Leave A Light On

by todxrxki

Summary

It is impossible, he knows. He is not human. It is only humans who experience such things, who are able to feel joy and happiness and sadness and grief. He is just a monster, a demon, a creature made from the leftovers.

But still, he wants to experience human things with a fervor he cannot describe.

In which a boy, raised inside of a highly unethical laboratory, comes to understand humanity through the love of the people who rescued him, but especially through his closest friend.

Notes

Trigger Warnings/Content Warnings for this chapter include:
- Child Abuse (Psychological/Emotional/Verbal/Physical)
- Somewhat Graphic Death
- Gun Violence

Please, please don't read if these topics are sensitive to you.

The combination repeats in sharp succession in his mind, cold and unfeeling. Perhaps, he thinks, he should feel some kind of connection to the letter and the numbers. They describe him; no, to be more precise, they are him. They are his only identifier. For as long as he can remember, they have been etched into the otherwise flawless skin of his forearm in foreboding black ink. They are all anyone refers to him as, beyond ‘freak’ and ‘demon’. So he thinks it’d be reasonable to feel some kind of connection to them.

But he does not. He despises the sound of them, as though they are nails being hammered into the wood of his ears, little by little, drilling in further every single day. They are a subtle reminder of his status. He has noticed that nearly everyone else he’s come into contact with is referred to by a name: Doctor Akiba. Doctor Kumagai. Doctor Morimoto. One of them has a son, referred to as Morimoto Kazu. Sometimes the doctors bring outsiders into the building: Higa Kansuke, Ota Norio, Otanori Iwane. They have a name, a solid reminder of their identity, a connection to who one is at one’s very core.

K3734 is not a name. K3734 is a mark. K3734 is his worst fear.

“K3734,” comes a deep, gruff voice from just outside of the iron bars in front of him. “On your feet.”

The boy in question slowly pushes himself up. He keeps his eyes low, trained on the ground, as he approaches the bars. He says nothing. He knows all too well that any words he says can be misinterpreted as signs of insubordination. The security guard pauses and scans him from head to toe, looking, he knows, for even the slightest indication of rebellion. Finally, the guard nods. “Today is day two,” he grunts. “Come. Now.”

The boy’s teeth sink into his lower lip as a cold chill covers him. Day two is among the worst of the days here. Day twos, he’s learned, consist of a lot of difficult questions about other people that he does not know nor care to find out about. And he can’t afford to miss any of the questions. He gives a slight nod of his head to appear acquiescent, then walks a pace behind the security guard down the hallway, his hands clenched into tight fists on either side of his body. As they keep walking, more and more security guards join them. He’s not entirely sure why, because he has never once tried to put up a fight. Still, he says nothing of it.

“Hello, K3734,” says a sweet, syrupy voice that leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. So today is
Doctor Kumagai, then. Kumagai, at least, is not as ruthless as Akiba, but not as easily persuaded as Morimoto. Today will only be moderately unbearable. The boy does not lift his head, not until Kumagai demands, “Look at me.”

He picks his head up and focuses his eyes on Kumagai’s forehead. The idea of making eye contact seems too bold and threatening. Thankfully, Kumagai doesn’t seem to notice or care that it’s not direct. “Sit down. You know the drill.”

“Yes,” he says as he sinks into the chair. His voice trembles a little at the end, and he winces, hoping that Kumagai won’t notice.

He is never so lucky. Kumagai’s eyes narrow. “Oh, what could you possibly have to be scared of? You realize that you are nothing but a monster, correct? You are the furthest thing from human. And yet we continue to allow you to live among us as though you were worthy of it. You would do well not to forget that, and to stop faking emotions, as though that could ever garner you any pity.”

The boy feels his heart speed up even more. Still, he tries to focus his eyes on Kumagai’s face and gives a single nod. He wills his body not to shake. “Yes, sir.”

“Let us begin,” Kumagai says, and then glances over to the left. “Enter.”

A man he has never seen before walks into the room. The man looks mysterious; his hat is pulled down so that the brim covers his forehead, and he is wearing sunglasses. His hands are fully covered by sleek black gloves and he has a long coat on, so long it almost reaches the floor. He does not dress like anyone that the boy has seen before. The man glances up at the boy, but his face conveys nothing.

“K3734, tell me this man’s name,” Kumagai commands.

The man’s name. Something crashes into the boy, something fast that slams straight into his chest. He has never seen this man before, much less been introduced to him. There is nothing on him that could give away any hints as to who he could be. The boy’s breath comes quicker as he desperately searches for an answer. Calm down, he tells himself in the privacy of his own head. Do not freak out yet. You have done this before.

There is only one solution, though, and he knows it. Kumagai knows it too. The problem is that he hates the solution so terribly much. The other problem is that the punishment for not solving this
question is infinitely worse.

The boy breathes in through his nose deeply, then out through his mouth, scrunching his eyes shut. He navigates through the space in front of him, his mind stretching out to poke at the mind of the man in front of him. The man’s defenses, thankfully, are not high, so he barrels straight through the barrier to his mind. Immediately, things come flooding into the mind of the boy.

A woman, smiling, her face painted with heavy makeup, as she leans in - for a kiss, the boy assumes. A young girl, reaching out to be picked up. An elderly man in the hospital, his breaths coming slower and slower until at last, they cease. A man in a dark suit, his face slack as he says, “I’m afraid we just don’t have a position for you here anymore”. All these scenes of someone else’s life, a real human’s life, all these scenes he has not been granted permission to view and should never be able to see. He fights through until he finds the painted face woman saying “Heiji, this isn’t going to work out,” and another memory of a man greeting him on the street with a “Hello, Wakuri-san.”

“Wakuri,” the boy says, taking care to keep his voice level this time. “Wakuri Heiji.”

Kumagai nods, picking up the pen to write something down on his paper. “Correct. Tell me about him.”

“He has a daughter,” the boy recites. “He used to have a wife, but they are now divorced. The wife was the one to request the divorce. He was recently fired from his work as an accountant. His father passed away three months ago. He does not have custody of his daughter at the moment.”

Wakuri Heiji looks positively terrified. It is a reaction the boy is all too familiar with. Every single person that comes into the lab looks somewhat apprehensive at first, but as the boy digs through their minds, dredges up everything they’ve tried so hard to keep hidden, that expression slowly devolves into abject terror. The boy knows that every person he’s encountered is terrified of him. The boy knows that he himself is a monster. This is what he deserves.

Kumagai smiles. “Good, K3734. Now, why did the wife request a divorce?”

The boy glances down at the ground, his heart skipping a beat. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”
“I - it wasn’t in his recent memories.”

“I would rethink that answer if I were you,” Kumagai says, his finger hovering just above the red button in front of him. “Go deeper.” He slowly presses down on the button, and immediately an electrical current flows through the boy’s body, sending his limbs into a spasm. It feels as though there’s red hot fire burning in his veins. Back when he first started day twos, he would scream as the electricity swarmed through him, but he’s trained himself to bite his lip to muffle his sobs. He finds that it’s far less embarrassing that way.

Wakuri Heiji looks to Kumagai, eyes wide. “Are you - is that ethical?”

Kumagai waves a hand. “He is not human. He does not feel. He’s just… very good at faking it.”

Once the current stops and the fire simmers down inside of the boy, he grits his teeth and inhales deeply, redirecting all of his energy into his mind. He stretches out again, his mind bursting through the barrier into Wakuri Heiji’s mind. Frantically, he pushes through past the recent memories, past the happy memories, past the mundane memories, all the way into the memories that Wakuri Heiji has tried his best to forget about. He uses all of his strength to force his way in.

The woman, his ex-wife, is sitting on the couch, her head in her hands. “Heiji, this isn’t going to work out.”

“No,” Nariko says, her mouth in a flat line. “I saw your messages with that Ikari from upstairs. What, you thought I wouldn’t find out? And you told me you were at the gym last week, but here I found out you were with Arata from work instead. Any opportunity you have, you take full advantage, eh?” She barks out a laugh. “I am not some young fool. I will not sit around and be played like this. I have lived far too many years.”

“I… I’m sorry,” Wakuri Heiji says, but it sounds flat, lifeless.

Nariko stares back. Her eyes are in flames, but the rest of her face conveys nothing. All she says is, “I hope it’s worth it.”

Suddenly, the boy is thrown back into the present moment, gasping for air. He twines his fingers
into the long strands of his own hair and holds on tight as he says, “He tried to cheat on her and she found out. I think he probably did cheat on her.”

“I would never!” Wakuri Heiji splutters, but the exaggerated wideness of his eyes makes it obvious that he is lying.

“Very good,” Kumagai says approvingly. He glares at the man. “Out, now. And tell the next one to come in.”

It goes on like this, person after person. They bring in four more people and implore the boy to delve into their minds, extracting their greatest secrets. It gets harder and harder every time. As the boy’s energy depletes, each attempt takes more time and therefore results in more electric shocks. By the time the last man leaves, after the boy informs Kumagai that said man had left a boy on his basketball team to drown back in the seventh grade because of his cowardice, the boy is positively exhausted. He does not allow himself to sag, though. Instead, he forces himself to stay upright.

“That was passable,” Kumagai says. “But you need to improve your stamina greatly, or else you will be just as worthless to us as you have ever been, leaving us with no choice but to eliminate you.”

Elimination. The word sends a shiver up the boy’s spine as he pictures the other experiments he has been acquainted with over the course of his life, other creations that outlasted their usefulness and then were never seen again. He’d heard them being yelled at while walking down the hallways, things such as “terrible stamina” and “useless powers” and “subhuman scum”. He’d simply tilted his head further down and hoped it wouldn’t be him next.

“Yes, sir,” the boy says. *Don’t let it be me.*

“Good,” Kumagai says darkly. “Tomorrow is day three. I dearly hope your control powers have improved since last session.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy says. His powers have not improved since last session. He does not know how to improve them.

“The guards will bring you a meal soon. Now get out, I have more important sessions to do today.”
The boy gets to his feet shakily. Before the man can notice his trembling, he scurries out of the room, keeping his eyes on the floor. The floor is safe and solid. The floor is not painful to look at. The floor itself won’t harm him.

As he is locked back into his cell, a plate of bland bread and carrots plus a glass of water slid through a small hole, he thinks back to one of the women whose memories he had parsed through. He’d seen one of her treasured memories - a childhood memory. She’d been around his age, her hair tied back a ponytail as she sat on a seat attached to chains that moved back and forth through the air. There was a smile on her face, a brightness in her eyes, a look of such absolute joy that he didn’t want to look away. He’d kept it tucked away in his own mind.

It is impossible, he knows as he thinks of it now. He is not human. It is only humans who experience such things, who are able to feel joy and happiness and sadness and grief. He is just a monster, a demon, a creature made from the leftovers.

But still, he wants to experience these human things with a fervor he cannot describe.

“Day five,” Morimoto says from across the table. Morimoto’s son, just a small child, sits in the corner, babbling away to himself as he plays with a colorful star-shaped toy. The older boy drags his attention away from the small child to focus on Morimoto, who takes out a vase from under the table and places it on top of the table. “K3734, can you do something for me?”

The demand is framed as a request, but the boy knows better. Even the gentlest of the doctors clearly has threats lurking behind his words. He holds himself straight as he says, “Yes. What is it?”

“I need you to move this vase onto the floor without breaking it,” Morimoto says.

“It would be easiest to do so using my hands,” the boy says.

“Yes, that is true. But that’s not how we want you to do it right now, and you should know that. Or need I explain it to you again?”

It is a threat, and the boy is well aware of this fact. Those who cannot follow and remember
instructions are the first to be eliminated. The boy focuses all of his energy onto the vase this time, feeling his way around the vase with his mind, slipping it into his grasp. Carefully, he lifts it just an inch off the table, then slowly, slowly, lowers it down onto the floor. He is sweating profusely by the time the vase touches the ground, and he sighs in relief as he releases and the vase does not fall.

“You know, K3734, you do a remarkably good job at playing human,” Morimoto tells him, his mouth drawn into a thin line. “Had I not known you your entire life, I might actually believe you were displaying human emotions.”

The boy knows better than to reply back. It’s the truth, anyways. As an inhuman creation, it is not as though he even has the potential to experience emotion. So he simply nods, his head tucked downwards.

“It’s an impressive skill, but really quite annoying,” Morimoto says darkly. “Anyways, put the vase back on the table.”

The boy does as he is asked, fixating his mind back onto the vase and slowly, carefully, setting it back onto the table in the same position as before. Morimoto sighs, tapping his foot on the floor. “You’re far too slow, K3734. I’ve been trying to convince the others that it’s not time to get rid of you yet, but if you keep it up with these lackluster results, I’m afraid you’ll be useless to us and we will have no choice.”

The boy inhales sharply, feeling the beat of his heart in his throat. He nods, but he knows this means he has no chance of survival. There is no way he can increase speed without sacrificing precision. Certainly not without hours upon hours of practice, which, given the schedule he’s been given, he has no time for. If he were to argue, though, to point out any of this, he would most certainly be eliminated at once. So he ignores the pounding of his heart. “Okay. I will improve.”

Morimoto checks something off on the clipboard in front of him. “I should hope so. Next, send that vase flying into the wall.”

“You… want me to break it?” the boy asks hesitantly.

“Yes. It would do you well to listen to instructions when they are given the first time and follow through immediately,” Morimoto says, but at the very least, he does not offer any form of punishment.
The boy fixates all of his energy on the vase again. The motion to sling something, he knows, is much different than the motion used to pick something up and move it. It’s more of a flick of the wrist. He takes the vase, lifts it up, and then, with a quick burst of all the energy pent up inside of him, slams it into the wall. The vase shatters in front of his eyes. *I can’t be eliminated yet,* he thinks to himself. *I have to be useful somehow.*

“Hm,” Morimoto says, tapping his pen against the paper. “K3734, that was much better than last week. Much more force. You may prove yourself useful yet.”

The boy tilts in acknowledgment. Before he can form a reply, though, a wail sounds from the corner of the room. Morimoto’s head snaps back around to look at the boy in the corner. “Oh, Kazu,” he says, standing up to walk over and scoop up the child into his arms. “Did that scare you? Don’t worry, now. Daddy will protect you from all the monsters in this world.”

The last part is directed very pointedly at the boy across from him. Kazu, who has calmed down very quickly at the soothing tone in his dad’s voice, just babbles away, his hands grabbing at pieces of Morimoto’s hair. The boy stares at the shiny, black tone of Morimoto’s hair, then changes his attentions to a piece of his own hair that has fallen into his eyes. It’s a bright yellow color. Different. Part of what makes him inhuman.

He never wanted to be this way.

After dinner, Doctor Akiba calls him to a sparring session. The guards march with him down the hallway into an empty room, a room with white walls and a stark white ceiling. It feels so bland and dim. He imagines the memories he’s divulged from other people, visions of a world outside the constraining walls of this building, a world where there is color everywhere - color on the walls, color in the sky, color in the plants, colors everywhere he looks. He tries to keep that image in mind as Akiba sneers at him.

“Hello, K3734,” she says, scowling. “I hear you’re this close to elimination. Only thing keeping you around is your potential for fighting.”

“Yes,” he says. He had figured as much during his session with Morimoto. He’s improved in his ability to sling objects, and that coupled with decent mind reading and his decent capacity for mind control makes him an ideal weapon.
“But there is no way you can be used in a fight if you can’t defend yourself,” Akiba snarls. She launches herself at the boy without further warning, a knife in her curled fist. The boy sees it coming mere seconds before the knife pierces his flesh and steps to the side, letting the knife pierce the flawless white expanse of the wall behind him. He doesn’t move far enough, though, to stop the woman’s foot from colliding with his calf, sending him sprawling backwards onto the ground. She crosses her arms. “So not only are you a demon, you’re an idiot too. You can’t win this fight without using your powers.”

The boy is not convinced he even wants to win this fight. He doesn’t like using his powers, really, and actually trying at this would be incredibly tiring. It seems better just to accept the pain and let Akiba win. But then he remembers how close he is to elimination, how his utility in a fight could be the only thing that saves him. He exhales deeply. Perhaps if he were to win this fight, to show how good he has the capability to be, they would start sending him on missions and prolong his life just a little bit longer. It seems actually trying at this fight is a necessity, then.

He pokes at Akiba’s brain. At first, a long thread of memories flood into his brain: Akiba being sneered at by a classmate, who says that girls are naturally worse at science, and that’s why she’s at the bottom of the class. A young boy in front of her, his eyebrows creased as he snarls, “Gross. Like I’d ever be friends with someone like you.” He winces, pushes further in, until he can hear her current thoughts a little more clearly. *Attack from the right… start out with knife again and lead into a kick…*

This time the boy is able to dodge. He steps further to the left, jumps over her flying leg, and lands back on his feet. She eyes him with something like approval coloring her face. “Hm. Maybe Morimoto was right and you’re not completely useless.” *Still won’t see this coming, though.*

The boy throws himself back just in time, the knife inches from his leg. He pushes out again, this time his mind latching onto the knife. He gives it a tug with all of his strength, sending it flying. He does not trust himself to catch the knife; instead, he ducks just enough so that the knife flies into the wall, hard enough so that it sticks about halfway in. Quickly, he pushes himself back up to his feet so that he can beat the stunned doctor to the knife. He pulls it back out, clutching it tightly in his small hands. Akiba blinks. *No fucking way. This kid was all but useless last fight. What changed?*

What she says, though, is “Exactly what I’d expect from a soulless monster. But if you can be of use to us, I guess we’ll keep you around for now.” She rips the knife from his hands and kicks him straight in his ribcage, sending him sprawling down onto the ground. A smirk spreads over her face. “But you’d better work on keeping your guard up.” She turns around, her hair flying over her shoulder, and stalks out of the room.

The boy lets go of her mind, of any hold he had over the knife, and collapses fully on the ground. His arms fall to the side and his hair spreads out like a halo above his head. “I am a weapon,” he
mutters aloud. “I am K3734.”

The words taste like poison on his tongue. He does not want to be a weapon. He does not want to hurt anyone, and he certainly does not want to kill anyone.

But he is a monster. He is not human. So he does not get a choice in the matter, it seems.

His training gets kicked up a few notches. They have him throwing around larger and larger objects, piercing into the minds of convicts, seeing all kinds of unspeakable things and repeating them back to the doctors. Not only does he spar against doctors, he also spars against other people from outside of the laboratory three to four times his size. He has to use every available drop of his power to even stand a chance.

At the end of the day, he returns to his quarters, exhausted, bruised, and often bloody. He stares at the jet black of the wall in front of him and reminds himself why he is doing this. One day, one day soon, he will go on a mission outside of the laboratory. One day, he will be able to look up and see color. It might come at a price, but no price is too much to pay.

After a few weeks, Akiba calls him into her office. She stares him down with her cold, dark eyes. “I’m not convinced you’re ready yet.”

“Yes,” he breathes. That is okay, he tells himself. It’s a disappointment to hear that he will have to try even harder, but maybe there’s more he can do to improve himself… maybe he can somehow increase his power level… maybe he can…

“But,” Akiba says, interrupting his train of thought, “the rest of the team seems to think you are. You will be sent on your first elimination mission tomorrow. We have caught word of a man who is conducting an intense investigation of this laboratory. You will be sent out to end him. Is that clear?”

It is clear. Too clear, in fact. It is exactly what the boy had feared, that he would have to kill someone, to end the life of a real, living, breathing person who has done nothing wrong. It is absolutely horrifying. It is the last thing that he has ever wanted to do. As he imagines it, he can feel his eyes start to water. He swallows deeply, digs his nails into his palms to prevent any leakage of his eyes. “Yes.”
“Don’t look so devastated, freak,” Akiba says with an eye roll. “This is what you were made for. It’s not like you have a soul to kill anyways.” Her hand comes up to cup his chin, her sharp nails digging into his chin. She tilts his face up to look at him, her eyes piercing, and her scowl deepens. “It’s almost terrifying how inhuman you are,” she says quietly, then releases his face roughly. “Get out. Get some rest so you’re not useless on the mission tomorrow.”

The boy nods and leaps out of the chair, darting out of the room and back to his quarters. He lies down on the cot and stares at the ceiling, but no matter how hard he tries, he cannot coerce himself to fall asleep. The scent of fresh blood is pungent in his room.

Sometime in the middle of the night, the boy is startled out of his half-asleep state by the sound of a blaring alarm. He shoots up out of his bed, his mind whirring. In all of the years that he’s been there, he has never heard this alarm except for during an occasional drill. He certainly has never heard the loud screams and gunshots that are happening along with the alarm right now.

He has no idea what to do. It’s true that he has been trained for battle, but not a battle at the laboratory, and certainly not a battle where he has no idea who the bad guys and the good guys are. He does not want to go out there. He does not want to face the reality of death or to have to use his powers to kill other people. So instead he shrinks into the corner, wrapping his arms around his legs and pulling them close. He takes the blanket from his cot and drapes it around his body, as though it could offer some form of protection. And so he sits for what could be minutes, or could be hours. His entire body shakes as the gunshots and yells get closer and closer.

Then the door to his quarters is unceremoniously thrown open. Quickly, a man steps in. “Anyone in here?” he yells. The boy does not respond; he doesn’t know who the man is, and he’s hyperaware that the man could very well be his enemy. The man glances around the room and his gaze falls on the boy in the corner. “Hands up!” the man yells again, his voice rough.

The boy’s heart rate picks up even more. He lifts up his arms slowly, his eyes wide, and the man blinks. “Oh, shit,” the man says. “You’re just… just a kid.” He steps slowly towards the boy, kneeling down in front of him. “What’s your name, buddy?”

“Name,” the boy repeats, then shakes his head. “No. I… I don’t have one.”

“You… don’t have a name?” the man repeats. The boy feels another piercing pain through his
heart at yet another reminder that he is abnormal, not human, but he still nods. The man swallows. “How long have you been here then?”

The boy sits for a minute, considering. He doesn’t really know how long he’s been here, but it’s been a long time - days and weeks and months and years. He hasn’t bothered to keep track because they seemed endless. The only word he can think of to describe it is, “Forever.”

“Forever.” the man repeats, his eyes even wider. He shakes his head. “Shit, those bastards. They’ve been fucking up the lives of children? Okay, well, let me ask you this, then. Do you want to leave?”

The boy knows that he does not know this man. He has no clue about this man’s background. The man could very well be even worse than the doctors at the laboratory, and clearly he has no idea about the boy’s abilities and how much of a monster he is. But yet, already this man has treated him with a semblance of humanity, and that is… more than he has ever had before. So, without a second of hesitation, he nods vehemently.

“Ohkay,” the man says, and suddenly he steps forward, his hands grabbing at the boy. The boy winces back on reflex, but then tells himself that it’s okay, that this man is trying to help him. Something flickers in the man’s eyes before he takes ahold of the boy and helps him onto his back. “Hold on tight, okay? I’m gonna get you out of here.”

The boy nods into the rough, dark fabric of the man’s jacket and holds on for dear life.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: description of corpses, discussion of past childhood abuse, PTSD symptoms (nightmares).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Don’t look,” the man hisses once they enter the hallways. Unfortunately, though, his words come just a minute too late. The boy has already seen what’s become of the pristine white laboratory. There are bodies strewn everywhere, body parts twisted at unnatural angles, blood spatters painting the white walls a deep red. The eyes of the people on the ground stare back at him, their eyes glassy, unseeing, staring into nothing. The scent of decaying flesh is overwhelming. The boy turns to bury his head into the man’s jacket, inhaling the unfamiliar scent. Its unfamiliarity is almost comforting, in a way. He never wants to smell this place again.

With a pat on the boy’s leg in warning, the man takes off into a run. The boy clings on, trying not to dig his nails in to the man’s flesh lest he unintentionally cause him any pain, but desperately not wanting to fall off and be left here. He can’t imagine what he would do — alone in a maze of corpses, left to fend for himself in this nightmare. He feels his breath start to come faster and faster. The man fires off a couple of gunshots, and the boy feels a bullet zip past his shoulder. A little knot forms in his stomach as he internally laments not being able to help at all. After all, he has been trained to fight. There’s no reason he wouldn’t be able to help. But then they’re bursting through the doors of the laboratory and he forgets to think at all.

For the first time in his life that he can remember, he is outside. Outside! In the real world, outside of the laboratory! He takes in a deep breath and chokes, his breath stuttering in his lungs. The air here tastes different - fresher, he thinks, warmer, less sterile. The man crouches down so that he can get off his back, and the boy stumbles to the ground, his hands landing in something soft. Grass, he realizes. It doesn’t feel anything like he’d expected it to. Not as sharp.

He looks around, taking everything in. It’s still dark. When he glances up, he can see little flecks of light decorating the sky. There is a huge expanse of lush green grass, a sprinkling of tall trees, and a charcoal black road leading out past the laboratory. This is the real world, he thinks. This is everything he’s been missing. He’s finally here.

“You’ve never been outside,” the man says, as if in realization.
“No,” he says, even though it’s not really a question. “I haven’t.”

“God, those sons of bitches,” the man curses, and even though the boy doesn’t completely understand his anger, he fully agrees. The man holds out a hand towards him. “Come on, I’ll take you to my car.”

“Car,” the boy says. He knows what a car is, technically; he’s seen enough of them in memories, but the concept is still kind of terrifying to him. Before he can voice a word of protest, though, he’s been dragged over to a car: half white, half black, with words on the side of it. The man opens the back door and settles the boy into one of the seats. Next, the man pulls a strap of fabric over the boy’s chest and then there’s a clicking noise and… he’s trapped. Oh, no, he’s trapped. He should have known better than to trust someone he first met, this guy is probably working with the laboratory, and now he’s going to take him somewhere else to be tortured; good guys don’t trap people —

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong?” the man asks, patting him gently on the shoulder.

“Let me go,” he hisses, feeling his throat starting to close up. “Let me go, you can’t trap me like this, I’ll just - “

“Oh,” the man says, stepping back. The boy hears a click and then the fabric is gone. “Oh, you’ve never been in a car before, huh? See, this is called a seat belt, okay? It’s not here to trap you. Look.” He puts the fabric back. There’s another click, and once again he’s trapped. This time the man leans over and points at a red button. “If you press this, you can release it yourself. So you’re not trapped. Okay? It’s just here in case something bad happens and the car stops really fast so you won’t go flying out of it.”

The boy presses down on the button and sure enough, the belt loosens. He puts the belt back into its container and nods. “Okay.”

“Okay,” the man says. “I’ll be right up front, okay?”

“Where are we going?” the boy asks. His heart is still beating so fast. He wants it to slow down.

“We’re going to where I work,” the man says. “Those guys… they’re bad. And they’re going to get in trouble for what they did to you and all those other kids. But to do that, I need you to talk to some of my friends. Can you do that for me?”
The boy thinks for a second. He doesn’t particularly like talking to new people, especially considering how terrified new people typically are of him, but this guy seems okay. And if it means that he will never have to be a part of the laboratory again, under the control of those people again, he’ll do anything - regardless of how much he doesn’t want to. So he nods. “Okay.”

“Okay,” the man says, visibly relieved. The car starts to move, which is a new sensation that makes the boy’s heart beat even faster, but the movement of the car is smoother than he’d imagined. After a few minutes of silence, with just the roar of the car as background noise, the boy’s heart starts to slow down and he feels… better. Then the man says, “Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Kuroo Hachiro.”

“Nice to meet you, Kuroo-san,” the boy says in response.

Kuroo Hachiro chuckles. “You’re very well-mannered, huh? Not at all like my boy back home. He’s about your age, I think. Say, how old are you? Do you know?” The boy shakes his head in response, and the man growls. “Those sons of bitches. About ten, I bet. Maybe a small eleven. My boy’s twelve. But we’ll talk to the doctor soon, I’m sure they know better than me.”

“Sons of bitches,” the boy agrees flatly.

Kuroo Hachiro laughs again. “Hey, kid, you’d better not tell anyone I taught you that, all right? You ever been to a doctor before?”

“Yes,” the boy says. “Every week. Lots of tests. Brain scans too.”

“Shit,” Kuroo Hachiro says, shaking his head. “They’re crazy, all of them. Lunatics. But we got you out of there, all right? So don’t worry. No more of that.”

He doesn’t really think that he has the ability to worry, even if he tried, but still, his body does feel better when he’s not constantly thinking about when his next training session is. He feels lighter just knowing he’ll never have to do that again. He also feels lighter as he glues himself to the window, watching the trees speed by. Then suddenly there are buildings, too. There are big buildings, and short buildings, and so many people walking down the streets - lots and lots of different people. None of them have hair as bright as his, but they’re all still so different in their outfits and their sizes and their ages, and it’s the coolest thing he’s ever experienced. There are animals on the street too, sometimes. Dogs, which he’s never seen in real life! Cats, which he’s always so wanted to see! Little squirrels with their curly tails! He’s almost disappointed when the
car stops and Kuroo Hachiro opens his door. “Okay, come on. We’re just going inside.”

The sign outside proclaims that they are at a police station. The boy doesn’t know much about the police, besides vague flashes from memories of criminals having run-ins with them, and the police had always seemed so angry in those memories. The boy dearly hopes all the other policemen are like Kuroo Hachiro and won’t be angry with him. He gulps as Kuroo Hachiro opens the door, and Kuroo Hachiro gives a reassuring smile. “You have nothing to worry about. They’re just gonna ask you some questions, okay?”

“W… will I be punished if I don’t answer them? Or i-if I answer them wrong?” the boy asks. He hopes Kuroo Hachiro won’t be mad at him for stuttering, or for asking, but he needs to know what this type of training involves.

“Punished?” Kuroo Hachiro’s eyes widen, and then narrow. “Those fuck- I mean, no, no, of course you won’t be punished. And there aren’t any wrong answers. We just want to talk to you about everything that’s happened in your life, okay? No one’s going to hurt you. I promise.”

“Promise,” the boy repeats.

“Yeah, you know, something you tell someone you’ll do that you’d never lie about,” Kuroo Hachiro says.

“Okay,” the boy says. He still is a little suspicious, but he decides it can’t hurt. There’s a little part of him that trusts Kuroo Hachiro. He’s not a hundred percent sure why.

The boy gets out and follows Kuroo Hachiro into the building, his arms crossed tightly across his chest. His immaculate white outfit has gotten dirty for the first time, he notices. It’s stained with red, probably blood, and something black as well. He wonders what the people here must think of him. He’s almost tempted to prod into their minds to find out, but he hates doing it so much, and it also seems like a bad thing to do. Kuroo Hachiro leads him to a back room, and he sits down in a chair beside him. Another man joins them, settling down in a chair across the table.

“Hey, this is my co-worker, Okura-san,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “Okura, this is one of the kids from the facility we infiltrated.”

“Hey, kid,” Okura says with a nod, then turns to Kuroo Hachiro. “He doesn’t have a name?”
Kuroo Hachiro shakes his head. “No name, no idea about his age, nothing. He talks fluently, though, and seems to understand everything I say.”

Okura nods and scribbles something down. It reminds the boy vaguely of Morimoto, which sets his heart off pounding fast again. Okura says, “Kid, you ever been to school?”

The boy shakes his head. “No. They taught me how to speak, read, and write, though. They said that for someone like me, everything else isn’t important.”

Okura stops writing. He sets down his pen and cocks his head. “Someone like you?”

“Yes,” the boy says. He tilts his head further down so that his hair spills into his face. He doesn’t want to see their faces when he confesses this last part. “I am not human.”

“Not human?” Okura asks, something like a laugh tucked into his voice. “Kid, I hate to break it to you, but you got oxygenated blood flowin' through those veins just like the rest of us. You’re human.”

The boy sighs. He doesn’t really want to belabor the matter any further, so he figures that the easiest way is just to show them, as much as he doesn’t want to. He feels around until he’s able to grasp one of the pencils on the table and raise it into the air. And then, with just a flick, he sends the pencil flying at the wall. He releases directly afterwards, feeling his body sag. Once again, he’s found he absolutely hates the use of his power. “See,” he says, sinking back into the chair.

“Holy shit,” Kuroo Hachiro breathes.

“So they really were doin’ human experimentation at that lab,” Okura mutters. “Can’t wait till they get what’s comin’ to ‘em. Doin’ this to innocent kids for their own gain. Fuckers.”

The boy peers up at Kuroo Hachiro and Okura. Both of them are staring at him, but not with the wide eyes and frozen bodies he’s used to; no, there’s some other emotion in their eyes, one he’s unfamiliar with. They don’t look scared of him. They aren’t calling him a monster. No, it seems as though they’re just angry at the laboratory, and… sad, maybe, sad for him. The boy doesn’t know what to do with that.

“I’m a monster,” he tells them, because he needs them to know. He doesn’t want to hurt them. He
doesn’t want to *disappoint* them. “I’m not human, I’m a freak, I’m a -“

“No,” Kuroo Hachiro interrupts firmly. “Nothing that’s happened to you was your fault. I need you to know that. You are not a monster. Those people that did this to you? They’re the monsters. Do you understand?”

The boy knows he has to answer this question. It sounds a lot like the threats that he’s heard from the people at the laboratory. He also knows he must answer it with a yes, because that’s what Kuroo Hachiro is looking for, but it’s not as though he actually believes it. He’s seen what he can do, how he can hurt. Still, he says, “Yes, I understand.”

“Good,” Kuroo Hachiro says, leaning back.

“What else can you do?” Okura asks.

“I can… I can read people’s minds,” the boy says hesitantly. “Read their memories. I can even control them sometimes, but I’m not very good at it. And I am… was learning to um. To use time. Go back and forth.”

“Okay,” Okura says, blinking rapidly. He leans back in his chair a little. “Okay, that’s good to know. I’m gonna say again that you’re not a monster, okay? But still, right now, don’t use your powers, all right?”

“I wasn’t going to,” the boy says, a little petulantly. “I don’t like using them anyways. I only used them when they made me.”

Kuroo Hachiro shakes his head. “Poor kid.”

“Yeah,” Okura says in agreement, scribbling something down. “Okay. What did they do to you if you didn’t do what they asked?”

It goes on like this, question after question, for a lot of minutes, so many the boy loses count. They ask about the laboratory, about the electric shocks, about the beatings, about the sparring. They ask for as many details as he can remember on all of the doctors. They ask for his living conditions, his meal plan, every single thing about his years spent at the laboratory. And the boy absolutely despises talking about all of it. It makes him feel sick to think about that place, especially now,
when he’s gone from it and there’s a chance he might never have to go back. Eventually, Kuroo Hachiro seems to pick up on this, because he says, “Maybe we should have a break.”

“Yeah,” Okura agrees, setting down his pen. “Kid, you stay here for a few minutes, okay? We’ll bring you back a drink and some snacks.”

The boy nods, not really wanting to be alone but knowing he probably shouldn’t argue. The two men leave the room. After only a few minutes, though, Kuroo Hachiro returns, someone tucked behind his leg. “We thought it could be good for you to talk to someone your age for a little bit,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “This is my son, Kuroo Tetsurou. He’ll stay with you while we go get some food, okay? He’s a nice boy.”

The boy nods again as Kuroo Hachiro heads off, leaving behind a boy a little taller than the blonde boy, a boy with dark spiky hair, bright dark eyes, and a big red hoodie. What weird hair, the blonde boy can’t help but think as he observes the other boy. Kuroo Tetsurou stands up straight, his head held high, and smiles. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“I-I don’t have a name,” the boy stutters out, his heart beating fast again.

“Huh,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, crossing his arms. “That won’t work! Everyone’s gotta have a name. What do people call you when they need you, then?”

The boy inhales deeply before forcing himself to say, “Uh, K-K3734.”

“K3734,” Kuroo repeats. He walks over to the table and picks up one of the pieces of paper, scribbling down K3734 on it and peering at it. “Well, that’s not a name, but y’know, it kinda looks like one! Like if you made this 3 into an E, and the 7 into an N, and then this 3 could be an M, and the 4 could be an A - see, now it’s Kenma!” He grins and scribbles the kanji down below it.

“Kenma,” the boy repeats, staring at the paper. It’s… familiar, somehow, as if it was something he was always meant to have. It makes his body feel warm all over. And the way that Kuroo Tetsurou is grinning at him makes him feel even warmer somehow. Kuroo Hachiro was good to him, so the boy should have naturally assumed that his son would be good as well, but it’s nice to have this confirmation. He nods. “Kenma is good.”

“Kenma it is then,” Kuroo says, sitting back down across the table. “But Kenma’s just a first name. Hey, I read this book recently, though, about this really cool warrior with the last name Kozume!
He was super brave and fought hard all the time. Do you think that’d be a cool family name to have?”

Kozume, the boy thinks to himself. Kozume Kenma. He doesn’t think he’s particularly brave at all, but maybe if he has a name that’s associated with someone brave, then he’ll have to naturally become even braver to match the name. So he nods - Kenma nods. “Kozume Kenma. I’m… Kozume Kenma.”

“Hell yeah you are,” Kuroo says. He is still smiling. It makes Kenma feel warm all over now, but it also kind of makes his stomach twist. Kenma has never really had the opportunity to socialize with kids his age before. He’d tried, a couple of years ago, to talk to some of the other kids in the laboratory. But the first and only friend he’d ever made was eliminated a mere two months after Kenma had started talking to him. The doctors had said that the other boy was useless, that he didn’t try hard enough, even though Kenma was rather under the impression that he tried harder than anyone. So after that Kenma had stopped trying, and eventually he didn’t even have the time anyways. Therefore, it’s a little odd to be sitting here with someone his age now, someone that he’s finding he kind of enjoys spending time with. Kuroo continues, “So you’re from the lab, right? This is your first time out in the real world?”

“Yeah,” Kenma says.

“Have you had real food yet?” Kuroo asks. “I bet they fed you all sorts of gross stuff in the lab, didn’t they?”

“Mostly just dry bread,” Kenma tells him. “And water. And sometimes carrots and asparagus and stuff like that.”

“That sounds disgusting,” Kuroo says, wrinkling up his nose. “I’m gonna text my dad, tell him to bring you back some pie, yeah? I think you’re gonna like pie.”

“Pie,” Kenma repeats. He’s seen pies before in people’s memories, and they always seemed to have such fond memories of it. Suddenly he really, really wants a pie. “Pie sounds good.”

“Okay, cool. Pie for breakfast,” Kuroo says. “Hey, so you’ve never watched TV then, right?”

“Uh, no,” Kenma replies. He only vaguely even knows what a TV is.
“Then you’ve never seen my favorite TV program!” Kuroo says, gesturing wildly. “So there’s this space pilot, right, and he…”

For the next twenty or so minutes, they continue on like this. Kuroo tells long stories with a lot of hand gestures and peppers him with questions about everything. Most of his questions, unlike the policemen’s, aren’t too deep; they mostly focus around things he hasn’t eaten, or things he hasn’t seen, or places he hasn’t been. Everything he says he hasn’t experienced, Kuroo makes a vow to introduce him to. Then a knock sounds on the door and Kuroo Hachiro walks in, carrying a pie and some drinks with steam rising up off of them.

“I brought pie and hot chocolate, at Tetsurou’s request,” Kuroo Hachiro says, smiling softly.

“Thanks, Dad, you’re the best,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, launching himself at his father for a hug. Kenma watches. There’s something unfamiliar stirring in his chest. For some reason, he suddenly wonders what it would be like to have someone touch him so fondly, to be held in someone’s arms in such a reassuring manner. Then he blinks, pulling himself out of it. It’s not helpful to fantasize, he knows. Even now, even with all of this, he’s not human. He’s not like Kuroo Tetsurou. He can’t have what Kuroo Tetsurou has. Kuroo Tetsurou continues, “Oh, guess what, Dad! He has a name now. His name is Kenma. Kozume Kenma.”

“Kozume Kenma, eh?” Kuroo Hachiro asks. “You let this ruffian name you? It’s not a bad name, though, I think. It’s fitting.” He shrugs, sitting back down at the table and scrawling Kozume Kenma across the papers he and Okura had been writing on.

“Dad, can Kenma come to our house sometime?” Kuroo Tetsurou asks, tugging on his dad’s arm. “I told him I’d let him come watch our TV and see our game system and stuff. He’s never done stuff like that before.”

“Actually,” Kuroo Hachiro says, “I was coming to ask you both something about that. You see, the police department has agreed it’d probably be best if Kenma came to stay with us for a little bit, but only if you’re both okay with it. Is that something you’d want?”

“That’d be great,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, nodding vehemently.

Kuroo Hachiro smiles, then turns to look at Kenma. “Kenma? How about you?”

Kenma considers for a minute. He imagines being able to spend every day with Kuroo Tetsurou
and Kuroo Hachiro, to live the way that Kuroo Tetsurou describes, watching TV series and playing video games and eating pies and… living, living like a human boy would. It sounds better than anything he could have imagined back in the laboratory. It sounds better than he deserves. But he is selfish, so he says, “I would like that a lot.”

“Then it’s settled,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “I’m gonna make a couple of calls, but you two dig in.”

The pie is heavenly. That’s the only way Kenma can think to describe it. He knew it was going to be good, better than anything he’d eaten in the laboratory for certain, but it’s like taking a bite out of heaven itself. The richest flavors combine in his mouth, sweet and chewy and soft. And then he washes it down with the hot chocolate, and he thinks he might just die here and now.

Kuroo Tetsurou glances over at him and sees the expression on his face. He gives a small smirk. “You’re enjoying it, huh? Told you it was good.”

“It’s really, really good,” Kenma says, shoveling another mouthful into his mouth.

Kuroo laughs. “Eat as much as you want. You deserve it.”

That isn’t true. Kenma definitely does not deserve anything half as good as this. Still, he doesn’t have the heart to tell Kuroo this.

Kuroo Hachiro returns a few minutes later, once the entire pie is gone, and shakes his head. “Should’ve known you two would eat the whole thing. Hey, Tetsu, go get your stuff, okay? We’ll head out in a few minutes. But I need to talk to Kenma here for a minute first.”

Kuroo Tetsurou nods and takes off. Kuroo Hachiro turns to him. “You know, Tetsurou’s always been a talkative boy at home, but he’s not usually so talkative around people his age. It’s interesting that he's talking so much now.” He pauses, then says, “But you’re sure you’re okay with staying with us?”

“Positive,” Kenma says, doing his utmost to make his voice sound as confident about the decision as he feels.

Kuroo Hachiro nods. “Good. We’re happy to have you. So you’ll stay with us for however long you need. Bad news, though, you’re going to come back here tomorrow afternoon after your
“Doctor’s appointment,” Kenma says, feeling his heart sinking slowly down into his chest.

“It won’t be half as intense as the ones you’ve had, I assure you,” Kuroo Hachiro tells him. “Just some basic vitals. If they do a brain scan, which they might need to given your… unique powers, then it’ll only be one. Nothing unnecessary, and nothing very painful. And the doctors here are kind people. Plus, I will stay with you the entire time, I swear.”

“Okay,” Kenma says, but his voice still shakes a little bit, and he’s not sure why.

He and Kuroo Hachiro meet Kuroo Tetsurou at the car. This time, the back of the car isn’t so lonely with Kuroo Tetsurou there as well. Kuroo Hachiro asks his son about volleyball, which starts off a whole new wave of chatter. It’s obvious within seconds that volleyball is something that Kuroo Tetsurou loves immensely. Kenma does not know much about volleyball, but he’s heard a little bit from the minds of people, enough to know that it is a team sport, so Kenma asks, “Do you play on a team?”

“He should,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “But he won’t.”

“I can’t, Dad,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, and for the first time since Kenma’s met him, his voice is low, quiet, almost. “I’m no good with new people and places and stuff.”

Kenma looks over at him curiously. From the second Kenma had met him tonight, Kuroo Tetsurou had been very talkative, very friendly, very warm. Never for a second would Kenma have even considered that he wasn’t good with new people. But there’s something in the shine of Kuroo Tetsurou’s eyes and the down tilt of his mouth that conveys that he is very serious about this. Kuroo Hachiro looks as though he’s going to say something along those lines by the way he glances back and forth between Kenma and Kuroo Tetsurou, but then shakes his head. “I still think it’s a waste.”

They arrive home just a few minutes later, and Kuroo Tetsurou drags him in to meet the other two people that live in the house, the Kuroo grandparents: Kuroo Tatmotsu and Kuroo Homugi. They both greet him warmly, even when Kuroo Hachiro informs them of his background, of the fact that he is nothing but a lab rat that they’d rescued. Kuroo Homugi assures him that she’ll be more than happy to bake him pies any time he wants them. Kenma can’t shake the thought that he certainly does not deserve one bit of this.
“We’re going to let Kenma rest for a bit,” Kuroo Hachiro announces. “He didn’t get to sleep much last night with all the commotion, I’m sure. Tetsu, would you mind putting the futon up in your room?”

“No problem,” Kuroo Tetsurou says. He grabs Kenma’s wrist and pulls him up the stairs to the second floor and then into his room. As Kuroo pulls out a futon along with a pillow and blanket, Kenma glances around in wonder. It looks like the room he’d always imagined a young human boy would have: posters all over the wall of volleyball players and cars and science-related things that Kenma can’t even begin to understand. He has some action figures on his shelves and lots and lots of books, books with titles like *Chemistry in Action* and *Science Experiments for Kids*. Kenma wonders idly what it would be like to be able to have his own room, to have his own belongings, to be a normal child. His chest hurts.

Kuroo Tetsurou gives him some clothes to change into, a pair of sweatpants that are way too long on him and a sweatshirt that hangs down almost to his knees. They’re the softest clothes he’s ever worn, though. He never wants to take them off.

“Get some sleep,” Kuroo says, patting the futon. “And then tomorrow when you get back from all that shit you have to do, we’ll play some games and watch some TV shows, okay? And I’ll convince grandma to make us cookies.”

“Ohayou,” Kenma says, slipping under the covers. He thinks later that he’d either been really tired or really weighed down by the stress of the day, because he falls asleep almost immediately, faster than he ever has before.

It turns out Kuroo Hachiro was right. The doctor here is much nicer than any doctor Kenma has ever met. She fusses over him effusively, telling Kuroo Hachiro he’s going to have to start feeding this boy a large, balanced diet if Kenma is going to get into the healthy weight and height range for his age. Kenma asks if pie is healthy, to which she laughs heartily and tells Kenma she wishes, but that it’s fine for a treat every now and again. She checks every inch of his body for bruises, cuts, and scars, her frown deepening at each one she finds. When it’s time for the brain scan, the staff does their best to make him as comfortable as possible. Just as Kuroo Hachiro had promised, he sticks close to Kenma’s side the entire time.

After all the tests have been run, the doctor tells them, “He’s about as healthy as can be for a boy in his situation. Lacking in a lot of essential vitamins, though, so I’m going to prescribe him some supplements and a healthy diet. His brain is certainly abnormal, most likely owing to his powers, but still there’s nothing wrong with it, so we’ll leave it alone for now. But beyond some enlarged brain structures… he’s a normal kid. What I’m most worried about, honestly, is his mental health.”
Kenma is still stuck on normal kid as she keeps talking about something called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its effects. Never once in his life has he heard himself referred to as that, especially not by a doctor. To hear someone who knows so much about humans call him that… he can feel his throat swelling up, something wet welling in his eyes. Some weird bodily function, he figures. But he still can’t quite believe that he’s a normal kid.

“Kenma?” the doctor asks, bringing him back to the present moment. “Are you all right, honey?”

“Yes,” Kenma says, lifting a hand to dab at his eyes. “Maybe I’m still a little tired.”

The doctor and Kuroo Hachiro exchange a look. Kuroo Hachiro says, “That’s understandable. Just a little bit more to do today.”

“I would recommend getting him a therapist,” the doctor says.

“I’ll keep an eye on him for now,” Kuroo Hachiro assures her. “But if it gets any worse… I’ll find a therapist immediately.”

“And bring him back in soon,” the doctor says.

Kuroo Hachiro nods. “Of course.”

They go back by the police station, where they drop off his old clothes as evidence for the case and he gets asked some more of the same types of questions about his old life back at the laboratory. It feels so nice to refer to it as that, as his old life, but it’s hard to even consider it his old life when he still has to talk about it constantly. By the time he gets back to the house, he feels tired to the bone, but not at all sleepy.

Kuroo Tetsurou smiles at him when he walks into the room. “Still wanna play some games, or are you too tired?”

“Tired, but not sleepy,” Kenma explains.
“Sit down then,” Kuroo says, patting the futon and putting a game controller into Kenma’s hands. “So this button is to move, okay? And this one is to attack. This one is also to attack, though. It’s like two different kinds of attacks. And this one is to dodge my attacks…”

Games are fun, Kenma discovers. Games are like fights, but without the effort or the pain, just the rewarding feeling of having won at the end. And games require enough mental effort that he doesn’t expend any dwelling on his past or what kind of a monster he is. All he thinks about is pressing the right buttons, ensuring that he’s doing enough to make sure that he takes down Kuroo’s character.

Kuroo, however, is not very good at games, Kenma discovers quickly. It only takes three rounds for Kenma to start consistently winning against Kuroo. Kuroo glances over at him, his mouth drawn into a line. “Damn,” he says. “You’re good at this.”

Kenma does not want to explain that he knows all the strategies from actually having to fight other people in this manner, so he just shrugs. “I guess.”

“We’ll have to play another game so that I can beat you, then,” Kuroo says, the corners of his mouth turning back up.

“We’ll see about that,” Kenma answers.

Kuroo Hachiro lets Kuroo Tetsurou take a couple of days off of school to ‘help Kenma get settled in’. Kenma almost feels a little bit bad for having Kuroo Tetsurou miss out on his education to stay with him and keep him comfortable, but thankfully, Kuroo seems beyond ecstatic at the idea of having time off of school. Between all of the errands that they have to run, things such as getting Kenma registered with the government so he can have official citizenship and dropping Kenma off at the station for various rounds of questioning and other things to do with the case, Kuroo drags Kenma up to his room to play video games. They play the fighting game from before a lot. Then, Kuroo introduces a racing game as well, and then some kind of weird game where cartoons fight each other, and even some single-player games that involve a lot of puzzles and fighting enemies. While Kenma plays the single-player games, Kuroo will pick up one of the books off of his shelf and thumb through it, sitting mostly in silence, but still ensuring that Kenma knows that he is there. It’s not like Kenma has a lot of experiences to go off of, but he thinks that this is the most fun he’s ever had.

He eats even more pies. Kuroo Homugi sneaks them to him after Kuroo Hachiro and Kuroo
Tatmotsu have gone to bed with a smile on her face, whispering to him “don’t tell Hachiro” in a conspiratorial tone. He also eats more foods he’s never tried before, foods with such rich flavors that he never could have imagined. Kuroo Tetsurou also shows him some episodes of his favorite show. Eventually, one day, Kenma relents to be dragged outside so that Kuroo can show him volleyball. Kuroo coaches him to receive the ball, which it turns out Kenma is colossally bad at, because it goes the exact opposite direction of where Kuroo says that it should go. Kenma laughs, a real laugh for once in his life, and it sounds foreign even to his own ears. Kuroo stares at him, losing his hold on the ball and letting it drop down to the ground. The ball starts to roll away. Then Kuroo suddenly bursts into laughter as well, his laugh loud and strong and completely obnoxious. All it does is make Kenma laugh even harder. His chest feels lighter than ever before.

He goes up to the bathroom after their volleyball ‘practice’ and stares at himself in the mirror. During his time at the laboratory, he was never allowed to observe himself. Any self-exploration was done without the aid of a mirror, or through little glimpses of his reflection in glass or metal. Now, though, he takes in his appearance. He is thin, so incredibly thin that he feels like he might waste away without something holding him up. His hair is as bright and golden as the sunshine in the morning, but still with the dark roots that he’s sure will never really leave. His eyes are a dull gold, but somehow, they look a little brighter now. He puts one hand up to the mirror. Absently, he wonders if the room will fade away behind him to reveal that this has all been nothing but a dream.

When he returns back to the room, Kuroo says, “I’m glad you’re happier here. Even if it’s only a little bit.”

“It is definitely better here,” Kenma replies, sitting down next to Kuroo. “But…”

“But?”

Something inside of Kenma pushes up to the surface, forcing through until it finally spews out all over the place. “I don’t deserve this,” he says in a rush.

“You… what? What do you mean?”

“Your father had to have said something,” Kenma says, staring at the ground. “About… who I am. About how I’m not a human. About why I was at that facility, because… because I’m not human. I’m less than human. I’m a freak that does things with my mind. Things that can hurt people.”

