Come Morning Light

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Summary

All in life will come and go. People and places will ebb and flow. Fate's dealt cards can't be foreseen. Safety is obsolete. When a nuclear blast on the island of Japan destroys all of the families and dreams within its radius, all that is left in the aftermath is to rebuild something - anything- out of the debris. Back to back, heart to heart, it's a long way up for the kids who have seen their lives go down in flames. But once at the top, for those who have made it, there is nothing left to do but admire the view.

In which all of the aspects of their future are uncertain, except for the fact that unity will always lead them home.

Notes
Not really a songfic (of "Safe and Sound", performed by Taylor Swift). I just wanted to indulge in some nice Karasuno family apocalyptic survival world AU stuff. I like the Karasuno boys. And nuclear apocalypses.

No ships, really, except maybe a little further on in the story a couple of the ones tagged? But there isn't gonna be any overt romance in this story because I want to investigate family dynamics and individual characterizations.

Warnings at the beginning of every chapter needing a warning!

Please enjoy our lovely crow family!
Chapter Summary

It was all gone in the blink of an eye, in a flash of fiery light, in the heat of an inferno burning down countless homes and countless lives. And yet, Hinata lived. Hinata lived, because he knew that the night is always darkest before dawn, and that even if his night lasted for years, he'd still have his family to light up his life through the hopeless moments.

Chapter Notes

I know this is a lot of Hinata-centric stuff right here, but the POV will probably cycle. Or at least, everybody will get their time in the spotlight somehow.

Warnings: Violence, minor character death, swearing, blood, medical things...

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Just close your eyes, the sun is going down."

But the sunset was blazing a violent, bloody red, the sun hidden behind all the smoke pervading the air. Were he to close his eyes now, he'd lose the only light left in this godforsaken world.

"You'll be alright, no one can hurt you now."

He wanted to believe her, pressed his ear to the closed door, desperately hanging onto every word that gently fell from her lips, her soothing voice weaving a lullaby that was nursing the cries of the little girl in the room. He wanted to believe her because there was nothing else he could believe in now.

"Come morning light, you and I'll be safe and sound."

He leaned away from the door, and put his back against the wall, hugging his knees and burying his face in them until fireworks exploded behind his eyelids. In the room, his mother was humming, and his sister's crying had finally gone silent. He wanted to cry as well. He wanted to be held and to be rocked to sleep to the sound of his mother's soothing voice. Even if it was trembling minutely, even when he heard her weary sigh and the bed creak as she got up to leave, even when she cracked the door open and looked down, her sunken gaze falling onto her precious, innocent son curled up against the wall, and even when she sat down next to him and gathered him in her arms, he wanted nothing more than to be told that he would be alright.

"Come morning light," his mother assured him in a breathy whisper, her words falling an ounce of
conviction flat away from being a promise.

And more than anything, Hinata realized, he wanted to believe her.

Hinata woke up to a loud noise booming in the distance. Groggily sitting up in his bed, he turned his eyes to the window, faint light filtering through the shutters.

Something welled up inside of him and he got out of bed, stumbling towards the window in mild disbelief. The morning light. His mother had promised.

Hinata opened the shutters, and his breath flew out of his body as if an explosion had rocked his entire system.

The night was alight with fire in the distance. In front of his very eyes, to another booming noise, closer this time, another pyre lit up spontaneously. And again, much closer, he recognized the train station in the distance going up in flames, momentarily blinding him. He shielded his eyes, throat dry, and his ears picked up the sound of an engine overhead.

Oh.

And he felt strangely at peace.

The next booming noise, close enough to make Hinata's head ring, preceded the light from a split-second. And Hinata stared in morbid fascination as the neighbourhood exploded, the blinding light rushing to end it for him as well.

He stared at the fiery inferno as it consumed everything, barely even felt the heat rushing against the window and shattering it, barely even felt himself be pushed and hit something solid, barely even heard the screams inside and outside the house, barely even heard the house creak and crumble and give in, barely even felt himself falling, and he closed his eyes.

He'd never see the morning light, perhaps, but at least now, he was safe.

The morning light reflected off his hair, greasy and dirty and matted with dust and blood and dirt, and yet it felt strange to feel the sun's warmth caressing his cheeks. There were no sounds, not even the sound of voices, nothing but the comforting crackling of a fire somewhere around him. For a moment, Hinata did not even feel alive.

And then, there was pain. Even before his vision flooded with light, his entire world went red with pain. And yet there was a weight on his chest, and the sobs that wanted to tear out of his mouth were caught underneath what he realized was a wooden beam sitting on top of him.

Hinata whimpered, finally having enough sense to look around him. He was lying uncomfortably on rubble, bricks and wood digging painfully in his back. He couldn't see anything past his chest, the wooden beam trapping him limiting his vision. He moved his arms experimentally, crying out softly when pain shot up his spine at the movement. Thankfully, nothing seemed broken. Or if there was, Hinata was too confused to realize it.

The blood on his hands was slippery as he tried to push the beam off of himself. It was thick and heavy and after several tries, Hinata felt like conceding. But then, if he gave up... he wouldn't be safe. His mother had promised...
His mother... Natsu...

"Mom?" he cried out weakly, struggling to push again. The beam creaked, and hope welled up inside of him. Holding his breath, he pushed harder, arms straining painfully until the beam budged a centimetre above him, and it was enough. Hinata slid himself carefully, the rubble tearing his back to pieces, arms trembling with the effort it took to hold the beam up until his head was out of the way. And then he let go, the beam falling back with a soft thud into the dirt. A cloud of dust stung Hinata's eyes, and he coughed, ribs aching at the action. He gave himself a moment of respite, waiting for the dust to settle, before sitting up.

He was mostly cut up and bruised, aching all over, and he finally took a breath as deep as the sharp pain in his ribs would let him, realizing that the blast must have thrown him under his desk or bed, and the furniture had taken the brunt of the collapse until it had given way and had gotten Hinata stuck under the beam.

But then, what about his family?

"Mom?" he called softly, trembling as he tried to stand. It took him a few tries, but once he did, he held on to a nearby pipe jutting out of the ground for support, swaying in place. "Natsu?"

Nobody replied. Only the crackling of fire did.

Hinata looked around him, and did not know how to react to the sight of his entire neighbourhood flattened, piles of flaming rubble marking places where lives had been built throughout the years. All gone. In the blink of an eye and in the literal heat of the moment. Gone.

And then, he saw it.

A patch of cream amongst the charcoal of his broken home.

And he prayed with unprecedented fervour that it was the remains of the living room couch stuck in between the rubble. A piece of marble counter or the porcelain of the bathtub or anything, anything but the strangely intact wrist and hand and fingers sticking out from under a large pile of smoking rubble, nails so impeccably manicured and limp and lifeless and skin soft, even in death.

Hinata knew this because he caressed the hand, held it reverently with his own calloused, grimy ones, bent to put the palm against his cheek and shivered at how cold and soothing it was on his fevered skin. A mother's touch never failed to comfort the troubled mind.

The early-morning light filtered through the dust floating in the air, breaking through the smoke of the dying fires that had burned so many lives to ashes.

And Hinata screamed.

..."..."..."..."..."..."..."

They later called this event "The Forty Fireworks", a sickeningly playful term given to such a sickeningly tragic night. Forty towns and cities of Japan, including the capital, seemingly chosen at random, had been reduced to rubble in one night, and millions of people had been killed in the span of a few hours. In the days that followed, over half of the several dozen millions of wounded died as well, from secondary effects of the blast, lack of resources, and environmental destruction. Aid flew in from other countries but the government itself was so torn up that close to none of the donated resources actually were put to use.

And amidst the nation-wide blackouts, the mass exodus towards rural areas and other countries, the
power struggle between the military and the government, and of course, the looming threat of more attacks from opposing countries, nobody thought to consider the misery of the individuals who had survived the entire ordeal.

Hinata stayed three days in the rubble of his home. Three days, he lay down by the untimely grave of his mother and sister and watched the sky, listened to the silence of the desolate environment around him and breathed as if it was the only thing he knew to do anymore. Occasionally, he'd blink, but no matter what time of the day it was, there never again felt like there was light.

On the second day, it finally rained, putting out the fires that were dwindling in intensity, and taking away all noise from Hinata's environment. It was strange that the orange-haired boy, all broken up and beaten to his knees, had simply watched the heavens drown out the earthly sorrows, and then had opened his mouth, as if by a mere reflex to stay alive. The dirty, ammonia-filled raindrops soothed his scratched throat as they slid down and kept him alive for another day.

Hinata kept staring and wondered why he was still trying.

On the third day, Hinata woke up to the first noise he'd heard since the rainfall. It was the sound of car engines and slamming doors, and immediately, he felt the foreign entities invade what had essentially been a graveyard and sanctuary for him all this time. And just as survival instincts had made him push the beam off, just as they had made him open his mouth for water despite having nothing to live for anymore, they now dictated that he stay where he was and didn't move.

The men had rough voices, perhaps in their middle-aged years, judging by the scratch in their tones. Or perhaps they were thirsty and weary and dead on the inside like everybody else, aged beyond their years.

The thought of young men and women brought a strange burning up into Hinata's throat, and he tried not to think of his friends. His friends, who were probably dead as well. Why was he the only one who was doomed to survive?

He closed his eyes and held his breath as a few of the men walked past what used to be his house. They were discussing something and swearing, complaining about the lack of resources fit for the taking, and Hinata slowly realized that there was no life anymore. There were no more societies and no more communities and only rag-tag bands of scavengers who struggled to survive until they fell over and died. In the span of a single night, a hardened and glorious nation had been wiped out, and its people, or whatever were left of them, had returned to the state of nature.

It was kill or be killed at this point, and yet, as the footsteps echoed away from his spot, Hinata wished he could find the courage to call them back and ask them to put a bullet in his brain.

But he didn't. His voice stayed captive in his larynx as the car engines were heard again, and the vehicles sped off. He was amongst the silence again.

And yet it felt wrong. After nearly three days of lying down and letting himself die, it felt wrong now to stand there and do nothing. Hinata had never been the kind to give up, not before, and not now.

His mother would have wanted him to live. She'd have wanted him to fulfill the promise she couldn't. Her hand, now pale and blue and cold and rigidly stuck in the rubble like a morose white flag strung up overhead was a sign that she had given everything to ensure her children's safety. And Hinata couldn't disrespect her sacrifice like that.

"I'm sorry, mom, Natsu," Hinata whispered, throat parched and eyes sunken as he took a whiff of the wet dirt under him one last time before beginning his painstaking ascension. First, he pushed himself
up, arms trembling, and then began to stand. His head spun, vision going black, and when it returned to him, it was blurred around the edges. Hinata's hand and legs trembled with the overwhelming weight of the promise he was carrying on his shoulder, and he took a tentative step forward.

The world did not end when he stepped away from his broken life. And so he took another step, and another, passed over the toppled kitchen table, went around the broken living room lamp, climbed over a mess of stone and wooden beams and when he finally stood at the top, he looked back down one last time.

His mother's hand was still there, and Hinata was still alive, and it felt like she was saluting his courage and waving him off on another one of his marvelous adventures.

"Thank you," Hinata whispered, and tore his eyes away, letting the light wash over his broken body before sliding down, towards the street.

He had one last thing to do before he died.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

It was harder than he anticipated. He lived in an area where hills were very steep and rather numerous, and his undernourished, dehydrated, wounded, weakened body could only do so much. He was lucky enough to have found solace in an old corner store, and had drank a warm sports drink that hadn't been scavenged yet off the floor. He spent the night there and set out again in the morning, glad to leave the stench of its old owner's decaying body behind.

He stuck to the alleys, freezing up at the slightest noise, but thankfully did not have any close encounters. Once, he heard a car coming down the street and threw himself flat on the ground, and the car drove right past him. He stayed there for twenty minutes, enjoying the coolness of the stone on his warm face, wondering what it would be like to waste away and die right there, before he stopped entertaining his fantasies and set out again.

It rained again the next night, and Hinata spent it huddling on himself under the holed awning of a fruits and vegetables store closer to the centre of the town. He was getting closer to his goal every day, but his body was letting him down even more every day. He was pretty sure that his cuts had been infected and that he was running a fever, and he probably had a concussion and cracked, if not broken ribs. And most of all, he felt weak and dizzy and ready to fall over and close his eyes and never have to get up again. But he pulled through. On the dawn of the sixth day, he set out, convinced that he would make it to his goal this time. His pace was agonizingly slow, and he had to stop many times, and get sidetracked to find some water before his body gave up entirely, but by the evening of the sixth day since his life crumbled to pieces, Hinata finally saw the light.

Looming at the end of the street was his salvation and his final resting place. The only place where he knew he'd feel safe and happy, and the only place that would soothe him and steal his worries and take away his pain as he laid down and waited with a smile on his face. A cold gust of wind blew, carrying the smell of smoke and decay with it, and Hinata shuddered, clutching his sweater's hood over his matted hair and quickening his pace. He couldn't wait to die.

Karasuno High was slightly beaten up, dark and windows broken, one part of it having seemed to have caught fire before the rain put it out. It felt eerie and devoid of life and yet Hinata could not have asked for more. He went around the school, life returning to his eyes more and more as he took wobbling steps towards the building behind it, the familiar sight of it making relief well up in his heart and tears in his eyes.

He finally felt like his journey had led him home.
And yet, all of it seemed like it had been stolen from him in the blink of an eye, like the explosion had done on that night, by the simple impact of a body against his. And part of Hinata wished, as he hit the rough ground harshly, that this time, he would stay dead.

His vision swam and his voice escaped him, the impact jarring his irritated ribs and making him breathless. There was somebody towering above him now, face hidden in darkness, and yet the baseball bat by his side was clear-cut. Hinata's eyes widened minutely, and he was overcome with a sudden sense of bitterness. That he would be stopped right before entering the gates of his grave was simply too cruel. He didn't want to do this anymore.

"...at...ng... ere..."

Hinata hadn't heard voices in so long. He wondered if he still remembered how to speak. The voice questioning him mercilessly belonged to the faceless man now pointing the bat at his face threateningly, and yet it seemed familiar somehow, like a warm hug.

But there would be no warmer hug than death at this point, Hinata was convinced of that fact.

"Who are you? What's your purpose here? Have you come to rob us? Damn it, answer me! You... you aren't dead, are you?" the voice questioned continuously, and Hinata figured he may as well indulge the man. At least one of them would go to sleep satisfied tonight.

"I..."

"Identify yourself!"

"I..." Hinata continued, having trouble breathing. "I... came here to die."

"What?" the voice suddenly backed off, and the bat was lowered. "What the fuck?"

Hinata wanted to laugh, but he couldn't even muster the energy. It was all gone. Everything.

"Oi, what... Who are you?"

There were hands on him, and Hinata did not even care enough to struggle. They fumbled lightly with his hood, trying to pull it down, and Hinata did not even complain when the person -so, so familiar, like the smell of home and the feeling of safety- tugged at his hair while bringing it down.

And there was a gasp.

"H-Hinata!"

That must have been his name. Probably. Did this guy know him? The orange-haired boy probably knew him, too. Somewhere. In the depths of his eclipsed mind, he probably did. But now...

"Oh god, I messed up. Oh god, hang on, hang on!"

There was no point in hanging on anymore, the boy wanted to say, eyelids drooping sluggishly. He wanted to sleep and never wake up.

"Damn it, Hinata, eyes open! Oh hell... Tanaka! Tanaka, I need help!" The hands turned him over on his back, and Hinata did not respond. Slowly, he was shutting down, and his eyelids slid shut over his dull, lost gaze.

A harsh slap to the face suddenly jolted him back, and Hinata glared lightly at the person above him. Soft, lovely, wide brown eyes were looking down at him, the rest of the features hidden under the
hood of the other person's jacket, and Hinata felt at ease with them. He perhaps did not recognize the person kneeling next to him, but he was glad that he was dying next to somebody he apparently knew once.

"Don't close your eyes! Hinata, I swear to god, stay awake! Stay awake... You're safe now. You're safe. You're safe..."

His mother had said that. Perhaps she hadn't been lying. It wasn't morning anymore, but the sun was dying now, and perhaps this is what she had meant by him being safe and sound in the end.

"Noya! What's going on?"

"It's Hinata! He's hurt, help me get him inside!"

"What!?" There was shuffling, and someone was tugging at his limbs. "Fuck, he's a mess... Oh god, what do we do?"

"Get him inside! Now!" the first voice responded, tone trembling. A hand was suddenly put on his forehead, cool and comforting, and it pushed all of his dirty hair out of his eyes. "Hinata... You're gonna be okay. We're going to take care of you."


He closed his eyes.

"Hinata! Shouyo! Don't do this! Shouyo, wake up!"

Hinata drifted off.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

It was cruel for heaven to look like the Karasuno gymnasium, Hinata thought as he opened his eyes to a familiar ceiling. Now he'd have to spend all of eternity remembering the life he used to have before he died. Perhaps he'd ended up in hell instead.

Slowly, testing himself out, he sat up, taking a deep breath to steady himself and regain his bearings. He couldn't remember how he died, or when that happened, but it was finally over, and Hinata could rest at ease.

But then... Why did his body still hurt all over if he was dead and hanging out in heaven now? And why the bandages everywhere? Couldn't god just snap his fingers and fix him?

"This sucks," he huffed, crossing his arms, and biting his lip to stifle a cry of pain. He breathed harshly through his nose until the sensation ebbed away and then carefully turned to sit on the edge of the bed. Then, he realized that he had a tube sticking out of his nose, and he cried out softly, touching it. It was taped to his nose and he had no idea why it was there, but he figured he'd ask when someone came around. Until then, he needed to know what was going on.

The soles of his naked feet were raw and hurt when he tried to stand up, and his knees buckled at first, but Hinata steadied himself with the bed and began taking a few steps around his little bedroom. Although that term was rather lightly used.

In reality, it was just a single mattress mounted on a metal bedframe, and a small table at the side. Curtains had been set up with poles and created two walls whilst the gym walls made up the corner
where the bed was pushed. It was a sweet little setup, and Hinata was grateful for the isolation.

But he needed to know what was going on.

Tentatively, he went for the curtain, and gently pushed it open. His eyes immediately fell on the scene in front of him, and his eyes widened.

He stood on the landing that ran above three sides of the gym, looking down on the court where he used to play volleyball with his friends. His hands tightened on the railing to steady himself, a sudden vertigo taking his entire body hostage, and his knees buckled. He held onto the rail for dear life until he could bear his own weight again.

The gym was mostly empty, although there was a small setup next to the back entrance to the gym that looked like a camping stove and some buckets of water. Plastic dishes were stacked on top of a table next to it, along with some other cooking utensils, and the whole setup looked like an improvised kitchen, and a pretty good one at that, too. If Hinata bent over the railing a bit, too – his ribs hurt like hell, nevermind-, he could see a small table with a laptop on it, some maps, and what looked like a battery-operated radio. There was a chest next to it and some chairs, and the amount of papers and pens strewn around the area made it look like it was often used.

He turned his attention to the top landing, noting that it had become something of a bedroom, for the most part. Sometimes separated by cardboard boxes, curtains or night stands, futons, mattresses, and clumps of blankets were lined up against the wall, some of them made up really nicely, others completely messy. Hinata chuckled at that. It made the whole setup look lived in, and strangely homey.

On the central stretch of the landing, where he was standing, there seemed to be a medical station, hence the isolated bed. There was a desk with some papers on it and pens, and then a bunch of medical equipment. Hinata could see disposable gloves, masks, bandages, antiseptic solution, and maybe a syringe or two. The rest of it was probably in the cardboard boxes stacked under the desk. Then, further away, there was a blue cooler, and next to it were some ripped grocery bags that obviously contained half-eaten food.

Hinata's stomach grumbled at that, and he made a move to go grab something to eat.

"Eh...? Hinata!"

At the sound of his name being cried out in such surprise, the short teen turned around to face the person who'd called him, the sudden movement almost making him lose his balance. He swayed on his feet, but thankfully, there was a reassuring grip on his arm before he could fall.

"Hinata, what are you doing? You're not well enough to be up. Go right back to bed, alright?" the person chided him gently, and a huge grin blossomed on Hinata's face.

Maybe... maybe being alive wasn't so bad after all.

"I'm so happy to see you, Suga," he beamed, and put his arms around the silver-haired third year. And Suga laughed and held him, and Hinata laughed and cried, because finally, finally, he was home.

Suga had picked up nursing, apparently, in the six days since the world went to hell. He'd taken textbooks and practically transported the school nurse's office to his little corner on the Karasuno gymnasium's landing and had poured everything he'd had into mastering skills necessary to take care
of his team. To Hinata's relief, Suga had informed him that most of the members of their volleyball team had gathered and had made it through thick and thin, only to set up base in the gym to try and outlast the storm.

But then, although he'd had a thousand and one questions to ask him, Hinata had been just too tired and had retired. Suga had come around with a stethoscope and a heavy-looking textbook and had done his best to give him a head-to-toe check-up according to the book's instructions. He then had skimmed over what he'd done for Hinata, and had told him that the tube, that they'd been using to feed him liquid foods while he was out for the past day, could come out now. Hinata didn't really fancy anything inside of him that didn't have to be, and agreed that Suga should take it out.

Once it was out, Suga told him that it was important that he drink lots of fluids to help ease his state of dehydration and malnutrition. If he didn't keep anything down, he'd have to get fluids intravenously.

But then, when Hinata looked down at his arms, both of which were mottled with bruises he didn't think he had before, he kindly refused Suga's offer to try and insert an IV (which had obviously turned out so well the last... fourteen times he'd tried?), and he promised to eat. Tomorrow.

Suga told him the team should be back from their daily raids for dinner soon, and that they'd be glad to see him, but Hinata was too tired to stay up. That isn't to say that he didn't try, but then at some point, his eyes slipped shut and he was gone.

"...Are you sure he'll be okay?"
"Well, you saw how we found Tsukishima, and he's okay now, isn't he?"
"B-But his wounds are so infected..."
"Let's do our best, alright?"

Hands and voices dragged Hinata out of his dreamless sleep, and he opened his eyes to the sight of Suga and Yamaguchi leaning over him.

"Ah, you're awake!" Yamaguchi gasped, stepping back before a smile dawned on his lips. "I'm so happy..."

"Yamaguchi bandaged your wounds when you got here, you know," Suga smiled. "He's the one to thank."

"For looking like a mummy?" Hinata chuckled, his ribs aching at the motion. He winced, and then smiled. "Thank you, Yamaguchi. I appreciate it."

"It's nothing at all. Suga's the one who calls the shots around here," the dark-haired boy chuckled sheepishly.

"But you did a good job, too. We're a team, and we're the ones who patch people up when they get hurt, so both of us have our roles to fulfill," Suga encouraged him, and then turned to Hinata. "Anyway, enough about that. How do you feel?"

"Better. Less tired. Kinda hungry," Hinata shrugged. "Sorry. I'm probably using up a lot of your supplies by just being here..."
"No such thing. We can always find more." But the sudden strain in Suga's smile didn't make him very credible on that. Guilt welled up inside of Hinata, and he looked down, ashamed.

"As soon as I get better, I'll help you guys find more stuff, okay? Promise," he whispered.

"Just get better, alright?" Suga's eyes darkened for a moment, but then perked right back up.
"Alright. Your vital signs still seem okay. You have a bit of a fever, but it should go down if you take care of yourself. Asides that, we'll have to see how you're fighting the infection, and hopefully, the next raid Daichi will coordinate will be in a pharmacy still stocked with antibiotics."

"Can I see the others?" Hinata asked, eager to get moving a little bit.

"They should be back any time now, so if you wait, I'll tell them to come see you."

"Can't I get up?" Hinata pouted, crossing his arms.

"Not yet. Gather some more strength. You can start walking tomorrow morning, if you feel up to it," Suga smiled, moving to the curtain and struggling a bit to pull it open entirely on both sides. Hinata got a view of the front entrance to the gym and smiled gratefully at Suga for his consideration.

"Thanks again, Suga. For everything."

"Not at all, Hinata," the vice-captain of the volleyball team assured him, and then his expression turned wistful. "Some horrible, horrible things have happened to all of us, and when there is nobody else, we have each other. And we have to stay together because there's nothing else in the world more valuable than us."

The two first-years nodded silently at that. Hinata, mostly because he couldn't get a sound out of his throat at the thought of his mother's body still buried underneath all that rubble. Suga was right. He had nobody but the team now. They were his family.

Suga and Yamaguchi seemed to notice the haunted look in his eyes and shared a glance. Then, the older teen stood back and motioned to the younger.

"Come, Yamaguchi. We have to do medical inventory before the others get here."

"Yeah," the younger nodded curtly, heading for the desk and sitting on the floor.

"Tell me if you need anything," Suga nodded to Hinata, and then joined Yamaguchi at the desk. The two began checking the inventory of their cardboard boxes, and Hinata left them to it.

For a while, he closed his eyes and listened to the ruffling of equipment in the boxes and the occasional comment made by one or the other of the improvised medics. His heart warmed at the thought of Suga, ever-so-caring Suga, volunteering all of his time and energy taking care of others. And Yamaguchi, shy and quiet Yamaguchi, working hard to save other people's lives... it really was incredible.

He wondered what the others were up to.

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The front entrance to the gym slammed open, startling Hinata right out of his shallow slumber. Suga and Yamaguchi, who were studying some nursing textbook or another together, stood up to look over the railing, and Hinata tried to lean as much as he could to take in as much of the scene as he could.
"Bow down before our skill!" A familiar voice echoed across the gym, and a large grin split Hinata's face.

"Behold!" The second voice added in, and Hinata outright laughed when Tanaka picked Nishinoya right off the floor, the latter brandishing a pack of toilet paper as if it were a gold ingot into the air.

"The almighty saviour of our asses, literally!" Noya exclaimed, sounding so convinced in his own speech that Hinata couldn't help but have tears in his eyes at the sight of the familiar ridiculousness of his two senpai.

"You're so crude and loud. Put that down," an exasperated voice came after them, and Hinata did not even need to see to know that it was Tsukishima, apathetic as ever.

"Don't you understand? My butt can't take any more towels!" Tanaka sobbed dramatically, putting Nishinoya down.

"Noya, Tanaka, you're embarrassing..." Asahi's gentler voice muttered as the ace walked in, carrying a backpack that looked rather heavy. He dropped it in the middle of the gym, next to Nishinoya's prized toilet paper rolls, and sighed. "Honestly..."

"Asahi is right, the familiar, comforting, commanding tone of their very own captain rang out as Daichi strode in, carrying a backpack as well. "Just because the world is ending, it doesn't mean you can be so crude."

"Lighten up, captain. Today was a good raid, after all," Noya grinned. "Let's have a feast tonight!"

"Agreed. I'm starving," Tanaka complained, flopping down on the gym floor and dropping his baseball bat next to Noya's.

"You two are going to doom us all, you know," one last voice rang out before the double doors closed and the chains around the handles were locked, and Hinata's heart positively leapt out of his throat. "With your appetites, we'll be running out of rations in no time!"

And he was on his feet before he knew it, covers thrown off and completely disregarding Suga's instructions because he was so happy, so, so happy that everyone was alive.

A debate had sparked on the floor below, and Hinata didn't care. He was flying again, soaring above the clouds where no pain could touch him and no sadness could rob him of this one moment when, standing in the light, he finally felt like he was safe and sound.

His knees buckled under his weight as he ran to Suga's side, and thankfully, the third-year was astute enough to catch him before he fell again.

"Hinata!" he chided, straightening him up, but nothing could wipe away the bright, sunny smile on his face.

All heads turned up to the landing at the sound of his name, and all eyes, without exception, went to his smile.

"Hinata!"

"Kouhai!"

The collective cry tumbled out of everybody's lips -even Tsukishima looked astonished, what a surprise-, and Hinata's cheeks hurt from how hard he was grinning.
"Idiot!" One cry towered above all others, and Hinata looked at Kageyama, who looked absolutely pissed and yet absolutely relieved to see him on his feet. "You stupid, stupid idiot!"

And Hinata laughed, and laughed, and though he wanted to welcome them back, all that came out of his mouth was a bright and unintentionally uplifting "Welcome home!".

...-...-...-...-...-...-

Home was imperfect.

Its inhabitants didn't always get along. The electricity sometimes went out and they'd have to have cold showers for days. When food ran out, they'd go to sleep to the lullaby moaned by their collectively empty stomachs. They couldn't turn on the lights due to a fear of being spotted at a distance and had to make good use of the daylight, and dragged black cloth over the windows at night. Sometimes, people disagreed on who got the night watch shifts. Other times, people disagreed on raid parties.

Sometimes, people cried. Sometimes, people bled. Sometimes, people were so afraid that they would wake up screaming in the night, and everyone else would pretend they didn't hear them sobbing quietly into their pillow. Sometimes, people came close to giving up. Sometimes, people did.

And yet Karasuno stood strong and towered over the challenges set in their path. Best of all, Karasuno succeeded. They trampled over obstacles, helped each other over the walls blocking their way and kept one another alive.

And through the dark, cold, terrifying nights where survival was put into doubt, there was always the mute reassurance that whether they lasted to see the morning light or not, they would do it together.

Karasuno was imperfect, but Karasuno was home. And when the sun shone through the dark clouds to wake them up in the morning, if there was no joy in living, there was always joy in being together.

Chapter End Notes

Medical notes: What Suga put into Hinata's nose is a nasogastric tube (nose to stomach). It's actually pretty easy to insert, so he could do it if he knew the theory. Although NG tubes need to be used to administer prepared feeds only, Suga obviously doesn't run a hospital, so I imagine they injected cold chicken noodle soup and diluted juice or diluted, mashed up food into the tube. It's not the intended use, but... you gotta make do! As for IVs, they're also easy to set up once you've got the catheter in the vein, and the types of solutions to infuse are pretty easy to understand, but venipuncture (the process of piercing the vein to insert the catheter) is suuuper hard, especially if the person has difficult veins. So no wonder Hinata had bruises all over his arms from failed IV insertions. Baby.

So the verse is kinda... vaguely defined. It's a modern-day thing when Japan has a non-specified enemy they're at war with and the enemy bombarded cities and towns off the map to demoralize the people? But instead, what they achieve is mass panic and total disarray. Japan's total population is 127 million people, and I imagine that with all the fatalities in the week following the Forty Fireworks, maybe a little less than half of the population died or moved out of the country.
The offensive wasn't nuclear just yet, but it's coming! Also, if I could come up with a scientific rationale to include zombies, would you like that? Or would you rather I keep it a nuclear apocalypse!verse?

And please someone tell me what colour Yamaguchi's hair is oh my god. Wiki says black, brown, or evergreen, but seriously. What.

And one last thing: I'm not gonna use Japanese honorifics in this fic. IDK. It just doesn't sound right to include random bits of Japanese (I'm already having trouble with kouhai and senpai haha) throughout an English text. Sorry if that's a bother!

Hope you enjoyed! I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts about this AU. I like it so far! And I definitely want to write more. Please feel free to leave a comment!

~GiveMeLibertea
Close your eyes and filter out the sights and sounds of this world on fire. Let it bleed and hold my hand, because if the Captain says that things will be fine, then they will be.

Finally getting into the actual apocalyptic setting this chapter! Yaaassss!

Last chapter was a lot about Hinata, and now it's from Daichi's (and Suga's) point of view. But again, there's a bit of everybody.

I hope I didn't write these kids too OOC. I'm trying to adapt their personalities to how they'd cope in an apocalyptic world and IDK. I think they wouldn't be able to adapt as well because they're strong and united, but they've also never been so alone (without adults I mean) to face their struggles. So now they're trying to be adults when 2 months ago they were simple kids.

Warning: violence, some graphic imagery towards the very end, off-screen minor character death.

Please enjoy!

"We're not going to make it, are we?"

The question was whispered softly, as if it hadn't even been meant to be verbalized, and yet Suga caught it and turned around. Daichi was leaning on the railing, looking down at the rest of the team who were either loafing around or half-heartedly passing each other a volleyball. The slackness in their movements betrayed the exhaustion that had resulted from their day and the accumulation of all the others before that, and Daichi wondered if playing volleyball in that fashion was lowering their morale rather than boosting it.

None of them had properly indulged in their favourite passtime since, two months ago, the country went to war and the world went to hell. Even bright, energetic Hinata looked too tired for a kid his age, even if all of his visible injuries had healed in the past three weeks he'd spent in their safe house.

"I feel like we're just pretending to keep it together," he added after a moment's thought, and sighed. "What do we know about survival? Most of us are not even legal yet. We don't have a single adult amongst us to help us through this. The authorities aren't coming for us. We're doing a rush job of patching up all the holes in our fragile plans and I know it's going to come falling apart sooner or later."

Suga thought about these things, too. A lot, in fact. As the third oldest person in their group, he felt
responsible for the others, and feared every single day for their safety. But the fear of loss was something he'd learnt to cope with after they'd received Tsukishima amongst them, four days after the destruction of the town. Then, he'd taught himself that fear of loss was not an obstacle, but something to motivate him to work harder.

"We'll be fine," he mumbled in reply, getting up from his chair and slowly walking towards Daichi. The words sounded like lies, but not entirely. That had to count for something, at least. "We've made it this far, haven't we? It's almost been a month since the Forty Fireworks, and we're all still alive. Roughed up, tired, maybe a little bit hopeless, but we're alive." Suga leaned over the railing, his arm just barely touching Daichi's in a silent gesture of comfort. "We're alive, and... we're still together," he added as an afterthought, and a small smile tugged at his lips. It suddenly felt more important not to be alone than not to be dead.

"You've always read the atmosphere so well. You should lead us instead," Daichi murmured, his lips answering Suga's smile with a smile of his own. And yet, his was sad as he watched Nishinoya purposely miss a ball, too exhausted to dive for it. "I'm not fit to lead. One day, I'll make the wrong choice and the consequences might kill you and the guilt might just kill me."

"You've always been our pillar of strength, Dai." Suga waved down at Hinata, who was waving up at them with the tired smile he always seemed to wear these days. "And you've never let us down. I don't think you ever would, no matter what you did."

"Captain!" Hinata yelled. "Suga! Do you want to play a 3 versus 3 with us?"

