house is empty (his parents are enjoying their early retirement in a quiet coastal village), he agrees to play host for their stay in Seijoh.

His house isn’t as disorderly as Daichi’s was, so they don’t take too long to tidy things up. Hinata, showered and sleepy, trots to Oikawa’ room and collapses on the futon Oikawa set up for him. He wrestles with the complicated emotions bubbling in him — happiness at being with his friends, amusement at Oikawa’s (one-sided) joyful reunion with Iwaizumi, and of course, the shock, resentment and another emotion he doesn't know how to describe at seeing his rival. Their meeting on Kitagawa Daiichi was the ingredient for making things more needlessly complicated. And now Hinata isn’t sure why he wanted so badly to sneak into the military operation. At that time, it seemed logical — Kageyama, his rival, was fighting a bunch of enemies; there was no way Hinata could just let him take all the glory. And maybe he wanted to make sure Kageyama wouldn't die before they had their rematch.

Oikawa saunters in with a towel cinched around his waist. He dries his damp hair with a smaller towel. It’s just the two of them sharing his room, as Oikawa has claimed Hinata as his favourite crow (Noya accused him of favouring the ass-kisser, something Oikawa didn't deny). The other four are sharing a guest room.

“Shou-chan, are you comfortable? Do you need more blankets? Or more pillows?”

Hinata smiles sleepily. “I’m peachy, thanks, senpai!”

“Oh, Shou-chan, you’re so precious,” Oikawa weeps dramatically into his hair towel (which Hinata believes isn't hygienic, but he doesn't point it out). “You’re so sweet. I wish Iwa-chan was more like you.”

“Iwaizumi-san seems cool!”

“Yeah, he totally is. I can never beat him in an arm-wrestling match. His arms are glorious — but don't tell anyone I said that, or I’ll never hear the end of it from Noya-chan.”

“He and Asahi-san should arm-wrestle each other. That would be awesome to watch, I bet!”

“I’ll bring the popcorn, you’ll bring the pompoms.” He tosses his towels aside to change into a pair of boxers and a shirt.

Hinata closes his eyes. Oikawa and Kageyama’s… strange relationship lingers in the forefront of his mind.

“Oikawa-san? Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“What happened between you and Kageyama? You don't seem to like him very much — not that that’s very hard, but what did he do to you?”
Oikawa stiffens for just a fraction of a second, but he quickly loosens up when he notices Hinata’s concerned expression. “It was just — it’s not important. Stuff happened, I got mad at him. Nearly hit him, heh, but Iwa-chan stopped me.”

“Stuff that you don't wanna talk about?” Hinata may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he is good at reading social situations.

“Yeah.” Oikawa settles down on the futon next to Hinata and shoots him a slightly strained grin. “Don’t worry about it. It’s all in the past. The main thing that irks me is that he isn’t a team player, that’s all.”

Hinata pauses to dwell on his words.

“He isn't a team player.”

Then he thinks about the Thing.

“I… I know what he was like in the past — he was all grumpy and rude and selfish like grr! And he’s still grumpy and rude. But… I think you should give him a chance, Oikawa-san. Before I left Karasuno for the palace, Kageyama and I were working on this Thing together. I think he's a better team player now ‘cause of that Thing.”

“Yeah.” Oikawa rolls over onto his side to face Hinata. “I was wondering about that. What is this Thing you two are working on? I'm intrigued. I never knew Tobio-chan to willingly work on anything with anyone. And from the looks of it, you two don't seem to be the best of friends, so I think you get where my curiosity is coming from.”

And Hinata does. He has always been good at putting himself in others’ shoes, and he himself was as surprised that this Thing worked out the way it did. He’s about to tell Oikawa all about it; he can feel the excitement and words building up like water behind a dam. He wants to announce it to the whole world at the top of his lungs, looking triumphantly down from the summit.

Then he thinks about the stuff Oikawa has kept from him, and his general secretiveness when it comes to anything about his past.

He just smiles at his senpai. “You’ll see.”

Suga spots Daichi sitting under the tree outside Oikawa’s house, just like he said he would. He jogs over to join his old friend.

“Have a seat,” Daichi says, patting the spot next to him.

Suga chuckles, though not without some trepidation. He knows that when Daichi invites someone to have a seat he’s upset — not mad, ’cause if he was mad he would just yell and glower scarily. But he is definitely upset, and Suga hates it when Daichi is upset more than when he’s pissed. Suga sees no point procrastinating placating the dragon, so he gracefully folds himself on the grass.

“Why did you do that?” Daichi asks without any preamble, his voice low. In the darkness of nighttime, Suga can barely read his expression.
“I thought it would be the best for us,” Suga replies. He tries to keep his tone even to hide his guilt. Truth is, he feels bad for what he did, and he can see why Daichi is upset. He prides himself on being understanding and sensitive to others’ feelings, so for him to make an impulsive mistake like that — it gnaws at his conscience. Still, he continues. “There are dangerous people out there, and not just the bandits. They’re easy enough to take care of. I’m talking about the assassins — we don’t know who they are, what their true motives are, or even how many of them are out there. We can be facing a small group of ten, or a group large enough to be considered a military threat. They might not be done with whatever it is they wanted to achieve. They could be planning to attack Noya right at this very moment. Point is: we need as many skilled fighters as we can to boost our defences, especially since Noya and I can’t fight the way you warriors can. The more we can recruit, the better. I’m sorry; I realise that the way I went about it wasn’t the best, no matter how amusing it was.”

Suga knows that’s not what Daichi is really upset about, but he wants Daichi to say it himself.

Daichi exhales a long sigh, and the sound tugs further on Suga’s conscience. “Look, I get it. I was thinking the same as you, in fact. But, the part that hurt me was: you didn’t ask me first.”

Suga called it, not that it makes him feel any better.

“We’re co-captains. We lead the team together, just like how we led the district volleyball team back in the day. So I’d really appreciate it if you could just… just talk to me first, before acting on whatever plans you concoct. You’re smart, Suga, so incredibly smart and that's what I admire about you, so you gotta tell me your plans first before you rush off to put them into action. Please.”

“Right.” Suga lets out a brief self-deprecating chuckle. “Sorry. It’s been so long since we led anything together; I forgot what it’s like to work alongside you. It’s just — please don’t take this as me making some crapass excuse for what I did, ‘cause it’s not.”

“Don’t worry. I know you're not the type to make excuses. You’ve always blamed yourself too much.”

“Thanks. It’s just… working at the spa. As you know, we were low on manpower, so I had to shoulder more responsibility than what was stated in my job description when I first applied. When there were problems to be solved, I had to come up with solutions quickly and implement them just as quickly, to make sure the business could continue as normal. I’m still getting used to talking things out as a co-leader. I’m really sorry, Daichi, but if you could be patient with me for just a little longer —”

“No problem,” Daichi says immediately. He smiles at Suga, and even in the darkness he can tell it’s a lovely smile. “That's all I needed to hear. And I’ll give you all the time you need to adjust, so don't sweat it.”

Suga chuckles, playfully punching his shoulder. “You make it sound like such a difficult insurmountable task. You underestimate me, dear Captain.”

“Please, I could never underestimate you. Anyway, I’m really grateful for your help. Knowing you’re there with me makes leading this team easier. Thanks.”

Suga rolls his eyes. “Don’t get sappy on me now.”

“Like you’re one to talk about sap, you hopeless romantic. How many times did I have to entertain your flights of fancy involving roses and candle-lit dinners and walks along the beach?”

Suga laughs, punching Daichi again. Their banter is so easy and familiar, it’s like they were never
apart in the first place. He watches the man next to him, suddenly taking note of his rapidly pounding heart. He can almost hear his heart drumming against his ribs. He wonders if Daichi can hear it too — he’s so close.

“You’re surprisingly quiet, Suga. I thought you’d have thought of a witty retort by now. What’s on your mind?”

And it’s like the personal quality of boldness has assumed a form and taken possession of Suga’s body, because he’s doing something he never thought he would ever do, no matter how many times he has imagined it happening. He leans forward, bracing his hands on Daichi’s (extremely impressive) thigh, and quickly pecks the other man’s lips, light as a feather, faster than a blink.

He is positive his face must be melting off his head, like — like something that melts. Ice. Whatever eloquence he possessed vanished the moment he kissed his best friend. Screw similes anyway. There’s no comparison for what he is feeling, he’s sure of that.

Daichi sits there, still as a statue. His lips are curled in an ‘O’ shape, and he looks like a deer caught in headlights. His eyes are so wide Suga is worried he wouldn’t be able to blink again.

“Great talk, Captain,” Suga says with a smile, pushing himself up. “I’m gonna make sure Asahi and Noya aren’t up to anything they shouldn’t be doing in the guest bedroom. Goodnight, sweet dreams!”

And then he all but dashes back into the house, not even waiting to hear Daichi’s spluttering reply.

Hinata wakes up from a nice dream about eating cake with Natsu (oh, how he misses his baby sister). Speaking of cake, he wonders if there’s any in Oikawa’s kitchen. Feeling snacky, he slips out from under his blanket and as quietly as he can so as not to wake Oikawa up. He tiptoes out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

He passes by the balcony on his way to the kitchen, and he hears a familiar voice from the other side of the glass door.

“—sorry to wake you up, Asahi.”

It’s Noya-san, and it sounds like he’s crying. Hinata peeks around from behind the wall, which he has pressed himself against to see what the fuss is. Noya has his face buried in the sanctuary of Asahi’s chest, sobbing brokenly. His fists clench the front of Asahi’s shirt. Asahi’s arms are wrapped snugly around Noya’s midriff, and his chin rests atop Noya’s nest of black and newly bleached dirty-blond hair, as if sheltering the smaller boy. Hinata can’t help but note that despite crying his heart out, Noya appears incredibly safe, maybe even cozy, tucked in Asahi’s arms. Or maybe it is because he’s incredibly safe that he feels like he can cry his heart out.

Hinata knows that on principle, it’s bad to spy on others having what is evidently a private Moment; but his curiosity overrides whatever principles he has. He squats down, carefully positioning himself in the shadows to cloak his nosy presence.

“Please don’t be sorry,” Asahi murmurs. He rubs small circles on Noya’s back. “What’s bothering you?”

“Bad dream,” Noya sniffles. “I must sound like such a kid, huh?”
“No, no! It's normal! Please don't feel ashamed — you know I’ll never judge you, right?”

“Yeah, of course, my dependable Ace.” The admiration in Noya’s voice is practically palpable.

(Hinata catches sight of Asahi’s very, very slight flinch at his title.)

“I dreamt that instead of my parents, it — it was me. The assassins—” Noya hiccups a sob. “—they killed… they came for me instead. And I felt — I was so scared… terrified. They had these fucking swords. Covered in blood and other gross stuff… A-and…”

When it seems like Nishinoya won't, or can't, go on, Asahi gently prompts, “Was that the scariest part?”

Noya shakes his head against Asahi’s chest, his hair tickling the underside of Asahi’s chin. “N-no. I, fuck, Asahi — the scariest part was that I didn’t… I wasn't scared in the dream. There was these… these bigass swords and assassins holding the bigass swords, but I wasn't scared. It was like I wanted to die, in the dream.”

“... Do you want to die? Like, for real?”

Noya actually pauses for a heartbeat. Hinata’s heart turns into stone and drops to the pit of his stomach.

“I — Asahi, you know I have a goal now, right? Make amends, help the people — and my mood’s been mostly up ever since I met the Vigilantes and Ukai-san. I’ve been really happy, in fact. But sometimes… I wonder if I’d be better off dead, y’know?”

Hinata thinks about the amount of trust Noya must have in Asahi for being able to share something as deep and personal as that. He wonders if he can have something like that with Kageyama — that something everyone else seems to have with one another. Daichi and Suga, Asahi and Nishinoya, Oikawa and Iwaizumi. They all have that something he wishes he could have with Kageyama, though he’s not sure why he’d want that with Bakageyama in the first place.

“Maybe nee-chan shouldn't have saved me and let me get gutted,” Noya continues. “Maybe I should’ve been the one assassinated, instead of my parents. At least if they were alive, the kingdom could still run, and nee-chan wouldn’t be suddenly forced to take the throne under such terrible circumstances. I don't know.

“But at the same time, I don't wanna die. It’s probably selfish of me, but I wanna live. I have so much to live for — you, Daichi, Shouyou, Suga, hell, even Tooru, and our new teammates. I don't know them as well as Shouyou and Tooru do, but I wanna get to know them. I wanna be friends with them, ‘cause they seem like cool people. I mean, anyone who can sass Tooru like Iwaizumi has gotta be pretty badass, right? And nee-chan wants me to live, so I gotta live, y’know?”

From his angle, Hinata can't see Asahi’s face; but if he were to guess, he’d bet that Asahi is smiling his usual kind, soft smile.

“I’m glad you think that way, Noya, ‘cause I want you to live too. I don't ever want you to give up, okay? And maybe it’s selfish of me, but if I had to choose who to save that night… I’d choose you, each and every time. Being with you shortens my lifespan like nothing else, but I like being with you. And I wanna keep being with you. It scares me to think about what I’d do, the lengths I’d go to, all to keep you safe.”

Hinata doesn't even have to look to know that Nishinoya is blushing furiously. It’s funny how easily flustered the young boisterous prince is.
“S-stop that. It’s embarrassing,” Noya huffs, but his aggressive tone fails to conceal the adoration and affection he clearly feels towards Asahi.

Oh.

Hinata thinks he knows what the something that Asahi and Nishinoya share is. It makes him wonder what it says about him that he thought of wanting to have that something with Kageyama. That line of thought disturbs him on such a profound level that he actually shudders.

He doesn’t feel like having cake anymore.

The awkwardness of his thoughts regarding Kageyama last night doesn’t stop Hinata from meeting up with him the next evening in the Academy building anyway. He considers sneaking in through the window, but he decides that just ‘cause he ditched some moral principles last night doesn’t mean he should throw them all away. Instead, he goes and registers himself as a visitor at the entrance like a good boy. Being a royal guard makes the clearance process easy, thankfully.

The layout of the building here in Seijoh is similar enough to the one in Karasuno that he manages not to get lost. Before his mind can distract him with more thoughts of Kageyama and that something, he arrives at the training room the other boy booked for them.

Hinata pauses at the entrance to admire the place. Each Academy branch has a team of sorcerers who convert the various training rooms into whatever terrain the warriors need for their training, which helps in simulating actual battles. Today, the ground is all earthy and packed with soil and dirt, like squish squish! He amuses himself by stamping lightly on the soft earth.

Kageyama stands in the center of all the earth, probably for dramatic flair, hands planted on his hips. He’s wearing a pair of dark tapered trousers and a navy sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing twin tattoos of what look like a cliff splitting into half on his forearms.

(Hinata wonders what it says about him that he thinks Kageyama actually looks good in that outfit. He also wonders if it has anything to do with that something he was thinking about last night.)

“T Took you long enough, dumbass!” Kageyama growls.

“Maybe you shouldn’t give such last-minute notices,” Hinata huffs, tossing off his black blazer (Noya insisted that all of them got matching ones when they came across a clothes store earlier that day). “Iwaizumi-san is a busy guy — he’s too busy to be your messenger.”

“Whatever, don't lecture me. You're so annoying.”

“Oh yeah?! And what about you, huh? Bakageyama!”

“Don't call me that, Hinata dumbass!”

“Whatever. You were the one who slammed me against a tree and practically made out with me on Kitagawa Daichi! I think I have every right to call you what you are, which is a Bakageyama!”

“Wha—what?!” Kageyama screeches. The red flush that spreads from his ears to his cheeks to his neck is so satisfying that Hinata temporarily forgets about his own embarrassment. He doesn't meant
to bring that up, but since it has slipped out he might as well keep going with the momentum it has created.

“Yeah, don’t you remember? *You* kissed *me* on Kitagawa Daiichi—”

“I do, shut up, you dumb dumbass!”

“No I won’t!” Hinata folds his arms. “Seriously, Bakageyama?! That was my first kiss. I wanted my first kiss to be something more romantic and less *forced* on me, you know! And maybe not in the middle of a war!”

“Don’t be stupid, it was a very safe distance away from the fighting.” Kageyama scowls, like he’s trying to scare the blush away.

“Okay, but have you tried *not* forcing people to kiss you? You know, if you had just *asked* I would have ki—”

Then he slaps a hand over his mouth, horrified. Kageyama is staring back at him with a similarly stunned expression.

*What the hell did I just say?! Hinata Shouyou, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Kageyama is right — you are a dumbass. Dumb, dumb, dumb!*

They stand in the most tense and awkward silence that Hinata has ever experienced in his entire life and his possible previous lives. (He takes back what he said about last night's dinner being the most awkward silence in his whole life, ‘cause this right now totally takes the cake.)

Then Kageyama clears his throat, not meeting Hinata’s eyes. “Oi, stupid, did you get rusty?”

“Please, you have no idea what kinda workout I get protecting Noya-san every day,” Hinata proclaims smugly. He is secretly relieved at the change of topic, though.

Kageyama’s frown shifts into a smirk. “Good. Then it looks like I won't have to hold back so much today.”

Hinata scoffs. “Bring it on, Bakageyama! Don't hold back, or *I* might have to.”

“You asked for it!”

Then, Kageyama’s tattoos glow dark blue.

Chapter End Notes

ah yes, look at me not-so sneakily dumping important exposition via Suga ;) sorry for the info dump but it is really important to know how magic works in this universe.

and about the whole 'forced kiss' thing between Hinata and Kageyama. just a disclaimer: I am NOT trying to romanticise forced kissing. it's just how I figured a KageHina first kiss might go if Kageyama was the one to initiate it. and just bc Hinata was mostly okay and just affronted about it doesn't mean I think it's okay to forcibly kiss people.

as always, thanks for reading :)
pls help me be more active on tumblr
survivors

Chapter Notes

this chapter was a lot of fun to write! er, until the end, that is. I apologise in advance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oikawa woke up in a makeshift hospital cot. He turned his head and spotted Watari in the bed on his right and a blond bespectacled boy named Tsukishima on his left. With a groan, he let his head flop back down on the hard pillow. Today was worse than yesterday. The arrows were poisoned, and he had been hit by no less than six of those damn arrows. The places that had been struck were bandaged tightly, though he can see spots of blood seeping through the sterile wrappings. The initial pain of the poison and piercing had ebbed away, to be replaced by a dull ache.

“I’m sorry,” Watari whispered, his voice hoarse. Oikawa knew what he was apologising for — he’d taken the arrows for his kouhai, after all.

“Don’t be,” Oikawa rasped back. His mouth tasted like blood. “I’d take any number of arrows for you, over and over again. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to protect you from all the arrows.”

Because Oikawa had been too busy reeling in pain from the poisoned arrows in his shoulder, palms and calves, Watari was struck by two more. Oikawa hated himself for not being able to protect his kouhai from the pain he was going through. The guilt hurt him more than the aching in his body. What kind of captain was he if he couldn’t even protect his precious unit members?

“I wonder if things would be better if Iwaizumi-san was here,” Watari mused. “Um, no offense, Oikawa-san! You are a great leader, too!”

Oikawa’s heart lurched at the thought of his absent best friend. Iwa-chan was supposed to co-captain this unit with him, except that he had fallen prey to food poisoning the night that they were supposed to head off to Kitagawa Daiichi. Or so he remembered. The memories were strangely hazy.

“You two are so noisy,” Tsukishima muttered. “Shut up, some of us are trying to remember why we’re even here in the first place.”

The word ‘remember’ sent a jolt, like electricity, through Oikawa’s body, though he has no idea why. His head hurt so much he almost missed the following conversation.

Watari frowned. “Aren’t you here because you wanna defend our kingdom?”

Through the haze of pain, Oikawa barely noticed Tsukishima stretching languidly on his bed.

“What is the purpose of such a useless endeavour?” the blond boy countered, his tone lazy yet sour. “Okay, maybe Kitagawa Daiichi isn’t much of a threat because they’re a small weak nation. So we defeat them and that’s one military threat down, right? But sooner or later, we will face a more imposing threat that we are unable to beat. Then our happy little kingdom will fall — and that means everything we are doing here is meaningless. Everything is meaningless when you look at the grand scheme of things, don’t you see? Effort is futile.”
The boy’s nihilism caused a bitter lump of bile to well up in Oikawa’s throat. How dare he talk about their nation like it was nothing? How dare he belittle the suffering they went through for their nation’s sake? But his mouth felt like it was filled with acid, so he chose to say nothing.

“If you think our effort here is so meaningless then why are you here?” Watari challenged.

Tsukishima shrugged the best he could, since his shoulder was bandaged. “Because I have got nothing better to do. If everything is meaningless, then I can act on whatever whim I please, since it’s not like it will have much impact anyway. Consequences are temporary in the long run. Besides, Kuroo-san goaded me into applying for the Elite Squad, so I refuse to give him the satisfaction of not fighting.”

Oikawa was pretty sure that if he knew anything about the Nekoma trickster, Tsukishima choosing to fight was what gave him satisfaction. But he figured it was in the country’s best favour not to bring that up, lest Tsukishima decide to give up fighting altogether.

Tsukishima continued with his lecture about the futility of hard work and why everyone should just convert to nihilism. Oikawa pulled his covers over his head and tuned the blond boy out. Tsukishima might not have a real reason for fighting, but Oikawa knew he himself did. He was doing this for his kingdom, and for his precious Iwa-chan back home.

And that’s all he needed to know.

Oikawa wakes up with a gasp. He shakily sits up and brings his knees to his chest, taking steady breaths to calm his racing heart. He reminds himself of who he is, where he is and the fact that he’s safe.

Operation Kitagawa Daiichi is over, he tells himself firmly. It was a success and is now in the past. It can’t hurt you anymore.

“Oikawa-san? Are you okay?”

Hinata has rolled over to face Oikawa. From the looks of his wide-open eyes and distinct lack of bedhead, he hasn’t been asleep before Oikawa woke up from his nightmare.

“Y-yeah,” he stammers. He smooths his hair back, away from his clammy forehead. “Just a bad dream.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

Oikawa forces a smile and pets Hinata’s hair. “No thanks, Shou-chan. Everyone gets bad dreams every now and then; it’s no big deal. Go back to sleep.”

“Alright, g’night.” Hinata rolls back onto his back. A few seconds later, the only sound from him is soft, peaceful snoring. Oikawa can’t help but envy the ease with which his kouhai sleeps. He wonders what it’s like to be able to fall asleep without being terrified of the prospect of nightmares.

He doesn’t want to sleep anymore.

He scrambles out of his futon and out of his room. Leaning back against the comforting solidness of
the door, he squeezes his eyes shut and clutches his shirt, right over his heart. He gets the feeling that there were some big chunks of memory missing from his dreams of Operation KD. Has it got anything to do with trauma-induced amnesia? He didn't ask his shrink; he figured he would be better off not remembering as much as he can about his war days. He is barely eighteen, yet he's bearing immense amounts of pain, guilt and trauma that would break men twice his age.

Instant ramen. Instant ramen has always been able to calm him down. And he desperately needs something to distract him.

The thought of comfort food propels him down the hallway. He passes by the balcony and spots Asahi and Nishinoya so wrapped up in each other’s arms they don't notice Oikawa. He can't help but smile. The two of them really are adorable together. He’s glad the two of them are able to find comfort and safety in each other’s presence.

He continues down the hallway, then remembers he needs his Pyrokinesis glove to start a fire, so he backtracks to his bedroom. To his relief, Hinata is still fast asleep. He’s smiling in his sleep, probably dreaming of cake or volleyball, knowing what he's like. Oikawa notices his blanket has slipped down. With a ‘tut’ and a fond smile, he bends down and tucks the blanket snugly around the smaller boy.

He heads back out to the kitchen. He snaps his fingers several times to test the flames out of habit. A small string of flames erupt from his fingertips, to his satisfaction. His glove is still functional, though he can't imagine why it wouldn't be.

He fumbles around the cupboards before remembering his mother liked to hide his favourite instant ramen in the highest shelves when he was a kid. Clearly, she hadn't anticipated that he would grow to a respectable height of 184 cm as a teenager. He easily reaches up to open the shelf and fish out a packet of instant ramen. The bright green packaging brings back an unexpected wave of nostalgia — a longing for days that were less painful and nights that were less frightening.

No matter how vehemently he denies it whenever Daichi brings it up, he knows he’s quite a disaster as a cook. But he doesn't want to wake up his teammates (or interrupt their canoodling, in the case of Asahi and Noya) just ‘cause he wants a late-night snack. Besides, how hard can it be to prepare a bowl of instant ramen? He’s so got this, he tells himself proudly. He'll show that critical captain that he so can cook without poisoning everyone — maybe that will get him back his vice-captain position. Or maybe he should launch a revolution and force Daichi to abdicate his captaincy. It is with these motivating thoughts that he bustles off to prepare the best damned instant ramen the world has ever had the privilege of bearing witness to.

The instant ramen tastes like a diseased pig died in it.

Retching and weeping, he throws the ruined noodles out, then runs to the toilet to vomit. Looks like he won't be getting back his vice-captaincy any time soon, he thinks glumly.

There’s only one solution. And that solution is right next door.
"I knew I should have moved away when you left for the palace. Like maybe further down the street. Or to Shiratorizawa. Damn it, I should’ve gone to Shiratorizawa."

Oikawa gasps in genuine horror. "You wouldn't!"

"So why are you dangling from my window this time, Shittykawa? I’m not helping you hide the body."

Oikawa pulls himself up to be on eye-level with a tired and decidedly displeased Iwaizumi. "Please, Iwa-chan? I was hungry, but I ruined the instant ramen. Somehow. I don't know! I blame Daichi for dragging down my confidence in cooking, that stupid criticising captain."

"What am I, your mom?" Iwaizumi demands. "Get lost from my window."

"Please, Iwa-chan! You’re the bestest boyfriend in the whole wide world! You’re so strong, and so smart, and so handsome, and so brilliant, my amazingly amazing Iwa-chan—"

"Oi, shut up, you’ll wake up the neighbours," Iwaizumi hisses. "I didn't say no, did I? I told you to get away from my window so I could go over to your place and make you your stupid ramen. Now will you get off?"

Oikawa’s world entire world lights up. In one swift motion, he launches himself into Iwaizumi’s bedroom and bowls him over in a tight, grateful hug. He nuzzles Iwaizumi’s chest happily, akin to a puppy greeting his human after a long day apart.

"Get off, Trashykawa. You’re crushing me."

"Can you stop ruining special moments, Iwa-chan? Just let me be happy, ’cause I’m so so so happy my favourite baby boo Iwa-chan agreed to—"

"I’m taking back my offer if you don't get off me right this moment."

"Tch, so grumpy, Iwa-chan." But Oikawa gets off his boyfriend anyway and helps him up to his feet.

Ten minutes and two bowls of steaming ramen later, Oikawa decides that he’s gonna marry Iwaizumi. The ramen tastes so wonderful, like a comforting embrace after a nightmare, he is nearly moved to tears. Iwaizumi’s ramen tastes a million times better than a diseased deceased pig, that's for sure.

"Marry me, Iwa-chan," Oikawa demands.

Iwaizumi scowls. "Why? You've barely been back for like a day and you're already thinking of marriage?!"

"It’s ’cause you can cook, Iwa-chan!"

"You should just learn to cook on your own. It’s not that hard."

"But I tried!" Oikawa sobs in between mouthfuls of ramen. “I’m brilliant at many things, like fighting, volleyball and styling my hair, but cooking is just something I’m not cut out for! The world is so unfair."

Iwaizumi sighs irritably. “Then you’re doing the housekeeping. I don't have the time and patience to put up with your slobbiness."
“Excuse you, Iwa-chan, have you seen the pristine state of my house? Housekeeping won’t be a problem.” Then Oikawa pauses, a silly grin taking over his face. “Wait, is that a yes, Iwa-chan?!”

He might just be seeing things, but he swears Iwaizumi actually blushes. Iwaizumi rubs the back of his neck, refusing to meet Oikawa’s eyes. “Shut up, don’t get ahead of yourself, Shittykawa. We’ll talk more about… that once this journey is over.”

Considering that this is Iwaizumi, that’s as good as a yes. Oikawa beams at him, causing the dark-haired man to glare at him.

“Stop looking at me like that and eat your ramen,” Iwaizumi orders. “I didn't wake up at three fucking a.m. just for you to let the ramen I cooked go cold.”

“Are you my mom, Iwa-chan?”

“Considering that your stupid ass just proposed marriage to me, that’s a very disturbing thing to say.”

“Ha, grumpy as always!” Even so, Oikawa can’t keep the stupid grin off his face. He feels like he’s glowing with sheer unbridled joy, as though he is falling in love with Iwaizumi Hajime all over again.

With his precious, sweet, adorable Iwa-chan sitting across from him, Oikawa’s nightmare about Operation KD becomes a thing of the distant past.

Oikawa still hasn't stopped smiling when the next morning rolls around. Since it’s a Saturday, Iwaizumi doesn't have to go to the Academy; hence, Oikawa gets Nishinoya’s assistance in wrangling Iwaizumi to his house so they can have breakfast together.

“Seriously?!” Iwaizumi demands, wearing a Kiss the Cook apron. “You wake me up again just to ask me to make breakfast for you?”

(By “having breakfast together”, Oikawa actually means getting Iwaizumi to cook for him.)

“Take this as good practice for married life,” Oikawa says good-naturedly.

Iwaizumi scowls. “Don’t talk married life when you haven't even gotten a ring yet, Stupidkawa. I’m putting rat poison in your food.”

“Iwa-chan! Is that any way to be talking to your fiance?!”

“I'll talk to you however I please.”

Noya raises his eyebrows. “Oi, Tooru, why didn't you say you were engaged, you stud? Dude, congrats.”

“I’m not sure if I should take offense at how surprised you sound,” Oikawa sniffs. “And I just got engaged last night, so I wasn't really hiding anything from you.”

Noya laughs heartily and continues teasing Oikawa. Truthfully, Oikawa would have gone to Iwaizumi’s house for breakfast, if it weren't for Noya wanting to interview Iwaizumi about his likes
and dislikes about the kingdom. It’s a thing he is doing called the Noya Talks Thunder!! (a really lame name, in Oikawa's expert opinion), in which he goes around talking to people about the problems, whether in regards to the governance of the country or their own personal problems, with varying degrees of subtlety. Since Iwaizumi is aware of his true identity, Noya has decided to just straight-up interview Iwaizumi without preamble.

Iwaizumi yells at them to collect their breakfast from the kitchen because “I’m not your maid, so stop being a lazy piece of shit, Shittykawa”. He is already shaping up to be a wonderfully endearing fiance, Oikawa dreamily marvels.

Iwaizumi sits down opposite Noya, his hands clasped on the table. “Alright, shoot your questions.”

“With pleasure.” Noya clears his throat, like he's trying to sound professional. “So, Iwaizumi-san—”

“Just Iwaizumi.”

“Iwaizumi, would you call yourself a proud citizen of this country?”

“Er, I like it well enough, I suppose,” Iwaizumi says, scratching the back of his neck. “It’s not perfect, obviously, but it’s inhabitable. There's food, water, shelter — though the safety could be better. Stupid bandits.”

“It’s nice to know you have such high standards for the country you live in,” Oikawa teases.

“Shut up and eat your breakfast, Shittykawa. I'm talking to Nishinoya-sama.”

"No need for formalities!" Noya rushes to add, blushing at the use of the honourific. "And you can just call me Noya. That's what they all call me."

"Oh, alright."

(Oikawa glares at Noya for stealing his Iwa-chan’s attention away from him.)

Noya looks down at the notes he has compiled. Oikawa has to give him some credit — for a guy who hates sitting still and writing, he must be incredibly dedicated to making amends for something that’s not even his fault to have written notes about the citizens’ woes about the way the country is run. He isn't sure what the prince is gonna do with his notes, though; it’s not like he can go back to the palace and hand them back to Princess-soon-to-be-Queen Nishinoya. Mailing them to her doesn't pose a good idea, as mail can easily be intercepted by their enemies, whoever the hell they are.

“Is there anything else, besides safety, that you’re concerned about?” Nishinoya prompts, all professional and businesslike.

Iwaizumi pauses, mulling over the question. “Well… from word on the street, the high school kids and faculty seem unhappy with the previous queen and king for cutting their funding in favour of pouring more funds into the Training Academy. I walk past Aoba Johsai High School every day to get to the Academy. The front gate is shit, if you can even call it that. Bandits have broken in many times to terrorise the kids and wreak havoc on the place. Parents are terrified out of their minds for their children, so many of them have pulled their kids out from school. The remainder who still go to school are scared as hell, and I don't blame them. I’ve intervened whenever I see them being harassed, but there's only so much I can do when I walk past the school just twice a day.”

Noya’s hands tremble, but he manages to hold himself together — a true testament to the mental strength he has cultivated. “I… I see. Is there anything else?”
“I heard they’re doubtful of the Princess Nishinoya’s ability to solve things, when she’s formally coronated as Queen in two weeks’ time — no offense, though, I know she’s your sister,” Iwaizumi rushes to add when he sees the incensed look that flashes across Noya’s face.

Right. With all the running around they’ve been doing, Oikawa has forgotten that the entire kingdom is supposed to spend two months grieving the deaths of the king and queen, and that the princess can only be formally crowned as queen once the grieving period has passed. He wonders how Noya feels about having to miss his nee-chan’s coronation ceremony.

(Probably intensely bitter and heartbroken. Oikawa knows he would feel that way, if he were in Noya’s shoes.)

“None taken,” Noya says, a forced smile on his face. “I understand. They have every right to be distrustful, after the way they previous king and queen let them down.”

Oikawa notices how Noya pointedly refused to call them his parents.

“What about you, though?” Iwaizumi asks.

Noya blinks, like a confused penguin. (Do penguins blink? Oikawa isn’t sure.) “Huh? Me?”

“Yeah, do you think Princess — sorry, I mean, your sister. Do you think she will be able to solve the kingdom’s problems?”

An instantaneous beam pops up on Noya’s face. “Yep! She’s really smart and capable. I have complete faith in her. She’ll be an amazing queen.”

“Not that I wanna burst your bubble, Noya-chan,” Oikawa interjects, “but it’s gonna be tough for your sister. Remember, she’s running an entire kingdom on her own. Unless she has a secret husband she’s hiding somewhere?”

Noya snorts. “Oh please, Chikara’s too chicken to propose.”

“Right. Er, anyway, as I was saying earlier, Princess Nishinoya probably won’t be able to solve all of this kingdom’s problems, and definitely not as soon as we’d like. Governing a country’s hard work and a long, painful process.”

Noya seems to deflate a little. “Yeah, I figured.”

Oikawa thinks it’s remarkable that Nishinoya doesn't throw a hissy fit. He really has come a long way from his days in the palace, breaking vases and destroying paintings, at the slightest perceived criticism of his big sister.

But Noya perks up again. “Yeah, so that's why I’m doing my part to help solve some of the problems! Even if it’s small, an impact is still an impact. I’ll do everything in my power to contribute to the country’s well-being, as the kingdom's guardian deity!”

“Don’t let Shou-chan’s praise get to your head now,” Oikawa scoffs.

“Like you’re one to talk!”

“The prince is right, Shittykawa.”

“Tch, you’re both so mean!”

Even so, Oikawa is happy to spend his Saturday morning with two of his favourite people, so he can
handle whatever insults they throw at him.

Then Noya starts to interview Iwaizumi about Oikawa’s deepest, most embarrassing secrets, and Oikawa decides that a line has to be drawn somewhere.

Daichi, Hinata and Oikawa arrange shifts among themselves to escort Nishinoya on his excursions in the Seijoh district over the next few weeks. (Asahi isn't allowed to accompany Noya anymore because of his tendency to scare people off with his appearance.) When it is not Oikawa’s turn, he visits his old friends and teammates at the Academy, as well as his favourite pastry shop. He is sad they’ve run out of his favourite raspberry pastries, but he supposes life just isn't fair.

Sometimes, when it’s his turn to accompany the prince, he brings Noya to meet his buddies, and they play all volleyball together. As much as he enjoys playing against the petite libero, he likes playing with Noya on the same side of the net as him even more. It took them a while when they first met all those months ago, but they eventually figured out a style to suit both their playing styles. Now almost all of Noya’s receives send the ball in a perfect arc to the setter position, allowing Oikawa to set up attacks without a hitch. Together with Iwaizumi, they easily crush their opposition.

Today, Noya insists on talking to more citizens. Oikawa is surprised that Noya hasn't managed to interview just about everyone in the district, considering that he spends most of the daytime out there just talking. As extroverted as he is, Oikawa figures it must eventually get exhausting for him, yet he just keeps going, like giving up is no longer an option.

Oikawa holds a bag of chips between them. Noya has been working so hard, so Oikawa thinks he deserves a treat. They amble down the street, taking turns to help themselves to the wonderfully salty and unhealthy chips.

“Was that lady pissed or what?” Noya says. “She seemed really upset about retirement packages getting cut in half.”

“Yeah, it’s like the king and queen wanted to create a super military or something.” Oikawa grimaces. “I didn't think Kitagawa Daiichi’s threat scared them that much.”

“Yeah. I wish that I — I wish I knew back then what I know now, so I could ask my parents why. Why did things get this bad? Why cut funding for so many places and people for the military? Just… why?”

Oikawa pets Noya’s head. “Hey, if you keep looking back you’ll never be able to move forward. Forget about what you could have done and instead focus on what you can do.”

Noya swats his hand away. “Gross, your hands are oily. And that was so cheeesy, Tooru. I hope you never lose your job as my bodyguard, ‘cause you’d make a shitty motivational speaker.”

“Thanks for your glowing words of encouragement. They really touched my heart.”

Noya snickers and throws a chip at Oikawa’s face.

“No — that’s gross, you uncivilised beast!” He’s about to grab a handful of chips to fling back at Noya as revenge—
—except the sight of a man barreling towards them with a bat completely derails his previous agenda. Instinctively, he steps in front of Noya and slips on his gloves. If he comes any closer, Oikawa will totally give him a piece of his mind. He will roast any bastard who tries to hurt his prince alive, he will freeze them to death, he will—

Noya leaps in front of him, with his bracelets in arm-guard mode. He slams the arm guards together, the ensuing shock wave blasting the man back.

“Noya-chan, what the hell?” Oikawa demands.

“I'm protecting you, stupid. Did you forget about my super-cool bracelets?”

“Well—”

The man gets up, an unhinged look in his eyes. He’s staring right past Noya and straight at Oikawa. “You bastard! How dare you show your damned face here?! Wanna rub salt in my wounds?!”


“You dare ask me what’s my problem?!” Spit flies from the man’s mouth. “You killed my daughter! You fucking cold-hearted beast! You murdered her!”

Oikawa stares blankly at him. “Who?!”

Five men and three women, all armed with bats and clubs, approach them and flank the man accusing Oikawa of a murder he’s pretty sure he never committed, to the best of his memory. Oikawa is sure he can handle them if he were on his own, except now he has to worry about Noya’s safety too.

“Stop feigning innocence!” the first man shouts disgustedly. “You, all you dogs of this kingdom's military, have blood all over your filthy hands! Now you have to die to repent for the sins you have committed against my people!”

“Hold up, who the hell are you guys?!” Oikawa doesn't want to attack yet, not when he still wants answers. Once he gets what he wants, he will deal with them with righteous fury.

The nine people form an ominous semicircle around him and Noya, the first man standing at the very front. Oikawa reaches out and pulls Noya closer to him. Noya glares at their attackers. His arm guards glow as if to represent their master’s fury.

“I'm a survivor of Kitagawa Daiichi. The name’s Kai Tou, remember that. We all are survivors. And we have a bone to pick with you warriors, so why don't we start with you?”

Oikawa freezes at the mention of Kitagawa Daiichi, which is a stupid, stupid mistake. Seeing his moment of weakness, the man named Kai Tou lunges forward towards him. Only Noya’s insane reflexes save Oikawa from getting his brains clubbed out.

Then, like someone dumped ice cold water on him, he realises it’s a trap. When Noya surges forward to defend Oikawa, two men behind take the opportunity to grab Noya. They hold a knife to his throat, and two of the women hold his legs still to prevent him from thrashing.

Oikawa stands there, his fingers still in mid-snap. If he was faster, if he hadn't frozen back then, these apparent survivors would have already been down on their knees, clothes on fire and begging for mercy. But with Noya’s life on the line, he knows he can’t afford to make any hasty decisions.
“We have no idea who the kid is, so we don't wanna hurt him,” Kai Tou says. “It’s simple. Come quietly with us, and he won't be harmed.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Noya spits.

“Shut up, this has nothing to do with you.” Kai Tou jabs his elbow against Noya’s temple, and it takes all the self-control Oikawa has not to just lash out and set the whole damn street on fire.

Oikawa weighs his chances. No matter how fast he can snap his fingers, he’s hopelessly outnumbered one versus nine. The moment he makes any move to attack, they’ll kill Noya. And Noya can’t die — he has so much he has to do. So much more good he wants to do for the nation. So many lives to touch, so many people to love.

No, Oikawa won't let Noya die. He won't let anyone else die for him. Kitagawa Daiichi drew the line for him.

His pride as a war-hardened warrior is the only thing that keeps him from trembling as he says, “Okay. I’ll go with you. Do what you want with me, just don't hurt him!”

“**Tooru, what the fuck!?**”

“Excellent,” Kai Tou says, sounding pleased with Oikawa’s proposal. “Hand over your gloves. Yes, your gloves. I was there on Kitagawa Daiichi, I know about all the murders that were committed by the power of those gloves. **Hand them over now.**”

Oikawa hates every second of it, but he reluctantly peels his lifelines off and passes them to Kaito. Without them on his hands, he feels naked and vulnerable. He loathes it. Even on Operation KD he never felt _vulnerable_, because he had his gloves and comrades with him. And now his only comrade is restrained with a knife to his throat, as blackmail to get Oikawa to surrender. He refuses to meet Noya’s gaze, which he knows is filled with rage and betrayal.

The third woman hands Kai Tou a knife. Oikawa refuses to flinch when Kai Tou slashes his gloves into tiny shreds, completely destroying his only way of defending Noya and himself.

Noya sobs. “Fuck you. I hope you all burn in hell.”

Two men circle around behind Oikawa and bind his hands tightly in shackles, like he's some prisoner of war. They kick him, but he refuses to stumble. He is way too proud for that shit.

“Drop the kid and let’s go,” Kaito says.

The four people holding Noya back dump him on the ground. One of them, wearing a pair of steel-toed boots, kicks him hard in his gut. Noya doubles over and coughs, several drops of blood spilling onto the cobblestone street.

“You said you wouldn't hurt him!” Oikawa yells.

“It’s nothing personal,” Kai Tou says. “Li Hou was probably just annoyed at his mouthing off.”

“Tooru, don't do this!” Noya yells, which would have sounded impressive if he hasn't paused to cough up some more blood in the middle of his sentence.

“Oi, get going,” the man behind Oikawa orders.

He refuses to look back at Noya, not wanting to see the smaller boy’s betrayed expression. He lets
them blindfold him and lead him to wherever they’re gonna kill him, feeling strangely content. Maybe this is what he deserves. Maybe this is what’s best for him, to absolve him of his guilt. All of it — for letting his friends get hurt because of him, for committing so many murders, even if it was in defense of his country. A life is still a life, and a murder is still a murder.

At least Noya will live. That thought is what gives him the strength to take the next few steps forward to his sure death.

Chapter End Notes

yeah that was one hell of an emotional rollercoaster. if it's any reassurance, obviously Oikawa isn't gonna die, or I would've used the 'Major Character Death' Archive Warning.

when I first planned this chapter, I didn't plan for Oikawa proposing to Iwaizumi, but hey sometimes unexpected things happen for the better. I know what people say about teen marriage but I MEAAAN the heart wants what it wants ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ and more importantly, they are old enough to consent in this universe.

edit (11 Oct 2018): originally it was Kunimi in Oikawa's flashback, just as it originally was in chapter 2, but I changed Kunimi to Watari when I noticed his portrayal didn't fit his canon personality.

thanks for reading!

give it a click
“We haven’t seen each other in a year, and you still haven’t improved your kissing?”

“Shut up, dumbass, like you’re any better!”

Hinata scoffs. “I’m the superior kisser, don’t deny it!”

“No, I’m better and you know it! And at least I asked you first before kissing.”

“You don’t get points for being a decent guy,” Hinata says bluntly.

Kageyama scowls, but he clearly has no comeback to that. Hinata smirks and awards himself that victory. If he remembers clearly, they’re tied 35-35.

The two find something else to argue about as they make their way down the street. They draw some odd looks, likely due to the fact that they are covered in dirt and mildly disheveled, but they ignore them. Hinata is pleased with the progress of their Thing, and he can’t wait to show it to everyone else. It’s so cool, like ZING and KA-BLING!

“—and you’re still a Bakageyama!”

“Well, your face—”

Kageyama suddenly stops in his tracks, and Hinata crashes into his back.

“Why did you stop?” Hinata demands, rubbing his sore nose. Kageyama has quite a hard back.

“Isn’t that… isn’t that your prince? Why does he look injured?”

It’s like someone replaced all the blood in Hinata’s body with ice. Alarméd, he shoves Kageyama aside, desperate to prove him wrong, only to see that he’s right. Noya is sprawled on the ground, clutching his stomach and wincing in pain.

And what pisses Hinata off so much is that no one has helped Noya. There are about fifteen people in the vicinity, but they are all just standing there, whispering among themselves and trying to stare at the hurt prince as discreetly as possible.

“Noya-san!” he shouts. The rest of the world turns into a blur as he rushes towards Nishinoya. He kneels down next to Noya, and he grabs Hinata’s hands.

“Tooru…” Nishinoya chokes out.

“Oikawa-san? What happened to him?”

“Taken—” Noya coughs, and blood splatters on the ground.

Kageyama crouches in front of Noya, pulls his hands away from his stomach with surprising gentleness and lifts his shirt up. Hinata sucks in a breath when he sees the glaring bruise on Noya’s stomach.
“We need to take you to Suga,” Hinata says. He gently removes his hand from Noya’s desperate grip and hooks his arms under Noya’s arms, pulling him to his feet.

Kageyama’s eyes wander to a sickeningly purple bruise on the side of Noya’s temple. “Does your head hurt? Did you pass out? Do you feel confused, or like puking?”

“Wha— no, stop worrying about me!” Noya shouts. “Worry about Tooru instead! For fuck’s sake, he is kidnapped! By some people who say they’re survivors from Kitagawa Daiichi or some shit like that. Leave me here and go after him!”

“Oikawa-san can take care of himself, I’m sure,” Hinata says in what he hopes is a soothing manner, even though on the inside he’s panicking. Among the Blue Crows, he is the least experienced when it comes to dealing with a hysterical Nishinoya. “We need to get you back to Suga-san—”

“What part of kidnapped do you not understand, Shouyou?! He can’t take care of himself because they destroyed his gloves and bound him!”

“Noya-san—” Hinata begins, but Kageyama interrupts him.

“And we won’t be any good to him if we go after him right now,” Kageyama says firmly. “You’re hurt. And if the people who took Oikawa-san are who you say they are, we can’t take them on by ourselves. We need backup. Hinata, help him get on my back. Lead the way to where the rest of Nishinoya-san’s bodyguards are.”

Despite Noya’s protests, Hinata loads him onto Kageyama’s back. They take off at a brisk pace, but they take care not to go too fast. They don’t want to risk hurting Noya any more than he already is.

They burst into Oikawa’s home. The scene inside is so domestic and peaceful, such a sharp contrast to the panic and danger outside, that Hinata would laugh if the situation weren’t quite so severe. Iwaizumi and Asahi are drinking tea and talking in the kitchen, while Suga is leaning against Daichi on the couch, reading a book. The four of them look up — their previously serene expressions crumble away, to be replaced by a look of grim worry.

“What happened?” Daichi asks, automatically taking charge of the situation like the good capable captain he is.


While Kageyama hastens to the living room, Hinata explains the situation the best he can to Daichi.

“What?!” Iwaizumi growls. “That idiot got kidnapped?! By people who say they are survivors of Kitagawa Daiichi?”

Hinata nods earnestly. “That’s what Noya-san said.”

“You did good in bringing Noya back and telling us, instead of blindly rushing off to rescue Tooru,” Daichi tells Hinata.

“He could be dead right now!” Noya yells. The sound of rustling cushions indicates he’s squirming. “What are you guys doing just standing around? Go save him!”

“Shh, Noya, and stay still,” Suga chides. He presses one hand against Noya’s bruised temple and the other against his stomach. He closes his eyes and murmurs an incantation under his breath. A silvery glow emanates from his hands, and from where Hinata is standing he can vaguely see the bruises fading away.
“I'm gonna go rescue him,” Iwaizumi says. “You guys stay here. It’s not safe,”

He storms to the door, only to be stopped by Kageyama.

“Senpai, I don't think it's a good idea for you to rush off on your own,” Kageyama cautions. “Remember that time Kindaichi got abducted by those survivors? Four of us were barely able to deal with them — there were so many of them. And their numbers may have increased since then. You'll just get yourself killed if you go on your own.”

“He's right,” Daichi adds. “I understand your concern, Iwaizumi, but recklessly running in without backup or a plan will only endanger yourself, and then you'll be of no use to Oikawa.”

Iwaizumi huffs, but he steps away from the door. “Okay, then you tell me what our plan is.”

“No, you stay here” is the first bit of instruction from Daichi.

True to his obstinate nature, Noya isn't having it. “I'm fine! Suga healed me! Besides, it's my fault Tooru got kidnapped. If I hadn't been there, he would've been able to fend them off without worrying about me.”

“You can't think like that,” Asahi argues in a rare display of boldness. “You can't blame yourself for something that’s not your fault!”

Noya rounds on Asahi, furious. “Don’t tell me what to think! Stop trying to fucking sugarcoat things! It’s all my fault, so let me own up to my mistakes.”

“Hinata said Nishinoya-san’s bracelets can deflect attacks, right?” Kageyama cuts in. His eyebrows are furrowed, which Hinata recognises as a sign that he’s thinking hard about something.

“Yep!” Hinata says. “They can also turn into arm guards and deflect bigger weapons.”

“Then it'll be useful to have Nishinoya-san with us to guard our backs.”

“Yeah, exactly!” Noya chimes in.

Asahi is the first to protest. “No. He already got hurt — we are not putting him in any more danger.”

“But I'm willing to take that risk.” Noya's eyes flash dangerously. “I'm not a china doll, Asahi. The whole point of me getting these bracelets from Ukai-san was so I can defend all of us, so you won't have to worry about me.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Iwaizumi growls. “Can we stop arguing about this and just go? Noya’s right — Oikawa could be dying right now, and all we’re doing is bickering about who gets to go, like this is some school excursion. That asshole’s my fiance, so I get to decide who I want to come along to rescue him, and I want Noya with us. End of story. Now can we get going?!”

If a teammate hasn't been kidnapped, Hinata would have asked about this whole ‘fiance’ business. But as it is, there are more pressing issues to take care of. He mentally files that away as a question for another time, when they have Oikawa back in their ranks.

“Fine,” Daichi says, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Noya, I want you to stick with Asahi. I don't want you to overexert yourself trying to defend all of us, got it?”

Noya opens his mouth, like he’s about to argue again. Then he seems to mull it over, and he shuts his mouth.
“Besides, Ace here tends to leave openings in his defense when attacking,” Suga hums. He would know, having sparred with Asahi. Suga is surprisingly good at hand-to-hand, for such a delicate-looking fairy-guy. “He’ll need Noya to cover up those openings.”

Daichi turns to Noya. “Do you have any idea where they could have taken Oikawa?”

It’s Iwaizumi who answers. “Kageyama and I have an idea where. We’ve visited once before, when one of ours got kidnapped.”

Daichi nods to him, as if temporarily handing his leadership position to Iwaizumi. “Okay, then. Lead the way.”

“‘Cause we don't know how many of them there are, so we don't want to aggravate them. If we attack them, it’ll just confirm what they think of us warriors. And they might try to stir some shit, like a rebellion, or discord among the people. So far they've been laying low, targeting just the warriors who took part in Operation KD, but they're leaving civilians and the other warriors alone — as far as I know, at least.”

Guilt wells up in Hinata. He figures the survivors probably don't know who he is, since he only snuck into Kitagawa Daiichi on the last day. That thought should make him feel safe, except it instead makes him feel an immense amount of survivor’s guilt, because he gets to be safe while Oikawa-san and Kindaichi and what sounds like many other warriors have gotten hurt just because the survivors remember what they look like.

“Iwaizumi-senpai, this is it, isn't it?” Kageyama asks.

Iwaizumi nods grimly. “This is it alright.”

They stop outside a place that looks like it used to be a grand mansion but is now run-down and dilapidated from lack of maintenance. The windows are grimy and boarded up. Cracks and holes dot the dirty walls. The doorknob looks so rusty Hinata believes that if he touches it, a layer of rust might come off on his hand. Or at least, that's how he thinks rust works. He isn't sure.

*If I got kidnapped and kept here, I'd be miserable,* he muses.
“We can't just kick down the door and march in,” Iwaizumi mutters. His hand is resting on his sheathed hunting knife, as if preparing for someone to jump out at him. Since they’re in the territory of the people who abducted their friend, it seems reasonable to be cautious. “Do we conveniently have someone on hand who can sneak their way in and open the door from the inside?”

“See, Daichi, it’s a good thing I came along,” Suga says, his tone too cheery for someone who is on a rescue mission.

“I didn't say anything! And be careful.”

Suga laughs, pecks a quick kiss on Daichi’s cheek (when did that happen?) and—

Hinata has to blink. He has seen Suga shrink several times, but each time never fails to surprise him and make him doubt his eyesight. This time is no different. Suga, previously a guy of about 174 cm, is now tiny enough to fit in Hinata’s palms — and Hinata’s palms are small.

He watches as tiny Sugawara flies up (yeah, that will never stop being weird either) and slots himself with ease into a crack in the door. He hears some sounds indicating a brief scuffle, then the door swings open. Suga is standing in the doorway, holding a frying pan. (Where did that come from?) He's back to his normal height, standing over the beaten-up and unconscious bodies of who Hinata guesses are other survivors.

“Thanks, Suga,” Iwaizumi says, stepping over the battered survivors. “But, er, it would’ve been nice if you left one conscious for us to ask questions.”

“No worries, there are more of them!” Suga replies, once again sounding too chipper for a guy who beat up three guys bigger than he is on his own. Hinata wonders if acting cheery is his way of hiding his fear. “You can ask, say, one of the friendly looking ones approaching us from behind. Maybe the one with the knife. Oh wait, they all have knives.”

Iwaizumi’s lips form a tense line. “Let’s go and get some answers, then.”

Hinata is about to march in behind Iwaizumi, except Kageyama grabs the back of his shirt and yanks him back.

“Oi, dumbass, now may be a good time to use that Thing,” he says gruffly.

Hinata grins, excited in spite of the seriousness of the situation. “Yeah, let’s do it!”

Kageyama grins back, which looks absolutely terrifying. He rolls up his sleeves. His tattoos light up, glowing dark blue.

Ahead of them, Iwaizumi, Suga, Daichi, Nishinoya and Asahi are busy clearing a path for them. Iwaizumi fights with cold efficiency, knocking his opponents’ feet out from under them, firing furious punches and jabbing with his hunting knife when necessary. Really, Hinata muses, the survivors should’ve known better to kidnap Oikawa.

Suga, as it turns out, is quite proficient with the frying pan. He alternates between slamming the cooking utensil into faces and karate chopping stomachs. Hinata hears him offer brief apologies before knocking out his attackers, but for once Hinata suspects he isn't being sincere.

Daichi fights with a steady, refined grace, spinning his collapsible bo-staff at such a fierce speed most of the survivors don't dare to even approach him. There are hardly any gaps in his defense, so other than some minor scrapes and bruises he seems fine.
As instructed, Noya sticks by Asahi. His agility and reflexes never fail to amaze Hinata, whether on the volleyball court or in a melee fight. He crouches down, as if preparing to receive a volleyball, and lunges out to block blows with such alarming speed he becomes a blur. With Noya guarding him, it’s no wonder Asahi fights without any restrain. He lashes out with brute force, wielding his polearm with so much power Hinata actually spots some attackers careening into walls.

“There are more of you!” the one fighting Daichi exclaims, sounding exasperated.

What looks like twenty survivors instantly surround Kageyama and Hinata, as if they were hiding and waiting for them to approach.

“What, there are more of you?!” Kageyama retorts. He turns to Hinata. Hinata nods in reply. He’s ready. They have worked on their Thing for a while now; he’s confident it will work.

Kageyama takes a deep breath, then exhales sharply. His tattoos glow even more luminously, and around them the ground fissures. Through the newly-formed cracks in the floor, mounds of earth rise up — and that’s Hinata’s cue. The rest of the world disappears. Now, it’s just Kageyama controlling the earth and Hinata running to leap onto the earth Kageyama summoned. He sprints from mound to mound, high enough above the ground to kick the survivors in the face and too high for them to reach him. Normally, he’s not a very strong guy. If you want someone with raw physical power, Asahi is your man. But with the momentum he has gathered from running and leaping without pause, he’s able to put enough power in his attacks.

Kageyama doesn’t miss a beat, either. For every mound of earth that eventually succumbs to gravity and falls back down to the ground, he is efficient in preparing several more suspended in front of Hinata, charting him a path to the next opponent he needs to take down. Run, jump, attack and duck if necessary. Rinse and repeat. All he has to do is keep moving.

In no time, the twenty survivors who gathered to deal with Hinata and Kageyama are unconscious on the floor.

“Dude, since when was that a thing?” Noya asks, sounding awed. “Shouyou, Kageyama, that was so badass!”

The rest are done with their own battles. All the KD survivors who came out to greet them now litter the ground, and the Blue Crows — original and new — stand victorious.

“They’re keeping him in the basement,” Iwaizumi announces. “He’s alive. Let’s go.”

“Guys, remember the plan,” Daichi says quietly. “Suga will shrink and rescue Oikawa, while the rest of us will distract whoever’s there, got it?”

“Got it, Captain!”

They storm down the stairs to the basement. The KD survivors they meet must have witnessed the brawl at the front of the house, as they are quick to move out of their way. Hinata, scared of the state they will find Oikawa in, clings close to Kageyama. Kageyama glances down at Hinata practically pressed up against him, but for once he doesn’t snap at Hinata or call him a dumbass.

Iwaizumi kicks down the door when they get to it. They spill into a dungeon-looking room, where Oikawa is conveniently situated right in the center. Metal shackles bind him to a rickety-looking chair. He looks really worse for wear — he is covered in bruises and his hair is matted with blood. Iwaizumi mutters a curse.

Oikawa opens his black eyes, and he frowns. “Iwa-chan? Are you guys here to rescue — wait why
is Tobio-chan here?!” he demands, like that’s the most pressing concern right now.

“To rescue you, Oikawa-san,” Kageyama says, with no trace of malice or hostility — with no trace of sentimentality, Hinata realises. “It is good to see you’re alive.”

“Bloody fuck, there are more of you?! What a pain,” a man curses. He lightly whacks a crowbar against his palm. Hinata notices each time the crowbar strikes the man’s palm, Oikawa flinches.

“That’s the asshole,” Noya informs them. “Kai Tou.”

Hinata knows that as the team’s chattiest person (perhaps except for Noya when he’s in a good mood), it is his unspoken duty to keep Kaito and his men’s attention on them and away from tiny Suga. So he starts with, “That was mean of you, Kai Tou-san. If you were gonna kidnap Oikawa-san couldn’t you at least have brought him to a nicer place?”

“Yeah!” Noya chimes in, catching on to what Hinata is doing. “Like a place with a nicer garden, y’know? Ever heard of landscaping?”

Kai Tou twitches. He places his crowbar on a nearby table and picks up a knife. “I don’t have time to deal with you. I don’t remember most of you being part of Operation KD — except for you there, with the tattoos.”

Kageyama stiffens next to Hinata.

“Do kids really like dying these days or what?” Kai Tou huffs disgustedly. “I don’t want to hurt anyone who wasn’t involved in the destruction of my country, but if you insist on getting in my way, my men will kill you. Oh, and by the way I know what you’re up to. You have a stupid part-fairy shrunk down, and you’re distracting me so that I won’t notice him freeing my prisoner, isn’t that right?”

“Well, fuck,” Iwaizumi curses, pretty much summing up what Hinata is thinking.

“I was told there was a part-fairy among the intruders. It’s a good thing the shackles are made of iron. Can’t see your friend getting past that one — if he were a full fairy he’d probably be dead right now.”

“Suga!” Daichi shouts, panicked. He makes a move to rush to his (boy?)friend, but Kai Tou holds out a hand to stop him. One of his men crouches down behind Oikawa’s chair and scoops Suga up. It’s hard to tell from so far away, but Hinata thinks Suga is breaking out in some sort of rash. His weakness to iron must be severe if he is too weak to fly out of the man’s grasp.

“Don’t fucking move,” Kai Tou says. He circles around to stand behind Oikawa and presses the knife against his throat. “If you do, I’ll kill this sinner here. And your fairy friend is so small and delicate, Reo could easily crush him.”

Both Iwaizumi and Daichi wear identical murderous glares, but they stay as still as statues.

“My power is long-distance,” Kageyama replies, his voice dangerously low. “If you move, I’ll open up the ground underneath you. The earth will swallow you up and crush you, and all I’d have to do is think about it.”

“Spoken like a true dog of the military. You are powerful, I’ll give you that. I know people who have their magic branded on their skins like some dirty gangster are more powerful than those who use physical mediums, like, say, gloves—”
If looks could set things on fire, Oikawa’s glare alone would be enough to burn the whole house down.

“—but the cost is that they are more draining, aren’t they? From the sounds of the commotion you made, you exerted yourself too much earlier. You haven’t found the right amount of power to use that would still allow you to last long enough. If you use your power now, the effort might cause you to faint and render you useless to your friends — or you might even die, just as a piece of scum should. And even if you could, I would feel the ground under me moving, and I would react much faster. I think by now you should be getting what I’m saying. Your power is useless. Your power is futile. All it’s capable of is destroying — destroying innocent lives, destroying this sinner here, destroying you. And it can't stop me. Together with the rest of the survivors and our leader, I will purge the world of the bastards who wrecked Kitagawa Daiichi. Do you understand?”

Kageyama clenches his fists so hard there’s no way his nails wouldn't be digging into his skin. Hinata bets Kageyama is still willing to overexert himself for Oikawa’s sake; and if Kai Tou knows anything about Kageyama he’d know that. Hinata has a sinking feeling in his gut. They are stuck in a stalemate — they can't move because Kai Tou would kill Oikawa, and Kai Tou can’t move because Kageyama would kill him and then he wouldn't be able to get his revenge against the rest of the Operation KD warriors. Hinata wonders how long they're just going to stand there and wait for someone to make a move. The tension in the air is so thick he could slice it with a knife, if he had one. Each party eyes the other warily, like how one would eye a venomous snake, neither giving in.

BAM.

Then the guy named Li Hu collapses onto the ground, with Suga — back to his full height — straddling him. He holds the handle of the frying pan across Li Hu's throat, similar to how one would hold a knife to a throat. And honestly, it would have been less scary if Suga wore a fierce glare, instead of a normally soft-looking smile that is now twisted with venom. Kaito, for all his bragging about his reflexes, is so stunned all he can do is stand there and gape — and Kageyama takes advantage of that opening. His tattoos glow, and a fissure opens in the ground under Kaito. He falls into it, and the hole swallows him up to his neck.

“Didn't you consider that if I could shrink from 174 cm to 7 cm, the reverse would also hold true?” Suga says, sounding incredulous. He rises to his feet and looks down at the man at his feet with a rare condescending look on his face. “Your plan to crush me in your hands was a lost cause from the beginning. I was simply biding my time.”

The other men in the room lunge forward to attack; but before anyone can do anything, chasms split across the ground at lightning speed, swallowing the men up to their necks, just like their leader.

“Don’t,” Kageyama growls, sweat pouring down his face from the exertion, “insult my power. Because it’s not just an insult to me, but also to Hinata.”

Then his knees buckle. Hinata catches him and quakes under Kageyama’s weight. Gee, does this guy have to be so darn tall?

“Oi, Yamayama, get up,” he wheezes. “I can't carry all your bulk.”

“Shut up, dumbass.” But Kageyama totters back on to his feet anyway, leaning slightly on Hinata.

“Why didn't you kill him?” Hinata asks. “You easily could have, and no one would blame you.”

“Cause it would prove him right. And I hate proving people who insulted us right.”
Hinata’s heart warms at the mention of “us”. He was expecting Kageyama to say “me”. He feels a sudden urge to kiss him here and now, but he manages to just barely hold himself back.

Daichi rushes to Suga and cups his face, which Hinata has just noticed is flushed unusually red. “Suga, are you feeling feverish?”

“Yeah, just a little. Stupid iron allergy. Honestly, it’s such a pain. I can't even buy a lock without breaking out in a rash, you know.” Suga’s tone is lighthearted, like he’s trying to alleviate Daichi’s worry without actually telling him not to worry.

In the meanwhile, Iwaizumi has been busy freeing Oikawa. Oikawa leans heavily on his boyfriend (fiancé? Man, Hinata can't keep up with all these sudden changes in relationship status), but he apparently possesses enough strength to turn around and flip Kaito off.

Kai Tou growls in response. “Fuck you. You don't deserve to live. Stop tainting the world with your sins, sick bastards.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, Kaito-chan, but I don't have to listen to you,” Oikawa sneers. Hinata gets the feeling there’s a double meaning to that sentence. “Have a fun life, stuck in the ground.”

“Burn in hell.”

“Don't get bored waiting for me now. Toodles!”

“Can we go now?” Noya demands, hands planted on his hips. “This place is starting to give me the creeps, and now that the danger's over I’m hungry.” He turns to Asahi. “Can we go get chips? And cupcakes. I want cupcakes.”

“Uh, sure?”

Oikawa rolls his eyes. “Just don't throw your cupcake at Asa-chan’s face the way you threw chips at mine.”

“Don't worry, Tooru, I’ll only ever throw my food at your face.”

“Are you propositioning me, Noya-chan?”

And Hinata doesn't even mind the fact that he isn't in on the joke. He’s just glad that Oikawa-san is alright.

“I can't believe it,” Oikawa mumbles, drawing his legs to his chest. He is curled up on the rug in Iwaizumi’s room, next to Iwaizumi. It is two in the morning and apparently Oikawa can't sleep, which is why he invited himself into Iwaizumi’s room; but since he was kidnapped and beaten up, Iwaizumi decides not to argue.

“What can’t you believe?” he asks.

“I just… I can't believe you came for me. All of you. Even Tobio-chan.”

“Huh? What's so surprising about that? Shouldn't you have expected a rescue?”
Oikawa tilts his head down, pressing his forehead against his knees. “I just thought — I don’t know. I guess I was just expecting to die, that’s all. Killed by someone from Kitagawa Daiichi, that would be poetic justice, wouldn’t it? I killed so many people there, after all.”

“Oi.” Iwaizumi grabs Oikawa’s shoulder. “You did what you had to do as a soldier, as a warrior, to protect the kingdom.”

“Yeah, but a kill is still a kill, even if the person was a threat. And I can’t help but think — the KD soldiers I killed were also just doing what they had to. They didn’t do anything wrong, not really, so I just — I don’t know! It’s so frustrating. I think I was… no, I know I was just so overcome with guilt when the guy said he was a survivor, that I wanted to die. And I figured, better me than Noya-chan. He’s got so much to live for. Like, surely even a brute like you can tell he and Asa-chan have something special together. And he has his own goals that he wants to achieve. He couldn’t die yet.”

Hot, searing rage surges through Iwaizumi’s entire body. He roughly seizes Oikawa and forces him to look at him. “And you don’t? You don’t have anything to live for?! You piece of shit. Even besides the fact you have friends and family who would be crushed if you died, am I not reason enough for you to live?! What, didn’t you think for a second how I would feel if your stupid ass got killed?”

“Iwa-chan—”

“No, shut up, I’m not done with you yet,” he seethes. He lets the angry tears slide down his face and fall on Oikawa’s shirt, because the thought of his Oikawa dying is unbearable as hell, as though the mere thought could crush his entire being. “You think you’re such a selfless martyr, but in reality you are singularly the crappiest, most selfish piece of shit to have ever invited himself into my life! What kind of guy proposes and then lets himself die before his lazy ass even gets his fiance a ring?! No, Oikawa Tooru, you are not allowed to die, and certainly not allowed to let yourself die. I won’t have it. I’ll beat the crap out of you if you dare give up again, you got me?”

“Iwa-chan—”

“No, I’m still not done with you.”

Because he isn’t. He snatches Oikawa’s face and plants the most aggressive kiss he can muster on Oikawa’s lips. Oikawa squeaks a little, before his hands come to rest hesitantly on Iwaizumi’s shoulders.

Iwaizumi pulls away and scowls, ignoring the heat surging across his face. “You heard me?” His voice comes out lower than expected.

Oikawa manages a weak laugh. His face is as red as Iwaizumi imagines his own is. “Loud and clear, Iwa-chan.” He pauses, his eyes flickering a little lower. “Hey, uh, can I have another one? But perhaps a little gentler this time.”

“Don’t push your luck, I’m still pissed.”

But he gives in, because — let’s be real — when has he ever been able to turn Oikawa Tooru down?

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I got some things I think I should clear up.
It wasn't wise of Noya to rush into another fight right after getting injured. Even though I chose not to explicitly say it, Noya did lose quite some blood — he was kicked quite hard. Yes, Suga did heal him but Suga, while an amazing part-fairy, can't replenish the blood Noya lost. Blood loss like that can lead to dizziness and feeling lightheaded, among other things, which would've been disastrous in a fight. Noya was lucky to have remained conscious and upright throughout the whole fight; hence, Daichi and Asahi were right in wanting Noya to stay at home and rest. Kageyama was thinking pragmatically, planning the best way to save Oikawa; thus, he figured if Noya said he was fine then he should come along to boost their fighting chances. Iwaizumi, under better circumstances, would have been rational enough to side with Daichi and Asahi. However, he was distressed 'cause his fiance had been abducted — hence, he wanted to get to Oikawa as fast as possible, and the fastest possible way he saw was agreeing to let Noya to come along with them.

On a lighter note, Daichi and Suga got together off-screen. This isn't a romance-centric story, so I didn't think it wasn't all *that* important to show the getting-together onscreen, but if you want me to do a spin-off one-shot about how they got together, just let me know in the comments.

Thank you for reading :))

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Last night, Asahi watched as Suga patched up the scrapes and bruises on Nishinoya’s body with a silvery glow and a smile. Not for the first time, he was immensely grateful that Suga, with his array of magical abilities, joined them on their journey. With someone as reckless as Noya, having someone with instant healing powers was proving extremely handy. And besides for his direct abilities, Suga apparently has a latent healing ability, which was probably why none of their assailants died in the earlier melee battle. Asahi still found it weird when flowers bloomed whenever Suga walked by, and especially that Tuesday when Daichi had stared at Suga’s face, snapped his fingers and exclaimed, “Oh, so that’s what I forgot.” Suga had explained that restoring forgotten memories was a rare side effect of his latent powers, and the process could either be instantaneous or gradual. Still, weird.

Noya lay his head against Asahi’s shoulder, causing heat to flare across Asahi’s body. They both watched Suga heal the nasty injuries all over Oikawa. (What on earth did those Kitagawa Daiichi survivors do to him? Poor guy.) Iwaizumi sat on the couch next to Oikawa, holding his hand like he never wanted to let it go ever again. Instinctively, Asahi glanced down at Noya. Noya was clutching his cup of tea, a sleepy yawn threatening to break across his face. That was adorable. Asahi knew if Noya was in Oikawa’s place (heavens forbid), he would never leave the boy’s side. It’s probably a good thing that Noya wasn’t the one who had been kidnapped, as guilty as it made him to admit.

This is what Asahi ponders as he practises his jump serve in Oikawa’s backyard. It’s a fairly quiet morning — Hinata disappeared off earlier to find Kageyama (Asahi was quite surprised to see their combo attack yesterday, since he was under the impression they couldn’t stand each other), Daichi and Suga are sitting inside the house, eating breakfast and playfully bantering, and Oikawa and Iwaizumi are standing a safe distance away from where Asahi is, drinking coffee and arguing about something or another.

Noya is probably still asleep.

That realisation suddenly makes the backyard feel uncomfortably silent.

“There really is no need for you to worry so much, Iwa-chan!” Oikawa insists. “I have a spare pair of gloves that work the exact same way as my previous pair; I don't need to get magic tattoos!”

“And what if those pair of gloves get destroyed too? Do you have a spare spare pair to replace your spare pair?” Iwaizumi counters.

“... They won't get destroyed. I'll make sure of that!”

“Hubris was what led to Icarus’ death.”

“Don't be ridiculous, Iwa-chan — I’m not in some Greek tragedy!” Oikawa protests. "Don't doubt my ability to take care of my gloves.”

Iwaizumi sighs. “Even so, tattoos are more powerful. Don't you want to max out the power of your Pyrokinesis and Hydrokinesis?”

“Yeah, no need to rub it in,” Oikawa huffs, crossing his arms.
“... Are you still jealous of Kageyama?” Iwaizumi asks suspiciously.

Oikawa spits his coffee back into his mug. “Hmph, I never said it had anything to do with Tobio-chan! Sure, tattoos may be more powerful, but I’m infinitely more refined in using my elemental magic than Tobio-chan can ever aspire to be!”

“Yeah, you’re jealous alright.”

“Iwa-chan!”

Asahi becomes aware that he’s eavesdropping on their conversation. He quickly looks away to deflect suspicion and picks up the next ball to serve. He tosses it high up into the air, takes three steps forward and pushes himself off the ground on his left foot, smacking the ball hard with his right hand. It sails through the air towards the plastic bottle he is using as a target. Excitedly, he wonders if it will make contact this time. His success rate has improved to seven out of ten — maybe this will be one of the seven, and he has already missed three times prior so mathematically, it should knock over the bottle this time, right? How does probability work anyway—

“Rooowwwwolling Thunder!”

A shock of black and bleached-blond hair pops up from nowhere, the bearer of said hair rolling on the ground to receive his serve. And a shock it is, because Asahi suspects he’s going into cardiac arrest.

(By now, he really should be used to his young prince materialising out of nowhere to receive his serves, yet Noya never fails to make an entrance.)

“Yo, Ace! That was one hell of a serve!” Nishinoya praises, grinning from ear to ear.

Asahi flinches a little when he hears Noya’s nickname for him, but he brushes it aside. “Noya! Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

Ever since Noya’s nightmare the other night, Asahi has made it a habit to ask if he slept soundly the night before. Hearing about Noya’s dream and his thoughts regarding it shook Asahi, though he had to force himself to remain strong, for Noya’s sake. He has to be the Ace for Noya, especially when he is vulnerable.

“Perfect! I don’t even remember what I dreamed, so that’s good, right? Means I had a deep sleep, right?”

“Er, I would think so?”

Noya laughs. “Okay, if you say so! Come at me, Asahi, throw all your serves at me! I’ll receive ‘em all!” He jabs his thumb at his chest proudly.

Asahi jumps and serves the next one, which Noya receives with ease. Asahi can’t help but notice how cool he looks, especially when he executes his dive-receives, with his black blazer flapping behind him and dark hair ruffling in the wind. Asahi wishes he could look as effortlessly cool as Noya.

Nishinoya’s face contorts in a grimace as a ball ricochets off his wrists and tumbles towards where Oikawa and Iwaizumi are still arguing. (Oops, Asahi has forgotten that they are there after Noya’s entrance.)

“Argh, sorry, Asahi! I messed up. I’ll get the next one, promise!”
“No, don't worry about it,” he hastily reassures Noya. “You’re an amazing libero. And it’s normal to mess up, so please don't be so hard on yourself.”

Because Noya is amazing and so determined to improve, no matter how amazing he already is, Asahi wonders where he stores all that determination and whether he can ask to borrow some.

They go back and forth for a while, serving and receiving, before a thought occurs to Asahi.

“Hey, are you gonna go out into the district and have your — er, what did you call them? The Noya Talks Thunder?”

“Yeah! I mean, no! I’m not gonna interview people today. I wanted to, but Suga insisted I take a break today ‘cause he doesn't want me to burn out, so I listened to him!”

“Well, at least there’s someone you listen to,” Asahi mutters.

“Hey! Don't I listen to you too?!?”

Asahi stares at the prince, incredulous. “Since when have you ever listened to me?”

Noya bursts out laughing, joined by Oikawa in the background. “Right, good point.”

They continue with their practise, Oikawa and Iwaizumi joining them after seemingly wrapping up their argument. Asahi is impressed behind the power behind Iwaizumi’s spikes and serves. If there’s anyone more deserving of the Ace title than him (and Asahi believes there are plenty), it’s Iwaizumi. Together, Oikawa and Iwaizumi make a fearsome and taxing duo to deal with on the volleyball court; but Asahi knows he has nothing to fear, with Noya behind him. Even though he’s supposed to be Noya’s bodyguard, it seems like Noya is the one protecting him more than the other way round.

As Asahi’s jump serves aren't steady yet, Oikawa and Iwaizumi end up winning their impromptu two-on-two. Asahi turns around to apologise to Noya for messing up, only for Noya to just cackle and slap him on his back. For such a small guy, he packs one hell of a slap.

They retire back to the living room to cool down and find Suga and Daichi seated at the coffee table, poring over a heavily-annotated map. Asahi recognises the elegant script as Suga’s.

“No matter which route we take, we're gonna have to take the long way at some point,” Suga says, pressing the tip of his pen against his lower lip.

“The layout of the districts in this kingdom is ridiculous,” Daichi agrees.

“What’s up?” Noya asks. He plops himself on the couch next to Asahi and presses his cheek against Asahi’s shoulder. Asahi attempts to ignore the warmth spreading all over him, to little avail.

Noya’s just a very touchy guy, he reminds himself. He would lie his head on anyone’s shoulder. You’re not special.

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“Daichi and I are discussing the best route to take after leaving this district,” Suga answers, smiling at them. It’s like the guy is always prepared with a warm smile for any given situation.

Asahi leans forward to examine the map, careful not to jostle Nishinoya’s head, and instantly gets what the issue is. The districts are laid out such that Nekoma is at the heart of the kingdom, with Johzenji to the west of it, Tokonami to the north of it with a whole lot of sea between them, Dateko (which is also south of Seijoh) and Fukurodani to the east of Nekoma, and Shiratorizawa at the southwest of the kingdom. If they want to head to, say, Fukurodani first, the fastest way would be to
travel south to Dateko, then head east to Fukurodani. Then they'd have to backtrack through Dateko to cover Nekoma, Johzenji and Tokonami, then backtrack again to Nekoma to head to Shiratorizawa. There's no way to head directly to Fukurodani from Seijoh either, as the sea would be too dangerous to cross. Daichi is right — the layout of the districts is ridiculous. Travelling through all of them on their quest to make amends would be a pain and incredibly inefficient. He's glad the assassins at least had the decency to give them a year.

Noya bends forward too, the movement causing light to glint off his good luck pendant. “Why don't we just head to Dateko first, then worry about which way to go? If we stay here and worry about the fastest route, we won't be getting anywhere.”

“For once, the prince does propose a good point,” Oikawa agrees, earning a glare from Noya. “I’m sure we’ll be struck by a brilliant revelation once we get moving.”

Iwaizumi doesn't say anything, but he nods.

Daichi’s eyebrows furrow. Asahi knows how much his captain dislikes going anywhere without a concrete plan, but this time Asahi is on Noya’s side. As the leader, Daichi probably wants to know every variable out there that could pose trouble to their journey, so he can plan the best and safest way to avoid them. But at the same time, Asahi knows time is limited, so they shouldn't waste in on overly-scrupulous planning, which is why Noya is right.

“They have a point,” Suga says, patting Daichi’s bicep soothingly. “Let’s just go with the flow and see where that takes us, alright?”

“Alright, then,” Daichi relents. “If you say it’s okay, then I’ll just have to believe you.”

“That’s the spirit!” Suga pecks Daichi’s cheek.

“Good grief, stop with the PDA,” Oikawa complains, rolling his eyes. He moves to cover Noya’s eyes. “There are innocent eyes and ears here.”

Annoyed, Noya swats Oikawa away. “Fuck off, Tooru, I’m not that innocent. Don't be a condescending ass.”

Oikawa cackles. “Oh right, of course you're not, Noya-chan.” He shoots Asahi a knowing look, making Asahi wonder what on earth he’s thinking of. “If there's anyone whose innocence I should worry about, it should be Shou-chan. Oh, that poor innocent baby boy. The perversity of the world would swallow him up if it weren't for his senpai to guide him.”

“Nah, not really,” Noya counters. “Didn't you see that mark on his neck?”

“Mark — wait, what did Tobio-chan do to him?!”

As if on cue, the door slams open, and Hinata and Kageyama walk in. They're covered in earth, their clothes and hair are disheveled and their faces are mildly flushed. As he walks, Hinata’s collar slips a little, and Asahi spots the mark Noya mentioned. Embarrassed, he averts his eyes.

“What did I do to who?” Kageyama asks, puzzled at Oikawa’s accusation.

“Kageyama has done many things, Oikawa-san,” Hinata adds. “You should be more specific.”

Oikawa stands up and rounds on Kageyama, his arms folded across his chest. Kageyama returns Oikawa’s livid glower with a confused but sour stare.
“Tobio-chan,” Oikawa begins, his tone dangerously saccharine. “Care to explain what you’ve been up to with my Shou-chan here?”

Hinata holds his hands out in an attempt to placate his overprotective senpai. "Er, Oikawa-san, it’s not—"

“We’ve been practising our attack. And making out,” Kageyama says bluntly.

“Oh boy…” Asahi mutters. He does not want to be around for a showdown between two warriors who can wield elemental magic, especially with Oikawa looking like he is about to blow up. He and Noya exchange a look. Seems like they're thinking the same thing.

Asahi could do with more serve practice anyway.

“I told you we should have taken a left turn.”

“And I told you to stop being a backseat driver.”

The next day, after running damage control for the epic showdown between Kageyama and Oikawa over the preservation of Hinata’s virtue, the group has set off for Dateko. As usual, Daichi and Suga lead the group, bickering over directions. It’s funny — most of the time, they agree on pretty much everything, except when it comes to whether to take a left or right turn. Asahi deliberately lingers a ways behind their captains with Noya, not wanting to get roped into their argument again. Behind them, Hinata is running a commentary of the scenery around them, with Kageyama cutting in to tell him to stop being a dumbass. Oikawa and Iwaizumi trek beside Asahi and Noya. While Oikawa still seems sour about Hinata and Kageyama apparently having a strange thing together, he doesn't press the issue anymore after seeing how happy Hinata is. At least he’s no longer bemoaning the loss of his vice-captaincy too.

The distance between Seijoh and Dateko is greater than the distance between Karasuno and Seijoh, so they end up on the road for about five weeks and counting, which gives Asahi plenty of time to think about stuff — namely, about how all of his teammates are paired up, except for him and Nishinoya. Anyone with eyes can see how Daichi and Suga are practically married. Not to mention Oikawa and Iwaizumi, who are apparently engaged. Asahi still isn't sure whether they’re for real or Oikawa is just being Oikawa. Then there's Kageyama and Hinata. That one took Asahi by surprise. When he saw their combo attack, he thought they merely shared a grudging alliance. Clearly there’s more history between them than what they are letting on. Not that it’s any of his business.

He glances at Noya in front of him, who is laughing and singing a pop song with Hinata. Come to think of it, Noya hasn't indicated much of that kind of interest in anyone (other than that pretty masseuse he mentioned being exceedingly gorgeous).

Well, it won't be me, Asahi figures, his heart sinking. But that's the reality of the situation. He is just the Ace and Noya’s bodyguard. He’s surprised that Noya even kept him around for so long, considering that guys like Oikawa and Hinata have got to be far more interesting than he is.

“—isn't that right, Ace?” Noya asks, turning around to look at Asahi.

(He flinches again at the mention of ‘Ace’. He hates being reminded of his title and all the expectations and pressure that came with it.)
“What’s right?” he replies blankly. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts he didn’t pay attention to Noya’s conversation.

“Nee-chan and Chikara! Tooru, Shouyou and I were betting on who would make the first move.”

Oh right. Ennoshita and Princess Nishinoya, that’s another pair. What’s up with everyone getting paired up these days?

“Chikara-chan will,” Oikawa insists.

“Hm, I don’t know about that,” Hinata says. “He’s too professional for that, y’know?”

(Asahi wonders if having those thoughts about Nishinoya would be considered unprofessional, if he goes by Hinata’s definition of ‘professional’.)

(Probably.)

“Nah, nee-chan totally will,” Noya argues. “She’s too cool to wait for a guy to make the first move! And Chikara is completely oblivious to her feelings, and he refuses to act on his, so she’s gonna have to be the one to make the first move.”

“Oh, Noya-san is right! I can — wait, is that Dateko ahead?”

In unison, Daichi and Suga’s heads snap up from studying their map. Ahead of them, a tall imposing gate stands, concealing the district from view.

“See Suga, this was the right way to go.”

“Fine, fine, I admit I was wrong. For once.”

“Come on, let’s go!” Hinata exclaims, dashing ahead of them. “I want meat buns. Do you think they sell meat buns in Date— oomph!”

In his excitement, Hinata crashes straight into a large white-haired guy. The most unnerving thing about him? His distinct lack of eyebrows. A shiver snakes down Asahi’s shoulder. This can only mean bad news.

The white-haired guy is flanked by at least fifteen others. All of them are wearing matching uniforms: a teal tunic cinched with a brown belt, grey tights and black combat boots. A guy of average build with short dark hair and a black cloak steps forward.

“Hello!” he says with a strained smile.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you,” Daichi greets, stepping forward with his right hand stretched out for a handshake.

“Moniwa-san, there’s no need for formalities,” a tall brunet guy drawls. “Let’s just do our job and chase them away.”

“Shut up, Futakuchi, and listen to your captain,” another guy, a blond, snaps. He seems to be the second-in-command to Moniwa’s captain.

“Chase us away?” Oikawa asks, his voice soft and venomous. He strides forward, resting his hand on Daichi’s shoulder. “Who are you? And why do you have the authority to chase away innocent travellers like us?”
“Look, we’re the Vigilantes of Dateko,” Moniwa explains. It comes out sounding more like a plea, like he is trying to avoid a fight.

“Ooh, like the Karasuno Vigilantes?” Noya interjects.

“We have similar values, but we operate differently,” Futakuchi says. “After Kitagawa Daiichi’s military blew up our district, ‘cause of the sin of being the closest to their sad pathetic island, our resources have been scarce. We’re trying to build ourselves back up with what we have, so in the meanwhile we vigilantes have taken it upon ourselves to restrict the entrance of outsiders.”

Moniwa nods, not appearing put off by Futakuchi’s interruption. “That’s right. We only allow those who can fight us to a stalemate, or even defeat us, to pass through.”

“We also gotta protect the districts from bandits,” the second-in-command adds. “We don’t know who we can trust, so if you’ll forgive us for our suspicion. Name’s Kamasaki, by the way.”

“Why bother introducing ourselves?” Futakuchi yawns. “We’re gonna defeat them anyway.”

“Why don’t you learn some manners, stupid brat?!”

“Boo, Kamasaki-san, you’re no fun.”

The Blue Crows share a look. These vigilantes mean well for their district, even if some have more flippant attitudes than others, but they need to enter Dateko, and that means they have to get past these vigilantes.

“So, let me get this straight,” Daichi says, going for the diplomatic approach. “If we want to get into Dateko, all we need to do is defeat you in battle.”

“That’s right,” Moniwa says.

“You make it sound so easy,” Futakuchi snorts. “Defeating us means getting past this guy, isn’t that right, Aone?”

The white-haired giant grunts in reply. He does look like he’ll be hard to get past, Asahi notes. Uneasiness makes itself home in his stomach.

“Alright then, let’s rumble!” Noya declares. He rolls up his sleeves and his bracelets glow, transforming into arm guards.

“Just know that this isn’t anything personal,” Moniwa says, tossing his cloak back. A steely look replaces his previously kind expression. “We’re just doing what we have to do.”

“And so are we,” Daichi replies, extending his bo-staff.

The two groups stand and eye each other warily. The tension in the air is so thick, Asahi feels like he’s about to suffocate. He looks down at Noya. His eyes are focused and determined; gone is the frightened, traumatised prince who was forced to flee his home.

If he’s focused, then I should be too.

He gets into a stance, holding his polearm in front of him, ready to either attack or defend.

Aone makes the first move, lunging forward towards Asahi with more speed than someone so huge should have, and everything turns to chaos. Yelping, Asahi dodges Aone’s sword and lashes out with his polearm, which Aone manages to duck. Behind him, he hears the clashing of metal against
Noya’s arm guards and Futakuchi cursing. Once again, Noya has saved him.

Asahi and Aone continue their duel. Aone really isn't giving Asahi any room to breathe. Asahi can barely land any hits, and he’s taking more than he normally does. He grunts, slightly lightheaded from the blood loss. But he can't give in, not with Noya fighting with everything he has behind him. So he continues his assault, even though few successfully make contact with his opponent, much to his increasing frustration.

This calls for desperate measures. He reaches into his pocket, fishing out a pouch he vowed he would only use if he’s caught in a pinch, which is definitely what he's in. He uses the tip of his polearm to slash open a hole in the fabric and tosses its contents at Aone’s face. He hears the giant cough and splutter, and he uses that opportunity to duck behind a tree. That trick will only buy him a few seconds at best, so he needs to think of a strategy fast.

Then he notices something is horribly wrong.

Throughout this entire battle, he’s seen all sorts of weapons being wielded — swords, spears, knives, frying pans.

But the ground hasn't split open once. There haven't been any mounds of earth floating around for Hinata to use as a platform.

Neither have there been any flashy displays of fire and ice.

“Fuck.”

Asahi whips his head around, and he finds Kageyama bent over on the ground. Kageyama’s face is scrunched up in agony. He clutches his forearms, on which his tattoos are glowing not their usual dark blue, but instead an ominous red.

Asahi forgets about Aone, who by now must have gotten over the cheap trick, and rushes over to the setter.

“Kageyama! What’s wrong?” he demands, panicked.

“That Moniwa-san guy… he’s a sorcerer,” Kageyama gasps. Tears leak down his face, which Asahi takes as a very, very bad sign. If someone as stoic as Kageyama is crying, Asahi doesn't want to imagine the pain he must be in. “Danger — he’s the most dangerous, aside from th-that Aone guy you were fighting. We—” He licks his lips. “—we need to regroup. And strategise. And — behind you, Azumane-san!”

Asahi whips back around to see Aone lunging towards him. He slams Aone’s sword away with his polearm, his arms shaking from the force of the impact. He rolls back on to his feet and lunges at Aone. He aims for his side, but Aone unfortunately catches on. He parries Asahi’s polearm with so much force that if it weren't for his tight grip, it would have flown out of his grasp.

“Regroup!” Daichi shouts, just barely fending off Kamasaki’s relentless attacks. He kicks the other man’s legs out from under him, then beats a hasty retreat behind a brick wall.

Distracted, Asahi winces as Aone’s sword slashes his arm. He clumsily smacks Aone’s sword away and turns tail, sprinting behind Daichi.

“Should we let them go?” he hears Futakuchi ask.

“We can use this as an opportunity to re-strategise,” Moniwa answers. “I’ve taken care of their two
long-distance attackers, so we need a plan to take out the rest.”

The voices of the rest of the Dateko Vigilantes grow fainter as they move further away, presumably to “re-strategise”.

The rest of the Blue Crows are quick to join Daichi and Asahi behind the wall.

“How are we holding up?” Daichi asks urgently.

“That captain of theirs destroyed my gloves,” Oikawa complains. “That was my only spare pair.”

“Th-that Moniwa-san guy,” Kageyama says, still holding his forearms. “Oikawa-san and I were about to do, you know, our thing. But… but before we could use our magic, Moniwa-san fired some spell at us. And now, it — it hurts. Real bad.”

“Oh dear,” Suga clicks his tongue. “I can guess what he did. Both of you aren’t natural magic wielders, so you use mediums that act as sources of Potential Magic which you then convert into your elemental magic. What Moniwa did was that he converted your Potential Magic into another form of magic that causes debilitating pain to incapacitate you. He did something similar to destroy Oikawa’s gloves.”

“Can't you heal it?” Hinata asks desperately. His arms are wrapped around Kageyama’s shaking form, pressing Kageyama’s head against his chest.

“Unfortunately, I can't. I can only heal injuries, and in this case there are technically no injuries. I'm sorry.”

“Don't you know a spell to reverse it? I mean, you’re part-fairy, right? Fairies can do magic, right?”

Suga lowers his head, like he's ashamed. “No, this is far more advanced than what I know. I really am sorry.”