“You haven’t hurt me,” Kuroo points out.
“Because I hate using them - uh, my powers,” Kenma says. “But I have used them. I have… I’ve hurt people.”

“Why did you hurt people?”

Kenma bites down on his lip. He remembers forcing his way into a man’s mind, making him use his own hand to hit himself in his face. He remembers the look of pure terror on the man’s face afterwards, the way the man had stammered out “G-get me away from that m-m-monster!” before taking off running. He remembers the muffled sobs of the people whose worst secrets he’d exposed. He remembers slamming a bottle onto Akiba’s hand to prove that he was capable of being a weapon. He remembers the blood afterwards. He says, “I- I hurt people because I had to.”

“Not because you wanted to.”

“No! No, of course I didn’t want to.”

“Then you’re not a monster,” Kuroo says firmly, “and that’s that. Monsters want to hurt people. Like King Kong and stuff. That’s kind of their whole thing.”

Kenma almost wants to believe him, but he still hears the voices in his head. *Freak. Monster. Created to kill. Created to harm. Emotionless. Dead inside.*

*Kuroo just doesn’t know you well enough yet. But give him time, and he’ll see exactly what we all see.*

After the weekend, though, which Kenma learns consists of the days Saturday and Sunday - here, days are not labeled by Day 2 and Day 3 - Kuroo Hachiro insists that Kuroo Tetsurou return to school. Kuroo Tetsurou is less than happy about this, but Kuroo Hachiro says that education should come first, and Kenma not-so-secretly agrees. Kuroo Tetsurou looks almost embarrassed when Kenma points out that education is a privilege and that he should take advantage of it.

“Speaking of education,” Kuroo Hachiro says, “Kenma, eventually, you’re going to have to start going to school.”
Kenma’s eyes widen. On one hand, school is the most mundane thing he can think of; the one thing that was present in the memories of everyone whose mind he read. On the other hand, school involves a whole lot of unknown variables: subjects he’s never studied, exams he’s never tried, teachers he’s never learned from, and worst of all, children his own age, who he has no idea how to interact with. Kuroo Tetsurou is easy enough to interact with, but Kuroo Tetsurou, he thinks, had done most of the work, and Kenma had just followed along naturally. He stutters out “B-but… I’ve never gone to school and I d-don’t….”

“We’ll catch you up to speed before you go. I’ll tutor you, especially in math, science, and history, since you haven’t had those subjects before. And Tetsurou will help out,” Kuroo Hachiro tells him calmly, but in a way that conveys that he is not taking no for an answer. “But education is necessary, especially if you want to get a job in the future.”

“Yes sir,” Kenma says flatly, just the way he’s been taught.

The breath catches in Kuroo Hachiro’s throat. Kuroo Tetsurou, standing beside him, looks equally as caught off-guard, his jaw hanging low. Kenma winces back, ready for the slap that’s going to be directed his way, or the foot that will collide with his leg. Instead, Kuroo Hachiro says, “Kenma, we aren’t going to hurt you.”

Kenma lets his shoulders fall a little bit, but still doesn’t let his guard down completely. “You aren’t?” he asks meekly.

“No, Kenma. No matter what you do, okay?” Kuroo Hachiro says. “You can disagree with me all you want. Hell knows Tetsurou makes a game out of it most of the time. But no matter what, I am not going to lay a hand on you with the intention to cause pain. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Kenma mutters, his cheeks heating up.

"Don't be embarrassed,” Kuroo Hachiro says, his tone a little softer than before. "Kenma, children are supposed to be able to trust the adults in their lives. And you had adults that betrayed that trust time and time again. It is not your fault that you are naturally suspicious of adults in your life. It is entirely theirs. But I am going to try my hardest to make sure I never betray your trust, okay?"

Kenma nods. He understands what Kuroo Hachiro is saying, really, but at the same time, he thinks - no, he knows - that he deserved it. He knows that the doctors, who knew him down to his core, who had created him, were all just treating him as the monster that he was. And this... this dignity,
this respect... it's all far beyond what he deserves. He's grateful for it, so grateful for it, but it's impossible for him to begrudge anyone who thinks he deserves less.

That night, he falls asleep only to be haunted with his first full-on nightmare.

He’s back in the laboratory, back in that room with its dark walls and eerie atmosphere that causes goosebumps to leap up and down his body. He wraps his arms around himself, as if somehow that can protect him from the cold world around him. His breath comes faster and faster. Already, he can feel himself bracing for what’s to come.

Akiba enters the room, the sound of her shoes echoing down the hallway in front of him before she even comes into view. She turns her nose up at him cowering on the ground. “Once again, K3734, your acting skills are impeccable,” she sneers. “Really. I almost believed you were scared for a second there. No wonder you’ve been able to play human for this long. But they’ll see soon enough.” She smiles, a smile with clear malicious intent. “But hey, at least you won’t be able to feel this either.”

He screams the second he feels the barbed leather sink into his skin. Then there’s red everywhere - so much red - blood, on the walls, on the floor, on his hands - and someone is yelling even louder this time. Then someone is saying “Kenma, Kenma, Kenma,” which makes no sense at all, because no one here calls him Kenma. He’s pretty sure they would sneer at the very idea of it, of him having a human name. He looks around frantically, panting out the only name he can think of to respond with: “Kuroo? Kuroo?”

“Yeah, Kenma,” the voice responds, Kuroo Tetsurou’s voice responds, clear as day. “Wake up.”

And he does. Kenma’s eyes fly open and there’s a sudden brightness all around him. Above him, Kuroo Tetsurou hovers, his dark eyes shining. “Hey, you’re awake now. No one’s going to hurt you, all right? I swear.”

Kenma blinks, taking in the sight around him. He is not in the laboratory. He is in Kuroo Tetsurou’s bedroom, on the futon, and Akiba is nowhere to be seen. He focuses on getting his breathing back to a reasonable pace, then chokes out, “S-sorry. Bad dream.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kuroo says gently. “We kind of figured those might happen sometimes.
Just glad I could help you get out of it.”

“Y-you should go back to sleep,” Kenma says, his teeth still chattering the slightest bit. “You... you have school tomorrow.”

“Ah, like school matters anyways,” Kuroo says flippantly.

“It should.”

“Fine, whatever,” Kuroo relents. “You try to go back to sleep too, okay? Get some rest. I’ll see you after school tomorrow.”

Kenma’s sleep after that is fitful, to say the least. He thinks maybe his subconscious is resisting being stuck back in the laboratory his mind has conjured up, because he wakes many times during the night. One of the times he wakes is when Kuroo Tetsurou is about to leave for school, and, while pretending to be asleep, he sees Kuroo send a fond glance his way before he heads out. He’s never really seen anyone outside of this house look at him like that. It’s always been a marked expression of fear or disgust.

When Kenma finally wakes up for good, he finds Kuroo Hachiros waiting for him, a stack of school books on the table in front of him. “Time to get to work,” he says cheerfully.

Kenma wrinkles up his nose before he can think twice about it, but then realizes the action could be seen as insolent. He bows his head slightly. “Sorry. I appreciate it.”

“Kenma,” Kuroo Hachiros says, shaking his head. “I told you already that you don’t have to apologize for normal reactions, okay? I can’t imagine any eleven-year-old I know not having a negative reaction to the idea of schoolwork. You won’t be punished for things like that. So you can show your emotions to me. Got it?”

It’s not an emotion, Kenma wants to tell him. I don’t have those. It’s just... me not liking school. But it’s not an emotion. Instead, he just nods, his head still tilted downwards.

“We’re gonna start off with some math,” Kuroo Hachiros says. “Do you know what this means?” He points at a piece of paper, indicating two lines that form a cross.
“A… addition,” Kenma replies.

“Good,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “Now if you do this equation, add five and six, what do you get?”

Kenma pauses for a second, calculating. “Eleven,” he says, finally, a little scared that he’s taken too long, which means he can’t really do it, and that means he won’t be able to go to school anymore.

Instead, Kuroo Hachiro looks pleased. “Okay, good, so we won’t have to start from the very beginning. Now what about subtraction?”

They spend the next few hours on various math skills. Kenma finds that a lot of them come naturally to him, since they all rely heavily on logic. Math makes sense; five times ten is fifty. Six times nine is fifty-four. Four times seven is twenty-eight. All of these questions have one solution. It all just makes sense.

“Honestly,” Kuroo Hachiro says after they’re finished, “I don’t think you’ll be very far behind your classmates, if at all. Go ahead and rest, okay? Tetsurou should be home any minute, and then tomorrow we’ll go over some science things.”

Kenma nod and heads back up the stairs. Just a few minutes later, true to Kuroo Hachiro’s word, Kuroo Tetsurou bursts in, his face drawn into a smug smile. “Dad says you’re a natural at math.”

“I don’t know,” Kenma says, letting his shoulders drop. “It just makes sense.”


Kenma wrinkles up his nose. “Chemistry seems complicated.”

“Give it a chance, at least,” Kuroo says, rolling his eyes. “You’re gonna have to do it either way. Did you manage to get back to sleep?”
Something about the question has Kenma’s ears burning. Maybe it’s just that he feels odd about the fact that Kuroo has brought up something that makes him seem so weak. All he says, though, is, “A little bit.”

“Good,” Kuroo says, sounding relieved.

“How was school?” Kenma asks, partially because it’s something people always say in the memories he’s sifted through, and partially because he genuinely wants to know, maybe because he thinks it’ll give him some kind of insight of the nature of the beast Kenma will have to face soon.

“Shitty,” Kuroo says. He collapses onto his bed, giving a long, low sigh. “I don’t like anyone, and they don’t like me. Classes are long. I know a lot of what they’re teaching already.” He closes his eyes. “I don’t mean to scare you or anything. Sorry.”

Kenma’s mind starts whirring. He definitely does not know how to process situations like this. Over the course of his life, he has never been around someone who has expressed negative emotion so freely around him. The doctors certainly never had, and he’d never gotten close enough to any of the other experiments to hear their complaints. So now he realizes he has absolutely no idea how to handle this situation. He wants Kuroo back to his talkative, smiling self. His brain frantically flicks through all of his memories, and then it hits him. He remembers, in vivid detail, the way Kuroo had smiled when he’d talked about volleyball, how he’d laughed while they were playing together, and he says, “Do you want to play volleyball?”

Kuroo’s head snaps up immediately, his eyes flying open. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Kenma says.

“Only if you want to,” Kuroo says, his voice a little bit brighter.

“I want to,” Kenma confirms. He wants to do anything he can to make Kuroo brighter. It doesn’t matter that he’s not any good at volleyball. And then it dawns upon him that he shouldn’t really care, that there is no logical reason for him to be invested in Kuroo’s emotional state. That, in fact, he probably should want Kuroo to suffer, because that is the kind of creature that he has been programmed to be.

He wonders what the doctors would say.
And then he picks up the volleyball and decides it doesn’t matter.

Science is hard, Kenma discovers. It takes a lot of effort, effort Kenma doesn’t particularly care to expend, and often just doesn’t follow the same rules of logic that math does. He doesn’t understand why cells work the way they do or how flowers turn sunlight into food or why certain chemicals explode when put together. He also doesn’t really care why these things happen.

He also finds history difficult, because it requires the memorization of names and dates and societies, things Kenma has never been able to learn before. It is, however, a little interesting to hear about the society that he’s apparently been surrounded with for his entire life but never knew anything about. He finds out about the history of Japan, about the current status of Japan, about all the other countries in the world, too - countries with people who have brightly colored hair like his, countries with foods he could have never imagined, customs that are different to anything he’s ever heard of. That much is interesting, at least.

The rest of the classes, Kuroo Hachiro assures him, aren’t things he needs to catch up on, things like music and art, things he’ll be able to learn on his own. And so, after just a few weeks of study, Kuroo Hachiro declares that Kenma is ready to start school.

“Too bad we won’t be in the same school,” Kuroo Tetsurou hums.

Kenma’s eyes widen. He can feel his heart rate start to pick up. “We won’t be in the same school?” he repeats.

“Unfortunately not,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “Tetsurou just turned thirteen, which means he’s in his first year of junior high, and you’re around eleven or twelve, which would put you in the last year of primary school.”

Kenma’s chest feels a little tighter. He knows, realistically, that there’s nothing to be done about it. He’s nowhere near prepared enough for his own grade even, much less to skip a grade. But the idea of going to school alone, without Kuroo Tetsurou, makes his palms start to sweat.

Kuroo Tetsurou frowns. “You don’t have to be nervous. School sucks, but every kid does it, y’know? So it’s not scary, really. Just… annoying. Honestly, it’s pretty boring.”
“I’m not nervous,” Kenma protests, but it doesn’t look like either Kuroo believes him. He remembers what the doctors always said about how he was good at faking emotion. He doesn’t like that he’s even fooling these two, even though it’s not as though he’s trying to.

Kuroo Hachiro helps him gather some basic supplies for school the next day. He holds one of the pencils in his hand, a simple blue pencil with a pink eraser on the end. He’s used pencils before, back when he was still learning about the things he could do and the doctors insisted he take notes to get it through his ‘thick skull’. But now, sitting here on the soft rug in Kuroo Tetsurou’s room, he realizes that this is the first pencil he has ever owned. In fact, it’s one of the first items he’s ever owned.

He has things now, which is odd to think about. Kuroo Hachiro had taken him out shopping, bought him a few warm sweatshirts and sweatpants and a pair of jeans, among other things. And Kuroo Tetsurou had insisted that Kenma have one of his action figures. It’s one of the Power Rangers, or so Kuroo Tetsurou had said, one that reminded Kuroo Tetsurou of Kenma. He puts the Power Ranger into his backpack too. It feels comforting to have it with him somehow.

“It’ll be fine,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, bursting into the room, a towel still wrapped around his head. “Don’t worry. My school’s right beside yours, so if you need something that badly, you can always come and get me.”

“I’m not worrying,” Kenma says, watching as Kuroo takes the towel off of his head and starts desperately trying to flatten his hair. Kenma tilts his head. “Is something wrong with your hair?”

“Well, yeah,” Kuroo says, “it won’t stay down, no matter how hard I try. It just springs back up and looks like a damn rooster’s feathers!”

Kenma can’t help the way the corners of his lips twitch up. “It’s just bedhead.”

“No one else’s bedhead is this bad,” Kuroo retorts.

“Yes, but no one else sleeps with their head between two pillows all night,” Kenma points out.

“I don’t mean to!” Kuroo protests. “When I fall asleep, my head is on my pillow, and then when I wake up, another pillow appears out of nowhere and my head’s squished between them!”
Kenma exhales something like a snort, and then it occurs to him that he’s laughing. He’s laughing without thinking about it, without laughing along because it seems like the right thing to do, the human thing to do.

It’s terrifying.

Kenma should not be able to laugh. Kenma should not be able to feel light, to respond to jokes, to feel anything other than a blank nothing. He wants to chalk it up to the fact that he’s been around humans for long enough that he’s started to unconsciously absorb some of their mannerisms, but then he notices Kuroo staring at him, one of his eyebrows lifting, and some other weird sensation washes over him. His stomach feels like it’s been tied in knots. His eyes drop to the ground, his cheeks heating up.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Kuroo says finally. “It’s nice to hear you laugh.” He stretches out on his bed, then says, “We should get to bed, yeah? Gotta get your beauty sleep for your first day of school tomorrow.”

Kenma finds it hard to sleep that night too.

Chapter End Notes

And enter Kuroo Tetsurou! (+ his dad, who I had a lot of fun writing/characterizing!) Things are getting better for Kenma little by little, huh? Thank you so much for reading, and I hope you all enjoy this chapter! Please leave a comment or kudos if you enjoyed. It'll get me to update faster!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: PTSD mentions, flashbacks of child abuse (physical/emotional), childhood trauma mentions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kenma grips the straps to his backpack tightly as he walks up to the school. Beside him, Kuroo Tetsurou smiles reassuringly. “It’ll be fine, I’m telling you,” Kuroo says, exuding calmness that Kenma can’t completely comprehend. “We just moved here a couple of months ago, so I was the new kid too! And school sucks and everything, but it’s still not that bad. Especially for…” Suddenly Kuroo’s face shifts into a pinched expression. “For someone who’s been in a place that’s a million times worse.”

Kenma doesn’t know what to say to that. It’s the truth, after all. School, a muted kind of torture that every child’s subjected to, is nothing compared to what he’s experienced. For one, he’s heard that the teachers don’t electrocute you if you get a question wrong. So he just nods. “Okay. I’ll see you after school.”

“Wait for me here once you get out, okay?” Kuroo says. “Well, unless you make lots of friends and want to walk home with them.”

Kenma blinks. “I don’t think that’ll happen, so I’ll see you after school. Bye, Kuro.”

“Kuro?” Kuroo repeats.

Kenma hadn’t really thought about it when he’d said it. It had seemed like a natural thing to say for whatever reason, but now he wonders why he’d said it, and he can’t come up with a reason. He shrugs, his stomach a little bit queasy. “It… it’s easier to distinguish between you and your dad that way.”

“Kuro, huh,” Kuroo says again. “I like it.”

Kenma bids Kuroo goodbye again, feeling the blood rush to his cheeks. He keeps his head down as he walks into the school, into his classroom, packed with more kids than he’s ever seen in his life.
His heart rate picks back up as he tries to slip into the classroom unnoticed, but then he realizes that he doesn’t know which desk to sit in. Holding onto the straps of his backpack even tighter, he starts to wish that the floor would follow him whole.

“Are you new?” someone asks loudly, coming up to stand beside him.

“Y-yes,” Kenma stutters out. He flinches at his stutter. Reasonably, he knows this random student isn’t going to strike him for misspeaking, but nonetheless he can’t help the automatic reaction.

“Kozume Kenma, right?” the boy says. “We heard you’d be coming today! I’m the class representative, Ishida Toju! And your desk is over there.”

“T-thank you,” Kenma says, bowing slightly, which makes a weird expression appear on Ishida’s face. Kenma doesn’t really feel like making any more conversation, so he slides by Ishida and heads to his desk, which is blessedly near the back of the classroom. He sets down his bag and is about to start unpacking. Before he can, though, the person in front of him turns around.

“Ah, new kid,” he says. “What’s up with your hair?”

“It’s so long,” the guy on his other side says. “Man, your parents let you dye it?”

“Or are you some kind of delinquent?” the first guy asks.

“No,” Kenma stammers out, his eyes fixated on his desk. He really, really doesn’t want to talk to these guys. He closes his eyes and hopes that somehow they’ll just disappear. Thankfully, though, the teacher shows up at that moment and commands the attention of the class.

The day only gets worse from there. The teacher makes him come to the front and introduce himself, which turns out to be extraordinarily bad when she asks where he went to school last, and he has to say that he hasn’t gone to school before. The teacher seems to realize something, then, because she goes beet red and says, “Oh, I’m so sorry!” The instruction time is all right, but during every break, kids stare at him and make whispered comments under their breath. Kenma’s pretty sure some of them must have heard of him. Eventually, his curiosity and his obsession with what the kids in his class must be thinking get the best of him. He forces his mind to reach out to one of the whispering groups, slipping into the mind of one of the girls.
He forces through her memories, mostly of her playing with her friends, petting her cat, and competing in various violin competitions. Finally, he finds her current thoughts.

That’s the boy from the news, isn’t it, she thinks. Ori said she thinks he is too. That one kid with the powers or something that they were experimenting on. How scary! I hope he doesn’t use them to hurt us. To be safe, though, we should all stay away!

Kenma lets go and feels his mind snap back into place. Beyond the usual weariness that comes with using his powers, his chest suddenly feels heavier than usual, and his eyes sting a little bit. He buries his head in his arms. I shouldn’t have looked, he thinks to himself. I don’t like using my powers anyways. I don’t know why I did it. But there’s something that’s pulling at his mind, whispering that he’d done it because he’s a monster, and this is what he’s meant to do. He’s meant to invade people’s privacy, to hurt anyone he comes across.

And there’s also the issue that everyone seems to know who he is and where he’s come from already. He’d been hoping he could just blend in, be a normal primary school student, but those hopes are all gone now. He’s become the school weird kid already, just by existing.

It becomes even more evident at lunchtime. He takes the lunch box that Kuroo Homugi had put together for him and glances around the classroom, noticing how everyone seems to section off into different groups to eat with. It’s obvious to him that no one’s going to want to eat with him, so he just sighs and opens up his lunch, letting his hair spill down to cover his face. At least this way hopefully no one will notice that he’s eating on his own.

Once Kenma finally leaves the building at the end of the day, he finally feels like he can breathe again. Kuroo Tetsurou shows up just a few minutes later. “How was it?” he asks.

“Terrible,” Kenma replies flatly. “You were right. School sucks.”

Kuroo chuckles as they start to walk. “It really does. What sucked, though? Were people rude to you?”

“Not exactly,” Kenma says quietly. “But they know. About me. And where I came from. So they don’t really want to talk to me.”

Kuroo’s mouth turns down and his eyebrows crease. “What the hell?” he hisses. “In what universe is that a reason to not want to talk to someone? Assholes. I should go give those little shits a talking
“Don’t,” Kenma says, a slight undertone of pleading in his voice. “It’s normal that they wouldn’t want to talk to me. I’m a freak, after all.”

Kuroo turns his glare onto Kenma. “You are *not.* Stop saying that. Seriously.”

“Kuro, I wasn’t born like you were,” Kenma tries to explain. “They created me in that lab. There’s no way that I could be human. I don’t even have parents.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Kuroo argues back. “That’s not what makes a human. And when I get to be a real scientist, Kenma, and I have my own lab and stuff, I’m gonna prove to you that you’re human.”

Kenma thinks that’s silly, but there’s an undertone in Kuroo’s voice that implies that he won’t be listening to any arguments in response, so Kenma decides it’s best to leave it. They walk home in silence.

Once they get home, though, Kuroo offers to play Kenma’s favorite game with him - as some kind of a peace offering, Kenma assumes. When Kuroo Hachiro gets home, he chuckles at seeing the two of them parked in front of Kuroo Tetsurou’s TV and says, “I guess you two don’t want any dinner then if you’re too wrapped up in that game.”

“Oh please,” Kuroo Tetsurou scoffs. “I’m never too busy for dinner.”

“How was school?” Kuroo Hachiro asks him as Kuroo Tetsurou darts down the hallway.

Kenma frowns. “School sucks. But a normal kind of sucking, I think.”

Kuroo Hachiro laughs. “Did you meet anyone nice?”

Kenma hesitates for a second, then shakes his head. “Well, some people were nice, but I didn’t talk to anyone really.”
“It’ll get better,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “It’s just hard right now because you’re new.”

Kenma nods in acknowledgment, but doesn’t believe it for a second. He’s already had his stroke of luck in having his life improve. He doesn’t think he’s due for any more good luck for at least another hundred years.

School the next day sucks too, and the same for the next day, and the day after that. When the weekend finally rolls around, Kenma and Kuroo Tetsurou celebrate with a lot of video games. When the Kuroo grandparents finally throw them out of the house for some fresh air, Kuroo Tetsurou makes Kenma play volleyball with him. He introduces Kenma to the concept of tossing, a new kind of pass that Kenma hasn’t ever seen before. It’s not too difficult to get the hang of, though, and it seems to make Kuroo really happy whenever he does it. By the end of the weekend, Kenma can toss it high enough so that Kuroo can try to hit it, even though, as Kuroo says, he’s not quite tall enough to hit it over the net yet.

Then it’s back to school again. It still sucks, and he still sits alone at lunch, but it somehow becomes a more tolerable kind of annoyance. At the very least, it doesn’t seem that anyone’s whispering about him anymore. Everyone’s just kind of accepted his presence, just as he’s accepted theirs. And then, on the Wednesday of that week, Kuroo Tetsurou and Kenma arrive at home to see Kuroo Hachiro with his hands in his hair, a terse expression on his face.

“What do you mean, they only caught one of them?” he’s hissing into the phone. “There were three fucking doctors. Three. And these bastards were torturing children. God, Kawasaki, if you could hear the shit Kenma’s told me - they would fucking electrocute him if he got their questions wrong, they’d beat him, they’d tell him he was a monster. And you dumbasses let them get away?” He pauses, breathing in, and Kuroo Tetsurou grabs Kenma’s arm.

“Maybe we shouldn’t listen to this,” Kuroo Tetsurou says softly.

“No,” Kenma says, nudging Kuroo Tetsurou off of him. “No, I need to know.”

Kuroo Tetsurou doesn’t try to argue. Kuroo Hachiro’s expression becomes even more pinched. “God, fine, I guess there’s nothing we can do now except put all of our energy into tracking those bastards down for a second time. And why did it take you guys so long to figure this shit out, anyways? More high priority cases, my ass. There are lives of children at stake… no, it’s not my
own personal attachment getting in the way, goddamn it. Yes, I’m going to get on this case right now. I don’t think I could live with myself if I didn’t. Goodbye.” He jumps to his feet, grabbing the gun in front of him and sliding it into his holster. He turns around to grab his jacket and then finally notices Kuroo Tetsurou and Kenma standing there.

“Hey, kids,” Kuroo Hachiro says wearily. “How much did you hear?”

“Am I going to be okay?” Kenma asks quietly.

“Yes,” Kuroo Hachiro says, resting a hand gently on Kenma’s head. This time, Kenma barely even flinches. “Yes, I promise you that you’ll be okay. Trust me, yeah?”

Kenma nods. “Are you going to be okay?”

Kuroo Hachiro’s eyes darken. “I’ll be fine. I’m just going to clear this mess up, and then we’ll all be safe, okay?”

“Okay,” Kenma says, but if there’s anything Kenma’s learned in his eleven years of life, it’s that people lie. As Kuroo Hachiro walks out of the room, Kuroo Tetsurou lets his hand drop off of Kenma’s arm, but then takes a hold of his hand tightly and squeezes it.

Kenma wants to squeeze back, but he can’t bring himself to.

The nightmares get worse.

The fact that there are two of the three doctors still out there seems to be bothering him on some level, because the doctors invade his dreams. He doesn’t know which two of the three are out there, so they switch positions. In one of them that occurs far too often, Kumagai electrocutes him repeatedly while Akiba laughs. In another, Morimoto whispers, “If we can’t have you, no one can” before firing a bullet straight through his skull. He wakes up screaming with a pounding headache after that one. It takes him a while to calm down, so Kuroo Tetsurou gets Kuroo Hachiro, who brings him pain medication and a cold washcloth. As he examines Kenma, he says, “Maybe a therapist is a good idea.”
Kenma doesn’t argue. He’s not even sure how he could; he’d just woken up Kuroo Hachiro’s son for the fourth night in a row with screaming nightmares. But he’s just not sure what good therapy would do for a creature who was programmed not to have emotions in the first place. He’s heard enough about therapy to know it’s supposed to be some kind of treatment for humans with emotional problems or whatever. Besides, he knows why the nightmares are happening. And until that’s fixed, until he knows where the other two doctors are and knows that they aren’t coming to get him, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to rest easily.

Still, just a week later, he ends up sitting in a therapist’s office. His therapist is a kind-looking woman, about medium height with plain, straight black hair. Despite her unassuming appearance, she pulls out a notebook during the first couple of minutes of the session, and even that much is enough to set Kenma on edge.

“So, Kenma,” she says in a soothing tone, “you’re from the laboratory that was recently invaded, right?”

“Yes,” he says. He can feel his stomach start to squirm already, but he ignores it, sure he probably ate something that’s not sitting well with his stomach.

“Okay,” she says, and he thinks she’s probably going to say something about the laboratory, but then she says, “Let’s not talk about that right now, though. Tell me about yourself. What kinds of things do you like?”

“Pie,” Kenma says immediately, which makes her smile.

“I like pie too,” she says. “What else?”

“Uh, I like video games,” he says, fidgeting a little in his chair. “And… volleyball isn’t so bad. Even though… it’s mostly just, uh, Kuro that makes me do it.”

“Who’s Kuro?” she asks.

“The guy that… that rescued me… his son,” Kenma says slowly.
“I see,” she says, writing something down in her notebook. Kenma’s tempted to reach out and find out exactly what she’s writing, but he doesn’t want whatever backlash he got from his body last time he’d used his power - the weird chest squeezing - so instead he just waits. She asks, “So, is he your friend?”

“Friend,” Kenma says, his brain whirring. He has definitely never had one of those before. But… from what he knows from other people, a friend is someone that you spend a lot of time with, that you like talking to, that helps you out when you need it. And if Kenma’s going off of that definition, then he’d have to say, “Yes, I guess he is my friend.”

Kenma has a friend. His chest squeezes again, but this time it feels… good, almost.

“That’s good to hear,” she says. “Now, you two play volleyball together, you said. What else do you do when you spend time with Kuro?”

The session goes on like this for the next hour. She mostly asks questions about Kenma, about school, about Kuroo Tetsurou, about his life with the Kuroos in general. Kenma finds it hard to answer some of them; he doesn’t know much about himself, after all. He’s only had the last few weeks to figure out what kinds of things he likes and doesn’t like. He doesn’t even really know what questions like “favorite color” really mean. He just knows that he doesn’t like white and he doesn’t like black. Red is a little iffy, too, but he still feels some kind of draw to it.

After the hour is up, she bids him goodbye and he gives her a stiff goodbye in return. Kuroo Hachiro is waiting outside to greet him and take him home. “How was it?” he asks quietly.

“It was weird,” Kenma replies honestly. “We didn’t really talk about the lab at all or the doctors. So I guess I’m not sure how it’s going to help with my nightmares.”

“Hm,” Kuroo Hachiro says thoughtfully. “They probably don’t want to rush into it. Just in case it were to trigger any bad memories, you know? That might make it worse.”

Kenma doesn’t know how to feel about that. He definitely has had bad memories brought up while talking about the laboratory, but he doesn’t see why bringing up bad memories could be harmful. Still, it had been nice to be able to talk about the situation with someone completely unrelated to it, to attempt to fill in the blanks about who he is, because he does know that he has things he prefers and doesn’t prefer, even if he’s not exactly like the humans he knows. So he just nods. “Okay.”
When he gets home, he eats a slice of pie as a reward for going to the therapy session. He’s never been rewarded for anything before; when he’d done good things before, he’d only avoided punishments. Then he heads up the stairs, finding Kuroo Tetsurou sprawled out on his bed, a book in his hands. Kuroo Tetsurou grins at him. “Hey, how’d it go?”

“Are we friends?” Kenma asks. He’s not sure if that’s the kind of thing that normal humans ask so bluntly, but he wants to know, and he can’t think of another way to phrase it.

Apparently they do not ask things like this, because Kuroo looks bewildered for a moment, his eyes wide and mouth open. Then he shakes his head and lets the smile work its way back onto his face. “Yeah, Kenma. Of course we’re friends. Y’know, actually…” He pauses for a second, then continues with, “Well, I don’t have that many other friends, but I would still say you’re my best friend.”

“Best friend?” Kenma asks, tilting his head.

Kuroo nods. “It’s like, a friend that you like more than all your other friends. Your favorite friend.”

Kenma doesn’t know what to do with this information. Actually, come to think of it, in the memories of most of the younger people whose minds he’s read, they went out with friends a lot - played together in parks, went for ice cream together, hung out together after school. He doesn’t recall Kuroo ever saying he was going out with friends. After school, Kuroo would usually walk home with Kenma, then go home and do homework with Kenma, then play games with Kenma, then go to sleep, in the same room as Kenma. He doesn’t really know what that means. But he says, “Okay. Best friends then.”

It’s still kind of nice, going from having no friends to having a best friend, Kenma thinks. But he’s still a little uneasy the fact that Kuroo doesn’t have any other friends, or at least none close enough that he hangs out with on a regular basis. It causes Kenma to wonder what Kuroo had done before Kenma came along. But Kuroo is grinning again, and seeing his grin makes Kenma think he doesn’t want to voice these concerns and cause the grin to disappear.

Instead, he waits until Kuroo says, “So video games?”, and he nods vehemently in response.

At the next meeting, the therapist asks him, “How are the nightmares?”
“Every night,” Kenma replies. He’s gotten better about waking Kuroo Tetsurou up, at least, because he’s trained himself to keep his mouth firmly shut in the dreams, which also results in him not screaming in the real world. But he does not enjoy going to sleep at all. Every night he sees the doctors coming to hurt him. Every night he wakes up covered in sweat, his breath coming far too fast, and occasionally he even finds something wet on his cheeks. He supposes that he’s become better at imitating human emotion even in his dreams.

She nods, writing something down on her clipboard. “That’s normal, so don’t worry about it,” she says. “But we’re going to go a little deeper today, okay? So I’m going to talk to you about something that might be causing these nightmares. This may be a little distressing, but if it gets to the point that you feel like you can’t handle it, I need you to tell me. Can you do that for me?”

Kenma thinks for a second and supposes that he could probably be comfortable enough to say something if he starts to feel weird about the questions. He gives a slight nod. She smiles and says, “Okay. Well, sometimes people experience something that is very, very tough and very terrible. And that event leaves an impact on them. Their brain can’t understand why the event happened. So they need a little help to come to terms with the event. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” Kenma says. He’s still not sure that’s the case with him, because all the bad dreams that he has are realistic, in a way. If the doctors are still out there, then they can come after him easily. It’s not like it’s an irrational fear, exactly.

“We psychologists refer to it as PTSD,” she says. “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. You know about illnesses, right? The flu, cancer, fevers, things like that?”

“Yes.” He’s had fevers and things like that before. When he’d felt ill, the doctors had confined him to a bed, forced medicine into him through an IV, and continued his lessons, but without most of the punishments. So he hadn’t minded being sick too much. “What about them?”

“Well, PTSD is an illness too, but of the mind,” she says.

“I’m sick?” Kenma asks. He doesn’t feel sick exactly. His forehead isn’t warm and his stomach doesn’t feel queasy or anything.

“You could say that,” she says, sounding a little hesitant. “And you know how you treat your body if you’re sick, right? So we’re going to try some things to treat your mind in the same way. But first of all, I need you to talk about some things that are going to be a little tough so we can beat
this sickness. Is that okay with you?”

It’s not really okay with him, if he’s honest. He knows that she’s going to ask about his time in the laboratory and he’s pretty sure that he could go his entire life trying his best never to talk or even think about it again. But he doesn’t want to keep having these nightmares. And if talking about it will get rid of the nightmares, well, that’s just a sacrifice he’ll have to make. So he says “Yes” as quietly as he can.

She looks pleased with this answer. “Okay, Kenma. I understand that you spent the first eleven years of your life at the laboratory. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Kenma says, giving a slight nod of his head.

She writes something down. “So you didn’t really experience anything outside of the laboratory until you were here? You never left?”

“No,” Kenma says, feeling his chest squeeze.

“I see,” she says. “Did you want to leave?”

“Yes,” Kenma replies emphatically. He’d wanted to leave more than anything. He remembers lying back on his cot, staring at the ceiling, dreaming of the outside world, and can hardly believe that he’s here now.

“Why did you want to leave?” she asks.

“B-because,” Kenma says, bowing his head down so that he can stare the ground, as if it’ll somehow make this easier.

“Take your time. I know this is hard.”

“Because it was bad there,” Kenma finishes, finally. “I was training all the time to use my powers, and I hate using my powers.”
“Your powers?” she asks.

“Yes,” Kenma says. “I can do things w-with my mind.” He considers how much he should say, but then remembers that there had been a pretty major press release about the laboratory, and Kuroo Hachiro had probably explained the situation to her before agreeing to allow her to be his therapist. She must be trustworthy, then. Or at the very least, trustworthy enough for him to divulge the details of his powers. “I can move things without touching them, read people’s minds, see their memories, uh, stuff like that. Stuff that humans can’t do.”

“Well, most humans,” she says, and before Kenma can question what that means, she continues, “Why don’t you like using your powers?”

“They make me tired,” Kenma mumbles. “I don’t like being tired.”

“What would they do if you didn’t use your powers? For example, if you said you were too tired to use them that day.”

“I couldn’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“I wasn’t… I wasn’t allowed,” Kenma says. He can feel his cheeks heating up.

She pauses for a second, writing something down, and then glances back up. “This is going to be a hard question, Kenma, so you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But what would they do to you if you didn’t? What made you listen to them?”

Kenma really does not want to answer the question. His throat feels like it’s closing and his eyes start to water. But still, still he wants to stop the nightmares, to stop being sick, so he choke's out, “They would hurt me. Electrocution, hitting, all kinds of things…”

“That’s good,” she says hurriedly. “Thank you for telling me. Now, Kenma, I need you to breathe, okay? Breathe in for five seconds, then a big exhale. And again. Breathe in, breathe in, breathe in.”
Kenma feels dizzy and sick to his stomach, and he thinks for the first time that maybe he is really sick. He follows her instructions, though, focusing all of his energy on breathing. In and out, in and out, over and over again, until finally he can feel his mind clearing up. He leans back in his chair. His therapist says, again, “Thank you for telling me. That took a lot of courage.”

*Is it really courage if I don’t feel fear?* Kenma thinks. “Yeah,” he says, though, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“But you know, it’s not going to happen again,” she tells him in a soft, soothing voice that he can almost believe. “They’re not going to get you again. And you don’t have to use your powers anymore, not if you don’t want to. But…”

“Yes?” Kenma asks nervously when she doesn’t continue speaking for a few seconds.

“I don’t know a lot about powers,” she says. “They’re not very common, so it’s not something we’re usually taught about in school, but I don’t know the effects of not using your powers for a long amount of time. It seems like using your powers is an expenditure of your energy, so I am afraid that not using them would let energy build up, which could be potentially dangerous for you. I’d have to talk to someone about it, though, get a more professional opinion.”

Kenma feels his heart speed up again. This doesn’t sound good at all; words like ‘potentially dangerous’ and ‘energy buildup’ dance around in his mind. He tries to hold back the nausea building in his throat. If she’s right, which he really can’t say if she is or not, then he has to use his powers on some occasions. And maybe enough to keep himself in balance, which could be a good amount. He feels something painful thrumming through his veins.

“Okay,” he says, feeling small and vulnerable all of a sudden.

She says, “Don’t worry too much about that, though. You’re safe now. They can’t get to you.”

She doesn’t know the doctors, Kenma knows, and for that reason, Kenma feels entirely justified in not believing her. He shrugs. “Okay,” he mutters.

“Kuroo Hachiro would never let anything happen to you,” she says. “And from what you say, neither would his son.”
“But they shouldn’t have to risk anything for me,” Kenma says, somewhat desperately. “So I wouldn’t let them do that. I won’t.”

“Kenma,” she says. “You have been through more than any eleven year old I know, unquestionably. But you are still only about eleven years old. And eleven year olds are still kids, okay? They’re supposed to let people take care of them. You don’t need to have this burden all by yourself.”

Kenma shrugs.

He wishes he could believe that too.

Kuroo Homugi picks him up after the therapy session, informing him that Kuroo Hachiro is busy with work. Kuroo Tetsurou sits in the back with him. “You seem quiet,” Kuroo Tetsurou murmurs after they sit in silence for a few minutes.

“I am quiet,” Kenma replies. He really doesn’t talk a lot, he thinks. Not nearly as much as Kuroo Tetsurou or any of the boys in his class.

“Quieter than usual,” Kuroo Tetsurou amends.

He shrugs. “Therapy is tough.”

“Sure,” Kuroo Tetsurou acknowledges. “But if it helps you feel better, then it’s worth it, right?”

Kenma thinks for a second, then gives a slight nod. He definitely does want to feel better. He doesn’t want to have nightmares every night, to shake every time someone raises their voice or brushes by him. He doesn’t want to be sick anymore. This makes Kuroo smile, a warm smile that brings heat to Kenma’s cheeks.
They pull into the driveway just a few minutes later. Maybe he’s become well-attuned to the rhythm of the Kuroo household, or maybe it’s some strange facet of his psychic powers, but the minute they pull into the driveway, he can sense that something’s wrong. His suspicion is confirmed when, upon entering the house, Kuroo Hachiro hisses, “Get down.”

Kenma obeys immediately, his hand reaching out to pull Kuroo Tetsurou down behind him. His voice shakes a little bit as he whispers, “W-what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Kuroo Hachiro says quietly. “It’s just a precaution.”

It’s complete bullshit, and Kenma knows it. He also knows that, no matter what the rest might argue, he is their best chance. So he has to know.

He’d promised himself upon being taken in by the Kuroos that he’d never use his powers on them. It would be unethical, an invasion of their privacy. But he also is well aware of the fact that desperate times call for desperate measures, and he’s not sure he’s ever been as desperate as he is right now. He can’t let them die. He won’t let them die. He won’t let them get hurt, even, not for his sake. And if it comes down to choosing between an invasion of privacy and the lives of these people who had done so much for him, then the choice is obvious.

So he reaches out for Kuroo Hachiro’s mind. He’s hit by a memory almost immediately, a woman in the front seat of a damaged car, blood trickling down her face as Kuroo Hachiro weeps. He bites down on his lip in concentration and keeps pushing through, through the memories that spring to mind, until finally he comes to what Kuroo Hachiro’s thinking at the moment. I have to stay calm, he thinks. I can’t let the boys know. They shouldn’t have to worry - they’re just kids…

Kenma’s heart rate picks up again. He just wants to know what he’s not supposed to be worrying about. He sighs, realizing he’s going to have to resort to one of the dirty tricks that he learned in the laboratory for discovering secrets. Frowning, he says, “We don’t usually do this. Is something happening? Is someone looking for us?”

For you, more like, Kuroo Hachiro thinks. I can’t believe those complete fuck-ups spotted a wanted criminal in the neighborhood of one of the kids he tortured for years and let him get away. Especially after he said he was looking for the kid. And he’s probably on his way here now. God fucking dammit, I swear I’m the only one in this entire police force that can do anything right. Guess you gotta do things yourself if you want them done right.

Kenma releases, gasping as the breath is knocked back into his body. Usually he feels exhausted after using his powers, but he feels something buzzing under his skin now as he crawls closer to
the doorway. Kuroo Hachiro growls, “Kenma, get back here.”

“No,” Kenma says, and thinks with some level of chagrin that it’s the first time he’s ever openly disobeyed an adult.

“Kenma,” he says, crawling towards Kenma, one hand outstretched as if to grab onto Kenma’s leg. Kenma does what he knows he should not and reaches out, pushing Kuroo Hachiro’s body back with his mind. Kuroo Hachiro’s eyes widen in shock. “Kenma, God, stop it. It’s dangerous out there. This isn’t your fight, do you hear me? Let us handle this.”

“They’re after me,” Kenma says simply. “It’s my fight.”

“Kenma,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, and his voice is thick. “Please, Kenma, please, just get back down here.”

“I can stop them,” Kenma says. He knows it to be true; he has powers, and if there were ever a thing they should be used for, it’s this right here. He’s been sparring with the doctors for months and months. He knows how they fight. He has an advantage that he’s sure that no one else does. So long as he gives this fight 100%, he should be able to beat whichever doctor it is easily. He pushes Kuroo Hachiro back again and gets to his feet, feeling the steady thrum under his skin as he walks to the door.

Just as he’d imagined, or rather as he’d feared, there is someone outside. He pushes open the door, ignoring the hisses of “what the fuck” and “Kenma, god, stop” behind him, and steps outside into the black of night.

“K3734,” the figure says, stepping closer, and a jolt runs through him as he realizes that it’s Morimoto. He feels the blood in his veins freeze over.

It’s like his nightmares, but it’s real. Morimoto is really here in front of him. And that fills Kenma with something, some sensation, something strong enough that his mind reaches out as if of its own accord and wraps itself around Morimoto, hoisting the man into the air. Morimoto starts to choke and sputter almost immediately, but he breathes out, “K3734, please, just let me say something. You can kill me after that if you want.”

“My name,” Kenma growls, “is Kenma.”
Kenma’s not sure what he expects Morimoto to say. However, he certainly is not expecting Morimoto to sag and say, “Okay, Kenma, please,” in between coughs. He recoils in shock a little bit. Maybe it’s not the wisest decision, but he knows he’ll wonder forever if he doesn’t, so he releases his grip on Morimoto, letting him tumble to the ground.

“You have one minute,” Kenma says darkly.

Morimoto stares at the ground, looking like he’s stumbling over the words in his head, and then he blurts out, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Every second since the lab was raided, I’ve been thinking about you, about the kids there, and how they could have been my own son. And I… god, I just wanted to make money, to support my family, and the lab’s pay was so high… but now I’m a wanted criminal and I’ve ruined the lives of innocent children. I deserve to be punished. I deserve to die. But I just… wanted you to know that first.”

Kenma’s mind runs at about a million miles per hour. Never would he have expected this, even from Morimoto, who had been perhaps the most human one of all. He has no idea how to respond. After a few incredibly long seconds, he manages to formulate the words, “My life is not ruined.”

Morimoto looks up at last, taking in the house Kenma’s standing in front of, noticing what Kenma’s protecting. “No? Well, uh, I suppose that’s good to hear.”


“I don’t expect you to,” Morimoto says. “I just wanted you to know.” He lifts his hands above his head and tucks his head back down. “You can kill me now if you want. Like I said, I deserve it.”

“I won’t kill you,” Kenma tells him firmly. “Maybe I’m a monster, but I’m never going to be a monster like you.”

“Kenma, you… you were never -“ Morimoto starts, but his sentence is interrupted by a loud crack and then he’s falling to the ground, blood pouring out of the wound on the back of his head. Shocked, Kenma stumbles backwards onto the ground. It takes him a second to realize that the men stepping out of the shadows are the police force, that they had snuck up on Morimoto during his conversation with Kenma, and that now Morimoto’s dead and Kenma will never know what he was going to tell Kenma before he died. Furious, he feels his brain reach out without his approval again, latching onto the rocks on the ground beside him.
“He wasn’t trying to hurt me,” Kenma snarls. “We were just talking.”

“He’s a wanted criminal coming after a child he tortured for over a decade,” one of the policemen says, not sounding the least bit apologetic. “He was a threat. We had to neutralize him before he did any more harm.”

“I can handle myself,” Kenma insists, and as if to prove it, the rocks hovering in the air around him fly up into the sky, clattering down all around him. The policemen stumble back, their eyes wide in fear - the way it should be, something inside of Kenma insists - and that’s the last thing he registers before his consciousness fades away.

When he wakes up, he realizes he’s in a bed, not the futon he’s slept on on Kuroo Tetsurou’s floor for a while now. That’s his first clue that something’s off. Then it all comes crashing down on him: how Morimoto had been there, how he’d seen the light fade from Morimoto’s eyes as he crashed down to the ground. He feels himself grow lightheaded again and his breath pick up as he squirms under the blankets draped over him.

“You’re up!” comes a bright voice from over in the corner. Kenma jumps a little bit at the sound, his eyes flicking over to land on Kuroo Tetsurou, who grins. “Now that you’re awake, I’m gonna go ahead and let you know that you’re a total dumbass.”

“What?” Kenma asks, struggling to process what in the world Kuroo Tetsurou could be talking about. He doesn’t recall doing anything all that dumb or embarrassing, though it’s not outside of the realm of possibility.

“You should’ve just stayed hidden,” Kuroo Tetsurou continues, sitting down at the edge of the bed, which Kenma realizes now is Kuroo’s own bed. “Dad totally had it covered! He called all those policemen in. You didn’t have to go out and talk to that evil dude.”

“I didn’t want anyone else to have to risk anything,” Kenma mumbles, staring down at the bedcovers. “It’s my problem. They have nothing to do with it.”

“See, this is why you’re stupid,” Kuroo says. “It’s not your problem. You didn’t get yourself into this. You were born into it, and you didn’t have a choice in the matter. So now you can let people help you with it! Like adults. With real guns and not just mind powers.”
“Shit,” Kenma says, falling back down onto the pillows. “Does your dad hate me?”

Kuroo’s brow furrows. “No. Why would he hate you?”

“I used my powers on him,” Kenma groans. “I didn’t mean to - I just panicked and… I’m terrible. I promised myself I wouldn’t.”

Kuroo sighs. “Oh, that. He was a little mad at the time, but mostly because you were using it to put yourself in danger. Y’know, Kenma, for someone who gives themselves so much shit about being a monster… well, I don’t know a lot of monsters, but I don’t think any of them would make promises like that, promise not to use their powers on people. They’d probably be using their powers to help themselves and stuff.”

“I broke my promise,” Kenma says.

“Because you thought we were going to die,” Kuroo tells him, his eyes dark and serious. “And Kenma, I trust you. I know you wouldn’t use your powers unless it was necessary. You wanted to protect us. That is not what monsters do.”

“No, it isn’t,” comes another voice from the doorway, and Kenma glances over to see Kuroo Hachiro standing there, his arms folded across his chest. “Though I do have to say you gave my squad quite the surprise when you made it rain rocks. But I still feel like a monster would’ve made them hit them, or at the very least, had better aim.”

“It was still cool-looking, though,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, smirking.

Kenma chokes out a laugh, a laugh that quickly devolves into a sob, and then there are tears streaming down his face. He’s not sure why he’s crying, exactly. He’s not supposed to be able to cry, but he supposes that maybe being around the Kuroos has softened him up a little.

And then there’s an arm around his shoulders, and a head on his chest, and he realizes that both Kuroo Hachiro and Kuroo Tetsurou are hugging him. It’s an odd sensation. In all of the eleven years of his life, he’s never been hugged before. But it makes him feel warm all over, and he kind of likes it, so he just leans into them and lets his tears fall onto their shoulders. It’s not completely safe yet, but it’s starting to seem like it could be soon.
Thank you all so much for reading and for your comments! I'm sorry it took me so long to post this next bit, but I hope you enjoy it nonetheless :) Please let me know what you think if you're reading!
The rest of the semester passes relatively uneventfully. He keeps going to therapy, and his nightmares start to fade away, little by little. The only problem, though, is that they start to change just the slightest bit. Instead of the doctors coming after him, or rather, the doctor now that the rest are dead, he hears Morimoto say “Kenma, you were never going to be human” or watches, over and over again, as Morimoto’s eyes become glassy and he crumples to the ground in front of Kenma.

“You just can’t catch a break,” his therapist, who he’s finally learned is named Kinjo Itsuko, says softly. “But that’s also a traumatic event, did you know that? Watching someone die.”

“It’s not so bad,” Kenma mumbles, kicking his feet back and forth.

She smiles a little. “Unfortunately, your idea of not bad isn’t exactly the usual idea. But we’re going to try to get those nightmares to go away too, okay? And hopefully nothing else bad will happen to you for a while. I think you’ve had enough bad to last a lifetime.”

Kenma's sure that he definitely agrees.

Before he knows it, he’s graduating from primary school. Honestly, he’s glad to part with it; he’d spent most of his months there avoiding his classmates and despising almost every second he spent in the building. He figures it’ll be nice, though, to get to go to a new school, filled with some new people. Also, Kuroo Tetsurou is extremely excited about Kenma joining him at his middle school.

“We’re gonna be at the same school,” Kuroo tells him, nudging Kenma’s leg with his own. “We can see each other every day! We can walk to school together!”

“We already do that,” Kenma points out.
“Yeah, but now we’ll walk onto the same campus,” Kuroo says.

“Is that such a big deal?”

“It is to me,” Kuroo says, poking out his lower lip.

Kenma shrugs. “Okay. Then I’m glad. I guess.”

“Well, it doesn’t count if you say it now.”

A few days before school starts, though, Kuroo Hachiro finds Kenma sitting alone on his futon in Kuroo Tetsurou’s room, playing on the DS Kuroo Hachiro had bought him as a celebration for graduating from elementary school. Kenma had insisted he didn’t need a gift, much less one so expensive, but Kuroo Hachiro had insisted and even taken to hiding it on various places in Kenma’s space until Kenma finally accepted it. Kuroo Hachiro bends down now, settling down onto the floor beside Kenma. “Kenma, I have to talk to you about something.”

“Okay,” Kenma says, pressing the pause button, his stomach suddenly feeling a little queasy. He settles his DS in his lap and wraps his arms around himself, glancing up at Kuroo Hachiro.

“It’s nothing bad,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “But let me start off by emphasizing something. We love having you here. We are not angry at you for anything. We all care very deeply about you. And you are welcome at this house any time.”

Kenma’s chest squeezes. Whatever this is, it doesn’t sound very good. Part of him wants to reach into Kuroo Hachiro’s mind, to find out what the hell’s going on before Kuroo Hachiro can say it, but he resists, instead giving a hesitant nod.