"I hardly think any of us have energy for something like that, Hinata," Suga laughed, but leaned away from the railing. "How about we just do some light drills?"

"Yeah!" Hinata nodded fervently, and Daichi admired his energy and optimism despite all that had happened. Hinata seemed to have recovered fully from his traumatizing ordeal, even though anyone could guess that he would never forget the nightmarish days he passed by his family's grave, and the captain wondered if perhaps he, too, could muster that kind of optimism to motivate his team.

His team. His people. His family.

"I'm coming," Suga called down to Hinata, and then turned to pat Daichi's arm comfortably. "Don't put yourself down. You know everybody looks up to you and believes in you entirely. This isn't pressure put on you. On the contrary, it's a load off your shoulders, because we'll definitely have your back, no matter what."

And he started walking away.

"I suppose I shouldn't disappoint, then," Daichi muttered softly, more to himself than anybody else, and whether Suga heard him or not, he still did turn to read the flickering hope in his eyes.

"We all believe in you. When things go wrong, you always tell us it's going to be fine, and everybody believes you because if our captain said so, then it must be so."

For a second and a half, Daichi believed him entirely.

..."..."..."..."..."..."..."

Daichi had never ever in his entire 19 year-old life been at a loss of what to do like he was at a loss now.

But then again, never in the span of his 19 year-old life had he had the lives of 9 other people quite
literally in the palm of his hands.

He wanted to say that he was too old for this shit, but in reality, he was too young. Too damn young. All of them were.

"Find the near-ssssshhh... basemen-shhhh... hide and pray-shhhhhhh-"

"Damn this useless piece of junk!" Nishinoya raged once more, thumping the battery-powered radio that was currently reading off their collective death warrant.

"To all survivi-sshhhhhhhh... There is-sssshhhh... no hope-"

"That's enough," Daichi turned the radio off completely, and he'd be lying if he said that his trembling fingers didn't fumble with the knob for a second before all sound filtered out of the gigantic room.

The team hardly even breathed at this point.

"We're all going to die," Nishinoya finally stated as if it was something inevitable. And the fact that nobody answered proved that they believed it, too.

"It's probably some dumb announcement from some guy thinking he's like in a video game, broadcasting on an AM station during the apocalypse," Tsukishima growled, but there was no bite to his words.

"He's been our rare source of information so far, and it's all been correct until now." Suga's eyes were on the radio, his eyes dull as he lost himself to his thoughts.

"But he's based in Tokyo. Maybe it doesn't concern us?" Hinata tried meekly, and it was so incredibly obvious that he didn't even believe himself.

"Tokyo isn't that far from here. A nuclear explosion that would affect Tokyo in any way would affect us here, too," Asahi murmured, eyes downcast.

"Well, they didn't specify that Tokyo was the target! Maybe they're way off. Maybe the bombing is going to happen somewhere on Hokkaido, even, so we won't even be bothered by it," Yamaguchi tried again, and Daichi dimly noted that it was the most the boy had spoken in days. Shame it had to be about a topic like this.

"We don't know anything, though. Better safe than sorry," Kageyama butted in, strangely level-headed and focused, his gaze scouring the map of Japan that was stuck on the wall next to the command centre with duct tape. "We don't even know what kind of weapon they're planning to use."

"What if it's a huge explosion that'll destroy the entire island?" Hinata blanched suddenly. "We'll sink into the sea if that happens!"

A round of chuckles flitted across the small crowd, but it was uncomfortable, and the tension withstood the small relief brought by the orange-haired boy's antics.

"So... What's the plan, Captain?" Tanaka asked, and all eyes turned to Daichi, who suddenly felt sick from all the attention he was getting. He didn't want the burden of leading these people, who meant so much to him, into the jaws of death.

"I... I think... We should pack up supplies for a few days and hide in the maintenance hallways under
the school. At least until we're cleared." His voice was fighting a war against the ball in his throat, but somehow, he managed to choke that out. "We're better safe than sorry, like Kageyama said."

"That doesn't make any sense," Tsukishima objected. "The maintenance hallways aren't meant for use over an hour or so, much less for living in!"

"This entire world isn't meant for living in anymore, Tsukishima," Tanaka grunted. "Dunno if you've looked outside the window lately."

"I know exactly where we stand."

"Please, Tsukki. Don't fight!" Yamaguchi set a hand softly on Tsukishima's arm, only to have it pushed off.

"I'm just trying to say that I went there once to hold the ladder for the janitor while he checked for a leaking pipe and I couldn't stand being in there for fifteen minutes." His lip curled in disgust.

"Tsukishima is right." To everyone's surprise, it was Kageyama who spoke up, although the familiar sight of anger etched into his features was a reassuring constant. "Just this once. Those hallways are dark, tight, mouldy, humid, dusty, full of spider webs, and just generally in really bad shape. We wouldn't be able to survive in there."

"What else are we supposed to do!?" Nishinoya bit back. "Just sit here and wait to die?"

"Well... if that place is as unsanitary as they describe... We'll all get sick and wreck our lungs and it won't help us any more than being, well..." Asahi trailed off quietly, his stomach roiling at the thought of what awaited them on the surface, or below it. Both options were highly unpleasant.

"Alright, so we'll sit here and die," Nishinoya clicked his tongue, glaring at Asahi as if he was the one at fault. "Best plan I've heard yet."

"What is wrong with you?" Tsukishima raised a brow. "You're so stubborn, it's annoying. I'm being logical here-"

"Logical!! That's funny!"

"Suga-senpai!" Hinata suddenly cut through the argument that was slowly escalating. All eyes went to him, and then to Suga, who hadn't spoken at all.

"What is it?" Suga asked as calmly as ever.

"What's your opinion?" Hinata asked, and suddenly his voice hushed, as if he was afraid, and hanging onto the next words with an almost religious fervour.

"Well..." Suga closed his eyes, and everyone was surprised to see him smile softly. "I suppose we'll have to trust our captain one more time. He's never made any bad decisions before and I don't believe he'll start now, when it matters the most. I trust that we will be safe if our captain says it will be so."

There was a silence again, and people shifted awkwardly. And slowly, as the tension that was so palpable in the air began to dissipate, Daichi finally breathed a sigh of relief and thanked whatever god still existed out there for Suga's existence.

"Alright, so let's get some basic stuff for a few days down there," he began talking, and was glad to see that all eyes were on him, though there was nothing but defeat in all the gazes upon him. "Suga,
bring our most needed medical supplies down there. Kageyama described the place as mouldy and damp, so let's take the environment into consideration."

"Of course. I'll definitely pack some vitamins for while we're down there," Suga nodded.

"Alright then. Tanaka, take Yamaguchi and pack non-perishable food for all of us for... 3 days."

"Yes, captain," Tanaka nodded, then motioned to Yamaguchi. "Come on, kouhai! Let's see what we can dig up."

"Alright, so Asahi, start bringing down some of the smaller beddings. I'm thinking sleeping bags and futons. Leave the mattresses."

"Alright," the gentle giant nodded, and vacated to his task.

"Noya, please gather some stuff we'll need down there, like flashlights and batteries, toilet paper, entertainment... Maybe grab some clothes, but not too many."

"Got it, captain," the smallest team member nodded, determination in his eyes, and left to gather his stuff.

"Hinata, Kageyama, grab a baseball bat or a crowbar and patrol the perimeter. We have a lot of things to get across to the school and we can't have anybody sneaking up on us to steal our supplies."

"Yeah," the infamous duo of Karasuno exclaimed at the same time, visibly serious about their important task, and left to pick their weapon of choice.

"Tsukishima, you and I are going to go get access to those halls," Daichi finished with a sigh, looking at the tall blonde. "Do you know if there are any keys?"

"Probably in the principal's office, or maybe the security office," Tsukishima pondered out loud. "Although those are pretty far out in the school. I don't think we should be venturing too deep. This school is the biggest place for miles around and it's a possibility that other groups have taken refuge somewhere in there. Let's be discreet and quiet-

"And bust open the lock?" Daichi finished, and then laughed. "Right. I suppose you're right. Sounds like you've played a lot of zombie apocalypse games in your free time to know all this."

"Enough to know that there's probably something worth surviving for, out there," Tsukishima shrugged, and Daichi held his breath. His eyes went to the violent red scar that drew a jagged line from the side of the blonde's neck into his hairline, and he knew at that moment that the first year knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Captain! We're ready!"

And he turned around, eyes on Hinata and Kageyama with their baseball bats and binoculars, and then surveyed the buzzing scene behind them, and realized that Karasuno was worth surviving for.

...-

The hallways were way too tight and mouldy and smelt of humidity accumulated over the years and filled their lungs with dust with every breath. And when Asahi made a noise, they all quickly learnt that he'd found spiders uncomfortably close to him, and that was no comfort at all.

The futons and sleeping bags were opened and lined up on the floor along the small hallway, barely
wide enough to accommodate a regular sized person laying in width. Nishinoya and Hinata got lucky for once, but poor Tsukishima and Asahi quickly realized they'd have to sleep in foetal position. Slowly but surely, the team cleaned up the small space as best as they could while Suga passed out some masks for them to wear (they wouldn't keep everything out, but at least dust would keep clear of their lungs!), and by the time night had fallen (hard to tell, really, but Daichi had a digital watch that read 10:38 PM), they were all set up.

"Dinner?" Suga suggested once everybody had picked a spot on the sleeping bags, thin and barely keeping the chill of cold stone off of their bodies.

"What's on the menu?" Tanaka asked, probably smirking under his blue mask.

"I dunno," Suga flashed some light into the box keeping their rations. "How about canned pasta? One can per two people."

Groans came from everybody, but Suga pulled the cans and spoons out, knowing they were not going to refuse the meal. And, predictably, the cans were passed in silence, popped open with some effort, and then the only thing they could hear was the slow chewing of people who weren't even sure why they were trying anymore.

The night was freezing, and when the team finally silently agreed to huddle up under the thin blankets, everybody also silently agreed that what happened underground stayed underground. The occasional shifting or not-so-occasional cough lulled them all into a restless sleep.

The morning was only announced thanks to Daichi's watch alarm. When the team woke up, it was still pitch black, and only their flashlights oriented them one by one a couple of minutes down the hallway, where they established a corner for all their hygienic needs. After that, they had a small breakfast of canned potatoes then basically all returned to huddling under the blankets to outwait... whatever they were outwaiting at this point.

...~...~...~...~...

Daichi's watch showed 9:13PM, and the team was going to go absolutely crazy.

"I can't stay here any longer," Tanaka groaned.

"I've never been claustrophobic but this is way too much!" Noya agreed.

"Please stay strong, senpai!" Hinata pleaded with the most upbeat voice he could manage through the roiling sickness in his gut. "Only another day and a half!"

"Kouhai..." The two voices came, as expected, but they were exhausted beyond relief and everybody knew they were just behaving like they usually would have in order to keep a semblance of normalcy. "We'll do our best for you."

They called an early night, but nobody slept. Somewhere in the incredibly suffocating darkness, at some point during the eternally lasting night, Kageyama began crying into the pile of clothes he used as a pillow, and all the others pretended they couldn't hear him.

Some people woke up with sore backs from sleeping on the ground. Others woke up with sore jaws from biting on their pillow through the night.

That morning, at 10:28AM, time froze.

Suga was in the middle of telling a story about his middle school days. Nobody was actually
listening, but they were glad for the background noise. The occasional clanking of old pipes and the drip-drip-drip of moisture droplets really was the most depressing background noise ever. And it was eventually going to drive them crazy.

One could even say that the loud and terrifying sound of an explosion somewhere on the outside was a welcome change of pace.

But really, it wasn't.

The wooden beams holding up the walls shook and dirt and plaster began falling, more dust raining upon them.

Karasuno forgot to breathe.

"Under the blankets!" Of course, Daichi was the first to recover. Captain's orders were always right. "Cover your heads!"

There was noiseless shuffling as the team members practically threw themselves on the nearest blanket, and it was actually surprising how seamlessly they all agreed on who shared which blanket in the span of a second. Blankets were thrown over their bodies, and the team bore the impact of small pieces of debris and held their breaths for what must have been an eternity. An eternity in which the earth rattled and shook and they all feared at some point that the entire school would collapse over their heads. And perhaps this was the end. Perhaps their efforts were futile. Perhaps they weren't meant to survive in the first place.

And then, it lightened, and it stopped.

The rumbling stopped and everybody was left to listen to the violent thumping of their own hearts in their ears.

After a minute where bits and pieces of debris still crumbled down noisily, Daichi was the first to poke his head out of the blanket, and immediately, his eyes stung from the dust in suspension that had been kicked up around them.

"Stay under!" he ordered, breaking into a violent coughing fit that almost ended up in retching.

"Daichi! Don't hurt yourself!" Asahi's worried world came, muffled by the blankets.

"Captain, you should get back under a blanket until the dust settles," Kageyama's cool voice added on, muffled as well.

"I'm going to try and air out this place," the Captain coughed again, weakly grabbing an extra blanket and standing up. His eyes watered from all the dust and he closed them, painfully feeling small particles burning his eyes and rubbing against his eyelids. Blindly, he shook the blanket several times, hoping he was at least making some difference at all.

But then he was coughing his lungs out, and someone was tugging at his sleeve and he relented, laying down under the blanket of the person who'd grabbed him.

It took him a while to get his eyes open again, and when he did, he saw jackshit in the dark. But then, there was a sigh, and Daichi knew exactly who had pulled him down, and he couldn't help but smile, just a little.

"I told you," Tsukishima murmured, as if it was meant just for him. "There's always something worth surviving for."
Daichi checked his watch from time to time. Around 11:49AM, he decided that they'd stayed in semi-silence under the suffocating blankets long enough.

"Does anyone have a flashlight on hand?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"I have one," Suga called. "Do you want me to check if the dust has cleared?"

"Please be careful," Daichi replied, and listened to the ruffling of the blanket as Suga slowly took it off his head. There was a click, and a welcome light filtered through the cloth of his blanket.

Suga took a sharp, audibly panicked breath.

"Suga?" Daichi asked, immediately on high alert.

"I-It's nothing," Suga waved it off in a shaky voice, not mentioning how horrifying the scene looked to him.

Seeing his comrades lined up on the ground, silent. A leg or an arm poking out of the blankets, limp. The lumps under the covers, unmoving. It was as if he'd lined up their bodies, or as if he'd stumbled upon their final attempts to survive. The blankets seemed more like body bags.

He didn't mention it and instead used his light to survey the darkness around them. Most of the dust particles had cleared from the air and Suga wasn't coughing his lungs out, so that was a good sign, definitely.

"Okay," he called, readjusting his mask. "You can come out slowly so we don't kick up the settled dust again."

With soft groans, Karasuno's survivors began pushing their blankets off of their heads and taking deep breaths, then coughing to clear out whatever dust they'd inhaled. One by one, more flashlights clicked on, until the light in the small hallway was acceptably bright.

"Is everyone alright?" Tanaka asked, rubbing the kinks out of his neck.

"No injuries?" Daichi shone his flashlight at his team members, one by one taking in their haggard, dirty, terrified expressions.

When nobody answered, Suga nodded.

"Good," he sighed out. "I'm glad. Hinata, can you pass us the bottles of water? It'll do us some good."

"Yeah," the short teen replied softly, and the lights shining on him helped him find the bottles in the box of their (quickly dwindling) food stocks. The water was silently passed around, everybody knowing not to take more than 3 gulps each despite their aching throats, and soon enough, they were back in the silence.

"What happened out there?" Nishinoya finally ventured to ask, voicing a question that people were too afraid to ask.

"Could it... could it have been...?" Asahi began, but trailed off quietly, and nobody needed him to finish to know what he'd meant.

"Probably," Kageyama grimly contributed, lips pinched in a frown. "But since it's over now, we can
"No," Daichi replied, though the resulting questioning noises, dripping with confusion and desperation, made him wish he didn't have to be the one to make that call. "We don't know if there is a second one being prepared. And even if there isn't, we have no idea what they used up there. If there's any radiation, we should let it dissipate as much as possible before exposing ourselves."

"Damn," Tsukishima clicked his tongue. "So what you're saying it that we're stuck here anyway?"

"Yeah," Daichi's eyes went to the cold concrete floor in shame and in resolution. "Sorry. At least another day."

At first, there was nothing. And then, soft, quiet sobs punctuated the air. Daichi felt Tsukishima lean away from him, towards where Yamaguchi was, and realized that the gentle first year must have been the one who'd cracked under the pressure. The blonde was now probably holding his best friend and if he was crying at all, it was probably muffled in his hair.

The flashlights turned away from the duo in respect, but then Hinata began sniffling as well, and Kageyama said something akin to "don't cry, stupid", in his own shaking voice.

The lights turned off one by one until there was total darkness, and within its chokehold, the group of teenagers held one another and softly, quietly grieved the uncertainty of their future.

"Okay," he finally announced over lunch, which was a grim, silent event at this point. "After lunch, let's pack up and get out of here. Whatever happens, we can't stay here anymore."

He didn't expect the entire team to drop their food immediately and shuffle to get things organized. There was the sound of bumping and quiet a few cries of pain, but Daichi found himself laughing at the sudden burst of energy that had taken hold of his team. Flashlights turned on and wherever they shone, there was a new air of hope and relief that radiated and made the freezing hallway a fraction of a degree warmer. Just enough to push them forward.

They were packed up in the impressive span of 20 minutes, and ready to go.

"Alright, we all okay?" Daichi asked, feeling his own breath against his cheeks and eager to remove the annoying mask that had become almost a part of him in the past three days.

"Yes, captain!" Several cries echoed out, the loudest, most welcome noise they'd had in days, and Daichi chuckled.

"Right. Let's go."

Nobody looked back as they began making their way down the hall.

"Now remember that we don't know what's out there," Suga explained as they made their way out. "First, we'll secure the gymnasium, and then we'll take care of ourselves like we deserve. Don't let your guard down until we're back in the gym with the doors locked behind us."

"Oh man, I can't wait for a shower," Noya groaned, and there was a collective, airy laugh that
answered his complaint.

"Please, showers?" Tanaka huffed. "I can't wait to breathe without having to choke every two seconds."

"I can't wait for the sun," Hinata piped up.

"Yeah, it must be warm outside right now," Yamaguchi agreed cheerfully.

"I can't wait to sleep without having to double over," Tsukishima grunted.

"We can all do without the back pain," Asahi agreed sympathetically.

"Well in any case, at least we won't be sitting around doing nothing anymore," Kageyama added.

"Yeah. And at least we're all still alive," Suga topped off reassuringly.

Daichi's contribution to the conversation was the sound of a door being pushed open, and a light shining on a rusty ladder melded to the wall.

"One by one, wait for the signal to climb before getting on, and be careful of how cold and slippery the metal is." He than turned to him team, not even needing his flashlight to know that their eyes were sparkling in relief. "Let's get out of here, Karasuno."

Ascending to the surface made them aware of the gradual, but huge difference in temperature between where they were and where they were going. Even before exiting the busted door that would lead them to the outside, they could feel their bodies rewarming.

Daichi's heart sunk, though, as the door only opened a sliver before blocking.

"Shit," he swore, heart thundering as he tried to push. The door creaked and slowly opened another centimetre, but did not budge otherwise.

"What's going on?" Suga asked behind him.

"Can't open the door. I think something crumbled behind it and is now blocking the door," Daichi grunted, pushing hard. "Damn it!"

"Daichi," Asahi softly spoke up, determination brimming in his voice. "Let me try and push."

"Do your best," the captain grunted, letting Asahi take his place by the door.

The ace planted his feet firmly in the ground, and began pushing the door with all of his strength. Slowly, it budged a little more, and debris tumbled in front of the small segment of the door that was open. They could see the school hallway and so the blockage must only have been partial, but it must have been one hell of a blockage if even Asahi couldn't move it.

"Come on, come on!" the long-haired brunette grunted mostly to himself, weakened muscles straining to push the door open. It opened a bit more, but Asahi could feel the debris pushing back. If he let go, the door would close, and he didn't know if it'd open again. And he could feel himself weakening, strength sapped out of him with every breath he huffed out in effort.

"Asahi!" A voice cried out from the back suddenly, and Asahi almost let go.
"Noya?"

"Keep it open. I think I can get through the gap and go clear the rubble outside," Nishinoya volunteered, his tone of voice familiar and comforting. It sounded exactly like when Nishinoya promised to guard their backs during volleyball games. And the libero had never gone back on his promises before.

"Go," Asahi prompted without hesitation, and everybody shuffled to let Nishinoya pass.

"Hinata!"

"Yes, senpai?" the orange-haired kid snapped to attention immediately.

"Come with me! You're tiny enough to fit through, too."

"Yeah," Hinata nodded, determined, and the two smallest of the group. Maybe being small wasn't so bad after all.

Nishinoya and Hinata did fit through with some effort, indeed. It was strange to see them go through, but as soon as they did, the adrenaline that had pushed Asahi further began to evaporate.

"Asahi," Nishinoya called, standing in the sliver of the door that was open still. "You can let go. Keep your strength for later cause we'll probably ask you to push again."

"But."

"Let go." Nishinoya's voice was quiet and flat. "Trust us to get you out."

There was a slight hesitation to abandon the smallest hope they'd had in so long, but then, Daichi realized that the smallest hope they had in this situation was Nishinoya, followed by Hinata.

"Do as they say," the captain decided. "They'll get us out."

"Okay," Asahi nodded, and looked straight into Noya's eyes before the two nodded to each other. "We'll wait."

The door closed, and there was the slight sound of rubble falling in front of it. It was an ominous sound, and a sudden nausea welled up in everybody's throat at the thought of being locked in here forever.

"Hey." There was a knock on the door from the other side, and everybody jumped at the sound of the libero's voice, muffled by the thick wood. "Don't worry too much. Trust us."

Nobody replied, but the tension definitely lowered down to an acceptable level.

"Well..." Daichi sighed, sliding down to the floor. "You heard him. Sit down. I guess we'll be here for a bit."

The next hour passed with the company of occasional chatter, but mostly the sound of rubble outside. Occasionally, Nishinoya's or Hinata's voice would be heard, but the two seemed to be working in silence mostly.

It was heartening to hear the debris scratch against the door because that meant that the others on the other side were still there. So the team almost took a nap, lulled by the sound of their teammates' hard work.
There was a knock at the door again after a while, startling everyone out of their thoughts.

"Asahi, try pushing a little bit," Nishinoya directed from the other side, and the tall teen stood up, nodding.

"Get away from the door," he warned, and gave the agile libero five seconds before throwing his weight against the door.

To their relief, the door opened, and slightly wider than before. However, again, it struck a piece of rubble, and wouldn't budge.

"Okay," Noya appeared in the now-clear doorway. "There's a large piece of wall here that's blocking the door, and it's the only thing left in the way." The second-year thought for a second, and then looked into the darkness. "If we push and pull at the same time, we could probably clear it. Can we get anybody else through here?"

"Kageyama is rather slim," Suga suggested, turning his eyes to his fellow setter.

"That is, if his head's not too big to fit through the door," Tsukishima added snarkily, and Yamaguchi laughed softly next to him. The others rolled their eyes at his antics, slightly comforted by the familiar display.

"Yeah, because you'd be so much better, four-eyes," the black-haired teen frowned.

"In fact, both of you can fit through," Noya smirked. "Get over here. Yamaguchi, you, too."

"How come you get all of our kouhai, Noya?" Tanaka pouted as the three made their way to the door.

"I'll take care of them, Tanaka. You help our senpai out," Noya smirked at his best friend, and pulled the door slightly to let Kageyama, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi squeeze through with some effort.

"Count on me, Noya," Tanaka smirked back to him.

"Right," Noya looked behind him at his kouhai. They were staring at the wall, eyes wide at the sight before them, and Nishinoya gave them a moment because when he and Hinata had seen it at first, they'd had the same reaction.

But then, there was work to do.

"Kageyama, Tsukishima, Yamaguchi, get a grip on that piece of wall. Hinata, you and I will pull on the door. You guys behind push with everything you've got on three, alright?"

"Right!" All voices answered him, and there was movement as everybody got into position. The ones behind the door caught a sight of their younger teammates grabbing what seemed like a huge piece of rubble, and when Hinata and Nishinoya hooked their fingers on the door, they saw their split and bleeding fingers, and a sudden sense of determination to help their kouhai as much as possible overcame them.

"On three!" Nishinoya directed. "One, two... Three!"

The collective groans of effort on every side filled the air, and the door creaked at all the pressure on it. The rubble rumbled as it moved slightly, and it lit new hope in their hearts.

"Just a little more!" Nishinoya encouraged, and the effort doubled in the last stretch.
The piece of wall suddenly moved, and the door swung open. The momentum of the abrupt movement sent everybody stumbling, and cries from different parties arose as Karasuno fell to its knees.

But then it stood, and it laughed in the face of adversity as it always had done in the past.

"We did it!" Hinata was the first to cry out, laying on the floor panting with his bleeding fingers imprinting on the dirty floor. "We're out!"

"Good job, everyone," Daichi grinned, catching his breath. "Let's go back."

He didn't say they should return home, because home had been with them this entire time.

"Alright, let's gather our stuff and get out," the captain directed, stepping out of the dark place and letting his eyes get adjusted to the light once more.

And then, he looked to the wall that had crumbled, and his eyes widened.

"Spooky, isn't it?" Nishinoya mumbled, following his line of sight. "This world will probably never be the same again."

The third-year nodded, speechless.

The wall had crumbled entirely, leaving them with a view to the outside. He could only see the sky from where he stood, but it was enough. It was enough to see the dark clouds covering the afternoon sun, diffusing the rays into an eerie blood red colour. The sky was bleeding.

"I don't like the looks of this," he simply muttered before tearing his eyes away. "Let's get back to the gym as soon as possible."

"We'll escort," Tanaka announced from behind them, tearing his eyes away from the chilling sight as well to throw Noya a baseball bat.

"Thank you," Daichi nodded, and looked back. Whilst most of the teens were moving their things out of the dark entrance to the maintenance hallways, Suga was sitting with Hinata and cleaning up and bandaging his ruined fingers. A quick glance at Noya's hands proved that they were just as bad, but the second-year did not look bothered at all.

"I know," the libero answered his captain's silent inquiry when he saw what his gaze had found, and twirled the bat in his hands to prove he was fine. Dull pain spiked up both of his arms, but he'd ask Suga to help him out after they were all back in the gym and safe.

As safe as they could be.

"Let's go," Tanaka motioned to the pile of rubble that led up to the crumbled part of the wall. Noya nodded and they both began scaling it. It wasn't very high, a little over two metres, and when the two stood at the top, they looked at the gym.

The bloody sky was casting a fiery orange glow on the building that had housed them for a month now, and they noted with sinking hearts that a part of the roof had been blown away, leaving a clean hole on top of the building. Behind the gym, the houses right off of school grounds were smoking from extinguished fires, or were completely destroyed.

They didn't dare look further. They tried to enjoy the moment they had to themselves, together, free under the broken sky. They took a simultaneous, deep breath of warm, dry air, and then jumped
Daichi was receiving the sleeping bags that Kageyama was throwing down to him from on top of the broken wall and was handing them off to Suga, who was helping Asahi get loaded up with equipment. Their chain system was working very well, with the first years passing them the equipment on the inside, and the third-years getting ready to transport them on the ground.

"Okay, I'm coming down," Kageyama announced when Asahi was loaded enough, and jumped and rolled as he hit the ground in front of Suga. Tsukishima took his place on top of the broken wall and took over the job of lowering their equipment for Suga to be loaded this time.

The equipment was lowered entirely to the ground and the first-years all jumped down to join the rest of the team around the time when Tanaka and Nishinoya came running up to them.

"What's wrong?" Daichi immediately asked, on high alert.

"There's someone," Nishinoya panted softly, whipping sweat out of his dirty face. "At the gym doors."

"What?" Daichi's eyes narrowed, and he gritted his teeth.

"A girl," Tanaka frowned, breathing heavy. "She's asleep under the awning at the entrance. We saw her from afar and we weren't sure what to do."

"Thank you for coming back and reporting," Daichi nodded, then turned to Suga, whose face was set grimly.

Girl or not, survivors of this world were often merciless, and nobody could be trusted. Except those that could be.

"Alright..." Daichi took a while to come up with a plan. Behind him, most of the packing had been finished, and the first years had seemingly volunteered to carry their stuff in the time he spent debating. "Asahi, close the pace. Noya, go with him in the back in case this girl has accomplices that want to jump us. Everybody carrying equipment in the middle. Suga, Tanaka, we'll lead up front."

"Right," the collective acknowledgement rang out, and people moved into position quickly. Daichi did not even need to look back to make sure that everyone was following before leading them forward.

The gym was not far away, a five minute walk, but they were out in the open and everyone's heart beat fast as they tried to spot possible dangers around them. Thankfully, nothing happened during the walk, and soon, Daichi could see the girl that the scouts had reported.

She had long matted brown hair and was wearing some dirty sweatpants and a sweatshirt. She was curled up on herself by the foot of the stairs to the gym and wasn't moving.

"Okay, stop," Daichi whispered when they were close enough. "Everyone stay here. Tanaka, with me."

"Sure." Tanaka's buzz-cut hair had grown a little bit, but his face still looked tough enough to intimidate. Coupled with the baseball bat, he'd definitely cut it in terms of psychological warfare.
The two broke away from the group and carefully approached the girl. She did not seem aware of their approach and stayed still.

"Miss," Daichi carefully called out. "Miss, wake up."

The girl didn't acknowledge them in any way.

"Oi! You're trespassing!" Tanaka added, ready to swing his bat if she suddenly became aggressive.

"Hey," Daichi frowned, and they stopped a metre away from her. "Hey, can you hear us?"

"Hey Miss!" Tanaka called out, extending his bat to poke her shoulder roughly. "We don't wanna hurt a pretty lady, so wake up and let's talk!"

But she did not respond. Even when Tanaka repeatedly tapped her shoulders and then her side with his bat.

Daichi's blood ran cold.

"Suga!" he called, turning to the group.

His trusty vice-captain did not even hesitate before he and Yamaguchi were running towards them, the latter carrying their first aid kit.

"What's up?" Suga asked, face set seriously as he arrived.

"Can you check if she's unconscious?" the captain requested, and the silver-haired teen nodded.

He got on his knees behind the girl and carefully set a hand on her back. She didn't respond. His other hand went to her neck, where he searched for a pulse point.

A moment later, he turned back to Daichi. The rest of the team had arrived behind them as well, looking anxious at the sudden development.

"So?"

"I... I don't think..." Suga's voice went dry, because no amount of books memorized in the span of a month could prepare him for his first fatality.

Too scared to look at his team, he turned back to the girl and took her arm, gently turning her over on her back.

Her bent knees stayed bent and her crisped arms stayed crisped. Suga noted how she was incredibly stiff and nothing but dead weight. Couple with the lack of breathing and pulse, there was no mistaking it.

But then biggest giveaway was her face, and Suga had never been so terrified in his entire life.

He yelped in surprise and fell on his butt at the sight of it, heart thundering and eyes burning. He closed them because when he volunteered to be their medic, he didn't volunteer for this, and as if Daichi had read his thoughts, a second later there were strong arms around him shielding him from the traumatizing sight.

She'd died with her eyes wide open, mouth open in a soundless scream. One of the eye sockets was empty, blood coating the entire right side of her face, dried with pieces of hair and dirt congealed on it. Many of her teeth were missing, and her nose was crooked. Her throat and jaw were bruised in
several places and her ears were slit where someone had probably ripped her earrings right off her ears. She must have died while trying to seek shelter in the gym.

That in itself had many terrifying connotations, but nothing was as terrifying as her appearance.

Thankfully, before the first-years had a chance to see everything that Suga had seen, Tanaka had quickly knelt in front of the girl to stand in their line of sight, and Noya and Asahi had come to stand in front of the group, even if their own faces were screwed up in disgust and horror. But they'd moved just a little too slowly. The first-years hadn't seen everything, but they'd seen enough. And the shock was clear on every single one of their faces.

Tanaka had his eyes shut and was trembling silently.

"I'm okay," Suga announced shakily after a moment, and Daichi carefully removed his arms.

"Sure?" he whispered. "It's... pretty gruesome."

"We have to move her," Suga breathed out, getting up shakily. "She'll decompose and get us all sick." Nevermind the fact that they would never keep their sanity intact if they left the mutilated body on their doorstep.

"What do we do?" Tanaka's voice was strained, and Suga admired his courage. He gently put a hand on his shoulder and knelt next to him, taking a moment to take in the distress in his expression.

"Can I have a blanket?" Suga asked, and Kageyama snapped into action, shakily handing Noya one of the thinner blankets they had. Noya stepped forward to give it to Suga, who smiled sadly at him and opened up the blanket. As soon as the body was covered, everyone let go of the breath they'd been holding.

"Okay, Asahi, lead everyone inside the gym. Once you're all there, drop your things and grab a weapon, then sweep the entire gym to make sure nobody infiltrated while we were gone," Daichi ordered, patting Tanaka's shoulder to get him to stand up. "Go with them."

"B-But, the b-body-"

"Suga and I will carry it away," the captain assured him. "Just make sure there's nobody in there. Search every nook and cranny of the building."

"Yes captain," the second-year nodded and joined the group that silently went into the gym.

Once the gym doors clanked shut behind them, Suga turned to Daichi.

"Sorry. I... I shouldn't have turned her."

"We would've seen her face somehow at some point, so don't worry," Daichi spoke softly.

"But... The first years-

"-are not children," Daichi finished the sentence, and yet his heart clenched at the lie. They were kids, all of them were still kids expected to experience things that would rob seasoned adults of their sanity, and yet they were here and they were strong and they were going to make it.

"I wish this all didn't have to happen," Suga murmured, and then snifflled, wiping his eyes. "I don't know how much longer I can look at them suffering like this."

"Suga..." Again, his vice-captain's kindhearted nature struck him like a punch to the gut, and Daichi
found himself taking one of Suga's hands in his own. The gesture was not unwelcome. It was warm and it was comforting, and it was all too simply human.

"Sorry, Dai. I'm being a little dramatic, huh?" Suga laughed, grinning at the black-haired teen despite his puffy red eyes.

"You're being human," Daichi replied, and squeezed his hand one more time before letting it go. "In this world, it's the best we could hope for."