“Then you will have to stay here, out of harm’s way,” Daichi instructs Kageyama, who is in too much pain to argue. “The rest of us — we need a plan to take Moniwa out. As a sorcerer, he’s the most dangerous. We need to incapacitate him before he pulls any more tricks on us.”

“Shou-chan…” Oikawa mutters.

“Me?”

“Yeah… Shou-chan is fast. He can run and do something about that Moniwa bastard.”

“Oikawa makes a good point,” Suga says. “Hinata is fast and small, so he should be able to surprise Moniwa and take him out — er, non-lethally, of course. Maybe knock him out or something. Then all the rest of us need to do is keep the other vigilantes’ attention on us. How does that sound, Hinata?”

Hinata nods somberly. “I can do that. I was having a hard time against those big guys anyway.”


“Yes, Captain!”

“The rest of us, let’s head out.”

They emerge from behind their wall, to find that the vigilantes have been waiting for them. Their
weapons are drawn, and other than some minor scrapes they look none the worse for wear.

“What is your verdict?” Moniwa addresses Daichi.

“We’ll continue fighting,” Daichi says firmly.

“Whaaaat, even without your long-range attacks?” Futakuchi drawls, smirking.

“We’ll be fine. Don't underestimate us.”

“Very well, then. Let us continue!”

This time, Asahi lunges at Aone first. However, Aone blocks his jab with ease, as if he is reading Asahi’s movements. He continues to match each of Asahi’s blows, with only a few managing to cut through. Even so, those only got through the rare gaps in Aone’s defense, which Asahi attributes to narrow luck.

_Seriously, what is up with this guy?_

Well, at least he’s keeping Aone’s attention on him. Hopefully that buys Hinata enough time to take out Moniwa.

“Keep your head in the game, Ace!” Noya shouts. He shoves Asahi back and slams his arm guards together. However, the force generated — normally able to blast people off their feet — merely knocks Aone behind several steps. “How the hell?!”

Aone grunts. He charges forward towards Noya, who thankfully reacts fast enough to cross his forearms over each other in defense. Aone pushes the flat of his sword against Noya’s forearms. Noya’s brown eyes widen in shock, not that Asahi can blame him, since most weapons bounce off Noya’s arm guards upon making contact — how strong _is_ this guy? Aone continues pushing, and Noya starts sliding backwards. He grits his teeth and keeps his arms locked in position, but that doesn't stop him from being backed up by a guy a foot taller than him.

A blur of movement catches Asahi’s eyes. He spots Futakuchi charging at Noya from behind, spear poised, and rage overwhelms his senses. He leaps behind Noya, his polearm clashing against Futakuchi’s spear.

“Man, couldn't even get that one past you,” Futakuchi groans in mock defeat. “Guess that's why the kid calls you Ace, huh?”

Asahi flinches — a mistake. He lets his guard down for a moment, and Futakuchi rushes at him with his spear.

A blur of black and bleached brown dives in front of Asahi, and everything else happens in slow motion, yet Asahi — stupid, useless Asahi — can't move a muscle.

Futakuchi’s spear, intended for Asahi, instead buries itself in Noya’s side. A choked gasp wrenches itself from Nishinoya’s throat.

And Asahi’s world falls apart.
Nishinoya stumbles back into Asahi’s arms. Panicking and infinitely more terrified than he has ever felt before, he bends down and lowers Noya to the ground. Shit, fuck, there’s so much blood. Too much blood. Noya’s face is rapidly losing colour, and his breathing is shallow.

“Noya! Noya!”


Asahi is torn between wanting to take Noya somewhere safe and wanting to beat the living crap out of that bastard Futakuchi, who’s looking down at them with mild surprise.

“Man, I didn’t want to hurt a kid,” he mutters. “The only reason why I went after him was to get to you, big guy. Jeez, did he have to pop up and take that attack?”

“I’ll—” Noya coughs, blood splattering on Asahi’s shirt. “—I’ll always protect Asahi.”

“Well, sorry about that. Just doing my job.”

Asahi curses, a rarity for him. He fumbles around his pockets, desperate to find something, anything, he can use to stem the bleeding. Fuck, his hands are so sweaty, they keep slipping off things. He empties his pockets, only to find a crumpled-up receipt and two sweet wrappers. Shit, shit, shit, where is a clean cloth when you really need one?!

“Asahi!” Daichi yells. “Grab Noya and get out of here! We’re retreating! Take him to Suga!”

Right. Suga is a part-fairy. He can deal with Noya’s bleeding easily, and all Asahi has done is waste time, causing Noya to lose even more blood.

“Everyone else! Retreat!”

“What?! But I can still—” Oikawa trails off when he sees the state Noya is in. “Right, okay, roger, Captain.” He slams his fist against Kamasaki’s jaw, then turns around to escape.

“Oikawa-san! Daichi-san!” Hinata’s voice calls faintly. “A little help, please!”

But Asahi doesn’t stick around to see what happened to Hinata, as much as the worry threatens to overwhelm him. He trusts that Oikawa and Daichi will take care of it. Right now, he needs to do something about his prince. He picks Nishinoya up bridal style and scampers away to regroup with Suga.

Behind the wall, he finds Kageyama wrapped up in a blanket, leaning against Suga. Suga’s face, normally kind and friendly-looking, is twisted with grimness. He pets Kageyama’s dark hair in an attempt to soothe him. However, when he sees Noya bleeding in Asahi’s arms, he shoots straight up to his feet. Kageyama’s head flops weakly against the wall.

“Put him down, Asahi,” Suga orders.

Asahi obeys him, setting Noya in front of their medic. While Suga starts work, the rest join them. They all definitely look worse for wear. There’s a nasty red welt on Daichi’s cheek, Iwaizumi is covered in scrapes, and Oikawa — battered and bruised too — is holding Hinata up, who appears like he might pass out any time.

“Sorry,” Hinata says, his voice faint from exhaustion. “The Moniwa guy caught me. Cast some spell on me. Felt like every step I took I took drained more and more of my energy. Sorry.”
The fact that he isn't speaking in onomatopoeia is proof enough of how drained he is.

“Don't be,” Daichi says firmly. “None of us could have predicted that they’d have such a powerful sorcerer among them. None of this is anyone’s fault. Come on, Asahi, sit down. You must be exhausted.”

Asahi’s hands tremble. After what happened to Noya, he doesn’t deserve to rest.

“No.”

Daichi raises an eyebrow.

“No… you’re wrong,” Asahi reiterates with a rare forcefulness. "This is my fault.”

Noya forces himself to sit up, much to Suga’s alarm. “I swear, Asahi, if you’re blaming yourself for my injury—”

“Yes, Noya, yes I'm blaming myself for what Futakuchi did! ‘Cause it is my fault, damn it!”

“And how the hell is that your fault?! I was the one who chose to jump in front of that spear!”

“But you wouldn't have needed to do that if I had been paying attention!” Asahi’s throat burns from the yelling and guilt. But he doesn't deserve nice things, so he continues. “I'm a failure of a bodyguard, alright? What kind of bodyguard lets the one he’s supposed to be protecting get hurt? Why don't you tell me, Noya?!”

Noya growls. “What kind of bullshit is that? You're not a failure just 'cause I got hurt. You're the Ace, Asahi—”

There it is again. Ace. The one who’s supposed to be the best. The strongest. The most capable. Nothing that he actually is, but everything everyone expects him.

“And the person with the highest score in our class is... Azumane Asahi!”

“Wow, that totally makes you the Ace of our class, right, Azumane?”

“Azumane-kun, you should totally aim higher! Like, to become the Ace of our cohort! Maybe even of the whole school!”

“As the principal, I expect great things from you, Azumane. You are the pride of our school.”

“Oi, Azumane, I swear I’ll beat you one day and become the new Ace!”

“Asahi, as the eldest child, you must understand that you have responsibilities, a duty, to set a good role model for your siblings. Azumanes must excel in every field we pursue, so I expect you to be the best in everything you do, to honour the Azumane name and be a good example for Izuki and Riku. Do you understand?”

Everyone expects so much. His teachers, his schoolmates, his family and now his prince.

And he’s had enough. He has had enough of never being good enough to measure up to their expectations.

“And maybe, I'm not good enough to be the Ace!” Asahi bursts out. “Maybe I’ve had enough of everyone telling me I should be this, I should be that, so they can mould me into what they want me to be. And maybe, Noya, that's not me! I'm no Ace. I'm not strong, I'm not capable — I had the
opportunity to take out Futakuchi. He was right there, right in front of me. But instead, I let him hurt you. Don’t you see? I can't protect you. All I’ve ever done is get you hurt. If you want an Ace, look for someone else. Like Iwaizumi. But not me. I can never be the Ace you think I should be.”

Noya looks like someone just slapped him. He stares at Asahi, as if truly seeing him for the first time.

Suga places a hand on Asahi’s shoulder. “Now, Asahi, you've had a long day. How about we get to somewhere safer, and I’ll make you some tea and we’ll talk this out—”

He shakes Suga’s hand off. “No, Suga, I know what I’m saying. It’s the truth. And Noya deserves the truth.”

Noya’s expression hardens. Faster than a clap of thunder, he’s on his feet, and his hands are gripping Asahi’s collar, shoving him back until his back slams roughly against the wall.

“So what?!” he shouts back, shaking Asahi back and forth. “You’re just gonna give up? If you think you’re such a failure at protecting me, then why don't you try harder instead of giving me that half-assed crap!”

“Enough, Noya—”

“No, it’s not enough! This is not you, Asahi! Since when have you ever given up, huh? You are stronger than this, for fuck’s sake! You’re better than this! So stop wallowing in that self-pity bullshit!”

Asahi grabs Noya’s hands and yanks them off his shirt. He pushes Noya away before turning his back on him. He silently walks over to pick his bag up.

“Oi, don't you fucking dare—”

“I’m leaving. And, Noya, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can't be who you want me to be.”

And it tears him apart. He can't decide which burns more, his throat or his eyes. It completely wrecks him, hearing Noya scream at him to come back and Daichi having to restrain him. He walks away from the prince he has come to admire so much, the boy he has come to fall in love with.

But if he knows anything about love, sometimes the best thing a person can do for the one they love is to stay out of their life.

He doesn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

… and the angst only intensifies from here on out. sorry. or maybe not.

thanks for reading :DD

drop by my tumblr
Kageyama’s arms hurt. He is in so much pain he barely notices how unusually quiet Nishinoya is, or how everyone seems to be treating the prince like he is a ticking time bomb. He’s not close to Nishinoya, so he decides to leave him to his own devices. The burning pain makes it difficult for him to concentrate on anything else anyway.

It has been days since Azumane walked out on them. They chose not to chase after him, despite Nishinoya’s furious insistence. Instead, they’re taking a detour to Tokonami. Daichi says he has a friend there who might know how to lift Moniwa’s curse off Kageyama. He hopes the captain is right.

As if to fill the gap left behind, Hinata and Suga work extra hard to lift up everyone’s spirits. Suga fusses over everyone more than usual, especially over Nishinoya and Kageyama. He has given up trying to tell the mother hen of the group that no, he really doesn't feel like having so much soup. The one good thing about Suga’s fussing is that he has found a spell that can alleviate some of Kageyama's pain, though it’s not a complete cure. Now the agony has lightened up from unbearable to just torturous. He can bear with torturous.

The best and worst thing about the curse Moniwa placed on him is that Hinata is clinging to him even more than usual. He insists on sharing the same tent as Kageyama, eating with him and would have followed him to the shower if Suga didn't stop him. While he still finds Hinata's loud larger-than-life presence somewhat aggravating, he has to admit that it is a pleasant distraction from the constant pain he is in. When he can't sleep, he’ll listen to Hinata’s soft breathing. When he can't eat, Hinata will gladly eat the rest of his food. Having Hinata around does have its merits — not that he would ever say it out loud, of course.

That night, Kageyama wakes up from a nightmare. For the life of him, he can't remember the details, but he has a feeling it was related to Operation Kitagawa Daiichi. His memories of Operation KD are strangely unclear, as if there's a thick fog blocking them from view. The only thing he remembers clear as day is his moniker King of the Battlefield; it lingers at the forefront of his mind, like a scar that refuses to fade away.

He sits up, surveying his tent mates. Hinata and Nishinoya are fast asleep. Nishinoya in particular appears to have cried himself to sleep, if the stains on his pillow are any indication. Kageyama wouldn't know; he was out like a light the moment his head hit his pillow.

He slips out of the tent and heads towards the river. The river has always been a source of comfort to him. There was one near his home that he would visit when things got particularly difficult at home. He has heard that it’s a good idea to talk about your problems with others, but he's never been good at that. Heck, he never realised that what he was going through at home was even a problem. He
thought every kid’s home life was characterised by their parents ignoring them and occasionally withholding meals as punishment. That was how he learned not to question authority. But at school, when he heard of how other kids’ parents would take them out shopping, or how their mothers would bake them their favourite cookies, he realised how much of an anomaly he was. He wasn’t dumb — he knew others would judge him if he talked about his home life. That’s why he always escaped to the river, because the river would never judge him.

And no one would be able to distinguish his tears from the river’s water.

But, at the same time, sitting by the river is incredibly, painfully lonely. And he’s been so lonely for so long — the lone King.

“You don’t have to be alone, y’know, if you’re gonna cry like that.”

“Big boys don’t cry, so stop crying.”

Furiously swiping away his tears, he glances up and scowls.

“Shut up, dumbass,” he snaps.

“If you’re sad or in pain, you could’ve woken me up,” Hinata says, settling down next to Kageyama. He dips his feet into the cool water.

“You would’ve just smacked me in the face with your pillow and told me to go back to sleep.”

“Nah, that’s what you would do. I’m a nice person.”

Kageyama snorts but finds that he can’t argue with that. Hinata is many things, including a total dumbass, and nice is definitely one of them.

“Hey, Kageyama, you wanna see something really cool?”

Kageyama raises a wary eyebrow. “Will it involve Kinoshita-san, a kettle, three beetles and a hell lot of bleach?”

“Not this time — though that was a good time! Good memories, huh?”

Kageyama figures that he and Hinata have very different ideas of what qualifies as a good memory.

“But this time is different,” Hinata continues. “I found this really cool thing when I went exploring earlier. I wanted to bring Noya-san along but…” His face falls. “He snapped at me. Said he wanted to be alone.”

Kageyama doesn’t know the young prince all that well, but he can deduce that that wasn’t par for the course for him. He figures that if he had a huge fight like that, he’d want some time alone too, instead of being dragged into Hinata’s shenanigans.

Then Hinata perks up. “Oh well, he’ll get better soon!”

“What makes you so sure?”

“’Cause Noya-san is super cool, and super cool people don't stay down for long!”

It must be nice to have Hinata’s worldview — optimistic and unblemished by scars.

“Anyway, I wanna take you to see that thing. It’s like… like bling and fwooh! If you're game for it,
of course. If you're still feeling sad and in pain, we can stay here. You can cry on my shoulder if you want to.”

Annoyed, Kageyama seizes the top of Hinata’s head, eliciting a string of “Ow, ow, ow, Kageyama you ass stop that it hurts!”

“I am always game,” Kageyama asserts. “Bring me to see this thing of yours.”

Hinata’s face lights up. He ducks out from under Kageyama’s hand, grabs it and drags the taller boy behind him. Kageyama stumbles behind him in the darkness.

“Oi, no need to drag me around like a dog,” he snaps. “I can walk just fine on my own.”

Still, he makes no move to remove his hand from Hinata’s grip. His hand is so soft and warm, as if it’s an anchor to reality.

Hinata laughs. “I’m scared I might lose you in the dark. You blend right in, what with your, ‘Oh look, my name is Kageyama Tobio and I’m so edgy I only wear dark colours der hur hur’ attitude.”

“What the—shut up, you idiot! What kind of crapass imitation of me was that anyway?!”

They wind their way on the uneven muddy ground while still arguing about Hinata’s impersonation skills. Kageyama has to duck below several low-hanging branches—which, he notices with amusement, Hinata can walk under without even needing to crouch down. They lapse into a companionable silence as they approach another river. Hinata continues to drag Kageyama along whilst they hop across rocks that are in a convenient line to get to the other side. Kageyama nearly ends up slipping into the water several times. He decides that if he does fall in, he’ll pull Hinata in with him since it’s his fault for dragging him around.

Of course, since this is Hinata with him, the silence doesn’t remain for long.

“Oi, Bakageyama, why does Oikawa-san hate you? What did you ever do to him?”

Kageyama flinches. “What, why do you assume it’s my fault?!”

“No — I don’t know, alright? All I know is that on the day we were assigned to the same training team after we were accepted into the Elite Squad — which was before we got assigned to our official units — I asked him to help me improve my control over my elemental magic. And he nearly hit me, except Iwaizumi-senpai stopped him. I chose not to speak much to him afterwards.”

“Ehh, that’s odd,” Hinata says. “But hey, if you two were on the same training team, then why did you two end up on different units on Operation KD?”

Kageyama shrugs. “Don’t know, don’t ask me. I just do as I’m told.”

Because that’s the only way he survived in his household. Do as you’re told, and there will be no trouble.

“Hmm, alright… Hey, speaking of Operation KD, man was it weird finding out there were survivors? I thought most of the population died ‘cause of the epidemic, and any survivors would be too ill to do… like, stuff, you know. It would be a good thing if they hadn’t kidnapped and hurt Oikawa-san.”
“Mmm.”

“I wonder what they said to Oikawa-san when they kidnapped him,” Hinata muses.

“Why don't you just ask him?” Kageyama reasonably suggests.

“Don't be stupid, I can't.”

“And why not?” Kageyama counters, glaring at the smaller boy. “If you're so curious, why don't you satisfy your curiosity?”

Hinata stares up at him, appalled. “God, Kageyama, that would be so insensitive! See, maybe this is why Oikawa-san doesn't like you.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“I asked Iwaizumi-san, 'cause — you know — maybe Oikawa-san told him stuff, but he said Oikawa-san refuses to spill the deets. He claims it's nothing important or truthful.”

“Mmm.”

The nice thing about being with Hinata is that Kageyama doesn't have to contribute much to the conversation. Hinata is a natural conversationalist; he can talk on and on to himself and not be bothered by it. Hence, he only half-listens to Hinata as he starts going on about something related to his sister and grandparents.

In the meanwhile, Kageyama wonders when was the last time he felt so… so… at peace. He thought he would be annoyed by Hinata’s constant, incessant chattering, but he actually finds it somewhat soothing. Maybe it's a reminder that he isn't alone — that he’s no longer alone. And he would rather endure this tiny redhead chatting his ear off than another day of unbearable loneliness.

“—so that's my family!” Hinata chirps, beaming up at Kageyama. “What about yours?”

Kageyama blanches. Even though he wasn't paying full attention to what Hinata was saying, he gets the feeling that Hinata’s home life was… well, normal, with the exception of his dead parents. He suspects that Hinata’s home was full of love, warmth, kindness and laughter, because all those traits manifest so perfectly in Hinata and his smile. So how can he explain his home life to someone like Hinata?

One of his most distinct memories of his parents was when he was six. It was evening and they were about to have dinner. Excited to see his mother, he bounded over to her, brandishing the painting he did in school earlier that day. It had taken him three tries and countless trips to the sink to refill his water cup before completing the final piece. However, she barely even glanced at his painting when she said, “What is it, Tobio? Can't that wait? I'm tired. I had a long day at work. I don't have the energy to be bothering with some painting. Now be a good boy and help your mommy set the table.”

The same thing occurred the next few times he tried. He soon learned what he did wasn't all that important and he shouldn't bother his parents after they had a long day, so as he grew up he found himself spending more and more time by himself in his room, only emerging for meals. He believed he was doing the right thing by staying out of his parents’ way, except one evening when he joined his parents for dinner, his mother looked up from her book and snidely commented, “Oh, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence? The King of the Household.”

“Can't believe he's coming after my spot,” his father added. “I was just about to forget what you looked like, Tobio, so it was good of you to join us.”
Kageyama refused to break down and cry, despite the frustration threatening to erupt like a volcano. When he tried to spend time with his parents, they dismissed him. When he remained his distance out of respect (and some resentment, though at that time he didn't dare entertain that thought), they criticised him. If they were joking, he didn't find it funny.

*Will I ever be able to do anything right?* he wondered angrily. *Or is everything I do wrong, unimportant and not good enough?*

Well, if they were just going to insult him, he had no interest in joining them for dinner. He took his plate and stormed back to his room, ignoring his mother’s yells at him for him to come back, to be a respectful son and sit with his parents.

*When I come, you push me away. When I go, you insist I come back. Make up your mind already, damn woman.*

Hinata is still watching him expectantly with those wide brown eyes of his, so he settles for a crisp “distant”. Hinata clicks his tongue but doesn't press the issue, for which Kageyama is grateful.

Hinata’s pace quickens, and so Kageyama hastens after him. They all but dash up the rocky path, dodging tree branches and sidestepping brambly bushes to find a... cave? Why would Hinata want to bring him to a cave?

“It’s so beautiful,” Hinata insists eagerly, yanking Kageyama into the cave. “You really have to see this!”

“Yes, I heard you the first million times, dumbass—”

The sight steals his breath away. The cool grey walls of the cave are illuminated by glowing crystals. There are too many colours and too many shades of colours to name — blue, teal, orange, gold, purple. Hinata laughs, lets go of Kageyama’s hand and twirls and bounces around amongst the crystals. Kageyama never thought it possible, but Hinata’s smile looks *even* brighter, lit up by the luminescent crystals.

“It isn’t this beautiful, Kageyama?” Hinata breathes. He picks up an orange crystal, scrutinising it with great wonder.

“Y-yeah.” He can’t keep his eyes off Hinata. Dazed, he ambles over to join Hinata because... he doesn’t know. He wants to be closer to this bright, exuberant boy? Damn it, he isn’t good with feelings, yet there are so many of them welling up inside him.

Hinata grins and practically pounces on Kageyama. Kageyama staggers under the sudden weight, but he doesn’t get the chance to complain when Hinata pulls him into a kiss. His free hand runs itself through Kageyama’s dark hair. Kageyama’s arms tug Hinata closer, partly because it’s kinda cold in the cave, and partly because he just wants to be close to this boy who is making his heart do strange, foreign things, like race and soar like an eagle.

It would’ve been quite a romantic moment, kissing and holding one another among glowing crystals in a cave, if a loud drawl doesn’t interrupt them.

“Look, dudes, I got nothing against two dudes making out, but right in front of me? Seriously?”

Startled, they break apart and whirl around to find the source of the interruption. The stinging in Kageyama's forearms is his only reminder not to lash out at the guy, who turns out to look kinda like a punk. He’s several centimeters shorter than Kageyama, which Kageyama is pleased to note, with a spiky blond undercut and pierced ears and tongue.
“Well, if you didn't want to see that you could've just, I dunno, walked away,” Kageyama snaps, lowering Hinata back on to the ground.

Pierced Tongue laughs, like two pieces of metal grinding against each other. “You make a good point, buddy, you make a good point. But I’m here for that.” He points at the orange crystal in Hinata’s hand.

“Why this one specifically, Terushima?” Hinata asks, clutching the crystal protectively against his chest. “There are plenty of other crystals. If you just want an orange one, I'm sure there’s no shortage of those.”

Kageyama doesn't know how Hinata knows this punk. He files that away as something to ask him later.

“Unfortunately, chibi-chan, the one you’re holding is the only orange crystal. I want one. They’re all the rage with the chicks in Johzenji.”

Hinata scowls. “Does it have to be orange? Girls like pink and blue and purple and black too.”

Terushima rubs his chin in mock concentration. “Well, I suppose not, but I just wanna make things difficult for you after what happened in Karasuno. She was quite a catch. Shame it turns out you didn't stick with her. Or do you swing both ways?”

“What is it to you that Yachi is my friend?!”

“Man, just a friend? Now that’s cold, chibi-chan. Didn't know you wanted the D quite so badly. Kinda greedy of you.”

Kageyama has heard enough. His simmering anger propels him to lunge in front of Hinata, shielding him from Terushima and his shit-eating grin. He’s glad Hinata is so much smaller than him. He tilts his chin up and straightens his back — the taller he is, the better he’ll be able to protect Hinata and hopefully intimidate this jerk.

“Don't be a little shit,” he growls. “Just take another crystal and go. There's no need to make things difficult.”

“Aw, boyfriend to the rescue.” Terushima’s eyes flash maliciously. “What are you gonna do to me, tough guy?”

“This.”

He puts the persistent, torturous pain burning in his forearms on the back burner. Channelling all his fury, the ground between him and Terushima splits open in the shape of a lightning bolt to form a wide, yawning chasm. The tremor causes several crystals to tumble into the crack and Terushima to fall on his butt, to Kageyama’s vicious satisfaction.

“Dude, geokinesis?” Terushima complains, struggling to get back on his feet. Out of spite, Kageyama unleashes another small tremor to knock the guy back down. “Okay, that was so not fair.”

“We’ll be taking the orange crystal,” Hinata sings. “Bye, Terushima!”

He seizes Kageyama’s arm, and they dash out of the cave. They make it to the river by their campsite before Kageyama collapses onto the ground — the painful repercussions of what he did has finally caught up to him. He whimpers. If the pain earlier was torturous, now it definitely has reverted back
to being nigh-unbearable. Still, he would do it over and over again if it meant keeping Hinata safe.

Hinata settles down next to him, reaches out and touches Kageyama’s searing forearms. He flinches, but Hinata’s hold is gentle and soothing, like aloe vera lotion on a nasty burn. He relaxes again. Hinata’s hands seem to be working some kind of magic, as some of the pain ebbs away. Or maybe it’s the smile on his face that’s doing the job. All Kageyama knows, that while he wouldn’t ever admit it, he loves that smile.

“That was cool, wasn’t it?” Hinata asks breathlessly.

Kageyama grunts. “Not bad, considering your tastes.”

“Shut up, Bakageyama. Things like that are even better when you see them with someone else, instead of being alone.”

Hinata gets up on his knees and presses a brief but tender kiss against Kageyama’s forehead. The skin where Hinata’s lips make contact with burns, but not unpleasantly. Hinata’s lips lower to catch his next, and a multitude of warm feelings arise in him. Blindly, he removes his arms from Hinata’s grip, winding them around the smaller boy’s waist and pulling him closer. Because having him close is the only proof he has that he isn't by himself, by the river.

He has been the lonely King for so long. The lonely King of the Household who could never do anything right in the eyes of his parents. The lonely King of the Battlefield, whose comrades abandoned on a hostile island to fend for himself, who shunned him at the Academy.

He has been so isolated, so lonely for so unbearably long.

But that doesn't have to stay the same, because of Hinata Shouyou. He dethroned him, tossed away his crown, took his hand and showed him a wider, brighter and warmer world that he never realised was out there.

Hinata is right. Things are better when you don’t have to see them alone.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a bit of a breather chapter, bc the next chapter is the finale of Part I, and things are gonna get REAL, so look forward to that by the end of this week (or the beginning of next, depending on your timezone and when I upload chapter 11).

Also, my apologies to Terushima fans. I was too lazy to come up with an OC, and he was the closest to the character I needed for that scene in the cave.

From here on out, I’ll be able to update this story only once a week, unlike the 2 chapters per week I've been doing for the past few weeks. I was on vacation and hence I had the time to edit and upload twice a week; but now that I'll be going back to school, I'll probably only have time to update once a week, so sorry about that. I will try to keep to weekly updates, but I apologise in advance if I don't upload, due to reasons like being busy as hell with school or forgetting to do so.

Thanks for reading :))

don't forget to drop by my tumblr pls
The truth

Chapter Summary

it's the final chapter of Part I.

Chapter Notes

the gratuitous Japanese phrases I use to name the spells and places are all from Google Translate (like Suga’s old workplace, Yousei Services, in which Yousei is supposed to refer to fairy but idk), so I don't know how accurate they are. If anyone has better translations, please let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The coronation ceremony is tomorrow. After three months of national grieving, Princess Haruka’s time to formally take the throne is almost here; hence, she’s been preparing herself by reading the vows and ceremony plan. Of course, she’s nervous, but more than anything else, she is immensely lonely. The palace has suddenly become bigger and emptier after her parents’ death and Yuu’s escape.

At least I have Chika-chan, she reminds herself. Yes, her loyal, if slightly long-suffering, bodyguard has been a bountiful source of emotional and mental support. She doesn't know what she would do without Chikara reminding her to eat and sleep, as well as occasionally lending a shoulder for her to lean on. A twinge of guilt gnaws at her, though — if he’s providing her emotional and mental support, who’s giving him the same support? She frowns. The words on the paper before her swim in and out of focus.

Someone knocks on the door of her study, interrupting her reverie.

“Princess, it’s me.”

A smile springs on her face, as natural as the sun rising at dawn and setting at dusk. “You don't have to be so formal, Chika-chan. If the door isn't locked, it means you're welcome to enter.”

She can practically sense his hesitation, before he lets himself in. He’s carrying a teacup and a teapot. He looks as he always does: standard dark blue royal guard uniform, neat dark hair, droopy but kind eyes. It is reassuring to know that in a world that can change at the drop of a hat, Chikara will always be her constant. Ugh, that was cheesy. She ought to think of a better, less cheese-filled way to describe him.

“Princess, are you okay?” he asks, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. “Did you sleep well last night?”

For the first time that whole week, Haruka did, in fact, get a somewhat decent night’s sleep. She did wake up twice, half of the number of times she woke up two nights ago, in the middle of the night and have a wildly vivid dream of Yuu playing volleyball, but other than that it was a good rest. She
supposes.

“Oh yeah. It was an early night for me!”

Chikara stares suspiciously at her. “And how early is early?”

“Er, half past midnight?” she admits in a small, sheepish voice. “Heh.”

If Chikara weren’t so respectful, he would have smacked his face. “You need to sleep earlier, Princess. You have a big important day tomorrow.”

A flutter of butterflies take flight in her stomach. As though sensing her discomfort, Chikara keeps quiet as he pours her a cup of tea, pushing the almost-full cup to her. She takes a sip. Ah, it’s white tea, her favourite.

She continues reading and rereading her vows, while Chikara stands guard next to her table. After the assassination, her security has been tightened up to eleven. Even inside the palace, she goes almost everywhere except for the bathroom with a small entourage of guards. Although the door is closed, she knows there are at least three guards outside. Chikara, as the head of her bodyguard squad, must’ve been quite shaken after her parents’ were assassinated right inside the palace. Heck, if it weren’t for the fact that he needs sleep too, he probably would stand guard outside her bedroom at night. (She does suspect there’s a night shift, though.)

She does a brief recap of what she plans to do after being formally crowned queen. She needs to investigate the assassination of her parents, obviously. She will arrange for the best investigators in the kingdom to tackle that. Then there is that agreement her parents were in the midst of negotiating with a neighbouring nation. She should drop by her parents’ old study and examine the files they had on that, before deciding whether she should continue with the agreement. There’s also the situation in the Dateko district, and of course the issue of bandits, and—

“Princess, Princess!”

She blinks. Chikara is crouched down in front of her, his hands gripping her shoulders.

“Chika-chan?”

“I think you need a break,” he says firmly. “You were spacing out there, then you just — you started shaking. Your face went really pale. You didn't sleep well last night, did you?”

“Uh, well, relatively.”

He sighs. “Princess. Relatively isn't good enough. C’mon, I’ll escort you to your room.”

Chikara takes her hand and leads her out of the study. She follows him in a half-daze. It’s only when they pass by the king and queen’s study that she remembers the agreement with the country.

“Wait, Chika-chan.” She tugs his hand. “There's something I wanna check in my parents’ study. Real quick, I promise! Then I’ll go and take a nap, just as you want. Pinky promise!” She waves her free pinky at him.

He nods with some hesitation, and she leads him into the study. She gently lets go of his hand, walking over to survey the well-stocked shelves. She curses when she realises that the files aren’t arranged in any particular order — at least, none that she can observe. Seriously, for all his nagging and misogyny, couldn’t her father at least organise his study? Time to do things the old-fashioned way. She ransacks the shelf in front of her, rifling through the pile of files and tossing aside whatever
doesn't seem related to what she wants. After several minutes of frantic searching, there is nothing of interest in the pile, much to her frustration. She turns to the shelf above and does the same, only to yield no fruits of her labour.

“Princess, maybe—”

“Hold that thought, Chika-chan,” Haruka says, spotting a file sticking out from the shelf next to the one she previously emptied. Upon closer inspection, she finds that it’s labelled *Operation Kita—*. The rest of it is hidden in the depths of the shelf, though she thinks she has a good idea of what it’s about. “Huh, this must be about Operation Kitagawa Daiichi. Though it’s not what I’m looking for, I’ve been meaning to read up on the details of what happened…”

She yanks the file out, only to go completely still with shock and horror. She can feel the blood drain from her face.

“Princess? What's the matter?”

The formal name of the military operation in Kitagawa Daiichi is, aptly, *Operation Kitagawa Daiichi*. Three words. Three words that she has become familiar with because of all the news reports and the essays she and Yuu had to write. Those three words were uttered regularly at the royal family’s dinner table when the operation was still ongoing.

Then, why was there a *fourth* word in the title? And why did it change *everything* she thought she knew about the operation?

“Morning, sleepyhead!” Suga greets, poking his head in Noya’s tent. “It’s breakfast time.”

Noya didn't sleep well last night. He kept tossing and turning, drifting in and out of short dozes but never falling into a complete sleep. That has left him feeling like utter crap.

“Don't feel like breakfast,” he mutters. He rolls over so that his back is facing Suga.

“Really? Hinata made it specially for you. He was hoping you'd like it. He had that puppy dog look in his eyes.”

Noya scowls. Cheap trick, Suga, cheap trick. Even if it *is* true, he refuses to play right into Suga’s deceptively tricky hands. Besides, he really has no appetite to appreciate Shouyou’s cooking.

“… Later, alright?” he mutters.

“I'll come back to check on you in ten minutes.”

Well, if there's a silver lining to Suga’s fussing tendencies, at least he acts more like a mother than Noya’s mother ever did. Something about him makes Noya feel like he’s always wrapped in a loving hug, even when they aren't making physical contact. His birth mother certainly didn't treat him like that. Or is he not supposed to speak ill of the dead? He doesn't know, nor does he care. Caring hurt too much, and caring was what led to Asahi leaving.

*Kill that train of thought. Don't even go there, Yuu.*

True to his word, Suga shows up again. This time, he makes it clear that he won't be taking no for an
answer. Reluctantly, Noya rolls out of his mat and joins the rest of his team for breakfast, where Tooru and Iwaizumi seem to be leading a council of sorts.

“So you really don’t have any spare spare gloves for your spare gloves,” Iwaizumi states, plain as day and blunt as a knife.

Tooru winces. “Uh yeah. But! That will not be an issue!”

“And why is that so?”

“I can just — I mean, I’m sure there are plenty of stores in Tokonami that sell magic gloves! Then all I’d have to do is concentrate really hard on converting the Potential Magic into my elemental magic. It’s all as Suga-chan said.”

“And what happens when that pair gets destroyed too? And the one after that?”

“Hey Iwa-chan, don’t say that like it’s such a certain future!” Tooru protests.

“The only thing that’s impossible is impossibility,” Iwaizumi retorts.

“Oi, don’t insult me then steal my line! I’m gonna put a copyright on that line.”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. “Just make like Kageyama and get your magic tattooed on yourself.”

Tooru spits his coffee out, choking and gasping histrionically. “I must have you heard wrong, Iwa-chan, ‘cause there’s no way you just said—”

“I said what I said, Trashykawa.”

“Iwa-chan!” Tooru proceeds to deliver an impassioned thesis speech about why he should not make like Kageyama, which Iwaizumi counters with short, blunt statements.

“Good morning, Noya-san!” Shouyou greets chirpily. He shoves a metal tin containing several slices of bread and some leftovers of the bird they hunted last night into Noya’s face. “Breakfast! I made it for you!”

Damn Suga, he was right. Hinata really has the infamous puppy dog look in his eyes, all shiny and hopeful that can turn sad and pouty if he doesn’t get his way. With a small sigh and brief thanks, Noya accepts his specially prepared breakfast, much to Shouyou’s delight. He lets out a cry of “Oh yeaaaaah!” and Kageyama yells at him to shut his face, because the way to get people to stop making noise is to make even more noise. Gotcha.

Noya turns to Daichi beside him. “They’re still going at it?”

“Yes, as you can see.” Daichi gestures at the bickering couple. “I think Iwaizumi’s making progress. Oikawa’s argument is exponentially less convincing today.”

“He must be cracking,” Suga adds, stifling his laugh behind his hand. Daichi’s cheeks colour slightly when hearing Suga’s small laugh.

_Looks like I’m surrounded by googly-eyed lovers_, Noya grumbles to himself.

“What do you think, Kageyama?” Iwaizumi asks, turning to the dark-haired warrior.

“Don’t ask Tobio-chan!” Tooru hisses. “This is just between you and me!”
Kageyama blinks in surprise. “Uh.”

Shouyou snickers. “Nice answer.”

The next moment, Daichi has to break up a quasi wrestling match between two of their youngest. Iwaizumi dryly remarks about how they're never going to make any progress at the rate they're going, which Suga is quick to reassure him of the contrary.

“That’s one of the saddest things that Noya has ever heard; the idea that pain is something that can be gotten used to. Yet, it's not like he can't relate at all to that sentiment.

“But Kageyama can still perform his magic even with the curse on him,” Shouyou pipes up.

“Wait, what? For real?!” Iwaizumi demands.

“The reason why he couldn't participate in the fight against the Dateko vigilantes after getting cursed was probably 'cause the pain was so new and sudden, like guhh!”

“And how do you know that?” Daichi inquires, arching a suspicious brow.

“It’s a long story,” Kageyama interjects. “But the idiot’s right. If you can fight through the pain, you can still do magic.”

Iwaizumi turns to Tooru. “Well?”

Tooru’s nostrils flare. “Fine, Iwa-chan, I’ll get the tattoos! ‘Cause the day I lose to Tobio-chan here is the day hell freezes over!”

“Iwaizumi is leading 30 to 29,” Suga murmurs, chuckling. “Match point.”

Daichi rolls his eyes, clapping Tooru’s shoulder. “Well, whatever your motive is, I’m glad you finally saw reason.”

Tooru sulks. “Don’t you start with me, Dai-chan.”

Now that the daily council of Should Oikawa Get Tattoos (The Correct Answer is Yes) has concluded, the team of seven finishes up their breakfast, takes down their tents and continue on the route to Tokonami. Even though Shouyou (and Kageyama, since he’s pretty much everywhere Shouyou is) sticks with Noya throughout the trek and makes small talk with him, he can't help but notice the hollow chasm in their team dynamic. It’s odd — Asahi was never the most talkative guy on the team, yet everything suddenly seems too quiet for Noya’s liking. He feels cold and empty, like a void. He’s not used to feeling like this; if he were to describe how he normally feels, he would allude himself to a firework — warm and loud and full of colour and life.

This is stupid. The absence of just one guy shouldn't so thoroughly change me.

Except he's lying to himself. Asahi is more than just one guy to him.
Things change, he bitterly reminds himself. Or rather, you find out different things about something, or someone, you were once so sure you knew. You find out the truth.

Tokonami is a small district, without much to look at. Noya is disappointed; he’s been hoping for some stimulation to make up for how dull everything has become.

After stopping for lunch, and briefly again after lunch when Shouyou spots some childhood friends (seriously, they can't bring Shouyou anywhere without him bumping into someone he knows), Daichi brings them to his sorcerer friend’s shop, which — just like the rest of the district — is small and quaint. The floor consists of slightly creaky planks of wood. Jars of strange and colourful substances line the shelves on the left-most wall, and books of differing states of being pristine or in disrepair jut out of the ones on the right. The other shelves are crammed with odd magical trinkets, like figurines of some famous sorcerers, dull bronze rings and a marble carving of a bra. The warm orange lights above them flicker feebly, like they're on their last flame.

A young brown-haired man at the counter looks up from the yellowing book he is reading, and his eyebrows lift in surprise. “Sawamura! What brings you here?”

“Ikejiri, it’s good to see you.” Daichi shakes his apparent buddy’s hand, offering a smile. “Well, as much as I’d like to say it’s my purpose for dropping by, I didn’t come here just to exchange pleasantries.”

Ikejiri returns the warm smile. “Figures. Business as always, that's so like you.”

(Noya doesn't miss how Suga’s shoulders just barely, almost imperceptibly, tense up.)

“So what's up?” Ikejiri asks.

Daichi grabs Kageyama’s arm and pulls him to the front of the group. He succinctly explains the whole debacle with the Dateko Vigilantes and the curse Moniwa placed on Kageyama.

“I see,” Ikejiri says, frowning. “That's nasty, the Curse of Kutsuu, but the vigilantes had to do their job. So you want me to lift the curse off him, I presume?”

“If you would.” Daichi bows to him, startling him.

“C’mon, Sawamura, you know you don’t have to bow! We’re old friends!”

“Yes. So, are you able to lift the curse?” Suga asks, stepping forward to stand next to Daichi. His ever-present smile is, naturally, on his face — not that it’s fooling Noya.

“It’s a difficult one — incredibly advanced — so it might take a while, but in short, yes I can. Just let me check my storage to see if I have the necessary ingredients.” He bustles off to the back room.

“Ingredients?” Shouyou asks puzzledly. “Is he gonna make some magic soup?”

“No, but magic soup does sound nice,” Suga answers. “To break such an advanced curse on Kageyama, an equally advanced counter-spell is required. And to perform such powerful spells, us magical beings — like demi-fairies, sorcerers, merfolk and what have you — may need special ingredients to augment our powers, depending on our power level and magical stamina.”
Shouyou lets out an impressed "WHOA", and Kageyama snaps at him to shut up. He's rubbing his forearms, as though anticipating finally being freed from the pain he has had to endure for the past two weeks. Nasty but protective anger flares in Noya. While he definitely wouldn't say he's close to the aloof warrior, Kageyama is a member of the Blue Crows, and the Blue Crows protect their own.

Ikejiri bursts out from his storage room, appearing harrowed. “Well, I'm kind of in a bind.”

“What kind of bind?” Iwaizumi questions. “Is it anything we can help with?”

“Uh, if any of you just so happens to have a magical glowing crystal about yeah size—” Ikejiri holds his index finger and thumb about three inches apart. ”—that would be fantastic.”

“Ah, you mean this?” Shouyou rummages around his messenger bag and brandishes the aforementioned crystal triumphantly. It glints and shimmers under the warm lighting of the small shop. The sight of something so beautiful and majestic takes Noya’s breath away. Judging by the others’ expressions, they feel the same.

Ikejiri blinks in surprise. “Whoa, talk about a stroke of luck.”

“There's magic in this? But I didn't feel anything!” Shouyou exclaims. His eyes are blown wide with surprise.

“That's ‘cause there's a Block around it, concealing its magical properties from obvious detection,” Ikejiri explains.

Shouyou cocks his head to the side, resembling an enthusiastic but confused puppy. “A Block?”

“A Block is made up of unconverted Potential Magic,” Suga, their resident expert on magic, expositis. “Particularly powerful Blocks are pretty much undetectable.”

“Ooh, I see! Thanks, Suga-san!”

“May I have that?” Ikejiri requests.

“Sure! I just picked it ‘cause it looked pretty!” Shouyou tosses the crystal to the grateful sorcerer.

“Thanks, that's a great help! Kageyama-kun, if you would follow me.”

Kageyama follows Ikejiri to a back room. Although his expression is stoic as usual, Noya can guess from the way his rubbing of his forearms has slowed down that he's hopeful. The poor boy has been in constant pain for the past weeks; he deserves this. Noya can't help but admire his strength, to have stayed sane through the suffering without throwing in the loincloth. Or is it the washcloth? Well, whatever the idiom is, Noya is glad to have someone so resilient on his team.

Unlike SOMEONE, he thinks passive-aggressively, as if the target of his passive aggression can hear him.

Curled up under his blanket, Asahi sneezes. Maybe it’s time for him to get a thicker blanket.
“Shou-chan, where did you get that?” Tooru demands, awed.

While waiting for Kageyama and Ikejiri, Shouyou exuberantly recounts the tale of how he and Kageyama visited a cave that was a veritable trove of glowing crystals a few nights ago when neither of them could sleep. There was a myriad of colours — blue, pink, orange, red, gold and so on. Shouyou’s constant interjections of onomatopoeia thankfully doesn’t detract from how gorgeous the sight must have been. A stab of envy pierces Noya’s heart. He wishes Shouyou took him along too.

*But you’d be a lamppost on their date if you went with the two of them — it’s better that you didn’t go,* he reminds himself.

From the sounds of it, Shouyou seems to be withholding some details about his late-night excursion with Kageyama, but Tooru’s exclamation prevents anyone else from questioning him.

“Did Tobio-chan taint your virtue?!” Tooru demands, shaking the redhead back and forth. “What were you thinking, going out at night with a strange boy alone? Shou-chan, I thought you were smarter than that!”

“Calm down, Stupidkawa, he's not your daughter,” Iwaizumi cuts in. “And he's sixteen, not six. If he wants to hang out with Kageyama at night, that's fine and perfectly legal.”

“Iwa-chan, *surely* you can’t—”

“The minimum age of consent here is sixteen, don't you remember?”

Tooru puffs up indignantly. “Yes, of course I do. And it’s fine if Shou-chan wants to hang out with any other person, but *Tobio-chan*—”

“For goodness’ sake, Shittykawa, find your chill. You can’t tell Hinata who he can and can't date. He doesn't need your approval if he wants to be with Kageyama.”

Tooru scowls but stops pursuing the topic. Poor Shouyou just looks baffled, like a lost sheep who witnessed a showdown between two wolves.

Ikejiri and Kageyama return from the back room. A small relieved smile is on Kageyama’s face, and his steps seem lighter. The tense atmosphere immediately dissipates. Even Tooru appears happy for him.

“How are you feeling?” Suga asks.

“Hell lot better,” Kageyama answers, his voice free of his previous fog of too-long suffering. “Like a gigantic weight’s been lifted off my shoulders. I feel like I might pass out from the sudden lack of pain.”

And that might simultaneously the best and saddest thing Noya has heard all week. Nevertheless, he’s happy for the boy.

“How much will that be?” Daichi addresses Ikejiri.

Ikejiri looks embarrassed. “Two hundred and fifty. Look, I don't mean to — I mean, I don't want to charge an old friend, and I feel really bad—”

“Say no more.” Daichi firmly presses a wad of notes into Ikejiri’s palm. “You have a business to run
and a living to make. I'm just grateful you healed our friend here, so if you hate to think of it as payment, think of it instead as thanks from a friend for doing a favour.”

“Heh, classic Sawamura. Say, it’s been years since I last saw you. How about dinner to catch up?”

Noya and Tooru’s eyebrows shoot up in unison. Oh ho ho, this should be interesting. Noya glances at Tooru, to see that he’s smirking. If he had a cup of tea, Noya would bet Tooru would be sipping the hell out of it.

Daichi turns to share a look with Suga. Suga smiles and nods, as if reassuring him. Daichi turns back to accept Ikejiri’s invitation. After making arrangements about where to meet after dinner, they part ways, Daichi with Ikejiri and the rest of them together.

After Tooru gets his magic tattoos (on his palms, ’cause he refuses to get them on his forearms like Kageyama), Suga finds them a restaurant where they can have an early dinner together. Just like the rest of the district (Noya senses a pattern), it’s not particularly spacious. However, it is cozy, which makes up for the fact that the six of them have to squeeze together in a too-small booth.

“You know what's the deal with them,” Tooru accuses Suga. “They're not just old friends.”

“You're a perceptive one,” Suga says absently, skimming through the menu.

“I'd use the word nosy,” Iwaizumi deadpans.

“Would it kill you to be nice to be for once, Iwa-chan?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh!”

“They’re exes,” Suga chimes in, still not looking up from his menu.

Tooru spits his water out. “Whoa, okay, I thought I had to wrestle the answer out of you or make some shady black market deal. I didn't think you'd spill the tea so easily.”

“'Cause I knew the lengths you'd go to pry the answer out of me, and I don't feel like getting into a wrestling match or involved in the black market. I have a shiny reputation to maintain.”

“Yet you're so chill about letting them have dinner together?” Noya asks incredulously. “You and Daichi are like, together, right? You’re not… like, uh—”

“Jealous? Worried? Insecure?” Suga arches an eyebrow. “They dated for, what, two weeks when they were fourteen, and that's short even for fourteen. I've known him my whole life. I trust Daichi to stay faithful to me.”

Noya ponders this. He wonders what it must be like to know someone so well to be able to have that much faith them, that they wouldn't just suddenly up and abandon you, leaving you feeling like a leaf drifting lost in the wind.

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The journey from Tokonami to Johzenji is relatively short. During the week and a half they are on the road, Kageyama has reverted fully back to his usual self. Well, mostly — sometimes he glances at
Suga, winces and grabs his head like he's suddenly overcome by a headache, whatever *that's* about. But it seems to go away as soon as it comes, so everyone figures it isn't a big cause for concern. Suga has made an educated guess that it’s attributed to the aftereffects of Moniwa’s curse, and they leave it at that. Kageyama feeling better means he and Shouyou get up to their usual antics. Daichi has had to stop their intensely competitive race multiple times because they were about to stray from the path and get lost who knows where. However, Noya finds their antics an endearing distraction from the emotional maelstrom in his head.

If Tokonami was vanilla and nothing too interesting, Johzenji is its polar opposite. The Johzenji district is lively, noisy and flashy — kinda like what Noya would be as a district, on a better day. Daichi is grumbling about a headache coming on from all the loud pop music, screaming fans and neon lights. Noya, being small for his age, knocks into several partying teens in the streets. Speaking of which, the streets are littered with streamers, beer cans and — disturbingly — a pair of lacy panties. Seriously, is this a district or a gigantic club?

“This is really too much,” Shouyou whimpers.

Everyone exchanges alarmed glances. If *Shouyou* of all people thinks Johzenji is too much for him, there’s no way the rest of them would survive.

“Can we find somewhere quieter?” Kageyama agrees, grimacing.

“At this rate, travelling to the moon seems more probable,” Daichi mutters. Nevertheless, he gamely leads them through the throngs of cheering, partying people and kicks aside stray beer cans, charting a path for them to follow. Ah, what would they do without their steady captain.

At long last, they find a comparatively peaceful corner. The nearest party is a good few streets away, which means most of the people in their vicinity are either here to, like them, hide from the chaos, or are completely wasted. Whatever it is, they won’t interrupt their newfound tranquility.

Never speak too soon, Noya realises, as from somewhere near them a loud, drawling voice cuts through the relative silence.

“C’mon, Glasses-chan, just one date, and I’ll be the happiest man alive. You can bring your gal pal with you too. I don’t believe in three’s a crowd; the more the merrier, now *that’s* more like it!”

“And I’ve told you, no means no. Now, please leave me and my friend alone.”

Ahead of them in a narrow alley is a tall guy with an undercut and pierced ears. Backed up against the brick wall is a petite blonde girl, with a taller dark-haired girl standing defensively in front of her. She looks familiar, Noya muses.

The Blue Crows aren’t just going to stand by and watch a guy bully two girls, so as one big horde in sweaty-shiny armour, they march over to give the guy a good one.

As it turns out, they’re not really strangers.

“Hey, Yachi!” Shouyou exclaims, surprised to see the girl he temporarily kidnapped from the spa she had been working at. “What does this ass Terushima want with you?”

“Shimizu-san?” Noya chokes out when he realises who the bespectacled beauty is. His face grows unbearably hot. Really, what are the odds?

“Shimizu, Yachi, it’s great to see you two,” Suga says. He eyes Terushima. “Though I wish it was under more pleasant circumstances.”
“Man, three may not be a crowd, but an additional… let's see, seven is really pushing it,” Terushima complains. “Can't a guy just ask a lady out in peace? Or two ladies, if he feels like it?”

Tooru glares at him. “That is so not how you ask someone out, you boner-driven piece of scum. The nice lady here said no, so suck it up and leave the two of them alone!”

“The hell would you know about seducing a lady — you're probably gay as hell,” Terushima snorts. He zeroes in on Shouyou, and Shouyou stiffens. “I'm still mad about you taking that crystal from me, chibi-chan. You're lucky your grumpy boyfriend was there with you. I'd hate to think what would've happened to you.”

Daichi frowns. “Hinata, Kageyama, you know him?”

“Unfortunately,” Kageyama growls. “Long story short, he threatened Hinata 'cause he wanted to make his life tough for the heck of it.”

“But it’s fine, 'cause Kageyama opened up the ground like bwoosh! And we escaped!” Shouyou interjects.

“Yeah, and I'm still mad about that.” Terushima scowls. “But we'll settle that tab later. Right now, I've got a date to — oomph!”

Terushima crumples to the ground, an ugly welt forming on the back of his head. Behind him stands Shimizu, looking drop-dead gorgeous and dangerous with a bulky box in her hands and a deadly glower on her face. Yachi’s jaw hits the ground. She can't seem to stop trembling.

Shimizu approaches Yachi and wraps her fleece cardigan around the smaller girl. “I'm sorry he scared you. Are you alright, Hitoka-chan?”

Yachi nods with a weak smile. “Yes, Kiyoko-san!”

“Are you two okay?” Suga asks.

Shimizu nods, and Noya follows her movements, entranced. “Thank you for the distraction. I needed an opening.”

Shouyou bounds over to Yachi, causing the poor girl to let out a small shriek of surprise. He grabs her hands and squeezes them. “Yachi! I can't believe that jerk had the nerve to try to hit on you again! I thought I scared him off enough in Karasuno! I'm glad you're fine, though.”

“Yeah, um, thanks for everything, Hinata,” she replies. Her weak smile grows stronger. “It's nice to see you again. What are you doing here though?”

“Oh! Um, adventuring. Yes, adventuring. That's what we're doing here. And what about the both of you?”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that,” Suga chimes in. “Aren't you two needed at Yousei?”

“Hitoka-chan and I have been discussing this for a while,” Shimizu replies. “And we decided that instead of waiting for people to come to us for healing and treatment, we’ll bring the healing and treatment to them. Not everyone can afford a visit to a spa, after all. That's why we're travelling around the kingdom, and we charge on an ability-to-pay basis. We don't know if this is a permanent arrangement — we're just doing what we can and want right now.”

“That's a very nice and sweet idea, don't get me wrong, but what about Yousei Services?” Suga
asks. “Last I remember, they were a little understaffed even with us there.”

“Don’t worry about that. We managed to recruit a bunch of new staff and interns, so Yousei is in good hands.”

Suga visibly deflates with relief. “Thank goodness. I knew I could count on the both of you.”

“Hey!” Shouyou exclaims, his eyes lighting up like he’s just conceived an idea. “Why don’t you two join us? We’re travelling, you’re travelling, so let’s travel together! Safety in numbers, y’know? We’re headed to — uh, what’s it called?” He stares at Suga intently, like he’s trying to recall a memory. Then he snaps his fingers, the memory finally coming to mind. What would they do without Suga’s latent memory-restoring power, honestly? “Oh, right, Nekoma! We're going to Nekoma! Right, Daichi-san?”

“Oh, Daichi.” Daichi consults his map, before looking up with an answer. “Nekoma looks like a good place to go after we’re done here.” He turns to Noya.

Noya grimaces. “I don’t even wanna bother with these people. They’re probably too busy drinking or partying, or both. I doubt I could get a straight answer out of them.”

“Okay, Nekoma it is. Yachi-san, Shimizu-san, what do you think?”

The two girls share a glance, before turning back with a smile and a nod.

And just like that, thanks to a jerk who doesn’t know how to take no for an answer and Shouyou’s natural magnetism, the Blue Crows have their first two girl members in their ranks.

They rent two rooms in a nearby inn — a smaller one for the two girls and a larger one for the boys.

Kageyama is apparently tired from whatever, so he takes an early night. Shouyou crows about how he beat Kageyama, since he is able to stay awake longer than the other boy. Their score is apparently 133-135, with Hinata (apparently) rapidly closing Kageyama’s lead. Noya has no clue what the two crazy crows are on about, but seeing their bickering puts a smile on his face. The rest of them play a bordering-on-violent game of blackjack — as it tends to occur when Tooru is playing — which Suga turns out to be infuriatingly good at.

“Five cards, I win,” Suga declares, spreading his cards out for them to see. He has a decent hand of eighteen, much to Noya’s annoyance.

“You’re cheating!” Tooru accuses. He flings his cards down, revealing his disastrous hand of thirty. Honestly, any idiot vaguely familiar with blackjack would know better than to draw with a twenty in their hand. “You were the dealer! Of course you were cheating!”

“No, I’m not,” Suga calmly deflects.

“You so are! No one plays blackjack honestly, especially if they’re the dealer.”

“Maybe that’s just in your experience, Oikawa. I play honestly.”

“Sure sure, whatever you say, you golden boy,” Tooru scoffs.
Daichi gathers the opened cards to him and shuffles them. He's about to distribute them, when a loud, anguished yelp from Kageyama startles him so badly he spills the cards onto the floor.

“Oi, Bakageyama, what's wrong?” Shouyou demands, promptly dropping everything to scurry over to the other half of their dynamic duo.

Kageyama struggles out from the tangle of blankets and mat trapping him. One glance at his face, and Noya instantly knows that there is something terribly wrong. Kageyama’s face is as pale as death, his eyes are bloodshot — like he was crying in his sleep — and his hands are shaking so badly Noya worries they’ll dislodge themselves from his wrists. And Kageyama has some of the steadiest hands in the group, so that's saying something.

But Kageyama doesn't answer Shouyou. Instead he turns to Tooru. “Oi, Bakageyama, what's wrong?” Shouyou demands, promptly dropping everything to scurry over to the other half of their dynamic duo.

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But Kageyama doesn't answer Shouyou. Instead he turns to Tooru. “Oikawa-san, you need—” He licks his dry lips. “—the truth. You need to know.” His voice wobbles towards the end of his sentence.

“Truth?!” Tooru asks sharply, alarmed. “About what, Tobio-chan?”

Kageyama takes a long heaving breath, like he's steeling himself up for what he is about to reveal. Even his breathing is shaky and shallow.

“Oi, Tobio-chan, don't mess with me! Spill it already!”

The room turns so silent a pin dropped would have echoed. Everyone seems to be holding their breaths, just waiting for Kageyama to explain himself. Noya’s heart drums against his rib cage. The earlier game of blackjack is but a distant, trivial memory now.

“I don't know how… but I remember. Everything. I remember the truth,” Kageyama finally says. His eyes lower to his lap, like he's ashamed. “It was… it's about Operation Kitagawa Daiichi.”

“Operation KD? What about it?” Tooru demands, the panicked curiosity palpable in his voice.

And then Kageyama’s whole body starts shaking, like he's caught in subzero temperatures wearing nothing but his underwear. He presses his clenched fist against his mouth, as though forcing tears or vomit — or a gross mixture of both — back.

“Kageyama!” Suga rushes over to kneel next to the trembling boy. “If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to. It can wait—”

“No…” Kageyama rasps. “It can't. Sorry, I just—”

“What is it, Tobio-chan?!”

The whole room takes one, big collective breath. The seconds seem to inch by.

“Operation KD wasn't just an operation to deal with a military threat.”
But she can't hear Chikara’s pleas, because of that damned fourth word.

The title of the file reads: Operation Kitagawa Daiichi: Extermination.

“...It was a genocide. Of the whole of Kitagawa Daiichi.”

END OF PART I

Chapter End Notes

so there we have it. the big reveal I’ve waited with waning patience for 11 chapters to finally reveal. but still, so many unanswered questions remain. this is just the beginning, oh boy, this really is just the beginning.

I must warn you that from this point onwards, the story is gonna get darker. you thought the assassination was dark? oh, you are so in for a rude awakening. and it's not just the reveal of what exactly went down in Operation KD, which will be in the next chapter, but also the subplot that will take place after that, which is probably the darkest subplot in this whole story, aside from Operation KD. and there’s gonna be angst. so. much. angst so buckle in folks, this is gonna be one hell of a ride.

thanks for reading, as always!

i have cool things on my tumblr
Part II: and I love you all the same

The past few days, Kageyama has been feeling off. Besides for the agonising curse he had been enduring before Ikejiri cured him, sometimes he would get strange flashes of something like a distant memory at increasing frequencies. All that has culminated into the vividly detailed dream, like a playback of a film, that he just awoke from. Now, he can't stop shivering, wishing he could bleach the memories from his mind. He thinks he gets what the phrase ignorance is bliss means. Because reality, his reality, is harsher than anything his wildest dreams could have conjured.

“Kageyama, are you sure that it wasn't just a bad dream?” Daichi asks. “That's a very… bold statement to make.”

“Yeah, sometimes we get very vivid dreams,” Suga soothes. “It happens to everyone.”

“Maybe you ate some funny mushrooms,” Hinata pipes up. “One time I ate some funny soupy bleuagh thing Natsu and my grandma made — don't tell them I said that — and that night I dreamed that I was dancing in just my boxers with cows and Oikawa-san was — wait, I should explain what he did with that lady's lingerie first—”

“No, I know what I saw,” Kageyama snaps vehemently. Why are all they looking at him with so much doubt and uncertainty? Don't they understand the severity of what he just said? Are they even taking him seriously? He doesn't sound that crazy… right? “I remember what the generals said. It was real. I know it's real. It all just came back to me so suddenly, everything all at one shot.”

Suga nods sympathetically. “You’ve been hanging around me for so long — my latent aura was sure to rub off on you sooner or later.”

“Yeah, and — I saw the people… I saw the civilians being killed. I even… me — I did…” He wrings his hands, frustrated. He wishes he has Hinata, Sugawara or Oikawa’s way with words. He wishes he knew how to properly communicate with other people in general.

“Why don't you start from the beginning?” Iwaizumi suggests. He's the only one who doesn't seem to be doubting his claims.

Kageyama hesitates. “It’s a very long story.”

“We have all night,” Daichi replies. “However long it is, we will listen.”

Kageyama nods.
It was the third of April a year ago. The members of the Elite Squad were assembled in one of the mass halls. The general was standing on the stage at the front of the hall.

“Fall in!” the general commanded.

“Yes sir!”

At once, everyone’s hands snapped to their sides, and their feet stamped together.

“We have a direct announcement from the king and queen,” the general began, pausing briefly to salute to the northeast, in the direction of the palace. “They announce that with the bombing of the Dateko district, Emperor Kai of Kitagawa Daiichi has declared war against our kingdom. Their orders are to send the Elite Squad, which is all of you assembled here, to Kitagawa Daiichi to swiftly deal with this threat. You shall assemble punctually in your respective units at the docks at midnight tonight. You know what you need to bring and do. You have six hours to say your farewells to your family. More instructions will be given then. Dismissed.”

“Yes sir!”

The warriors fell out of their ranks and dispersed out of the hall. Only Kageyama lagged behind. He didn't have anyone he wanted to say goodbye to. Certainly not his parents. They probably wouldn't care or think it was important. Neither did he have any friends he wanted to say goodbye to. He tended to keep to himself, only interacting with others when he deemed it necessary. Still, he knew that when dismissed he was not permitted to linger, so he shuffled awkwardly out of the hall.

A ball of red hair manifested from seemingly nowhere and bumped into his chest.

He glared down at his assailant. “Oi stupid, watch where you're going.”

Hinata Shouyou glared back up at him. “Watch where you're going, stupid Kageyama.”

“What do you want this time? And no, I'm not interested in a rematch until you're stronger.”

Hinata scowled. “It’s not about that, though I do want a rematch eventually. I heard what the generals said.”

“You weren't supposed to,” Kageyama pointed out, frowning. “You're not Elite Squad. You could get into trouble for overhearing info like that.”

“I know I'm not,” Hinata huffed. “But whatever. Just… don't mess this up, okay? We still have a rematch. I swear I’m gonna beat you and become the best warrior in the district. Just you wait. That's why you have to come back, got that?”

Kageyama merely scoffs. “Don't tell me what to do. Now get lost.”

Kageyama, together with his unit as well as Units Grand and Kitten (Kuroo Tetsurou apparently really liked cats), was on a military ship headed to the shore of Kitagawa Daiichi. He sat tensed in his seat, listening to the colonel’s instructions.
“Here is what the King and Queen ordered,” the colonel said, reading off a roll of parchment. “In addition to dealing with Kitagawa Daiichi’s army, they want you to eliminate as many civilians as you can.”

A small gasp echoed among the young warriors in spite of themselves.

Oikawa Tooru raised his hand. “Permission to speak, sir?”

“Permission granted.”

“Wasn’t one of the ethics of being in the military that innocent people are not to be harmed? Why then are we ordered to kill innocent people?”

The colonel sighed. “I don’t know why, but the King and Queen must have a good reason for issuing this order. It is probably in the best interest of the kingdom.”

“Permission to speak again, sir?”

“Permission granted.”

Oikawa bit his lip. “With all due respect, sir, I do not wish to participate in heartless slaughtering of civilians. I’ll do my job as a warrior to eliminate the military threat, of course, but I will not hurt innocent people.”

Murmurings arose in the ship, only to be quelled when the colonel spoke.

“Oikawa, your orders are to eliminate both the military threat and the civilians. You do not get to choose which orders you want to follow and don’t want to follow. As a warrior, it’s your duty to obey all instructions given to you.”

“Then I want out.” Oikawa’s voice trembled slightly, but he held the colonel’s gaze. “Throw me in jail, execute me, punish me however you see fit for being disobedient. But I refuse to disobey my morals, no matter what my orders are.”

The colonel’s stare remained stoic as he said, “Unfortunately, that won’t work. You are one of our best, most skilled warriors. It would be a waste of manpower to imprison or execute you. As much as I should punish you for being defiant, the kingdom needs you on this mission. Instead, I will tell you this: your boyfriend and vice-captain, Iwaizumi Hajime, couldn’t make it because of food poisoning, correct?”

Sourly, Oikawa nodded.

“Here’s the thing — it wasn't food poisoning.”

Oikawa shot to his feet. “What did you say?!”

“Sit down before you fall down,” the colonel ordered sharply. “I knew it would be hard to win your cooperation after you hear the King and Queen’s orders, hence I set up an insurance to make sure you will cooperate. Iwaizumi has been intentionally poisoned by one of my men under my instructions. If it is of any reassurance, it’s not severe enough to kill him. Once this is over, I assure you that I will see to it that he gets an antidote. However, if you disobey, I will make sure he will not survive. Now, will you obey the King and Queen?”

Oikawa sat back down and buried his face in his palms. His whole frame was trembling.
“Oikawa Tooru, do I have your word that you will follow the King and Queen’s orders?”

“Yes, fine, I will. Sir,” he added in a venomous mutter.

“Good. I knew I could rely on you.”

(Iwaizumi’s face is ashen, like the memory is returning to him too, while Oikawa’s entire demeanour is unusually stony — Kageyama thought he would have burst into tears or something by now.)

Oikawa stared burning holes in his boots, and no one dared look at him. Kageyama couldn't decide whether he admired him for speaking up against their superior officer or thought him stupid for trying to disobey. Just like Oikawa, Kageyama had a sense of morality; he didn't like his orders any more than Oikawa did, but he also didn't see any room to defy his monarchs. That was his world, where there was no room for defiance. And no room for defiance meant he kept what he thought to himself, no matter how much it burned him to do so.

They arrived shortly at Kitagawa Daiichi. No words were spoken as the young warriors gathered their weapons and gathered in their assigned units. Kageyama shuffled to stand behind a guy with dark spiky hair. Kindaichi, that's what Kageyama believed his name was. He wasn't particularly close to the people in his unit. They had trained and attended briefings together, but that was about it. He knew in this line of work that there was little point in forming personal and emotional attachments. Anyone could die, so he wanted to save himself the pain of grief by keeping his distance from others. Pain would cloud his objectivity. The rumours that circulated around the Academy called him the King who thought he was so above everyone else he didn't see fit to interact with them. He decided not to speak up to clarify the rumours — it was better that way. At least they gave him a wide berth, as well as an excuse for not talking to anyone unless necessary.

Even so, making sure he didn't form personal bonds and instead putting obedience to authority before his feelings didn't prepare him for the bloodbath in the streets of Kitagawa Daiichi that he was about to participate in, that he was about to cause.

(His voice chokes when he reaches this part of the story, but with a gentle squeeze from Hinata’s small but comfortingly warm hand, he pushes on.)

The warriors marched into the coastal village of the small island.

And thus began the slaughtering.

Screams and cries of children and women filled the air. It was chaos. There was absolutely no sense or order to the massacre that was going on. People dropped dead in the streets of their home, like flies. The clanging of weapons clashing indicated that some of the civilians were fighting back, but it was futile. Ordinary civilians were no match for the vigorously groomed warriors. Soon, the streets were painted red.

Kageyama’s Geokinesis made it incredibly, frighteningly easy to kill people. He strode through the streets, his tattoos glowing and burning, causing the ground to split open and swallow people whole. Large chunks of earth were levitated into the air, and crushed underneath them into the ground were unsuspecting civilians. He didn't stick around to see what was underneath — he didn't know if he could continue if he did, and according to his orders he needed to continue.

As per his orders, he didn't discriminate; whether it was armed men, women crying and trying to escape or children who couldn't understand anything that was happening, he slaughtered them all. His powers let him stand from afar and kill people, which meant he didn't need to get close and personal to the people whose lives he was about to snuff out. It made his job slightly easier, he
supposed. He thought this ruthless killing should make him terrified, but terror meant hesitation, and hesitation meant inevitable disobedience — and there was no room for that in his world. So he shoved his feelings to the back and coldly, completely focused on the task at hand.

More civilians several feet away were cornered by three of his teammates. They were taking too long to kill the group of civilians, so Kageyama decided to take matters into his own hands. Power coursed through him, his tattoos lit up that familiar dark blue, and the ground trembled as it fissured open. The warriors cursed and leapt out of the way. However, the civilians didn't have such sharp reflexes; screaming, they spilled in. Refusing to even spare them a glance, Kageyama sealed the ground shut with a resounding slam.

“What the hell, man,” Kindaichi growled as he approached Kageyama. He grabbed his collar and slammed him against a brick wall. “Sakunami, Kunimi and I had them! You could’ve killed us too, you bastard!”

Kageyama glared right back at him, anger simmering inside him. “If you didn't want to get caught in that then maybe you should have killed them faster! Don't blame me for your ineptitude; I'm just doing as I'm told. Don't wanna get hurt as collateral? Then stay out of my way!”

“Oh yeah? And what are you, the King of the Battlefield? You don't get to call the shots around here!” Kindaichi reared back his fist, as if to punch Kageyama, but Sakunami pulled him away. Kunimi stood apathetically by, like he couldn't be bothered to get involved.

“We don't have time to be fighting,” Sakunami articulated evenly, though he did shoot Kageyama a reproachful look. “We’re on the same side here, so instead of fighting each other, let’s fight together. And Kageyama-kun, that means not putting your teammates in danger. You can't prioritise the mission over the safety of your team.”

Kageyama scowled and looked away. He shoved Kindaichi away, causing him to fall back on his butt. “I don't have time for this crap. I'm going. Don't you dare get in my way again.”

Because the mission came before all else. Obedience above anything else. And he wasn't going to let something as stupidly trivial and sentimental as team spirit get in the way of that.

Kageyama stormed down the street, Kindaichi, Kunimi and Sakunami trailing behind him. He was having a fairly easy time so far, as his powers took people out so quickly they didn't have time to fight back. Hence his surprise when he rounded a corner and a volley of arrows came flying at him. Cursing, he dove to the ground and erected a mound of earth to shield himself from the arrows. He peeked around the corner of his earth shield to take a good look at the position of his attackers. They were ten feet away, about fifteen degrees from his position. This shouldn't be too hard then; he was just taken by surprise. Soon, they were no longer a problem, crushed and buried hundreds of feet beneath him.

“Are you fucking serious?” Kindaichi yelled. Kageyama whipped around and saw him bent over on the ground, pulling an arrow out from his leg. “You have those fancy powers, and you only covered yourself?! Sakunami, Kunimi and I could have died again, all because of your selfishness!”

“If you didn't want to get hurt, how about you try being stronger and faster?!” Kageyama snarled back, glaring at him. “And I told you not to get in my way! So really, you only have yourselves to blame for almost getting killed.”

“Now now, Kageyama-kun—” Sakunami started, holding his hands out in a placating gesture, but Kindaichi cut him off.
“No, don't reason with him, Sakunami. He's a stubborn, selfish bastard of a King — you can't change someone like that. They're just so stuck in their ways, you know?”

Kageyama was proud of the fact that he managed to conceal the tiny flinch he had at the mention of 'King'.

“Kindaichi-kun—”

“Listen up, asshole,” Kindaichi said, glowering at Kageyama. “If you weren't a teammate, and a damn strong one, I'd kill you on the spot. But I won't, no matter how much I want to, 'cause I know what it means to fight on a team. Maybe all that's in your mind is how to be world's biggest asshat, but you should think about what it means to be on a team.”

Kageyama had enough. He didn't want to hear any more. This conversation was a waste of his time — time he could have used to do other more important things. He turned around and stalked off. What it meant to be on a team? What bullshit. The assigning of units was just something to organise them. He fought alone. His powers didn't leave room for teamwork. Why would he need anyone else’s help when he had the power to literally split open the earth everyone walked on?

An unknown amount of time passed before he was summoned to a makeshift base the other guys managed to secure on the island. Kageyama grabbed a tray and helped himself to some food, before joining the rest of his unit at one of the tables in the mess hall. Most of them were looking a little scuffed up, but the most severe wounds appeared to be shallow punctures. Kageyama himself was barely scathed. Perks of having far-range powers.

The warriors in his unit must have heard about what happened earlier with Kindaichi, because all of them refused to make eye contact with him. He told himself it didn't sting. Whatever, it wasn't like he wanted to talk to them anyway. He didn't even need them. The only reason why he was sitting with them in the first place was because that's what he's supposed to do.

“I don't know if I can do this anymore,” Fukunaga from the Nekoma branch whispered. He hadn't touched his dinner, not that it was particularly appetising anyway. “Killing innocent people. I can't stomach it.”

“I know how you feel,” Sakunami said, his eyes downcast. “I joined the Elite Squad ‘cause I wanna defend the kingdom, y'know? I didn't sign up for a genocide. I'm going to hell for this.”

“Well, it's not like we can do anything about it,” Kindaichi muttered bitterly. “We all saw what happened to Oikawa-san from Unit Grand. He and Iwaizumi-san are practically joined at the hip, so to hear about what happened to Iwaizumi-san… it must have crushed him, to have the life of someone who means the world to him dangling over his head like that. They might have hurt our loved ones too for all we know. Even if we hate our orders, there's always the threat of 'what if someone I love has been hurt to keep me in line' looming over us.”

“Regardless of whether there's blackmail or not and of how you feel, there's no excuse for disobedience,” Kageyama interjected, fighting to keep his voice free of emotion. Everyone's eyes swiveled to stare at him. He balked slightly, but he scoffed at the idea of backing down. “We follow all orders given — that's our job as warriors. We don't think, we don't feel, we just do. That's how we get things done.”

“Spoken like a true King,” Kindaichi snapped. “Looks like on top of being selfish, you're also without a conscience. What, don't you feel any grief over what you're doing to those innocent people?”
“We’re not supposed to feel. We’re just supposed to do. If you can’t follow orders because of some sentimental shit like guilt, then maybe you shouldn’t even be a warrior in the first place.”

He ignored the small, almost undetectable lump of bitterness that could have tasted of guilt and loneliness, if he weren’t so good at repressing his feelings. This was important, he reminded himself. Obedience above all else, he reminded himself. Doing as he was told would save him a shit ton of pain, he reminded himself, as he learned from that one time he had disobeyed his mother and ate dinner by himself instead of with his parents. The scars probably still lingered, though unseen; most scars can’t be detected by the naked eye, after all.

“Okay, seriously, what is your problem?!” Kindaichi spat furiously. “Do you need to, like, constantly be an asshole in order to survive? Are you even human?”

Was he? He didn’t answer, for he didn’t know. He vaguely felt like he could have a conscience, but after all the repression and denial he had done, he wasn’t sure anymore.

Kageyama got up, even though he had only taken maybe three bites of his dinner. He was no longer hungry; instead, he’s tired. So terribly worn-out, and not just from the strain of using his powers.

This shouldn’t be a problem, he angrily berated himself. He should be used to this way of surviving. There were two types of people in the world: those who did what was expected of them, and those who didn’t make the cut.

The next day, his unit was deployed at the crack of dawn. Kageyama was fully prepared to have a repeat performance of the previous day, except Kitagawa Daiichi’s military was waiting for the warriors today. This should be more challenging. Yes, they were well-trained warriors, put through training from hell, but at the end of the day their enemies were at least ten years older than them and easily had twice their experience. Most people would call the King and Queen idiots for sending teenagers to deal with a foreign military threat, except Kageyama could sort of see why they did. Kitagawa Daiichi’s military was small, less than half the size of the kingdom's official (aka, adult) military. The King and Queen probably thought it would be a waste of resources to send their official military, which was why the student warriors had been sent to deal with Kitagawa Daiichi instead. In other words, they were expendable. Even with all his power and obedience, he was still considered expendable.

Still, there wasn't much one could do — even if they were a seasoned war veteran — when the very ground they walked and fought on was literally quaking and rupturing beneath them. In short, eliminating the KD soldiers was only a mildly more difficult task than getting rid of the civilians, mostly because the soldiers had better reflexes. Some managed to leap out of the way of the fissures, but Kageyama reacted faster, splitting open the new patch of ground they were standing on and thinking they were safe at.

(Some members of his unit almost fell in too. He maintained that it was their fault for being in his way.)

He marched out of the village to hunt down more soldiers (or civilians, whichever came first). He spotted a small building and several women carrying young children by the windows. Power thrummed through his veins, but he stopped himself when he saw a sorcerer glowing obsidian black, striding around the perimeter of the building. The sorcerer left a luminescent black trail behind him as
he glided. Kageyama recognised the magic being used — Genocidal Curse, which he believed only glowed like that when it's activated. He watched as the sorcerer’s staff lit up a murderous black. The building glowed the same colour briefly, and terrified, tortured screams erupted — before the whole building fell deathly silent. Kageyama didn't bother to hang around any longer. He knew everyone inside was dead — such was the power of the Genocidal Curse.

(Daichi shudders. “I can't believe the Genocidal Curse is real. I always thought it was just an urban legend or something.”

“Born of hatred, it is the ugliest but most powerful form of magic known to ever exist,” Suga murmurs. “Nothing can stop it. No one in history has ever been able to stop Genocidal Curse from being activated.”

Noya, seeming unable to properly express his feelings through words, simply glares at the floor while fiddling with the good luck pendant around his neck.)

Kageyama managed to fend off a horde of civilian fighters, though not without cost to himself. He all but collapsed against a tree, panting to catch his breath. His tattoos continued to fizzle with energy, but he wasn't sure his young, still-maturing body could keep up with the demands of his power. His world swam before his eyes and his knees quaked — a mistake. Searing pain exploded across his shoulder. He groaned, falling to his knees. The pain spread to the rest of his arm like a wildfire. Blindly, he groped for whatever was causing the pain and yanked it out of his shoulder, tossing it aside. He knew that would just cause him to bleed out faster, but screw him if he wasn't thinking clearly. He just wanted the pain to be over. He wanted to go home. Hell, he’d rather see Hinata Shouyou’s stupid face than that of another Kitagawa Daiichi civilian.

(Hinata glares at him but doesn't interrupt him.)

“Here,” a low but friendly voice said, proffering a hand. Without thinking twice, Kageyama grabbed it, and Sakunami pulled him to his feet. His dark hair was matted with dirt, sweat and blood, his face littered with small cuts and bruises. He, too, was bleeding from his shoulder. “Looks like the civilian archers got you too, huh?”

Kageyama grunted in response.

“There's a medics tent nearby; let’s go get patched up. Especially you. I was lucky — I was hit by a normal arrow, but the arrow that struck you was poisoned. You need to get that shoulder of yours checked.”

“I can handle it,” he muttered, even though his head was spinning. He leaned against Sakunami for support, in spite of his pride.

Sakunami rolled his eyes. Dark brown and exhausted but nonetheless kind, they seemed. “Stubborn as ever. Kindaichi-kun may hate your guts, but I don't want a teammate to die. Let’s go.”

Sakunami heaved Kageyama (he was surprisingly strong for someone so small) to the tent that the military medics set up. Kageyama was set down on a makeshift bed in front of a redheaded man with strikingly familiar honey brown eyes, dressed in doctor scrubs. Before he could wonder about where he could have seen this man before, the man instructed him to lie down. He proceeded to clean Kageyama’s wounds and inject with something that seemed like an antidote. Gradually, Kageyama’s head stopped spinning quite so rapidly, the pain in his shoulder dulling.

(“That must've been my dad,” Hinata says, his tone bittersweet and his eyes wet. “He and my mom were some of the best medics the military had.”
Suga slides his arms around Hinata, and he leans his head against Suga’s chest. And that revelation tears at something inside Kageyama, nearly choking him up to the point he thinks he can't go on anymore. Because if that really was Hinata's father, then Kageyama… no, he can't say it. He won't say it, as long as Hinata doesn't bring it up.

Please don't bring it up, he mentally begs Hinata.

“When can I go back out and fight?” Kageyama croaked. His throat was painfully parched. Each word he uttered felt like it was being ripped out from his throat.

“Not any time soon, I'm afraid, son,” the doctor replied. “You need to rest. Thanks to this antidote, you should be feeling better in just a few hours; but you shouldn't throw yourself right back into action so soon. I’ll be keeping you and your friend for a few days, just to make sure you recover smoothly. Once you're better, I will have you transferred back to the base your unit’s occupying.”

The stubborn part of him screamed at him to argue, to assert that something as trivial as poison couldn't get him down, yet the strictly obedient part of him told him to listen to the doctor. Also, there was just something about this man that compelled him to quietly acquiesce, though for the life of him he couldn't put a finger on what exactly. He lay back down and watched as the doctor hurried off to check on Sakunami, who was being attended to by a female doctor. Soon, he drifted off into a fitful doze.

Several days of impatient resting later, the doctor declared Kageyama and Sakunami fit to return to their base. The streets were quiet and empty, other than the occasional body they tripped over; hence they travelled in relative peace.

“Oh, by the way, Kindaichi-kun dropped by earlier while you were asleep and told me to relay the colonel’s instructions to you,” Sakunami spoke. “Tomorrow morning, we’re to cover the beachy area southwest of this village. Apparently there are some military strongholds there, and they're too fortified for the scouts to break into, so it's our unit’s job to take care of that. You're to go ahead of the group and clear a path for us to follow. Don't worry about us, Kindaichi was one of the scouts and he knows the way there. It shouldn't be a trouble for you to handle that, right?”

“Of course not,” Kageyama scoffed. “I can probably handle it on my own, especially if the rest are just gonna get in my way.”

Sakunami's expression was unreadable. He didn't say anything, much to Kageyama’s surprise. He thought the other boy would have chided him for thinking that way. He knew Kindaichi would be at his throat if he heard him.

Oh well. Life was easier without stupid teammates constantly getting on his case, criticising his work ethic.

In hindsight, maybe he should have been more suspicious.

Kageyama woke up earlier than the rest of his unit the following morning. He washed up and then rummaged around the fridge for a quick breakfast, before heading off to his next destination. He had consulted a map the night before, so he knew where he was supposed to go.

From the sounds of what Sakunami had told him, there were going to be a hell lot of soldiers to deal
with at the stronghold. Kageyama decided to save his energy for them to avoid a disastrous repeat of what happened several days ago with the poisoned arrow. He took detours to avoid the fighting in the streets and stuck close to the shadows as much as he could.

When he got there, he patrolled the area, his body tensed and alert. His eyes were sharp, and he was ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

Except, even after five rounds around the beach, he couldn't find anything. He checked the map again, just to be sure. That was odd — he was in the right place, he was sure of that. He had a decently good sense of direction. That’s what being the master of the earth did for one.

Then why was there nothing — and no one — on the beach?

Chapter End Notes

Emperor Kai has no familial relation to Kai Tou from the Seijoh arc. Kai is just a common surname in Kitagawa Daiichi. Neither does Emperor Kai have any relation to Kai Nobuyaki from Nekoma's team.

Side note, Sakunami is 200 kinds of adorable. **LOOK AT HOW CUTE HE IS.** Aone pls protect the smol one.

guessing game! there's a pair of non-canon cousins, and one half of the pair has yet to be introduced. (the pair is already tagged in the relationships tag so yeah that probably narrows it down.) whoever guesses correctly gets, er, nice stuff? a virtual cookie? the immense satisfaction of having guessed it correctly? I'll figure out the logistics another time.

thanks for reading :)

[drop by my tumblr and say hi](https://example.com)
dethroned

Chapter Notes

tissues and sad music might be a good idea, if you wanna get into the mood of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kageyama pauses, accepting the glass of water Daichi is holding out to him. Judging from the shocked and pensive looks on everyone’s faces, he thinks they need a moment to absorb the massive amount of info he just hit them with. Besides, he could use a breather. Between uncovering so many memories at one shot and talking for so long, he’s worn out too.

But his story is far from over, so he can't rest now. Instead, he watches the others’ reactions. Oikawa is still stony, and Iwaizumi keeps a firm grip on his hand. Kageyama isn't sure if Iwaizumi is trying to comfort Oikawa or elicit some sort of reaction from him. Daichi and Sugawara wear matching solemn expressions. Nishinoya appears as though he's just barely containing his rage. If it weren't for the severity of the situation, Kageyama hazards a guess that the young prince would've broken something. Hinata, sitting on the wooden floor with his legs tucked under him, looks like he’s in deep thought about something. His eyebrows are furrowed, creating a crease between them, and the usual cheer in his honey brown eyes is replaced by a rare rumination. He’s biting his lower lip, and under better circumstances, Kageyama would have found that cute.

"So… this genocide," Hinata says with an unusual amount of carefulness. "Did it kill, like, everyone?"

"Er, a sizable amount, I guess?" Kageyama isn't sure. He never stopped to count his kills. He just… killed. "But it's not like everyone died, since we met some survivors in Seijoh."

"And that epidemic must have killed even more," Suga adds sadly.

"Talk about some timing," Noya mutters, aghast. "A genocide at the same time as an epidemic? That — that's fucking horrible."

Kageyama swallows thickly. He can't believe he's going to say this. He isn't a dishonest person by nature (when it came to big, important stuff anyway), but at the same time… he has had a reason for keeping it to himself. But now he can't anymore, not when he's faced with Hinata — the one he has kept this from. Since the higher-ups have apparently gone through so much trouble to prevent the truth of what happened in Operation KD from leaking out, there's no way Hinata would know what really happened to his parents. That makes this even harder. "Um, about the epidemic…"

Hinata instantly stiffens. "What about it?" His tone is sharper than a knife's edge.

"There…” Kageyama clenches his fists, if only to hide their shaking. "There was no epidemic. None at all."

Hinata's face goes as pale as death. "What — I don't understand. What do you mean there was no epidemic?! There had to be one!"
"But there was none," Kageyama snaps, and regrets it somewhat for the look of hurt and betrayal in Hinata's expression. "I was there during the entire thing. I would've heard if there really was an epidemic."

"I don't believe you!" Hinata shouts, shooting to his feet. Suga immediately snags him around his midriff before he can do something, like charge at Kageyama. (Not that he wouldn't deserve it, considering what he did.) "There was an epidemic! My parents died 'cause of it! That — that's what the higher-ups told me. Why would there not be an epidemic?" He says it like it's such a basic, universal truth, and that drives the metaphorical poisoned arrow even deeper through Kageyama's heart.

"There, Hinata," Suga murmurs, stroking Hinata's bright hair in a fittingly motherly fashion.

"Look, I don't mean to be that guy," Iwaizumi cuts in with a sigh. "That's what Emperor Kai publicly announced — that there was an epidemic at the same time as Operation KD — but what if he was lying? Think about it. Our kingdom launched what they said was a military operation in Kitagawa Daiichi, then suddenly a whole bunch of the civilian population was gone — that would have aroused suspicion, so maybe the former King and Queen forced Emperor Kai to attribute the sudden loss of population to an epidemic to cover up the mass killings? I don't know for sure, and I don't think we'll ever know, but it's something to consider."

Hinata’s entire frame collapses. "Then how — how did they die, then?" His voice is too brittle to sound demanding, and it rips Kageyama apart. "What happened to my parents, Kageyama?"

Kageyama really doesn't want to do this. Once upon a time, he wouldn't have minded being the bearer of bad news; it would've been his job, after all, and he followed all instructions to a T. But now… now he has something to lose. And it would very well be his own damn fault.

But then he sees the terrified but desperate look in Hinata's normally lively eyes. So he takes a deep breath, steeling himself up, and he continues with his story right where he left off.

Kageyama decided to stay put and wait for his unit to show up. To keep himself occupied, he tried coming up with various ways to justify the situation on the beach.

_May_____be they heard we were coming and fled. Or maybe stupid Kindaichi told Sakunami the wrong thing who then passed on the wrong info to me and so this is Kindaichi’s fault. Stupid Kindaichi, he mentally cursed. He swore the next time he saw the guy, he would absolutely wring his neck._

The hours crawled by. The sun had long risen above the horizon, but no fellow warriors showed up. Heck, not even enemy soldiers appeared. Kageyama was getting antsy. What on earth was keeping them?

_Maybe they got lost on their way here_, he reasoned to himself. That was a reasonable, if moronic, excuse.

Wait.

_"Kindaichi was one of the scouts and he knows the way there."_

That's what Sakunami had said. Surely Kindaichi couldn't have gotten lost, right…?
Be reasonable, he told himself firmly. Maybe the rest of his unit got attacked on their way to the beach. Even though he hadn't seen many soldiers in the streets, he had also left early, so by the time the rest of them woke up there were likely to be more soldiers roaming the streets. That made sense, he supposed.

Loud, heavy footsteps approached him from behind.

“About damn time,” Kageyama snapped, whirling around, only to see a sword pointed right at his nose.

“You're one of those dog warriors from that kingdom, aren't you?” a man, dressed in the Kitagawa Daiichi dark green soldier’s uniform, asked viciously. He was flanked by six other similarly dressed soldiers. “Come with us quietly, and we won't have to hurt you.”

“Yeah, how about no.” Kageyama didn't know where they had materialised from, but he didn't care enough to find out. He took a deep breath, a rush of tingling, electrifying power coursing through his body — but a sudden tornado of nausea slammed into him, knocking him flat on his ass. The tattoos on his forearms glowed but nothing happened. The earth didn't shake like he had become accustomed to expecting. Shit, of all times for his power to fuck up. Magical exhaustion was a bitch. The soldiers approached him, all with their menacing weapons drawn. Desperation shoved the nausea out of the way — he was about to get killed and his stupid powers refused to work.

Come on, work already! he demanded. But nothing happened. He wasn't the religious type, yet he found himself praying for a miracle — for his powers to kick in any time soon, or at least for some divine intervention.

Hurry the fuck up! I'm gonna fucking DIE!

The soldiers closed around him in a tight circle, and out of fear, he squeezed his eyes shut. His heart slammed and pounded like a sledgehammer against his ribcage, pumping useless blood that wasn't helping him activate his powers and holy fuck he was going to die.

And the intervention that, much to his shock, actually came wasn't divine, but it got the job done nonetheless. A small mass of fluffy reddish-orange hair barreled into the soldiers, the force from its breakneck speed slamming them down onto the sand. Like a whip, its limbs sent all the drawn weapons spiraling several feet away faster than Kageyama can blink.

“What are you doing on the ground, Kageyama?” the familiar voice that grated so frequently on his nerves asked, offering a hand to help him up.

Kageyama scowled. “Shut up, dumbass.” He brushed the proffered hand aside and pushed himself up from the ground. He surveyed his not-so divine intervention up and down. Hinata looked like he usually did, with his messy reddish-orange hair, lithe build and light peach skin, except instead of wearing the standard-issue deep blue warrior uniform, he was dressed in a black full-length bodysuit with a matching mask covering the lower half of his face. His attire would have been sufficiently stealthy, if his bright hair didn't negate the effect.

“Jeez, I save your ass, and this is how you treat me?” Hinata grumbled.

“I didn't need saving,” Kageyama asserted. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“After I heard you were being sent here, I couldn't lose to you. You already beat me once when you made Elite Squad and I didn't. Besides, someone has to make sure you don't die before we have our rematch, and I've done a pretty good job of that so far.”
Kageyama scowled again. He didn't want to admit that Hinata was right; he most likely would have died an embarrassing death if Hinata hadn't intervened. “That's a stupid reason. I shouldn't be surprised, since you're such a dumbass. How did you get here—”

Hinata held up a hand to silence him. “Talk later. The soldiers are getting up and regrouping.”

Kageyama peered over Hinata’s head — not a difficult task — and cursed when he found that Hinata was right. This time, they had reinforcements, though he had no clue where they could have come from.