“Good,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “So we have a neighbor next door. An older lady. Her husband passed away a couple of years ago, and her kids have all moved out. So she has a ton of extra space in her place. And by no means do you have to agree to this, but she knows all about your, uh, situation, because of that, she wants to offer the extra room to you, a room with its own bathroom and everything. I know you’re happy here, but I figured maybe you’d like your own space, especially now that you’re getting older. Your own bed, too.”
Kenma thinks about this for a second. It doesn’t sound bad at all, really. He’s not sure he wants to leave the Kuroos’ house and the safety that it provides, but they’d still be right next door. Plus, he’d been feeling bad for a while about the burden he’d been putting on them. And it could be nice to stop sleeping on the floor. So he nods. “That sounds good.”

Kuroo Hachiro nods back. “Okay then. I’ll take you to meet her and everything tomorrow, all right?”

“Okay,” Kenma says as Kuroo Tetsurou walks in the door, looking back and forth between the two of them with a suspicious look on his face.

Kuroo Hachiro sighs. “And now we have the hard part.”

“What’s going on?” Kuroo Tetsurou asks, his voice rough.

“We were just discussing that Kenma might like a little more space,” Kuroo Hachiro explains. “And that the nice old lady next door has offered him a room of his own.”

“You’re kicking him out?!” Kuroo Tetsurou squeaks, his hands balling up into fists.

“Tetsu,” Kuroo Hachiro says in a calm, even tone. “You know that I would never, ever do that. But I gave him the choice. And it seems like he might want to take it.”

Kuroo Tetsurou blinks rapidly, his mouth twisting into a frown. He collapses onto his bed and sighs. Kuroo Hachiro shakes his head. “I’ll leave you two for a bit then. Seems like you have a lot to talk about.”

After Kuroo Hachiro leaves, Kuroo Tetsurou turns around to look at him and says, softly, “Did I do something wrong?”

Kenma fixates on a poster of a volleyball player on Kuroo’s wall, his head spinning. He counts all ten of the player's long, spindly fingers before he responds, “No. Of course not.”

“Then why?” Kuroo says, half a question, half a plea.
“It’s not like that,” Kenma says. “It’ll just be better for everyone this way, I think. We’ll both have more space. I won’t have to inconvenience your family.”

“You aren’t inconveniencing anyone,” Kuroo says firmly.

“I know,” Kenma says, even though he doesn’t see how that could be true. “But I’ll just be next door. So it’s not like I’m leaving, not really.”

Kenma’s still not one hundred percent clear on why Kuroo’s so upset, but he's never had a good grasp on why people feel things anyways. But it’s not like Kenma won’t still be around all the time, especially since they’ll be at the same school now. And he’ll still come over all the time to play video games and stuff. He voices this, and Kuroo looks a little more appeased.

“Promise?” Kuroo asks.

“Of course,” Kenma answers.

Kuroo blinks. “I just don’t want anyone else to leave. When my mom left…” He exhales deeply, his eyes welling up with tears. “When my mom left, she didn’t come back.”

Kenma pauses for a second. He’s no good at comfort at all, but he wants, more than anything, to be good at it, for Kuroo’s sake. He’d noticed, of course, that Kuroo’s mother hadn't been around, but he’d never tried to ask. He’d figured they’d tell him when - and if - they wanted to. But now he thinks Kuroo might want to tell him. Slowly, he says, “Where did she go?”

“She died,” Kuroo says quietly. “She got in a car to do some errands, and she told me that she’d be back soon, but then she never came back.”

“She didn’t want to leave,” Kenma says, because it sounds reassuring, and he’s not sure what else there is to say.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Kuroo whispers.
“I’m never going to leave,” Kenma tells him. He’s not sure if that’s a promise he can keep, but he’s damn sure he’ll die trying.

Mitsui Chifumi, the Kuroos’ next door neighbor, is among the nicest people Kenma has ever met, though truthfully he hasn’t met that many nice people outside of the Kuroos. She greets him with a homemade pie, which already endears her greatly to Kenma’s heart, and tells him long stories about her son, who is admittedly a really interesting sounding scientist. She shows him the vacant room, a bed fully made up and lots of furniture and empty walls, ripe for decorating. It’s more than Kenma could have ever dreamed of. He stands in awe for a few minutes, just taking it all in.

He moves in the next day. He doesn’t have a lot of stuff, just a few outfits and a couple of decorative items and his DS. Regardless, Kuroo Tetsurou insists on coming along to help. Kenma can’t think of any good reason to refuse.

“You have a real bed now,” Kuroo Tetsurou says with a small smile.

“It’s big,” Kenma comments. “Which is kind of overwhelming, honestly. I’d gotten used to the futon.”

“Still,” Kuroo says. “You deserve a bed.”

The way Kuroo says this makes Kenma think there’s some kind of deeper meaning behind it that he’s not getting, but he doesn’t know how to ask. Instead, he opens the closet and starts putting in his clothes. The closet seems too big, especially since Kenma only owns a few outfits. He closes his eyes and shuts the closet door.

“Come over,” Kuroo blurts, then scratches the back of his neck. “I mean, once you’re done unpacking and everything.”

Kenma nods. “Okay.”

He only gets a little bit of time at Kuroo’s place, though, because Mitsui calls him back home for dinner. She’s a surprisingly good cook, Kenma thinks to himself as he digs in to a plate overflowing with food.
“You really ought to eat more,” Mitsui chides him when he tries to excuse himself. “You’re a growing boy and yet you still eat like a bird.”

“I have a small appetite,” Kenma mumbles, because he doesn’t want to say that he’s sure surviving on tiny portions for all of his life has all but permanently decreased the size of his stomach.

“I’ll solve that problem,” Mitsui says confidently. “Eat all of your food and I’ll see if I can scrounge up some pie for dessert, you hear?”

Kenma isn’t able to finish the plate, despite his best attempts. Still, later that night, she delivers a slice of pie to his room with a wink. He digs in gratefully and then sits there, taking in the silence.

It’s odd. He hasn’t really had a quiet moment like this since moving in with the Kuroos. Kuroo Tetsurou was constantly talking, playing video games, watching TV shows, tossing a volleyball to himself, something. Kenma’s not sure he likes the silence.

So he digs out his DS and starts up Pokémon, hiking the volume up until the soothing sound of the background music fills the silence. It’s better than thinking anyways.

He wakes up shaking on his first day of middle school, and he’s not sure if it’s because of his usual nightmares or because today is a day he’s intimidated by. His therapist Kinjo had assumed he was nervous about it. He hasn’t had the heart to correct her. Even if it isn’t a feeling, even if he isn’t capable of feeling, it sounds close enough to what he’s experiencing.

His heart races as he puts on the new uniform, grabs his things, and heads down for breakfast. Rationally, he knows that it’s not going to be that different from primary school. It’ll be a lot of the same people, slightly more difficult classes, just a new school building and some new upperclassmen.

There’s a knock on the door.

Oh, yes, and Kuroo Tetsurou.
Kenma shoves the last few bites in his mouth and says, “Thank you for the meal” to Mitsui, though it comes out a little garbled. Mitsui just smiles and shakes her head. “Have a good day, and try not to get into too much trouble,” she says with a wink.

“I’ll do my best,” Kenma says back. He grabs his bag off of the counter and throws open the door. “You’re early.”

“It’s the first day of school,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, bouncing from foot to foot, “and your first official day of junior high school! Aren’t you excited?”

“For what?” Kenma says, wrinkling up his nose. “I mean, I don’t know that much about human school systems, but it seems like junior high is pretty much the same as primary school, just with more work.”

“First, I don’t know why you talk like you’re an alien or some shit, but I’ve got bad news for you: you’re not,” Kuroo replies, and Kenma knows better than to continue the argument they’ve had a million times. “Second of all, Dad says to tell you good luck and he’s rooting for you. And third, junior high is very different than primary school, because now you’ve got me.”

“We’re in different years,” Kenma points out. “That means we’re in different classes. So we won’t see each other.”

Kuroo groans. “You’re such a party pooper. I just mean we’ll be in the same building. So if you need me, you can come find me.”

As always, Kuroo’s heart is in the right place, Kenma thinks. Kuroo keeps babbling on about how now he’s an upperclassman now, Kenma’s upperclassman, in fact, and that means that Kenma has to do everything Kuroo asks. Kenma ignores him. Human traditions such as age hierarchies have never made any sense to him, after all. But the closer they get to the school, the less Kuroo talks, until they approach the gates and Kuroo shuts up completely, his face pale white.

Kenma’s suspicions start to rise, but he says nothing. He’s certain it would be embarrassing for Kuroo to talk about. Surely enough, as they walk through hoards and hoards of students into the school, Kuroo greets no one. No one greets Kuroo, either. The dots start to connect in Kenma’s head.
Kuroo drops Kenma off at his classroom and scratches his head, mumbling, “Uh, have a good day. I’ll be down the hall if you need me.” His voice is so quiet Kenma can barely hear him, a stark contrast to his usual loud boisterousness at home.

“You too,” Kenma says back. His voice isn’t loud either, but that’s his usual, at least.

The day is about what Kenma had expected. He recognizes a good few people in his classes, but still doesn’t really talk to anyone. It’s very much the same as primary school, but with more of an emphasis on high school entrance exams. Kenma doesn’t particularly care about which high school he goes to. After all, he never thought he’d even get to go to school. This is more than he could have ever asked for. He figures if he goes to high school, he’ll go wherever Kuroo Tetsurou goes.

After school, Kenma walks to Kuroo’s classroom, figuring it’d be the best place to find him. He peers in, standing up on his tip toes to peek through the tiny window in the door, and sees Kuroo packing up. Around him, groups of students chatter away in groups. Kuroo sits by himself. When he finishes packing, he takes off from the classroom, not speaking to anyone. No one says goodbye to him. Something in Kenma’s chest squeezes.

“Oh,” Kuroo says, his eyes widening when he spots Kenma outside of the classroom. “Kenma. I didn’t expect you to be here.”

Kenma shrugs. “Didn’t know where else to find you. We didn’t talk about where to meet.”

“The gate would’ve been fine,” Kuroo says, his voice still too quiet.

Kenma doesn’t know what to say, so he just nods and says nothing more. Kuroo doesn’t say anything either, not till they’re a good distance from the school and the weight seems to fall off of his shoulders. Then he starts chattering again, this time about how he’d been watching a volleyball game last night and had seen this totally cool new move where the spiker pretends like he’s going to hit the ball, waits, then jumps once he’s thrown the blockers off, and it would be totally awesome if he could figure out how to do it. Kenma regards him carefully, then sighs. “Kuro.”

“Yes?” Kuroo asks, lifting an eyebrow.

“You talk a lot,” Kenma says.

Kuroo rolls his eyes. “You know, there’s this thing that they call tact. I know you haven’t been in
society for very long, but I also know you know how to use it.”

“Why don’t you talk at school?” Kenma asks, ignoring him.

Kuroo’s eyes drop almost immediately, his cheeks heating up. Kenma just waits. He hasn’t known Kuroo all that long, but he’s been around him enough to know that Kuroo will still probably answer him. Sure enough, after chewing on his lip for a minute, Kuroo voices, “I don’t know. I’m just… scared, I guess.”

Kenma understands this. He is also uneasy about talking to people he doesn’t know. But he’s also still a little confused, so he says, “But you weren’t scared of talking to me.”

Kuroo keeps his gaze on the ground. “You needed me.”

The thing in Kenma’s chest squeezes again, and he feels his cheeks warming, probably red enough to match Kuroo’s. Kenma says, “Okay,” and then, “I think you should join the volleyball team.”

Kuroo’s head shoots up. “Kenma, no, no, I can’t. I can’t do it by myself. I’m so bad at new situations, and —“

“You don’t have to do it by yourself,” Kenma tells him. “I’ll join with you.”

It’s not a spur of the moment decision by any means. Kenma has thought about this before, pretty much every time Kuroo brought up volleyball, and hearing Kuroo say that he’d done something he was terrified of because he knew Kenma needed him — well, it pushed Kenma over the edge. If Kuroo can do something scary for Kenma’s sake, then Kenma can do something he doesn’t want to do for Kuroo’s sake. Kuroo needs him, now. And Kenma is more than willing to be there.

Kuroo’s eyebrows furrow as he processes this information. “You - you what?! But you don’t like volleyball that much, and —“

“It’s not that bad,” Kenma says firmly. “I said I’ll join with you. We’re going to join the volleyball team.”
His tone of voice leaves no room for argument. Kuroo sags a little. “Okay. Thank you, Kenma. And… we’ll make it fun. I promise.”

His therapist Kinjo seems surprised for a second when he tells her, but then blinks and nods. “I think it’ll be good for you,” she says softly. “Exercise is known to help with mental health. And it’ll be good for you to be with other kids your age.”

Kenma is not convinced that he agrees, but it’s far too late to turn back. Kuroo Tetsurou forces him to do some practice sessions before they try out for the team together. He emphasizes tossing for Kenma, showing him the proper technique to get it to the hitter for different types of hits. Kenma thinks this is a little advanced for a junior high team, but when it comes to volleyball, Kuroo will hear no arguments.

When the day of the tryout rolls around, Kuroo is positively buzzing with energy, bouncing out the door for them to head to school. Kuroo Hachiro walks out to where the boys stand and smiles at the two of them. “Kenma,” he says quietly. “This is a really nice thing you’re doing.”

“Well,” Kenma says, feeling his cheeks redden again, which is really quite annoying, “You both have done nice things for me. So.”

Kuroo Hachiro laughs. “Maybe if he can get all that volleyball energy out at practice he’ll cut down on the volleyball talk at home a little bit.”

“Doubt it,” Kenma replies.

Kuroo Hachiro grins and squeezes his shoulder. “Me too.”

The two of them easily make the team. In fact, the team seems very pleased to have them, because they’d only had six members and therefore had been playing all of their matches without a single substitute. Additionally, Kenma notices at their first practice with the team, most of the players aren’t very good. In fact, Kuroo is by far the best player on the team.

Kuroo rolls his eyes when Kenma tells him this while walking home after practice one night. “You’re biased.”
“Am not,” Kenma replies grumpily. “I would tell you if you were bad, you know.”

“You would not,” Kuroo disagrees, and then, “You really think I’m the best on the team?”

“I don’t think so. I know so,” Kenma says.

“We’re gonna be really good one day,” Kuroo promises. The light from the stars shines down on the two of them, bathing them in a low light, and Kenma thinks once again that this is more than he could have ever dreamed of.

At their fifth practice, the captain of the team praises Kuroo effusively for his hitting skills, saying that he is very impressive for someone of his age. Kuroo blushes, turning his head down and staring at the ground, but then says ‘thank you’ and asks him for any advice on how to keep improving. They end up having a short conversation. It’s the most Kenma's ever seen Kuroo talk to someone who's not him. Kenma's stomach churns a little bit, but really, he is pleased - not happy, he can't feel happy, but he likes that Kuroo is trying to make other friends. It's how he should think, at least.

At their seventh practice, Kuroo starts up a conversation with another player about his favorite professional volleyball team. At their tenth practice, one of the older players high fives Kuroo after a good play in their game and then, after practice, stays after to talk to Kuroo, leaving Kenma to wait outside. None of the other players really converse with Kenma, but that’s okay. Kenma doesn’t exactly start conversations with them either.

On the twelfth day of practice, Kenma waits for Kuroo outside of the gym. As usual, Kuroo comes out a few minutes after him, since he takes longer to get ready, but this time there’s a sheepish look on his face. “Adachi-san invited me to come eat dinner with him and Nakagawa-san,” Kuroo says, scratching the back of his head.

Kenma nods. “Have fun,” he says with his typical flat intonation.

Something weird flashes across Kuroo’s face, but then he’s grinning and nodding. “I’ll come by when I get home,” he says, because Mitsui is more than happy to have Kuroo over. She still thinks of Kuroo as a ‘polite young man’, which Kenma’s sure won’t last much longer.
And he does. It’s after 8, though. Mitsui tells him he’s only got half an hour, because the next day is a school day and Kenma needs his rest. Kuroo dashes up to Kenma’s room, beaming from ear to ear. “They think I’m really good,” Kuroo gushes.

Kenma frowns over the top of his 3DS. “I told you that already.”

“Yes, but you’re my best friend. You have to be nice to me,” Kuroo complains.

“No, I don’t,” Kenma says. “I told you your hair looked like a rat’s nest yesterday.”

“My soul is still stinging from that comment, I hope you know,” Kuroo says, placing a hand over his heart in faux-drama. “Anyways, they think I could be captain next year! Which would be so cool, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Kenma says. It would be nice, Kenma muses. He gets the feeling the current captains don’t think much of him, probably assuming, rather correctly, that he’s only playing volleyball for Kuroo. And it’s not like he’s a problem child or anything. He does everything the captains ask of him, though he especially loathes the tiring activities they assign to build ‘stamina’. But the complaints stew in his mind, and he’s sure they surface on his face as well. Plus he’s not the best player on the team, not even close. But he is the only setter beyond the third year starter, so he’ll probably be the main setter next year. And if that’s going to be the case, then he definitely wants Kuroo as his captain.

Kuroo grins, his eyes wide and bright. “We’re gonna be great, you and me,” he says.

Kenma’s sure that if he were a normal person, he’d be able to feel happy for Kuroo. Instead, he feels empty. So Kenma fakes a smile in return and wonders how long it’ll be before Kenma fades out of the equation altogether.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Kenma starts to feel weird. It starts with him just having the shakes, his heart beating fast, something hot thrumming in his veins, and him having the urge to tap his fingers on his desk and hit his feet against the floor. Something similar to restlessness, he supposes. He doesn’t question it, because he’s had symptoms like this before for no real reason, mostly when he’s talking to people he doesn’t know very well. But then he comes down with a
fever.

He doesn’t recognize it at first, because he hasn’t been sick since he left the laboratory, but when he stumbles downstairs flushed and sweaty, Mitsui practically faints. She presses a hand to his forehead gingerly. He winces, feeling his breath increase even more. She frowns. “Kenma, honey, you’re not going to school today.”

“‘m okay,” Kenma slurs out. He tries to get up, to prove this to her for whatever reason, but immediately starts to sway and sits back down. “…can I ‘ave my DS if I’m ‘ome?”

“Maybe after you rest a little, mister,” Mitsui says, swatting at his head. There’s a knock on the door, and she sighs in relief. “Oh, thank god. There’s no way I could have carted you up the stairs.” She opens the door and smiles at Kuroo Tetsurou. “Hello, you strong young thing. Would you like to help a frail old woman out?”

Kuroo’s eyebrows lift. “Of course I would. What’s going on?”

“Kenma’s sick and cannot walk,” she says, brushing a hand over Kenma’s head. Kenma does his best not to wince away. “And I might break a bone if I tried to tote him all the way to his room!”

“Kenma’s sick?” Kuroo asks, his voice suddenly sounding incredibly panicked. He walks around Mitsui quickly and presses both of his hands to Kenma’s cheeks, which makes Kenma jump and cringe at the suddenness of the movement. A frown appears on Kuroo’s face, but he doesn’t move away. “Holy shit, he’s burning up.”

“Watch your language,” Mitsui chides. “Do you think you could get him to his room? He still doesn’t weigh very much, you know. I’ve been trying to fatten him up, but there’s only so much I can do…”

“Yeah, of course I can,” Kuroo replies. He bends down a little more, puts his face near Kenma’s ear, which makes Kenma’s stomach churn even more at the close proximity. “I’m gonna pick you up, okay? I’m not going to hurt you.”

Kenma thinks of how weird it must be to have to say that, since most normal humans he’s seen don’t have to say that to each other before they touch each other, but he nods anyways. Kuroo slips one hand around his back and the other under his knees and picks him up. “I’ll go tuck him in and everything,” he tells Mitsui, and then starts walking.
He sets Kenma down gently in his bed, pulls the covers up around him, and then brushes Kenma’s hair up out of his eyes, something dark in his eyes. “I’ll be back after school,” he says seriously. “I’ll bring you soup.”

“Soup?” Kenma asks, crinkling up his nose.

“Brat, you can’t eat pie when you’re sick,” Kuroo says, flicking him on the nose.

“You’re a scientist,” Kenma mumbles. “Invent pie soup.”

Kuroo rolls his eyes, but there’s something like a smile on his face. It’s the last thing Kenma sees before he falls back asleep.

True to his word, Kuroo Tetsurou shows up a few hours of later. Kenma blinks at him, still trying to get the sleep out of his mind, and glances over at the clock. It’s club time, Kenma realizes, and he croaks out, “Volleyball?”

“They’ll understand if I don’t show up just this once,” Kuroo says cheerily, unwrapping the bag he’d brought with him. “Open up, kiddo. I brought soup.”

“’M only a year younger than you an’ I don’ need to be fed,” Kenma protests, but the words all slur together.

Kuroo grins. “Here comes the train….” he says, bringing the spoon up to Kenma’s mouth.

“What’s that mean,” Kenma manages.

“Oh,” Kuroo says, his eyes widening. He bites his lip. “Uh, it means… it’s just something adults do to get kids to eat. Like a fun little game.”
“Oh,” Kenma repeats. He sighs and then opens his mouth.

“Glad you’ve decided to cooperate,” Kuroo says, spooning a helping of soup into Kenma’s mouth.

Kenma swallows, then frowns. “‘S not ‘s good ‘s pie,” he complains.

“Get better and then you can have pie,” Kuroo says, giving him another spoonful.

There’s a soft knock on the door. Kuroo looks a little confused, but says, “Come in,” before Kenma gets the chance to, not that he even trusts his voice to be loud enough for the person to hear anyways. After a pause, the door opens and in walks Kuroo Hachiro. He gives Kenma a half-smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“How are you doin’?” he asks, standing at Kenma’s other side.

“No good,” Kenma grunts out.

Kuroo Tetsurou frowns. “Yeah, he can’t get up, can barely move or talk… I’m kinda worried, Dad.”

Kuroo Hachiro just nods. He pulls a thermometer out of his pocket and says “Open up” to Kenma, who obliges. He then says, “Put your tongue up, too,” and Kenma does that too, although it seems like an odd thing to do. Kuroo Hachiro puts the thermometer in and waits until he hears the beep, then pulls it back out. A frown appears on his face. “Yeah, just as I’d figured.”

“How bad is it?” Kuroo Tetsurou asks, his voice trembling a little.

“It’s bad,” Kuroo Hachiro says flatly.

“Shit,” Kuroo Tetsurou says. Kenma notices that his hands ball up into fists, fists that shake a little as he says, “Then we need to get him to the hospital right now! What are you waiting for? We can’t just let him suffer!”
“I want to try something first,” Kuroo Hachiro says, redirecting his attention back to Kenma. “Kenma, how long have you been feeling like this?”

Kenma thinks for a second, counts back the days. Then, not trusting his voice, he raises three shaking fingers.


“And you didn’t say anything?!” Kuroo growls, his eyes narrowing and mouth downturned. Kenma coils back, waits for the inevitable yelling or hitting, even, but nothing comes. Instead, Kuroo breathes out, his fists still curled up and his eyes pinched shut. “Shit, Kenma. You can’t… you can’t do that.”

“Tetsu, maybe not the time,” Kuroo Hachiro says softly, placing a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Kenma, how long has it been since you’ve used your power?”

Kenma thinks again. Maybe the last time… well, it’d been when he’d used it to stop a cat from falling out of a tree, and then been exhausted for the rest of the day. That’d been three and a half weeks ago. He puts up three fingers and puts his finger down, then up, then down again.

“Four?” Kuroo Hachiro asks, and Kenma shakes his head. “Three and a half?” he guesses again. Kenma nods. Kuroo Hachiro sighs. “Then that might be your problem. Your body… it’s not used to not using your powers. Honestly, I don’t think it’ll ever get really used to you not using your powers.”

“W-wha’ can I do?” Kenma tries to get out.

“Why do you not like using your powers?” Kuroo Hachiro asks. Kenma winces at the idea of trying to answer this question verbally, when it hurts to speak, but Kuroo Tetsurou seems to realize this before Kenma even says anything. He pokes around Kenma’s room for a minute, then resurfaces with a notebook and a pencil. Kenma scrawls They make me tired, and then Bad memories, and finally, They hurt people.

He turns it around and both Kuroos take a moment to read it. Kuroo Tetsurou’s frown deepens, but Kuroo Hachiro just nods. “The tiredness thing probably won’t go away, but it might get better the more you use them - you know, like how the more you exercise, the longer it takes you to get tired.
The other two… well, the second one you’ll talk about with your therapist, and the third one… it’s just not true. I don’t know if we can get you to believe that, but there are so many stories in our society of heroes who are able to rescue people with their powers, and I think you could too.”

*I was programmed to be a monster,* Kenma wants to say, but the words won’t leave his throat. He just casts his eyes downward instead. Kuroo Hachiro sighs. “We’ll work on that. But you’re going to have to use your powers, or this is only going to get worse. We’ll start with something small to see if it gets your fever down. Can you move the notebook back over to your book bag?”

Kenma really, really does not want to. Knowing him, he’ll somehow, without meaning to, send the notebook flying into one of their faces, or break it in half. His powers are only good for evil, after all. It’s what he’s programmed for. But he does not want to feel like *this,* either, so like the demon he is, he decides to be selfish and nods. He reaches out weakly to grasp onto the notebook and lifts it into the air, slowly, carefully moving it back to where it came from.

Kuroo Tetsurou gasps. Kenma doesn’t want to look at him, doesn’t want to see the look of horror in his eyes as he realizes what a monster Kenma is, but he’s a sucker for pain, so he does anyways. But when he looks, he doesn’t see what he’s expecting. Instead, there’s a look of wonder, of awe, wide, bright eyes and a half-open mouth. Kuroo Tetsurou’s gaze flicks back to Kenma. “Holy shit, that was so cool!”

Kenma sets the notebook back down and realizes, suddenly, that he hadn’t hurt anyone. He’d used his powers and everyone in the room was still standing, still unharmed. He braces himself, waiting for the inevitable bad result, but nothing comes. Kuroo Hachiro smiles at him knowingly, almost as if he’d expected this to happen, and Kenma suddenly starts to question things.

“Open up again,” Kuroo Hachiro says, and Kenma obeys. He glances at the thermometer. “Hell, you’ve dropped a degree already just from that. Your therapist was right, then. You’re definitely going have to use your powers on a regular basis.” Kenma realizes that his therapist must be talking to Kuroo Hachiro, then, which is both unsurprising and not really a big deal, since most of what he’s said to the therapist he’s also said to Kuroo Hachiro.

“You should use them more often,” Kuroo Tetsurou jumps in. “Not just because they’ll help you feel better, but also cause that was really fucking cool.” He looks at his dad. “You can’t tell me to watch my language.”

Kuroo Hachiro just laughs and ruffles Kuroo Tetsurou’s hair. “Fuck you, watch your language,” he says teasingly.
Kenma smiles, then says, “I’ll do my best” as best he can. It doesn’t come out exactly like that, but it’s close enough that the Kuroos seem to understand, because they nod approvingly.

Once the Kuroos leave, Kenma decides to try experimenting a little. He pushes out until he finds the mind of a random person on the street.

He grabs on to the person’s mind and pushes in, pleading his silent apologies as he does so, but he has to know. He’s sucked in immediately: a teenage girl, a little bit older than him, it seems. He watches as she watches a boy in her class from afar, wondering why she isn’t good enough for him. He watches as he turns her down, she nods to herself, and says she’s going to be better - not for him, but for herself. He watches as she studies for hours on end and joins the top of her class.

But I still feel like there’s something wrong with me, she thinks to herself. Maybe if I join more clubs... maybe if I find some kind of special talent, like the sudden ability to sing like an angel... maybe then I’ll feel like I’m good enough. I’ll come up with a plan today. I’ll... I’ll stop being the most boring person in my class.

Kenma releases, snapping back into his own mind with a pop. He blinks. It hadn’t been so bad, really, and he’s not all that tired now. And he doesn’t know the girl, but if he did, maybe he’d be able to help her. Maybe he’d be able to somehow convey to her that her worth as a human isn’t in her talents or in her achievements. He’s not sure how, exactly, but it would be nice if he could find a way to use his powers - his curse - to help people.

And even though it hadn’t exactly been an extended power usage session, he still feels a little bit better physically than before.

Huh, he thinks to himself. He half-expects one of the doctors to materialize out of nowhere, to backhand him across the face and tell him he’s crazy for even believing that he could be anything remotely resembling a hero. But no one does. Two of them are dead, he knows. One of them he had watched die. And the third... well, from what he’s heard, the third is nowhere to be found. Still a danger, but not one Kenma can really conceptualize until either Akiba or Kumagai resurfaces.

Maybe, just maybe, there’s hope for him after all.
He keeps using his power every few hours or so, once he’s fully recovered from using it the last time. He tries to use it in innocuous ways that couldn’t possibly be harmful - bringing objects to where he’s resting on the bed, reading the minds of people he’s never met and making sure to basically discard the information after learning it, easy things like that. And so he gets better; his fever coming down from near dangerous levels to within a normal range. Kuroo Tetsurou seems relieved when he comes back over the next day after practice, Kenma having insisted he go. “Thought you were a goner for a while there,” he says.

“Please,” Kenma grumbles. “So dramatic.”

“You were so white you looked like a corpse,” Kuroo teases in response.

“I’ve had worse,” Kenma replies passively, and he kind of regrets the word when he sees the flash of something harsh appear on Kuroo’s face. “Sorry,” he says, even though he’s not completely sure what he’s apologizing for.

“’s not your fault,” Kuroo says in response, even though that’s not really the truth.

He goes back to volleyball practice too, despite his reservations. One of the other players in his year says Kuroo told him that Kenma was sick, and asks if he’s doing all right now, which honestly surprises Kenma. He stands there, blinking rapidly, and then says, “Uh, I’m fine. Thank you,” because he thinks that’s the polite thing to say.

“That’s good to hear,” the guy says with a nod, and then stands there, as if waiting for something. Kenma has no idea what he’s supposed to say. Interacting with people his age still makes him incredibly nervous; Kuroo is, as always, the singular exception, the one person with which everything had come naturally, maybe mostly because Kuroo had done most of the work. Kenma tries to force a smile, but thinks to himself that either his skills at feigning emotions have rapidly deteriorated or that maybe he was never all that good to begin with, because he’s pretty sure it looks more like a grimace.

Even though the interaction was incredibly awkward and not all that interesting, Kuroo still asks him about it on the way home from school. To be more accurate, he squeezes Kenma’s shoulder and says, “Good to see you’re putting effort into getting along with the team.”

“I guess,” Kenma says, because he doesn’t really think that one five second conversation amounts to that much, but he also has some weird urge to not disappoint Kuroo. “I still don’t think they like
Kuroo shrugs. “They just don’t know you is all. I don’t mean this in a bad way, because I get why and everything, but you’re kinda hard to get to know.” Kenma nods. He’s not really sure what getting to know someone entails, anyways. It seems to him as though it would be like a lot of effort to let someone else into the workings of his mind when he’s already let Kuroo Tetsurou and Kuroo Hachiro and Kinjo and Mitsui, to a degree, in more than he thought he ever would. So he probably won’t do it. “But they’re not saying anything rude to you, are they?”

“No, of course not,” Kenma says.

“Tell me if they do,” Kuroo tells him. “I’ll kick their asses.”

“But they’re your friends,” Kenma points out. He doesn’t understand this side of Kuroo, isn’t sure he ever will. In fact, it’s a part of humanity in general that he’s not sure he’ll ever understand. He’s hurt people, to be sure, but he doesn’t think he could bring himself to hurt someone he calls a friend. Who knows what he’s capable of, though?

“You were my friend first,” Kuroo says firmly, avoiding his eyes. “Anyways, it’s not like middle school teams even matter that much. What matters is high school teams. Because then you can get the chance to go to Nationals and play on the real court.”

“Real court?” Kenma asks. “Is there a fake court?”

“Smartass,” Kuroo gripes. “I mean the big court, where people are watching you, where you’re playing against another strong team, where any mistake that you make matters! It’s so exciting!”

“That sounds terrible,” Kenma says, which makes Kuroo’s face fall a little. He regrets his word choice almost immediately and follows it up with, “I mean, everyone watching you. But I guess maybe it wouldn’t be that bad if both of us were there.”

Kuroo grins. “Then we’ll do it,” he says. “Both of us. We’ll go to the same high school and we’ll go to Nationals with the best team.”

“You can’t predict the future,” Kenma says, feeling his mouth tilting slightly downwards. “I can’t even do that.”
“Who knows, maybe you have some more latent powers you don’t know about,” Kuroo says with an eye roll. “But I don’t have to predict the future, idiot. I just have to believe in the two of us.”

“The two of us,” Kenma repeats. A sensation of warmth washes over him. Not thinking about the rest of the team is easier; knowing that Kuroo still prioritizes him over the rest of the team makes the knot in his stomach fade away a little. He tries to manage a small smile. “Okay, then. I guess we’ll see.”

He puts a little more effort into volleyball after that — not necessarily for his own sake, but because Kuroo seems to like it when he does. Kuroo’s face lights up when he sees Kenma move to get under the ball for a set or attempt to change the height of a set to match a specific player. And it makes the other players a little friendlier to him, not to the same degree as Kuroo, but not unfriendly, either.

Kenma’s not sure he understands why, but he doesn’t question it either.

“So you had different assignments on different days?” Kinjo asks, her pen scratching something out on the paper in front of her.

“Yeah,” Kenma says. “Day ones were attempts at mind control. Day twos were mostly memory searching. Day threes were mind reading. Uh, day fours were mind control again, since I was bad at that. Day fives were moving objects. Day six and seven were combat training.”

“Combat training?” Kinjo raises her eyebrows. “They made you fight? Against them, or against the other children there?”

Kenma stares down at his hands moving around in his lap, his only way of releasing his excess of energy. “Uh, mostly against them, I guess. But sometimes against other kids too. I wasn’t that good, but I got better before I was about to leave, and they were going to… use me as a weapon. To take out their enemies.” He chews on his lip, his mind taking him back. Back to when he believed that the only way out was to be a weapon, when he was slowly growing accustomed to the fact that he would have to murder people in cold blood. It hadn’t seemed that terrible back then, but mostly because he’d resigned himself to believing he had no other options. But now, knowing what he knows, having been exposed to the life that other humans live…
He realizes that his worst nightmare has become going back to the laboratory.

And it’s not fair of him to think. He doesn’t deserve to live this kind of life. He was bred for the laboratory, after all. He was bred to be a monster, to be a killer, to be able to take the life of these people he’s been surrounded with without even a second thought. He tries to imagine being forced to kill one of the Kuroos or Mitsui - or worse, Kuroo Tetsurou. The idea physically hurts him, feels like the blood in his veins has turned to lead. His breaths come faster and faster until he’s panting for air.

“Kenma,” Kinjo says in a soft, soothing voice. She’s sitting in front of him now, a little closer, Kenma realizes, but very determinedly leaving space between them. She gives him a reassuring smile. “You don’t have to talk about this if you’re not ready.”

“I-it’s okay,” Kenma says, his brain still fuzzy, heart pounding way faster than it probably should be. Kenma’s still not sure he understands the concept of emotions, but this… feels suspiciously close to what he’s heard from other people that experiencing emotions sounds like. The weird physical reactions, the feeling of physical pain even when nothing is happening to provoke that sort of a reaction. But it’s impossible, isn’t it? Kenma knows this, has known this as long as he’s lived. Emotions aren’t in his DNA. But maybe he could have broken free somehow? Or maybe… maybe it had been in his DNA to begin with. It wouldn’t be the first thing that the laboratory and the doctors had lied to him about.

He pushes the train of thought away. Somehow the thought of being only human after all this time is almost scarier than the alternative.

"Let’s change the subject for now, and we’ll revisit this at a later time,” Kinjo says. “Please feel free to ask for another subject change if this is also a bad topic, but I wanted to ask if you knew any of the other children at the laboratory.”

Kenma takes note of the fact that she refers to them as children and not as experiments, not as freaks, not as inhuman - but as children, still young, still human. He wonders if she would still feel the same way if she knew how they were made. He wonders if the Kuroos would feel the same way. He wonders if Mitsui would send him to fend for himself.

He pushes the thought away again. “I knew of them, mostly, but I tried not to talk to them.”

“Was there a reason for that? Were you not allowed to?” she asks.
“No, it’s not that,” Kenma says hesitantly. “I was… I used to talk to the other kids. I talked a lot to one of them and he was really, uh, nice, I guess. But then… then he died.”

“Oh,” she says, writing something else down on her paper. “Do you think that affects how you think of your friendships now?”

Kenma shakes his head vehemently. “I won’t let them kill Kuro,” he says, feeling his hands curl into fists, his fingernails dig into the soft flesh of his palm. “I won’t let them near him. So it’s not the same.”

“That’s true,” she says with a hum. “But it does sound a little bit like it’s something you’re still worried about happening.”

“I don’t worry about things that won’t happen,” Kenma says.

“It won’t, you’re right,” she says. “But do you think that maybe you hold things back in your friendship with Kuroo based off of your past bad experiences?”

Kenma doesn’t know, and to be honest, he doesn’t really want to think about it. So he crosses his arms and frowns. “How am I supposed to know that?”

“It’s just something to think about,” she says, voice still even. “But you don’t even have to think about it right now. We still have time. So let’s go back to volleyball…”

Kenma sighs and wishes not for the first time that he was a normal human kid. That he was born to two parents, grew up in a nice house, maybe near the Kuroos’. That he didn’t have any stupid powers he could use to hurt people. That he could just worry about volleyball and school and not have to go to stupid therapy every week, that he wouldn’t have to worry about a doctor from the laboratory coming back, that he wouldn’t have to worry about his best friend, his only friend, being killed.

But there’s no use wishing for such things. He can’t control time. So he just says, “Volleyball’s been better lately, I guess.”
When he gets back from the therapy session, he has an inexplicable urge to see Kuroo Tetsurou, so he heads over to the Kuroos’. Kuroo Hachiro opens the door and grins at him. “Hey, kiddo. Tetsu went out a few minutes ago to play football with some kids from the neighborhood, but he said if you came over you could wait here and he’d be back soon.”

“Kay,” Kenma mumbles.

“Just get back from therapy?” Kuroo Hachiro asks, leading him into the kitchen where he grabs a serving of applesauce and a spoon, passing it to Kenma.

Kenma opens the applesauce and nods. “Had to talk a lot.”

Kuroo Hachiro laughs. “Yeah, I hear that’s what therapy’s like. It’s helpful, though?”

Kenma shrugs. “I don’t have as many nightmares, at least.”

Kuroo Hachiro’s face brightens considerably. Kenma’s gotten better at telling the difference between fake smiles and genuine smiles on other people; there’s something in Kuroo Hachiro’s eyes now, a brightness, that hints that this is one of the genuine smiles. “Proud of you, Kozume Kenma,” he says, ruffling Kenma’s hair. Kenma half-heartedly nudges him away. Something rings at Kuroo Hachiro’s side, though, and he sighs. “Shit, that’s me. Tell Tetsu and the rest I’m sorry I won’t be home for dinner, okay?”

Kenma nods and, finishing off his applesauce, goes to join Kuroo Homugi on the couch where she’s watching some weird crime show. She just smiles over at him and says, “I hope that old geezer Mitsui’s been making you pies.”

“She feeds me vegetables,” Kenma confesses, wrinkling up his nose.

“Old coot doesn’t know how to spoil the young ones,” Kuroo Homugi scoffs, but she’s smiling.

Kuroo Tetsurou stumbles in about a half an hour later, covered in sweat and still breathing heavy. Kuroo Homugi says to him, “Tetsurou, why don’t you take Kenma with you to play football or whatever it is sometime?”
“I’d invite Kenma if I thought he wanted to go,” Kuroo Tetsurou says with a shrug. Kenma shakes his head vehemently; balancing school, volleyball, and therapy is tiring enough already. No way does he want to add anything more.

Kuroo Homugi rolls her eyes and tells him to make the best of his youth, and he nods, following Kuroo Tetsurou up the stairs. He collapses on the end of Kuroo’s bed as Kuroo sits down at the head and stares at him. “What’s goin’ on?” he asks quietly. “Therapy that bad?”

Kenma’s not sure how Kuroo even knows, but Kuroo somehow always knows. Maybe Kuroo has mind reading powers too that he just hasn’t told Kenma about. Either way, it’s not worth arguing about, because Kuroo knows, so Kenma just says, “Don’t leave.”

Kuroo shakes his head. “Idiot, why would I leave?”

“People don’t mean to sometimes,” Kenma answers, and he knows that Kuroo will understand what he means, because he’s said as much to Kenma before.

Kuroo just frowns, one hand stretching out to carefully land on top of Kenma’s. It’s an odd sensation; beyond brief handshakes, Kenma’s never really touched another person’s hand like this, and suddenly he’s very aware of how sweaty his palm is. Kuroo doesn’t seem to care, though. He takes ahold of Kenma’s hand, slowly, carefully, and gives it a squeeze. “You’re stuck with me,” he says firmly, and then, “Wait, is this cause I went to play football with those guys? ‘Cause they sucked real bad.”

“What? No.”

“Well, it was kinda weird timing.”

“I had therapy, stupid, and it made me think. That’s all.”

“You’ve gotten real sassy,” Kuroo says, giving his hand another light squeeze. “Sorry therapy was hard. Wanna play some games?”

Kenma has homework, but that can wait, he supposes.
Thank you for reading and for your lovely comments! Here we have Kuroken finally getting to play volleyball together, which makes my heart happy. Keep the comments coming, let me know what you think!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: flashbacks/mild description of child death, flashbacks of childhood abuse, trauma & PTSD mentions, nightmares.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time keeps passing. Kenma gets to the point where he works up enough nerve to tell Kinjo a little more about his friend. He keeps his head down as he recounts the tale: he was younger, a few years younger at least, and he’d been sitting down on the cold metal floor of the other boy’s room. The boy wasn’t particularly loud, either, just barely more talkative than Kenma. Most likely it was because they had harsh punishments for those who spoke out of turn. Sometimes they’d just sit in silence in the same room, him on his cot, Kenma on the floor. Other times, the boy would talk a little bit, mostly about how his sessions had gone. His powers were much different than Kenma’s. They’d bred him to be physically strong, strong enough to lift a car by himself, so he’d had more combat training than Kenma. Even at a very young age, the boy had started being sent out as a weapon.

“It’ll be fine,” he’d told Kenma when his first outing as a weapon. “I’m strong! There’s no way any bad guy could be stronger than me.”

They’d brought him back from that outing later that week, bloodied and panting. Kenma had hidden down the hall, but he’d heard as the doctors yelled at him, told him it was his job to exterminate those he’d been assigned to exterminate and any step out of line was treason. He’d heard the loud shock and the scream that slowly faded out.

For years after, he’d wondered why the other boy hadn’t fought back.

Afterwards, Kumagai had found him crouched in the hallway. Kenma half-expected to be yelled at or punished for being somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be. Kumagai had just tilted his head down to Kenma and smiled, a smirk that sent chills down Kenma’s spine. “Don’t step out of line,” was all he’d said. And Kenma hadn’t.

It’s painful to remember even now, all these years later, but he tells Kinjo all about it. Kinjo just smiles and says, “Thank you for telling me,” and Kenma does find that he feels a lot better, having gotten all of it out. They work together to put together a timeline of what he went through and discuss how the worldviews Kenma’s built up over time in the laboratory just don’t apply in the world he’s found himself in now, as well as ways that Kenma can change his thought process to
match that of his new, much kinder world. It’s hard. Kenma’s not sure he’ll ever fully get the hang of it.

Eventually, fall rolls around. Kenma’s never experienced the seasons before, not like this, and while winter had been cold, spring had been beautiful, and summer way too hot for his liking, fall is another thing altogether. He wakes up one weekend to see the leaves in different colors, making their way off the trees and onto the ground. He darts through the house until he’s standing outside and sits down on the front steps. His eyes follow the paths of the vibrant, colorful leaves.

After what could’ve been a few minutes or an hour - Kenma isn’t really keeping track of time - he hears the leaves start to rustle in front of him. His eyes dart over to land on Kuroo Tetsurou, who is grinning and holding two cups. He holds out one to Kenma. “Grandma sent over some hot chocolate,” he says.

Kenma feels his lips turn up as he takes the cup. “Tell her I said thanks.”

They sit for a minute in silence before Kuroo says, “Admiring the view, huh?”

Kenma nods, sipping at his hot chocolate. “I kind of learned about leaves changing color and all that in science, but I’ve never seen it in real life before.”

“It’s pretty,” Kuroo says. “I’ve always liked fall. My birthday is in fall, y’know, so it has to be the best season.”

Kenma rolls his eyes. “Shut up.”

“It’s true,” Kuroo replies, then stares at him, his gaze piercing. Kenma thinks the act is a little uncomfortable, so he looks back out at the trees. A few seconds later, Kuroo says, “You don’t have a birthday, do you?”

“No,” Kenma says, thinking to himself, *because I was never born.* It’s one of the things that marks him as distinctly inhuman.

“Well, that won’t do,” Kuroo says cheerfully. “You seem to like the fall, huh? We should give you a birthday in the fall, then, so you can enjoy your birthday during your favorite season every year. Maybe sometime soon...”
“Can you just give someone a birthday?” Kenma asks.

“Does it matter?” Kuroo responds. “It’s not like there’s some kind of a blood test they can do to find out your exact birth date. Chemistry hasn’t gotten that far yet. And every human needs a birthday. Didn’t Dad write one on your forms?”

Kenma crinkles up his nose, trying to remember. “October, maybe?” he says. “I think it was October 16th.”

The corner of Kuroo’s mouth tilts up. “October 16th,” he repeats. “So just a few weeks, and then you’ll be thirteen, I guess. The same age as me. We’ll have to celebrate.”

“Don’t do anything embarrassing,” Kenma warns. The idea of having a birthday celebration isn’t terrible, so long as it’s just the people that he actually cares about, and no one else is dragged into it. He doesn’t know for sure what it’ll consist of, though. It’s not like he’s had a birthday celebration before. And he’s never been to one, either.

“Please,” Kuroo scoffs. “Like I’m ever embarrassing.”

Kenma doesn’t dignify that with a response. Instead, he leans his head forwards onto his knees and watches the leaves fall again, one by one, dropping to the ground. He feels Kuroo turn to look at him, sees Kuroo’s smile widen out of the corner of his eye. Something in Kenma’s chest squeezes.

Another leaf drops.

Kenma’s birthday starts off in the best possible way. By that, he means the Kuroos and Mitsui show up in his room toting an apple pie with ice cream on top. Mitsui insists that this is unhealthy, and they’re going to stunt Kenma’s growth if they continue to feed him like this. Kuroo Homugi, his hero, rolls her eyes, tells Mitsui to shut up, and then starts them off in singing the birthday song.

“You’re a teenager now,” Kuroo Tetsurou says as they walk to school. “How does it feel?”
“No different,” Kenma mumbles. “You’ve been thirteen for 11 months now, shouldn’t you know?”

“But I wanted to hear it from your side,” Kuroo complains. “Hey, maybe if we tell the senpai your birthday is today, they won’t make you run as much.”

Kenma’s head shoots up. “You think?”

“No,” Kuroo says, chuckling. “But hey, it’s worth a try.”

Unfortunately, the senpai are not so merciful, and they still force Kenma to run all the laps with the rest of the team. But they do sing him the happy birthday song at the end of practice and give him a card. It’s a basic card, just a store-bought one with a bunch of signatures and generic birthday wishes, but Kenma cradles it close to his chest anyways.

“You’re gonna stay over at mine tonight,” Kuroo tells him.

“It sounds like I don’t have a choice,” Kenma says.

“Not really,” Kuroo tells him. “But it’ll be fun. Oh, and I got you a present, so you have to come over for that anyways.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” Something about the idea of Kuroo spending his fairly meager allowance on Kenma makes Kenma’s chest squeeze tight.

“Of course I didn’t have to,” Kuroo says. “No one has to do anything for anyone, you know. But I wanted to! And us boring, average humans usually buy gifts for each other on their birthdays, so.”

Kenma takes note of this and then realizes that Kuroo’s birthday is in just a few short weeks, so he’ll have to buy a gift for Kuroo in return. He’s glad his birthday comes first so he can know what sort of thing to buy Kuroo. This way, he won’t look like a fool come next month.

After eating dinner and yet another serving of Kuroo Homugi’s apple pie, Kuroo Tetsurou drags
him to his room. He slides under his bed and pulls out a box wrapped in newspaper with a bow haphazardly slapped onto the top of it.Kenma raises his eyebrows, and Kuroo elbows him. “Stop judging the wrapping, you little shit,” he says, too warmly.

“It only matters what’s inside, I guess,” Kenma replies dryly, taking the box. He slowly pulls off the wrapping paper, bit by bit, and carefully opens the box. Inside is a simple cellphone. It’s one of the flip phones, a solid black color, and Kenma holds it in his hand before looking questioningly up at Kuroo.

“A lot of kids our age have them,” Kuroo says, fidgeting a little. “And I got one recently too, but it’s no fun if I can’t text my best friend. Besides, this way if you ever want to know how I am, you can know, just like that!”

It’s his own way of saying that he knows Kenma worries and this is his way of trying to help with that. Kenma’s chest feels as though it might explode. He tilts his head downwards, biting down on his lip, and thinks that this is the closest he might ever get to really feeling. Kuroo steps closer, a little hesitantly, and then rests one arm on Kenma’s shoulder. When Kenma glances up, he notices the questioning look on Kuroo’s face and gives a small nod. Understanding completely, as he almost always does, Kuroo wraps both arms around Kenma and pulls Kenma tight against his chest. Slowly Kenma lifts up his arms to rest on Kuroo’s back.

It makes him feel warm and safe, like nothing in the world could ever hurt him. It feels like being encased in an apple pie straight out of the oven. Kenma never wants to let go.

But eventually they do, and Kenma notices that Kuroo’s cheeks are slightly pink. Then Kuroo says, “Uh, well, turn it on so we can see if it works!” and they snap right back into their own personal equilibrium.

This means, though, that Kenma has to get a great birthday present for Kuroo Tetsurou in return. His phone has been very useful, despite Kuroo taking it as an opportunity to send him dumb things all the time, even sometimes during class - stupid Kuroo and his natural propensity for school that makes it so he doesn’t need to listen in class. It’s incredibly hard to shop for a normal person, though, Kenma finds, even one that he knows as well as he knows Kuroo.

So he waits until Kuroo goes out to play football with the kids from the neighborhood again and sneaks into the Kuroo household. Thankfully, for once, Kuroo Hachiro isn’t out on a job. Kuroo Hachiro just lifts an eyebrow at him. “Tetsu isn’t here.”
“I don’t only come here for Kuro,” Kenma protests.

“Right, Tetsurou and my mom’s apple pies,” Kuroo Hachiro says with a laugh.

“It’s not just that,” Kenma huffs.

Kuroo Hachiro smiles. “I know, I know, don’t worry. And you know you’re welcome here any time. Doesn’t matter if the little asshole is here or not.”

“Okay,” Kenma says, sitting down across from him. “…though it is about Kuro a little bit.”

“See, I knew it.”

Kenma sighs. “I just… I don’t know what he wants for his birthday. And I’ve never bought a birthday gift before. I don’t know how any of this works.”

“I see. Well, honestly, it doesn’t matter all that much. There’s a saying in our society when it comes to giving gifts, that it’s the thought that counts, and with Tetsu especially, I think it holds very true. He’ll love anything you give him just because it’s from you.”

“That’s not helpful,” Kenma says, and then, freezing up a little as he realizes he’d said that to an authority figure, “…sorry.”

Kuroo Hachiro shakes his head. “You don’t have to apologize, kiddo. You can joke around with me. Hell knows everyone else does. But unfortunately, I don’t think I can tell you exactly what to get for him. You know him as well as I do at this point.” He gives a small grimace. “Teens in our world tend to try to distance themselves from their parents as they get older. And Tetsu’s not the worst by any means, but he is a teenager.”

“Yeah,” Kenma says, because he supposes it makes sense, but it’s still a little odd that human teenagers would distance themselves from their parents who care about them so deeply. Maybe it’s just another one of those things about humanity that he can never really understand.
“He likes sports, though,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “You know, most sports, but especially volleyball. Maybe you could use that somehow.”

“Volleyball,” Kenma says thoughtfully. “You’re right.” It makes sense. Volleyball is one of the things that they share together, something that he does mostly for Kuroo’s sake but doesn’t regret, could never regret. So he nods. “Okay, I think I’ve got it.”