Sugawara laughed, and nodded.

"Right. Let's get this over with. Where do we put her?"

Once the gym was cleared for use, the guys immediately grabbed a clean change of clothes and a towel and had all but sprinted towards the showers. The water was freezing due to the electricity shortage, but running water was all they needed because at this point, since anything that rid them of the 4-day old grime covering their bodies was welcome. The soap bar was passed around and by the time it got to the stall at the end, it was almost reduced to nothing.

After the shower, everyone set out to restock all of their equipment in the right place and do some chores. Clothes needed cleaning, the part of the roof that had crumbled had to be swept away into a corner of the gym, and best of all, dinner had to be cooked.

Asahi volunteered this time and used their remaining supply of fresh vegetables (hoping they weren't spoiled in the three and a half days they spent away) to cook them all a warm vegetable soup that settled in everyone upset stomach like a comforting hand on a teary face.

Though they were exhausted from a long set of days and so many (mostly unpleasant) adventures, the fact that the roof had caved in still remained, and they couldn't leave themselves exposed to the elements (especially since they didn't know what to expect anymore following the radiation of the blast).

Daichi tried to find their trusty radio announcer on the radio, but after 15 minutes, gave up, and wondered if the guy was dead.

In any case, it was easy enough to find some tarp that the school used to set up a passage between the school and the gym during the heavy snowy season, and cheer banners for the school's various sports teams were brought out as well.

The operation was done under the dying hues of the bleeding evening sky, with the team's most agile members climbing to the roof and nailing the tarp as best as they could to cover the hole. They then used the cloth banners of the sports teams to reinforce the edges of the tarp and folded and nailed those, too, to prevent infiltration.

And when they were done, the team of roof-climbers gathered their equipment and began preparing to go down when Hinata stopped them and held up one of the banners with a huge grin. His following suggestion was debated for a moment, and then accepted. Nishinoya led the operation and the sound of nails being hammered into the roof lasted just a while longer.

The people overseeing the operation from the ground watched it unfold, and a weight was lifted off of their chests as the final banner was hammered in.

The roof team came down to join the ground team and they all looked up at their rough patch job.
The fixed roof would already paint a huge target on their building, giving it away as being inhabited, and so the black banner fluttering in the gentle fall breeze, next to the patched-up hole, would not change a thing in terms of visibility.

In terms of morale, though, it worked wonders. And when, that night, several people woke up in cold sweat, haunted by their recent experiences, they sought out some form of human contact and returned to sleep, knowing that they'd be alright. Their teammates were still alive and well, and though the world had gone to hell, they still had everything they needed right there. And when the wind ruffled the tarp noisily, they did not care, because the words that had once been an emblem of their unity and of their strength were still out there, for them, and for the world to see.

"Fly, Karasuno!"

Chapter End Notes

Hinata's a huge sap and nailed the volleyball team's banner to the outside of the building. It sounded cute to me IDK.

So the nuclear weapon thing... It's fictional. I did some minimal research on nuclear weapons and plutonium-based fission bombs (atomic bombs) would not have covered both Tokyo and the prefecture where Karasuno is situated. So let's just pretend this nuclear bomb was a wide-range weapon that literally razed the entire island of Honshu (the main Japanese island). You saw how destructive it was, but we'll explore what it did elsewhere as the team moves. But I won't spoil anything about that! Anyway, so it's a radioactive-element based bomb because it had radiation aftereffects that will be described later in the fic. And it's probable that all living organisms that were not at least 6 feet under the ground at the time of the explosion were killed, or at least seriously affected by the radiation (or the blast, if the organism is closer to ground zero).

So how's about that dead girl. She wasn't an important character, but she is an important example. There is a lot of information about future developments hidden on her, and the Karasuno boys probably should have looked her body over a little more to pick out clues that could save their lives O: But then again, these kids are like. 18 years old. Autopsying is way out of their league.

Yeah sorry about the ages. I'm so confused, tryin'a figure out how old people are. In terms of third-years, I think it's Daichi, Asahi and Koushi, and they're all 18 in this story. This takes place in, like... September-ish. And the war began two months before, so in July. The Forty Fireworks happened in August.

This chapter was mostly Daichi and Suga-oriented, but Noya and Tsukki were important, too. I'm really looking forward to giving people the spotlight one by one. Next chapter I'll probably get on Tsukki's story, because I think it'll go real good with what I've got planned for these boys.

Family!Karasuno is incredible. I love the bits and pieces out of them. And okay, I might include some shipping later on, but it definitely won't be the centerpiece of the story. Anyway in a situation like this, I don't really feel like there is any atmosphere for romance. But anyway. Later. The pairings will be the typical ones, except maybe AsaNoya because I'm super neutral about that pairing so IDK if I'll be able to write
them? BUT RYUUNOYA BROMANCE WILL HAPPEN FO SHO. I love them.

Anyway! That's that for this chapter. I love this AU so much ahhh. Please be nice and leave me some comments about what you liked/disliked/would like to see! ;u;
Strength

Chapter Summary

And when he felt useless, they would entrust him with their lives. And when he felt pathetic, they would tell him otherwise. And when he felt like a burden they would soothe his cries. And never, never, ever did they leave him to die.

They'd always made sure he was okay, no matter how hard their lives got as well. So just this once, he wouldn't let them be worried about him. Just this once, Tadashi would do everything to protect the family that had cherished him, even when he hadn't been able to cherish himself.

Chapter Notes

What the frick is wrong with me, vomiting up a 13k word chapter in a couple of days. I really need to concentrate on the end of the semester, oops.

More Karasuno family adventures! This chapter's mostly from Yamaguchi's point of view, but Tsukishima's rather important, too. I didn't get to explore his background like I'd planned (13k words, come on...) but it should be next chapter or the one after, definitely. It's coming at some point, anyway. Although the TsukiYama is strong in this chapter if you're into that stuff! Nothing romantic, though.

I'm at a loss of whose POV to use next chapter, so please send me your suggestions, if any! Also, thanks to everybody who's supported me through comments, or kudos! I really appreciate the encouragement (:)

Warning: Lots of blood, violence, blackmail, swearing, guns, minor character death, some OOC ('tis an AU, my friends).

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Problems were not new to them at this point.

However, problems of such magnitude as they had now... were a different story.

"Hinata, hurry," Kageyama groaned, pounding on the bathroom stall door, doubled over.

"I outran you, so I got d-dibs-" Hinata's shaky speech was interrupted by the sound of violent retching and the first-year setter winced.

"I'm gonna die, too, you know," he complained, and the toilet flushed a moment later, the door opening. A pale and sweaty Hinata stepped out, moaning.

"There. Don't die. We still need you," he managed a weak smirk before stumbling away towards the
mass of bodies lying on the tiled changing room floor.

"Everyone still alive?" Daichi asked with a soft groan, face against the ground. A chorus of similar cries arose from everybody lying around him, a pathetic display at best of a group of people who had survived a nuclear explosion, only to be brought to their knees by a simple indigestion.

When the toilet flushed and the last member of their team joined them on the floor, Suga sat up with a wince and took a deep breath.

"Something we ate last night, maybe?" he asked mostly to himself. "Though I don't see why..."

"What did we eat, anyway?"

"Vegetable soup."

"Maybe the veggies went bad?"

"Not in that span of time. They were in the cooler and the ice packs were newly changed when we left the gym," Suga reasoned, and then groaned, lying back down.

A collective sigh rose from the bodies on the floor, and they let themselves think in silence.

"The bomb," a voice finally whispered through the sound of ruffling clothes. Everyone turned to the person who spoke, and Tsukishima sat up to reiterate his point. "The nuclear bomb. It's radiation, isn't it? Maybe..."

"Maybe it did something to the food?" Yamaguchi finished for his friend, sitting up as well now that the nausea had decreased.

"I'd think so," the blond mused out loud. "It makes sense. If the bomb set off radiation, it might have changed the DNA of organic matter, and made the proteins in food undigestable."

"Slow down, four-eyes!" Hinata cried out, sitting up in alarm and then groaning in pain at the sharp spike in his abdomen. "Urgh... Are you saying all the food is basically inedible now?"

"Maybe not all," Yamaguchi butted in, looking up at his best friend for confirmation. "Maybe... fresh things?"

"Canned food still has DNA," Tsukishima answered quietly. "But there are so many preservatives that maybe the DNA of canned food is already irreversibly changed anyway."

"And we can still eat it..." Asahi added in. "...Oh! So maybe canned food is still safe, right?"

"I don't think it's for sure, but..." Daichi clicked his tongue. "I guess we'll just have to try. Until we figure it out, we have the remaining rations from what we brought with us underground, so that should be safe. However, it won't last long."

"We'll need a volunteer to try the canned food and see if it's still edible..." Kageyama suggested, and a low hum of acknowledgement ran through the small crowd.

And then, all eyes turned to the second years, who were still silently sprawled on the ground. Feeling gazes piercing their backs, the two sat up, and then realized the gravity of the situation.

"H-Huh? Us?"

"W-Wait, can't we do rock-paper-scissors or something?"
"It's purely for scientific purposes, guys," Suga tried to comfort them, but his usually so-soothing smile was more threatening than anything else. "Come on, do it for the team."

"..."

"..."

"Damn it."

...~...~...~...~...~...

"Still alive in there?" Suga asked through the curtain of the infirmary, waiting for a groan or some other form of acknowledgement.

Instead, Nishinoya opened the curtain and looked at him questioningly.

"Well, as you can see, we're still okay."

"And Tanaka?"

"He's eating the second batch now. Canned pasta tastes like shit as usual, but we haven't dropped dead or anything."

"Well, it's been three hours now..." Suga thought out loud. "Technically the first batch has gone through your stomach already, so if you're not throwing up..."

"We're saved?" The libero's eyes lit up. "Hear that, Tanaka? We're okay!"

"Good. Can we eat something else now?" the wing spiker replied, peeking his head out of the curtain.

"Nope. But you've helped further science today, gentlemen, so thank you," Suga smiled and nodded. "Alright, out you come."

The three walked down to the lower gym where the rest of the guys were huddled around the command centre.

"Canned food is safe, as far as we're concerned," Suga announced as they arrived, and a relieved expression hit all of their faces almost comically.

"Good," Hinata pouted, crossing his arms. "So we won't starve to death."

"Debatable," Daichi answered to the silent question, eyes on the map. "Since we don't have any more fresh food, this decreases our supplies drastically. Cans will last us a while if we ration them, perhaps a few more days, but we're a lot of people, and there's definitely not enough food for all of us."

A somber silence fell upon them, and all eyes went to the floor. The implications of the statement were heavy. And highly displeasing.

"We're not..." Nishinoya licked his lips nervously, unable to meet Daichi's eyes. "We're not dropping anybody... are we?"

"No." However, as expected of the captain, the response was instinctively quick and fiercely passionate. The tension left the group, and there were a few sighs of relief. "I would never make any of us leave. We were lucky enough to find one another when this whole mess started. We'd be stupid
to let one another go now that things have gotten bad."

"Alright," Tanaka nodded, eyes brimming with determination, and maybe a few tears. "So what's the plan?"

"Raids," Daichi sighed, knowing to expect the sudden flash of fear that crossed all of their eyes. However, to his surprise, the fear was gone in a second, and there was nothing but cold, hard acceptance in these eyes. Acceptance, but not defeat.

"Alright. How are we dividing up the territory?" Suga asked, coming closer to the map of the town spread out on the table. There were scribbles on it already, places that they'd already raided before, or places that were not viable anymore, and Suga was shocked to see how little place there was left for them to look. Their town was not going to last them long anymore. They'd have to find an alternative lest it become their grave.

"Well, we're nine people."

"In threes?" Kageyama suggested.

"Three is too little. I'd be less worried if we were in groups of four," Daichi mumbled. "But then... five is too many."

"One person could stay in the gym?" Asahi suggested. "Maybe to make sure that nobody breaks in..."

There was a second and a half of silence as the mutilated face of the girl at their doorsteps flashed behind their eyelids, but then they all exchanged a determined glance.

"What areas are there to cover?" Nishinoya asked, eyes roaming the map. "These here are all residential. Think we can find anything?"

"The houses we saw yesterday, when we came out, weren't they all destroyed?" Tanaka frowned. "What salvageable things could we find there?"

"But they weren't completely destroyed, were they?" Nishinoya argued. "I'm sure there's stuff to find around there. Maybe we could look at houses that are still standing rather than the ones that are completely destroyed?"

"But you'll have to be careful. The houses still standing might not stand for a long time," Suga warned. "It's dangerous to go in those houses because we don't know what the state of the foundations are."

"Since when has anything ever been easy?" Hinata huffed. "Let's do it. Senpai, Kageyama and I will come with you!"

"Don't volunteer me without my consent, stupid," the setter crossed his arms, but didn't object. "Fine. Us four can go to a residential area and check out the houses. We're all pretty quick on our feet so if anything goes wrong, it'll be easy for us to get out."

"Done!" Hinata cheered. "Let's do it!"

"Alright. You guys can take this area here," Daichi circled a spot on the map. "You can probably enter the area if you go down the boulevard until you hit the smaller streets. Nishinoya, you can be in charge."
"Got it," the libero nodded proudly, ignoring Tanaka's indignant squawk.

"Suga, we'll go together to the stores on the main street. The smaller ones should still be okay to raid," Daichi decided, circling another spot on the map. "We haven't seen the state of the street, so we don't know how helpful these spots will be, but we haven't done them yet so we should at least try."

"Right. I'll get us some crowbars. We'll probably need protective gloves if we are gonna have to break through windows," Suga thought out loud.

"If you'll need to force your way in, maybe I should come," Asahi suggested, trying to be assertive. "And if things are crumbled I could help you move the rubble..."

"Good idea," Daichi nodded, and then turned to the two first-years that had been silent so far. "Tsukishima? Yamaguchi? Who's coming and who's staying?"

"I'll go," Tsukishima immediately volunteered without an ounce of hesitation. "Yamaguchi, you should stay here."

"But Tsukki!" the dark-haired boy exclaimed, and opened his mouth to contest, but then as the seconds ticked by and all eyes stayed on him, he realized that he had no objection. Tsukishima was taller, and stronger, and more adept and more dextrous, and more everything. Everything that he was not.

But the last time Tsukishima had gone on a raid...

"Hey," the blond sighed after a while, setting his hand on his best friend's head and ruffling his hair a little bit. "Don't say anything. Just stay here and take care of the place."

"Yeah..." Yamaguchi sighed, eyes downcast. "I'll wait for you, then."

"Then it's settled," Daichi concluded hesitantly, still looking at his younger members worriedly. "Yamaguchi, lock the doors when we're gone and we'll announce our return." He then turned to the group. "So let's take a few hours. I'd rather we don't stay out for longer periods of time, so let's say... Let's be back for an early dinner. We'll definitely be back before dark. With the sky like this, I'm sure it'll get dark earlier than normal, so let's try to be back here by five or six."

"Got it," the collective acknowledgement rang out strong from all of them.

"Alright, bags, weapons, and two bottles of water per team. Get dressed appropriately and go to the bathroom. Let's meet to leave in fifteen minutes."

"Right!"

The group dispersed to go and get ready. Yamaguchi stood back a bit and watched awkwardly as his teammates rushed around, and then pulled a chair by central command and plopped down on it tiredly. He was hungry and tired and maybe just a tiny bit disappointed that he'd been set aside, once again.

But it would be alright, he told himself, since all of the competent members of the team were going to go out and secure their collective wellbeing.

The competent ones would. And he'd just sit and wait. Again.

"Hey."
"Huh?" Yamaguchi turned his head to face the newcomer, but as soon as he saw that it was Tsukki standing behind him, looking down at him, he turned his eyes to the ground. "Oh. What is it? Did you need something?"

"Why are you acting like this?" Tsukishima jumped straight to the point, crossing his arms. "This isn't the first time we've raided the town."

"But..." The mutilated girl flashed in his mind as he blinked, and he bit his lip softly. "I... I guess I don't have a good feeling about today."

"Your feeling wouldn't have changed if you'd gone instead of me," the blond rolled his eyes. "It's okay. We'll be back before you know it. Play a video game or something. I think the orange midget charged the 3DS last time we had electricity."

"Yeah," Yamaguchi nodded solemnly, not meeting his friend's eyes "I'll do that."

"Good," the blond nodded and began walking away. "Stay put."

Yamaguchi let him go, watching him walk away like he always did, except this time, he wasn't meant to follow.

"Tsukki!" he cried out right before his friend got out of earshot. The tall teen turned around to address the call curiously, and Yamaguchi's fists clenched in determination. "Be safe, okay?"

Tsukishima did not answer, but as he turned his back, Yamaguchi was pretty sure that he saw him crack a smile.

So he smiled as well.

Everything would be alright.

It had to be.

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Two hours after the others had left, Yamaguchi had gotten sick and tired of playing Pokemon, and had decided to try and spike some balls when there was nobody around to laugh at his pathetic attempts. However, none of them had eaten lunch due to their morning mishap, and so he was too tired to continue after a mere twenty minutes of jumping around and running after balls.

"Bored..." he complained to himself, looking at the high ceiling of the gym. The lights were not on, as today seemed to be a no-electricity day (just their luck...), but the blood red sky was casting its eerie light in through the large glass panes surrounding the building and illuminating enough of the place. Yamaguchi wondered if he should set out the flashlights for when the boys returned. Maybe he should even surprise them with dinner.

Anything to get him off his feet.

He closed his eyes.

He wasn't sure when he fell into a light doze, but he sure as hell was woken up when a loud clanging sound echoed on the gym's double doors.

Groaning, the young teen got up, ruffling his hair, and headed for the door, putting his hand on the lock that kept the chains wound tightly around the handles.
"Daichi?" he asked in a soft yawn, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

The voice that replied, however, was not Daichi’s, nor that of anybody in his team.

And it wasn't anybody in Nishinoya's team either.

"Ah, so there really is somebody in there!"

"H-Hello?" Yamaguchi’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and he backed away from the door when it rattled again. "Who is this?"

"Nevermind that. Open the door, punk, or we'll break it down!" The voice replied, followed by the sound of people laughing.

"No way!" the teen exclaimed, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. These men made him nervous, and he didn't even know where they had come from. He could peek through the cloth-covered windows at ground level, but he was too afraid of what he'd see. "Go away!"

"Scary..." All noise ceased for a moment, and then the door was shaken roughly, chains clanging. Yamaguchi yelped in surprise and took a few more steps back, mouth dry in nervousness. "Open the fucking door, brat, and we won't hurt you... much!"

"You don't scare me!" Yamaguchi cried out, but they did, they did, and Yamaguchi was even more scared for the others, who did not have the luxury of locked doors. What if they returned at that exact moment? What would the men outside do to them?

They'd left him in charge to protect the gym. This was his responsibility. Everybody was out there risking their lives in completing their assignments, and he would be no different.

"You have nothing that can break through these doors, so there! I called your bluff!" The teen cried out, taking a few steps towards the door and willing his heart to stop hammering so loud, lest they hear it all the way from across the door. "Now leave!"

"Or better yet... We'll stay!" The voice on the other side dropped to a dangerous pitch. "We've been watching you, you know. You're not the only survivors in the area, and this school's just perfect as a hideout. And right now, all your friends are gone, aren't they?"

Yamaguchi's blood ran cold. If these men had been watching them all this time... Had they never been safe in the first place?

"We'll wait here and tear them apart as soon as they get within our line of sight."

Oh god, he didn't even know how many they were. Many, by the sound of their hoarse, cruel laughter, and Yamaguchi was going to cry.

"And maybe we'll even leave their corpses on your doorstep for you to admire, just like we did that pretty little girl."

"Stop it!"

There was a pregnant pause in the conversation between both parties, and then Yamaguchi clamped a hand over his mouth to contain the sobs that wanted to tear out of his throat.

"Stop it," he repeated, getting closer to the door so his feeble voice would carry over. "What do you want?"
"Supplies. Food. You know the predicament. Fork over everything you have," the voice demanded.

"N-No," Yamaguchi shook his head, eyes widening. He wondered if they'd leave if he pretended to faint. Not that he'd have to pretend, if this went on. "I won't give anything to you!"

"Not even a morsel?" the mocking voice echoed in response, and a fist was slammed against the door again. "Don't be greedy. We won't be greedy with your friends when they return, otherwise."

Yamaguchi couldn't fathom seeing his friends mutilated and murdered like the girl from yesterday. He didn't think he'd be able to stomach the sight of their strong and charismatic captain, broken and bleeding, or annoying, sunny Hinata without his smile, or his incredibly supportive senpais never again fawning over him, and Tsukki-

Tsukki.

"Okay," he found himself saying, his voice free of stutter. And he surprised himself, because he didn't know he could even manage being so determined. He wondered if his friends would consider him strong.

But they surely wouldn't. He'd given in so easily to the demands of what were essentially a bunch of thugs. He was a disgrace, and... he was pathetic.


"Just... I'll give you a few things, but I can't get much now," he explained in a quiet voice, setting his aching head against the cool metal door. "I'll give you some of our food, okay?"

"That sure as hell ain't enough. We ain't kids like you lot. Fork over everything."

"No, I... I can't," Yamaguchi swallowed thickly, tears burning his eyes. "The guys will be back by the time I gather up everything. It's a mess in here, you know. If you kill them, I... I'll never open the doors for you, and I'll just flush everything down the drains."

There was a silence where Yamaguchi held his breath. The whole situation felt unreal and he held himself tightly, wondering who would kill him first: these men for not cooperating, or the team, for cooperating.

"Fine. Make it quick. Get everything over," the gruff voice finally decided, and Yamaguchi thanked his lucky stars for the extension to his execution.

"I'll be right back," he announced, and raced away from the door as soon as he could.

And then, he was at a loss of what to do. Would he really give in to their demands and give out whatever meager supplies they had left? The guys were out there fighting to get more food to survive another day, and here he was, throwing their hard work out of the window. He didn't know what to do.

Maybe he could get away with giving them a few cans and hoping they left him alone...

His feet carried him over to their food stores, but as he began looking through their supply of cans with a ball of nervousness tying tighter in his stomach by the second, his eyes fell upon the cooler.

In a burst of spontaneity, he opened it. And lo and behold, Suga hadn't had the time to throw out their (not-so) fresh foods out yet.
He wondered if the men were aware of the radiation.

And on the off-chance that they didn’t...

He'd ran to his own bedding and had taken his sheet off his futon before he could think anymore, and then had raced back to the cooler, throwing all of the remaining fruits, vegetables, pieces of cold meat and slices of sweaty cheese into the sheet. Then, adding in a couple of cans of tuna for cosmetic purposes, he tied the entire thing into a bundle, and then hurriedly climbed down the ladder, almost missing the last few rungs.

Now, to get it to them without opening the door, which would surely end in disaster.

His feet led him to the back door to the gym, where he pressed his ears to the metal doors for any sounds. Nothing came from the outside, so he knocked gently.

"Hello?" he asked. "If anybody there?"

Nobody replied. If they were pretending, they were doing one hell of a good job. But then again, judging from how rowdy they were at the front door, he didn't think them capable. So he carefully unlocked the chains around the handles and slipped them out, wincing at the noise, and then very cautiously opened the door.

A burst of fresh, warm air hit him in the face, but nothing else did. There really was nobody around, and Yamaguchi was incredibly grateful that his gamble had paid off.

Quickly, he left the bundle by the door and retreated within the safe confines of the gym again, locking the doors with shaky fingers.

And then he stood back, and took a moment to acknowledge the mess he'd made.

But he had no time to lose. He'd come this far and wouldn't back out now.

Running back to the main entrance, he knocked on the door to catch the men's attention.

"So?" the leader replied in the same gruff voice.

"I gave you all the food we had," Yamaguchi tried in his most earnest voice. "It isn't much, which is why the guys left to look for more, but it's all bundled up in a sheet by the back door. Circle the building and you'll see it."

"Good boy," the voice on the other side sneered, and a barking order was given for someone to go get the bundle. "Maybe we will let you live, especially if you'll give us your food like this all the time."

Yamaguchi did not reply, only crossed his fingers that they did not know about the irradiated foods.

It felt like an eternity until the scout came back, and words began being exchanged on the other side.

"You're right," the leader finally spoke up, loud enough for Yamaguchi to hear. The teen's blood ran cold, and he held his breath anxiously. "This really isn't much."

He hoped the small cry of relief that left his lips hadn't been audible on the other side of the doors.

"It's all we had left," he restated in the most submissive voice he could muster. "I'm sorry... Please don't hurt us..."
"Fine," the person on the other side huffed, and Yamaguchi thanked his lucky stars that the men were underestimating them. "We'll leave you alone for today."

"Thank you," the dark-haired teen sighed out in relief, but then did a double-take. "Wait, what?"

"For today, pipsqueak," the voice laughed, followed by the many others. "We'll be back tomorrow for more. Convince your friends to leave again tomorrow and we'll be back around the same time."

"No!" Yamaguchi protested. "You can't have everything we worked so hard for!"

"But we can." A chill ran down the teen's spine at the unspoken threat. "And we will. We'll sit here until you and your friends decide to give us everything or you starve to death in this shithole, you hear me?"

"Go away!" Yamaguchi cried out, now too scared to be rational or cunning anymore. His friends were right (if they even were his friends anymore, not after this). He was useless and pathetic after all. "Leave us alone."

"Are you gonna cry to your mommy about it?" And Yamaguchi did cry, because his mother was dead, and his father was dead, and his friends would die when these thugs caught them and he would die with Tsukki's agonized screams in his head.

"Please leave," he sobbed. "Please leave!"

There was another silence, and Yamaguchi tried to muffle the sobs spilling out of his throat. He was pathetic. Stupid, useless, weak, unwanted, pathetic.

"We'll be back tomorrow," the voice finally warned with a tone of finality. "Expect us."

Yamaguchi cried to the beat of the heavy footsteps heading back towards the school. And he slid against the door and cried until exhaustion let him close his eyes, and in a second he was gone.

He wondered if there was a chance that he would never wake up again.

If there was even a sliver, he would take it.

...-...-...-...-...-...-

The teen woke up to the sound of thumping on the door, again, and for a tiny moment, the irrational fear that the men were back for revenge flashed in his mind, jolting him to his feet.

"Oi, Yamaguchi!" The person on the other side of the door called out, and the young man sighed in relief, rushing to the door.

"Captain?" he asked as he fumbled to open the lock on the doors, his senpai's voice muffled by the thick door.

"We're back," Daichi answered, and when Yamaguchi opened the door, he smiled to the first-year. "Come, help us put these things away."

"Welcome back!" Yamaguchi exclaimed in relief, rushing to help Asahi with the bag he had slung on his shoulders. The gentle giant sighed in relief and thanked him before jogging rather comically towards the locker rooms, probably to relieve himself, judging from the little waddle in his jog. Yamaguchi chuckled softly and began carrying the bag in when the captain spoke up again.

"Huh, the others aren't back yet?" Daichi noted as he walked into the gym, dropping his bag and
baseball bat. Yamaguchi's blood froze in his veins at the comment as his mind flashed with terrifying images of the other party being ripped apart by the thugs occupying the school, but then he shook his head and shrugged nervously.

"Not yet. They shouldn't be too long." He hoped they wouldn't be.

"Right. Maybe we can get started on dinner then. I'm sure we're all starving," Suga hummed, heading towards the locker rooms to wash his hands.

Daichi voiced his approval and then followed Suga into the locker room. That left Yamaguchi alone, fidgeting nervously.

The lock on the door clicked behind him all of a sudden and Yamaguchi practically jumped out of his skin, turning around to look at the door.

Instead, his eyes met Tsukishima's, the young blond having locked the door before turning to him.

"Calm down, you look like you've seen a ghost," Tsukishima noted, approaching his friend. "Still have that bad feeling, or something?"

And Yamaguchi considered telling him everything and admitting to how scared shitless he was, but then... he couldn't afford to be weak... Not when everybody else was so strong.

"It must be the nausea from hunger," he tried laughing it off, but Tsukki wasn't buying it, clearly. A cold sweat broke on the back of the teen's neck and he averted his eyes. "And you know none of us slept well last night. I uhh... I still see... it... When I close my eyes, I mean," he stammered.

And it wasn't a total lie.

Instead of the girl, however all his terrified mind could imagine was the bodies of his dead friends mutilated beyond recognition.

But Tsukki seemed to buy it and backed off with a sigh.

"Fine. Try to sleep more tonight," he mumbled, and then it was his turn to subtly avert his eyes.

"And uhh... if you can't sleep or something, you can talk to Suga or Daichi or... me, or something."

"I'll keep that in mind," Yamaguchi nodded, but they both knew he'd go for the latter if he needed anything. A warm feeling blossomed in his chest at the thought of it, but then a rough sneer cut through his thoughts and his heart chilled and froze in place.

"We'll be back tomorrow."

Oh god, he couldn't let them lay a hand on his friends.

They were working so hard and putting themselves in danger, and he had to do his share. If his share was lying in order to protect them, then so be it. He had to contribute somehow.

A little later, Suga returned, and they put away all of their newly-obtained supplies in an orderly fashion. It wasn't much either, the shops obviously having been ransacked before the teens got to them, but it was something, at least, to hold them off a couple of days.

"Hey Yamaguchi?" Suga asked as he finished doing the inventory of their canned vegetables. "Where did all of the stuff in the cooler go?"

"Oh." The younger teen froze, and his eyes darted nervously to the door as if he was expecting
someone to crash through at that very moment, locked or not. "Uhh... I figured since they were no
good, I'd clean up and throw them out."

"Ah," Suga nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer, because he closed the cooler and started
stacking boxes of dry pasta on it. "Thank you. However, you shouldn't go outside on your own. We
haven't seen anybody in the month we've been here, but that girl from yesterday isn't a good omen.
We should all be very careful."

"Yeah." Yamaguchi's tongue felt heavy in his mouth, and he couldn't bear to look at his senpai any
longer while blatantly lying to his face. "Sorry. I'll be careful."

Being careful wouldn't help him tomorrow, though. He had to tell somebody, he had to ask for help,
he had to tell them they were in danger... It was their right to know... But... They looked too happy
to be bothered like this. Too carefree, for the first time in weeks. He couldn't ruin that for them.

"You be careful too, okay, senpai?" he murmured as an afterthought, and Suga only gave him a kind
smile that Yamaguchi felt rotten for indulging in.

"Of course. Thank you for your concern. Now, before the hungry wolves in the other squad come
back, help me make dinner, alright?"

...-...-...-...-...-...-...-

Every little noise seemed to jolt Yamaguchi from his light sleep now, and after the seventh time his
eyes flew open, only to stare into the darkness, he really, really stopped finding this funny.

"Get over it," he whispered to himself, feeling the rumble of his voice clogged up in his throat. On
the bed next to him, Tanaka rolled over with a sleepy grunt and the younger teen froze.

When his senpai settled, he turned onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. The tarp covering the
broken part of the roof ruffled in the wind and Yamaguchi took comfort in knowing that he was, in
fact, still alive, and still safe within the confines of the gym.

But how much longer until the gym became their prison cell, and then their grave?

He needed to come up with a plan.

But what could he, a simple high school first-year, do about a situation so dangerous? None of them
could do anything about it. The men hiding in the school sounded like they were older, rough and
tough and hardened by the apocalypse already. In contrast, they were just kids who were trying to
cling on to their humanity and keep surviving like dogs in the street. One way or another, it would
not end well for Karasuno.

He wanted to cry, but he'd done enough of that already. But then again, just because he'd already
made so many mistakes, it didn't seem to stop him from making any more...

He turned around and dropped his head on his small pillow, the itchy futon underneath him irritating
his bare arms. He rubbed the goosebumps away and wished he hadn't given his bedsheet out, but
then again, he didn't want to start thinking about everything he regretted. Even the morning light
wouldn't save him from those, even if he tried.

"Stop thinking."

Yamaguchi shot up straight at that, forgetting to breathe for just a second before he recognized the
voice as Tsukishima's, coming from where he slept on the sleeping bag next to him.
"Huh?" he whispered back, sliding back down on the futon and willing his heart to stop hammering.

"You're too loud," Tsukishima mumbled, and only their proximity allowed the smaller teen to hear him.

"I... I haven't-"

"Do you want to say something?" the blond cut him off, and Yamaguchi suddenly wished for some kind of light source, just to see the expression on Tsukishima's face. He was probably looking at where Yamaguchi's eyes would be in the darkness, and even just imagining meeting his eyes was too distressing. He turned his gaze to the ceiling and sighed.

"W-Well..." The thugs would be back in the middle of the afternoon. They'd demand food again, probably. Maybe even demand more because Yamaguchi had been stupid enough to poison them with the fresh food -stupid, stupid, stupid-. Maybe he should have dipped all of the food in the floor wax they kept in the storage room, maybe that would have gotten them out of the way for good.

But he wasn't a killer. He wouldn't have the guts to do something like that... would he?

Would he do anything to protect his friends? The only people he had left in this cruel, bloody world? Would he give everything he had to save the ones who'd saved him?

The answer ringing in his head was a frighteningly loud 'yes'.

"Nevermind..." Yamaguchi finally sighed out. "I'm still thinking about things I'd rather forget."

There was a sigh, and for a second, Yamaguchi was struck by the irrational, and yet completely overpowering fear that Kei had finally given up on him.

But he wouldn't. He knew that much. And that wouldn't change, no matter what happened.

Tsukishima's sleeping bag made a soft ruffling noise as he seemed to shuffle closer, and Yamaguchi's heart pounded when the noise stopped dangerously close to him.

"You're going to wake up everybody else, and it's been a really long day," the blond mumbled, and Yamaguchi shuddered when a small weight fell on his futon, at waist level. "Just go to sleep."

And Yamaguchi couldn't see him, and he couldn't see the others, but he could hear Kei and he could hear everybody else breathing softly, and the night wind ruffling the tarp and scratching the windows, and maybe the thugs would come again tomorrow, but until then, there was nothing to do but breathe, and maybe even dream.

"Okay," the dark-haired teen finally nodded, relenting a small smile, and slipped his hand into his best friend's proffered one gently, as if afraid. "Good... Good night, Tsukki."