“Stay out of my way.” Kageyama shoved Hinata behind him. He furrowed his eyebrows in concentration, satisfied when the energy pulsating in his tattoos led to the rupturing of the sandy ground beneath them. Chunks of earth hovered in the air, and with a flick of his wrist they hurtled towards their targets.

However, what happened next took him and everyone else by surprise.

Hinata, who was supposed to be behind Kageyama, darted forwards and lunged up onto the chunk of earth in front of him, which was easily five feet in the air. He sprightly bounded from mound to mound, using the levitating earth as leverage to get close to the soldiers. Faster than Kageyama could yell at him for being an idiot, Hinata slammed the butt of his sword into the head of one of the soldiers. Before the soldier could even crumple completely onto the ground, Hinata had darted to the next mound of earth and knocked out the next soldier. Soon, Hinata made short work of the fifteen soldiers that had them surrounded them, and all Kageyama could do was gape, stunned.

(Understanding lights up Daichi’s eyes. “Ah, so that's where the freak quick came from.”)

For once, the mention of Hinata and Kageyama’s combo attack doesn't excite Hinata; it doesn't make him bounce up and down, doesn't spur him into exuberantly narrating other instances that they've used the combo — a true testament to the tenseness he must be feeling. Guilt gnaws at Kageyama's conscience.)

Hinata, with surprising gracefulness, landed back on the ground in front of Kageyama. The visible half of his face was flushed with exertion, his chest panting and heaving. He cocks his head as he stares up at Kageyama. “Whatcha looking at me like that for, Bakageyama?”

Kageyama roughly seized the top of his head, eliciting a string of pained squeals from the smaller boy.

“What's your problem, jeez!?” Hinata demanded, squirming to release himself from Kageyama’s iron grip.

“How did — what did you — what on earth was that!?” Kageyama spluttered. He had known from their previous skirmish that Hinata was frighteningly nimble, more so than the average person — especially for his height; yet he hadn't known that he could jump quite so high and keep his balance when seven feet in the air on a small mound of earth. And much less dash from mound to mound like he was running on flat ground.

Hinata just shrugged, irking Kageyama even more. “Don't know. Just thought it was a good idea, so I just zoomed, y’know?”

“... Right.” Kageyama chose to ignore Hinata's odd choice of not-vocabulary. "Anyway, I was about to ask earlier: how the hell did you get here?”

“I'm small, so I can be pretty undetectable when I wanna be,” Hinata answered dismissively. "Also,
Kenma — my friend from Nekoma — told me about his friend from Fukurodani who could help me get a boat to here. The guy’s, er, really persuasive, so in no time I zinged across the ocean on the boat, and so here I am!"

“Okay, but why?”

“I already told you, it’s ‘cause you—”

Kageyama waved his hand, annoyed that Hinata wasn’t getting it. “No, not that. Your instructions were to stay in the kingdom, right? So why did you disobey your instructions and come here instead?”

Hinata stared at him like the answer was obvious. “‘Cause I wanted to?”

Kageyama blew out a long-suffering sigh from his nose and suppressed the urge to smack his forehead. “You went against your orders just to do something you wanted!?” The idea was completely unfathomable to him. “You could get punished for that!”

“I mean, yeah, way to state the obvious.” Hinata’s eyes were innocently puzzled — not that Kageyama could see anything to be confused about. “But I’m okay with that.”

Kageyama blinked. Someone was actually okay with punishment? He definitely couldn’t comprehend that. The word ‘punishment’ alone always sent uneasy shivers down his back, yet Hinata here was treating it like it was a trip to the park or something. What was up with him?

“I’m fine with it ‘cause I know what I’m doing here is worth the punishment,” Hinata continued chirpily. ”Also, most of the higher-ups like me, so whatever punishment they have for me can’t be that bad!”

Kageyama grumbled something under his breath. Of course people actually liked Hinata. He always forgot that, since that wasn’t something he experienced on a regular basis. He didn’t know that being liked could get someone what they wanted so easily; he always thought the scary, authoritarian people were the ones who got their way all the time, regardless of anything else, but now he found that he was beginning to see a new and different perspective.

That train of thought was too complicated, so he decided to contemplate something else. Up until three minutes ago, he’d been under the impression that his powers granted him the ability to fight on his own. After all, he had control over the very surface people walked on — why would he need anyone else’s assistance? He had no need for something as cumbersome as teamwork, up until now. Now, he could see the different ways his powers could be put to good use with Hinata by his side.

“Let’s do that again,” he ordered.

“The thing where I run super fast and jump on the chunks of earth you whoosh up?” Hinata asked excitedly, bouncing up and down as if to demonstrate.

Kageyama really needed to get use to Hinata’s… unique vocabulary. “Yeah. Hurry up, dumbass.”

“Rude.” Still, Hinata positioned himself, ready for takeoff.

Kageyama swept his hand in an arc, and large chunks of rock and ground rose in the air. Hinata took off with the speed and agility of a wild bird. His feet barely landed on a mound before he was on the next one, then the next, and then the next. It was truly amazing, witnessing the speed and agility Hinata moved seamlessly with, Kageyama had to admit.
Hinata trotted back to Kageyama, who was staring in awe at him.

“That's… wow. I didn't — I had no clue we could fight like that,” he murmured.

Hinata laughed. “What, you thought you had to fight alone? Nah, people fight best when they have someone with them! Like a friend or a partner!”

Normally, Kageyama would have begged to differ; but he couldn't after what had just transpired between the two of them. Using his powers for Hinata didn't drain him as much as fighting alone did, and a weight in his chest that had been weighing on him the past few days somehow felt lighter now. The entire worldview he had spent his whole life constructing was crumbling before him, and it was many kinds of disorienting. Deciding not to dwell on that anymore, he turned to Hinata.

“So, where do you plan to camp out?” he asked, trying not to sound like he cared all that much. Because he didn't. He was just curious. That was all. “It's not like I can bring you back to the base, since you, y’know, snuck in and everything.”

“I'll camp out here tonight!” Hinata proclaimed. “But I’ll come by to check on you every now and then. During the day when you're out, I’ll tail you, then at night I’ll just hide wherever I can find. Don't worry about me!”

Kageyama growled, “Don't act like I care about you, idiot! I was just asking.”

“Wow, rude.”

For the rest of the day until dusk, they stayed together on the beach, practising their new combo attack. Kageyama had the vague idea that if his superior officers caught him slacking off on the beach instead of out there battling, he’d be in so much hot water. Strangely, maybe due to Hinata’s influence, he found that he couldn't care less. In fact, he preferred it here with Hinata, even if his insistent use of onomatopoeia was starting to get on his nerves.

The sun was slowly dipping beneath the horizon when Hinata said, “So, maybe it's a good idea for you to get back to your base? Before your unit gets suspicious.”

Kageyama nodded. He got up and brushed himself off. He turned to take several steps away from Hinata, but something close to his heart tugged him to turn back around. “Oi dumbass, if you die out here, I’ll wrench you out from the afterlife and kill you myself, got that?”

Hinata rolled his eyes. “Yeah, whatever, Grumpyama.”

That was as good an agreement as Kageyama figured he would get, so without looking back he returned to the streets that had misled him to that beach.

The trek back to the base was unnaturally quiet, so of course he had to bump into something he really wished he hadn't seen.

When he heard the colonel’s cold, commanding timbre, Kageyama instinctively flattened himself against a nearby wall, trying his best to blend in with the shadows. The colonel’s presence never meant anything good.
“Kill them.”

“What — wait, why? Aren't they our medics?” a higher voice asked, perplexed.

Kageyama risked a peek. He saw the colonel and two fellow warriors — Haiba Lev and Inuoka Sou from the Nekoma branch, he believed — in front of him. Their weapons were drawn, but he could tell even from a distance that their swords were trembling in their hands. In front of them, two medics — a man and a woman — were on their knees, with their hands bound behind their backs. Squinting, a jolt crashed through him when he realised he recognised the man. The redheaded man was the doctor who had taken care of him when he had been poisoned by that damn arrow. Kageyama was starting to get the faintest inklings of why he would recognise him, yet he couldn't quite place his finger on it. Next to the doctor, a dark-haired woman also dressed in light teal doctor scrubs wore a defiant expression, as if wanting to face her imminent death with dignity. That stubbornness was familiar too, but Kageyama, in his fear-ridden state, couldn't label it.

“No, they are traitors.” The colonel's voice was devoid of any emotion. There was only the clinical undercurrents of an order that must be issued. “They were under strict orders to take care of our warriors, and only our warriors, yet they had the insubordination to try and heal the local civilians here too.”

“What you're doing here is disgusting,” the woman snarled. “It is inhumane. You're slaughtering innocent people, and you're forcing *children* to do all the dirty work for you. Without all due respect, go and rot in hell.”

The colonel kicked the back of her head, and the redheaded man yelled a furious curse. “Shut up. Traitors have no right to speak.”

Inuoka and Lev were watching the ground, like they couldn't bear to see what was unfolding before them. If it weren't for fear of the colonel, Kageyama guessed they would have dropped their swords by now.

“Colonel, sir, we are medics,” the man pleaded. “Our job is to heal. To us, an injured person is an injured person, regardless of whether they’re one of our warriors or the ‘enemy’ s’ civilians. Please try to understand that.”

“I have had enough of this foolish talk. Haiba, Inuoka, eliminate them at once.”

Lev’s lower lip trembled. “But, sir—”

“Haiba Lev,” the colonel enunciated with hard and cold clarity. "Your older sister Alisa is engaged, isn't she? And their wedding is in just three months’ time, if I remember correctly. It would be terrible if, say, the detail of warriors I had assigned to watch her and her fiance were to kill them in their sleep. The night before their wedding would be a tragic time for it to occur, surely you agree?”

Lev, in all his 194 cm glory, seemed to shrink with each word of the thinly veiled threat, until he was just a shell of his former looming self. Yet his sword was still clutched tightly in his hands, like he couldn't defy orders and let go. Something about that felt like it reflected something in Kageyama, he uncomfortably realised.

“And Inuoka, I believe your mother is pregnant with twins. You must be looking forward to having two baby sisters to play with and take care of. You wouldn't want your mother to have a deadly miscarriage by some freak accident and lose three beloved members of your family, would you?”

Inuoka’s head hung even lower. He was just barely fighting back tears, but just like Lev, it's like he
couldn't let go of his weapon, regardless of whatever was going through his mind.

“I think you two know what I'm getting at,” the colonel said, folding his arms expectantly. "So just do as you’re told, now. No more delays."

As if she could sense the boys’ fear and hesitation, the woman said, “Just do it, sweethearts. My husband and I have lived fulfilling lives. My only wish is that we could’ve at least gotten to say goodbye to our children, but—" She sighs, short and tragic. "—sometimes unexpected circumstances occur.”

“Listen to her,” her husband added. “We won't blame you for what happens next. It was our honour to be able to serve you. I suppose this is goodbye, but we’ll see you again in paradise, I’m sure.”

“Now!” the colonel barked, the first glimmer of anger showing itself.

Kageyama must be a monster, because he watched, paralysed, as Inuoka and Lev sank their swords into the backs of the medics who he only realised later were Hinata’s parents. His gaze lingered as their lifeless, bleeding bodies flopped onto the ground. He didn't move when the enormous Lev crumbled to his knees, sobbing in grief, and when Inuoka collapsed on top of Lev’s back, crying into the space between his shoulder blades.

The colonel just walked away. He didn't even bother saying anything to the grieving and traumatised teenagers.

“I… I killed Shouyou’s mother,” Inuoka gasped between sobs.

“Hinata…” Lev cried brokenly. "I'm so sorry! Fuck, he's never gonna forgive me…”

All alone, they wept for the couple they killed. Kageyama's heartbeat roared in his ears, but for the life of him he couldn't move. He could only stand there in horror, frozen. The grotesque truth of why he was deployed here finally hit him in the face like a rude, traumatising awakening, and it made him want to — he didn't know which he wanted to do first: cry, vomit, or flee back home, where he didn't have to fucking do this anymore.

It felt like tens of thousands of hours passed before Kageyama was finally able to extricate himself from the wall. He pivoted on his heel, running in the opposite direction. It was the long way back to base, but at least he wouldn't have to see the dead bodies of the two medics and the broken children grieving their kill.

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Hinata can't stop crying. His face is buried in his knees, and Kageyama can see the tears forming a small puddle under his raised thighs. Sugawara and Nishinoya have wrapped themselves around the small, heartbroken boy in a futile attempt to console him. Oikawa’s stony demeanour has finally cracked to let a lone tear slide down his face and spill on Iwaizumi’s chest.

Kageyama flinches when a warm weight presses against his hand. He looks up and sees Daichi watching Hinata, his eyes firm.

“Are you okay?” Daichi asks him quietly.

“Why are you worried about me?” Kageyama chokes out, a sob rising up his own throat. But he
doesn't let it out, because he does not deserve that kind of catharsis. “I was the one responsible for his parents’ deaths. You should be more concerned about him.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I just — I just watched as they killed them. I could have saved them. I was there — I could have killed the colonel, which would’ve spared Lev and Inuoka from having to—” And Kageyama can't go on. The raw, torturous guilt is flaying him alive, and it hurts worse than any poisoned arrow, yet a masochistic part of him tells him, You deserve this. You're a monster, and monsters deserve to suffer. What's the point of having all your fancy powers if you couldn't be bothered to use them to save Hinata’s parents? Monster, monster, monster.

Daichi pulls Kageyama into an embrace he's certain he needs but doesn't deserve. Nevertheless, he lets himself dissolve in Daichi’s arms, trembling and muffling his cries in the soft cotton of Daichi’s shirt.

It hurts. Everything hurts. The memory of Hinata’s murdered parents that continues to haunt him. All the deaths he caused with his own hands. How he stood by and killed, and let killing occur. Seeing Hinata — cheerful, energetic, beautiful Hinata — so shattered, like glass. It all tore him apart, ripped him to shreds with its arrow-sharp vicious fangs. And he deserves it. He deserves every bit of suffering he gets for every bit of suffering he has ever caused.

An eternity of blinding, suffocating pain passes before Hinata lifts his head from Nishinoya’s small chest. He says, in the tiniest voice Kageyama has ever heard, “Was — is there more? I want to hear it. I want to hear the whole story, Kageyama. You never explained why you returned to the beach that night, or why you kissed me.”

“Shouyou, are you sure?” Nishinoya asks, concern imprinted in his normally loud and brazen voice. “Maybe we should call it a night—”

“No, Noya-san,” Hinata insists. "I wanna hear it. Please?"

Kageyama can never say no to Hinata. He gently pushes himself away from Daichi’s warmth.

“Well, after that…”

Kageyama was completely devoid of any feeling when he returned to the base. The world became a desaturated greyscale version of what it once had been. Every sound was just a faint white noise he couldn't be bothered to really register beyond, Oh, that's a sound. He was numb and hollow, now that the horror of what he had witnessed had dissipated somewhat. Or maybe it was denial. Who the hell knew?

The emptiness was soon replaced by rage when he saw Kindaichi and Sakunami. Furiously, he marched up to them. Without any warning, he seized the front of Kindaichi’s shirt and slammed him down onto the table. Shouts from his teammates chorused in the air, but he's focused only on the guy under him.

“The fuck do you want this time?” Kindaichi snapped.

“Where were you guys?!” Kageyama seethed, his spittle flying into Kindaichi’s face.
“Er, fighting?! Like, doing our jobs without putting our teammates at risk?”

Kageyama glared at him, not in the least bit pleased at the passive-aggressive jab.

“Sakunami said you told him to tell me to go to some beachy area ‘cause apparently there was some enemy stronghold we needed to infiltrate. Imagine my surprise when I saw nothing there, and you guys didn’t show up at all.” He shook Kindaichi, taking in vicious satisfaction from the way he winced with each shake.

“Kageyama-kun, let him go. It was me,” Sakunami confessed. “It was my idea.”

Kageyama rounded on him. “You what now?!"

“It was my idea to ditch you on an empty part of the island away from possible fighting, alright? We lost communication with the main base back home, so we couldn’t send you back even though Kindaichi-kun was all for that idea.”

“But… why?” Betrayal seeped into his bones, making his chest tighten painfully with each breath he inhaled.

Sakunami sighed wearily. “I didn’t want to do it, but what choice did I have? You refused to work with the team. You endangered us, even when you could have covered us. You are a danger and a liability to this unit, Kageyama-kun, so I figured that we would be better off without you.”

“And we are,” Kindaichi interjected. “Without you around, I was a lot less terrified that I was gonna be swallowed whole by the ground at any moment. For the first time since this operation began, I hadn’t got a headache from a mission.”

Kageyama stumbled back. He was at a loss for words. Yes, he thought he should be grateful. It was what he wanted, after all.

So why did it sting so much? Why did it hurt him so much to turn around, expecting to see his teammates fighting behind him, only to find that they weren’t with him?

Why did it hurt so much to be alone, when that's all he had ever wanted? He truly was a contradictory creature.

_Hinata wouldn't treat me like this._

That realisation was what spurred him to action. He whirled around, snatched up his things and headed for the door. He wasn't going to hang around and deal with this crap anymore. He was done, over and out.

“Kageyama-kun! Where are you going?” Sakunami asked worriedly. Yeah right, like he actually cared.
“You don't want me around anymore, fine,” Kageyama snapped. "I'm going. I'm getting the hell out of here."

Then, without so much as a 'by your leave', he stormed out of the makeshift stronghold. He barely heard what his former teammates yelled at him.

He let his feet take him where they wanted, which was how he found himself bypassing the fights that were occurring in the streets and back at the beach he and Hinata had been training at.

To his relief, he found Hinata where he had left him, curled up on the sand and watching the sunset. The warm rays from the descending sun lit up Hinata's red hair like a fiery halo. It wasn't an unpleasant look. In fact, Kageyama might go so far as to say it even suited him. Of course it did.

“You're back early,” Hinata greeted. He got up and turned around to face Kageyama. “What, did you get lonely without me?”

That guess hit too close for comfort. Kageyama didn't say anything, just tossed his things onto the ground and stood beside Hinata. He ignored the distant shouts and screams of the battles waging a ways from the beach. Instead, he focused on the boy next to him — the gentle, steady sounds of his rhythmic breathing, the way his fidgeting feet traced arbitrary symbols in the sand, the intensity with which those brown eyes carefully examined him.

“Do you ever feel lonely?” Kageyama blurted out before his brain-to-mouth filter could stop him.

Hinata tilted his head, as if contemplating his question. “Hmm, I suppose I did feel a bit lonely just hanging around the beach, waiting for tomorrow to come so I can fight with you again.”

“What about in general?” Kageyama pressed. Since it's already out, he might as well go all the way, right?

“Er… not really? I have many friends! Like Kenma, Kuroo-san, Inuoka, Lev, Izumi — he's an old friend from my neighbourhood. Man, I remember when I forced him to set for me 'cause I really wanted to play volleyball but had no one to play with. Mm, and I have my grandparents and Natsu, too! And even when I’m by myself, I know I'm not really alone 'cause of all those people who love me. I know they're somewhere out there, caring about me, so I don't feel lonely.”

Kageyama knew, in theory, that other people experienced love in many forms all around them. He saw it everyday, everywhere. In the streets, he saw couples who held hands and shared kisses when they thought no one was looking. In the Academy, he saw friendships blossom within his unit; some of them even made friends outside the unit. On his way back home after a long day of training, he sometimes would see his neighbours throwing a birthday party for one of their young children.

But he couldn't exactly relate. He didn't understand how people just… connected and loved so easily. Did they have no inhibitions, no fears? Or did they have them, but cast them aside in order to trust the other? Once upon a time, he couldn't fathom the idea of letting his guard down like that to let another person in. It was too open, too vulnerable.

But, watching the sunlit boy in front of him, he believed he could now. He didn't understand this feeling, the warmth that started from who-knows-where and ended somewhere in his chest, close to his heart. Was this what trust was? Perhaps it was. It was a risk, that he knew, yet he couldn't help but feel that Hinata was worth the risk.

“Er, Kageyama, you okay?” Hinata experimentally prodded Kageyama's chest. "You've been spacing out, and you have this really creepy look on your face — mmph!”
In one swift motion, Kageyama grabbed Hinata by the shoulders and roughly pinned him against a nearby tree, smashing his lips to his. Hinata let out a surprised squeak and squirmed a little, but he made no move to shove Kageyama away.

Just as quickly, Kageyama broke away. His hand flew to his mouth, only belatedly realising what he had just done. Hinata gapes at him. His cheeks were flushed red, his eyes wide with shock.

“I, er — that was a bit forward, stupid Kageyama,” Hinata stammered. He turned his gaze to the sand and refused to meet Kageyama’s eyes.

“Well, uh.” Kageyama rubbed the back of his neck. That was a bad idea. What if Hinata hated him now? What if he abandoned him, just like his unit had? Seriously, he shouldn't be let near another person even with a sixty-feet long pole. “Just shut up, dumbass.”

“You kissed me, and now you’re telling me to shut up?”

“Yeah, I am. It’s been a long day. Just shut up. You're annoying.”

Hinata stuck his tongue out. “Meanie.”

Still, he stayed.

As it turned out, the morning after Hinata arrived on the island, the emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi surrendered to the kingdom. A part of Kageyama found it anticlimactic, but most of him was glad that it was just over. While the king and queen of the kingdom and the emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi were busy negotiating an agreement, there was a ceasefire. Hinata and Kageyama used that time to continue practising their attack.

Once the agreement was signed, the warriors returned back to their kingdom. Kageyama reluctantly returned back to his unit, and Hinata left to find his own way back to the kingdom. On the ship back, he was given a weird blue concoction to drink, which supposedly was to speed up his body’s healing. Or something. Whatever it was, it gave him a splitting headache for the next few days. When he woke up one morning, he discovered that somehow, his memories of Operation KD were strangely blurry when he tried to think about it. The only things he could recall were the general feeling of killing a lot of people and Hinata’s presence. Still, he figured there was nothing good in those foggy memories, so it's probably for the best.

Kageyama doesn't share this part with the rest of his new team since he didn't see the need to: after Operation KD, he didn't get to spend as much time with Hinata as he would have liked to. They wanted to continue practising their combo attack, but things happened — after a two-month suspension for his stunt, Hinata’s application to be a royal guard was (somehow) accepted. What kind of charisma did that guy have? And at the same time, Kageyama was notified that he would be transferred to the Aoba Johsai branch to be mentored by Iwaizumi Hajime, not that he told Hinata. He didn't see any need — they would be going their separate ways; it was highly unlikely they would see each other again, so why bother?

Hence they parted ways.

Yet, fate had a funny way of reuniting people.
Kageyama watches Hinata sniffle brokenly in the protective cocoon of Nishinoya and Sugawara. And fate also had a funny, cruel way of punishing people.

He takes a deep breath, pushing down the wriggling pain in his chest. “So, um, that's it.” He glances up to gauge Oikawa’s reaction, only to see that his unusually stoic reaction remains pretty much in place. “Oikawa-san? Are you okay?”

Oikawa clears his throat and speaks for the first time since Kageyama woke up. “I see. Thank you for informing me about this, Tobio-chan.”

His calm, almost nonchalant reaction unnerves Kageyama even more than when he’s sneering and angry. He wishes that Oikawa would throw something at him and yell at him about how he must be lying. He was prepared to argue with the older warrior, to prove that he was correct, except the words on his tongue died with Oikawa’s cool, composed acceptance.

“That… that's it?” Kageyama blurts out, unable to comprehend Oikawa’s response.

Oikawa raises his eyebrows condescendingly. “What, did you want me to wax poetic about your storytelling skills or something?”

“What?! No, but I just… I thought you'd have a different reaction, that's all. Like, uh, maybe more shocked? Or something. I don't know.”

“Hmph. Whatever reaction I had wouldn't change your story, would it?” Oikawa dismisses.

Kageyama frowns. “Well, no…”

“Yeah, see? So why would I react any differently, Tobio-chan?”

“But that's not all, is it?” Daichi interjects. He removes his hand from covering Kageyama’s, and he folds his arms across his chest in what Kageyama recognises as his ‘displeased dad’ stance.

“I'm afraid we’re not on the same page, Dai-chan. Care to elaborate?” Oikawa challenges.

All eyes turn to Daichi, anticipating with frayed nerves for what he has to say. What else did their captain have to add to Kageyama’s nightmarish rollercoaster of a story? What did he notice that Kageyama missed?

“You didn't react the way Kageyama expected because you knew the truth all along, didn't you?”

Chapter End Notes

on my tumblr, a kind anon asked me if I had already more or less finished writing this fic, so I thought I'd share my answer here ICYMI: yes, all 28 chapters are done, completed and almost ready to go! I'm just taking my time to edit and upload them because school and life gets in the way — you know how it is. but rest easy, this fic won’t suddenly go dormant for 50 years without an update. in fact, I project that this fic should be concluded by either January or February 2019 latest.

if you're reading with tissues, keep them, because the next chapter is literally titled 'the breakup'. yeaah. but I promise things will look up, er, eventually.
that's all! thank you for continuing to entertain this random brain-child of mine!

if you have any questions or feedback regarding this story, please drop them in a comment here or you can totally drop by my tumblr, like the kind anon did ;)

the breakup

and so, in spite of my cold I UPLOADED THIS *pats myself on the back*. and I’d like to say: I’M SORRY. not for having a cold. for the ending. yeah.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the captain of the Blue Crows, Daichi has taken it upon himself to familiarise himself with each and every one of his teammates’ quirks and behaviour patterns. He can tell when Nishinoya is upset from the sloppier-than-usual way his hair is spiked up. Granted, of course, Noya isn’t exactly a closed book to read. Same goes for Hinata, who wears his heart on his sleeve. He has known Suga ever since they were children, so he was already closely acquainted with almost all of his habits and idiosyncrasies. Even though Iwaizumi and Kageyama weren’t part of his original posse, he is confident that he can at least predict their reactions to the other members of the crew and what they would eat for breakfast.

That’s why he’s able to identify that Oikawa isn’t being entirely truthful in his response to Kageyama’s story. While he technically isn’t lying, he also isn’t disclosing the whole truth, and Daichi could smell that from miles away.

“You didn't react the way Kageyama expected because you knew the truth all along, didn't you?” he declares with confidence.

Oikawa’s slight flinch is all the proof he needs to know he has hit the mark bulls-eye.

“I knew it,” Iwaizumi mutters, eyeing Oikawa out of the corner of his eye. “I was wondering why you were acting all fishy.”

Oikawa belts out a short series of dry laughs. “I can't get anything past the two of you, huh? Well, I guess the cat's out of the bag now. Dai-chan, you're right — I did know all along.”

“How?” Noya asks, confused. “And why didn't you say anything if you already knew?”

“Noya-chan, if you were told point-blank that you were responsible for the loss of hundreds of lives, would you advertise that fact to your friends?”

Noya’s immediate recoil makes it clear that his answer is no.

“See?” Oikawa chuckles bitterly, self-deprecatingly. "When I was kidnapped back in Seijoh, that Kai Tou bastard told me the whole sordid tale, which led to the memories flooding back all at once. Turns out his daughter was a twelve-year-old girl who wanted to be a doctor when she grew up. Except I apparently burned her to death before she could make her dreams a reality. Obviously, I didn't want to believe him at first, even though my memories were agreeing with him. Me? Kill an innocent little girl in cold blood? Impossible; not even if you threatened my life would I do that.”

“Except it wasn't your life that was threatened,” Iwaizumi says quietly. His eyes are downcast.

Oikawa’s impassive expression gives way to something more sorrowful, akin to a bullied puppy. “Iwa-chan—”
Suga places a hand on Oikawa’s shoulder, in an attempt to console. “It wasn’t your fault. Your boyfriend was threatened.”

“I know that, Suga-chan!” Oikawa shouts, tearing up. “Of course I wasn’t going to let my Iwa-chan die! That’s why I feel like such a rotten monster — I know that even though what I did was horrible, if I could go back in time I would still do it, ‘cause I don’t want to lose Iwa-chan. It’s selfish of me, I know. What gives me the right to decide whose life is more important than others? But at the end of the day…” His voice breaks. "We’re all self-serving, aren’t we? We’d all choose to save one person we know over hundreds we don’t. And I’d still choose Iwa-chan over all those Kitagawa Daiichi people, even if that means I’d suffer an eternity of damnation for what I did.”

Iwaizumi ducks his head. “Please just — just shut up, Trashykawa. Don’t do yourself like that.”

A silence befalls the group, punctured only by Hinata’s occasional sniffles. Daichi uses the quiet to ruminate on Oikawa’s words. Maybe it’s horrible of him to think like this, but he’s glad he didn’t apply to join the Elite Squad and instead left for the palace. Who would the higher-ups use to force him to bend to their will?

A rock seems to sink down into his stomach when his gaze falls on the silver-haired beauty next to Hinata.

Suga…

Daichi would do anything — and by anything, he means absolutely anything — to keep Suga safe and sound. He would take on armies on his own, he would traverse the seven seas, he would even let Suga have the last potato crisp. And he loves his potato crisps. He’s terrified of this train of thought; he’s terrified of the fact that he would probably be willing to sacrifice hundreds, thousands of lives just to keep that one person safe.

The idea that someone would dare to use people’s love against them sickens him to the core. His love for and with Suga is amazing and everything he has ever wanted; the thought that a cold, faceless colonel could easily sully that boils his blood to volcanic temperatures.

“Why?” Hinata whimpers, and all heads whip to him. “Why would anyone want innocent people to die? Why would the king and queen want that?”

“Look, Shouyou,” Noya says, his voice uncharacteristically soft, “the thing you should know about my parents is that my father was a proud, cruelly pragmatic man, and my mother was too much of a doormat to disagree with him. He — he probably thought that dealing with just the military wasn’t enough to get rid of the threat, ‘cause the emperor could always just get civilians to join the army, I guess. So by ordering — by killing the civilians, I guess he would be stamping out that threat.”

“That… that’s quite a stretch,” Suga murmurs, aghast.

“I know, but that’s just the way he is.” Noya's eyebrows frown, as though another thought has occurred to him. "Another thing is that — if I know anything about him — it’s that my father’s pride was also probably insulted. Kitagawa Daiichi was this… this tiny island of a country with a tiny military. He probably the emperor was mocking him by trying to threaten our kingdom, which was why he got the warriors to slaughter the civilians as revenge. And to, er, assert his dominance or some shit like that.”

“So… so all this was the king’s fault?” Hinata asks. No — ‘ask’ is the wrong word. There is a thinly-veiled undercurrent of rage under his voice, making his question too sharp for ‘ask’. But at the same time, his voice is too fragile for him to sound like he's demanding. "My parents were murdered
'cause the king was too arrogant, is that what you're saying?'

Noya flinches like he was slapped. “Um, well, my mother also had a part to play. She could’ve said something — she does have some power in the decision-making — but she didn't. Like I said, she was a doormat. She too was responsible for all the deaths. Shouyou, I can't — I’m sorry for what my parents did. My parents killed your parents. I… I understand if you hate me.”

Hinata shakes his head vehemently. “No! No, Noya-san, I don't hate you! I can't hate someone I like so much!”

“But why not? You're sad now ‘cause of what my parents did. You should blame me,” the prince, humbling himself down to an ordinary district boy, argues forcefully, but also sadly.

More insistent head-shaking. “I won't, Noya-san. I blame your parents, not you. What your parents did isn't your fault.”

“Hinata is right,” Daichi adds. “You are not your parents, Noya. You are your own person. You don't bear their sins; it’s not your responsibility.”

“But… but the amends!” Noya protests, tears threatening to spill and this night has been one hell of a ride and Daichi desperately needs a drink. "What am I making amends for if none of this is my fault?"

“Maybe this is why,” Oikawa says. His eyes are bloodshot from crying. “Maybe whoever told you to ‘make amends’ wanted you to see the imperfections of your parents’ rule and try to fix whatever you can. Just ‘cause their sins aren't your fault doesn't mean that you can just ignore the problems they caused. You're the prince — you have a responsibility to the kingdom, even if your ass isn't on the grand throne. The deaths — those are on them, but the well-being of the kingdom is on you and your sister — do you see the difference?”

“Way to make things sound more complicated than they have to be, Tooru,” Noya mutters. “But… I guess I do get what you're saying.”

For the first time that night, Oikawa cracks a smile. A sad, watery smile, but it's still a smile. “Well, as long as you understand.”

Daichi gets the feeling that if things were to continue like this, there might be more waterworks. It’s nearly one in the morning; if they cry and talk anymore, none of them would be able to sleep. Hence, he stands up and whisks them to bed. Although none of them seem particularly partial to the idea of catching some z’s, they nevertheless listen to him. In a matter of minutes, everyone is tucked under their futons, their eyes closed and lights out.

Daichi manages to get what he guesses is an hour of shut-eye and a dream with a hell lot of crying in it, before the sound of soft sobbing emanating from somewhere behind him wakes him up. Groaning, he rubs his eyes and pushes himself up into a sitting position.

Oh, for crying out loud, what now? he grumbles to himself, feeling remarkably like a father awoken by the sound of his baby crying. Now, that's a weird comparison for him to make. He really needs a break sometimes.

Well, it wasn't like he could sleep much after the metaphorical bomb Kageyama just dropped on him, so he might as well investigate the source of the sobbing.

He rolls out from under his blankets and rises to his feet. Pushing open the door behind his futon, he finds the young prince leaning against the railing of the balcony, crying into his forearms. A vice
wraps itself around Daichi’s heart, squeezing until it hurts to breathe.

“Noya?” he calls softly. “What's wrong?”

Noya startles. He hastily rubs the back of his hand across his face before turning to face Daichi. “Uh, hi! You're up early!”

Daichi arches an eyebrow. “So are you. Please answer my earlier question, Noya.”

“Look, I… I didn't want to cry in front of Shouyou and Kageyama,” Noya mutters sheepishly. "You saw how crushed Shouyou was, not to mention the look of guilt on Kageyama’s face. And Tooru and his Iwa-chan were getting all sniffly too. It would just make things worse if I broke down too.”

Hearing him say that only hurts Daichi even more. He almost prefers the time when Nishinoya wore his heart on his sleeve and openly snapped at everyone when he was upset. His hiding his feelings is proof of how much he has been forced to grow up ever since fleeing the palace. Daichi has never wanted this for him. All he wants is for the prince to be safe and happy.

“Daichi-san?”

Daichi frowns. Noya almost never addresses him with the honourific unless he thinks he's in trouble or he's pleading him for help. “Yeah?”

Nishinoya nibbles on his lower lip. “Do you think — how much do you think being a shitty person is genetic?”

The question is certainly nothing Daichi was suspecting. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Like, my parents. They… they weren't good people, not by a long shot. My father was a bully. My mother was apathetic. They created me. I have my mother’s build and eyes, and my father’s hair and face shape. But, what if my looks aren’t the only things they passed on to me? What if I inherited their terrible personalities too? Daichi, I’m scared — no, I'm fucking terrified — that I’m gonna end up like my parents. What if one day when we’re fighting bandits or something and I just decide that killing them would be easier, and so I go and murder them? Wouldn't that make murdering easier and easier, so every time I’m caught in a bad situation I just resort to killing like my father did?”

Noya pretty much never over-thinks — that's his sister's thing. But for him to say all that… he must have given this a whole lot of thought, more so than the usual.

Daichi reaches out and firmly wraps his arms around the trembling prince. He remembers whenever Noya gets upset, the princess and Asahi would stroke his hair to calm him down, so that's what he does. The action seems to ease some of the tension in Noya’s shoulders.

“You’re an honest guy, Daichi,” Nishinoya says, but it comes out sounding like a plea. "You can be honest with me. Just tell me I'm a bad person. I can't — it's not like I can do anything about it — it's in my genes, isn't it?”

Daichi shakes his head firmly. “I can't. Like you said, I'm an honest guy.”

Noya presses his cheek harder against Daichi’s chest. “Why? If my parents are bad, it makes sense that I'm bad too. I mean, they raised me and everything. Why then do you trust me so much? I know I don't.”

“Noya, the fact that you're scared of becoming like your parents is enough proof that you're not bad. You're self-aware, and you know the boundaries between good and bad. You know that mindless,
unnecessary killing is bad. Those are good first steps to becoming a not shitty person. Why are you here, Noya?"

"Huh? I didn't want my crying to wake the others, so I came out here—"

"No, that's not what I meant," Daichi clarifies sheepishly. "Sorry, I should have been clearer. What I meant was — why are you here in Johzenji? Why are you on this journey in the first place? And don't say it's just because the assassins told you, 'cause I know that's not all there is to it."

"'Cause I wanna help the citizens," Noya replies. "I want to know what it is about living in this kingdom that makes them unhappy and try to fix it. Or at least—" His voice falters. "—that's what I want. So far, I've only been able to achieve the first part."

“And that's still good progress. See, your intentions are good.”

“My parents technically had good intentions too,” Noya admits grudgingly. “I mean, I still hate his guts, but my father did all — all that to keep this kingdom safe, even if it was to inflate his own ego too. As much as I don't wanna admit it… I suppose he did have the kingdom’s best interests at heart.”

“He did, but just having good intentions doesn't automatically someone a good person,” Daichi says. "He went about things the wrong way. I'm not saying he was a completely bad person, because he still had good intentions. But I'm not saying he was a completely good person either, because he did some really terrible things too."

“You, on the other hand, are not bad by any definition of the word. You're not hurting anyone with what you're doing, and you have the same good intentions as your parents did. That's what makes you good, Noya.”

Noya pulls away from Daichi’s chest to wipe his eyes. “One hell of a speech, captain, that was one hell of a speech. You could afford to cut down on the cheese a little, though. And ugh, I got snot on your shirt. Sorry.”

Daichi smiles, petting Noya’s un-spiked hair. “It’s alright. Besides, if you're so worried about evil being genetic, why don't you take a look at your sister? She isn't someone I would describe as bad.”

“I wouldn't either. She's brilliant!” Noya exclaims.

It warms Daichi’s heart to see that Noya still adores his sister as much as he did when he was still living in the palace. Distance really doesn't change one’s capacity for love.

“See, Noya-chan?” a new voice chimes in. "This nature-versus-nurture debate is bullshit — you get to choose who you want to be and what you want to do.”

Both Daichi and Nishinoya whirl around to find Oikawa leaning against the door frame. His normally carefully-styled hair is ruffled from sleep, and his eyes are still rimmed with redness.

“Toro? The hell are you doing awake?” Nishinoya demands.

“Couldn't sleep, just like you two chirpy birds." Oikawa yawns, but Daichi is 100% positive it's faked. "Look, Noya-chan, do you know why I became your royal guard in the first place?"

Noya shakes his head, seeming mystified by the sudden change in topic.

“Even before Operation KD — well, there was just something about the lovely king and queen that
just didn't sit right with me. My gut told me not to trust them, and I trust my gut. Later, I realised why: it's because their eyes were so cold, almost soulless, in photos in the newspapers, and it wasn't because of awkward angling or shitty lighting. It alarmed me. I knew they had two children, a princess and a prince, and it scared me to think of how parents like that would raise their kid. That's why I joined the royal guards after Operation KD, to see for myself what the hell's going on. Then I saw your argument with your father and the way he talked down to you, and the way your mother just let it happen. It pissed me off, so I requested specifically be to in your squad, 'cause I wanted to protect you as much as I could from him.”

The wetness on Noya’s face glimmer brightly under the glow of the overhead lights. He rubs his face with the back of his hand as he grumbles, “That’s so — shut up, that's so cheesy, you little shit.”

“For the record, I'm almost a foot taller than you, so 'little' isn't an apt insult,” Oikawa sniffs. “After hearing Dai-chan’s spiel about being a good person, I’ve decided — no longer will I take ridiculous, unreasonable orders from someone I don't trust. I'll find a way to protect the ones I love and the people I don't know. That's why I will continue to follow you, Noya-chan, whether you like it or not, 'cause I trust you.”

Daichi’s smile widens. Although the two incessantly snipe at each other, he has always known deep down that they care for each other dearly. It is a strange relationship, he has to admit — they're constantly swinging between being the other’s most vitriolic enemy to their loudest cheerleader. Still, a relationship built on mutual love and respect is one worth keeping, no matter the tiny stones they like to throw at each other.

“Looks like I can't say no, then,” Noya says, furiously rubbing his eyes.

“For the record, it's not 'cause you don't give ridiculous, unreasonable orders. You do.”

“Telling you to shut your face isn't that ridiculous and unreasonable!”

Daichi watches the familiar banter between the both of them. He notes that despite the grin on Noya’s tear-stained face, it looks strained. Even his laughs still sound a little muted — and lost, like they're trying to find someone who isn't present.

It’s ‘cause he isn't around, he realises. Asahi always knew how best to make Noya feel better. He was Noya’s rock, his foundation from which he can take off from, run amok then return in search of safety.

But now that he's no longer with them, it's no wonder that Noya must feel so lost and confused, despite the brave front he's put on and the playful, challenging smirks he tosses to Oikawa.

*We need him. We need to get our Ace back.*
nice.

The entire time waiting for the boys to make their appearance at the inn restaurant, her nerves are set on edge. Even if they seem nice, she’s terrified of saying the wrong thing and offending them. Some of them appear to be warriors; they can easily overpower her without breaking a sweat in a physical altercation. Then she’d have to go to the hospital (if she survived), but then she wouldn’t have enough money to pay for her treatment. She would be forced to scrounge for money, maybe even having to resort to selling her organs—

“Hitoka-chan, what are you going to have for breakfast?” Kiyoko asks.

“Eh?!” Heat shoots across her cheeks when she realises she has spent the past five minutes over-thinking a completely hypothetical (and hopefully unlikely) scenario instead of picking what she wants to eat.

Kiyoko smiles at her. Mentoring and travelling with her for months now must have gotten the demi-fairy accustomed to her eccentric antics. “Take your time to choose what you want, okay? There’s no rush, since the boys aren’t here yet.”

Yachi nods, snatching the menu laid before her and flipping through it. Where does Kiyoko-san get all the patience to deal with her? She knows she’s not easy to be with, yet Kiyoko hasn’t said anything to indicate she’s fed up with her. For that, Yachi is grateful. If it weren’t for Kiyoko’s patient guidance, she’d have still been drifting about aimlessly, not knowing what she wanted. Now she knows what she wants: she wants to be with Kiyoko and fulfill their goal of helping as many as people as they can.

While she is trying to decide which tea she would like to have, three members of the motley crew appear. They don’t look so good — there are dark rings under their bloodshot eyes, their skin unusually pale and their hair a mess. Despite not knowing them all that well, Yachi feels a spike of concern. They mustn’t have slept well last night.

“Good morning,” Sugawara yawns, though he is quick to hide it behind his hand. “Did you girls sleep well last night?”

Kiyoko, thankfully, saves Yachi from having to respond. “Yes we did, thank you. You look like you didn’t, Suga-san. Is everything okay?” Her tone would have sounded clinical, maybe even cold, to others, but Yachi knows her well enough to know she’s just concealing her concern under a layer of professionalism.

“Didn’t sleep well last night,” Sawamura says. “Noya, stop staring. It’s rude.”

Yachi’s attention turns to the other customer who visited the spa all those months ago. The short spiky-haired guy has yet to say anything, being too busy gaping and blushing at Kiyoko. She can’t blame him; Kiyoko’s beauty has the tendency to paralyse people of all genders. Even now she still takes Yachi’s breath away.

“Eh? I, er — sorry,” he mutters bashfully.

Yachi peers behind the three guys, expecting to see the rest stumble in any time now. Except they don’t, which leaves her confused.

“Wait, aren’t there more of you?” she blurts out before she can think. Realising what she said, she clamps her hand over her mouth, horrified beyond words. “Ah! That was rude! I’m so sorry! I just meant that, uh, you know — yesterday there were like…” She waves her hands in a desperate
attempt to illustrate the fact that there are usually more than just three of them.

“Don't worry, we didn't take offense,” Suga reassures her. “The rest of them, um — they didn't feel like eating. They're still upstairs in our room, doing whatever. Moping, probably.”

“Moping? Did something bad happen?” Kiyoko questions.

Suga, Sawamura and Noya exchange a look that speaks a thousand words. They seem to silently elect Sawamura to be their spokesperson; hence, he turns to the two girls and succinctly explains what happened in their room last night.

At the end of his story, their food arrives, but Yachi doesn't have much of an appetite anymore. (Granted, she wasn't hungry even before the boys showed up due to her buzzing nerves. But still.) Kiyoko, normally cool and composed, has both her hands clamped over her mouth. Her lower lip trembles over so slightly, and Yachi can spot her eyes reddening at the edges. Still, she holds herself together, most likely for Yachi’s sake.

“So yeah,” Suga summarises, rubbing the back of his neck. “Kageyama, Hinata and Oikawa are still shaken. Iwaizumi’s most likely still trying to convince Oikawa to come out of his moping, which is why he hasn't joined us.”

A pang of worry hits Yachi at the mention of Hinata. After his visit to the spa and dragging her halfway through Karasuno to confront her mother, she has grown fond of him. If it weren't for the fact that he was constantly on the move, she would have offered to exchange letters with him because she was genuinely curious about his life.

“How is Hinata handling the news?” she asks cautiously.

“Hinata is, understandably, upset,” Suga replies. “He’s still in bed as far as I know, but he's awake.”

“May I see him? Or is he not in the mood for visitors?” She wants to see her friend for herself, but she doesn't want to impose. She knows how scary it can be when people imposed themselves on her space, and she doesn't wish to do the same to Hinata.

Suga smiles warmly, though it's strained by lack of sleep. “I’m sure he would be happy to see you. He has taken quite a shine to you.”

It's true. All throughout yesterday evening Hinata didn't leave her side, insisting on interviewing her on everything that's happened in her life since they last saw each other and regaling her with stories of his own adventure. She wouldn't mind, except for the intimidating frown on the face of his dark-haired partner. That guy is scary.

“Here.” Suga hands a key to her. “The key to our room. Second floor, third door from the left.”

Yachi thanks Suga, accepts the key and gets up. Her plate of food is still untouched. She decides to eat later, once she has gotten to see Hinata.

She hurries up the stairs and has to restrain herself from dashing down the hallway. That would just disrupt the other occupants on the floor. And she wouldn't want to do that. She wouldn't want to annoy people and have them get so fed up they called assassins and then she'd have to bribe them into not killing her and — okay, she really needs to stop this train of thought before she over-thinks herself into a tizzy.

Once she arrives outside Hinata’s room, she takes a moment to catch her breath. She ignores the familiar knot of nervousness in the pit of her stomach when it comes to initiating social contact with
others. Hinata is a nice boy; he would be happy to see her, just like Suga-san said, she reminds herself. With firm resolution, she inserts the key into the keyhole and pushes her way in.

In hindsight, she should have knocked at the very least. Stupid Hitoka!

For one, the occupants of the room are all shirtless.

For two, none of them appear to be in a particularly good mood.

For three, the shirtless moody guys are all staring at her.

She almost drowns in the wave of mortification and self-consciousness that engulfs her. “I didn't mean to — I am so sorry!” she squeaks. “I should have knocked! I’m not a pervert, I swear—”

“Yachi?” Hinata asks, sounding surprised by her sudden appearance (but not displeased, she notes with relief). He ambles to the door and holds it open wider for her. “Not that I'm not happy to see you anything, but er — what are you doing here?”

“Um, just wanted to see you. Sawamura-san and Suga-san you weren't feeling good.”

“Oh. Then you should come in, so you can see me better!”

Yachi decides not to argue with his peculiar logic. Instead, she steps into the room and tries not to flinch when Hinata shuts the door behind her. Maybe it isn't a good idea to come and visit Hinata when there were three other tall, muscular and shirtless guys in the same room. Seeing Hinata shirtless doesn't bother her because she already saw him almost nude before. And it's not like he is particularly frightening in terms of his physique either. The other guys, on the other hand — they are rather intimidating. All she can think about is that her mother has given her a talk about this before.

“Don't enter a closed room with a boy. Make sure there are other girls with you, or that the door is wide open at least. And definitely make sure ALL his clothes remain on.”

If her mother finds out about this, Yachi would never be allowed to leave the house again.

The brown-haired pretty guy — Oikawa, she believes — seems to pick up on her discomfort. “Go put on a shirt, Iwa-chan,” he chides. "No girl wants to see a brute like you naked.”

Iwaizumi kicks the back of Oikawa’s leg. “Shut up, Shittykawa, you're shirtless too.”

“Ow, Iwa-chan is so mean!” Oikawa whines. It sounds odd, coming from a guy older (and way taller, and bigger) than her. "Tobio-chan, Shou-chan, you two should put on some clothes too. We don't want to taint the poor maiden’s eyes with your indecency, do we?"

Kageyama just rolls his eyes, while Hinata sheepishly says, “Yeah, sorry about that, Yachi. Anyway, how are you?”

“Wha— wait, I should be the one asking you that!” Yachi exclaims, flustered. Why is Hinata always reversing their roles? First the spa, now here. This is more stressful than she imagined. “That's why I'm here! How are you, Hinata?”

He lowers his reddened eyes. “If Suga-san and Daichi-san told you I wasn't feeling good, then you probably know why too, right?”

Yachi nods. “Yeah, I’m… I'm sorry.” She knows those two words are over-used and incredibly hollow, but she doesn't know how else to express her sympathy. Her father left her and her mother
before she was born, so she never had any emotional attachment to the man and thus felt no grief over his absence in her life. She just accepted that as the way things were. But she knows how much Hinata adores his family, and he spoke so highly of his parents to her. It must have crushed him to find out the real, horrific way his parents died.

Hinata pulls his shirt over his head, effectively blocking him from her gaze. She hears a sniffle but doesn’t comment on it.

“It was my fault,” Kageyama abruptly announces, startling Yachi. He refuses to even glance Hinata’s way. “I stood by and just watched as they were — they were — you know.”

“Kageyama-kun-” she begins but then trails off. Having just met him yesterday, she’s unsure of how to best go about consoling him. She's left there, floundering awkwardly for words to try and comfort him.

But he puts a stop to those plans when he stands up and marches, ramrod stiff, to the door. “I’m… I'm just gonna go. You shouldn't have to see my face more than you already have.”

Then he’s gone, and Yachi was only able to say one word to him. Disappointed in herself, she turns back to Hinata. He sits cross-legged on his futon, hugging his pillow to his chest. From where she is standing, he appears small and fragile to her. It startles her — she knows that's how others perceive her, but being so petite herself she rarely views other people as anything but giants. She wants to comfort him, to protect him, to make him feel better like he did for her at the spa, because he's her precious friend.

As if sensing her intentions, Hinata pats the spot on his futon beside him. She takes that as an invitation, so she joins him. The moment her butt touches the futon, he leans down to rest his head against her shoulder like they’ve been friends for ages. The sudden weight surprises her, but she makes no move to push him away. How can she, after seeing how vulnerable he is? Carefully, she stretches an arm around his shoulders. He doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, she could even say that he’s taking comfort in her presence. That’s good to know. At least she hasn't managed to mess up and somehow upset him.

(Her mother would definitely blow a fuse if she heard that Yachi was sitting in the same futon as a boy and was sort of cuddling with him before she even introduced him to her. Joke’s on her though, because Yachi has no intention of bringing a boy home to meet her mother. A certain dark-haired, bespectacled beauty on the other hand…)

Hinata remains silent, so her mind tunes in to the conversation between the other two occupants of the room. She knows it’s rude to eavesdrop, but a part of her tells her that if they didn’t want others to overhear they shouldn't have their argument in a room where there were clearly other people.

“You should join the rest for breakfast, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says. ”Don't bother with me anymore.”

“Like hell I’d just leave you to wallow in your stupid self-pity game,” Iwaizumi spits.

“But… maybe it’s for the best. For you — for us.”

“What did you just say, Shittykawa?”

“I said, maybe it’s best if we just stop seeing each other. Which part of ‘don't bother with me anymore’ was unclear? Did I stutter?”

Although Yachi doesn't have eyes on the back of her head, she guesses that Iwaizumi must look like Oikawa just slapped him with a brick, if his stunned silence is anything to go by.
“Get that dumb-as-fuck idea out of your stupid head. I'm sticking with you, whether you like it or not. I'm not hearing any more of your bullshit excuses.” Iwaizumi’s voice is so incandescent, it frightens Yachi even though she knows she isn’t on the receiving end.

“It’s not a bullshit excuse! I mean it, Iwa-chan!” Oikawa insists, his voice escalating in volume. Yachi winces. "Stop calling everything I do bullshit! Look, the colonel poisoned you just to get to me. He could have killed you! You think I'm not going to do something about that?”

“And what can you do?! That was over a year ago. You may think that you're so great and all-powerful, but even you can't go back and change the past!”

A loud thump follows — someone, probably Oikawa, punches the wall. “Don't you think I know that?! I do, and it fucking tears me apart! The fact I had to choose between you and hundreds of innocent people has been killing me every single day ever since I was kidnapped, alright? I know I'm pathetic, I know I'm weak, so stop rubbing it in my face!”

Yachi risks a small turn of her head to get a glimpse of the scene unfolding behind her. Iwaizumi lunges forward and seizes Oikawa’s shoulders roughly. He shoves him against the wall, the loud collision knocking a painting of two lovers on a bridge askew. Neither guy notices her gasp.

“Are you still blaming yourself?!” Iwaizumi growls. “You moronic self-important martyr. I’ve told you: you were in an impossible situation. Most people faced with the same ultimatum as you would have made the same choice, I’d bet. It’s not your fault. Blame the colonel for forcing you to choose; hell, blame the former king and queen for even launching the fucking genocide in the first place. But I’m sick and tired of you blaming yourself!”

“And maybe I’m not!” Oikawa bursts out furiously. His fingernails dig into Iwaizumi’s forearms. “None of this would have happened if you hadn’t gotten poisoned! You idiot, you’re a trained warrior. Shouldn’t you have been able to tell that your food had been poisoned?!” His voice breaks down into sobs. “Why, Iwa-chan? I needed you. I needed you so badly! Watacchi nearly died ‘cause I couldn't protect him. I swear I was going mad, trying to keep the whole unit alive while trying to stay on task ‘cause the colonel was watching, and if I didn't do what he said he would kill you. I needed you by my side, yet you were off being fucking poisoned! I was abandoned, Iwa-chan, all because you couldn't sniff out some cheap poison in your dinner!”

Oh no, that is not a good turn to the argument. Yachi and Hinata can only watch in growing horror as Iwaizumi’s grip on Oikawa’s shoulders slackens. His previously wrathful expression is now unreadable. One by one, his fingers slide off Oikawa, until his hands are hanging limply by his sides.

“Okay, I get it now, Oikawa.”

The lack of an insulting prefix seems to jolt something in Oikawa. His eyes widen, as if only now realising what he just said. “Wait, no, Iwa-chan. It’s not that — I didn't mean it—”

Iwaizumi turns his back on the other guy. “No, you did. You meant it. And I have to say, I agree. Maybe it was my fault all along. And you're right. I guess we are better off not being together. I love you, but it’s clear that we shouldn't — I shouldn't hang around you anymore, in case you're forced to make another impossible decision again.”

Oikawa is crying a storm now. He reaches forward to grab Iwaizumi’s shirt, but Iwaizumi takes a step forward, causing him to stumble over his own foot. “No, no. Please — please don't leave me,” he pleads. "I'm sorry, Iwa-chan—”

“Stop it,” Iwaizumi interrupts him coldly. He grasps his ring finger, as if looking for something that is
not there. “Ah. I was about to throw my ring at you, like in those novels you like to read, but then I remembered I don't have one. Were you planning this all along, Tooru?”

Oikawa’s entire demeanour cracks like smashed porcelain. He sinks to his knees, burying his face in his hands. His body shakes with violent sobs. “How can you say that?! You know I love you! I really want to be with you, but—”

“We can't. I understand now, so you can stop blubbery-ing.”

Hinata gapes like a stunned goldfish at them. Yachi feels rather locked out of the loop. Ring? What did he mean—

Oh.

They were planning on getting married, she realises; the true horror of the extent of their argument finally dawns on her. Hinata must have known, which explains why he’s wearing the expression of someone who has just been informed that love's been a lie all along.

“I'm gonna go look for Kageyama. Thanks for the suggestion. Goodbye, Oikawa.”

“Iwaizumi Hajime!”

Then Iwaizumi storms out of the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving Oikawa with his heart a shattered mess on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE DON'T KILL ME. HITMEN ARE (PROBABLY) EXPENSIVE. AND IF I DIE YOU GUYS WON'T GET THE CONCLUSION FOR THIS STORY.

Thank you for reading! (aND I SAID I'M SORRY)

scream at me about how mad you're at me for destroying IwaOi on my tumblr
who the fault lies with

Chapter Notes

this chapter marks the point where i started really having fun with this story. there's a lot more action here, compared to the more dialogue-heavy (and ship breaking) of chapter 14. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It happened before Yachi came in and Kageyama left the room.

“If I had known they were your parents, I would have…”

But Kageyama trailed off, because while he knew that now he would fight to the ends of the galaxy for Hinata, at that time he hadn't even liked Hinata. Had he really been so heartless as to let the parents of someone he had disliked die a cruel, unwarranted death? So he ended his sentence there, opting to remain silent instead.

“So you would let any stranger die, as long as they weren't connected to Hinata in any way?!” Oikawa demanded furiously. If he weren't in such a despondent mood too, Kageyama bet he would have stormed over and wrung his neck.

Kageyama let his eyes fall to his lap. That was what he was thinking himself, and it only made him feel like more of a monster than he knew he already was.

“Oikawa-san, please don't,” Hinata murmured. “Please don't fight.”

Hinata’s tiny, weak voice only twisted the knife. He should absolutely abhor Kageyama’s existence, yet he was defending him? Kageyama was certain he did nothing to deserve such kindness. In fact, he had only ever done the very opposite.

The sound of a chair being forcefully dragged beside him snaps him out of his self-loathing thoughts about the conversation that took place earlier upstairs.

“Iwaizumi-senpai.” Kageyama is startled to note the redness in his mentor’s eyes. Has everyone cried in just this morning alone?

“Morning,” Iwaizumi says gruffly. “Pass the menu, Kageyama.”

Kageyama obeys. He knows what Iwaizumi can be like when he's pissed.

Suga lays a gentle hand on Iwaizumi’s more calloused one. “Is everything okay?”

Iwaizumi’s hard gaze remains fixed on the menu. “Peachy. Is the hard-boiled egg any good?”

“It’s decent, but they do scrambled better. Maybe I should amend my question – is everything alright between you and Oikawa?”

Iwaizumi’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “You heard us?”
“Dude, everyone in the restaurant heard you,” Nishinoya snorts. “One hell of a fight that was.”

“Noya,” Daichi reproaches, before turning to Iwaizumi. “Will things be okay between you two? I mean you two are… well, y’know…” He waves a hand awkwardly.

“Well, he was just being an idiot,” Iwaizumi says. “I didn't really mean what I said; I was just going with what the shithead was saying, since he clearly wouldn't listen to me when I tried to disagree with him.” He sighs, running a hand through his spiky hair. “Though I admit that I messed up quite a bit. I went too far. Don't worry about it, alright? I’ll go talk to him once both our heads have cooled off.”

Suga nods approvingly. “You're taking a mature approach to your relationship. That's good to hear.”

Iwaizumi’s lips quirk. “I can't decide if you're being encouraging or condescending.”

“A wonderful blend of both.”

A silence follows, which Kageyama doesn't mind. His stomach is still churning, so he abandons his pancakes and settles for drinking his coffee. He watches the rest gathered around the table quietly. Suga and Daichi are sitting so close their shoulders brush every time either one of them moves to take a bite of their food. Noya is busy doodling on his napkin, which for once Daichi doesn't tell him off for. Shimizu sits on Kageyama’s other side, taking delicate bites of her sandwich. How she manages to be elegant while bacon and lettuce dangle precariously between the slices of toasted bread, he doesn't know. He makes a mess every time he tries to eat a club sandwich. Iwaizumi is still scanning the menu, but it's clear from his unfocused gaze that, like Kageyama, he can't muster much of an appetite.

“Kageyama, you should talk to Hinata,” Iwaizumi says out of the blue.

“Why?” Kageyama asks sullenly. “He doesn't need to see me. All I’ve ever done is hurt him.”

Iwaizumi sighs heavily. “Kageyama, please don't be like Tooru. Stop blaming yourself; what happened to you was a normal human reaction to something so shocking and traumatising. Anyone would have reacted the same way in your position.”

“Doesn't make it right though.”

Iwaizumi’s smile is bitter. “Being human isn't about always being right. But being human is about being there for someone who needs you, and Hinata needs you. As cheesy as it sounds, you’re his strength.”

“But his friend — girlfriend, whatever — is there comforting him. He doesn't need me.” Kageyama tries to ignore the unpleasant gnawing in his stomach at the thought of the petite blonde girl. She is cute, in an aesthetic sort of way, he supposes, and Hinata looked so happy to see her. Hinata would be better off with her. It's not like he and Hinata ever defined what exactly they are — were. Sure, they've kissed and explored second base, but it's not as though they explicitly said they are — were exclusive.

Shimizu’s eyebrows arch so high they threaten to blend in with her hairline. “Girlfriend? Are you referring to Hitoka-chan?”

“Uh, yeah?” Kageyama replies, confused. “I mean, they did look all lovey-dovey and shit, hugging on his futon and stuff.”

“Kageyama-kun, you must be mistaken,” Shimizu says, though not unkindly. “Hinata-kun and
Hitoka-chan are not a couple. They’re merely friends.”

He stares at her, befuddled. He manages a very eloquent response of “Huh?”

“Besides, Hitoka-chan doesn't like boys that way.”

“Huh?”

“Hitoka-chan is my girlfriend, not Hinata-kun’s.”

“Huh?!?”

This time, his response is echoed by the other occupants at the table. Nishinoya gawks at Shimizu like she’s sprouted three heads.

“I don't see why you are so surprised,” Shimizu remarks. From anyone else, that would've sounded sarcastic, but she sounds genuine. “All of you are attracted to the same gender, aren't you?”

“Well, I swing both ways but yeah, I guess,” Nishinoya mutters.

Daichi, Suga and Iwaizumi have the decency to look abashed. Kageyama opens his mouth, but his reply dies on his tongue. He closes his mouth, feeling absurdly like a goldfish.

“That's why you have nothing to worry about, Kageyama-kun,” Shimizu continues. “And Iwaizumi-san is right. You seem acutely worried about Hinata-kun, so why not talk to him? I may have just met you, but I can tell Hinata-kun has, hmm… some special feelings with regards to you. I'm sure he would welcome your company.”

Kageyama’s eyes focus on his napkin. “But, uh – I don't… I don't know what to say. What can I say to him?”

Sugawara’s smile is kind as he says, “Sometimes, you don't have to say anything. Sometimes, all someone needs to feel better is the presence of someone who loves them dearly.”

Flames scatter across Kageyama’s cheeks and neck. “I’m not – I don't – I mean, like, uh. I mean, I do—”

Iwaizumi unceremoniously shoves Kageyama out of his chair. “Go talk to him already. Don't make Tooru’s mistake of bottling things up and exploding. I’ll eat your pancakes for you.”

Looks like he doesn't have much of a choice. With anxiety churning in his core, Kageyama drags his feet upstairs to their shared room. He tries to calm his nerves by reminding himself that Suga-san is an expert at everything related to emotions, so his advice wouldn't fail him. Hopefully. He really doesn't want to be any more alienated from Hinata – it hurts too much.

As he opens the door, a loud cry of “WAIT, DON'T—” greets him. A tidal wave also greets him, ramming into him and nearly knocking him off-balance.

What the hell?!

The entire room is flooded. Now, Kageyama is considered to be fairly tall, at a respectable height of 180 cm, so for the whole room to be flooded with water reaching up to his midriff means you could make a lake with all the water in the room.

I know he's sad and all, but this amount of crying is ridiculous, he gripes.
Quickly, he slams the door shut behind him to prevent the hallway from becoming any more flooded. He turns back to the room and surveys the... interesting scene before him.

Oikawa is crying in a corner, somehow remaining afloat despite not doing much to do so. Hinata and Yachi appear to have taken refuge on top of a chest of drawers. Hinata’s legs dangle casually over the edge, occasionally stretching out to splash the water, while Yachi clings to his arm like her life depends on it.

“What the hell is going on?” Kageyama demands. He can already feel a headache coming on.

“Oikawa-san is sad,” Hinata says, like he's aptly summing up the entire ridiculous situation. “This has been going on for, like, ten minutes, and I really really need to pee. And Yachi hasn't eaten breakfast yet.”

“I didn't know magic powers could be unconsciously activated by strong emotions,” Yachi whimpers.

“Man, this isn't even the worst he's gotten.”

“There's worse?!"

Hinata nods sagely. “Yeah. At least he's not crying fire now.”

“Crying FIRE?!” Yachi gasps, horrified.

“Yeah, it was super awesome! Like bwoosh! But also really scary. His ice is also really scary! Once, he got so mad at one of the other royal guards, he made the whole place hail. Noya-san couldn't play volleyball for a month 'cause he caught mild hypothermia, and Asahi-san wouldn't stop crying no matter how many chocolate bars I threw at him. He refused to talk to Oikawa-san for the entire month Noya-san was recovering.”

Kageyama pinches his forehead, suddenly feeling extremely sorry for Daichi, what with all the bullshit he's had to put up with.

Oikawa-san must have been REALLY upset after his fight with Iwaizumi-senpai if his powers have caused our room to resemble the Pacific Ocean, he grumbles to himself.

“Hinata dumbass, why didn't you escape earlier with Yachi-san?” he demands. “You're a warrior; surely you know how to swim?”

Hinata puffs up, as if offended. “Duh, I do! But Yachi is scared of water, and I’m not strong enough to pull along another person while swimming.”

Kageyama examines Yachi. She's so tiny, the smallest gust of wind would probably knock her over.

“So you here to rescue us or what?” Hinata asks. “Like I said, I really need to go—"

“Yes, I heard you, dumbass!” Kageyama snaps. A plan of escape is quick to formulate in his mind. “Alright, you two stay there, while I do something about all this water.”

“We don't have anywhere else to go anyway," Hinata snorts.

Kageyama pushes aside the urge to throw his shoe at Hinata. Instead, he launches himself off the ground and starts to swim. It is an arduous swim; he dives under random objects bobbing around in the water, curling his body around stray bags and futons, and without a pair of goggles his vision
underwater is blurry. He blindly gropes the surface to ensure it’s safe before rising up to get some oxygen in his burning lungs. To make things even harder, Oikawa’s powers are still in latent overdrive, causing the water level in the room to steadily rise and slowly push Hinata and Yachi closer to the ceiling. Hinata is whispering something into her ear, looking like he's trying to calm her down from her panic attack. It works, as she stops hyperventilating, though she doesn't let go of him.

Kageyama swims over to the nearest window and tries to prise it open, only to realise upon further inspection that it’s rusted shut. With much cursing, he evaluates his options:

1. **The doors.** However, he knows that at the rate the water level is rising, he wouldn't make it in time to either the balcony door or the main door before the room is fully submerged.
2. **The windows.** Unfortunately, that window is the only window in the room.
3. **The doors.** But he doesn't want to flood the hallway, and the door to the balcony is on the other end of the room. (It's a large room, okay, it's supposed to fit seven teenaged boys.)
4. **Oikawa.** However, with the hysterical way he's sobbing, Kageyama knows that trying to get him to snap out of his funk would be futile and thus a waste of precious time.
5. **Splitting open the ground.** Except, he doesn't want to hurt the people downstairs and damage the building’s structure.

That leaves only one option.

Kageyama swims to the chest of drawers. He straightens his back and continues to tread the water as he shouts, “Yachi-san! Jump down, and hurry!

Yachi’s eyes widen. “Eh?! B-but—"

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you! Just jump — it’s not as far down as it looks, I promise!”

“Yeah, trust him,” Hinata says encouragingly. “I’ve always trusted him, and he's never let me down!”

A stab of guilt pierces his heart, but Kageyama firmly shoves it aside. Get his friends to safety first, then wallow in more guilt and self-loathing.

“O-okay!” Yachi shuts her eyes and pushes herself off the edge of the chest. Reacting with the instincts of an experienced volleyball setter and a trained warrior, Kageyama catches her around her waist right before she hits the water. He holds her up, trying to keep her head above the water. A shot of alarm surges through him when the top of their heads hit the ceiling. They really have no time to lose.

He trusts Hinata to be smart enough to follow them, so with Yachi trembling in his arms he swims to the balcony door. His lungs burn with the effort of towing another person with him; even if said person is as light as Yachi, with the effort combined with the exertion of his earlier swimming expedition, it’s no wonder his strength is wearing thin.

They're halfway to the balcony door when their chins become submerged underwater.

“Fuck,” he manages to say before his and Yachi’s mouths become submerged underwater too. He pushes her up higher than him and tilts her head back, doing the same for himself, but he can tell that very soon their effort will be useless.

“Kageyama-kun…” she gasps.

“Yachi-san, hold on to me tight, alright? And take a very, very deep breath now and then hold it for
as long as you can," Kageyama instructs.

She nods and winds both her arms around his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his back. In unison, the two of them suck in a huge breath. They're just in time — the water level rapidly rises up above their heads, plunging them completely underwater. Kageyama tries to keep his eyes open in the water, despite the blurriness and coldness of the water stinging his eyes, and he desperately searches north, south, east and west for the balcony door through his blurry vision. His lungs start to burn even more intensely, screaming their pleas for oxygen, when his blindly-groping hand finally closes around something cool, metallic and round.

That must be the doorknob to the balcony! he realises with a jolt of excited relief.

He rattles it back and forth, each movement becoming more frantic, but the door refuses to budge.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, open up already!

As if ignoring his desperate pleas, the door remains resolutely shut.

To his shock, Yachi untangles an arm from around him. He watches the best he can as her tiny hand covers his, and together, with her hand guiding his, they turn the knob clockwise. He hears the affirmative clicking sound of the door opening, so he rams his shoulder against the door, and they spill out onto the floor of the balcony, the water crashing out with them. Still tangled up with each other, all Kageyama and Yachi can do is sit on the floor, panting hard like they would never get another chance at oxygen again.

The water level in the room swiftly falls, until all of it has emptied out into the open-air balcony and spilled past the edge. Kageyama hears several faint complaints of a sudden downpour arising from somewhere downstairs. Not that he cares. He's too exhausted and relieved that he made it out alive with Yachi to care.

Soon, Hinata and Oikawa emerge from the room. They're soaked to the bone but otherwise unharmed. Oikawa falls to his knees in front of Yachi, apologising profusely for “terrifying and nearly drowning a poor maiden like you I’m so sorry Yacchan I was just so upset because I pissed off Iwa-chan [cut for length]”.

Yachi is quick to reassure him that she's fine and held nothing against him. Kageyama is surprised at how forgiving she is; he knows he’s simmering with rage at Oikawa. What idiot gets so upset after a fight with their lover they literally flood an entire room with their tears and then does nothing to stop said flood from drowning the other occupants of the room. And not to mention that because of the aforementioned idiot, their belongings are probably ruined from being waterlogged. But Kageyama holds his tongue, out of grudging hierarchy-determined respect for his senpai.

“Kageyama, are you okay?” Hinata demands, grabbing his hands.

Kageyama is still too winded to muster a reply, so he nods. He juts his chin towards Hinata, hoping the idiot gets what he's trying to say.

“Oh, me?” Hinata points at himself, as if Kageyama doesn’t know who ‘me’ is. ”I'm alright! I did tell you I know how to swim. Anyway, you were so cool just now, Kageyama! You were like a knight in shining armour, carrying Yachi like she weighed nothing and finding a way out! Wow, you were way cooler than you normally are!” he adds teasingly.

The backhanded compliment causes Kageyama to smack Hinata’s arm, eliciting an offended yelp from him. Serves him right.
“Anyway, we should get going!” Hinata sings while nursing his sore arm. “I still need to pee, and Yachi and Oikawa-san haven't eaten yet.”

They trudge back into the room to wait for Hinata, while he runs to the bathroom to relieve himself, and Yachi while she returns to her room to change out of her dripping clothes. Kageyama and Oikawa check their drawers and bags, only to find that none of their clothes can be salvaged. With aggravated sighs, they silently hang up the soaked clothes to dry.

“Tobio-chan,” Oikawa finally says.

“Yes, Oikawa-san?” Kageyama forces out through gritted teeth.

The water-bender looks like he has to force the next few words out. “Listen carefully ‘cause I won't repeat, alright? You… you have my respect. You protected Shou-chan from that Terushima jerk that night, and you saved us from the flood I caused. I guess you're not so — I mean, I just want to say thank you, alright!” He takes in Kageyama’s bewildered look and huffs, “Jeez, stop staring at me like that! You're still weird and annoying, ngeh!” He sticks his tongue out childishly at Kageyama.

“Hmph, fine. Thanks and you're welcome, I guess.” Then a devious idea pops up in Kageyama’s mind. “But in return, I want you to do something for me.”

“… Just name your price” comes the reluctant reply.

“You have to explain this whole mess to the captain.”

“Now that's just cruel, Tobio-chan!”

Unfortunately, as Suga has forgotten how to perform a drying-off spell, Kageyama and Hinata have to spend their morning lying in the sun to dry off. The rest bring food, water and sunscreen for them, so it’s not so bad. Kageyama listens as Hinata chats to him about anything and everything under the sun (metaphorically and literally). Halfway through yet another story about Natsu, Hinata decides that it’s the most opportune moment to curl up right next to Kageyama and rest his head on his chest. Butterflies break out in Kageyama’s stomach.

“Oi dumbass, what are you doing?” he snaps, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“Cuddling,” Hinata says innocently. “You look like you need a cuddle, and I’m always down for cuddling.”

“Stu-stupid.”

“Shut up, you're stupid.”

“No you are.”

“You are!”

This goes on for a while, before Hinata suddenly says, “Hey, I don't blame you for my parents’ death.”

Kageyama chokes on his spit. “What — where did that come from?!”
Hinata just shrugs. “You’ve been blaming yourself since last night, so I thought I’d just tell you that I don’t.”

“And why don’t you?” Kageyama demands incredulously.

“You’re a good person. And you’re human. I don’t know a lot about psychology and how the brain works, but I’m pretty sure freezing when you see something like… like that is a normal reaction. Like closing your eyes when you’re about to sneeze. Or your bladder hurting when you wanna pee. Or you calling me a dumbass whenever I do anything.”

Kageyama looks away to try and conceal his blush from Hinata. He blames it on the sun. “Well, you are a dumbass. Dumbass.”

Hinata laughs. He shifts such that he’s suddenly on top of Kageyama, causing his eyes to widen. Hinata grabs his face, tilts it so that they’re facing each other and leans down to peck his nose. Kageyama goes cross-eyed from trying to focus on the (warm, kind, lovable, everything Kageyama doesn’t deserve) idiot lying on top of him, straddling him comfortably.

“Stupid Hinata!” he tries to growl, but he’s sure his massive blush is dampening the effect. “You missed.”

“I did not — oomph!”

Kageyama sits up so fast in an attempt to kiss him that his forehead crashes into Hinata’s.

“Oww,” Hinata whines, rubbing his sore forehead. “Great seduction skills, Bakageyama. Seriously, even a one-winged owl would be better at seducing than you.”

Kageyama chooses not to comment on Hinata’s odd choice of metaphor. “Shut up and kiss me, moron.”

Hinata laughs again and happily acquiesces. With a rare smile, Kageyama wraps his arms around Hinata’s waist to bring him closer. Hinata’s lithe fingers comb gently through his dark hair, releasing the pent-up tension in his body, and Kageyama finally relaxes.

They stay like that for the rest of the morning.

Neither of them miss Oikawa, who went mysteriously missing after explaining the flooding incident to their fuming captain.

Daichi is slowly but surely falling apart, Suga is astute enough to note. Oikawa pretty much bringing the aquarium to their room is the last straw. Suga watches as Daichi drags Aquaman by the hood of his drenched sweater out of the inn. Daichi returns about ten minutes later, his collar askew and shirt covered with street grime. Oikawa must have put up a fight. Suga doesn’t know why he tried — when Daichi gets into his scolding-father mood, any attempt at resistance would be instantly rendered futile. Having worked with the guy for a year, Oikawa should have known better. Oh well. Hopefully he has learned his lesson this time.

Afterwards, Suga accompanies Daichi to the receptionist counter to apologise for the mess and pay for damages. At least the staff are nice enough (though they are quite bemused by their explanation)
to clean up for them, despite Daichi’s insistence.

“I need a drink.”

“I didn't take you for a daytime drinker,” Suga says, smiling in fond amusement. “Being the team dad finally taking its toll on you?”

“I think it already took its toll a long time ago and I was just living in denial,” Daichi replies dryly, sighing like a long-suffering father.

Suga takes his hand. “Well, team dad, would you believe that I chose this inn specifically because there is a tavern nearby?”

“You're a miracle, Koushi.” Daichi kisses his cheek.

Suga laughs. “It comes with being the team mom. Shall we get going?”

“Lead the way.”

They get a table near the back of the tavern. Suga is grateful that they’re in a quiet corner — Daichi’s headache doesn't need to get any worse. They place their orders: beer for Daichi and water for Suga, since someone has to remain sober. While Suga can easily drink his boyfriend under the table any day, he decides to stay teetotal so Daichi can drown his sorrows without having to worry about who will tow him out later.

Once the waiter leaves, Daichi’s head falls onto the table. He mumbles something that sounds like “I'm not sure if I can do this anymore”.

Suga reaches out to pet his hair. Its softness takes him by surprise every time he touches it. He hums soft reassurances as he tangles his fingers in Daichi’s hair. He can't blame Daichi for cracking under the stress, what with a combined total of Nishinoya, Kageyama, Hinata, Oikawa and now even Iwaizumi acting like angsty, broody teenagers. (Well, they are teenagers, so he can't blame them either.) That’s almost enough angsty, broody teenagers to start their own angsty, broody volleyball team. (They're just short of one person, so maybe… basketball, instead?) Even Suga, with his massive reserves of patience and empathy, is getting weary from trying to cheer all of them up (which is why he conveniently “forgot” how to perform the drying spell — so that Hinata and Kageyama would spend some time together and sort out their issues on their own). But with Daichi the way he is now, Suga has to hide his own emotional exhaustion behind a soft smile and gentle touch.

Their drinks soon arrive. Daichi begins to chug down his beer like he's been deprived of booze his whole life. Suga can't help the smile that dances across his face as he watches him; he’s just so cute when he's drinking.

“Y’know what would be a good idea, Kou?” Daichi proposes.

Suga raises his eyebrows. “I know one beer isn't enough to get you completely drunk, so I’m gonna assume that this is a reasonable idea.”

“Yeah it is.” Daichi nods vehemently to illustrate his point. “Listen, y’know how Noya has been super moody lately? And how none of us have really been able to cheer him up?”

Suga nods. Although Noya has cracked some jokes and made some inappropriately blunt comments, he knows — thanks to his enhanced empathy levels — that it’s just a bravado. It’s a good bravado, he has to give him that, but Suga is good enough at reading people to know his behaviour is not
authentic. His laughs are too loud, his smiles too wide to be real.

“None of us, not even Oikawa or Hinata, has been able to get through to him,” Daichi continues. “But only one person has ever been able to get through to him when he’s in one of those moods. Well, two, but his sister is all the way at the palace.”

“Asahi?” Suga guesses.

“Bingo. So I was thinking — we need to get Asahi back. Only Asahi has a chance of breaking through Noya’s walls and helping him get back to his usual self. But he’s not here, and that’s where the problem lies—”

And as if on cue, the door swings open. The bell tinkling heralds the entrance of a tall man with a man-bun and goatee.

“No way, this is too easy,” Suga breathes, not daring to believe what he’s seeing.

“Asahi?!”

Asahi spots them and yelps in surprise. He spins around, knocks into a petite waitress carrying a tray of shot glasses and profusely apologises to her while helping her pick up the spilled glasses.

Daichi and Suga share a look.

Then, they spring into action.

Suga slams what he hopes is the right amount of cash onto their table, while Daichi performs an impressive leap over the table between them and their target. Asahi shrieks when Daichi lands right in front of him. In fact, he's so startled he manages to drop the shot glasses he just picked up.

“Asahi!” Daichi says, holding his hands out in a non-threatening fashion. "Wait, we just wanna—"

“I'm so sorry, miss!” Asahi squeaks. “I just — I gotta run! Got a sheep to feed! See you!”

Then he hightails it out of the tavern before the waitress can reply.

“Oi, get back here!” Daichi yells, giving chase after him. “You don't even have a sheep!”

Suga quickly helps the frazzled waitress pick up the glasses and offers a brief apology, before he himself chases after Daichi. To onlookers, they must look ridiculous, three teenaged boys pursuing each other in one long conga line. Mildly intoxicated Daichi isn't helping matters either, as he performs unnecessarily flashy parkour in his pursuit of Asahi. Despite not having Hinata’s jumping power or speed, he manages to leap over a group of children, vault over fences (much to the offense of an elderly woman and her cat) and even run on the walls.

“That's the third time he’s done that!” Suga exclaims indignantly to himself. How one glass of beer is able to help Daichi break the laws of physics, he will never know. He pushes himself to accelerate, despite not being nearly as fit as the two warriors in front of him, and manages to catch up to his boyfriend.

“Hey Kou, I’m gonna throw you at him,” Daichi pants.

Before Suga can not consent to the downright absurd idea, Daichi hoists him up and flings him with more force than should be possible at the fleeing warrior. Suga screams profanities his mother would be ashamed of all throughout the course of his flight. He doesn't stop until he makes contact with a
hard back and hears a rather unmanly squeal. He and Asahi tumble down the street, ending with Asahi splayed on top of the demi-fairy. Asahi hastily scrambles to his feet, but Suga tackles him back onto the ground, and he rolls on top of the squirming warrior, pinning his hands down to the concrete.

“Got him, Daichi!” Suga calls over his shoulder.

“Thanks. Knew I could count on you.” The kiss Daichi presses against the top of his head is almost enough to make up for the fact that he just bodily threw him six feet across the air at their friend. Almost.

“Daichi, Suga,” Asahi says weakly. “Didn’t think I’d be seeing you guys under these circumstances.”

“Well, these circumstances wouldn’t have happened if you had just stayed at the tavern instead of running off like an idiot,” Suga huffs with a rare show of pettiness.

Daichi squats down next to the both of them. “Asahi, I know why you left—"

“—And that's why you should let me go. I'm not read—"

“I wasn't done talking. As I was saying, I know why you left, but I really want you to return to the team. We need you, Asahi. Noya needs you.”

At the mention of the young prince, Asahi’s gaze snaps up to meet Daichi’s.

“Noya? What happened to him?” Asahi immediately begins fretting, like it's second nature to worry about his prince (though not without good reason, Suga grants). "Is he hurt? Did he punch a wall too hard? Or is it hypothermia again? I told Oikawa to stop making it hail every time he gets mad.”

Daichi shakes his head. “No, he's not hurt. And Oikawa made it flood this time, but no hypothermia this time.”

Asahi visibly deflates with relief. "Good, good."

“Well, he's not physically hurt,” Suga amends for Daichi. “But emotionally… Well, the only one who can really do anything about that is you, Asahi.”

Panic once again takes over Asahi’s features. “Why me? Wouldn't Hinata be a better person?”

Daichi grimaces. “He's dealing with his own emotional issues too.”

“Oikawa?”

“Ditto.”

“Okay, but what about you?”

“We bumped into each other for the first time in weeks at a tavern, Asahi.”

Asahi has the decency to look embarrassed. His face falls. “I still don't get it. Why me? The last time I was with him, all I did was get him hurt.”

Suga tries his best to hold back a long-suffering sigh. Key word: tries. It escapes anyway. “Ugh, I can't believe I’m gonna have to give the same ‘don't blame yourself for things that aren't your fault’ speech to three different people at least one million times per person.”
“I think it was a million and two in Kageyama’s case,” Daichi adds.

“Not helpful.”

“Sorry, Kou.”

Suga turns his attention back to Asahi. “Too long; didn’t listen, here’s the rundown of my super long speech no one pays attention to: it’s not your fault, stop blaming yourself, and come back to the team, or I’ll remove your goatee. Forcibly. *Without a shaver.*”

“You wouldn’t!” Asahi gasps.

“Don’t try me, Azumane.”

“But — but Noya got stabbed! I don’t think I should—”

Suga folds his arms across his chest. Clearly, he needs to go about this from a different angle. “Asahi, are you really *so arrogant* as to believe you can prevent any and every form of harm from befalling our beloved prince? I know he calls you the Ace, but the sheer cockiness of your thinking appalls me, and I used to run my hands up and down people’s near-naked bodies for a living. I’ve *seen* things. Anyway, back to my point — if you’re still blaming yourself for Noya’s injury, which is no one but Futakuchi’s fault, then you really have more hubris than I thought.”

“I’m not sayin’ — I didn’t mean I could — I just, er…” Asahi fumbles for words, gaping at Suga.

Satisfied with the damage done, Suga gets off Asahi’s navel with a smile that Oikawa calls his ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing smile’. “So what are you gonna do about it?” he asks.

Asahi sighs and gets back up to his feet. “Fine, I’ll return, only because I know Daichi will just throw you at me again if I try to run. But don’t blame me if Noya throws a fit.”

“Good, we’re glad to have you back on the team,” Daichi says, clapping Asahi on the back. “And don’t worry about Noya. I’m sure he’ll be pleased to see you.”

Noya is decidedly not pleased to see Asahi.

“What, got bored of whatever sewer you were hiding in?” he snarls. He folds his arms, glaring up at Asahi. For a guy nearly a whole foot taller than the prince, he’s cowering far too much.

“Noya—”

“Did you find others like you there?! You should’ve formed your own cowards club, maybe even make t-shirts. It must be nice to be surrounded by your own kind — why *did* you return?”

Suga winces. While his own words to Asahi earlier were harsh, Noya’s extends beyond harsh to plain *nasty*. Asahi seems to lose three inches in height with every enraged, spiteful word Noya hurls at him. Suga should have guessed Oikawa hasn’t been a good influence on the prince.

“It’s… it’s ‘cause Daichi asked me to,” Asahi says feebly. “He said you needed me.”

Noya practically bursts into flames with how much he’s fuming. “Oh, *did* he now?! Well, the captain
can take that and shove it up his ass. I don't need a coward who runs away after one defeat! I don't need an Ace who gives up so easily!"

And that's when Asahi snaps. “Maybe you should stop this whole Ace business. It's old. It's tired. Then maybe I wouldn't feel so pressured to always have to be the best for you, your Highness.”

Ohhh boy. When someone as docile as Asahi dishes out sass, you know things are not going to end well.

Unfortunately, Noya doesn't take the hint. “Oh, so now this is all about you and your fragile ego?! What do you want me to do about that, huh? Kiss your boo-boo until it stops hurting? Shower you with praise? Sorry to surprise you, but it's not like you ever accept my praise anyway! And it's not even my job to stroke your ego whenever it takes a single blow. You say you feel pressured? Sort it out yourself. It’s not my problem.”

Nishinoya storms out of the room, slamming the door so hard the knob rattles.

Suga glances at the spot Noya was just standing in, then at Asahi blinking back tears, then at Daichi massaging his temples. He can already tell that this reunion process is going to be a long, painful one.

“Koushi, let’s go somewhere more private,” Daichi growls. “I’ve got a lot of frustration, and only you can help me relieve it.”

Suga nods and lets his boyfriend lead him out of the room.

Yes, definitely a long process.

Ennoshita has had nothing short of an interesting day. This morning, he had to watch the Princess model her coronation dress for the umpteenth time that week and reassure her that no, it did not make her look fat. It would be hard for anything to make her look fat, since she shares the same petite gene Noya has.

Then he had to chide her — again, for the umpteenth time that week — for not taking better care of herself. She’s a good person, he is well aware of that, but she is also quite the airhead. He swears being her bodyguard has shortened his lifespan by an entire lifetime. Still, it's rewarding — in its own way.

Yes, it has been an interesting day. He's secretly looking forward to the Princess’s nap, not only because she really needs the rest, but also because he's been craving a break. No matter how much he cares about her and enjoys her company, as an introvert he needs some time to himself — time he hasn't been getting a lot lately, ever since the assassination.

Unfortunately, the universe seems to have decided that he isn't deserving of his break yet, because just then the Princess crumples right before his eyes.

“Princess!” Before the title even leaves his lips, Ennoshita finds himself by the Princess’s side. He slides his arms around her trembling frame, keeping her steady and upright, and she nuzzles into his hold but keeps her eyes and grip on the file. He takes a peek over her head to see what has gotten her so shaken.
The Princess flips through the pages too quickly for him to catch everything, but he manages to steal a glimpse at the title of the file. *Operation Kitagawa Daiichi: Extermination*, huh? Sounds fishy, but the princess’s well-being comes first before his curiosity.

“Deep breaths, Princess, deep breaths,” he urges. He hopes his voice resembles some semblance of calming. He feels her rib cage expand and push gently against his arms, and her tensed shoulders loosen up a little.

“I — I’m sorry,” she gasps. Her voice is wobbly and choked up, like she's fighting a gradually losing battle against tears. “I probably scared you, didn't I?”

He shakes his head. “You have nothing to apologise for, Princess. I’m just glad that you’re unharmed.”

“Always the gentleman, aren't you?” she giggles, but her usual teasing humour is conspicuously absent.

His cheeks flush at her teasing. He really should be used to it, having been her bodyguard for about two years now, except every time she does it still throws him for a loop. And well, he’s always embarrassed easily. He blames his ex (though without hard feelings; they split amicably).

Without responding to her playful provocation, he leans over her and plucks the offending file out of her hands. He places it on the desk, far out of her reach.

“Chika-chan?” she murmurs.

He rests his hand on her head. Since she's a rather tactile person, physical contact is a real help to calm her down. “I don't want you to look at that anymore, especially if it made you that upset. At least not until you've gotten some sleep, okay?”

Without looking, he can tell a small smile is blooming on her face. She usually gets like this whenever he worries about her. At least someone is enjoying all the worry they cause him, he grumbles to himself.

“I just — I can’t believe they would do something like that,” she speaks quietly. “It’s horrible. Chika-chan, they killed *innocent people*. My parents did that. I still can’t wrap my head around that—”

A loud thump behind them interrupts them.

Ennoshita whirls around to investigate, and the grotesque sight makes him immediately spin around to press the Princess's curious head firmly against his chest. She has had a difficult day, the last thing she needs to see is—

“What, the sight of my incompetent father’s dead body stole the wind from your sails?” the young man asks. He’s standing in front of the corpse, hands on his hips.

Ennoshita can see the resemblance between the dead and alive men. Both of them have chiselled jawlines, grey eyes (it is quite horrifying to see the open eyes of the dead body, even if he is a trained warrior) and curly dark hair. He recognises the older dead man from all the newspapers that were published during Operation KD — his photos were plastered all over the pages. That must be mean—

“You're Emperor Kai’s son,” he states, still not believing what he's seeing. This is way too surreal
and random to be real.

(But is it really *that* random, though?)

The Princess gasps. “Wait, what?! What’s *he* doing here? Chika-chan, please release me!”

“No, not yet.” He adds just a little more pressure on her head. “Not until I know what he's here for and why his father is dead.”

“One question at a time, Ennoshita-san,” the former emperor’s son says. “That's how you say it in your kingdom, right? Or should I say, your soon-to-be queendom, since my men eliminated the former king.”

“Your what?!” the Princess splutters. “Chika-chan, this is ridiculous. Please let me go!”

“Feisty,” the young man — he can't be that much older than either of them, maybe in his late teens or early twenties — hums approvingly. “I like you already, firecracker. But where are my manners? In case you forgot, I’m Kai Li. I guess you can say I'm the new emperor of Kitagawa Daichi, except there's not much left for me to rule thanks to your deceased King and Queen. You must know that, since you so astutely spotted the file I left dangling out of the shelf, Princess Haruka.”

Kai Li's nickname for the Princess rubs Ennoshita the wrong way, so he doesn't notice when the Princess manages to extricate her head from his chest. She pushes herself up to her feet, turning to face the young Emperor Kai.

“How did you manage to get in, Kai-sama?” she asks, her voice surprisingly even.

The apparently-Emperor Kai tuts, like he's talking to a clueless child. The gesture strikes a nerve, but Ennoshita forces his expression to remain stoic. He has to keep his shit together, in case things get ugly. “Is that even the question you should be asking, your Highness? I’d imagine you have more bubbling in that intellectual mind of yours. Still, I’ll grant you the courtesy of answering that question — honestly, it wasn’t a particularly difficult endeavour. I’ve planted some moles in your detail of bodyguards. They have been enjoying your company for what I estimate has been about nine months. And I’ve managed to sway even more to join my cause — people who weren't all too happy with your parents' reign. That's how I got in. Do you have any more to add to our game of twenty questions?”