And he does. Over the next couple of weeks, he invests himself fully into completing his project. When he’s not at therapy or school or volleyball, he’s trying to figure out how to make this present work. He even uses his powers to make sure that the present is perfect, despite the fact that he still has reservations about using them. Kinjo wholeheartedly approves, telling him that it’s nice to see him so enthusiastic about something. And so when Kuroo’s birthday rolls around, Kenma feels almost like a pit of lead has planted itself in his stomach.

But after school, after going to the Kuroos’ in the morning to bring over cake and after the team gives Kuroo all of their best wishes and balloons and after the football boys from the neighborhood bring him over a nice athletic shirt, claiming he needs it because he stinks, after all of it, it’s just Kuroo and Kenma. Kenma pulls out the present and notices his hands are shaking a little.

Thankfully, Kuroo doesn’t notice or knows better than to comment. Instead, he does that weird half-smirk, half-smile thing and says, “Uh, okay,” in his awkward Kuroo way.

Kenma sighs and pushes the box into his arms. “Just take it. Don’t be weird.”

“I’m never weird,” Kuroo protests dramatically, but takes the present anyways. He opens it more quickly than Kenma had, takes out the first gift, and his eyes widen. “New kneepads?”

“The ones you’re wearing are all torn up,” Kenma points out. “But there’s more.”

“Video tapes?” Kuroo asks as he peers into the box.

“Of old volleyball games,” Kenma says, squirming a little. “I like coming up with volleyball strategies, so I thought maybe we could come up with some moves together based on the old games. Just so we’re prepared for high school.”

Kuroo just stares at him for a moment, his eyes wide and unblinking, before he says, “Stupid,” and
throws his arms around Kenma again. Kenma feels his chest warm up again, but all he says is, “Don’t cry.”

“I wasn’t gonna,” Kuroo protests, but his voice is all choked.

Kenma smiles secretly into Kuroo’s shoulder and holds on just a little bit tighter.

The winter rolls around and Kenma almost starts to feel like a normal middle school student. He goes to classes, and, with Kuroo’s help, does decently enough to get by. He knows the names of every guy on their volleyball team, and they know his. He still doesn’t really talk to them, but they get along decently enough. They don’t do very well in the tournaments, though. Kuroo is their best player by far. However, in their region, a team cannot survive with only one star. And Kenma still has a long way to go before he’s anything close to a star player.

Kenma keeps going to therapy as well. Over the past few months, therapy has become a lot easier. He’s able to talk about things like his punishments and the other kids there without feeling like he’s going to be sick. And maybe his ‘family’ isn’t normal, exactly, but he’s come to notice that so many people don’t exactly have normal family situations either.

This might be the closest Kenma will ever get to feeling really like an average human.

But the universe could never be that kind.

At 9 PM one night, there’s a pounding on the front door. He slips out of his room at approximately the same time as Mitsui, who greets him with a sleepy smile before opening the door and saying, “How dare you knock on an old woman’s door past 8 PM!”

“Sorry, Mitsui-san,” Kuroo Hachiro says, his eyebrows pinched. “I wouldn’t unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

Mitsui’s face falls immediately into a frown as she steps in front of Kenma. “What’s going on?”
“One of the kids from Kenma’s lab was found,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “He ran off during our raid, like most of the other kids, and he’s apparently been living somewhere way off in the woods. So unfortunately we need to borrow Kenma to help us out again. Just some questions to verify the things this new kid has told us.”

“What kid is it?” Kenma asks.

“I’m gonna picture him.” Kuroo Hachiro says. “So just read my mind. It’ll be easier that way. No room for misunderstandings.”

Kenma nods and resolves himself to push past anything intrusive that Kuroo Hachiro wouldn’t want him seeing once again. He delves in, swims through the memories as fast as he can, not giving himself a chance to even observe anything that’s happening, until he finally finds the boy. The boy is dirty. His hair is messy, streaked with brown dirt; his clothes are in tatters. But still, Kenma recognizes him immediately - H1747. The boy with the bright orange hair. One of the enhanced physical abilities kids, and one that he’s certainly never interacted with.

“Do you know him?” Kuroo Hachiro asks when Kenma lets go, holding onto a chair to keep himself steady.

“Kind of,” Kenma pants. “Uh, I didn’t really ever talk to him or anything, but I knew of him. His number - H1747. And he has… super speed, maybe. Super jumping. I don’t know.”

Kuroo Hachiro nods. “Yeah, that’s about right. We’re gonna need you to come to the station for a little bit, though, just to get some more information, see how your stories match up. Do you want to talk to him?”

Kenma thinks for a minute. On one hand, talking to someone else from the laboratory could be interesting, but on the other, he’s sure it’d bring back bad memories that he’s not completely ready to face. Plus, there’s also the fact that they’d probably only have the lab in common, which leaves them little to talk about. Kenma’s not good at being conversational, he doesn’t think. Maybe one day he’ll get there. But as of now, it doesn’t seem like the best idea. Still, he has to know. “Where is the kid going to live?”

“We’ve found a family that is more than willing to take him in,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “And it seems like he’ll do well living with them. He’s very… uh, outgoing, I guess you’d say. He never shuts up. But it’s kind of endearing. Almost.”
“Really,” Kenma says. The opposite of Kenma. A kid who hadn’t let the oppressive regime of the laboratory get into his psyche the way Kenma had, a kid who has to be stronger than Kenma can imagine. Suddenly he really doesn’t want to meet this kid at all. So he shakes his head. “I don’t… I don’t think I could talk to him right now.”

“That’s fine,” Kuroo Hachiro says impassively. “I just thought I’d ask, just in case. But we still need you to come in, okay? Just for a little bit.”

“You’re going to keep a child out this late?” Mitsui scolds, swatting at Kuroo Hachiroy’s arm. “If he had school tomorrow I’d be tempted to call in and file a report about the police themselves!”

“We need the information as soon as possible,” Kuroo Hachiro repeats, sounding apologetic but also firm.

They ask him a lot of questions at the police station, mostly about this new kid, but even more that contrast his experience to that of the found boy. He feels his body start to shake as he answers the questions, his feet tapping incessantly against the ground. He really does not like this process, however necessary it might be, but it’s not as though he can refuse.

It’s late by the time he gets back. All he wants is to fall into bed, but his head still pounds with all the painful memories he’s had to dredge up. He curls up on his side in a ball. When he drifts off eventually, nightmares plague his mind, the nightmares he’d thought were fading away. Once again, he starts to feel as though he’s an outsider, someone far from human, far from the normal kids his age he’s surrounded with. It seems as though just when he’s about to get back up, life finds yet another way to strike him back down.

The year ends. Before Kenma knows it, he’s now officially a second year in middle school. Kuroo Tetsurou gets promoted to the captain of the volleyball team, just as about everyone had suspected he would be. And suddenly, the volleyball team is more tolerable. Kuroo doesn’t let him slack off, which is kind of annoying, but he is a respectable leader. Kenma has never understood the weird human obsession with age hierarchies. Apparently, he’s figured out, humans seem to think being born a couple of months or years older gives them some sort of authority. It’s the way the volleyball team had been run before Kuroo. But now, Kuroo doesn’t treat him as an inferior; instead, he often asks Kenma for advice on strategies to make their team the strongest possible, to effectively shut down other teams, and Kenma does his best to give it.

It amazes Kenma how different Kuroo has become over the course of the past year. It’s not as though he’s become a different person, but rather that he’s started to let more parts of him shine around people other than Kenma. He spends time with the boys in their neighborhood, with the
boys on the team, and eats lunch with some of the other kids in his class. Kenma still doesn’t eat lunch with anyone, but it doesn’t bother him the way it seemed to bother Kuroo, so he’s happy for him. Kuroo’s still very hesitant in new situations; he’d harassed one of his fellow third years into getting him to do the introductions to the first years, but he’s far better than before.

The new year also brings new ways to torture Kenma. Kenma’s started to learn about the concept of karma, that people with bad intentions and actions get negative consequences in return, so he supposes he shouldn’t be shocked that a monster such as him would have these things happen to him. It all starts with a news channel reaching out to him and requesting an interview.

“I don’t know how they got my name,” Kenma says to Kinjo, his voice shaking for some stupid reason. “I didn’t think they released that information when they did the news reports the first time, back when the raid first happened. Maybe they want to talk to me because of this new boy they’ve found. But how did they find me?”

“I honestly don’t know either,” Kinjo says. “But you don’t have to say yes to them, you know. In fact, it doesn’t seem like it would be a good thing for you to say yes. It seems like even just thinking about it is hurting you.”

“But if I say no, they might publish the story anyways, and it might be completely wrong,” Kenma answers. “They could publish complete lies or say that I k-killed people or hurt everyone or that it was my fault. They could say anything they want.”

“They could do that even if you take the interview,” she points out. “News outlets are infamous for pulling that kind of thing, twisting the words of people that they interview. Or if you manage to get a good, reputable news outlet to interview you, they could publish a completely accurate portrayal of what you say. So you’re taking that chance. But it’s up to you.”

“Aren’t therapists supposed to tell you what to do?” Kenma grumbles.

Kinjo just laughs. “I’m your therapist, not your life counselor.”

He talks to Kuroo Tetsurou about it next. Kinjo had been kind of apathetic, allowing Kenma the freedom to choose, but Kuroo Tetsurou’s opinions are incredibly strong. “No,” Kuroo says vehemently, his arms crossed.

“You can’t command me to do things,” Kenma grumbles. “I’m my own person.”
“You can’t,” Kuroo says, completely ignoring Kenma’s pronouncement. “Kenma, you don’t even like talking about that stuff with me, much less a total stranger.”

“I can talk about it more if you want,” Kenma says impassively. “I grew up as a lab experiment in a laboratory, and was forced to use my psychic powers on a daily basis—"

“That’s not what I meant,” Kuroo interrupts, his voice just a little louder. “And you’re shaking, see! It’s hurting you to talk about it. This is a terrible idea.”

Kenma frowns down at his own traitorous shaking hands. “I’m not shaking because I’m hurt.”

“I know you like acting like you don’t have a single damn emotion,” Kuroo replies. “But I know you feel things, Kenma. And I know you need to fucking admit that to yourself.”

Kenma just stares back at him, his gaze flat. He knows Kuroo doesn’t know the truth — how could he? And there’s a part of Kenma that wants to tell him, to let all the things he’s been holding inside out, to release them into the world, to Kuroo. But there’s also a bigger part of Kenma that doesn’t want Kuroo to know. Kuroo thinks a lot of Kenma; it’s obvious in the way that Kuroo talks about Kenma and to Kenma. And that’s something Kenma doesn’t want to lose. Something he thinks that maybe he can’t afford to lose. It’s one of the few things that brings him just the slightest bit closer to humanity. So he just shrugs uncomfortably and stares at the floor.

“This is a bad idea,” Kuroo says, voice softer than Kenma’s ever heard it. He reaches out to place one of his hands on Kenma’s arm. His touch is just as soft. “Trust me.”

All the breath leaves Kenma in a long exhale. There is no way he can go against Kuroo, no way he can argue back when Kuroo is sincerely pleading with him like this. And he does trust Kuroo — more than he’d ever imagined he could trust someone. He also doesn’t want Kuroo to think that he doesn’t trust him. And if Kuroo really believes that this interview is a bad idea, then maybe, just maybe he has a point.

“Ohay,” Kenma says, sagging a little. “Fine. I won’t take the interview. But if they make up stuff about me because of it, I’ll probably have no choice but to do some other interview.”

Kuroo gives a sharp nod. “That sounds fair to me. And, um.” He scratches the back of his neck, head tilted down, his cheeks reddening a little bit. “Thank you. For trusting me.”
“You’ve never given me a reason not to,” Kenma points out, smiling a little bit despite himself.

Kuroo smiles back.

The article comes out a few days later. They mention that Kenma had ‘declined requests for interviews’, which the Kuroos say makes him sound like he’s some kind of major celebrity, turning down interview requests left and right. Beyond that, though, it’s not too inaccurate. They gloss over a lot of the details, of course. Mostly, though, it’s a fairly decent summary of what life in the laboratory was like.

The problem, though, is that even though they don’t mention Kenma’s name, for anyone who knows him, it’s not hard to figure out. They mention his hair, blonde with dark roots, the fact that he’d only started school in his last year of primary school, that people describe him as quiet and reclusive, which Kenma thinks is inaccurate and mildly offensive. (Kuroo Tetsurou throws down the paper when he reads this, says that anyone who actually knows Kenma wouldn’t describe him like that. Kuroo Hachiro grins and says Kenma’s far too sassy for that description.) But for the kids in his school, for the kids on his team, it’s all too easy to figure out. And they’d mentioned his powers, which makes it even worse.

The reactions of his classmates vary greatly. Many people just avoid him, taking care to duck out of his way when they see him coming in the hallway. Kenma doesn’t really understand why. Logically, it doesn’t make any sense; he’d had his powers his entire life and had gone the past two years without harming anyone with them. But then again, humans don’t always seem to follow the most logical path. There are others, including some on his team, that seem to have taken the article as a pity tale and are now treating Kenma as though he’s damaged goods. They ask him many times throughout the day if he’s okay, reassure him that they’re there if he ever needs them, and even present him with tiny presents of candy and stuff. It’s a million times more irritating than those who just avoid him.

“I’m sure they don’t mean it offensively,” Kinjo reassures him. “They probably just feel bad about all the things that you’ve been through and are attempting to help in their own odd ways.”

“I don’t need help,” Kenma protests stubbornly. “It just makes everything worse.”

Kinjo frowns. “What does it make worse?”
“I dunno,” Kenma says, kicking his feet back and forth. “It’s like, there’s something squeezing in my chest when I’m at school a lot of the time. It’s annoying. And when I come home, it goes away. But when people are talking to me like that, it makes the squeezing more intense, like I can’t breathe.”

“Ah,” Kinjo says, writing something down in her notebook. “Almost like anxiety, huh?”

“I don’t have anxiety,” Kenma replies.

“Everyone has anxiety,” Kinjo tells him. “Hm, maybe I shouldn’t say it like that, but everyone feels anxiety at some point. Maybe over a test, or over a spider in the corner of the room, or over seeing someone that you do not want to see, or speaking in public. Feeling anxious sometimes is normal. It happens to everyone. But we’re going to see if maybe we can make it a little less severe, okay?”

She doesn’t understand, either. Kenma considers telling her, since he’s aware that therapists technically aren’t supposed to cast any judgments on their clients, but he also gets the feeling that she won’t believe him. No one he’s tried to explain it to so far has come close to believing him. So he’s not sure if it’s even worth trying. He just nods instead. “Okay.”

She goes on to tell him about strategies to manage the anxiety, ways to change his thinking, breathing exercises, and muscle exercise techniques that she says will help the squeezing to go away. Just from the little practice they do in the therapy session, the knot in Kenma’s chest starts to feel a little looser. He’s not sure how to feel about that. Surely it doesn’t mean he can feel anxiety. It’s impossible… isn’t it?

But the next day when one of the guys on his team, Kuroba, approaches him and asks if he wants some water, that look of misplaced pity shining in his eyes, Kenma breathes in slowly, counts to three, then breathes out, and nods. “Thank you,” he manages to get out.

Kuroba nods. “Uh, my parents showed me the article about that lab thing you were in. It sounds like it was really shitty. So… I’m sorry.”

_They’re not doing it to be rude_, Kinjo’s voice echoes in his head. _They just don’t know how else to go about trying to be helpful_. Kenma clenches his fists and then tries his best to smile, or at the very least, not to look unpleasant. “Thank you,” he says, because it’s the polite way to respond and he doesn’t know what else to say.
“Uh, it’s cool having you on the team,” Kuroba says, his hands fidgeting in front of him in a way that’s kind of endearing, kind of reminiscent of Kuroo. “I hope we can become friends.”

“Okay,” Kenma says, still trying to get his mouth to look more pleasant. “I… uh… I hope so too.”

When he tells Kuroo about this, Kuroo just laughs. “You think the whole world is out to get you,” he says teasingly. “So you’re shocked when people are actually nice. And don’t get me wrong, I get why. Probably would too if I were you. But it’s not the way life actually works.”

“It works that way for me,” Kenma tells him.

Kuroo blinks, his expression changing slightly. “So how do I fit into this world where nothing ever goes right for you?”

Kenma sighs, because even though he hates to admit it, Kuroo’s got a point. “You don’t,” Kenma grumbles. “You and your family and Mitsui and having a room and apple pie and hot chocolate and real food…”

“It’s starting to sound like a lot of things are going right for you.”

“…I guess so,” Kenma admits. “Stop making that stupid face.”

Kuroo’s smirk doesn’t fade, though. He drops his hand on one of Kenma’s shoulders and gives it a light squeeze. “People can be really nice sometimes,” he says. “You just gotta give them the chance. Not everyone is evil. And those doctors that did this to you… they were the real monsters. Not you. Not the boys on the team. Okay?”

A chill runs down Kenma’s spine at the words. He keeps his gaze straight ahead, because he can’t bear to look at Kuroo.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe the doctors are monsters. But seeing Morimoto, the desperate look he’d had on his face as he’d talked to Kenma for the last time… they were also human.
Kenma tends to pride himself on being observant. It’s something he’d had to pick up in the laboratory; he was punished for missing details, and picking up on facets of the doctor’s personalities had been necessary to figure out how to act around them. But apparently even he misses things sometimes. He’d overheard some students talking in the hallway, gossiping about something or another. One girl had whispered, “I think Kuroo is really hot,” and then, “And he’s so tall!” And all at once, it had hit Kenma that, holy shit, Kuroo’s tall.

Over the course of the almost two years that he’d known Kuroo, Kuroo had been slowly and steadily growing. He glances over at Kuroo as they walk home together, noticing that the gap between their heights is now much bigger than it had been originally. His doctor had told him back at the first appointment that he’d never be all that tall due to being deprived of essential nutrients during his first few years of life. Back then, he’d been okay with it, or at least resigned to it. But now it bothers him somewhat.

Even more so as Kuroo says, in his usual nonchalant manner, “I have news.”

“You can just say it,” Kenma points out. “You don’t have to announce that you have news.”

Kuroo grins, and then, with just a few words, turns Kenma’s life entirely upside down. “I got a girlfriend.”

Kenma’s vision blurs. For once, he finds that he has no idea what to say to Kuroo.

He’s never really thought about romance before. It’s not like it had been a part of life in the laboratory. He’d never even thought about it after leaving the laboratory, hadn’t ever considered it as a possibility for himself. And for some odd reason he’d almost figured that Kuroo felt the same way. But apparently that assumption had been entirely unfounded, because out of nowhere, here Kuroo is, saying that he is in a relationship.

Kenma’s never felt more different from Kuroo.

He doesn’t voice this, though. How could he? It wouldn’t be very best friend-like of him. Instead, he forces his mouth into a smile, or at least not into a frown. “Impressive,” he makes himself say. “Didn’t think girls were attracted to bedhead.”

“Shut up,” Kuroo says, grinning and elbowing him. Kenma’s chest aches, and he doesn’t
understand why. Maybe he’s coming down with something.

“Who is she?” Kenma asks, half out of politeness, half out of true curiosity.

“A girl from my class. Her name is Kimito,” he says. “She says she really likes athletes and thinks it’s awesome that I’m the captain of the volleyball team. And she’s come to a few of our games too! She said I was definitely the best on the team.”

“Well, it’s the truth,” Kenma mumbles as they step into Kuroo’s house. He’s not entirely sure why Kuroo needs some girl to tell him this when Kenma’s been saying it for the longest time, but maybe he’ll never really understand how humans work.

“I just don’t know how to be in a relationship, though,” Kuroo says. “But there’s a first time for everything. Hey, grab me a yogurt, will you?”

“You have hands,” Kenma retorts, but he still reaches out with his mind to open the fridge and deposit a yogurt in Kuroo’s hands for whatever stupid reason. Something twinges in his chest when he uses his powers, but it’s getting much easier to ignore, and the resulting tiredness is becoming less and less.

“Anyways, we’re going on a date this weekend, so I probably won’t be able to hang out on Saturday afternoon. But maybe afterwards.”

“Maybe.” Kenma kind of dislikes Kimito already, which is irrational and completely outside of how he’s been programmed to think, in a way that’s logical and not at all emotional. Perhaps he’s been spending too much time around humans. Maybe he’s beginning to catch onto how they do things.

He thinks back to what everyone’s been telling him, that he definitely has emotions, and a glimmer of hope flickers inside of him. Quickly, he tries to squash it.

They head upstairs, in their usual fashion, and Kenma uses his telekinesis to pass Kuroo a remote as well as to get one for himself. Kuroo beams at him. “See, I don’t know what I’d do without you and your crazy useful powers.”

Kenma feels his chest squeeze again. He thinks that he really should get that checked out.
Kinjo suggests he might be jealous.

Kenma’s familiar with the concept in theory, but he doesn’t exactly see how it applies to the situation. It’s not as though he covets something that Kuroo has. He doesn’t want a girlfriend. Girls seem fine and all, but he’s just not interested in trying to keep another human happy or whatever.

Kinjo shakes her head. “Not like that. More like… you’re not used to having to share Kuroo.”

“He has other friends,” Kenma protests. “The team, people in his class, the people he plays soccer with. I never cared about that.”

“Yes, but even with that, you always knew you were the most important person in his life,” Kinjo says. “And you still are, I’m sure, but maybe… this girl could seem like a threat.”

_Not being the most important person in Kuroo’s life._ Thinking back on it, Kenma doesn’t remember when exactly he became that to Kuroo, or when Kuroo became that to Kenma, but it just seems logical that he is. And there’s another pain in his chest at the idea of this random Kimito taking over that spot. Maybe he should see a doctor.

Kinjo laughs when he says this. “You don’t need to see a doctor for experiencing normal emotions, Kenma.”

_Not an emotion, part of him yells. Maybe it is an emotion, another part screams._

“Tetsu’s out with that girl again, huh?” Kuroo Hachiro asks, sitting down in the chair beside Kenma.

“Yeah,” Kenma answers, stabbing at his slice of pie.
“Maybe that’s a good thing,” Kuroo Hachiro chuckles. “Means he can’t hog you all to himself. How’s school been?”

“Dumb,” Kenma says.

“Damn, you really are getting into those teenage years, huh?” Kuroo Hachiro snorts. “All these one-word answers. And here I was hoping you’d stay the cute kid I rescued forever.”

Kenma rolls his eyes, but the stupid pang in his chest happens again and he resolves to talk a little more. “I’m still me. I just don’t like school.”

“No one’s bullying you?” Kuroo Hachiro asks, his eyes gleaming. “Because I know that they’re just kids and I’m a cop, but I can hire someone, make it seem like I have no association…”

“No one’s bullying me,” Kenma cuts him off quickly. “It’s just boring and long.”

Kuroo Hachiro nods. “Okay, just normal teenager stuff then. How about volleyball?”

“It’s okay,” Kenma says. “I don’t hate it. Getting really tired is annoying, but Kuro’s a good captain.”

“You don’t have to play if you don’t want to, you know. Tetsu will understand.”

“I want to,” Kenma replies firmly. His chest squeezes again at the idea of losing one of the things that connects him to Kuroo Tetsurou.

Kuroo Hachiro grins. “That’s good. I’ll have to try to make it to another game soon.”

“It’s okay,” Kenma says. “Kuro’s always saying it doesn’t really matter until high school anyways.”
Kuroo Hachiro just laughs. “That boy and his ideals,” he says fondly.

Kenma’s nightmares tend to fluctuate depending on a variety of factors. Kinjo says it’s mostly according to his stress levels, for one. Kenma’s not really sure if he can feel stress, so he’s not entirely sold on that theory. It’s true that they do occur more often when something bad happens, though. And, he’s starting to notice, more often when Kuroo Tetsurou is busier, which is unhealthy and somewhat embarrassing. He doesn’t mention this fact to Kinjo.

His nightmare tonight is brand new. The girl, who he still hasn’t even seen yet (which is odd, and Kenma’s starting to wonder if there’s something wrong with him. If not, why wouldn’t Kuroo want him to meet her or vice versa?) - the girl snatches Kuroo away right in front of Kenma and starts to drag him away. Kenma tries to yell but his voice doesn’t work. He hopes Kuroo will turn around, look back at him, but Kuroo just keeps walking with her. And then the girl he somehow knows is Kimito suddenly starts to morph, her body growing taller and muscles stretching until she’s Akiba, her face twisted into a snarl. Her hand tightens around Kuroo’s arm. Kenma yells but hears no sound, pushes himself forward but falls into the dirt, one hand desperately stretched out towards Kuroo. Then he’s suddenly being shaken and his eyes fly open to stare at Kuroo Tetsurou’s worried face.

It all comes back to him at once — that Kuroo had felt bad about ditching him over the past couple of days, had invited him over for a sleepover, that none of what he’d just seen had any basis in reality. He reaches out and clings on to Kuroo’s shirt, not caring how weak it makes him look, because Kuroo is here and not with Akiba. He is here, and he is safe. That’s all that matters.

“Kenma?” Kuroo asks, his voice shaking. “I thought you didn’t have the nightmares anymore.”

“Just not as often,” Kenma rasps out. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Kuroo says, and then, biting his lip and avoiding eye contact, “You were yelling my name.”

“Y-you were in danger,” Kenma says, staring down at the ground.

“Well, I’m not now,” Kuroo tells him. He takes one of Kenma’s hands and gives it a gentle squeeze. “So it’s okay. You can go back to sleep.”
Kenma nods and lays back down. Kuroo doesn’t go back to his own bed, though. Instead, he lays down beside Kenma, close enough so that Kenma can sense his presence but not close enough so that they’re touching in any way.

Kenma falls asleep faster than he’s ever fallen asleep before. After that, his dreams are uneventful.

Kenma is the main setter of his team now, which is a very interesting experience. In short, it means the team depends on him, which is a little bit overwhelming. He can’t just spend the matches on the bench anymore, watching the team and silently devising his own strategies. Instead, he has to participate in the match, and Kuroo often asks him for what strategy they should run.

There’s a certain amount of pride Kuroo takes in giving Kenma’s strategies to the team as well. Kenma doesn’t know what to make of that.

The matches are incredibly tiring, though. Upon multiple occasions, Kenma’s contemplated using his powers to move the ball’s trajectory on the other side just to speed the match up a little. Kenma also begins to wonder if anyone suspects him of using his powers. Kuroo insists no one does, but Kuroo isn’t always trustworthy when it comes to these matters.

Then, during a match, one of the players on the other team recognizes him.

“Hey, your setter looks like he could be that guy from that whack ass laboratory,” he says, a slimy smirk on his face. When no one on the team responds, and one of their less subtle players looks up into the air, the smirk on the guy’s face just widens. “Oh, so he is, is he? Doesn’t he have psychic powers or some shit? That seems like an unfair advantage. If only the refs knew about it…”

“You wouldn’t,” Kuroo says, taking a step forward before anyone else can respond, his hands clenched into shaking fists by his sides.

“Throw the match, then,” the guy says airily. “We could use another win on our record.”

“We don’t play that way,” Kuroo hisses, one of his hands already clenching into a fist and pulling
back behind him. The other guy also clenches his hand, looking as though he’s about to hit Kuroo, but before he can, Kenma reaches out and pushes him back with his mind, just enough so that he falls backwards onto the ground and sits there, a stunned look on his face. Kuroo turns around to stare at Kenma, eyes wide.

“He did this!” the guy yells, scrambling to his feet and pointing at Kenma. “And he’s allowed to play! What bullshit!”

“You tripped,” Kenma says darkly. He won’t result to mind control, not in this situation, but he’s almost considering it. “I’m just a normal high school kid.”

“I wouldn’t trip over air,” the guy sneers.

Kenma shrugs as he pushes into the guy’s mind. He releases quickly and says, “I don’t know if you’ve forgotten this, Daishou, but having psychic powers means having access to thoughts too. Which means I know all about your crush on -”

“Okay, okay,” Daishou yells, his voice starting to squeak. “Never mind. I must have tripped.”

Kenma nods and Kuroo turns to stare at Kenma, his eyes wide. Kenma braces himself for the inevitable rejection, for Kuroo to realize how evil Kenma can truly be, but instead Kuroo just grins. “That was fucking awesome,” Kuroo says, his eyes shining.

Kenma shrugs. “He was going to hurt you,” he says measuredly. “I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

“You took him down without even touching him,” Anzai, one of the first-years, gasps. “Kenma-san really is a badass!”

Kenma blinks and shakes his head. It’s not like that. Still, it’s nice to feel, even for a second, as though his powers aren’t a curse.
Kuroo Tetsurou really likes Kenma’s powers.

It’s something that he couldn’t have imagined back at the laboratory — that a human would take interest in his powers, that a human would think his powers are interesting or cool. But Kuroo does. On multiple occasions, he even tries to get Kenma to read his thoughts.

“No, as a matter of fact, Kuroo had not told him. And even besides that, Kuroo doesn’t look upset at all. Usually, he’s found, humans tend to be devastated by things like breakups. People seem to assume that their relationships will last forever. Instead, Kuroo is grinning lazily. “What the hell?” Kenma says.

Yeah,” Kuroo tells him, shrugging. “I just feel like maybe she’s not my type after all. And it’s not like I have a lot of time to spend with a girlfriend, anyways. I have school, and I really want to focus more of my energy on volleyball, you know?”

“Tell me that doesn’t mean…”

“You’ll toss for me, won’t you?”
“I already toss for you for hours a day,” Kenma moans.

“But next year I’ll be on the high school team!” Kuroo pleads. “And that means I have to be even better if I want to end up in the starting lineup, which means I have to practice as often as I can!”

Kenma hates that his stupid pleading face makes Kenma want to do whatever he asks. And he hates that some unknown force possesses him to say, “Fine, but I’d better get something out of it.”

“We can do whatever you want afterwards,” Kuroo says. “We can play your favorite games, even if I lose every single time. And I’ll convince grandma to bake you pies.”

“You do that anyways,” Kenma complains, but he can’t help but smile.

“Hey, since Kimito and I broke up, does that mean you’ll read my mind?”

“No. I don’t get why you’d want me to anyways.”

“I just think it’d be cool. And I trust you.”

*You shouldn’t*, Kenma wants to say. His chest aches.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your lovely comments once again! It's so nice to see people getting into the story, and I hope you'll keep it up.
To clarify one thing from this chapter, Kenma's jealousy/hatred in this chapter is irrational, and he knows it. Kimito did nothing wrong. I've heard controversy about this topic - girls being used to cause tension in m/m couples - and in this case I only included it to show that Kuroo's trying to have what he thinks of as a normal teenagehood, and yet it makes Kenma feel isolated and scared, so he takes it out on the idea of someone he's never met. Kimito is a very cool girl in reality! Just wanted to point that out just in case.
Thanks so much for reading again!
Soon after, the time rolls around for Kuroo to have to start worrying about which high school he’s going to attend. Kuroo is thorough about his research, the way he is about everything academic. He checks out nearly every school in the area and inquires about the volleyball programs of each of them. And then, a couple of weeks later, he comes to a conclusion.

“Nekoma,” Kuroo says firmly.

“Nekoma?” Kenma repeats. “Why that one? Their volleyball program isn’t that good right now, is it?”

“It was really good in the past, though,” Kuroo explains. “They were one of the powerhouses. And I don’t want to sound like I’m conceited or anything, but I think that we could make it good again.”

“We?” Kenma asks. He hadn’t thought that Kuroo had been looking to go to high school with anyone in particular, but maybe it’d just been something Kuroo had forgotten to mention.

Kuroo stares at Kenma, his expression unreadable. “I… if I go there, will you come with me?”

Kenma pauses as if to think, though he knows what his answer will be. “Yes,” he says measuredly. *I’ll follow you anywhere*, his brain adds, but he thinks it’s probably too weird to say. It’s not the kind of thing other kids he knows say to each other, at least.

Kuroo’s face splits into a huge grin. Quickly, he adds, “I mean, if it’s not where you want to go, we can look at other schools…”

Kenma shakes his head firmly. “I don’t really care that much either way. As long as it’s a decent school, I’m fine with it.”

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**Chapter 5**

**Chapter Notes**

Chapter warnings: Mentions of previous childhood trauma and abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Nekoma it is then,” Kuroo says, his voice bright.

Kuroo passes the entrance exam with flying colors, just as Kenma had known he would. In celebration, the Kuroos host a big dinner, to which Kenma and Mitsui are inevitably invited. They all sit around the table and the older Kuroos tell stories of Kuroo Tetsurou’s childhood, about how he’d been such a shy and reclusive child in the beginning.

“He was so lively at home,” Kuroo Homugi says fondly. “But then we’d take him to the store and he wouldn’t be able to look any of the other customers in the eyes. We thought there was something wrong with him for a while. But he’s grown so much since then, after he finally joined the volleyball team.”

“After Kenma dragged his ass onto the volleyball team,” Kuroo Hachiro snorts, patting his son on the shoulder. Kuroo Tetsurou ducks his head down, his cheeks flaming red.

“Someone had to do it,” Mitsui cackles.

“I’m grateful every day that it was me that was sent on that rescue mission,” Kuroo Hachiro says, his tone suddenly more serious. “That we managed to track down the lab that Kenma was in, because I don’t know where Tetsu would be without him.”

“Definitely,” Kuroo Homugi agrees, and Kuroo Tatmotsu grunts out his own agreement. “Thank you for taking care of our Tetsurou.”

“It’s not like that,” Kenma mumbles, his eyes on the ground, and he can practically feel the embarrassment radiating off of Kuroo Tetsurou, who’s seated by his side. “Kuro helped me too. With everything.”

Kuroo Homugi’s smile widens even more. “Oh, yes, and we’re very proud of him for that too.”

For more than two years now, Kenma thinks with a sense of wonder. More than two years and Kuroo Tetsurou hasn’t gotten tired of him or figured out that he’s an emotionless monster or told him to back off. His chest squeezes again.
It doesn’t stop feeling tight until they head upstairs, Kuroo having begged for Kenma to be allowed to stay the night, and Kuroo suddenly turns and pulls Kenma into his arms. Kenma’s shocked for all of one second, because it’s not like they hug all that often, but then he realizes that Kuroo must be feeling sentimental or something. He sags a little in Kuroo’s arms. After a second, he presses his head against Kuroo’s chest, his arms wrapping around Kuroo’s body.

“You’re not gonna quit the volleyball team when I leave, are you?” Kuroo asks suddenly.

Kenma hadn’t really thought about it before, but now he realizes he has to. The volleyball team without Kuroo feels… useless. He imagines that one of the other guys in his year will be the new captain. Though he has nothing really against them at this point, he still feels like there’s no possible way any of them could be as good a captain as Kuroo has been. None of them will show half as much understanding as Kuroo had or put half as much faith in him as Kuroo had put in him. And it’s not like he really likes volleyball that much, anyways. So he wants to say yes. Yes, he’s going to quit. There’s nothing left there for him.

But Kuroo seems upset at the thought, judging by the frown painting his face when Kenma peeks up. And… well, he knows the other boys on his team. They’re not particularly close, but he still has started to feel almost like a part of the team. And it is good exercise. Plus if he keeps at it, then he’ll be good enough once he gets to high school for him to actually play with Kuroo again. And maybe then they can make Nekoma into a powerhouse school again.

He hates himself for it, but he shakes his head. “No. I won’t quit.”

Kuroo’s face splits into a smile and he hugs Kenma even tighter against his chest. Kenma feels like he might suffocate, but it’s not the most unpleasant sensation he’s ever felt. “I’m proud of you,” he says quietly.

“Shut up,” Kenma grumbles in return, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

Kuroo laughs, and his chest rumbles against Kenma’s body. It’s oddly even more pleasant. “I’ll be waiting for you,” he promises.

“Are you worried?”
Kenma wrinkles up his nose at Kinjo’s question and all the implications it could hold. “About what?” he asks.

“Kuroo graduating, going to high school.”

“Don’t think so,” Kenma says. “It’s not like that much will change. We don’t see each other most of the day anyways.”

“Well, you can’t walk to and from school together anymore. And he won’t be on the volleyball team with you. I think that might make things a bit harder for you.” Kenma blinks, ducking his head down. The idea of school without Kuroo, of volleyball without Kuroo especially, is one he’s been trying to avoid thinking about. Kinjo seems to pick up on this, because she quickly adds, “I don’t mean to worry you if you really aren’t worried about it. I know that you can handle it. But I just want you to be prepared for the things that could, or will, change.”

Kenma doesn’t know what to say. He hasn’t thought about it much, honestly. He really doesn’t like the thought of Kuroo going off to school again while he’s stuck behind, but it’s not like there’s anything he can do about it, so he’s trying to resign himself to it. He shrugs slowly.

“It’ll be okay,” Kinjo says reassuringly. “And I know that. You’ve gotten a lot better just in the time I’ve known you. How long has it been since you’ve had a nightmare?”

Kenma counts slowly on his fingers. “Seven,” he says. “A week.”

She smiles. “And you used to have them every night. Plus, you’ve learned all the anxiety management techniques. And how many people on your team have you talked to?”

“All of them,” Kenma answers.

“See,” she says, crossing her arms. “You’re going to be the senior of the team next year. You’ll have kids looking up to you. It’ll be good for you.”

Kenma’s not so sure, but it’s not like there’s anything he can do to avoid it.
At least it’s only one year.

... And so the year comes to an end. They make it to the tournament, win two games against lesser schools, and then lose to one of the best middle school teams in Tokyo. It’s the expected result, really; it’s not like they’re really a powerhouse middle school or anything. Kuroo seems disappointed but not surprised.

“You boys did amazing,” Mitsui says. “Tetsurou, no one ever told me you could hit like that!”

Kuroo shrugs modestly. “I’m not all that great. But I want to be, one day.”

“Nonsense,” Mitsui tells him. “I snuck a peek at some of the other teams and there were only a few that had players as good as you. You surely will go great places in the future, son. And as for you, Kenma… I didn’t think you ever moved like that.”

Kenma rolls his eyes. “Is it so bad to not want to move around in my own home?”

Mitsui swats at his arm, but her eyes start to tear up, probably at Kenma referring to her house as his home. Kenma’s cheeks heat up a little bit.

Kuroo’s graduation is not all that eventful. Some of the kids in Kenma’s year with friends Kuroo’s age cry, which Kenma thinks is a little ridiculous. It’s not as though they’re disappearing for good. It’s just one year, and even then, Kuroo will still be right next door, just as he’s been every day since Kenma made his way into the real world.

There are much worse tragedies in this world.

“See, now I’m officially a high schooler,” Kuroo tells him self-importantly. “That means I’m really your senior.”

“You always were my senior, captain,” Kenma replies, deadpan.
“Yeah, but now I’m a high schooler while you’re still a lowly middle schooler,” Kuroo teases. Kenma fixes him with a scowl and then uses his mind to fling a balled-up napkin at him as hard as he can, which just makes Kuroo laugh harder. Kenma tries not to think about how he’d been taught that move to use to hurl objects like knives at other people.

He is in his third year of middle school now, fourteen years of age as best anyone can figure. He’s coming up on three years in this world and he still knows that he does not quite fit in. He doesn’t understand the things that these kids are concerned about, still doesn’t know what the point of dating is, can’t understand why anyone would talk badly about their friends to other people or start physical fights with other people. He feels like an impostor - living the life of a human, never truly becoming one.

He has become really good at pretending.

Kuroo’s school starts a week before his does. Kuroo wakes him up before he goes by throwing rocks at his window, which Kenma finds incredibly annoying. Kenma opens his window and says, “What’s wrong with you?” in as scathing a tone as possible.

“I wanted to say goodbye,” Kuroo says innocently.

“It’s not like you’re dying or something. I’ll see you when you get back.”

“I know, but…” Kuroo pauses, and Kenma can’t see his face well, but he knows him well enough to predict the uncertainty that’s probably flickering there right now. “I also wanted someone to wish me good luck. Dad’s still sleeping. He was out late last night. And the grandparents… Grandma’s doing some errands, and Grandpa’s… well, he’s not much of a talker, you know.”

Kenma sighs. “I’m coming down. Give me a second.”

“You don’t have to do all that,” Kuroo protests, but Kenma shrugs on his jacket anyways and heads outside. He walks till he’s by Kuroo’s side, then tentatively, steps even closer, until he’s tucked against Kuroo’s side. Kuroo’s arms slip around him easily.
“Good luck,” Kenma mutters into the fabric of Kuroo’s coat. “It’ll be fine.”

Kuroo smiles into Kenma’s hair. “Well, now if it isn’t fine, you’ll be a liar.”

“Shut up,” Kenma says with a groan.

And Kuroo’s school day ends up being fine, by Kuroo’s own admission. He and the kids in his class get along fine, and high school isn’t all that different from middle school. It’s not until his first volleyball practice where he runs into a problem.

“The guys on my team are assholes,” Kuroo groans dramatically, sprawled across his bed, one hand draped across his forehead.

“All of them?” Kenma asks doubtfully.

“Well, no,” Kuroo amends. “One of the other new first-years, Kai, he’s not so bad. But the other one, Yaku? He’s such an asshole. Everything I say, he has to argue about. I don’t know how I’m going to stand being on the same team as him for three entire years.”

“You’ll survive,” Kenma says passively. “Just don’t provoke him.”

“I never provoke anyone,” Kuroo says, gasping as though he’s offended.

Kenma raises an eyebrow at him pointedly. “You know, some people we played against in middle school used to call you the Master of Provocation.”

“They did not. What middle schoolers use such big words anyways,” Kuroo mutters, pouting.

Kenma ignores him. “How are the senpai?”

“Annoying.” Kuroo sighs. “But it’d be like that at any school, I’m sure. It’s just ‘cause we’re first-years and so we have to pay our dues and everything.”
“The age hierarchy thing is so stupid.”

“So, what, Mr. Third Year, you aren’t making your first-years fetch your water for you and wash your feet?”

“What? No. Shut up.”

But for the first few weeks or so, Kuroo just doesn’t seem all that happy. Kenma tries not to think about it too much, since he has school and volleyball to manage himself. It’s hard not to, though, what with Kuroo barging into his room most days and groaning loudly before collapsing on the floor. Kenma’s not exactly the best person to give sympathy, but he tries his best. He offers to help him ‘level up’ by playing volleyball with him, or he shoves a controller into Kuroo’s hands and turns on Kuroo’s favorite game.

Kinjo reassures him that it’s normal for kids Kuroo’s age to have mood swings and feel down for periods of time, but if it gets any worse, then Kenma should take further action. He starts to worry that it won’t get worse, but it also won’t get better, until the day of Kuroo’s first game.

He fires off a text wishing Kuroo a good debut. He then falls down onto his bed, squeezing his eyes shut and wishing, not for the first time, that his powers were good for something. Then suddenly he wonders how far his powers extend. He tries reaching out, pushing his mind out of the barriers of the house, down the street, seeing how far it can stretch. He makes it a good kilometer or so down the road before something snaps and his powers retreat quickly, smacking him back in the head.

“Shit,” he mutters, rubbing his now incredibly sore forehead. That means he definitely can’t jump into Kuroo’s head to see what’s going on in the Nekoma game. He sighs and stretches back out again, this time latching onto a random person on the street and sifting through their memories instead. This person is a doting father, and so his mind is filled with his two-year old daughter, memories of her rolling over for the first time and stuff. Boring, Kenma thinks, and retreats. He pulls his game system out again, but it’s hard to concentrate when his mind feels so restless.

After about another hour or so, his phone rings. It might be a little embarrassing how quickly he jumps to answer it. “Hey.”

“WE WON!” comes Kuroo’s boominly loud voice over the line. “Against a really good school, too! One of the powerhouses. Too bad it was just a practice match. But they said they’re gonna get
even better and we won’t be so lucky next time.”

Kenma’s a little bit impressed, though he’ll never say it. One corner of his mouth tilts up. He hasn’t heard joy from Kuroo this strong in a while. “That’s good. Congratulations.”

“Well, and I talked to their ace after the game,” Kuroo says proudly. “He’s a little obnoxious, but he’s fun. We exchanged numbers and we might hang out sometime. And you can come, of course, if you want to.”

Kenma wrinkles up his nose even though he knows that Kuroo can’t see it. “I don’t know. Hanging out with two obnoxious guys at the same time?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kuroo answers, snorting. “I’m the least obnoxious person I know.”

“Sure, whatever you say,” Kenma says. “When will you be back?”

“Probably late.” Kuroo’s tone is somewhat chagrined, so Kenma can predict what’s coming next. “We’re all going to dinner - yes, even Yaku, annoying little shit he is. So I’ll just come over tomorrow.”

“Okay. Have fun, Kuro. See you tomorrow.”

“Miss you already.”

“You’re so weird.”

When Kenma hangs up, though, resting his phone on his chest, there’s a weird sensation in his stomach. He thinks maybe it’s hunger, so he heads down to eat dinner with Mitsui, but the sensation doesn’t go away. It’s similar, almost, to what he’d experienced when he’d found out that Kuroo had a girlfriend.

An emotion, Kinjo says in his head. You have emotions, Kuroo Tetsurou repeats. You’re not the monster, Kuroo Hachiro adds.
Kenma lies back down in his bed and pulls the covers over his head. Because if he can feel something now, if he’s felt things before, that means that he’s real, that he’s human, and that completely turns everything he’d thought he knew about himself on his head. And he doesn’t know what to do if that’s true.

He doesn’t want to think that he is the same as everyone else, because then he doesn’t have an excuse as to why he doesn’t quite fit in.

“Hey, sorry I had to cancel yesterday,” Kuroo Tetsurou says, barging into his room without knocking, as always. “Bo invited me to meet some of the other volleyball players in Tokyo. They’re all kind of scary, way too serious, so I don’t think I’ll hang with any of the rest of them any time soon.”

“It’s fine,” Kenma says. He doesn’t look up from his game. He’s not sure what Kuroo will see if he does.

He’s not sure why he even would feel badly about the things that have changed recently. After all, he despises seeing Kuroo sad, would prefer it if Kuroo were happy all the time. Meeting all these new people through volleyball, meeting Bokuto Koutarou, is surely helping him to be happier. But at the same time, there’s something niggling at him, wondering why he in’t enough to make Kuroo happy, why Kuroo needs all these other people. Maybe it’s because Kenma himself doesn’t really have any other friends. But either way, it’s completely irrational and makes zero sense at all. So he pushes whatever it is down, tells himself the thoughts make no sense. He tells himself he can’t feel. He wasn’t programmed that way. He can’t. He can’t-

“Kenma?” Kuroo’s voice comes, and Kenma realizes that there’s a warm hand against his face. Kuroo is right in front of him, his eyes wide in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Kenma says, trying to keep his voice from wavering. “I’m okay. Just tired.”

Kuroo doesn’t look like he believes it, but he still asks, “Nightmares?”

Kuroo laughs. “Yeah, yeah, drama king. Well, I won’t bother you if you want to rest…”

Something flashes inside of Kenma, something sharp that he doesn’t fully understand, but he grabs Kuroo’s hand before he can even think about why he’s doing it. “No. You can stay. If… if you want to.”

Kuroo’s shoulders fall. He blinks quickly, then shakes his head. “Kenma, kitten, of course I want to. Listen… I like making new friends, and it’s cool to meet new people, but I’m never going to leave you, okay?”

“Kitten?” Kenma repeats, raising an eyebrow.

A little bit of red rises up on the apples of Kuroo’s cheeks. Kenma’s chest knots up again. “Well, I mean, you can be a lot like a cat, you know? You like to be solitary and to do things on your own, and you can be a little skittish. But you’re also very brave and very…. powerful.”

“Am not,” Kenma says, letting himself relax so that his head ends up on Kuroo’s shoulder.

“Yes, you are,” Kuroo says. “But I don’t have to call you that if you don’t want me to.”

“It’s fine,” Kenma decides. “I mean, it’s only fair that you have a nickname for me too, Kuro. But maybe don’t call me that around other people too much.”

Kuroo laughs. “What, is it too embarrassing for you?”

“Yes,” Kenma says.

“Too bad.”

“You make my life difficult,” Kenma huffs.

Kuroo just grins. “And I’m gonna keep doing it till the day you die.”
Kinjo tells him he might be feeling jealous again, and Kenma thinks his head might explode.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he grumbles, staring at his hands. “I don’t have any reason to be jealous. He’s still my best friend and we still hang out. So I shouldn’t be upset about it, if that’s what this is.”

“Maybe not jealousy, then,” Kinjo amends. “Maybe you’re just… stressed about Kuroo not being at your school anymore. Because now he’s in clubs that you don’t know about and friends with people you’ve never met and doing all this stuff you used to do together, but with new people. Does that sound familiar?”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Kenma repeats angrily. “He should be happy. I want him to be happy. So I shouldn’t… think badly about this situation.”

“Sometimes emotions aren’t logical,” Kinjo tells him softly. “And that’s okay. It’s okay to feel bad about things that maybe don’t make sense, especially when you’re a teenager. But I do think it makes sense. Almost any person would feel the same way.”

“I don’t understand,” Kenma says, his throat feeling like it might close up.

“It’s normal to be scared of your best friend moving on without you. But you have to know that he’s not leaving you, and next year you’ll be right there with him.”

Next year, Kenma thinks to himself, and he nods.

Maybe it’s pathetic, but the two of them start up a countdown to Kenma’s first year of high school.

Their volleyball team is even worse without Kuroo there.
Kenma doesn’t think he’s a bad player exactly, from an objective standpoint. He’s able to get the ball to the hitters most of the time, though most of the time they just bump it over because they aren’t tall enough to hit consistently. But the other teams are hitting, are serving overhand with high success rates, are diving to the ground for balls, which Kenma thinks he’ll never want to exert the effort to do. So his team just can’t really compete.

He also leaves most of the leadership to the other third-year. There’s only him, the other third-year, two second-years, and three first years, barely enough for a real team, which also puts them at a disadvantage. They lose almost every game in the season. It’s discouraging, almost enough to make Kenma up and quit.

It’s even worse hearing Kuroo talk about Nekoma’s wins. Nekoma gets crushed by the powerhouse school, Fukurodani, in their next game, but they still are able to beat most schools that aren’t powerhouses, and their record is a million times better than the middle school’s. Kenma thinks about what Kuroo had said, how he’d told him that his high school team would be important. He realizes that he has to get into Nekoma.

So he throws himself into studying whenever he’s not at school or volleyball or therapy. It’s not like it takes much time away from hanging out with Kuroo; Kuroo has training camps and long practices and real games against real schools. And whenever Kuroo’s free, he’s more than willing to help Kenma study. He helps him understand quadratic equations and rehearses English words with him until both their brains hurt. It’s the most effort Kenma’s put in since he first was rescued and had to learn enough to go to school. It’s extremely tiring, but Kenma hopes that it’ll be worth it in the end.

Because next year he’s going to go to Nekoma. He’s going to be with Kuroo again. And they’re going to use all the strategies they’ve been practicing to make the team even better. At least, that’s what Kuroo promises him.

And then one day, Kuroo invites him to come watch a game. It’s more like ‘harasses him to come watch until he finally agrees,’ really, but Kenma thinks he probably would’ve said yes eventually anyways. It’s a good idea for him to go see how Nekoma plays, and it seems like something that a supportive friend would do. He’s a little nervous that Kuroo will want to introduce him to the team. Even still, Kuroo tends to not speak all that well of most of them. But they will be his team next year too, so Kuroo might want to get a head start on the introductions. The thought makes his stomach knot.

He sits with Mitsui in the bleachers. There are other parents there as well, and some kids he thinks must also go to Nekoma, judging by their school uniforms. There are even a few from his middle school, which Kenma doesn’t particularly like. Mitsui nudges him. “Are any of them in your
“Yes,” he says, slumping down further.

“You should go say hi,” Mitsui says. “Classmates like it when you’re friendly.”

Kenma glances over at her, blinking. “Do you really think that I’m the friendly type of person?”

She swats at his shoulder. “Did Kuroo Hachiro neglect to teach you manners, young man? I ought to teach you a lesson - the nerve of kids these days -“

Kenma just gives her a smirk, something he’s sure he’s picked up from Kuroo that’s probably not a great habit, and turns his attention to the court. He spots Kuroo’s untamable mop of bedhead immediately. Kuroo’s seated beside someone tiny, who he assumes must be Yaku, and a more average-looking guy, probably Kai.