Tsukishima probably thought that he was protecting Yamaguchi from dreaming of the dead girl.

Yamaguchi didn't tell him that he would probably dream of him instead.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

"We're going out again?" Hinata asked, chewing noisily on his breakfast and whining when Kageyama swatted his head.

"What we brought back yesterday will only last us a few days, dumbass. Of course we should go back out again."
"But-

"Chew before you talk, you're disgusting," Kageyama interrupted him, effectively starting the familiar cycle of bickering between the duo.

"Settle down," Daichi sighed, finishing his meal and setting the can down, spoon rattling. "We'll head out after breakfast and get it over with early. We'll cover the immediate areas we didn't cover yesterday and be back and re-evaluate our supplies as well as the availability in the surrounding areas."

"There wasn't much left on the shelves of any store we saw yesterday..." Asahi noted worriedly. "Are we really gonna find anything today?"

"We'll have to try," Suga sighed, looking at the captain for confirmation. "It's all we can do at this point."

"Right. And we have to do all we can do at this point, cause otherwise, we'll die," Nishinoya added in, putting his plate down just a little too roughly, and the clang echoed off into the large gym.

His words rang true, and everybody knew it.

Especially Yamaguchi.

"Same as yesterday, then?" Tanaka asked, getting up and looking down at Hinata and Kageyama, who seemed to be sulking. "You know, our kouhai aren't all that bad! We make a pretty good team!"

"And Hinata and Kageyama do occasionally have moments of common sense where they work together like a charm," Nishinoya smirked, making the two concerned teens splutter indignantly.

"W-We don't-"

"It's not like we won't do what it takes to survive, you know!" the dark-haired setter clicked his tongue, crossing his arms as if daring his senpai to challenge him. Nishinoya just smirked down at his air of confidence, glad to see that he hadn't given up.

"Yeah," Hinata added, bolstered by Kageyama's quiet acceptance of the claim. "He once promised me that we'd be invincible together and we're still going strong, so there's no stopping us now!"

"... Hinata, that was really stupid."

"W-What!? You're stupid! Bakayama!"

"Tch, don't say my name like that, dumbass!"

"Hah, even after all this time, you still don't know any other insults!"

"Enough, enough," Suga chuckled, then turned to Daichi when the two first-years visibly ignored him. "Should we stop them?"

"Let them be." And instead of exasperation like he expected, Suga found nothing but happiness, and maybe a little wistfulness in the captain's eyes as they lazily followed the first-years' antics.

And he could only smile as well, because in the harshest of times and in the cruelest conditions, Karasuno's spirit would stay united as long as they still were. And it was a strange relief to see that despite the horrors of the outside world, within these walls, they were still the very same teenagers who, so long ago, only wanted to pass school and get to volleyball nationals.
"Let's stop wasting time and get going," Tsukishima was finally the one to bring everyone back to order. "The sooner we leave, the sooner we can come back and stop worrying about this issue."

"Don't tell me what to do, four-eyes," Hinata glared without any real venom to his words, but let go of Kageyama's shirt collar anyway.

"Yeah yeah, pipsqueak. Just go get dressed," the blond rolled his eyes dismissively and got up to go do the same.

"Ah, leave me your dirty clothes, everybody," Yamaguchi insisted before they broke apart. "I'll... I'll do our laundry while you're gone, if that's alright."

"Are you sure?" Suga asked kindly. "I know it must get boring around here, but you could switch with someone and go outside instead, if you like..."

But Yamaguchi could only imagine one of his teammates in his place, answering to the violent thugs and quaking in fear, and he didn't wish that upon anybody.

"N-No, that's okay!" he waved them off with a shaky smile. "I'd rather do some work inside. I'm really no good to you guys on the outside..."

"Don't say that, Yamaguchi. You have a heart of gold and anybody would be lucky to have you on their team," Suga laughed, and the freckled teen blushed a deep red because everyone was looking at him and laughing as well and he didn't deserve this kind of affection and attention and acceptance, not from the people he'd let down.

"I'll stay here, thank you!" he insisted softly. "Leave your dishes, I'll do them, too. Just go get ready, everyone!"

"Thank you for the meal," the collective cry came, and one by one, the team began disbanding to go get ready. Yamaguchi began gathering the dishes and stacking them, glad to see that no leftovers were on the plates and in the cans. They really couldn't be wasting food, not when Yamaguchi was already giving their stuff away.

He felt sick to the stomach and almost stumbled as he carried the dishes to the buckets of water they used to do the dishes.

"After you do the laundry, wipe the floor when it gets wet," Tsukishima's familiar, soothing voice broke through his thoughts, and Yamaguchi turned around in his crouch to look up at him with a small smile. Tsukishima turned his head, lips set in a frown, and he seemed to hesitate over what to say. "The gym floor gets slippery when it's wet, is all."

"Thank you," Yamaguchi only replied, knowing the implications of his words and loving how they were so typical of the blond's aloof persona. "And you be safe out there."

"Of course," Tsukishima nodded, and glanced at him one last time before heading off to get ready. Yamaguchi watched him walk away for just a few seconds, and then turned to focus on his task at hand.

Until he was once again powerless, he may as well pretend to be useful.

...~...~...~...~...~...~...

The arduous task of soaking the laundry and then manually washing it with a piece of a foam yoga mat had left Yamaguchi's arms aching by the time he was done. He'd taken the opportunity to clean
everybody's bedsheets and pillowcases as well, and so the whole process of soaking, washing, rinsing and straining all of the laundry had actually taken him a few hours.

However, as the hours progressed, and no sound came from the door, Yamaguchi got more and more nervous. What had happened to the thugs in the school? Had they been too sick to come harass him today? Were they still observing the gym like they claimed they had? Had something else happened to them?

Had they gotten mad at Yamaguchi for tricking them and had gone after his teammates?

The possibilities were endless, and Yamaguchi did not like the thought of any of them. So instead, he busied himself with tying a whole bunch of jump ropes tightly together to make a clothesline that he then looped on one of the rails of the middle landing, and then extended to the right landing. He repeated the action with a second set of ropes that he extended from the middle to the left landing, and then prepared himself for the arduous task of carrying all of the laundry up the ladder.

The process itself was hard on his arms and pretty tiring, and so Yamaguchi actually forgot about the thugs until after all the laundry had been hung up to dry. But then, at that point, it was already the afternoon, and the thugs had not come, so he figured that maybe this time, he had prevailed.

And slowly, as the minutes became hours, as the harsh silence inside the warehouse was filled with the sound of light-hearted humming and of a mop soaking up the water dripping from the clothes hung up overhead, Yamaguchi began to think that perhaps he hadn't messed up, just this once. Even the harsh red sky throwing its bloody light into the warehouse did not seem so threatening anymore.

Perhaps, just this once, he'd won.

He was mopping the floor under the drying clothes again when there was a knock at the door, and Yamaguchi immediately turned to it.

"Oi, Yamaguchi!" a voice called out from the other side, and the young man stopped his mopping to go open the door. The light was still high in the sky, and by the looks of it, it was only mid-afternoon, but the guys had left in the mid-morning, so it'd make sense if they came back early, as well. However, as he unlocked the chains, he stopped for a second, because he hadn't recognized the voice.

Maybe somebody had hurt himself? Some kind of injury to the face? Or an inhalation injury?

Only as the chains fell audibly to the ground did he realize that perhaps-

-it wasn't-

Yamaguchi realized his mistake a second too late. As soon as he bent to take the chains off the floor to snap them back over the handles, the door flew open, and a large shadow was cast upon his bent form.

The teen's eyes went wide, almost like a deer caught in headlights, and almost exactly like one, because though he saw the danger coming, he couldn't avoid it.

"Got you now, you little shit."

Maybe this is what he deserved, in the end, for being so pathetic.

In one last act of courage, if he even deserved to call it that, Yamaguchi Tadashi looked into the eyes of his tall attacker as the butt of a gun was slammed into his temple.
He blacked out.

The sun was still high in the sky, and Daichi’s watch read 4:07PM when the Karasuno gymnasium came into sight.

"It's so nice out," Asahi sighed. "I'm glad everything went smoothly today."

"Yes, the weather's wonderful," Tsukishima added sarcastically, glancing up at the sky. "I'd die for more of this wonderful latent radiation, you know."

"You don't have a sense of humour after all, do you, Tsukishima," Suga laughed, turning around to grin at the impassive first-year. "Lighten up a little."

"Kind of hard to 'lighten up' when we've basically come to terms with the fact that our town is not viable anymore, senpai," the blond replied with a roll of his eyes, and at that, Suga's smile slowly fell.

"Well, it had to happen someday..." he mumbled, and then turned to Daichi, who was walking a few steps ahead, and who was probably listening to them talk anyway. "But I'm sure Daichi has a plan for us. He always does."

The captain did not respond, but accelerated the pace. It had been a long day, and though the bag on his back was frighteningly light, his worried thoughts were heavy enough to weigh down on his shoulders.

They bridged the gap to the gym in silence, and they couldn't deny the relief they felt upon arriving.

"Yamaguchi? Are you there?" Daichi called out at the door, and waited. All four of them waited, and yet, after a minute, there was no answer.

"Knock? Maybe he's asleep. Laundry isn't an easy chore to do, especially when you're alone," Suga defended, and the captain nodded, doing as he said.

However, as soon as his fist hit the door a third time, the door swung a little on the inside. Immediate alarm bells began ringing in the teens' minds.

"Yamaguchi?" Daichi called again, putting a hand on the door. To his surprise, and perhaps slight apprehension, the door swung towards the inside again. "We're coming in!"

And they did step inside, all four of them, only to freeze in their tracks. A wave of horror ran down their spines simultaneously as they took in the scene in front of them.

Everything was pristine, just as they left it, except for the message scribbled on the floor, blanketed by the shadows cast by the laundry hanging overhead. It was dry for the most part, except for where it had blurred from the dripping water from the clothes, and it was short, clear, and concise.

"6PM, will come negotiate"

And it was written in blood.

"So? What's up around here?" Tanaka asked as Suga let them into the gym. All eyes immediately
went to Daichi, who was mopping the floor quietly.

There was a pink tinge to the puddle on the ground, and there were immediately no illusions as to the etiology of the puddle.

"What happened?" Nishinoya hissed, brows furrowing. "Someone's hurt?"

"Gone," Suga whispered in a scratchy voice, sunken eyes downcast.

"Gone...?" Hinata repeated, uncomprehending, but the third-year setter couldn't seem to say the words he was looking for.

However, one glance around the gym let them draw their own conclusions, and realization dawned on the newcomer party as their eyes fell upon Tsukishima's hunched figure sitting against the wall, Asahi worriedly glancing at him occasionally from his seat by central command.

"No," Tanaka whispered, his throat suddenly going dry.

"It's not... It's not Yamaguchi... is it?" Nishinoya asked for all of them, and they looked at Suga worryingly until the silver-haired teen nodded.

"No... Where did he go!?!" Hinata demanded to know, voice raising instinctively with the fear that had started creeping up his veins, slowly towards his heart.

"Shh," Suga prompted him, throwing a worried glance at Tsukishima, who hadn't moved. All eyes went to him as well, and suddenly, the tension had been replaced with a heavy weight in the air.

"What happened?" Kageyama asked in a quiet voice, knowing better than to make a scene in a crisis such as this.

"We don't know. We got here and the door was unlocked," Suga explained as they walked towards central command to leave their weapons. "There was a message on the floor, written in blood, which Daichi cleaned up. It said they'd come around to negotiate around 6PM."

"They?" Hinata asked softly, as if afraid of the answer. "Who are they?"

"We don't know," Daichi's voice drew their attention, and they all turned to face the captain, whose eyes looked more clouded than ever.

If Tsukishima was the most affected by the incident, then Daichi was the second most affected.

And they all gave him the right to that unwanted title, because negotiation meant bargaining through a leader, and he was the leader who'd be bargaining for Yamaguchi's life.

"What are we going to do?" Nishinoya asked worriedly, eyes going from the mop in Daichi's hands, to Tsukishima's curled form on the ground, to the sudden fear in his remaining kouhai's eyes, and then back to Daichi for guidance. "What if these guys are like... veterans or something? What if they have actual weapons?"

"Noya is right," Tanaka added. "The whole 'message written in blood' is obviously a scare tactic pulled right out of some typical horror game, but what if these guys are serious? What if Yamaguchi is...?"

"No," Daichi softly answered the silent question that nobody dared asked. "I believe he'll be fine unless we decide otherwise. We can't do anything for now. These guys obviously know where we
are, and the door was open so they could have raided the place as well, but they didn't. This means they want something they couldn't get without the rest of us around, and so they need a bargaining chip, like Yamaguchi."

"This is sick," Hinata whimpered, fists clenching. "Why did this happen to us? To Yamaguchi? It isn't fair... None of us have done anything wrong, especially not him."

"I wish the world saw through your eyes, Hinata," Daichi sighed heavily, and then put a hand on the spiker's dirty, matted orange hair. The younger teen looked at the floor, tears brimming in his eyes, and Daichi's heart broke because he could do nothing, apparently, to soothe any of their pain. "However, this world doesn't have rules anymore. We're in the state of nature now, and if we are to follow the theory behind this state of nature, then we must discard our morals and values and survive by any means necessary."

"But we can't just discard our morals... Even if it means we'll die!" Hinata protested weakly, and Daichi actually ruffled his hair a little bit, unsure what else to do to console the small boy.

"We may hold onto them, but they... Whoever they are, they've already let go of their humanity..." He bit his lip and looked at the door as if it would swing open and yield all the answers. "And if we are to stand up to them, we have to treat them as if they have none, too."

Six o' clock came too quickly, or maybe it came too slowly. Either way, it came, and the team couldn't sit still at all. After all, how were they supposed to relax when one of their team members, one of their friends, one of their family had been taken to be used against them?

"Okay," Daichi finally stood up from his chair, drawing the attention of all the fidgeting teens in the gym. "I'm gonna go stand outside. Show them we're not afraid. You guys-"

"-grab a crowbar, and the bats with nails in them," Noya hissed out, glancing at everybody and seemingly not even caring that he'd cut off their captain. "If they're going to mess with one of ours, we're not going to hold back."

But it was easier said than done, and despite the nodding that answered his words, nobody looked too sure about using those weapons at all.

"You could stay inside. Not everybody needs to come outside," Daichi suggested, but despite the small hesitation that flashed in their eyes, nobody backed down.

"No," Hinata slowly tested the words out, nervously looking at the others for support. "We're Karasuno, and we... we'll always stand together, won't we?"

There were small noises of acknowledgement, and Daichi was actually moved by how afraid, and broken, and courageous all of these kids were.

"Right," Suga replied in his stead, apparently taken by Hinata's words as well. "Well said. We are Karasuno, and we'll never let go of our own."

"Then let's go," Daichi nodded, turning around to go unlock the door. Behind him, Karasuno shuffled into action, grabbing their weapons and quietly whispering between themselves, probably trying to dispel the tension.

Despite the whole thing looking like a scene right out of a movie or a video game, they were all just human, and kids at that, too. There was nothing fun about what they were about to do, and it was
going to be terribly dangerous. One of them, or many of them, could die as a result of their actions, or get really hurt.

However, all of these terrifying facts had sunk in, apparently, because when Daichi opened the door, he found all of Karasuno striding out with him, backs straight and gazes firm. As if they were entering the court to play a game against a new adversary.

Except this time, if they lost the game, they'd lose more than just their pride or their reputation. And so, losing was not an option, more than ever before.

There was nobody outside just yet, and so the team silently decided to spread out a little, mostly on the adjacent grassy area. The school loomed ominously over them, and the red sky, now darker with the advancing evening, had never looked so threatening before.

They said nothing, but breathed as if it were the last time they would breathe.

And finally, around 6:14PM, the doors of the school slammed open, and all eyes went there.

All of the teenagers held their breaths as two men walked out, holding open switchblades that looked as threatening as they were meant to be. There was no illusions about the lethal dangers of such a weapon, and in comparison, the baseball bats and crowbars looked a bit pathetic. But it was all they had, and they'd fight 'till the end with all they had.

The two men looked at the teenagers, and the anxiety was practically tangible as the younger side felt scrutinized like pieces of meat set up on display. They had to break the tension somehow.

"Ah, so you came out!" Finally, there was a voice, and all eyes went to the entrance, that was shaded by the shadows cast by the evening sun. "I guess I have to give you lot a bit more credit for your courage. Or is it foolishness?"

"Negotiation insinuates that we speak as equals," Daichi called out. "So show yourself, and bring Yamaguchi back!"

"Right, Yamaguchi," the voice pondered out loud, and finally, there were two silhouettes in the doorway. One of them was tall and well-built, probably a man in his mid-fifties belonging to some biker gang or a bar bouncer, and Karasuno silently agreed that he was imposing as hell. And then, next to him, stumbling and looking rather pathetically frail was their very own Yamaguchi, blindfolded, gagged, wrists tied, and being dragged blindly around by the upper arm.

"Yamaguchi!" Nishinoya cried out upon recognizing his kouhai.

"Let him go!" Tanaka added, bolstered by Nishinoya's call.

"I feel like you two have no idea how negotiation works. Let your leader do the talking and I might just give him back," the man rolled his eyes, finally stepping fully into the light of the dusk. And asides from the numerous scars on his face, asides from the blood on Yamaguchi's face, asides from the bruising grip the man had on Yamaguchi, it was probably the gun in his left hand that was the scariest bit of the picture.

Knowing that they were totally and completely powerless was the worst part.

"Name your terms," Daichi finally sighed, unwilling to pass another second in this man's presence, and even more so, expose his team to this man's violent whims. "My only term is that you return Yamaguchi to us unharmed."
Said captive immediately began struggling, as if protesting the decision, and Daichi averted his eyes, especially glad that he didn't witness the harsh shake the man gave to his hostage that drew another muffled cry out of Yamaguchi's mouth.

"I've put a lot of thought into my terms, so you better listen well," the man began, letting go of Yamaguchi. However, as the team watched, Yamaguchi did not move a muscle, and immediately they guessed that there was some extra blackmail involved.

In a horrifyingly mocking gesture, the man caressed Yamaguchi's bloody hair and untangled a few of the strands, and with every stroke, the trembles of the young man's body became more and more visible.

"First of all, I request that you hand over all of your consumables," the man began, gently untying Yamaguchi's blindfold. The cloth fell from the young man's eyes, and the team immediately got a look at his teary, terrified gaze at the purplish bruise under his right cheek. Several cries of protest rose, but were calmed immediately for fear of repercussion.

"Done," Daichi replied in a heartbeat, because Yamaguchi was definitely worth a few cans of food.

"Good, I'm glad. Second, I request that you do not leave your hideout without my permission," the man numbered off, putting a heavy hand on Yamaguchi's shoulder. The dark-haired boy flinched at the touch and shied away, but a single glance at the gun held casually in his other hand was enough to freeze him in place.

"Why would you ask that?" Suga frowned, seeing that Daichi was busy looking at his precious kouhai's condition. "We're obviously not a match for you, and so aren't a threat at all. There's no point in confining us."

"I've learnt not to underestimate you lot, not after this little shit gave us food that almost killed us," the man glared at Yamaguchi, his grip tightening painfully on his shoulder. Despite the gravity of the situation, a few of the guys couldn't help but crack a wry smirk at Yamaguchi's sense of humour, but the atmosphere became heavier quickly.

"What do you mean, he gave it to you?" Suga asked again, frowning at the marks of abuse visible on the younger boy. And who knew what kinds of abuse had been done that hadn't left physical marks...

"Ah, he didn't tell you the story?" the man feigned surprise. "Well, we dropped by for a visit yesterday, while you guys were out. Yamaguchi here wasn't too kind and didn't invite us in or nothing, but after a couple of threats, he did give us some food. We promised to come back for more, but that was before the food made us sick like dogs." He clicked his tongue in displeasure. "So I figured I'd make better use of him this time. I suppose it worked."

"Alright, so what if we agreed to your terms to stay inside?" Daichi began again. "What benefit would that have?"

"Well, I'd have you lot under my thumb, for one," the man thought out loud, trailing his fingers up Yamaguchi's neck to undo his gag. The boy visibly shuddered at the vile touch, but as soon as the cloth was out of his mouth, he took greedy gulps of air and turned to Daichi.

"Captain! Don't give him what he wants," he pleaded, dried blood smeared around his lips giving him a pretty beaten-up look.

However, before he could continue, his chin was gripped tightly, and he grunted when the grip
bruised his jaw.

"Now, now, Yamaguchi... I didn't take your gag off for you to run your mouth like the impolite brat you are," he mock-chided, and then turned to Daichi, whose eyes were steel-cold now. "Which brings me to my next term."

"What now?" Kageyama muttered out, disgust rolling off of him in waves at the state of his comrade. Hinata gently put a hand on his arm to try and calm him down, but Kageyama shook him off with a grunt.

"You see, we're only three in our lonely little hideout in the school. We used to be more, we had survivors like you working for us, but then, well..." He clicked his tongue and let the sentence trail off.

"He was the one who killed her," Yamaguchi sobbed out softly, and everybody knew whom he was referring to. "And she had friends, and he killed them, too! And he keeps their bodies in the school!" Yamaguchi's voice cracked and tears began running down his face. And nobody could blame him as the shocking truth poured out of his mouth. "He's a psychopath, captain, don't give him-"

"Shh, Yamaguchi, shh," the man warned, and the young man's voice caught in his throat as something cold touched his thigh, and then began running up. He didn't need to look down to know what it was. He kept his eyes on his teammates' shell-shocked expressions, and bit his lip to keep it from wobbling. "So. My terms are that you take these girls' place. With just three people, I can't afford to deploy anyone to raid the town for supplies. You boys do your job just fine already, so you'd just keep at it, except you'd bring all of your finds to me. And I'd give you a share, obviously."

"No, Daichi," Yamaguchi shook his head desperately. "Don't say yes, please don't-"

"Yamaguchi," the man warned, and the gun trailed up further, cold metal kissing his side and then his arm, and then his shoulder.

"I'm not worth it, Daichi," Yamaguchi sniffled, totally ignoring his captor's warnings. "I've done nothing but cause trouble so far and I can't do anything useful around here, so don't throw away everything for someone like me," he pleaded, and more tears poured out when Daichi's murderous expression never faltered. He wasn't sure if he was glad for the loyalty, or frustrated that they were about to throw everything away for someone like him.

"Yamaguchi," Daichi finally called, and all wide eyes went to their leader for some sort of salvation. Suga put a comforting hand on Daichi's shoulder, and, feeling bolstered by the vote of confidence, Daichi stood taller than before. "Don't ever say anything like that again. You're in pain and in shock, and you don't know what you're talking about."

"I know it! I'll cause more trouble-"

"Yamaguchi!" Daichi warned, and at that, the teen shut up, sniffing pathetically. "Listen to me. You've never been useless. Nobody in our team is useless. We're not like these monsters. We don't throw around one of our own and we don't consider any of us as expendable. You're one of us, you always have been, and always will be. I don't want to hear any more nonsense about not being worth it again."

"But-"

"No objections!" Daichi yelled out, and Yamaguchi froze. "Yamaguchi... Tadashi... It's going to be okay. I promise you it's going to be okay. We're not going to leave you behind. You're coming home
with us, no matter what."

And Yamaguchi remembered that whatever the captain promised was a promise that would be fulfilled.

Something tugged in his heart, something he didn't know he had bottled up inside of him. He could hardly even feel the gun pressed painfully to his jaw now or the tight grip on his opposite arm, because he had gotten a pardon that he never should have been entitled to, but Daichi had forgiven him and his team still loved him, and they were fighting to have him back. And he really, honestly did not know how to feel about their blind devotion.

"I'm sorry," he sniffled, and then burst into a loud cry. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Please forgive me, I'm so, so sorry!"

The mantra continued for a little while until Yamaguchi had cried a river, and then quieted into small sniffles.

"Now. Your final terms," Daichi turned his eyes away from the younger player, to his captor. "What if I were to refuse?"

"Well then, I guess I'd just have to shoot little Tadashi here," the man replied nonchalantly, and the mocking way he said his first name did not pass unnoticed. There were many clenched fists and gritted teeth, but nobody said a word.

"And what if I accepted your terms?" Daichi asked one last time.

"Then I suppose you'd be free to go," the man thought out loud. "But..." Nonetheless, the gun never lowered. In fact, the man reached out and clicked its safety off, and the ominous sound rang in Yamaguchi's ear forebodingly.

"Stop it!" Hinata cried out, immediately recognizing the situation as an immediate danger, but it was now Kageyama's turn to hold him back.

"Don't antagonize him, stupid!" the setter growled at him, holding his upper arm tightly, but he didn't let go, even after Hinata backed down, and the small spiker gritted his teeth, concentrating on Kageyama's quasi-painful grip on him rather than the situation at hand.

"But, I guess I'd just have to keep little Tadashi with me... For safekeeping, you know," the man finally announced, and Karasuno immediately ruffled its feathers.

"We'd never agree to that!" Daichi spat out. "My terms for yours, and I clearly demanded Yamaguchi's safe return, and this is final!"

"But were you ever in any place to make demands, little man?" the thug laughed as if he was truly amused by the situation. "You're all children still, pretending you can be adults, but truth is, you know nothing. And you can do nothing against us adults! Just accept my demands and you can live in peace!"

"Don't do it!" Yamaguchi cried out one more time, and the gun was twisted further into his jaw.

"Yamaguchi, stop talking," Suga pleaded fearfully, eyeing the man's fingers, so dangerously close to the trigger.

"You monster, let him go! We'll do what you ask if you stop hurting him!" Daichi roared, now beyond the point of civility. Nobody threatened his ragtag band of surviving family this way and got...
"Then I would have no reason to hurt him, if you followed my orders. I'd just keep him with me, and if you're good little dogs, I'll give him a nice bed and food and you wouldn't have to worry," the man cooed mockingly, and anger flared from the group of teenagers. "But if you disobey, well... Maybe I'll carve him up like I did Rena. Or was it Rin? I don't remember her." He shrugged, but then a predatory smirk split his face. "But then, I'll always remember his lovely screams and his glorious tears and I'll never forget my precious, precious Tadashi."

"Stop it!"

All air left their lungs, and time froze. And then, tension began mounting, and mounting, until it was suffocating and nothing they could do could deflate the balloon that was filling up because the balloon was full of burning hot air and it was so, so, so close to bursting-

"I'm tired of listening to you run your filthy mouth."

"N-No, wait," Asahi stammered, putting a hand up to try and stop him, but his effort was futile.

Tsukishima had already taken a step forward.

And then another. And another. And another. And cries came from behind him to stop and turn back, but he didn't stop, because Yamaguchi, his best friend for years, kind-hearted and selfless Yamaguchi was being hurt and humiliated and threatened and there was no way he would forgive someone, something as heinous as the monster holding his best friend captive.

"You have no right to say his name!" he cried, twirling his bat in his hands threateningly. "You have no right to even touch him. He's a thousand times better than you and you're the dirt under his feet!"

"Tsukishima, come back!" Suga pleaded. "Please stop, I know you're angry but-

"I won't let this go unanswered," the blond growled out in an uncharacteristic show of anger.

No. An uncharacteristic show of pure, unadulterated rage that left a chill deep in the observers' bones.

"Don't get involved, kid. I have no use for a hothead like you," the man warned, and Yamaguchi immediately began struggling.

"Stop! Tsukki, stop!" he pleaded, but the grip on his arm dug deep against his nerve, and he cried out in pain.

"Don't hurt him!" But Tsukishima wasn't pleading anymore. He was threatening, his steps crossing miles in his attempt to reach his best friend. "Don't you dare harm him again! You've done enough. Now leave!"

"Tsukishima!" Noya and Tanaka cried out at the same time, noting the two other guys with switchblades advancing, and in the middle of it all, Daichi realized that this was another nuclear bomb in the making.

And it exploded before he even had a chance to try and dismantle it.

"I'm gonna tear you apart!" the blond growled out, twirling his bat again. At the same time, the men with switchblades began heading for him, but then Nishinoya and Tanaka were on them with war cries, and all hell broke loose.
"Don't take another step closer or I'll shoot your friend's brains out!" the man threatened, taking a step back and dragging Yamaguchi with him. Yamaguchi struggled with his bound wrists and tried helping Tsukishima out as much as he could, but the gun's safety was still off, and the man's finger was too close to the trigger for it to be safe for anybody.

"Not before I'm done with you!" Tsukishima threatened, livid with rage, and suddenly, the man realized that he wasn't kidding anymore. And that the tall teen was nobody to be trifled with.

"Fuck this!" the man growled, hooking one arm around Yamaguchi's throat, almost choking him, and then raised his gun at the advancing blond. "You'll be the first one to go, kid! You never should have messed with me!" His finger slid onto the trigger.

"No!" Yamaguchi cried out, struggling with all he had because Tsukki, Tsukki, Tsukki, he had to protect Tsukki- "NO!"

The shot rang out in the air, and Tsukishima staggered back a few steps with a grunt.

Blood splattered on the ground, and all eyes went to him, wide and terrified.

"Tsukishima!" The cries came from everybody witnessing the horrifying scene, but loudest of all was the most agonized, most anguished cry of all.

"KEI!"

Tsukishima turned his eyes back to Yamaguchi, who was looking back at him with wide, pleading eyes dripping with tears, and then looked down at himself.

A patch of red had blossomed on his shoulder.

But then as he recovered from the initial shock and burning pain, he noted Yamaguchi's tied hands wrestling the man's left arm, and he noted how he could still move, and nothing mattered anymore but the fact that Yamaguchi had saved his life. Again.

It was now time to pay him back.

"You're dead to me!" he cried out, and broke into a jog, bat raised.

Several things happened at once at that moment. Noya and Tanaka distracted the other two men long enough for Asahi and Daichi to hold them down against the ground, disarmed. Then, Tsukishima evaluated the angle he'd have to swing his bat to catch the tall man, but not his smaller friend. Then, the man swore softly, and turned his gun back to Yamaguchi's jaw, setting it crookedly against the teen's face, even as the teen tried to wrestle the gun away with his tied hands.

And then, Yamaguchi moved his head to the side, and his finger, not the man's, but his own finger was on the gun's trigger. His eyes were completely open, determination and fearless abandon radiating from underneath the tears.

Everything clicked into place in the span of a second, and suddenly Tsukishima understood.

"No, Tadashi, don't do it!" he cried out, but it was too late.

He watched with wide eyes as Yamaguchi pulled the trigger.

The second shot rang out, and this time, it was absolutely deafening, sucking out all the sound in the scene like a vacuum. It was hard to breathe for the seconds that followed before the loud thump of a
body hitting the ground brought all sensation back to the witnesses of the scene.

The man's blood splattered all over the ground, a bullet hole carved clean diagonally through his throat, and out right below the opposite temple.

And Yamaguchi still stood, gun clutched in reverse in his tied hands, warm, fresh blood splattered on his head and running down the back of his neck, all over his back and shoulder, and saturating his ruined clothes like a mockery of the laundry detergent he'd used earlier that day to clean the traces of death off of their clothes.

"Oh, god." But it was Tsukishima who spoke first, bat dropping on the ground noisily. He stepped carefully to Yamaguchi's side, and slowly extended a hand to the gun. Yamaguchi only watched him work, eyes blank, and did not offer resistance when the blond pulled the gun away and clicked the safety back on.

And then, the gun had been thrown away carelessly, and Kei's arms were around Tadashi, supporting him as the smaller of the two buckled and fell over.

"Oh my god," the blond kept repeating, tightly holding his best friend against his chest, hot tears dripping down his face and smothering in Yamaguchi's blood-drenched hair. By extension of the intimate contact, Kei's clothes were soaking in the blood as well, as if he was trying to bear as much of his friend's burden as possible.

And yet Yamaguchi was unresponsive to his attempts to communicate.

Behind them, Daichi had gone and picked up the gun with disgust clear on his face, and had looked at the two men with switchblades.

"Leave your weapons here, and get out of my sight. Take your things and leave. We won't harm you if you leave now," he spoke quietly, diplomatically like this mission had been at first, and yet now he wasn't being manipulative. He was simply mourning.

And the men seemed to understand the message conveyed in his eyes, and nodded. Leaving their switchblades untouched, they stood up under careful supervision from the teenagers, and quickly left the scene, glancing back only once at the fresh body on the ground.

And then, as the tension finally diffused, all the gazes went to the blond kneeling next to Yamaguchi, crying as if his apologies and his confessed grievances would someday be enough to resuscitate whatever had just died inside of his friend.

This new world was cruel. And one way or another, it left no survivors.

Chapter End Notes

I'm taking so many creative liberties with this fic, it's not even funny. Timeline-wise, physics-wise, character-wise... Somebody stop me. The food radiation mutation thing is perfectly sound, though, as DNA sequences can be changed by radiation! And the reason why the guys projectile vomited their dinners rather than pooped it out in the most painful way is because they ate right before sleep (decreased gastric motility), so the food stagnated in their stomachs for a while + the proteins are undigestable, so they can't be broken down in order to enter the small intestine. Voila! It's all real physiology
applied to fiction.

I read somewhere (I don't remember where, might've been Tumblr) that Yamaguchi would be the first one to crack in a post-apocalyptic world and would be the first one broken by it. I dunno why but I really liked the idea, and so the first kill goes to our precious Tadashi. However, if you're worried, Yamaguchi WILL recover. Maybe not go back 100 percent to what he used to be, but he'll definitely make a good recovery. I'm a sap, remember?

Sorry about Tsukishima, I feel like I've written him 110 percent out-of-character this chapter. I really did try, but I had no idea how to make him get angry/break down while remaining in-character. Tips? And again, I know I promised his backstory in this chapter, but it didn't fit, so I'm gonna go with my backup plan, and include it in the next, or following chapter. I'm really excited about that, too!

I'm taking a lot of stuff from Fallout: New Vegas for the following chapters (especially as they hit the wasteland later on, oops, spoilers?), so if you want to see anything at all, feel free to make a request by leaving a comment, or by contacting me on Tumblr (my URL is the same as on here)! I'd love to hear any and all your thoughts about the fic. And, again, I'd like to hear whose POV the next chapter should explore, cause I'm at a loss! (Can you tell I'm in love with this AU?)