The Princess attempts to stare him down, a feat that impresses Ennoshita. Kai Li is easily over six feet, whereas she is just barely keeping her nose above five feet; yet, she's somewhat holding her ground against him, though Ennoshita can see her hands trembling by her sides.

“Why is your father dead?” she interrogates. “Did you have anything to do with that?”

Kai tuts. “Asking two questions at the same time isn't fair play, Princess. I’ll answer the second one: yes, but the reason why is not important for now. Maybe later, if the two of you are nice hosts, I will divulge the sordid tale. But don’t you think he looks lovely?” He snatches his father's wrist, dragging his body closer for them to see. The Princess recoils in disgust. Ennoshita grabs her arm, pulling her back to his side. “He’s the perfect image of utter incompetence, isn’t he? I just thought I’d make an impression for my formal introduction to the lovely princess and her bodyguard. Besides, isn’t it poetic to have the dead body of an inept ruler in the office of a pair of comparatively more capable rulers? I think so.”

“What are you playing at?” Ennoshita asks sharply, done with his toying around.

Kai Lu shrugs flippantly. “Nothing much. I just enjoy things that are poetic in meaning. You look
like an intellectual man, Ennoshita-san. I imagine you’re the kind of man to spend his leisure time with classic literature and pick apart the little details.”

His accurate description of Ennoshita’s favourite pastime pokes a chink in his composed, professional armour. The sly look hidden behind the deceptively charming smile simultaneously grates on his nerves and unsettles him. What is up with this guy?

“My love for all things poetic is also why I chose that date to send Prince Yuu on his wild goose chase around your charming kingdom,” Kai Li casually adds. “The fourth of April was when your warriors struck my country, after all.”

The Princess’s spine stiffens at the mention of her brother. “What has Yuu got to do with any of this?”

“Heartful as you are, you make my point even more. Nothing much other than pure chance, really.” Kai Li punctuates his statement with another blasé shrug. “It could’ve been you, too. As long as a child of the royal family was present at that time, everything would be going according to my plan.”

Only Ennoshita’s tight grip on the Princess’s arm stops her from stepping closer to Kai. “Forgive me if I don’t trust you, Kai-sama. What plans do you have with Yuu?” she asks coldly.

Kai’s smile only widens. “Oh, dear princess, you shall see very soon.”

This time, she breaks free of Ennoshita’s grasp. She lunges towards the smirking man and shoves him clumsily onto the floor. She straddles him, fishing a knife out of her skirt pocket and pressing it against his throat, not hard enough to draw blood but hard enough to send across the message, “Say something wrong, and you’ll see how quickly ‘not hard enough’ can turn into ‘too hard’.”

“I believe I have been very patient in entertaining you, Emperor Kai,” she says, her voice now as soft as a tigress’s growl. “But my patience has waned. I am done with your games. Tell me everything — what you’ve done to Yuu, to my parents, to your father, as well as your plans here in my country.”

The humour in Kai’s eyes flickers out, replaced by a dangerous look. His eyes glow a murky black for a moment, and the next the Princess is pinned against the desk by an invisible force. With a loud curse, Ennoshita starts towards her, but he slams abruptly into an invisible barrier. He stumbles backwards, clutching his sore nose and cursing.

“If you know your place, dear princess, you shouldn’t be taking that tone with me,” Kai Li says in an equally soft tone. “This is why I’m warning you now: I am not a man to be trifled with. I’m one of the most powerful sorcerers of my country, and it’s an epithet I wear with pride. The only reason why any of you are still alive is because it’s what I so desire. I want you to witness all the bloodshed and carnage and despair that my plan will bring to your lovely country. I will be taking up residence in this palace with you, just to make sure you don’t act out. Please don’t take me to be condescending; I only have your best interests at heart. And fret not, I will not stoop so low as to disgrace or unnecessarily harm you as long as you remember that I have the power to snuff out your life and your brother’s life too, Princess-sama.”

“What did you do to Yuu?!?” she demands, her voice taking on a hysterical edge. She struggles fruitlessly against her invisible trappings.

“No lasting harm. Probably.” He strokes his chin, like he’s pretending to mull over her question. “His staying alive is essential to my plan, of course, but that doesn't I can’t let my people — ‘bandits’, as your people refer to them as — have a bit of fun toying around with him.”
“‘Bandits’…?” Ennoshita echoes suspiciously.

“That's right, Ennoshita-san. I have banded together whoever is left of my ravaged nation and let them loose on your thriving nation. They've been hungering for revenge for ages, and I'm pleased to see that they're getting the vengeance they deserve.”

The Princess’s fists tremble. “Well, that's one mystery solved. But you haven't fully answered my previous question. I want answers.”

Emperor Kai’s smile is so dark and cruel it sends uneasy shivers up Ennoshita’s spine. The Princess must feel it too, as she stops struggling on the desk. She watches the man warily, like he's a snake poised to strike anytime.

“Well, if you really want to know…”

Kai Li’s sadistic smile doesn't waver throughout his entire explanation. When he's done with it, Ennoshita very much feels like throwing up. Or punching something, whichever comes first.

The Princess, having been released, sinks down to the ground. Her eyes, wide and horrified, stare down at the red carpet under her. Her hands tremble as she hands her knife to Kai, who pockets it with a flourish. She's powerless under his control, and the both of them know it. The thought of her being so helpless makes Ennoshita’s blood boil, but he can't act on that angry impulse. Instead, he can only watch as the Princess falls apart silently next to him. He doesn't blame her one bit. If he were in her position, he would do the same as her.

After all, Prince Nishinoya, his friends and the entire kingdom are in grave danger, and they have no way of warning them.

Chapter End Notes

well, it's about time I brought Asahi back, huh? least I could do, considering what I did to Iwaizumi and Oikawa in the previous chapter. but still, drama and angst remain. stay strong Asahi.

thanks for reading! :D

chat with me on tumblr!
the best of times, the worst of times

Chapter Notes

Buckle in, folks, it's gonna be a long one. Also, Tsundere!Noya is strong in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everyone else who isn't Noya accepts Asahi’s return to the team without much of a fuss, the young prince is a little miffed to note. Then again, none of them were as affected by Asahi’s abandonment than him. Seeing as he's outnumbered, he doesn't protest Asahi’s return. To keep himself occupied, he tries to make himself as comfortable as possible on his futon, fluffing his pillow and smoothing out the wrinkles in the blanket.

Or at least, as comfortable as he can be with Tooru’s annoyingly long legs draped over his lap.

“You're not happy, are you, Noya-chan?” Tooru asks.

“Does it look like I'm all sunshine and rainbows?” he snaps back.

“Jeez, don't take your anger out on me. I wasn't the one who brought him back.”

“I know that.” Noya scowls in the general direction of Daichi and Suga. As much as he appreciates their concern for him, he isn't sure what they're hoping to achieve by bringing Asahi back. Asahi makes up the bulk of the reason why he is even upset in the first place, which is why he snapped yesterday. And, okay — truth is, looking back on it, he kinda regrets what he said yesterday. He honestly didn't mean it. He has this horrible tendency, as he's beginning to realise, to blurt things out in a fit of intense emotions. He really ought to work on his impulse control, he reflects regretfully.

However, that doesn't change the fact that he's still upset and very much hurt. Why did Asahi come back, when he made it clear he wanted nothing but out the last time they were together? What changed? All the confusion swimming circles in Noya’s mind hurts, yet he can't bring himself to voice them to the one who is the cause of said confusion.

“I don't see what you're making such a big hoo-ha about,” Tooru continues, oblivious to Noya’s emotional turmoil. “He came back for you. It’s not every day people come back to you after a fight like yours. You should appreciate the chance you've been given.”

Noya gets the not-so subtle implication in Tooru’s words. It would be hard not to, given how longingly he is gazing across the room at a certain Iwaizumi Hajime.

He unceremoniously shoves Tooru’s legs off him. “It’s different. Our situations are too different to compare, so don't even try.”

“Oh yeah?” Tooru challenges.

Noya is not one to back down from a challenge. “You chased Iwaizumi away. Asahi abandoned me. Yet, ironically enough, you’re the one wanting Iwaizumi back, while I never asked Asahi to come back. I didn't even think he would.”

Tooru snorts. “That doesn't mean you didn't want him to.”
The statement feels like a knife stabbing through a tiny chink in his armour and finding its mark. Noya doesn't feel like admitting to Tooru just how too close for comfort his statement was, so instead he just mutters a sullen “shut up”.

Thankfully, Tooru does not pursue the topic any longer. Instead, he reaches into his bag and pulls out his reading glasses and a book. Curious, Noya squints at the title.

“A Tale of Two Cities?” he reads aloud, intrigued.

Tooru nods. “I went shopping a few days back after the water, er, incident. I saw this book and remembered it being a classic in Seijoh, yet I myself never got around to reading it, so I bought it. Do you want me to read you a bedtime story, Noya-chan?”

While Noya isn't an avid reader, he needs a distraction from the tall guy with a goatee at the other end of the room. Since he isn't the one doing the actual reading, he decides to take Tooru up on his offer.

By “alright, go ahead”, he didn't mean it as an invitation for Tooru to practically toss himself onto Noya.

“Oi, what the hell?” Noya wheezes under Tooru's weight. While he isn't bulky, being more on the slender side, the weight from his lankiness practically squashes the air out of Noya. He unceremoniously shoves Tooru’s offending head off his sternum.

“Don't you know? People normally cuddle up really close when someone is about to read a story,” Tooru says smugly.

Noya scowls up at his aggravating bodyguard. “I usually don't say no to a cuddle, but dude, personal freaking space.”

“Do you want me to read this story or not?”

“Ugh, fine; just get started already.”

Tooru pompously clears his throat. Then he opens the book and starts reading to Noya with dramatic flair.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way…”

True to his nature, Noya’s attention begins to drift. Tooru’s words wash right over his head as his gaze wanders away from the outstretched book in front of him to a certain (former) Ace at the other end of the room.

Truth be told, Noya isn't completely furious about Asahi’s return. Yes, his initial reaction was one of shock and rage. But somewhere in his heart, there was and is a small candle flame of happiness and hope — happy that after being gone for what has felt like an eternity Asahi is back; hope that the one who got away is now here to stay.

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’
The best of times: Asahi has come back, even if he was forced back.

The worst of times: just like any other tiny candle flame, Noya’s one of happiness and hope can be easily doused by another abandonment. The fact that Asahi is back for now doesn't change the fact that he can leave again any time he wants. The possibility still exists. After all, as Tooru likes to say, the only thing that is impossible is impossibility. Hence, he resolves not to get attached to the former Ace’s presence like he once was, having learned his lesson. That way, when Asahi leaves again it won't hurt quite so bad. The best case scenario would be if it wouldn't hurt at all.

Why did things have to be so complicated? Why did he have to have both the best and worst of times? Can't he just be either angry or happy? The confusing and opposing mixture of both emotions ravages his heart and mind, until it’s all he can think about even in his dreams when he falls asleep halfway through Tooru’s story.

“Okay, let’s do a last check to make sure we have everything before we leave—”

“Wait, Daichi-san!” Shouyou yelps, bouncing up and down in the air with his hand raised.

Concern crosses Daichi’s face. “What's wrong? You can go to the bathroom if you want; we don't mind waiting.”

“No no, it’s not that this time! It’s just — er, how do I say this?” Shouyou fidgets in his spot. He looks strangely sheepish.

“Using words, idiot,” Kageyama snaps.

“Don't be a smartass, Bakageyama!”

Suga, seeming to have noticed the irritated wrinkles between Daichi’s eyebrows, is quick to intervene in the pair's squabble. “You wanted to say something, Hinata?”

“Oh yeah, I did! The thing is, I — um, Isentaletterawhilebackandinwaitingforareplysowecantleaveyetbutuntilbeheresoonpromise!”

Eight out of ten people gathered in the room exchange nonplussed looks.

“Huh?” Yachi says, voicing their thoughts for them succinctly.

Kageyama translates for them. “Basically, what this dumbass is trying to say is that he posted a letter to someone and hasn't gotten a reply yet. I'm assuming you told them to post this address.”

“I don't know what kind of letters you've been writing, dearest Tobio-chan, but most people tend to include a return address at the back,” Tooru sneers.

(Iwaizumi doesn't tell him off for teasing Kageyama, a gesture no one fails to notice.)

“Yeah, I told my friend I'd be in Johzenji by the time he sends a reply,” Shouyou says with a nod. “It should arrive by Tuesday latest, promise!”

“Hinata, you should have said something earlier,” Daichi sighs.
Shouyou’s face falls. “S-sorry! It was supposed to be a surprise for you guys. Please don’t be mad, Daichi-san!”

No one, not even their strict captain, can stay mad at Shouyou when he’s making his sad puppy eyes. Hence, with another smaller sigh, Daichi lets the matter go but firmly states that if the letter doesn’t arrive by Tuesday, they’re leaving regardless of Shouyou’s ‘surprise’.

Shouyou, excited and bubbly again, drags Kageyama off with him.

“Where are you bringing me, dumbass?!” Kageyama demands as he’s being towed away by his energetic partner.

“To the post office, duh!” Hinata shouts.

“Why?!”

“To check if my letter has arrived!”

“And why do I need to be there?! It’s not like my presence would make the letter come faster!”

“‘Cause I want you to be there, obviously!”

“Who’s the letter from, anyway?!”

“I said it’s a surprise, Bakageyama! What part of ‘surprise’ don’t you understand?!”

“Dumbass Hinata!”

"Race you there!" Hinata challenges. "Loser has to buy the winner meat buns for a week!"

"I hope you're ready to lose, then, idiot!" Kageyama retorts.

The pair continue their bickering down the street. However, it seems like Kageyama — for all his bluster and arguing — doesn't seem to actually mind being roped into Shouyou’s shenanigans. Being taller and stronger, he could have easily broken away if he wanted to, after all.

The rest of them don't feel like unpacking again after they just spent the whole morning packing up. Thus, each of them finds something to keep themselves occupied with. Iwaizumi and Asahi disappear off somewhere, talking in low voices. Daichi and Suga mention something about getting drinks, while Yachi and Shimizu vanish off to do… girl things, Noya guesses. Having only ever been to close to one female figure his whole life, Noya doesn't know what girls do together, especially when they’re, like, together-together.

Tooru offers to continue reading the book to Noya. Noya, not liking the book for putting his strange and ambivalent emotions into unnecessarily complex writing, declines.

Instead, Noya tries to take a nap, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so when Tooru keeps gasping and groaning and muttering stuff under his breath at random intervals. Stuffing his head under a veritable mountain of pillows doesn't help. Humming whatever song that comes to mind doesn't help. Even throwing a pillow at Tooru doesn't help. If anything, it only spurs him to gasp and groan and mutter stuff under his breath even louder. How he manages to sound like he's bellowing at the top of his lungs while also muttering under his breath, Noya doesn't know. He needs to have less annoying friends.

Exasperated with Tooru’s aggravating reading habits, Noya escapes from the room. He wanders to
the open sports court at the back of the inn. He doesn't know why he's even going there when he doesn't have anyone to play with. In hindsight, maybe he should have dragged Tooru away from his reading and made him serve for him.

Then he sees a volleyball whizzing over a net.

Once again, he reacts on pure instinct. He sheds his favourite black blazer and dives to the ground with his arms outstretched in the familiar position.

“ROOOOOLLING THUUUUUNDER!” he bellows as the ball bounces off his wrists with a familiar smack. It glides in a satisfying high arc through the air to the setter position, before landing on the ground with no setter to toss it.

Noya looks up, and his stomach lurches. However, before he can leave, Iwaizumi spots him.

“Hey, Noya. Wanna receive for us?” Iwaizumi asks.

At the mention of the prince’s name, Asahi practically leaps a mile into the air.

“Er, sure…” Noya mutters. He feels rather awkward, with Asahi cowering by the net and refusing to look at him, but an itch urging him to play volleyball was what led him to the court in the first place, and he's not one to back out of something once he's put his mind to it. He sits down and starts on his stretches.

A shuffling of footsteps announces the arrival of their captains and Tooru.

“What are you three doing here?” Noya asks blankly. He points at Daichi and Suga. “Aren't you two supposed to be getting drinks? And Tooru, I thought you were busy wrapped up in your book?”

“Um, how should I put this?” Suga says. He rakes a sheepish hand through his hair. “Daichi and I kinda got banned from the bar. Something about a terrifying bearded giant frightening their rookie employee with something about a sheep and his two friends.”

Asahi’s shoulders slump — not that Noya is looking at him or anything!

“I’m here because I realised the stupid pillow-throwing prince I was supposed to be bodyguarding vanished,” Tooru huffs, folding his arms. “That chapter ended on a [cliffhanger], Noya-chan! Couldn't you have at least scampered off when I was at the beginning of a chapter or something?”

“Sorry I can't read minds and find out which part of whatever chapter you're reading,” Noya snaps. “Next time I’ll be sure to sneak out at a more convenient time for you.”

“Since we’re all here, why don't we play some volleyball?” Daichi interjects pointedly before the squabble can escalate.

A murmur of agreement choruses. Technically, there really is no need for them to be gathered together. In fact, some of them would really like not to be gathered together — Asahi is staring at a speck of dirt next to his sneakers, Iwaizumi is glaring at the sky, Tooru is pretending to be busy examining his nails and Noya is trying to occupy himself by stretching his hamstrings a little more than necessary. But none of them know what else to do while waiting for their dynamic duo to return from their post office date, and despite their differences they all share a common love for volleyball, so they stay.

“Okay, it’s settled then,” Suga says in an airy tone. “Noya, which team would you like to be on?”
“I’ll stay where I am,” Noya quickly says, afraid that Suga would try to shuffle him to the other side if he doesn’t get his reply out fast enough.

Suga turns to Asahi. Noya pretends he’s not paying attention. (But he totally is.)

Asahi remains rooted on the other side of the net, telling Suga and Noya everything about which team he will be playing with. Noya tries to ignore the bubbling of both relief and hurt threatening to well up in his eyes. What’s wrong with him? He wants to be as far as humanly possible from Asahi. He never wants to let him go ever again. The confusing dichotomy is about to either make him cry or split open his skull, whichever comes first.

The teams are soon sorted. On his side of the net is Tooru and Daichi. On the other is Asahi, Iwaizumi and Suga. Tooru kicks things off with his signature jump serve… only for the ball to veer right out of the court.

“Ah, sorry!” he exclaims. “I hit it too hard!”

“Don’t mind,” Daichi replies reassuringly.

“Yeah, maybe try serving like you’re actually serving instead of like you’re trying to spike the ball into someone’s face,” Noya mutters. He hasn’t forgiven Tooru for his noisy reading habits.

Tooru flicks his forehead before returning to his setting position by the net.

Asahi gets the next serve, and the rest of the world fades away when Noya locks on the ball. The world spins in slow motion as he dives to receive the hurtling ball. He winces when it smacks off his forearms with more power than he anticipated. Still, it sails in an imperfect but decent arc towards Tooru, who sets for Daichi to land the final hit. The ball blasts through Iwaizumi and Suga’s block, landing on the ground with a satisfying thump.

In spite of their never-ending bickering and sniping, Tooru and Noya function as a deadly pair on the court when they’re serious. Most of Noya’s receives end up nice and neat where Tooru is, ready for a toss (or a dump, as he tends to favour to catch their opponents off guard). And when Daichi is forced to receive, Tooru is able to give Noya an easy to set to work with despite his discomfort with spiking. He prefers playing defense and fighting on the ground, but if it’s Tooru setting for him he will attack if he has to.

Still, the other team puts up a good fight. They go back and forth for a while in a tight, rigid deuce, neither side being able to score two consecutive points before the other gets a hit in.

The match is in the other side’s favour when Shouyou pops up from nowhere and spikes a ball that Tooru set for Daichi. Asahi is so startled he messes up his receive, and the ball bounces out of the court.

“You two are back earlier than expected,” Suga comments lightly.

Shouyou nods excitedly while Kageyama mutters something about how “this dumbass nearly tore my arm off”.

“We have to go now!” Shouyou bursts out. He waves a letter in the air for all of them to see.

“Why?” Daichi asks, frowning. “Is it an emergency?”

“It’s a surprise, Daichi-san! But we have to go now if we wanna make it in time for the surprise!”
“Ooh, that sounds fun,” Tooru croons. He ruffles Shouyou’s hair affectionately.

“Can we please, please go now, Daichi-san?” Shouyou continues to beg. “It’s really important to me, and I don’t want you guys to miss it after all the effort my friend went through to help me with this surprise.”

Once again, Daichi can’t resist when Shouyou is giving him the hopeful puppy eyes. With a resigned sigh, he announces that their scrimmage is a draw and instructs them to wash up before they head off for Nekoma.

Noya, for once not complaining about an incomplete game, scrambles to get as far as possible from the dichotomy of emotions waging a war in his heart.

More than anything else, Haruka is tired. Sure, she's angry, and terrified, and frustrated at her own powerlessness — like, tomorrow she’ll be coronated queen, yet there’s nothing she can do to stop Kai Li — and all that has made her very, terribly tired.

Why me? she thinks bitterly to herself. Why her? Why did she have to be the one to be the sole monarch of this stupid country? She didn’t ask to be born into this stupid royal family, to two stupid parents who went and got themselves assassinated, to be the stupid first-born heir—

“Princess, you're over-thinking again,” Chikara cuts in, cool as ever. “You're going to drive yourself crazy at this rate.”

“Who says I’m not already?” Haruka says with a bitter, humourless laugh.

He sighs quietly as he takes her forearm and leads her down the hallway. “I would’ve told you. So no, you’re not crazy, but you are under a lot of stress, which is why you will go and sleep immediately.”

Her lips quirk slightly, despite everything. “Such a mother hen, Chika-chan.” And hell, she appreciates him for it. Who knows what her mental health would’ve been like if Chikara weren’t around to remind her to sleep and call her out when she’s going down a spiral of over-thinking?

She should listen to him, though, for once. Her eyelids feel like there are sandbags weighing them down.

They arrive outside her bedroom on the second floor, one floor below where Kai Li has made himself home in her parents’ bedroom — and just that thought pisses her off, that he can just saunter into whatever room he chooses and make it his because she’s helpless under his control.

Normally, Chikara doesn't walk her all the way to her bedroom. But normally, the palace is the safest place she could be at, before all the assassins and insane emperors invading her home, so he's taken it upon himself to make sure she's safe at all times. A twinge of guilt gnaws at Haruka. Chikara’s always putting her before himself, always considering her needs before all else, and she wishes she could repay the gesture somehow; repay all the times he’s taken care of her and put up with her bullshit, and to take care of him for once.

But right now, she is completely powerless. And maybe neither of them would even live long enough for her to repay him, if Kai Li is dead serious about executing his plan.
(She doesn't doubt Kai Li’s seriousness, if his earlier demonstration was anything to go by.)

“Well.” Chikara lets go of her wrist and takes a few steps back, away from the door. “Get some rest, Princess. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

_We might not even be alive tomorrow._

And that’s the thought that sends her forward, latching onto his arm and refusing to let go. She presses her face against his shoulder as she murmurs, “Wait, don't go. Please, just — stay, Chikara-chan. Please.”

She can feel him stiffen. “Princess, I'm not — I don't think that would be a wise idea,” he replies haltingly. “You're a girl and I'm a guy, it wouldn’t be—”

“I know,” she interrupts, a lump forming in her throat. “I know it’s not ‘decent’, but I just—”

She gets it, she really does. He’s being respectful and decent, never wanting to overstep his boundaries, and _god_ does she love him for it — but she desperately wishes he could just _see_ how much she doesn’t need that right now, and how much she needs _him_ instead.

“Just this once, Chika-chan,” she says quietly. “Please. Please, just… just for this moment, for tonight, forget we’re supposed to be bodyguard and princess. I can't — I _need_ you. There's this crazy fucker _right here_ in this palace, just one floor above, threatening to kill everyone — you, Yuu, the kingdom, me. I'm terrified out of my mind, Chika-chan. I just — I don't think I can _bear_ to be alone right now, or I might really go crazy.” And she can't help the hiccup of a sob that escapes her at the end of her sentence. She’s so tired, so weak.

She looks up just in time to see something in his carefully-crafted impassive expression soften. “Okay,” he says. “Just… just this once.”

He reaches and opens the door, guiding her into her room before gently shutting the door behind them. He leans back against the door, and she follows, leaning against him for support because he’s all she has left. Her parents are dead, other than Chikara she doesn't know who among the palace staff can even be trusted anymore, and who knows where the hell Yuu and his entourage are now.

Oh god, _Yuu_.

The puff of breath he releases with his sigh warms her forehead. “You said you'd drive yourself crazy if you're alone, but you seem to be doing just that even with me here with you.”

“I — oh, sorry,” she says sheepishly. “I was just thinking — do you… do you think Yuu knows?”

“Knows about?”

“His pendant.” Fuck it, the tears are returning again with a burning fury. “It’s all my fault, Chikara-chan. His pendant — _oh_ god, he thinks it’s a good luck pendant. He's who-knows-where in this country, thinking that stupid fucking pendant is some good luck charm, but it’s…” The thought is too horrible for her to even complete, and it chokes her up with yet another wave of tears.

“How’s that your fault?” Chikara asks. _How is he still so composed? He heard the exact same thing she did, yet he’s still unruffled while she's falling to pieces. Or… or maybe it's _because_ she's falling to pieces that he has to stay calm, even though he could very well be freaking out inside right this very moment._

“It was — I was the one who put the pendant on him, don't you remember? I — I clasped it around
his neck, stupidly thinking it was some *good luck charm*—” She spits the phrase out bitterly. “—and because of me, the whole country’s condemned—”

“Princess,” he cuts in, with more urgency in his voice this time. “Princess, listen to me — you have to listen, okay? Tell me you’re listening, please.”

She nods. “Mhm, go on.”

His arm rests lightly — too lightly, fuck, she wishes he wouldn't hold himself back so much and just *touch* her properly, professional boundaries be damned — around her shoulders as he says carefully, “You’re probably not going to believe me anyway, if I know anything about you — but it’s *not* your fault. You couldn't have known the truth of what that pendant is. And the fact of the matter is that you *didn’t* know it at that time, so you can't beat yourself up for knowing now what you didn't then. So, please, stop hurting yourself like this. Makes me feel like I'm no good as your bodyguard if I can't protect you from yourself,” he adds self-deprecatingly and lowly, as if he didn't mean for her to hear it.

She opens her mouth to protest — “You’re wrong, you're a great bodyguard, the best I could’ve asked for. I'm sorry for always being so much trouble.” — but his other hand rests (again, too lightly) on top of her head, and the comfort and familiarity of the contact shuts her up.

None of this actually changes the fact that her baby brother, his friends and the entire kingdom are still in grave, unspeakable danger, all thanks to that stupid pendant Yuu’s wearing. Neither does it actually do anything to get rid of the madman on the floor directly above her (she shudders just to *think* of him lying in the bed her parents used to sleep in). This is pretty much the worst case scenario she could think of being stuck in, with no way out.

But, she thinks, pressed up against her cluelessly beloved bodyguard, that she can pretend just for tonight that everything is going to be okay.

——

And here they are, back on the road. As usual, Daichi and Suga are at the front, bickering good-naturedly over the directions like an old married couple. Kageyama and Shouyou follow behind, arguing over something or another. It's nice to see that some relationships never change. Yachi and Shimizu amble next to the two boys, holding hands and talking quietly among themselves. Asahi and Iwaizumi stay a safe distance from the rest of the group, both probably wanting some space from everyone else. Noya and Tooru bring up the rear.

“Mine is bigger than yours!” Hinata declares.

“Dumbass, size doesn't matter! Quality is more important!” Kageyama retorts heatedly.

“Well, mine has better size *and* quality, ha!”

“No, you moron! Maybe you should borrow Oikawa-san’s glasses, ’cause clearly you can't see that mine is better than yours!”

“Look at those two,” Noya snickers as he points at the bickering dynamic duo. “They're getting so heated up comparing their—”

“Pebbles; I know, Noya-chan, it’s ridiculous,” Tooru agrees, slinging an arm around Noya’s slender
shoulders.

‘Pebbles’ is not a metaphor or quirky euphemism — you see, Shouyou and Kageyama have made a game of picking up pebbles along the way and are competing to see whose pebble is nicer. It is, as Tooru has eloquently put it, ridiculous. However, Noya doesn't mind the absurdity of the pair’s strange dynamic, as he hasn't seen Shouyou in such high spirits ever since the night Shouyou learned the truth of his parents’ death. Noya may not be the sharpest tool in the hut or wherever the place is, but even a fool can tell much of Shouyou’s improved mood can be attributed to Kageyama’s presence by his side. In fact, Noya hasn't seen them apart ever since Tooru tried to find Nemo in their room.


Tooru snorts. “Yeah, I wouldn't make out with you. My taste in men isn’t as scrawny as Tobio-chan’s. I prefer men with more bulk and masculinity to balance out my delicate, almost effeminate, beauty. Someone like, say, Iwa-chan…”

He freezes when he realises what he let slip. Ahead of them, Iwaizumi’s shoulders tense at the sound of his nickname, though he doesn't turn around. Tooru’s crushed expression shows he notices the lack of movement too and tells Noya everything he needs to know about his friend’s emotional state.

“Still cold between you two, huh?” Noya asks.

“It’s like the Arctic, Noya-chan,” Tooru whimpers. His wet eyes narrate a story of heartbreak that the storyteller doesn't believe will ever be healed.

Something in Noya twinges — maybe pity, maybe something more personal like empathy — and he shuffles closer to his bodyguard and wraps an arm around his waist (because that's where he can comfortably place his arm without having to reach too high). He doesn't know whether he’s hugging Tooru to make him feel better, or because he himself needs something, anything, to soothe the throbbing loneliness that has made itself home in his heart. All he knows is that they're in the same boat. Although the reasons for their loneliness is different, the outcome is the same — the guy who means the most to each of them is not by their side, and it hurts like neither of them has ever felt before.

Because of this commonality they share, Noya doesn't care if Tooru will tell him to go away and leave him alone, or find something else to pick on. He cares too much about his friend to let him go through the same pain that he's feeling alone. So what if the broken pieces of Tooru’s heart pierce him too? Noya has never been a stranger to pain to begin with.

“You wanna talk about it?” he asks.

Tooru shakes his head. “There's nothing to talk about. Let’s talk about you instead, since your problem is easier to solve.”

“Huh? How?”

“He returned to the team for you, Noya-chan. All you have to do is give him a chance to return to you now.”

Noya’s eyes sting. Does Tooru think he doesn't want that? He wants nothing more than to leap onto the familiar back of Asahi and force him to piggyback him, steal his jackets again just to see Asahi lumber around looking for his missing clothing and play volleyball on the same side of the net as him
again. He wants to receive his practice serves, but he also wants to receive serves for him. But fear of being deserted again forms the chasm between where he is now and the place where he wishes he could be at.

“Look, I know what your stupid thick head is thinking,” Tooru says, sighing. “To put it shortly, you’re don’t want to let him back in ‘cause you’re afraid he’ll leave again. I understand—”

“How can you?!” Noya cries out angrily. “Have you ever been abandoned before?”

“Not personally, per se. But I imagine that Iwa-chan is probably feeling the same way as you are,” Tooru says, a note of bitterness and self-loathing in his voice. “That’s why he refuses to look at me. He hasn’t left yet because he knows the team still needs him, but he’s probably scared to be near me because he doesn’t want me to chase him away again. But I’m digressing from my point. The point is, everything that hulking yet timid Ace-chan has ever done since he met you is out of love for you, my impossibly dense prince.”

Noya opens his mouth to protest, but Tooru is quick to cut him off.

“Just hear me out, okay? It’s quite similar to what Princess-chan did, actually — she forced you to leave her ‘cause she thought you wouldn’t be safe with her. Asa-chan left you ‘cause he thought you wouldn’t be safe with him. It’s unfortunate you were hurt by his departure, of course, but the thing you should know is that he didn’t leave because of a selfish reason. He left out of a misguided but selfless love for you. And now he’s back — again, not for a selfish reason, but out of the same selfless love for you. He is one hell of a coward, don’t get me wrong; but to return after a falling out like that — that takes courage. Maybe you should show the same courage and give him a chance, Noya-chan.”

Noya watches his feet as they glide across the grassy terrain. “... Okay, but where do I start? I might have damaged things between us permanently.”

“And you probably thought Asahi’s departure from the team was permanent too,” Tooru counters. “Why don’t you start with telling him how you felt when he left?”

Noya tilts his head up to stare skeptically at Tooru. “That sounds like an awkward start. I mean, we didn't exactly get off on the right footing when he first returned.”

Tooru pats his head. “Hey, when in doubt just start with the elephant in the room. Things will work like clockwork from there, I’m sure of that.”

Noya doesn't reply. He doesn't feel the need to — what else is there to say to Tooru’s surprisingly thoughtful advice? Instead, he gives his friend a brief squeeze to show his appreciation.

“I could give you the same advice,” Noya finally says. “There’s a pretty big elephant in the room with you and Iwaizumi too.”

“As I said earlier, there's nothing to say. It’s all said and done — we’re over. He confirmed it himself.”

Noya hesitates a little, not sure if it is his place to say what he wants to say. He doesn't remember it being a secret, so he decides to say it. “He, um… he said he didn't actually mean it. What he said, I mean.”

Tooru’s brown eyes are as wide as saucers. “What do you mean, Noya-chan?”

Before Noya can answer, Daichi and Suga suddenly stop right in their tracks. The rest follow suit
behind them.

“What’s wrong, Captain?” Tooru calls from the back of the group.

“Whole bunch of bandits up ahead,” Daichi replies, his arms tense by his sides. “Let’s stop here for now, and Koushi and I will try to find another way to Nekoma—”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but that’s the only route to Nekoma from Johzenji,” Suga says. “Unless you want to backtrack to Tokonami and try to cross the sea?”

Noya grimaces. Every one of them knows that is not an option. First of all, they don't have the time to go all the way back to the Tokonami district. Second of all, even if they did, the situation regarding the kingdom’s seas is tricky at best. After the main port district, Dateko, was blown up last year, the kingdom lost a good number of ships and boats. The people who still have their ships and boats intact guard them jealously, refusing to even loan them to others. None of the Blue Crows has their own boat or connections to someone who has a boat, so travelling via sea was out of the picture. And even if they somehow manage to get themselves a boat, the waters of the kingdom are completely polluted with pirates. From what Noya has heard from his interviews with the citizens, they operate on the same principle as the bandits, the difference being that they just pillage at sea instead. In short, travelling across the sea would be too dangerous for them, even more dangerous than travelling across the land.

Besides, there is also Shouyou’s ‘surprise’ for them that can't seem to wait.

“We better gear up for a fight, then,” Iwaizumi says. He already has his hunting knife out.

Daichi turns to the girls. “You two—”

“I’ve been in a fight before,” Shimizu cuts him off. “I probably am nowhere near the level of you warriors, but I believe that I’ll be able to hold my own if I have to. However, in the interest of keeping Hitoka safe, I will do my best to stay out of harm’s way, unless I need to fight to keep her safe. Hitoka-chan, please stay by my side at all times during this fight.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” Yachi squeaks, sounding absolutely terrified.

“Everyone ready?” Daichi asks.

“Yes, Captain!”

As one entity, the Blue Crows charge forward. The bandits — about forty or so of them, as far as Noya can see — spot them and surge forward to meet them in the middle. Both sides know what the other wants, so they waste no time with formalities like pre-battle trash talk.

Caught right smack in the middle, Noya watches as the battle rages around him. He feels the vibration of his bracelets transforming into his trusty arm guards, stretching over his forearms.

Then, he waits. Normally, he isn't a patient one. But he recognises his limits, and he knows he's only useful when he sees a threat that needs deflecting. To do that, he needs to stand back and observe the fight carefully.

It seems Tooru has gotten the hang of wielding his power from his tattoos. Flames, brighter and hotter than the ones Noya has previously seen, spurt out from the warrior’s fingertips. A circle of dancing fire traps a small group of bandits, while ice shards stabbed straight through the ground in a triangular formation confine another three. With a protective veil of fire and ice swirling around him, he obviously doesn't need any assistance.
Noya’s watch turns to where Daichi and Iwaizumi are fighting back to back. Daichi’s spinning staff trips up several unsuspecting bandits, and Iwaizumi is deadly swift with and without his hunting knife. Even when one bandit manages to knock his knife out of his grip, he doesn’t panic, but he quickly flips said bandit onto the ground with so much strength the bandit instantly passes out cold. Then he picks up his fallen knife and continues fighting. And with Daichi guarding his back, there are no gaps in their defense.

Starting to feel restless, Noya fidgets as his gaze falls on where Suga, Shimizu and Yachi are hidden behind a tree. While Shimizu and Yachi stay out of the fight for the most part, occasionally he spots them throwing rocks at the back of several bandits’ heads. Suga is glowing luminescent white, which explains why none of them so far has seemed to take any permanent damage. Even they are contributing more to the fight than he is.

Needless to say, Kageyama and Shouyou need no help either. Their freak quick attack works both on the volleyball court and the battlefield. Noya watches in awe as the small redhead leaps impossible distances from boulder to boulder, taking his enemies by surprise and knocking them out. Kageyama doesn’t slack off either. Instead of simply dropping the boulders that are no longer used as stepping stones, he flings them at the other bandits encroaching their area, slamming them back several feet and cleanly knocking them out cold.

Finally, Noya’s eyes find Asahi, and he blinks in surprise. Has Asahi always been able to fight with this much agility? His movements are sharper and more fluid, making him look less like he is fighting and more like he’s dancing. Each powerful swing of his polearm sends bandits scattering away, each synchronised kick causing them to fall to their knees in pain.

But, Noya notices as he squints a little, Asahi’s shoulder is bleeding profusely, like a mini waterfall. He’s probably too far from where Suga is to be healed by their resident part-fairy, which is why the bleeding hasn’t stopped yet.

Then he spots something whizzing through the air, straight towards Asahi, and Noya realises what caused the bleeding.

He dashes like a streak of light towards the back of the unsuspecting giant, and he smashes his arm guards together, forcefully repelling the hurtling knife with a powerful BOOM. Halfway through its trajectory in the opposite direction, it combusts mid-air, and the dust of what was once metal flutters with ironic gentleness to the ground like ash after a volcanic eruption.

In unison, the remaining conscious bandits look up, startled by the loud sound.

“Did that kid just blow up a knife?” one of them says in disbelief. Noya notices a strange, almost foreign, twang to the bandit’s words. He briefly wonders why.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” another one cries out loud. “They’re more trouble than they're worth, and they knocked out too many of us. Let’s retreat!”

The bandits turn and flee with their metaphorical tail between their legs while dragging their fallen comrades with them.

Suga blinks bemusedly as he emerges from behind the tree. “Well, that was anticlimactic.”

“Yeah, and I was about to put on a show for the bandit I was fighting,” Tooru pouts. “Stop ruining all my cool moments, Noya-chan!”

“Whatever it is, I'm glad it’s over,” Daichi says. “Let’s get patched up, then we’ll continue on our
way to Nekoma.”

Noya spends the remainder of their trek reflecting on Tooru’s unexpectedly sage nuggets of wisdom. Unable to go five minutes without talking, Tooru continues to go on about something or another despite Noya’s obvious inattention. Tooru’s talking provides a nice background noise that helps him to focus on his thoughts, so he doesn’t tell his bodyguard to shut up.

The sun starts to slip below the horizon, so Daichi announces that they would be setting up camp here — a lovely spot beside a creek with plenty of trees to provide shelter. Nobody protests as they set their belongings down. Half of them begin to set up camp while the other half prepares dinner.

Later, during dinner, Noya decides to act on Tooru’s advice.

“Asahi,” he pronounces, pointing his chopsticks at the warrior diagonally across from him.

"Eep! I-I mean — yes, Noya?” Asahi’s voice trembles as he says Noya’s name.

“Talk.”

“I am? Talking, I mean.”

Noya’s face flushes when he hears Tooru snicker beside him. “I — I mean! I want to talk to you. Later. Not now. Maybe by the water or something.”

“Um, okay?” The large warrior looks rather much like he wants to dissolve into the grass.

While Asahi still isn’t meeting Noya’s eyes, his positive response satisfies Noya. He ducks his head to continue eating his dinner, trying to ignore the burning in the tips of his ears and Tooru’s not-so quiet snickering.

“Nice one, Casanova,” Tooru teases.

“Oh, shut up,” Noya snaps. “At least I talked to him.”

Still, his stomach is twisting and turning with unprecedented nervousness. What is he so nervous about? This is Asahi, who wouldn't kill a fly without at least apologising to it first, whose demeanour is far too nonthreatening for his intimidating appearance, who can't even look Noya in the eye.

*Asahi can leave again just as easily as he did last time.*

He has nothing to be afraid of, except he has everything to be terrified of.

Later that night, he finds Asahi by the creek, as promised. Unsure of how to inform Asahi of his presence, he awkwardly shuffles his feet as loud as he can.

Asahi hears him, as he turns around. His gentle brown eyes widen when he spots Noya. “Noya!”
“Um.”

*Good start, Yuu,* he snaps at himself.

“Were you… were you waiting long?” Asahi asks hesitantly.

“No. I just came. Er, arrived. Yeah.” Noya, not knowing what to do, aimlessly prods a stray pebble with the toe of his boot.

*This is so awkward I might actually die,* he mentally groans. He almost wishes they have a mediator between them — except, he knows that he has to do this himself. This is between just him and Asahi; he shouldn't drag others into their mess.

“You don't look so comfortable standing there,” Asahi ventures. “You can sit here — ah, but only if you want to, of course! It's not like I'm trying to force you or anything…”

Noya silently takes the offered spot beside Asahi, but there's a clear arm’s length of distance between them.

The two of them sit there in complete, awkward silence. Asahi’s spine is ramrod stiff, like his body is prepared to bolt at any moment. Butterflies continue to flap in Noya’s stomach, and he swears he has entire garden of them renting his stomach for their leisure.

Why did I think this was a good idea? Stupid Tooru, talking me into things I don't want to do, he curses his friend.

“Noya?”

Noya is glad Asahi broke the silence first. “Hmm?”

“It's not like — it's not that I'm ungrateful or anything, but… why did you save me earlier? I didn't think you liked me that much anymore. That knife was really small, so it wouldn't have done any permanent damage anyway. And — and even if there was major damage, Suga could've just healed it anyway.”

Noya stares resolutely at the moon’s reflection in the dark water as he says, “Well, just ‘cause you abandoned me doesn’t mean I was about to abandon you too.”

According to their reflection, Asahi flinches like Noya hit him between his eyes.

“Look, Noya, I didn't mean — uh, I mean—”

“Did you know how much it hurt?” Noya cuts in. Then all at once, everything bursts out, unable to stay contained in his small body. “When you left, I mean. Did you know how lost I felt without you for the past few weeks? How *abandoned* I felt? It hurt more than anything else I’ve ever felt, and I got stabbed before.”

“Noya, listen, I can explain—”

“No, I’ve already heard it from you before,” Noya steamrolls on. "I don't want to hear anymore. *You* listen. You *betrayed* me, Asahi. I thought I could depend on you!”

"I'm sor—"

"Don't you remember? *You* were the one who told me that you didn't want me to give up. And so I didn't, because I thought if Asahi was the one telling me not to give up then I shouldn't. So I kept
fighting and doing my best to improve so I could be an asset to the team instead of a burden, because you told me to. And when the going got tough, what did you do? You ran away!”

“Listen—” Asahi tries to plead, but now Noya is too caught up in his own hurt and fury to pay attention, so he cuts Asahi off again.

“But it's more than just that. All I've ever done is believe in you, Asahi. And you believed in me. So why couldn't you do the same for yourself?”

Asahi's crestfallen expression crumbles even more. He fumbles at thin air with his hands, like the perfect answer would just magically materialise from nowhere.

Angry tears form in Noya's eyes as he continues his tirade. “Don't you think it's funny that the person who told me not to give up, who told me he believed in me, was the same person who couldn't believe in himself and ran away like a fucking coward after one defeat, Asahi? Because I don't. Do you get how fucking hard it was to try and pretend that your betrayal, your hypocrisy, didn't hurt? And even now, talking about it…” His lower lip quivers. “It hurt so much every day you weren't here. And I thought that if somehow, by some miracle you came back, it would be better.”

“And I'm back now, Noya!” Asahi says, desperation evident in his voice.

“But for how long?” he counters. Fuck it, he's crying now. “How long are you going to stay before you give up again? Or is coming back to the team just a temporary escape from whatever it was you were running from before you bumped into Daichi and Suga?”

I can't even bring myself to say hello to you without wondering if the next thing I'll be saying to you is another goodbye.

“Please, Noya—”

“You know what, why am I even talking to you? I should've known it wouldn't do any good, since you can just up and leave again—”

“Noya, please listen to me!” Asahi grabs Noya’s shoulders, turning him so that they face each other. “I wasn't running away from anything when I met Daichi and Suga at the bar. In fact, I — maybe I should start from the beginning.”

Noya hates to admit it, but he's intrigued. He doesn't pull away, but he folds his arms across his chest to prevent Asahi from coming any closer.

“After we, er, parted ways, I went to a village just southeast of Dateko to seek out my sensei. Sensei Ukai was the first one to—”

“Wait,” Noya says, his eyes widening with recognition, "your sensei is named Ukai?!"

Asahi blinks, confused. “Er, yeah—”

“What's he doing all the way there? Doesn't he have a store to be running in Karasuno? And isn't he too young to have been your first sensei?”

Asahi’s eyes widen. “Noya, I think you're mistaken. My sensei is sixty-nine years old.”

“Huh?” Noya says blankly, the gears in his mind screeching to an abrupt halt.
“My sensei is Ukai Ikkei. I think the Ukai you're thinking about is his grandson, Ukai Keishin-san. Ukai-sensei told me he had a grandson who owned a store in Karasuno.”

“Oh.” Now Noya feels stupid for interrupting.

Asahi nods. “Yeah, families can be confusing. Er, anyway, he was an old friend of my grandfather’s, so my oji-san asked him to train me when I was a kid. That was before I enrolled in the Training Academy. Ukai-sensei was an accomplished warrior in his prime, which is no surprise that because he trained me, I ended up being the ‘Ace’ of my cohort.

“So after my, um, defeat, I was wandering around aimlessly for a while, before I started feeling lonely and regretting leaving. I wanted to return to the team, but I knew if I returned the way I was I would just be a liability to you guys. So I decided to visit him and ask him to help me polish my skills.”

“Ah, so that explains why I thought you were fighting differently earlier,” Noya remarks.

Asahi rubs the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah, Ukai-sensei really whipped me into shape. I… I planned to return all along — I just needed some time to be good enough before officially rejoining the team. I’m sorry I kept you waiting for so long, Noya. If there is anything I can do to make it up to you, I’ll do it. I swear, Noya, I’ll do everything I can to prove that I am here to stay with you, this time.”

And Noya believes him, because while Asahi is a coward, he isn't a liar. He stammers and blushes and rubs the back of his neck far too much to even be a mediocre liar. It really is that simple.

Fresh tears well up in Noya’s eyes, but these ones aren't from hurt or anger. They're different — lighter, maybe even happier. “I suppose there is something you can do.”

“Yeah?”

Noya tilts his head, so he's looking at Asahi straight in the eyes as he says, “I want you to tell me you believe in yourself. But only when you can actually mean it. I don't want any more empty words and bullshit from you.”

Asahi nods. “Alright, I'll keep that in mind. Is there anything else I can do?”

Noya doesn't even pause to think. “Hug me. I need a hug.”

And whatever Noya’s needs are, Asahi always finds a way to deliver in the end. Asahi leans closer and engulfs his prince in his arms, encasing him in his familiar warmth. His arms wrap around Asahi’s neck, and he shuffles such that he’s perched on his lap. Asahi’s cheek pressed against his temple sends warm jolts through him, but it's not unpleasant, he finds. In fact, it feels really fucking nice, like a reminder that Asahi is here and not going anywhere.

“I'm sorry, Asahi,” Noya chokes out.

“What for? You have nothing to be sorry for!” Asahi exclaims, sounding panicked.

“I'm sorry for doubting you. I really fucked up. I should have had more faith in you.”

“Shh, it doesn't matter to me. I'm just glad we’re okay now — er, we are, right?”

Noya pulls his face away from Asahi’s chest so he can look at him while laughing at how much of a dork he is. “Of course, you big doofus. Like I could hold a grudge anyway.”
Asahi’s tense body relaxes against Noya’s. “Oh, okay. That’s — that’s good. Yeah, it is.”

Then — completely taking Noya by surprise and throwing him for a loop — he brushes Noya’s bleached bangs away from his face and tenderly kisses his forehead, like he's afraid Noya would break if he applied too much pressure. The gesture feels sweet and protective, but Noya — caught off guard — lets out a gasp, which startles Asahi into abruptly pulls away.

“Ah! I’m so sorry, Noya!” he frantically apologises. “That was too forward—”

“N-no, I was, um — it's cool,” Noya stammers, his cheeks flaming. “Stop apologising, you nerd.”

“O-okay…”

Despite the shock of the surprise kiss, Noya stays curled up in Asahi’s lap. He doesn't want to go just yet. The warmth and safety of being in the haven that is Asahi's arms is too good for him to leave so soon. And from the firm way Asahi is holding him, it is clear to even the bluntest tool in the hut or wherever that he doesn't want to let go either.

It truly is the best of times.

Chapter End Notes

Aww, I thought after all the consecutive cliffhangers I’ve been leaving for the past 5 chapters, you guys deserve a happy closing to a chapter. So enjoy some AsaNoya fluff — I’ve been long overdue to write some AsaNoya fluff for ages.

Also, the book Oikawa was reading is a real book! It’s called A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens. I thought the whole spiel about the best of times and the worst of times fit Noya’s personal angst of wanting to be with Asahi after being apart for so long but also not wanting to see Asahi bc he's still pissed!

As always, thank you for reading! :DD

hang out with me on tumblr maybe?
The next three weeks on the road to Nekoma are the happiest Noya has been in a while. With Asahi officially back, how can he not be? There's an extra spring in his step, an extra stretch in his smile and an extra burst of butterflies in his stomach whenever he lays his eyes on Asahi. He doesn't ruminate much on the last feeling, though. He's done enough thinking; now, he just wants to enjoy being with him.

Tooru congratulated Noya on reconciling with Asahi the morning after they made up. He teased Noya when he brought up the hugging (though Noya chose to keep the forehead kiss to himself) and made a big show of pushing the two to walk together when they set off on their journey after breakfast. However, despite his bravado, Noya didn't miss the way Tooru’s gaze lingered longingly on Iwaizumi when he thought no one was looking. He tried to convince Tooru to just man up and talk to his fiance — he refused to accept that they had called off their engagement — but every time he brought Iwaizumi up, Tooru completely closed off. It frustrated him to no end and put a small damper on his otherwise upbeat mood.

Earlier this afternoon, Tooru specifically told Noya to give him some space. Noya agreed with some reluctance, and so here he is, walking next to Asahi and regaling him with stories of what happened during his absence.

“Wow, I can't believe Suga actually got jealous,” Asahi says, surprised painted in his tone.

Noya laughs. “He would totally deny it if you call him out on it, though.”

Asahi smiles his usual soft, sheepish smile, and Noya’s heart soars. It has been doing a lot of soaring lately, mostly in the vicinity of Asahi.

“I see it, I see it!” Shouyou’s enthusiastic voice rings loud and clear from where he is at the front.

“Yes, the rest of us have eyes too, idiot.” Kageyama snaps.

“Well, you didn't point it out first, so I win! Don't scowl like that at me, or your face will stick like that — that’s what my mother always used to say.”

“Don't tell me what to do, dumbass!”

As usual, the duo continue their bickering the rest of the way to the Nekoma district. Asahi looks worried about them, and Noya reassures him that they're always like that, in case he forgot.

When they finally step foot into Nekoma, Daichi turns to face the rest of the group.

“Okay team, you know the drill. It’s going to be evening, so let’s get a room at an inn and call it a day, alright?”
Their usual chorus of “yes captain” is interrupted, surprisingly, by Shouyou.

“Wait, Daichi-san! We still have things to do!”

Daichi arches an eyebrow at Shouyou’s announcement. “And what is this ‘thing’, exactly?”

“The surprise!” Shouyou waves the letter from his mystery friend excitedly. “Since we’re finally here in Nekoma, I’ll show you guys what the surprise is!”

“Oh, about time, Shou-chan,” Tooru says. “You’ve been killing me with the suspense ever since you said you had some surprise in store for us.”

“Just get on with it,” Kageyama grunts.

Grinning with infectious joy, Shouyou rips open the envelope and waves a glossy red and black slip of paper at them. Daichi carefully plucks the paper from his hands and scans its contents. His dark eyes widen in surprise.

“What is it, Dai-chan?” Tooru demands.

“They… they’re Platinum-seat tickets for something called Night of Wonder — A Team Neko Production,” Daichi says, his voice hushed with awe.

Suga gasps. “No way, Hinata! How did you even manage to get tickets to a Team Neko production?”

Shouyou beams. “I have friends who are part of the production! I knew their annual show was coming up, so I wanted to get us all tickets to catch it.”

“But this is Team Neko we’re talking about,” Iwaizumi interjects disbelievingly. “Tickets for even the worst seats cost something in the triple digits range, and these are for the VIP seats in the house. What did you pay for to get these, an arm and a leg?”

Shouyou’s cheeks are tinted pink. “Um, well, when my parents passed away, they left a lot of money behind for me and Natsu. And I’ve been saving up ever since last year’s show, so yeah.”

“And you spent all that money on something like show tickets?!” Kageyama yells. “How much of a dumbass are you?!”

Shouyou blinks up at him in confusion. “I said my parents left a lot of money behind. Like, a lot. There’s still, like, several hundred million left.” Seeing their gobsmacked expressions, he rushes to add, “It’s not a big deal, really! My grandparents and great-grandparents were some bigshot business tycoons, and my parents were military medics, so it’s really a no-brainer that I have some extra money.”

“There's more,” Daichi mutters as he fishes another small stack of apple-red tickets out from the envelope.

“Exclusive backstage passes?” Yachi gasps, her hand clutching Shimizu’s tightening in shock. Even the usually composed Shimizu looks surprised.

“Those are on the house,” Shouyou mumbles. “I wanted to pay, but they insisted. Just… please don’t worry about the cost, okay? I just want you guys to enjoy yourselves later tonight at the show. They worked really hard on it, and from what my friend told me it sounds like it’s gonna be really awesome. Like bwoosh! and zing!”
Suga ruffles Shouyou’s hair affectionately. “Thank you for this lovely surprise, Hinata. It was very sweet of you.”

“Yeah, you're the best, Shouyou!” Noya cheers. He runs over to give his friend a hug, which Shouyou enthusiastically returns.

Now, with renewed cheer after Shouyou’s surprise, the team sets off in search for a place to stay.

Noya is proud of his team. It took them only ten minutes to find their super fancy seats near the top of the theatre. That has to be some kind of record, given how gigantic the place is — the place looks more like a stadium that could seat an entire village than a simple theatre.

All of them are dressed in their smart-casual best. Noya takes great pride in the outfit he has assembled for himself — his usual black blazer, an orange shirt underneath, with the characters for ‘love never gives up’ across the chest in a stylish font, his usual crow pendant around his neck and skinny black jeans ripped at the knees. It really has that ROLLING THUNDER vibe to it, he thinks. Yachi and Shimizu are very pretty in their pink and black dresses respectively, and the dudes look fresh — though he believes Asahi should get special mention. The giant dork managed to steal Noya’s breath when he emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a dark blue button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows (his forearms look so good it should be a sin) and grey jeans (his butt looks so good in them it should also be a sin). Noya has always known his bodyguard is quite the looker, but hot damn does he clean up nicely.

The group take their seats. Kageyama, Shouyou, Yachi, Shimizu and Iwaizumi take the front row, while Tooru, Noya, Asahi, Suga and Daichi occupy the second row. While waiting for the show to start, Suga entertains them with details about the production he’s reading off the programme booklet. Noya, having been holed up in the palace for most of his life, has never heard of Team Neko Productions, so he listens with rapt attention. Turns out that this year is Team Neko’s hundredth anniversary, which is why they’re putting up four consecutive nights of performances instead of their usual two to celebrate. Another detail Suga shares is that most of the acts are teenagers like them, which makes the whole thing sound all the more impressive to him.

However, when Noya notices Tooru and Iwaizumi’s unfocused gazes, his good spirits fall a little. Ever since he and Asahi made up, he’s been trying to push them together with varying degrees in subtlety. Seeing that Tooru was a lost cause, he tried talking to Iwaizumi instead; but his efforts proved futile. Iwaizumi was unwavering in his belief that he had no business being with Tooru if Tooru didn’t understand what he wanted. It’s odd — Noya distinctly recalled Iwaizumi saying during one breakfast that he’d go and talk to Oikawa once they had calmed down, but that obviously hadn’t happened yet. Oh well. Noya supposed it’s just human nature to say you’d do something but decide against it when you're actually about to do it, out of — who knows? — awkwardness, shame, not knowing what to say.

Well I mean, yeah, loving can cause people pain, Noya reasons to himself as he watches the feuding couple. But if there's anything he knows about love, it’s that staying away from someone you love and who loves you doesn't do either party any good. Unconsciously, his hand finds Asahi’s larger one and squeezes it. Asahi jerks but is quick to return the squeeze.

“Noya?”
“Yeah?” he asks, turning to the bodyguard next to him.

“You okay?” Asahi asks. His eyebrows are furrowed together, a gesture that Noya can’t help but find incredibly endearing.

He quirks a smile. “Never been better!”

Asahi nods, returning the smile shyly. “That’s good, ’cause the show is starting.”

Noya turns around and realises that the lights in the theatre have darkened, with the only light emanating from the stage. Oh well, he’ll figure out how to fix Tooru and Iwaizumi later. Now, he has a show to enjoy. With that thought in mind, he snuggles up next to Asahi, pressing his cheek against his sturdy shoulder.

The performance blows all of Noya’s prior expectations out of the water. The opening act, an intricate dance performance, alone steals all the air in his lungs. Many other different acts follow — singers who manage to hit impossibly high notes and get the audience chanting along; martial artists who perform all sorts of awesome moves while striking cool poses; improv comedy sketches that has the audience rolling in the aisles, and a skit that tugs at Noya’s heartstrings. He can’t help being a softie, alright, so don’t judge him for shedding a few manly tears.

He isn’t the only one moved by the skit. On his left, Tooru has an entire box of tissues on his lap and is furiously blowing his nose. Shouyou has his arms wrapped around Kageyama’s while he bawls into Kageyama’s shoulder. Shimizu passes a handkerchief to Yachi, who uses it to dab away her tears. Suga, to Noya’s mild envy, is a pretty crier. His nose isn’t gross and runny (unlike Tooru’s), and the tears only make his hazel eyes even brighter and prettier. Daichi seems to think the same way, if the loving way he’s gazing at Suga is any indication. Gross; Noya might just barf from how sickeningly sick those two are.

A thunderclap-like sniff on his right nearly scares Noya out of his seat. He turns to his right and finds Asahi’s huge frame trembling with each sob that escapes him. Something in Noya melts. Since when was Asahi this cute?

“You can cry on my shoulder if you want to,” Noya teases.

“You’ll to have to get the child’s booster seat if you want that General Sherman tree to be able to reach your shoulder without spraining his neck,” Tooru snorts. Noya glares at him and, out of pettiness reserved only for Tooru, knocks the tissue box off his lap.

“You two, behave yourselves,” Daichi scolds.

What seems to be the final act of the night follows the tear-jerking skit. A guy who can’t be any older than Daichi saunters onstage. The cheers that resonate all around the theatre indicate that this guy is quite popular, maybe even the most popular act. From where he is sitting, Noya can’t tell much about his height, though he can see that the guy is quite well-built, lithe yet muscular. The thing that really stands out about him is the unruly mess of black hair that sits on his head. Noya can’t help but feel impressed by how high this guy’s hair stands, and in so many directions too.

From behind the curtain, a smaller guy with hair that is blond at the tips and dark at the roots emerges. He sticks close to the edge of the stage as he snaps his fingers. Hoops of fire dance mid-air, and that seems to act as a cue for his taller partner. With a grin, he transforms into a black panther-like cat, causing Noya to gasp in surprise and Shouyou to bounce up and down in his seat in excitement. Even a “calm down, idiot” from Kageyama doesn’t dampen his energy. To Noya’s further astonishment, the large cat leaps through the row of fire hoops, twisting its/his long slender
body to fit through and make sharp turns. After making it through the fire, the cat lands on the ground feet-first and morphs back into the dark-haired man. Screams threaten to deafen Noya, yet the guy doesn't seem bothered. He flashes a charming grin at the crowd, causing the chanting of "Kuroo! Kuroo!" to rise in volume, and bows.

The whole theatre seems to hold its breath as the man-cat continues to perform stunts that his blond partner sets up without missing a beat. Each stunt increases in absurdity, until Noya can't see how it is possible for anyone to perform them. Yet, Kuroo pulls each and every one of them off flawlessly. At the end of his act, he receives a standing ovation from the whole audience. The entire building is quaking with all the cheering and applause for this breathtaking stuntman and his partner. Noya and Shouyou are jumping up and down on their seats, and even the normally stoic Kageyama and Iwaizumi are standing and applauding.

“Honestly, what was that idiot doing in the Elite Squad in the first place?” Tooru mutters. “He should’ve just been doing this from the beginning.”

The cheers soon die down when Kuroo opens his mouth to speak. His voice is projected clearly, even though there doesn't seem to be anything to amplify it.

“On behalf of the whole of Team Neko, I’d like to thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to come and catch our humble production,” Kuroo says, spreading his arms to address the chuckling audience. Noya can see why he’s the most popular act; not only did his performance get the most enthusiastic response, his charisma automatically makes the audience cling to his every word. He runs his hand through his messy hair — an action that evokes excited squeals from the girls in the crowd. “None of this would have been possible without all of you. As we at Team Neko like to say, the most important people in any production are not the performers, director, or producers, but it’s you guys. You guys are like the blood in our veins, keeping us functioning and going. So to thank all of you, we have one more surprise for you!"

He pauses to let the audience gasp and cheer for him again, before dramatically raising a hand to quell the noise. Instantly, the whole theatre falls silent.

He grins a handsome grin. “This one is all Kenma, so be sure to give him your loudest cheers, alright? Look up — your surprise is up there.”

Noya obeys him, and his jaw drops when the roof vanishes. Jets of red light zoom up into the obsidian night sky and twirl around like ballerinas, forming hundreds of tiny hearts. The hearts dance to the beat of the music pounding in the background, spinning and gliding on an invisible stage. In the center, two small hearts meld together smoothly to form a bigger heart, and the hearts change in colour from ruby to amethyst. The rest follow suit. The hearts continue joining in pairs, changing colours along the way, until a gigantic golden heart is floating in the sky. Then it erupts into a shower of golden sparks that rains over the audience.

“Beautiful…” Noya breathes out, awestruck.

Asahi probably crapped his pants when the roof disappeared, he snickers to himself. However, when he turns around to confirm his hypothesis, he's shocked to find Asahi’s gaze already on him. He hastily brushes it off and shoots him a wide grin. Asahi returns it with a shy but genuine smile, his eyes sparkling with unadulterated joy as he turns his gaze back up to the night sky. Noya feels like Asahi is taking his heart with him, with every movement and every shy smile. Suddenly, he understands why Daichi looks at Suga with such tenderness. Even though he can't see his own face, he's willing to bet that he’s gazing at Asahi with the exact same adoration. He can't hold himself back — Asahi is just too radiant for him to tear his eyes from.
The light show concludes all too soon. All the performers return to the stage to bow one last time to the audience, and then the curtains shut and the theatre is flooded with light.

“Amazing,” Suga says breathlessly. “Hinata, thank you for bringing us to see this.”

Shouyou waves it off. “It’s no biggie! But the night isn’t over yet. I gotta introduce you guys to the team. C’mon, let’s go, let’s go!”

Shouyou drags them all the way to the backstage, where they are let in after showing the guards their backstage passes. Noya only has a brief moment to wonder if Shouyou has friends in every single district before Shouyou’s loud cry of greeting cuts his thoughts off.

“Kenma!” Shouyou exclaims, galloping over to the skinny blond guy. The other guy flinches slightly when Shouyou grabs his arms, but quickly relaxes when he sees that it’s Shouyou. “That was so amazing! Like gwah and bam!”

Kenma shuffles his feet awkwardly. “Hi, Shouyou.”

Yachi gasps. “Hinata, why didn't you say you were friends with my cousin?”

Everyone gapes at her. Cousin?!

“No way, you two are related?” Shouyou exclaims, buzzing with excitement.

“Yeah, though she's the actual blonde,” Kenma mutters.

“I haven't seen you in ages, Kenma!” Yachi says, hurrying over to squeeze her cousin's hands in greeting. “Wow, you've grown a lot taller since the last time I saw you.”

“I didn't — I'm not that tall…”

Yachi smiles at him. That smile could stop a riot. “Regardless of height, that really was an impressive performance!”

“Yeah!” Shouyou exuberantly agrees. “You just zoom! and the lights went pop! in the sky and you just whoosh! and suddenly there were so many hearts! You really are an awesome sorcerer!”

“What, nothing to say to the main star of the show?” a new voice drawls from behind Kenma.

Shouyou perks up. “Kuroo-san! You were incredible too! Like bwah! and za-boom!”

Kuroo laughs, a deep, throaty sound. He strides over to Shouyou and Kenma, slinging his arms around both their shoulders. “Just kidding. Kitten here was the real star.”

“No, I wasn't,” Kenma mutters.

“Yes, you were.”

“No, I wasn't.”

“Yes, you were.”

“No, I wasn't.”

The Blue Crows exchange awkward looks. Just from one observation of their interaction, it’s clear as day that there is something going on between Kenma and Kuroo.
“Who are your friends here, chibi-chan?” Kuroo gestures to Noya and his friends.

“Oh right, I should introduce you!” Shouyou briefly introduces the team to Kuroo and Kenma, before turning to the Blue Crows. “Guys, this is Kuroo and Kenma! They’re one of the coolest acts, and they’ve been working with Team Neko since last year.”

“Wait, so this is only your second year performing?” Suga asks, surprised. When Kuroo nods, he raises his eyebrows. “Wow, that’s really impressive! From the applause and cheering, I thought you two were long-time favourites or something.”

“Nah, but I’m flattered you think that,” Kuroo says, a casual grin on his face. “I was actually a warrior before the stage captured my heart and stole me away from the Elite Squad. That’s how I know Seijoh over there, actually. We Elite Squad captains are tight.” He playfully slaps Tooru on the back. “Been a while, dude. You still doing your prince-guarding gig?”

“Um, well…” Tooru mutters. For once, he seems to not know how to respond. Noya realises why — he’s supposed to be dead, which means Tooru technically has no prince to guard as far as the public knows. They haven’t encountered a situation like this before, so they don’t have an alibi prepared.

Kuroo rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry, I didn't mean to phrase it like a question. It's just been a long day, y’know?”

Tooru’s head snaps up, slightly alarmed. “I beg your pardon?”

“I mean, short stuff over there is the prince you’re supposed to be waiting on hand and foot, ain’t he?” Kuroo says, gesturing to Noya, who freezes.

The rest of the team stares at Kuroo in disbelief. How on earth is he able to tell that Noya is the prince? The public isn’t supposed to know what the prince looks like, to protect him, until he becomes of age — that’s why his parents refused to let him beyond the palace gates when he was younger. Yet Kuroo figured it out like it was just a game of chess.

“Oops, was that classified info?” Kuroo drawls, not sounding particularly apologetic.

“Kuro,” Kenma sighs, “the prince was assassinated, remember?”

“You know I don't buy that crap, kitten. I never believed the prince was dead, and the proof is right here.”

Daichi narrows his eyes. “And why is that so?”

Despite Daichi’s threatening tone, Kuroo’s body language remains relaxed. “That’s ‘cause I know what kind of guy Seijoh is. I know that he won’t let anyone under his protection die without sacrificing himself first. And since I didn't get any news of his tragic demise, I could only assume that he and hence, the prince, are both alive.”

Noya’s jaw drops. This guy isn’t just an amazing stuntman who can transform into a cat – he’s also dangerously smart. Although Shouyou seems fond of him, Noya doesn’t want to let his guard down around Kuroo just yet.

“Besides, he looks too much like the queen for it to be a coincidence,” Kenma adds quietly.

“Nah, ordinary laymen wouldn't notice the resemblance unless you put the two next to each other,” Kuroo says. “Kenma is just observant.”
So Kuroo is clever and Kenma catches all the tiny details others would overlook. Noya can see how they could make a dangerous pair to mess with.

Tooru frowns. “Well, the thing is—”

“Don't even try lying, Seijoh,” Kuroo interjects, his lazy drawl frosting over. “I can smell bullshit from ten miles away, thanks to my feline senses. But don't get your panties in a twist over it, your secret’s safe with us.”

“You're just as aggravating as ever,” Tooru sniffs disdainfully. “It’s nice to see that some things don’t change.”

Kuroo smirks in response. “I am a fount of stability. But you're not really one to talk about aggravating, are you? I'm sure your Iwa-chan would agree.”

A pregnant silence swallows the room. This is so not how Noya imagined meeting the performers after the show. The tension is so thick it nearly forms a cocoon around him, and no one seems to want to meet anyone’s eyes. Well, except for Kuroo and Tooru, as they stare each other down from opposite ends of the room. Beside him, Iwaizumi clears his throat awkwardly.

“So, Kuroo-san and Kozume-san,” Suga says, finally dissolving the awkward silence. “Why did you two decide to join Team Neko?”

“Just Kenma,” Kenma mumbles. He twists his fingers so much Noya worries they’ll snap off.

“Right, sorry,” Suga quickly amends, giving Kenma a gentle smile.

Kuroo smoothly reverts back to his usual relaxed stance. “For me, it was after Operation KD. After all the shit that went down, I was done. I didn't want anything else to do with the military, not if I would be ordered to take away innocent lives.”

Tooru and Kageyama stiffen simultaneously.

“Wait, you know?” Shouyou asks.

“I remember,” Kuroo corrects. “After General Nekomata made the first announcement, I couldn’t help but feel like something was just off about the whole thing. My gut told me they would try messing around with my memories using Memory Alteration Magic, or something to that extent; so when I went home to say bye to Kenma, I asked him to cast a spell on me to prevent anyone from tampering with my memories. Whatever it was that I was about to get into, no matter the horror or trauma that would follow, I wanted to remember. I hate staying in the dark and being used like a pawn.”

Tooru’s gaze lowers as he quietly asks the next question weighing on all their minds.

“Do I regret it? No, not at all.” Kuroo’s conviction in his automatic response takes all of them by surprise. “I didn't kill any innocent people, 'cause my unit was focused on taking out the soldiers, so I have nothing on my conscience—”

Kageyama looks like he wants to bolt out of the room, if the clenched fists by his sides are anything to go by.

“—and I’ve come to terms with everything that happened. PTSD was a thing, obviously, but I think I've managed it pretty well. I went for therapy, and the shrink suggested I consider a different profession, maybe something to do with entertainment 'cause I have a flair for showing off in front of
a crowd, according to her. I dragged Kenma along with me, and so here we are now.”

“I — I see,” Suga stammers. “Thank you for sharing.”

Kuroo shrugs. “Sharing is caring. Hey, you there — the grumpy one.”

“Oh, you mean Tobio-chan?” Tooru asks. A mischievous grin crosses his previously pensive expression as he pushes Kageyama in front of Kuroo.

“Yeah, I remember you.” Kuroo nods sagely. “Your reputation really preceded you back on Kitagawa Daiichi. The guys in my unit couldn't stop talking about this badass guy from Unit Flare who could literally split the earth into half.”

Kageyama’s face flushes with embarrassment, but his reply is cut off by a sneering voice from somewhere behind Kuroo.

“Oh, look what we have here. Has the famous King of the Battlefield graced us with his noble presence?”

A tall blond guy enters the room, with a freckled companion by his side. He strides towards Kageyama until they’re just a foot apart. He has several centimeters on Kageyama, which to Noya means he is really freaking tall.

Kageyama scowls at him. “Don't call me that.”

“Why not? I believe it's rude to not address royalty with the proper respect they deserve, your Majesty.” The blond’s matching golden eyes fall on Noya. His lip curls. “I was expecting someone a little taller to be the actual prince of this queendom, though. What is the age difference between you and the new queen? Ten years?”

“I'm seventeen, jackass!” Noya snaps. “And nee-chan is nineteen.”

Kuroo rolls his eyes as he places a hand on the blond’s shoulder. “Yo Tsukki, did you eat your weight in fries or something? ’Cause you're being really salty, even for you.”

‘Tsukki’ glowers at Kuroo. “It’s Tsukishima, so please don't call me that.”

“Sweet little Yams calls you that all the time.”

“Well, unless I am mistaken, and I rarely am, you aren’t Yamaguchi.”

Tsukishima’s freckled friend, Yamaguchi, snickers. “Nice one, Tsukki.”

Kuroo’s provocative grin widens. “Jeez, aren't you a delightful one? You know what you should do, Tsukki? Take your sass — yeah, just take it — and put it in your pocket, ‘cause it’s not needed right now.”

Tsukishima eyebrow twitches with barely concealed irritation. “Kuroo-san, with all due respect—”

“Wait,” Noya says, the realisation hitting him like a brick. “Your name is Tsukishima?”


“Sass in your pocket, Tsukki,” Kuroo chides.

“I met your brother in Karasuno,” Noya rushes to say before Tsukishima can say something snappy
to Kuroo. “Tsukishima Akiteru, right?”

A scowl flickers across Tsukishima’s face, before it’s replaced by his usual deadpan expression. “What about that soft idiot?”

“He, er…” Noya hurriedly ransacks his brain for the memory of what Akiteru said. “He told me to tell you that he’s sorry for, uh — what did he do again? Oh yeah, he lied to you. So yeah, he’s really sorry about that. He also says that he loves you and that he wants to watch one of your performances, if you’re alright with it.”

Everyone’s bewildered stares swing between Noya and Tsukishima, like they’re watching a volleyball match. Noya, however, is only focused on the tall blond in front of him.

Tsukishima’s impassive expression barely wavers. “Message not acknowledged.”

“Excuse me?! I remembered that for him!” Noya exclaims indignantly. “It’s been months since I saw him, yet I remembered it for you—”

“And I said, message. Not. Acknowledged.” Tsukishima’s golden eyes flash dangerously behind his glasses.

Yamaguchi touches his bicep gently. “Come on, Tsukki. This is Akiteru-nii we’re talking about. Your brother, whom you haven't seen in ages. Don't you want to know what he has to say?”

“Shut up, Yamaguchi.”

“Sorry, Tsukki!”

“Besides,” Tsukishima adds, moving closer to Noya so he can stare down at him, “asking someone to pass a message is outdated. If he really cared, it would be easier to just send a letter. Lord knows I need extra fuel to keep my fire burning, what with the weather getting colder.”

“Gee, Tsukki, no need to go all Jack Frost on your beloved big brother,” Kuroo teases.

“Yeah, and stay away from Noya-san!” Shouyou shouts. He rushes to plant himself between Tsukishima and Noya.

“I see you are just as annoying as ever — and not to mention, short,” Tsukishima sneers, eliciting a low growl from Shouyou. “Your King couldn't spare you even a few sips of his favourite milk? Or is the flavour of his Majesty's royal milk too much for a mere peasant to take?”

Kageyama storms over to Tsukishima. He grabs the sneering blond’s collar and shoves him against a wall. “You bastard—”

“Enough, you two,” Daichi says sharply, placing a warning hand on Kageyama's shoulder.

Asahi’s hand slips into Noya’s. He whispers, “Daichi-san is mad.”

“Yeah, he sure is,” Noya agrees. Daichi’s twitching eyebrow and Asahi adding the honourific to his name are usually pretty good indicators of the captain’s temper.

“You wanna get out of here? I mean, so we don’t have to see Daichi-san explode.”

Noya grins. “Don’t worry! If he blows up, I'll protect you!”

He knows how ridiculous his words must have sounded. The small prince trying to protect his large
bodyguard? That paints an absurd mental image. Yet, both on the volleyball court and the battlefield, he guards Asahi’s back as much as Asahi guards his. Their renewed relationship is founded on mutual protection.

Then Noya notices Daichi taking a deep breath, an action that tends to precede a severe tongue-lashing.

“Yeah, you're right. We should run.”

Once they are a safe distance from the theatre, Noya slows down and bellows a victory cry. It’s not every day he manages to escape safely from Daichi’s imminent wrath. Asahi, taking more caution than him, hurriedly shushes him.

“Sorry,” Noya laughs. “It was just so… so ugh inside there, y’know?”

Asahi smiles softly. “You sound so much like Hinata.”

“Ah damn it, I've been spending too much time with that kid.”

The two of them walk in an amiable silence to a park. Since it’s close to nine p.m., the place is deserted. The emptiness and darkness of the park makes the walk with Asahi feel more intimate than it would have felt during the daytime. Normally, such an empty quiet place wouldn't have attracted him, but he supposes things are different when it’s Asahi with him.

They sit on a bench facing a small lake. The moon’s reflection, as well as that of the remnants of the light show Kenma put on earlier, dances alluringly on the surface of the water. The tension from the meeting with Team Neko washes out of Noya’s body, replaced by a strange feeling of serenity, something he hasn't felt in a long time. When was the last time he felt so at peace, so… content?

Nevertheless, despite the newfound calmness, Noya can't stay quiet for more than five minutes. Because that's how he rolls.

“Say, Asahi, those two are totally dating, aren't they?”

“Huh? Who?”

“Kenma and Kuroo-san, duh! Dummy,” he adds teasingly. He enjoys the flush that spreads across Asahi’s cheeks. It's a good look, he notes dreamily. “They have a similar vibe to Daichi and Suga, and Tooru and Iwaizumi — the 'known each other forever' kind of vibe.”

“Um, I'm not — I wouldn't know,” Asahi mumbles, rubbing the back of his neck. “I'm not exactly an expert on romance.”

This piece of information puzzles Noya. “Aww, why not? You're not bad-looking, and you're nice. Surely you’ve had a girlfriend before?”

Asahi shakes his head sheepishly. “N-no. Never. No girlfriend.”

“No way, really? I thought you'd be more popular! Is it 'cause they’re scared of you?”

“Um, it’s not like I would know…”
“But you must have at least had a girl like you before, right?” Noya insists. He can't believe this. If anyone is the perfect boyfriend, it would be Asahi. Who wouldn't want to date him? He’s kind, strong, caring, loyal and an all-round fantastic person. His good looks are a wonderful bonus, too. That ticks pretty much all of Noya’s boxes. “And surely you’ve at least had a crush on a girl before.”

Asahi fumbles with his hands as he stammers, “Ah, Noya, the thing is — um, it’s not like that. My sexuality, you see, uh — I mean, I don't like girls! Not like, romantically. Or, er, sexually. Not like that.”

Understanding dawns on Noya, and he's rather embarrassed for presuming Asahi’s sexuality. He himself is firmly and proudly bisexual, so he really should've known better than to assume Asahi was straight. “Ohh, you're gay? Why didn't you say so before, you big dork?”

“W-well, you never asked. And, um, some people aren't very accepting of people like… like me, you know?”

Noya purses his lips. When it comes to homosexuality and other sexualities that aren't straight, most of the queendom is pretty open-minded. People are allowed to marry whoever they want, regardless of gender. It’s always been like that since he was a kid; he can't imagine a place where people are not allowed to marry the person they love. Still, there is a very small minority who are unbudgingly ‘traditional’ in their views.

“Like my… my father,” Asahi continues, chewing his lower lip. “My mother couldn't care less about who I liked, as long as I continued to do well in the Academy.”

“Your father sucks ass,” Noya says hotly.

“It’s just his opinion. And it doesn't really matter to me — he and I were never close anyway. Er, I don't really wanna talk about him anymore…” he mumbles.

“Okay!” Noya has never liked talking about fathers anyway. “Hmm, let’s see… so you've never had a girlfriend before ‘cause you like dudes. Then how about a boyfriend? Have you ever had a boyfriend?”

Much to his shock, Asahi shakes his head. Seriously, the population of guys who like other guys are really missing out on an amazing catch.

“No way!” Noya exclaims in disbelief. “What, have you been celibate your whole life or something?”

“Well, I’ve always been busy training at the Academy, then at the palace guarding you, so dating wasn't really one of my top priorities,” Asahi replies haltingly.

Guilt washes over Noya. “Oh. Was… was I a hindrance to your dating life? I mean, like, you had your hands so full with me that you didn't have the chance to find that special someone outside the palace.”

“No, Noya, I didn't mean it like that!” Asahi says in a frantic tone. “Besides, it never bothered me, since that ‘special someone’ was always inside the palace anyway…”

Asahi’s eyes widen, like his mouth said something his brain didn't want it to. His entire face and neck turns beet red, as he clamps a hand over his mouth.

Noya stares at him in confusion. “What, you had a crush on nee-chan?” Then he pauses, realising the
error in his question. “Wait, nee-chan is a girl. And Chikara already has the hots for her, so according to the bro code you couldn’t have a crush on her even if you liked girls.”

Asahi looks away, his face so scarlet you’d think he was giving an education about blushing. “I just — I didn’t say anything! I didn’t, okay?”

“But you did! You have a crush on someone in the palace! Who is it? Tooru and Shouyou don’t seem to be your type… wait. Oh for fuck’s — Asahi, do you like Daichi?” Seeing Asahi’s gobsmacked expression, Noya barrels on. “Oh my god, you totally have a crush on Daichi, don’t you? I can’t believe you, Asahi! That’s so scandalous. I’m totally ratting you out to Suga! Sorry Asahi — or should I say, Mr Steal Your Man — but Suga has the right to know that someone is coming after his man. Man, Tooru’s gonna love this soap drama, that gossipy drama queen.”

Asahi’s jaw drops. “What, no! It’s not — I don’t like Daichi!”

Noya skeptically regards him. “You sure?”

“He’s not even my type! I prefer guys who are, like, smaller—” Asahi cuts himself off, looking like he wants to disappear into the bench. “No, you didn't hear anything, okay?!”

“So you're into smaller guys?” Noya muses. “That makes sense. Since you're so tall, a guy even bigger than you might feel threatening to you. Hmm, but most of the guards at the palace are pretty tall — to me at least, since I'm so… small…”

He stares at Asahi, who is resolutely not looking at him, not daring to believe what he is thinking. There's no way… right? No, it can't be possible.

“Asahi,” he says in the smallest voice he's ever used. “Do you like… me?”

Asahi buries his face in his hands, sighing. “I want to say no, but I can't bring myself to lie to you. You'd just call me out and get mad anyway.”

Noya puffs up indignantly. “Of course I’d get mad if your stupid ass lied to me! What did I say about empty words and crap — wait, was that a yes?”

Asahi refuses to respond, so Noya takes things into his own hands. Literally — he plops himself on Asahi’s lap and pushes his chin up so that they're looking at each other.

“N-noya! What are you—”

“I don't believe you,” Noya says. He searches Asahi’s eyes desperately, which is hard to do as Asahi absolutely refuses to meet his eyes. “Was that an actual yes? Because I don’t believe that someone like you could ever like someone like me—”

“Fine! I like you, okay?!” Asahi bursts out. “I like you, Noya! All this time, for the past two years, I’ve never liked anyone who isn't you.”

“Ha… ha, Asahi,” Noya says weakly. Feeling like he's about to topple off Asahi’s lap, he hastily grabs the front of Asahi’s shirt to steady himself. “Very funny. Didn't know you could joke like that. Nice one. I nearly fell for it.”

Asahi shakes his head again. “I'm not joking, Noya. I wouldn't ever joke about feelings. That’s a cruel thing to do — not even Oikawa would do that.”

(Halfway through mediating the free-for-all verbal war between Kageyama, Tsukishima, Hinata and
Kuroo, Oikawa sneezes. He should get a thicker jacket. The weather is getting colder, as that blond bar of salt has so kindly pointed out.)

“B-but…” Noya stammers. He has so many things he wants to ask, they’re all fighting to get to the front of the queue.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” Asahi says. “It’s just — I mean, this doesn’t have to change anything between us. I’ll continue with my bodyguard duties professionally, so you don’t have to worry about me trying to take advantage of you, okay?”

“It — it’s not that.” Then something hits Noya. Maybe a lightbulb, or something heavier like a revelation. “Asahi, listen, I think—”

“And please don’t feel guilty for not reciprocating my feelings,” Asahi continues, as if he didn’t hear Noya. “Nothing has to change between us. I’m happy to just get to be with you like this, and I won’t ever ask for anything more.”

“What, no! Asahi, if you would just listen—”

“So please don’t feel awkward about having to reject me. I’ve already come to terms with it. I won’t get mad, promise.”

“Asahi! Please, just listen to me! I actually—”

“Ah, that’s where you two ran off to!”

The sudden appearance of Suga startles Asahi so much he accidentally jolts Noya off him. The prince yelps as he tumbles ungracefully to the ground.

“Oh… sorry, did I interrupt something?” Suga asks warily.

“No!” Asahi replies too quickly to not be suspicious. “Of course not — we were just, ah, talking. About, you know, stuff.”

Suga chuckles. “Yes, stuff is quite a popular conversation topic at dinner parties. Do you need any help getting off the ground, Noya?”

“I got him.” With a powerful tug, Asahi pulls Noya up to his feet.

“Okay then,” Suga hums pleasantly. “It’s getting really late, and Daichi is beyond pissed, so we should get back to the inn before he snaps all our heads off.”

“Okay!”

The entire walk back to the inn, Noya stares at Asahi’s figure ahead of him. He can't help it. He never would have believed that Asahi would like him, of all the guys he could have liked instead. What is it about him that’s so attractive, anyway? He’s loud, obnoxious, stubborn, short-tempered — what would someone as wonderful as Asahi see in him?

It really is a night of wonder, in more ways than one.
The whole “sass in your pocket” thing was a reference to 50% Off aka one of the best things I've encountered on the internet thus far.

I also want to share a small excerpt from my outline of this chapter in my notes. It's basically a random burst of inspiration that led to the Kageyama, Tsukki and Kuroo conversation. Here it is:

*intro to blue crows and kei is like "oh u the king" and kags is like stfu and kuroo is like "yo tsukki, did u eat ur weight in fries or smth? bc ur being really salty rn even for u. so take that sass, take it, and put it in ur pocket. just do it."

Of course not everything made the final cut, but I thought it was funny in a crack-ish kinda way so I wanted to share it.

Thanks for reading!

*also, i'm taking requests on tumblr so if you'd like to, please send me some*
what is Kenma's secret?

Chapter Notes

i have no idea how theatre productions work. i tried searching it up but i didn't get anything specific, so i'm taking huge artistic license with the technical aspects of theatre productions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Spoiler alert: things will not go well for Kuroo and Kenma. Things will start well, but soon everything will begin to go down a slippery slope that leads to nowhere but betrayal, suffering and heartbreak.

So with that mind, let’s open up Kuroo and Kenma’s story with a cheerful, domestic start.

Kuroo Tetsurou loves his current life. Why wouldn't he? He has a cosy, comfortable apartment, a job he takes great pride in and, most importantly, he gets to wake up next to the love of his life every day.

Life is great.

Until he hears soft whimpering coming from said love of his life.

Startled, he rolls over and places a hand on Kenma’s shaking shoulder. His small hands fist the blankets tightly, and his eyebrows form deep creases between them. For every few shallow breaths he takes, a pained whimper escapes his lips.

“Hey, Kenma,” Kuroo murmurs. He gently shakes his boyfriend until Kenma’s eyes crack open.

“Kuro?” Kenma chokes out.

Kuroo turns him over so that they’re facing, then wraps his arms around his slim body, pulling him against his chest. “Another nightmare, kitten?”

Kenma’s head bops against his chest — a nod.

“Wanna tell me what it was about?”

A horizontal bop this time, a shake of his head. Kuroo frowns, but he chooses not to pursue the matter. He knows prodding Kenma would only cause him to clamp up even more, which would be counterproductive.

“Can you cat, please?” Kenma asks quietly.

To anyone else, the question would have warranted a quizzical stare. But Kuroo knows what Kenma wants. He untangles himself from Kenma and gets off the bed. The familiar hum of power courses
through him, starting from his chest (where the source of the power is branded into the skin), down his torso, across his limbs and up his neck to his head. When he opens his eyes, instead of seeing hands he sees paws. Instead of tan skin, black fur covers his body.

Now a cat (panther), he trots over to Kenma’s outstretched hand and rests his feline head in Kenma’s lap. He purrs in contentment as Kenma starts to stroke his black fur. Petting Kuroo as a cat has always helped calm Kenma down. Technically, any cat would do, but Kuroo takes pride in the fact that he’s the cat with the most effect on Kenma’s anxiety. He also takes pride in his special ability, which he shares with his father and his grandfather and all his other forefathers; it’s a tradition for Kuroo men to learn Animal Metamorphosis, and it's taken with great dignity. Kuroo knows that every time he transforms into a cat, he is honouring his deceased grandfather’s memory, as well as bringing quiet joy to Kenma.

Their shared love for felines was why Kuroo chose a cat, of all animals, to learn to transform into. And as for why he’s the size of a panther instead of a typical domesticated cat — well, part of the reason is because he is naturally a tall person. The other is that he wants to be able to protect his love with his size, and a panther seemed like a good option when he was choosing his animal form.

Learning to transform into a cat was not an easy process, considering he had to learn it by himself (another Kuroo men tradition). Animal Metamorphosis is regarded as one of the hardest forms of magic to learn for a damn good reason. But for Kenma’s sake, Kuroo pushed through all the accidents, frustration and (temporarily) missing appendages. When he finally mastered the art, he declared to Kenma in a super cheesy and sappy speech, “I did this out of love for you, kitten. This is a symbol of my promise to you that I’ll always love you and never betray you — to never let you down, basically. So yeah. If there ever comes a day that I do fail you, I swear I’ll renounce this power of mine, because I would be unfit to wield it.”

Kenma blushed ever so slightly and muttered, “You're a dork. That was so lame, Kuro. And cheesy. Besides, I can't see any way you could ever let me down.”

Grinning, Kuroo kissed him for the first time — after transforming back to his human form, obviously. (While he's able to talk like a person in his feline form, he would rather kiss the boy he was so in love with as a human instead of a cat. That would just be weird, no matter how fond of cats Kenma was.)

The stroking of Kenma’s fingers through Kuroo’s fur gradually slows down. Kuroo recognises that as a sign that Kenma has calmed down, so he pulls away from his hand and morphs back into a human.

“I’ll go make us some breakfast,” he says, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of Kenma’s head. “Get washed up, and leave some hot water for me this time.”

Kenma rolls his golden eyes. “You're the one who uses up all the hot water.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

Kuroo laughs and presses a kiss to his lips this time. “We agree to disagree. C’mon, get going. The hot water won't wait forever for you.”
Kuroo watches as Kenma gathers his clothes and disappears into the bathroom. The grin on his face slides off when he realises how thin Kenma has gotten. He was never the biggest-sized guy to begin with, but for the past two months Kenma’s weight has been going nowhere but down. It frightens Kuroo so much he cooks an extra egg for Kenma, even though he knows he won't eat it. His appetite has decreased with his weight, starting some time two months ago. Come to think of it, Kenma started getting frequent nightmares around that time too. Kuroo is not one to believe to believe in coincidences. In fact, he has a heavy suspicion that Kenma is hiding something from him, but every time he asks if he’s okay, he just gets a nonchalant “yeah” and nothing else. It frustrates him endlessly. If this were anyone else, Kuroo would already have all the answers he wants. For better or worse, this is Kenma, who has known him ever since they were in diapers. He knows all of Kuroo’s tricks, so he won't fall for them.

Kuroo sighs. He just has to trust that Kenma will eventually open up to him. Hopefully.

As predicted, halfway through breakfast, Kenma slips the extra egg onto Kuroo’s plate.

He shuffles it back onto Kenma’s plate.

This goes on for a while, until Kenma speaks.

“I'm really not hungry. Can you eat that for me, please?”

“But you’ve gotten so skinny,” Kuroo protests. “I’m afraid that one day when I wake up, I won't find you next to me ‘cause you've gotten so skinny you disappeared.”

“That sounds stupid. And I won’t disappear so easily. I'm just not hungry.”

A small sigh escapes Kuroo’s lips, but he lets the egg remain on his plate. For someone who is practically allergic to effort, Kenma can be incredibly obstinate. While Kuroo prides himself on his strong will, he's also smart about when he should continue betting and when it would be better to fold.

For now. One day, I’ll get him to eat more. And tell me what the hell is going on.

(Kuroo does have a last-ditch plan, but that is only and ONLY for in the event he has been completely backed into a corner without any cards left to play. He isn't ready to throw in the towel just yet.)