Kuroo’s the only first year in the starting lineup. Kenma isn’t too surprised, but he still finds himself inadvertently smiling out of something like pride as Kuroo steps onto the court. He looks every bit the valiant hero from Kenma’s video games.

The game starts. Kenma doesn’t recognize the other team, which means they most likely aren’t a powerhouse, but the way they quickly claim the first point through a quick attack tells Kenma that they’re nothing to sniff at either. Kenma’s attention is captivated throughout the match. He’s always found that he much prefers watching volleyball to actually playing it, and this match is proof. He likes trying to predict where the setters will send the ball, who the server will aim at, which hitter will step up to hit, what strategies they’ll use. It’s part of why Kuroo had recommended he be a setter in the first place.

And Kuroo does better than Kenma had imagined. He gets some pretty significant blocks, even against the giants on the other team, and even a couple of kills. Kenma doesn’t cheer as loud as the rest of the crowd. It’s just not the kind of person that he is. But he claps along and smiles, and after one of Kuroo’s major kills, Kuroo tilts his head up to search the audience. When his eyes land on Kenma, his face completely lights up.

Kenma’s heart squeezes in his chest again.
They win in two straight sets, 30-28, 29-27. It’s closer than Kenma would have liked. He thought he might have a heart attack during all of the deuces, squeezing his hands together and pleading to whatever god might be out there that Nekoma would win in his head. Mitsui seemed to be doing much of the same thing, only aloud and quite loudly. Thankfully, most of the crowd was too busy yelling to notice.

At the end of the game, he and Mitsui head out to the court to congratulate Kuroo. Kuroo immediately latches onto Kenma, wrapping both his arms around Kenma’s body. Kenma wrinkles up his nose and tries to step back. “Ew. You’re all sweaty.”

“Get over it,” Kuroo gripes in return, burying his face into Kenma’s shoulder. “God, I wish there weren’t other people here so you could summon up a nice cold Gatorade for me right now.”

Kenma rolls his eyes, even though Kuroo can’t see it. “I’m not a genie, idiot.”

“I’m sure you have your ways,” Kuroo says. He finally releases Kenma and greets Mitsui, then turns back to Kenma, grinning. “You have to come meet the team.”

Kenma suppresses the groan he’s been building up ever since he imagined this scenario. Instead, he just nods, resigned. “Fine, I guess.”

“You could stand to be a little more enthusiastic,” Kuroo gripes. “They’ll be your team as well next year.”

The way Kuroo talks, it’s obvious there’s no doubt in his mind that Kenma will be there next year with him. Having this kind of belief in him… well, it’s something that’s entirely new to him. The only thing people had believed he could do in the past was harm others. He tilts his head down, wondering what’s stirring inside of him.

Kuroo grabs onto his hand, though, and drags him over to the team, releasing as soon as he gets close. He grins. “Everyone, this is my best friend, Kozume Kenma, who’s gonna be on the team next year. Kenma, this is the Nekoma men’s volleyball club.”

“Hm,” the really tall guy who Kenma assumes is the captain says, eyeing him. “You’re kind of scrawny. You’re applying to Nekoma?”
Kenma doesn’t think he likes this guy very much, but he still says, “Yes,” in a quiet tone, because he doesn’t want to embarrass Kuroo.

“Huh,” the guy says, his nose scrunched up. “Well, I won’t be around to see if you get in, so it’s not my problem. What position?”

“Setter,” Kenma mumbles.

“Well, I guess that’s okay, since we have one third-year and one second-year setter. You can be the backup next year if you’re any good.”

Kenma squirms under his scrutiny. The guy he’d assumed was Kai seems to recognize this, because he cuts in with a bright smile. “Nice to meet you, Kenma. I’m Kai Nobuyuki. We’d be glad to have you on the team.”

“Well, he doesn’t seem as obnoxious as Kuroo,” the guy he assumes is Yaku says, his gaze burning holes in Kenma’s face. “I like him more than Kuroo already.”

Kenma feels his lips turn up the slightest bit as the older guys turn away, leaving just Kuroo, Yaku, Kai, and himself. “Thank you,” he manages to get out. “Uh, you know, you aren’t as bad as Kuro said, either.”

“Hey!” Kuroo yelps, pinching Kenma’s arm. “You’re not supposed to expose me like that!”

Both Yaku and Kai laugh at that. Yaku says, “Yeah, I definitely like this kid. Anyone who’s willing to gang up on Kuroo is good in my book. But hey - sorry Imaeda was a dick. We’re all just kind of waiting it out ‘till they all graduate.”

“Building the team from the ground up,” Kuroo says, exchanging a look and nod with Yaku and Kai.

He then proceeds to introduce him to the coach, Coach Nekomata, a jolly-looking old man who Kuroo explains is a mastermind of a coach that’s going to lead the team back to the top. Nekomata looks Kenma up and down, but instead of having the same disapproving frown he saw from the older boys, he just smiles and gives him a warm greeting.
Kenma’s starting to see the basis for a team here. And suddenly, he wants even more desperately to be a part of it.

Kenma starts skipping therapy sessions to study for the high school examination. It’s not necessary, everyone tells him; he’s very intelligent in his own right. But Kenma doesn’t like the uncertainty of it. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he somehow doesn’t pass and has to go to some other high school with kids he doesn’t know and doesn’t really care to know. So he starts feeling a little worse physically, almost as though he’s getting sick, and his nightmares come back full force and with newfound topics, so he doesn’t really sleep that much. He figures he’ll straighten himself out after the examination is over.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Kuroo says, frowning as he drops off the bowl of soup Mitsui had sent up to him. “You can’t just retroactively make up for bad health habits. And if you’re not establishing good health habits now…”

“You sound like Kinjo,” Kenma groans. “Spare me the lecture. I have to study English desperately. It’s my worst subject.”

Kuroo frowns, but sits down at his desk anyways. “Couldn’t you just read someone’s mind if you don’t know an answer?”

Kenma’s head shoots up. Something hot shoots through his veins. “I’m not doing that,” he says firmly.

“But you could,” Kuroo says, because upon occasion, he really doesn’t know when to stop.

“I am not going to do that,” Kenma repeats, his hands clenching into fists. “That’s completely immoral and… would make me as bad as everyone thinks I am.”

“Not everyone,” Kuroo says quietly, but he nods. “You know, for someone that’s convinced he’s a monster, you have one of the strongest moral compasses of anyone I’ve ever met.”
Kenma’s eyes meet Kuroo’s. He sees something hiding there, something he can’t fully understand, and he hates that he can’t return it. So he drops his gaze and stares down at his lap. “I have to study,” he says quietly.

“I know.” Kuroo leans down, the intensity still in his eyes, but then straightens up and ruffles his hair. “You’ll be fine. I can help you if you want for a little bit, but I told some guys I would play football later.”

Kenma just nods and softly tosses him the English book with his mind. “If you insist.”

Nekoma does not make it to Nationals.

They get eliminated in the qualifiers. They play against teams out of their league, and even with the skills and teamwork they’ve built up, it’s not enough. Kuroo sends Kenma a text after the game is over, so Kenma’s prepared when Kuroo bursts into his room late that night once Kenma’s finally put his study materials away.

“You shouldn’t leave the door unlocked,” Kuroo mumbles. “You’re just inviting creeps to break in.”

Kenma rolls his eyes. “Clearly creeps break in already.” He pauses to look back at Kuroo, then says, in a softer tone, “Besides, I only left it open because I knew you’d come over.” He doesn’t mention that he could probably take them if they did break in. He doesn’t think it’d help the situation.

Kuroo just stands in the doorway to Kenma’s room, silent and hunched over. After a few seconds of silence, Kenma sighs and pats the bed next to him. “Kuro, come on.”

Kuroo slowly makes his way over to Kenma’s bed and collapses onto it, folding himself up into a ball, knees pressed against his chest. He stays silent, doesn’t even glance over as Kenma shifts closer to him. Kenma doesn’t know shit about comfort, really. It’s something elusive, something so human that Kenma’s not sure he can fully grasp it. But he’ll try his best. For Kuroo.

He slips his arm around Kuroo’s back and squeezes Kuroo’s shoulder. Kuroo’s head drops down
onto Kenma’s shoulder, and almost on instinct, Kenma’s hand comes up to run through Kuroo’s messy hair. It’s softer than Kenma had imagined. He feels warm inside, almost like he’s glowing, like Kuroo is the spark that has ignited some stray match buried deep inside of him, so deep Kenma wouldn’t even know where to look.

Kuroo dozes off to sleep after a few minutes, and Kenma tucks him into his bed. He climbs down and heads over to the window, staring out into the endless black of the night. He presses his hand against the glass and pleads with whatever God might be out there to let him have this just a little while longer.

Kenma’s team doesn’t make it far in their qualifiers, either. No one had been expecting them too, so it’s not too much of a disappointment. Kuroo still buys him an ice cream afterwards though as a consolation prize, even though it’s the dead of winter. When Kenma points this out, Kuroo sticks out his tongue and insists that ice cream doesn’t have a season, that it’s just a myth to keep Kuroo away from one of the best pleasures this decrepit world has to offer. Kenma calls him a nerd.

Then, before Kenma knows it, he’s taking the Nekoma entrance exam. He’s buzzing with some kind of energy by the time he gets there, sweat pooling in his palms. He squeezes his fists together. The feeling of his nails digging into his palms is oddly grounding.

The exam itself isn’t all that difficult, but Kenma still thinks of it as somewhat of an uncertain result. When he finishes the exam, he calls Kuroo, who just lets out a loud whoop. “Now you’re officially a Nekoma student.”

Kenma scowls. “Am not. I might have failed the test, you know.”

“You did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”
“Did not. Come on, kitten, you’ve been studying so hard. There’s no possible way you failed it.”

And for once, Kuroo is right. He gets his acceptance letter and stares at it, unblinking, before darting down the stairs.

“You passed?” Mitsui asks without even turning around.

“Yes,” Kenma replies, feeling his mouth turn up.

“Well, now we’re going to have to celebrate, aren’t we?” Mitsui says, grinning. “Good thing I had a feeling this would happen and already started preparing a celebratory dinner, right?”

Kenma’s eyes narrow. “What if I had failed?”

“Then it’d be a consolation dinner,” Mitsui says, whipping at Kenma with a dish towel. “Go get Tetsurou. I know that you’re dying to.”

Kenma nods and walks a little faster than normal over to the Kuroos’. Kuroo Tetsurou swings open the door on the first knock, his signature smirk plastered on his face. “What did I tell ya?” he says.

“Don’t be obnoxious,” Kenma grumbles, but he lets Kuroo pull him in anyways. He stays still in Kuroo’s arms for a second, letting it sink in that in just a few weeks, he’ll be going to school with Kuroo every day again. They’ll be on the same team again. He’ll officially be an important factor in Kuroo’s everyday routine again.

It’s selfish, Kenma knows, because that’s who he was programmed to be. But he thinks back to what Kuroo had said about empathy and feels his chest squeeze again.

Kuroo Hachiro walks in and clears his throat, but then laughs and wraps his arms around the two of them. “I’m guessing Kenma here is gonna be at Nekoma next year, huh,” he says with a chuckle. “We all knew it.”
“See,” Kuroo says in his too smug voice.

“We’re so proud of you, kiddo,” Kuroo Hachiro says thickly. Kenma nods, not sure he quite understands why, but he appreciates the sentiment nonetheless. Especially since it means he gets multiple pies later that day and Kuroo Tetsurou brings over a new game he’d bought for Kenma in celebration.

Just like that, Kenma’s middle school career comes to a close, and he finds he has very little to show for it. His grades are decent, mostly due to Kuroo Tetsurou’s influence, but he hasn’t made a single friend of his own accord. His volleyball team tolerates him at the most. Plus, they’d never made it into a real tournament. He supposes it’s more than he could have asked for, back when he was stuck in the laboratory, but somehow he’s starting to want more.

You can’t have it, Akiba’s voice echoes in his head. Monster. Genetically programmed to be our weapon. Nothing more. How could you ever have a real human life? It’s no wonder you were a freak at your last school too.

He graduates. Both Kuroo Tetsurou and Mitsui show up with flowers and immediately start squabbling about whose bouquet is better, while Kuroo Hachiro just laughs, ruffles his hair, and tells him he’s getting old. Kuroo Homugi fusses over how her boys are getting far too old and Kuroo Tatmotsu just chuckles in his deep baritone. Kenma’s aware he’ll never have a biological family, a mother and father in a nice little house with a pet cat, but he imagines this is about what it must feel like.

He tells Kinjo about his fear of having not accomplished anything in his middle school career. He’s known Kinjo far too long now to have any qualms about sharing that kind of thing. Kinjo stares at him, unblinking, and then shakes her head. “Kenma, when you came to me, you barely spoke. You were in a bad place, mental health wise. You wouldn’t think of doing any clubs. You barely even talked to Kuroo that much. And now…”

She trails off, but Kenma gets the point. He supposes it’s a fair point, though he’d also had half a year in primary school to get better. He voices this, and Kinjo shakes her head.

“Most kids your age don’t have half the things you had to worry about,” Kinjo tells him. “They worry about obeying their parents and going to school and making friends and clubs. They don’t worry about psychic powers or laboratories or traumatic pasts or doctors escaping from jails or the police. So to worry about that while still getting good grades and getting into a very good high school and managing your own mental health - I personally find it very impressive. Besides, I think
it’s easier to make friends in high school. So there is no need to worry about that, okay? Let’s reframe, think of all the good you’ve done in middle school."

Admittedly, Kenma does feel a little lighter after the session. And maybe a little bit tougher. It only makes sense, after all. He is a high school student now.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, thank you all so much for reading and your reviews! I'm glad you all thought last chapter was handled okay!
Bokuto has shown up now, as well as Yaku and Kai! In the next few chapters, we're gonna start to converge with canon, so more and more characters will show up. And we're definitely starting to get more happy moments in the next few chapters as well! Please leave a comment if you enjoyed!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: Character death, murder, grief, trauma, PTSD, anxiety attacks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kuroo Tetsurou starts off Kenma’s first day of high school by sounding a blowhorn in Kenma’s room at an ungodly hour.

The main problem with this is that when Kenma’s half asleep, he has much less control over his powers. He also doesn’t hold back when he thinks someone’s broken into his room to kidnap him and bring him back to the laboratory, since that is still within the realm of possibilities. So he subconsciously responds by throwing Kuroo back against the wall. A few seconds later, he processes what’s happened, jumps out of bed, realizes it’s Kuroo, and, panicked, asks, “Kuro?” in a shaky voice.

Kuroo coughs, but then dissolves into cackles. “Should’ve known better than to mess with a fucking psychic, huh,” he rasps.

“It’s not funny,” Kenma says, crossing his arms. “I could’ve killed you.”

“You subconsciously held back, I bet,” Kuroo says. “But this is reassuring. You can definitely hold your own in a fight.”

“I always could,” Kenma says. “Now get out, I have to go get changed.”

Kuroo rolls his eyes and mumbles something along the lines of “demanding,” but he heads downstairs anyways. Kenma changes into Nekoma’s uniform for the first time and takes a careful look at himself in the mirror.

He’s still not completely used to seeing his reflection. The person in it seems foreign, somehow; his hair too bright a shade of yellow at the ends, his eyes too big and golden. He’s finally starting to look older, he thinks, though he’s still nowhere near Kuroo’s height. Kozume Kenma, he repeats in his head, the corner of his mouth turning up. K3734 is no more. There’s only Kenma. The way it should have always been.
He hears Kuroo yelling for him downstairs and grumpily grabs his bag, slinging it over one shoulder as he heads down the stairs. “I helped make you some food,” he says, grinning.

“You poured the juice,” Mitsui says, unimpressed.

“And took the fruit out of the fridge!”

“A culinary genius,” Kenma says. He eats the food as quickly as he possibly can, then shoves his DS into his back pocket and beckons Kuroo. “Let’s go.”

“My baby, starting high school,” Kuroo fake-sobs, while Mitsui just says, “Go, before I get all emotional on you.” She gives him a bit of pocket cash to spend on a treat after school, despite Kenma insisting that it’s not necessary, and shoos them both out the door.

Kenma’s gotten in the habit of playing while he walks. It’s not as though he had anyone to talk to when he was walking to his middle school, so there was nothing else for him to do, and it’s nice to have something to keep his brain occupied. So as soon as they start walking, Kenma pulls his DS out of his pocket and starts to play. Kuroo glances over at him in disapproval. “You’re gonna walk into a pole or something.”

“Am not,” Kenma says. “It hasn’t happened one time in the months I’ve been doing this.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

“It only happened once or twice,” Kenma shoots back.

Kuroo sighs. “I guess I’ll just have to be your eyes, then,” he says. One of Kuroo’s hands softly brushes the top of Kenma’s back, stays there for a few seconds, and then drops, as if giving a gentle push for Kenma to keep walking. Kenma feels his heart unclench a little bit as he continues walking, his head buried in his game.

They don’t talk a lot on the way to school, besides Kuroo dropping random bits of conversation about how he’s sure the team will be better with Kenma on it or how they’re going to kick Fukurodani’s ass this year. Still, Kenma finds it hard to concentrate for whatever reason.
Something about Kuroo being there right beside him feels odd. He feels more zoned into the world than usual. It becomes even more obvious to him when a tree branch breaks off, right above Kuroo’s head, and Kenma sends it flinging off into the sky before it can even brush Kuroo’s head.

Kuroo blinks, and then slowly breaks out into a grin. “My hero,” he croons, ruffling Kenma’s hair.

Kenma frowns. “It’s not like I’d let you die,” he says. He thinks he might have thrown the branch too far, though, because he’s starting to feel a little tired.

Kuroo notices before Kenma can even say anything, and puts his hand back on Kenma’s back to give him that extra boost as they walk. Kenma starts up the next level and tries to let the sound effects of the battle lull him into relaxation.

High school is something new altogether.

Middle school hadn’t felt all that different than primary school, but it’s only been one day, and already Kenma feels like high school is a brand new universe. The other students seem much bigger than him, much scarier. The teachers are more serious. It’s only his first year of high school, and they’re already going on and on about college, something Kenma hasn’t even considered. He’ll have to study all over again if he wants to get into a decent college. And in only a year, Kuroo will have to think seriously about these things. He shakes his pounding head to clear it.

He still doesn’t talk to anyone in his class, because he has no reason to. He doesn’t feel as though he has that much in common with them anyways. The whispers about crushes from middle school have blown up into full-blown relationships. People talk a lot about popular TV series, about popular music groups, things Kenma’s never paid much attention to. He doesn’t even know where to start with popular culture beyond the few shows Kuroo makes him watch. All he knows about is video games and, somewhat regrettably, volleyball.

Volleyball practice is about what he’d expected. The third years haven’t gotten any nicer since they were second years. When he announces his intentions to join the team, they eye him with disdain, and all the more when he says that he’s a setter. He grits his teeth and bears it. Then they start to command him and the other first years to do all the grunt work - clean the gym after practice, pick up all the balls, fetch water for the upperclassmen. Kuroo gives him sympathetic glances, but there’s not much he can do.
A part of Kenma wants to use his powers to make the senpai dump water on themselves while drinking or trip them or dig into their heads to find their darkest secrets for blackmail. But he knows he can’t. He can’t become who the doctors believed he was. He won’t use his powers for harm.

So he just gives them the grumpiest looks he can get away with, and even asks on one occasion why they use the first years for their grunt work. They scowl at him and start grumbling about first years not knowing their place. In response, he ducks his head down and keeps doing as they say. It’s not like he goes looking for trouble, after all.

Kenma appreciates Yaku and Kai still (and occasionally, Kuroo too), but the other first-years are also an ordeal. Actually, one of them isn’t that bad; Fukunaga is funny and mostly quiet, which are good qualities in Kenma’s eyes. The other first-year, though, Yamamoto, manages to push every single one of Kenma’s buttons within a matter of days.

He’s loud. He’s obnoxious. He’s constantly yelling, constantly fired up, and the worst part about it is that he expects Kenma to be just as fired up. When Kenma lets a ball drop in front of him on the court, he not only has the upperclassmen on his ass, but also Yamamoto. And also occasionally the coach, who is actually quite knowledgeable and respectable but has no tolerance for slacking off. Kenma hates every second of it, hates how hard he has to work, hates that he comes down with a fever after the first week of practice.

Kuroo shows up and places a cold rag on his head. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

“Sorry for what?” Kenma coughs out. “It’s not like it’s your fault. You didn’t tell them to be assholes.”

“Sorry I got you into it,” Kuroo says.

“Too late now,” Kenma says, closing his eyes. “Stop worrying about it. Like I said, it’s not your fault. Volleyball wasn’t bad in middle school.”

“Still,” Kuroo says, shrugging. “I wish you liked it. But I guess there’s nothing that can be done about that.” He lowers his head a little bit. “Thanks for sticking with it.”

Kenma nods before he dozes back off to sleep. But as he drifts off, the knot in his chest just grows bigger.
The only good thing about high school as compared to middle school is that his reputation has diminished considerably.

No one in high school knows who he is, nor does it seem like they care to know, really. The thing about humanity is that most of their trends are short-lived. The story of the laboratory had made headlines during his middle school career, but it’s died down as of recently. There’s always another tragedy to latch onto, another crime to recoil in horror about. No one’s attention can stay on one horror for very long. And everyone seems to have accepted that these laboratory kids weren’t of any harm to anyone else since they haven’t cropped up in the news in quite some time. Many of these people haven’t gone to school with him since primary school and don’t know that he was transferred in randomly with no educational background. They assume he’s dyed his hair its bright shade of gold.

It’s much easier to blend in.

He doesn’t use his powers during school or on school grounds unless absolutely necessary, like the time Kuroo managed to get a volleyball stuck in a tree, and even then he makes absolutely sure that no one else is around. So as far as anyone else is concerned, Kozume Kenma is just the quiet boy who sits in the back of class and doesn’t really talk to anyone.

It’s what he’s always wanted. He’s just an average, albeit quiet, human kid. And to his team, well, to the senpai, he’s the annoying first year who doesn’t want to do all the shit they push onto him. To the second years besides Kuroo, he thinks they kind of see him as a kid brother that they almost enjoy being around. Yamamoto thinks he’s lazy and Fukunaga thinks of him as… maybe a comrade or something, Kenma doesn’t fully know. But no one sees him as the kid with powers.

Kenma wants it to stay that way forever.

However, after a couple of weeks, Kenma decides that he wants to quit volleyball.

It’s not just that it’s tiring and it’s given him multiple fevers. That in itself is bad, but Kenma could have dealt with it. But the dehumanizing way that the third years treat him and the other first years is the main issue. Every time he tries to say something, voice any kind of opinion, he’s immediately shut down. He gets disdainful names thrown around behind his back. It feels like a muted version of being thrown back into the lab, being looked at and treated as subhuman, but
because of his age this time. He starts faking sick to get out of practices.

Kuroo notices, because Kuroo always does. He drags him out to the park they like to practice at. Kenma curls up on the steps, places his head in his arms, while Kuroo stands beside him, staring off into the distance.

“You’re a keen observer,” Kuroo says at last. “And everything you suggest makes sense.”

“But I don’t wanna say anything,” Kenma answers. “Every time I do, the third years tell me not to be such a smart mouth. They even made me run twice as much as the other first-years yesterday.”

“Those third years are all going to retire from the club soon,” Kuroo promises him. “And rumor has it that Coach Nekomata, you know, the famous coach, may be coming back. So no quitting, okay? The third years don’t have a clue, but the rest of us all know how good you are. You’ll be a big asset to the team. I know you will.”

Kenma doesn’t blink. At this point, he’s almost convinced that Kuroo might be the psychic, because he hasn’t ever voiced the desire to quit to Kuroo, but he’s not shocked that Kuroo figured it out. Kenma buries his head further into his arms. “I… it’s hard,” he says. Kinjo is always telling him that he needs to be more vocal about the things that he thinks. Plus, he trusts Kuroo as much as he thinks he can ever trust anyone. “It reminds me of… of being in the lab, the way that they talk to me, and the things I hear them say about me behind my back. It’s like I’m not even a human being to them.”

“Oh. Well, fuck,” Kuroo says. He frowns, and then steps to his side, sitting down beside Kenma. He stays silent for a moment, biting down on his lip, and then says, “I could take them down. And you wouldn’t have to use your powers or anything.”

Kenma frowns. “Then you’d get kicked off the team, stupid. That’s not what I want.”

“I guess,” Kuroo answers. “But it’d be worth it.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t even think about using your powers?” Kuroo asks. “I mean, even just tripping one of them could make them see how powerful you are…”
“Kuro.”

“Fine, fine, I know. You’re a better person than me, kitten.”

Kenma wrinkles up his nose. “No, I’m not.”

“You are,” Kuroo affirms, tilting himself to face Kenma and placing his hands on Kenma’s shoulders firmly. “Kenma, I need you to know that you’re absolutely human, and a very good human at that. Nothing those bitter third-year assholes can say will change that. And if I get to be captain next year... I’ll make sure everyone knows how important you are.” And I’ll never treat you like a subhuman hangs heavy in the air between them.

He’s never had a reason to doubt Kuroo. So he nods. “Fine. I won’t quit yet.”

Kuroo looks him dead in the eyes. “And Kenma, you aren’t alone. Not now, dealing with this. Not ever.”

And so he perseveres. It’s not fun still by any means, but at the same time, he now realizes that he’s not alone. Kuroo hovers around him more than usual, deflecting any stray comments from the third-years, glaring at anyone who says anything bad about Kenma. Kuroo also seems to have put Yaku and Kai to work doing much of the same thing. He still has to deal with the obnoxiousness of his fellow first year, but it gets better, little by little.

And then their first training camp with Fukurodani rolls around.

Kenma’s not looking forward to it by any means. This camp, consisting of days upon days of volleyball with very little rest, is the stuff of nightmares for him. He makes sure to bring his DS, tucked into the pocket of his jacket, and whips it out as soon as they get on the bus. Kuroo, of course, is seated by his side.

“So this camp is going to be held at Fukurodani,” Kuroo says casually.

Kenma glances over, presses the pause button on his game. “Really,” Kenma replies.
“Which means that you’ll get to meet Bokuto.”

“Okay,” Kenma says, because he doesn’t know what else he can really say. He unpauses his game. He needs a distraction.

“I think he’ll like you,” Kuroo continues regardless. “There aren’t very many people that Bokuto doesn’t like, to be honest. But he can be a little… much, at times. So I’ll understand if you need to step away or something like that.”

“Okay,” Kenma agrees. His heart speeds up a little bit, but it’s not like he can really argue, and since the bus is already pulling away, there’s no way to get out of meeting Bokuto. He moves his character to the side to attack near the heart.

Kuroo nods, sounding satisfied, and gently ruffles his hair. “Gonna nap. Wake me up if you need anything.”

Kenma hums in agreement and keeps playing his game.

The bus ride is spent mostly with Kenma doing his best to ignore Yamamoto’s obnoxious talking, mostly to Fukunaga, and the senpai yelling at him to shut up already. He has a headache by the time they pull in beside the Fukurodani gym. Kuroo yawns, stretches out, and then gives him a sympathetic stare. “You look grumpy.”

“Loud,” Kenma grumbles.

Kuroo nods. “Well, unfortunately, that’s how most of today is gonna be.”

The two of them get off the bus with the rest of the team, grabbing their bags and belongings. Then suddenly a ball of gray comes barreling out of nowhere, nearly knocking Kenma over in his rush to get to Kuroo. “Bro!” he yells, pulling Kuroo into a tight hug. Once he lets go, though, Kenma finally gets a chance to observe his face, and his heart drops in his chest.

“B0450,” Kenma whispers.
Kuroo’s brow furrows as he looks between Kenma and Bokuto, his mouth curving downwards. “Kenma, do you -“

“Hi, K3734!” Bokuto exclaims brightly. “It’s been a while, huh!”

“You could say that,” Kenma says, staring at the ground. The sound of his old ‘name’ feels like needles prickling at his skin. He hates it. “I don’t… really go by that name.”

“Right, sorry,” Bokuto says sheepishly. “Uh, you’ve gotta be Kenma, then?”

“You two know each other?” Kuroo finally interrupts, looking awestruck.

“We were in the same lab,” Bokuto says cheerily.

“How did you survive?” Kenma interrupts frantically.

Bokuto’s face grows a little more serious. “How about you guys put your stuff down, and then we’ll talk,” he offers.

Kenma’s head is buzzing at a million miles an hour as he follows Kuroo and the rest of the team numbly into the sleeping rooms. Kuroo glances back at him, face unreadable. “I…” he starts, but then stops.

“I didn’t know,” Kenma tells him. “I didn’t have a clue or I would’ve told you.”

Kuroo shakes his head and sighs. After a second, he says, “I know.”

They meet Bokuto outside of the room, and Bokuto leads them down the hall to an empty table. He says, “I got away during the escape too. And then I was on the street for kinda a long time, because I didn’t go with the police or anythin’. But then this cool family came along! And they were like, hey, kid, where do you live? So I told them I didn’t have any place to stay, so they said I could stay with them! And then I was in cram school for, like, ever, but eventually I got smart enough to go to
Fukurodani! And now I play volleyball and it’s so awesome. I’m the eighth best ace in the nation, y’know!”

“But good enough to crack the top five,” Kuroo says, but his voice doesn’t have the same teasing edge it typically has when he says things of the sort. “Do you have some kind of psychic powers you’ve been holding out on me?”

“Nah,” Bokuto says. “Just got these guns, baby! I was in the division that was more about, like, physical strength and shit. So that’s why I didn’t see, uh, Kenma that much. But I still said hi to him when I could and everythin’.”

Kuroo seems to be processing this. After a moment’s pause, he nods. “But why didn’t you tell me, bro?”

“How was I s’posed to know your best friend you always talk about is a lab kid!” Bokuto complains. “People freak out when you tell ‘em you’re a lab experiment!”

Kenma’s mouth quirks up. “See, Kuro, I told you people freak out about that stuff.”

Bokuto’s gaze falls back on Kenma and he jumps up from the table, bounding over to wrap Kenma up in a hug. “I’m glad you’re okay!” he chirps, grinning. “It’s good to know more of us survived. Even if that means now I gotta kick your ass in volleyball.”

Kenma’s nose wrinkles up. “Isn’t it kind of cheating for someone with super strength to play volleyball?”

Bokuto looks affronted. “I don’t use my full strength or anythin’! Besides, it’s a curse a lot of the time! My hits and serves always go out. And then my team gets really disappointed in me. But it’s not like I mean for it to happen! I try my best!”

In some weird, twisted way, Kenma supposes it makes sense. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Bokuto-san,” comes a voice from down the hall. “We’re supposed to have a game soon. Where have you gotten off to?”
Bokuto’s eyes light up all over again. “Akaaaaaashi,” he yells, letting go of Kenma to dart back down the hall. “Akaaaaaashi, come meet my friends!”

“We weren’t really friends,” Kenma mutters, though he knows it doesn’t matter that much. Kuroo just laughs quietly.

Bokuto returns to the table, a tall, dark haired boy with objectively good looks following him. The boy has a flat expression, though there’s something in his eyes that Kenma thinks displays his fondness for Bokuto. Bokuto grins and says, “Kuroo, Kenma, this is my setter, Akaashi! Akaashi, this is my bro Kuroo and my old friend Kenma!”

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Akaashi says formally, dipping into a slight bow. “You must be from Nekoma. I’m excited to have the opportunity to play against you.”

“Oh, believe me, we are too,” Kuroo replies, a predatory glint in his eye. Kenma shoots Akaashi an apologetic glance, and Akaashi returns it.

“I apologize, but we really have to go,” Akaashi says, hooking one arm around Bokuto. “We’ll see you soon?”

“Bye guys!” Bokuto says, following after Akaashi, a bright smile on his face.

Kuroo turns to Kenma. He looks oddly bemused. “Maybe it’s fate that Bokuto and I became friends,” he muses. “Since you two knew each other and everything, and I had no idea. At least I don’t have to worry about you two not liking each other.”

Kenma shrugs. “I guess so. We probably need to go too, though. We’re supposed to play our first practice match in a minute.”

The senpai yell at him and Kuroo, but mostly him, for being late. Kenma doesn’t really listen, though. He watches Bokuto jump on the other court, soaring into the air and sending the ball flying down onto the court, and his chest feels a little bit lighter. He turns back to the court with a slight smile on his face.
It becomes nearly impossible for him to get any time alone while he’s at the training camp.

Despite the fact that Bokuto and Kuroo play volleyball all day every day, even after the practice matches are over, they still somehow have a desire to practice even more. They have a perfectly good setter in Akaashi, but Kenma still gets dragged along more often than not just to experience the ‘pleasure of their company’, as Kuroo puts it. Bokuto exclaims that Kenma’s the only person that he knows from the laboratory and he wants to get to know him. It’s nice to see that someone else got out and is doing well, Kenma thinks, but at the same time it’s a little painful to see Bokuto. He remembers seeing Bokuto wandering the halls of the laboratory in his white scrubs, scratches and bruises on his muscular arms, but that bright smile on his face. It’s nice to see him direct it at his teammates now. Still, it feels like a smack in the face every time he sees it, a throw back to much darker days.

As he always does, Kuroo notices that something’s up. He ensures that their futons are positioned beside each other and, when everyone else dozes off to sleep, Kuroo’s hand slides into his. The nightmares still resurface most nights, but it’s much nicer to wake up and feel Kuroo’s strong hand around his, like there’s something grounding him to this world.

He eats all his meals with Kuroo, Bokuto, Akaashi, and occasionally Yaku, Kai, and Fukunaga. Yamamoto also sits closer than Kenma would prefer. Bokuto brags loudly about how he’s going to be the best ace in the nation, making too many of the aces of the other teams around them glare at him. Sometimes it makes Yamamoto chime in from down the table about he’s going to be the ace next year as well, which makes their third year ace yell at the captain to assign him extra laps.

“You know,” Bokuto says one night after dinner, after extra practice, when they’re all settled on the gym floor. “I always felt bad for you mind people. Felt like you had it the worst. Like all we did was spar each other and occasionally get beaten, but not the like, mind torture you guys got.” He bites down on his lip, his eyes welling up with tears, but he looks up at Kenma and says earnestly, “I’m glad we got out of there.”

Kenma’s eyes widen. There is no way that Bokuto is faking this, he thinks; he’s really known Bokuto only for a few days now, but already he can tell that Bokuto is disturbingly honest in all things. So does that mean that Bokuto… that Bokuto is feeling… that he could feel…

He watches on with his hands clenched tightly as Akaashi pats Bokuto on the back lightly, handing him a tissue to wipe his face, and Kuroo offers him a reassuring shoulder squeeze. All he can say, though, is “Me too.”

Just a few minutes later, Bokuto’s laughing at some dumb joke Kuroo made and jumping back up,
demanding in a playful tone that Akaashi give him ‘just a few more sets, ‘Kaaaashi, I promise!’’. Kuroo turns his blazing dark eyes onto Kenma and says, quietly, “I’m glad you’re here.” Kenma can’t quite decipher what it means. There are so many directions he could take that simple statement - Kuroo’s glad he was made, on this Earth; Kuroo’s glad he hadn’t quit volleyball and therefore is at the training camp; Kuroo’s glad he got out of the laboratory and is here with him instead. But it makes his chest feel all funny, and even funnier when he says, “Me too,” again and Kuroo directs a blazingly genuine smile at Kenma.

The weirdest moment happens on the last evening of the training camp.

One of the other schools has a female manager. Kenma honestly wishes they had one too, not for the reasons that Yamamoto probably wishes, but just because it would be nice to have some assistance with all the grunt work that the first-years are forced to do. But he’d noticed that the manager’s eyes had been following Kuroo while they played. He hadn’t thought much of it; after all, Kuroo was still one of the better players on Nekoma’s team, and it’d be only natural to watch his absurdly good blocks and hits. However, on the last evening of the camp, Kenma emerges from the bath to find Kuroo in the hallway with the girl.

Kenma isn’t much of a snoop. With the abilities that he has, it would be easy enough to become one; he could find out the secrets of everyone he knows in just the snap of a finger. But he’s never really had that desire. Now, though, for whatever odd reason, there’s something egging at him to stick around and listen. So he doesn’t question it and leans surreptitiously against the wall.

“It’s been really nice to talk to you, Kuroo-san,” the girl says kindly.

“Uh, yeah,” Kuroo says, awkward as ever. “Too bad we… didn’t talk that much.”

“Yes,” the girl agrees. “It would be very nice if we could talk more. And I’m going to be honest, even though it’s very embarrassing. Is that okay?”

“I… guess,” Kuroo says slowly. Kenma resists the urge to snort.

“I like you, Kuroo-san,” she says. “I think that you’re a great volleyball player and are very good-looking and intelligent. And honestly, I think I would like to talk to you more and get to know you! If you like me too, I mean!”
Kenma’s chest squeezes again. Rather irrationally, Kenma thinks that this girl has no idea what she’s talking about, though he promises himself silently that were Kuroo to date this girl, he’d be better than last time Kuroo was in a relationship. That this time, he won’t be so resentful, especially if it’s someone Kuroo cares about. He can do that. He knows he can.

“Ah,” Kuroo says, scratching the back of his head, like Kenma knows he always does when he’s nervous or feeling awkward. He chuckles again in his stupid awkward way. “Uh, that’s really nice of you, seriously. Thank you. But, well, I just… don’t really have the time to get to know someone like that. I have volleyball practice often, plus my friends, and it’d be tough with us going to different schools…”

“Oh,” the girl says, her head tilting down. “That’s okay then. Thank you for considering my feelings, Kuroo-san.”

She turns away and darts off. Kenma’s a little shocked. The girl had seemed incredibly nice, and she was gorgeous; many of the other boys at the training camp had been talking about how they’d love to get the chance to date her. So he can’t really imagine why Kuroo wouldn’t leap at the opportunity. His answer that he doesn’t have time isn’t wholly true. Kuroo wastes a lot of time lounging about, playing video games with Kenma, and that’s time he could spend with a girlfriend if he had one. So…

“Kenma,” Kuroo’s strong voice interrupts.

Damn, he’s been caught. He sheepishly lifts his head to look at Kuroo. “Hi.”

“You should go get some rest,” he says, not sounding angry in the least.

Kenma breathes out a quiet sigh of relief. “I’m feeling a little off. Might go outside and try to find somewhere quiet to mess around with my powers.”


“I will.” Kenma promises before walking out. After all this time, he thinks, maybe there’s something about Kuroo that he’s missing.
He’d never invade Kuroo’s privacy by reading his mind, but he’s never been more tempted than he is right now.

Kenma’s admittedly pretty relieved when they finally leave to go back home. It’s not that the training camp had been terrible; having Bokuto and Akaashi there had made it more bearable, and beyond games and sleep time, he’d been able to mostly avoid Nekoma’s third years. But Kenma finds that he still immensely prefers the privacy of his own home and his own room. Besides, Mitsui is grateful to have him back, stating in no uncertain terms that she’d been very lonely and he’d better not leave her for that long again. So it’s back to the old routine, back to how things should be. It’s not good, exactly, not with the third years still being assholes and Kenma still being their servant, but it’s as close to good as it can get.

Kenma should have known it could never last.

One day after practice, Kenma gets home and sets his bag down, takes off his shoes, all of his normal routine tasks. His phone starts buzzing in his pocket. This is odd itself; no one really ever calls him. Everyone that knows him knows that he’d always prefer to text. But then he sees Kuroo’s name on the screen and his heart jumps into his throat. He picks up immediately. “Kuro?” he asks.

“Kenma,” Kuroo says, his voice choked and words nearly incomprehensible. “Kenma.”

“Kuro,” Kenma breathes out. “What’s going on?”

“I got home and… and grandma…”

“I’m coming over,” Kenma says quickly. He hangs up the phone, puts his shoes back on, and darts out the door.

He pushes the door open with his mind before he can even get there and dashes in, his eyes scanning the vicinity before noticing Kuroo’s hair peeking up above the couch. He runs into the living room and immediately sees what’s going on.

Beside Kuroo, lying back on the ground, is Kuroo Homugi, completely unresponsive, all the color drained from her body. Bile rises in Kenma’s throat. Still, he forces himself to kneel on the ground next to her body, beside Kuroo Tetsurou. He pushes in with his mind, tries to see if there’s
“We have to call the hospital,” Kenma says hoarsely.

“What good is that gonna do?!” Kuroo demands, voice harsh and coated with tears. “She’s gone, Kenma, she’s…”

Kenma can hear his own heart pounding in his ears. He pulls out his phone, dials Kuroo Hachiro’s number, and listens to it ring once, twice, three times before Kuroo Hachiro says, “Kenma, you know I love you, but I’m kind of on a case right now…”

“It’s your mom,” Kenma makes himself say. “Please come home. She’s… she… gone…"

It’s silent for a minute before Kuroo Hachiro says, in a voice more broken than Kenma’s ever heard, “Okay. Stay right there. I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay,” Kenma says quietly. He puts an arm around Kuroo Tetsurou’s shoulders, and Kuroo collapses into him, sobbing against his shoulder. Kenma tries to shield his eyes.

He’s never been more lost than he is right now.

Kuroo Hachiro shows up and confirms that she is, in fact, deceased. He then has people come to remove the body from their house. Kuroo Tetsurou stands at the door in shock, then shakes his head and runs up to his room. Kenma doesn’t know whether or not he should follow, but Kuroo Hachiro nods, motioning towards the stairs. He says, “He needs you,” and that thought in itself is kind of terrifying, because no one’s ever needed Kenma, and he’s not entirely convinced he can provide what Kuroo Tetsurou needs. But he follows, just as he always has. Just as he always will.

They sit in silence for what could be minutes or hours. All Kuroo says is, “I don’t believe it,” when he finally speaks.

“I’m sorry,” Kenma says.
“Me too,” Kuroo says. He lets Kenma climb up next to him and burrow into his shoulder, though, and he holds Kenma tightly as he cries again.

It doesn’t really fully hit Kenma until the day of her funeral. He sees Kuroo Tatmotsu standing by her grave, his face a picture of devastation. He knows that despite the mental faculties Kuroo Tatmostu has begun to lose, he loved his wife wholeheartedly. As he watches, he can’t help but think about not only what he’s lost, but what the entire family has lost. He remembers the look on Kuroo Tetsurou’s face and the undertone of grief in Kuroo Hachiro’s voice. And then, all of a sudden, he realizes there’s something wet sliding down his face.

“Is it raining?” Kenma mumbles, putting his fingers to his cheek, blinking rapidly when they come away wet.

“No,” Kuroo Tetsurou says from beside him, staring at him with something like awe in his eyes. “Kenma, kitten, you’re crying.”

“I… what?” Kenma says. Sure enough, when he moves his fingers a little higher, he finds that the area right under his eyes is soaked. He’s started to tremble as well. He chokes out something like a sob and catches himself.

Kuroo slips an arm around his shoulders, drawing Kenma close to his chest. Resting his forehead on top of Kenma’s head, he whispers, “You’re crying. It’s a normal thing people do when they’re sad.”

“B-but I can’t,” Kenma says.

“You can,” Kuroo says firmly. “We’ll talk about this later, okay? But you can.”

He squeezes Kenma tighter. Kenma just turns his face into Kuroo’s jacket and lets the tears come. He’s aware on some level that this is Kuroo’s grandmother, that he should be the one comforting Kuroo and not the other way around, but when he’s being held like this he can’t bring himself to care.

When they get back to Kuroo’s house and Kuroo all but drags him up to his room, Kuroo rounds
on Kenma and says, “I never want to hear you say you don’t feel things again.”

“I don’t,” Kenma says, hiccuping. “I can’t, Kuro.”

“You clearly fucking can,” Kuroo says. Although the words sound hostile, his tone is anything but. “Why would you think that?”

Kenma rolls up his sleeve, clearly displaying the K3734 imprinted there. Kuroo’s seen it before, he knows - they’ve been around each other enough, but Kuroo’s never commented on it, isn’t the type of person who would comment on such a thing, and Kenma’s never explained. “This is why,” Kenma says. “I’ve had this ever since I can remember. It’s a reminder that I wasn’t born. I didn’t have two parents who came together to create a kid. I don’t have a family at all, because I was created in a lab. I was created to not feel things, to be a cold-blooded killer. Do you get it now?”

He cuts himself off. Kuroo is silent, the only sound now just Kenma’s ragged breathing. But when he finally convinces himself to look up, to see the rejection on Kuroo’s face he’s sure will be plainly painted there, instead all he sees is wide-eyed sympathy swimming in his dark eyes. “Is that what they told you?” Kuroo says at last.

“Is that what they - Kuro, it’s the truth,” Kenma answers.

“It’s not,” Kuroo tells him, as sure as if he were informing Kenma that the sky is blue. “There is no way that’s the truth. And you know how I know that? Because I know you. I’ve spent more time with you over the past four years than I have anyone else. I’ve seen the way you react to things. Your face is so fucking expressive. I’ve seen you experience emotions, seen the hurt on your face when someone says something mean, seen the light in your eyes when someone gives you pie, seen the way you care so deeply about people and your own morals. And now I’ve seen you cry, too. If you’re not human, then I don’t know who is.”

“Kuro,” Kenma chokes out, the tears sliding down his face again. Kuroo holds him again and Kenma sobs into his chest, because he knows one thing for certain, and it’s that he doesn’t deserve this. He has never deserved this, deserved Kuroo. But here he is telling Kenma that he’s human, that he’s not a monster, maybe that he never was. And suddenly he feels. The pressure in his chest, the beating of his heart, the warmth of Kuroo - it’s sadness, a little bit, but it’s also happiness, pure happiness that Kenma has never felt before.

Come to think of it, certain things make sense. The tightness in his chest when he spoke to people he didn’t want to had been anxiety. The crushing weight had been sadness. He had been jealous, of Kuroo’s girlfriend, of Kuroo’s friends.
But if they had lied about Kenma’s capacity to feel, then what else had they lied about?

When he voices this to Kuroo, Kuroo stares into his eyes and says, “I… don’t think you were created.”

“But I have powers and stuff,” Kenma argues. “And my hair, my eyes… those aren’t natural.”

“I think you have parents,” Kuroo says.

Kenma raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I can’t know anything for sure, and I’m still in high school,” Kuroo says with a laugh. “But there’s definitely a way to genetically engineer a fetus. I think that they messed around with you while you were still developing and then took you away from your parents to grow up. So they’re the monsters, okay? Not you. Never you.”

Kenma stares at him, the gears in his mind turning. He blinks.

“How did Kuroo Homugi die?” Kenma asks urgently.

Kuroo Hachiro stares at him. “Kenma, what the hell?”

“It’s important,” Kenma says. ”Just… please.”

Kuroo Hachiro sighs. “Well, she was getting old, but… the autopsy showed trace amounts of some kind of tranquilizer drug in her system that could have conflicted with the medications that she was taking for her arthritis. But it also could’ve been self-administered, so there’s no need.”

“It wasn’t self-administered.”
Kuroo Hachiro frowns. “We’re waiting for the results of the autopsy.”

“It wasn’t self-administered,” Kenma repeats, his eyes dark. “And you know that Kuroo Homugi didn’t do drugs. She wouldn’t just take that strong of a tranquilizer randomly. This wasn’t a natural death, so… so that means…”

“It’s not your problem,” Kuroo Hachiro replies, his voice hollow. “You’ve been through enough trauma for a lifetime. I didn’t even want you to figure that out, even though I had a bad feeling that you would. This shithead’s fucked up your life enough. So please… don’t worry, okay? I’m going to keep you safe. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“What about everyone else?” Kenma answers. “What about Kuro, about Kuroo Tatmotsu, about Mitsui, about Kinjo? If they can’t get to me, they won’t stop there. They’ve shown that.”

“They didn’t mean to kill her, I don’t think,” Kuroo Hachiro says. “They just wanted to tranquilize her, to keep her quiet. It was a drug malfunction. I don’t think they’re out to kill. So please… don’t worry.”

Kenma leans back against the wall. His breath is coming too fast, which he recognizes now as being panic, nearly overwhelming in how it grips his throat. He groans, “I can’t go back.”

“You won’t,” Kuroo Hachiro promises. Kenma finds that for the first time in a while he doesn’t believe it.

It becomes hard. Everything becomes hard.

Everyone he sees on the street is trying to kidnap him. He hates that he’s come to recognize the emotions that he’s feeling, because he’s come to realize that the constant feeling of suffocation is anxiety. Even when he’s in his therapy sessions, he’s always staring at the door, checking around the room for hidden cameras, digging his nails into his palm to try to make these feelings go away. Maybe, he thinks, maybe life was easier when he couldn’t feel.
No. He dismisses the thought before it can solidify fully. He’d always been able to feel, but had been better at suppressing it. And it’s not like everything he’s felt has been bad. But even still…

Kinjo frowns at him, her brow creased. “Hey, Kenma. What’s going on?”

Kenma snaps back to attention, a shiver running down his spine. “Nothing,” he says.

“You look like you’re looking for someone,” Kinjo tells him softly. “Who are you looking for?”

“I…” Kenma trails off. She won’t hurt you. She’s not with them. “I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Kinjo prods him.

“They killed Kuro’s grandmother,” Kenma says quietly. “They didn’t mean to, but they did. And they could hurt the people that I… care about.”

“They?” Kinjo asks. “Kenma, who are they? The doctors? They’re gone; they can’t hurt you anymore.”

“They can,” Kenma insists firmly. “There’s one of them still out there and she’s the most dangerous one. I don’t know what she wants me for, but she’s planning something, and she won’t stop at anything to get me.”

Her expression just becomes even more concerned. “I heard that Kuroo’s grandmother died of an accidental medical overdose caused by combining two medications. It wasn’t ruled as a murder.”

“To the public,” Kenma insists. “They only said that so no one would worry.”

“I see,” Kinjo answers, though he doesn’t really think she does. “I know that because of your past, it might be hard when someone you care about dies, but that doesn’t mean it’s necessarily connected.”

“But it is.”
“Well, say it is,” Kinjo says at last. “They aren’t going to get you, Kenma. You have so many people looking out for you. You even have the chief of police looking out for you. He would rather die than let anything happen to you.”

“I can’t let him do that,” Kenma says desperately.

Kinjo winces. “That may have been bad wording. He won’t die. You have the entire police department on your side.” “Well, that hardly means anything if Akiba’s been building up an entire army of psychic warriors,” Kenma mutters bitterly.

“You don’t know that that’s happening,” Kinjo points out. “Let’s not think of the worst case scenario.”

“I just want to be prepared,” Kenma says. He doesn’t like the idea of them being ambushed and having absolutely zero defenses. It’s terrifying. His heart pounds against his ribcage, singing a high-pitched song.

“The police can prepare for the worst case scenario,” Kinjo tells him softly. “So you don’t need to worry about it.”

He leaves feeling no more reassured than before.

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He absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, leave Kuroo Tetsurou alone, he decides. It’s not like he wants any of the people that he cares about to be targets, but there’s no way he can be with all of them at once. He thinks that Kuroo Hachiro can probably take care of himself. Kuroo Tatmotsu is at the hospital more often than not these days, and he tries to convince Kuroo Tetsurou to hang out at Kenma’s home, so that they can be near Mitsui as well, but there are just some times that he has to leave Mitsui. But he doesn’t want to - can’t bring himself to - leave Kuroo Tetsurou.

Over the past few years, Kuroo Tetsurou has become an integral part of him. The first thread had been woven that first day when Kuroo Tetsurou had introduced himself without hesitation, had taken Kenma under his wing, given him his name, introduced him to pie, to everything good in this world. And the threads had just kept multiplying: Kuroo playing video games with him, playing volleyball together, Kuroo’s birthday gifts, the first days of school together. Eventually they’d all
come together in such vibrant harmony to form a quilt of a million different colors. There is no possible way that Kenma can untangle himself from Kuroo now.

If Kuroo Tetsurou were to die, a large part of Kenma would die as well. Of that Kenma is absolutely certain.

So he becomes Kuroo’s shadow. Wherever Kuroo goes, Kenma goes also. He follows him closely, to and from school. When Kuroo is home, Kenma is there too. He spends the night at Kuroo’s every night, curled up on the futon on Kuroo’s floor once again. Even when he goes to play football, Kenma follows and plays his DS under the shade of a nearby tree. It becomes somewhat problematic when Kuroo has to go to the bathroom, but then Kenma hovers near the door. Kenma also tags along when Kuroo goes to hang out with Bokuto. Thankfully, Bokuto being the person he is, Bokuto doesn’t complain one bit.