I'd love to have your feedback, and I will see you next time! ;u;
And right before he lost his life to the ebb and flow of the hectic tides, the sound of his name being called pierced through the crashing of the violent rain and reminded him that he had to stay afloat, because from now on, he had a family to return to.

5AM by the time I post this, I am so pumped for a new chapter omg. Sorry about the delay! It wasn't finals or anything holding up this chapter. It was simply the fact that it's, oh, you know, 20.5K WORDS LONG. You might have to read this in two sittings, I am so sorry about this.

All of this was written to the Haikyuu!, Free! and Attack on Titan OSTs and lemme tell you, that shit motivates.

The main suggestions I got were between Noya's and Kageyama's POVs. So I went with Kageyama this time. Noya is coming! He's my fav, so I wouldn't miss out on writing him~

Warnings: Disturbing imagery at a certain moment, hinted KageHina (can be gen or pre-relationship, however you want).

Enjoy!

Tsukishima still had not returned from the showers with Yamaguchi, but the team could not bring themselves to go interrupt them. They themselves had a hard time understanding what had just happened, and it really was at times like these that they were so painfully conscious of how young they all were and how mortal they all were.

"How are you holding up?" And as always, it was Suga who was bending over backwards to try and fix everything, or at least try and hold everything together as long as possible before they fell apart.

"I'm not the one you should be worried about," Daichi mumbled in response, not lifting his eyes to meet his friend's.

"I know you're feeling like this is somehow your fault, though," Suga persisted, sitting down next to the captain on the floor, and then leaning his head against the wall to look sadly at the ceiling. "So you are somebody I should be worried about.

"It was my decisions that led us to that point," Daichi replied softly, looking down at the floor intently instead. His eyes were red, but the third-year setter had not seen his friend cry since the
incident, so he could only imagine how painful it was for him to hold in all of his anguish.

"You could not have prevented it from happening." The truth was harsh and cold, but it was also a soothing balm on a fresh burn. "There is nothing you could've done. Those men had us overpowered and no matter what, you could not have helped that this situation happened."

"I should have tried harder."

"It's a good thing you didn't."

At that, the captain finally lifted his eyes curiously, and the setter turned his gaze down to meet his. He smiled at the surprise in Daichi's expression.

"Really. We're all here, and we're all safe, and things have gone completely haywire but we're alive and together." Glancing away, Suga's eyes went instead to their team members, who were trying to keep themselves busy to keep the horrifying memories out of their minds. A fond expression settled on his face. "It's all that has mattered until now. And it's all that will ever matter from now on."

He turned his eyes back to Daichi, who was looking at the floor again, but his frown seemed just a bit less sad and a bit more tight now.

"As long as we're together," Suga reminded him again, and he would continue to remind him until the day he died. "As long as we are united, there is nothing that will be able to break us."

To that, Daichi only sighed, and blindly slipped his hand into Sugawara's to feel his grip grounding him to this hellish reality of theirs.

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That night, it rained for the first time since the explosion. The dry, almost aggravating air that had burned their nostrils until now suddenly became humid, and smelled tangy a little, like metal. The tarp kept most of the water out, but whatever soaked through drip-drip-dripped down to the gymnasium floor, and the soothing sound of raindrops outside and inside finally lulled them all to sleep.

It did not last long for some.

In the middle of the night, Kageyama shot up from his sleeping bag with a strangled gasp, suddenly aware that he was suffocating. His voice caught in his throat and he clutched at it, eyes wide and scared, and clawed softly as if it would help dislodge whatever was in his windpipe. The fabric of his bedding rustled noisily as he briefly scrambled around in panic before air flowed back into his lungs at once, and he began settling.

Taking three deep breaths, with each and every one of them he repeated to himself what he'd been repeating to himself all this time.

*My name is Kageyama Tobio. I am in the Karasuno gym with my friends. I am safe.*

His breaths heaved as he tried to calm down, and he repeated the information in his head one more time before he felt his heart relenting and beginning to slow to a normal rhythm.

Lying back down with a heavy sigh, he briefly glanced around him to make sure that he hadn't woken anybody with his relatively loud panic attack. Of course, people had become tragically used to their peers waking up in cold sweat in the middle of the night, and now, hardly anyone stirred when someone had a nightmare, unless their awakening was particularly violent. He supposed that it
was because they trusted one another to discuss their nightmares willingly come morning light, if they felt the need, but that in itself was wrong.

At least for Kageyama it was.

His hands hadn't stopped shaking. Sighing, and finding no solace behind his closed eyelids, he sat up and pushed his body out of the sleeping bag, standing up. He carefully walked around Noya, who was curled up next to him, and then over Tanaka, who had his limbs spread out next to Noya, and did not even glance at the empty spots where Tsukishima and Yamaguchi usually would sleep. However, when he passed by the curtained medical bay, he held his breath and listened for signs of life within.

There was nothing, not even an audible breath, and Kageyama did not know whether or not to take comfort in that. But he moved on. They all had to.

His feet carried him down the ladder, past central command, and into the hallway leading to the locker rooms. He figured he may as well splash some water on his face and clean off the stench of fear that seemed to cling to him permanently.

Upon entering the boys' locker room, though, he stopped to the sound of sniffling. For a moment, he listened, but soon he recognized the voice softly whimpering between the sniffles, and he stepped forward.

The teen did not stop him, and Kageyama wondered if he was even aware that there was another person in the room with him. He only stopped next to him and plopped down tiredly on the bench.

"Hey," he sighed. "Stop crying. You need to get back and get some sleep."

"Shut up," was all the boy next to him choked out, rubbing his eyes. "I could say the same to you."

"Huh." Kageyama shrugged, and crossed his arms, looking in front of him with his usual tight-lipped expression. "Then at least stop crying, dumbass. I'm not crying, am I?"

The boy sniffled and let out a small laugh, rubbing his eyes and finally looking up. Kageyama met the light brown eyes with his own and was maybe slightly relieved that they still had their usual life sparking in them.

"You're terrible at comforting people, you know that, right?" Hinata smiled sadly, sniffling loudly as the tears finally stopped.

"Yeah well, whatever." Kageyama huffed and looked away, embarrassed. However, Hinata had stopped crying. He was grateful about that, at least.

"So why are you up, too?" Hinata asked after a bit of silence.

"Why do you think?" Kageyama bit back, hoping Hinata wouldn't make him say it out loud.

He didn't.

"Ah. Well, me too. Did you... Was it about what happened?" The spiker's voice had lowered slightly, and he was not longer looking at Kageyama, but at the ground.

"Hmm."

"I saw my mom. And Natsu." Hinata let out a shaky sigh. "How I lost them."
"I see." But Kageyama didn't. Kageyama had no right to speak about such things.

Because he had not lost his family in the apocalypse.

In fact, he'd never had one in the first place.

"You know, I was sure that we'd make it," Hinata continued, a wistful smile gracing his lips. His legs swung above the ground idly. "My mother always said that the night was darkest before dawn and that come morning light, we'd be safe and sound."

And Kageyama suddenly felt sick, and inhuman for bearing witness to Hinata's confessions. When he spoke, the setter felt like he had no right to hear what he had to say.

But the king of the court was greedy and selfish, two things about him that he had tried, and apparently failed to bury. So he answered. He answered although even the silence would have been too good for him.

"They're in a better place now."

"You're just saying that."

"Well, think about it," Kageyama sighed. "They're not here. They don't have to be scared or cold or hungry or insecure about their futures. And they... they went together. So they're not even alone."

Hinata seemed to mull over his words, and then let out a watery chuckle, sniffling one last time.

"You still suck at comforting people. But I guess you're right. I can't imagine Natsu having to live like this." His eyes had a pained look to them and the setter hated that look on the bubbly orange-head. "But mom... Mom could have made it. She's really smart and resourceful, I'm sure she could have..."

"But would you leave Natsu alone in the afterlife?"

"That doesn't mean my mom had to die, too. And if she's with Natsu, why couldn't she have been with me?" The question was asked in a whisper, as if Hinata was ashamed of even thinking of it.

"But Natsu needs her," Kageyama decided to answer, knowing that he was tiptoeing on eggshells. "You have me. And uhh... me, and us, I mean! The captain and Suga and Asahi, and our senpais, and even that annoying Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. You're not alone, so... It's okay." Kageyama thought of leaving it there before he made an even bigger fool of himself, but Hinata was still frowning and he absolutely hated that look on him. So he kept going. "None of us will ever replace your mother and your sister. However, you shouldn't doubt even for a second that we could be your new family."

And Kageyama didn't know how he did it, but Hinata cracked a smile. It was small, it was pained, but it was there, and suddenly he had no more words.

"Thanks, Bakayama. You're surprisingly considerate when you want to be."

"Don't call me that," the setter huffed. "You're the stupid one here, dumbass."

"Yeah." Hinata's tone wavered again, and Kageyama cursed himself for letting the neutral mood sink. "I guess I was a little bit stupid. To think that we'd all make it out alive."

He didn't know what to answer to that. Silence fell between them, disorted slightly by the rain
pattering outside, in the distance. Thankfully, Hinata continued after a while.

"I held her hand, you know."

"Huh?"

"My mom's." Hinata wasn't looking at him anymore, but at the ground. "It was like... sticking out of this pile of rubble, and I was there for a long time, so... At some point, I held her hand, and it was cold and stiff, but I don't know... I guess it built up the desire to live inside of me. Even in death, she's always encouraging me to go forward," he chuckled softly, but now his tone was nostalgic and wistful as opposed to sad.

But Kageyama still couldn't relate.

After all, when was the last time he'd seen his mother's hand, let alone held it? He didn't even remember her encouraging him to pursue his dreams, ever. Maybe once, in passing, but it might've been something meaningless, something that would definitely not be as heartfelt as something Hinata's mother would say. Kageyama could not say that his parents ever instilled the desire to live inside of him. However, he could say that they unconsciously made him want to grow stronger, stronger and more independent and less likely to chase after mirages, like the illusion that had been his family.

"I'm glad she helped me move on," Hinata sighed, and then smiled at the ceiling. "I miss her, but... I know we'll meet again someday. In a long time, maybe, but I'll see her again, and when I do, I'll thank her for helping me through thick and thin."

"Yeah." He didn't miss his mother, or father, as a matter of fact. He'd long since gotten used to spending time apart from them. He didn't even think they'd meet in the afterlife, knowing their free spirit. And if they did meet, Kageyama would have nothing to say to them.

He never had anything to say to strangers, anyway.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate it," he finally decided to say, because he figured it was the right thing to say.

Apparently it was. Hinata grinned at him, and stood up, a small bounce in his step.

"Thanks, stupid. Are you okay after your nightmare, though?"

"Fine," Kageyama insisted, huffing. He couldn't even remember that his nightmare was about anymore, either, so it didn't matter.

"Cool. So I'm gonna head back to bed. Do you want to come?" Hinata asked, and Kageyama found himself nodding.

"Don't trip in the dark or anything. Last thing we need around here is a broken nose," he sighed, and stood up to follow Hinata through the dark hallway.

The nightmare really had faded from his mind, and he slowly felt the exhaustion sinking back into his bones with every step he took. He didn't even need to splash water on his face to wash off the scent of fear anymore. Just being near Hinata seemed to be enough.

That morning, over a small breakfast of tuna and beans, the mood was somber and quiet. It may have
been because the team remembered last night's events, or it might've been due to Daichi's previous announcement of their plans for the day.

"So..." Noya broke the silence first, putting down a half-eaten can of tuna, all appetite suddenly lost. "Just to be sure I heard right... Does this mean we can't stay here anymore?"

"This town is not viable anymore, like I said," Daichi sighed in response, knowing how much it hurts everyone to hear these words. "We're gonna try to gather as many supplies as we can one last time, and then we're going to think about moving."

"But we're safe here," Asahi murmured, sloshing the beans around the can idly. "We don't know what's out there..."

"But we do know what's waiting for us here," Suga answered instead, always as diligently taking Daichi's side. "It's certain death. This town doesn't have any more supplies to give us and sooner or later, we would have had to go in search for help. So we may as well do it now."

"Where will we go, then?" Tanaka asked, a crease in his brow the only thing disrupting his otherwise cool-looking expression.

"We don't know yet," Daichi shrugged. "I was going to look over it. My suggestion was heading towards Tokyo since most relief efforts would probably be centred there..."

"But we don't know where the bomb dropped. What if Tokyo is ground zero, and we start heading towards someplace that's even less viable than here?" Hinata asked worriedly, looking up at Daichi as if he'd have all the answers.

"We have to take that chance." Daichi bit his lip. "I don't know what we're getting ourselves into, either, but we've made it this far, so we at least have to try to make it further."

There was another silence, this time punctuated by the scraping of utensils on the bottoms of cans and the slight sounds of disgust made as the team tried to swallow the tasteless food as quickly as possible.

"Well, as always, spoken like a true captain," Noya finally acquiesced, and Daichi's face became an interesting shade of pink.

"Well, it's not like I did anything special. I'm just looking out for the team."

Smiles replied to his modest answer, but deep down they all knew that Daichi's leadership was one of the strongest bonds keeping them together.

"So who's going out?" Tanaka asked, putting down his empty can. "I could definitely go with Noya again."

"Daichi and I will probably stay in to start planning our move," Suga looked to the captain for confirmation, and got a nod.

"I can stay to start packing up if you need me to," Asahi suggested.

"We can go," Hinata volunteered, pointing at Kageyama.

"Don't volunteer me without asking," Kageyama repeated for what felt like the thousandth time, but didn't really mind either. Fresh air would do him some good. And also, there was no way that he was letting Tsukishima go, no matter how much he butted heads with the guy. Yamaguchi still hadn't said
a word since yesterday, and the blond was the best person to have around to help him cope.

"Then it's settled. Where are we headed?" Noya asked, giving an encouraging thumbs up to his kouhai.

"The furthest edges of downtown. It's a couple of hours of walking but it's not like we've got anywhere else to be," Daichi chuckled. "That's a mixed commercial and residential sector that we haven't gone through yet, only because it's so far from us. But we don't really have a choice now, so..."

"That's fine. We'll get whatever we can and come back as soon as possible." Noya stood up, looking at his partners for the raid. "Let's go get ready."

"Yes sir!" Hinata exclaimed enthusiastically, apparently glad to have an opportunity to stretch his legs, and jumped out of his seat to take his dirty dishes to the kitchen corner.

"Let's bring back a year's worth of stuff so that we never have to leave our home here," Tanaka added boldly, getting up to follow Hinata.

"That'd be the life," Noya laughed, following Tanaka as the pair easily joked.

That left Kageyama to contemplate the empty can in his hands silently, unreadably. He knew Suga was looking at him, probably with a mixture of worry and confusion as he always did, and immediately got up to escape his scrutinizing gaze. As he walked, there was an impending sense of danger that licked at his heels and bogged down his steps, but he brushed it off.

"Hey Kageyama, hurry up!" Hinata called, and the setter looked up at the ball of sunshine waving at him. Though Hinata was grinning wide, Kageyama felt his heart tighten in his chest until it felt like his circulation had stopped entirely. There was a cold feeling in his fingertips and toes and he hated how ominous it felt.

"Worry about how slow you are, stupid," Kageyama called back, and turned around to go gather his things as soon as he could. His team members' eyes were on his back as he left, but he shut them out. He didn't like where this was going.

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"It smells weird out here," Hinata complained as they set out, walking away from the gym with the rest of the team watching them leave from the doorway.


"With the amount of gel you put in it, I highly doubt anything would be able to ruin your hair," Tanaka joked, starting a small squabble between the two. Kageyama only half-listened to them, eyes set on the horizon and hands tight on the straps of his backpack. Something felt awfully wrong out here, and he didn't like it.

Kageyama was no expert, thankfully, but he could swear that the air smelled like blood.

The ominous red sky, clouded over heavily with grey, did nothing to appease his worries.

The neighbourhood around the school was familiar, and so none of them really paid attention to their surroundings as they walked past the empty, broken homes and the abandoned streets. They made
small talk, although it was mostly between Nishinoya, Tanaka, and Hinata, and slowly, the familiar landscape turned a little less familiar. However, it was still their home town, so although they got confused here and there, they didn't really get lost.

About three hours later, finally, the surroundings became unknown to them.

The area was not one of much interest to them. Even before the war, it wasn't an ideal place for teenagers to go hang out, since it was mostly a mix of houses and small businesses on the other end of the downtown area from the school. However, now, as their final salvation, it felt like a godsend when the cramped downtown streets became smaller, but quaint-feeling paths lined with small town houses and occasional businesses.

And it was only at that point that the four finally took the time to look around them. And perhaps not immediately, but gradually, alarm bells began to pop up in their minds.

The houses, the stores, the cars, the bicycles... They were...

"Is it just me, or did something weird happen around here?" Tanaka mumbled, glancing around suspiciously. His comrades mimicked the move, trying to pinpoint what exactly their bad feeling was about, but nothing they could see felt out of the ordinary.

"Well, I mean, unless you're just now noticing how everything's deserted," Noya shrugged, eyes peeled for whatever was making all four of them apprehensive.

"Funny, Noya. I mean it."

"I sense it, too," Kageyama interrupted before the two could start bantering again. "Like there's something here that shouldn't be here."

"Stop it, Kageyama. That's seriously freaky!" Hinata exclaimed, shuddering. His mind conjured fleeting shadows around corners, eyes observing them through cracks and whispers in the wind, but he knew none of that was real. The danger they were facing, though, whatever it was, was very real.

"Okay," Noya sighed, stopping them in the middle of a deserted crossing. "Whatever it is, it's not out in the open yet. So we're going to have to be careful, but it's already around noon time, so we can't waste any more time worrying. Let's split up and immediately start collecting what we can and get back as soon as possible."

"Right," the remaining three nodded, and out of reflex, Tanaka took a step towards Noya whilst Hinata took a step towards Kageyama.

"Let's do opposite sides of the street," Noya continued. "Two by two, Ryu and I will take the right side, and you two take the left."

"Got it," the two first-years nodded. "We're off, then."

"Holler if you need help," Tanaka reminded them as he and Noya headed off towards houses on the other side of the street.

The two teams entered their respective houses simultaneously.

Unlike what they entailed, raids were often mostly quiet. They involved breaking into a house or business, going straight for the kitchen and loading up on consumables, as well as other items if necessary at the time, and then getting out quickly to move on. They were rarely eventful, and the only reason why people were so apprehensive about them was that you never knew what to expect.
in houses. Once, Asahi had almost been shot by an old man whose house they'd broken into unknowingly, and who had refused to listen to them. After they were out of danger, it was a pretty funny adventure to retell, but in the heat of the moment, when adrenaline ran high and nothing but the sight of a gun aimed at them mattered, it was a pretty frightening experience for a bunch of teenagers.

And then, there was that one time where Tsukishima...

"Let's move to the next house," Kageyama grumbled, refusing to look at the shadowy corners of the abandoned house lest he find something in them that he did not like.

"Yeah, I'm done here," Hinata nodded and silently followed him out. Just as they entered the next house, their senpai came out from their first and mimicked their move with a slight nod of their head to indicate that they were fine. The younger duo waited for the confirmation before Kageyama turned the knob on the door. It was locked, so they had to resort to smashing through the first floor window. At least with all the power cut, there was no chance of an alarm going off.

And yet, no matter how smoothly things went, Kageyama still couldn't shake off the feeling that something was terribly wrong. His palms and fingers tingled almost painfully the longer he went on, and even though Hinata seemed to have calmed a bit, he still was on his toes about whatever felt wrong.

A couple of hours must have passed before the four of them met again, to this time tackle the businesses.

"Did you guys find anything useful?" Tanaka asked as they made their way to the main commercial street. "Our houses were kinda empty. Seems like everyone planned in advance to take their stuff and leave. This sucks."

"We've got enough for a day or so," Noya estimated. "About 30 cans. Three meals a day for nine people, and some leftover."

"Approximately the same here," Kageyama clicked his tongue in discontent. "We've got a bit more, but a lot of the cans aren't edible on their own. Like tomato paste and olives, and stuff like that."

"Damn," Nishinoya frowned. "This isn't turning out to be a good haul. My backpack's already pretty heavy with all these cans, too, so we don't have place for much more."

"We'll dump whatever is less worth it," Hinata suggested. "Like if we find shredded chicken, we can throw out the tomato paste because chicken makes better sandwiches than tomatoes!"

"You're way too enthusiastic for someone who can't even stomach bread," Kageyama huffed, rolling his eyes. "Let's stop goofing around and keep moving. The commercial establishments will have more for us, hopefully."

"Good call," Nishinoya nodded, and led them on. Hinata trailed after his senpai with a spring in his step, and Kageyama watched Tanaka follow them both, scratching his right palm intently. By reflex, Kageyama began scratching his hand as well, and then narrowed his eyes. He lifted his palms to his face and looked at them closely.

His right palm seemed to be a bit redder than the left.

"Tanaka," he called, taking long strides to join his senpai. The spiker turned around and slowed so Kageyama could catch up, and they walked together after their smaller comrades. "May I see your hands?"
"Huh?" the older teen uttered, puzzled, but nodded and showed him his hands. Kageyama turned them over to look at his palms, and surely enough, his right hand was slightly red as well.

"What is this?" the setter mumbled under his breath.

"What are you talking about?" Tanaka asked out loud, grabbing their teammates' attention.

"What's up?" Noya asked, waiting for them to catch up and looking at them with a raised eyebrow.

"May I see your hands? Both of you?" Kageyama asked again, drawing confused looks from the other two.

"Did you finally lose your mind, Kageyama?" Hinata asked, frowning as he stuck out his hands, and the setter noted that they looked perfectly fine. Hinata did not seem to scratch them, either, so whatever it is that he and Tanaka shared, Hinata didn't have it. Noya didn't seem to have it, either, and he let them retract their hands without a word.

"What was that about?" the libero asked once they began walking again.

"Your hands aren't itchy or hurting, right?" the dark-haired teen asked.

"No."

"Then... what have Tanaka and I been doing that you two haven't?" he wondered out loud.

"Nothing, really... We've all been doing the same thing so far," Hinata answered. "I mean, we just go into houses or break in if we have to, gather stuff from the kitchen and then leave the way we came."

Kageyama thought for a while, replaying all of the sequence in his head a couple of times, before slowly, a bizarre, but plausible answer came to mind.

"Nishinoya," he called, grabbing the libero's attention. "Do you ever go into the house first?"

"Huh?" Nishinoya raised an eyebrow, and then turned to look at his partner. "I don't... think I do. I don't really think about it. Ryu usually opens the doors or breaks the windows because he can hit harder."

"Then that must be it." Kageyama nodded, lips set into a thin line.

"Opening doors," Kageyama mumbled, taking a look around him. "The knobs and handles. They're irritating our hands."

He glanced around, as if looking for an explanation, and suddenly, it all made sense. His sharp eyes caught onto tiny details he'd never considered until now. It all felt so analytical, and strangely nostalgic, as he felt the same way he felt in volleyball matches when he sized up his opponents. And just like in volleyball, all the intricacies of his environment suddenly came together and the answer popped up in the forefront of his mind.

The metallic smell. The stuffy feeling. The irritated hands. The humidity.

The house railings peeling. The cars looking faded. The road signal poles rusting over.

"Do you think..." he began, taking in every single detail around him meticulously. "Do you think that the rain that came down last night might have been acid rain?"
"Acid rain!?" The reply came from the other three at once, loud and incredulous.

"I mean... It's not a stretch if you think about it. The sky's been looking weird so far since the explosion. If the radiation mutated all the fresh food, couldn't it have... poisoned the water, or something?"

"Kageyama, you're so confusing," Hinata complained.

"Suga or Daichi or Tsukishima would probably be a better bet than me to confirm this theory," Nishinoya conceded, pensive. "But I guess... it does make sense. You two are the only two who have been touching things that have been in contact with the rain, and your hands are red and itchy. It makes sense."

"Damn it. This is annoying," Tanaka clicked his tongue in displeasure, itching his hand. "We'll have to be careful from now on. And if it starts raining, we'll have to find shelter as soon as possible."

"Alright. If we pass by a clothing store, let's try and grab some gloves as well," Nishinoya decided, leading them on. "And let's definitely tell the captain when we get back. We'll have to consider the rain when we start moving!"

The grim reminder of their imminent departure weighed heavily on their minds as they made their way towards the commercial street, but somehow, Kageyama felt like the dread was only getting worse.

They weren't out of trouble yet.

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To their relief, the stores yielded more than the houses. Of course, they'd been completely ransacked, but a meticulous check of every aisle in the small corner stores and pharmacies gave them a respectable amount of canned goods and even some medical supplies. Suga would be happy with their finds, at least.

Their bags were heavy by the time they left the third store they hit, but they all knew that the weight was deceiving. With the number of people they were, they would probably last a few more days on what they'd gathered so far. Nishinoya had also broken off at some point and then returned with several pairs of worker's gloves from a hardware store down the street, so that they could work without fear of touching the contaminated surfaces.

A couple of hours later, in the mid-afternoon, they were finally done.

"So what have we got in total?" Nishinoya asked as they all checked their bags for inventory.

"I've got food and some random medication I grabbed off the shelves," Hinata reported, looking through his things.

"Food, and I also grabbed some clothes from the sports store on the corner," Tanaka added.

"Mostly food and hygiene products, as well as bandages, some antiseptic, and things that looked important and that Suga could probably recognize better than me," Kageyama counted off, swinging his backpack on his shoulders again.

"Right. And I've got food, nine pairs of gloves, a hammer and some big nails, rope, and a couple of tarps. Hopefully, we can use these like tents when we start moving out," Nishinoya finished.
"Good thinking, Noya!" Tanaka gave him a thumbs up as they all zipped up their backpacks and began walking again. "Now. Let's head back. We'll be back in time for dinner at this rate!"

"I wonder what we're having," Hinata sighed out dreamily. "Tempura, I hope. Or maybe we're mixing it up and having steak. Oh, but I really want yakisoba... And taiyaki for dessert!"

"You're asking for too much, Hinata," Kageyama sighed, rolling his eyes, but then saw the dejected look on Hinata's face.

Of course. Of course Hinata knew he was asking for too much. But then again, Kageyama could have let him dream for a moment. That moment of peace wasn't asking for too much.

He suddenly felt really guilty.

"I know. It's alright. Maybe we can have cream of chicken soup instead," he finally sighed, a small smile touching his lips, but the roiling in Kageyama's gut didn't stop in the least.

"Oi, dumbass," he muttered, instinctively stepping closer to Hinata's side to keep their conversation away from their senpai. They'd probably laugh at him if they heard what he'd say next. "Just... sorry. Keep dreaming, okay? You're the only one who still can, and..." A red tint touched his cheeks, and he looked away from Hinata's surprised gaze. "...we need somebody like you."

"Huh?" the orange-haired boy stuttered dumbly, but slowly, the blush on Kageyama's face registered, and a shit-eating grin split his face. "Oh, what's this? The King is actually apologizing to me?"

"What are you laughing about?" Tanaka asked from a few steps behind them, and Kageyama turned to glare at him murderously.

"Nothing! Hinata's being stupid."

"You keep saying that, Bakayama!" Hinata stuck his tongue out at him childishly, and jumped away with a laugh when Kageyama made a move to grab him by the shirt and shake him.

But he was relieved. That Hinata's innocence hadn't been stolen away, despite the horrors of this world.

"Let's just go home," he sighed, and his strides became longer until his tall legs were leading the march down the street.

"Hey, wait!" Hinata patted his arm to get his attention. "One last pit stop here. Look!" he pointed at a crumbled building that looked like it was about to collapse.

"What am I looking at?" Kageyama asked, raising an eyebrow dubiously at Hinata's enthusiasm.

"A health store!"

"One of those hipster stores that sell all these herbs and seeds and natural products?" Tanaka asked, looking at the small shop stuck at the foot of the small building, which might've been an apartment complex on top of businesses. "How do you even know?"

"The sign is all broken up, but see, you can see the word 'Health' right there," Hinata pointed at a large sign that had fallen to the ground and broken, leaning against the wall.

"That building is in terrible shape, though. I bet even just opening the door would make the entire
"But Kagayama!" Hinata insisted, pouting. "Imagine how useful it would be to get all these... healthy things! We'd all be in better shape and have more energy, so it would be awesome if we could bring some stuff back."

"Kageyama is right, Hinata," the other spiker crossed his arms, looking at the building. "The shocks got that building hard. It looks really dangerous to go in there."

"But Hinata is right on the fact that supplements are what we desperately need right now, especially since we're not getting an appropriate diet," Nishinoya piped up, looking like he was mulling things over. "Although that building does look really precariously balanced..."

"Well if we have to bring home a box of vitamin tablets and a dead body, I don't think anybody will consider it helpful," Kagayama huffed. "Let's go."

"No way," Hinata crossed his arms. "We've been in crumbling houses a lot of times before, and we've been super careful. Nothing has happened." He looked to Noya for support. "Nishinoya and I are really small and light, so I bet we could get in there, grab some stuff, and get out without disturbing anything at all!"

"It is true that Hinata and I have handled all the delicate infiltrations before," Noya thought out loud. "You're not actually considering this, Noya?" Tanaka gaped incredulously. "It's a bad idea!"

"Come on, senpai. It'll be a huge help if we pull it off," Hinata puffed his cheeks out, playing the 'senpai' card to draw Nishinoya to his side.

"If you pull it off, you said it yourself, dumbass!" Kagayama groaned in exasperation.

"I meant 'when we pull it off'! Obviously!" Hinata glared at Kagayama. "You're just jealous because I can do something you can't!"

"Are you kidding me...?" A vein popped on Kagayama's forehead. "You're such a child! I'm just looking out for you, here."

"Yeah?" Hinata stuck his fists at his sides defensively, tensely. "Since when have you cared?"

"W-What?-"

"Alright, alright, that's enough!" Noya interrupted their slightly aggressive argument by putting a hand in the air. "Hinata and I will go in, briefly, and grab the first things we see. You two stay out here and count five minutes, then call us out. Keep an eye on the building in case it does start looking dangerous."

"Are you sure?" Tanaka looked indecisive, but Noya didn't.

"I'm sure. We need these supplements, especially since we'll start moving from now on, and we have to try and get them, if nothing else."

"Alright, senpai! Let's do it!" Hinata punched the air, skipping towards the building.

"Urgh..." Kagayama followed, massaging the bridge of his nose tiredly. Right now, all he felt was anger at Hinata's attitude and some exhaustion at their circumstances, but nothing could overpower the intense clenching feeling he had in his gut. It left him nauseous and he could feel his heart...
throbbling in his throat, but although the situation was dangerous, he must be overreacting.

"Noya knows what he's doing," Tanaka assured him as they accompanied the two smaller members to the door, but Kageyama could see his shaky confidence as well.

"Just be careful, you two!" Kageyama sighed, not even caring about their individual statuses anymore. He just wanted his friends to be safe.

"Don't worry, Kageyama. Leave it to your senpai!" Noya gave him a thumbs up, carefully opening the door and observing the building for a second.

"And trust in me. You always have," Hinata added, and glanced at him briefly before turning his head, and walking in.

Kageyama wanted to remind him that he trusted him more than anything in the world, but the words felt too foreign on his tongue so he swallowed them, and stepped back to count five minutes.

Inside the store, the two small teens split up immediately, Noya going into the few aisles and Hinata immediately going for the counter. There was a bizarre smell in the air, stuffy and slightly unpleasant, but Hinata figured that it was some kind of healthy product smell. He first grabbed all the healthy-looking things he could find on the shelf facing the counter, and did his best to stuff them in his bag. It was heavy, but manageable, so he also stuffed in some protein powder, but only the smaller containers that would fit somewhere in between the cans of food.

"How is everything going?" he called out to Noya as he walked to the counter.

"Good. I've got a lot of stuff that can be added to food in cooking so Suga will be happy," his senpai called back to him, and Hinata was proud of his idea. Maybe he could finally contribute to their survival properly, instead of mooching off their resources like he felt he was doing all this time.

"I'm gonna go see if there's anything behind the counter," he informed him for the hell of it, and then went around the counter to open the door that led inside.

However, when he did open the small door, he was faced not with the sight of herbal medication, but with the sight of something much more gruesome.

A dead body, that of an old man, obviously a few weeks old, laying propped halfway against the counter and staring right at Hinata with its dried up, rotted eyes wide open. Hinata's scream echoed across the entire store.

"Hinata!" Nishinoya called him from the back, but Hinata's heart was pounding loudly in his ears, and a cold sweat had broken on the back of his neck, and he was stumbling, falling back, away, away, away from the putrid body. The smell of rotting meat just then assailed his nostrils and nausea welled up in his throat like tears welled up in his eyes.

His foot suddenly hit something that had fallen to the ground and Hinata's ankle twisted, sending him falling backwards with another, fainter cry. His head hit the shelf behind him before he slid down, and as he lay dazed and struck by inexplicable horror, the shelf he'd struck groaned, and then fell back.

It hit the shelf behind it with a thundering noise and that shelf, too, fell down and crashed to the ground. Shocks went through Hinata's entire body, but his wide eyes were still stuck on the body, yellow and black and flesh melting right off the bones. He couldn't tear his sight away.
"-nata! Hinata!"

"Senpai," he called, but his voice was strangled in his throat. The entire building groaned around them, and suddenly, Hinata's racing heartbeat stopped, and he held his breath. He tried to get up, but his limbs seized. Shock coursed through his system, and although adrenalin slapped him in the face, to get up and run, there was a cold terror that settled deep inside his bones and bogged him down in his fallen place.

"Hinata, where are you!? Get out, the building's gonna fall!" Nishinoya called from the front, trying to see his kouhai through the fallen shelves and the dust beginning to crumble from the ceiling.

"Noya, get out here!" Tanaka called from the doorway, and the libero shook his head, eyes wild.

"Hinata is in there!" he protested, coughing when he inhaled dust, and doubled over.

"Shit," Tanaka grit his teeth and rushed in, grabbing Noya from behind. "Come on, he'll come out on his own! It won't help if both of you are in here when the whole place falls to pieces!"

"We can't leave him! He's our kouhai!" Nishinoya cried out, thrashing in Tanaka's strong grip. "He's our friend! He's our little brother!"