After they wash their plates, they head to the theatre for their final rehearsal before tonight’s show. Tonight will be the last time Team Neko will put on their Night of Wonder production. The thought sends mixed feelings through Kuroo. On one hand, he's relieved. Performing those insane stunts three nights in a row has worn him to the bone, and that's not even counting all the rehearsals he has had for the past six months in preparation for the team’s annual production. Even though the show ended around eight each night, he only got to go home when it was nearly ten because of debriefing and other admin stuff. Point is, he's exhausted and can't wait for it to be over.

On the other hand, he loves his job. He genuinely does. Being a warrior, a dog of the military, never gave him the same sense of fulfillment. Sure, he was good at warrior-ing, but he always felt like there was something missing. Now, as a stuntman and comprising one half of Team Neko’s most popular act, he has finally found his calling.

He glances at his quiet boyfriend. Although Kenma is not the most expressive person in town, Kuroo knows he likes what they do too. No matter how much he complains about all the work they have to do, Kuroo always spots a small smile on his face every time he casts a spell. Kenma really is an
amazing sorcerer. Kuroo can't be any prouder of him without feeling like he would burst with pride.

The *real* reason why Kenma joined Team Neko with Kuroo, not the crap about being dragged into it by Kuroo that Kuroo gave Hinata’s strange friends last night, was for his anxiety. He knows, it’s strange; why would performing onstage help someone who is naturally anxious in social settings? But Kenma’s shrink reasoned that since his anxiety stemmed from being in settings where others can see and judge him, and it was impossible to completely hide from other people in real life, the best way to deal with the anxiety would be to learn to cope with it and get used to it. And the best way to get used to it would to put himself out there in a situation where he knew other people would see him, like on a stage.

Naturally, Kenma wasn’t on board with the idea. It took Kuroo a solid month to convince him to at least give Team Neko a chance. He promised Kenma that he would join with him so he wouldn't have to be alone, and that if he didn't like it he could leave, which was what finally got Kenma to agree to the plan.

Now, Kenma has made tremendous progress in dealing with his anxiety. He's now able to talk to their director by himself, instead of needing Kuroo to voice his thoughts for him (though he still needs Kuroo to be present in the room with him). His panic attacks have become far less frequent, with his previous one being nearly four weeks ago. That’s huge progress, considering that at this time last year, Kenma would get at least one panic attack every three days. And even though Kenma would still get stage fright before they went on stage, it was manageable. All in all, Kuroo is so very proud of the progress his boyfriend has made — which is why Kenma’s recent weight loss and recurrent nightmares worry him so greatly.

They arrive at the familiar red building. As part of their everyday routine for the past months, they take the stairs up to their dressing rooms after Kuroo gives the receptionist a jaunty wave. Their final full-dress rehearsal is in just five minutes’ time, which means they’ll need to change quickly to avoid getting chewed out by their manager, Yaku Morisuke. Their ‘mother cat’, as Kuroo likes to call him, has been complaining about the talents giving him premature frown wrinkles “from all the crap you put me through”.

Since Kenma’s dressing room is the first door in the hallway, that’s where Kuroo drops him off.

“I’ll catch you later, kitten,” Kuroo says, leaning down to kiss Kenma. “Try not to let your jaw drop too much when you see me.”

Kenma rolls his eyes. “I’ve been seeing you in that outfit for the past five months. If I wanted my jaw to drop, it would’ve already done so.”

Kuroo laughs. “You're an absolute riot.”

He waits until Kenma’s door is shut before making his way to his dressing room, which is a little ways further down the hallway. He opens the door, only to find his second-favourite blond lounging on his cushioned chair.

“Morning, sunshine,” he says, grinning. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“A favour,” Tsukishima replies coolly.

Kuroo shuts the door behind him. As he pulls off his shirt, he heads over to his closet to fish out his performance costume. He's a fantastic multi-tasker.

“Kuroo-san, do you have no shame?” Tsukishima snaps.
Kuroo smirks, satisfied that he’s already managed to get under the salty blond’s skin so early in the morning. “You're just jealous of my killer abs,” he drawls.

Tsukishima scoffs. “Stop lying to yourself.”

“Oh Tsukki, how you wound me.”

Tsukishima’s “tch” precedes a moment of quiet. Kuroo tosses his shirt to the ground and tugs the skin-tight red-and-black costume on his body. Tsukishima remains silent, as if waiting for Kuroo to say something.

“And why will I owe you a favour?” Kuroo finally asks. He tries to keep his voice nonchalant by focusing on pulling the equally tight black pants up his legs, but he has to admit that he is curious. It’s rare for the assistant producer to visit him out of his own volition — much less in his dressing room of all places.

Tsukishima’s next words freeze him. His hands pause at the hem of his pants, and he barely dares to believe what he just heard.

“I need to tell you something. It’s about Kenma.”

Oikawa is grateful that it has been a quiet afternoon. Asahi and Nishinoya vanished after breakfast, probably for Noya to conduct his routine interviews with the citizens of Nekoma, and he hasn't seen them since. While he's happy for Noya, he can barely suppress a twinge of sadness and jealousy when he sees them laughing together and occasionally touching each other. Watching Noya’s hand brush Asahi’s (with an unusual amount of shyness, he notices — weird) halfway through a laugh would cause his gaze to fall on a certain Iwaizumi Hajime. He never let his eyes linger for more than a heartbeat, not wanting yet another reminder of the man he can never be with again.

Oikawa has decided to spend the afternoon by himself, hoping that a day with some coffee from a cute coffee shop and his book will improve his sour mood. Halfway through his second cup of latte, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi enter the coffee shop and take the table next to his. He stiffens, prepared for an onslaught of insults from the aggravating blond salt-stick, but thankfully Tsukishima ignores him. Yamaguchi gives him a small smile. He returns the smile, glad that at least one of them is a decent person.

He's about to scream at yet another cliffhanger ending when a familiar puff of orange hair materialises in front of him. Surprised, he shuts his book and removes his reading glasses.

“Shou-chan!” he exclaims.

“Hi, Oikawa-san!” Hinata greets cheerfully.

Tsukishima scowls at them. “Do you have no concept of an indoor voice?”

Yamaguchi conceals his snicker behind his cup of tea.

Oikawa glares back at the blond. He is really getting ticked off by Tsukishima’s nasty attitude and constant picking on his favourite redhead. “Do you have no concept of not being a dick?”
“Ah, just ignore Stupid-shima!” Hinata says hurriedly. “He's always like that!”

Tsukishima rolls his eyes. It gets on Oikawa’s nerves, but since Hinata asked him to ignore Tsukishima, he decides to heed his advice. Instead of retorting, he turns back to Hinata.

“No, I’m not happy to see you, but aren’t you supposed to be with Tobio-chan?” he asks curiously.

“Well, I was with him,” Hinata admits. “But I saw how lonely you’ve been lately, so I decided to spend some time with you, senpai!”

Oikawa’s heart bursts with warm fuzzy feelings that being with Hinata never fails to give him. He’s such a sweet boy — why would anyone want to hurt him? With a pang of guilt, he realises that he’s been so busy moping ever since his fight with Iwaizumi that he never checked to see how Hinata’s coping with the news of his parents’ murder.

“That’s really kind of you, Shou-chan. How’ve you been lately? I mean, with Tobio-chan’s news of — you know, that.”

Hinata absentmindedly swirls the marshmallows in his hot chocolate, like he's thinking of the best way to answer Oikawa’s question. That action reminds Oikawa of those coffee shop dates he had with Iwa-chan back in the day. He would buy hot chocolate and play with the marshmallows, and Iwa-chan would scold him for being “a childish little shit.”

(A pang of pain stabs his heart when he remembers he can never have that ever again.)

“I mean, I don't think I'll ever be able to think about what happened without feeling sad,” Hinata finally says. “But being with Kageyama and everyone makes me really happy! The pain is still there, and I don’t think it will ever go away, but it slowly becomes easier to deal with, y’know?”

Oikawa pauses to think about Hinata’s words. Just like how Hinata’s pain of losing his parents has apparently become easier to deal with over time, it feels like his pain of losing his relationship with Iwaizumi has gradually become easier to deal with. Or is he just getting used to the constant heartache? Yeah, that sounds more like it. He’s nowhere nearly as wonderful as Hinata, after all. For him, pain doesn’t become easier to deal with, but rather it becomes such a routine part of his life he sometimes forgets about his suffering until he thinks about it. That’s why the coffee and book was such a good escape, until Hinata brought up his loneliness.

“Ooh, is that the book you were reading to Noya-san the other day?” Hinata asks suddenly.

Oikawa nods, pushing the book to Hinata for him to take a closer look. He flips to the front (Oikawa is glad he bookmarked his page) and reads the first few words aloud, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times—’ Whoa, there are so many complex words!”

“Yes, books tend to have words in them,” Tsukishima cuts in. “And they’re not that complex; you’re just too dimwitted to understand words that are beyond an elementary schooler's vocabulary.”

“You looking for a fight, asshole?!” Hinata snaps.

“C’mon guys, let’s not make a scene,” Yamaguchi cajoles.

“Shut up, Yamaguchi,” Tsukishima says curtly.

“Sorry, Tsukki!”
Oikawa pinches the bridge of his nose. So much for the quiet afternoon he was hoping to have.

“So, if you're so sad without Iwaizumi-san, why don't you go talk to him?” Hinata questions, abruptly changing the subject again. “I mean, you’re so lonely here, reading by yourself, when you could've been reading with Iwaizumi-san.”

Oikawa sighs. “It’s complicated, Shou-chan.”

“I may not be good at understanding difficult words, but I think I can get complicated situations. You can tell me!”

Well… that is true. Hinata is kinda dating Kageyama, which in and of itself must be a strange, complicated situation. Besides, he’s always been an expert of social situations, whether he realises it or not. Oikawa decides to give him a chance, then.

“Long story short, being around me only gets Iwa-chan hurt,” he says quietly. “You heard what Tobio-chan said — the colonel poisoned him to use him against me. He got hurt at my expense. Then — oh my god Shou-chan, what did I do? I was so stupid. I blamed him for getting poisoned, even though he really had no way of knowing there was poison in whatever that bastard colonel gave him. And — and he got so mad at me he literally called off our engagement. What's wrong with me?” His voice breaks. “Am I… am I not good enough for Iwa-chan?”

Tears prick his eyes, but he refuses to let them fall in front of Tsukishima. Damn it, he still has his pride, if nothing else.

“So… basically, you think it’s a good thing for Iwaizumi-san if you stay away from him?” Hinata asks dubiously.

When Oikawa nods, Hinata rushes to say, “But what if it’s actually a bad thing? Yeah, maybe being around you causes him pain, but it’s not like you’re the… the direct reason. It’s not like a SHOOSH but more like a zeep-zeep-BAM, y’know?” His sound effects are accompanied by animated hand movements. “And he’s really sad without you too. I bought him a meat bun ‘cause he looked so sad, since meat buns always cheer me up, but he only took, like, one bite before telling me to finish the rest.” He pouts. He doesn’t like it when people don't finish eating their meat buns.

Oikawa stares at him, feeling more confused than comforted. “I — sorry, I’m still trying to wrap my head around the… shoosh part.”

“I don't mean to eavesdrop,” Yamaguchi says. He offers an apologetic smile. “But from what I've gathered, I think what Hinata is trying to say about the situation between you and, um, Iwaizumi-san is that there might be a correlation between your presence and his suffering, but not necessarily causation.”

Hinata perks up. “Yeah, that's what I meant! Er, whatever that was. Wow Yamaguchi, you're so smart!”

“Yamaguchi is a little above average, but that does not detract from your sheer idiocy,” Tsukishima cuts in, smirking when he sees Hinata’s smile melt into a glare.

“Hmph, whatever! Anyway, as I was saying—” A rare somber look crosses Hinata’s face. “—there may be bad people around you who cause you and Iwaizumi-san pain, but that doesn't make your love bad. And bad people wanting to take advantage of your love doesn't make you bad.”

All Oikawa can do is blink at his kouhai. Since when did sweet little Shou-chan become so wise?
“That’s really poetic, Hinata,” Yamaguchi says, and Hinata practically glows at the praise. “What about you, Tsukki? You’re really smart, way above average, so you must have some valuable insight that Oikawa-san could use.”

Tsukishima lets out a long, aggravated sigh. “Do I really have to?”

“Please, Tsukki?”

“Stop making that face at me. It’s pathetic.” Tsukishima imperiously pushes his glasses up his nose. “This sounds like yet another clichéd case of someone sacrificing themselves because it’s what they think is best for the other party. But what imbeciles such as yourself fail to realise is that it doesn’t make the other party happy, unlike what your sickening bleeding-heart heroism may delude you into believing. Foolishly sacrificing yourself without even clarifying if it really is what the other party desires renders your sacrifice a pointless endeavour. If you truly believe that your lover is pleased with your stupid martyr syndrome, then you have confirmed all my expectations of you—which is that you are nothing but a pretty face without any shred of intelligence to add any real value to your whole person.”

“Um, I think what Tsukki is trying to say is that Iwaizumi-san doesn't want you to separate yourself from him for his sake, because you're the true source of his happiness,” Yamaguchi clarifies. Not that Oikawa really needs it; he gets it, but it's the disdainful way that Tsukishima phrased his ‘advice’ that makes the tattoos on his palms itch with the desire to literally roast him where he is sitting.

“Stop paraphrasing my opinions into sappy little love songs,” Tsukishima says coldly.

“Ah, sorry about that,” Yamaguchi replies with a sheepish smile.

Hinata beams at Oikawa. “You see? You have to go make up with Iwaizumi-san! And give him a big smooching kiss!”

Oikawa sighs. He wants to, yet he gets the feeling that now isn't the right time to do so. If he tries to talk to Iwaizumi now, it will most likely end in more fighting, tears and another flooding incident.

He will wait. He will wait for the opportunity to show his beloved Iwa-chan that he finally understands what he's been trying to tell him all along.

Kuroo glances down at the hastily-scribbled list of orders before bursting into Nekoma’s most popular coffee shop. He catches sight of Tsukishima and Yamaguchi (he was wondering where the assistant producer and understudy had disappeared off to) talking to Oikawa and Hinata. That's a rather strange group of people to be hanging out together, but hey, he's not one to judge, especially if little Tsukki has taken initiative to expand his circle of playmates.

After two back-to-back rounds of rehearsal, the director finally gave them a break. Immediately after his announcement, Kenma curled up in an armchair and fell asleep. He looked so cute Kuroo was tempted to take a photograph, except he knew his boyfriend wouldn't be happy with having a photo taken of him without his consent.

However, Kenma’s cuteness couldn't ease the knot of worry gripping Kuroo’s heart. Around the same time Kenma’s weight had begun to drop, he had also started to tire a lot easier after performing spells. Because of this, the director had to make changes to the production to accommodate his
needs. After rehearsal, Kuroo was planning to get coffee and snacks for everyone, as well as some fresh air for himself; but after seeing how exhausted Kenma was, he was about to change his mind and stay with Kenma when Yaku assured him that he would take care of Kenma.

*Kenma is in good hands,* Kuroo reminds himself. Yaku is a capable manager who Kenma has eventually opened up to. He will be fine.

He rattles off the orders to the barista (and makes sure to include Kenma’s favourite apple pie), then shuffles to wait by the side of the counter.

Just then, the door’s bell tinkles, and Sawamura and Sugawara walk in. Kuroo immediately plasters a relaxed smile on his face and waves to the couple. Upon spotting him, Sawamura’s eyes widen while Sugawara returns the wave.

“Kuroo-san, it’s lovely to see you,” Suga greets. “What brings you here?”

“No need for the honourific, man, we’re friends,” Kuroo says. “And I’m just getting grub for the team. This coffee shop is a pretty popular spot for dates, but you probably already knew that if you’re here.” He grins when Sawamura blushes. Ah, so they’re a fresh couple. From the way they were talking last night, he thought they had been together for years just like him and Kenma; they have been dating for three years — living together for a year after he resigned from the Elite Squad — and are still going strong.

“I took a lucky guess,” Suga chuckles. But his smile falters when he seems to notice something on Kuroo’s face. “Are you okay? You seem preoccupied about something.”

Kuroo takes care not to show his surprise at Suga’s perceptiveness. “Ah, well…” He is about to brush off Suga’s concern, but then he remembers what Tsukishima told him in his dressing room.

“What about Kenma?” Kuroo asked sharply.

“I saw him and the producer talking last night,” Tsukishima replied, too vague for Kuroo’s liking.

“What were they talking about?”

Tsukishima shrugged. “Didn’t catch it. They were too far away, and I’m not one to meddle in other people’s affairs anyway, unlike *someone.*”

Kuroo let the last comment slide; there were other, more pressing matters at hand. “Then what’s so urgent about them talking that you felt the need to alert me?”

“I was about to just walk away and leave them to it, but something about Kenma’s body language caught my attention. He looked…” Tsukishima paused, like he was trying to find the most accurate word to use. “He looked afraid.”

It felt like someone replaced all the blood in Kuroo's body with ice. *Afraid?*

“What? What was he afraid of?” Kuroo demanded, just barely keeping his cool.

“Like I said, I didn’t catch what they were talking about, so it could be any number of things,” Tsukishima snapped. “All I know is that he looked afraid of Fujinuma-san for whatever reason. I just
thought you ought to know.”

Many questions burned in Kuroo’s mind, and worry made itself home in his stomach. But he refused to let it show. Instead he just smirked and said, “Aww, you’re such a sweet little bean for telling me this.”

“Stop spewing nonsense. I only told you this so that you would owe me a favour.” Tsukishima shoved his glasses higher up his nose. “... Besides, if it was Yamaguchi, you would do the same for me. So I wanted to beat you to the punch before you could lord it over me, that's all.”

Indeed Kuroo would do the same. No matter how annoyed Tsukishima liked to act around him, he knew he could always count on Tsukishima to have his back (even if it was with the motive of getting him to be in his debt).

“Alright, you can cash in one favour from me.” Kuroo slipped his shoes on. He paused at the door and turned his head to look at the lanky blond still sprawled on his chair. “And thanks, Kei. I really appreciate it.”

“I almost would rather you use Yamaguchi’s nickname for me,” Tsukishima muttered.

Kuroo cackled and left his friend in his dressing room. When he closed the door, his smirk slid off his face. The gnawing worry in his gut expanded its territory until there was nothing left but a fearful dying to know.

The whole situation is perplexing. Why would Kenma be afraid of the producer? The woman doesn’t even turn up for their rehearsals all that much, preferring to leave Tsukishima to take her spot and report to her at the end of the day. Besides, she’s a nice woman. When she does have the decency to show up, she usually has doughnuts and other assortments of snacks with her. And she always makes it a point to give every talent constructive criticism at the end of each session.

(Kuroo has noticed Kenma’s slight flinch every time Fujinuma-san glanced at him, but he just chalked it up to Kenma's natural self-consciousness. Now he feels like an idiot for not investigating any deeper.)

His first idea was to look for the producer and try to worm out an answer from her. Unfortunately, she’s as elusive as she is flaky. In other words, her address and schedule are mysteries, so he can't stalk her back home to demand an explanation. And he hasn't seen her in a while, which means he doesn't know when she will show up next.

The arguably easier way would be to just ask Kenma. However, he doesn't think he will able to get a straight answer from Kenma either, especially if this incident with Fujinuma-san has anything to do with his recent nightmares and weight loss (again, Kuroo doesn't believe in coincidences).

Well… there is the third option. But is he willing to go that far? He knows that by playing his trump card, he'll be risking going to the point of no return. He could lose everything he holds so dear.

And Kenma might never forgive him.

*Which do I value more: being with Kenma, or his well-being?*
And he knows what his answer is.

“I suppose there is something you could help me with,” he admits slowly. He can't believe he's doing this, but there is no turning back now.

“What’s the matter?” Sawamura asks, all businesslike.

As concisely as he can, he explains to the two Karasuno denizens his situation with Kenma. Throughout his explanation, neither one interrupts him, to his relief. If they did, he thinks he would change his mind.

“I see, that is quite a problem,” Suga says once Kuroo is done.

“I think I know someone who can help,” Sawamura says.

Kuroo perks up. Maybe he doesn't have to play his trump card just yet.

“How close is Kenma to Yachi?” Sawamura asks.

Kuroo pauses, sifting through his memories of Kenma and their childhood together to search for the petite blonde girl. “Well, I guess they're alright. From what I remember from our childhood, he can talk to her just fine without feeling nervous or self-conscious. But it’s been a while since they last saw each other, so I don't know how comfortable he is with her now.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Sawamura says firmly. “Tell you what — we’ll inform Yachi about your issue with Kenma, then we’ll let you know if she’s keen to help.”

“Thanks, you two,” Kuroo exhales. “I was really at my wits' end.”

Suga smiles a smile that could stop a war. “Don't mention it. We’re friends, just like you said, remember?”

Kuroo does. Despite their slightly awkward first meeting last night, he's grateful to have met them. Lord knows he is going to need all the help he needs if he wants Kenma to be alright.

Kenma raises his eyebrows when he spots Yachi sitting on the couch. “Hitoka? What are you doing here?”

“Hi Kenma,” Yachi says, offering a smile. “I told Tetsu-kun I wanted to catch up with you, so he very kindly brought me to your home. It’s a lovely apartment, by the way!”

Kuroo watches the cousins interact, leaning his shoulder against the wall to make himself a little shorter for Yachi’s sake. The poor girl looked terrified when he approached her at their meeting point. He figures it had to do with the fact he has grown to be at least a head taller than her since the last time they saw each other, which was a fair few years ago, so he tries to make himself appear smaller by drawing his shoulders closer together and slouching. The last thing he needs is to scare away the very person who's trying to help him get Kenma to open up.

He's impressed with her skill at conversations, considering how shy she was when they first met. While she doesn't have Hinata’s natural extroversion or Kuroo’s cunning, she has her own sweet, trustworthy charm that she's currently working on Kenma. Kuroo is glad she isn't a professional
interrogator, or even he would let his guard down and spill all his secrets to her.

Yachi skillfully directs the conversation from their final performance last night to concern about Kenma’s weight. He brushes it off, and that's when she asks the question that defines her entire purpose of being in the apartment.

“Is everything okay, Kenma?” she asks. The smile on her face is open and welcoming; no one has any reason to fear her.

Yet Kenma doesn't take the bait and just mumbles, “Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Mhm. Just performance stuff that was weighing on me, but now that the annual production is over there’s nothing left to stress about.”

“Hmm, alright!”

Yachi changes the subject, asking Kenma how he met Hinata.

“Shouyou said he was in Nekoma for some training camp, a few years ago when Kuro was still a warrior,” Kenma explains, his expression softening slightly when talking about his friend. “Training Academy stuff, probably. After training was done, Kuro brought him to the sports court we usually play at, and that's where we met. He kept begging me to toss for him after seeing me set for Kuro.”

“He wimped out after three tosses,” Kuroo adds.

“Shouyou is a tiring person to be around,” Kenma mutters defensively.

“But he’s nice, isn't he?” Yachi says. “At least you had a decent first meeting with him. My first meeting with him was so embarrassing! He was my first client, like, ever! I swear I messed up real bad. I don't think I hit all his pressure points.”

“I'm sure Shouyou enjoyed it just fine.”

Yachi shrugs sheepishly. “I sure hope so. But meeting him really opened my eyes, y’know? Before I met him, I kinda just kept all my problems with my mother and future to myself ‘cause I didn't want to bother other people with my problems, but I just felt so lost and helpless without anyone to confide in. Then I met Hinata. He got me to open up about my problems, and he even helped to resolve the tension between me and my mother. That's when I realised: I shouldn't have bottled up my problems. If I had spoken about my struggles earlier, I could have saved myself a lot of pain. So I just want you to know that if you have anything, anything at all, that’s bothering you, you don't have to be afraid of telling someone. Like Tetsu-kun, or Hinata, or even me.”

Kenma looks away as he lets out a non-committal “mmm”.

Sensing that the conversation isn't about to go anywhere, Kuroo steps in and offers to walk Yachi back to the inn. She accepts his offer gratefully.

“I'm sorry, Tetsu-kun,” she says once they're outside the apartment.


Her cheeks flush. “But I didn't manage to get him to talk about his problem. Wasn't that why I was there in the first place?”
He pats her head lightly. “Hey, don’t worry about it, Shortcake. I still struggle to get Kenma to open up, and I’ve known him pretty much my whole life. But you reminded him that the option of opening up is always there, so I have that to thank you for. How about I buy you dinner, as thanks?”

“Oh no, that really won’t be—”

“I insist,” Kuroo says. “C’mon, I know a place with killer ramen. And order to your heart’s content, alright? I have a fair amount of pocket change to spare.”

He ignores her spluttering as he drags her all the way down the street to the ramen restaurant. She’s just as fun to tease as he remembers from his childhood, playing with her and Kenma, before her family moved to Karasuno four years ago.

After eating with Yachi (the poor girl looked like she was going to pass out after a bowl of ramen and some dessert) and dropping her off at the inn, he returns to the apartment

“Kitten, I’m home,” he sings.

Kenma is curled up on the couch, looking much like a displeased kitten. “Why did you do that?”

“What? — okay, fine, maybe I did.” Kuroo sighs, plopping himself on the couch next to Kenma. “Look, I’m sorry about it, okay? But I’ve just been so worried about you, kitten. You wouldn’t tell me what’s going on with you. Every time I asked you’d say you’re fine, but I’m not dumb — you haven’t been eating properly, and you’re losing an alarming amount of weight ‘cause of that, and not to mention your constant nightmares.”

“It’s just stress,” Kenma retorts.

“Then what about Fujinuma-san? Has she been causing you stress too?”

Kenma’s entire body stiffens, and Kuroo knows he’s hit a nerve. He turns around, his back facing Kuroo. “… Don’t butt into things that aren’t your concern.”

“But you’re hurting, and that makes this my concern too!” Kuroo bursts out, frustrated.

“Am I really your concern? Or am I just another problem for you to solve?”

Kuroo freezes, feeling very much like someone slammed a brick into his gut. “What are you — where did you even get that idea from?”

Kenma shrugs with obviously faked nonchalance. “It’s always been like this ever since we were kids. I’d discover some new problem with myself, and you’d try to solve it. It’s almost like a game. When we were kids, it was my shyness and reluctance to play volleyball. Then when we became teens, it was my social anxiety. Now, it’s my weight loss and nightmares. Will I never be good enough for you, Kuro? Or will I always have some defect that you need to fix?”

“What — no! That’s not what I meant, kitten,” Kuroo pleads, completely horrified that Kenma even thinks he thinks like that. He reaches to touch Kenma’s shoulder, but he jerks away from Kuroo’s hand. He might as well have been stabbed with an unsharpened sword — it would hurt exponentially less. “That’s just — that’s downright absurd. Listen, I love you so, so much, and I just
want you to be happy. When you’re happy, everything is right in my world; and when you’re not, I just wanna do everything I can to make sure you go to sleep with that beautiful smile of yours on your face. So please — please don’t see yourself as just a series of problems for me to solve, ’cause you mean so much more to me than that.”

Kenma remains silent, which scares Kuroo more than anything else he said. Just as quietly, he gets off the couch and walks to their bedroom. The door swings shut behind him so soundlessly it is louder than any slam.

And Kuroo can feel his heart fall to pieces at Kenma’s feet.

“I need your help. Please.”

“Of course; have a seat,” Suga says, patting the chair next to him.

“Thanks.” Kuroo sets his coffee mug on the table and takes the offered seat. He runs a hand over his face, sure he must look like hell. After the fight, he slept on the couch out of respect for Kenma’s space. It goes without saying that he didn't sleep well. How could he, when he didn't have the familiar warmth curled up in his arms to lull him to sleep?

“What can we do to help?” Sawamura asks.

Kuroo sighs. He should have known that asking for Yachi’s help would just be delaying the inevitable. Now he really is backed into a corner, with only his trump card left to play. He knows that by playing this card, he will more likely than not end up losing everything he’s betting, but what choice does he have left? If Yachi, Kenma's family, couldn't help, then maybe not even Hinata can do anything.

“You guys are travelling around the queendom, right?” When Kuroo sees their nods, he continues. “It would be great if you could fetch a friend for me. I would do it myself, except Kenma doesn't like travelling, and I don't want to leave him alone.”

Suga nods. “Sounds reasonable. Where’s your friend from?”

“He hails from Fukurodani. It should be hard to miss him — he’s part-fairy, so he should be radiating an aura of beauty or something. And he’s almost always with his boyfriend, who looks like an owl if he isn't already in his owl form.”

Suga and Sawamura exchange matching nonplussed looks.

“Oh…”

“Yeah, they're a riot. Shrimpy knows them,” Kuroo adds. “I'm sure he’ll be more than happy to bring you to them.”

“Yes, it does seem like Hinata knows someone in every district we’ve been to,” Suga chuckles. “Who's this friend of yours?”

Kuroo forces a lazy grin. “Just tell Shrimpy the name he wants is Akaashi Keiji, alright? Akaashi’s a smart cookie; he’ll know what to do from there.”
and thus kicks off the subplot they gave me the most stress and anxiety to write because, well, you'll see. no spoilers, but this Nekoma-Fukurodani subplot is one of the heaviest in this whole story (even taking into account how fucked up the truth behind Operation KD really was). hang on tight, guys.

i 300% headcanon Kuroo as a super mushy cheesy romantic sap and no one's gonna tell me otherwise. (▔oundary)

thanks for reading!

give my tumblr some love
Noya is confused. Specifically, he is confused about a certain handsome, long-haired, cowardly but wonderful bodyguard of his, and this confusion started after said bodyguard dropped the “I like you” bomb on him three nights ago. Even though he was initially annoyed at Suga’s interruption, now he’s glad that Suga intervened, because he needs time to absorb the new information and really think about his feelings for Asahi. Yes, he’s known ever since he hit puberty that it’s okay for guys to like dudes and ladies. It never seemed like a big deal to him; he knew from Tooru that it’s okay for guys to like other guys. And he has never been a clear-cut 50-50 — it’s more of a squiggly line that falls a little more on the side of men.

Still, he never would have guessed that the squiggly line would include Asahi, though looking back he really should have. He has always found Asahi physically attractive, and among all his bodyguards he has the emotional connection with him. Nothing against Tooru, Daichi and Shouyou, obviously, but Asahi is just… different. The most wonderful, butterflies-inducing type of different.

Among his frothing mixture of feelings (most of which is confusion) is a small bubble of happiness. He still can’t believe that Asahi like-likes him — like, what does he see in him, seriously? But when he sifts through his memories of his bodyguard, he realises that it has been so obvious all along. Every time he turned around to look at Asahi, he would already be looking at him. The way Asahi has always found a way to please Noya. The way Asahi has constantly worried about Noya. And the fact that he came back for Noya; not anyone else but him. How could he have been so clueless all this time?

And because Noya is so happy, he wants to figure out his feelings so he doesn't have to leave Asahi hanging any longer. After the confession, Asahi hasn’t brought it up again, which makes Noya both relieved and nervous. True to his word, nothing much has changed between them. Asahi still frets about Noya, and Noya still teases his timid bodyguard. They talk without any awkwardness. But Noya has also noticed some things that are different between them — like the way Asahi’s expression softens when talking to Noya. The flush in his cheeks that Noya now knows is not just embarrassment from Noya’s teasing. The small smile that instantly springs on his face the moment Noya turns to speak to him. These gestures never fail to get Noya’s heart racing in the most nerve-wracking yet pleasant way.

Is does what falling in love feels like? If so, Noya thinks he likes this feeling. Still, he believes he needs more time to be certain of his feelings before telling Asahi anything — he doesn't want to hurt him by making a rash decision.

This is why he’s spending most of his time with Asahi — because he wants to figure out these strange, foreign feelings in him. Yesterday and the day before, he dragged Asahi around the district and went shopping. Now he has more black blazers than he thinks he will ever need. Today, he plans to take Asahi to the coffee shop that Shouyou and Tooru were at yesterday. Shouyou said that their hot chocolate was amazing, like BWAH!
Or at least, that is the plan, until Daichi, Suga and Kuroo burst into the inn room.

“Wait, what do you mean we’re leaving for Fukurodani today?” Noya demands. Wow, that is so rude of Daichi, springing sudden last-minute plans on the team without any fanfare. Though, he sheepishly realises he isn't one to talk about sudden decisions.

Kuroo runs his hand through his messy hair. “Yeah, I’m really sorry to spring this on you out of the blue.”

“But we want to help Kuroo with Kenma,” Suga says gently. “We do, don't we?”

“Of course! I love helping people!” Noya declares. Fine, maybe this isn't going completely according to his plan for the day, but that doesn't mean he can't figure out his feelings for Asahi on the way to Fukurodani. No matter where he goes, he knows Asahi will be there with him.

“So, Daichi, if I may clarify,” Iwaizumi says, “we’re supposed to go to the Fukurodani district and find a demi-fairy named Akaashi Keiji to sort out Kuroo and Kenma?”

“Yes, that's pretty much the plan.”

“Not that I have any objections or anything, but we might encounter a problem with that.” Iwaizumi lays the heavily-annotated map of the now-queendom on the coffee table. “To get to Fukurodani, we need to get through Dateko first. And I think we all remember how that went last time.”

Asahi flinches, while Noya’s hand brushes his waist, where he befriended Futakuchi’s spear the first time they tried to pass through Dateko. Kageyama rubs the tattoos on his forearms, and Tooru mutters something about his previous pair of gloves. Yes, no one has forgotten the horror that was their battle against the Dateko vigilantes.

“Oh right, the Dateko vigilantes,” Kuroo says, snapping his fingers. “I heard it’s practically impossible to get into the district cause those guys do a damn good job upholding the Iron Wall. Especially that infamous sorcerer of theirs. Rumour has it that they've only lost, like, three times before. But don't worry about it — I’ve talked to Kenma, and he’s agreed to help you guys deal with the sorcerer. Sometimes it’s best to fight fire with fire. Then we’ll be coming back home after we help you guys.”

Daichi frowns. “Are you sure you want to get involved? We wouldn't want you and Kenma to get hurt.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Besides, you guys are doing me a favour, so this is the least I can do for you.” Kuroo’s smile dips slightly. “Truthfully, I don't want to get Kenma involved; but he’d get pissed at me if I snuck off without him to get into a fight. And I’d rather not have him any more pissed at me.”

“Ah, trouble in paradise?” Noya asks.

“Don't be rude, Noya,” Suga chides, elbowing his ribs.

“Nah, it’s fine,” Kuroo says with a small laugh. “I like people who call it as they see it. And that really is the whole reason you guys are dragged into my mess.”
“Well, if we’re going to help you sort out your ‘mess’, we’re gonna need the whole team.” Daichi stands up and does a quick head count. “Say, has anyone seen Yachi—”

As if on cue, the door slams open and Yachi bursts into the room. However, one look at her face and Noya can tell that something is horribly wrong. Her face is flushed, and her eyes are red and puffy, like she’s been crying.

“Hitoka-chan!” Shimizu rushes to the smaller girl and takes her by the hand. “Where were you? And what’s the matter?”

Yachi hiccups a sob. “Ah, sorry! I’m so sorry I didn't tell you guys where I went. It’s just — Kenma suddenly reached out to me and said he wanted to talk.”

“Kenma?” Kuroo’s relaxed grin is swiftly replaced by a frown. “What did he want to talk about? Was it about whatever’s causing him all these nightmares and weight loss?”

Yachi falters, as if she is hesitating about what to say. “W-well, I — I’m so sorry, Tetsu-kun, but I can't tell you.”

“What? Why not?”

“Ah, please don't get angry!” she pleads. “I want to tell you. I really do! But Kenma made me keep it a secret. That’s why he didn't want to talk in the apartment, 'cause he didn't want you to overhear.”

For a brief moment, Kuroo looks like he has all the wind knocked out of his lungs. But just as quickly, he recovers his composure. “I-I see. It’s okay — I’m not mad at you, Shortcake, promise.”

“Mm, okay.” Yachi glances around the room, confused. “Sorry, did I interrupt something?”

Daichi shakes his head. “I was just telling everyone about the plan. We’re leaving for Fukurodani today, to help Kuroo find someone named Akaashi.”

Instantly, the flush in Yachi’s face drains away. “Wait, why Akaashi-san…? No, you're not actually thinking—”

Kuroo averts his gaze. He almost looks… ashamed? But what would he be ashamed of?

Yachi shakes her head vehemently. “No, Kuroo Tetsurou-kun, you’re not going to do what I think you're going to do, right? … Oh my god you’re totally going to do what I think you’re going to do.”

“It’s not like I have any other choice, Shortcake,” Kuroo says wearily.

“Please don't do this to him,” she begs, tugging on Kuroo’s sleeve. “If you drag Akaashi-san into this, it could completely destroy your relationship with Kenma. There has to be another way!”

“No, there isn't — unless you wanna tell me what Kenma told you?”

She flinches. “I — but maybe, you don't need to know what the issue is, right? You can always just, like, support him like you’ve always done without knowing.”

“Yeah, and look what good it's done!” Kuroo shouts. When he sees Yachi recoil and Shimizu step protectively in front of her, he winces. “Ah, sorry about that. I didn't mean to lose my temper. It’s just that — I’ve done nothing but support him in the dark the past few months, yet he hasn’t gotten any better. I'm at the end of my rope, Hitoka. I don't like this any more than you do, but I really can't see any other way.”
“Then… then I don't want any part of this.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Shouyou asks, sounding concerned.

“I don't want any part of a plan that's gonna hurt Kenma and wreck your relationship,” Yachi says. Her lower lip trembles, but she stands her ground. “I want to stay here in Nekoma, so I can take care of Kenma. It — it's not like I have anything against Akaashi-san; I just… I just can't. I'm sorry.”

Kuroo nods. “That's reasonable. Just promise me you won't tell him?”

“… Fine, I won't. But I still don't approve.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

Shimizu clears her throat, catching the attention of everyone in the room. “Then I’ll stay here with Hitoka-chan. Unless there are objections?” Her tone makes it clear that objections are not welcome.

“None at all,” Daichi says. “We all respect your decision. Anyone else who doesn't want part of this?”

“Shrimpy, you have any problems with the plan?” Kuroo asks. “You're the only other person in this room who knows what Akaashi can do.”

“I… argh, I don't know!” Shouyou exclaims, tugging his orange hair in frustration. “I mean, on one hand I know this is a terrible idea and Kenma's gonna be so mad, but on the other hand I want Kenma to get better soon. Argh, I'm just so BWEH!”

“And pulling your hair isn't gonna make things better, idiot,” Kageyama snaps. He snatches Shouyou’s hand out of his hair and keeps it captive in his larger one. “What do you think is best for Kenma?”

“… Kuroo-san’s plan, even though I know it's literally the worst plan ever. But if it helps Kenma, then I'm on board.”

Daichi nods. “If there aren't any other objections, then let’s get packed up. We leave in two hours’ time. Our first stop is Dateko.”

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They've managed to set off for Dateko without a hitch with Kuroo, Kenma and Daichi leading the group to the port district. Normally, Daichi and Suga would be bickering over directions — except now that they're just half an hour from Dateko’s infamous Iron Wall, Daichi instructs Suga to rest up for the upcoming battle, since he'll probably have lots of healing to do. Suga agrees with him. He shrinks until he is barely three inches tall and settles himself on top of Daichi’s head, making himself a nest out of Daichi’s hair. Now that Noya has gotten used to the fact that Suga can shrink and fly, the image of him napping in Daichi’s hair is ridiculously adorable.

(Suga once tried to take a nap in Noya’s hair. That's never happened again, because when he reverted back to human size he was covered head to toe in sticky hair gel. And that is why he only naps in Daichi’s hair.)

“You gonna be okay, Asahi?” Noya asks. "I mean, the last time we faced the Dateko vigilantes, you
Asahi recoils, while Iwaizumi shakes his head and says, “Noya, you could afford to be more
tactful.”

“No, he’s right,” Asahi admits sheepishly. “I was a coward. But… I think I’m more confident in my
skills now. I think I can fight that Aone guy on more even footing now.”

Noya beams up at him. “Okay, I believe in you! Don’t hold back, alright? ‘Cause I’ll be guarding
your back!”

In the meanwhile, as if taking the place of Daichi and Suga, Kuroo and Kenma are arguing over the
directions.

“I told you it was a left turn, kitten.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

Noya gets the feeling that most of their arguments can be summed up as a back-and-forth stalemate.
Even so, under their good-natured banter, he can see the underlying strain between the couple. He
hopes that whatever Kuroo has planned with this Akaashi guy won’t wreck his relationship, unlike
what Yachi predicted. Maybe she was just exaggerating. She tends to do that when she’s nervous or
scared about something.

The three at the front stop and turn to face the rest of the group.

“Oh, are we here already?” Shouyou asks, clambering onto Kageyama’s back to get a better view.

“I’ll throw you back to Nekoma if you don’t get off me, dumbass.”

“Meanie!”

“Yes, we are,” Daichi says, pointedly ignoring their squabble. “If anyone wants to turn back, now
would be a good time.”

“Nah, I have a bone to pick with that Moniwa bastard,” Tooru seethes.

“He’ll probably try to put the same curse on you now that you have magic tattoos,” Kageyama
reminds him.

“Hmph! Like some stupid curse is gonna take me down so easily! I’ll show that bastard exactly who
he’s messing with.”

(Iwaizumi opens his mouth, like he’s about to say something. Tooru perks and turns to him, but he
clamps his mouth shut and looks away. Noya doesn’t miss Tooru’s dejected look.)

“Can we just get this over and done with?” Kenma mutters. “I want to go home.”

Kuroo pets his hair. “Get through this, and I’ll buy you apple pie.”
“A month’s supply.”

“Anything for you, kitten.”

“Okay then,” Daichi says, drawing their attention back to him. Suga materialises next to him, now back to his full height. “Let’s go, team!”

“Yes, Captain!”

“We need a better pre-battle cheer,” Iwaizumi deadpans.

As a single entity, the Blue Crows (and Cats, Noya supposes) march towards the Iron Wall of Dateko. All of their heads are held high with dignity. None of them are cowering, nor do they look like they are about to turn tail and bolt. Instead, they stride towards the same people who forced them to retreat with a new steely determination.

“Oh hey, it’s these guys again,” Futakuchi drawls. He bounds forward, as if to get a better look at them. Behind him are at least twenty others — their numbers must have increased since their last encounter. “Good god, am I glad you’re here. We haven’t gotten any good challengers lately, and I was starting to get bored. Ooh, and aren’t those two from Team Neko Productions? Nice, we’re getting celebrity endorsements too.”

“Enough,” Kamasaki snaps. “Let our captain address them.”

Moniwa steps forward. “It’s — well, I can't say that it’s good to see you again, considering what happened last time.” He sounds so genuinely apologetic, Noya wishes they didn’t have to fight him. “But we know how things are. No hard feelings — we’re just doing our job.”

Daichi nods. “I understand.”

“Man, can we skip all the fluff and get to the good part already?” Futakuchi yawns. “Like the part where I knock that big Ace guy down and he gets so dejected he runs away. Though I hope I don't have to stab the little guy again.”

Noya glances over at Asahi, expecting to see him flinch at the mention of his former title. However, Asahi merely has concentration written on his face. His eyes are focused, looking less like glass and more like steel. Noya wonders if he even heard Futakuchi.

“Well, if you're ready,” Moniwa offers. Seriously, how can a guy be this polite before engaging in battle?

“We are, but are you?” Tooru counters. His hand rests on his hip, but his stance is tense.

The air falls silent as the two teams stand opposite from each other, poised and ready for a rematch.

This time, Asahi makes the first move. He charges towards Futakuchi and thrusts his polearm at him. Futakuchi yelps, but he's quick to dodge Asahi. He counters, slamming his spear against Asahi’s polearm. However, Asahi pushes back against Futakuchi’s spear with so much force Futakuchi is forced to take several steps back. Sweat pours down both warriors’ faces, but neither gives in.

Everyone else, empowered by Asahi’s first strike, spurs into action. The only one not taking part is Suga, as per Daichi’s instructions. As the team’s healer, Daichi doesn’t want him to get hurt; hence, he shrinks and flies high above the fighting, keeping a watchful eye on everyone in the event someone becomes in need of healing. Noya sticks close to Asahi, but he keeps a careful watch on the rest of the team, in case he needs to leap to their defense.
Kageyama and Shouyou, as usual, fight as a battery. When Hinata shouts, “Give me a toss!” cracks form in the ground in a jagged circle around him. With a flick of Kageyama’s wrist, the patch of ground Shouyou is crouched on launches into the air. The earth projectile hurtles towards one of the vigilantes, and Shouyou slams his elbow into the vigilante’s face before he can even blink. The vigilante crumples to the ground, where it splits open and swallows him up to his neck. That’s one vigilante down, about maybe forty or so more to go.

Tooru fights with deadly precision. His shards of ice find weak spots in the defenses of the clusters of vigilantes that surround him, and he mows them down. The ring of blue flames around him keeps the vigilantes away from him, which gives him a safe control tower from which he can attack. His arms swing faster than Noya’s eyes can catch, flinging shard after shard at the opponents stupid enough to go near him.

As they did with their previous fight on the route to Nekoma, Daichi and Iwaizumi fight back-to-back. Daichi handles their defense, using his skill with his bo-staff to keep the opponents at bay, while Iwaizumi’s speed and power swiftly takes down the rest around them.

As it turns out, Kuroo’s shapeshifting isn’t just for show. He smoothly melts into a panther and reforms back into a human in between attacks, looking almost like he’s dancing and not fighting. With his opponents caught off guard, he sneaks past their defenses to steal their weapons, rendering them vulnerable to his viciously sharp claws. He fights behind Kenma, who’s caught in a showdown with Moniwa. Flashes of light clash into each other, and sparks fly from the collision. Neither sorcerer is giving the other room to even catch his breath, which makes their battle so terrifying yet gripping to watch. Each time Moniwa fires a silver beam, Kenma blocks it with a golden beam, causing the silver beam to dissipate in a shower of sparks.

However, things take a turn for the worse when Moniwa catches Kenma by surprise with a sudden burst of green light. It temporarily blinds everyone in the vicinity — the clashing of weapons pauses in confusion. When the green light fades away, a red beam cuts through the air with such breakneck speed that Kenma doesn’t react in time. The beam diverges into two thinner beams, each one slamming into both Tooru and Kageyama and engulfing them in their sinister red glow.

Then, agonised screams fill the air.

Tooru, stumbling from the pain, drops his wall of fire and ice shards. Noya’s brain barely registers the vigilantes encroaching on Tooru’s space when he takes off. He dives and rolls across the ground to duck under several swords thrust his way and springs back onto his feet in front of Tooru. He slams his arm guards together, the resulting blowback force blasting the surrounding vigilantes back ten feet.

“Tooru, you okay?” Noya asks.

Tooru grimaces as he rubs his palms. “Hurts like a bitch, but I can fight. Go fuss over Tobio-chan.”

Noya turns to look for Kageyama. Despite his face twisted in pain, he’s still fighting. He continues to rupture the earth and send Shouyou flying through the air, but Noya can tell his precision is off. He seems to be distracted by something Noya can’t see. After making sure Tooru will be fine on his own, Noya bounds over to the other warrior.

“What’s up, Kageyama?”

His eyebrows are drawn together in a taut, nauseated line. “All the swirls… and lines. They keep changing colour. From transparent… then to silver. Or golden, if it’s from Kenma.”
Noya stares blankly at him. “What are you talking about?”

Kageyama lets out a low growl of frustration. “You mean you can't see it?”

“See what?”

“The lines, Noya-san! There are so many of them! Connecting here and there.” Kageyama swings his arm in an arc, as if to demonstrate what he means. The action causes the rock Shouyou is perched on to veer in the same arc. Yelping, Shouyou leaps off and dodges several swords in his hurry to get to Kageyama.

“Daichi-san!” Shouyou calls. “I think Kageyama has gone crazy!”

“I’m not crazy, dumbass!” Kageyama snaps. “I’m just seeing a whole bunch of colourful lines, that's all. You mean you guys don't see them?”

“Alright, I think we need to take a time-out,” Daichi says. “Er, we can do that, right?”

Moniwa nods. “Fair enough. I need a regroup with my team too. Temporary truce?”

“Temporary truce.”

The Blue Crows and Cats gather behind a wall, while the Dateko vigilantes gather behind another.

“Er, what's going on?” Asahi asks.

“Oikawa-san, you can't see it?” Kageyama demands.

“What am I supposed to be seeing?” Oikawa snaps, probably irritated from the pain of the curse.

“Like — like a whole bunch of colourful lines and swirls!” Kageyama waves his hands, frustrated. “Like, before Moniwa casts a spell, the lines around him are transparent. But as he’s casting a spell, the lines change colour. Like, to silver. Or green, or red, depending on the spell he’s using.”

“Maybe the pain's causing you to see weird shit,” Noya points out.

“No, Kageyama’s right,” Kenma says. “It’s a rare gene, but I heard some people with this gene can actually see Potential Magic when under immense pain. The lines of Potential Magic are transparent with thin outlines. When a magic-wielder casts a spell, basically converting the Potential Magic into a useable form of magic, the lines change colour and become visible to everyone else.”

“Did this happen the last time you were under this curse?” Suga asks.

Kageyama shrugs helplessly. “Don't know. I was too distracted by the pain to notice.”

“But this is a good thing!” Kuroo exclaims. “If you can literally see the magic being converted, then you can help Kenma stop Moniwa, right? All you gotta do is tell him when the Potential Magic is about to be converted, then he’ll just have to negate Moniwa’s sorcery, and boom one troublesome sorcerer down.”

“Are you up for it, though?” Suga asks. “The last time you were placed under the Curse of Kutsuu —”

“I can handle it,” Kageyama says. "Hinata?”

“Huh? What about me?” Hinata replies.
Kageyama rolls his eyes. “Dumbass, don't you remember? We fight as a team; but if I'm gonna help Kenma against Moniwa you’re going to have to fight on your own, 'cause I don't think I can concentrate on both the lines and using my powers.”

“Ohhh, sure!” Shouyou chirps. “I had a life before I met you anyway!”

“Tch, do you have to say it like that?!”

“But it’s the truth, Bakageya— ah ah ah that hurts, stupid Kageyama!”

“Shrimpy and I can fight together,” Kuroo suggests. “He’s fast, and he can jump high, so together we should be able to take the wind out of their sails.”

“Then it’s a plan,” Daichi agrees, prising Kageyama’s iron claw off Shouyou’s hair. “Koushi, if you will.”

Suga nods. He closes his eyes, and a soft white glow surrounds the group. Noya glances down at his bruised and scraped arms, noticing the blue-and-black bruises fading into the usual light tone of his skin and the wounds closing up. Having his wounds healed in the matter of seconds still throws him a loop each time it happens. He can imagine himself getting used to it, though.

Noya notices Iwaizumi looking like he's struggling to say something. His green eyes keep flickering to Tooru, and then to Noya, like he's asking for his help. Noya cocks his head, thinking, before he gets what Iwaizumi's trying to say.

“Tooru, you going to be okay?” Noya asks, pointing to the angry red tattoos on Tooru’s palms. “Or do you wanna sit out—”

“You underestimate me, Noya-chan,” Tooru scoffs. “If Tobio-chan can handle the curse, I don't see why I won't be able to.”

“Okay, if everyone’s ready, then let’s back out!” Daichi instructs.

“Yes, Captain!”

Most of their formation changes. The only things that stay the same is that Tooru is still a one-man army, Suga is still sitting out from the battle, and Asahi and Noya are still fighting as a duo. Daichi and Iwaizumi are now fighting separately, presumably to cover more ground. Kageyama and Kenma stand side by side in their flashy face-off against Moniwa, while Shouyou is straddling the black panther that's Kuroo.

Noya is grateful for his wide field of vision, as it allows him to remain focused on guarding Asahi while watching what the rest are doing. He watches in fascination as Kuroo takes off, streaking through the throng of vigilantes. He leaps into the air, above Kamasaki, and Shouyou launches himself off his back. In his downwards trajectory, the redhead takes two vigilantes out with his elbows, before performing a rolling land and sweeping Kamasaki’s legs out from underneath him. His back slams onto the ground, and Kuroo pounces on him. The two continue their tumble while Shouyou buzzes around the other two vigilantes. Noya can see how Shouyou’s small size works to his advantage in this situation — when coupled together with his speed, it's nigh-impossible to land a blow on him accurately.

His attention is stolen, however, by an arrow zipping through the air straight towards Iwaizumi’s back. His instincts nearly kick in, but he halts when he sees Tooru — his face still twisted with unendurable pain — bolting towards Iwaizumi. He leaps in front of the arrow, as if prepared to take it; but then he seems to suddenly realise something, because he ducks at the last moment and yells,
In a show of incredible reflexes, Iwaizumi spins around and catches the arrow. Other than a slight wince when the arrow grazes his palm, he's unharmed, with the arrow mere inches from his face.

"Are you okay, Iwa-chan?" Tooru demands. "Oh my god, your palm is bleeding! We should call Suga—"

"Shut up, stop worrying," Iwaizumi snaps. "I'm fine."

Tooru visibly deflates with relief. "O-oh, okay! That's great, Iwa-chan!"

Iwaizumi turns back to the battle. "Shut up and focus on the fight." Then he pauses, a pink flush creeping into his cheeks. "And, uh, thanks for the heads-up, Shittykawa."

And the smile that springs on Tooru’s face at the familiar insult is so bright it could light up the whole queendom. He turns back to the fight, his back pressed against Iwaizumi’s. He snaps his fingers — the burst of flames that spurt out from his fingertips burn with even more luminosity than before to match his smile. The flames grow in height and range, until it has trapped no less than ten vigilantes into its circle.

Now, there are only about fourteen vigilantes left — a sharp decrease from the previous forty. Daichi is gradually gaining the upper hand in a stalemate of defense against an older-looking guy, Kuroo and Shouyou are taking on four at once, Iwaizumi and Oikawa are up against another four, Asahi and Noya are locked in fierce combat with Aone and Futakuchi, and Kenma and Kageyama are still concentrating their efforts against Moniwa.

"Over there, Kenma!" Kageyama shouts. "Now!"

Kageyama has been yelling similar stuff for the past few minutes, only for Kenma to be just a split second late in stopping Moniwa.

"Crap, that was too late," Kageyama cursed. "Sorry."

"Just focus," Kenma says in his usual quiet tone. "We’ll get the next one."

Moniwa blasts a silver beam at them, which Kenma quickly deflects with a translucent golden shield. (If this weren't a fight, the display of colourful lights would be really pretty.)

Kageyama, his eyebrows creased in deep focus, cracks open the ground beneath Moniwa — probably an attempt to catch him off guard. However, Moniwa launches himself into the air, using another silver blast of energy to propel him upwards. With a sharp flick of his wrist, Kenma makes the silver blast evaporate. Shocked, Moniwa falls and lands hard on his back.

"Now!"

This time, Kenma’s eyes glow golden, his hair floating around him like a matching golden halo. The air becomes electrified as he directs his golden gaze to Moniwa, whose eyes flash silver.

“You're almost there!” Kageyama shouts. “Keep pushing, Kenma! No no it’s turning silver — oh never mind, it’s golden now. Direct your energy left — no, your other left… yeah, you got it! Just keeping pushing against him!”

None of Kageyama’s bizarre instructions makes sense to Noya. But if he were to hazard a guess, it would be that Kenma and Moniwa are fighting for some kind of dominance over the Potential Magic.
that both sorcerers naturally exude (or at least, according to Kageyama’s non-explanation of the “lines and swirls” of Potential Magic).

A loud clanging of metal on metal rings out behind Noya, tearing his attention from Kenma and Kageyama.

“Man, you guys really don't know when to quit!” Futakuchi comments. Much to Noya’s frustration, he manages to evade Asahi’s polearm again when Asahi jabs it at him.

Aone silently feigns a punch to the left, and then drives his sword towards Asahi’s unguarded right. Noya leaps to fill the gap immediately, his arm guards rushing to meet Aone’s sword. He flinches slightly at the sight of a sword so close to him, but he refuses to let it overwhelm him. He has to protect Asahi.

What does overwhelm him, however, is Aone’s sheer strength. He manages to somehow ignore the blowback force that Noya’s arm guards normally exude upon contact while shoving Noya backwards using the flat side of his sword’s blade. He grunts as he’s helplessly being pushed back. Try as he might, his arms quake with the effort of trying to push the giant back.

*If I can't overpower him, how about I use his strength against him?*

Noya lets Aone back him a few more steps, before he makes a fast break away. The force that has been building up underneath the pressure of Aone’s sword blasts Aone a good ten feet away, his sword spiralling out of his own hand. Noya grabs Aone’s sword and dashes over to see where the white-haired giant landed.

Aone is sprawled on the grass, a look of surprise on his usually stoic face. Even upon seeing Noya, he makes no move to get up. Noya doesn't want to take any chances, so he straddles his navel and presses the sword against his throat.

“Don't move,” he warns. “Or…”

Or else, *what?* He doesn't have the strength to keep Aone down. It’s like a mouse trying to pin a lion to the ground. If he wants to, Aone can easily get up and brush Noya off like a speck of dust. And if push comes to shove, he doubts he has the stomach to actually *kill* Aone. Holding a sword alone already makes him want to puke with revulsion — the image of his parents’ bloodied bodies swims in the forefront of his mind.

“Jeez Aone, you let yourself get beat by that kid?” Futakuchi drawls, casually shunting aside Asahi’s polearm. “You two are like David and Goliath. Hey kid, you don't need to keep him down anymore. I can read his face, and he’s saying he’s totally freaked out by your arm guards and is, quote and unquote, ‘humbly bowing down to your power’. Or something like that. Those arm guard-bracelets are super cool, don't get me wrong, but you’re not really a hotshot on your own. Without them, Aone would have beaten your ass without even breaking a sweat.”

At the last remark, Asahi snaps. He swings his polearm with more strength and speed that Noya has ever seen — but Futakuchi reacts with rival speed. He dodges and plunges his spear into Asahi’s arm. Grunting, Asahi stumbles back a few steps, landing on his butt.

“Asahi!” Noya screams. But before he can bolt to him, the body underneath him flips them over. Now Aone is on top of Noya, one hand holding his sword just an inch from Noya’s throat and his other hand easily pinning Noya’s skinny wrists to the ground above his head. He can feel the pressure building up in his arm guards, but Aone’s huge hand remains resolutely clamped like an iron handcuff on his wrists.
Futakuchi towers over Asahi. “I was lying about Aone giving up, but it’s funny to see you actually fell for it. Just give up already, good god. You couldn't beat us last time — what makes you think you can beat us this time?”

Asahi glares up at him, despite his bleeding arm, instead of cowering.

“I don’t think I can. I know I can, because I’m the Ace of this team!”

Then he kicks Futakuchi’s legs out from underneath him. Futakuchi crumples to the ground, and Asahi wastes no time in getting up and snatching the spear out of his grip. He presses both his polearm and the spear against Futakuchi’s head. Seeing as he is without his weapon, Futakuchi raises his hands above his hand.

“Cheesy one-liner, but fine — I’ll give you that one. You win,” Futakuchi admits.

“Good.” Asahi turns to Aone, the scariest glare that Noya has ever seen on his normally kind face. “Get off Noya now.”

Nodding, Aone stands up, places his sword on the ground and helps Noya up. He even dusts Noya off, much to his surprise.

“Uh, thanks?” What is the appropriate response to when someone who just tried to kill you now dusts you off? Noya is lost for words.

A loud BOOM catches all of their attention. A blinding golden dome surrounds Kageyama, Kenma and Moniwa. It expands and crackles like electricity, before finally bursting in a storm of golden sparks. When the air clears, Noya sees that the ground around the trio is charred for fifteen feet in all directions. On said charred ground is Moniwa, looking like someone hit his head with a tree. His eyes are glassy, and his expression is dazed.

“Did — did you fry his brain?” Kageyama chokes out.

Kenma scratches the back of his head and mutters, “I may have miscalculated and used too much power.”

“Oh my god, you totally fried his brain.”

Suga pops up beside Moniwa. He touches the sorcerer’s head, before announcing, “Don't worry, the damage is minor and can be fixed.”

A soft white glow emanates from Suga’s hand. When the light fades away, Moniwa’s eyes gain focus. He shakes his head a couple of times to get his bearings.

“Congratulations,” he says. “You defeated us.”

“As a reward, you get to kill one of us,” Futakuchi adds.

“Huh?!”

Even Kuroo can't hide his shock.

“Yeah,” Futakuchi yawns behind his hand. “It’s a policy meant to instill fear in us Dateko vigilantes, so we’re motivated to keep training to become stronger and undefeatable. And besides, it’s the way this world is. If you don't take the opportunity to cut down your enemy, they will cut you down first. Then you'll die regretting not getting rid of them when you had the chance.”
The Blue Crows and Cats exchange uneasy looks. Even the war-hardened warriors appear reluctant to agree to those terms.

“Look, I’ll even volunteer to cut you guys some slack,” Futakuchi offers. “Think of it as your revenge against me for nearly killing the kid there. Was Noya the name? Hey, the kid should totally do the honours. Aone, lend him your sword.”

Aone’s frown is deep, but he listens nonetheless. He lumbers to Noya and plants the sword in his shaking hands.

A cold sweat breaks out on the back of Noya’s neck. He can feel everyone holding their breath and staring at him, waiting for him to make a move.

And so he does.

He drops the sword.

Futakuchi arches an eyebrow. “Kid, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and an excellent one too.”

"No, it’s not,” Noya says firmly. Or as firmly as he can, when he’s shaking from having a sword shoved into his hands. “I won’t.”

“Why not? The sword is still by your feet — you can, like, just pick it up and kill me with it. It’s no biggie, I promise. It’s not like I have any family left to mourn me if I died.”

Noya feels a wave of bile rise up his throat. “Taking a life is no biggie?! No, I won't. Just ‘cause I can doesn’t mean I will. Not everything has to be kill or be killed! Fuck ‘survival of the fittest’, ‘cause even the weakest can prove to have some strength too!” He pauses to take a deep breath. He thinks of all the lives that have been lost. His parents. Shouyou’s parents. Ukai’s niece. Countless other people getting murdered by bandits. He doesn't want to add to that ever-growing list. “And I want as many people to live as possible. I’m not gonna have any more people to die — not if I can help it.”

Futakuchi’s eyes flash with mocking mirth. “Well, you see—"

“Enough, stop messing with his head,” Moniwa scolds, flicking Futakuchi’s forehead. He turns to the Blue Crows and Cats. “Sorry about that. We don’t actually have a policy like that — he’s just joking. Please, go on ahead.”

Daichi nods. “I see. Thank you.”

“No problem. Have a safe journey!”

Once the Dateko vigilantes take their leave (Kamasaki drags Futakuchi away by his ear), Noya’s first reaction is to turn to Asahi.

“No way, Asahi — did you actually call yourself the Ace?”

Now that the fight is over and Suga has healed all their injuries and Kenma has lifted the curse off Kageyama and Tooru (turns out he’s so powerful he doesn't need an orange crystal), Asahi’s fierce glare slides off his face, replaced by an adorable pink blush. “Uh, I mean, I kinda just — y’know, it just blurted out, but—"

“But I thought you hated being called the Ace! You got so mad at me when I called you that!”
Asahi’s blush deepens. He ducks his head as he mumbles, “I mean, I did hate it, at first. But then I realised that being the Ace means, um — how should I put this…? Uh, like, if being the Ace means I get to fight by your side, then it’s not something to be ashamed of. Like, I — I’m proud to fight by your side, Noya, so that’s why I’m proud to call myself the Ace — mmph!”

Pure, unadulterated joy pulses through Noya — so much so that he leaps on Asahi, wrapping his arms around his neck and legs around his waist. He laughs as Asahi stumbles back a few more steps, before his hands hesitantly press under Noya’s thighs to hold him up.

But Noya doesn’t stop there. Oh no, he doesn’t, because Nishinoya Yuu goes all the way in everything he does.

He leans forward and kisses Asahi — on his cheek.

(Okay, so maybe not all the way, but he’s still figuring out his feelings, dammit!)

Asahi tenses against him. He can practically feel Asahi’s cheek heat up against his lips. He lets his lips linger, closing his eyes and taking in Asahi’s scent. (Which smells like sweat mixed with nature and cologne — can he get any hotter, seriously?)

“Jeez, you two, the rest of us are still here,” Kuroo’s voice cuts in, which startles Noya into pulling away from Asahi.

Shouyou and Kageyama wear equally stunned expressions, Suga is smiling softly, Daichi’s eyebrows are raised, Kenma and Iwaizumi look bored, Kuroo and Tooru have identical shit-eating grins on their faces and Noya just wants to crawl into a ditch and never see the rest of the world ever again and just die of mortification. Good lord, what was he thinking, kissing Asahi in front of everyone like that? Judging by the redness in his face, Asahi seems to be following the same train of thought.

“Save the PDA for later, you two,” Daichi scolds. “We need to get going.”

“R-right,” Noya mutters, looking away. Can the heat in his cheeks just go away already? Seriously, he’s so dumb; what does Asahi see in him? At least when Asahi kissed him (on the forehead), he did it when it was just the two of them. But stupid, reckless Noya just had to kiss him (on the cheek) in front of everyone and consequently embarrass the both of them. What an idiot.

(He supposes he should be glad he didn't go for the lips, or he might have actually died of embarrassment).

Still, he kissed Asahi. The memory of Asahi’s surprisingly soft skin against his lips sends electricity racing down his spine.

Although he can’t meet anyone else’s eyes for the rest of their trek, even the embarrassment is unable to snuff out the spark of happiness blooming in his heart.

There isn’t much to do in Dateko, since most of the district is still in reconstruction after last year’s bombing. Though most of the radiation must be gone by now, Daichi doesn't want to risk anything, so after waving Kenma and Kuroo goodbye, they hastily pass through Dateko without a fuss.
Now setting up camp a safe distance from the district, Oikawa can't help but let his gaze wander to Iwaizumi even though he's supposed to be busy pitching a tent. He can't believe Iwaizumi spoke to him after weeks of radio silence, and it was to thank him. The victorious grin refuses to stay off his face. In fact, it stretches his muscles so much it starts to hurt.

“Oi, what are you grinning about?” Iwaizumi snaps.

*He's talking to me again!*

“Uh… you!”

*Nice going, Tooru. Real smooth criminal skills. He’s so going to swoon at your feet now.*

Iwaizumi raises a judgemental eyebrow. “About what facet of me, exactly?”

*Is that a flirty undertone? Oikawa wonders. Or is it awkwardness? He sounds so normal, like we haven't not been speaking for ten thousand years oh my god Tooru don't blow this.*

Oikawa nervously combs his fingers through his hair. “You *spoke* to me, Iwa-chan!”

“Well, you did warn me about the arrow, so that's the least I could do.” Then Iwaizumi’s raised eyebrow settles into a pensive frown. “Not that I'm not grateful for the warning, but you were right where the arrow was — I thought you would’ve tried to take the arrow for me or some shit like that.”

“That was my initial plan,” Oikawa admits. “But then, I remembered what some… guys told me a few days ago. They told me that you didn't appreciate my, uh, my ‘sickening bleeding-heart heroism’ — I think that's what they called it. Was that why you got so mad at me, Iwa-chan? Because I kept blaming myself for bad things happening to you? And 'cause I pushed you away from me without checking to see if it’s what you really wanted?”

Then — is he seeing things? — Iwaizumi’s frown softens into a rare smile. It’s rare the same way a jewel is — hard to find; but when it is unearthed, it takes Oikawa’s breath away with its exquisite beauty. The heartache that has been haunting him for the past few weeks melts away, replaced by a swooping sensation in his heart that leaves him feeling like he's simultaneously falling and flying.

“About time you got it, Shittykawa,” Iwaizumi says. He strides over and grabs Oikawa’s face so tenderly Oikawa might just melt there and now, and he kisses him. Stunned, all Oikawa can do is stand there like a limp sack of potatoes while Iwaizumi kisses him.

As though sensing his shock, Iwaizumi pulls away. He looks at Oikawa, concern in his olive green eyes.

*How come I never noticed how pretty Iwa-chan’s eyelashes are until now? Oikawa wonders.*

“Hey, you okay?” Iwaizumi asks, frowning. “Sorry, was that too soon?”

Then his brain finally catches up to everything that has happened. With a delighted cry of “Iwa-chan!”, he bowls Iwaizumi over and peppers his face with feverish kisses. Iwaizumi grunts under Oikawa’s weight, but he doesn’t push him off. Instead, he wraps his arms around his waist, drawing him closer.

Once he's done with his onslaught of kisses, Oikawa pulls away to gaze down at Iwaizumi’s face.

“So, are we okay?” he asks with a rare show of hesitation. To distract himself from his pounding heart, he smooths out non-existent creases on the front of Iwaizumi’s shirt. (Really, it's just an excuse
for him to run his hands over Iwa-chan’s wonderfully toned pecs.)

“Hmph, as long as you promise me you won't pull that stupid martyr shit again,” Iwaizumi mutters.

Fireworks go off in Oikawa’s chest, bursting into life and colour and lighting up the darkness that took his heart hostage in Iwaizumi’s absence. In an almost drunken rush, he swoops down and presses another kiss against Iwaizumi’s lips. And another. And another one, each kiss lingering several heartbeats longer than the last, because he hasn't kissed his beautiful Iwa-chan in nearly a month and he misses him so badly he would rather lose his powers than suffer another moment without him.

“Promise!” he sings happily. Then he kisses Iwaizumi again, just because.

Iwaizumi glances away, but he can't hide the flush creeping up his neck and taking residence in his cheeks. "Also, I owe you an apology," he mutters.

"Huh, what for? Iwa-chan did nothing wrong, it was me—"

"How 'bout you let me finish first, idiot? I just meant that — I shouldn't have responded with anger when you were already upset. I'm... I'm sorry."

"Aww, has Iwa-chan finally realised what a nasty temper he has?” Oikawa teases, but he quickly sobers when he sees Iwaizumi shift uncomfortably. "Apology accepted! How could I ever stay mad at my precious Iwa-chan anyway?"

“Shut up, moron. Don't overdo this stupid sappy shit,” Iwaizumi snaps.

Oikawa giggles. Iwa-chan is so cute when he acts all cold and aloof.

“You know I can't promise that!” he sings. “You do remember who you’re engaged to, right?”

“A melodramatic piece of shit; yes, I remember. If you buy a ring that’s in the five-digit range or beyond I will call off our engagement again.”

“Iwa-chan!”

Chapter End Notes

1. i’m a sucker for happy endings, so i was never planning on keeping IwaOi broken up. so yay, they're back together.

2. i was planning on introducing Bokuto and Akaashi in this chapter, but then the battle got way out of hand, so y'all gonna have to wait one more week.

3. a quick breakdown on Noya's sexuality: here, he is bi. in his case, he's attracted to the 'extreme' ends of what's generally considered to be masculinity and femininity, such as Asahi (tall, muscular, rugged) and Kiyoko (delicate, beautiful, v 'feminine'). of course, not all bi people identify the same way as Noya does and that's cool.

4. er, I realise I kinda accidentally transferred Aone's canon friendship with Hinata to Noya. I'm gonna have to fix that eventually in a future short story.
okay, that's all. thanks for reading!

i write stuff on tumblr too!
Kageyama cannot keep up with the constantly changing relationship statuses of his companions. First of all, there is the forever-volatile pair of Iwaizumi and Oikawa. When he first spotted them trading saliva at the Academy, he was like, *Okay, so they're a couple. Gross, like can they go make out somewhere else, but whatever.* Then he met Oikawa again with the rest of the Blue Crows, and suddenly they became engaged? And then they called off their engagement? But now they are engaged again? God, he wishes people would just make up their minds about whether they wanted to be together or not. Normally, he's as perceptive of other people’s social relationships as a potato — except Oikawa keeps peacocking his renewed engagement to Iwaizumi to anyone and everyone who would listen that it would be pretty damn hard to stay clueless.

Second of all, what the hell is up with Asahi and Nishinoya? When they first met, he thought they were really good friends and nothing could separate them. Then that fight happened, and he didn't see any way they could make up. They did anyway. Now they're back to being good friends… who also like to kiss each other on the cheek? Do friends do that?

Kageyama glances at Hinata, who is engaged in a scintillating conversation about ROLLING THUNDER with Noya. He and Hinata have kissed plenty of times now — on the lips, forehead, cheek, neck and many other places he shouldn't mention in polite company. But what are they? They aren't childhood-friends-turned-lovers the way Daichi and Suga, Oikawa and Iwaizumi, and Kuroo and Kenma are. Neither do they have the deep, trusting, more-than-platonic-but-less-than-romantic relationship that Noya and Asahi share.

He doesn't like uncertainty, so he decides he needs to clarify his relationship status with Hinata.

“Hinata, dumbass! I like you!”

Startled, Hinata leaps a mile in the air. When he lands, he spins to glare at Kageyama. “What, you wanna fucking go?! C’mon, stick ‘em up, Bakageyama!” He puts his fists up, ready for a fight.

“What — no! I said, I like you, idiot! Not that I wanna fight! God, what do you have stuck in your ears? An entire fucking continent?!”

“Wha— jeez, then don't say it with such a scary face!” Hinata shouts back.

Growling, he seizes the top of Hinata’s stupid carrot-top head. “I was born with this face, asshole!”

“Yeah, and have you ever heard of changing your facial expressions?!”

They bicker back and forth for a while, before Hinata suddenly smiles, like the sun peeking above
the horizon at daybreak and casting its bright rays across the dark ocean.

“I like you too!” he says, beaming. “I mean, someone has to, since you’re so scary and rude and grumpy — ah Bakageyama that hurts!”

This conversation is a mistake, partly because Daichi is glaring daggers at them over his shoulder. Kageyama notices that the captain looks more ragged than usual. Dark shadows lurk under his eyes, a five o’clock shadow sits prominently on his jaw and his hair appears like it hasn’t seen a comb in several days now. Well, they are constantly travelling, so it isn’t easy to look glamorous while doing so.

Kageyama changes the subject.

“How do you know this Akaashi guy, anyway?”

Hinata’s eyes light up. “I met Akaashi-san and his boyfriend — well, at that time they were just friends, but now they’re totally boyfriends. They’re super cute together! Er, what was I talking about? Oh yeah, how I met Akaashi-san and Bokuto-san! I actually met them at the same time I met Kuroo-san and Kenma. I was at Nekoma for a training camp, and that’s where I met Kuroo-san. We talked, and we found out that we both liked volleyball! After training was done for the day, he was like—” Hinata pauses to push his hair upwards in a vague imitation of Kuroo’s perpetual bedhead. “—Hey, Shrimpy, you wanna play some volleyball? My boyfriend’s a pretty good setter’. And I was like ‘hell yeah!’ Then we got to the volleyball court, and Kenma was already there with Bokuto-san and Akaashi-san. We played volleyball together until it was way past curfew, but Kuroo-san somehow managed to sneak us in without getting caught. He’s really smart like that. It was fun! Even Kenma had fun, and he usually acts like volleyball is so ugh.”

Kageyama can’t say he is surprised. It isn't uncommon knowledge that Hinata tends to make friends in the strangest place. Kageyama won’t ever admit it, but he’s secretly impressed with (and envious of) the ease with which Hinata interacts with and befriends people.

“Are they warriors, too?” Kageyama asks, because while back in the Academy everyone knew Kuroo the provocation master from Nekoma, he’s never heard of the other three.

Hinata shakes his head. “Bokuto-san used to be one, but he dropped out after two years ‘cause he said it wasn’t his thing. He started attending normal high school after that, which is where he met Akaashi-san. Akaashi-san said he got recruited by the Academy, but he rejected them.”

Kageyama’s eyebrows shoot to his forehead. “Wait, he rejected them? But why?!”

The reason for his shock is because just trying to get into the Training Academy is a ridiculous battle itself because of how prestigious it is to be a warrior. And to be specially recruited is a one-in-a-thousand chance. These people usually have some special natural talent, which means they’re usually not 100% human. Most of them, like Akaashi, are demi-fairies.

Hinata shrugs. “Don’t know. He’s a really private kinda guy, y’know? Bokuto-san said not to pry too much, ‘cause when he did Akaashi-san threatened to kick him out of their dorm.”

“Hm, okay.” Kageyama isn’t satisfied with Hinata’s not-answer, but even he knows that continuing to push the matter won’t get him anywhere. Still, he's rather curious about this mysterious friend of Kuroo’s, so he asks the next question weighing on his mind.

“What is Akaashi-san’s special ability? I mean, Kuroo-san said he’s part-fairy like Suga-san, so he must have kind of special power.”
Hinata’s smile dips downwards. His expression darkens, like the sun suddenly plunging below the horizon without any warning and leaving the sky a dark, confused mess. Quietly, he explains Akaashi’s power to Kageyama.

Kageyama frowns when Hinata is done with his explanation. “Okay, so he can do that. But I don’t see how that will help Kuroo-san — oh. Oh.”

Even he knows that Kuroo’s plan with Akaashi won’t lead to anywhere good for him and Kenma.

“So, Captain, where should we begin searching for this Akaashi fellow?” Oikawa asks.

They have arrived in the Fukurodani district. Since it's still early in the afternoon, it makes sense to begin their search of Akaashi Keiji now.

Daichi shrugs, frowning. “I don't know — I don't know this Akaashi guy any better than you do. Hinata, do you have any ideas?”

“Hmm, let’s see…” Hinata checks his watch. “It’s almost two, which means Akaashi-san should be ending class soon. Let’s start there!”

Hinata leads them to a prestigious, sprawling school complex that can rival the Training Academy in terms of grandeur. The imperious-looking golden plaque on the front gate reads, Fukurodani Academy. Beyond the front gate is a quad, where students mill around. Some are lying in the grass, reading their textbooks; some are walking with their friends and laughing; others sit under the shade of the large cherry blossom trees doing their homework. The quad is surrounded by four tall buildings with a smattering of small buildings behind them, all painted a pearly shade of white. Kageyama can’t help but wonder how they manage to keep the walls so pristine. The Training Academy’s walls are painted every colour except white to hide dirt. All around them, students file out of the school. In their street clothes, Kageyama and his companions stick out like a sore thumb in the sea of smartly-uniformed students.

“So, uh, are we just going to wait here for him to show up?” Iwaizumi asks.

“Yeah!” Hinata says. “He and Bokuto-san usually go to a coffee shop after school on Wednesdays to study together, so all we have to do is intercept them and ask Akaashi-san for his help.”

Kageyama folds his arms. “I thought you would have, like, a more exciting plan than just hanging around and waiting for him to show up.”

“Well, if you're so smart, why don't you go look for Akaashi-san?”

“Idiot, I don't even know what he looks like!”

“Which is exactly why you should listen to me, Bakageyama!” Hinata sticks his tongue out for good measure.

“Cut it out, you two,” Daichi snaps, his tone more irritated than usual. “Let’s just go somewhere we won’t get in the way of students and wait patiently.”

They shuffle to the side let the students out, some of whom give them odd looks. To pass time, Noya
suggests they play Never Have I Ever — which turns out to be a very bad idea. Kageyama now knows things he rather he doesn't about what Oikawa and Iwaizumi like to do in the bedroom. He doesn't think he can look at either of them the same way ever again.

“—and so Iwa-chan took the—”

“Oh oh oh, that's them!” Hinata suddenly yells, which is a welcome interruption of Oikawa’s recount. He bounces to his feet and bolts to the gate, waving his arms like a wild crow. “Akaashi-san! Bokuto-san! Over here!”

The rest of them follow Hinata to the best of their ability, and they find him talking to two tall teenaged guys. One has a rather muscular build and two-toned white-grey hair. He's wearing the standard school uniform — a grey blazer, a striped blue-and-white tie, a white collared shirt and black trousers — except the shirt is untucked, the sleeves are rolled up to his elbows and his tie is loose. The guy next to him is slightly shorter with a pretty face, messy dark hair and a more slender build. In contrast to his companion’s uniform, his is much neater.

“Hey hey hey, little man!” the muscular guy cheers, ruffling Hinata’s hair with a level of enthusiasm that can rival Hinata’s.

“It’s good to see you, Hinata,” the other greets politely.

“Guys, this one is Akaashi-san!” Hinata points at the pretty boy. Right, Kageyama should have guessed, since demi-fairies exude a natural aura of stunning beauty. “This one here is Bokuto-san! He can transform into an owl!”

Bokuto’s golden eyes gleam. “You want me to demonstrate? I’ve been dying to transform, but Akaashi wouldn't let me!”

“That’s because you get feathers everywhere, Bokuto-san.”

“You should back me up more, Akaashi!”

Hinata giggles, like this is a regular occurrence with these two. He quickly introduces them to the Blue Crows before Bokuto can go off about something else.

“I don't mean to be rude,” Akaashi says, “but what exactly is your business in Fukurodani? There really is not much to do here.”

“Yeah, Nekoma and Johzenji — that's where the real fun’s at!” Bokuto adds. “Fukurodani sucks ass, man. We just have corporations and schools and boring stuff like that. You guys casual travellers or something?”

“Oh, you could say that,” Daichi says. “But there’s something else we’re here for. You see…”

Daichi explains the whole situation with Kuroo and Kenma to Bokuto and Akaashi, who listen with varying degrees of seriousness. Bokuto lets out a hoot at the mention of Kuroo, and Akaashi politely tells him to shut up.

“So, let me get this straight,” Bokuto says, rubbing his face. “Something’s weird with the little kitten but Kuroo doesn't know what, so he wants Akaashi to help him find out? But how would Akaashi — ooh. That sly bastard, does he really think that's a good idea?”

Akaashi’s expression is chillingly stormy. “I see, I think I understand what Kuroo-san would like me to do.”
Hinata’s expression lights up. “That's great! So you'll help us, right?”

Akaashi’s next words cut through the hopeful atmosphere like a sword.

“… No. I refuse.”

“Aww, why not?” Hinata pouts. He offers Akaashi sad puppy eyes, but Akaashi doesn't flinch.

“Yeah, I'm with Shouyou,” Noya says, planting his hands on his hips. “Your friend needs your help, man. Are you really gonna leave him hanging like that?”

Akaashi shakes his head resolutely. “I won't do that to Kenma, no matter what Kuroo-san wants.”

Hinata, not one to give up, continues grovelling at Akaashi’s feet. He even does the dogeza, but Akaashi still refuses to budge.

“Look, I'm sorry — I really am,” Akaashi says, but his impassive tone doesn't give anything away. "I know how much Kenma means to you. I care about him too. But Kenma and Kuroo-san have loved each other since they were children. This will absolutely wreck their relationship, and I won't be the catalyst for that. I'm sorry, Hinata, but Kuroo-san will have to find another way.”

In a desperate last-ditch, Hinata turns to Bokuto. “Bokuto-san! What do you think?”

“I, uh…” Bokuto rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. “Look, little guy, this is kind of a tough situation, y’know? Of course I want what's best for Kenma — he's a cool guy. And Kuroo’s my bro, so I want to help him. But I also gotta respect Akaashi’s wishes too. If he doesn't wanna then I can't force him.”

Any remaining shred of hope on Hinata’s face falls apart. He opens his mouth, probably to argue some more, but Daichi’s hand on his shoulder stops him.

“I see,” he says. He sounds thirty years older than he is. “Thank you anyway for your time. We’re sorry to bother you.”

“It’s fine,” Akaashi replies coolly, already turning around. “I sincerely wish you and Kuroo-san all the best. Come on, Bokuto-san, let’s go.”

“Hey hey, wait up!” After giving them a wave goodbye, Bokuto chases after his boyfriend, leaving them completely out of options.

____________________________________

“Mmm, I am living for Iwa-chan’s biceps.”

Kageyama sighs. He should have known better than to try and take a nap when Iwaizumi is working out shirtless in the same room as Oikawa; he wishes he went with Hinata, Noya and Suga to talk to Akaashi for the third time that week. In the other corner of the room, Daichi and Asahi are discussing something in quiet tones and generally doing a good job at ignoring Oikawa’s thirstiness.

“Doesn't Iwa-chan look good when he’s doing push-ups? What do you think, Tobio-chan?”

Caught off guard, all Kageyama manages is an awkward “uh”.
Oikawa rolls his eyes behind his reading glasses. “I know your taste in men is scrawnier and shorter than mine, but even you can appreciate Iwa-chan’s magnificent arms. Oh my god, I want him to impregnate me, Tobio-chan. I want to bear his children.”

“You can’t — you’re both guys,” Kageyama intelligently points out. “Unless you want to do an organ transplant.”

“No thanks. I like my male parts. Besides, he may look like such a brute but Iwa-chan is actually very creative about how we use our male—”

The door slams open, which cuts off the rest of the horrifying mental image that Oikawa is trying to plant in Kageyama’s mind. Suga, Nishinoya and Hinata slump in with identical dejected looks on their face.

“Didn’t work?” Daichi asks, even though the answer is obvious enough.

“He’s so stubborn!” Noya bursts out, yanking his hair in frustration. Asahi hurries to detach his hands from his hair. “How can anyone be so damn stubborn?”

“You exist,” Oikawa sneers. He expertly dodges the shoe Noya flings at his head.

“I don't wanna give up, but I don't know what to do,” Hinata says, sounding like he's on the verge of tears. As if sensing the oncoming waterworks, Suga pets his head encouragingly. “If Akaashi-san won't help, then Kuroo-san will be stuck not knowing how to help Kenma and Kenma will stay sad and that will make me sad! I don't want Kenma to be sad.”

“We’ll think of something.” But even their optimistic team mom sounds unsure of himself.

In unison, everyone turns to look at their trusty captain.

“What?” Daichi asks, seeming put-off by the sudden attention.

“I mean, you are our captain,” Oikawa says. “You call the shots around here. Like where to go, what to do, and who gets the vice-captain position.”

“You're going off-topic, Shittykawa,” Iwaizumi grouses.

Daichi rubs the back of his neck. “Well, I mean—”

“Oikawa-san’s right!” Hinata exclaims, perking up. “You're so smart, Captain! Surely you have a plan, right?”

The frown lines between Daichi’s eyes deepen. “I’m not sure—”

“Well, you will think of something, right?” Noya adds. “You always do! That's why you’re our captain, ‘cause you always have a plan—”

“And maybe this time I don’t!” Daichi suddenly bursts out, slamming his fist against the wall. The framed painting nearly leaps off the wall in fright. “Look, I'm sorry, but in contrary to what you guys think I don't always have all the answers. I'm just in the dark about this as all of you. All I know is what Kuroo wants and the name Akaashi Keiji, just like the rest of you do, so I'm sorry if I can't pull a solution out of my ass to solve all our problems. I'm sorry — I just… I can't do this anymore.”

He storms out of the room. The door slams shut behind him like a thunderclap.

Stunned, all that the remaining occupants of the room can do is stare at each other. Where the hell did
Hinata’s lower lip trembles. “Did I say something wrong? Did I upset Daichi-san?”

Suga runs a hand over his face. “No, you didn't. He’s just very stressed right now. It’s nothing personal, so don't worry about it. I’ll go talk to him, alright?”

Stressed? But Daichi hasn't burst out like that until just now. In fact, Kageyama didn't even notice—

Oh. So that's why Daichi has been looking more worn out than usual lately. A wave of guilt engulfs Kageyama when he realises that he didn't notice Daichi’s mounting stress, and it took the captain finally cracking for it to get his attention.

Suga slips out of the room and closes the door much gentler behind him, probably to go after their overworked captain. Kageyama, Hinata, Oikawa, Iwaizumi, Noya and Asahi exchange nonplussed and distressed looks.

“Say, what will we do if we really can't get Akaashi-san to help and Daichi-san doesn't come back?” Hinata whispers.

No one has an answer.

Suga finds Daichi in a seedy tavern with a glass of frothing beer in front of him. Figures that drinking his sorrows away would be what he’d be doing after a breakdown like that.

“I don't know how you can drink that crap,” Suga says lightly, sliding into the seat opposite him.

“Every time I try beer my tongue dies a little more.”

“Not everyone likes sex on the beach, Koushi,” Daichi mumbles into his glass.

“Well, they're really missing out.”

The two share a strained laugh before lapsing into silence. A waiter comes around, and Suga orders a platter of cheese for him and Daichi to share and a glass of Shirley Temple for himself. One of them has to stay sober, after all. Suga twists his fingers in his lap, trying to think of a way to address the elephant in the room without upsetting Daichi any more than he already is. He knows that even without conflicts such as this, their relationship is hanging on a thin precarious thread, what with the older generations of the demi-fairy community frowning down on sexual relations with humans. Their relationship can be so easily ripped apart by his kind — yet it would be ironic if the one to cause the undoing is himself.

“I don't know what I’m doing, Kou,” Daichi says after taking a long swig of beer.

Okay, maybe addressing the elephant in the room won't be such a big deal after all.

“What do you mean?” Suga asks patiently. Truth be told, his first instinct is to reassure Daichi; but in his experience, he has learned that sometimes it’s better to hear out the person instead of immediately jumping in to comforting them.

“Like, what am I playing at, trying to lead a team I’m — I’m, y’know…”
“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Suga actually does, but he has also learned that sometimes the upset person needs to articulate their problem themselves in order to feel better.

Daichi’s exhausted eyes dip from Suga’s face to the table. “Kou, you know what happened to my dad. I — I shouldn’t even exist. I shouldn’t have been born in the first place. So what is a — a sin like me playing at, trying to be a leader? I just — I’m not good enough. A sin shouldn’t be someone others look up to for guidance. Maybe… maybe the team would be better off without me.”

And now looks like a good time for Suga to intervene.

“Daichi,” he says softly, covering his boyfriend’s hand with his, “you didn’t ask to be born, so you can’t blame yourself for that.”

“And my dad didn’t ask to be raped, but look what happened.” Daichi gestures to himself disgustedly, and a crack forms down the center of Suga’s heart. “I’m disgusting, Koushi. A sin. Maybe you won’t understand, ‘cause you were born of your parents’ love, but me — I just… I can’t. I’m sorry.” A lone tear slides down his face and drips into his beer, but he doesn’t seem to notice. From the broken, faraway look in his eyes, he’s probably wallowing in his head.

Suga lets a tiny sigh escape his lips, then he reverts back to all business. “Okay, the first thing I’m gonna do is take this crap away from you before you get alcohol poisoning.” With his free hand, he slides Daichi’s beer closer to his side of the table. Daichi doesn’t fight him. “Second of all…” He pauses. This is a delicate issue — if he says one wrong thing, he could break Daichi to the point of no return. He needs to tread carefully, like he’s walking on glass. “Look, this is going to sound really cheesy — but your past, your origins don’t define you. Circumstances that are out of your control don’t define you. Yes, your birth mother did something very, awfully terrible to your father. But sometimes good things can come out from bad incidents, y’know?”

Daichi snorts derisively. “What good could have come out from that?”

“I’ll use an example to illustrate. I remember when I was six, I was playing in the backyard at school when a bunch of kids started giving me a hard time — throwing sand at my face, stealing my lunch, pinching me. I was sad and lonely and hurt, like you wouldn’t believe it.

"Then you came. You saw me crying, so you came over to me and you gave me your lunch, helped me clean the sand off and brought me to the teacher to get my bruises treated ‘cause it turned out I wasn’t self-regenerative. I’m still not, sadly. I made my first real friend then, and now that friend has become the man I’ve come to fall in love with.” Suga lifts Daichi’s hand and kisses the back of it. “Okay, I get that the two situations are quite different, and that being bullied kinda pales in comparison to being forced into having sex.

"But you get what I'm trying to say, right? Every cloud has a silver lining and all that stuff. Yes, something terrible happened to your father, but the silver lining is you, just like how the silver lining to me getting bullied is meeting you. Bad circumstances don't always produce bad results. Sometimes the result is a kind, caring and determined person such as yourself. And honestly, Daichi, you could’ve been born of the most mind-blowing and enthusiastically consensual sex, and I’d still love you. To me, you’re not the product of rape. To me, you are Sawamura Daichi — hardworking warrior, steady leader and just an all-round amazing person I’m so lucky to have met. You’re not a sin. You're a blessing. And… I know that words alone won't suddenly make everything alright, but I hope that over time you will come to see yourself the way I see you.”

“Koushi…” Daichi’s voice cracks, and an embarrassed flush shoots up his face. “I — how did I get so lucky as to have met someone like you?”

“I was bullied, Daichi,” Suga whines.

“Well, those bullies seriously don't know what they're missing out on.”

Forgetting that he's still in a very public setting, Suga leans over the table and kisses Daichi. Judging by the way Daichi’s hand reaches up to cup his face, he too has forgotten that there are other people around them. Well, it's always like that for them. When they're together, they tend to forget the rest of the world.

It takes an annoyed cough from the waiter to jar them back into reality. They sheepishly break apart and let the waiter place Suga’s order on the table.

“So is that the main reason why you were so upset?” Suga asks. He nibbles on a small piece of cheese while studying Daichi’s face. He's so easy to read, like an open book written in neon ink — Suga already has his answer. But he waits for Daichi to articulate it himself.