Kuroo picks up on it the very first day, Kenma’s sure. But Kuroo doesn’t comment on it. At least, not until one day when a wave of paranoia hits Kenma and he lies on the futon on Kuroo’s floor, practically hyperventilating. Kuroo stares at him with wide eyes for a couple of seconds, then pats the bed beside him and says, “Come up here.”

Kenma knows that it’s kind of weird in most people’s eyes for boys their age to lie in the same bed together. Still, he can’t bring himself to care as he curls up next to Kuroo, his eyes searching through the darkness for his anchor. Kuroo gives him a reassuring smile. “Kenma, it’s okay.”

“No,” Kenma whispers, his heart sinking down in his chest. “It’s not.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kuroo promises. “Not unless you want me to, of course.”

“You don’t know that,” Kenma hisses into the darkness. “I’m sure your grandmother didn’t think she was going anywhere either.”

Kuroo winces. Immediately, Kenma wishes he could reach out and pull back the words. He’s sure that Kuroo’s going to push him away, off of his bed, back into the cold night of his futon. Instead, Kuroo reaches out, wrapping an arm around Kenma’s back. “I’m not going anywhere,” he repeats firmly. “I’m not my grandmother, or my mother. I can defend myself. I will defend myself. I will defend you too if I have to.”

“You don’t have to,” Kenma says, peering up at Kuroo. “I have powers. I can use them, and I will
Kuroo sighs. “I know. Doesn’t stop me from wishing I had them too to protect you.” He buries his head into Kenma’s shoulder and grips him just a little tighter. “It scared the fuck out of me when my grandmother died. Not just because she’s dead, you know, although that scares me too. But also because when you started following me around, I realized that… that it wasn’t a natural death. And that meant that they were coming after you, and I can’t… I can’t handle that.”

Kenma holds on even tighter. “Kuro,” he says, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“So I understand,” Kuroo mumbles into Kenma’s shoulder. “Trust me. I get it. But this isn’t healthy, okay?”

“I know,” Kenma mutters, even though he doesn’t want to admit it.

“I won’t leave,” Kuroo repeats. Kenma trusts Kuroo in almost everything, but apparently, he’s beginning to find that there are some exceptions.

Kinjo has him bring Kuroo Tetsurou into the therapy session for the first time ever. Her eyes convey no real emotion when she first sees him, but Kenma still thinks he spots a spark of recognition. She smiles cordially and says, “You must be the Kuroo Tetsurou I’ve heard so much about.”

“Well, I’d hope you have,” Kuroo says, in his stupid smug, obnoxious persona. “I mean, I am his gorgeous, hilarious, charming best friend. There’s just so much to talk about.”

“Shut up,” Kenma grumbles, glaring at him.

Kuroo softens immediately. “Sorry, kitten,” he says, still somewhat teasingly, but he sits down next to Kenma and places a reassuring hand on his shoulder. There’s something else in Kinjo’s gaze now, but Kenma can’t figure out what. He wonders what she must think of the two of them.
The three of them talk for a little bit about Kuroo Homugi’s death, about the bizarre circumstances, and then Kinjo asks Kuroo about Kenma’s recent behaviors. Kenma stares at the ground, unable to stop his cheeks from heating up—embarrassment, he supposes—so Kinjo asks if he’d like to step out. Kenma shakes his head vehemently. The idea of being talked about when he’s not around is somehow even more embarrassing. Kuroo puts an arm around Kenma’s shoulders as he talks. He tells Kinjo how Kenma had been clinging just the slightest bit closer to Kuroo ever since Kuroo Homugi’s death, how he’s scared of losing Kuroo too, and how he doesn’t mind, because he’s equally as terrified of losing Kenma, but he knows that it’s not exactly healthy behavior. Still, Kuroo says, still when he’s away from Kenma, he finds it hard to breathe sometimes. He thinks Kenma probably feels the same way. Ashamed, Kenma nods, because what can he say? And it’s not like Kinjo has judged him before, when he’s said so much worse.

So she helps them to come up with a plan. They both come up with things they’ll do alone, small things at first, things where they can easily call each other. And they’ll try some more separation eventually to get them to a better, healthier place.

It’s the right thing to do, Kenma knows. It’s better for both of them. And yet, the idea of being apart so often from Kuroo still stings.

At the end of the session, Kinjo requests to speak to Kuroo alone, though. She phrases it as a request, but Kenma knows the look on her face well enough to know that it’s not actually a request, so he steps out without protest. He can’t help but wonder, though, as he hangs out outside of the room, what in the world she could be talking to Kuroo about.

When Kuroo steps out, he smiles sheepishly. “It’s all good, kitten. Don’t worry.”

“What’d she want to talk to you about?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Like I said, don’t worry.”

“Asshole. That only makes me worry more.”

Kuroo laughs, though it doesn’t sound completely sincere. “She’s a good therapist,” he hums. “Sometimes, I think, too good. Too observant.”

Kenma doesn’t know what that means, exactly. But he nods anyways.
Chapter End Notes

Well, there we go. I'm sorry that this chapter had to end the way it did, since we finally got to meet Bokuto and Akaashi, but they'll get it together :-( We're starting to intersect with the anime/manga, as I'm sure you can see! Thank you for all of your comments/support, and for getting this fic to 100 kudos! I appreciate it greatly :) Please keep leaving your thoughts!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Flashbacks of the lab, child abuse mentions, anxiety attacks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kenma really doesn’t like being away from Kuroo.

He doesn’t remember it having been all that bad before. After all, he’d spent an entire year mostly separate from Kuroo, in a completely different school, even. But now every minute is weirdly painful. And he sees the same thing mirrored in Kuroo, in the way he winces before bidding Kenma goodbye as he goes to classes, to hang out with other people, to go for runs, to play other sports on the weekends. He’s sure his own face conveys the same.

But it’s the right thing to do, he knows. He can’t live his entire life dependent on Kuroo. He’s heard the term from Kinjo’s mouth - co-dependency - and it’s definitely not what he wants for himself or for Kuroo. He wants the relationship that they have to be healthy and positive for both of them. And the very last thing he wants, ever, is to drag Kuroo into his messes.

Kuroo, for his part, tries his best to cheer Kenma up. On Kenma’s birthday, he buys Kenma a PSP, which is an upgrade from his DS in that it’s a newer system and can run some games Kenma’s been dying to play, most notably MonHun. He nearly cries all over again when he opens it. Instead he just buries his head in Kuroo’s shoulder and holds on tightly. For Kuroo’s birthday, he gets Kuroo a leather bracelet, just because he knows there’s nothing material Kuroo really needs or even wants. It’s his only way of showing that no matter how much distance they have to have between them, they’re still connected. Kuroo seems to realize this, judging by the watering of his eyes as he sties the bracelet around his wrist. He only takes it off for practices, Kenma notices. It makes his heart warm. Kenma’s still not fully sure why.

But, he’s starting to realize, the last thing that he wants is to wipe the smile off of Kuroo’s face.

So he finds things to distract himself with. And, weirdly enough, some of those things involve people.

Well, mostly one person.
Kenma does not like Yamamoto Taketora. More specifically, he doesn’t like Yamamoto Taketora’s outlook on things. He doesn’t like the way that Yamamoto insists all problems can be solved through an excess of willpower and belief in oneself. It’s an absurd theory Kenma cannot get behind at all, because it’s painful to think that he could’ve broken himself out of the laboratory before he’d been rescued if he’d just had higher amounts of willpower, or he could’ve gotten past his own mental issues if he’d just believed in himself more. Realistically, he knows there’s no way Yamamoto could have thought about these things. His theory most likely applies to normal humans and to volleyball, but he still hates it. And he still seethes every time Yamamoto yells at him to try harder or to build up his willpower.

One night, during one of their rare walks home together, Kuroo tells him that he should put more effort into getting along with others. He reminds Kenma that Kenma and Yamamoto have got a lot of time left to spend together, and Kenma begrudgingly has to admit that Kuroo has a point.

Then the first practice match (that the first years will play a significant role in, at least) rolls around.

Their coach puts Kenma in halfway through, and Yamamoto a little bit before that. It goes fairly well, or at least Kenma thinks so. He’s able to set nice tosses right to where he wants them to go, and he even pushes himself to go for some balls that might have otherwise hit the ground. By the end of the match, he feels as though he’s pleased with his performance, and the coach gives him a silent nod of approval after the game.

Yamamoto, though, is not so pleased. He sits on the floor, his knees pulled up to his chest, head buried in his knees. Kenma had noticed that he’d missed a few hits, but Kenma hadn’t thought much of it at the time. After all, when Kuroo first started playing, he’d missed all the time. It’s a part of being human, Kenma believes. Making errors. There’s nothing else really to it.

Kuroo stops by and gives him a few words of encouragement, which Kenma thinks is very captainly of him. But after they’re done cleaning up, Kenma decides it’s on him to make sure he’s getting along with the others, so he speaks up in the storage room. “Um… Yamamoto-kun, maybe it’d help if… you relaxed the power in your shoulders a bit?”

Yamamoto doesn’t even look at him when he says, “…easy for you to say.” His face contorts a little, out of anger, Kenma thinks. “As if it’s so easy to do! I’m trying to put what I’ve worked hard for into practice. You think it’s so easy to just let go and relax?” He pauses, shaking. “Whatever. Anyways, I didn’t just didn’t have enough willpower, so -“

Something flares in Kenma’s chest. Annoyance, Kenma thinks to himself. He feels just how annoyed he is at the situation, at these words of Yamamoto’s that just don’t make any sense at all. He can’t stop himself from saying, “I think you should stop being caught up on broad, abstract concepts like willpower or whatever, and actually start thinking about the problem in more precise,
tangible terms.”

Yamamoto glances back at him, but then just keeps going, saying, “I was too hyperaware of the ball! I got riled up by the opponent’s taunts! I tried too hard to score from those difficult angles!”

Kenma doesn’t understand. “If… if you know all of that, then why do you write it off as an issue of willpower?”

“Well, the origin of the issue is that I didn’t work hard enough or have enough willpower in our training sessions, right?!”

The flare burns brighter in Kenma’s chest, feels like it’s about to explode. Kenma hisses, “All of your running and weight training isn’t you trying to ‘work hard.’ You’re just doing it for your own ego and self-satisfaction.”

Yamamoto lurches forward, grabs ahold of Kenma’s shirt in the way Kenma realizes people do when they’re about to fight. And for the first time, Kenma understands why, because he’d rather like to punch Yamamoto in the face about right now. He does his best not to wince. Instead, he quietly reminds himself over and over that Yamamoto is just another boy like himself, not a doctor, not someone with any real power over him. “How about you then?” Yamamoto sneers. “How many balls have you just not bothered to chase?”

It’s true, and Kenma knows it. But he was also really tired. Plus, he’d figured even if he’d saved the ball, it’d end up being a point for the other side anyways. Yamamoto doesn’t stop. “If you can’t even be motivated during training sessions, then it’s gonna be the same deal during matches, right? An unmotivated person like you has no right to talk about what willpower is!”

And Kenma just can’t take it. He’s rarely ever burst out in anger before, but now he just physically can’t stop himself from snapping and yelling, “Cut it out with the willpower crap! It’s vague and meaningless! Physical strength isn’t the only thing that matters!” And his hands are pushing out in front of him, hitting into Yamamoto’s forehead, and Kenma’s sure he’s about to get in his first real physical fight but then -

He’s covered in water.

Yamamoto drops him. Both of them turn to look at the perpetrator, only to find Fukunaga in front of them, holding a bucket and looking at them with wide, unblinking eyes. “Take it easy,
Yamamoto starts yelling again, though it’s more like his normal volume, and everyone else in the gym dissolves into laughter. Kenma can’t help but chuckle a little himself. “Fukunaga-kun, you’re pretty funny.”

Kuroo’s finally noticed there’s something going on, because he starts inquiring at high volume about the ‘ruckus’, but Kenma just sighs when he asks him. “It’s been a long time since I’ve raised my voice like that.” It’s been a long time since he’s needed to, really.

Kuroo stares at him like he’s gone crazy. Maybe he has.

But he starts to slightly increase the effort he expends for volleyball. Not even because Yamamoto told him to, because it’s not like he takes orders from some loud dude on his team, but because he doesn’t want to lose to Yamamoto. He wants Yamamoto to know that Kenma can do better with his own ideals. So he runs a little bit faster, pushes himself a little bit harder, all to spite Yamamoto. Maybe it’s a stupid motivation. Maybe it’s an overwhelmingly human one. Kenma doesn’t know what to do with that thought.

When the qualifiers roll around, though, and Kenma gets playing time, he’s able to pass to Yamamoto, and Yamamoto’s able to get kills off of his tosses. And when Kenma tells him about the observations of the opposing team and the strategy they’re going to have to change to, Yamamoto listens. For the first time, Kenma thinks he’s a little glad to have this guy on their side.

After the game, Yamamoto turns to him. “Oi, Kenma. Feel free to call me Tora. It’s what good mates call each other.”

Kenma stares at the ground silently, then dares to look up. “Do I have to?”

Yamamoto grabs onto his collar again, more of a playful wrestling this time, but from that moment on he’s Tora to Kenma. Kenma doesn’t think they’re ‘good mates’, really, and not even close to what he has with Kuroo. But maybe… just maybe… they’re friends.

Friends, Kenma thinks with some trepidation. Never in a million years could he have imagined he would have friends, plural, more than one. But it seems they seek him out without him doing anything about it. And it’s not like he’s complaining.
Kuroo is happy about it, though. He likes to see that Kenma’s getting along with the team, that he’s putting in the effort, and it makes Kenma feel good to be able to make Kuroo smile. He’s still not making friends on his own, outside of the team, outside of people who are all but obligated to talk to him, or outside of people who associate with him because of Kuroo, people like Bokuto and Akaashi. But that’s okay, he thinks. Maybe this is enough for now.

He still misses Kuroo, despite the fact that they still spend multiple days a week together plus practice, but it dulls into an ache rather than a sting. He doesn’t freak out when Kuroo leaves, even though he still sends messages every so often just to verify that Kuroo is still alive. Kuroo replies within minutes every single time, and he never seems all that annoyed with him for it; his replies are warm, affectionate almost. It’s better, Kenma thinks. Healthier.

During the next round of qualifiers, they end up having to play a school named Nohebi after falling to Fukurodani.

Kuroo tenses up visibly when this is announced, but Kenma doesn’t have the time to ask why before the game warmups start and he glances across the court to see Daishou Suguru on the other side.

Daishou’s slimy smirk worms its way onto his face. “Hey, the lab rat’s back,” he drawls, eyeing Kenma. “Can’t say I’m too thrilled to see you fuckers again. But don’t worry, I’ll be getting my payback on the court only, so there’s no need to read my mind again, freak.”

Kenma’s not sure he entirely believes him, or so he convinces himself, because that makes him feel a little bit better about what he does next. Despite Daishou’s words, he still pushes his way into Daishou’s mind, pushes through his memories again just so that he can get a glimpse of Daishou’s thoughts. Thankfully, all that Kenma finds is a confirmation that Daishou’s not planning anything -

“I’d better stay on the freak kid’s good side if I don’t want him to reveal all the embarrassing details of my life, like how some girl told me my breath smells like shit when I tried to kiss her, God I don’t want Mika to find out or she’ll never date me. So he releases and breathes out, nodding.

“You won’t be getting your revenge today, though. Because we’re going to kick your asses.”

“Yeah, you wish,” Daishou says, his eyes glinting. “You couldn’t even beat us if you were using your fuckin’ freaky mind control powers.”

“Shut the fuck up, Daishou,” Kuroo growls. Kenma’s not even sure where Kuroo appeared from, but he’s kind of glad. Daishou has an oddly intimidating aura. “We’re going to beat you, fair and
“But you have no way to prove that,” Daishou taunts. “Even if you were to win, we’d never know if you won of your own skill or because you have that freak of nature on your team that can break into people’s minds. Hell, you’d probably never even know, would you? He could be reading your mind all the time, intriguing into all your private thoughts, and you’d never have a goddamn clue. I couldn’t live like that.”

Kenma’s heart jumps in his chest, then sinks. He’d never do that, especially not to Kuroo, but it’s not like he hasn’t used it to his advantage in the past with other people. So maybe Daishou’s not that far off. But he hopes that Kuroo knows that Kenma could never do that to him. He’s afraid to look over, to see the look on Kuroo’s face. When he does, though, he sees nothing but pure and utter fury.

“Kenma would never do that,” Kuroo seethes. “And you know how I know that, Daishou? I know that because I know him. I know the kind of person that he is. I know what he went through, and I know that he has more of a moral code than you, a person who was probably brought up in a normal family, will ever have. So back the fuck off and mind your own business.”

Daishou blinks once, then twice, looking as though he’s deep in thought before he replies. “Well, I guess you’re right that you know more about it than I ever will,” he says airily. “But don’t say I didn’t warn ya. Just lookin’ out for ya, Kuroo-kun.”

“Don’t call me that,” Kuroo practically spits, turning on his heel to face Kenma. He says, “Just ignore him,” in a dark tone.

“Right, ‘cause you’re doing a great job of that,” Kenma replies.

Kuroo shakes his head. “Do as I say, not as I do. My new motto.”

Kenma usually doesn’t care much about the outcome of games. It’s sad that Kuroo feels bad after a loss, but it’s not like Kenma is particularly invested. Still, though, he has a weird desire to beat Nohebi, just to wipe the stupid smirk off of Daishou’s face.

“We’re gonna kick his ass,” Tora says lowly, putting a hand on Kenma’s shoulder. Kenma just nods.
He has no idea if his team knows about his past. He knows that the information is out there, that
enough people know that it wouldn’t be a huge shock if the information spread to his new school,
but he’s never heard them speak about it. Thankfully, if they don’t know and had heard Daishou’s
comments, at least they don’t ask him about it.

He wonders how they would feel if they knew the whole truth. He wonders if they would be
bothered by having a freak with powers on their team, regardless of how truly human he’s begun to
discover he is. It’s not like he’s the only one; seeing Bokuto on Fukurodani’s team has shown him
that much, but he wonders how much the rest of Fukurodani even knows. Bokuto doesn’t consider
it cheating, of course. He just doesn’t know if other people would have the same opinion.

He tries not to think about it. After all, he knows that he would never use his powers to cheat, and
he knows that Kuroo trusts him fully never to cheat. So it really shouldn’t matter what everyone
else thinks.

All that matters right now is winning this game and throwing it right back in Daishou’s face.
Nekoma had been eliminated in the qualifiers back in August, after two particularly disappointing
games, and now Kenma’s determined. He remembers what Kuroo had said about going to
Nationals being his dream. Kenma wants that for him.

But he can’t turn his stupidly human mind off.

When he gets put into the game, “I couldn’t live like that” keeps repeating in his head, intertwining
with “freak” and “soulless” and all the other words he’d heard for so long. He reminds himself
that he’s human, that the person who knows him better than anyone believes that fully, but it just
doesn’t seem to stick. His tosses are too low, too close to the net, and occasionally even go over the
net. After just a few minutes, he gets pulled back out.

The coach stares at him. “Kenma,” he says, “is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Kenma replies. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand that you’re still a first year and might be nervous, since this is only your second
tournament,” the coach says quietly. “But if I am going to put you back in, I need you to do better.”

Kenma’s mouth draws into a line. “I’m not sure that I can.”
He gets put back in anyways, just a few minutes later. None of the team members are playing all that well, which makes him feel a little bit better about completely missing a toss altogether and directing another right into the net. He gets pulled out again just a couple of minutes later and sits out for the rest of the sets, watching as they lose to Nohebi in two straight sets, meaning that they will not go to Nationals this year.

“It’s okay,” Kuroo says as they walk off the court, tears welling in the corners of his eyes. “There’s always next year.”

Next year, Kenma vows, next year will be different. Next year, they will get their revenge.

The rest of the year flies by. Without constant volleyball practices, Kenma suddenly has a lot more free time. He goes to therapy, tells Kinjo about the tournament. She tells him that it was normal to have the reaction that he did, but should he see Daishou again, he should practice some strategies to stop Daishou from getting under his skin. Kenma nods and promises that he will.

And then, before he knows it, he is starting his second year of high school.

Their volleyball team gets a new coach, Coach Nekomata, who had been the one to coach Nekoma to the Nationals a couple of times in the past. He’s very famous and very kind-looking, but also very strict. Kenma finds very quickly that it’s going to be even more difficult for him to slack off. But he doesn’t seem to think badly of Kenma at all, which Kenma finds reassuring.

The other thing that changes is that Kuroo becomes the new captain. Kenma had been certain he would be; he’s the only one it really could be, honestly. Kai is his vice-captain. And volleyball is suddenly a million times better. Kuroo doesn’t go easy on him, of course. He’s constantly yelling at Kenma to move faster, run more, actually go for the balls and don’t let them hit the floor, for god’s sake. But then he’s also asking him about strategies constantly, telling the first-years to listen to Kenma's advice, telling everyone to get the ball straight to Kenma so that he can make the best decision for the team. It takes until Kuroo starts leading the team in a speech for Kenma to realize what’s going on.

“We are like the blood in our veins,” Kuroo says with immense precision, as if he’s practiced this a hundred times in front of his mirror. “We must flow without stopping. Keep the oxygen flowing and your mind working.”
As he finishes, his gaze falls directly on Kenma, and Kenma realizes with a jolt that the speech is about him, that Kuroo is basically implying that Kenma is the brain of Nekoma. Everyone else is staring at him too, knowing smiles on Tora, Fukunaga, Yaku, and Kai’s faces. Kenma ducks his head down so that his hair falls in his eyes. Not for the first time, he’s grateful for the ability to hide behind his hair.

Once they separate from their huddle, Kenma hisses, “What the hell was that,” to Kuroo.

Kuroo just smiles loftily. “What?”

“You know what I mean.”

“It’s just the truth,” Kuroo says with a shrug. “I told you, everyone would know how good you are this year. And I’ll make sure they won’t forget it.”

“Kuro, that’s so embarrassing.”

And it is. It’s not like Kenma’s all that good, anyways. He’s watched thousands of volleyball games at this point. He knows what prodigy setters look like, and certainly he’s far from it. It’s a mantra that’s repeated in his head every time he hears someone whisper “So that’s Nekoma’s setter? He’s kind of scrawny, doesn’t look like much, don’t you think?”.

But Kuroo just grins. “You’d better get used to it,” he says confidently, leaving Kenma to scowl after him.

Now, it seems, during timeouts, the team looks to him for strategies on what to do. And usually he’s able to come up with something. He’s able to read the movements, the expressions, on the other team’s faces well enough to generally be able to figure out what they’re going to do. He never uses his abilities for it, of course. That would just be downright cheating. But he wonders if Kuroo ever questions how he figures out the things he figures out.

When Kenma gets home after the volleyball practice match, Mitsui looks at him, her lips pursed. “How was the game?” she asks.

“It was okay,” Kenma says with a shrug, heading straight to the fridge in search of leftover pie.
Mitsui’s face breaks out into a smile. “Well, I’m glad,” she says softly. “First time you haven’t said it was terrible or something else negative like that. Now you aren’t having pie for dinner, I hope you know. Growing boys that exercise need lots of vegetables.”

“Fine,” Kenma says with a scowl, a scowl she gives back in full and makes him back off. He supposes he can stomach some vegetables tonight. They’re good for him, anyways, or so he hears.

The first-years are going to drive him crazy.

Well, two of them in particular. Shibayama and Teshiro are generally quiet enough and kind enough to avoid causing him trouble. However, Inuoka is tall, enthusiastic, and really loud, which especially does not work in combination with Tora’s loudness. His enthusiasm is troublesome to someone with Kenma’s personality. And then there’s Haiba Lev.

In the few weeks since joining the team, Lev has quickly become the bane of Kenma’s entire existence. First of all, he’s never played volleyball before, which means the team has to basically train him up from scratch. Kenma’s sure they wouldn’t normally do this, except for the fact that Lev is half-Russian, incredibly tall, and has a lot of natural athleticism and power. When Kenma had first walked into the gym and seen Lev standing there, he’d thought Lev might be an experiment too. He has light hair and piercing green eyes. But then he’d been introduced and Kenma had realized, nope, Lev is just of foreign heritage. Of foreign heritage, and without a single brain cell to his name.

He does not listen. Kuroo tells him over and over again how to get under the ball in the correct position to receive so that the ball goes in a nice arc to Kenma. Yet over and over again, Lev manages to mess something up so that the ball hits the ceiling. He can’t get to Kenma’s tosses, he jumps completely wrong, he falls into the net multiple times, and he manages to trip Tora, who is not at all happy about being tripped. And his personality is even worse than his skills. He’s loud. He’s obnoxious. He brags about how he’s going to be the ace. He’s absolutely the opposite of Kenma, and Kenma doesn’t want to have to deal with him.

“Can’t we just kick him off the team?” Kenma groans to Kuroo. “He’s terrible.”

Kuroo shrugs, stretching out his long limbs, one of his arms falling across Kenma’s shoulders. “Just because he’s bad now doesn’t mean he will be forever. But Coach and I have agreed not to put him in until he gets better, so don’t worry about it.”
“That’ll be never,” Kenma grumbles, but he leans further into Kuroo’s side. “I’m pretty sure if I read his mind there would be nothing there.”

Kuroo laughs his stupidly loud laugh, his body shaking Kenma in an almost pleasant way. “That’s not true. It’s probably a running loop of ‘I am going to become the ace of Nekoma!’”

Kenma huffs. “I’d offer to bet you, but I wouldn’t invade even Lev’s privacy like that.”

Kuroo smiles, resting his forehead against the top of Kenma’s head. “I know.”

But thankfully, when Nekomata announces their next practice match, Kenma doesn’t have to worry too much about Lev bringing them down, since he won’t be attending. Inuoka is, though, and he bounces all the way to the van. The only other person who seems half as chipper (beyond Tora, who always is) is, surprisingly, Kuroo.

“What’s going on?” Kenma asks him as they board the bus. “Who’s this school we’re playing?”

Kuroo’s mouth twists up into a smile. “Karasuno. Otherwise known as our fated rivals.”

As the bus begins to move, Kuroo launches into a story, a story of how Nekomata and Karasuno’s former coach Ukai used to be rivals and had built up a rivalry between Nekoma and the school they’re about to play, Karasuno. They’d both once been big powerhouses in volleyball, good enough to get to the Nationals. They challenged each other, built each other up, an interesting synthetic relationship, Kenma thinks. But then both had been in decline in recent years. Karasuno hadn’t made it to Nationals in quite a while. But, from what Kuroo’s heard, it seems they might have something up their sleeve this year.

“I heard they beat Seijoh in a practice match,” Kuroo says. “You know, that school from Miyagi with the supposedly genius setter.”

“Oikawa Tooru,” Kenma says with a confirmatory nod. “I’ve seen him play in some videos online. He’s actually really good. The rest of his team is decent too. How did they manage that one?”

Kuroo shrugs. “No clue. But they did. So we can’t exactly take them lightly in this game.”
Kenma simply nods again. He’s not exactly sure what they can do to beat this team he knows nothing about, but he’ll figure something out. The team is counting on him, after all.

Once they arrive in Miyagi, Kuroo sends them all out running. As usual, Kenma lags behind. He’s just not the super athletic type, the way some of the other guys on the team are, and it’s not as if he can be bothered to put all of his energy into running if it’s just for a warm up. The problem, though, is that typically when Kenma falls behind, it’s in Tokyo, and he knows how to navigate back to Nekoma. But here when Kenma falls behind, he realizes very quickly that it might be a bigger problem, in that he can’t see his team any more and he doesn’t know where he is.

*Shit,* Kenma curses internally. He quickly thinks about his options. Wandering around and trying to find his way back seems useless. None of his powers are all that helpful for this situation, since most people wouldn’t be thinking about the way to get back to the gym and moving objects with his mind would do nothing of use. The only other option is to try to fire off a text to Kuroo and stick around where he is now. And he knows, deep in his heart, that Kuroo will come back to find him.

So he sits down on the edge of a fence and whips out his phone. He doesn’t really care that much for the apps he has downloaded, but they’re certainly better than sitting around and doing nothing, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach and the incessant pounding in his heart. It kind of works for a few minutes, but then -

“Hi! Whatcha doing?”

Kenma whips his head up to see a blur of orange barreling towards him, the person stopping just in front of him, his eyes wide and smile big. The boy has bright orange hair, burnt orange eyes, and is tiny and thin, almost as though he’s been nutrient deprived for a big part of his life. It only takes a few seconds for Kenma to realize, and he feels his heart sink in his chest.

“You’re the kid from the lab,” Kenma whispers, his voice barely audible.

“Huh?” the boy says, bouncing up and down in front of him, still smiling. “Oh, yeah, the lab! Yeah, yeah, my number was H1747! Hey, that means you’ve gotta be from the lab too then! What’s your number? Who are you?”

Kenma stares at him. *H1747… we found a kid from Kenma’s laboratory…* the image of this kid streaked in dirt, from living in the woods for so long… *he’s outgoing… almost endearing…* The guilt hits Kenma like a bomb, exploding in his stomach. His hands clench into fists. His mind feels
fuzzy, muddled, a million miles away, like everything’s coming in through a layer of dirt a mile
deep.

He can’t talk to this kid, god, he can’t. But then the kid is kneeling down beside him and saying,
“Hey, are you okay? It’s okay, we don’t have to talk about the lab if you don’t want to! But it is
nice to meet someone else from the lab!”

Ugh. Well, now it’s not like he can ignore him, either. So he lifts his head up and says, “I… I’m
fine. Yes, I was in the lab. My number was K3734. But… I don’t really go by that anymore.”

“One of the mind power people! That’s so cool!” the kid enthuses, eyes wide. “But what’s your
name now?”

“Kozume,” Kenma says hesitantly.

“Kozume…?” the boy asks, seemingly expecting a first name.

Kenma can’t think of a reason not to give it, so he follows up with, “Kenma.”

“Oh! Kenma! Nice to meet you,” the boy says, grinning from ear to ear. “Now I’m called Hinata
Shouyou, by the way, and you can call me Shouyou! Oh, wow, those are volleyball shoes! Do you
play volleyball too?”

“Yeah,” Kenma replies.

“Cool! Are you in high school? You look like you are! I am! I’m a first year.”

Kenma’s beginning to feel a little overwhelmed, but he does his best to keep up. “Yes, I’m a
second year.”

“Oh, no, you’re my senior!” Shouyou frets. “Sorry! I’ve been so informal.”

“It’s fine,” Kenma says, his eyes fixed firmly on his screen. “Forget about it. I don’t care for that,
“Oh, really?” Shouyou says. “That makes sense, since uh, you’re from the lab… so do you like volleyball?”

“Oh… kind of?” Kenma replies. The answer is complicated, so Kenma does his best to try to answer in a way that’s true. “I’m kinda just playing it. I don’t hate it… I just don’t like getting tired and sweaty and stuff.” Or getting a fever, or getting bossed around by stupid upperclassmen, though the latter admittedly hasn’t happened as of recently. “Some of my friends play on the team though, and I think they’d be upset if I wasn’t there.” To say the least. He thinks Kuroo might die if he ever tried to quit.

“Huh, I think you’d have way more fun if you learned to like it,” Shouyou tells him.

Kenma’s not so convinced, but the way Hinata says things is so decisive that it’s hard to disagree. “Eh. I’m only going to be playing through high school anyways.”

“What position do you play?”

“Setter.”

“Whoa, really? You’re totally different from our setter! He’s all ‘grahhh’ and ‘hrggh’ all the time! By the way, I’m a middle blocker!”

Kenma studies him for a second. The same position as Kuroo, one typically played by taller people. It’s an interesting choice. Shouyou seems to notice, because he says, “Yeah, it’s really weird, isn’t it. Middle blocker is supposed to be a position played by all the tall guys.”

“Yeah, it is, I guess… but I don’t think it’s weird,” Kenma says finally. “I mean, you’re one of the physically enhanced experiments, aren’t you?”

Shouyou puffs out his chest. “Yeah! I can jump super high! And before you say it, no, I don’t think it’s cheating!”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Kenma says.
“I mean, I have disadvantages in other areas! Like that I’m short and that I can’t receive at all, so it all evens out! Besides — “ Shouyou seems to have finally caught on to the fact that Kenma had answered, because he pauses, his eyes wide. “You don’t think it’s cheating?”

“No,” Kenma says. “I don’t use my powers when I play, but I know another guy who can’t help it, either. He tries to dial back his powers, though. And I think he works really hard. So it seems… uh… wrong to call it cheating.”

“Really?!” Shouyou says, his face breaking out into a huge grin.

“Besides, a lot of people look at me weird at tournaments too,” Kenma says. “People look at me like, setters are supposed to be the smart guys, what’s he doing there?”

“Well, if you’re a mind guy, I bet you’re really smart,” Shouyou says. “Hey, is your team any good?”

Kenma pauses for a second, thinks about his team. Thinks about Kuroo, their fearless leader, about Tora, their ace, about Yaku, about Kai, even about the snotty first years, then he says, “I dunno. I hear we used to be really good, but then we got really bad. But the team we’ve got now… I think it’s pretty good.”

Shouyou looks as though he’s about to ask something, but he’s interrupted by a deep voice.

“Kenma!”

_Kuroo_. The relief in his chest is instantaneous as he jumps to his feet, shoving his phone back in his pocket. “Gotta go,” Kenma says, bidding Shouyou farewell. His gaze drifts down to the logo on Shouyou’s shirt - *Karasuno High School*. Huh. So that’s where the other lab boy had ended up, then. “See you later, Shouyou,” he says, because clearly he will be. This makes the Karasuno game just that much more interesting.

“Quit wandering off,” Kuroo scolds him.

“Sorry,” Kenma says absentmindedly, his mind still someplace else.
Kuroo’s hand falls onto his shoulder, a reassuring weight that drags him back down to earth. “Who was the shrimp?”

“Oh,” Kenma says, realizing he had neglected to introduce the two of them. Social niceties like that still escape him on occasion. “He’s on Karasuno’s team. Their middle blocker. He just randomly started talking to me.”

“Hm? Middle blocker?” Kuroo asks. “He’s a little small.”


“Shit,” Kuroo says quietly.

“The one your dad and the other police found a couple of years ago,” Kenma says. “The one I refused to see.”

“You weren’t ready then,” Kuroo says, moving his hand to Kenma’s other shoulder so that his arm is fully around Kenma’s shoulders now. “And that was okay. It’s okay if you’re still not. But I think you might be.”

“It should have been me,” Kenma says, barely a whisper. “I shouldn’t have been the one that was rescued immediately. Shouyou is… he’s clearly a better person than I am. He went through all that and he’s still… I’m just…”

“Kenma,” Kuroo says, coming to a stop, and then, “Kozume Kenma.” Kenma turns to look at Kuroo, his eyes wide. Kuroo never says his surname. To Kuroo, he’s always been Kenma, just Kenma. But there’s something serious and low in Kuroo’s voice now as he says, “Do you remember what I told you when I gave you that name? I named you after a brave warrior, someone who fought hard all the time, because even though I hardly knew you, that’s what you made me think of. And even now, nearly five years later, that’s the way I see you. That will never change. Kozume Kenma, you are the best person I know.” Kenma glances up at him, his heart thudding in his chest as Kuroo says, “You know, all those years ago, I made a promise to myself that I would never let anyone talk badly of you. That I would fight anyone who tried. And that includes you, Kenma. You aren’t allowed to talk shit about my best friend, okay?”
Kenma bites down hard on his own lip, the lump in his throat increasing in size as he nods. Kuroo’s arms encircle him softly, cradling Kenma against his chest, and Kenma slumps down the slightest bit. He sniffs and Kuroo chuckles, making Kenma hiss, “Shut up.”

Kuroo laughs. “What, I give you that whole ass speech and this is the thanks I get?”

“Thanks,” Kenma says, as genuinely as he can, and he knows Kuroo can feel the warmth behind it. “And you know… I think you might be right. I think I’m ready now.”

Kuroo grins. “Well, you’d better be, because we’ve got ass to kick tomorrow.”

“Hm,” Kenma says thoughtfully as they turn to walk, “I think I might be looking forward to tomorrow’s game.”

Kuroo seems to jump a little bit at that, his head snapping over to look at Kenma. “You… huh.”

“It’ll be interesting to see how Shouyou plays,” Kenma says. “After all, I’ve never played against anyone with superhuman jumping and speed before.”

Tora and the first-years (besides Lev, who thankfully they’d had to leave behind for this game) are equally as shocked when Kenma voices that he’s kind of looking forward to the match. Tora says, “What?! Mr. No-Enthusiasm-For-Anything himself is looking forward to a game?!” He’s got a point, Kenma supposes. Enthusiasm is an emotion that Kenma is particularly unused to showing, or feeling, come to think of it. Still, he’s glad when Kuroo steps in, threatening to give Tora extra laps.

When they finally get to the day of the match, though, and both teams line up outside of the gymnasium, Shouyou makes some loud “bwah” noise, which draws even more attention to him. Then after that, he confronts Kenma. “Why didn’t you tell me you were on the Nekoma team?”

“You didn’t ask,” Kenma says honestly. It’s not like it’d been a secret or anything.
“But when you asked, you said ‘see you later’! You knew where I’m from!”

“Yeah, your shirt had Karasuno High School written on it,” Kenma points out.

After Tora and some scary-looking bald guy from Karasuno butt in, Kenma excuses himself, entering the gym. They do their usual warm-ups and everything, then Kuroo herds them all into a circle, launching right back into his now usual cheesy speech about them being the blood in their veins. Kenma frowns at him after it’s over. “Kuro, can’t we stop with that speech thingy? It’s embarrassing.”

“Why, what’s wrong with it? It’s all about establishing the mood, bro!” Tora interjects, in typical Tora fashion. “It’s a great way to get us pumped up and play.”

“See?” Kuroo says, like the cocky asshole he pretends to be more often than not. “C’mon, let’s go.”

And then, far too quickly, the game is beginning. But before it starts, Kenma walks up to the net, to where Shouyou’s standing. “Y’know,” Kenma says. “When you asked about our team, I said I thought we’re good. But that’s not because I’m on it. It’s because we’re together.” And truly, in Kenma’s deepest being, he knows it to be true.

It doesn’t take very long for Kenma to notice that Karasuno is very interesting indeed. It takes a single point, in fact.

Their setter, a scary-looking guy with dark hair, sends the ball to Shouyou at a speed too fast for Kenma to keep track of. Kenma internally thinks that there’s no way that even Shouyou could get to it, but then he realizes very quickly that he’s grossly underestimated Shouyou, because… because Shouyou can fly.

One second Shouyou’s on the ground, and the next second he’s in the air, his hand making contact with the ball, sending it flying down onto Nekoma’s side of the court. Not even Yaku is fast enough to get to it. They all just stand there, shell-shocked and silent, until Kenma comments, “Wow, that was surprising.”

Kenma has to find a way to shut it down, he thinks. He can’t let them go on like this; it’s his duty as the brain to make sure that their strategy is foolproof. So at the first time out, he says, “If Shouyou is the core of their offense, then all we need to do is stop him.”
He explains that they need to chase him down, that they’ll send Inuoka after him. And they’ll switch to cluster blocking, putting all their blockers on the right side so as to lure Shouyou in to hitting on the other side. It seems impossible, Kenma knows. After all, they’re up against a boy with inhuman speed and jumping ability. But even them, Kenma knows, there have been battles in his life that seemed impossible. Once upon a time, he’d never imagined that he would escape from the laboratory. He’d never imagined that he’d have a friend, much less a best friend; he’d never imagined that he’d have a team, go to school, find out just how human he is. It had seemed completely impossible. And yet, here he is now.

He’s faced bosses that seemed impossible to beat, and he’d come out on top. So this is not impossible either. He’s sure of it. He’ll be the valiant hero that leads his team into battle.

His plan starts to work.

Inuoka’s able to get a finger on the ball, making it easier for Yaku to receive. Kenma’s able to pull off a setter dump just by fooling the Karasuno players into believing that he is going to set the ball to one of the other Nekoma players. And so slowly, steadily, they build up their points. He sets to Kuroo, to Inuoka, to Tora, and they keep hitting solid hits, receiving solidly. Thankfully, they don't make him move around too much; their receives are steady, sending the ball straight to the tips of his fingers. And they catch up to them at 18 points. Then they surpass them, playing slow, steady, the way they always do, up until they get to 24 points.

Kenma observes quietly as Shouyou approaches his dark-haired scary setter and says something, to which the setter looks confused but nods anyways. Kenma doesn't need any powers to know that the setter's next toss is going to Shouyou. He nods to Inuoka. Inuoka's got this, though. Kenma's sure of it. He's been leveling up slowly while they've been playing, gaining experience points. And now he's ready.

Turns out that it's unnecessary, though. Shouyou jumps for the ball, just as Kenma had supposed he would, but his eyes are open this time, as opposed to the other times, when they'd been firmly shut. He stares at the ball for a second and then Inuoka shows up, slamming the ball back down onto Karasuno's side of the court.

Just like that, they win the first set.

Kenma doesn't know what's going through Shouyou's mind as they jump into the next set. He imagines he’d have to be feeling somewhat defeated, but he doesn't put half as much investment into this game as Shouyou clearly does. A part of him hopes that this new setback will dampen Shouyou's spirits so that he'll play worse.
And in the beginning of the second set, Inuoka blocks Shouyou yet again. Kenma's not sure what he expects, but it certainly isn't for Shouyou to look up, his mouth stretched into a terrifying smile. It sends a shiver down his spine. A part of him wants to use his power, to reach out and see what's inside this weird kid's brain. Clearly, the laboratory has taught him some form of perseverance.

It shows in the way that he continues to play. He keeps on trying to get hits, even when he messes up, and then eventually he manages to jump high enough and fast enough to get past the block. Then he gets a block on Inuoka. It's both terrifying and kind of motivating. Just when Kenma thinks he's got them nailed down, that he knows exactly what they're going to do next, they change it up on him. And then, finally, Shouyou manages to get a hit over Kuroo's block.

Kuroo looks astonished for a second: not in a way that would be obvious to anyone else, but Kenma knows the slight lift of his eyebrows and widening of his eyes. It slowly curves into a smile, though, and he says, "Man, those guys are amazing, huh? I guess that's what people mean when they call someone 'superhuman'." He turns to look at Kenma, his smile wide. "Reminds me of someone I know."

"Shut up," Kenma grumbles.

"Not inhuman," Kuroo repeats thoughtfully, "superhuman. Better than human. But they're not the only ones." He straightens up, still grinning. "Well then. Let's go get that ball back."

Kenma pulls out some of his favorite attacks: the one where all of their attackers swarm the net, for one, but also some of the ones that he's been practicing with Kuroo for years now, ever since back in the day when Kuroo convinced him to play volleyball for the first time. There's their quick, which they have down to a science now, and also the delayed attack, which Kuroo had insisted would come in handy and Kenma now has to begrudgingly admit it kind of is. Once they get to the 23 point mark, Kenma does another setter dump and listens with satisfaction to the sound of the ball dropping to the ground on the other side. Kuroo beams at him, something like pride shining in his eyes, and Kenma's not fully convinced that he deserves it still but it still makes his heart swell.

That pride gets even more obvious when, on the very last point, a bad receive sends the ball flying. Kenma won't let it end like this, though, so he dives to the floor, the very edge of his hand sending the ball back up into the air and to the other side of the court. The Karasuno players aren't able to receive it.

And just like that, they beat Karasuno.
The team descends on him, so Kenma has to push them all off. Kuroo maintains his distance; instead, he just stares with warmth in his eyes, then ruffles his hair when everyone else backs off. Kenma elbows him off but can't help but half-smile anyways.

Shouyou starts to yell "AGAIN!", to which Nekomata just laughs and shakes his head, telling Shouyou that if he wants to play again, it'll have to be at the Nationals. Kenma lets himself imagine it. Somehow, the idea of playing a game against Karasuno, a game where they have everything to lose - it doesn't seem half bad.

After the game, though, before they're about to leave, Shouyou pounces on him. "Kenma!" he yells. "Back when we met up on the road the other day, you said you didn't really like volleyball all that much, right?"


"What about now? You won all those awesome games! What do you think now?"

"Um, it was... okay, I guess," Kenma answers slowly. It's not that it had been bad, exactly. It wasn't the most fun thing in the world, but it was with his... with Kuroo and the rest of his teammates, and it was against a kind of interesting team.

"Next time," Shouyou says darkly, "we're gonna make you play really hard and make you get really determined, but we're gonna win. And then we're gonna make you say 'it was really fun' or 'it was a hard loss' or 'we're gonna get you next time!' Something other than it was okay!"

Kenma truly can see where Kuroo Hachiro was coming from. There's something endearing about Shouyou's simplicity, about his honesty, the positive energy he brings. So Kenma just lets himself smile. "Okay. I'll look forward to it."

"Great," Shouyou says. "Oh, and by the way, I was totally right! You're super smart! I wish my powers were that cool!"

Kenma raises an eyebrow. "Uh, you can jump really high and really fast. Isn't that... good for volleyball?"

"I guess," Shouyou whines. "But I still have to limit myself, otherwise everyone will realize that
"Yeah, I guess," Kenma says with a shrug. He bids Shouyou farewell before he heads back to his team, where Tora is apparently babbling on about Karasuno's female manager. Kenma wonders how abnormal it is that he hadn't even really thought twice about the fact that they had one.

"Tanaka said he'd teach me to say hi to her next time," Tora says, his voice far away. His gaze snaps to Kenma. "Hey, Kenma, didn't know you were so social! Who was that kid?"

"Shouyou," Kenma says, shifting uncomfortably. "We met when I got lost."

"Hey, where d'you think he buys his hair dye? Actually, where do you buy your hair dye? It lasts so long; it's gotta be really high quality."

"I... don't," Kenma admits. "This is how my hair naturally is."

"Really?" Tora stares at him, but then just shrugs. "Lucky. I have to dye my hair every few weeks, and it's such a damn pain..."

Once they get back onto the bus, Kuroo murmurs "You played well today" as he slides into the seat beside Kenma, just as he always does.

"We needed to win," Kenma says with a shrug.

"We need to win every game," Kuroo shoots back, but he still looks amused nonetheless. "I'm surprised we won, actually, what with Shorty on the other team and his... powers."

"He limits himself."

"Yeah, like Bo," Kuroo says thoughtfully. "Do you think of it as cheating?"

"No," Kenma says. "They work hard, just like everyone else. Besides, Shouyou's clearly terrible at receives, and Bokuto has... his own downfalls."
Kuroo chuckles. "Isn't that the truth."

"Besides, everyone seems to believe that they enhanced my intelligence level in the laboratory," Kenma says quietly, his voice wobbling a little despite himself. "So if that's true... then all of my strategies would be cheating as well."

Kuroo places his hand on top of Kenma's, gives it a light squeeze, and then shakes his head. "Well, in that case, you should be in class 1 without even trying."

"I don't like school," Kenma grumbles. "So I don't want to give it any effort."

"And then I'm forced to tutor you," Kuroo says.

"You don't have to."

"Do too."

"Do not."

"Do too."

"Do not."

"I'll do anything for you," Kuroo says, his voice earnest, and Kenma doesn't know why the blood rushes to his cheeks in response.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading, and I want to apologize for the delay in between chapters! Sometimes I just forget to update, so please feel free to get on me if I forget again. Anyways, let's all welcome Hinata (& Karasuno) into the story! I'm sure
everyone guessed he'd show up soon, but we have 3 lab boys now :'}
When they finally get back to Tokyo from Miyagi and get off the bus, Kenma heads home with Kuroo. He walks in, gives his greetings to Kuroo Tatsmotsu, and then turns to Kuroo Tetsurou to ask where his dad is.

Kuroo Tetsurou shrugs. "He'd said he'd be home when I got back. But you know how that goes."

Kenma frowns. "Okay."

"Don't worry, he's fine," Kuroo says, because apparently he's actually the mind-reader between the two of them. "He's just a fucking workaholic."

Kenma nods and lets Kuroo pour him a glass of milk, 'to get his bone strength up' according to Kuroo. The two of them sit down on the couch to watch some stupid anime Kuroo's heard is 'one of the best of the season', but Kenma finds to be more cheesy than anything. Kuroo starts to doze off during the third episode, but Kenma stays awake, feeling too uneasy to sleep.

Two hours later, Kuroo Hachiro bursts in the door. "Tetsu, shit, sorry, we had a lot of paperwork and I - oh, hey, Kenma."

"He fell asleep," Kenma says. "It was a tiring game."

Kuroo Hachiro chuckles. "You won, I'm sure."

"Of course," Kenma agrees. "Uh... I'm here because I wanted to tell you that... uh... well, the kid you guys found... Hinata Shouyou... he plays for the team we played today."

"Oh," Kuroo Hachiro says quietly. "And you met him."

"Yeah," Kenma says. He finally meets Kuroo Hachiro's eyes. "He's... interesting. Very friendly.
"Optimistic, I guess you'd say."

"He's a good kid," Kuroo Hachiro agrees. "I think it'd be... good. For you two to be friends. But if you don't think you can handle it, that's also understandable."

"It's fine," Kenma replies. "I can handle it."

"I think you can, too," Kuroo Hachiro says. "I'm glad to hear that ball of energy is doing well. I was kinda afraid he'd get himself into some shit with his... lack of a filter and excess of energy, but it's nice to hear he has an outlet." He sighs. "I probably should go get some shut eye. If you're staying the night, tell Tetsu I'm proud as hell when he wakes up, okay? And hopefully I'll see him tomorrow."

"Okay," Kenma agrees. He hasn't slept over at the Kuroos' for a while, but it feels like the right thing to do now. He's missed staying over, waking up and having Kuroo Tetsurou be the first thing he sees in the morning, as weird as it sounds. And his anxiety has gotten a lot better, which means he doesn't want to stay for anxiety purposes. It's just... what he wants to do.

He tries not to read too much into it and leans his head on top of Kuroo's, because, in his sleep, Kuroo's head has made its way onto Kenma's shoulder. It's far too easy to drift off.

Since getting into high school, Kenma has found that there's even more of an emphasis on romantic relationships, and it's only increased since he's entered his second year. Girls and boys walk to class holding hands, exchange kisses on the cheek, give chocolates on the proper holidays. He's seen people getting confessed to in the hallways, whispered voices weaving together romantic sentiments. It makes his stomach curl, but he's not sure why.

It makes him wonder, though. Ever since that one girlfriend, Kuroo hasn't ever really talked about girls to him at all. He hasn't had a girlfriend, either, or if he has, Kenma doesn't know what time he would've spent with her. It's not like Kuroo's unpopular, either. Kenma's fully aware of the way people's gazes follow Kuroo wherever he goes. Once, trying to hone his powers, he'd slipped into someone's head only to find it was a girl from their school daydreaming about Kuroo. Disgusted, he'd pulled back immediately, but it had made him start to think.

Kuroo had rejected that girl at the training camp. He's probably rejected dozens more, too. It just
doesn't make sense. Kuroo does spend a lot of time at volleyball practice, but he could certainly make time for a girlfriend if that's what he wanted. After all, he makes plenty of time to hang out with Kenma. So what exactly is his issue?

God, maybe if Kenma had grown up in the real, human world, he'd be able to figure this out. It seems like most normal human kids are able to figure it out well enough. He scowls to himself. It's just not fair.

"Hey, kitten," comes a voice from behind him. Kuroo never knocks; it's one of his most annoying habits, but Kenma doesn't have the heart to yell at him today. Kuroo sinks into his desk chair. "What's with the ugly face?"

"At least mine is temporary."

"Ha, ha," Kuroo says dryly. "Seriously, though. You look like you want to punch someone."

"I wish I'd been brought up normally," Kenma says, burying his face into his pillow.

Kuroo doesn't answer for a second. Then, slowly, carefully, he says, "Me too." He pauses again, and Kenma desperately wants to know what's next. "Not because there's anything that I would change about you, but just because it hurts me to think about you being in that stupid fucking laboratory. And if it'd make you happier, then... that's what I'd want. But unfortunately, there's nothing we can do about it."

"I know," Kenma says, lifting his head up to look at Kuroo. "I just feel like... I can predict people, sometimes, but then other times I have no idea what motivates them to do the shit that they do. And I think maybe if I'd been brought up normally I'd know."

"You think I know the shit that goes through Bokuto's head?"