"I know, Noya!" Tanaka's heart tore in half at those words, but he tried to keep himself together. "I know! That's why he'll pull through, but you need to come out!"

"Hinata!" Nishinoya screamed once again, and a piece of the ceiling caved right next to the two.

Tanaka swore, and, knowing he was making a terrible, but necessary decision, he grabbed Nishinoya around the waist, and lifted him off the ground to drag him away. It was almost like all the times Tanaka had lifted Nishinoya in the air in excitement, except this time, it was anything but.

"Shouyo!" the libero cried out once more, desperate tears leaking out of his wide, terrified eyes as Tanaka dragged him out of the doorway and dropped him on the pavement.

"Where's Hinata!?" Kageyama immediately asked as Tanaka struggled to hold Nishinoya from going back inside. A pipe creaked and burst somewhere, another piece of rubble falling down on the small store loudly. "Senpai, where's Hinata!?"

"Inside!" Noya looked at the doorway, still open to reveal the clouds of dust kicking up in the desolated environment inside. "He hasn't come out!"

And although he was stating the obvious, Kageyama's blood still ran cold.

"Hinata!" he called out, going as close to the store as he could. "Get out here, dumbass! Get out here, quick!"

Hinata heard Kageyama calling for him, but couldn't move. His voice was trembling, and he sounded scared, more scared than ever before. A part of him was glad about that, but another part of him was too terrified to care. He tried to stand up but his left ankle collapsed under his weight, and he fell again with a pathetic cry that turned into a cough as dust settled into his lungs.

Outside, Kageyama's blood ran cold as a part of the wall loudly caved in, and he held his breath throughout the shockwaves. Behind him, Nishinoya was sobbing loudly, and knowing Tanaka, he was probably crying, too, but Kageyama could not muster anything. His eyes were dry, and wide, and stuck on the part of the wall that had caved, and the large ceiling that was now unstable and groaning in the wind. Pieces of plaster and tile were crumbling off periodically, metal poles sticking
out dangerously.

And then, when everything settled and the wind blew, there was a sound that let Kageyama release the breath he'd been holding.

"Tanaka-senpai..." It was a low sob that rose from the half-demolished store's confines. "Nishinoya-senpai..." New hope sparked inside of Kageyama, but the groaning of the precarious structure shocked him back to their grim reality. The building was not going to hold up. And poor Hinata would die, crushed as he cried out for his family to help.

No, Kageyama did not want to lose his family now that he finally had one.

"Kageyama!" The cry finally burst through the rubble, and the ceiling began to tilt down.

The setter's eyes went to the ceiling. The metal poles sticking out were visibly rusted from the acid rain.

His bag had dropped and his feet had begun moving even before Hinata cried out his final words.

"Tobio!"

"Kageyama, don't go!" His senpai screamed from behind him, but it didn't matter.

His feet carried him through the doorway, letting him vault over the fallen shelves, swerve around the rubble and climb over the fragments of the wall, and finally, as the noise from the crumbling building became overwhelming, he saw the ball of orange curled up on the floor and jumped towards him as if nothing else mattered at that moment.

Kageyama's warm body enclosed over Hinata's prone form, and the world came crashing down on them.

Kageyama felt the floor breaking away under his feet, and his heart soared in his chest as they fell. His grip on Hinata was bruising, but the smaller teen wasn't complaining. There were no illusions about the uselessness of Kageyama's gesture should a large piece of rubble fall on them. Both of them would be crushed under it without a doubt. However, it was comforting to have somebody by his side when he died, Hinata figured in his panicked mind. Last time he was in such danger, on the night of the Forty Fireworks, he had been alone and unable to seek help or comfort in anybody else. He thought he would die alone.

But this time, he wasn't alone. When he opened his eyes amidst the collapsing reality around them, all he could see was the burgundy of Kageyama's sweater, all he could hear was Kageyama's heaving breath in his ears, and all he could smell was the familiar musk and sweat of the only person who'd held him like this since the world went to hell.

He felt weightless and the world was timeless as he fell, wrapped in Kageyama's warm embrace.

And then, they hit the jagged ground, and there was pain, confusion and an overwhelming sense of terror.

Hinata let out a scream of pain and heard Kageyama do the same as the impact of falling rubble shook them around and sent them tumbling down a small pile of rubble. There was more shaking above their heads, and they held onto one another tightly, pressed against the ground and praying to any god that existed out there that nothing big would fall on them.

Slowly, as time regained its course, the rumbling stopped, and the pieces of debris painfully pelting
Kageyama's back ceased. When there was not a single sound around them anymore, air rushed into both of their lungs, and they finally dared let go of one another to look around them.

It looked like they'd fallen down into the foundations of the building, on top of a pile of rubble against the edges. That left a large crater at the bottom of the pile, fille with wooden beams, pieces of debris, and metal poles. Above their heads, collapsed wooden beams crisscrossed and created a sort of prison cell with them in it. Although Kageyama could see the angry red sky, covered over with heavy grey clouds, it was only in certain places, and right above their heads, there was a large piece of ceiling that had remained intact and that was casting a large shadow over their heads.

"Kageyama! Hinata!"

"S-Senpai!" Kageyama called out, coughing violently as the dust settled.

"Oh god, I hear them," Tanaka's voice came from overhead. "Where are you two!?"

"Over here," the setter called, his throat raw and his eyes wide, stuck to the cell-like crisscrossing beams above them. Surely enough, it took a while, but soon, there was shadows filtering down through the gaps, casting over the rubble massed in the crater.

"Where?" Nishinoya's familiar, comforting voice came as well, and Kageyama saw the two of them stepping on the beams, testing them carefully.

"Down here, senpai," he called. "Be careful, those beams don't look very solid."

The two second-years turned to the sound of his voice and knelt carefully on the beams to have a better look at them. Relief dawned simultaneously in their eyes before they filled up with tears.

"You're okay," Noya sniffled. "Oh god, for a moment there, we were sure-"

"It's okay," Kageyama interrupted him, knowing that it would do them no good to dwell on hyopotheticals. "We're okay."

"S-Senpai..." Hinata coughed out from behind Kageyama, and the setter immediately turned to assess him.

The little spiker was covered in small cuts and smudged with dirt, but didn't seem to be in major danger. His nose had bled, but had stopped at some point as well, but asides from that, there wasn't a lot of blood on him.

"Hinata? How are you doing?" Tanaka asked from up top, and Kageyama shifted to let his senpai take a look at the younger player.

"I-I'm fine," Hinata nodded. "Just shaken."

"Understandable." Noya nodded, getting up. "Okay, don't worry, we'll get you out of here."

"Sorry..." Hinata murmured so that only Kageyama caught it, but he knew that Hinata's guilt went so much deeper than a simple sorry.

"How are you going to do that?" he asked instead, shifting the attention to their senpai carefully maneuvering on the beams above.

"I don't know. Let me see, maybe we can pull some rubble out overhead and open up a hole you could climb through."
Kageyama sighed and sat back, looking over Hinata instead of up overhead, where Tanaka and Nishinoya were discussing extraction possibilities. The young man had a dazed look in his eyes, and Kageyama figured he was still in shock.

"Hey. You okay?" he asked, carefully looking him over just in case he'd missed something before.

"I'm sorry..." Hinata whimpered, and then coughed some more. Kageyama hesitated, and then put a hand on his back to rub comforting circles, and it seemed to help Hinata calm down.

"It's okay. It's done now," he insisted, not liking how quiet the other was being.

"But I could've killed you. I could seriously have hurt you."

"But you didn't, so stop thinking about things that didn't happen." Kageyama himself was a bit shaken up, too, and his body ached where it was bruising from taking the impacts of his several falls, but it didn't feel like anything was broken.

"I'm sorry..."

"Hinata?" Now that was odd. No matter how apologetic Hinata was, he'd never sounded so solemn. That was something Kageyama had never seen before. Gently, he put his hand on the other teen's shoulder, and recoiled when Hinata flinched.

"I'm sorry, I messed up... Please don't hate me. Please!" He sounded desperate, and when he looked up, Kageyama saw the tears glistening in his chocolate brown eyes.

"Oi, did you hit your head? Of course I wouldn't hate you," Kageyama frowned, but then the possibility became more and more plausible, and he scooted over to kneel next to Hinata. "Lemme see your head."

"H-Huh?"

"Shut up," Kageyama sighed, looking through Hinata's matted hair strands (even so dirty, they were so soft...) to finally find a spot that was dotted with blood, in the back. "See? I knew it. You hit your head. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah..."

"You're not gonna faint or throw up, right?"

"No..." Hinata lowered his eyes. "Just, uhh.. There are like... black dots in my eyes. B-But I'm sure they'll pass!"

"Tch," Kageyama let go of Hinata and turned his gaze away to hide the worry that was surely reflected in them. "Tell me if they don't. Maybe Suga can help when we get back."

"Mhm... Sorry about all this."

"I said it was okay, so stop apologizing."

"Oi, you okay down there?" Tanaka called out, grabbing their attention.

"Still fine," Kageyama replied, looking up, but seeing no one on the beams.

"Noya and I are still looking for a way to get you guys out, so it might take a while!"
"Yeah..." Kageyama sighed more to himself than anybody else. His eyes turned to the parts of the sky he could see from where he sat, and he frowned at the heavy grey clouds. Those were not a good omen, either. They were hard-pressed for time.

"Don't worry, though. We'll get you out in no time!" But Noya's words felt shaky to his own ears, never mind to that of others.

"Senpai," Kageyama called after a few more minutes of deliberation, and clenched his fist. The suggestion he was about to make was not easy for anybody. "I... I think I have a plan."

"You do?" There was hope in Tanaka's voice, and Kageyama immediately felt guilty for what he was considering.

"Yeah." His eyes turned to the skies again. "It... It looks like it's about to rain. So there's no point if all four of us are stuck here until it lets up."

"All the more reason to get you out as soon as possible!"

"No, listen," Kageyama insisted, throwing a look at Hinata, who seemed to be in and out of the conversation. "Hinata hit his head. It's about to rain and now that we know what the rain can do, we can't afford to stay under it. We're three hours away from the gym. And you can't seem to find a way to get us out, right?"

"... What are you suggesting, Kageyama...?" Noya asked shakily, as if he already knew what was coming.

"Please, I need you to do this." He bit his lip hard. "Please run back to the gym as fast as possible and get help. Suga and Daichi might have more ideas."

"And leave you here alone? No way," Tanaka huffed, stepping within their sight to glare at them. "What kind of senpai would we be if we abandoned you?"

"You're not abandoning us. You're being the best senpai you can be by getting us the help we need," Kageyama insisted, eyes cold and hard. "Please. It looks like it's going to rain and it won't help if you two can't make it to the gym before it starts. Please leave quickly and come back quickly."

"What about you?" Noya asked, joining Tanaka on the beams, the look in his eyes strangely subdued. "You'll be okay?"

"Noya, you're not seriously considering it, are you?"

"We'll be fine. Our heads are covered here, so if it rains, it'll fill up the hole here, but it won't touch us," Kageyama answered, meeting Nishinoya's eyes with respect. He knew that it was not easy to make the call to pretty much abandon them, but it also was not easy to be the one to suggest it.

"Alright. Good. Don't move, then," Nishinoya nodded. "We'll be right back. We'll run as quickly as possible."

"Please be careful," Kageyama replied dutifully.

"You, too." Noya then turned his eyes to Hinata, who was slouching and staring blankly at the ground. "Shouyo. Can you hear me?"

Hinata took a moment to react to his name, but looked up, squinting at Noya.
"Senpai...?"

"Yeah." There was a proud and determined glint to Noya's eyes, and behind him, Tanaka stood squared and tense. "We're going to be back for you, alright? Don't pick a fight with Kageyama while we're gone."

"Only if Kageyama doesn't pick a fight with me," Hinata replied dazedly, and the second-years couldn't help but laugh.

"Right. Be safe, okay? We're coming right back for you," Nishinoya repeated once more, just to hammer it through Hinata's thick skull, and then stood back.

"Leave the rest to your trusty senpai!" Tanaka added, grinning widely down at them. Kageyama could see the strain to his smile, but Hinata seemed to be happy with what he got, so it didn't really matter.

"Good luck," Kageyama wished them as they stood back, and saluted before jumping off the beams, onto solid ground, and leaving.

Instantly, the air felt colder, and Kageyama shivered.

"Well, guess we'll just have to put our faith in them," he remarked, turning to look at Hinata, who didn't respond.

The young teen was falling asleep where he sat, quiet and subdued, and Kageyama's heart clenched at the sad sight. Usually, Hinata would be jumping around, looking for a solution already, but now, there was nothing either of them could do. The beams were at least seven feet overhead, definitely more, since Kageyama couldn't see himself reaching them without jumping, and even if he reached them, Hinata wouldn't be able to, and there was no way he was leaving the smaller boy behind.

His eyes hardened as they fell upon him once again, and he knew that he would never be able to leave the boy behind.

Not Hinata, who had challenged him time and time again to become a better person. Not Hinata, who had stayed by his side despite their rocky beginnings. Not Hinata, who had proven to him that teammates were dependable and not a burden. Not Hinata, who had knocked him clean off his throne as King of the Court and who had ripped off the heavy cape that had been weighing down on his shoulders.

Not Shouyo, who had cared for his wellbeing since the moment they met. Not Shouyo, who had encouraged him to keep going when he wanted to do nothing but give up. Not brave, determined, sunny, optimistic Shouyo whose innocence felt like the last salvation of this damned world.

"I'm not letting you go," he finally decided to say out loud, because Hinata was probably asleep, and he didn't have to deal with the consequences of his words.

"Hmm..." The boy hummed, though, and Kageyama froze, then turned to see a smug glint in his clouded eyes. "I've never let you go, either... Not gonna start now."

"Hinata, I'll hit you again if you keep saying embarrassing things," Kageyama threatened half-heartedly, painfully aware of how hot his cheeks had become.

"You said them first," Hinata chuckled softly. "Maybe you should hit yourself for once. You wouldn't hit an injured person, anyway."
"Not if that person is you," Kageyama huffed, turning his eyes away.

"I'd like to see you try."

"I won't hold back."

"Sure you won't."

"How's your head?" Kageyama suddenly asked, waiting for Hinata to crawl and sit next to him.

"Better, I guess," the spiker yawned, hesitating a second before setting his head on the other's shoulder. "The black spots aren't... so tenacious anymore. I'm just... so tired."

"Well, I'm not... really familiar with first aid or anything, but try to stay awake," Kageyama pursed his lips. "If you die, I'll never forgive you."

"I won't die," Hinata laughed softly, but then his voice caught in his throat, and they fell silent.

The wind blew on the surface, howling as it infiltrated their spot through the crisscrossing beams overhead. It was a cold wind, and Kageyama bit his lip, knowing that it would rain soon. Next to him, Hinata gave a violent shiver, but neither of them had anything in Hinata's bag, tossed a few feet away, that could help them against the cold.

At times like these, Kageyama seriously wondered if he would make it out of this ordeal alive.

"Hey, Kageyama?" Hinata finally called again after a while of silence.

"Hmm?"

"Where are our senpai?"

"You don't remember?" Kageyama frowned, looking down at Hinata worriedly. "They left to go get help."

"Oh." Hinata looked unconvinced. "Why?"

"Because we can't get out of here on our own. We need Suga and Daichi to come and help."

Kageyama watched as Hinata furrowed his eyebrows and softly pronounced the names again, and then nodded.

"Okay. Are they back yet?"

"They just left." Kageyama drew back and took Hinata's face in his hands to look into his eyes. He then looked at his bloody nose, though it didn't seem crooked, and then to the ugly purple bruise on his right cheekbone that seemed to be from when he hit the ground. Many other small cuts littered his face, but they were more scratches than anything else and didn't really concern Kageyama. "Are you okay? You're acting weird."

"I said I was tired," Hinata huffed, tilting his head away from Kageyama. "I want to sleep."

"Try not to until Suga gets here."

"I'm bored, though."

"Tough."
"You're an asshole," Hinata pouted childishly, pushing himself on all four to get up, but as soon as he began to push himself off the ground, he collapsed again with a soft cry of pain. "Ow!"

"Hinata!" Kageyama was immediately on high alert, heart thundering as he looked over the smaller boy. He was clutching his right leg in pain, and for a moment, Kageyama was terrified that maybe he'd broken a bone.

"Just my ankle," Hinata huffed out, though, once the pain had subsided. He winced as he stretched his leg out, and in the red light filtering through the beams, Kageyama could see that his ankle was swollen up and red, almost the size of his fist.

"Shit..." he swore, gently manipulating it to take a look. "Is it broken?"

"I can still put weight on the foot. I just can't move my ankle," Hinata winced as his partner touched the swollen joint. "Probably sprained it when I tripped."

"Damn it. It'll be problematic if you can't walk," Kageyama clicked his tongue in displeasure, then released his ankle. "I'm not carrying you."

"I wouldn't ask you to. I'll just hobble along," Hinata joked with a wink, and Kageyama looked away again.

They fell into silence, only occasionally shifting to find a better position to sit in. The adrenaline had crashed for them a while back, so both of them felt weak and shaky, and it didn't help that their body temperatures dropped in this cold. And neither of them had a watch, so neither of them could tell how long it had been since Noya and Tanaka left to get help.

"Hey Kageyama?" Hinata finally piped up after an extended silence. Kageyama, who had almost fallen asleep sitting, was jolted awake by his name, and turned to Hinata quickly.

"Yeah?"

"What do you think the rest of the world is like outside of town?" he asked in a soft, curious voice, looking up at the cloudy sky. "Like... What do you think we'll see when we leave home?"

Something about that statement struck Kageyama as wrong, but he thought about it for a bit regardless.

"I... I guess it looks the same. The buildings must be all broken up and burned, and there will be streets blocked by empty cars. Ransacked houses and stores, most definitely. Maybe since it's rained acid, there will be a lot of rusted poles and things like that..." he mused out loud.

"So it'll look pretty desolate, huh?" Hinata paraphrased. "Do you... you think there's a place for us out there?"

"Of course. Daichi will know what to do when the time comes," Kageyama insisted. "There's gotta be a place on the island where a survivor's camp is set up. We just have to find it."

"So we're not the only ones still alive?" Hinata gasped, a slight sparkle in his eyes at the thought.

"Course not, dumbass. You're not some video game protagonist. Of course there are other survivors." Kageyama's eyes glinted like steel in the light as he said it. "And we're gonna find them. And we're gonna be safe and sound."

"But... what if the other survivors are like the ones who..." There was a slight hesitation in his voice.
"The ones who hurt Yamaguchi?"

"Then we'll protect one another until we find the ones who aren't out to hurt us," Kageyama answered as if it was a simple thing to do. "It might be long, and it might be hard to find someplace where we can be safe, but I know we'll find it."

"You sounds strangely optimistic, you know," Hinata remarked, and Kageyama balked at that.

"Well, my apologies for trying to make the best out of a shitty situation."

"It's okay," Hinata laughed. "I'm glad you're still you. And that none of the terrifying things that have happened so far have changed the mean, pushy friend you are to me, Bakayama."

And there was something so heartwarming about that sentence, accompanied by Hinata's bright little chuckle, that Kageyama couldn't bear to look at him. He turned his entire body away from the smaller male, instead opting to push on his head with one of his hands, eliciting a squeak of surprise and then a laugh from the other.

"Just shut up and sleep if you're going to say such embarrassing things, dumbass," he mumbled under his breath, but Hinata heard it and grinned widely.

"Sure, sure. Whatever you say, King."

And even when Hinata set his head against Kageyama's shoulder, the setter couldn't bear to take his hand off the orange tufts of hair. There was something tiny and precious about the boy next to him that Kageyama felt like would kill him if it disappeared. So he'd have to protect it, no matter what. Kageyama would not let go of him.

His grip loosened on Hinata's hair, but he drew him just a little closer, just enough to make him comfortable on his side. And when they were both settled, Kageyama did not let him go.

Not Hinata, the boy who had called his name when he thought he would die. Not Shouyo, the boy who had given him a family to call his own.

...

It began raining a while later. Both of them has fallen asleep against one another at some point, so when the first crash of thunder echoed in the heavens, they both jerked awake and took a moment to situate themselves. However, their mutual presence by one another's side quickly calmed them down and drew them out of their sleepy haze.

"Feeling better?" Kageyama asked, yawning as he looked at Hinata.

"Bit," Hinata mumbled, stretching his upper body with grunts of pain. "How long has it been?"

"No idea," Kageyama clicked his tongue and looked up at the sky. It was impossible to tell how advanced they were in the afternoon because the grey clouds were too dense to see the sky from where they sat, but there was at least one certainty in the entire situation.

"It's gonna rain," Hinata whined. "What are we going to do?"

"Let's retreat as far back as we can against the edge there. A piece of the ceiling collapsed on this entire area, so we're covered from the rain, but if it gets windy, we could be in trouble," Kageyama suggested, starting to push himself up. His entire body creaked and protested the movement, pain circulating through his veins like wildfire, but he stood up anyway and put a hand down to help
Hinata get up as well.

The smaller teen hesitated for a second, then threw all his pride out of the window when he realized that he wouldn't be able to move without Kageyama's help. Besides, he didn't think that either of them were eager to talk about what happened down here to anybody else, so whatever happened in these ruins stayed in these ruins.

Kageyama helped him limp away from the uncovered area, towards a safer, but darker spot. Already, these was a slight mist falling down through the openings in between the beams, but both of them knew that the actual rain would not be long now.

Once there, they both settled again to wait. They didn't know how long it had been since they'd separated from Noya and Tanaka, but they hoped that the two had gotten back to the gym in time. Now, both teams were paralyzed until the rain let up, and hopefully that would be rather soon.

The area they settled in was better covered from the elements, but it was also a few feet lower than where they'd stood before. Kageyama estimated that the deepest crevasse must be about 4 feet deep, and pretty wide, so they should be safe, but then again, nothing was ever guaranteed around here. They'd just have to wait and see.

"What now?" Hinata asked once the rain had begun in earnest, starting out like a regular rainfall but soon becoming heavy, one of the heaviest rains they'd ever seen in their short lives.

"Stop asking me that," Kageyama huffed in irritation, crossing his arms. "We have to wait for the rain to let up so our senpai have the opportunity to get us help."

"Do you think it'll rain for long?" Hinata asked again, almost as if questioning things around him was the only thing keeping him alive right now. Kageyama figured that if he had a concussion, that might partially be true, so he could stop being a bit of a tit about his constant pestering.

"I want to say no, but we won't know until it starts letting up," he shrugged. "Just don't get cold. It's windy and it sounds like a thunderstorm out there, so it might get a little wild."

"Just what we need right now," Hinata sighed, but then settled back against Kageyama. "Hey. You don't mind if I do this, right?"

And Kageyama's back hurt from sleeping hunched over and bearing Hinata's weight, but hell, he couldn't ask for anything more than keeping them both safe.

"Whatever. Do what you want."

"Thanks," Hinata grinned at him, and Kageyama felt guilty for indulging in that smile so much. "Hey... You've forgiven me, right?"

"Huh?"

"For messing up..." Hinata's smile vanished. "And for getting us stuck like this."

"Don't talk as if we were going to die in here," Kageyama clicked his tongue in reproach, but then shrugged. "I'm tired of you apologizing all the time. You're not the only one involved, okay?"

"But it was my idea-"

"But there were three other people to stop you. And three other people to come in and make sure you didn't break anything. And I willingly came in when the building began to fall, so if anything, it's my
fault I'm here," he insisted. "So stop being so selfish. You're not the only one who matters around here. It was a group mistake, so we'll all take responsibility for it."

The number of times he’d heard a variation of that statement during volleyball games was astounding, and so at some point, it had stuck. And now, it seemed ideal to return the statement to Hinata, who seemed to be doing the most fatal thing; taking all the blame on his shoulders.

And Hinata probably recognized the idea behind the statement, because he gave Kageyama a weak smile.

"I didn't thank you, by the way."

"For what?"

"Coming in to try and save me. Even though I made the whole building collapse," Hinata looked away.

"Well, I couldn't let you kill yourself due to your own stupidity," Kageyama did the same thing in the other direction, his heart skipping a beat. "Don't say it like it's admirable."

"But it is. You didn't have to, but you came," Hinata insisted, turning back to him, but Kageyama still didn't meet his eyes.

"Well... you called my name," he muttered, and at that moment, a crash of lightning lit up the sky, thunder rolling ominously.

"S-Sorry. I don't think I heard that right. Could you repeat?" Hinata stammered, eyes wide and cheeks pink.

"Nothing," Kageyama insisted out loud, but then when the rain gained in intensity, words he never even knew he could conjure came tumbling out of his mouth in a hushed whisper, a secret promise. "I said that... when we die and decompose, tomorrow or in a billion years, even if we are stardust separated by millions of light-years... If you call my name, I'll always find my way back to you."

When the last word left his lips, he immediately blushed to the tip of his ears, clenching his fists and not even believing what he’d ended up saying. He didn't even want to see Hinata's reaction now, he was so embarrassed.

"...Huh?" Hinata finally conceded, frowning at Kageyama. "Stop mumbling, you're creepy, and I can't understand a thing. What the heck did you just say?"

And Kageyama's wide eyes whipped up to look at him incredulously, as if wondering if this kid was for real, and slowly, slowly, an irritated expression flashed across his face, right in time to stop the smile that was about to emerge instead.

"I said you didn't have to thank me, so shut your mouth and get some sleep!" he huffed.

"Fine, fine, you don't have to be so pissy about it." Hinata stuck his tongue out at him. "Bakayama!"

"You're incredibly mature, I know that already, so shut it!"

The usual banter flew over their heads for a few minutes longer before they tired of it and fell silent. Instead of talking, they listened to the rain's violent descent, wondering if the heavens themselves were falling over their heads this time. It was raining buckets, and the bottom of the foundations they were stuck in was already filling up. Water accumulating from nearby buildings and structures also
fell into the hole, and suddenly, Kageyama was struck with the frankly irrational fear that if he went to sleep, the next time he'd wake would be underwater. Or never again.

Hinata was already dozing off next to him, somehow finding drowsiness through the cold wind that was racking his small body with shivers, and finding solace in the booming thunder periodically ripping through the sound of heavy rain. But then, Kageyama realized that his arm was still around Hinata's shoulders, and that perhaps the smaller teen had found solace within his embrace.

And it was there, at that moment, that something hit him straight in the chest, something heavy and loaded that he could not identify, but that suddenly lit every single one of his nerve endings on fire. It hurt, but it also empowered him for some reason, and the longer he looked at Hinata's trembling form against him, the longer his ears registered the sound of puffing breaths through the noise drowning them out, the longer he felt Hinata's cold skin against him, the more his chest clenched and the more it hurt.

His hand tightened on Hinata's opposite shoulder, almost crushing him, and the young boy whined in pain. Kageyama did not let him go, though, because if he let go now, he didn't know whether or not he'd be able to get him back.

Neither of them fell asleep then. It was too noisy and too cold for any peace to be found, and so they both stayed seated, rooted in place and stuck close as if they were the only things keeping one another alive. Slowly, the hole was filling up with water, and the smell of acid and rotten eggs was becoming stronger.

The next time the boys opened their eyes, it was to the terrifying sound of a groaning metal pole struggling to stay upright despite the erosion of the acid rain. Both of them blinked out the lethargy set into their eyelids and tried to look through their darkened surroundings for the source of the loud groaning. They only ended up hearing the pole when it snapped and fell into the pool of water that was steadily rising up, and, frantically searching for the telltale disturbance on the water's surface, they ended up realizing that the water had risen to only a couple of feet below where they were standing. How long had it been since the rain began? Neither of them even knew. The concept of time was obsolete down in the ruins holding them captive. All that mattered was surviving until help arrived.

"Hinata," Kageyama called over the howling rain, strangely calm. "Let's move up to the highest point. The water's rising."

"We're gonna drown, aren't we?" Hinata whimpered, barely audible over the rain.

Kageyama did not have the heart to tell him that the acid rain would probably burn them to death before they had a chance to drown.

"We're gonna make it," he promised instead, because no matter what, he would find a way to save them, or die trying. He wasn't going to lose Hinata. Not when he needed him the most. "Come on, lean on me."

"I don't want to die, Kageyama," Hinata continued, grunting when the setter pulled him up. Together, they began hobbling up the pile of rubble, slowly, carefully as not to trip, and settled at the highest point.

"You're not gonna die. I'll make sure of it," Kageyama answered as confidently as he could manage, setting Hinata down.

"Where are you going?" Hinata suddenly grabbed Kageyama's sleeve as he got back up. "Don't go
anywhere!"

"Calm down." The setter was visibly shocked at the fear that had suddenly permeated Hinata's eyes. As if he'd been actually afraid of being abandoned. "I'm just gonna go get your bag before it gets swallowed up by the water."

"Oh," Hinata mumbled, and then hesitantly let him go. "Be careful."

"It's right there, I'll be fine," Kageyama gave him a moment, and then turned to walk back down to where they were a moment ago. Hinata's backpack was laying where they'd left it, and although immediate survival was a priority right now, they also had long-term survival to consider, and letting a bag of perfectly good supplies go to waste was just stupid.

As he picked up the bag from the strap and swung it on his back, his ears were suddenly assailed with a new sound. One that he had never wanted to hear, ever.

Hinata.

Screaming.

Kageyama's blood ran cold and in the second and a half it took him to whip around towards his partner, a million scenarios were already haunting his mind.

But Hinata was still there, where he'd left him, except his eyes were elsewhere. Lost, even as they stared in horror at the water rising up, and for a moment, Kageyama was so afraid that Hinata had been burned by a sudden splash or something of the like.

"Hinata!" he called urgently, jogging up the small hill separating them and sliding to his knees next to him. "What's wrong?"

"T-T-The..." Hinata seemed to be unable to make words, eyes still fixated at something behind Kageyama. The setter turned to look where Hinata seemed to be staring, but in the darkness, he couldn't see much. "I-In the water!"

Lightning flashed loudly, and finally illuminated what Hinata had seen. And truly, Kageyama admitted through the welling nausea in his throat, that it was a nightmarish sight. And he would probably have screamed, too, had the terror not been caught in his throat in a tight ball.

There was a body in the water nearby, not only visibly several months old and decomposing, but also waterlogged from the abundant rain. It was bloated up into a shapeless mass of black and yellow tissues leaking into the pool, but worst of all, the teens could observe the effects of the acid rain on its rotting flesh.

All of the flesh was in the process of being eroded, holes burning through the crevices of the body where water had accumulated. In several places, the body's clothes had been disintegrated and were in the process of fusing with the soft, melting flesh. The body was deformed and pieces of muscle and skin were floating next to it in the water, blackened and painted with heavily congealed, rotting blood. Where bones had already been uncovered, in places like the body's face, the white had become yellow and cracked and all of the hairs on the body had been burned clean off, leaving red spots on its skull, face and arms.

"Don't look," Kageyama found himself whispering, wide eyes stuck on the corpse, unable to tear away.

"I-I saw him!" Hinata sobbed out, turning his face into Kageyama's shirt. "It's the store owner. I saw
his body behind the counter and it took me by surprise, and that's why I tripped." He sniffled and Kageyama finally found himself tearing away from the macabre display to look at a more uplifting sight instead. "But that's definitely not what he looked like before!"

"It's the rain," Kageyama answered shakily, not knowing what to do. Even in the darkness, the sight of the body seemed to be everywhere, even behind his own eyelids, and an uncontainable terror welled up inside of him as well. "Oh god, this is all due to the rain."

"Kageyama, I'm scared," Hinata admitted, suddenly grabbing onto Kageyama's sweater. "I'm sorry for everything, but I don't want to die. Please, I don't want to end up like that!"

"Hinata, calm down," Kageyama prompted although his own heart was about to beat right out of his chest. He could practically feel the corpse's empty eye sockets on his back and he felt slimy just imagining it. A shiver of disgust went through him, and he found himself holding onto Hinata's hand on his sweater, just to anchor himself to reality. "It's gonna be okay."

Hinata seemed to take it well as he put his other hand on Kageyama's chest, and then leaned into him, smothering his tears and terrified sobbing into the wool of his clothes.

And hell, at this point, pride was something that neither of them could afford to have, or even still had, for that matter. So Kageyama put both of his arms around Hinata and drew him close, just to feel him alive and breathing against him. And somewhere along the line, tears began dripping down his face as well, and his shoulders shook with every shuddering breath he took.

But every shuddering breath he took smelled like Hinata, and maybe, maybe things weren't too bad.

"Kageyama?" Hinata finally asked him in a scraggly voice, heavy with unshed tears. Although their heads were covered by the piece of collapsed ceiling, still, there were small leaks in the area where they stood, and the wind blew the rain in their direction, so occasionally, Kageyama would feel the burning of a drop of water trailing down exposed skin or soaking through a piece of clothing.

"What is it, Hinata?" he sighed, refusing to budge. He was comfortable, as strange as it was to say, as if being interlocked with Hinata was keeping him warm and safe even though the entire world around them was going to hell.

"Can you talk? About anything," he mumbled against Kageyama's chest, then lifted his face and drew a bit back to look into Kageyama's bloodshot eyes. "Please just... talk some."

"I don't really make small talk, you know that," Kageyama answered uncomfortably, but Hinata's eyes were wide and wet and pleading him to distract him.

"Please. About anything. Childhood friends and dreams, favourite teacher, what you want to eat first when we get someplace safe, I don't know. Anything."

"I... I'd like to... eat curry, maybe?"

"... And?"

"... What do you mean, 'and'?" Kageyama sighed, looking away with a blush. "I don't know what else to say."

"You're boring," Hinata laughed, but the laugh was wet and followed by a sniffle. "Well, I want to eat a big bowl of warm miso soup. With extra tofu in it. And then I feel like eating yakitori and okonomiyaki, fresh off the grill. And then as a main dish, I want to eat tonkatsu with a lot of rice, or maybe even in a curry if it's available, and of course, I want dessert, too."
"Oi, that's a bit excessive, don't you think?" Kageyama raised an eyebrow, but Hinata just laughed at his surprised face and kept going.