“Well, a large part of it,” Daichi admits. “The other is just stress, really. Even before we picked you up from Karasuno, I had to hold the crew together for about two years now. Would you believe it — Noya was even harder to manage when he was still at the palace. He constantly fought with his father, and not the friendly way he does with Oikawa. He broke things, Koushi — most of the palace’s spendings were on replacing all the stuff he broke.”

Suga giggles. He hasn't heard much about what Noya was like as a prince, so he is quite fascinated. “It sounds like he has toned down quite a fair bit ever since fleeing the palace.”

“Yeah.” A pensive look crosses Daichi’s face. “He was forced to grow up real fast. All of us were. It was a hell lot of pressure, just trying to keep everyone alive and safe. The world — it’s cruel.”

“We’re too young to be saying stuff like that.”

“I know, right? I'm surprised I haven't grown any white hair yet. Uh, I haven't, right?”

Suga gives Daichi’s stubbornly black hair a mocking once-over. “If you have, they're probably too scared of you to come out.”

Daichi lets out a low chuckle. He swipes a cracker from the platter and munches on it. He truly is an amazing person, and it hurts Suga to know he doesn't see it. So until Daichi finally realises how wonderful he is, Suga will support him in every way he can.

“If you want to, I can temporarily take over as captain,” Suga offers.

Daichi looks up sharply. “Wait, you don’t mind?”

“If I did I wouldn't have offered, would I? Jeez, Dai, your brain is dying for you to use it.”

“Right, sorry. And yes, please. I could really use a break. But if you need any help, just say the word.”

Suga smiles. “Then it’s a deal. But don’t get me wrong — this is only a temporary arrangement for you to chill out for a while. You're better at leading than I am, so I expect you to come back eventually, got it?”

“Loud and clear.”

And, somehow, Suga knows Daichi will keep his word. Because if there is one word to describe the
wonderful and complex human being that is Sawamura Daichi, it would be ‘reliable’.

Oikawa not-so surreptitiously checking his muscles out while he is working out is flattering for the first two minutes or so. Then it begins to get on Iwaizumi’s nerves.

“Mmm, yes Iwa-chan, work it,” Oikawa purrs.

“Oi, stop eye-fucking me when I’m trying to work out,” Iwaizumi snaps. From his planking position, he pushes himself up and grabs a towel to wipe himself with. “I can't focus when you keep making all those stupid sounds.”

Oikawa pouts at him. Iwaizumi hates how pretty he looks with his glasses on. It makes it harder for Iwaizumi to stay annoyed at him. “But you look so fine, Iwa-chan! I can't even check my hella sexy fiance out now?”

“Not if it interrupts my exercising. I'll lock you out of the room next time I want to work out, especially if you're going to say ‘hella’.”

“So grumpy, Iwa-chan. You're blessed to have found someone who’s willing to put up with your grumpiness and marry you.”

“Yes, very blessed indeed,” Iwaizumi says sarcastically. He slips a shirt on, much to Oikawa’s disappointment. Still, it's very satisfying to know just how wrapped around his finger Oikawa is. “I'm gonna go out for a while, away from your stupidity.” He scans the room, and his eyes settle on a certain redhead. “Hey Hinata, you wanna come with?”

Hinata perks up. “Sure! See you later, Kageyama!”

Kageyama grunts something non-committal before returning back to filing his nails in his usual meticulous fashion.

“Hey, why are you bringing Shou-chan with you?” Oikawa demands indignantly. “I can't believe you’re taking Shou-chan out on a date but you won't let me check you out!”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes as he opens the door. “It’s not a date, so shut up. I won't even be out long. Later, Shittykawa.”

(Frankly, there's no particular reason for his asking Hinata to accompany him. He has no idea where he plans to go; his gut just tells him he needs to get out there with Hinata, and he isn't one to doubt the same intuition that has saved his life more times than he count in a fight.)

“Iwa-chan is so mean!”

“Bye bye, Oikawa-san!” Hinata chirps.

Iwaizumi and Hinata leave the inn and enter the fairly busy streets of Fukurodani. It's nowhere near as wild as Johzenji was, nor as densely-packed as Nekoma. It's more like Seijoh — busy without making Iwaizumi want to shove everyone out of his way out of impatience.

Hinata bounces along beside him, twittering about some cool volleyball move he and Kageyama are perfecting. Even though Iwaizumi is really only half-listening, he feels his lips quirk into a smile. It's
nice to see Kageyama finally work together with someone, which was what he was trying to teach Kageyama all along — y’know, before they got whisked on this journey. And Hinata is a nice kid. He can’t imagine anyone else more perfect to balance out Kageyama’s moody aloof nature.

He lets Hinata’s bubbly voice wash over him as his mind drifts off to the earlier conversation he, Noya, Hinata, Kageyama, Asahi and Oikawa had in their room.

Noya asked them what they wanted to do after their journey was over. The question sent a jolt through Iwaizumi, because he had been so focused on just making it alive out of every adventure they got themselves into that he didn’t even think about the fact that one day their journey together would come to an end one day, one way or another.

“I want to stay with you, Noya-san!” Hinata declared. “Wherever you go, I’ll follow! I mean, I want to visit home and see Natsu and my grandparents too — but I’m definitely sticking with you in the long run. What about you, Bakageyama?”

“I’ll go where you go,” Kageyama said, scowling at the nickname. “There’s nothing for me to return home to anyway.”

Noya nodded. “Mmm, fair enough. What about you, Asahi?”

“Same as Hinata.” Asahi smiled shyly. “It’s my job to protect you, after all. Oikawa?”

“There’s definitely my wedding with Iwa-chan,” Oikawa said smugly. “All of you better show up, or I’m disowning all of you.”

Noya snorted. “Yeah, like I’d miss it after waiting so long to meet your mystery Iwa-chan. What about you, Iwaizumi?”

“Well…” he said. He pretended to concentrate on doing his push-ups to slowly mull the question over. “I guess I’ll just go back to being a mentor at the Academy. That’s what I was doing before I joined you guys anyway. But no matter where I end up, I know Shittykawa over here will be with me.”

Oikawa beamed. “Yeah, like I’m letting my precious Iwa-chan go so easily!”

Iwaizumi hastily lowered himself back to the ground to hide his warming face. Now that he was thinking about it, maybe he should further his studies and become a proper teacher instead of just a mentor. The difference was that teachers attended to whole classes, while mentors worked on an individual basis with certain students and sometimes acted as the teachers’ assistants too. The pay would certainly be better. Since Oikawa was going to be a part of his future, he would definitely need all the money he could get to compensate for Oikawa’s frivolous spending habits. And he found that in spite of his introverted nature, he quite enjoyed working with the students and watching them blossom into capable warriors, such as Kageyama. Kageyama had made so much progress ever since his ‘King’ days, and Iwaizumi was so proud of him. He supposed he had Hinata to thank for that.

“That’s great!” Noya trilled, but his grin wobbled a little. “That’s great, hearing you guys have a plan for your futures.”

A heavy feeling settled on the previously cheery atmosphere. It wasn’t hard to guess why — Noya himself had no real future to look forward to. He was a runaway prince, supposed to be dead. Any future he could have after this would be marred by secrecy and living in hiding and pretending he’s someone he’s not.
“Did I just kill the mood?” Noya groaned. “Man, do I suck or what. Sorry, I just — I guess for me, I'll just continue what I'm doing now: interviewing people, see what I can do to help them. My parents left quite a fair bit of things to take care of, like the push on the military and agricultural scene at the cost of education and healthcare. And I wonder — why? I never liked my father, and I was never close to my mother, but I'm kinda wishing they're still alive now, so I could ask them why. And what I can do to, you know, make things better.”

It remained unspoken, but Iwaizumi understood crystal clear. Even with all this newfound knowledge about the affairs of the nation, it wasn't like Nishinoya could really do anything. He held no political power. He had no say in the running of the queendom. Hell, he wasn't even supposed to be alive. Yet here, he was, worrying about the country and being helpless to do anything.

It was the sort of helplessness they were all feeling in regard to their current mission.

“—and Kageyama was all BWOOSH and I — hey, is that Bokuto-san? Hey, Bokuto-saaaaan!” Hinata cheers, snapping Iwaizumi out of his thoughts. He bolts off to greet his Fukurodani friend.

“Little champ!” Bokuto exclaims with equal enthusiasm. “Ah, that's one of the dudes you were with, ain't it? Iwaizumi, was it?”

Iwaizumi nods, not minding the lack of an honourific. He's never been one for formalities. “It's nice to see you again.”

“What are you doing here, Bokuto-san?” Hinata asks, still bouncing up and down. “And where’s Akaashi-san?”

“Akaashi’s studying his lovely lil butt off! He’s got a whole bunch of exams this week, the poor guy. I'm already done with my exams, so I decided to go out for a walk, get some fresh air. Perks of not taking advanced classes, am I right?”

Hinata nods eagerly like this is the most important piece of information he has received all week. Iwaizumi is already tired from hanging around these two energy vampires. And that's saying something, considering who he's engaged to.

Hinata tugs on Bokuto’s sleeve. “Bokuto-san, is there really no way we can convince Akaashi-san to help Kuroo-san?”

Bokuto sighs, his grin melting off his face. "Y’know what he’s like. When he doesn't wanna do something, he really won't. I know I'm super awesome and all that, but even I can't control him.”

“But Kuroo-san was really sad! You should’ve seen what he was like!”

Bokuto’s expression darkens into something much more serious. Even if Iwaizumi has just met him, he can tell that it’s a rare expression for the exuberant guy to wear. “Was he? Was he, like, really torn up about it?”

Hinata bobs his head vigorously. “Yeah! He looked really hnngh and bleh!”

Bokuto pats Hinata’s head while shaking his own. “Kid, I love you — but you gotta use, like, real words.”

“What Hinata is trying to say is that Kuroo was really down on to his last leg,” Iwaizumi supplies. Truthfully, he still isn't used to Hinata’s… unique pattern of speech, so he is inserting some of his own impressions of the Nekoma performer. “He looked like he hadn't slept in a week, and he sounded really desperate.”
Hinata flails his arms in what Iwaizumi presumes is an act of agreement. “Yeah, that's right! Yachi tried talking him out of the plan too, but he insisted even though he didn't like it either. He doesn't want to do this any more than Akaashi-san does, but he really has no other choice. He just wants to make Kenma happy, but not being able to do so is making him really sad too. Please, Bokuto-san, you gotta get Akaashi-san to help him!”

Bokuto runs a hand over his face. “Man, if even the little lady is involved then this must be something really huge. Does she know what’s up with Kenma?”

“Yeah, but apparently Kenma made her promise not to tell,” Iwaizumi says. “That's what pushed Kuroo to doing this — whatever this is.”

He has no idea what the big hoo-ha about Kuroo’s plan is. Hinata didn't bring up what exactly Akaashi can do to help Kuroo, so he decided not to push him. If he wanted it to be known, he would have declared it to the whole world by now. Nevertheless, he is done with all this mystery surrounding Akaashi Keiji — his curiosity practically burns through him.

“Fine, I’ll do what I can,” Bokuto concedes. “But no promises, alright?”

Hinata beams. “Thank you, Bokuto-san! You really are awesome!”

Bokuto fondly ruffles Hinata’s hair. “I know, right? C’mon, I’ll bring you guys to our dorm!”

The three of them set off down the street. Bokuto and Hinata bounce along, chatting animatedly like kindred spirits, and Iwaizumi is fine with hanging behind them. He doesn't know why exactly he and Hinata need to be there for Bokuto’s confrontation with Akaashi, but curiosity keeps his legs moving in the same direction Bokuto is taking him.

That is, until a shrill cry rings out.

“Please leave me alone!”

“Fuck, it’s those bandits again,” Bokuto curses, breaking into a sprint. “They’re real dirtbags. They like to target young girls — like, our age, but sometimes even younger — for whatever sick reason. Let’s go, we need to help her!”

Iwaizumi and Hinata keep up with Bokuto as he rounds a corner, leading them into a dingy alley. Cornered against a dirty brick wall is a girl who looks around the same age as Hinata. No less than five bandits surround her, all wearing equally repulsive leers. They slowly close in on her. She lets out a terrified sob, ducking to hide her face.

“These bastards — I’m so going to teach them a thing,” Bokuto growls, rolling his sleeves up and cracking his knuckles. But before he can spring into action, another voice rings out behind them.

“If I were you, I’d leave the young lady alone.”

Startled, Iwaizumi whips around. Akaashi is standing behind them, his hands on his hips and his eyes — are they glowing? Iwaizumi squints, but it's hard to discern with the afternoon sunlight beaming down on Akaashi’s face.

The bandits turn around, snarling and clearly annoyed at having their fun interrupted.

“Which one of you was it?” the one closest to the girl snaps.

“Me,” Akaashi says calmly. He slinks past Bokuto, who's staring at him with wide eyes, and goes
right up to the bandits. Even though all of them are holding a weapon, while he's empty-handed, his face is the picture of calmness. “I’ll only repeat it one more time—” The glow in his eyes intensifies, and in the dimness of the alley Iwaizumi can see that it is a metallic blue glow. “—drop your weapons, leave the young woman alone and get out of this district. Now.”

And, as if controlled by invisible puppet strings, the bandits toss their weapons to the ground, pivot around and march straight out of the alley. Without a fight. Without any resistance. They just… did.

Akaashi approaches the girl and says something quietly to her. She bows to him gratefully before she scampers off too.

Iwaizumi blinks, confused. What the hell was that all about?

“Just in the nick of time, Akaashi!” Bokuto says. “Or I might’ve had to get rowdy!”

“Please refrain from getting rowdy, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi replies. The glow exits his eyes, which revert to their usual dark blue. “What are you three doing here anyway? This does not seem like an ideal spot to hang out at.”

“Well, we were actually looking for you. Then we heard the girl cry out for help, and I wasn't just gonna leave a damsel in distress to fend for herself!”

"And why exactly were all three of you looking for me?"

“I’m on their side!” Bokuto declares, sweeping his arm out. “You gotta help Kuroo, man!”

“Not you too,” Akaashi mutters with an aggravated sigh.

“I’m serious, Akaashi. At first, I didn't wanna force you into anything you didn't wanna do—”

“Then why are you doing this now?” Akaashi counters.

“It’s ‘cause this is really important to Kuroo. Little guy here says Kuroo doesn't want to do this any more than you do, but he’s totally backed into a corner now. Yacchan is involved, Akaashi! This has to be a big deal if the cousin is involved and doesn't want to tell Kuroo. And since this is important to my bro, it’s important to me too!”

Akaashi sighs. “Look, Bokuto-san, there has to be another way without involving me. I'm sorry, but I won't do this. I'd just make things worse.”

Then, to Iwaizumi’s astonishment, Bokuto’s entire demeanour does a 180 degree flip. A pout crosses his features, and he turns away from Akaashi dramatically, covering his face with his forearm. “Are you saying you don't care about me?” He lets out an overdramatic sniffle. “Fine, be like that, Akaashi! You can keep not caring about me, and I’ll just super-glue my broken heart back together or something!”

“Bokuto-san, please be reasonable about this—”

“I’ll even move to Iwatobi so you’ll never have to care about me ever again!!”

Akaashi’s eyebrow twitches, before something in his stoic manner finally gives way. “… Fine, Bokuto-san, I’ll do it. Please don't move to Iwatobi — your feathers will not survive there.”

Bokuto’s entire face lights up, a marked change from his previously despondent behaviour. “Really?! You'll really do it?!”
“Yes, I will. But at the end of this week, after my exams.”

“Yeah, of course! You're the best, Keiji!” Bokuto enthusiastically flings his arms around Akaashi and plants a loud kiss on his lips.

Akaashi pushes Bokuto away, a pink tint in his pale cheeks. “Please, not in public, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto laughs boisterously. “You're so shy, Akaashi!”

“It’s called having public decency, Bokuto-san.”

Iwaizumi and Hinata exchange bewildered looks but don't say anything. Finally, after days of grovelling and begging and ripping their hair out from frustration, Akaashi has finally agreed to help them.

But a knot of dread sits in Iwaizumi’s stomach. What will Akaashi do, and why is just the idea of it causing so many people distress?

“Oya?”

“Oya oya?”

“It’s good to see you again, Bo-bro!” Kuroo exclaims, flinging open the door to his apartment. He and Bokuto perform a complex handshake routine that ends with them bumping chests. Akaashi sighs. Those two really haven't changed at all. They are eccentric on their own and downright ridiculous when together.

“Back to you, Ku-bro!” Bokuto practically sobs. “It's been so long, man! Like an eternity!”

“It has only been two months, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi feels the need to point out.

“Two long months without my main man!”

“Nice of you to show up too, pretty boy,” Kuroo says, grinning at Akaashi.

Akaashi just sighs. He has long since given up trying to get Kuroo to drop the stupid nickname. “You and I both know why you sent them to fetch me. Can we please just get this over and done with?”

Kuroo’s trademark grin dissolves, giving way to a more serious expression. “Right, of course. He’s inside. Come on in.”

“Thank you.”

Akaashi, together Bokuto and Hinata, enters Kuroo’s apartment. It is just as he remembers — apple red walls with tiny black cats painted on them, small but intimate. Perfect for a couple who has known each other for ages and bonded over their love for felines.

Kenma glances up from his position curled up on the couch. When their eyes meet, Kenma’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline.
“I thought I heard voices,” Kenma mumbles, rubbing his eyes. “Didn’t know you were coming.”

“Kuroo-san didn’t inform you?” Akaashi asks. But he really should have known. Kuroo was sneaking around behind Kenma’s back to try and get him to confess whatever it is that’s bothering him — why would he inform him of Akaashi’s (very unwilling) visit?

“I wanted to surprise you, kitten,” Kuroo says, his voice smooth as silk. “C’mon, make yourselves at home. I’ll get tea for everyone.”

On his way to the kitchen, Kuroo shoots Akaashi a look that seems to say, *You know what to do.*

He does. That doesn't make him hate it any less, though.

Akaashi knows that Kenma knows what he can do, so he doesn't automatically leap into his main objective. As painstaking as it is, because he just wants to do the damage he has to do and leave, he warms Kenma up by asking simple non-suspicious questions about his life and work.

“Man, I can’t believe we missed your big nights!” Bokuto exclaims. “School was just so hectic, Akaashi and I were drowning in work!”

“You were drowning, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi points out. “I handled it just fine.”

“It was great!” Hinata chirps. “Kenma was super cool, like BWAH! It’s a shame you two missed it.”

“Stop exaggerating, Shouyou,” Kenma mutters self-consciously. Akaashi is glad that the other Blue Crows (or whatever it is that Noya calls them) have respectfully left him, Bokuto and Hinata and went off to find an inn. Kenma would probably feel even more uncomfortable if they were all here, crowding the apartment.

He realises that this is his opening. Taking a deep breath, Akaashi summons his power. It hums a tune only he can hear that travels up his chest to his vocal cords, and then further up to his eyes which he knows must be glowing from his power. It is a dirty, manipulative power — and he's about to use it on one of his closest friends.

He fixes Kenma with his glowing eyes. Kenma automatically slackens in his seat, as though suddenly overcome by a daze.

Akaashi opens his mouth to speak, and the words come to him naturally like a second nature.

“Kenma, I heard that you have been troubled lately,” he says. His voice sounds like a stranger’s to him, all sweet and rich and soothing — because it’s not his voice, but rather his power’s voice. “Kuroo-san says you haven’t been eating or sleeping well, and that worries me. Is everything alright? Or is there something you wish to talk about?”

Kenma blinks rapidly. For a brief moment, his eyes gain focus; but Akaashi forcefully overpowers his will with his power.

“If something happened to you to trouble you so greatly, please don’t hesitate to tell me. All I want to do is to help you, Kenma. I am your friend.”

(He feels dirty, but the words pour effortlessly out of him. Trying to stop himself from talking would be like trying to stop a waterfall.)

“I… I suppose I can tell you,” Kenma finally says. His voice sounds flat and devoid of any control, thanks to Akaashi’s power taking dominance over his mind and forcing him to spill everything Kuroo
wants to hear. “It was two months ago. The producer—” He gasps, like he's choking back tears. “I shouldn't — I can't talk about this. I'm—”

“Please, Kenma,” Akaashi quickly interjects, concentrating even more power into each inflection of every word he speaks. “Please tell me what happened with this producer of yours.”

Akaashi hates how he can feel the remainder of Kenma’s will turn to putty. It horrifies him to no end how easy it is for him to force people to cave to his power. All he has to do is speak, and people become his puppets.

But what horrifies him even more is what Kenma says next.

“She forced me to have sex with her.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I'm dealing with an extremely sensitive subject matter with the reveal of what happened to Kenma, so please please believe me when I say I did my best to address it with all the respect, severity and sensitivity it deserves. I did my best to portray the impacts of what happened to him as realistically as I could, based on the research I did. And no two people’s reactions to the same event are likely to be exactly, 100% the same, and Kenma is one survivor out of an unfortunate many, so he does not represent every single survivor. All survivor are equally valid, and there is no one correct or wrong reaction to have to something like that.

Honestly, this was extremely hard to write. Not only was I terrified of not addressing what happened to Kenma properly or sufficiently, I was also really upset and emotional when writing this. This entire subplot was singularly the most emotionally-draining thing I've ever written, because I had to pour my whole heart into writing Kenma's reactions, as well as the reactions of the people who care about him — especially Kuroo, good god; in a few chapters’ time you'll see what I mean.

On a lighter note, this was written WAY before chapter 331 of the manga was released, so there may be inconsistencies between BokuAka here and canon BokuAka. I'll try to fix up what I can in my final rounds of editing, but I apologise in advance for possible OOC-ness.

Well, that's it! Thank you for staying strong and continuing to read this trainwreck!

Scream with me about Haikyuu on my tumblr!
same TW from the previous chapter applies: **discussion of past rape/non-con.** it's nothing explicit, but Kenma does talk about how he felt during the whole incident, which may be triggering to some.

this one’s shorter because it's setting up stuff for the next chapter, where things will **really** go down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Allure Speech — that's what Akaashi’s power is called. It's a very rare gift among demi-fairies, like a one-in-million or something chance, because the allele containing Allure Speech is recessive. And since the fairies who held the gene for Allure Speech were among the first to go extinct — they were hunted for their gift by greedy humans and other beings — the likelihood of inheriting it is quite small, which is why Akaashi’s gift (or curse) is seen as so precious. (He isn't sure if he agrees with this assessment.)

As Akaashi’s fairy blood has been dampened by many generations of human blood, his power is considerably less potent than his ancestors’. He's unable to use Allure Speech for more than a total of five minutes a day, unlike his full-blooded ancestors who didn't possess such a time cap on their power. One time he hit seven minutes, which resulted in him having a horrible sore throat. He took four days to recover from that. He could barely speak, so Bokuto had to speak for him (which itself was a terrible experience, as Bokuto added far too many hoots and “hey hey hey”’s into what Akaashi wanted to say). After he hits his five-minute limit, he needs twelve hours to recuperate before he can use his power again.

His power has another limitation. If someone is aware of his power, they're better able to resist him. Kenma knows about Akaashi’s power, which is why Akaashi has to use more energy to bypass Kenma’s resistance and force him to cave.

The thing is, only he (and the people he chooses to confide in) knows how much his power sucks. Unlike what others think, he isn't actually in control of Allure Speech — as demonstrated in his current interrogation of Kenma — and it has a total pain-in-the-ass time limit. Yet people won't stop hounding him for his power. When he was nine, he used his power in public for the first time to stop a group of bullies from beating up a classmate — and the rumours took off from there. Word somehow circulated to the military, and soon he had the Training Academy sending him recruitment letters and even showing up at his home. He turned them down each time as all they wanted was his power, not him. He wasn't interested in becoming a tool for the military to use. He just wanted to live a normal, ordinary life (or, at least, as ordinary as it can be when Bokuto is his roommate and boyfriend).

And yet, here he is in Kuroo and Kenma’s home, letting Kuroo use his powers to get what he wants out of Kenma. Resentment bubbles in his chest, but he can't focus on that now because of what Kenma said.

“She forced me to have sex with her.”
Out of the corner of his eye, Akaashi can see the colour in Kuroo’s face drain away. His arm around Kenma slackens in shock, and his other hand clamps itself over his mouth. Hinata gasps. Bokuto lets out a horrified cry of “No way!”

Disgust at what happened to Kenma crawls under Akaashi’s skin. But unlike his friends, he doesn’t have the luxury of expressing his repulsion and horror. He has a job to do — as much as he hates it, he also isn’t one to half-ass things, so he's reluctantly determined to see this through to the end.

“All right, Akaashi’s Allure Speech says in that disgustingly saccharine voice. “Would you please elaborate on what happened? But only if you are comfortable, of course.”

(A liar, that's what his power is. Regardless of whether Kenma is comfortable or not, Allure Speech will force the answer out of him.)

“It was — it was three months ago,” Kenma says. “After rehearsal. Kuro went off to change out of his costume, so I went back to my dressing room. But Fujinuma-san was there. When I saw her, I was nervous. I’m not really comfortable around the higher-ups without Kuro or Yaku around. Then she… she told me to close the door. Said she wanted to talk to me. I didn't want to — I was scared, but I listened to her ‘cause I was scared of what she’d do if I didn't listen to her.”

“And you have nothing to be ashamed of,” Akaashi says. There's a little bit of his own voice mixed in with the Allure Speech. “That’s a normal survival instinct everyone has.”

Kenma shudders. Akaashi can't tell whether it is because of fear from having to relive the memory or trying to fight against Akaashi.

“Then — I think she said something about having a… ‘thing’ for younger guys who are smaller than her. I’m not very sure. And whatever she told me to do, I did. I was so scared — more scared than I had ever been in my entire life.”

Hinata is crying into Bokuto’s chest, his sobs wracking his small body. For once, Bokuto isn't grinning his silly grin. Instead, his arm is wrapped around Hinata’s shoulders to comfort him, while he himself looks like he's desperately fighting back tears.

“And when she — she touched me, I just felt so… so dirty. But more than that, I felt powerless. I couldn't tell her to stop, to go away and leave me alone, no matter how much I wanted to. She controlled me. Everything I did. And everything she did, it made me feel like I was — like an object underneath her. I couldn't do anything. I was so powerless and so humiliated. Now, I can't even look at her without feeling the same helplessness and fear and humiliation. I don't want to feel that way again. I wish I could just… just forget.”

“Kenma, have you reported this?” Akaashi asks. He has a feeling he already knows the answer, but he needs to be sure.

“No, of course not. No one would believe if a guy said he didn't enjoy or consent to getting fucked by a woman.”

Kuroo flinches so badly he nearly topples off the couch. The sudden jerk of his body against Kenma’s must have jolted Kenma out of his hypnotised state; the cloudiness in his eyes clear like a gust of wind blew it away. He gasps, his hands flying to his mouth.

“My god, Akaashi. What did you — you used your powers on me. You did, didn't you?”

The betrayal and hurt in Kenma’s voice is so potent that it nearly chokes Akaashi.
“Kenma, listen—” he pleads, but Kenma, in a rare display of forcefulness, steamrolls right over him.

“I can't believe you did that,” he accuses. He springs off the couch and backs towards the door, looking very much like a cornered animal. “You’re always going on about how much you hate your powers. How you hate it that people only want you so they can use your powers to manipulate others. How it makes you feel like a tool. Then why did you use your powers on me? You're such a hypocrite, Akaashi.”

“Kitten, it wasn't him,” Kuroo begs. “I made him do it. I asked the Blue Crow guys to go to Fukurodani and get Akaashi to help me. They practically dragged him here because I asked them to.”

“Oh my god, Kuro.” Kenma blinks rapidly, as if forcing any outward display of emotion back. Kuroo makes a move towards him, but he stops when Kenma takes a step backwards. “I just — why? Why did you do that, Kuro?”

Kuroo clenches his fists, tears of his own spilling. “Because I was so worried about you! I knew that something bad happened to you, but you wouldn't tell me what. I needed to know so I could help you. All I want is for you to be happy — you know that, Kenma!”

Kenma backs up several more steps. “And maybe, did it ever occur to you that I didn't want you to know? There was a reason why I didn't want to tell you, but noo it’s not like you cared enough to consider that. Now I just — I don't know if you really care about me, or just about satiating your curiosity.”

“Kenma, please!” Kuroo’s voice cracks with desperation, and he falls to his knees on the floor. “It’s not like that! I really do care about you. This isn’t about my curiosity — this is about me wanting what’s best for you. Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry it had to happen like this. But please, love, can we just — just talk. Let’s just talk about this, okay? We can work through this. Please.”

Kenma shakes his head. “There's no working through this. How can I trust you when you just… assume what’s best for me without asking me first? Because what you think is best for me might not actually be what is best for me! But it’s always like this with you. You made me play volleyball because you thought I needed to get out of the house more, without thinking that maybe I preferred staying at home. You made me join Team Neko, without thinking that maybe I would be terrified to death of performing in front of hundreds of people. And now, this.” He jams his feet into a pair of boots. “This is the last straw. I really — I can't do this anymore. I'm leaving.”

“Kenma, wait! Please don't go!”

But the door slams resolutely shut behind Kenma’s retreating form. Kuroo, defeated and heartbroken, slumps back against the sofa. He drags a hand over his face, suddenly appearing twenty years older.

Anger boils in Akaashi’s chest — anger at the producer for what she did to Kenma, anger at Kuroo for being a meddlesome idiot, anger at himself for being Kuroo’s enabler. “Look what you made me do, Kuroo-san. I told them no, but because you were so fucking stubborn, I had to come despite knowing this was a bad idea, and look what happened! Well, I hope you're happy now. You finally got the answers you so desperately wanted.”

(The thing you must know about Akaashi is that he's polite to a fault, especially to someone older than he is. So for him to lash out at Kuroo like this — it speaks volumes of the raw fury burning in him.)
“I know, I fucked up,” Kuroo groans.

“Yeah, you best do,” Akaashi seethes. “Look, I know you wanted to know what was going on with him so you could help him. But I hope you realise that, ironically, by wanting to help him you lost your only chance to actually do that.”

“I don't think you need to rub it in, man,” Bokuto says with a wince, but the glare Akaashi sends him quells him into silence.

“I’m going to look for him!” Hinata declares, bouncing to his feet.

“Wait, little man — I don't think that's a good idea,” Bokuto, of all people, cautions him. “Kenma’s beyond pissed now.”

But Hinata bolts over to the door and tugs his sneakers on. “It’s fine! I'm not the one he’s mad at anyway—”

Kuroo recoils like someone slapped him.

“—so I'll just go and check where he’s going and make sure he's safe. See you! Hope you feel better soon, Kuroo-san.”

Hinata dashes out of the apartment, leaving Akaashi behind with his troubled boyfriend and heartbroken friend.

Akaashi gets up from the couch. “I need some space. Kuroo-san, may I borrow your guest room?”

“Yeah, it’s all yours,” Kuroo mumbles into his forearms. “Make yourself at home.”

Akaashi stalks over to the room and lets himself in. The guest room is just as he remembers — a futon pressed against a wall, a simple nightstand next to it and a small closet by the door. He slumps down on the futon, pressing his face into his hands.

Typical Kuroo-san, dragging me and Koutarou into his mess.

See, nothing good ever comes from him using his powers.

“Hey, Keiji?”

Akaashi lifts his weary head and spots Bokuto leaning against the door frame. “Yes?”

“Is it chill if I join you? I mean, you look really upset, and upset people shouldn't be alone. Probably. Yeah, I'm probably right. But, anyway, can I join you?”

He nods wordlessly. Bokuto treads in, closing the door lightly behind him. He settles down on the futon beside him, and Akaashi instinctively leans against his broad frame. Bokuto wraps his muscley arms around him, as what they always do when they're alone. Akaashi closes his eyes when he feels Bokuto’s lips press against the top of his head.

Akaashi is thankful for the peaceful silence between them. For someone normally so impulsive and loud, Bokuto has become sensitive to when Akaashi is alright with his usual chattiness and when Akaashi needs some silence, just like how he has become attuned to Bokuto’s different moods. They're as good as polar opposites, yet they work well together like clockwork.

(If only his parents could see this as well. The older demi-fairies are so restrictive when it comes to dating. While he isn't big on PDA himself, he would very much like to be able to have both
Koutarou and his parents in his life. But that's a matter to worry about another time.)

Draped in the warmth of his boyfriend, the mental exhaustion overpowers Akaashi’s frayed nerves. He gives in to the warmth, letting sleep free him from his distress and anger.

“Okay let me get this straight. You don't want five slices, but five whole apple pies?”

“Yeah, that's right.” Kuroo leans against the counter of the coffee shop. “And my usual order too.”

Inuoka raises an eyebrow. “Kuroo-san, we love your business here, but you’re really going to buy us out of apple pies. There are other customers who want some too.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry, it’s just — ugh, where do I even begin?”

“Trouble in paradise?”

Kuroo runs a hand through his bedhead. “Like you wouldn’t even believe, man. Kenma stormed out of our place, and I haven't seen him since last night after I fucked up.”

“Ah, that sucks,” Inuoka hums sympathetically. “I’ll be sure to add more sugar to your coffee, then.”

“Thanks. You’re the best, Inuoka.”

The barista grins. “And don't you forget it.”

Kuroo watches as Inuoka bustles off to prepare his order. He seems happier working here at the coffee shop, instead of risking his life as a warrior. Unlike Kuroo, he doesn't remember what happened during Operation KD, nor does he want to remember. Kuroo respects that — to each their own. Now, just like a fair number of other Elite Squad members, Inuoka has dropped out of the Academy after Operation KD. As part of his new life, he's working with Lev (who is also an aspiring act at Team Neko, with... subpar results) at this cute little coffee shop.

Inuoka passes Kuroo his order — the apple pies in a gigantic red box and his macchiato in a paper cup — and he hands Inuoka a wad of cash, telling him to keep the change as a tip. After waving the barista goodbye, he hurries down the street to the only other place in the neighbourhood he knows Kenma would stay at: Yaku's home. He knows this, since Yaku has complained to Kuroo several times about Kenma camping at his place whenever they have their “pointless lovers’ squabbles” so would Kuroo please sort out his relationship issues with Kenma on his own without involving their “I'm so done with your BS” manager. Still, he knows Yaku would let Kenma in each time he runs there; that's just the kind of guy he is.

And what kind of guy am I? he wonders glumly to himself. He really is a shitty boyfriend. He thought that seventeen years of knowing Kenma and three years of dating him would have been more than enough time for him to get to know each and every one of Kenma's quirks, wants and dislikes. But if their fight has proved anything, it's that Kuroo has to suspend everything he thinks he knows about him if he wants to fix this mess.

He soon arrives outside Yaku’s apartment. He knocks the door thrice, then lets his fist fall to his side while he waits for his manager to open the door. He shuffles his weight from one foot to the other, feeling like someone lit a bunch of coals under him. What if Yaku isn't home? Or what if Kenma told
him not to answer the door because he knew that Kuroo would come around?

Stop overthinking, Tetsu. Overthinking won't get anything done.

After several heartbeats and an eternity, the door finally swings open. Yaku stands before him, hand on his hip and decidedly displeased with Kuroo’s presence.

“What can I do for you?” he interrogates more than asks.

Not even bothering to answer him, Kuroo instead demands, “How’s Kenma?”

Yaku rolls his eyes. “All I know is that he’s mad at you for prying in his business. Seriously, haven't you heard of curiosity killed the cat?”

“Low blow, man, low blow. Anything else?”

“I had to calm him down from several panic attacks. He’s resting now. He is very firm about not wanting to see you.”

A panic attack? But Kenma hasn’t had a panic attack in ages. Did talking about the producer last night cause him to have one?

Or has he been having panic attacks when I’m not around? Kuroo wonders, horrified. The thought that Kenma would go so far as to hide his panic attacks from him makes whatever is left of his broken heart splinter into even tinier pieces.

His first instinct is to push past Yaku anyway and demand to see Kenma. That was what he would have done just a few days ago.

But now, he knows better. As much as it tears him apart to stay away from his love, he has to respect Kenma’s space.

He nods in understanding. “I see. Can you pass this to him for me?” He lifts the gigantic red box of apple pies for Yaku to see. “Tell him it’s a peace offering, so whenever he’s ready to talk, he can just come home. Or if he doesn't want to at all, that’s — that’s also fine.”

“Alright,” Yaku agrees grumpily, taking the box from him. “I’ll try to talk to him for you, but no promises. And seriously, I want a pay raise if I’m gonna be your go-to mediator whenever you have your stupid lovers’ spats.”

Kuroo quirks a strained grin. “I’ll be sure to bring that up with the boss. Thanks, demon manager.”

“Anytime.”

He turns around, hands shoved in his jeans pockets, and shuffles out of the apartment building. The weather is getting colder without having Kenma around to keep warm (his kitten sucks at retaining heat — a truly endearing quality and a good excuse to cuddle). He winds his scarf tighter around his neck. Without anything planned today, he begins to make his way back to his place when he hears a familiar cry of his name.

“Kuroo-san! Kuroo-san!”

Bounding up to him is Hinata, bundled in a red bomber jacket and a grey beanie perched on his head. He waves his arms wildly at Kuroo, reminding him amusedly of a very excited windmill.

“Hey there, Shrimpy,” Kuroo greets. “You're awfully perky.”
“I’ve been looking all over for you!” Hinata exclaims. “I went to your apartment, but Yachi said you left to get coffee. But you weren’t at the coffee shop when you got there, so I ran around for a really long time looking for you!”

“Yachi, what — oh, right.” For a moment, he almost forgot she dropped by this morning to check on him and the Fukurodani couple. It was nice of her to do that, considering how anxious she tends to get when surrounded by guys all a head taller than her, and the fact that it’s his fault her cousin is upset in the first place. “I assume you have a purpose for looking for me? Unless you just wanted to run around for a while — which is totally cool too.”

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about what happened to Kenma.”

Kuroo recoils. When he heard what that bitch producer did, he became blinded with rage. He nearly flipped out if it weren't for Kenma pressed up against him, shaking with fear as he recounted his horrifying experience. He wanted nothing more than to hunt down Fujinuma and make her pay for what she did to Kenma. But with Kenma terrified out of his mind and vulnerable next to him, he pushed that instinct aside so he could be there for him.

“What about it?” he asks.

“Well, what happened to him is a crime, isn't it? So shouldn't we, like, report it or something?”

Kuroo sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I wish it were so easy, Shrimpy. But it’s unlikely that the police would just believe us like that.”

Hinata puffs up angrily. “And why not? Kenma isn't lying!”

“Well, we know that, but they don't. We need to present them with concrete irrefutable proof if we want them to believe us. The problem is, the incident was so long ago, it would be hard to find that kind of solid evidence.”

“So what can we do?”

“I wish I knew, kid,” Kuroo says wearily. “But I'm really stuck. I want justice for Kenma as much as you do, but I don't know how to go about that without hurting him even more.”

Hinata purses his lips, looking like he's engaged in deep thought. “Hmm, okay. I don't have any ideas either, but maybe we can get the rest to help. Surely with so many people working together, we’ll eventually find a solution!”

Despite his pain, Kuroo can't suppress a smile at Hinata’s unwavering optimism. After feeling so lost and hopeless for so long, it’s nice to finally feel some hope, no matter how fleeting it may be.

Kuroo nods. “Alright, that's a start. Tell you what, Shrimpy — you bring your pals to my place. We’ll work a solution out together.”

Hinata beams up at him. “Yes, Kuroo-san! See you!”

As he watches Hinata hurry off, his smile slowly slips off. He's down to his final leg — if this doesn't work out, he really might just break.
“I like your walls, Kuroo-san!” Noya exclaims approvingly as he examines the walls of Kuroo’s apartment.

“You can drop the honourific, you know,” Kuroo says, “since you're a prince and all that; so I should really be the one addressing you with the honourific.”

Noya waves him off, flushing slightly. “I don't mind! Really! It’s more chill like this, y’know?”

“Hey hey hey, you're a prince?!” Bokuto shouts. His yellowish eyes are wide with shock. “Wait, didn't the prince get killed?”

“My nee-chan faked that so I could escape the palace safely,” Noya replies in a matter-of-fact tone. “She didn't want the assassins coming after me if they knew I was alive.”

“Ah.” Bokuto nods like this explains everything.

“C’mon you two, we need to stay focused,” Suga chides. “We need to put our heads together to help Kuroo, remember?”

Luckily for Kuroo, Hinata already explained the situation to his pals so he doesn't have to recount the whole sordid tale again. Just thinking about that happening to his precious Kenma makes his blood boil.

All twelve of them — the Blue Crows, his Fukurodani friends, Kuroo himself, Yachi and her girlfriend — are squeezed around the redwood coffee table in his living room. Noya is perched on the couch cross-legged (a feat Kuroo can't manage, thanks to his too-lanky limbs), leaning against Asahi. Bokuto and Akaashi are seated next to them. Not one for overt PDA, courtesy of Akaashi’s reserved nature, their fingers are just barely brushing between them. The rest of them are seated comfortably on cushions on the floor.

“Is everyone comfortable?” Kuroo asks, just to make sure. He wants to be a good host. “If anyone needs more tea just give me a shout.”

“OKAY!” Bokuto bellows, and Akaashi winces.

“He didn't mean it literally, Bokuto-san.”

“OKA— I mean, okay!”

Suga clears his throat, drawing their attention back to him. He looks self-conscious with all eyes on him, what with him apparently being the acting captain now and all according to Hinata, but it doesn't deter him. “Okay, so what do we know about this… incident?”

“Kenma was forced into having sex with his producer!” Hinata exclaims indignantly.

“Well, yes. Do we know any more details?”

“He hasn't reported it,” Kuroo says. “He says the law wouldn't believe him, and that's a fair point. It’s one thing for that to happen to a lady, and even then the law enforcement gives lady survivors hell — but to a guy? It's almost unheard of. Or widely unreported.”

Daichi shifts on his cushion uncomfortably. “Exactly. That… that happened to my father, too. Long story short, he couldn't cope with the trauma and it killed him. Which is why we need to help Kenma ASAP. I don't want anyone else to die because of something like that.”
Kuroo nods. “Yes, that is a good point.”

Suga taps his lower lip thoughtfully. “Okay, so Kenma was forced into sex against his will, and he didn't report it. It was three months ago, right? If it was really that long ago…”

“Akaashi, can't you use your power to tell the police what happened?” Kuroo suggests. “I mean, they don't know about your power, so they wouldn't be able to resist.”

The glare Akaashi sends him could melt steel. “No, enough is enough. Haven't you used me enough, Kuroo-san?”

Kuroo cringes. For such a polite guy, Akaashi sure knows how to cut deep.

“Look, I want justice for Kenma as much as you do, but I refuse to achieve it through such underhanded means. We will have to find another way.”

The room, hitting a wall, lapses into silence. Every person, even the ones who barely know Kenma, are all in deep thought. Despite the tense and somber atmosphere, Kuroo can't help but feel incredibly lucky to have met such kind souls who are willing to help him, even though they really have no obligation to.

“Say, does this woman have a type or something?” Iwaizumi asks. When everyone stares at him confusedly, he quickly adds, “I mean, was Kenma her only victim? Or has she done something like that to other people too?”

“Y-yeah, Kenma said something like that,” Bokuto answers, clearly uncomfortable with the subject matter. “He said this woman has a ‘thing’ for younger, smaller-sized dudes.”

(Kuroo internally cringes with disgust at the idea of the producer objectifying Kenma like that.)

That's when Noya’s eyes light up. “Guys… I have an idea. You guys are gonna absolutely hate it, 'cause it’s crazy, but just hear me out, okay?”

Everyone exchanges uneasy looks. This prince fled his palace after an assassination attempt, and who knows how many other dangerous escapades he has had before arriving in Nekoma — if he says something is dangerous, then it must be insane.

“Okay,” Suga says with great reluctance. “Let’s hear it.”

“So I was thinking…”

Chapter End Notes

what Akaashi did was NOT cool. when he heard about what had happened to Kenma, he should've stopped there instead of forcing Kenma to relive the whole thing under his control. being forced to relive a traumatic memory can be extremely harmful.

catch me on tumblr here.
“Okay, you look good. Go and check yourself in the mirror, Noya-chan.”

Noya turns away from Tooru and checks his reflection in the mirror. Tooru has dressed him in a black velvet blazer, a light blue button down shirt and a pair of leg-hugging jeans. His usual crow pendant sits around his chest like an anchor, and his bracelets stay on his wrists to give him a “sophisticated good-bad boy look”. His hair, instead of being gelled up in their usual spikes, is stylishly tousled to the side, courtesy of Tooru’s hair-styling expertise. He smooths the front of his shirt self-consciously. Even if he was the one who suggested the plan in the first place, he’s still wracked with nerves about actually carrying it out.

“I didn't take you to be a fashionista,” Noya says, trying to keep his tone casual. “Way to live up to the stereotype of gay men being experts at fashion.”

“I am a man of many talents, gay or not,” Tooru replies haughtily. Then his tone slips into something more serious. “Noya-chan, are you absolutely sure you want to do this? I mean, that’s a really dangerous plan, and that’s saying something when you consider all the dangerous stuff we’ve been through. You can change your mind, you know. I’m sure Kuroo would understand.”

Noya grimaces when thinking of the implications of his plan. He knows it’s ridiculous, not to mention horribly uncomfortable for him to even think about, but…

“I know, but I’ll do it,” he says firmly. “The whole reason I’m on this journey in the first place is to do everything I can to help the citizens. I want to get justice for Kenma so he doesn't have to stay afraid of her.”

Tooru sighs, his smile bittersweet. “Stubborn as ever—I should’ve known better than to try and talk you out of it.” He pats Noya’s shoulder. “You’re a pain in the ass, but you’re really brave. Not many would offer to do what you did.”

Noya just shrugs. He doesn’t particularly care what others would do. He only cares about what he can do.

Tooru gives Noya a final once-over before ushering him outside to Kuroo’s living room, where Kuroo, Bokuto and Akaashi are waiting for him. When they spot him, Kuroo lets out a low whistle, Bokuto hoots, and Akaashi continues to maintain his deadpan expression.

Looking sizzling, your Highness, Kuroo’s voice floats teasingly in Noya’s mind.

No, Noya is not imagining voices. Kuroo actually spoke in Noya’s mind. You see, a big facet of the plan is the psychic link that Suga (after two weeks of practising, blood, sweat and tears) has managed to set up between the four of them. Given the risky nature of the plan where one tiny slip-up or error
in timing can lead to the plan falling apart, they need a covert way to communicate. The psychic link is only temporary, since it was really freaking hard for Suga to even get it right, and none of them know how long it will last. So Noya has to work his magic as fast as he can without arousing suspicion. Yeah, probably easier said than done.

ARE Y’ALL READY FOR THIS?! Bokuto bellows, causing Kuroo, Akaashi and Noya to grab their heads in pain.

Bokuto-san, just because we are communicating telepathically does not mean your shouting won’t hurt our hearing, Akaashi says.

How the hecky-dizzle does that work anyway?

“Noya.” Asahi approaches Noya, his eyebrows drawn together in worry.

Yeah?

Your Ace isn't in our telepathic link, your Highness, Kuroo snickers.

“Ah, right.” Noya is glad this is only temporary. He doesn’t know how much of Kuroo snickering in his head he can take. “Yes, Asahi?”

Asahi chews on his lip nervously, sending sparks through Noya despite his fear. “Um, just stay safe. Please. I don’t think I can take my lifespan being shortened anymore.”

“Okay! I’ll be fine, so don’t you worry your glass heart about me,” Noya teases. He pulls Asahi into a lingering hug, because in spite of his bravado he’s terrified of what he’s about to do and needs some kind of assurance and comfort and he really is just a mess right now. Asahi gets everything Noya isn’t saying. He wraps his arms around Noya’s waist and squeezes him gently. Noya’s heart soars so high he worries it would hurt his throat.

“Oh stop it, you two,” Tooru cuts in, rolling his eyes. “You’re going to wrinkle the clothes I very lovingly picked out for him, Asa-chan.”

“O-oh! I’m sorry!” Asahi hastily pulls away from Noya.

Is everyone ready? Kuroo asks.

As ready as I’ll ever be, Noya replies.

Yeah!

I am ready too, Kuroo-san.

Then let’s get going. Fujinuma-san won't be waiting forever.

The quartet wave the rest goodbye before leaving for. During the short walk from Kuroo’s home to the tavern, Noya’s stomach is twisting itself into increasingly tight knots. He’s scared of many things, like the plan not working. If this doesn’t work, Akaashi might have to use his powers to convince the law enforcement to arrest Fujinuma—and given how upset he was at the idea, that’s a last resort everyone hopes they don’t have to use. He’s also terrified of the plan actually working too well. He doesn’t want to leave the tavern with regrets or a disease.

He shakes his head. Who am I? Asahi?

“Hey kid, relax,” Kuroo says aloud, squeezing Noya’s shoulder. “I’ll be with you in the tavern in
“Case things get messy, so stop worrying and just focus on what you have to do.”

“Mm, right.” Hearing a voice that’s not in his head frees enough tension from Noya’s body for him to be confident that he won’t throw up here and now.

Halfway, the four part ways. Bokuto and Akaashi head to their position, where they will wait for Noya’s signal. Ten more minutes of walking leads Kuroo and Noya to the tavern, where the bouncer outside eyes them skeptically.

“Card?” he says, directing the question at Noya.

Noya fishes the fake ID Kuroo somehow managed to procure (he claims he has friends in both high and low places) and flashes it at the bouncer. Satisfied, the bouncer nods, stepping aside to let them.

“Hey, that’s her at the bar,” Kuroo says, nudging Noya. “Third stool from the left. Dark hair, red dress and gross cougar aura.”

Noya pushes down the queasiness in his stomach. Right. Okay. I can do this.

Yeah, you can. I'll be at the table near the back if you need me. Don't be afraid to say you need help, alright? I don't want you to get hurt for my sake.

Right. See you.

Noya watches Kuroo slink to the back of the tavern before turning back to his objective. Third stool from the left. Mustering all the confidence he has (which isn't much), he strides to the bar and takes the seat next to Fujinuma. Now that he can see her up close, he figures that if he didn't know what she did to Kenma he wouldn't have guessed anything suspicious about her. She has a pretty and kind-looking face, her dark hair tickling her shoulders. She's clad in a wine-red dress that clings to her figure. Blushing, Noya glances away. He scans the row of bottles in front of him, feeling overwhelmed. He knows he should order something, since he is sitting at a bar, but he has never drunk before.

Kuroo, what should I order? he projects.

Why don't you ask the cougar? Kuroo suggests. It would be a good opportunity to talk to her.

Right, of course. His nervousness is making him blind to simple solutions.

“Hello, miss,” Noya says, tentatively tapping her shoulder. “Sorry to bother you, but I'm new here and I don't know what’s good to drink. What do you recommend?”

She turns to him, and a wide smile blossoms on her face. It could look friendly. “Hello! Aren't you a little too young to be drinking?”

Noya figures that since she’s into younger guys, the whole innocent act would be a surefire way to tempt her. He shyly averts his eyes and runs a nervous hand through his hair. “I’m actually eighteen, miss.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry! Right, they wouldn't have let you in if you were underage. I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have assumed.”

“It’s fine, I get that a lot,” Noya says, trying his best to sound reassuring. “I’m just small for my age, that's all.”
“Mm, right.” Her dark eyes run all over him. Noya shudders, getting the distinct feeling that she's picturing his unclothed body in her mind and is using his clothed body as a blueprint. He has never felt so invaded in his entire life—and considering that Oikawa No-Sense-of-Personal-Space Tooru is his friend and bodyguard, that sure is saying something.

“Anyway, my name is Fujinuma Asami, but I’d prefer it if you call me by my given name.” She winks flirtatiously at him, and he has to repress another shudder. “What’s your name?”

“U-uh—” In a haze of panic, he forgets the fake name Kuroo came up with and instead blurts out the first name that comes to mind. “Azumane! Azumane Yuu.”

(Noya can sense Kuroo laughing through the psychic link.)

She beams at him. “Okay! I’ll call you Yuu-kun.”

“Er, okay…”

The innocent, demure boy act seems to be working, as her beam widens. She leans closer to her, her plunging neckline dipping even lower and—whoa, Noya tears his eyes back up to focus on her face. His face burns with embarrassment. Turns out this shy charade isn't so difficult to pull off, after all.

“Anyway, Yuu-kun,” Fujinuma says, “you’re a first-timer here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, um, Fuji—Asami-san. I wanted to ask for what drink you recommended I get—if that’s alright with you, of course!” He channels as much of Asahi’s natural meekness into his behaviour as possible, which makes him feel horribly fake and not all all like himself.

“Of course it’s alright with me! You’re so cute, Yuu-kun. Hmm… well, if this is your first time here, I recommend a sex on the beach. They do sex on the beach really well.” Her voice is laced with so much sensual undertone it’s practically tangible.

Noya squirms on his stool. “Oh, um, I think—I mean, yeah! That sounds good. Thank you, Asami-san. Er, how do I—”

“Don't worry about it, I’ll order for you,” she says, laying a manicured hand on his forearm. "Your drinks are all on me tonight, so drink to your heart’s content.”

(Noya is glad that Suga made him drink some disgusting, murky grey concoction that he claimed was to make him resistant to the influence of alcohol and commonly used date-rape drugs. He doesn’t put it past her to try and roofie him.)

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, Asami-san,” he mumbles. He deliberately averts his eyes in what he hopes is an endearingly coy manner.

A predatory smirk crosses her face before it is chased away by a kind smile.

The two of them continue their back-and-forth tango. Fujinuma asks about him, he bashfully answers her and returns the question. As the both of them take a few swigs of their respective drinks, her physical advances start to become more overt. As she’s telling him about her work as a producer at Team Neko, her hand traces up and down his thigh, each lap upwards brushing increasingly closer to a part of his body that really shouldn't be touched in public. Instinctively, he jerks away from her hand; but she just shifts closer to him, her wandering hand now clamped firmly on his thigh. He tries not to whimper from the sheer discomfort of everything.

Hey Noya, just checking in, Kuroo says. Is everything cool on your end?
Noya tries to form a coherent reply in the haze of discomfort. *Uh, yeah, I guess. I mean, she’s started touching me more, which is really uncomfortable but I don’t think it’s enough to get her arrested.*

**Okay. If it gets too much—**

**Yeah, I’ll tell you. Don’t worry about me, okay?**

**Hard not to, considering the danger you’re putting yourself in for me, but I’ll try.**

“Yuu-kun?” A manicured hand waves in front of his face, snapping him out from his mental conversation with Kuroo. “Is everything alright? Or is the drink too much for you?”

Truthfully, Noya is starting to feel slightly tipsy—this is the third glass of sex on the beach she bought for him. Once again, he thanks his lucky stars for Suga’s fussing motherly ways.

“Y-yeah. It’s just, y’know, my first time drinking so much at one shot.” He hopes the shake in his voice isn’t as obvious as he thinks it is. "Were you saying something to me?”

She nods. “Yep. I was asking if you have a girlfriend. You strike me as an attractive young man, so I want to know if there is another girl trying to jump on all that.” Her heavily-lined eyes sweep over and downwards his body, like he’s a delicious piece of meat she can’t wait to devour. It sends repulsed shivers up his spine. He almost wants to leap off his stool and run out of the tavern, but he's quick to remind himself that Kuroo and Kenma are depending on him to pull this off.

“No, I don’t.”

Her eyebrows raise in surprise. “Oh, wow. That's a shocker. Have you ever had a girlfriend, then?”

He almost says no, except Kuroo’s voice cuts in.

*Lure her in, your Highness.*

“Well, one,” he lies. The blush that fills his cheeks comes naturally now. “But it didn't end so well. It was actually quite recent, so I’m still, you know, torn up about it.”

“Ah, so you came here to drink the pain away?” Fujinuma asks with what sounds like practised and manufactured sympathy.

That isn't what Noya has in mind (well, not that he has anything in mind because he really is just making everything up as he goes), but he decides to roll with it. He nods with what he hopes is enough sorrow to be believable.

Then she presses up even closer to him. Her chest pushes against his arm, and her hand rubs circles in his thigh that makes his stomach twist painfully. God, his face is going to burn off his head. He wants nothing more than to run to the other end of the district, but he forces himself to remain seated.

Her lips brush against his neck as she whispers, “How about I find another way to help with the pain?”

He jolts, mortification rocking through his senses. “Asami-san, I’m not sure—”

She gets up, despite his protest, and places a stack of cash on the bar. “C’mon, Yuu-kun, you know you want me. You’re truly a fine young man, and you deserve a real woman who will treat you well. Who will touch you well. I promise you, once I’m done with you, you’ll never want another woman
ever again.” Her voice is sweet and alluring like a Venus flytrap, and Noya has never felt more turned off. “Let’s take this back to my place.”

The mental image of Asahi’s blushing face after Noya kissed his cheek flashes briefly through his mind before he finds himself tugged to his feet and dragged to the entrance of the tavern.

_Noya, do you need me to intervene?_ Kuroo’s alarmed voice demands.

_N-no. This is a perfect opportunity, actually. The whole point is to catch her in the act, right?_

_Dude, you’re not planning on going all the way, are you?!_ Bokuto chimes in.

Noya tries to keep the grimace off his face. _Hopefully it won’t have to come down to it. I’ll give you and Akaashi a call when the time is right._

_OKay, Akaashi says, though it sounds forced. Please don't put yourself in any unnecessary danger until we get there._

_I’ll try not to, _Noya replies.

Butterflies flap in Noya’s stomach, but they aren’t the pleasant butterflies he gets around Asahi. They feel more like the ones he gets when he’s about to get into a battle: apprehensive, terrified and ready to act on fight-or-flight. Fujinuma’s hand keeps a vice grip around his wrist, like a shackle.

_So this is how Kenma felt when she approached him._ The realisation nearly makes him puke.

_In a lustful haze, Fujinuma jams her key into the keyhole and practically shoves him into her house. The door clicks shut behind him—and that’s when real fear washes over him like a tidal wave. He is trapped in a house with a drunk and dangerous woman, who’s scanning him from head to toe like he’s a delectable platter of meat, arousal smouldering in her gaze._

_“Don't look so nervous, Yuu-kun,”_ Fujinuma purrs. She takes several steps forward, forcing Noya to take several backwards. He gasps when the back of his knees hit the edge of a sofa, but she doesn’t stop there. She pushes forward until he ends up flat on his back on it. “I promise to treat you very, very well.”

Fujinuma’s knees clamp on either side of his hips, effectively confining him to the sofa. Since she has a good few inches on him and he himself isn't particularly strong, he doubts he would be able to shove her off before she traps him back in place. Her hands skim over his torso, sending acrid flames flaring through him. He has never felt so degraded and filthy before. She doesn't stop there, however. Her eyes flicker with wanton longing down to his lips, and she dips her head until their noses brush. _Wait, I’ve never had my first kiss before!_

Another image of Asahi flickers in his mind, causing him to sharply avert his face away from hers. _“Okay, what's the deal?”_ Fujinuma snaps. She seizes his jaw, forcing him to face her. “Don't leave a woman hanging like that, Yuu-kun.”

Panic shoots through him when her lips smash harshly against his. He squirms under her, but her hands pin him firmly to the sofa. He whimpers, feeling utterly helpless and weak. Humiliated tears prick at the corners of his eyes, threatening to burst. This isn’t how he wanted to have his first kiss at all. He wanted to have it with someone he wanted and who wanted him back, not to have it forcefully stolen from him by a woman he doesn't even know.
I'm sorry, Asahi. I should have just kissed you when I had the chance. I'm so sorry.

Fujinuma’s lips rip away from his, and she tears his blazer off.

“Asami-san, I don’t—"

“Shut up,” she snaps, all traces of the friendly woman at the bar gone. “If you didn't want this, then you shouldn't lead a woman on, looking and acting like that. I'm in control here, you got that?”

Noya continues to thrash under her, and her dark eyes flash dangerously.

And his fear spikes into overdrive when she reaches into her handbag and fishes out a piece of rope.

Hey, Bokuto, Akaashi? It takes all his willpower not to scream out loud. I think now would be a good time! And please hurry!

Akaashi can feel Noya’s terror through the telepathic link. It's so overwhelming it almost feels like his own fear—or maybe there is some of his own fear mixed in with Noya’s. He and Bokuto share a brief look before he tunes back into the telepathic conversation.

Okay, he says, trying to keep his alarm out of his mental voice. Do you know where exactly she has taken you?

I... I don't know. Noya’s mental voice trembles. I'm so sorry. I—I was so scared I forgot to pay attention to my surroundings.

Hey, don't apologise, little prince! Bokuto reassures. Ku-bro, did you tail Noya and the cougar?

Yeah, Kuroo says. Her house is a ways behind the tavern, on 5th Avenue. Left side of the street, second house. Typical picket white fence—the only one on the street so it should be hard to miss.

Okay, thank you, Kuroo-san.

Akaashi and Bokuto get out from behind their hiding spot behind a bush and hurry towards the police precinct. It's a sprawling brick building with the flag of the queendom on display at the entrance. Akaashi pushes his way inside, Bokuto hot on his tail, and approaches the first officer dressed in the typical beige uniform he sees.

Akaashi, not wanting to waste time, quickly activates Allure Speech and reports the situation to the officer. The officer doesn't ask any questions and hurries to gather a squadron of officers. In no time, the officers are galloping towards 5th Avenue on their police horses. Akaashi shrinks down to three inches in height, while Bokuto transforms into a large horned owl. Bokuto’s clawed feet gently pick Akaashi up, and together they soar after the police.

(Technically, as a demi-fairy, Akaashi can fly on his own; but Bokuto outstrips him in terms of speed, and they want to get to Noya as fast as possible.)

Noya-sama, how are things on your end? Akaashi asks.

Getting more uncomfortable, Nishinoya whimpers. Her dress is half-off and oh god this is so uncomfortable I want to die.
Please stay calm. The police are on their way. Bokuto-san and I are behind them. Please, just try to hold on for a little more. We're almost there.

Despite not knowing the prince all that well, uneasiness makes itself home in Akaashi’s core. Well, someone who willingly puts himself in danger for Kenma is good in his books. And he's determined not to let that risk go to waste.

From his position in the sky, Akaashi sees the police round a corner beyond the tavern, heading towards 5th Avenue.

Noya-sama, we're nearing Fujinuma-san’s house. Please make some noise so it sounds like there is an assault going on, Akaashi instructs.

Yeah, no problem, Noya gripes.

Bokuto, Akaashi and the police soon arrive outside the house Kuroo described. When Bokuto lowers Akaashi to the ground, he can hear cries begging for someone to stop emanating from the house. The pleas sound too fearful to be fake. Akaashi’s gut twists when he feels a shot of pain through the telepathic link.

Akaashi and Bokuto revert back to their full-sized human forms just in time to see the officers kick down the door. They edge closer to the door and find Noya on a pristine red sofa shirtless, his hands bound above his head and a half-undressed woman straddling him. Any idiot can tell from his general body language and the way he’s writhing under her, like someone put layers of hot coals under his body, that he's terrified out of his mind.

“This is the police! Get off the young man!” the first officer orders.

“What the fuck—where did you come from?” the woman spits. She rounds on Noya. “Did you set me up, asshole? Tell me! Did you?!” She strikes Noya’s already-bruised face.

“That bitch,” Bokuto snarls, and Akaashi struggles to hold him back from charging at her.

“That’s enough!” the officer shouts, raising his bat threateningly. “Get off the boy and put your hands above your head. You are under arrest for assault and sexual assault.”

Muttering furious curses, Fujinuma does as she is told. The officer quickly secures a pair of handcuffs around her wrists and leads her out of her house.

A few other officers hurry to untie Noya’s bound hands. Akaashi can see them asking him questions, but from so far away he can't hear what they are saying.

Uh, guys, a little help! Noya pleas. They're asking me for my age and stuff and I don't know what to say 'cause I literally met her at a bar which I entered using a fake ID and I really don't feel like getting arrested 'cause I still have one more district to make amends in and also Asahi would be sad, and Shouyou and Daichi, and Tooru too I suppose, and...

Akaashi pushes past the officers into the house, quelling their protests using Allure Speech. He approaches the officers surrounding Noya and convinces them not to interrogate Noya any further. Under the spell of Allure Speech, the officers dazedly acquiesce and leave the house, presumably to accompany Fujinuma to the precinct.

Now with the house to themselves, Akaashi releases a breath he hasn't realised he was holding. He studies Noya, scanning his injuries. The prince has some scratch marks on his chest and arms, a smattering of bruises on his face and several reddish-purple marks on his neck. But the attention-
stealer is the crow pendant around Nishinoya’s neck. There's something… off about its aura. He recalls Nishinoya proudly proclaiming it’s a good luck pendant when Bokuto asked him about it. He's briefly distracted from the situation at hand to focus his mind on trying to break through the layers of Blocks on it, but to no success. He wants to ask Nishinoya about it, but then the bruises on the prince’s neck recapture his attention from the corner of his eye, and he remembers the situation at hand. Whatever it is about the pendant, it's probably not a big deal if Nishinoya hasn't made it a big deal. And it’s not any of his business what accessory the prince chooses to wear.

“Noya-sama, how are you feeling?” Akaashi asks, handing him his tossed-aside shirt and blazer.

“Relieved,” Noya mumbles. He hurriedly dresses himself, like he's afraid to stay half-bare for even a second longer. “I was—that might have been one of the scariest things I’ve ever experienced. And I saw my parents’ dead bodies. Traumatising.”

“Dude, that took some insane balls to pull off,” Bokuto hoots, thumping his back. Noya flinches slightly from the contact. “Sorry, was that too hard?”

“Ah—no. Sorry, it’s just—like, physical contact, you know…”

“You were very brave,” Akaashi says. “Let’s regroup with Kuroo-san outside, okay? Then we can go home, where you will be safe.”

“Mm, okay.”

Noya’s legs are trembling too much for him to walk steadily, so Bokuto carries him on his back out of the house where Kuroo is waiting for them. To anyone else, his body leaning against a tree would have appeared casual. But to someone who has known him for an exasperating three years, Akaashi can see how tense he is.

“Dude, you alright?” Kuroo asks, slinking towards Nishinoya.

Noya's nod wobbles. “Y-yeah. Just shaken up, that's all.”

Kuroo ruffles his hair. “I can't believe you did that for me. I—I don't know how I should repay you, man. You really didn't have to do that.”

“But I wanted to. I’m the prince, after all. What good am I as a prince if I don’t take care of my people?”

Akaashi ruminates on that. His whole life, he has perceived the royal family as high-and-mighty but faceless monarchs who issued orders from their thrones, whose decrees the people just followed. He thought of the citizens as being ‘for’ the monarchs, never once considering that the rulers were supposed to be ‘for’ their people just as much, if not even more. And here, in his midst, is a fallen prince chased away from the grandeur and fancy of his palace and forced to dwell among commoners.

Yet Prince Noya has never acted like that, like he's above everyone else because of his status. In fact, his interactions with his bodyguards are more like that of between friends and less like between prince and underling. He teases them, bickers with them, cheers for them and even listens to their instructions without (much) protest. Case in point: Sawamura (or Sugawara now). Even though ranking-wise, Nishinoya has the superior position, he defers to Sawamura and Sugawara, and any reluctance to obey is due to his natural stubbornness and not at all due to arrogance. Akaashi wonders how much humility it must take for someone literally of royal blood to lower himself to his people and let them use him for their means.
And here is Akaashi, who refused to share his power even for a friend’s sake. Yes, one reason for his general aversion to using Allure Speech was because he didn't wish to use his power to manipulate and hurt others. But another, more selfish reason, was because he didn't want to be used and ‘degraded’ to a mere tool. And what was the cost of that selfishness? Noya had to put himself in danger, all because Akaashi didn't want to use his power to get Kenma his rightful justice.

It only feels right to wonder if he will ever have that kind of humility.

‘TEAM NEKO PRODUCER ARRESTED FOR ALLEGED ASSAULT AND SEXUAL ASSAULT.’

“Well,” Kuroo says, taking a sip of his coffee as he reads the news article, “it’s not complete justice until that cougar bitch is rotting in a prison cell, but it’s a start.”

It has been a few days since Fujinuma was arrested. Noya was pretty shaken up after the ordeal, but as far as Kuroo knows he's coping well. The telepathic link between them has faded, so he can't check himself into Noya’s mind to ask how he is. According to Hinata (who drops by every day to give reports about how Kenma is doing), Suga has decided for the Blue Crows to hang around Nekoma for a while until Noya fully bounces back.

“What else did the article say?” Yachi asks.

She, Bokuto and Akaashi are keeping him company in his apartment, since Kenma is still conspicuously absent. They're engaged in a casual game of blackjack. So far, Yachi has been winning while Bokuto has been on quite a losing streak.

“Hmm…” Kuroo scans through the rest of the article, his lip curling in disdain. “Apparently, she claims that her ex-husband, who’s a whopping fifteen years older than her, sexually abused her for three straight years before she finally filed for a divorce—and what happened to her traumatised her so much she turned to sexually preying on younger guys, probably to give herself some sense of power and control, I guess.”

Kuroo—well, he does feel bad for her. He may hate her entire being for what she did to Kenma, but he isn't an unsympathetic asshole. Sexual abuse is terrible and unforgivable, in his opinion. However, having been hurt before doesn't justify hurting others, so he still wants her to rot to death in prison.

Huh, he wonders if Kenma has heard the news yet.

Abruptly, he shoves his chair back, tossing the newspaper aside. He strides to the door and slips a coat on.

“Dude, where are you going?” Bokuto asks.

“I'm going to see Kenma,” Kuroo tosses over his shoulder.

“I'm not sure if that is a sound decision, Kuroo-san,” Akaashi cautions. He draws a card from the deck, does some quick mental calculations and sets his cards face-down. He maintains his usual deadpan expression. Yachi may have Lady Luck smiling down on her, but Akaashi’s master poker face makes him a difficult opponent to play against. “I do not intend to be tactless, but he hasn't spoken to you in such a long time. If he wanted to see you, I doubt he would wait over two weeks to
Kuroo winces. “Well, yeah. But I just wanna make sure he heard the news. And it doesn’t hurt to try anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s the spirit!” Bokuto encourages. “Go get your man back, bro! We’ll be cheering you on from here.”

“I hope you don’t mean that literally, Bokuto-san.”

Yachi offers a gentle smile. “Good luck. I hope it works out.”

“Thanks, guys. See you.”

With high spirits, Kuroo practically swaggers out of the apartment building. For some reason, he’s unusually optimistic. Maybe hanging out with the rays of sunshine known as Hinata, Yachi and Noya for the past two weeks has something to do with that. Or maybe it’s the fact that he has finally gotten some semblance of closure with Fujinuma’s arrest. Now, all that is left is to try one last time to get through to Kenma. It has been two weeks since their falling out; he must have cooled down by now. Hopefully. It never hurts to be hopeful, right?

*I got this,* he reminds himself.

He smooths down the front of his coat to make himself look presentable (nothing he can do about his perpetual bedhead, though) before rapping on Yaku’s door.

The door swings open instantly, revealing a sullen-looking Yaku. The manager truly isn't a morning cat.

“What now?” he grumbles. “Did you two have another fight while I wasn't around?”

“Jeez, find your chill, demon manager,” Kuroo teases. “And no, no fight. I just want to see him.”

“And I thought I made it abundantly clear that he does not want to see you?”

“Yeah, I know that. But please, just let me see him just this once and I'll be out of your hair. Promise.”

Yaku sighs. With evident reluctance, he steps aside to let Kuroo in. “Fine. But I am not to be held accountable if things get ugly.”

“Yeah, of course.” Kuroo sweeps past him, and Yaku shuts the door behind him.

“And I want a pay raise!”

“Right, right.”

Kuroo makes his way past Yaku’s tidy living room, where he spots a familiar red box sitting on the table. The seal looks untouched. He frowns. The pies inside must have gone bad by now if the box still hasn't been opened.

“He's in the guest room at the back,” Yaku calls to him.

Kuroo sends a thumbs-up over his shoulder. As he treads down the hallway, the burst of confidence he felt earlier slowly dissipates, giving way to frayed nervousness. He hasn’t spoken to Kenma since that fateful night; what if Kenma’s still unhappy with him? What if—
Cut that shit out, Tetsu. Stop over-thinking and just talk to him.

The door to the guest room is wide open, to his surprise. He peeks in, and his palms become slick with sweat. Kenma is bundled up in a veritable cocoon of blankets, his arms clutching a pillow and his expression vacant. He looks… Kuroo doesn’t know. Not unhappy. But not happy either.

“Kitten?” he calls softly.

Kenma nearly flinches out of his blanket-cocoon. He turns, and his eyes widen with shock. “Kuro? What are you doing here?”

“Just wanted to, y’know, check on you.” Kuroo’s hand reflexively finds his hair. “How are you?”

Kenma averts his gaze. “Fine.”

“Oh, cool.”

God, this is so awkward.

But Kuroo forces himself to push on. “So, uh, have you seen the news? Of, you know, the producer’s arrest and all that jazz.”

Kenma’s expression instantly hardens. “Yeah, you bet I did.”

Kuroo’s heart sinks to his stomach. What did he do wrong this time? Oh god, did he fuck up again? But how would he have fucked up this time?

“It was you, wasn’t it? You got her arrested.”

“Well, kinda. I mean, Noya was the real star of the show, really. He was the one who baited her, and Akaashi and Bokuto were the ones who summoned the po-po. All I did was act as backup in case things got messy.”

“You put the prince in danger just to, what, avenge me?” Kenma chokes out. “It was bad enough you got Akaashi and Bokuto tangled up in my mess, and now the prince?”

Any shred of Kuroo’s previous confidence shrivels up and dies. “Well, it was his Highness's idea. Everyone was against it, but he’s stubborn as hell. But, yeah, I was the one who asked for their help for in the first place. I wanted to get justice for what that bitch did to you, kitten. I couldn't stand the idea of a woman who hurt you like that just—just walking free, you know?”

“... and there you go again.”

“Huh?” Kuroo’s mouth feels like it has been filled with sawdust.

“How many times do I have to spell it out for you?” Kenma asks, his voice soft like a thunderstorm. “How many times do I have to tell you that I am sick and tired of you always going off and doing what you think is best for me without asking me if I thought it was best for me?”

“Kitten, I—I don't understand. What she did was a crime! Don't you want justice for what happened?”

Kenma’s arms tighten around the pillow. “What I want is to forget everything that happened and just… just move on. I was starting to forget, but then you just had to go and publicise the whole thing. It’s all over the damn news, Kuro—how the hell am I supposed to move on now? Now I’m terrified the police is gonna come after me and ask me to testify and force me to relive everything that
happened and I just—I can't.” He ducks his head, blond hair curtaining his face, but Kuroo can see increasingly large damp spots on the pillow in his grasp. “I just want peace. I just want to move on. You're always trying to give me what I want, but why can't you do that for me this time? Why... why did you have to—” His voice dissolves into quiet and disjointed sobs. And he never cries.

Kuroo's knees weaken with every verbal blow, until he has to lean against the door frame just to stay upright. “My god, I swear I didn't mean to—I'm so sorry, kitten. I swear I didn't mean to do any harm. I really just wanted to help—”

“And I'm fed up with your help."

“Please, Kenma,” Kuroo begs, a lump forming in his throat. “Please, we can work this out. We've been through so much together; we can work this out. Just tell me what I can do for you. I'll do anything for you, Kenma, anything in the whole damn world! Please, just let me prove myself to you.”

“No. I—I'm sorry, but I really can't do this anymore. This time, there really is no working through this. This, whatever this is between us—it's over.”

All the blood in Kuroo's face drains away. “N-no, this can't be. Please, can we just—”

Kenma rolls the covers over himself, as if signaling the conversation over. “Please just... just go. I don't want to see you anymore.”

Someone might as well have picked up an entire building and rammed it into Kuroo's gut, knocking all the wind and confidence and everything out of him. It would be a relief from the heart-wrenching pain eating him alive. Because for the past few weeks, every fight with Kenma, every mistake he made, every new discovery of Kenma's suffering—all of it has been bearing down on him, pushing him down lower and lower, threatening to crush him but not quite reaching there yet. And with that final rock added to the already unbearable weight...

Kuroo has finally been pushed off the edge.

Chapter End Notes

happy 2019! i hope the new year has been nice to all of you. if not, i hope it gets better.

this fic will be concluded soon. if i'm able to stick to my weekly schedule and not have anything come up, this story should be complete by February. thank you for your patience!

and damn it, you guys are too smart—y'all guessed Noya's plan correctly in the previous chapter. or maybe the foreshadowing was too obvious ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

hope y'all enjoyed this! thanks for reading.

chat with me on tumblr!
promises

Chapter Notes

i have 2 TWs for this chapter. one is a spoiler, so i'll be putting it in the end notes in case people don't want spoilers. but if you want to be warned, click 'see the end of the chapter for more notes' to bring you to the end notes.

the non-spoiler TW is that there's some brief description of what Fujinuma did to Kenma, but it's not explicit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Twenty-one,” Akaashi says calmly, setting his cards down. “I win.”

“No way, seriously?!” Bokuto cries out. He flings his cards down, revealing a twenty. “I so thought I had that one!”

Yachi giggles. “You’ll win next round, Bokuto-san. I’ll even shuffle the deck so that it'll in your favour.”

Bokuto perks up. “Really?! Wow, you’re so awesome, little lady!”

“I estimate only a 10 percent window of victory for you, Bokuto-san.”

“C’mon, Akaashi! You should back me up more often!”

Akaashi lets out a tiny sigh. Even if Bokuto is exasperating at times, he's still immensely endearing in his own burly boisterous way. “Bokuto-san, you—”

A sudden SLAM cuts Akaashi off and frightens Yachi so much she drops the entire deck of poker cards. Kuroo stands in the doorway, panting hard like he just ran a marathon around the entire queendom. But what startles all of them the most is his eyes: they're puffy and red. Tear tracks run down his face like multiple criss-crossing river streams.

“Tetsu-kun! You’re—wait, what's the matter, Tetsu-kun?” Yachi asks worriedly.

Kuroo slumps in, the dejected air around him practically tangible. “I—I failed him. I—god, I really fucked up this time.”

“It’s okay, everyone makes mistakes,” Yachi soothes. “Come on, I’ll make you some tea and we’ll work something out—”

Kuroo shakes his head vehemently. “No, you don't get it. There is no working this out, Hitoka.”

“Don't be like that!” Bokuto exclaims. “C’mon, we totally can think of a solution—”

“I’m serious!” Kuroo yells, slamming his fist against the wall. “There’s no fucking solution ‘cause he broke up with me!”

It’s like all the air has been sucked out of the room. Yachi’s eyes widen, Bokuto nearly falls out from
his chair and Akaashi desperately fights to keep his emotions off his face.

“N-no, that can't be,” Yachi stammers. “He didn't mean that, I’m sure——”

“He did, Hitoka, he did. Because of me. Because of my constant fucking up. Because I failed him.”

A sudden thought seems to occur to him. He marches into the apartment, the door still gaping open behind him, straight towards the kitchen.

“Dude, chill!” Bokuto dashes after him and grabs his arm. “What the hell are you going to do in the kitchen?!”

Kuroo’s voice lowers dangerously, and Akaashi isn't sure how much of him there is left inside there. “A promise.”

“Huh?!”

“I made a promise to Kenma. I told him that if I failed him, if I betrayed him, that I would give up my ability to shapeshift.”

“Okay, but how would you achieve that?” Akaashi asks, trying to keep his voice even. “Your power is literally tattooed into your skin, so how—oh my god. Kuroo-san, please don’t tell me—”

Kuroo roughly shoves Bokuto away from him and rips his shirt off. On his chest is the inscribed ink containing all his shapeshifting power—a tattoo of a cat curled up within an octagon.

Yachi screams in horror. “No! Tetsu-kun, please! You can't carve your tattoo off.”

“Sure I can,” Kuroo declares, his tone disturbingly devoid of any of his previous emotional thunderstorm. “All I need is a knife. Or any sufficiently sharp object. It’s that simple.”

“Akaashi!” Bokuto shouts, not that Akaashi needs the prompt. He rushes to activates his power, fixing Kuroo with his glowing eyes.

“Kuroo-san, please listen to reason——”

But a mental force stronger than any typhoon or hurricane forces him out of Kuroo’s mind. The repulsion physically sends Akaashi careening into a wall, causing Yachi to cry out his name.

He rubs the back of his head. “I’m sorry, I can't get through to him. The grief is too powerful.”

“Shit,” Bokuto curses. Then his curse becomes louder when Kuroo takes another step towards the kitchen. “Shit! Kuroo Tetsurou, don't you dare——”

“Just fuck off, Bokuto,” Kuroo snarls. “Don't you dare get in my way.”

Yachi pounces on him, latching onto his arm. He shakes the captured limb vigorously, but she remains stuck in place.

“Akaashi-san, Bokuto-san! Go get Kenma! He's the only one who can stop him.”

“But what about you?” Bokuto counters. “He’s dangerous, Yachi——”

“I know. That's why you have to go now!”

Akaashi forces himself to get up despite the throbbing welt at the back of his head. At least it doesn't seem to be a concussion.
“But—”

“Let’s go, Bokuto-san.” Akaashi shrinks himself down, and Bokuto seems to get the idea. He transforms into an owl, grabs Akaashi and zooms faster than a flash of lightning out of the door.

*Please, Yachi-san. Please hold on to him for just a little longer.*

Way to fucking go, Kenma, Kenma angrily tells himself. The blanket cocoon starts to feel suffocating, so he tries to get himself out. The blankets tangle around his feet, nearly tripping him up each time he attempts to make an escape. Cursing under his breath, he rips the blanket off him and—in a rare display of athleticism—flings it to the other end of the bed.

Once out, he paces around the room, each footstep falling onto the hardwood floor like a boulder thrown off the highest mountain. *This is what happens when you act on instinct like some idiot instead of thinking, you idiot.*

And given that Kuro pretty much ran off after Kenma’s stupid outburst, he figures there's no way he can salvage things now. Things are broken for good now, all because of some fleeting instinct, some irrational fear, that overtook his higher cognitive functions in that one moment.

But why? Logically, he knows he has no reason to fear Kuro. In all three years of their relationship—before Kenma ended it earlier—Kuro has never intentionally hurt or threatened to hurt him. He always sought consent before doing something, especially if it was the first time. That's why Kenma knew he didn't have to fear Kuro’s touch. Kuro always kept things strictly above the hips, and even after three years of dating he never even hinted at taking things any further. Kenma still finds it odd; Kuro is a pretty physical person. When they were still together, he always found some excuse to run his fingers through Kenma’s hair, or kiss him, or tackle him into a cuddle.

But he never propositioned Kenma. Kenma figures he's either asexual (which he thinks is odd, since he's certain Kuro would've mentioned it some time in their seventeen years of friendship and three years of romance) or had extremely good self-control. Whatever it was, being with Kuro never gave him a reason to *fear* his touch. In fact, most of the time he *enjoyed* touching Kuro and being touched by him, even after the… *incident* with Fujinuma.

Yet sometimes—especially during cuddles or a makeout session—poisonous, inexplicable fear would sink its claws into Kenma’s mind. Rationally, he knew Kuro would never do anything like *that* to him, but a small part of him always asked ‘*what if?* ’ But he never dared to pull away. He didn't want Kuro to suspect something was wrong, because he knew that bleeding-heart idiot with a mild saviour complex would attempt something like he just did if he found out. And Kuro is sharp—if he had a feeling something was off every time he made physical contact with Kenma, he’d soon connect the dots and (probably accurately) figure out what had happened. Kenma didn't want that. He wanted to have a normal relationship with Kuro, to have things continue on as they had always did. And if that meant faking it to make it, then Kenma was willing to do it. If he could pretend his relationship with Kuro was as it had always been, he could pretend what happened with Fujinuma never happened.

But the nightmares plagued him and still continue to do so. Sometimes he's afraid of going to sleep, since sleep half of the time at least means reliving the whole ordeal over and over again. How can he pretend it never happened if he feels her hands crawling like snakes over his body, her breath against
his neck like acrid cigarette smoke and her knees around his hips like an iron clamp again in his dreams?

And now that Fujinuma is all over the news, how the fuck does Kuro expect him to heal and move on?

Everything is a mess.

Metaphorically and literally, because just then, a large mass of feathers smashes straight through the window. Glass sprays across the floor haphazardly. Kenma scrambles out of the impact zone just in time to see the feathery mass barrel through the hole and tumble onto the ground. It morphs into Bokuto, who has some stray feathers stuck to his forehead. A tiny figure leaps off Bokuto’s broad shoulder and sprouts into Akaashi. Both of their faces are pale, like they have come to deliver a premonition.

“What did you two break Yaku’s window?” Kenma sighs. “He’s going to be mad. And he isn't nice when he’s mad.”

“It’s an emergency!” Bokuto shouts. “Your man just went off the deep end! He’s completely fucking bonkers—”

“Kuroo-san said something about keeping a promise to you,” Akaashi interjects. “Long story short, he’s going to mutilate himself to get the tattoo off. I tried using my power to stop him, but his grief was so powerful it forced me out of his mind. Please, Kenma, you don't have to get back together with him. I'm sure once he calms down, he’ll respect your decision. But please come back just to calm him down before he does something stupid and hurts himself.”

Kenma’s eyes widen. Oh look what you did, you fucking moron.

“That idiot—” he chokes out. Then he pauses, his eyes narrowing. He regards the pair suspiciously. He won’t put it past Kuro to… “Wait, how can I believe you? How do I know he didn't send you here to tell me this just so I would go back to him?”

Well, he would go back to Kuro regardless if he would have him back, but he has to make sure the two don't have any ulterior motives first. He's had enough of Akaashi deceiving him, even if it was with good intentions.

Akaashi points at his eyes. “I’m not using my power, am I? If that is all I wanted to do, I would have just used my power.”

The fight leaves Kenma’s body. He nods, determination replacing his previous skepticism. “Okay. Bring me to him, quickly.”

“Please, Tetsu-kun! Please be reasonable!”

Kuroo growls. He tries prising Yachi’s stubborn fingers off his arm, but she refuses to budge. This stupid girl, can’t she just stay out of his fucking way? Doesn't she understand that he has a promise to keep? He can't go back on a promise he made—he may be a horrible fuck-up in many ways, but he refuses to break a promise.
Still, she’s too light to be able to put up much of a resistance. Dragging her along, he stomps into the kitchen. Her feet desperately scrabble at the ground, struggling to find some kind of purchase to stop him in his tracks, but Kuroo strides too fast for her to do that. He won't let anyone get in his way anymore. If he can’t be with Kenma, then there’s no point in keeping his power. He doesn't deserve it if he can't protect the one who means everything and beyond to him.

“Don't do this!” Yachi continues to plead. “Kenma wouldn't want you to do this—”

“And what the fuck do you know what Kenma wants?” Kuroo roars, kicking a stray stool out of his way. That feels good, too good. “Because I sure as fuck don't! And who the hell knows these days? This is for my own peace of mind—for me to know that at least I got some kind of punishment for failing him so badly.”

He is so close. Despite Yachi’s persistence, he eventually reaches the knife drawer. Her hand reaches out to intercept his, but he easily brushes it aside. He yanks the drawer open and grabs the first knife he sees. Yachi, still undeterred, seizes his hand and tries to tug the knife out of his iron grasp.

“I mean it!” she cries. “Don't do this. Please. Please just listen to me, Tetsu-kun!”

“Get off me!” he snarls. “Why do all of you insist on getting in my way? Why don't you understand what I'm trying to do? If I can't make Kenma feel better, if all I ever do is make things worse, then let me punish myself.” He growls when she shakes her head. He pulls the knife closer to him, the tip just barely brushing against his bare chest where the tattoo is engraved. “Stop fucking meddling around shit that doesn't concern you, Yachi! I swear to god, just let me—”

“Kuro.”

And he freezes.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can make out Kenma standing in the doorway. His hair is tossed all over the place, probably from Bokuto flying him across the district at a million miles per hour, his clothes are rumpled from the wind, his face is pale—and if there's anything Kuroo is and will ever be sure of, it's that he has never seen anyone so breathtaking in all eighteen years of his life. But he can't speak, can't move, can't do anything except stare, the air slammed out of him with that soft utterance of his name.

“Hitoka, please step away from him,” Kenma instructs, his voice as soft as a kitten's purr.

Yachi inches away from Kuroo like he's a wild beast ready to attack. After glancing back and forth between them, she turns around and scampers out of the apartment. The door swings shut behind her rapidly retreating form.

“Kuro.” Kenma treads slowly towards him, his hands spread out in front of him. “Please put the knife down.”

Kuroo trembles. He tries to, he really does, but the knife remains glued to his hand. “I wish I could—but I really can’t.”

“Then I’m going to help you. I will not make any sudden movements, so please don't be alarmed.”

At the same achingly slow pace, Kenma approaches him. With each measured step he takes, the sound of Kuroo's heart ramming against his ribs grows exponentially louder and harder. He'd love nothing more than to have Kenma close to him, but—no, Kuroo would just hurt him again. He shouldn't be anywhere near Kenma—he doesn't deserve it—but he remains frozen in place as Kenma closes the gap between them. His hand covers Kuroo’s larger one, gently prising his fingers
off the knife one by one. Kuroo slackens at the warm contact. Not trusting himself to do anything for fear of hurting Kenma, he lets Kenma take the knife from him and watches passively as he puts it back in the drawer.

“Let’s not stay here. Let’s talk outside,” Kenma murmurs.

Hand still in his, Kenma leads them to their living room. They settle next to each other on the couch. The familiarity of the action tugs painfully at Kuroo’s heart, but his lips are still sealed shut by some power out of his control.

“Kuro. I—I’m sorry.”

That snaps Kuroo out of his near-catatonic state. “What, no! You have nothing to apologise for. I should be the one apologising—”

“And you’ve already done enough of that.” Kenma’s lips quirk into a small, sad smile. “Now, it’s my turn, so please—just hear me out, okay?”

Kuroo nods and mimes zipping his lips.

“Dork. Anyway, I just—I’m sorry. You did some stupid things, but I was the one who overreacted. I know you were doing it out of concern for me, and I should’ve been grateful, but instead I lashed out at you. I said so many things I didn't mean, and I’m so sorry.” Kenma scuffs his feet back and forth against the carpet. “All you’ve ever done is care about me. There are so many reasons why you shouldn't love me—I’m troublesome, my anxiety must be a pain in the ass for you to deal with, I overreact—and yet you do, unconditionally. And I realise I’ve been taking advantage of that.”

Kuroo stares at him blankly. “I don’t understand.”

“Kuro, she had sex with me.”

“You were forced into it. You can't blame yourself for that.”

Kenma shakes his head. “I don't. Because blaming myself would mean I could have done something to prevent it from happening, but in reality there was nothing I could have done. I was just so—so weak. So helpless.”

Kuroo’s heart twists painfully. “Kitten, I—”

“But I digress. My point is—I get it if you don't, or can't, love me anymore. I get it, I really do. I’m not a virgin. I wanted to save myself for you, but I’m impure. I’m tainted now. And I kept it from you all this time, ‘cause I wanted to feel loved. I just wanted to feel like I was worthy of being loved, like I was good enough for you, and I used you to make myself feel better. So I understand if you can't, like, see a future with me anymore. You can leave if you want to.”

Kuroo's heart clenches like someone's wrapped their hand around it and is trying to squeeze all the blood out of it. He sucks in a deep breath to resupply his empty lungs before quietly asking, “Would it hurt you if I left?”

“... Yes,” Kenma admits just as quietly. “But I want what's best for you, and maybe being with me isn’t that.”

“If that's your only reason for thinking we shouldn't be together, forget it,” Kuroo says. His voice comes out firmer than expected, considering how badly his hands are shaking at Kenma’s words. “I’ve loved you my whole life and I don’t plan on stopping anytime, ever. I'm sticking with you,
forever and always. The only reason I’d accept for breaking up is if you don't want this anymore, for your sake. Do you want this?”

There is no trace of hesitation in Kenma’s voice. “I do.”

For the first time in days, Kuroo smiles—a genuine, unashamed, glowing smile. Fireworks go off in the vicinity of his once ripped-apart heart, lighting up the dark crevices of a space once achingly so gloomy. In his hurricane of bright blinding emotions, he’d love to kiss Kenma, but he holds himself back. Instead, he simply leans closer and, light as a feather, brushes Kenma’s cheek. “Then that makes the two of us. I don't give a damn if you're not a virgin, love. Virginity is just a stupid and pointless social construct anyway. I love you, Kenma, and no fucking social construct is gonna convince me otherwise.”

Kenma’s eyes are wide and glimmering. He stares up at Kuroo, as if he can't believe his ears. “Kuro…”

“And—I have to apologise,” Kuroo adds as another guilty thought strikes him. “I was stupid. I shouldn't have tried mutilating myself just ‘cause you broke up with me. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry.”