Kenma shakes his head. "No." He doesn't think even Bokuto knows exactly what goes on in his own head.

Kuroo says, "So then why do you think you'd know if you'd been brought up normally? Humans sometimes do things that, by all means, make no sense. I've done things myself that I've looked back and couldn't figure out why I'd done them. Like I said, there are reasons I wish you'd had a
more normal childhood, but I don't think it makes sense for that to be one of them."

Kenma frowns. "I hate when you're rational."

"You're annoying." Kuroo shoots back, but he reaches over to ruffle Kenma's hair. "Now, I seem to recall you demanded a rematch in Mario Kart..."

"You only won last time because you got a blue shell near the end," Kenma grumbles. "It doesn't count if you win by luck."

Kuroo grins. He starts up the Wii and settles in next to Kenma, not even an inch of space between them on the bed as he passes a controller Kenma's way. An uneasy heat settles in Kenma's stomach. He wishes once again that he had some kind of experience with romantic and platonic relationships, because from what he's seen, he imagines that this is the kind of thing you'd do with a lover - sit too close and spend hours on end together.

Being human is confusing. Kenma doesn't like it.

Unfortunately, they are eliminated once again during the qualifying rounds of the fall Tokyo Prefecture Interhigh Preliminaries, this time in the quarterfinals. They try incredibly hard - well, the rest of the team does, at least, and Kenma gives it as much effort as he can physically can. But they just aren't as strong as the other teams yet.

Kenma's nervous about Kuroo's reaction, mostly. After all, it had been his last fall tournament. But when they get to the locker room, Kuroo is grinning, which Kenma finds a little bit freaky. The rest of the team seems to be feeling much the same way, because they kind of edge away from Kuroo as they get dressed. Kenma almost wants to do the same thing, but he reminds himself that it's Kuroo - his Kuroo, the Kuroo he's known for every single year he's lived in this part of the world. "What's with the smile?"

Kuroo turns the smile on Kenma. "Huh?"

"It's freaking me out."
"What? Why?" Kuroo asks.

"Because we just lost," Kenma points out. "It's not that I want you to be sad or anything, but, uh, most people on the team are."

"But that doesn't matter," Kuroo says with a flap of his hand. "Because now we know what to improve on. And we're going to come back for the spring tournament stronger than ever. I am a hundred percent sure that we're going to get to Nationals in the spring."

Kenma can't help the slight smile on his face. "You sound a little cocky there."

"It's deserved," Kuroo says. "And do you know why it's deserved? Because this team is amazing. You hear that, everyone?"

"Yes, captain," comes the chorus of voices in response.

"So you're not retiring, then?" Kenma asks.

"Did you really think that I would?"

"No," Kenma says. "Of course not."

Kenma knows, perhaps better than anyone, how much Kuroo loves volleyball. Of course Kuroo wouldn't retire until he was physically forced to. Sure, it would make it harder for Kuroo to study for college-

College.

Kenma's avoided thinking about it until this moment, but it hits him with the force of a thousand bricks. Sure, it's become easier to be apart from Kuroo; they've spent days without seeing each other at a time when things got particularly busy on weekends. However, the idea of being separated from him for weeks at a time makes Kenma's stomach churn. It's exactly the opposite of what he wants. And it'll be happening fairly soon. Kuroo will be leaving, going to college, joining the college's volleyball team, finding older, cooler people, leaving Kenma behind.
Kenma bites his lip, trying to pull himself back into the moment. He finds Kuroo still grinning at him, Kuroo, who is real and solid and right in front of him. Kuroo, who won't be leaving for another few months. He's going to make the best of it until then. It'll be okay, Kenma tells himself, trying to use the positive thinking strategies that Kinjo is constantly telling him he needs to practice. Kuroo won't leave him behind. Because Kuroo cares about him.

Something deep in his head, though, asks, How much?

As the volleyball season goes on, Kenma finds that he does not enjoy working with Lev by any means.

Lev is just... too much, Kenma thinks. It's not that he's bad at volleyball or anything. In fact, Kenma can tell that he's going to be one of the better players on the team once he gets himself together. But his personality just doesn't match up with Kenma's at all. And he shows up to practice late, which grinds on both Yaku and Kuroo's nerves. Plus, Nekomata decides to ruin Kenma's life by deciding that Kenma needs to spend time working one-on-one with Lev to get him up to Nekoma standards so that Lev can start playing in official matches. And his traitor of a best friend Kuroo has absolutely no sympathy for Kenma. Instead, he just smirks at Kenma and says, “You heard him,” to which Kenma accidentally uses his powers to untie one of Kuroo's shoes. It's what Kuroo deserves for being so heartless.

Lev, to his credit, decides to give this 100% of his energy, just as he gives 100% of himself to everything he does, warranted or not. During practice, even when he misses the ball completely, he begs Kenma for more tosses. He tries his best to adjust to Kenma's toss. He laps up every bit of advice he's given. He just can't seem to pull it together somehow, and even though Kenma knows it doesn't make any sense since Lev can't really help it, it annoys Kenma.

Kenma thinks that the way Kuroo describes it makes the most sense. He says that Kenma and Lev are like oil and water, and for that reason, they just don't mix well.

But then Kuroo flips it all on his head. One day, on the train home from school, Kenma's got his head buried in a new game he's been playing. He can't seem to beat the game he's playing, though, which is incredibly annoying. Since he keeps sighing repeatedly, Kuroo quickly picks up on it.

"You still haven't beaten that enemy?" Kuroo asks.
"Yeah," Kenma answers absently. "Its attacks are so strong I get taken down in an instant."

"But the game will be over if you beat him," Kuroo reminds him. "Isn't it more fun to have enemies you can't defeat?"

"Not being able to beat something is pretty boring too," Kenma disagrees. It feels an awful lot like not being able to escape, which Kenma isn't particularly fond of for obvious reasons. He doesn't like the concept of not being able to win. He'd spent so much of his life never being able to win. He presses the buttons again, sure that this time he'll be able to win, only to be defeated yet again. Sighing loudly, Kenma leans his head back.

"Then isn't it better to attack before being attacked? They do say offense is the best defense, right? Just now, before the enemy attacked, its tail lit up," Kuroo explains.

"Eh...? No way," Kenma says, staring back down at the device in his lap.

"What? You didn't notice?" Kuroo asks. "I was sure you'd notice. You also tend to lose sight of your surroundings when you're fired up."

Kenma glares back at him. "I'm not fired up," he says, then switches his attention back to his game.

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

The next day, though, Kenma's able to pass the level. It gets his mind whirling. He won't give Kuroo the satisfaction of knowing he was right, but well, there are some things that Kuroo just tends to be completely spot on about. And most of those things involve being observant, mostly
involving Kenma. Kenma isn't sure how to feel about that.

And then, one day, the team goes running. Kenma lags behind as usual, because he's never going to be a runner, but this time, Lev sticks behind with him.

"You can go ahead, too," Kenma says.

"No, I have to work hard to match you, Kenma-san!" Lev says excitedly.

He's trying, and that's something that Kenma can certainly give him. But on the other hand, Kenma just wishes he could do it in a less annoying way. Then he says, "I have to become Nekoma's ace!" which is equally as annoying, and Kenma just wants to be rid of him.

Then there's a loud meowing, and the two of them realize a cat is stuck in a tree at the same time. Kenma stares at it. He knows that he could take the easy way out and use his powers to get the cat out of the tree. However, there is the fact that Lev is here with him, and Lev does not know about his powers. Also, Lev is notorious for being far too honest. Kenma doesn't trust his ability to keep a secret in the least.

Which means that he has to find another option to rescue the cat. (Or he could just leave the cat there and take off, which he's a little tempted to do.)

"Can you reach it by jumping?" Kenma asks.

Lev tries, which results in the cat yelping and wincing away from him. However, he's able to get to the height of the cat, which is actually an extremely high height. Kenma lifts an eyebrow as he realizes just what the boy in front of him is capable of.

But the bad thing is that he realizes what has to be done. He curses himself for not wanting to be open about his powers and climbs onto Lev's shoulders, extending a hand towards the cat, who still doesn't move. Kenma really doesn't think it's worth it. "Ugh, I want to quit."

"What are you saying?!"
"I'm bad with animals in the first place," Kenma answers. They kind of freak him out, honestly. He hadn't seen an actual animal in the flesh until he left the lab, after all, so he doesn't know how to interact with them. And it's not like the Kuroos or Mitsui have a pet. He hasn't really had a chance to learn how to interact with animals in a friendly capacity.

"No, but-"

"Enough. Let me down," Kenma insists. He's kind of uneasy about being up this high, anyways.

"We can't just leave it there!" Lev protests. "Oh, sorry. I got too carried away," he adds, probably because Kenma is his senior or whatever.

"It's fine," Kenma says. "I don't really care about things like that. Anyhow, we should call Kuroo and the others." Kuroo will know what to do, Kenma's sure of it. Kuroo's better about things like this. And he trusts Kuroo more than anyone else.

But then there's a gust of wind, and the cat falls from the tree. Instinctively, Kenma reaches out an arm to try and catch it. It's a living thing, after all; he can't let it get hurt. But his arm is too short and stubby. Below him, though, perfectly in sync, Lev's arm reaches out to grab the cat before it can hit the ground.

Then the cat starts to struggle and the two of them hit the ground. Kenma falls hard enough to injure his face, and he can feel the blood dripping from his nose before he touches it. But somehow, despite the grumpy words he says, he can't help but smile.

And later that day, before the match, somehow he feels just the slightest bit more in sync with Lev. He might never be completely on Lev's wavelength, but there's something about him, something that kind of reminds him of Shouyou. And so when he sends a high toss Lev's way and Lev slams it down to the other side, he's not too shocked.

The incredibly proud smile Kuroo sends his way is just a plus.

They get invited to another training camp, the one they do every year with Fukurodani and some of the schools from the Tokyo area. However, the only difference is that this year, Karasuno is
invited as well, courtesy of their coach. Kenma's not exactly sure how to feel about this news.

"Bokuto and Shouyou in the same place," he muses to Kuroo as they sit on the bus on their way to Fukurodani.

"It's going to be incredibly loud, I'm sure," Kuroo says with a laugh. "You'd better start preparing yourself. Are you planning on telling Bo that Shouyou's from the lab too?"

"You don't think he'll figure it out himself?"

"There are times that he surprises me with how perceptive he is," Kuroo replies. "But then there are also times that he surprises me with how dense he can be, so I'm preparing myself for both."

Kenma pauses, thinks about it for a second. He thinks that in a lot of ways, Bokuto and Shouyou are incredibly similar, what with their outgoing personalities, their optimism, even in the face of adversity, and their dedication to the sport. It would be a crime not to introduce them fully. So he nods. "Yeah, if he doesn't figure it out, I'll tell him."

Bokuto is waiting for them when they arrive at the camp. He hugs Kuroo first, his hug tight and affectionate and so utterly Bokuto, and then he turns to do the same to Kenma, though his hug doesn't account for Kenma's smaller stature and he manages to lift Kenma off of the ground. Once he lets go, Akaashi greets them as well. "It's good to see you two," Akaashi says kindly. "Bokuto-san has been talking nonstop about this camp for weeks."

"Well, duh, I get to have all my favorite people in one place!" Bokuto says. Kenma envies the effortless way in which Bokuto shows affection. He wonders where Bokuto could have learned it, or if it just comes naturally to him in a way that it doesn't to Kenma.

When they head into the gym to start warming up, though, Kenma glances around at the Karasuno team beside them. Kuroo and Tora had gone out to greet the Karasuno team when they arrived, and Kuroo's still talking to their captain, who he thinks might be named Daichi. He spots their ace, their other third year, the loud seconds years, but... "Huh? Where's Shouyou?"

"Make-up tests," Tora tells him.

"Ahh..." Kenma says. It's not surprising, really, given Shouyou's clear... lack of propensity for
schoolwork, but a part of him still hopes that Shouyou's able to make it to at least a part of the camp. He notices that a lot of the Karasuno players are fixated on something in particular, so he turns around and realizes they're staring at Lev.

Oh, right, he thinks. He'd forgotten that the last time they played Karasuno, Lev had not been allowed to attend, given how terribly bad he'd been at that point. Lev's... improved, kind of. He's not as terrible as he'd been at the start, at least. His receives are still ridiculously bad, but his hits are getting there, and so are his blocks. But he's still got a long way to go. Good thing this camp is for training, Kenma thinks.

Karasuno plays Fukurodani first. Without Shouyou and the scary setter around, they don’t exactly have much of an edge over the other teams, especially a team like Fukurodani that has Bokuto with his unbeatable hits. He hears people whispering, asking each other if Nekoma had been exaggerating. After all, it doesn’t seem to them that Karasuno poses much of a threat. Kenma just lets it slide. They’ll see once Shouyou and the setter arrive, after all.

Nekoma is able to beat the team that they play first by a small margin, which Kenma is incredibly relieved by. He doesn’t particularly want to do the sliding receive practices, after all. They make him extremely tired, which isn’t a feeling that he particularly enjoys. They rotate to face Fukurodani, which is a match that, unfortunately, they lose. Bokuto sticks his tongue out at them as they do the dives. In return, Kuroo tries to lunge at him. Kenma’s barely able to hold him back. They play Karasuno next, and Kenma finds it’s much less interesting without Shouyou and the main setter, though it’s not like Karasuno’s terrible without them or anything. They’re able to win that match pretty easily. They keep rotating, playing game after game, exhausting Kenma to his very core. And then, at the end of their eighth game, the doors burst open and Shouyou and the setter stand on the other side.

Kuroo shakes his head in disapproval. “Are they seriously pulling the whole ‘heroes show up late’ thing? Talk about irritating.”

Kenma has to disagree; he’s glad that they’ve finally shown up, even though it’s so much later than everyone else. Maybe the camp will start to get a little more interesting. He doesn’t have much time to consider it or to say hello, though, because he’s thrown back into their next match against Ubugawa. At this point, he thinks he might just keel over from exhaustion.

They’ve got Lev on their side this time, which is kind of an advantage in that he's finally starting to almost get the hang of it. He's able to get in some solid hits, and with his help, they take down Ubugawa fairly easily, 25-20.

After the game, Kenma gets dragged off by Shouyou. Kenma gives Kuroo a slight wave, which Kuroo understands instinctively and returns with a nod. Shouyou immediately jumps into drilling
them about Lev - who is he, how tall is he, is he good. It's easy for Kenma to answer his questions, since they're not exactly intrusive or anything, and Shouyou's the type of guy that it's just easy to talk to. He's a little overwhelming, though. Kenma can't ever imagine being allowed to relax in his presence.

"You were social today," Kuroo teases when he heads back in for the night.

"Shut up," Kenma mumbles.

Kuroo's hand comes down to rest on top of his head, and he peers down at Kenma. "It's not a bad thing," Kuroo says softly. "I'm glad. You know that. It's nice that you're finding people you can be comfortable with."

"I'm comfortable with you," Kenma mutters, somewhat petulantly.

Kuroo chuckles, low and warm, familiar. Kenma feels a sudden urge to reach out and hug Kuroo, an urge that he can't fully explain. Generally, he's not exactly one to initiate touch. But there's something strong in his chest that wants to be near Kuroo right now. Alarmed, he steps back.

Something flickers across Kuroo's face, something that Kenma doesn't recognize. Kuroo doesn't say anything, though. Instead, he just sighs. "Good night, Kenma. And don't you dare stay up on your PSP all night. We've got even more games to play tomorrow."

As Kuroo heads off to the baths, something squeezes tight in Kenma's chest. Once again, he's found that he has absolutely no idea what's going through Kuroo's mind.

Kenma makes himself get up a little earlier than everyone else the next morning. It's not ideal for him, since he loves sleeping in more than almost any other pleasure in this life, but it's necessary. He goes outside and picks up one of the branches on the ground using only his mind, then adds another branch, and then yet another until he's got five sticks all hovering in the air at once. His power is definitely getting stronger with practice, he realizes. It's both terrifying and gratifying.

"Hey!" comes a loud voice. Startled, Kenma jumps and drops all of the sticks in a pile to the ground. When he turns around, Shouyou's standing there grinning at him. He breathes out a silent
sigh of relief. There's no way he could imagine explaining this to Lev. "That was so cool!"

"I guess. I just have to practice using my powers or else I'll get sick," Kenma says. "Why are you up?"

"Kageyama and I are going to race before everyone else wakes up!" Shouyou says proudly. "It's the best way to start a day, you know!"

Kenma's not entirely sure he agrees with the sentiment, but he nods anyways, and figures that Kageyama must be Shouyou's scary setter. He waves Shouyou off as the two set off on their jog and heads back for breakfast.

"Early bird?" Kuroo asks him as he walks into the cafeteria.

"Had to practice," Kenma mumbles, shooting him a look that he hopes will convey what he was practicing. Kuroo nods and pats the seat next to him, something like an apology for the weirdness the day before.

They play Fukurodani first today, which means that Bokuto is beaming at him from the other side of the net. Before they start, he makes sure to inform Kenma, "Did you know that my ace ranking is increasing? I'm in the top five now!"

"Congratulations, Bokuto," Kenma says. It's not like he can bring himself to be rude to someone like Bokuto, after all. Plus, it is kind of nice to see the way his face lights up afterwards. Akaashi gives him a slight, knowing smile as well. Kenma's secretly glad to know that Bokuto has someone like Akaashi on his side.

This time, they nearly beat Fukurodani. Maybe it's having Lev playing consistently for them, yelling for Kenma's tosses, which is annoying only because Lev likes to spring these things at the very last second. They only lose by two points, 27-25. It's certainly not the worst they've ever played.

And then they have to play Karasuno, but this time with Kageyama and Shouyou on the team.

They'd beat them twice without Kageyama and Shouyou. But now comes the real challenge, Kenma thinks. Things are about to finally get more interesting.
And they start off with a bang, Karasuno getting two points to Nekoma's one. But then Shouyou attempts one of their quicks and Lev, big lanky Lev, jumps up immediately, his hands colliding with the ball and sending it back down to the other side. Shouyou stands there in shock while Nekoma celebrates, a smile making its way onto Kenma's lips. Looks like Nekoma truly has leveled up with the addition of Lev. Though Kenma hopes no one will ever tell him that. His ego is big enough already.

Kageyama walks over to discuss something with Kenma, and Kenma's brain starts to whirl. He gets the feeling that they're going to shift up their strategy now that they've realized that Lev has the ability to stop their quick sets. So he calls Lev over. "I think Karasuno is going to start using normal quick sets a lot more now. Switch over to read blocking."

"Read blocking? Which one is that again?"

Kenma tries not to sigh. "The one where you wait to see where the ball goes before you jump."

"Oh, got it!" Lev says, and Kenma's not quite convinced that he does, but, well, he hopes.

Apparently he does, though, because he's able to block Hinata's next hit as well as getting a kill, putting them up 3-2. However, the game only gets weirder, because Hinata collides with Karasuno's current ace in the air, almost as if he's trying to take the ball from the ace. And then something goes down between Shouyou and Kageyama, because their entire rhythm gets thrown completely out of sync. Nekoma easily takes the set, 25-18.

Kenma's glad not for the first time that he's on Nekoma's volleyball team and not Karasuno's. Nekoma is steady and calm. They have their problem children, sure, but ever since his yelling match with Tora back in the day and the squabbling between Lev and Tora over who the real ace is, they haven't really had any arguments or drama. It's the team Kuroo's been building up for the past few years, a team steady and unshakeable, built around... well, built around Kenma.

Kenma's still not convinced it's completely warranted, but he trusts Kuroo.

The day passes by in a flash, game after game, and when Shouyou attaches himself to Kenma's side during lunchtime, Kenma can feel the tension in his stature. He's constantly fidgeting as well, as if he's trying to get some of his energy out. When Kenma asks, though, Shouyou just grits his teeth and shakes his head.
They leave that night to return to Nekoma, but with the promise of another camp, this time even longer, hanging in the air. Kenma lets Kuroo lean on his shoulder on the way back. "Those Karasuno first years are a handful," Kuroo mutters.

"So are our first years," Kenma reminds him.

"Yeah, but at least they get along," Kuroo says. True enough, Lev and Inuoka are seated in the back of the bus, chattering away about things that don't even make sense. Kenma just shrugs lightly, careful not to knock Kuroo's head off of his shoulder. "Looking forward to the next camp?" Kuroo asks.

Kenma wrinkles up his nose. "Eh."

"One of these days you'll like it, I hope," Kuroo says softly, closing his eyes. "But... thanks for sticking with it anyways."

Kenma doesn't know how to phrase the words that rush into his mind: that he'd do almost anything for Kuroo, the boy who'd brought him into his life when Kenma had nothing else; that he kind of enjoyed being a part of the Nekoma team even if the actual volleyball playing wasn't that great; that he liked spending time with Kuroo, even though it was through volleyball. All of it seemed too cheesy and cliche to convey to Kuroo. So instead, he just nods. "Yeah."

The weeks before the next training camp are as normal as they come. Volleyball practices, school, hanging out with Kuroo, hanging out with the team, playing video games for half the night until Mitsui scuttles into his room at 3 AM to scold him and force him to get some rest. And yet, despite all of it, Kenma can't shake the anxious feeling that's settled in his body.

Kinjo tells him that it's normal for someone with his past to get flares of anxiety, even if there's no tangible reason for them to feel anxious. Kenma still isn't convinced. His powers, unfortunately, don't include that of premonition, but he wouldn't count out the possibility of some kind of prediction powers lingering somewhere in him. When he tells Kuroo, Kuroo just says, "Don't worry about it. If anyone tries to hurt you, I'll make sure they regret it," with an awful lot of conviction for someone without any real combat training.
Kenma rolls his eyes. "I can take care of it. I just hate having this feeling."

"Try not to worry about it too much," Kuroo says reassuringly. "I mean, we have to go to the training camp starting tomorrow, so maybe you won't have a lot of time to dwell on it. Besides, you'll have Bokuto and Shrimpy for backup there."

Kenma snorts. "What's Shouyou going to do, outjump them to death?"

"Bokuto'd be good backup though," Kuroo says. "And you have Nekoma, too. Tora seems like he could pack a good punch."

It's weird to think about how many people would have his back. Kenma tries to push it to the back of his mind.

This training camp is held at Shinzen, which Kenma doesn't enjoy too much, particularly because of all of the bugs. However, this training camp is a little different from the last one. The games are much of the same as last training camp. However, this time, Karasuno seems even more off than usual, which Kenma doesn't fully understand. Once the day is over, though, Shouyou starts bugging Kenma to set for him.

Kenma throws Kuroo a stare he tries to pack with as much hopelessness as possible. Kuroo just smirks back. "Seems like you've got someone who wants your attention. It's fine, though. Bo and I were planning on getting in some extra practice, plus I need to get Lev into shape, and Akaashi already volunteered to set for us anyways. And unless you want to practice a little more..."

Kenma wrinkles up his nose and shakes his head.

Kuroo chuckles. "I didn't think so. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Yeah, later," Kenma says as he follows Shouyou out. "Just ten tosses, okay? I'm not staying here all night."

"Okay, okay, ten!" Shouyou chirps. "But maybe ten more after that."
"Shouyou."

"I just want to get better," Shouyou whines. "Is that a crime?"

As Kenma observes Shouyou, though, he can't help but think about his former conceptualization of his own self, how he'd imagined that due to his laboratory origins he couldn't possibly be human. Looking at Shouyou, at how freely and obviously he expresses his emotions, Kenma's starting to realize how ridiculous he had been. Shouyou is so completely and utterly human. It's obvious in the way that he reacts to things, in the way that he smiles and the way that he pouts, in the way he argues with Kageyama for no reason at all. Bokuto is also incredibly human, more than some 'normal' humans Kenma knows. He's prone to letting his emotions get the better of him, actually. More than once, Kenma's seen Bokuto get discouraged in the middle of the match and go into something that Akaashi describes as 'emo mode'. Given that, Kenma thinks it'd be ridiculous to think that if they're so human, he couldn't be human as well.

Kenma tosses fifteen balls for Shouyou, which he considers to be a real compromise. After he's done, he slinks over to the gym and peeks in.

He spots Bokuto, Kuroo, Lev, and Akaashi immediately, but there's someone else there too. A tall guy, blonde hair, one of the Karasuno players, Kenma thinks. The one that had tried to read his sets during the first Karasuno match. The one that clearly thought a lot more than Shouyou during the game. Kenma hadn't known they were friends, but he shrugs it off and heads back to the room anyways. He still has time to get in a little bit of gaming before bedtime.

When Kuroo comes back to the room, Kenma asks, "Hey, who was the tall blonde guy you were practicing with?"

"Oh, four eyes?" Kuroo says, his mouth stretched into a smirk. "Karasuno's middle blocker, the one who isn't Shorty. He seemed like he could use some practice, don't you think?"

"Tell me you didn't provoke him into practicing with you."

"I provoked him into practicing, and then I provoked him into leaving."

Kenma sighs. "Kuro."
"He'll survive, kitten. I'm gonna go wash up. Once I get back, you're going to bed."

"Like hell I am." Kuroo fixes him with a dark stare, and Kenma rolls his eyes. "Fine."

"Thanks," Kuroo says, too soft, and then he abruptly leaves the room. Kenma hates the feeling in the pit of his stomach: a combination of Kuroo, his best friend Kuroo, acting weird, and the fact that there's something about Kuroo hanging out with this new guy that's bothering him. He's never really cared this much about Kuroo hanging out with other people before, besides Bokuto, he supposes, but he’s way past that now.

He wonders if Kinjo would say he's jealous again. Burying his head in his pillow, he thinks that he doesn't really know what that entails.

The next day during the break, he follows Kuroo to get some watermelon. Kuroo tells him he'd better eat up, but then he disappears, so Kenma sticks with Shouyou and Lev. Kuroo resurfaces with Karasuno's captain and some of the other Karasuno team members, saying something in a low tone. Kenma starts to reach out with his mind unconsciously, but as soon as he realizes, he withdraws and scolds himself for even considering invading Kuroo's privacy like that.

Instead, he turns to Shouyou. "Hey, who's that tall blonde guy on your team?"

"Oh, Tsukishima?" Shouyou replies, mouth full of watermelon. "He's our other first-year middle blocker! He has a terrible personality, though! And I get the feeling he doesn't care very much about volleyball."

"Ah," Kenma says, biting down into the watermelon. "Apparently he was practicing with Kuro yesterday."

"With your captain?" Shouyou blinks. "I didn't get the feeling Tsukishima was the type to do extra practice!"

"He looks like he might kill me any second," Lev chimes in.
"You might deserve it," Kenma says.

"Kenma-samaan," Lev complains. "Kuroo-san said I'm an asset to the team!"

"Kuro lies."

"Kenma-samaan!"

"It's okay," Shouyou says brightly. "Kenma said my receives suck! Though not as much as yours."

"Kenmaaaaa-samaaan!"

Kenma ignores the pair of them, watching Kuroo through the crowd. The tight feeling in his chest hasn't loosened the slightest bit.

The rest of the training camp seems to pass in much of the same way. Unsurprisingly, with Kuroo's help, Tsukishima's blocks improve. It kind of annoys Kenma: not just because of the jealousy or whatever he's been feeling, but also because it makes Karasuno more difficult to play against. Everyone on Karasuno's team seems to be evolving, though. It's both incredibly interesting and incredibly irritating. It's like he's trying to level his own character up while the final boss is leveling up as well.

Shouyou keeps dragging him out to toss for him, but Kenma manages to sneak away every single time. This camp just is not his type of thing. One night, after all the practice sessions, Akaashi finds him sitting in the hallway, playing his game, and sits down beside him. "Hey, Kozume-san."

"Kenma's fine."

"I... I couldn't. Anyways, Bokuto-san and Kuroo-san have been missing you at our practice sessions."
"They have enough people, right?"

"I guess," Akaashi says, his gaze falling to his lap. "But it isn’t really the same, as I'm sure you're aware."

"I'll stop by on the last night, then."

"Besides, Bokuto-san says he wants you to teach him how to do your 'special things' or something."

"I... don't think that I can do that."

Akaashi laughs quietly. It's a surprisingly bright sound. "I'll let him know. But we would be glad to have you. Just so you know."

"W-what do you think of the Karasuno middle blocker? The one who's been practicing with you?" The words spill out before Kenma can think twice about them. He's grateful it's just Akaashi; saying something like this to anyone else could prove to be disastrous.

"Oh, Tsukishima," Akaashi says, silent for a minute before he continues. "He's not bad at volleyball, but he can be a little... difficult at times."

"It was Kuro who asked him to join you guys, right?" When Akaashi nods, Kenma says, "Why do you think he asked him?"

"It's a pretty simple explanation, actually," Akaashi says. "You should ask him, though."

"I guess that's fair," Kenma says, and so he does, just a few minutes later when Kuroo returns.

Kuroo looks caught off guard for a second before he blinks. "I didn't think you'd ask, honestly. Didn't think you cared about that kind of stuff."

Kenma stares downwards, unable to meet Kuroo's eyes. "Of course I do. It's... it's important to
"Oh, huh," Kuroo says. "Well, you know how Karasuno and Nekoma used to be fated rivals or whatever? And they had that epic game called the Battle at the Garbage Heap?" Kenma nods, and he continues, his face looking just a little bit brighter. "Nekomata seems to be really invested in getting it to happen again, and I guess I'm pretty invested in it too. But I can't do that if some of Karasuno's members are lagging behind. It just…. wouldn't be half as interesting. And who knows if they'd even get to Nationals if they sucked?"

"Oh," Kenma says. It makes sense. Kenma's chest feels just the slightest bit lighter. "You could've just told me."

"I told you, I didn't think you cared about that kind of stuff."

"I do," Kenma protests. "I told you already. If it's important to you, it's important to me too."

He looks up at Kuroo, his gaze serious, and what he doesn't expect to see is the slightest tinge of red on Kuroo's cheeks. Kenma feels his own eyes widen, and this just seems to get Kuroo even more flustered, because he spits out something along the lines of, "Thanks Kenma, I'll see you later," and takes off to the baths again.

Running a hand through his hair in frustration, Kenma sighs. He still has no idea what the hell is going on.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! Once again, thank you all so much for reading and your lovely comments. I'm always so glad to know what you guys are thinking! I'm terrible at remembering to update this, so thanks for bearing with me! Here's a new chapter - featuring a little bit of Kenma jealousy and, well, Kuroo being completely obvious... I hope you can tell where this is going. Thank you all for reading again, and please let me know your thoughts in the comments!
Even after the training camp ends, things feel strange. For example, on the last day, Kuroo had implied that maybe Kenma would play better if Shouyou was on their team. Kenma had denied it vehemently - after all, just the idea of being on the same team as him is beyond exhausting - but Kuroo didn't seem to fully believe him, and had even implied that Kenma got a look of excitement on his face when he watched Shouyou play, almost like he had gotten a new game that he was excited to play. Kenma very much does not agree.

Since then, though, Kuroo has continued to be distant. It's not in the sense that Kenma can really call him out on it; they still talk all the time, and Kuroo still comes over to his house for dinner a couple of times a week or vice versa. Plus, Kuroo still plays video games with him when Kenma asks. It's just that there's something unfamiliar in the way that Kuroo avoids touching him, avoids his gaze at any possible opportunity, and often even avoids being near him when the whole team is together, preferring instead to hover around Yaku and Kai. Kenma finds that it hurts to be snubbed by Kuroo like this.

Kinjo gives him a look of sympathy when he explains it to her. "Sometimes people can be weird when they're going through changes as a teenager," she says soothingly.

"Kuro's 18," Kenma points out. Technically an adult at this point, and yet even more confusing than ever.

"People's brains don't finish developing until they're 25 most of the time," Kinjo says with a laugh. "You're still in high school. You're still figuring things out. And it definitely seems like Kuroo is still figuring a lot of things out himself."

"Like what kind of things?" Kenma asks.

Kinjo pauses. "I don't think it's my place to tell you. But let me just tell you something, very seriously, as your therapist, okay? Kuroo Tetsurou does not hate you. Nor do I think that he ever will, honestly. The second he walked into the room, that much was obvious to me. So don't let that thought even cross your mind. I'm sure he'll figure it out soon."

Kenma isn't fully satisfied with that answer, but he accepts it anyways, because it's not like he can press her for more information. Unfortunately, though, soon the whole Kuroo situation becomes
the lesser issue preying on his mind.

It starts with a cute little lost puppy in the road. That one is easy enough; he just checks the tag around the puppy's neck and returns it to its grateful owner. That situation doesn't even require that he use his powers. But then there's the cat stuck on top of a roof. He's with Kuroo, so he makes Kuroo keep watch while he slowly gets it down from the roof. Then it's the kid in the river while he's going for a walk to try to clear his mind. He can't in good conscience just leave a child there to drown, so he concentrates deeply. Breathes in, breathes out, pushes the water away from the kid so that the kid can scramble out safely. Then he darts away, praying that the kid didn't get a good enough look at him to recognize him.

He doesn't start to think that something's up until he conveniently stumbles into an armed robbery.

"Fuck," he mumbles to himself. He'd just been sent to the store to pick up some herbs for Mitsui; this is the last thing he'd wanted. But now that he's here, wouldn't it make him just as bad as a person if he didn't do anything? His mind works quickly, going through possible solutions. He reaches out to grab the gun with his mind, tosses it to the floor, and slides it towards himself.

"What the hell?" the robber bellows. "Who in here is fucking with me?"

"N-not me," stutters the terrified cashier. "Y-you didn't just dr-drop the gun?"

"Why the hell would I do that?" the robber hisses. "Someone in here is fuckin' with me, and I swear they're gonna get it - kid, was it you?"

Shit. Kenma weighs his options here. There's not much he can really do without exposing himself, and that's the last thing he wants right now - attention for being some kind of a savior. So he does something that might be considered unethical and slips into the man's mind.

_You don't want to hurt this kid_, he thinks, as strong as he can. _You want to sit down and wait for the police to come_. He thinks it over and over again and balls his hands into fists, hoping for the best.

It works. The man slumps to the ground and stays down, not moving a muscle. The cashier's alarmed gaze falls on Kenma, so Kenma tries to paint a picture of shock on his own face as well, shrugging to convey that he also has no idea what had happened here. But there's something that he'd seen when he'd slipped into the man's mind that's nagging at him.
Someone had paid him to do this.

They'd told him the location and the time, and offered him a pretty hefty sum if he'd just pretend to rob the store and 'take out anyone who stands in his way', but he hadn't gotten much more than that. Kenma's not too up to date on the latest crime trends of this world. However, he still doesn't think it's all that common for people to pay other people to rob stores.

He stands dumbfounded against the wall, trying to make sense out of the situation, until Kuroo Hachiro and the rest of the police finally show up. Kuroo Hachiro looks from the robber on the ground to Kenma and crosses his arms.

"I was just a bystander," Kenma mumbles. "Mitsui sent me here for groceries."

"Shit," Kuroo Hachiro says. "Well, you sure helped us out a lot, but let's hope this was just a fucked-up coincidence, yeah?"

The second time it happens, the building where he'd been eating dinner had 'spontaneously' caught on fire. Kuroo Hachiro sighs, crosses his arms, and says, "Two times just means you got terrible luck, all right? But if this keeps happening, you'll have us out of a job."

The third time it happens, Kenma is walking down an alley alone when there's a gunshot behind him. He jumps to the side instinctively, a remnant of his combat training, only to see someone at the end of the street holding a gun, their hands shaking. He reaches out to throw the gun far away from the perpetrator and immediately takes off, only to run into Kuroo Hachiro at the end of the alley. "Fuck, Kenma," Kuroo Hachiro says. "Again?"

"It's not like I ask for this," Kenma says, meaning for his voice to come out petulant, but it's more panicked.

"This can't be a coincidence," Kuroo Hachiro mutters to himself. "But don't worry, okay? We'll take care of it."

Kuroo Tetsurou flips out when he finds out.

His jaw drops and his hands ball into fists. Loudly, he says, "What, and you were just not gonna tell me? What the fuck were you thinking?"
"I didn't think they were all that important," Kenma says. "I mean, I didn't die or get hurt or anything."

"This means that someone's after you," Kuroo hisses back at him, voice rough. "So I don't think that's exactly out of the question."

"They're not after me," Kenma tells him flatly. "They would be trying harder than that if they were. No, I think they're just here to distract me."

"Distract you?" Kuroo's eyebrows furrow. "From what?"

"Well, that's what I've got to figure out. But I think that something's happening with - with, y'know. The last doctor."

"Shit," Kuroo whispers, his voice sounding hollow. He takes a step forward then and stands there for a second, conflict painted across his features, before he takes another step and envelops Kenma in his arms. Kenma stands frozen for a second. It's been a while since Kuroo's held him like this. But after a second, he finds himself melting into it, because it's Kuroo, after all. Kuroo whispers, "Stay safe, okay? I can't... you can't..."

Kenma doesn't need any powers to know that Kuroo's screaming that he can't lose Kenma. Maybe Kinjo was right about the whole Kuroo cares about you thing after all, he thinks, and he nods. "I can take care of myself."

"I know," Kuroo whispers, but he still sounds concerned. He holds on to Kenma for another few seconds, and then he lets go, his eyes on the ground. "Sorry," he says, but he doesn't say what he's sorry for, and Kenma doesn't ask.

Kuroo Hachiro won't let him go anywhere without a policeman in uniform with him now, which is incredibly annoying, to say the least. Kenma mostly stays inside in protest. Even then, though, they still have a policeman stationed outside of his home, so he can't fully escape.
Thankfully, he gets a little bit of a reprieve when qualifiers roll around. No events have happened since the last alley mugging, so he gets cleared to go to qualifiers with his team without a constant guard. It’ll also be nice, he thinks, to have some time thinking about strategies to defeat another volleyball team rather than strategies to keep his life. Kuroo is clearly relieved too; he admits that he’d been worried about what Nekoma would do without him there to set. It’s not that Teshiro is bad, exactly, but he is young and relatively inexperienced.

They cut down the teams to the top four in Tokyo, which is admittedly a little intimidating, but it turns out that Nekoma makes the cut. As does Fukurodani. And… as does Nohebi.

Kenma’s body does an involuntary shudder when he hears that. Kuroo looks equally as disgusted; their disdain for Nohebi and Daishou in particular certainly hasn’t lessened since the last time they encountered him. And of course, he has to show up and make some kind of snarky comments the moment they arrive at the preliminaries.

“Let’s go out there and do what we always do,” Kuroo is saying in his typical captainly fashion, a speech that works at this point to make Kenma feel warm and comforted. But then Daishou interrupts.

“What you always do is maintain high-level teamwork and defense, hm? Yet you always seem to be missing that last decisive something, don’t ya, kitty cats? Or maybe you can finally find that something this year, your *superpower*, if I may say,” Daishou says, a stupid smirk painted over his face.

Hot-headed Tora steps forward, of course, saying “Whatchoo say?” with a stupid look. Kenma’d figured out pretty quickly that Tora would gladly go to war for any member of Nekoma. However noble, though, this proves particularly problematic with masters of provocation like Daishou.

Kuroo steps in, though, telling him not to bother, but then Daishou says, “Y’know, I’ve always wondered. Do you keep your hairstyle like that just so you can fake your height? I bet you aren’t even six feet.”

Kenma groans to himself. Kuroo’s hair has always been one of his sore points, so of course hearing that makes him jump into argument mode, like a complete and total idiot. He starts yelling something about Daishou’s ex-girlfriend, which Kenma had told him about in confidence, which makes Daishou even more irritated. Thankfully, before Daishou can start yelling about Kenma’s powers, Lev shows up and looms over them. “What Nekoma always does is different this year,” Lev says.
Yaku starts yelling at him about dumps, and something about this combination of people makes Daishou finally back off, because he says, “See you in the finals” before he heads off.

Their first game, though, is thankfully not against Nohebi. Their first game is against Fukurodani. Kenma senses the way Kuroo’s twitching beside him, and says, “What, nervous, Kuro?”

“Say what?!” Kuroo says, still in his stupid dramatic argument mode. He softens a little, though, and says, “Hell yeah I am. You know who we’re up against.”

Bokuto is standing across the court from them, grinning from ear to ear as the crowd yells for him. They’ve both known for a while that Bokuto is a crowd favorite, which means that already the odds are stacked against them. It’s almost heartwarming, in a way, a lab experiment becoming the darling, not only of his school, but of other schools as well. At least they have Lev’s sister and Tora’s sister, both of which are incredibly loud and leading the crowd in a variety of chants. And then, before the game starts, Tora starts goading him. “Hey, Kenma!! You ain’t talkin’, bruh! Let’s hear that voice!” Kenma just glares at him, which unfortunately, doesn’t get him to shut up. “C’mon, there’s actually a real reason behind it and everything! When you talk, your cerebrum is supposed to shut down all your extra thoughts and stuff to focus on the words, so speaking up helps you focus and keeps you from getting distracted.”

It doesn’t take Kenma long to formulate a plan for revenge on Tora. He knows Tora’s weak spots at this point, after a year and a half together, so he says, “I saw Lev’s sister looking at you.”

“Wha?! Really-“ Tora starts, and at that point, a very distracted Tora gets hit on the head hard with a ball and yelled at to pay attention.

Kenma smirks. “Looks like you need to focus, Tora. Maybe you need to speak up.” Tora scowls at him, but thankfully, leaves him alone after that.

Kuroo reiterates that the key to this game is shutting down Bokuto. Kenma agrees fully, but at the same time, he’s not keen on receiving Bokuto’s spikes. He’d figured out pretty fast during the training camp that Bokuto’s inhuman strength was not something to be messed around with; he’d had bruises on his arms after attempting to receive one of his hits. But he also knows what’s at stake here. If they win this game, they can go to Nationals. It’s been Kuroo’s dream for years and years. And so… he’ll give it his all.

He and Kuroo start off with a quick set to take the first point. Then Bokuto jumps back in, with one of his crazy hard spikes that manages to reach all the way into the crowd, and Kenma thinks, yeah, no thanks. He rather enjoys having both arms in functioning order.
It goes on like that. Bokuto, unfortunately, is in top form. His line shots are good, too good, and when he aims for Kenma, Kenma just doesn’t have the pass control necessary, and it goes flying. “Bokuto-san usually loves hitting cross shots,” he mutters to himself. “But it looks like he’s doing really well with line shots today.”

Akaashi smirks at him from across the net. “Who can say? We all know just how streaky of a player he can be.”

Kenma blinks and turns away. Generally, he likes Akaashi - calm Akaashi, the foil to their idiots of best friends - but on the other side of the net, Akaashi is no friend of his.

He formulates a plan during the next timeout. He wants to change the direction of the hits to the cross, where Yaku is, but first… he’ll get Bokuto nice and comfy with his line shots. When he explains the plan to his team, Kuroo grins at him, a grin of pride but also with something mildly evil hidden in it. It’s one of Kenma’s favorite smiles. And when, during the next point, Kuroo stuffs Bokuto’s hit directly, Kenma finds himself wearing much of the same smile. It only gets bigger when Kenma commands the team to start shutting down his line shots and Bokuto hits his next shot out. Perfect, Kenma thinks to himself. This game is going exactly the way he wants it to. That is, until he starts setting to Lev, who somehow manages to screw it up despite the fact that they are involved in one of their most important games possibly ever. And then Nekomata tells him that he’s leaving it to Kenma to handle Lev.

God, this is the last thing Kenma wants, but he does have a few choice words for Lev. His gift for reading people has shown him that Lev responds to tough love, if it can even be called that, so Kenma comes out swinging. “You panic too much and you try too hard. All. The. Time. At least make sure you watch the ball. Stop letting your elbows drop. And prioritize height over speed.”

“Oof! W-wait, g-go slower! That’s too much at once!”

Kenma does not. “These are all things I’ve been telling you over and over forever.” And then, the final blow: “Sheesh. You’re still nowhere as good as Shouyou.”

That should do it, Kenma thinks to himself. And, unsurprisingly to Kenma, it does. Lev gets blocked by Fukurodani, but at least he’s hitting the ball at its highest point. Lev starts to fret loudly, but Kenma’s not too concerned. “Quit worrying so much. We have everything in place.”

It’s Fukurodani’s set point, so Kenma’s not too sure they’ll be able to take this set, but they have
the tools in place to take the next two. Lev gets a kill with his high contact point, but then, unfortunately, manages to serve way out, giving Fukurodani the set. The next set, though, becomes a test of endurance, and that is where Kenma knows that Nekoma does their best. They stay neck-in-neck with Fukurodani. Kenma commands them to send everything at Akaashi as much as possible, so that Bokuto has to hit sub-optimal balls. The problem is, though, that they have another player on the court that’s able to toss surprisingly well for someone other than the setter. And it works, for a while. It works so well that Bokuto seems to get confused for a little bit, losing a little bit of confidence.

Unfortunately, having Akaashi on the team means that his spell doesn’t last for long.

With Akaashi’s help, he regains his confidence and starts back up with his crazy shots, so crazy and so strong that it’s impossible even for Nekoma to get them. Nekoma plays hard, but still they fall to Fukurodani, 30-28.

“Goddamnit,” Kuroo grumbles. “Guess I can’t really call cheating when we have the world’s greatest strategist on our team, but that stupid owl still pisses me off.”

Kenma just blinks up at him. Kuroo loves Bokuto most days, but in games, the two of them clash like fire and water. He just shakes his head.

Their next game is against Nohebi, which is going to be even worse, Kenma thinks. He'll have to make sure Kuroo's able to keep his cool, while trying not to get distracted of thoughts of anything else, of the past few weeks of hellish experience after hellish experience himself. It’s not ideal, but this is their last chance. Kuroo starts it off by preaching about how they need to look out for Daishou, for drinks, for blocks, which Kenma is all too aware of.

The main problem in Kenma’s opinion is the fact that Nohebi, much like Kuroo, are masters of provocation. They say things under their breath about the Nekoma players constantly. And with highly volatile players on their team like Lev, who gets highly offended over them saying that Lev whiffs a lot, and Tora, who gets pissed when they say that he can’t hit a line shot, Kenma’s a little concerned. And then they’re able to turn both the referees and the crowd in their favor, by doing what Kuroo calls a ‘slimy snake move’ - acting nice and polite to the referees while being shitty to Nekoma. It doesn’t help either that with Kenma’s dyed-looking blonde hair and Tora’s mohawk, they look more like the delinquent team. So all of the calls start going against Nekoma, which sure as hell isn’t gonna make this easy for them.

And then Yaku gets hurt, and it gets even harder.
Shibayama isn’t bad at all. He’s actually very good for a first year, far better than Lev when it comes to receives. The problem, though, is that Shibayama can get a little fearful when it comes to the game. Kenma tries to send calming vibes. *We’ve still got this*, he tells himself, and then the rest of the team. It kind of seems like they might actually believe him.

They keep Kuroo in at all times, only substituting in Shibayama for Lev, which Kenma informs Kuroo means that Kuroo will have to step up and work harder. Kuroo knows, though. He doesn’t argue. And so the tide starts to turn. Kenma feels his chest fill a little bit with something like hope.

Lev is able to shut down some of their hits. Kenma gets a setter dump on them, which makes him feel kind of good, though he’d never show it. Then, to end the first set, Kenma tries out a back attack with Kuroo, one he hasn’t practiced yet but he thinks they can pull off. When they do, something like pride swells in his stomach. It’s somewhat nice to be able to win, especially against a team with a shitty personality like Nohebi.

The second set, though, starts off with Kenma making a bad toss. It’s mildly terrifying, to say the least; Kenma and Kuroo aren’t usually out of sync. Because Kuroo is the person he is, the player he is, the captain he is, though, Kuroo’s still able to score off of it. Kenma feels incredibly relieved. And this match, it seems, Lev is even more in gear than usual, calling for tosses and hitting balls with all of his power. If Kenma didn’t know how terrible he still is at receives and stuff, he might have thought Lev was from the lab, a genetically engineered volleyball machine. However, with Lev getting all the attention and praise, Kenma can tell that Tora’s starting to get a little antsy.

Tora is Nekoma’s ace. There’s no doubt about it; no one has ever had a problem with giving Tora that position. That is, until now, when the crowd is buzzing about Lev Haiba instead and doubting his capability to score for the team. God, that’s gonna get to him, Kenma’s sure of it. But then Tora’s saving balls, and calling for tosses, and slamming it down onto the other side - being a little obnoxious about it, certainly, but still. Kenma should never have doubted him.

Then Lev is pulling it together too, and it finally feels like they are flowing together. Like all of them are connected, parts of a whole, coming together. With connectivity like that, it’s all too easy to take the second set.

With that, Nekoma is officially advancing to Nationals for the first time.

Everyone is hugging and crying, which is very much not Kenma’s thing. He tries to slink away but gets caught by Yaku and some of the second years. But he sees the look on Kuroo’s face, pure and utter joy, like nothing else that he’s ever seen, and it makes his heart feel light. He wants to keep that look on Kuroo’s face forever.
After they leave the stadium, someone suggests that they all go eat together. With a food-driven team like Nekoma, the suggestion is snapped up immediately and everyone piles into cars and buses to shuttle over to a nearby pizza restaurant. Kenma hopes that he’ll be able to talk to Kuroo, even for a second, but instead Kuroo is shuttled away to the end of the table by Yaku and Kai, leaving Kenma with Tora, Fukunaga, and the first-years.

Lev shoves an entire piece of pizza in his mouth at once. “Man, this is delicious,” Lev says around his food.

“Dude, that’s disgusting,” Tora replies, even though he also has food in his mouth.

Kenma sighs. Not only are they gross, but they don’t provide enough of a distraction for Kenma to avoid thinking about the events of the past few weeks. He feels the paranoia creeping back up as he looks around, half-expecting someone to barge in with a gun or something in the kitchen to explode, endangering not only Kenma but the rest of his team. He can’t stop looking around, checking all entrances and exits. It gets to the point where he feels genuinely suffocated, so he says “I’ll be back in just a second,” to the people at his part of the table and slips outside.

He sends a quick text to Shouyou to tell him they’d made it to Nationals and then calls Mitsui, thanking her for coming. Even after that, he still doesn’t feel like he can go back outside, so he leans against the wall. A figure pops up suddenly beside him and he jumps back, instinctively pushing the person back with their mind.

“It’s just me,” the voice calls. Kuroo. Thank god.

“S-sorry,” Kenma stammers out.

Kuroo sighs. “I shoulda known something was up. C’mere.” Kenma does, taking a step forward and letting Kuroo hug him again. He buries his head in Kuroo’s chest and inhales. The scent is calming, familiar, and Kenma feels like he can breathe again. “What’s up?” Kuroo murmurs into his hair.

“Just scared,” Kenma whispers. “I guess. That’s what it is when you feel like something bad’s gonna happen, right?”

“Yeah,” Kuroo says. “But nothing bad is gonna happen, kitten.”
“You don’t know that.”

“If anything does, you can just throw them like you almost did me,” Kuroo says, laughing a little bit. “You’re powerful enough to take on anyone. And we’ve all got your back.”

“I guess that’s true,” Kenma says, and then, “Sorry. You should be inside celebrating.”

“The celebration’s no fun without one of the major reasons for our wins,” Kuroo says, his face split into a grin. “You were great today.”

“So were you, glorious captain.”

“Why do I feel like you’re saying that sarcastically?”

“I would never.”

“Little shit,” Kuroo says, his hands lightly tickling Kenma’s sides until Kenma swats him away. He stares down at Kenma for a few seconds, his eyes shiny, and then abruptly turns away. “Uh... I gotta go. Please come inside again soon,” he says, and then he disappears.

God, Kenma thinks, hitting his head back against the wall. Maybe he’d never get back that complete understanding with Kuroo. Because whatever this is, whatever wall Kuroo’s built up, Kenma sure as hell can’t see what’s on the other side.

Volleyball practice gets excruciating after that. They’re practicing as often as possible as hard as possible. Plus, he keeps getting yelled at from all sides to run more, to build up his stamina so that he won’t pass out during the Nationals matches, and it’s all just so annoying. Kenma would rather be at home playing video games. But, well, he remembers what Shouyou had told him when they’d first met, that they were going to be able to play a match where there are no second chances, one mistake and it’s game over. That sounds fun. That’s what he’s working for.

“You look exhausted,” Mitsui scolds him when he comes home.
“I am,” Kenma groans. “But it’s okay. Nationals are soon and then I won’t have to worry about volleyball ever again.”

“Until next year,” Mitsui points out.