"Daifuku. Daifuku are good. Especially with the strawberry filling. Oh, but I've always wanted to try mochi ice cream, so I bet that'd be worth a shot as well! But then I'd have to keep some place for an obligatory Garigari-kun after the meal," Hinata's grin brightened Kageyama's world a hundred times more than the flash of lightning that made both of them flinch in fear for a second. Neither of them turned to look at the corpse floating a few feet away, and neither of them needed to to remember the danger they were in.

But Hinata's optimism was brighter than any dark future, so Kageyama chose to stick with him for the time being.

"You know... my mom used to make really good doughnuts. They were really sweet, and crispy on the outside, but really fluffy on the inside." Hinata's smile suddenly wilted, and soon, he looked nostalgic.

Kageyama's heartstrings tugged inside his chest at the sight of such sadness in the energetic boy. The other's fists clenched into his sweater and instinctively, he shifted closer to encircle him better.

"She was... She was really good at everything," Hinata murmured, and suddenly, Kageyama knew where this was going. And he was very familiar with Hinata at this point, and had even briefly spoken to him about his family the night before, but the idea of intimacy to the point of discussing their families was somewhat frightening. "She was loving, and caring, and she only wanted the best."

He had nothing to say to that. Hinata seemed a bit disappointed, because he looked at him hopefully, but then sighed and look back down to where his fists were in his sweater.

"She shouldn't have died. Not like that, not right now. She always promised that come morning light, we'd be safe and sound. She promised to protect us."

And Kageyama still had nothing to say, only because he'd never known that kind of relationship before. Hinata spoke of it fondly, and he was slightly envious of him for it, but he couldn't miss something he'd never really had. And so he kept quiet.

"She... She probably died protecting Natsu," Hinata's eyes watered up again at the thought of his baby sister. "Since the war began, Natsu would always be so afraid, she'd always end up in either my or my mom's bed. We'd chastise her in the morning and tell her there was nothing to be afraid of, but we wouldn't mind it so much when she did it again."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Kageyama finally decided to say, feeling slightly awkward. However, Hinata was trusting him enough to share more than ever before about his relatively-newly deceased family, and he would take pride in that. "I hadn't had the chance to meet them, but I'm sure we would have gotten along."

"Mom would have liked you, even if you're an arrogant prick sometimes," Hinata laughed, and suddenly, there were new tears leaking slowly down his cheeks. "Natsu would probably have gotten jealous of you because I spend so much time practicing volleyball with you instead of being at home. She was... She was really looking forward to going to school again so I could help her with her homework. And she asked me to teach her to play volleyball, too, when she got older."

His fists clenched so tight on Kageyama's sweater that the setter was afraid he'd loosen it up irreversibly. However, when he saw Hinata hang his head, and then felt the trembles in his arms, he
didn't say anything at all. He let him stay like that as long as he wanted.

"I... I miss them," he sniffled. "I miss talking to them, or being with them, or even just seeing them. On some days, it gets so lonely that I find myself wanting to die so I can see them again," he admitted, and Kageyama's eyes went wide.

"You wouldn't do that, though... right?" he asked tentatively, treading as lightly as he could. To his relief, Hinata shook his head.

"My mother died protecting my sister. And I lived. It would be shameful if I gave up now. She loved us both so much, and raised us as best as she could on her own, so it would not be right to throw away the life she gave me, even after her death," he mumbled. "But still... it hurts so much. I just want to see them one more time and tell them I love them. I just want to say goodbye to them."

"I'm sure they both knew your feelings, even when they died." Kageyama's eyes then went to the clouded sky, barely visible through the heavy raindrops falling down noisily. "And wherever they are, they are watching over you and protecting you even today. So don't regret what you couldn't do and just... remember all the happy memories you made with them."

"You're right," Hinata nodded softly. "It actually... I know this is incredibly weird to say, but it actually helped a lot when I spent the four days next to them. I... I didn't see them because they were crushed under the house, but... I feel like it gave me time to remember them. I was glad to be able to hold my mother's hand one last time, even if she didn't hold me back. And ultimately, I feel like it was my mom who pushed me to leave and keep living, no matter how much I wanted to die then."

"I..." Kageyama sighed, really not knowing what to say. "I'm... honoured you decided to share this with me. It doesn't look like it's easy."

"It's not, but... I felt like I had to do it," he smiled up at Kageyama softly, almost shyly. "So... thanks for listening to me."

"Don't thank me for something like that..."

"I want to." Hinata left it at that, and set his head back down on Kageyama's chest again.

They stayed like that for a while. Their fingers and toes were absolutely frozen by then, but it hardly mattered when the rest of their bodies were warmly pressed up against one another. And their skin burned in several places where the acid had had time to burn a few layers of epidermis off, but it didn't matter if the rain now brought them a sense of serenity, rather than fear. The image of the bloated, burned corpse flashed in their minds with every bolt of lightning, but then dissipated into the darkness in between. And so, it really wasn't that bad.

"Tell me about your family, now," Hinata softly suggested at some point, and Kageyama snapped back awake from a state of semi-lethargy he'd been lulled into.

His first instinct was to check the water level, and he was worried to see that it had risen enough to start submerging the spot where they'd been sitting a while back. A few more feet of accumulation, and they were done for. However, the rain also seemed to be lighter and lighter, so Kageyama crossed his fingers that it wasn't just an illusion, and then turned his eyes to Hinata.

"I don't really have much to say," he spoke truthfully, because unlike Hinata, his family hadn't been a close-knit one he could remember with fondness.

"Come on, you have to have something to say about them. How was your mom? And your dad? Did you have any siblings?" Hinata prompted, and Kageyama legitimately thought about those questions
for a while.

"I don't know," he finally conceded.

"How do you not know? That's kind of ridiculous, even for you," Hinata frowned.

"I don't know," Kageyama sighed, and then looked away, suddenly self-conscious. "I don't know because... I've hardly ever spoken to my parents at all."

"... Huh?" Hinata let out dumbly, suddenly giving all of his attention to Kageyama. "How come?"

"I don't know. It just happened that way. It's always been that way," the setter shrugged, not daring to meet his partner's curious gaze. "Since grade school. My mother would drop me off to school and then pick me up from after-school programs and then she'd go work in her room for the rest of the night."

"And your dad?"

"He's a businessman, so he travels a lot. I've seen him a few times in passing, but I haven't really talked to him or anything," Kageyama mumbled, not wanting to look at Hinata because he was afraid of what he might find. Pity, perhaps? He did not want to be the 'poor kid without parents'. He was just fine without them anyway.

"But then... who made your lunches?"

"I did."

"And dinner?"

"Sometimes there'd be leftovers to heat up."

"But who tucked you in?"

"I didn't... need anybody to tuck me in."

"And who went to your parent-teacher conferences?"

"I was a good student, so my parents were never called to the school."

"Who made you feel better when you were sad, then?"

"Well you hardly need other people to get involved when that happens..."

"That doesn't make any sense," Hinata finally groaned out. "You're so weird."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kageyama balked, feeling like he should feel offended somehow.

"You're acting so unbothered by the fact that you never had parents who took care of you!"

"Well I did fine on my own, didn't I?" the setter argued. "I'm fine now, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but you could've been better," Hinata crossed his arms. "Don't you feel like something is missing?"

"I can't miss something I've never had."

"That's horrible," Hinata frowned. "You shouldn't have to say that. You should have had somebody,
anybody, who took care of you and who was there for you when you needed them." He took a moment to think about what he'd just said, and Kageyama had no words to respond to him with. There was something akin to shame welling up inside of him, and he hated it. "Didn't you... didn't you ever feel lonely...?" Hinata finally asked.

And there was something that clicked inside of Kageyama.

All those years of not knowing how to interact with other people and not knowing how to read other people's emotions. All those years of eating lunch alone, walking home alone, studying alone. All those years of angry, self-centered behaviour because he'd never been taught otherwise.

Only now he realized how absolutely lonely he had been up until high school. Constantly surrounded by a crowd, but never by people. And it hurt a lot more than he thought to come to that conclusion now.

"It doesn't matter." The words slipped out of his mouth before he even felt them tumbling out. When he finally looked up, he saw the look in Hinata's eyes, and suddenly, there was anger festering inside of him like pus on an old wound. "Don't pity me."

"Huh?"

"I see it in your expression." Even in the dark, the pursed lips and shifting eyes were clear to him. "You're pitying me, and I don't want that. There's a reason why I don't say anything about my family, and it's because I know people will react this way!"

"It's not pity," Hinata interrupted him solemnly. "It's sadness. I'm sad."

"Don't be. I'm not sad, so you shouldn't be, either."

"Exactly my point," Hinata insisted. "You're not sad because you've always lived like this. But you shouldn't have. I've had a mother and a sister who have been my constants until now. Even when I had nothing else, I had them. And even when things weren't ideal, or things went wrong, we still had one another." The spiker's eyes were hard and determined. "But you... you've never felt that. How reassuring it is to know that someone has your back all the time, and that you have somebody who will love you unconditionally. You haven't had anybody that has stuck with you throughout your life and who has seen you in every way there is. So of course you're not sad. But I am, for you, for what you've missed, for what you could've, and should've had."

"That's embarrassing," Kageyama started to speak, but his voice cracked and with horror, he realized that his eyes were burning. His chest felt empty, as if he'd been hungry for something all this time and had only just realized it, and the persistent tugging of his heartstrings was about to make him vomit up whatever had been plugging the gigantic gaping hole in his chest before Hinata came and recklessly pulled it out. "Stop talking," he finally said, and ducked his head, biting his lip to keep in the embarrassed tears.

Hinata said nothing, and let him compose himself.

Kageyama had never really thought it weird that his mother never really stuck around him. People were different, he'd come to accept that from an early age. Sure, it had hurt at first, to hear other kids boast how their mother made their bento or took them to the arcade or took care of them when they were sick, but soon he found himself doing all of those things independently from the woman who only showed up when she absolutely had to, and then left back into her room to do whatever. Since Kageyama began junior high, she'd also taken up a new hobby of travel, and would often disappear for days, or even weeks without notifying Kageyama at all. The only thing he'd have to remember
her by was a wad of cash by the front door, and after the first few times, it stopped bothering him.

It became his routine, and he had never really thought about it twice.

Until now, until years later, one boy had been bold and shameless enough to stick his nose into his personal business and rip apart the frail lies he'd built for himself. And he didn't know what else to do. His entire character was built on the constant that he did not need anybody else in his life.

And now, there was Hinata. And there was the rest of Karasuno. And there was nobody else.

"You're too shameless," Kageyama finally ended up saying, his voice shaking, but he proudly swallowed his tears and looked at Hinata straight in the eyes. "I don't need anybody else. That's all there is to it."

"Well, you're saying that because you're pretty stupid most of the time," Hinata huffed jokingly, smirking at him. "But a family is a constant presence that grounds you when you feel like you're gonna lose it, and who guides you when you get lost. A family changes you for the better, and a family loves you more than anybody else in the world. And a family doesn't have to be blood-related. So that way, everybody has a family, whether they know it or not."

Faces popped up in Kageyama's mind, and he momentarily reeled at how easy it was to associate people with Hinata's new description of a family. The spiker seemed to see the surprise on his face, because he smiled and gave him a moment to think it all out.

"So. Kageyama," he began again after a moment, looking up at him with new life in his gaze. "Tell me about your family."

And by the looks of it, Hinata knew exactly what the answer was, and yet he still wanted him to say it out loud. Kageyama puffed out his cheeks, refusing to give in, but Hinata was looking so intently at him, as if saying it out loud would save the world, or something.

So he turned his eyes to the sky poking through the crisscrossed beams dripping with raindrops. The rain had become a slight drizzle at this point, and not too soon at all as only about two feet of dry land remained around them. The corpse had floated away further, and Kageyama was glad that he didn't have to be reminded of how mortal they were.

"Fine. Well..." He knew Hinata was still looking expectantly at him, but he kept his eyes on the cloudy sky. "I... I have a... mother. He- uhh... She is very nice." He would smile no matter what and encourage him to move forward. He'd listen to him and give him advice, or just lend him an ear if that's what he needed. He was determined and ready to take responsibility, and Kageyama admired him a lot. "She knows a lot of things and always wants to learn more, and she takes care of the people around her devotedly. She's always there when you need her."

"And your dad?"

"He's..." It was embarrassing, because he could feel Hinata grinning as he recognized the people he was referencing. It was like playing a game where both of them could read between the lines. "He's strong. And a very imposing presence. He takes care of his family very well and tries to provide for them however he can. I think that's his main problem; that he's always trying to hard to take care of others and he's always taking the responsibility on his shoulders. My... mom tries to carry some of his burdens, and together, they're not half-bad as parents."

"They sound wonderful," Hinata commented in earnest. "Others?"

"I have an uncle," Kageyama tested out the word on his mouth and found it fitting. "He's a big teddy
bear. He's real sensitive so he's got this naturally trustworthy air to him, so he's a good listener. But he cares a lot and he's pretty strong, so if you mess with people he loves, he might not go easy on you."

"Wouldn't wanna be on the receiving end of him," Hinata laughed.

"I also have two cousins. They're little shits, to be honest." At that, Kageyama's face twisted into a weird expression that was a mix of exasperation and irritation. "One of them is not so bad. He's pretty quiet and mostly follows my other cousin around, but he's got skills, too, and he likes being helpful, so I guess he can be nice when he's not being an arrogant prick like the other one. The other one, he's like this beanpole with a smart mouth, and he gets on my nerves. He's always trying to pick a fight and coming up with dumb insults and comebacks, and half the time I want to punch him in the face." But then he remembered something, and the irritation fell from his face. "But... both of them haven't been doing so good lately. Some bad stuff happened and they're not over it yet, so as much as they annoy me, I still... wouldn't wish that upon anybody. So I hope they feel better soon."

"I'm sure they'll make it," Hinata added pensively, biting his lip. "They have their family, too, to help them along."

"Right."

"Anyone else?"

"Uhh... I have two older brothers," Kageyama blushed slightly as he began to come closer to the centre. "They're rowdy and loud and way too enthusiastic about everything, but they mean well. They don't always think with their entire heads, but they're definitely quick to protect those they love, so they're very dependable. They get along really well, too, and they're goofballs, so I guess it's... kind of nice to have them around to lighten the mood when things get bad."

"They sound wonderful," Hinata commented, and they fell silent at that point. It felt like there was a door that should be left unopened staring them in the face. And neither of them was sure if they wanted to see what came out when they did, or not.

"Anybody... else?" Hinata finally ventured, looking at Kageyama expectantly.

And Kageyama felt his inquisitive gaze on him and tried to fight down the exasperation he felt at playing all these games. But then again, he was embarrassed, so he was glad to be able to detach himself slightly from what he was saying. Plus, it was now or never. He wanted to put this last tidbit of information out there and get it over with. Besides, he trusted his partner not to divulge anything he said here once they got out.

"I... I have..." he hesitated for a moment. "... a little brother."

"You do?" Hinata's voice was perfectly neutral, and Kageyama admired him for the rare show of composure. Perhaps the concussion was doing him some good after all.

"Yeah. He's... special." There was no other way to describe him. "He's got his head in the clouds all the time, an idealist and a dreamer. He doesn't really know how to use his common sense at all and always rushes into things. He's shameless and loud and too easily impressed, and he doesn't know how to sit still."

"Don't you think you're being a bit too harsh?" Hinata laughed a bit uncomfortably, suddenly red in the face.
"Not really. It's true," Kageyama snorted, but then his tone softened. "But it's also true that he's eager to help, and that his optimism is unrivalled. He's quick on his feet and always full of energy, so he's really dependable if anybody ever needs help with anything. He doesn't try to be, but he's actually pretty entertaining, even if it gets annoying sometimes. And right now, a lot of people need someone like my little brother... To kind of... give them some hope. That there is something worth fighting for and that the future should never be given up on. He's naive and clueless, but he teaches me a lot of things that I'd never bothered to think about, so I think... I think, sometimes, that we... complete each other."

"I see. Your family must love you very much, I'm sure."

"At first, I was... afraid. That I would lose them like I've lost other people before. But then, over time, it's sunk in that even if I wanted to let them go, they... they wouldn't let me go," Kageyama mumbled, not sure if he wanted Hinata to hear that last bit. But Hinata heard it, and strangely enough, his serene expression didn't change.

"I'm sure they wouldn't dream of it. You must mean a lot to them, all of them."

"Yeah... But anyway! This is embarrassing. There. I told you about my family." Kageyama hid his face in his hands, unable to face Hinata after all that he had said.

"I'm glad you shared. I'm happy you feel safe around these people," Hinata chuckled, and watched as the reflections on the water bounced off onto his friend, illuminating softly the pink tip of his ears.

"Now stop talking. You're saying too many clueless things, dumbass!"

"Sure," Hinata shrugged, and then scooted closer. "You okay there?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're all red in the face!"

"Why you-"

Hinata interrupted Kageyama's incoming rant with a loud laugh, a genuinely amused laugh. As if responding to it, the rain ceased softly, and only the waterfalls of rain draining from adjacent structures kept flowing into the ruins that were close to becoming their casket. And yet, neither of them could bring themselves to see the hopelessness in this situation. It was bizarre.

Kageyama was convinced that Hinata's laugh had something to do with all that.

"Hey, Tobio?" Hinata suddenly called, and the unfamiliar sound of his name sent the setter spinning around to look at his friend's smiling face. Nobody ever called his first name unless there was trouble, so this was a refreshing change that sent a newfound hope soaring through his heart.

"Hmm?"

"I'm cold," Hinata simply stated, and Kageyama understood.

Slowly, he drew Hinata close to him once again, and Hinata melted against him, warm and soothing, and unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Together, they sat and watched the last bits of water empty around them, the water rising up further and further until they were stuck on an island only a few feet wide.

But they were okay. They were alive, and they'd made it through the storm, and in the process had
discovered things that they never even considered before.

"Hey, Kageyama?" Hinata murmured as they both watched the sky lighten up, gradually reverting back to its usual red colour.

"What is it?" Kageyama answered softly as well, unwilling to disturb the almost sacred silence that had set around them now that the noisy rain had ceased.

"Just one thing."

"Hmm?"

"You know I'm older than you, right?"

"H-Hinata, you absolute dumbass!"

They fell asleep again. Though they hadn't moved since they'd settled in their high spot, their conversation had worn both of them out emotionally. Mixed in with the boredom of being confined to a small space, both of them had found it fit to fall asleep to the dripping noise of the last drops of water emptying into the acidic pool surrounding them.

They were woken by the sound of hasty footsteps and panicked voices, and after the first few seconds of disorientation, hope soared inside of them.

Their senpai had returned.

"Hinata! Kageyama!"

"Senpai!" The two younger members exclaimed, eyes stuck to the crisscrossed beams overhead, hoping to spot their friends.

"Oh god, they're alive," another voice cried out in what must've been exhilarated relief. "They're alive down there!"

"You okay?" The voice was definitely Nishinoya's, and surely enough, the small libero soon came into view, maneuvering over the beams to take a look at them. "They're here!"

"Senpai, you're back!" Hinata cried out in relief, eyes watering up.

"Of course we are! We'd never leave you here, ever!" Nishinoya assured him, and then pointed in front of him, where the two couldn't see. "And, I got backup."

"Hinata, Kageyama," a new voice jumped in, and the two first-years were relieved to hear their trust captain's voice. Soon enough, Nishinoya had gotten off the beams, and Daichi had stepped in where he had stood to take a look at his teammates. "You're okay... We were very worried when it started raining so much."

"So you know about the rain?" Kageyama asked, glancing around them briefly.

"Suga figured it out with the data Noya and Tanaka brought back when they came to get us. What was it again, Suga?" Daichi asked, looking up where the two couldn't see.

"Sulfuric acid. It's a compound that reacts violently when mixed with water and creates acid rain." Suga's unmistakably gentle voice answered, and it was something akin to peace that washed over
both of the first years. "Are you two hurt?"

"A little," Daichi answered first. "I can see a few burns, probably from splashed rain."

"Ah," Kageyama answered dumbly, only then feeling the pain from the patches on his face and arms where the water had corroded his skin. "Well, Hinata's ankle is sprained pretty badly and I think he has a concussion. The rest is just minor cuts on both of us."

"You two got lucky. Noya said the entire building collapsed on you, so we were expecting much worse. Thank goodness for your safety, though," Daichi grinned up at where Suga must've been standing. "Suga almost got a grey hair worrying about you on our way here."

"Hilarious, Daichi. It wasn't funny."

"Of course it wasn't. But they're okay. We're going to get them out safely, and we're all going to go home together," Daichi insisted. "Speaking of which, don't worry. Noya said there was a hardware store at the end of the street, so I sent Asahi to gather some tools so we can get you out."

"Sorry about the trouble," Hinata mumbled guiltily, but Daichi waved him off, predictably.

"Don't worry about it. We're just glad you're both safe."

Kageyama noted that Daichi, Suga and the rest really were way too kind for their own good.

"Here comes Asahi!" Noya cried out from somewhere the two couldn't see. "Oi, Asahi! Hurry up!"

The first-years laughed as the sound of hurried footsteps and panting, and Noya's unintelligible mumbling as Asahi arrived.

"You try carrying all this stuff and running around, Noya!" the third-years complained, but they all knew it was half-hearted. Instead, all of them immediately got to work. Soon, both Daichi and Asahi were precariously perched on the crisscrossing beams with saws in their hands, working on cutting out the obstructing pieces to give them a place where they could come up from.

"Be careful, we don't know how the rain eroded those beams," Kageyama warned them. "It was pretty heavy, so be sure they don't break."

"They feel stable enough for now. Just a little slippery," Asahi commented. "I wouldn't wanna fall in there. Looks deep."

"At least four feet of acid," Hinata huffed. "I wouldn't want to fall in there either."

"You two got so lucky that the rain stopped when it did. A little longer and you would have been submerged," Daichi commented, working hard on his piece of wood. The saw got stuck at several intervals, but soon enough, a piece of wood had been cut out, leaving a large enough space for someone to squeeze through.

"Watch out," Asahi warned them before he dropped the piece of wood into the water, splashing it some, but not enough to get any on the first-years.

"Okay, Noya, you're up," Daichi called, and Nishinoya approached them.

Daichi and Asahi gave him space, careful not to step on the beam they'd cut through, and Noya sat down on one of the stable beams, back to the first-years. The two watched him curiously, and their eyes steadily widened as Noya slowly but surely began leaning back, back until he had dropped,
was hanging from his legs from the beam. Daichi and Asahi came back next to him and tested the stability of the beam before stabilizing both of his knees.

"Senpai, please be careful! That's too dangerous," Hinata protested, watching as Noya dangled with his head only a few feet above the water line. If he extended his arms down, anything past his mid-forearm would probably be submerged.

"Don't worry about me. I'm going to catch you when you jump, alright?" Noya winked at them from his upside-down position. "I'm going to swing to come close, so jump when I'm closest. I want to catch your waist, so when you jump, try to grab onto one of my legs. And be careful that your feet don't touch the water. You might be more of a concern than Shouyo, Kageyama, but do you best. Once I've got you, Asahi and Daichi will pull you up to see Suga."

"Please be careful!" the vice-captain's voice came worriedly from the other side.

"Alright then." Kageyama wasn't too sure about the plan, but it was better than anything else they could come up with. Noya wasn't too far, and the gap to clear between them was only a few feet wide. However, in such a tight space, it might be hard for him to maneuver due to his height. Plus, Hinata had a badly sprained ankle, so he might even have trouble jumping. "I'll throw you Hinata's bag first. Then, Hinata, you can go ahead."

"What? Is it because you're scared, Bakayama?" Hinata pouted, but the setter rolled his eyes. "Don't be a baby. It's because I want to be sure you make it. Someone's gotta go after you if you fall in like the stupid idiot you are," Kageyama rolled his eyes, and as they fell silent, neither of them mentioned what the setter had just implied. Instead, Kageyama busied himself with throwing Noya the backpack, which was quickly passed along to the guys up top. Then, all eyes went to the first-years again.

"Fine. I'll go first," Hinata sighed, and Kageyama helped him stand up. It was cramped with both of them on the small island, but Hinata took a step back as far as he could, whimpering when he applied pressure on his ankle.

"Okay, I'm ready!" Noya signaled, beginning to swing back and forth.

"We're ready up here," Daichi nodded, one hand on Noya's knee, and the other ready to grab Hinata as soon as he was within reach. Asahi silently held the same pose.

"Ready?" Kageyama looked at Hinata, whose face looked a little white. There was sweat on his forehead, but it was probably due to the pain of his ankle. "It'll only be for a second. Jump as far and as high as you can, as if you were spiking a volleyball, okay?"

"Got it," Hinata took a deep breath and let go of Kageyama's hand. The latter got out of his way as much as possible and watched him prep himself for the jump. "I'm gonna go on three, okay, senpai?"

"Got it!"

"Okay... One... Two..." Hinata took a deep breath, and put his weight equally on both feet. "Three!"

And as impressively as he always jumped during volleyball games, Hinata took two running steps, and his feet left solid ground. Sound was sucked out in the second that he spent airborne, and everybody held their breath.

And then, Hinata's arms were around Noya's left thigh, clinging on for dear life, and Noya had his forearms folded under his butt to push him up, and Hinata was crying out in pain whilst Asahi and
Daichi struggled to pull him out of the tight hole they'd opened up.

And Hinata was out, and Kageyama could suddenly breathe.

"Okay Hinata, come here. Come here, Hinata," Suga was encouraging him as Asahi momentarily got up to help the smaller boy limp out of Kageyama's line of sight, towards Suga. Once Asahi returned, all eyes went to Kageyama again, and he waited for everyone to call their position before getting into his.

"Alright, Kageyama. Just be careful of the water," Noya reminded him, looking a little bit red in the face from hanging upside down for so long.

"Got it. Sorry in advance, I might be a little bit heavy," he warned.

"Don't worry about it. We're got strong guys up there to pick you up," the second-year winked, and began swinging again. "Now go for it."

"Okay," Kageyama nodded, and took a few steps back, until the water was lapping at his heels dangerous. "On three. One, two... three!"

He mimicked Hinata in taking two small running steps, and jumped. His timing was impeccable, as expected, and he managed to grab onto Noya's legs. Immediately, he felt his senpai's arms around his waist, and then two hands grabbing his sweater to pull him up. He helped them out by transferring his hands to the beams around him, and pulling himself up just until the two third-years could loop their hands under his armpits and get a better grip on him to pull him up.

They pulled him up until he could sit on one of the beams, and from then onward, it was easy enough to pull his legs out of the hole as well and get up.

"Kageyama, over here," Suga called him from a bit further away, on solid ground, and the setter went to meet his senpai whilst the third-years helped Noya out of the hole.

"I'm fine," he insisted as he dropped to his knees next to Sugawara, who was busy over Hinata's ankle. "Is he okay?"

"That's a really bad sprain, but it doesn't look broken," Suga assured him, wrapping a compression bandage over the cold pack he'd wrapped around Hinata's ankle. "There's probably some medication I can give him for it, but I'm going to have to check in my books when we get home. For now, two compression bandages and a cold pack will do. You sure you're okay?"

"Just cut up and bruised. I'll be fine," Kageyama promised, and Suga motioned him over anyway.

"Alright. Just to be safe, though, I'm going to clean that small burn you've got on your face right now, since burns keep burning the longer they are left untreated," he explained, wetting a compress with cold water and then applying it to his jaw, where, indeed, a red patch had resulted from splashing rain.

"Thank you," Kageyama sighed, holding the compress to his face, and then the gravity of the situation hit him. They were saved. "Really, thank you. For everything." He was already on his knees, so he just had to bow a little bit forward to express his gratitude, which left Suga understandably flustered.

"Not at all! Don't thank us for doing what was right, Kageyama," Suga waved him off a bit awkwardly. "We'd never leave you two behind, and that goes without saying."
"You're family now, so whether you like it or not, you're stuck with us," Noya's voice cut through their conversation, and Kageyama turned to see all three of his senpai walking up to them with relieved smiles on their faces.

And Kageyama was terribly, irrationally, incredibly happy to see them all together in one piece.

"I'm sorry we took so long, Kageyama, Hinata," Daichi apologized as Kageyama got up to meet him. "We would have come sooner if we could have. It must have been a scary experience to live through, being powerless in the face of advancing death."

"But we're fine thanks to you. So it's alright." It had been terrifying throughout, watching the water rise up to swallow them in a painful death without knowing if help would arrive on time. But if they remembered that they hadn't been forgotten, and if they kept believing in their friends, their family, they would make it through. And it had been that mentality that had allowed them to survive.

And later on, as the six of them walked back to the warehouse whilst discussing new plans and new findings, Kageyama found himself glancing often at Hinata's face, peacefully squished into Asahi's back as he slept while being carried. And there was something about that face that gave him hope, so that when they arrived at the gym in the late evening and they were greeted by the three who had remained there, Kageyama could only glance softly at them, and proudly call out; "We're home!".

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon: Kageyama's emotionally stunted and irrationally afraid of being abandoned because he hasn't had a good family. Not necessarily neglectful. Just... Not caring so much. IDK, I look into things too much. Psychologically looking at his character, I feel like he has trouble with people because he's never had constant human role-models in his life so idk.

Sulfuric acid is a sulfur-based chemical compound that reacts violently when mixed with water. It's what acid rain is made of IRL. In this AU, due to massive radiation, IDK what happened but the concentration of sulfuric acid in the rain is so huge that it can burn skin right off of you if you touch it. It also degrades metal and other things, like clothes or shoes, so these kids are gonna have to avoid the puddles for a while. Also, especially with chemical burns, even once the burn has cooled on the outside, it keeps burning on the inside, so it's important to continuously cool the burn to avoid secondary thermal burns.

I sprained my ankle like Hinata did while I was playing volleyball last weekend and let me tell you that shit is painful as fuck. So running/jumping was all adrenaline, cause his ankle came real close to breaking. His ankle's already the size of his fist and all black and blue (and probably red, bc he didn't take ibuprofen, unlike me ewe), the poor sweetheart.

Again, sorry for OOC. For some reason, Kageyama was incredibly hard to characterize, especially in relation to Hinata, and half the time I had no idea what I was doing (excuse the 20k words of nonsense). But the point that I tried to hammer home this time is that Karasuno is a family and Karasuno is all they have left, so like it or not, you're stuck with the wild big brothers and bitchy cousins ahah.

So! Next time! Let's say goodbye to Karasuno gym... Our kids are setting out. But to
where? Is there a place for them, even, somewhere in this vast, lonely land?

Thanks for reading, you guys! And please please please leave a review if you liked/disliked! It's always so nice to have encouragements! ;u;
Everything in his life was a variable, there one second and gone the other. And worst of all, it was his fault for pushing these away, for making these precarious constants into ever-changing variables, for being unable to control his own life. And if his life was not his to control, what did he have left for him on this godforsaken planet?

He had hope. And hope had been a constant that he’d had all along without ever noticing, until three new additions to his family swept in in a fiery blaze and pointed it out to him.

22k words. Somebody needs to stop me. I'm serious, guys.

So before rambling on, I just want to thank everyone who's taken the time to comment on this fic. I really appreciate all your kind words and encouragements, since they're often the reason I keep writing. I don't reply to comments on AO3 because I dunno what the etiquette on authors commenting their own fics is?? But I really really appreciate the time you put into these comments! So thank you so much for your support, everybody! (Shoutout to the people on Tumblr who wrote asks about this story! You guys are the best ;u; My Tumblr is givemelibertea, by the way, if you have any questions or comments to make!)

I've gotten real busy watching Kuroko no Basket rn, sorry about the delay. Also, con season is coming up, and I sprained my finger at volleyball, so trying to type with a taped finger was pretty hard. Please forgive the spelling mistakes, if any.

This chapter has like... 4 changes of setting, so I'm sorry if things get confusing. For this reason, I am really dissatisfied with this one, but hey, it's something I had to get through to keep moving on with the story.

Warnings: Blood, kinda gory towards the end.

Please enjoy~

Tsukishima woke up again in the middle of the night, to the sound of nobody's panicked breathing but his own.

"Again...?" he mumbled to himself, rubbing his eyes tiredly for what seemed to be the umpteenth time. He lost count after the 4th time in two nights. At this point, time seemed to meld together in certain moments, and everything felt like one whole, really long day, ever since the incident.
The incident...

The blond turned his head slightly to the side, observing the figure sleeping next to him. Yamaguchi was curled up with his back to Tsukishima, facing Tanaka. The second-year had rolled close to Yamaguchi, and actually had his hand out within reach, in case Yamaguchi woke up and needed something to hang on to.

It pissed Tsukishima off, that his very own best friend would not rely on him in time of need.

"Whatever," he huffed, laying back down, and glaring at the ceiling. Several places over, Kageyama mumbled something in what seemed to be a rather restless sleep, and shifted noisily in his sleeping bag. Tsukishima figured it was because the orange-haired brat was still stuck in the infirmary with that busted ankle of his.

And in a way, Tsukishima understood him, because they were both going through the same thing right now. Having to cope with the fact that their best friends were hurt, and that they could do nothing to help them.

But hell if he'd actually admit it to the setter.

His thoughts circled back into his head as he closed his heavy eyelids. He ought to get some sleep, since tomorrow was bound to be a big day, so he did his best to relax, despite the circumstances.

He was almost asleep when Yamaguchi shifted next to him, turning around to face him instead. He said nothing, but Tsukishima swore he felt a weight in one of his limp hands. However, he was too sleepy to check, and within the following minutes, was dead asleep.

Yamaguchi's eyes, half-lidded and burdened with immeasurable sadness, followed the gentle flutter of his eyelashes throughout the night.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Breakfast was a quiet moment. Everybody seemed to be concentrating on eating whatever food they could scrape up. Once in a while, Suga would fuss over Hinata, who had woken up unable to bear weight on his leg at all, but then the silence would blanket them again.

It was comforting, for whatever it was worth. But every time Daichi opened his mouth, seemingly to say something, the entire room froze and the team held their breaths in apprehension.

But Daichi ended up saying nothing. That in itself was a relief, but also incredibly worrying at the same time. Suga kept eyeing him throughout the whole morning, even when they all vacated to their routine chores and activities, and so there was a tense silence in the air most of the time.

Finally, it was Asahi that broke the silence, and rather surprisingly at that.