“I didn't mean it,” Kenma protests. “In heat of the moment, I just—you know—said something incredibly stupid.”

“I know. But I don't want you to feel like you have to stay with me ‘cause you're scared I’d hurt myself if you left. If… if there ever comes a time you don't want this anymore, I promise I won't hurt myself. I’ll respect your decision.”

Kenma pauses, as if thinking, and then shifts closer to press a chaste kiss on Kuroo’s cheek. “Thanks for giving me the option. But that won't be a problem. I don't have any intention of ending things with you.”

Kuroo grins at him. “Looks like we’re in the same boat, then. The same boat crossing the river of love~” he adds teasingly, just to see Kenma roll his eyes at his sappiness.

“Dork.”

Kuroo’s grin widens, and he’s about to lean in for a kiss when he suddenly remembers something. Mumbling a quick apology, he pulls away from Kenma and hurries to their room.

It better be where I hid it.

It is. After rummaging around in the drawers next to his side of the bed and much cursing, he finds what he is looking for—a small, black box. Grinning from ear to ear, he hides it behind his back as he springs back to the living room where Kenma is still curled up on the couch.

“You're grinning,” he observes astutely. “I don't know if that's a good thing or not.”

Kuroo’s grin widens as he takes his place beside Kenma. “When I asked your parents for permission to let you move in with me, they allowed it under two specific conditions. One, I am not to have sex with you until we’re married. Two, I am not to propose marriage to you until you're at least twenty.” He opens the box and holds it open for him to see. Inside are a pair of rings—silver bands with a ruby-red cat perched on each band.

A rare red blush creeps across Kenma’s cheeks. “Kuro, are you…?”
“Promise rings, ‘cause I’m a good boy and I don’t want to break my promise to your parents. But I also want a way to show you that I’m serious about you, about us, and so I thought of getting us promise rings. And, er, I realise that normally only the one being promised to gets a ring, but I really liked the idea of us having matching cat rings. I may be jumping the gun quite a bit, since we just got through a really rough patch, but do you—”

“Yes,” Kenma says immediately, his blush intensifying. “I mean, you stupid spork. You didn’t have to spend so much on rings. Just being with you is enough for me.”

Kuroo throws his head back as he laughs. “You’ve called me many things, but ‘stupid spork’? Now that’s a first. And I really don’t mind spending money on rings. I am quite the romantic, don’t you remember?”

Kenma rolls his eyes, though not without a tinge of exasperated fondness. “Dork. Just put it on me already.”

Kuroo can’t keep the smile off his face as he slides the ring on Kenma’s index finger. Then he holds his hand out for Kenma to do the same for him. Kenma’s hand lingers in his, even after the ring is in place.

“I love you, Kenma.”

“Yeah. Wait, I’m sorry. I mean, you too. I love you, too.”

It really is incredibly adorable how shy Kenma is to say those three words, even after three years of dating. Kuroo leans forward, but then stops himself again.

“Wait, are you okay with me touching you?” he asks. He knows that after incidents like that, survivors are more likely than not going to be afraid of or averse to physical touch. He doesn’t want to do anything to make Kenma uncomfortable.

Kenma regards him quietly for a few moments. “Well… if it’s you I don’t mind. But gently, please. Not too tight. And if we’re lying in bed to make out or something, I would like to be on top, please. Just for now, until I get over this. I don’t think I can handle being underneath a person, even if it’s you, without feeling… feeling how I did at that time. I’m sorry, but I just—it’ll only be for a while until I recover, promise.”

“Don’t apologise, kitten. Take as long as you need. I’m happy to do anything for you to feel comfortable and safe.”

“You sure?”

Kuroo smiles and presses a light kiss against Kenma’s forehead. “Yeah, I’m sure, I promise.”

And Kuroo, for all his flaws and impulsiveness and stupidity, has all the intention in the world to keep this promise of his to his beloved.

Chapter End Notes

spoiler TW: attempted self-harm.

so there are some things I think I ought to mention:
1. While I did base Kenma’s reactions and views of what happened to him based on the research I did, please note that different people react differently to similar circumstances, and so this is just Kenma’s way of reacting. Kenma not blaming himself is a different reaction from what many other survivors feel, but I think it fits his character more. To me, Kenma is the kind of person who sees that type of situation as hopeless. But, as I said earlier, that's just Kenma's individual reaction. Every single reaction is perfectly valid and doesn't make what happened to the survivor any less real.

2. I can't stress this enough: what Kuroo tried to do, the whole self-mutilation thing, is a one-time thing because of his accumulated stress and guilt—he was stressed about what happened to Kenma, he probably found some way to blame himself for what happened to Kenma (it’s not stated explicitly in the fic but it can be inferred based on the kind of guy he is—there's a reason why Kenma called him a bleeding-heart idiot with a mild saviour complex) and he felt guilty because Noya put himself in danger to help him. Hence, the breakup was the final straw, but it was not the only or main cause of what Kuroo attempted to do. He’s a perfectly normal guy who just so happened to be in abnormal circumstances, so he reacted abnormally. Of course, since I have no intention of permanently breaking up KuroKen because I'm soft, we have no way to verify that Kuroo will keep his promise not to hurt himself should Kenma want to end things. All we have is Kuroo’s promise—and, well, we know how seriously Kuroo takes promises he makes.

thank you for reading!

give my tumblr some love.
Kai Li, son of Kai Huang and the most powerful sorcerer in the whole of Kitagawa Daiichi, was forced to watch as his nation burned.

When the enemy troops stormed their small island, his father forced him to hide in the basement of the palace. He protested, fought, screamed and cried. He threatened, blackmailed and bribed in hopes of persuading his father into letting him participate in the battle. But nothing would sway Huang.

“Fuqing,” Li begged (fuqing meant ‘father’ in their native tongue). “Please, please let me save our nation.”

“Absolutely not,” Huang declared. “You’re only a child. I will not be like that king and let a child participate in a war. And even besides that, you’re the only family I have left. I can’t lose you too.”

“I’m seventeen. Please, it won’t even take that long. I am the most powerful sorcerer in this whole nation—I know I can do something.”

“No, and that is final. You are to stay here, where I know you will be safe and sound.”

Every day, the servants brought him reports of what was going on outside, each one driving him closer and closer to the edge: news of a young warrior who could burn an entire building of civilians to death with just a snap of his fingers; descriptions of another younger warrior who could literally tear the ground open and have it swallow people up from afar, cold and impersonal; military sorcerers who used Genocidal Curses to make the mass killings of his people easier. Each piece of news gradually cracked his spirit—and his sanity.

Then, five days after the genocide was launched, Emperor Kai surrendered.

And that was the final straw for Li.

But he knew he couldn't act irrationally. He had to plan, and he had to wait for the most opportune moment.

So he bided his time, patiently waiting to enact his plan. Time slowly chipped away at his mental endurance. Several instances, he nearly gave up. But he always kept his motive close to his heart, to remind himself why this was so important to him, and hence why it was so important to wait.

After months of painful waiting, the opportunity finally presented itself. Li snuck into his father’s room and killed him quietly while he slept. At least he would depart this world in peace, unlike the citizens he had condemned to a horrific fate. Part of him wanted to burn the body until it returned to ash. But another part of him wanted to preserve it, and so he listened to that part and cast a preservation spell over Huang’s corpse. He supposed it was poetic in a grim sense.

Once phase one of his plan was completed, he gathered the remaining survivors of the horror that
befell Kitagawa Daiichi. There were so few of them left that trying to rebuild their nation would be a futile endeavour. Instead, he rallied them using shared sentiments of fury, bitterness and hunger for vengeance. He promised them that he would give them the opportunity to exact their revenge for their fallen friends and family, and he had every intention to deliver.

After that was more waiting. Technically, Li could have enacted his plan any time he wanted. But he wanted to wait for April to carry out the assassination of the King and Queen of that kingdom, because April had been when ‘Operation Kitagawa Daiichi’ had been launched. It was poetic to kill the people who destroyed Kitagawa Daiichi on the same date they razed his nation to the ground. He wanted to execute the deed himself, but a group of enthusiastic civilians were determined to assassinate the King and Queen for him. Li was all for pleasing his people, so he let them.

Then, he waited for a little longer before finally making his move.

And now, here he is in the queendom he will bring hell on earth to. Almost everything is ready—he has the young queen too helpless to do anything to stop him, the young prince unwittingly helping him bring his plan into fruition and his people have taken over the queendom’s newsletter.

And very soon, the final piece of his plan will fall into place.

“—and I had no idea hiccups were so painful,” Noya complains. He's lying on the floor with his head in Asahi’s lap and feet propped up on Hinata’s lap. Hinata pets his feet encouragingly.

For about three days after Nishinoya baited Fujinuma into getting arrested, everyone has been giving the prince some space to recover from the ordeal, as per Suga’s orders. Hinata has been bubbling with curiosity but just barely restrains himself from asking. As curious as he is, he also wants to respect Noya’s space.

After a few days of sitting unusually quietly by himself and flinching at the slightest physical contact, Noya seems to have bounced back for the most part. He's back to teasing Asahi, squabbling with Tooru and demonstrating his ROLLING THUNDER to Hinata, much to his delight.

Currently, he's sharing his experience with everyone gathered their room. Hinata is horrified to learn what happened to Noya. No one deserves to be treated like that, like they're just an object for people to use. He stares at his prince, in complete awe of how brave Noya-san was to willingly put himself in danger and let himself be humiliated for the sake of someone he barely even knows.

“That must have been horrible,” Suga says sympathetically. “See, it was a good thing I made you drink that drink even though you hated it.”

“Yes, mother, I get it,” Noya mutters.

“You were very courageous,” Daichi adds quietly, surprising Hinata. He's mostly been hanging around in the background and silently watching everyone, letting Suga take the reigns. The sight of his once firm and steady captain so... so bweh makes Hinata feel very bweh too.

Noya blushes. “I-I mean, it was the right thing to do! That woman committed a crime, so it was only right for me to help get justice for Kenma and so—”

Several knocks on their door cuts Noya off.
“Yo, it’s us,” Kuroo’s voice drifts in from the other side of the door. “May we enter?”

“Yes, of course! Just hang on a moment…” Suga gets up from the sofa, hurries over to the door and unlocks it.

Kuroo, Kenma, Bokuto and Akaashi enter the room. Kuroo strides with an air of laidback triumph, Kenma looks mostly bored but also slightly apprehensive, Bokuto bounces in with his usual exuberance, and Akaashi continues to maintain his deadpan expression.

“Kenma!” Hinata greets excitedly. “And Kuroo-san, Bokuto-san and Akaashi-san! It’s great to see you!”

“Hey, sorry to crash the party,” Kuroo says, grinning. He appears happier than Hinata has seen him for the past several weeks. He must have made up with Kenma, then. Hinata nearly bursts with delight. Finally, it’s about time those two sorted out their issues and stopped being mad at each other. He doesn’t like it when his friends are mad at each other. It makes him feel very gah.

“No, please don’t apologise,” Suga replies, returning the smile. “What’s the matter?”

“Nah, no matter at all. Just wanted to thank everyone, especially his Highness, for helping me and Kenma out. Man, we really owe you guys one.”

“What, no!” Noya exclaims. “You don’t owe me shit if I was the one who volunteered in the first place.”

“You put yourself in danger for me,” Kenma mumbles, eyes fixed on the ground. “There has to be something I can do to, like, pay you back or something. As thanks, I guess.”

Kuroo squeezes Kenma’s hand. “You don’t have to push yourself, kitten.”

“But I want to. I mean, it’s kind of a pain, but it would be rude not to say thanks.”

“How about you join us?” Hinata suggests. “Then we can hang out all the time and play volleyball together! I miss hanging out with you, Kenma!”

“I, uh…” Kenma mutters, embarrassed.

“What, you don’t miss me, Shrimpy?” Kuroo teases. His expression soon turns thoughtful, though. “Well, if you guys are gonna be travelling it’s going to be real dangerous, and having a powerful sorcerer and ex-warrior to fill up your ranks can be a great help to you.”

“Yeah, count us in too!” Bokuto chimes in, raising Akaashi’s hand high into the air and waving it back and forth.

“Yes, I foresee many circumstances where my ability can be a great aid to you,” Akaashi says.

“I—I mean,” Suga says, rubbing the back of his neck. “Only if you really want to. I mean, you guys have your own lives too and we wouldn’t want to drag you away from your work and school.”

“Eh, it’ll be fine.” Kuroo waves the concern aside. “If Kenma wants to, we’ll just take an undetermined amount of leave. There isn’t much going on at Team Neko now that our annual production is over, anyway. Kitten, do you want to join them?”

Kenma nods. “Yes, I suppose, since Shouyou wants us too.”

“And school for us will not be a concern,” Akaashi adds. “Bokuto-san and I have completed our
final exams, so we're on vacation now. We will be glad to spend our vacation with you.”

“Yeah! Having an awesome shapeshifter like me will totally be great for you guys too,” Bokuto brags. He transforms his arm into a wing and flaps it wildly, as if to emphasise his point.

“So cool, Bokuto-san!” Hinata squeals.

“Oh please, everyone knows I’m the superior shapeshifter,” Kuroo scoffs, his hand morphing into a paw.

“No, I am! I am the best damn shapeshifter in this whole kingdom!”

“Bokuto-san, you dropped from top three to top five.”

“And it’s a queendom now, Bo,” Kuroo adds. “Get your facts right.”

Bokuto and Kuroo continue their debate about who is the better shapeshifter, swiping each other with their wing and paw respectively. Kenma rolls his eyes while Akaashi sighs like this is a regular occurrence.

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“Okay, cut it out, you two,” Suga chides, clapping his hands together to get their attention. “If you are certain, then shall we depart for Shiratorizawa?”

(Over his shoulder, he glances at Daichi, as if asking for approval. Daichi juts his chin back at him, like, Hey, you’re the boss now.)

“Yes, captain!”

With four new teammates and a new (temporary) captain, there are some changes in the status quo of the Blue Crows (and Cats, and Owls). Namely, Suga and Daichi aren’t bickering over directions as they normally do. Instead, Daichi walks quietly beside Suga while Akaashi helps Suga navigate with Bokuto chiming in to ultimately not-help. The two part-fairies get along like a house on fire (the “union of team moms”, as Kuroo dubs it), and so the group only gets lost on their way to Shiratorizawa a grand total of one time.

During the last stretch of their trek, they meet a large group of bandits, bigger than any they have encountered so far. Not that they are any trouble to deal with, given the sheer power of the whole team. Unfortunately, their victory comes at a price—Kenma is completely wiped out from having to perform so many spells, so Bokuto and Kuroo take turns to piggyback him. In addition, Akaashi used his Allure Speech to chase away as many bandits as possible—and accumulated with the fact that earlier in the day he had to use the same power to break up a heated debate between Bokuto and Kuroo, and then again between Kageyama and Hinata several times, he has hit his five-minute limit for the day. Now his voice is lower and raspier than usual, sounding rather much like he's caught a nasty cold, and he winces every time he speaks. Since his sore throat is a consequence of his own magic, Suga can't heal him. (That doesn't stop him from trying anyway.)

With nothing much to do other than to put one foot in front of the other in multiple cycles, Hinata's attention soon wanders to the others. Noya and Asahi, for example, are caught up in their own conversation, stars in Noya’s eyes and a shy smile in Asahi’s. Oikawa and Iwaizumi are still honeymooning after their recent re-engagement. Oikawa bounds along, swinging Iwaizumi’s hand with his, while Iwaizumi pretends to be disgruntled. Hinata giggles—Iwaizumi reminds him so much of Kageyama. Like mentor, like student, huh?

Hmm, that actually gives Hinata an idea.
He snags Kageyama’s arm, ignoring his spluttering protests, and tiptoes to kiss his cheek. He pulls away to watch his reaction. Kageyama’s face instantly floods with red, like someone is furiously pumping the colour into his face, and he seizes the top of Hinata’s head in his usual death grip.

“Dumbass!” Kageyama growls. “What the hell was that for!?”

Hinata shrugs innocently. “Just wanted to see your reaction. Besides, I win! That's 50-47 now.”

Kageyama practically lifts Hinata off the ground by his collar, leaning his face close. “Then I’ll make that 50-48!”

“Nuh uh!” Hinata shoves Kageyama’s face away. “It only counts if you take me by surprise, and since I just kissed you I won't be surprised.”

Kageyama scoffs, but he sets Hinata back down on the ground. “I’ll get you next time, moron.”

“Yeah, whatever you say.”

They continue trekking in a comfortable silence. Honestly, even describing silence as ‘comfortable’ surprises Hinata, because he loves chatting and is so used to being the one to fill up awkward silences. But with Kageyama, it’s different. But not unpleasantly so. It is less like a guh and more a bwah! if you get what he means. When not trying to pick a fight with him, Kageyama usually keeps to himself, only letting out non-committal grunts in response to Hinata’s twittering. Not that he minds; he just likes to talk. But he’s also comfortable with not talking to Kageyama. That’s just the way Kageyama is, and Hinata isn't one to judge people for being who they are.

To his even greater surprise, Kageyama breaks the silence between them.

“So, uh, how are you dealing with… you know, that?”

Hinata tilts his head, confused. “The what?”

Kageyama wrings his hands awkwardly. “You know! Uh, what happened to your parents. Does it still, you know, make you sad? Or something. Or angry. I read somewhere that sometimes, when stuff like—like that happens, people get angry. Sometimes they want—” He eyes Hinata with an odd wariness. “—revenge. Or something. I don’t know, okay! I’m totally, like, taking wild guesses here. But don’t this to be anything sentimental or shit like that! I just wanna make sure you’re not, like, going to go off the deep end with anger, because that would mess up our combo attack. And our team really doesn't need any more drama.”

“It’s okay! I think I get what you're saying. And I…” Hinata trails off. Truth be told, he has never given a whole lot of thought to the idea of avenging his parents’ murder or anything like that. He genuinely doesn’t hold anything Inuoka and Lev; they were blackmailed into it, after all. How can he hate people who just wanted their loved ones to be okay?

But the colonel, the one who forced them to do it—now, that's a different story. Just the thought of him makes rage boil in Hinata’s core. His parents just wanted to help people! What's wrong with that? How dare he reduce their hard work to something ‘traitorous’? When Kageyama broke the news to him, he was overcome simultaneously by soul-crushing grief and blinding, seething fury. But would he actually act on those feelings? He has been trying to keep them off his mind by doing other stuff, like hanging out with Kenma, Kuroo, Bokuto, Akaashi and Yachi (who's staying behind in Nekoma with Kiyoko), practising his and Kageyama’s quick volleyball attack and sometimes even going for jogs to blow off some steam. But sometimes, when he's alone, the thoughts come back and whisper dark, forbidden words in his mind. They tempt him, make him want to do… bad things.
Very bad things. He doesn't want to do bad things.

(But sometimes, he does.)

A hand waves in front of his face, jarring him out of the rabbit hole he's digging himself into.

“Oi, dumbass!” Kageyama snaps. “Did you just zone out on me?”

Hinata blinks himself back into reality. “I, uh, sorry. What were you saying?”

“My god, are you actually going to make me repeat—I asked if you were feeling upset or angry about what happened to your parents. Idiot, pay attention to when people are talking to you!”

“Oh, right.” Hinata rubs the back of his head sheepishly. “I, um, I don't really know. It's confusing. But I'm okay, if that's what you're worried about! Aww, I didn't think you cared so much about me, Yamayama-kun!” he adds teasingly.

That distracts Kageyama. “Dumbass, I didn't say it was anything like that!”

The dynamic duo continue their argument all the way to Shiratorizawa, which is only a fifteen-minute hike from where they left off. The first thing they see is a bakery, and the aroma of baked bread allures them like bees to honey.

Oikawa, a lover of baked goods, has a field day. He ‘ooh’s and ‘ahh’s at the displays of croissants, cakes and pastries. Iwaizumi rolls his eyes at his antics, but a fond smile finds a home on his stern face anyway.

Oikawa gasps as he grabs a pastry and holds it high up in the air, as if in worship. “They have raspberry pastries! Look, Iwa-chan, they have raspberry pastries!”

“I can see that, Shittykawa,” Iwaizumi grumbles. “It would be hard not to, given how high up you're holding it.”

“But it’s a raspberry pastry! You should sound more excited, Iwa-chan! They didn't have any of these back in Seijoh.”

“Ah, I see,” a familiar baritone voice cuts in. “You should have come to Shiratorizawa, then.”

In unison, everyone whips around to find the source of the voice.

“JAPAN!” Hinata shrieks in horror, leaping ten miles up in the air.

Oikawa’s previously delighted expression morphs into one of distaste. “Ushiwaka-chan. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Hey there, Farmer Dude,” Kuroo says, bumping Ushijima Wakatoshi’s shoulder with his fist. “Been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Hinata Shouyou, Oikawa Tooru and Kuroo Tetsurou, greetings,” Ushijima greets. “None of those are my names. My name is Ushijima Wakatoshi. And to answer your question, Oikawa, this is my home district—why would I not be here?”

From anyone else, the question would have sounded sarcastic. But coming from Ushijima, it sounds like he's genuinely puzzled.

“Old friends again?” Suga asks, offering a placating smile.
“Yeah, you bet,” Kuroo says, smirking. “Farmer Dude here was a hell lot of fun during those captain meetings back when we were all in the Elite Squad, all serious and focused like we were planning for war—which was what we were doing, I suppose. Those were the days, man, those were the days.”

“It’s nothing like that, Suga-chan,” Oikawa mutters, spearing Ushijima with a dirty look. Back in the Academy, Hinata heard a rumour that the one warrior Oikawa could never defeat in a spar was Ushijima of Shiratorizawa. If it's true, then that explains Oikawa’s bitterness towards the Shiratorizawa denizen.

Hinata continues to gape at Ushijima, floundering for words. This is *Ushijima Wakatoshi*, one of the top three student warriors in the entire queendom. He looks just as Hinata remembers: olive brown hair and eyes, tall, muscular build. However, instead of being dressed in the standard student warrior uniform, he's dressed in a dark purple tank top—showing off the tattoos of various plants like grape vines, tomatoes and palm trees that start at his impressive shoulders and end at his wrists—and a pair of black soil-stained trousers.

“Ooh, you were in the Elite Squad, Ushijima-san?” Noya asks curiously. Poor Noya has to tilt his head almost all the way back just to make eye contact with Ushijima. “Oh, name’s Noya by the way.”

“Yes, I used to be in the Elite Squad,” Ushijima replies evenly. “But I resigned after Operation Kitagawa Daiichi was concluded.”

Hinata blinks. This is news, though—granted—he left for the palace fairly soon after Operation KD was over so he didn't manage to stick around for the gossip. “But why? You were one of the best warriors the Academy had!”

“I wanted to focus my efforts on supporting Shiratorizawa’s agricultural production. I believed I would be of great assistance with my powers.” Ushijima gestures to his tattoos. “Shiratorizawa is the other port district in this queendom, besides for Dateko. But after the tragedy that befell Dateko, the situation at sea has become tricky, for lack of a better word. The business at the port has fallen at an alarming rate, so to compensate the district has been refocusing efforts on maximising our agricultural production, another key niche of Shiratorizawa.”

“You must have been working so hard,” Suga says politely. “I'm sure you have been a massive help to the agricultural production.”

“Don't fall for him, Suga-chan,” Oikawa hisses, still glaring daggers at Ushijima.

Ushijima is either ignoring Oikawa or hasn't noticed his vitriol. “Things have been improving at a steady rate, I'm pleased to say. It has helped that the previous monarchs were very supportive of our business here. They have given us ample funding for our business to thrive, even in the circumstances of today.”

Noya’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline. “Really?”

“Indeed, Noya-san. I hold a great deal of respect for the previous king and queen. I may not have agreed with all their policies, but I respected them nonetheless because I knew they always had the nation’s best interests at heart. I myself had the privilege of meeting the king to discuss business, as one of the representatives of Shiratorizawa’s agricultural sector.”

Nishinoya’s eyebrows lift even higher. “That’s—that's so cool. What, er—what kind of man did he strike you as?”
Ushijima pauses to mull over his question. “He struck me as someone who did not allow sentimentality get in the way of his objectivity. He reminded me a great deal of myself, in fact, if I may be so forward as to suggest. He was very straightforward in instructing everyone gathered at the meeting not to permit their emotions to cloud their sound judgement. People complained that he was too harsh, not that it was completely unwarranted. One thing he said that struck me in particular was, and I quote, ‘I don’t care about what you feel—’”

Noya flinches like he was slapped, but Ushijima doesn’t notice and he continues.

“—tell me what you think.’ Initially, even I believed him to be too blunt, though I chose not to disclose my opinion. But now, I understand. In my experience working in the agricultural business, putting one’s feelings on the shelf in favour of objectivity has helped the business tide through difficult times, and we are still going strong because of this. I imagine that running an entire kingdom was quite similar, albeit on a much larger scale. Many people saw the king as cold—I saw him as someone who was very dedicated to and focused on his job.”

“Ah…” Noya chews his lower lip, as if deeply contemplating something, before he speaks again. “So, er, have you ever heard of any rumours of the king being too—how should I put this?—being too married to his job? So much so that he… neglected his children?”

Hinata, Daichi, Asahi and Oikawa stare at him with wide eyes. The others, who aren’t as intimately familiar with the prince’s testy relationship with the former king, watch them in confusion. But Hinata thinks he gets what Noya is trying to get at. He’s grasping at proof, any proof he can get, that somewhere in his father’s faraway heart, there was a shred of love for him. The thought saddens Hinata, who grew up never having to doubt his parents’ limitless and unconditional love for him and Natsu.

Ushijima rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Well, now that you mention it, I do recall something else the king said during the meeting. He said, and I once again quote, ‘I apologise if you disagree with my strict way of doing things, but it’s necessary because I want this kingdom to be in a good shape so that when it is time for my children to run this kingdom, they won’t face the same struggle my wife and I faced. The economic crashes, the famines, the wars—I wish for Haruka and Yuu face as little of those as possible, should they be put to the test.’”

“Did—did he really say that?”

Ushijima nods. “If it is true that the king neglected his children, I believe it was out of a misguided love, as my impression of him is that he was very focused on his duty as king. I believe this, as I am quite similar. My siblings have told me that I can be too stern in taking care of them, but that’s because I simply care for them and want the best for them. I, hence, am of the opinion that there is a good chance that the king was the same way.”

Noya ducks his head, but Hinata is quick to spot the glimmering of emotion in his eyes. “I—I see. Thanks, I guess.”

Suga, seeming to sense Noya’s emotional turmoil, hastily changes the subject. “It’s great to hear that the agricultural sector is going well! How about the rest of the district?”

Ushijima’s impassive expression darkens ever so slightly. “Not so much. There has been plenty of tension and fear a lot lately, due to the emergence of these people who claim to be the survivors of Operation Kitagawa Daiichi.”

“W-wait, for real?” Oikawa stammers, his face ashen.
Ushijima nods seriously. “I believe so. They have been holding ‘demonstrations’, where they would round up the warriors who took part in Operation Kitagawa Daiichi and publicly humiliate them before executing them.”

The entire bakery sucks in a horrified breath. Hinata’s hands shake by his sides.

“So you’re laying low?” Kuroo asks.

“Not precisely. I believe that if they were to come after me, I would be more than capable of fending them off.” Ushijima tilts his head to the side, as if listening closely to something faraway. “There is one currently going on, actually. I think they have captured one of the colonels this time.”

“Colonel?!” Oikawa growls.

“Where?” Kageyama demands.

“At the center of the district. It’s a wide open space with a fountain and a large flag of the queendom, if you are curious. But I caution you to stay away if you know what is good for you, especially you three, Oikawa, Kageyama and Kuroo.” He picks up a baguette from the tray in front of him. “It has been pleasant meeting all of you, but I have to take my leave now. Farewell.”

The Blue Crows and Cats and Owls watch him in silence, like they got the air punched out of their lungs, as he pays for his baguette and then leaves the bakery.

“A demonstration, huh?” Kuroo muses in mock thoughtfulness.

“Kuro, you’re not actually thinking of checking it out, are you?” Kenma asks apprehensively.

“Well, people are getting hurt. And I am, as Tsukki calls me, a bleeding-heart knight who jumps at every opportunity to play the hero. Seijoh, you’re thinking what I’m thinking, right?”

Oikawa cracks his knuckles. “If it’s who I think it is, I want to help the survivors.”

He, Kageyama and Kuroo all share a look that speaks a million words.

“You all can’t be serious,” Iwaizumi snaps. “If they spot you, they could—oi, where the fuck do you three think you’re going?!”

Without paying Iwaizumi any mind, Oikawa, Kageyama and Kuroo discard whatever baked goods they were holding and are sprinting out of the bakery, fast as cheetahs.

“Hey, Bakageyama!” Hinata shouts, giving chase. “Wait up!”

Four pairs of feet pound on the cobblestone path as they dash from the bakery to the district center. The pace and distance doesn’t bother Hinata, since his main utility in battle is his speed and stamina, but the fear does—fear of what Kuroo, Kageyama and Oikawa plan to do, fear of what (or who) he will see at the district center, fear of what he himself would do.

They round a corner when Oikawa at the front suddenly screeches to a halt. The three of them stop behind, and Hinata has to tiptoe to see past the wall comprising of Kageyama, Kuroo and Oikawa.

Right smack in the center of the district center is a badly beaten-up man bound to to a pole, where the flag of the queendom waves in the air as if bidding someone goodbye. A group of unfamiliar people stand around him, jeering and throwing eggs at him. Hinata doesn’t recognise the man, but judging from the way the others’ shoulders stiffen, they do.
“That’s him,” Oikawa snarls, the tattoos on his palms lighting up. “The bastard who poisoned Iwachan. Who forced us to kill all those people.”

“He killed Hinata’s parents,” Kageyama growls. His tattoos glow to life too.

“Tobio-chan, are you thinking what I am?”

“Most likely.”

For the first time since Hinata’s known them, Oikawa and Kageyama are willingly working together—and Hinata can tell that nothing good will come from this newfound teamwork. Still, he remains frozen in place.

This is the man who ordered the execution of my parents. He KILLED them. He took them away from me and Natsu.

But he can’t move, despite the fury pounding through his veins and screaming at him to do something.

“Oh boy, that’s not gonna be pretty,” Kuroo whistles lowly.

“You’re not gonna join them?” Hinata asks.

“Nah, I don’t have any particular bones to pick with the colonel. Besides, those two have freaky far-range powers. Even if I wanted to beat the shit out of him, I’d just get hurt in the crossfire.”

Hinata can only watch as Kageyama and Oikawa march straight up to the man responsible for their grief and trauma, their tattoos glowing and eyes smouldering with rage.

“Oi, you two!” one of the survivors shout. “You two killed our people, didn’t you? I recognise you. What are you here for, a death sentence? Because we would be more than happy to deliver.”

Oikawa whips around to glare at her. “Okay, first things first, we were forced into it by this bastard here. Trust me, if I had a choice in the matter I wouldn’t have even glanced at the civilians.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really. I fought against it as best as I could, but he blackmailed me into it. He blackmailed most, if not all, of the warriors who participated in Operation KD. We were only kids. Our loved ones were threatened.” Oikawa’s voice cracks with grief. “I’m sorry to have to put this so harshly, but if you had to choose between killing a bunch of people you didn’t know or having your loved ones die, I’m sure you would have made the same choice!”

The woman’s hollow eyes scan him. “… Fine. I gather that you are telling the truth. Just this once, we citizens of Kitagawa Daiichi will deign to work with you dogs of the military. We shall let you take your rightful vengeance against this man.”

“Besides, we’d probably get killed if we try to interfere, if they’re just as powerful as they were back then,” another man mutters, and a chorus of agreement accompanies his words.

The survivors step back, forming a semicircle around Kageyama and Oikawa, who stalk towards the colonel. He watches them with bruised eyes.

“Kageyama, Oikawa,” he says. “I never thought I’d see you both again.”

“Neither did I,” Oikawa seethes. “Nor did I think I would be so delighted. But I am, because I finally
get to punish you for what you did to Iwa-chan.”

“I merely did what was necessary.”

“Shut up!” Oikawa roars. A fireball forms in his hand, and he lobs it straight at the colonel, setting his clothes on fire. “Shut the fuck up! You are disgusting. You are less than vermin.” Another fireball. “Don’t you fucking dare speak unless it’s to beg for mercy for what you did.” A third fireball. “Maybe if you start grovelling I’ll kill you quicker. If not—well, I have all the time in the world anyway.” An ice shard, as long as a sword, this time pierces through the colonel’s thigh.

Kageyama’s voice is lower but far frostier than Oikawa’s. “You murdered Hinata’s parents. You made him cry. I——” The unbridled anger that must be flaring through him seems to render him unable to articulate the sheer multitude of his rage. To make up for his loss for words, his tattoos speak for him, glowing brighter than the sun. Chunks of rocks swivel in the air around him like a tornado, and he hurls them with lightning speed one by one at the colonel, who grunts with each rock that hits him.

This is the most frightening Hinata has ever witnessed either of them be. The two work in perfect tandem, pelting ice, fire and rocks at the colonel, slowly but surely killing him. The colonel stays quiet except for the occasional grunts of pain as he lets them beat the living shit out of him.

The rest of the team catch up soon, and all of them share a gasp of horror.

“Oikawa, Kageyama!” Suga pleads. “Please don’t this!”

“Dudes, you're going to kill him!” Bokuto yells.

“Good!” Oikawa bellows, an almost unhinged glare in his eyes. “He better fucking rot in hell if there's any justice in this universe.”

Kageyama doesn’t say anything, but the fury practically forms a vacuum around him, making him deaf to everyone else’s pleas to stop. With a flourish of his hands, a tornado of rocks bombards the colonel, and blood and several teeth splatter to the ground.

Oikawa’s eyes are possessed by a cold fury as he meticulously freezes each and every one of the colonel’s fingers. Even from afar Hinata can see that his fingers are turning blue.

“Let them,” the colonel rasps. Hinata is surprised that he can even speak, given how badly brutalised he is. “Let them. It’s not like I have anyone who will miss me. My family—after they found out what I did, they rejected me. They didn’t want a husband or a father who could so easily order the mass elimination of many. I was merely following orders, but I understand why they would be upset. So let them do what they want—perhaps it is what I deserve.”

“You're sure as hell right,” Oikawa growls.

Suga is not one to give up so easily. “Please, you two! Please—WHOA!” He's forced to shrink to dodge a stray fireball. It sails well over his head and sets a nearby tree on fire.

Noya squirms in Asahi’s vice grip. “Let me go, Asahi! They're going to regret this if someone doesn't stop them.”

“I know, but if you go you'll only get hurt!” Asahi protests, struggling to restrain his prince.

“Shittykawa!” Iwaizumi bellows. “Don't do this!”
Oikawa doesn't even turn around. His attention is like a laser, focusing on the colonel and solely on the colonel. “Don't you dare stop me, Iwa-chan! I'm doing this for you. I'm avenging you. Let me do this!” Another shard of ice drives itself right through the colonel’s other thigh.

“I swear to god, Tooru—”

Another stray fireball hurtles towards Iwaizumi this time. Yelping, he dives to the ground to dodge it.

“Fuck, I can't reach him. Kenma, you have magic,” Iwaizumi says desperately. “Isn't there a spell to stop them or something?”

Kenma feebly lifts his head from Bokuto’s shoulder. Small golden sparks spurt out from his fingertips, but they quickly fizzle out too. “Sorry, the earlier fight with the bandits drained pretty much all of my energy.”

Iwaizumi turns to Akaashi. “I know you have that five-minute limit, but—”

Akaashi’s eyes briefly glow bright blue, but just like the golden sparks, the glow fades away. “Even if I hadn't reached my limit, their anger is too much—I can't reach their minds.”

Desperation fraying him at the ends, Iwaizumi turns to Kuroo. “Kuroo—”

Kuroo shrugs. “I mean, I did consider stopping them. But then I thought—if the colonel had blackmailed me using Kenma, I’d be doing the same as them.” He pauses, as if considering another thought. “Actually, nah, I would be far worse.”

More fireballs. More shards of ice, more frozen appendages. More tornadoes of rocks blasting the colonel in rapid-fire succession. And no one can, or will, stop them. Suga can't reach them with his sweet, gentle voice. Asahi refuses to let Noya go for fear of his safety. Bokuto and Iwaizumi can't intervene without getting hurt, Bokuto especially as he's carrying Kenma. Kenma is too drained to use his magic. Akaashi is at his limit, and he wouldn't be able to get through to them even if he isn't. Kuroo won't stop them, and Hinata is still frozen to the spot like the dumbass Kageyama regularly reminds him he is, and—

“THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH!”

A bo-staff materialises out of nowhere and whacks Kageyama and Oikawa hard across their backsides. Startled, they abruptly halt their barrage of abuse on the colonel and whip around to identify their assailant.

Daichi stands behind them, one hand on his hip and the other gripping his staff, wearing the most incandescent glower any of them has ever seen him adorn. “Cut this shit out, now! And step away from him!”

“Dai-chan—”

“Don't ‘Dai-chan’ me. I'm your captain, and as your captain I am ordering you to stop this nonsense now!”

Oikawa gapes at Daichi. “But—”

Iwaizumi interrupts him, tackling him down to the ground before he can attack again.

“Stop it, Tooru,” Iwaizumi says, his voice uncharacteristically soft.
Angry, frustrated tears slide down Oikawa’s face. “Why? Why, Hajime? I love you—that's why I have to avenge you—”

“No, you don't have to. I don't want you to avenge me or any shit like that, especially if it’s going to cost you your morality.” Iwaizumi bends down and kisses Oikawa’s sweaty forehead with surprising tenderness. “I fell in love with you because of your morality, because of your firm sense of right and wrong, because of your determination to do the right thing and be the hero, even if it means sacrificing yourself like an idiot. Don't let this asshole take away one of the many precious things I love about you.”

“Iwa-chan…” Oikawa dissolves into a mess of incomprehensible sobs.

Iwaizumi gets off him and pulls him into a tight hug. Then he looks up at Kageyama, who is still frozen in shock. “Kageyama, look, there’s nothing wrong with being angry for Hinata’s sake. It's a perfectly valid feeling, given how important he is to you. But you should let Hinata avenge his parents himself instead, if that's what he wants.”

Kageyama doesn't put up the same resistance. Quietly, he backs away from the colonel. His eyes meet Hinata’s, and he gestures to the colonel.

Something about Kageyama's wordless message thaws Hinata’s stiff limbs. As silent as a grave, he treads towards the colonel. Up close and personal, he doesn't know how the colonel is still alive. He sees more blood, burns and bruises than skin, and what skin he can see is tinged a sickly, hypothermic blue.

“Hinata Shouyou,” the colonel rasps, like his vocal cords have been simultaneously frozen stiff and charred to ash. “You look so much like your parents. It was too bad they were traitors.”

Before he can stop them, furious tears tumble down Hinata’s face like snowball accumulating in size and velocity as it rolls down a mountain. He rears his fist back and rams it against the colonel’s bluish-black cheek, and a bloody tooth falls out of the colonel’s mouth. A tidal wave of sadistic satisfaction engulfs him at the sight.

“You have more stomach than your parents,” the colonel says approvingly. The words crawl under Hinata’s skin like bugs. “Maybe you'll even have the stomach to kill me or at least watch me slowly die. I know your parents didn't. You have the makings of a fine warrior, Hinata Shouyou.”

Wrath wipes Hinata’s vision blurry. He wants nothing more than to complete the work Kageyama and Oikawa set out to do. He wants to feel his fists pounding the life out of the colonel, see every tooth in the colonel’s mouth tumble out and watch him bleed to death at his feet, just like the colonel probably did to his parents. There are so many things he wants to do so badly and so many furious emotions raging a thunderstorm in his chest.

But…

“No,” Hinata Shouyou says firmly. “I won't kill you.”

The colonel smirks a bloody, nearly-toothless smirk. “What, lost your nerve? Or have you forgiven me? I'm sure that's what such bleeding-heart parents must have taught their equally bleeding-heart and naïve son.”

Hinata punches him again, and another tooth falls at his feet. “Don't get me wrong. I hate you. I don't think I can ever forgive you for killing my parents. But I won't kill you—not for you, but for my parents. This isn't what they would have wanted. My parents were medics. All they ever wanted
was to save lives, not take them away. To kill you, or to kill anyone, would be to spit on their graves. And as long as I'm alive, I want to honour my parents' memory."

Breathing heavily, Hinata takes several shaky steps away from the colonel, who still taunts him for not having the 'stomach' to go through with the kill. He doesn't want to have the 'stomach' to kill. He wants to make his parents proud of him, wherever they are.

Then his knees buckle under him, and he briefly hears a curse of “Oi, dumbass!” before his world spins into black.

Hinata wakes up in a warm, soft futon. Startled, he bolts upright and rapidly takes in his new surroundings. He's sitting between two long rows of futons. Twelve bags are piled neatly together in a corner beside a set of dressers. The sunlight streaming in through the clear windows casts a lush glow on the soothing green walls. No bloodied and bruise colonels are anywhere in his field of vision. He is safe.

“Dumbass.”

He whips his head around and finds Kageyama behind him.

“Dumbass, couldn't you have at least given a warning before you passed out on everyone?!” Kageyama snaps. “Just 'cause you're short doesn't mean it’s easy to lug your ass all the way here.”

“Aww, you're so worried about me,” Hinata coos, reaching up to pinch Kageyama's cheeks.

“Sh-shut up! Anyway, how are you feeling?”

Hinata touches his head. “Alright. Lighter, I guess.” His heart definitely feels lighter without all that bitterness, fury and grief weighing it down. “How long was I passed out?”

“Nearly fourteen hours,” Kageyama snorts. “You slept like a log.”

Hinata’s stomach lets out a displeased growl. “Ah, that explains why I’m so hungry.”

“Yeah. Everyone tried waking you up for dinner, but you wouldn't so much as twitch. Daichi-san was so worried you had somehow slipped into a coma he had Suga-san do a check on you. And, well, you were obviously not in a coma. Duh.”

“Yeah.” Hinata pauses. “Say, what happened to the colonel after the—after everything that happened?”

“Suga-san healed him, 'cause he’s Suga-san, and then kicked him out of Shiratorizawa.” Kageyama shrugs. “It was pretty awesome to watch.”

“I bet! Demi-fairies kick ass, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Hinata lapses into silence, content to just watch Kageyama squirm and resolutely refuse to meet his eyes. He can't believe Kageyama would do all that—and actually did—all that for him. Yeah, it frightened the hell out of him, but… still. Kageyama, former selfish King of the Battlefield, got mad
at someone for his sake. The thought lights a glowing spark in him. (Though he's probably—definitely—gonna need to have a nice long talk with Kageyama about his anger management and thirst for vengeance some time later.)

He crawls forward on his knees and pulls Kageyama into a grateful kiss. Kageyama happily returns it, resting his hand with surprising gentleness on the back of Hinata’s head. Hinata’s hands grip the front of Kageyama’s cotton shirt, and he’s content to just stay here with Kageyama for the rest of the morning.

Then his stomach belts out another grumpy warning.

“Wow, that was a total mood-killer,” Hinata giggles, getting up and pulling Kageyama up with him. He wanders over to his bag and fishes out the shirt at the top of the pile. After sniffing it to deem it decent enough to wear again, he tosses off his sweaty clothes from yesterday and tugs the new shirt over his head, then pulls out the first pair of decent pants from his bag. The soft crispness of fresh clothes on his body refreshes him, like he's cleaned off the dirt of yesterday and is starting anew.

“Let’s go get some breakfast,” Kageyama suggests once Hinata is properly dressed. “The rest are waiting for us at the restaurant downstairs.”

As usual, the duo race all the way down, and Hinata is mildly disgruntled to declare their race a tie, but also happy to be with Kageyama regardless of winning or losing.

But that burst of happiness drains rapidly out of him when he sees the unnervingly somber expressions everyone else is wearing. For once, Bokuto and Kuroo aren't up to their usual ridiculous antics; Oikawa isn't pestering Iwaizumi about something or another; Daichi and Suga aren't conversing in their usual light-hearted manner; Noya isn't poking fun at Asahi and Asahi isn't wilting.

In fact, Noya’s pale, gobsmacked face is the biggest red flag that something is terribly wrong.

“Er, guys, what's up?” Hinata asks nervously.

“Have you read the news?” Daichi asks, rubbing his eyes.

“I just woke up, so, no.”

Everyone falls silent, looking at Noya as if expecting him to break the news. His fingers grips the newspaper in his hands so tightly Hinata wonders how he hasn't punctured holes through it yet. Ice pools in the pit of Hinata's stomach. The last time he saw Noya this rattled…

Noya opens his mouth to speak, and the revolution of the earth screeches to a halt.

“Apparently, the new emperor of Kitagawa Daichi is holding my nee-chan hostage. And he’s threatening to kill her if I don't return to the palace.”

Chapter End Notes

I must apologise. My editing game for this chapter isn't strong due to health complications (nothing serious) and general exhaustion from school. Nonetheless, I hope this chapter was satisfactory. Thanks for reading!
my tumblr.
Noya scans the news article again, just to make sure he has read everything correctly, even though the words swim back and forth before his eyes.

**A Letter to the Not-Quite-So Dead Prince**

Dear Prince Nishinoya Yuu (or Noya-sama, as I believe is your nickname),

Greetings. I am Kai Li, the new emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi—or what is left of it, anyway. You remember Kitagawa Daiichi, don't you? You know, the country your parents decimated. Sorry, that was passive-aggressive. I apologise.

Anyway, I hope you have had a pleasant journey around your kingdom—queendom, sorry. I've been keeping tabs on your progress. Sorcery is quite a useful tool. But now it is time for you to return home. Why, you must be wondering. Allow me to clarify: I am holding your sister, Queen Nishinoya Haruka, hostage. She is a joy to be around—you are very lucky to have such a delightful older sister as your role model. But you won't have her as a role model for much longer if you don't make haste to the palace within three days, starting from the second this letter is published. Or if you're fine with me killing your sister, you can choose to continue hiding and pretending that you are dead. It is your choice.

I hope to see you soon.

Best regards,

Kai Li

Emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi

There are some mistakes in the characters written and the punctuation, but they are minor enough for Noya to overlook and still get the overall message.

He feels sick to the stomach. The world around him is spinning at a million miles per hour around him, and he can feel his hands tremble so badly they practically vibrate. His nee-chan is in danger. She's in danger of this Kai Li guy killing her. How long has she been in danger? Has this emperor guy just broken into the palace? Or has he been there all along, biding his time and torturing her? The thoughts make him want to both throw up and break something.

“R-return to the palace?” Shouyou stammers. “Are we actually—is that what we’re actually going to do?”

“Of course!” Noya bursts out furiously, slamming his fist on the table and toppling over Tooru’s cup of coffee. “He’ll *kill* nee-chan if I don't go back. And I only have three days.”

“Noya-sama, I’m not sure if that is a wise decision,” Akaashi cautions. “This sounds very much like a trap to me—”

“Like I give a fuck about that! I *have* to go back. I can't lose nee-chan.”
“And no one is saying you're not going,” Suga says soothingly. “But let’s think this through rationally, okay? Daichi, what do you think?” When Daichi blinks in confusion, he rolls his eyes and adds, “I mean, you said you're the captain, didn't you? Unless that badass declaration of captaincy was just something you said to get Oikawa and Kageyama to calm down.”

“Oh right.” Daichi rubs the back of his head sheepishly. “Well, Noya, if you want to go back so badly—”

“I do!”

“Alright, then you shouldn't go alone. We shall all accompany you, unless anyone wants out.”

No one says anything. All of them stare at Noya with determination burning in their gaze.

Noya flounders for a moment before managing to stammer out, “But this is dangerous! This Kai guy—if he managed to keep my nee-chan down enough to hold her hostage, who knows what he’ll do to you guys if you come along? I already dragged all of you through so much shit; I can't drag you into this mess too.”

It’s true. His four bodyguards had to flee with him all because he couldn't take care of himself. They sacrificed their comfort for his safety, got less sleep than him in the wilderness so they could keep watch at night to keep him safe, put up with his temper tantrums, among so many other things. Suga came along because Noya was reckless and needed someone who could magically heal him in an instant. Iwaizumi and Kageyama were dragged along from Seijoh because they needed the numbers to fill up their ranks against the bandits. Kuroo and Kenma had a life and future back in Nekoma, performing and living together and exchanging promise rings, but they threw it away to help him on his journey. Bokuto and Akaashi could have returned back to Fukurodani to enjoy their vacation without risking their lives, yet they tagged along because they wanted to help him too.

Noya has been nothing but a troublesome burden. He got into trouble and needed others to fight for him because he didn't know the first thing about fighting. He got angry and pushed people away when they tried to help him. He doesn't want to burden them anymore—this is why he has to do this alone. He can't ruin their lives any more than he already has.

“Oh please, Noya-chan, isn't that we’re all here?” Tooru says, cutting into Noya's distress with a sharp tone and roll of his eyes. “You can't do this alone. No one can do this alone. That's why we’re all in this together, aren't we? Besides, you may have those flashy arm guards but you can't fight for shit. Someone has to do the fighting for you.”

Asahi smiles gently. “I know you want to protect us from danger, but we want to protect you too. I want to protect you, Noya. I won't be able to forgive myself if I left you alone again.”

“That's right!” Shouyou cheers. “We’re your bodyguards, so it’s our duty to protect you. Daichi-san, Oikawa-san, Asahi-san and I have been with you right from the start, and we don't plan on leaving you right when you need us the most. Besides, I like you! I don't want to leave people I like alone.”

Kageyama nods in agreement, even though he technically isn't one of Noya’s guards.

“If you're going to go through with this, you'll need a healer on your side,” Suga says. “And someone to kick some sense into you when you fly off the rails.”

“They're all right,” Iwaizumi adds. “You took the time and effort to find out what the citizens had to say about the running of this nation. If you go alone and die, all that hard work would’ve been wasted.”
“And I owe you one,” Kuroo pipes up, a lazy smirk on his face. “You're not going to deprive me of the opportunity to pay you back, are you?”

Kenma glances away. “I mean, I’d really rather be at home; but if you could put yourself in danger for my sake, I guess I can do the same for you.”

“Yeah!” Bokuto cheers. “You've been a blast to be with, little prince. And I still have yet to show off my other cool owl moves to you!”

Akaashi folds his hands primly on the table. “I learned many things from you, Noya-sama. I want to lend my assistance wherever I can as a show of my gratitude.”

A lump wells up in Noya’s throat. He isn't sure what he has done to deserve so much love and kindness. He really doesn't.

But if there is anything that travelling with this crazy bunch has taught him, it's that love empowers people. And with so much love around him, he realises he doesn't have to fight alone.

“…Okay, fine,” he finally says, blinking his tears back rapidly. “That's—yeah, cool.”

“Now that all of us have professed our undying loyalty to Noya,” Daichi says, “let’s think of a way to get us all to the palace within three days.”

“But that's impossible!” Noya bursts out, feeling very much like crying from frustration now. “It took us months just to get here on foot, and the palace is all the way on the other end of the country. There’s no way we can make it back there in time.”

“No one said we have to go by foot,” Kuroo points out.

“Huh?”

“Shiratorizawa is a port district, isn't it? So we can just hijack a ship and sail to the palace, easy-peasy.”

“That would be a good plan, in theory,” Akaashi says. “But where would we even get a ship from? People who own whatever marine vessels are left in this queendom are less than generous in lending them.”

Kuroo grins. “What, you forgot that you can literally convince people to do anything you want?”

Akaashi sighs. “Sometimes I think the only reason why you keep around is for my Allure Speech.”

“Certainly isn't for your sunny disposition.”

“Fine, I’ll steal a ship for us and use my power to convince Kuroo-san to jump overboard.”

“Wow, I’d expect that kinda salt from Tsukki—but from you, pretty boy? Rude.”

“But even that aside, the situation at sea is really dangerous,” Iwaizumi interjects. “There are probably more pirates than water at sea.”

Daichi sighs. “That's just a risk we have to take. Between fighting our way through pirates or leaving the queen to die, I think the choice is clear.”

Noya nods determinedly. Haruka has done so much for him. She's loved him unconditionally, always put him first before herself even when he was being difficult, and took over the throne at a
moment’s notice just so he could live safely outside the palace. After all that she sacrificed for him, there’s no way in hell he is just going to leave her to die.

It's time to go home.

“Shit! Your left, Hinata!”

“Got it!”

The sounds of the ongoing battle on the upper deck spark an itch in Noya, but he remains where he is. As much as he would like to participate in the battle, Daichi is very firm about everyone sticking to the shifts he has assigned. Now that they are traversing the sea (thanks to Akaashi convincing a sullen old man to loan them his massive yacht—Akaashi can be so extra sometimes) and there’s no shortage of pirates looking for a fight, Daichi wants everyone to take turns to take watch. The ones currently on duty are Hinata, Kageyama, Daichi, Kuroo and Kenma. The rest of them are resting below the deck in different rooms.

Noya tightens his grip on Asahi’s hand, anchoring himself to reality. The two of them are in one of the rooms in the lower deck because Noya wants some privacy with just Asahi. Not that he has anything planned with him. He just wants his big, reassuring presence.

“I can’t believe after all the running around we’ve done, we’re going back to the palace,” Noya murmurs. “To be honest, returning home was never a future I had considered. Like, I thought once I was done making ‘amends’ I’d just continue wandering around. I mean, it’s not like I had a future, y’know? How can someone who’s supposed to be dead have a future?” He snorts bitterly.

Asahi squeezes his hand back, resting their clasped hands on the bed between them. Noya has his legs tucked under him, while Asahi’s longer ones are sprawled over the edge. The toes of his boots brush languidly against the foot of the nightstand. The room is small, meant only for one, but they manage to make it work for the both of them anyway. It’s an unusually serene scene, considering all the chaos going on upstairs.

“Was that why you asked us about our futures that time?” Asahi asks.

“Mhm. Even if I couldn't have a future, I wanted to make sure you guys had one. And you big softie idiot.” Noya lightly punches Asahi’s shoulder, not that it would have hurt him if he used greater force anyway.

“W-what? What did I do?”

Noya’s cheeks heat up. “I mean, you don’t have to include sticking with me in your plans for the future. Like, I’m technically not really a prince anymore since I’m, like, dead to the public. So you’re technically free to go wherever you want once we’re done with… with this. It’s just—I feel like I’ve held you back from your future long enough. You can go back to Karasuno and, like, do your own thing. Have your own future. Maybe get married, have a family and a safer and more stable job than protecting me.”

Asahi shifts closer to Noya, lifting their joined hands and resting them on his lap. “You know why I said I would go wherever you go? ’Cause I can't see a future without you, as cheesy as that sounds.” His free hand tangles itself in his loose hair. “I didn't want to say it front of everyone earlier, ’cause
It's kinda embarrassing and stuff—ah, I'm not saying I'm embarrassed by you or by, y'know, liking you! It's not that! It's just me—"

Despite the tension twisting knots in his stomach, Noya can't help but throw his head back and laugh. Good god, Asahi is ridiculously adorable.

"You're laughing at me again," Asahi mumbles petulantly.

"Yeah, sorry," Noya snickers. "You over-thinking oaf, I knew you didn't mean you were embarrassed by me. We've known each other for over two years now—obviously I know what you mean."

Asahi visibly deflates with relief. "Oh, that's good."

They slip into a comfortable, companionable silence. Unconsciously, Noya’s gaze flickers down to Asahi’s lips. When he was baiting Fujinuma, he couldn't stop thinking about Asahi, and he resolved to kiss Asahi and confess his feelings once he returned to their room. But after the adrenaline of the ordeal waned away, he lost his nerve. He just told Asahi that the experience had been horrible and he was glad it was over, all the while too scared to voice his own feelings. It was stupid; he already knew Asahi liked him, so it was not like he had to fear a rejection or anything like that. But irrational fear held him back from voicing his true feelings.

Now, in the privacy of a room on board a yacht, sailing to what might be the most dangerous thing Noya has ever had to face, he suddenly has that urge to kiss Asahi again. Like, on the lips, not the wimpy cheek kiss he gave him the other time.

He scoots closer, keeping his eyes fixed on the lower half of Asahi’s face. Has Noya mentioned how hot Asahi’s little scruff of a beard is? Because it is. He wonders what it would feel like rubbing against his face. Nervous sparks go off in him, igniting him and pushing him to close the gap between his and Asahi’s bodies. And Asahi seems to be getting everything he isn’t saying. He removes his hand from his hair and grabs Noya by the waist, tugging him closer. Noya watches as Asahi’s eyes slowly dip shut, and Noya does the same. They're so close, just a little more and—

"Yo, lovebirds!"

Noya lets out an undignified screech as he shoves himself away from Asahi, nearly tumbling off the bed and onto the floor.

Kuroo stands in the doorway, the top of his perennial bedhead brushing the arch of the door. At least he has the decency to look sheepish about walking in on their moment. "Oh, sorry. Didn't realise you two were planning on sucking faces. Just be strategic about how you use your tongue. Once I went a bit overboard and it took me a week to convince Kenma to let me kiss him again. That kitten really loves to play hard to get. But anyway, about my real objective here. The good ol’ captain put me in charge of delivering you two a status report—we’re in the clear for now. But he wants you two to be ready and on the upper deck, just in case. He had Bo fly ahead. Bo said there were more pirates a ways ahead."

"O-oh, okay," Asahi mumbles. "Thanks, Kuroo."

Kuroo smirks at them. "Anytime. I’ll leave the door open so you two don’t get, hmm, distracted and attempt to shirk your duties."

With a final cat-like grin, Kuroo disappears into the room next door.

Trying to ignore the heat in his face, Noya hops off the bed and flicks his wrist. His bracelets expand
into his trusty arm guards, covering his entire forearms from his knuckles to the crook of his elbow. He treasures them dearly—without them, he stands no chance on the battlefield. Even if he can't fight offensively like the rest, he can still defend their backs with his arm guards. He really has Ukai Keishin to thank for giving them to him free of charge.

Asahi’s long brown hair is now tied up in his usual man-bun, which Noya appreciates as much as he does for his loose hair. His expression is no longer embarrassed, shy or meek, but one filled with grim determination. He unsheathes his polearm and gestures to the door with it.

“After you, Noya.”

Noya nods, striding with confidence to the door, ready to do what he does best—protect the people he loves.

Night falls too soon. Time always seems to zoom right past one's fingertips when there's a deadline breathing down the back of one's neck, Akaashi muses to himself.

With no pirates left to take care of, Akaashi trudges down to the lower deck with Bokuto’s arm draped around his shoulders.

“Hey hey hey!” Bokuto cheers, high on his victory. “Did you see that last hit I gave that guy, huh, Akaashi? Did ya see it? I hit him like *bam* and just as he was charging towards me, I transformed into an owl! You shoulda seen his face when he went tumbling over the edge!”

“I did, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi replies evenly. Although he won't say it, since Bokuto’s head really doesn't need to get any bigger when he's on a high, he’s quite impressed by Bokuto’s fighting skills, considering he hasn't been a warrior for a couple of years. Perhaps it was his raw physical prowess. Akaashi’s eyes wander to Bokuto’s muscily arms—good lord, his *arm*—with the veins bulging against his skin, and he feels a faint flicker of a blush creep across his cheeks and neck. Yes, most likely his physical prowess.

Bokuto continues his brag-narrating of the earlier fight, which Akaashi was also present at, as they enter the makeshift lounge/dining room that Suga set up earlier.

“Good job, guys,” Nishinoya groans tiredly from somewhere on the couch. He’s slumped against Asahi, who—to Akaashi’s mild amusement—looks like he’s been put in charge of keeping a fragile glass doll in one piece for a week. The glint of the lamps above them reflects off the pendant around the prince’s neck—and there it is again. That strange, sneaking feeling that there's something not quite *right* about the accessory. This time, the feeling is even stronger, more potent, somehow.

Akaashi glances at Suga, who is busy patching up Iwaizumi and Oikawa, and then at Kenma, who has his head in Kuroo’s lap on a loveseat. Besides for him, they're the only ones who have magic in their blood. He wonders if they’re feeling what he’s feeling. He initially didn't want to bring it up, since he figured it wasn’t a big deal… but now, it's too obvious for him to just ignore, as much as he doesn't like getting involved in others’ affairs.

“Akaashi,” Akaashi mutters, ducking out from under Bokuto’s arm. He pads over to where Kenma and Suga are. “Sorry to bother you, but may I talk to the both of you, Kenma, Suga-san?”

“Sure,” Suga hums pleasantly.
“What is it?” Kenma, not one to beat around the bush, asks.

“Be nice, kitten,” Kuroo drawls as he threads his fingers through Kenma’s dyed hair. “Akaashi looks like he has something important to say.”

It never fails to unnerve Akaashi how easily—and accurately—Kuroo is able to read people, and Akaashi considers himself to have a master poker face.

“What’s this about?” Kenma asks, pointedly ignoring Kuroo.

Akaashi glances at where Noya is still lying against Asahi on their shared couch before lowering his voice. “Have either of you felt or noticed anything… weird about Noya-sama’s pendant?”

“Well,” Sugawara says slowly, like he’s measuring his answer before giving it, “there’s definitely some faint traces of magic on it, probably concealed under a bunch of Blocks, it feels like. He said it’s a good luck pendant, so I’ve always just left it at that.”

Kenma frowns ever so slightly. “Whatever magic it is—well, I’ve never heard of anyone being able to convert luck into actual magic. Luck’s always been, like, a stupid social construct to explain good things and coincidences happening. But… you’re right, Akaashi,” he adds, sounding a little uncertain. “Now that you mention it, it does give off this strange vibe.”

“Yo, can we back up for a moment?” Kuroo interjects, holding his hands out in a ‘T’. “Us non-magical folk are having a hard time keeping up. What’s going on?”

Akaashi sighs. “It’s difficult to explain, Kuroo-san. It’s just—there’s magic in Noya-sama’s pendant, and it… it doesn’t feel like good magic.”

“Then why don’t you ask him about it?” Iwaizumi asks bluntly, and Oikawa nods his agreement with great vigour. “This sounds like something he should know.”

Akaashi bites his lip. He doesn’t want to worry the prince any more than he already is, but Iwaizumi has a point.

“Noya-sama,” he calls over to the other couch.

Nishinoya perks up at the sound of his name. “Yeah?”

“May I ask you something? It’s about your pendant.”

“Oh, this thing?” Noya lifts up the crow pendant from under his shirt to show them. “Sure, though I’m not sure if there's a lot to say about this.”

“Do you…” Akaashi pauses to choose his words carefully. “Has your pendant ever made you feel… weird?”

“Er,” Noya says, frowning like he's in deep thought. “Er, no. Is it supposed to?”

“I—” Akaashi just shrugs helplessly. He should’ve known that Noya wouldn't know. He doesn’t have magical blood after all; he doesn't have a demi-fairy or sorcerer’s sensitivity to the finer nuances of magic. Not sure how else to go about this, he shoots Suga a pleading look.

“Noya, can you take off your pendant just for a short while, please?” Suga requests. “We just wanna see what's up with it.”

“Huh? Is there a curse or something on it?” Asahi frets. He places a protective hand on Noya’s
shoulder.

“That's what we’d like to check.”

Noya, frowning slightly, turns around to let Asahi unclasp his pendant. Asahi bites his lip, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration, but he struggles with the tiny clasp fruitlessly. His fingers keep sliding off it, as though repelled.

“I can’t get it off,” Asahi says, sounding frustrated.

“Let me try,” Akaashi offers. It’s probably just that Asahi’s fingers are too thick to get a good grasp on something as little as the clasp. Akaashi’s fingers are slimmer, so he figures he’d have better luck trying to get the pendant off Noya.

… Or so he thought.

While he’s able to get a firm grip on the clasp, every time he tries to unhook the two tiny bits, it’s like there's a powerful force keeping the two ends of the clasp tightened together. He tugs gently, careful not to accidentally choke Nishinoya, and summons all the strength he can muster to try and push the teeny lever down. But—nothing. It refuses to budge. The pendant stays resolutely hooked around Noya’s neck like a bur.

“I can't either,” Akaashi grits out. But now that he's up close to Noya, he can feel the magic even stronger from here—and its potency nauseates him. He blinks rapidly as unwanted bile forms a lump in his throat, fighting what feels like a futile battle to keep it down. Why? What kind of magic would cause him to literally be sick?

And why would it be attached to an object that absolutely refuses to be removed from its wearer?

“Can't you just, like, magic it off me if it really bothers you that much?” Noya asks, sounding torn between impatience and fear.

“That wouldn't be a good idea,” Suga cautions. “There's some magic in your pendant. Who knows what additional magic acted upon it could do? It could hurt you for all we know. We’re not risking that.”

“Then—then do you at least know what the hell the apparent magic in my pendant is?” Noya demands, his voice rising with panic.

Suga and Kenma close their eyes, concentrating. A silver and golden light flare around them respectively like twin halos. The lights extend from them towards the pendant but don't quite touch it. Akaashi can hear Noya suck in a nervous breath and feel the crackling of magic in the air buzzing like electricity.

The sorcerer and other part-fairy open their eyes, and…

“No,” Kenma says, sounding perplexed. It must be something really confounding if he’s openly expressing his confusion. “I'm—I don't know. I don't know what it is, but it feels… sick.”

“Yeah,” Suga groans in agreement. He presses the back of his hand against his mouth, as if he's suppressing vomit.

“The magic in my pendant feels sick,” Noya repeats skeptically. Not that Akaashi blames him. This whole situation is downright bizarre and creepy.
“It’s probably just us,” Suga says. To anyone else, the cheer and reassurance in his voice would've been convincing, but Akaashi—with his enhanced level of empathy—can detect the forcedness hidden under the surface of his words. “I'm sure your pendant’s just fine. There's nothing for you to worry about, Noya.”

But what if there is?

No one says it, but Akaashi is 100% sure everyone is thinking it.

The sky darkens, then the sky brightens. Now it's their second day at sea, and they have less than twenty-four hours to get to the palace (or so; Kai Li didn't specify by what time precisely Noya had to be there), but they're surrounded by unyielding pirates whom they've been fending off nearly non-stop for the past forty-eight hours or so.

All things considered, it's lucky (and convenient) that Kenma knows a spell to make the ship self-steering, or they would have even less manpower to fend off the pirates. The pirates are tougher fighters than the bandits, but it really is the sheer number of them that's wearing down the Blue Crows and Cats and Owls.

Currently, those on watch duty are Noya, Asahi, Tooru, Kuroo, Shouyou and Kageyama. Noya, as usual, is mainly focused on guarding Asahi’s back, but he doesn't hesitate to leap to the others’ defense too. While deflecting shurikens and darts flying faster than he can blink, Noya wonders how much abuse his arm guards can take. They have deflected and even destroyed so many weapons—arrows, swords, spears—yet not a single dent has marred their glossy black surface. Perhaps they are indestructible. He likes that idea. He wants to be an indestructible pillar of defense that his teammates can rely on, so they can fight without fear.

And fight without fear, they do. Tooru has the terrain advantage, being surrounded by water. He has capsized at least eight enemy boats while simultaneously blasting fire and ice at the pirates stupid enough to come near their ship. He probably would be able to capsize even more if his powers weren't quite so draining. Noya can see he's just barely holding onto the thin frays of energy left in him, but he resolutely pushes on. With a flourish of his left hand, he conjures a veritable snowstorm and blasts a throng of pirates into the sea, where swirling whirlpools trap them. The enormous amount of effort exerted causes his knees to tremble. His face is pale with exhaustion, but he keeps fighting.

Kuroo, constantly morphing between a panther and a man, is just beginning to tire when the pirate he's exchanging blows with slams him overboard. Luckily for him (and not so luckily for the pirate), Tooru propels the great panther back on deck with a large pump of seawater. Muttering curses under his breath, Kuroo shakes his soaking black fur, flecks of seawater flying everywhere.

“Buddy, one thing you should know about a cat is that we don't appreciate getting wet,” Kuroo purrs dangerously. Before the pirate can respond, he pounces. His razor-sharp claws rip across the pirate’s face, and when the pirate moves to punch him he clamps down on the offending hand. His fury at getting wet forces the pirate back so swiftly the pirate slips on a wet patch. Quickly seizing the opportunity, he headbutts the pirate off the ship, and Tooru engulfs the pirate in a whirlpool.

“Any other asshole wants to get me wet?” Kuroo offers, his yellowish eyes glinting with unspoken threats. Several pirates near him share nervous glances, probably freaked out by a speaking panther,
and hastily jump off the ship. Wise choice.

Unfortunately for Kageyama, being at sea means he can’t use his powers—at least, not without destroying the sea bed. But the sea bed is so below the surface of the ocean that it would take him too long to summon the chunks of earth before he is killed by a pirate. Of course, that doesn’t mean he’s completely useless on the battlefield. He’s just as proficient at close-quarters combat with a knife as he is with his powers. He engages two pirates at once with frightening strength and agility. He thrusts and slices so furiously he backs them up to the edge of the ship and kicks them off. Then he spins around to engage another pirate without missing a beat. He may not have Shouyou’s insane speed and stamina, but he is a respectable warrior in his own right.

Kageyama not being able to use his power doesn’t render Shouyou incapable of fighting either. While he may not be able to fly without Kageyama’s power as a stepping stone, the sheer speed at which he’s running and jumping around is a close enough imitation. In fact, he’s so fast Noya can barely keep up. Out of all of them on the upper deck, Shouyou is probably the one with the most fight left in him.

Asahi’s sheer power overwhelms the pirates who try to take him on. As he is fighting near the edge of the ship, each powerful swing of his polearm manages to knock the pirates overboard. And even he doesn’t manage to, the strength of his swing would send them stumbling towards someone else who will send them into the sea.

All in all, they fight like a cohesive unit. Kuroo, still in panther form, bounds towards Kageyama, letting the younger warrior hop on his back. Even with the additional weight on his back, Kuroo loses no speed, sprinting ‘round the deck, sinking his fangs into pirates’ calves while Kageyama fends off other relentless pirates with his knife. He remains balanced on Kuroo’s back as he kicks another pirate off deck. When that pirate tries to climb his way back onto the deck, Kuroo whips his long tail into his feet, knocking him back off the ship.

It feels like either five seconds or five hours could have passed. Noya, even with the stamina he’s built up from playing volleyball and traversing the entire country on foot, is starting to wear out. His leg muscles are screaming for respite, but when he spots a blur of a projectile hurtling towards Tooru, he forces himself to zip across to where Tooru is standing at the mast and meet the projectile head-on with his arm-guards. With a sharp flick of his wrists, a black bubble of force blasting from his arm-guards causes the projectile to blow up and turn into ash.

Only too late, thanks to his exhaustion, does he notice the umpteenth pirate charging at him from somewhere out of the corner of his eye.

“Oh fuck,” he curses, barely dodging out of the way of the pirates’ polearm. The pirate—a lady one this time—continues slashing at him with her polearm, and each time it just barely misses him by a hair. But he’s been on his feet, running around and protecting his friends for what has felt like hours and his eyelids are heavy with exhaustion, so with a lucky jab, the tip of the polearm slashes a cut across Noya’s bicep. He winces. It doesn't feel like a very deep cut, thankfully. He’ll be fine, probably.

“Just ‘cause you’re a lady doesn't mean I won't do anything about you hurting my Noya-chan!” Tooru seethes from somewhere behind Noya. A wave shaped like a gigantic fist—does this guy need to get any more extra?—snatches the pirate up around her midriff and unceremoniously dumps her into the sea.

“Your Noya-chan?” Noya echoes incredulously. Never again does he want those words to leave Tooru’s mouth.
“Hmph, just be grateful I saved your ass, bratty prince,” Tooru sniffs.

And so, they continue fighting. Eventually they manage to clear the ship of pirates. Relieved and worn to the bone, all of them slump to the ground. Noya drapes himself over Asahi’s stomach, while Asahi lies flat on his back on the wet floor; Shouyou and Kageyama prop each other up on the other’s shoulder; Kuroo morphs back into a human and spreads his long limbs around him as he leans back against the wall, and Tooru flops face-down on the ground.

Suga emerges from the lower deck, his eyebrows raised in amusement. “You guys must be exhausted. That was probably the longest fight we’ve had ever since we boarded. You guys did a good job fending them off.” He waves a hand over them. An alabaster glow surrounds them, healing all the scrapes and bruises they sustained during the scuffle. The ache in Noya’s forearms fades away, as do the other small cuts on his face and upper arms.

“About damn time we’re done,” Tooru grumbles. “I’m worn out.”

“Same,” Kuroo groans. He accepts a towel Suga holds out to him and dries himself off. “Are we any closer to our destination, vice-cap?”

“As a matter of fact, we are somewhere between Karasuno and the palace,” Suga says. “Kenma is guiding the ship to the river bank over there, since that’s the furthest we can go. Then we’ll have to travel to the palace on foot from there.”

“Peachy,” Noya mutters, rising unsteadily to his feet. Now that the adrenaline of the battle has worn off, he realised he needs to piss real bad. He stumbles downstairs and hastily shuts himself in a small cubicle to relieve himself. The knot of uneasiness in his stomach has been growing with every hour that passes, until he feels like he has the world’s largest ribbon of anxiety in his core. He shivers and retches, but nothing comes out but choked gasps and tears. Even though there’s nothing to throw up, he continues to retch till his sides ache and he has to gasp for breath.

Someone knocks on the door. “Noya? Is everything okay?”

It’s Daichi, sounding rather much like a worried father.

“Y-yeah,” Noya forces himself to say. “Just doing number one. Coming out now.”

Embarrassed at getting caught by the captain in his moment of weakness, he shuffles awkwardly out of the cubicle and shuts the door behind him. Daichi leans against a wall, swaying with every rock of the waves beneath them.

“Seasick?” Daichi asks sympathetically.

Noya shrugs. “Yeah, part of it.” Fighting for your life isn’t easy when the floor beneath you is oscillating back and forth, sometimes at a gentle pace, sometimes so roughly you fear you would be tossed overboard.

“So there’s something else bothering you?”

Jeez, has Suga’s way of sneakily leading people into the real question he wants to ask rubbed off on Daichi? Yet, around the captain he has known for almost two years, he can’t keep his worries to himself.

“It’s just—I’m scared,” Noya admits, nibbling on his lower lip. “Of… of everything. Of why Akaashi, Suga and Kenma think there’s something weird about my pendant. They said it’s nothing to worry about, but… I don’t know. And, like, I don’t even know why this Kai Li guy wants me back.
at the palace, or what he wants with nee-chan, but I don't think they are for any good intentions. And —and what will happen when we do get back to the palace? Will there be a fight? Or will… what if we don't survive? He's threatened to kill nee-chan—what if he kills us too? And I can't bear the idea that I could be leading all of you to your deaths. I mean, I know everyone chose to come with me. But if you guys get hurt, it’d be 'cause of me. Maybe all of you would have been better off if you hadn't met me.”

“Noya.” Daichi’s hands land firmly on his shoulders. “Look, I don't have any answers about your pendant, since I'm neither part-fairy or a sorcerer—but I can tell you this: no one here regrets meeting you. Meeting you has touched all our lives. I can't speak for everyone, but the ones I can speak for are the ones who have been with you right from the beginning: me, Hinata, Oikawa and Asahi. Being your bodyguard gave me a purpose, especially after I spent so long questioning if I even deserved to live. I know it gave Hinata a means to provide for his sister and to make a wonderful new friend, and Oikawa a way to recover from the trauma of Operation KD. I also know it led Asahi to the possible love of his life.”

Noya chokes and splutters at the last statement, eliciting amused chuckles from Daichi.

“It’s true,” Daichi emphasises. “All of us could see it even before he finally found the balls to tell you. And as cheesy as it sounds, I believe in destiny. I believe that everything that we've had to go through will lead us to something bigger and grander than any of us can imagine. It’s like… like we’re all pieces of puzzle, you know? We’re all different, and sometimes we clash because of our differences. And on our own, we’re just one individual piece. But when everyone works together, something truly amazing will happen. Something like fate.”

Noya rolls his eyes. “God, you're right. That is cheesy as hell.”

“Maybe,” Daichi admits. “But you get what I'm saying, right? We’re all better off 'cause we met each other and are fighting together for our destiny, so I don't want to hear you say we’d be better off having not met. Clear?”

Noya nods.

“Good. Second of all, you are very right. None of us know what will happen when we do get to the palace. It is a huge, scary unknown looming ahead of us. But that's the thing—it’s still ahead of us. Right now, we’re still at sea and approaching land. Let’s take things step-by-step: get off the ocean, make our way to the palace and find out what is going to happen, together. Sound like a plan to you?”

And… it does. Although the future is still one gigantic question mark, when Daichi puts it so logically and systematically, it doesn't sound so terrifying or insurmountable. And things have a tendency to become less terrifying and insurmountable when one doesn't face them alone.

Noya nods again, a more genuine one this time.

Daichi smiles and claps his back. “That's great. Let’s head back to the deck—I think we have finally reached land.”

Noya instantly perks up. After two days of rocking back and forth of the ship, sleeping with one eye open and fighting to stay alive surrounded by enemies, the land sounds like a very nice place to be. He hurry's back to his room, grabs his belongings, and takes the steps up to the upper deck two at a time.

“Noya-san, over here!” Shouyou calls. He is standing on land, waving at Noya. With him are Kuroo,
Bokuto and Asahi, helping the rest off the yacht.

*Land. Sweet land.*

Excited, Noya bounds towards the gangway, and Asahi helps him off the swaying yacht. Once safely on land, Noya surveys his teammates. Everyone looks like they have seen better days. All of their faces are pale, probably from mild seasickness, and the dark rings under their eyes serve as a harsh reminder of their exhaustion from fighting almost non-stop for two consecutive days. But their eyes are steely with resolve, their shoulders thrown back with confidence. This is the family Noya has found when he lost the one he had at the palace. It has grown and undergone numerous tests, but now they're together—and together they will be until the end, whatever it may bring.

But first, they have to find their way to the end. And in the middle of a random patch of wilderness, Noya hasn't got a clue where to go.

It truly is a good thing Daichi is such a reliable captain, and even more so after he snapped out of his funk. He pulls out a lovingly-annotated map from his pocket and briefly discusses directions with Suga, Kuroo and Akaashi, before turning to address the rest of the group.

“I estimate that if we walk briskly and there are minimal interruptions, we should be able to make it to the palace by midnight, latest,” Daichi says.

Noya glances at the sun dipping steadily below the horizon. That isn't much time, especially if Haruka’s life is in danger.

“Then let’s get going!” Shouyou exclaims, already bouncing away towards the lone clearing ahead of them. Noya smiles. Shouyou’s enthusiasm in everything he does is a truly endearing trait, even if other people complain that it makes him tiring to be around.

(Though Noya notices there is significantly less spring in each of Shouyou’s steps. Not even the tiny mass of stamina is immune to wearing out, as it turns out.)

“Hey Shrimpy, don't run too far,” Kuroo calls. “If the trees ahead get too tall we might lose you.”

Shouyou giggles and shouts some bizarre insult back at Kuroo, and then continues dashing some more. The others, not wanting to lose their redheaded ball of energy, hurry after him as best they can in their exhausted states, following the path he's charting for them through the trees and bushes.

But then he screeches to a sudden halt—and he actually takes several fearful steps back.

“Guys,” Shouyou says in a teeny voice. “I think we have trouble again.”

Forming a boundary along the perimeter of the clearing, stand at least fifty bandits, all armed and looking none too friendly.

And all twelve of them, even energetic little Shouyou, are worn right down to the bone.

Chapter End Notes

man i'm really excited. the end is coming real soon and i can't wait to share it with you guys!! thanks for reading :)
I'd love to chat with y'all on Tumblr. Feel free to drop by whenever :-)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Forming a boundary along the perimeter of the clearing, stand at least fifty bandits, all armed and looking none too friendly.

And all twelve of them, even energetic little Shouyou, are worn right down to the bone. Kenma has spent most of his energy keeping the yacht self-steering and fighting magic-wielding pirates on his shift, and even the one hour of respite he had after his watch hasn't been enough for him to fully recover his energy; Akaashi has most likely hit his five-minute; Suga's face is drawn with exhaustion from constantly healing all of them, and the warriors have reached the breaking point of their stamina.

Noya's vision blurs with tears. Is this how it ends? After months of travelling and two long perilous days at sea, is his journey going to end with not even being able to reach his sister? Throughout the entire course of his journey, he thought he was pushed to his very limit on multiple occasions, but this might just be the peak.

The bandits surrounding them seem to be thinking the same thing.

“So these are the guys giving our brothers at sea a hard time?” one of the many sneers. “We have to thank them for wearing these prey down for us, ’cause now our job is a hell lot easier.”

“Fuck,” Tooru curses. “I don't know if I can—”

“I know,” Daichi says grimly. He raises his staff with hands trembling from the exertion. “But we have to fight.”

Another bandit howls with derisive laughter. “You sure you can? All of you look like you're ready to pass out any moment. So how about we make your death quick—”

Out of nowhere, a throwing knife whizzes through the air and buries itself in the bandit's back halfway through his sentence. He crumples to the ground, choking and groaning in pain. A volley of arrows follow, taking out another fifteen, and a blinding silver blast knocks the consciousness out of most of the remaining bandits.

A throng of people wearing black bandannas with the emblem of an orange crow and another wearing teal tunics on them drop down from the trees, tackling whoever is left to the ground and making quick work of them.

And all Noya can do is watch and gape. Nor do the rest of his team seem to have any words, not even the chattiest of them.

In no time at all, the fifty bandits that had them surrounded lie around the perimeter of the clearing, either unconscious or dead. Now that their mysterious saviours are no longer in the midst of battle, a lightbulb goes off above Noya's head—he knows them.

“No way! You guys—you're the Karasuno and Dateko vigilantes!”

Daichi turns to Noya, his eyebrows raised. “You know the Karasuno vigilantes?”
“Yeah, we took him out for drinks once,” Saeko says, walking over and slinging a slender but toned arm around Noya’s shoulders.

“Noya!” Daichi, in full-on dad mode, admonishes.

“I didn't actually drink anything, I swear!”

Suga chuckles. “Man, and I thought it was only Hinata who had friends everywhere.”

Noya looks all around him, unable to believe his eyes. Ryuu, Akiteru, Saeko and the other Karasuno vigilantes stand around, smiling and waving greetings at him. Moniwa of the Dateko vigilantes offers a polite smile, Aone gives him a respectful nod and Futakuchi looks bored. The other Dateko vigilantes appear uncomfortable with the sudden attention.

“I don't believe it,” Noya breathes. “What are you guys doing here?”

“We saw the news,” Ryuu replies. “Dude, why didn't you say that you were the freaking prince?”

“You wouldn't have believed me anyway, since I was supposed to be dead.”

“We told you we wouldn't ask questions.” Saeko shakes her head exasperatedly, though on her face is a fond smile. “Anyway, we saw the news that some guy was threatening to kill the queen if you didn’t return to the palace, so we decided to help you out. I mean, you did save my baby brother that time.”

Noya flushes. “It—it's not a big deal! I mean, you guys saved my back too, y'know.”

“But we are very grateful for your help nonetheless,” Suga interjects, proffering a friendly smile.

“And what about you guys?” Kuroo asks, gesturing to the Dateko vigilantes. “Don't you guys have your Iron Wall to guard?”

“We have other guys on duty,” Moniwa answers. “Like the Karasuno vigilantes, we saw the news and wanted to help you guys.”

Tooru arches a skeptical eyebrow. “But why? We defeated you, so shouldn't you want revenge?”

“Moniwa here was all like, ‘defeat means friendship’,” Futakuchi says. “And Aone didn't like the idea of the pipsqueak who bested him having to fend for himself against that emperor upstart.”

Noya has to blink back a fresh wave of tears. Jeez, when did he become such a crybaby? But he can't help it. He never would have expected to see either group of vigilantes again, especially under these circumstances. He was so convinced that he and his friends were outnumbered, doomed to die without achieving their objective.

“You can't do this alone. No one can do this alone. That's why we’re all in this together, aren't we?”

That's right. He couldn't have made it this far without his friends by his side, but he also had the vigilantes to thank, even if they have only met once or even a handful of times. Every single person on this journey he has met, whether they joined him or stayed behind, has brought him to where he is now—and in one beautiful circle, they have come back for him and his friends.

Then, as if Noya hasn't been surprised enough, the Karasuno vigilantes part like the Red Sea—and a familiar man with dyed blond hair and pierced ears emerges from behind the group.

“Ukai-san?” Noya chokes out.
“Wait, that’s Ukai-sensei’s grandson?” Asahi gasps.

Ukai Keishin grins at him. He's still dressed in his storekeeper’s get-up: orange apron, name tag and casual jeans. The only thing different is that in his hand is not a cigarette but a throwing knife. “Been a while, kid. Jeez, if I had known you were the prince, I would have charged you for the bracelets.”

Noya sticks his tongue out at him. “Rude. What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you had a store.”

“Keishin here is an honourary member, actually,” Saeko pipes up. “He doesn't do much fighting these days, 'cause he's an old fart trapped in the body of a twenty-six-year-old man, but he supplies us with weapons.”

“Whoo, that's cool!” Noya whistles appreciatively.

“How are the bracelets, kid? Still working well for you?”

Noya beams and sticks his arms out for Ukai to see. “Yeah! Not a dent!”

“Good, that's good.” Ukai pats Noya’s shoulder. “Well, as much as I’d like to play catch-up with you, you have the queen to save, don't you?”

The bubble of happiness from seeing so many familiar faces come to his aid pops, replaced by grim worry. That’s right, the vigilantes aren't here to talk about the weather. They are here to help him in his journey back to the palace.

“That's right!” Ryuu says. “We’ll hold down the fort here, in case any more bandits try to jump you guys from behind, so just go!”

“Thank you all, again,” Daichi says, bowing. “Just—stay safe, okay? We wouldn't want you to get hurt on our account.”

Saeko waves his concern away. “Yeah yeah, just go already.”

Everyone in Noya’s team exchanges silent looks. Each and everyone one of them still looks worn out, but the new fire burning in all their eyes is all the proof he needs that they won't give up so easily. And so, neither will he. As long as he has all these people backing him up, he can't let them down by throwing in the towel.

“Let’s go!”

Noya should have known better. When things start going a little too well, that should have been a major red flag that everything will start to go wrong.

And that is exactly what happens.

Out of nowhere, small iron balls race pass Noya’s ear and pelt Suga and Akaashi. The two demi-fairies freeze, and Noya has the horrifying feeling that it isn't from shock. Angry red rashes spread across the fair complexion of their faces like a wildfire, and their knees give out beneath them. The barrage stops, but Noya doesn't get to investigate the person behind the attack because of the sounds of retching from the two part-fairies.
“Koushi!”

“Keiji!”

Daichi and Bokuto rush to their respective boyfriends. Daichi pulls Suga close to him, while Bokuto all but crushes Akaashi to his chest.

“Koushi!” Daichi cries out. “Shit, it’s your allergy to iron, isn’t it?”

Suga retches again, vomit splattering on Daichi’s shirt. “I—I’m so sorry. I… I don’t think I can move. I can barely feel my limbs.”

“What about you, Keiji?!” Bokuto demands, shaking Akaashi.

“It’s the same for me, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi rasps. His voice is so strained, one more word and his vocal cords might just snap. The pain from just speaking is making his eyes water.

Kuroo rakes his hand through his hair. “Well, don’t you have a medicine or something to counteract the allergic reaction?”

Akaashi shakes his head. “No, I used up what’s left of it after our previous fight against the pirates —” The rest of his sentence gets intruded upon by a coughing fit, eliciting an alarmed cry of his name from Bokuto.

“Please just—just go,” Suga groans, shivering. “We’re too weak to be of any use.”

“I’m staying with you,” Daichi says firmly.

“Dai—”

“No arguments. The forest is full of hostile bandits; I’m not leaving you alone and defenseless.”

“Same here!” Bokuto declares. “And I’m not taking any arguments.”

Akaashi opens his mouth to speak again, but all that comes out is more coughing and tiny flecks of blood.

“The rest of you, go on without us.” Daichi’s expression speaks of the pain that he must’ve experience, but his tone is final.

Noya’s stomach flips. “What, no! We can’t just abandon you guys!”

_We’re all supposed to be in this together, aren’t we?_

“You have a time limit to get to the palace, Noya. You can’t waste time worrying about us.”

“But—”

“Kuroo, I’m leaving you in charge,” Daichi interrupts. He fishes the map out of his pants pocket and hands it to Kuroo, who takes it with uncharacteristic seriousness. “Lead them to the palace for me.”

“Will do, cap.”

“But we can’t—Daichi, Bo—”

“Come on, Noya,” Asahi pleads. “We need to go.”
Noya feels like his mind might just tear apart. Yes, he wants to return to the palace. Yes, he wants to rescue his sister. But he doesn't want to do it at the expense of his friends. They're supposed to go to the palace together.

Asahi tugs Noya’s arm firmly, and his feet reluctantly take him away from where Bokuto and Daichi are shielding their fallen friends.

Noya stumbles along ahead of the rest, between Asahi and Kuroo. Everyone’s faces are grim, but even they know they don't have time to linger. The sun has already set, and the sky is now a severe, ominous black. As much as Noya hates to leave his friends behind, he grudgingly knows it’s for the best. He hopes.

“Don't worry, your Highness,” Kuroo says. “Bo and the cap are strong guys. They'll be just fine with the two fairy boys. Have more faith in them.”

Noya nods silently. He can't afford to worry. Besides, Daichi and Bokuto are capable fighters, so he has to trust that nothing bad will happen to them. He just has to keep forging ahead and pray for the best.

A few more bandits try to jump them, but Iwaizumi and Tooru at the back of the group make quick work of them. Kuroo expertly navigates them through the dense forest, calling out warnings for stray roots and bumps. He leads with such confidence, like he was born to be a leader, that no one questions him. In fact, the rhythm of the group that was shaken by Daichi, Suga, Bokuto and Akaashi’s absence is starting to return back to an imitation of their previous groove.

Which is when the next thing goes wrong.

Noya’s lungs burn from the non-stop fast-paced walking, yet he ignores his exhaustion as his speed increases. So preoccupied with fear and apprehension, he doesn't hear Kenma’s panicked call of his name until he slams right into—well, nothing. Startled and disoriented, he stumbles back, trips over a tree root and falls, catching himself on his left hand. Pain shoots up his wrist like fire's burning his nerves. He lands on his butt, sending a jolt of agony up his tailbone. He grabs his sore left hand and examines it. The heel of his palm is beginning to swell. He tries flexing his wrist, only to feel another aching sting.

“Shit.” Asahi drops down beside Noya and gingerly takes his injured hand, examining it with worry in his dark brown eyes.

“Great, and we don't have our healer,” Kuroo groans. “Does anyone know first-aid?”

“Sorry,” Noya whimpers. Great, just when Suga's down he had to go and injure himself and slow down the team. How fucking brilliant of him.

“Don't be,” Asahi reassures him. He rummages around his bag and pulls out a bandage. He winds it tightly around Noya’s injured wrist, starting from the middle of his palm, down the heel of his hand and knotting it around his wrist. Noya can barely move his wrist due to the stiff bandage, which he supposes is a good thing. He doesn't want to injure it any more than it already is, at least until Suga returns.

(If he returns. Noya quickly and firmly shoves that thought aside.)
“We have another problem,” Kenma says. His eyes glow golden, and suddenly the invisible whatever Noya walked into becomes visible. It’s a translucent green, fizzling with energy. “There’s another sorcerer in the area.”

“Can you locate him, love?” Kuroo asks, his eyebrows furrowing.

Kenma nods, his eyes glowing even brighter. The same golden glow wraps around a nearby tree. A burst of magic blows the tree up, and an androgynous-looking person falls from it.

“I told him the tree wasn’t a good place to hide,” they grumble.

“Who are you and what’s your business here?” Kuroo asks sharply.

“A sorcerer and survivor of Kitagawa Daiichi. I was instructed to let only the prince of this queendom pass through, but the problem is—I don’t know what the prince looks like. The emperor tried getting the queen to tell him, but I heard she’s a stubborn one. They had a war of back-and-forth blackmailing. He said he’d kill the prince if she didn't tell him, but then she said if he killed the prince she wouldn’t tell him and that his plan needs the prince alive for it to work so his threat is stupid—”

What the hell? What plan? Noya wonders, growing more alarmed with each word the sorcerer speaks. What on earth are we getting ourselves into?

“—and she's really scary. Anyway, which one of you is the prince?”

“Like hell we’d tell you,” Tooru snarls. Despite his all too evident exhaustion, the tattoos on his palms flicker to life, ready for a fight. “What does your emperor want with the prince anyway?”

The sorcerer shrugs. “Don't know. Not everyone is privy to his plan, but we all trust that it’s gonna be awesome.” Their blasé tone lowers into something more threatening. “I won't ask nicely again. Who is the prince?”