“Ah… yeah.” Kenma hadn’t really thought about whether he’d go on playing volleyball after Kuroo graduated. His avoidance of the topic means that he’d been living in the present moment, not really considering the future. The idea of playing without Kuroo again is terrifying, but it’s not like he can ditch his team either. He can’t - doesn’t want to - leave Tora or Fukunaga or the first-years to scramble around on their own. They need someone to strategize for them, after all. So that settles that.

Ugh. Who knew a lab experiment could get so invested in other people? Take that, doctors. It turns out in the end, he’s only human after all.

But the days and practices fly by, jam-packed with trying to improve and trying to get Lev’s receives more consistent and trying to get Tora to get just the right amount of fired up and making sure that Yaku’s ankle has recovered. Then, before he knows it, they’re on the way to Nationals.

“So this is it,” Kuroo whispers, clearly awe-struck.

“You made it,” Kenma tells him.

Kuroo shakes his head. “Nah,” he says easily. “We made it.”

They run into Karasuno just before they step into the admittedly huge venue. The first years look like they just might have a heart attack as they look around, eyes wide, at the stage they’re now going to be playing on. There are people everywhere, incredibly tall people, and when Kuroo comments to the Karasuno captain that Shouyou looks like a lost middle schooler, Kenma has to agree. Then Bokuto shows up, hooting and hollering as always. Kuroo shakes his head. “Owl-head sure is hooting up a storm.”

“I envy how he can act like any place is his own home,” Kenma mutters. He wishes he had that ability, too, but as someone who’s not 100% certain of what he would call home, he thinks it might just be impossible.
They go through the opening ceremonies with still-wide, starry eyes. Then they learn that their first game is to be against a team called Kiyokawa. It’s at the nationals level, so Kenma expects that it’s going to be a tough game, and they have an ace that Kenma supposes it will be hard to take on. However, they’re able to beat the team fairly easily in two straight sets. Good, he thinks as Kuroo hooks an arm around his neck. Being eliminated in the first game at Nationals would have just been positively embarrassing. Karasuno and Fukurodani advance as well. Honestly, Kenma hadn’t been expecting anything less.

Day 2, however, will be much harder.

He can practically feel the stress emanating from Kuroo as he tells Daichi, Karasuno’s captain, not to get eliminated. Because it’s easy to say, surely, but a lot harder to do.

Kenma’s thankfully rooming with Kuroo. He sits on his bed, fixated on a video of the team they’ll be playing tomorrow, and glances up at Kuroo staring out the window. “You should try to get some rest,” he says calmly.

“Me? And what about you, Mr. Low Stamina?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenma says, because he knows that with the stress of Nationals and the still-present fear of someone breaking into his room and trying to hurt him or, worse, Kuroo, there’s no way he’ll be able to sleep for long. “We’re going to win, you know.”

Kuroo turn back to stare at him, then nods. “I guess so.”

Karasuno’s match is against Inarizaki, which, for the purposes of the Battle at the Garbage Heap only, is somewhat concerning. Inarizaki is one of the teams that’s rumored to be able to win the entire tournament. People say that their setter, Atsumu Miya, is the nation’s best high school setter. Karasuno can be surprising, though; Kenma’s learned that firsthand too many times to count. So they might still be able to pull it off.

Their match, however, is against Sarukawa Tech, a school with defense nearly as tight as theirs. Kuroo informs him that their coach had trained under Nekomata, in fact, which explains why their defense is so good. It becomes clear pretty quickly, though, that they are determined to exhaust him to the highest degree, or rather ‘crush their setter’ as Nekomata puts it. By the end of the second set, Kenma feels as though he’s about to melt into the floor. He truly cannot let this go on to another set. He’s pretty sure he’ll just die on the spot.
But Nekoma pulls through. They always pull through. And sure, Kenma comes up with a plan of sorts too, a plan that puts way too much of a burden on him, but none of it would be possible without his team, he’s sure of it. And so they take down Sarukawa without Kenma dying, though he certainly comes close. His strategy gets them that coveted final point. They finally break the deuce. And Kenma exerts the very last of his small reserve of energy.

After the game, though, Tora says, “You sure showed me your willpower, Kenma.”

“…you’re wrong,” Kenma says. “I’m not at the level where I can activate my willpower.”

It’s the truth. Kenma isn’t like Shouyou, or Bokuto, or Tora, or even Kuroo. He doesn’t have guts, stamina, resilience oozing out of him like the rest of them do. He just doesn’t know how to explain this. Tora peers at him. “Wuh?”

“How should I put this, it’s like it’s a sense of duty,” Kenma says, but the irritation creeps into his exhausted body as he tries to get the words out. “Or like, everyone else is giving it their all out there, getting the ball up into the air, so I have to do the same at the very least? Why d’you have to put such a clear label on the concept of putting in effort for something and word it like that?! Is it so weird to see me working hard?!”

“You seemed pretty mad about something in the middle of the match,” Kai chuckles, and Kenma thinks, well, I’m exhausted, it makes sense, idiots.

Kuroo pushes a handful of bananas towards him. “You’re low on sugar, yeah?”

“Is it weird or something to work hard for your friends?” Kenma grumbles in between mouthfuls of banana. “Is it weird for me to do it?!"

That prompts everyone to attempt to hug him, which is the last thing Kenma wants. He’s just speaking the truth; it doesn’t warrant being dogpiled by lots of sweaty boys. He manages to extricate himself from the pile and appears beside Kuroo, muttering, “I hate this willpower thing after all. It’s too much of an enigma for me.”

But even though that’s the truth, he still feels like he’s been able to level up. Which means that maybe he can have a go at the final boss fight, he think as he glances over at Karasuno. The one thing that could fully hold his attention, pull it away from whoever’s been coming after him, a
game where there’s no second chances. He’s been looking forward to this.

And he’s sure it’s going to happen. He doesn’t need clairvoyance to know that much.

Karasuno takes the first set against Inarizaki easily, but their second set comes with a fall by 9 points. Which means that they get sent into a stressful third set. Kema watches with Kuroo, Kai, and Yaku, silently rooting for Karasuno even against a team with a legendary setter. He’s sure they can do it. After all, they’ve got someone beyond human on their side. And they’re able to pull through with a final block from Shouyou - 32 - 30, Karasuno, meaning that the Battle at the Trash Heap is finally going to happen. Kenma can’t help the flutter of excitement in his stomach.

“Go to sleep already,” Kuroo mumbles through a haze of sleep, kicking at Kenma’s leg. “Put the game down.”

“Can’t,” Kenma hisses back, his leg involuntarily hitting back against Kuroo’s. “Stomach feels weird.”

“Ooooh,” Kuroo says, his words coming out all blurred together. “You’re excited for a match.”

Kenma scowls at him through the darkness. “Shut up.”

“I’m glad,” Kuroo says, and even though Kenma can’t see his face he knows that there’s a smile there, the soft smile that he so often uses with Kenma but seldom with anyone else. He hears Kuroo’s breathing even out and knows that Kuroo’s drifted off to sleep.

It takes Kenma a little while longer. He obsessively plays the same boss over and over again, reveling in the feeling of victory and hoping that, maybe, he’ll get some semblance of this feeling tomorrow as well. Eventually he drifts off to sleep, but only hours later he’s woken up by someone violently shaking him.

“Let’s go, kitten,” Kuroo says, the expression on his face the combination of a smirk and a grin. “We’ve got some crows to take down.”
Today, when Kuroo gives the speech about the blood in their veins, it feels a little different somehow. He can feel everyone’s eyes on him, expectant, dependent, in a way that Kenma doesn’t think is quite so bad. He’d never expected to have people around him, depending on him. He’d just assumed that he would hurt anyone he came into contact with. But now he has a team that works to keep him functioning at peak efficiency. And that team has made it to Nationals. It makes Kenma feel something that he still doesn’t have a name for.

Karasuno gets the first serve, and from there everything starts going at a too-fast pace. Shouyou spikes; Kenma dives for it but isn’t able to get there. Shouyou grins at him across the net, a smile that’s not entirely innocent, and says, “It’s a match where there’s no second chances, Kenma!!”

*It sure is*, Kenma thinks. It’s a match where he has an opponent that’s kind of like him, a match where he doesn’t feel guilty if he uses his mind to its full potential, though he still could never actually utilize his other powers in a match.

One of the things that Kenma finds the most interesting about Karasuno is how constantly they continue to evolve, to level up. They certainly are nothing close to the team that they fought back in October. And although it’s not like Nekoma hasn’t evolved as well, it still throws into question the capability of Nekoma to win against Karasuno. When he asks himself if they can win it, if it’s worth the effort, he finds himself realizing that he’s not sure.

So he gives 100% of his effort. He will be the valiant hero that defeats them. The valiant hero with a team of heroes behind him.

During the first set, he dives for balls. He uses his glance feint to fake Shouyou out. He watches as the other members of his team play up to their fullest potential, blocking even the toughest of hits. Kuroo’s decision to teach that Tsukishima how to block comes back to bite them in the ass, though, when Tsukishima’s better blocks end up shutting out Kuroo himself. Kenma tosses a glare Kuroo’s way. Leave it to him to make things more difficult than they need to be. But… that just means Kuroo will have to level up as well, Kenma decides.

Karasuno’s highest statistic is offense by far. They’ve started to pull out synchronized attacks where every member of the team acts as though they’re going to hit, which just makes it all the harder for them to block. Nekoma’s highest statistic, though, is defense, Kenma thinks. So he watches. He watches the strategies that Karasuno uses, the way in which Kageyama tosses, the ways that the hitters hit, the strategies that they use. Kenma desperately wants to win the first set, as it’ll make things easier in the long run, but when they’re down 18-20 it becomes a little more of a long shot. Still, Kenma wants to make the game as long as possible to get the precious information that he needs to defeat this boss.

Near the end of the set, Tora’s pass goes to the wrong location, and yet it’s still his ball. Kenma
knows that he can’t exactly stand by and let this one come to him, so he moves quickly, turning it into a high toss despite the odd angle. He can hear everyone’s breath catch at once. He rolls his eyes, wondering why this is so shocking.

Kageyama is watching him from across the net. Slowly, he says, “Kozume-san, you move after all.”

Kenma sighs, looking away. “Well, I am a living being after all.” I’m only human. It feels like a relief to say, even if just in the privacy of his own head. Kenma is only human, human with a few additional abilities, but human nonetheless. A person, with the capacity to move and to feel and to be.

Then Tora starts in. “You’re not losing to Kageyama, Kenma!”

“The hell’re you on about?” Kenma glares at him.

“That bad, huh?”

“Putting me in the same category as a guy as hardworking as that is just rude,” Kenma tells him flatly. “But, whenever I witness something amazing happen, the words ‘you can do it too’ becomes just a little louder.”

He’s always known he’s capable of great things, after all. But now he’s beginning to think those great things could be positive rather than just negative.

They catch up with Karasuno late in the set, which just makes things all the more stressful. Both sides are playing to the highest of their abilities, pushing each other to the highest degree. Even as Karasuno keeps firing off offensively, Nekoma is prepared to dish it back with their airtight defense. Kenma’s able to think of other strategies as well; he manages to bait the blockers into a net foul, and then sends the ball to a location on the court where he knows they’ll be too confused to get it. Then, just like that, Nekoma takes the first set.

The second set starts off with Shouyou being able to receive, then run up to the front for a broad attack, which honestly, Kenma wasn’t expecting. When he finds Shouyou at the front, he gives a small smile. “Shouyou,” he says. “Stay interesting.”
Unfortunately for Kenma, the second set shows absolutely no signs of slowing down. Nekoma’s players are diving for every ball, falling to the floor to stop Karasuno from getting points. Karasuno is coming at them as fast as they can, and Kenma does his best to fire back, going at his serves as quickly as possible, sending any balls he has to send over to the hardest possible locations. The blocks get harder to break through. And when Tanaka, one of their wing spikers, is able to get a service ace, Kenma sighs. “It feels like they’re really heating up now,” he says to no one in particular.

Karasuno stays in the lead, despite Nekoma’s best efforts to turn the tide of the match. And Kenma decides that it’s finally time to put his plan into action. He has long since known that Shouyou, Karasuno’s oddball, is the centerpiece of the beast he has to defeat. So if he wants to beat this boss, he has to crush Shouyou. His first point is to stop Shouyou’s run-ups, making Shouyou’s jumps become less high therefore easier to block. Therefore, he’ll target places that would cause another member of the team to block Shouyou’s run-up. Plus, the longer it goes on, the more frustrated Shouyou will become and the worse he’ll play.

When he explains his plan, the entire team just stares at him. Lev says, “Kenma-san, you’re terrifying.”

“So I’m still terrifying either way?” Kenma asks. It’s interesting that he, with all his various powers, would be thought of as terrifying for his mental prowess rather than his literal capacity to invade people’s privacy or control them.

“Yes, terrifying,” Kuroo agrees, but he’s smiling, and Kenma gets the feeling he’s just ribbing at Kenma.

“Yep,” Kai agrees cheerfully.

Kenma’s fine with being a little bit scary, he thinks, if it gets people to listen to his strategies. But he’s ready to take down Karasuno now. It’s not just about the points, Kenma thinks. They’re going to sever Shouyou’s flow, clip his wings, his run-ups.

Kuroo shakes his head when he listens to Kenma’s plan, the small smile still on his lips. “Kenma, you like to talk all valiantly like the hero who wants to take down a powerful boss. But no offense, you sound more like the demon king in reality. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, though.”

It’s an interesting point, Kenma thinks, but after all, no matter how human he is, he’s kind of been conditioned to be a bit of a demon king. He opens his mouth to speak, but Kuroo cuts him off. “And no, I don’t actually think you’re a demon. Just in volleyball. But, well.” Kuroo grins at him.
“Whatever gets us points.”

He’s got a point. Kenma’s plan truly is effective; by the time Shouyou goes to the back row again, he hasn’t scored a single point for Karasuno. It’s everything Kenma had wanted, and yet, something feels wrong. Kenma frowns, and Kuroo looks over at him. “Everything went according to plan, so why’re you making a face like that?”

“I’m lamenting that the interesting version of Shouyou is about to come to an end,” Kenma says as he realizes it himself. Even as he tears their wings apart with his own two hands, he laments the fact that they’re no longer able to fly.

“You’re such a pain,” Kuroo says.

“Shut it,” Kenma shoots back.

All the running is doing a number on him, though. He’s exhausted of running from one place to the next, trying to keep up with Karasuno, trying to give the fight his all, the way everyone else is doing. Still, they catch up to Karasuno and overtake them, 20-19. It feels just as though everything is going to plan. But then…

Then, Shouyou breaks out of the cage.

He jumps for the ball, so high that everyone has to look up to be able to see him, almost like an actual crow. It’s not a hit, but it goes over the heads of the blockers nonetheless, impossible for them to receive. And then the next hit he gets over the blockers, flying through the air, slamming it down onto the other side. This forces Kenma to have to think about the types of attacks, and how they can possibly counter this. And then it hits him.

Nekoma sends in Inuoka - tall Inuoka, a shield against Shouyou’s spear. But as Kenma watches Shouyou play, he remembers that he’d once thought about him as just a weapon, one with high attack stats. No, Kenma thinks to himself. It turns out Shouyou’s a demon himself too. Perhaps the laboratory is just great at churning those out.

Shouyou manages to get a critical receive, scoring them the last point to take the set, and Kenma shakes his head. Shouyou’s truly different every time they fight, he thinks. And it’s interesting. Exhausting, but also very, very interesting.
It does mean that they’re going to have to go into a third set though, and Kenma feels like his entire body might melt away. He tries not to think about the fact that this could be it. If they lose this, this could be the last game he ever plays with Kuroo. Kuroo’s going to graduate soon. He won’t be Kenma’s captain anymore. Kenma tries to push the thoughts away, but almost immediately, they bubble back up to the surface.

Kuroo notices him staring as Kuroo tries to rile up the rest of the team and asks, “What?”

“I was just thinking, you’re talking a lot,” Kenma says.

“Always with the jibes,” Kuroo shoots back.

But Kenma’s thinking back to the Kuroo he’d first met that day, in the police station. That Kuroo had been talkative too, but only around Kenma. When he got to school, Kenma knows, he’d turn off, quiet and afraid. He’d been scared to join the team alone. That Kuroo and this Kuroo seem almost like different people, but when Kenma catches Kuroo’s eye, he sees the same determination, the same softness, the same kindness he’d first seen all those years ago. Something about it makes Kenma’s heart feel like it’s going to explode.

If this is Kuroo’s last game, Kenma’s going to make it a hell of a last game.

“Kuro, if you were just some party animal socialite, I wouldn’t have done this with you,” Kenma says, so quietly, but he’s sure Kuroo will hear him. And he’s sure that Kuroo will get what he’s trying to convey. If Kuroo were anyone else, anyone other than himself, Kenma would never have done this with him. But Kuroo being the person that he is - the kind, warm, supportive person that he is - Kenma couldn’t imagine not doing this with him.

It becomes obvious within the first few minutes that Kuroo is not going to back down. He goes toe-to-toe with Karasuno’s Tsukishima, a battle of the blocks, and throws 100% of himself into it. It’s hard for Kenma not to match that — his observant eye constantly watching everything that’s happening, coming up with potential strategies, trying to figure out the best way to go. He ends up in a momentary battle against Shouyou, ending it with a hit that falls right in front of where Shouyou hits the ground in an attempt to receive. Then he greets him with a smirk. Maybe, he thinks, Kuroo’s rubbing off on him too much. They send in Teshiro to serve, which Kenma realizes pretty quick means he’s supposed to play setter until the end.

Then, Shouyou acts like he’s going to put it up front, but sends it further back. Kenma jumps for it, but can’t quite receive it. As he’s trying to get up, he slips to the ground, but he realizes pretty quickly what the erratic pounding of his heart means.
“Oi, Kenma, are you all right?” Kuroo asks, sounding concerned. “Did you injure yourself somewhere?”

“…this is fun,” Kenma answers.

Kuroo stares at him, his eyes wide and watery, but then he throws back his head and laughs, the smile on his face one of pure joy. Kenma can’t help but think that it’s kind of beautiful. He still doesn’t know what that means.

He’s exhausted, nearly at the brink of death, he feels like, but he’s going to fight it out a little longer. He can’t let this end, not yet. As Lev collides into him, falling to the ground, Kenma hears himself yell, “You idiot!! The ball hasn’t dropped yet!” as he pushes himself to go harder, go further, do what he has to. But then he goes to set and his hands are too slick and the ball’s covered in sweat and it just… drops.

And that’s it.

Nekoma falls to Karasuno, 21-25.

Kenma stretches out on the ground, at least grateful that it’s finally over, but determined that it had been one of the most fun experiences of his life. He pushes himself up to a sitting position and turns to his best friend, saying “Kuro. Thank you for getting me into volleyball. Actually… thank you for everything.”

That’s enough to get Kuroo to freak out. He can see the tears brimming in the corners of Kuroo’s eyes, his Kuroo, and the grin on his face. He knows it’s what Kuroo’s wanted to hear for so long. And Kuroo starts to say something, because he turns to Kenma and says, “Kenma, I -“ but he’s cut off by a whistle and a loud “Line up!” Kenma supposes he’ll just ask Kuroo about it later.

Kenma doesn’t like the feeling of losing, not at all. He doesn’t like the sad looks on the third years’ faces, the way that Nekomata’s face seems more despondent than usual as they thank each other for the past year. He doesn’t like the sinking feeling in his chest as he thinks about the fact that Kuroo Tetsurou has just played his last high school volleyball game ever.

It makes him slightly more clingy, and thankfully Kuroo doesn’t seem to mind. He sticks by Kuroo’s side as they go to observe the other team’s matches: Fukurodani’s next match, which
unsurprisingly they win, and Karasuno’s next match, which ends up being a surprising loss. They stick around to watch Fukurodani win the tournament, which they’re both surprised and unsurprised by, and then go down to congratulate Bokuto and Akaashi.

“Thanks, guys!” Bokuto says, his face split into the world’s biggest grin. “I couldn’t have done it without my friends, after all!”

“Maybe you’ll crack the top three now,” Kenma tells him.

“I don’t see why I haven’t yet,” Bokuto wails.

Akaashi just shakes his head and smiles softly. “You will.”

“You guys deserved it,” Kuroo says sincerely. “Even you, stupid owl.”

“Stupid cats,” Bokuto says back, ruffling both Kuroo’s hair and Kenma’s hair. “Hey, Kenma, I don’t wanna kill the mood or anythin’, but I’ve been hearin’ ‘bout some weird stuff goin’ on in Tokyo. Some, uh, police reports about some kid being a witness to a lot of crimes ’n stuff. It’s not anythin’ to do with you, is it?”

Kenma thinks about his options here. The crimes have died down substantially, to the point that nothing’s happened in weeks, so he decides it’s probably best not to make Bokuto worry. So he shakes his head. “No, I haven’t heard about that. Weird.”

Kuroo glances over at him, like he’s going to speak, but then he just sighs. “Yeah, weird.”

Bokuto frowns. “Well, if you need any help or somethin’, you can always let me know, y’know? I’ll be there. Like a superhero!”

Kenma nods. “Yeah, of course.” Hopefully he won’t be in need of anything like that any time soon.
Ahh sorry for taking so long to update again, but once again I want to say thank you to everyone who's commented! You all are my motivation to keep posting, so keep it up :')

Also, this chapter is mostly canon stuff with a bit of a twist, so sorry if it's a bit boring! Next chapter we get back to the action :)

They head out a little under an hour later, slipping into the bus in the dark of night. Everyone falls asleep on the bus ride home except Kenma. Kenma stays awake, staring out the window, something tangled in his stomach that he can’t quite decipher. Between the weird feelings he’d started to experience concerning Kuroo and Bokuto’s offer and the whole ‘someone’s out to get him’ ordeal and the fact that he’d effectively lost the set for Nekoma, Kenma certainly has a lot on his mind. More than anything, the feeling in his stomach gives him the impression that something big is about to happen.

Which is why he’s not all that surprised when he stumbles into the doorway of the Kuroo household beside Kuroo Tetsurou to see Kuroo Hachiro frantically on the phone again.

“What the fuck do you mean they found the headquarters?” Kuroo Hachiro is barking out. “More children? What do you mean it’s not safe to invade? We have to get them out — no, they’re not inhuman, you piece of shit, they’re children! You have to get them out of that lab right now. Are you listening to me?!”

Kenma doesn’t think twice before he dives into Kuroo Hachiro’s brain.

He pushes through all of the other thoughts in Kuroo Hachiro’s mind as fast as he can, disregarding irrelevant memories, to find exactly what he’s looking for. He’s thinking about the fact that there’s a new laboratory, as well as where it is, information that his coworker Okura has conveyed to him over the phone, that one of the doctors has managed to establish a new lab underground to continue with her research - her, fuck, that means it’s Akiba. Then his gaze flicks over to Kenma. Oh shit, Kuroo Hachiro thinks, but it’s far too late.

Kenma throws his bag to the ground and starts running.

“Shit,” Kuroo Tetsurou hisses, grabbing Kenma’s arm, but Kenma pushes him back and keeps running. “Kenma!” he yells, and his voice sounds frantic. “You can’t go there by yourself!”

“Not going by myself,” Kenma yells back.

“Leave it to the police!” he hears Kuroo Hachiro scream, but Kenma’s not listening. He uses as
much power as he can to drag Kuroo Tetsurou’s bike over to him and get the lock off, and he praises Kuroo Tetsurou mentally for teaching him how to ride a bike a few years back. Desperate times call for desperate measures, he thinks.

Once he gets a little bit down the road in what his phone map app tells him is the right direction, he switches to the phone app and dials a number. Bokuto picks up on the second ring.

“Hey, bro, Tetsu just texted me, what’s goin’ on?”


“Where?” Bokuto asks urgently. “I’ll be there.”

Kenma gives him the location and the basic directions from his map app. “I’m on my way there now. I’ll meet you there.”

“See you soon,” Bokuto says before hanging up. Next, he fires off a quick text to Shouyou with the location and a short description of the issue. Shouyou’s abilities aren’t quite as combat-suited, but it would be nice to have more backup, and Shouyou’s survived a lot. Still, despite his desire for backup, he wouldn’t dare call Kuroo Tetsurou, would never dare to put Kuroo in any danger. This is a quest the valiant hero must complete on his own: a quest to protect the ones he cares about. The ones who have taken care of him throughout the years.

He pedals as frantically as possible. Yet again he’s grateful for Kuroo Tetsurou’s interference; without him, Kenma definitely would not be in shape enough to handle this trip. He pedals for what feels like centuries, the only sound besides that of the city around him the pounding of his own heart. Eventually, he gets outside of the city limits, and then suddenly he’s surrounded by millions of trees and darkness. Of course they’d set up camp in the middle of nowhere, Kenma thinks. He can feel his heart picking up, so he pulls out one of the breathing techniques Kinjo recommended for his anxiety. He can do this. He has to do this. He’s the only one who can, the only one who knows what Akiba is truly capable of.

He gets to an iron fence and throws Kuroo’s bike down into the grass. Thankfully, Bokuto is already there, and Shouyou, who thankfully hasn’t left Tokyo yet after Nationals, says he’s just a minute away. Kenma just stares at Bokuto, who shakes his head ruefully. “We gotta stop this, man,” Bokuto says. “I couldn’t stand it if they did that shit to more innocent kids.”
“I know,” Kenma says firmly. “And I think that we’re the only people who can put an end to this completely.”

“We’re really superheroes,” Bokuto says, his face far too happy for someone about to go on a life-threatening mission. Valiant heroes, Kenma thinks with a chagrined smile.

“I’m here!” comes another voice from behind. Shouyou’s panting desperately for air as he says, “Sorry, I ran as fast as I could!”

“Don’t worry,” Kenma says. “Bokuto, do you think you can break the fence?”

“Well, I can try,” Bokuto says with a salute. He steps forward, his hands gripping each side of the fence, and pushes with all his might against the bars. After a few seconds and a lot of sweat, they budge enough for them to be able to slip through. Bokuto grins. “Leave it to me!”

“Thanks,” Kenma says. “Okay, don’t go busting in just yet. Hopefully they didn’t imagine that anyone could get through this kind of a fence, but they might have some kind of security system. Give me a second.” Kenma reaches out with his mind, drifting into the building, and eventually he gets a hold of one of the people inside. He delves into their mind - immediately realizing that it’s a kid, one of the kids they’ve been experimenting on - and winces as he plunges through her memories of abuse, but maintains his hold. There’s nothing in her current thoughts about any kind of alarm or security breach. He breathes out, letting go of his hold, and barging into another person’s thoughts. This time it’s an employee - a fairly high-ranking one, it seems, and the images of the things that they’ve done make Kenma want to puke - but they don’t seem to have anything in their thoughts about a breach either. He gets the impression they’re in a meeting, too, which makes it all the more easy for them to break in now. He lets go. “We’re good,” Kenma says. “But we should stick together. On our own, I doubt any of us could do that well.”

“Okay!” Shouyou yelps. “Now can we go? I feel kinda sick thinking about all those kids in there! I want to get them out!”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Kenma answers, and they start their approach to the building. Both Bokuto and Shouyou have no idea how to be inconspicuous, it seems, because Kenma keeps having to hiss at them to stay down and not move too quickly.

“My only power is too flashy now,” Shouyou whines.
“Use it once we get in,” Kenma says.

They find an entrance around the back, guarded by a single security guard. Kenma glances over at Bokuto. “I’ll get his weapon,” he whispers. “You knock him out.”

Bokuto nods. Kenma reaches out, grabs the man’s weapon and sends it flying through the air. “Hey!” the guy yells. “What the hell?” Before he can look around any further, Bokuto jumps out from behind a tree and connects his fist with the man’s face, sending the man sprawled backwards against the wall.

“Hey hey hey,” Bokuto says quietly, crossing his arms across his chest. “I don’t like violence, but that felt kinda good.”

“Let’s go,” Kenma mutters. They slip in through the door, and the hallway they arrive at first is all but empty. Kenma shakes his head, whispers, “Let’s keep going. We’re looking for the final boss here, Akiba. The minor bosses don’t matter.”

“Final boss?” Bokuto repeats.

“Like in a video game!” Shouyou says enthusiastically. “That’s so cool!”

Unfortunately, the emptiness doesn’t last long. When they come to the next hallway, some assistants in white coats stare at them. “Who are you kids?” one of them asks, sounding baffled. “You’re gonna be in so much shit for getting out of bed—“

Kenma has to think fast. Sending entire humans flying uses way too much of his stamina, which he still hasn’t built up to the level that he wants to, and he still doesn’t really want to kill anyone, so instead he moves just the head of one of them, knocking it against the wall. Another one of them steps forward, mouth twisted into a scowl. “You kids are gonna pay for this,” he hisses. “You really think you can take on this entire facility?”

Bokuto steps in, his punch sending the man flying backwards. “I do!” Bokuto chirps. “It’s not like it’s impossible or anything!”

“Yeah!” Shouyou says, zipping around another doctor and sending them sprawling to the ground. “Nothing’s impossible when you’re a superhuman!”
They might be lacking in the intelligence department a little bit, Kenma thinks, but there’s not anyone else he’d want on his team. Well, beyond one person that he will never, ever put into this kind of danger.

Someone steps forward, a firearm in their hand, and fires off a bullet headed directly for Bokuto’s head. Kenma instinctively reaches out and sends it flying into the wall. The person gasps. “Wh-what the hell are you?”

The corner of Kenma’s mouth twists up. “A monster that you idiots created,” he says. “And now you’ll finally have to deal with the consequences.”

They head down the hallway, Bokuto throwing punches left and right, Kenma sending objects towards any of the employees he can, and Shouyou keeping watch to ensure that they don’t accidentally harm any of the children. At the end of the hallway, they come to a room with a big, dark door. “This has gotta be important,” Kenma mutters to himself.

“Then let’s go in!” Bokuto cheers, sending a strong kick to the door before Kenma can tell him to stop. Immediately, a red light starts flashing, a robotic voice chanting “Unauthorized Entry” over a loudspeaker.

Kenma groans. “This is what I was afraid of.”

“Well, we’re in,” Bokuto points out, motioning to the open door. Both he and Shouyou start to skip into the room before Kenma can say anything to stop them. Sighing and shaking his head, Kenma gives in and follows suit.

The room is dark, a bunch of cribs lining both sides of it. The cribs are filled with children: children of all different shapes, sizes, and each wailing at the top of their lungs, though it can hardly be heard over the sound of the alarm. There are IVs tucked into the arms of all of the children, an oddly colored liquid that Kenma’s sure isn’t water flowing into their bodies. It hits Kenma all at once. “These are the experiments,” Kenma whispers, running a hand through his hair. “This… this was us.”

“But none of them have weird hair,” Bokuto points out. “Or weird eyes.”

“They must be a side effect of the experiments,” Kenma says thoughtfully. “But if they don’t have
“That they’re normal now?” Shouyou pipes up.

It all comes crashing down on Kenma, and, as if on cue, he hears, “You got me,” from behind him. They all turn around as quickly as possible to see Akiba beaming at them. “I’ll admit when we got a security alert, I didn’t expect it to be you, K3734. I was hoping you’d be smart enough to stay as far away from here as possible. And I didn’t think these two boneheads would be able to bust in here, either. They certainly weren’t programmed for intelligence.”

“Hey, you take that back,” Shouyou mutters grumpily.

“Why do you have normal children here?” Kenma hisses.

“Well, it’d take a lot more money to grow children from scratch, funding that we certainly don’t have,” Akiba says. “But there are some children in our society that no one notices. Kids that are born to parents without many resources, born in the gutters, kids that were born to be nothing. So we remove their families and do society a service by taking them in. It benefits both them and science, don’t you think? They were never going to have good lives anyways.”

“And what, you think this is a good life?” Kenma says. “Traumatized kids, being trained to be weapons and probably die in the field? Never getting to live normally?”

Akiba sighs. “What would you know about a normal life anyways, you cold-hearted freak?”

“Well, that’s just not true,” Shouyou butts in. “Kenma’s not cold-hearted at all! I think he’s nicer than a lot of the people I know, like our setter! He’s totally normal, or so they say, but he’s so rude and mean-spirited sometimes! But I mean, Kenma’s a normal guy, he has friends and a volleyball team and-“

“A volleyball team?” Akiba stares at Kenma. “Well, I certainly know that you weren’t programmed for athleticism.”

“His team made it to Nationals!” Shouyou says, and Bokuto hits him lightly on the shoulder.
“Ah, yes, it must be that policeman’s mutt,” Akiba says, lip curling up. Kenma does his best not to react to Kuroo Tetsurou being spoken of in such a way, but something about his expression must give him away, because the smirk shows up again. “Oh, what, has the monster developed actual feelings for the ‘prince’? What, do you actually think he cares about you? That you could actually care about him? You weren’t programmed for that. You’re nothing but a shell of a human.”

“I’m human,” Kenma grits out. “I was one of those children, wasn’t I? One of the babies you snatched off the street?”

“Yes, of course, all of you were, but that’s no matter,” Akiba says. “We broke you. Caused you to experience the worst of situations and feel nothing through them, messed with your heart rate, never helped you to properly identify things, never allowed you to have human connections. By all means, you shouldn’t be able to feel.”

“Well, isn’t that ironic,” Kenma says darkly. “Because right now I’m pissed as hell. I had parents. What the fuck did you do to my parents?”

Akiba grins. “They weren’t necessary.”

“Who gave you the power to decide what’s necessary?” Kenma hisses. His powers are growing without his permission, extending to the world around him, picking up the tools on the tables next to the babies, parts of the wall, anything he can reach, all of them twirling in a circle about Kenma’s head. “Who died and made you God?”

“Kenma,” Bokuto says, appearing by his side. “Kenma, it’s okay -“

“It’s not okay,” Kenma says. “She’s a murderer. A real shell of a human. A monster. She made me this way. She ruined me -“

“You’re not ruined!” Shouyou interrupts.

“I’m going to make her pay,” Kenma says, and he doesn’t recognize his own voice. His powers are intensifying; he can feel the whole world around him spinning, but he doesn’t know what exactly he’s doing. It feels like he’s lost his grip on reality, on humanity. “She’s going to pay. You’re going to pay for what you’ve done, you evil -“
“Kenma!” Shouyou yells above the roar of the debris around them. “Please! You can’t do this! This isn’t who you are! You’re not a monster, you’re a good person, and you’re going to destroy everything! And… Kuroo wouldn’t want you to!”

Kuroo. Kuroo, Kuroo, Kuroo. You are the most human person I know. You aren’t a monster. You’re a genius. Nekoma’s brain and heart. His words echo in Kenma’s head, just the reminder of them significantly decreasing Kenma’s rage. He keeps them on repeat, holds them closer to his heart, until they’re what’s pumping through his veins. He concentrates on slowing his breathing down, using the breathing exercises that have been drilled into his head. He can’t become a monster. He can’t destroy everything he’s worked so hard to build up.

When his vision clears, the room is in total chaos, the sound of crying babies ringing in the air. In front of him, Bokuto has Akiba restrained. There’s blood staining both of their faces, pouring from cuts on their heads. Kenma clenches his hands into fists. “Did I do that?”

“It’s no problem, bro!” Bokuto says with a smile. “Barely even hurts!”

“But I hurt you,” Kenma points out.

“It’s okay, I know you didn't mean to this time!” Bokuto says. “And I know you're gonna get better control of your emotions in the future! But, uh, she’s kind of squirming a lot, so maybe someone can go get the police…?”

“On it!” Shouyou says, darting out the door at the speed of light.

“What?” Akiba taunts, still looking too confident for someone who’s been defeated. “You’re not going to kill me?”

Kenma shakes his head slowly. “If I did that, I’d be just as bad as you.”

Kozume Kenma is human. He is 100% human, a human who has been pushed to his limits, tortured to the point that he’d imagined there was no repair. He’s been pumped full of nasty chemicals. his body forever changed, molded into someone with powers of someone else’s design. Still, though, he is human, and he is not broken. He will not break. He will adhere to his moral compass, to what makes him who he is. To do that, he knows, he has to walk away from here with no blood on his hands.
The exhaustion only hits him when the police come flooding in. He falls to the ground as officers surround Akiba, surround all of the babies, hurriedly taking them outside one at a time. He feels a hand fall on his shoulder. “We could’ve handled it,” comes a deep voice.

“I wanted to make sure she was caught this time,” Kenma answers sullenly.

“Ye of little faith,” Kuroo Hachiro chuckles. He reaches down and scoops up Kenma into his arms, just like the first time that he’d taken Kenma out of the laboratory, brought him into an entirely new world. “Hold on tight. I’m gonna get you out of here.”

As Kenma fades out into exhaustion, he barely hears Kuroo Hachiro say, “You know, Tetsurou’s pissed as hell.”

He wakes up in Kuroo Tetsurou’s bed.

He can tell within seconds that it’s not his - the texture is all wrong, the scent is all Kuroo. He groans mentally. He’d been kind of hoping to have some time to himself to prepare before he gets confronted with an angry Kuroo. Surely enough, a voice comes from the other end of the room. “I know you’re awake.”

Kenma gives a long sigh. “I’m asleep, actually.”

“Yeah, nice try,” Kuroo says, his voice not at all masking his anger. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Seriously? God, Kenma. Do you even think for a second before you do things?”

“It worked,” Kenma grunts out.

“It doesn’t fucking matter if it worked,” Kuroo says. “You put not only yourself in danger, but Bo and Shrimpy too. Did you think about that? Did you even care?”

“What was I supposed to do? Just sit by and let her keep doing things because it was ‘too dangerous’ for the police to raid?”
“It was too dangerous because they didn’t want to unintentionally harm any of the children by rushing in too fast, idiot.”

“D… did I hurt any of the children? I didn’t mean to—“

Kuroo sighs, leaning back against the wall. “Well, no. Not seriously, at least. But you very easily could have. Bokuto told me about what happened, about how you almost lost control. And just that took so much out of you. Imagine if you’d kept going.” His voice takes on an edge that Kenma doesn’t recognize. “God, Kenma. You could have died. You were this close to it. And you left me behind. I…” His voice chokes. “I don’t know what I would do without you, okay?”

“I’m sorry,” Kenma says, his voice hoarse.

“I’ve lost too many people already. I’ve lost my grandmother, my mother, and if I lost you… I’d… I can’t even imagine. You could have died,” Kuroo continues, “and I never would’ve gotten to tell you that… that I…”

“That you what?” Kenma says. He can feel his heart pounding loud in his ears. This has suddenly taken a turn that Kenma doesn’t understand, a tone that is all too similar to all the things Kuroo’s done that he doesn’t understand, the one secret that Kuroo has been consistently keeping from him. He so desperately wants to know what it could be that’s kept Kuroo at a distance lately.

It’s not at all what Kenma expects.

“I love you,” Kuroo whispers, and then, a little bit louder, “I am in love with you, Kozume Kenma. So, so in love with you. And I don’t know what the hell to do about it.”

Kenma’s entire world stops.

Kuroo… loves him? Is in love with him? Kenma doesn’t understand. This doesn’t make any sense in the least. Kenma is not the type of person that people fall in love with. He’s not broken, but he is damaged, even still. The idea of anyone… falling for him is so ludicrous that he can’t believe it. He chokes out a, “What? You can’t… Kuro, I… there’s no way.”
Kuroo shakes his head and smiles ruefully. “This is as serious as I’ll ever get. Besides, if you don’t believe me…” He exhales sharply. “Read my mind.”

“R-read your mind?” Kenma repeats, eyes wide. “I can’t do that.”

“I’m giving you permission to,” Kuroo says. “No, scratch that. I’m begging you to. Please, Kenma, please. Just… see.”

Kenma makes eye contact with Kuroo to see if this is what he really wants, and surely enough, he sees nothing but pure honesty in his eyes, pure willingness. This is what Kuroo wants. And so, reluctantly, Kenma pushes in.

He sees himself, the first time he’d met Kuroo, dirty and gross but somehow still adorable, eating pie with Kuroo. He sees himself attempting to play volleyball with Kuroo back in the day. He sees himself, firmly planted beside Kuroo at every single opportunity. And, more recently, he notices the shade the memories have begun to take, colored in warmth and affection so strong it nearly knocks the breath out of Kenma. He sees a million clips of him smiling, feels the way that Kuroo’s heart nearly bursts when Kenma thanks him for everything. He sees Bokuto in front of him as Kuroo says, “What do you do when you fall in love with your best friend?” and Bokuto says, “I don’t know, man, but let me know when you figure it out.” And the thoughts that are there - Kenma, my everything, I swear to you that I love you more than anything in this world- he can’t take it. He releases, his breath coming far too fast.

“See,” Kuroo says. “It’s the truth. It’s probably always been the truth, and it always will be the truth, because from the second you walked into the police office I knew I needed you in my life. And it’s okay if you don’t feel the same way. I just… almost losing you made me realize that I wanted to take this chance.”

Kenma breathes in. How does he feel? He’s never thought about the possibility of the bond between him and Kuroo being something romantic, but that’s just because he’s never really thought all that much about romance. But he has been getting that fuzzy feeling in his stomach around Kuroo lately, and he wants nothing more than to see Kuroo smile, and he would stop the entire universe if it meant saving Kuroo. He would do anything for Kuroo. There’s always been something different between the two of them, something that certainly isn’t like the bond he has with his friends, with Shouyou or with Tora or with Bokuto or with Akaashi. And that’s when everything suddenly makes sense.

Kenma is very much in love with Kuroo Tetsurou, and he has been for practically forever.
“Kuro,” Kenma says, his voice quiet but strong. “I love you too.”

“Y-you what?” Kuroo stammers out, staring at him incredulously.

“I love you too,” Kenma repeats. “But that’s it, I’m not saying it again. It’s embarrassing enough already.”

Kuroo laughs, tears pooling in the corner of his eyes, and stumbles over to the bed Kenma’s laying in. Kenma’s seen enough of Kuroo’s cheesy romantic anime series to know what’s coming next, so he props himself up and lets Kuroo cradle his face almost reverently, his eyes still shiny. “Can I…?”

Kenma’s always been good at knowing what Kuroo’s thinking, so he nods and tilts his face up so that his lips can meet Kuroo’s. It’s Kenma’s first kiss. He’s aware that it’s supposed to be a big deal, an explosion of fireworks, but instead it just feels more like a slow burning in his stomach. His hands make their way into Kuroo’s hair as Kuroo kisses him softly, again and again, but Kenma pulls away when the tears start to roll down his face.

“Gross,” he says, wrinkling up his nose. “You taste salty.”

“You little shit,” Kuroo says, wiping his eyes and then rubbing his hands on Kenma’s face.

“You’re disgusting,” Kenma says, batting him away. “Stop it, you bastard-“

“Boyfriend privileges,” Kuroo says, beaming, and even though the context of the words is extremely annoying, Kenma feels his heart flutter in his chest.

“So you pull off a super badass move and then go home and get a boyfriend?” Shouyou whines into the phone. “Why can’t my life be that cool?”

“It’s not cool when your boyfriend is Kuro,” Kenma says, switching Shouyou over to speaker so that he can look at all the texts he’s receiving - mostly just excessive amounts of hearts from
“I mean, he’s a little scary but also super badass, I think,” Shouyou says. “His hits are like *whoa* and like *bam* and his blocks are so *kapow!* Don’t you think?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, you should learn, so that you can teach your underclassmen to do them next year!” Shouyou says indignantly.

“I’ll try,” Kenma says, though he definitely won’t. “But thanks for coming, by the way, when I asked. It… I’m glad I had you for backup, and to stop me from… going crazy.”

“Of course, anytime!” Shouyou says. “It’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever done! Since being in the lab was really not cool, and living in the woods was kind of terrible. It’s nice to have something super awesome now!”

“That’s basically what Bokuto said too,” Kenma says, shaking his head. “You two are crazy. But… I appreciate you both a lot.”

“Yeah, we appreciate you too!” Shouyou says. “I’m just glad they left us out of the police report, because they might ban me from playing volleyball if they find out I have jumping powers and speed powers, y’know! Oh, have you told Nekoma yet? I think they’ll be the ones to go a little crazy.”

“Tora yelled for about an hour. I think Lev cried. Yaku and Kai threatened to beat up Kuro if he hurts me.”

“…aren’t they his friends?”

“Yeah. But they have to protect ‘Nekoma’s precious setter’. And also, I think that they know that… that Kuro would never hurt me. At least, not intentionally.”

“Kenma!” Shouyou squeaks. “That’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever heard!”
“Shut up,” Kenma grumbles. There’s a soft knock on his door, and Kenma sighs. “Speaking of Kuro, I think he just got here, so I’m gonna hang up now.”

“Bye, Kenma! See you soon!”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Kuroo walks in a second later, his face curving up into a smile, a real, bright, genuine smile, when his eyes finally find Kenma’s. “Hey, kitten.” Kenma doesn’t reply, just hoists himself up and walks over to Kuroo, letting Kuroo pull him into his arms. Kuroo presses a gentle kiss to the top of his head. “Tough day?”

“Just boring without you,” Kenma says. “It’s gonna suck, doing this every day next year.”

“I’ll come visit every chance I get,” Kuroo promises. “Besides, it’s only a year, right? And then we’ll be together again… I mean, if you want…”

“Are you asking me to come to college with you?”

“I.”

“Cause if you are, this is a stupid way to do it. Stop with the weird hints.”

“So high-maintenance, god. Fine. Kozume Kenma, light of my life, will you come to college with me after you graduate?”

Kenma laughs quietly, buries his head into Kuroo’s chest. “Where else would I go?”

“I love you,” Kuroo breathes into his hair, and Kenma holds on tighter.

Later that night, when they’re both curled up on Kenma’s bed, Kenma says, “Oh, that reminds me.
I’m human.”

“…yeah?” Kuroo says, raising an eyebrow. “We knew that already, did we not?”

Kenma sighs. “I mean, I saw the babies at the laboratory. I was normal, once upon a time. I was born to parents that weren’t well off, and the lab… they killed my parents and basically kidnapped me and did all sorts of shit to get me this way. I… I had parents, Kuro, I…”

“Kenma,” Kuroo says, wrapping his arms around Kenma and giving him a tight squeeze. “God, Kenma, I’m so sorry. I wish I could give you the life that you deserved, the life that those bastards stole from you. I’m so sorry.”

Kenma’s not okay. He’s still completely in shock about what he’s found out, still shaken from his encounter at the laboratory, still traumatized over everything that’s happened. But… but he has Kuroo, fully, now. He has his friends - real friends, his team, Shouyou, Bokuto, Akaashi. He has his therapist, who will help him work through it. He has his family: Kuroo Hachiro, Mitsui. He can get through this.

Speaking of Mitsui, she bangs loudly on the door. “You’d better be decent in there, or I swear -“

“Kenma, put your shirt back on,” Kuroo yells back.

Kenma squirms out of Kuroo’s arms so that he can kick at him. “Oh my god, you’re the worst,” he says fondly as Mitsui barges in, her arms crossed as she squawks about how she’s going to ban Kuroo from her house forever at this rate. Kenma just sits on the bed, his cheeks pink and smile wide. He’ll get through this.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is the last real chapter!
Thank you all so much for bearing with me and my slow updates. There's also an epilogue (which is what you'll see next, since I'll post them at about the same time), so I'll give my speech there, but thank you all so much for reading!! It's been a fun ride (and I hope this ending is satisfactory for all of you)! I know the dialogue gets a bit cheesy at the end there, but I hope you enjoy anyways!
“Hey, Captain.”

“Would you stop calling me that? It’s embarrassing,” Kenma complains.

“Is it so wrong to be proud of my boyfriend?” Kuroo asks, sounding positively affronted. “My boyfriend, the captain of the Nekoma team, which, under his leadership, is most certainly going to go to Nationals again…”

“I’m going to hang up,” Kenma threatens.

Kuroo laughs. “Okay, fine, fine. You’re as spirited as ever. Guess that means everything’s going well there?”

“Well, if you don’t count the first years. One of them has receives that are worse than Lev’s. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

“I shudder just imagining it.”

“Yeah, you should. How’s your team?”

“You know Bo, he’s his usual self - ups and downs, twists and turns. He asks about you all the time. Uh, Oikawa and Ushijima are making eye contact at least, now, though the captain is getting pissed that Oikawa’s having a hard time ‘syncing’ with Ushijima or whatever. Hopefully they’ll get there. The senpai are fine, mostly nice people, though they sure know how to put me in my place.”

“You need that sometimes,” Kenma says.

“I know, I know,” Kuroo says. “It’ll be better when you get here next year.”
“Like I’m gonna play at all with prodigy Oikawa on the team.”

“He’s got a minor knee injury,” Kuroo explains. “He can’t be playing all the time. We’re in desperate need of a good backup setter.”

“Then I’m afraid I don’t meet the qualifications.”

“Oh, shut up. Anyways, enough about volleyball-“

“I never thought I’d hear you say that -“

“Have you been going to therapy? How’s that going?”

“Yeah, of course I have been,” Kenma says. “Uh, it’s going well. I’m… coming to terms with the loss of my…. biological family, I guess you’d say. It’s weird to think about it as a loss, since I never knew them, but apparently it’s still normal to feel sad about it.”

“Course it is,” Kuroo says softly.

“She’s glad our relationship is going so well, though she’d like you to know that you’re very obvious and she figured out you were in love with me within a minute of you stepping foot into the office.”

“Fucking hell,” Kuroo groans. “That’s what she’d wanted to talk to me about after the session, but I thought I was doing so well at being inconspicuous for at least the first few minutes.”

“You’re terrible at that.”

“You didn’t figure it out, so I don’t wanna hear it.”

“Only because I knew absolutely nothing about romance and also I thought you were into women,
given that you had a girlfriend back in the day…”

“There’s a reason it didn’t last!”

Kenma smiles, and he can practically hear the smile in Kuroo’s voice as well. Even if Kuroo’s not physically here, just talking to him over the phone is enough to lift Kenma’s spirits, make him feel like he’s walking on air. “I haven’t had any nightmares recently, either. I think they’re getting better.”

“Good,” Kuroo says. “I’ll keep my phone on ringer every night, okay? So if you have a nightmare and you want to talk to me, just... please, please call me.”

“Okay,” Kenma agrees. “Same to you, though.”

Kuroo sighs. “I know.” Since the incident, as everyone refers to it these days, Kuroo’d had a few nightmares about Kenma dying, the kind that had him sitting up in the middle of the night, covered in sweat and tears and screaming at the top of his lungs. The first time he’d witnessed it, Kenma had felt his heart sink in his chest. It was awful seeing Kuroo like that. Even worse since it was because of him. But they’re starting to fade away too, Kenma thinks. “I’m gonna try to make it to the Karasuno match next weekend,” he continues.

“Okay,” Kenma says. “And I’ll come for the match in two weekends.”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Kuroo says. “Am I allowed to make one of those fan signs for you?”

“No. No. Absolutely not.”

“#5 will have you mesmerized when you look into those gorgeous golden eyes--“

“I’m going to tell them to ban you from the premises.”

“No one from Karasuno or Nekoma would have the heart!”
“The first years don’t know you.”

“Yes, but I’m sure you talk about me enough that they know all of my best qualities.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

“I do not.”

Kuroo laughs, his stupid, loud hyena laugh that Kenma hates that he finds endearing. “Sure, sure. I can’t wait to see you, by the way.”

“…me too.”

“Huh? What was that?”

“I said me too, and I’m not repeating it again.”

“Killjoy,” Kuroo says, his voice too soft. “I love you. So much. And you’re the best human being I’ve ever met.”

“I love you too,” Kenma says. “And, you know, you’re one of the best things about humanity. Third only to apple pie and hot chocolate.”

Kuroo laughs again. “You’re so annoying. I love you. Okay, I need to go to bed, and you do too. Don’t stay up playing video games, or I swear I’ll come track you down.”
“Is that supposed to be a threat…? Cause it doesn’t sound like a bad thing.”

“I’ll tell Tora on you.”

“Fuck. Fine. Okay.”

“Good night, Kozume Kenma. I’ll see you soon.”

“Night, Kuro,” Kenma says, and lets himself slowly fall into sleep, his chest still light, feeling as though there’s nothing in the world that could bring him down.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s the sappy epilogue that we’ve all been waiting for (and that Kenma deserved, tbh). I hope you all enjoy!
Please leave a comment to let me know what you thought :) Thank you all so much for reading and for your support once again!!!

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