Kenma lets out a small, resigned sigh. “And you won't have to. None of us will tell you.”

He waves his hand, from which a golden beam erupts and zips towards the greenish wall. The wall glows even brighter, but Kenma’s magic burns a hole through it, large enough for it to fit even someone as tall as Kuroo if he crouched a little. A glowing green patch grows back over the hole, only to be blasted apart again by a golden beam.

“Go!” Kenma calls, sweat pouring down his increasingly pale face. “I’ll hold them off!”

“Kitten—”

“Go!”

Kuroo’s mouth opens, as if to protest again, but his demeanour steels instead. “Alright. You first then, your Highness.”

He shoves Noya through the hole Kenma is desperately fighting to keep open. Once Noya is safely on the other side, he hurriedly ushers the rest through before tucking something into the back of Tooru’s pants and stepping away from the wall.

“Kuroo-san, aren't you coming?” Shouyou asks.

“Nah, someone’s gotta watch our sorcerer to make sure he doesn't burn out. Besides…” Faster than a flash of lightning, Kuroo morphs into a panther and pounces on top of a wolf-like figure Noya didn't
even notice creeping behind Kenma. The two large animals fight each other, transforming into humans and back into their animal forms smooth as a river current in between each swipe and blow. Even on the other side of the wall, Noya can see blood dripping down the left side of Kuroo’s slashed hind leg. His snout and paws are matted with even more blood, but he keeps scratching and biting.

“Kuroo!” Noya pleads. It’s bad enough they lost four members at one shot earlier, and now two more are going to leave themselves behind. He doesn’t know how he still hasn’t fallen apart yet.

“Shit,” Iwaizumi curses, apparently seeing something none of them can. Right as the hole is beginning to close up despite Kenma’s best efforts, he lunges right through it. He leaps behind Kuroo, just in time to take an arrow in the forearm. He staggers back, groaning. Still, he yanks the arrow out and flings it back where it came from. More arrows shoot at him, but he ducks to the ground, managing to dodge most of them. A few tag the back of his calves, eliciting another low groan of pain from him.

“Iwa-chan!” Tooru screams. “No, Iwa-chan!” He tries to force his way through the hole—which is now only about five inches in diameter—with his bare hands, but Kageyama grabs his wrist and pulls him back.

“We need to go, Oikawa-san,” Kageyama says quietly.

“But Iwa-chan—”

“Go!” Iwaizumi shouts. He knocks aside another arrow with the flat of his hunting knife. It lodges itself in the wolf's hind leg. “You guys need to get to the palace.”

“They'll be fine,” Kageyama asserts. “Our priority is getting Noya-san to the palace, so we need to focus on that. Besides, Kuroo-san's left you in charge.”

“Huh?” Oikawa splutters.

“Back of your pants, Seijoh!” Kuroo yells, leaping away to avoid a swipe from the wolf-man. “The map! Lead them there. We’ll catch up, promise. I’ll take care of lover boy for you.”

Tooru gropes behind him and tugs the wrinkled map out from his pants. He takes a deep breath, and the fear in his face is replaced with the calm focus of a leader. He tilts the map a little, studying it, before he nods.

“Okay,” he says. All traces of the Tooru that Noya knew—flippant, frivolous, childish, petty—have vanished. Now he holds the commanding air of a seasoned captain, which was probably what he was like on Operation KD. “We go north. Follow my lead, and try not to get lost.”

It almost physically tears Noya apart to leave another three members of his team behind, but he forces himself to take another step away from them.

*They're going to be fine.*

And another.

*They will be fine.*

And another, until he falls into a pattern of walking and reassuring himself that his friends will be okay. They have to be. They're strong, and the bandits have never been much of a threat to them before. They are more than capable of taking any enemy down. He just needs to have faith in them.
From twelve members, he's down to five. But at least Noya knows he isn't alone, even if they aren't at full strength. As long as he isn't alone, everything will work out fine.

Things only get worse.

A dart whizzes straight towards Shouyou’s unsuspecting back, but in his worn-out state Noya can barely even push himself to take another step, let alone leap to Shouyou’s defense.

Kageyama reacts in the nick of time. His tattoos glow, and the chunk of ground Shouyou is walking on is launched into the air with no warning. The dart flies right under the floating mound of earth and pierces Kageyama’s left forearm, right in the center of his tattoo. Cursing and wobbling, he loses his concentration, so the mound of earth crashes back onto the ground. Shouyou leaps off it before the earth fully resettles back into the ground and dashes to his partner.

“Kageyama, what's wrong?” he asks frantically.

“A poisoned dart, that's what's wrong,” Kageyama snaps. “It won't kill me—Iwaizumi-senpai helped me build a high resistance to most common poisons. At most it'll weaken my power.”

“So you can still fight?”

Kageyama nods.

“Good,” Shouyou says, “cause I spot, like, ten or so bandits. We gotta hold them off so Noya-san can go to the palace.”

“Right.” Kageyama pulls the dart out of his forearm. Blood dribbles down his forearm and entwines his wrist. The tattoos on both arms glow to life, though the light in the left one is much dimmer than the other.

“Go, Noya-san!” Shouyou shouts, already breaking into a run and then flying in the air. “Kageyama and I will cover you from here!”

Noya’s protest lodges itself in his throat. This can’t be happening. How can this be happening? Just this afternoon, all twelve of them were fighting together as a team. And now their numbers have dwindled to eight, then five, then three—a quarter of what he started out with. He wants to sink to the floor and just give up and never move again, but Asahi’s large hand around his forearm pulls him forward.

“C’mon, Noya-chan,” Tooru says. “If you keep standing around and moping, you’ll just be wasting everyone’s efforts.”

“Right.” Noya swipes his good wrist across his face. After, taking a deep breath to steel himself up, he falls into step behind Tooru and beside Asahi. Each footstep echoes behind him in a foreboding sort of way.
The final stretch of their trek is suspiciously peaceful. No one tries to jump out at them. Not a sorcerer. Not a horde of bandits. Not even a wild animal. It’s like someone heard that Noya was coming and decided to clear a path for him by chasing all life away. An unsettled feeling wraps itself around his heart and squeezes painfully.

Tooru blasts aside a knot of low-hanging branches out of their way with a fireball. Just several meters ahead of the three of them is the achingly familiar metal gates of the palace. It rises a good ten feet or so above his head, just as Noya remembers. Nothing about the palace seems different, which makes him even more apprehensive.

Everything is the same, yet everything is also out of place.

“Halt,” the guard stationed in front of the gate orders. “The orders are for only the prince to pass through.”

“From who?” Tooru challenges. “The queen or the bastard emperor holding her hostage?”

“It doesn't make a difference who, since the queen can't do anything anyway. In fact, I am also under orders to take captive of anyone else who isn't the prince.”

“No,” Noya says fiercely. “The emperor will either take all of us or none of us.”

The guard merely raises his eyebrows. “Your sister’s life is in the emperor’s hands; I don’t think you're in any position to be making threats, your Highness.”

Noya's gearing himself up for an argument, but Asahi cuts him off.

“It’s okay, Noya. Just go—your sister needs you.”

Tears prick at Noya’s eyes. How many more friends will he have to leave behind to achieve his goal? He thought he could only do it with them, but it's clear that the opposite holds true too. Or maybe the opposite is the only way after all. What was he doing, thinking he could gallivant back to the palace with all his friends like some merry band in some stupid fucking fairy tale?

“Oh please, don’t act like this is such an ultimatum,” Tooru scoffs. “You don't even have to make the choice, alright? Asa-chan and I will choose to be taken captive. There, problem solved.”

“But—”

“Prince Nishinoya, you only have five minutes until the emperor gets tired of waiting for you,” the guard says in a warning tone. “What will your choice be?”

“Go,” Asahi murmurs, gently pushing Noya forward. “We’ll be right behind you, okay? So you don’t have to be afraid.”

Noya stumbles forward, tears threatening to blind him. Right before the gates, he chances a glance behind him—two other guards are binding Asahi and Tooru’s hands behind them. On their faces isn't exactly a look of defeat. It’s more like… Noya doesn’t get a chance to figure out, because the first guard opens the gates and shoves him through.

“The emperor is expecting you in the throne room,” the guard says.

Noya nods mutely. The gates clang shut behind him, sealing him on the opposite side from the rest of his group. With heavy feet and an even heavier heart, he takes another step forward in the familiar courtyard of the palace grounds.
Prince Nishinoya Yuu has finally returned home, and he has never been more alone in his entire life.

Chapter End Notes

hello all. i've come with bad news, unfortunately. as i have some big exams at the end of February, i'll have to take a **1-month** hiatus to prepare for them. the next update should be up some time around the **first of March**. i'm sorry to have to make you guys wait, but thank you for your patience. <3

find me on my [tumblr](#)
The familiar foyer of the palace is dark and empty. Not a soul is around—not a maid, not a royal guard. It's just Noya, all alone in the cavernous palace.

His footsteps echo like drum beats as he climbs the sleek marble stairs to the second floor. The sound matches the pounding of his heart against his ribcage. The sheer, palpable silence freaks him out so much he wishes he could hear Shouyou’s twittering or Tooru’s scoffing or Daichi’s nagging or Asahi’s mumbling just one more time—he needs something, anything, to fill up the deafening void of silence encompassing him. He almost considers talking to himself, but he feels like he left his voice behind with Asahi and Tooru at the gates.

His crow pendant, cool, smooth and apparently ‘weird’, bounces against his clammy chest. This is the only thing that he has been allowed to keep from the beginning of his journey. Not his friends, but some stupid object supposed to bring luck or whatever. He doesn't feel very lucky. He doesn't even feel anything from it, despite Akaashi, Suga and Kenma claiming it to feel ‘weird’. No one ever explains anything to him.

His bracelets jostle up and down his wrist with each step he takes, and his left wrist continues to throb. His sweaty and dirty clothes cling to his body like a second layer of skin. It makes him feel rather much like a commoner in his own palace. As he walks, he notices that the portrait of his parents have been heavily vandalised—there are gashes in the canvases looking creepily like someone had taken a knife to them, and red x’s have been painted over the eyes. A shudder racks his body.

At long last, he arrives outside the grand double-doors of the throne room. Sleek, dark oak with an arch at the top and indescribable patterns inscribed on the surface—it looks like everything he remembers.

But what lies beyond is going to be nothing he has ever encountered, this he knows. His good hand reaches out to grab the round door knob.

He hesitates.

*This is it, Yuu. Everything that has happened so far has led up to this moment, as what Daichi would probably say.*

And this second he is standing in feels monumental, for reasons he doesn't know how to explain. The pressure nearly crushes him. He's so scared, tired and alone, he just wants to hide outside here where no one can see him in his weakness. He doesn't want to face the emperor inside—the emperor he doesn't even know. The guy has threatened to kill Haruka; who says he won't kill Noya too?

*Nee-chan is on the other side.*

The thought of his beloved big sister floods his body with newfound courage. His right hand grasps the door knob, and he pushes his way in.

He pauses to take stock of what he's seeing.

Chikara is on his knees beside the plush red and gold throne, his hands bound behind him. He looks
way worse for wear—cut lip, black eyes and a smattering of blue-black bruises across his face. His expression is as calm as always, despite his injuries.

Bound to the throne with reddish wisps of energy is Haruka. Her face is bloodied and bruised, like she put up one hell of a fight before being dragged here. Her purple gown is torn at the hem, but her silver diadem with an amethyst in the center sits proudly on her head. When she spots Noya, her eyes widen and she cries out his name.

And in front of her…

Noya has never met the previous emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi who reigned at the same time as his parents, but he's seen photographs of him. This young man is the spitting image of him—tall, lean, dark curly hair and calculating grey eyes. His stance in front of Haruka is relaxed, like nothing can get to him. This has to be Emperor Kai Li.

“Prince Yuu!” Kai Li calls, spreading his arms in a too-warm welcome. “How nice of you to finally join the party. Don’t get me wrong, Queen Haruka has been a wonderful hostess, but spending months with just her—and her bodyguard too, I suppose—has made her company grow stale.”

“I’m here,” Noya says, trying to keep his tone as even as possible (it’s a difficult endeavour). “I’m here on time. Now will you let my nee-chan go?”

Kai Li’s eyebrows raise in amusement. “Why would I let her go and deprive her of the opportunity to watch my plan unfold? I have been keeping her in suspense for months—very ungentlemanly of me, I know.” He sounds genuinely confused, like he can’t figure out anyone who wouldn’t to watch his plan unfold, whatever it is.

Fury replaces Noya’s exhaustion and fear, boiling his blood to volcanic temperatures. “What the fuck—you made me go through all that shit, made me leave my friends behind, and now that I’ve upheld my end of the deal you still won't let her go?”

“I believe what I said was that if you didn’t come back I would kill her. I chose not to disclose what I would do if you did come back in time. It’s more interesting that way, don’t you see? And poetic, in a suspenseful sense. Still…” A thoughtful look crosses Kai Li’s face. “Since you were so polite as to come all the way here on such short notice, I should reward you. How about this: I’ll invite your friends so you can watch my plan unfold together?”

Noya doesn't get the opportunity to even ask how he would do it when Kai Li snaps his fingers. A blinding light briefly fills the room; then it vanishes just as quickly. And then, just like that, Noya’s friends materialise in the room.

And in all the time Noya has known them, he has never seen them look so… defeated before.

All eleven of them are bound together with the same reddish wisps of energy around Haruka, appearing nothing short of beaten. Akaashi and Suga’s rashes have spread from their face to their neck and arms, and they look like they’re just barely holding on to their consciousness.

Daichi and Bokuto’s hair are matted with blood. Bokuto’s arm is bent at a painfully unusual angle.

The glow in Kenma’s golden eyes flicker weakly, like he’s trying to conjure up a spell but an external force is preventing him from doing so.

Kuroo resembles a horror show, with blood and deep claw marks marring his face and neck, while Iwaizumi still has several arrows embedded in his calves. There’s still blood trickling out of the wounds.
Shouyou sports twin black eyes. His legs look like some powerful force blew up the bone structure in them, while Kageyama and Tooru’s faces are twisted in identical expressions of pain. Noya spots why—their tattoos are glowing red, just like that time Moniwa put them under the curse of Kutsuu. Except this time, the red glow is angrier, more vengeful. Dark blue sparks escape through but are quickly snuffed out by the red curse.

And Asahi… good lord, Asahi. When Noya takes in his appearance, he simultaneously wants to rage, scream, hit someone and break down and cry. Asahi’s long hair is tangled with leaves and blood, his lip is swollen, and there are more bruises and cuts than skin on his face. Even his nose looks broken. Noya doesn't need to be told to know that none of them are in any shape to be fighting.

The horror and despair nearly overwhelms Noya. He's up against someone who evidently is a powerful sorcerer, perhaps even more so than Kenma and Moniwa, and his friends are too hurt and incapacitated to fight. Even in a room full of people, he feels terribly abandoned, like he's stranded on a deserted island with absolutely nothing to help him survive, destined to die alone.

“What—why are you doing this?” Noya croaks. His voice comes out even weaker than expected.

“Revenge,” Kai Li says simply. “Revenge for what your country did to mine. Your country gave mine hell, so I will repay that gesture tenfold. I will wreck your entire queendom, raze it to the ground, and then some more. I want you to feel the pain my people and I did. I want to watch your nation burn, just as I watched mine.”

Fear and disgust take a physical form in Noya’s gut, fighting for dominance. His blood freezes like ice, and the first thought that comes to mind is, This guy is nuts as fuck.

But at the same time, Noya can see where Kai Li is coming from. When he heard about the truth of Operation KD, his stomach nearly flipped itself upside-down from the horror of the revelation, and Kitagawa Daiichi isn't even his nation. His country—his own country—did that. His parents commanded warriors not even old enough to be considered adults to commit mass murder on Kai Li's country. He can only imagine the anguish Kai Li felt when all his people were so heartlessly slaughtered. If that happened to his queendom… he doesn't know how would he react. Would he be just as ‘nuts’ as Kai Li? Would he want… revenge?

He doesn't voice any of these questions, for he fears the answer.

Instead, he asks, “And how will you achieve that?”

Kai Li’s menacing smile widens. “Oh, dear Prince Yuu, I think you've been in the dark for far too long. That was very cruel of me, to enlist your assistance in the destruction of your nation and not even tell you how exactly you’re assisting me.”

All the blood in Noya’s body drains down to his feet. It's like each word Kai Li speaks knocks a small bout of air out of his lungs, until there is nothing left and he is desperately choking to breathe.

“What—what do you mean? How have I been helping you? Tell me!”

“You know that—ah, what did my double agent say it was? A good luck pendant? Well, whatever he said it was, that's not what it actually is. It doesn't contain something as flimsy as luck, but rather a spell. By travelling all over your nation, under the impression that you’re supposed to be making ‘amends’, you have helped me plant said spell all over the perimeter of your country. And by coming to the palace, where you started from, you have brought everything to a literal full circle, which was my real purpose for summoning you back here.”
Noya almost doesn't want to know. What he wants to do is to rip the pendant off him (it remains stubbornly stuck to his neck) and run far away. Away from the throne room, away from this man, away from just everything.

But he's a curious creature by nature, so he asks anyway.

“What is this spell, you ask?” Kai Li’s dark grin, if possible, nearly expands off his face.

“Why, it’s Genocidal Curse.”

In the forests, in the mountains, in the districts, everyone can feel it. No one can understand or explain it, but they can feel it—a chilling, foreboding sense of doom. It is inexplicable, nothing science or psychology can rationalise, and yet it's there all the same, very real and nigh-tangible.

In the back of their minds, in the depths of their subconscious, they all know. The time of reckoning has come for them.

It’s as though an entire thunderstorm has struck Noya and fried just about everything in him. The weight of the reveal causes him to stagger back. He barely dares to believe his ears. All this time, all this fucking time, he thought he was finally doing some good with his life—travelling around his nation, finding ways to help people—only to find out that everything has been one big lie. There was no need to make ‘amends’ to his people; he just needed to help a crazy, hellbent-on-revenge emperor perform genocide on his own country. How could he have been so naïve as to believe he could ever have nice things or do any good?

“No fucking way,” he hears someone gasp. He doesn't know who—his head is spinning too much. His throat can't seem to decide whether it wants to well up with a lump of tears or bile.

“Yes, indeed,” Kai Li says somberly. “I'm sorry. It must be a lot to take in.”

Rage pounds through Noya. “Shut up! Just—just shut the hell up!”

“No, now, Prince Yuu, let’s be reasonable about this—”

“Reasonable?! You bastard—you want to kill everyone in my country, and you're asking me to be reasonable?”

When Kai Li takes a step towards him, instinctive panic spikes in him. His bracelets expand into arm guards, and he smashes them together. The black bubble of force ripples towards Kai Li; but he flicks his wrist, repelling the blow-back force back to Noya. Before he can move or do anything, the force rams into his gut, sending him careening into the wall behind. A groan escapes his lips when his head bashes against the wall. Tenderly, he touches the sore spot. No blood, thankfully. He blinks rapidly, and to his panic he finds his arms feeling very bare. He lifts his arms into his line of vision, just in time to see his arm guards shatter to a thousand tiny pieces and fall to the ground.
A tornado of helplessness swallows him whole. His friends are restrained and too hurt to fight. Now his only means of staying alive in a battle has been destroyed so easily. He has nothing left to fight with, and there is nothing he can do against the most powerful sorcerer he has ever met and the Genocidal Curse threatening to wipe out his entire queendom. He wants to just curl up and cry and pass out, then wake up and find out that his parents are still alive, that his sister is still the princess and none of this has happened.

But nothing like that happens, because reality is one horribly realistic nightmare that he can’t escape from.

“Why me?” Noya blurts out, desperate to buy any sort of time. “Why did you choose me of all people to carry your stupid pendant of death around? Wouldn't it have been more—I don't know—reliable if you just did it yourself?”

“I suppose, practically speaking, it would have been easier if I did it myself,” Kai Li ponders. “But poetically speaking, you were the perfect person for the job. Imagine, the prince of his own country was the one who brought about its rightful destruction.”

*Insane, fucking insane—that's what he is.*

But Noya needs to buy more time, *any* time he can get for some kind of magical solution to suddenly materialise and end all this.

“But why?” he asks.

“I already told you—”

“I *know* that! But *why?* Killing my people won't bring yours back to life!” Noya yells, tears pricking his eyes.

Kai Li’s expression hardens. “Don't you think I am aware of that? All the magic and power in the world, but I am unable to bring even a single dead child back to life. This is not a wild, futile endeavour in attempting the impossible. This is for my people—to salvage their pride and to respect the memory of those who have fallen.”

“And you think they want that? Do you think they want their emperor, someone they look up to, to commit senseless murder?”

“I would stop running my mouth if I were you, Prince Yuu. What do you *know* what *my* people would want? You're the prince of *this* wretched nation, not mine. And, as a matter of fact, I *do* know what my people want. They want revenge for their fallen loved ones. They have the same vision as me: to see your entire fucking country *burn*. Hell is empty because all the devils are here in your military, in your streets, in your palace. And to hell I will return you.”

Noya backs up several steps, some of his fury giving way to fear. The look in Kai Li’s eyes—there's no way he can get through to him. He's gone far too deep and is too convinced in his beliefs to be swayed otherwise. Noya’s despair rises tenfold. He can't fight, he can't defend himself, and he can't even talk Kai Li out of this. Is there really nothing he can do?

“Still, I shall give you a chance, Prince Yuu,” Kai Li says. “The way I perceive it, you and I are parallels of each other.”

Noya stares at him. “*Parallels?* I don't understand. *I'm* not the one wanting to commit fucking genocide.”
“No no, that's not what I meant. My parents—well, my father anyway—loved me too much. He refused to let me fight because he didn't want me to get hurt, and so he let Kitagawa Daiichi fall. On the other hand, your parents cared too much about your then-kingdom and failed to give you and your sister the same care. My purpose here is to seek revenge, while yours of helping the civilians and making ‘amends’ was just delaying the inevitable. Soon, you will realise the depths of your sorrow and anger, and you will turn to revenge, whether to avenge your parents, or perhaps some other tragedy.”

Noya shakes his head insistently. “No. You don't know me. You don't know what I want.”

“Really? Then perhaps you are more naïve than I gave you credit for.” Kai Li shrugs. “Anyway, I will spare you, Prince Yuu. Because I see some of myself in you, I will give you a chance to escape this country before I annihilate it.”

“I don't believe you.”

“I am being genuine. You can even bring your sister. Think of it as my way of thanking her for being a delightful host.”

And well... Truth be told, the offer is tempting. Too tempting. Isn't that what Noya has wanted all along? To be free, to be away from pain and suffering; to just be somewhere safe and sound, where he doesn't have to have a care in the world. That was what he wanted when he was forced to flee the palace all those months ago, and that is what he so desperately wants now.

But then he sees his friends. Their faces are contorted in agony, rage and fear, even the more stoic ones of them. Kai Li said he could bring his nee-chan—he didn't say anything about them.

And he knows what his choice is.

“I can't,” Noya answers. “I don't believe in abandoning people I love just to save myself. I will not abandon my friends to die here, and neither will I abandon my people to the same fate.”

Kai Li’s face twists in a sneer. “Oh, so you're turning my gracious offer down because of love?” The disgusted way he spits the word makes Noya’s skin crawl. “This love you're talking about is futile. Have you not seen it so many times in your life, Prince Yuu? Love leads to nothing but suffering. It led to suffering for me, and it has led to suffering for you. Let me spell it out for you: your parents loved this country so much they neglected—maybe even hated—you, which in turn caused you to resent them. And you think your beloved big sister loves you so much. Yet in a crisis, she pushed you away and forced you to suffer out there in the real world, all alone and terrified.”

On her throne, Haruka flinches like someone slapped across the face. Ennoshita jolts, as if he's about to make a move towards her, but he remains bound in place.

“Hell, just look at you and your merry entourage of friends. Let’s start with your puppy crush, Azumane Asahi.” Kai Li points at Asahi, and Noya’s fists clench tightly. “His ‘love’ for you caused him to walk away from you when you needed him the most. You looked up to him, didn't you? You admired him and his strength. You called him the Ace. But he abandoned you, not realising how much it would hurt you.”

Asahi glances down to the floor, the corners of his eyes reddening with shame. Noya gapes at Kai Li. He desperately tries to think of a snappy comeback, but the emperor presses on.

“Oikawa-san was so in love with Iwaizumi-san, he proposed marriage to him, didn't he? Yet when things got difficult, that ‘love’ chased Iwaizumi-san away. Poor Iwaizumi-san. One moment the love
of his life couldn't get enough of him; the next he didn't want anything to do with him.”

Tooru’s face pales, while Iwaizumi’s bound fists shake.

“And your ever-so reliable captain, Sawamura Daichi. He wasn't even born of the love made between man and woman.” Kai Li’s nose wrinkles. “And then his father drank himself to death 'cause he couldn't love his son properly. Or maybe his son, which he perhaps didn't even want in the first place, just wasn't worth living for.”

Daichi’s jaw is tense, like he's preparing a severe scolding, but he doesn't say a word.

“Hinata-kun’s parents were killed because they cared too much about some civilians they didn't even know. Their love dug their own graves—how tragic,” Kai Li drawls.

“They were your civilians, asshole!” Shouyou shouts, his eyes blazing with fury at the mention of his parents.

Kai Li steamrolls on like Shouyou didn't say anything. “And Kageyama-kun—he never got to grow up with love. His parents could never make the time to love their son. They were always too tired from work and could never muster the energy to even entertain a painting their son created. And then he went to school and still never found the love he so desperately craved but so severely lacked. He was ostracised for being an overbearing, selfish ‘King of the Battlefield’, as I believe he was called. He has never even known love.”

Kageyama scowls at the mention of his hated nickname, but his eyes glimmer with what seem to be unshed tears.

“Kuroo-san’s love for Kozume-san ended up betraying Kozume-san’s trust,” Emperor Kai continues. “And every time Kuroo-san tried to make things right, he only ended up making things worse. And not to mention, Kozume-san used Kuroo-san’s love to make himself feel better while continuously tearing Kuroo-san’s efforts down—how selfish was that?”

Kuroo blanches, and Kenma’s face reddens with shame.

“And Akaashi-san—let's talk about Akaashi-san,” Kai Li says with a sneer. “He supposedly cared about his friends. But when he heard a friend was in trouble, he had to be begged and blackmailed into helping said friend, even though he had the power to help them. He was born with a wonderful and rare gift, and what does he do with it? He keeps it all to himself, not wanting to share it with those who need it the most.”

A crack forms in Akaashi’s usually impassive expression, letting a glimmer of guilt pass through.

Bokuto shoots a glare at the emperor, but even he seems to realise that Kai Li is too much of a threat to directly confront, so he doesn't say anything.

“Oh, I could list so much more,” Kai Li adds. “I wish I could, but I’m afraid I have wasted enough time. It has been pleasant getting to know all of you—mind-reading is a wonderful but tiring spell to work—but now it is time for me to complete what I have set out to do.”

Alarm crashes through Noya’s entire being. “No! Please don’t do this. Please, I’ll do anything. Just don't kill—”

Without any warning, his pendant grows unbearably hot against his skin, like someone's pressing a red-hot tong against his chest. He seizes it and tries to rip it off him, but to no avail. The glossy black surface glows a dark, almost bloody red. Lines of red circle the entire perimeter of the room. A flare of red energy emerges vertically from the lines on the floor, bathing everyone in its devastating
bloody glow. Noya risks a glance out of the window. As far as he can see, everything is showered in the same red glow. The sky, instead of obsidian, resembles a sea of blood. The dark trees of the forest are tinted in the same redness.

And that’s when the pain kicks in. Unbearable agony blazes through him, starting right from his core and spreading everywhere like an unstoppable combustion. Screams reverberate around the room. He doesn't know if it's his own screams, or his friends’, or Haruka’s, or all of their own mixed together in a terrible cacophony.

Kai Li stands right in the middle, bathed in the same red glow. He must have known his plan would kill him too, yet here he is. It's frightening to know that he’s wanted this so badly that he would even sacrifice his own life—and he has achieved it. He has achieved his goal without any hindrance, and Noya can physically feel his life being tugged out of his body. His knees rock together violently, his vision is dotted with black spots, and dear god he just wants the pain to be over.

“Your plan will never work.”

Noya, shocked that someone can even talk in spite of the excruciating pain, forces his head to turn to see who has spoken.

Despite the red tendrils of magic binding him, Kageyama is standing. He is shaking and pale from the pain, and his hands clutch the burning red tattoos on his forearms, but he's standing nonetheless.

“What do you mean, Kageyama-kun?” Kai Li demands. “Everything is working perfectly according to plan. Can you not feel it, the pain of your life being consumed by the curse?”

Kageyama nods. “I can, which is why I can see it. All the lines of your magic—and of Noya-san’s magic counteracting it.”

“What?”

As if waiting for that exact moment, an iridescent burst of white-hot energy flares out of and around Noya. It pushes away the fierce red glow of Genocidal Curse, slowly but surely overpowering it. Astonished, all everyone can do is stare. The red energy fights back, but to little avail. The iridescent energy spreads around the room, forming a second layer on top of the red energy, suppressing it down closer to the floor.

“What is this?!” Kai Li snaps his fingers furiously. Briefly, the entire room is lit up by a powerful red glow. But following that, as if in response, is an unfamiliar and uncontrollable tugging in Noya’s core. The iridescent energy illuminates even brighter, dulling the bloody red glow.

And somehow, Noya gets it. He doesn't know shit about magic or Potential Magic or how to wield it. He's just a simple human boy without fairy or sorcerer blood or even a set of fancy magic tattoos. But this—this iridescent thing, he knows what it is.

“You say my love is futile?” Noya says, his voice soft just like the warm prismatic energy radiating from him. “That may be what you think, but I will always believe in love, as dumb and cheesy as it says. You're right, my parents weren't the best parents. They actually kinda sucked. But my mother loved me even if she was really distant. She took the initiative to approach me, and she told me she and my father loved me. She didn't have to. No one asked her, and my father even cautioned her against seeing me. But she did, 'cause deep down, she loved me.

“And maybe... maybe I'll never know if my father truly loved me, but I know that there’s at least a possibility. He worked hard to get this country into the best shape he can, so that when it's time for
me and nee-chan to step up, we won't have to struggle as much as he and my mother did. And a possibility of love is better than no love at all. Still doesn't excuse him from being a dick, though.” He shakes his head before plowing on. “Everything they did was in the best interests of this country. Their love was misguided, but they were just doing what they thought was best for me and this country.”

Kai Li snarls. “That's enough—”

“And you talked shit about my nee-chan, which I can't take lying down like that,” Noya interrupts him. “Nee-chan forced me to leave ‘cause she loved me and wanted to protect me. All she’s ever done is look out for me. She's the best nee-chan in the whole damn world!”

Haruka nods at him, smiling tearfully. Noya’s heart soar. With the newfound strength, he continues.

“You talked shit about my friends too. I won't have that. Yeah, Asahi was one hell of a coward, running away like that. But in his absence, instead of wasting his time away, he picked himself back up and trained to become better, for the team’s sake. Because he cared about the team. And then he came back! He came back for me, ‘cause he cared about me and wanted to be with me. He always puts me before himself, even when I don't deserve it. And I want to find a way to show him that I feel the same. All this time, ever since we met. I want to show him that I care about him the same way he cares about me!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Asahi give him a shy smile. Realising belatedly what he just blurted out, Noya flushes with embarrassment. But still, he pushes on.

“Tooru’s love for Iwaizumi pushed him away, but it’s also what brought them back together. Because Tooru loved Iwaizumi, he figured out what it was that Iwaizumi wanted all along and gave it to him. So in case you missed it, they’re back together and going stronger than ever.”

Tooru is sobbing into his knees, and Iwaizumi’s pinched expression softens as he whispers something to Tooru.

“Daichi’s father tried,” Noya continues. “He could have given Daichi up for adoption or just abandoned him on the streets, but he didn’t. He took Daichi in as his son and raised him. And when that didn't work, he had Suga with him to make him feel loved. They are disgustingly sweet together, and seeing their PDA and having to watch them act like an old married couple fighting over directions makes me wanna puke sometimes—and by sometimes I actually mean all the time—but it’s their love that counts.”

Daichi’s stern expression melts into something softer. Suga shoots Noya an approving thumbs-up.

“Kageyama may not have had the best childhood, but he found love with and in Shouyou. And volleyball, I suppose. He may have once been the selfish King of the Battlefield, but now he's a team with Shouyou. And speaking of Shouyou, his parents were wonderful people, and you can see that clear as day in him. He’s one of the most loving and caring people in the whole team. He always looks for ways to cheer people up and tries to get everyone to get along. I'm proud to have Shouyou as my bodyguard and volleyball kouhai.”

Kageyama’s face is beet red, but he nods at Noya, acknowledging what he said.

Shouyou perks up at the mention of his name and lets out a tearful cry of “Noya-san is so cool! Like GWAH!”

“And I can't believe you even tried to come for Kuroo and Kenma, man,” Noya says, shaking his
head. “Kuroo has done nothing but love Kenma his entire life. His love made him want to do anything and sacrifice everything if it meant making Kenma feel better. And Kenma was not using Kuroo. He didn't mean the hurtful things he said, and he actually thought Kuroo would be better off without him. But because of this love that you called futile, they realised they're better together, and that's why they are still together. Yeah, Kuroo’s pet names are gross as hell, everyone knows that; but they love each other, and not even you can deny it if you know everything they went through together.”

A lazy but entertained smirk crosses Kuroo’s face. He leans back, as if watching an epic showdown. Kenma averts his eyes awkwardly, but a tiny hint of a smile quirks at his lips.

“And Akaashi’s a real stand-up guy,” Noya declares. “He was reluctant to help at first ’cause he didn't want to force his friend to do something against his will, not ’cause he was selfish. And after that, he and Bokuto helped to get Kenma the justice he deserved. Then they saved Kuroo from doing something really fucking stupid, ’cause they cared for the both of them.”

“No need to rub in the last part, your Highness,” Kuroo groans.

Bokuto cheers, while Akaashi permits a small smile to permeate his stoic facade.

“And this is why you’re wrong,” Noya concludes. He strides forward, until he's planed himself between his friends and Kai Li. “Love is not futile. Love is powerful, and it's why your plan to destroy us all will never work.”

“Oh please,” Kai Li rebuffs disdainfully. “All the examples you brought up are of people who are mandated by societal expectations to love each other. What kind of couples would your friends be if they didn't love each other? And about your sister—she's your family, so obviously she’s supposed to love you. As for your bodyguards, their literal job is to take care of you. They're paid to wait on you hand and foot. Don't you see? Everyone in your band of friends is obligated to love each other. Your ‘love’ doesn’t count. It is invalid.”

Noya gapes at him. What kind of nihilistic, pessimistic asshole do you have to be to reject the very notion of love and call it invalid? He opens his mouth to argue, but much to his frustration he doesn't know what to say.

“You said the love Noya and everyone shares doesn't count because they're, what, ‘supposed’ to love each other? Then let me show you your final undoing—me.”

At the back of the group, Kenma rises to his feet. His legs shake from exhaustion, his eyes are weary, but his face shows uncharacteristic determination for someone Kuroo claims to be “allergic to effort”.

"You?" Kai Li spits. “How are you my final undoing, a puny, lazy sorcerer such as yourself? Please enlighten me, Kozume-san.”

“Because Noya had no reason to love me, to care about what happened to me,” Kenma says simply. “When we met, we barely knew each other. We only had, like, one mutual friend which was Shouyou. You couldn't even call us acquaintances since we barely spoke and I mostly stuck by Kuro during our trip to Dateko. Yet he helped me with what happened to me. He willingly put himself in danger and acted as bait to get the producer who raped me arrested. It would be understandable if it was, say, Shouyou or Kuro who did that. But Noya didn't know me at all. He let himself be degraded like that, and he sacrificed his time and safety to help me, a stranger. That's altruism, the most selfless form of love you could ever see in a person—and that is the final piece that has solidified Noya’s counter-spell. It’s love, and that's why your plan to use Genocidal Curse to wipe
out everyone in this queendom will not work. Look around you.” He spreads his arm out to
demonstrate. “The iridescent magic you see all around us is the magical manifestation of Noya’s love
for everyone, and it is overpowering your Genocidal Curse.”

Kenma is right. During the entirety of both their speeches, the iridescent energy has smothered most
of the Genocidal Curse, until only a few feeble flickers remain. The pain has faded away too,
replaced by a gentle undercurrent of strength Noya has never felt before. Until he realises he has felt
it all along and just didn't notice it until now.

“What the—this is ridiculous,” Kai Li scoffs. “Genocidal Curse is the strongest form of magic to ever
exist. It is literally created from hatred—the hatred I have for your country and everything it did to
mine. No one has ever discovered a counter-spell for it, and that's not going to be happening any
time soon.” He flicks his hand, as if to send out more sparks of red energy—but then a hurricane of
dazzling pearlescent magic billows around him, snuffing out whatever magic he was trying to
conjure. A loud BOOM and haze of grey smoke follows.

When the smoke clears, it reveals Kai Li on the ground, pale and shivering. What remains of the
Genocidal Curse flickers out, replaced by a dazzling display of too many colours to name. The
myriad of hues dances across the walls, floor and ceiling like fireflies. It fills the room with warmth
and wraps itself around each and every one of Noya’s friends. He watches, amazed, as their wounds
close up. Fresh skin grows over the cuts and abrasions. Bruises fade into nothing. Bones that were
broken or knocked out of formation restructure themselves. Noya glances down. The same light
encircles his injured wrist, whispering the ache away and fixing the sprained muscle. Energy fills his
exhausted body, enough for him to make a final stand against the emperor.

“It's not. It has always been love,” Noya replies, his voice soft as a prayer.

“Let’s be real, Kai-sama,” Haruka adds. The last of the red wisps of energy binding her to her throne
has dissipated. She rises to her feet and plants her hands on her hips. “Hatred never stood a chance to
begin with.”

Kai Li spears all of them with an unhinged glare. He snaps his fingers, flicks his wrists and mutters
incantations under his breath, but nothing happens. Whatever that iridescent magic is, it appears to
have taken his powers from him. It really is poetic.

“Congratulations,” Kai Li spits. “Your ‘love’ has won. Turns out your country will abscond from the
karma you deserve.” He shakes his head and pulls a knife out from his pocket. “Well, I see little
point in living in a world where I can't have the revenge I deserve. And the endgame was to kill
myself too, after all was said and done, so I should at least achieve one of the things I set out to do. I
shall go and join the rest of my brethren in heaven.”

After making his final speech, the emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi takes his own life, still bitter and
alone. Noya looks away, not wanting to watch another senseless murder. He wishes he could at least
save one life, but he has realised that there are some people he just can't talk out of doing what they
are absolutely fixated on.

Instead, he turns his attention to the ones he did manage to save. Haruka has her knife out and is
approaching Chikara, whose hands are still bound. Since Haruka is free and moving, Noya guesses
he's still bound by something physical.

“I see you're a little tied up, Chika-chan,” Haruka says, a teasing lilt in her voice. She crouches down
behind him and works on cutting his ropes off.

“I don't think now is the time for puns, Queen,” Chikara deadpans. “And please be careful with the
knife.”

“I know how to use a knife. I’ve killed a man with it before, remember?”

“That’s exactly why I’m worried.”

Haruka laughs. She bends forward, one hand still gripping her knife and the other on his jaw, tilting his face back to meet hers, and she kisses him. His body goes rigid with shock, like he can’t believe this is happening.

“Attitude to the girl untying you is not appreciated, Chika-chan,” Haruka murmurs against his lips after she pulls away.

His entire face reddens. “Yes, my Queen.”

Noya grins. About time *that* happened.

Now that he knows his sister and her bodyguard are okay, he turns to his friends. Dazed, they shakily get to their feet. They pat themselves and check their bodies, as if unable to believe they’re no longer marred with injuries. His grin widens. It strains his facial muscles, but the happiness at seeing his friends safe and sound overrides the pain.

“Hey, how are you guys?” he asks, just in case.

“Great!” Shouyou chirps. “Wow, Noya-san! That was badass as hell. Like, you just *BWOOSH* at him even though he was like *GYAH* and then there were so many colours and—”

“Use proper words, idiot,” Kageyama snaps.

Shouyou sticks his tongue out at Kageyama. “Bleh! You're just jealous that the stuff Noya-san about me was way cooler than yours.”

“What—no, dumbass! Mine was cooler, and you know that.”

“Cut that out, you two,” Daichi chastises. “Everything Noya said and did was amazing.”

“I suppose Dai-chan makes a fair point,” Tooru says. “What you did—whatever the hell *that* was—well, it was freaking incredible, Noya-chan. Wouldn't have expected it from you.”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. “Make up your mind about whether you want to praise him or not, Shittykawa.”

“Don't be so mean after we all just nearly died, Iwa-chan!”

Noya scratches the back of his head. “Er, I don't understand how I did that—like, the whole power of love thing. It was many kinds of awesome, but where did it even come from?”

Suga smiles warmly at him. “The cheesy answer would be that it was with you all along, which is not wrong but doesn’t fully answer the question either. What I think happened was that there was a whole lot of Potential Magic Blocking the Genocidal Curse imbued in the pendant, which was why none of us could detect that your pendant was enchanted. You’ve probably been subconsciously converting all that Potential Magic into—well, let’s just call it the power of love, even though it’s so cheesy only Daichi would unironically call it that.”

“Hey!”
“So while you were leaving behind a trail of Genocidal Curse everywhere you went, you were also leaving behind this trail of power of love to counteract it,” Kenma adds. Now that the danger is over, he has reverted back to looking bored. “Also, his Genocidal Curse was flawed. True Genocidal Curse—which is born of pure hatred—leaves a black trail behind, not red, once the sorcerer has activated it. He wielded this curse out of hatred for this queendom, yes, but he also did it out of a twisted, misguided love for his people, so the curse was imperfect. If it was perfect, it would have killed us all within seconds, at most.”

“Which means the nutcase’s plan was doomed to fail from the very beginning?” Kuroo asks.

Akaashi nods. “Very shrewdly noted, Kuroo-san.”

Bokuto lets out a victorious hoot. “Alright! The prince kicks ass, man. This was the best way to spend our vacation, Akaashi. Aren’t you glad you listened to me and came along, huh?”

“It was the best, other than almost dying multiple times, Bokuto-san.”

“Don’t be such a wet blanket, Akaashi!”

Asahi approaches Noya and gently places his hands on his shoulders. “I’m glad you’re okay. You were really brilliant. And what you said—” He blushes and hastily corrects himself. “I mean, just everything. Everything you did was brilliant.”

Noya’s smile stretches to the widest it has ever been. “And I meant every word of it, Asahi.”

And because he’s done with waiting and over-thinking his feelings and getting interrupted, he grabs the back of Asahi’s neck, yanks him down and kisses him full on the lips. It really is about time they kissed, after two years of quietly (and unknowingly, in Noya’s case) pining for each other. He can vaguely hear some cheers, wolf-whistles and chants of “Go get some, Noya-san!”, but he ignores them to focus solely on the man he has been hopelessly and cluelessly in love with for the past two years.

After several eternities, Noya pulls away slightly, just so he can watch the pink that floods Asahi’s cheeks. He really is too cute. Noya pecks a kiss on the tip of his nose before letting him go.

“So, er, what are we going to do about this?” Chikara cuts in awkwardly, tapping Kai Li’s dead body with the tip of his boot. “I was planning on arresting him—before he killed himself, of course—but I don’t know if I have the authority to do that. Do I, Queen?”

Haruka shrugs. “Well, this has never happened before as far as I know, so there’s no standard protocol about what to do in these circumstances. Hmm, perhaps I should make a law.”

“That sounds like a wise decision, especially if this is going to be a common occurrence,” Chikara replies with a sigh.

“Yeah, sounds like we’re going to have our hands full of this. But we’ll worry about that another time. For now…” Haruka turns to Noya, a wide smile on her face. She wraps her arms around him, and he enthusiastically returns the gesture. He buries his face in her shoulder and takes in her familiar scent—light and citrusy. Looks like her perfume still hasn’t changed after all this time.

“Welcome home, Yuu.”

Chapter End Notes
hello everyone, i'm back! thank you for your patience <3 exams were, well, a thing but what matters is that they're OVER and i can resume business as usual with this story. all that's left now is the epilogue and, well, another surprise in store for you guys, both of which should be up next week!!

chat with me on tumblr!
“I’m going to miss the both of you,” Kuroo sniffs into his handkerchief.

“At last, some peace and quiet,” Kenma mutters under his breath.

"We’ll miss the both of you two, too," Akaashi says diplomatically. Kuroo finds it equal parts amusing and ridiculous that both Akaashi and Bokuto are dressed like typical tourists even though they haven't left the country yet—a short-sleeved button-down shirt for Akaashi, a bright yellow T-shirt for Bokuto, and matching knee-length shorts for the both of them.

It has been a month since the fateful night at the palace. After the emperor of Kitagawa Daiichi committed suicide, word got out to the remaining survivors (who turned out to be the bandits and pirates) and they fled the queendom. Kuroo has no idea where they went to. Maybe they have gone back to Kitagawa Daiichi to rebuild their lives properly. Maybe they went off somewhere else to wreak havoc. Or maybe they’re planning another genocide. Who knows these days? But Kuroo is not too concerned about that. If someone else wants to commit genocide on this country, all they have to do is get Noya to activate his power of love, easy-peasy, and Kuroo can go home and cuddle with Kenma. In any case, without the pirates inhabiting the sea and making things difficult, the ports in both Dateko and Shiratorizawa have been reconstructed and are now back in business.

Bokuto and Akaashi still have three more weeks of vacation, so they've decided to go on a romantic getaway to a nearby country. With nothing else to do and being good friends, Kuroo and Kenma have accompanied them to the port to send them off.

Akaashi checks his watch. “Bokuto-san, I believe it would be wise if we check ourselves in now, before the rest of the crowd arrives.”

“C’mon, Akaashi! Don't you want to spend more time with Kuroo and Kenma? We won't be seeing them for another three weeks. We won't die if we don't check it now,” Bokuto wheedles.

“Bokuto-san.”

“'Kay fine, Akaashi!” Bokuto grins at Kuroo and Kenma. “Well, we gotta jet now. See you two crazy cats real soon!”

“Have fun, bros,” Kuroo says, punching Bokuto’s shoulder and ruffling Akaashi’s hair. Kenma offers them a small wave and a barely-there smile.

Bokuto pulls Kuroo into a fierce bro-hug, which Kuroo returns with equal enthusiasm. The two wax poetic about how much they would miss each other and how the distance would never change their bro-adoration for each other and how they solemnly swear not to cheat on the other with another bro while apart. (Kuroo gets the feeling that Akaashi and Kenma are exchanging long-suffering looks over their respective boyfriends’ shoulders.)
“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi says, cutting into their tearful bro-fest. “We really ought to go now.”

“Kuro, stop being embarrassing. It’s embarrassing.”

The two pull away from each other and exchange a final fist bump. Kuroo watches Bokuto and Akaashi’s figures retreat into the port, keeping a firm hold on Kenma to prevent him from sneaking away. He has a tendency to do that when Bokuto and Kuroo are having a “moment”. He gives them a final wave, before turning away to Kenma.

“Shall we go, kitten?”

“Please,” Kenma says. "I was starting to get bored during your speech about bro-adoration or whatever."

“Don’t get sassy with me, young man,” Kuroo teases. “You should make like Tsukki and tuck that sass away in your pocket.”

“You’re my boyfriend, Kuro, not my mother.”

Kuroo laughs. “Damn right.” He leans down and kisses Kenma, ignoring the disapproving looks around them. PDA isn’t something most citizens are comfortable with—not that Kuroo cares. He wants the whole world to know he loves Kenma. He’d shout it from the rooftops if it didn't embarrass Kenma.

Kuroo transforms into a panther and Kenma clambers onto his back. The two of them take off back home. With Kuroo’s speed and stamina in his animal form, they make it in several hours, pausing only a couple of times for a break.

They spend the rest of the evening at home, cuddling, cooking together, occasionally making out and engaging in other activities.

When they don't have a Team Neko production to prepare for, also known as their ‘off-season’, their usual routine consists of cuddling in the morning until one of them needs to pee, breakfast, and then whatever they feel like doing for the rest of the day. Occasionally, they have to train to keep themselves fit. Kenma loathes any form of physical exertion, but he'd do it anyway as it's necessary for them to keep fit to keep their jobs. Kuroo thinks Kenma has it far easier than he does. All Kenma has to do onstage is stand there and conjure magic, and that doesn't take as much physical exertion as magical stamina. Kuroo’s the one who does all the crazy stunts, so his training regimen is far more brutal.

Kenma usually helps out at his family’s spell shop down the street when it's off-season for Team Neko. He claims to not particularly enjoy the work he has to do—since it's, you know, effort, and some customers can be rather pesky—but Kuroo figures it can't be that bad if he's still helping out there.

While the both of them are fairly well-off with their Team Neko income, Kuroo decides to find work too. He wants to keep himself active, and a little extra pocket change never hurts anyone. Sometimes he works at the coffee shop with Inuoka and Lev. Other times, he helps people do deliveries. This time, he has managed to get a modelling deal with a local seamstress. He’s surprised anyone would want him to model their clothes for the public to see—he doesn't think people would find his untameable bedhead appealing. Nevertheless, a job is a job; he'll take whatever he can get.

After a long day of posing for cameras, Kuroo heads back home, wanting to just flop on the bed and cuddle Kenma. And maybe a hot bath. Preferably with Kenma. And then a nice meal. That would be
lovely. And more cuddling and making out afterwards.

And in the way back home, who should he bump into but his third-favourite blond?

“Tsukki!” he greets smugly. “My main man—wait no, I promised Bo I wouldn't cheat on him. Hmm, maybe you can be my main—”

“Stranger.” Tsukishima turns to walk in the opposite direction, but Kuroo catches his sleeve.

“Sass in your pocket, Tsukki.”

“Sorry to inform you, but I am currently not wearing any pockets on me.”

Kuroo chuckles. “You must be real fun at parties. Say, have you heard of the new train system that's being constructed?”

Tsukishima shoves his glasses up his nose. “I fail to see how that concerns me, or how those two statements are remotely related to the one another.”

Kuroo ignores him. “Well, I say it’s about time, you know? Other countries already have their own trains, so it’s about time our queendom caught up. And you know what this means, don't you?”

“I think I’d prefer not to.”

“This means you can take sweet Yams and visit your home district.”

“Yamaguchi and my home is here in Nekoma, Kuroo-san,” Tsukishima says coldly. “It's the more convenient option, since we work here.”

Kuroo rolls his eyes. “No one’s stopping you from taking some time off to visit Karasuno. I'm sure your brother would appreciate the gesture.”

Tsukishima’s entire body stiffens. He tugs his arm out of Kuroo’s grip and begins storming in the opposite direction, without so much as a “by your leave”. Ah, looks like his big brother is still a sensitive topic. Oh well. Kids these days. Still, Kuroo has confidence they'll sort out their issues soon.

He cheerily ambles back to his apartment, resuming his previous train of thought regarding cuddling, a hot meal, Kenma, a nice bath, maybe some post-bath activities involving Kenma and a nice dreamless sleep. He grins. He has his whole evening planned out, and it’s going to be awesome.

Then he freezes when he sees Kenma curled up on the floor, hyperventilating and sobbing and gasping for breath like he’s drowning and can't break through the surface for air.

Oh shit. Shit shit shit.

But Kuroo has to stay calm for Kenma’s sake. If he panics, it’ll only make Kenma’s panic worse.

He quietly slips his shoes off and pads over to Kenma. He squats down next to him, careful not to touch him. He has learned from experience that touching Kenma when he's having a panic attack only makes things worse.

“Hey, love,” he says soothingly. “It's me, Kuro.” He has also learned that using Kenma’s childhood nickname for him helps to calm him down, for whatever reason. “I'm here. I'm here with you, and you are safe. I won't let anything or anyone hurt you, I promise.”
Kenma’s limbs loosen ever so slightly at the sound of Kuroo’s familiar low voice.

“Just focus on breathing, okay?” he soothes. “I’m going to ask you some questions, but you don’t have to answer them if you don’t want to, alright?”

Kenma weakly nods to acknowledge he heard him, but his body is still trembling.

“What happened, love?” Kuroo asks gently.

“I—I saw,” Kenma replies, his voice fragile as a thread stretched too thin. ”A news article. The producer—it was about the producer.”

“What did it say?”

“She was—she was charged. For what she did.”

“What did you believe was going to happen after you read it?” Kuroo asks softly. It’s not a condescending or rhetorical question; he wants Kenma to answer it so they can work on rationalising his fear. It took him a while to figure this method out, after discovering that telling Kenma “you have nothing to be afraid of” didn’t give him the results he expected and in fact only made things worse. Since then, he’s diligently read psychology research journals about panic attacks and mental health so he’d be better prepared to help Kenma with his panic attacks. He’s an intelligent guy, so he didn’t take too long to decipher the complex jargon of scientific journals.

“I just thought—I don't know,” Kenma mumbles. “I just saw her name and I was just—really scared. That she would come after me again and try to do—do that to me again.”

“And what actually happened?”

“She was charged for what she did.”

“And what does that mean?”

Kenma pauses, as if thinking. “She's in jail. She is imprisoned.”

“And what does that mean?”

“She… she's far away. And she's locked up.”

“And that means she can't hurt you if she's far away and locked up, right?”

“Mhm.”

Gradually, Kenma’s hyperventilating slows down. Kuroo continues to encourage him, reminding him to breathe as well as all of the other times he survived a panic attack (“You survived this before, kitten, remember? You were so strong then, and you are so strong now. You can do this; I believe in you.”).

“I love you, and I won't be going anywhere unless you want me to,” Kuroo repeats again and again, just so Kenma knows.

Eventually, after several minutes, Kenma completely calms down. His breathing becomes slower and deeper, and Kuroo finally relaxes. He lowers himself fully to the ground and pulls Kenma into his arms. Kenma nuzzles his chest, wrapping his thin arms around Kuroo’s midriff. His arms are still too thin to be healthy, Kuroo notes with a frown. He makes a mental note to cook extra tonight. While Kenma’s appetite has improved and he's put on a little weight, he’s still underweight. The both of
them are going to continue working hard to help Kenma recover. It’s going to be a lot of work, and it won’t be easy. But Kuroo has put himself through hell to see Kenma smile again, and he would gladly do it again and again and again.

Because when Kenma is happy, everything is alright in Kuroo’s world.

“You’re so strong and brave,” Kuroo murmurs into Kenma’s hair. “I’m so proud of you, Kenma.”

“Mhm. Thanks for being there with me. I love you.”

Coming from Kenma, that’s practically a grand declaration of love bellowed from the rooftop of the royal palace. Kuroo’s heart nearly bursts with overwhelming joy and adoration and love for the boy in his arms.

“I love you too, kitten.”

Kageyama isn’t sure how this is his life. Here he is in the royal palace, on his first official duty as a royal guard. With Iwaizumi’s support, he went back to the Academy after the debacle with the emperor and submitted his withdrawal form. After that, he decided to join the royal guards, because he promised Hinata he’d go anywhere he went, and he’s not one to back out of promises.

But he thought his new job would be more… exciting. Hinata’s stories of his experience bodyguarding Prince Noya made it sound like every day with the prince was a wild adventure filled with excitement, grit, insurmountable trials, tests of courage and cake. Lots of cake apparently. But instead…

“I don't get it. What the hell are we doing, just standing outside Prince Noya-san’s study?”

“Guarding!” Hinata twitters, like that’s a sufficient answer.

“From what, exactly?”

“Well, the idea is that in case an assassin were to come in—and that has happened before, by the way—we would be prepared to grab Noya-san and make an escape,” Hinata explains with far too much enthusiasm for someone talking about running away from potential assassins. “But really, it’s to make sure Noya-san doesn't try to run away when he's supposed to be doing his work.”

Kageyama contemplates this, and he nods. That, without a shadow of a doubt, sounds like something Noya would try to do, if he's learned anything about the prince from the past months travelling with him. And if there's anyone perfect to catch the nimble prince, it would be Hinata.

Still, just standing outside Noya’s study is rather dull. There really isn’t much to see, anyway, besides for Hinata. On the wall opposite him are some paintings and portraits that were interesting to look at for, like, the first two minutes of his shift. The only thing breaking the monotonous static of the shift is Hinata, who's regaling him with what happened when he returned home to visit Natsu and his grandparents. It’s nice to hear about Hinata’s home life, but sometimes it sends a bitter pang through him. He can never have that. He hasn't returned home once after the journey with Noya. There's nothing for him to look forward to at home, anyway. Just more criticism and ignoring from his parents. No, he's happier here at the palace where Hinata is.
“—and they said they would love to meet you!”

*That* catches his attention.


Hinata rolls his eyes. “Natsu and my grandparents, duh!”

“And why would I do that?”

“'Cause I told them about you, and they want to meet you! I mean, you *are* my boyfriend. It’s normal for people to bring the people they're dating home to meet their family.”

“Oh.” Kageyama’s stomach flips at the implication of Hinata’s words.

Hinata must have noticed Kageyama’s uneasiness, because his grin disappears and is replaced by a concerned look. “I mean, you don't *have* to meet them, of course! They're nice people. They won't eat you up, promise. And they'll understand if you're not comfortable with meeting them.”

“That’s—that's not what I'm worried about,” Kageyama mutters. “I'm sure your family are nice people.”

“They are! But then, what's the problem?” Hinata pauses, studying Kageyama’s face. He gets the distinct feeling that Hinata is peering right into his soul and picking him apart. “… Is it *your* family? Do you not want me to meet them? I mean, it’s totally cool if I don't meet them! It’s just—”

“I know what you mean. And—well, it’s not like there's much point in introducing you to them. We’re not… we’re not very close. I haven't spoken to them in ages.”

He still hasn't told Hinata the truth about his family life and childhood. He can't bring himself to, because he knows it would make Hinata sad. And he doesn't want to make Hinata sad. He's already seen enough of sad Hinata to last him the rest of his life. But he’s afraid that Hinata would ask, and then he would have to answer him since he can't say no to Hinata, like, *ever*, so how should he phrase it—

“Hmm, okay!”

Kageyama stares blankly at him. He’s confused. Hinata *doesn't* have questions?

“What are you looking at me like that?!” Hinata shouts, putting his fists up. “You wanna fight?”

“Dumbass!” Kageyama’s hand clamps down on top of Hinata’s head. “That—that's not what I meant! I just… I was just surprised. That you didn't have questions. Like, about why I'm not close to my parents, or why I haven't spoken to them in ages.”

“Oh. I mean, I *am* curious. But I figured you'd tell me when, or if, you wanted to, so I didn't see any need to ask. There's no pressure to tell me, so don't worry about me. I'd still like you whether you choose to tell me or not, 'cause you're important to me, even if you're an asshole sometimes.”

And what feels like a genuine smile stretches on Kageyama’s face. The feeling is strange, practically foreign, but… it’s nice. Being with Hinata is nice. Being told that he’s important is nice too. And smiling because Hinata told him he's important is even better.

He presses Hinata against the door and leans down to capture his lips, eliciting a muffled squeak of surprise from him. Then Hinata relaxes between the door and Kageyama, and he returns the kiss,
even tugging on the front of Kageyama’s shirt to draw him closer. His hands find themselves
gripping Hinata’s waist. He doesn’t want to let go. He wants to stay here with Hinata, arguing with
him, kissing him, playing volleyball with him and practising their combo attack together. This is his
new life. No longer will he bear the crown of the King of the Battlefield, because Hinata forced his
way onto the island and into Kageyama’s heart, dethroned him with his overwhelming personality
and bright smile, and showed him a new, happier and less lonely way to live.

He pulls away from the kiss, smirking when he spots Hinata’s flushed cheeks. “65-63. I’m leading.”

Hinata sticks his tongue out at. “For now. I’m going easy on you. I’m gonna win, just you watch!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah yeah! Bring it on, Bakageyama!”

“Just you try, dumbass!”

Bokuto wants some fresh air and to enjoy the sea breeze, so Akaashi accompanies him to the open
deck. They lean against the railings and watch as the sea ripples like satin underneath the ship. It’s
hard to believe that just a month ago, Akaashi truly believed he and his friends would die on the
same sea. It is astounding how much things can change in one month.

“It feels like we really earned this, huh?” Bokuto says, grinning at him.

Akaashi rests his head against Bokuto’s shoulder, since there isn’t anyone else at the deck to witness
their rather public display of affection. “What do you mean, Koutarou?”

“C’mon, you know what I mean! We worked so hard to save Kenma and Kuroo, and then the prince
and the whole freaking country. We—well, you were pretty awesome, Keiji.”

Akaashi is uncertain about what he did to warrant such praise. “I'm afraid I don't understand. I didn't
do much to save this country. That was all Noya-sama. And I had to be begged into helping Kenma,
just like the emperor said. I was very selfish.”

Bokuto shakes his head, his white-grey spikes bobbing with him. “Man, do you sell yourself short or
what. You helped Kenma in the end. That's what matters, so fuck what that emperor said. And in a
strange, er—what's that word I'm looking for? Like, a loop-de-loop, but not really?” He twirls his
hands energetically in wide circles to demonstrate what he means.

“Roundabout?”

“Ah yes, I knew that!” Bokuto snaps his fingers. It's so endearing when he gets like that, Akaashi
can't bear to point out that he, in fact, did not know that. “Anyway, as I was saying; in a strange
roundabout way, without you, there was no way the chibi prince could have saved us all. If you
didn't get Kenma to open up about what happened to him, Noya wouldn't have come up with the
plan to do that selfless act of love thing for Kenma. Then the chibi prince’s counter-spell probably
wouldn't have worked against the emperor’s Genocidal Curse.”

Akaashi contemplates this. He’s surprised; Bokuto is making a surprisingly good argument that
doesn’t end with him entering an emotional slump, for once. He finds that he doesn’t have anything
to use to argue against Bokuto.

“… I see. I understand.”

Bokuto belts out his loud, obnoxious but somehow still endearing laugh. “Of course you do! I'm awesome, ain’t I?”

And this is the part where Akaashi usually cuts Bokuto down to size (politely and constructively, of course). He’s about to; but then he takes a look at the broad, loving beam on Bokuto’s face, and he just can't bring himself to do it.

Instead, he breathes, “You are splendid, Koutarou.”

Not caring that a mother and her two children have entered the open deck, he tilts his head up and snags Bokuto’s lips in an affectionate kiss. Bokuto delightedly returns it. In fact, he gets so excited he hoists Akaashi up and sits him down on the railing, keeping a tight grip on his hips to prevent him from falling into the water. Technically, Akaashi figures he’d react fast enough to transform halfway and fly back to safety before hitting the ocean, but he appreciates the gesture anyway.

Akaashi has no idea what adventures lie ahead of him and Bokuto on their vacation. But he gets the feeling that as long as he has Koutarou with him, they will be fine. They have always been, and will always be.

The Dateko and Karasuno vigilantes have been keeping themselves busy too. Now that bandits are no longer a threat, the two groups of vigilantes have shifted their attention elsewhere.

The Dateko vigilantes have decided to concentrate their efforts on helping out with the reconstruction of their district. Most of it is functional, so all they need to do is conduct some final checks and help patch roofs, repaint peeling walls and fill the remaining holes in the streets. It’s tough work, but they figure it beats having to risk their lives every day. They’re only teenagers, after all, with their oldest being just eighteen.

It's a similar but different story in Karasuno. After hearing about the queen’s plans to build a nationwide train system for easier travelling, they decide to help out with the construction of the train tracks and station in their district. Saeko studied engineering before becoming a vigilante, so she acts as one of the directors while the men work help out with the construction. Ukai occasionally brings them refreshments during their breaks, though he grumbles about how they always make life harder for him. They get compensated, but their main motive has always been to serve people. Also, they figure that this train system would make things easier for the not-dead prince if he ever has to flee his palace again.

With construction and reconstruction underway, the futures of both districts look bright (and travelling more convenient).

Yousei Services was thriving in Suga’s absence, he's pleased to note. With the coronation of the new
queen, they have regained the funding they lost during the previous reign. Now they can afford more
staff, and that means there’s no more need for the demi-fairies to work double duties. Praise heavens.

Yachi and Shimizu have returned from their travels too. Shimizu resumes her co-supervisor position
alongside Suga, while Yachi is busy preparing her final essay discussing her internship and travels to
make up her total grade. She’s as nervous about it as ever, but Suga can see that her experiences
have made her gain a little more confidence in herself. There’s really nothing like saving an old
friend from mutilating himself that can raise a girl’s self-esteem, apparently.

Regardless of whatever her final grade turns out to be, the boss has made it clear that she has a
position in Yousei post-graduation, if she would be willing to take it. Suga is really happy for her—
Yachi is a lovely, hard-working girl. He wants nothing but the best for her. She burst into tears when
she got the news, and Shimizu had to get a coworker to cover her shift so she can calm Yachi down.

As Suga's preparing a report for the big boss, he overhears a conversation between two coworkers.

“I still can't believe the prince is alive. The prince.”

“That news is a month old, girl. Don't you have any new gossip?”

“But don't you think it’s weird? The emperor of some random tiny island apparently kills himself in
our queendom’s palace, and then it turns out the prince has been alive all along?”

Years of practice manages to keep Suga’s sigh at bay. These workers weren't there with the rest of
them at the palace; they don't know anything so he shouldn't lose his cool, he reminds himself.

After the almost-genocide, the queen decided to make a formal announcement declaring that Noya
was alive, since the public had already known thanks to Kai Li’s published letter. She informed the
public that Noya’s bodyguards forced him to fake his death and go undercover to keep him safe, all
without notifying anyone else. That way, the queen wouldn't lose the citizens’ trust, and no one
would think Noya was a coward for running away after the assassination if they believed he had
been forced into it. It was a good idea, since the country would completely fall apart if she revealed
the truth and consequently lost the people's trust. Suga recognises that it’s—for better or worse—a
necessary white lie. Now the dead prince turning out to be alive after all has kinda become a
nationwide inside joke.

Suga finishes up his report and places it under the boss's desk in his office. He remembers to put a
paperweight on it. One time he was in so much of a hurry he just dumped his report on the table,
and barely a moment later a cheeky gust of wind blew it away and he had to rewrite all 3000 words
and he broke down into tears every 200 or so words and it was just a really bad time. Yes, he has
learned from his mistakes.

His hand slips into his pocket, fishing out a lovingly-wrinkled piece of paper. He reads it again for
the hundredth time that day. It’s a letter from Daichi, detailing his past few weeks back at the palace.
According to him, there were some changes in the status quo. For instance, Oikawa resigned from
being a royal guard so he could settle down with Iwaizumi back home at Seijoh and prepare for their
wedding. Kageyama took his place, which Daichi wasn't sure was a good or bad thing. On one
hand, that meant less bickering between Oikawa and Noya. On the other hand, that meant more
bickering between Hinata and Kageyama. There are other new developments in the palace, such as
Ennoshita and Queen Nishinoya’s open secret of a relationship, Asahi and Noya’s not-so secret
relationship (since Noya can't keep a secret) and a whole bunch of reports the queen was making
Noya do. Suga can't hold back a chuckle when he reads that line. He can just imagine Noya
grumbling and complaining about having to write reports for his sister, no matter how much he
adores her.
He pauses when he reaches the final paragraph. He reads it and rereads it, then reads it backwards, trying to burn the words into memory.

**While I'm glad this wild dangerous journey is over—'cause I was really afraid of growing premature grey hair—I miss spending so much time with you. I mean, I don't mean to make you feel bad, of course! I'm glad you're enjoying your work. I'm really proud of you. Nabbing a co-supervisor position at the tender age of 18? That's amazing, Kou.**

_And I know we're both busy, you with your spa and me with Noya and the rest of 'our' kids, but I hope I get to see your pretty face soon. Just let me know when you're free and I'll make myself available for you, alright?_

Love you,

Daichi

A bittersweet lump rises in Suga’s throat. Although he tends to roll his eyes and scoff at Daichi’s cheesy ‘inspirational’ speeches, his wonderful boyfriend has a certain way of words—a way that makes him smile like an idiot in the hallway of his workplace.

Come to think of it, he has the entire of next week off. He checks his watch. It’s four in the afternoon, which means his shift ended an hour earlier. He briefly considers going back home for a meal and a rest, but you know what? He doesn't think he can go another week without seeing Daichi. So he sprints back home, hurriedly tosses several sets of clothes and a toothbrush into a knapsack and shrinks himself and the bag down.

At the highest speed he can muster without passing out from the exertion, he zooms towards the palace. He occasionally hitchhikes on birds that happen to be flying in the same direction—it’s not a crime, he believes, since birds are fair game—to catch a breather. If he were his usual size, he would be able to cover more distance and pose more resistance against particularly strong gales of wind. Such is the woe of not being a full-blooded fairy.

He’s glad for the fact that the queen has granted him (as well as the other members of the Blue Crows and Cats and Owls and no Suga is not snickering _he is not he swears_) the title of Royal Guest. It enables him to visit the palace any time he want as long as he has his identification card, and he plans to use this privilege to his full advantage. Or, as much as he can, given how far the palace is from Karasuno.

At long last, he spots the grand palace. From overhead, he can spot several figures in the palace garden—a puff of vibrant orange hair, two figures with short dark hair, a figure with longer dark hair and a fifth with a tiny tuft of bleached dirty blond amidst black spikes. Suga smiles, recognising all of them even from so high up in the sky. He zips downwards and lands in his favourite mess of dark hair.

“Oh sweet god!” Daichi exclaims, jolting under the newfound weight (which admittedly isn't a lot).

“That's a big fly,” Hinata comments.

“That's Suga-san, dumbass!” Kageyama shouts.

Suga laughs. He flutters off Daichi’s head and reverts back to his full height.

“Hey guys!”

“Suga!” Noya exclaims excitedly. “Why didn't you say you were coming to visit?”
He rubs the back of his head, all sheepish-like. “Let’s just say I totally forgot that I have next week off. If I remembered, I would’ve said something, I swear! Sorry, things have just been wild at Yousei.”

“Only you would forget you had a whole week off,” Daichi teases him. “I hope you’re not too married to your job. I’d like to think there’s still some space for me in your life.”

Suga kisses his cheek. “There’s always space for you, Dai—after I do some spring cleaning, that is.”

“Wow, rude.” But Daichi is smiling him in that affectionate way, like Suga is the only thing he can see in the whole world, and it still makes Suga’s heart do funny gooey things even after several months of dating.

Then that idyllic daydream is interrupted by Noya launching himself on Asahi and fiercely kissing him. With a muffled yelp, Asahi staggers back but returns the kiss nonetheless.

“You guys are all gross,” Hinata complains. “C’mon, Kageyama, let’s go. Toss for me?”

“Alright.”

“Last one to the court has to buy the winner meat buns for a week!”

“Deal—oi, don't give yourself a head start, asshole!”

Hinata and Kageyama dash off, leaving a cloud of dust behind them.

“We should go too, Asahi,” Noya says. He’s still wrapped tightly around Asahi. “These honeymooners are making me sick.”

“Oh okay. Ah, but be careful, Noya! Please hang on tight, I don't want to drop you because if I drop you you’d get hurt and the queen won't be happy and you won't be able to play volleyball…”

Asahi carries Noya off to wherever, still fretting about the consequences of dropping his boyfriend, finally leaving Daichi and Suga alone.

“Surprise.” Suga holds his arms out.

Daichi’s smile widens. He sweeps Suga into a tight embrace and murmurs into his hair, “Best surprise ever.”

“Cheesy.”

“All for you, love.”

“I'm leaving the palace if you say one more cheesy thing,” Suga threatens.

Daichi rolls his eyes. “Like you can resist me enough to leave.”

Suga hums in agreement. After all, he did drop everything just to fly all the way to the palace and see his boyfriend.

“So what do you want to do?” Daichi asks, rubbing the back of his neck. “Since you're a guest, I'm sure the chefs would be happy to cook a meal for you. Or I can show you around the grounds, since the last time you were here it wasn't exactly the most… pleasant of circumstances. Or—”

Suga kisses him to shut him up.
“I just want to stay here with you,” he mumbles. “Just… wherever. It doesn't matter, as long as you're there.”

Daichi grins at him. “Oh, now look who's being cheesy?”

“Oh shut up. You rubbed off on me.”

Suffice to say, they spend the rest of the evening in the garden, playfully arguing and exchanging sweet nothings and canoodling. And Suga is content to just stay like that. His house and workplace may be in Karasuno, and not everyone in the demi-fairy community may approve of his relationship with human, but none of that matters to him, because his home will always be with Daichi.

(Oh damn it, Daichi’s cheesiness has really rubbed off on him.)

It’s not as adventurous as being Nishinoya’s bodyguard, but Oikawa is enjoying his new job as an elementary school volleyball coach nonetheless. It started when his nephew visited him and Iwaizumi and told him that he and a bunch of friends wanted to learn how to play proper volleyball but they didn’t have a coach so could he please teach them thank you very much. As the world’s self-proclaimed best uncle, there was no way Oikawa could turn his beloved nephew down.

Also, he figures being a coach might help with some of his Operation-KD-related guilt. Just because he was forced into it and was just ‘obeying orders’ doesn’t exempt him from being the one to kill all those innocents. That's why he has left the warriors for good and is now focused on helping children achieve their goals instead of cutting their lives off short.

He doesn't exactly have the proper qualifications to be a coach, but he has sufficient knowledge about exercise, how the body works and how to work with others from his warrior days—and volleyball, of course. He can tell that the faculty advisor is skeptical about having a teenager coach a bunch of children not even a generation younger than him, but the advisor hasn’t said anything against him, so he figures he’s doing a good job. Well, of course he is. He’s Oikawa Tooru.

He waves goodbye to the last kid before locking up the gym doors. He hands the key to the advisor, who bids him a curt farewell. Jerk. But Oikawa chooses not to dwell on it. He's in too good a mood to care about a mean adult when he has a special something in his pocket. Humming a zany tune under his breath, he skips all the way home—his and Iwaizumi’s home now.

With his parents’ permission, he sold his family house and moved in with Iwaizumi. It’s just the two of them, since Iwaizumi’s parents have retired early to stay in the same coastal village as Oikawa’s parents. They're old college friends, apparently. They are also fine with their sons living together, since they are engaged, after all. All things considered, they're pretty lax with their parenting.

(They did return to Seijoh briefly to deliver them the mandatory speech about marriage and commitment and a bunch of other heavy stuff, since they did get engaged at a pretty young age.)

He bursts through the front door. “I'm home!”

A non-committal grunt emanates somewhere from the living room. Oikawa strolls over and finds Iwaizumi man-spreading on the sofa, reading some handwritten notes in a spiral bound notebook.

Just like Oikawa, Iwaizumi has decided to do something different after their journey was over. He's
furthering his studies at the Academy to become a proper teacher. It seems like a lot of work—most of the time when Oikawa returns home from school, he finds Iwaizumi buried in lecture notes and homework. Despite his immense workload, Iwaizumi still makes time for Oikawa, no matter how much he gripes about how “clingy” Oikawa is. Oikawa prefers the term affectionate.

“Iwa-chan has such pretty handwriting for a brute,” he sings as he peers over Iwaizumi’s shoulder.

“Call me a brute one more time and I’ll kick you out of our house, Shittykawa.”

“So grumpy, Iwa-chan.” He vaults over the back of the sofa and snuggles his head into Iwaizumi’s lap. “One would think that seeing my pretty face would lift your spirits after a long hard day.”

“And one would think that after all this time you would learn that that’s not the case.”

Iwaizumi uses Oikawa’s face as a book-stand, much to Oikawa’s chagrin. Iwaizumi continues flipping through his notes, occasionally pausing to make annotations that somewhat tickles Oikawa’s nose.

Oikawa huffs. “Don’t just cover my face like that, like you can shut me up by pressing a book to my face.”

“Let a man dream.”

Oikawa rolls his eyes. He adjusts his head so he can gaze up at Iwaizumi from under his notebook and sighs contentedly. His Iwa-chan is so cute when he’s focusing intently on something. There’s this adorable crease between his eyebrows, and sometimes he nibbles on his lower lip, which Oikawa thinks is hot as hell. His olive green eyes—whoa, Oikawa could totally get lost in those eyes.

And he almost does, until his hand absentmindedly brushes against the square lump in his pocket and he suddenly remembers his agenda.

He fishes the thing out of his pocket and brandishes right in front of Iwaizumi’s face.

“It’s a box,” Iwaizumi aptly describes.

“I didn't ask you to play name-the-object, Iwa-chan—ow ow ow don't shove me off your lap!” Oikawa pushes himself up and dusts himself off. Iwaizumi is still staring blankly at him. He holds the small blue box out to Iwaizumi. “Open it, open it!”

“Jeez, fine, no need to get so excited, it’s not even my birthday—oh.”

Inside the box, sitting on a tiny black cushion, is a silver ring. A sapphire gem trimmed with small diamonds perches on the top of the ring, staring expectantly at Iwaizumi’s now-blushing face.

“Well, it was about time you got a ring,” Iwaizumi mutters, his voice thick with emotion he usually keeps wrapped up under his stoic demeanour. “I was—I was starting to get impatient. I was about to go and get a ring myself.”

Oikawa beams at him, but behind his back he’s fiddling nervously with his fingers. “Do you like it, Iwa-chan?”

“I—I do. It’s a very pretty ring. But—oh my god, you stupid Shittykawa. This must have cost a fortune! Sapphire with diamonds—what were you thinking? Were you even thinking?”
Instead of arguing, Oikawa just smiles with fondness. He sits down next to his fiance and pulls him into a tender kiss.

“I was,” he murmurs against Iwaizumi’s lips. “I wanted to make you happy, Hajime.”

Iwaizumi rubs a hand against his damp eyes. “Don't be an idiot. There are more important things in a marriage than a ring. Like commitment, communication, love.”

“All of which we have in spades. C’mon, don't be a wet blanket, Iwa-chan! I—I thought you'd like it, ’cause it’s blue and really pretty, that's why I got it. But if you don't like it—”

Iwaizumi cuts him off with a ferocious kiss. “Don't get me wrong, I do. I just—please don't frivolously spend money on things like this, okay? Weddings are expensive hell, and then there's the honeymoon, and after that—who knows? Maybe a pet. I was thinking of a dog. Maybe even kids; the orphanages aren't getting emptier, after all.”

Oikawa gapes at him, for once at a loss for words. He suddenly forgets how to word. Which one is the more grammatically correct statement anyway? He wouldn't know—he's forgotten how to word.

“What are you looking at me like that for, Crappykawa?”

“It’s just—I mean, you're thinking of—of kids? Like, adopting kids?”

“You don't have a womb to bear children with, do you?” Iwaizumi scowls at him, like that's a stupid question.

“What—no, of course not! Don't you think I know human biology, Iwa-chan?” Oikawa bites his lower lip. “I mean, I was just surprised. That you thought so far, that is. I was—I didn’t think—I mean…” He fumbles for the right words, a rare occurrence for him.

A worried look crosses Iwaizumi’s face. “Wait, I wasn't—I didn't go too far, did I? It’s not like I’m trying to, like, pressure you into thinking of kids. I get it; you just got me an engagement ring, we haven't even started planning the wedding yet, so yeah considering adopting kids now must be scary—”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that! It wasn't, like, a bad surprise. It was a good surprise! Besides, I don’t think I’m in any position to be criticising you for taking things ‘too far’, since I literally proposed to you only a few hours after seeing you again after a year apart.” Oikawa smiles fondly at the memory. “I’m happy, ’cause I—well, I may or may not have fleetingly thought of children too. But not any time soon, of course. I mean, we’re still teenagers trying to sort our shit out.”

“Of course. After everything that happened… it’s hard to believe we are all still so young, yet we’ve already been through so much.”

They really have. They joined the teenaged military when they were 13, and when he was 17, Oikawa was forced to help commit genocide while having Iwaizumi’s poisoned lifeline hanging over his head. Then they went on that crazy adventure with Nishinoya and nearly died multiple times and saw and learned many horrifying things and got tangled up in a literal nationwide conspiracy to annihilate the whole country—yeah, all that barely fits into “we’ve already been through so much”.

“But we survived it, and we’re together. That's what matters.” Oikawa finds Iwaizumi’s calloused hand and squeezes it tight.

“Damn right.”
The couple remain cuddled up on the sofa. Iwaizumi’s notes and their past ghosts are forgotten, in favour of them simply enjoying each other’s warmth. They got into the whole mess together, lost each other briefly along the way, and then they came out of it together.

And together, they will go to their future.

“Okay, first thing first,” Iwaizumi says. “We are not having the ceremony until I finish my education and get a secure teaching position in the Academy. We don't want to be owing huge debts just to pay for the wedding, do we?”

Oikawa wrinkles his nose. “How long is that going to take?”

“Another two years to finish my training, and I'm hoping to get a secure position after that ASAP. You think you can wait two years?”

“Mmm, fine. You're so lucky you're cute, Iwa-chan, or I might die from impatience,” Oikawa grumbles.

Iwaizumi spears him with a dark look, though the edges are soft. “If you die before the wedding, I'll resurrect you and kill you myself, Shittykawa.”

“So mean, Iwa-chan!”

The moment the clock strikes five o’clock, Noya slams his pen down and leaps out of his seat. Finally. It's taken him all of his self-control not to burst with impatience and excitement for the past three hours he's been forced to sit still and fill out reports for his nee-chan, but now it’s five o’clock and he's officially off-duty. He only pauses to grab his signature black blazer before racing to the door.

“What are you so excited about?” Daichi asks with a fondly exasperated shake of his head. “I know you don't like sitting still and doing work, but this is the most excited I've ever seen you finish your work.”

“I have plans,” Noya replies, buzzing with energy. “Specifically, I have date night plans with Asahi and you all aren't invited. Except for Asahi, of course.”

“Eh?” Asahi yelps. “We have plans?”

“Ooh, what plans, Noya-san?” Shouyou questions. He bounces up and down, his enthusiasm mirroring Noya’s. It’s sweet that Shouyou is so excited for Noya despite not being a part of his plans.

But as much as Noya would love to show off his magnificent date night plans to Shouyou, he kind of is in a rush. “No time to explain! I gotta go. Asahi, stay here. I'm just going down to the kitchen to get some, uh, stuff. Meet you in the garden at seven?”

Asahi nods meekly. “Sure thing.”

Daichi pinches the bridge of his nose. “Kageyama, Hinata, go with Noya. Make sure he doesn't make a mess or disrupt the chefs’ work.”

During the jaunt to the kitchen, Shouyou’s bombardment of questions about Noya’s plans for his
date night turns into yet another round of bickering between him and Kageyama. Noya’s brain tunes them out. Right now, he’s solely focused on the task at hand: prepare for the date.

The month they’ve been together has been nothing short of bliss. Every moment they spend together, Noya feels like he learns something new about love and how he could love someone. Every kiss, every touch, every shy smile Asahi offers him—it lights his heart up and makes him feel like he's sipping on heaven. He never knew just being with someone could make him feel this way. So much has changed from when he was a sheltered bratty prince living peacefully in the palace.

Other things have changed too. For instance, without Tooru around to trade insults with, things are a little quieter. Noya feels tamer, in a weird sense; being with Tooru brings out his brash attitude, it seemed. He wouldn't ever admit this out loud, since Tooru’s head really doesn't need to get any bigger, but he kinda misses having him around. Of course, he's happy for him. He's happy Tooru has found love and a future with Iwaizumi. Tooru has promised to visit every now and then, and with the construction of the railroad system underway, visiting the palace (or visiting him in Seijoh) would be a hell lot more convenient.

Noya bursts into the kitchen with a loud and cheerful greeting. The chefs instantly stop what they're doing and bow low at the waist. Never being one for formalities, he hurriedly dismisses them.

Noya rummages through the pantry for a picnic basket large enough to fit food for both him and Asahi. Once satisfied with his choice of basket, he bustles around the kitchen to fill it with food: cheese, sliced loaves of bread, fruits, ham, you name it. Shouyou tries to help by shoving even more food into the basket, while Kageyama yells at him for causing Noya’s basket to overflow not once, not twice, but thrice. Still, Noya appreciates the help and enthusiasm.

After he’s filled the basket nearly to the brim, he hurries back to his room, having forgotten to pack some blankets. It’s going to be a chilly evening—perfect excuse for cuddling, though it’s not like he ever needs an excuse to cuddle. He's grateful for the fact that Daichi and Asahi have left, presumably to take a break or to train, or he'd have to explain what the basket is for. He doesn't want to ruin the surprise for Asahi just yet.

Before he knows it, it’s nearly seven. With a yelp of sudden realisation, Noya grabs his basket, bids Shouyou and Kageyama a hurried goodbye and speeds out of the room. He takes the marble stairs down three at a time, hopping and sliding and scaring a few maids. He has been reprimanded time and again for being reckless around the palace, but each time he conveniently forgets each scolding. Something about being forced to survive out there with bandits lurking in every corner must've done a number on his sense of self-preservation.

Through the glass panels of the back door, he spots Asahi on the other side. He's dressed in the usual royal guard uniform. The only thing different about his appearance is that his hair is down in loose waves, tickling his shoulder blades. Noya’s heart swoops in wide loops. Beautiful. Asahi is a work of art.

“Asahi!” Noya crows, bursting through the back door.

Asahi jolts. “Ah, Noya!” He peers down and raises an eyebrow when he spots the basket. “Um, what's that for?’”

Noya grins up at him. “For us to share. C’mon, let’s go, let’s go!”

He grabs his boyfriend’s hand, entwining their fingers together, before all but dragging him through the garden. They wind through the stone pathways nestled between hydrangea and rose bushes, Asahi stammering and spluttering all the while behind him.
The garden really is beautiful. It’s one of the few things about the palace grounds that has undergone a huge change since the last time Noya was at the palace. More flowers of greater variety bloom in every corner: lilies, gardenias, azaleas and so many more he can’t name. It’s as though the garden has deliberately decided to produce more life after Kai Li’s plot to kill everyone and everything in this queendom.

Soon, they bump into a fence tucked away behind bushes of rosemary.

“Noya, what's this?” Asahi asks apprehensively. At some point, he managed to prise the basket out of Noya’s hand and is now carrying it. For someone his size, he can be surprisingly sneaky.

“Don't tell me you've never been here before?” Noya replies in disbelief. When Asahi shakes his head, he laughs and reaches forward to slide the latch of the gate out, unlocking the gate. “When I needed to stretch my legs and get some fresh air after hours of doing work, I’d explore the palace a little. The place’s huge, and there's plenty of land beyond the palace I hadn't seen yet. So I found this. I thought we could spend some alone time here.”

Asahi worries at his lower lip. “I don't know… It seems like a security hazard if you could unlock the gate so easily.”

“Don't worry about it! I asked nee-chan, and she said the land beyond this gate is still palace property. The gate’s just for—I dunno—aesthetic purposes? Anyway, let’s go!”

He bounds through, Asahi following behind him with more hesitation. They shut the gate behind them before turning to the hill in front of them. Reclaiming Asahi’s hand, he takes Asahi up the hill.

Already, Noya is enjoying the privacy of this area. For a place that belongs to the palace, it’s surprisingly empty. He would’ve thought more nobles and duchesses and dukes would have visited this more. There's only the quiet singsong chirping of birds, the gentle flowing of the clear river below them and the rustling of leaves as a light breeze blows by. He resolves to bring Asahi on more dates here.

In no time, they reach the top of the hill, and they're barely out of breath. The hill looks taller than it is.

Noya removes the cloth covering the basket and pulls out the thick blanket he managed to fold and fit inside with the combined efforts of him, Shouyou and Kageyama. Noya plops himself down with a happy sigh. He pats the spot next to him, gesturing for Asahi to sit next to him. Asahi nods and gracefully folds himself next to Noya. Reflexively, Noya leans closer, nuzzling Asahi’s chest and winding his arms around Asahi’s torso. Asahi’s arms encircle Noya’s waist, tugging him even closer, and he plants a light kiss on the top of Noya’s messy spikes. Asahi is still shy about displays of affection, though Noya can't say he's surprised. There's something endearing about Asahi’s gentle handling of Noya, like he's a precious work of art, even if Noya’s libido would really like Asahi to be a little (or a lot) rougher.

The view before them is magnificent. The deep purple sky stretches above and all around them like a satin dome, the little stars twinkling like diamonds sewn into the surface. Below them, trees dot the land and a clear blue stream winds its way between the rows of trees. The air is clear and fresh, carrying the smell of the stream up to them from below. Beautiful, peaceful and serene.

Noya’s stomach lets out a growl, promptly ruining the moment.

“Oh, you're hungry,” Asahi says, his eyes wide. “I'm sorry, I should've realised it. Here.” He rummages through the basket and produces a sandwich. Noya opens his mouth and Asahi feeds it to
him obligingly. As Noya chews on the bread, Asahi fishes a bunch of grapes out of the basket, plucks one and gently places it in Noya’s waiting mouth. If he weren’t so distracted by the food, he would’ve commented on how sensual this all is.

“You spoil me, Asahi,” Noya teases. He snatches the basket and pulls it to his side, reaching into it to produce a cracker. “Let me spoil you.”

“Well, I am your boyfriend,” Asahi says, smiling shyly. “It’s kinda my job to spoil you. I love you, Noya.”

A thrill of joy bursts in Noya’s chest. “I love you too.” Fueled by the warmth spreading from his chest to the rest of his body, he grabs Asahi’s jaw, tugs him down and slants his mouth over his. Asahi’s scruff tickles Noya’s chin—not that he minds it. If anything, he finds it incredibly arousing.

The kiss quickly heats up. Asahi, in a rare display of boldness, leans forward, forcing Noya backwards, until Noya finds himself flat on his back on the blanket. His heart races, slamming repeatedly against his chest. The view of Asahi above him, his long hair curtaining his face and lightly tickling Noya’s shoulders—well, it’s something Noya finds he would really like to get used to.

“Mmm, Noya, you're really cute, you know that?” Asahi mumbles. He lowers himself to press his face against the side of Noya’s neck, leaving soft open-mouthed kisses against his skin.

Noya shivers at the repeated contact of Asahi’s warm lips against his neck. He coils his arms tighter around Asahi’s broad back. “You know, if you'd like to, you can call me Yuu,” he whispers. His body temperature rises exponentially with each lingering kiss Asahi leaves against his neck, like there's something building up in him that needs a release.

“Do you—would you like that? If I call you by your given name, I mean.” Asahi’s brown eyes peer deeply into his, as if searching for the answers in them.

Noya presses a kiss against Asahi’s jaw. “You can call me whatever. Noya, Yuu—it doesn't matter much to me. As long as I know I'm the one you're calling.”

“Yuu,” Asahi murmurs, as if testing the sound of Noya’s name on his tongue. “Was that okay?”

Noya laughs, loud and unbridled. He smiles up at his wonderful, gentle, caring boyfriend. “Yes, of course. I’m cool with whatever you wanna call me. I'm happy as long as you're here with me.”

And it’s cheesy—cheese worth Daichi’s ‘inspirational’ speeches—but it’s the truth. After months of grief, suffering, uncertainty, pain, insecurity and so many other horrible feelings, he finally is happy. And after months of wanting to be safe, wanting his friends to be safe, and wanting Asahi, he finally is content. Of course, this isn’t the end of the road for him. He knows he still has many adventures and challenges ahead of him, but he knows now that he won’t ever have to go through them alone.

Like, ever.

And so, this was a story about some of the worst of humanity. Some of the most needlessly cruel acts of humanity. The people who built up walls. The people who gave up when the going got tough. The people who shattered, whose shards pierced those who came too close. The people who were
tired and wanted everything to end.

But this was also a story about some of the best of humanity. Some of the most selflessly loving acts of humanity. The people who climbed over the walls anyway and built a bridge whilst walking on it. The people who refused to give up when the going got tough, and the ones who were brave enough to come back even after they did. The people who held the shattered tight, knowing they could hurt themselves too, to squeeze the broken shards back together. The people who were tired and wanted everything to end, but kept going because they wanted to draw their own finishing line.

This was a story about love, and the optimism to believe in love in a world of hate. And love had always been Nishinoya Yuu’s greatest strength. And it’s not just his greatest strength—it’s the greatest strength of the friends all around him.

Noya and his newfound family were broken in their own individual ways, and they loved each other all the same.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY i am so emotional that this is over. i'm so happy I got to share this wild ride of a story with everyone and just—i'm just super emotional and happy.

this isn't the end! there's a compilation of one-shots that can be found here, it's a fun collection of side stories that didn't make it into the main story but i still wanted to tell. i'm open to requests, so if you have any requests i'd prefer if they're dropped in my tumblr ask box.

once again, a huge thank you to everyone who has left kudos and/or feedback, whether here or on my tumblr, or has given me silent support while reading. i appreciate each and every one of you who has given my story a shot <3

i'm fairly active on tumblr so if you wanna chat, feel free to drop by here!

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