"Daichi," he called out loud when everybody was occupying themselves on the gym floor somehow. The boys idly tossing one another a volleyball stopped, and the ones reading books and maps looked up curiously. All conversation ceased, and all eyes went to the third-years, who seemed to be slightly uncomfortable with being put on the spot.

"Yeah?" Daichi finally replied, eyes glancing to the side to find Suga's reassuring presence next to him.

"Are you going to tell them yet?"
"Tell us what?" Noya jumped in almost immediately, dragging everybody into a state of high alert with him.

"We were going to address the issue when we figured out how to do it," Suga sighed, giving Daichi a break from the confrontation. "It's a big topic, and, well... it's not that easy to announce."

"What's going on?" Hinata asked, eyes wide. "Did something happen?"

"Well... Daichi and I were talking for a while and discussed an ultimatum with Asahi this morning... We just didn't know how to get you guys in on it," Suga answered, looking ready to diffuse any tension that might develop. That in itself was an aggravating attitude to have, and the room suddenly swelled with tension.

"What's this about?" Tanaka questioned, eyes narrowing. "You were going to tell us eventually, right?"

"Of course," Daichi answered this time, voice as steady as ever. They all took a moment to admire how strong he was through all this, but then, the questions came back.

"So. What's this about?" Kageyama prompted.

And suddenly, all eyes were back on Daichi, who seemed to be unable to take all the stares.

"Well, we've all thought about it on and off for a while now. It's just that we've finally come to terms with the decision and we've made it for good," he rambled on, too obviously for anybody to miss.

"Don't beat around the bush," Asahi softly pushed him. "We've all been through worse. We can take it."

"It's not an easy thing to say nonetheless," Suga defended Daichi, as expected. "It's a very heavy decision to make."

"All of our lives are hanging in the balance after making this decision," Daichi wrung his hands nervously. "So you understand that, well..."

He trailed off, and the tense silence felt like it would explode.

"Captain." Finally, it was Tsukishima who broke the shaky truce, staring straight at Daichi. "The decision you've made. It's about leaving the gym for good, isn't it?"

The silence seemed to become heavier and heavier in the span of the few seconds it took for Daichi to lick his lips and nod.

"Yeah." And suddenly, the tension was gone, replaced by an overwhelming feeling of despair. "Yeah, we're leaving. Tomorrow morning. We're packing our bags and heading out."

More silence.

Almost as if nobody even knew how to handle the news.

But the last few days had been trying for all of them. One danger after the other, there had been an almost constant weight on all of their shoulders up to now. So really, it was sad, but expected, to see all of the Karasuno team members lower their gazes in defeat, having given up without even fighting it.

For the first time, they'd backed down from a challenge. Even if that challenge was arguably worth
"It doesn't have to be a bad thing," Suga tried comforting them all, his own voice choked and tense. "We'll have more access to resources if we move to a new place. And we can probably find help if we head towards more populated areas. We're gonna be okay." But he hardly seemed to be convincing even himself, let alone the others.

Briefly, through the thoughts muddling his mind, Tsukishima glanced to his side, where Yamaguchi was staring up at Daichi. His eyes, as they'd been since the incident, were devoid of emotion, as if there was nothing left inside of him to react with. And Karasuno was a constant for Yamaguchi, one of the only things he had left for him. Leaving what they'd all considered to be a home for them all since they came together under one roof would definitely stunt his recovery.

And yet, Karasuno had also been a safe haven for them until Yamaguchi had been attacked inside of it. It felt like a sort of betrayal, and now the walls that had once protected them seemed to be trapping them. So in the end, being unable to read Yamaguchi's emotions in regards to the news announced kept Tsukishima from gauging whether or not the decision was beneficial or not.

It frustrated the hell out of him.

He got up without even trying to hide the weakness in his limbs and the sway in his step. He had no words, but apparently, Suga did. Suga always did.

"Tsukishima. Where are you going?" And the blond felt all eyes go on him, though the team was mostly caught up in their own thoughts to care much.

"Shower," he answered gruffly.

"There's no electricity today, either. You'll freeze," Suga warned him in a worried tone, and suddenly, the frustration flared inside of him.

He felt like they were all being babied, but at the same time, that they weren't being taken care of enough. The contradiction made everything so complicated, and he didn't know how to feel about anybody anymore.

Least of all Yamaguchi, whose dull eyes he could feel on his back.

"I don't give a damn," he spat out, and stalked off to cool his head, rather literally. He could hear a few people call him back half-heartedly, but nobody pursued the issue, nor him as he made his way to the locker room.

And deep inside, he figured as he grabbed a (probably) clean towel and started undressing, he was upset as well that they were leaving. He'd personally considered the Karasuno gym as a home, and a safe place where they would stay until help arrived for them. It was foolish to even think of it that way in the first place. Tsukishima knew better than anybody that constants were never constant.

"I'll be with you until the end, you hear me, Kei? No matter what happens."

Tsukishima had lost everything already, so the feeling of loss that welled up inside of him was frustrating. He should be used to loss by now, and should be desensitized to pain. He'd lost so much more than a home to this goddamn war; he'd lost his family, too. And now, he was losing his second home... Would he be forced to forfeit his second family as well?

Was Tsukishima Kei just not destined to have stability and safety in his life?
The water was freezing, as Sugawara had predicted, but it hardly bothered Tsukishima as he sat down under the spray. Very soon, he was shivering and his teeth were clattering, but the cold took his mind off of the pain that was slowly but surely poisoning his entire system. Whatever was coursing through him did not feel like sadness. Rather, it felt akin to anger, in the sense that it caused his blood to boil, his hands to shake, and his teeth to clench.

He figured he would be angry at how unfair this life was to him. Angry at how they'd all been left alone to 'deal with it', as if a fucking nuclear apocalypse was some sort of teenage drama that a bunch of high-schoolers could work through on their own. Angry that he wasn't able to be as strong as he wanted to be, and angry that he couldn't help in places where his contribution mattered the most.

But then, as angry sobs began spilling from his lips and burning tears began spilling from his eyes, he realized that he was sad. It was just another type of sadness than usual, one that he hadn't let himself feel so far, just because it would surely drag him down.

But he'd hit rock bottom at this point. There was nothing left for him anymore.

So he bit his hand to muffle the frustrated cries escaping him, and let the anguish consume him.

He let himself evacuate all of his frustration and let all of his pain wash down the drain with the freezing water raining on him. Finally, though, when his heaving breathing calmed down, he suddenly felt the chill seep into his bones, and slowly stood up to turn the water off. Once it was off, he stayed standing for a little while, droplets dripping off of him with the rest of his sadness, and finally, once he felt composed enough, he pulled the curtain back to get out of the shower.

Right in front of him, seated on the bench facing the shower stalls, holding his towel, was Yamaguchi.

Letting out a surprised noise, Tsukishima pulled the curtain back in front of him, more out of reflex than anything else, and then waited for the thundering of his heart to calm down a bit.

"I didn't hear you come in," he finally addressed his best friend. "What are you doing here?"

As expected, Yamaguchi did not answer him. In fact, the dark-haired boy had not answered anybody since the incident. Asides from the occasional whimper in his sleep, no noise had come from him so far.

"Fine," Tsukishima sighed, rubbing his eyes in exasperation. He felt like he was talking to himself. "Can you hand me my towel and glasses, at least?"

The wooden bench creaked when Yamaguchi stood up, and Tsukishima was suddenly grateful that his friend could at least understand them still, even if he wasn't communicating. A hand came through the curtains, bearing a towel that Tsukishima promptly wrapped around his waist. The cold had finally seeped in, and he was shivering by the time Yamaguchi handed him his glasses.

Stepping out from behind the curtain, he made his way to the bench and plopped down on it, waiting to dry. It probably wasn't the best idea, considering that the locker room was cold in itself, but at this point, Tsukishima was too weak and too cold to care.

Yamaguchi came and sat next to him, but said nothing. That in itself irked Tsukishima a bit, but he had no idea how his friend was feeling at that moment. He'd been through something highly traumatic, so of course he'd have changes in his behaviour. However, the lack of response from him was worrying. Tsukishima expected tears, anger, helplessness, even violence from his friend. He didn't expect silence.
It felt like Yamaguchi had killed himself, too, when he'd pulled the trigger on his captor.

"Does it still hurt anywhere?" he finally decided to ask, knowing it was fruitless. However, he'd been in the infirmary when Suga had patched up all of Yamaguchi's injuries, and despite the small nature of all of his wounds, he still couldn't help but be worried.

As expected, there was silence. The smaller boy didn't even move to acknowledge the question.

"I heard you move last night, too. I hope you're getting enough sleep, or else you won't be able to keep up with the move," Tsukishima noted as well, totally skipping the question since he knew there would be no answer.

At least to that, Yamaguchi hesitated a bit before nodding once.

Tsukishima left it at that.

The shivers dancing across his skin were still bothering him, and his fingers and toes were annoyingly cold, making him rub his feet and hands together idly. None of it actually helped, but it was a comforting and familiar gesture.

One of the only familiar things left for him, anyway. If there was one thing he'd gotten from this entire experience, it was that there would never be anybody more reliable than himself. He was the only constant in his own life at this point.

But then, suddenly, there was a warm hand on his upper arm, fingers softly but securely anchored on his skin, clutching just enough to remind him that there was something still out there for him.

"It's cold," Yamaguchi's raspy voice rang out in a whisper for the first time in days, scratchy from disuse. However, Tsukishima wondered if he was referring to the temperature of his skin, or the physical sensation given off by the emptiness he surely must be feeling.

It was his turn not to answer. And when he found comfort in the silence between them, he wondered if this is what Yamaguchi had been feeling all along.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

It was a rather saddening sight to see all of Karasuno's possessions being stacked up against the gym wall. All the sleeping arrangements and makeshift furniture were brought down from the landing and stacked, and the entire infirmary was moved and taken down as well. The teardown of the space that they'd become so familiarized with was heartbreaking. Every object seemed to have a significance to it, a significance that was being destroyed as they were all pushed against the wall in categories.

In the end, the gym ended up looking like some sort of organized junkyard. It also made the boys conscious of how much stuff they actually had piled up in their cozy little home.

Which would be home no more, after that night.

The thought in itself was like a heavy weight just hovering over their heads, threatening to crush every single one of them if they let their eyes linger on one spot for too long.

The day had passed all too quickly. Tearing down had been a silent affair for all of them, so much that when they were finally done and stepped back to admire their depressing handiwork, they found that they could not speak.

Dinner was also a silent moment for them all to recollect themselves. The cold canned potatoes and
peas were as tasteless as ever, but not a single peep came from any of them. All eyes were on the cans, as if by staring long and hard enough, the mess that was the gym would have gone back to normal by the time they looked up.

But everything was still as they were set up when dinner was over, and the inescapable truth finally washed over them like a midnight tide.

"Let's start packing," Daichi finally suggested, breaking a stubborn silence that had pervaded the usually jovial atmosphere for hours by then. With small noises of acknowledgement, the members all lined up in front of the stacks of stuff that once used to be their home, and blankly looked up at the pile, then at one another.

"We should categorize, so we don't lose ourselves," Suga suggested. "Like... I'll take the medical equipment. Maybe Asahi can take the stuff we picked out to build tents out in the open. Daichi, you can take the maps, obviously, and all the miscellaneous items..."

"Good idea," the captain nodded. "Tanaka and Nishinoya, you two pack all of our consumer items. Kageyama and Hinata, take care of clothes."

"Hinata still can't walk on his own, though," Kageyama argued without much bite to his voice, nudging the boy sitting down next to him to prove his point.

"Doesn't mean I'm useless," Hinata mumbled with something akin to fear underlining his irritated tone. Nobody mentioned it, but nobody also mentioned that Hinata would never be left behind, no matter what. At this point, it seemed to be common knowledge, and repeating it felt redundant, and frankly, embarrassing.

"Of course not," Suga shook his head with a sad smile. "But let's see what we can do. I don't have crutches for you to use, so until we can get some, or you get better, how about we have Asahi carry you around? In return, you'd have to carry his bags as well as your own, but that's hardly anything worth mentioning."

"Eh, are you sure?" Hinata asked, insecurity brimming in his eyes. "Asahi, aren't I too heavy?" he turned to the third-year in questioning.

"Not really. You hardly weigh anything at all," Asahi laughed sheepishly. "If I carry you and our bags, it'll be like carrying a regular-sized person."

"Don't call me short," Hinata huffed under his breath, making a few people chuckle.

"It'll be fine like that. It's only until you can walk on your own again," Daichi reassured him, and then turned to the two first-years that hadn't been addressed yet. "Yamaguchi, would you mind splitting medical supplies with Suga? You two would know how to make the best use of them, after all."

The teen looked up at his captain, and nodded softly, not looking too sure of himself. There was a small silence that lasted about a second and a half before it started stagnating.

Tsukishima hated how the silence almost reeked of pity. And he knew that Yamaguchi hated it, too, but was too shy to mention it.

"And I'll pack beddings tomorrow morning. For now, I'll lay them out and help the midgets grab things that are stacked too high for them," he volunteered, smirking when Hinata let out an indignant squawk, as if personally targeted by the insult.
"That settles it. Let's get to work. Once we've got everything packed, let's take one last shower and then get some rest. We'll leave at dawn tomorrow," Daichi called out, and a collective, but tired cry of acknowledgement answered him. People soon vacated to their duties, grabbing backpacks and sling bags to fill up with their assigned items, making small talk all the way.

Yamaguchi had disappeared in a second, and when Tsukishima blinked a second time, he saw his friend by Suga's side, silently listening to whatever the setter was explaining. He didn't seem to be too bothered by whatever was happening, and this blank emotional state was the most worrying bit for Tsukishima. Yamaguchi had always been the quieter of the two, but he was snarky, cheerful and energetic the rest of the time. Now... now he just felt like an empty shell.

Tsukishima clicked his tongue and turned his eyes away, beginning to drag out the mattresses and lining them up against the wall. He first set out the mattresses one next to the other, and then the futons. The sleeping bags came last, and then he opened up the thin covers on the beds. The final touch was the pillows, and then he was done.

Looking up, he found everybody still working on maximizing the space in their backpacks, arguing whilst shoving things in there. Surprisingly enough, Hinata and Kageyama seemed to be the two most cooperative ones, Kageyama throwing Hinata the clothes he found in the pile, and Hinata folding them and setting them into neat piles by articles of clothing. Both of them seemed to be quiet, in contrast to Nishinoya and Tanaka, who were rowdy as always, and Tsukishima figured that they were still shaken from whatever happened to them on that raid.

Raids never seemed to be a good idea for anybody.

"I'll be fine, you'll see. We'll be back with plenty of food for mom and dad, and we'll be okay. We'll all be okay."

Nothing ever seemed to be okay for him, or anybody he bothered to give a damn about.

Caring about people ended up killing them. Tsukishima felt like a curse upon every person he'd ever gotten close to, willingly or otherwise.

Perhaps that was why Yamaguchi was the way he was. Tsukishima was not superstitious, but there was no other explanation. He'd killed his entire family. And now, he was beginning to corrupt his second family.

Tsukishima felt like a blight on Karasuno's skin that no amount of hope could purify.

Suddenly feeling like the most useless person on this godforsaken planet, Tsukishima stood up to try and shake off the nausea welling up in his throat. However, every step he took towards Daichi with the intention of seeking out new tasks to complete made him feel heavier and heavier, so that when he stopped behind his captain's turned back, he was ready to throw up.

"What else can I do in the meantime?" he asked in a low voice, not trusting himself to sound anything akin to confident at the moment.

Visibly startled, Daichi fumbled with whatever he had been holding in his hands, and then turned around. Tsukishima's eyes immediately went to the small cardboard box in his hands, and his eyes caught the glint of black metal within it. And immediately, he knew what it was. Bile rose up in his throat and he swallowed several times to push it down.

"I'm sorry," Daichi whispered, noting his discomfort and associating Tsukishima's pale face to the sight of the gun that had nearly taken his best friend's life. "I was just thinking..."
The gun had obviously been cleaned on the outside, wiped down until there was no trace of death left on it. However, like his own hands, Tsukishima knew that the blood on the gun would always exist, even if it wasn't visible. And knowing that Yamaguchi's fingerprints were on the trigger also disturbed him greatly. The gun had destroyed everything in his best friend's life. Yamaguchi had stood behind the trigger, but somehow in the end, he still had been on the receiving end of the shot.

It disgusted him to know that such a small and innocent-looking object could rob people of something as precious as their heart and soul in the blink of an eye. It wasn't fair to the person staring down the barrel, wondering if their life would end before they could take their next breath. And it certainly wasn't fair to the person whose finger shook on the trigger, wondering if their life was worth the life of their target.

The cursed object glinting in the dim light of the dying sun filtering through the windows glared at Tsukishima, as if laughing at his misery. As if it was flaunting the fact that despite promising safety to one man, and making another a victim, it always ended up creating two victims.

"Keep it," he found himself saying, and the nausea reared its ugly head again. He stood speechless for a second, wondering what the hell had taken him to say something like that, and even Daichi seemed flabbergasted that Tsukishima would suggest something like that. However, his tongue was not his anymore, and he kept saying things he didn't even realize he'd been thinking. "Keep the gun. It hurt all of us a lot, but it also kept us alive. And as long as we're alive, there's always hope."

No, no there wasn't. Tsukishima didn't want to say all of these things. He didn't think them at all. There was no hope for any of them anymore. He was just lying to himself and to the others at this point. And yet, no matter how hard he tried to bite his tongue, the words still seemed to tumble out.

"So keep it, and keep it safe. It's best if we never have to use it, but if we ever have to, it'll be because we are protecting the only hope we have left."

"Tsukishima..." Daichi trailed off, not even knowing what to say. "But... What happened to Tadashi..."

"Wasn't anybody's fault," Tsukishima completed, terrifying himself with how empty he felt while saying those words. As if he was simply articulating out syllables, instead of speaking out words. "And we sure as hell shouldn't close doors on ourselves because of one accident. If one of us is in a dangerous situation again, this gun could be the difference between their life and their death." Or their agonizing dying moments and a quick death.

"Didn't realize you were the type to consider all of these things," Daichi commented to try and dispel the depressing mood that had suddenly spawned overhead.

"Well, there's just no way all this junk can be carried with any less than 9 people," the blond huffed, which made Daichi crack a smile.

"Right. So we're not letting anybody leave anymore," Daichi assured him as if he could read Tsukishima's anxiety-riddled thoughts. "We're together until the end on this one."

"Sure," Tsukishima replied half-heartedly, unable to take his captain's stare anymore. Instead, his eyes searched for something to observe, and finally, his gaze settled on Yamaguchi, neatly working on packing medical supplies into a backpack with Suga.

Daichi followed his gaze and gave him a moment in his own bubble, in which he set down the box with the gun with the rest of the objects he was packing. When he stood up, though, he found Tsukishima still looking at Yamaguchi, unblinking. He, too, took a moment to watch his kouhai
work silently under Suga's direction, and a saddened expression crossed his face.

"So..." he began, grabbing Tsukishima's attention again. "How are things holding up?"

Tsukishima did not like the way the question was worded, and did not look at Daichi to answer.

"Fine. He spoke briefly to me this morning. He'll be okay." He wasn't even sure who he was convincing anymore.

"That's good, but that's also not what I was asking," Daichi answered almost immediately, and that shocked Tsukishima enough to make him turn back to face Daichi. There was a sober, serious look on the captain's face, and the blond actually shivered slightly at the weight of the information being asked of him.

"If you tell me what's wrong, I'll definitely tell you what to do to make things right again."

"I'm fine," he finally replied, a bitter taste settling in his mouth at the memory that resurfaced all of a sudden, at the annoyingly warm and comforting voice that resonated in his head and that refused to leave him alone.

And suddenly, dinner was coming back up.

"I've gotta go," was all he managed to choke out before his legs were carrying him away from the inquisitive stares of the eight other Karasuno members, into the locker rooms, past the lockers, into the bathroom stalls, to his knees, and then-

And then, there were hot, bitter tears sliding down and plopping into the toilet with his stomach contents, and Tsukishima could not bring himself to care.

"Nothing is going to make things right again," he sniffled rather pathetically, glad he was totally alone with his thoughts. Or perhaps that was the curse that was plaguing him. Perhaps he needed to stop insisting on facing his nightmares alone. But then, he couldn't share his thoughts with anybody but the voice in every single one of them. "Nothing is going to be alright anymore." Kei slumped against the wall, defeat tasting like stomach acid on his tongue. "Stop lying to me, Akiteru."

There was something foreign about sleeping on the mattresses on the gym floor. It felt too weird not to be on the landing anymore, and to all be sleeping back to back rather than in individual beds. It reminded them, rather unpleasantly, of the three days they spent in the undergrounds of the school, cuddled next to one another under blankets of dust swallowed by the darkness, but it felt like nothing would ever compare to the fear that had permeated their every breathing moment at that time. Not even the uncertainty of their future was as terrifying as the time when the uncertainty of their present had been predominant.

As if mocking them, the weather had turned sour in the night, heavy winds whipping a violent rain against the covered windows. In the total darkness, the only noise was that of the tarp ruffling noisily, and if the Karasuno team members were not already being kept awake by their insecurities, they definitely would have been kept awake by the infernal noise. Nobody spoke, but the constant shifting of the bodies next to one another proved that none of them were actually asleep.

And then, as the rain let up, one by one the teenagers went into whatever troubled sleep they could get in the few hours they had left before dawn. Slowly, the sound of breathing evened out, and the gentle reassurance that they were all still alive and together gave them all the peace of mind they needed to slip into a dreamless unconsciousness.
Dreamless, for all but one.

Tsukishima's awakening in the early hours of the morning was rather violent, a suffocating terror grasping him by the heartstrings and dragging him out of his sleep rather abruptly. His heart leapt in his throat as his consciousness returned, and in those few seconds, he felt like he was drowning and falling at the same time.

And when he shot up with hysteric words dying on his lips, it took him a few seconds to realize that he had been crying his brother's name in his sleep.

"Just call for me, I'll be there for you."

The memory made his heart ache, because Kei was calling for a brother who did not exist anymore. And he didn't want to do that anymore, he didn't want Akiteru to haunt his every waking moment and every dream and nightmare he saw behind closed eyelids. So Tsukishima closed his eyes, and buried his face in his hands to compose himself for a moment.

The early morning light was filtering through the makeshift curtains they had set up on the windows all around the gym. It was red and orange, a fiery hue that reminded Tsukishima of blood. Slowly, when he drew his face out of his hands, once his heart settled in his chest again, he looked down at the faint outline of his shaking fingers now visible in the light. He clicked his tongue in displeasure at the display of weakness, and for one moment, wondered if he would ever stop being haunted by the consequences of his mistakes. Maybe it just wasn't his fate. Or his right.

His eyes caught a glint in the early morning light. Slowly, he turned his head, and then looked down, freezing in place when he saw Yamaguchi's wide eyes staring right at him. The innocent look in his eyes was obviously a trick of the light, since Tsukishima knew that Yamaguchi's gaze was empty, as usual. And it was kind of creepy, since Yamaguchi never seemed to sleep anymore.

That brought up the question of whether or not that was a speculation, or an actual reality.

Tsukishima opened his mouth to ask, but surprisingly, Yamaguchi beat him to the punch.

"You can't sleep soundly anymore, ever since the other day."

The sound of his raspy, low voice was so surprising that Tsukishima had to take a moment to realize that he'd actually spoken. And when he registered the words, he turned his eyes away, bristling.

"Shut up. Every single time I see you, you're not sleeping. Don't criticize me."

Yamaguchi did not reply to him, and did not even move. When he blinked for a second too long, Tsukishima swore that he looked like he was asleep, and that Tsukishima was hallucinating his voice. Just like he was hallucinating Akiteru's voice.

But then, Yamaguchi's eyes were wide open and looking back up at him, and it was unnerving to be put on the spot like that. The rest of Karasuno seemed to be asleep (they were all light sleepers these days, so it was never a given), but Tsukishima felt like the whole world was looking at him.

"Akiteru wasn't your fault."

"Shut up." Tsukishima's whole world seemed to freeze for the second it took him to suck in a breath. "Shut up. Don't talk about him."

Yamaguchi's covers ruffled lightly as Tsukishima saw his outline moving into a slow shrug. And suddenly, he felt bad for being so rude. But obviously, he didn't want to break the silence. That
wasn't his job.

"Forgive yourself and learn from what happened."

With that, Yamaguchi turned his back to Tsukishima and stilled. The blond was left to think about those words until the sun rose and Daichi's watch began ringing to announce a new day.

Not a lot of them seemed to be rested when they got up. As if giving them a parting gift, the gym was running power long enough for them to cook breakfast on their electric stove tops. While Suga busied himself with a light breakfast of canned vegetable and tomato soup, the boys packed up the covers into bags, leaving the pillows for they were too bulky to be transported. The sleeping bags were rolled up and set by the door with the other backpacks and sling bags that were ready to be picked up on their final way out.

The sun had barely even finished rising when they were done with breakfast. Everyone cleaned their dishes in the locker room sink and then packed them up tightly wherever there was place, and soon, there was nothing left to do but leave.

Daichi's watch showed 6:27AM when he finally stood in front of the silent teenagers sitting in a circle, and everybody knew that it was time. He didn't need to say anything for the team to stand up and fall into a silent procession towards the door. Slowly, still without a word, they began picking up all of their things, until each one of them looked like a pack mule ready to go on a long, long journey.

And then, during the last check at a glance to make sure that nothing had been forgotten, Hinata spoke up.

"Can I write something on the floor?" he asked softly, surprising everybody around him.

"Sure, I guess. Permanent marker?" Daichi shrugged, and when Hinata nodded, he dug into his backpack for the pack of permanent markers he carried around. In the meantime, Kageyama helped Hinata get off of Asahi's back and go to Daichi.

Curiously, the team watched as Hinata lowered himself to the floor, and uncapped the marker. It hovered over the dusty gymnasium floor for a second, before there were long lines, and then big characters, and then large-font words in front of their eyes.

*Remember Karasuno. Remember that we lived.*

Shakily, Hinata signed his full name, *Shoyo Hinata*, in a smaller font next to the message.

And Daichi was second to understand and approach, signing *Daichi Sawamura* by the other's side.

One by one, very silently, all the other members approached as well, passing one another the marker. The gym was filled with the scratching noise of ink on floor, reminding them of the sound of shoes on the court in the days in which they used to be carefree.

Soon, all around the message, nine names had been scrawled out, and the sight of it was heartwarming and heartbreaking at the same time.

"We should go," Suga finally whispered, breaking the trance that all the members seemed to be in.

"Yeah..." Daichi nodded, unable to keep the sadness off of his face at the thought of this goodbye.
They wouldn't be back here, probably ever. And if they did come back, it would never be the same for any of them. If this part of Japan ever got reconstructed in their lifetime, they'd all be separated and would be unable to return to the place where they'd prematurely buried their innocence.

This goodbye would indeed be a farewell.

Wordlessly, the teenagers walked out of the gym in a single file line, glancing back at the dark gym one last time before crossing through the door frame for one last time.

Tsukishima was the last to come out, closing the pace after Yamaguchi, and was almost out before something called him back, and he couldn't help but turn around again. The walls seemed to whisper in the voices of his comrades past and present, and when he looked at the court, he swore he could hear the squeaking of shoes. The thumping of a ball on the ground. The smack of it hitting a spiker's or a blocker's hand.

Tsukishima suddenly felt warm as he remembered. The voices. The laughter. The encouragements. The hours spent lost in their own little world of sets and spikes and blocks and receives, the stability found in the single constant that was volleyball in their daily hectic lives.

And then he felt cold as the voices disappeared, and the gym seemed darker than ever. The piled up equipment seemed to cast unrealistically long and pitch black shadows that seemed to swallow everything up. And soon, Tsukishima was staring at what essentially was an abandoned building, an old establishment, a previously inhabited place, and a broken home.

He closed the door behind him swiftly, hoping to lock his regrets in the gym with the rest of their memories. Not necessarily to condemn them, but to return to them once his future was insured well enough to allow him to make amends with his past.

For now, he had to discard everything he had behind those closed doors, and become a new Tsukishima, the Tsukishima that they needed now in order to survive.

Their departure was anticlimactic in that sense. It came down to a closed door and clenched fists as they began walking without looking back. Backs loaded with equipment, faces set with solemn frowns, they advanced. And when the autumn breeze blew gently, the ruffling of the black banner hung up on the building punctuated the staccato of their unfaltering steps, saluting their courage and waving them off towards the horizon, where a new sun was slowly rising.

"Fly, Karasuno!"

In the end, it was decided that they would head for Tokyo, since as the capital of the country, most relief efforts would probably be centered there. During the lunch break of day one, Daichi opened up a map and calculated that if they slept 8 hours a night and spent 2 hours a day for meals, raids, and other pausing needs, they should make it to Tokyo in just below a week's time. Not wanting to get lost, either, they all agreed to walk on the freeways rather than take the pedestrian route to Tokyo.

They had moments where they would talk as they walked. Other moments where they would fall into a silence that either put them at ease or made them uncomfortable. Always as dutiful, Suga and Asahi collaborated (with Hinata's interjected comments from Asahi's back) to create a schedule, since they all needed a routine, a constant to hold on to when their entire world was swept out from under their very feet.

They would wake at 6:30AM, and leave their camp at 7AM. At 11AM, they would take a short
fifteen minute breather, and then set out again until 1PM, for lunch. At 5PM, they'd take another break, and then tough it out until 9:30PM, where they'd set up camp and have dinner, with curfew at 10:30PM. And then, they would rinse and repeat. In theory, it was a good plan. In practice, too, they hoped.

All in all, it was an adventure in the making, but not one that they were very enthusiastic about.

The first day was uneventful, to their relief. However, it did give them an idea of how strenuous walking under the bloody sky all day was, and suddenly, a week felt like forever.

They made it out of the town and onto a stretch of freeway that was surrounded by nothing but wilderness. At first, the leafless trees and dried up plants did not faze them as they tried to disregard the morose landscape, but then, as they advanced, and sat down for lunch, and then a break, and then felt the vegetation crunch under their feet when the cloudy night plunged them into darkness, they realized that they may as well be the last things alive on the entire island.

They set up camp further in the field, away from the freeway in case survivors passed by in cars and decided to surprise them in a more unpleasant way than necessary. The weather had gotten kind of chilly as soon as the sun had dropped behind the horizon, so it was a rather unpleasant experience to set up their amenities for the night. Bodies sore and aching from the long day of non-stop walking, Karasuno began vacating to their self-appointed tasks. Noya, Tanaka and Kageyama went to gather firewood for a campfire, whilst Asahi and Daichi set up a rudimentary tent from a tarp stretched out and secured with ropes and a few wooden rods. In the meantime, Suga helped Hinata do his ankle-rehabilitating exercises and gave him his meds, and Yamaguchi silently got busy figuring out what they'd have for dinner.

Tsukishima found himself heading for his friend, who was browsing through the contents of Noya's backpack pensively.

"What are we eating tonight?" he asked, looking down over him. Yamaguchi stopped for a moment and turned around, shrugging with an uninterested look on his face. "Whatever. Fine."

Turning around, he got ready to leave, probably to see if he was needed anywhere. Although he highly doubted it, since it never seemed like he could be of use. Tsukishima always felt like he was an extra, and one that didn't even contribute.

"Why don't you ever say anything?" he suddenly asked, clenching his teeth. He could feel Yamaguchi's eyes on his back, and the frustration of being helpless in every situation welled up inside of him.

"There's never anything to say," Yamaguchi answered after a second of hesitation. Tsukishima turned back to face him, not understanding what he meant, but then there was the blank look in his eyes, and he knew everything.

"I'll get you to talk again," he found himself promising, surprisingly at that. Suddenly embarrassed, he began walking away, to go occupy his mind with work, any work at all. "You can't say things like that as if you'd given up. There's plenty left for you out here."

There was plenty of life for Yamaguchi to experience.

But Tsukishima wasn't so sure about that for himself.

...-

It rained at night, and the first few minutes with the droplets pounding on the tarp stretched overhead
were the most frightening they'd all experienced in a while. All of their eyes were open wide, bodies pressed against one another to keep out the cold and the shivers, shame having long been thrown out the window in favour of their survival instincts.

Nobody dared breathe for a while, wondering if the acid would eat through the tarp during the night, but at some point, they became so habituated to the fear that one by one, they began falling asleep. Only Nishinoya, the first night watch, stayed awake, silently observing the rise and fall of his comrades' shoulders to the background lull of the rain.

Somehow, they did not die that night. And somehow, that made the morning even better.

Hell, even the breakfast beans were almost appetizing. Almost. Victory can only taste so good, after all.

There was a new bounce to their steps as they packed up, lethargy clinging to them like the apprehension that seemed to be a part of them at this point. However, something about the morning seemed brighter than usual.

By the time the sun had come up entirely, Karasuno was already heading out towards the greener pastures. Or so they hoped.

They deviated to go through a small town on the second day. Predictably, it was in ruins as well, but an hour of well-organized raiding later, their backpacks were once again full with food and water. That in itself was a boost to their morale as well. They pushed on with heavy bags and heavy hearts.

The landscape slowly began to change as they advanced towards the capital. The greenery had been dead and dried up where they started, but as they advanced, it felt less like life had left the land, and more like life had been robbed of the land. Wilted plants and muddy lakes gave way to uprooted trees and dried up rivers. As the days cycled on, it felt more and more like the entire country had become one big graveyard.

The towns were no different. The boys tried not to stop in town often, but supplies always needed to be replenished, so they couldn't help it. They also couldn't but notice the state of the towns they visited. The closer they got to Tokyo, the more destroyed and abandoned the towns seemed to be.

"I think you were right, Daichi," Suga noted as they started walking on the freeway again, weaving through the cars stopped in an eternal traffic jam. "Tokyo was probably the epicentre of the nuclear explosion, if that town was hardly anything to go by."

"What town?" Tanaka grumbled, weariness lacing his every word. "I just saw a bunch of piles of rubble, I dunno about you."

"Don't worry, Tanaka-senpai," Hinata tried to comfort him from the rather uncomfortable position he was in, pressed against Kageyama's side. He'd begun walking that morning, and although bearing weight still hurt, he could hobble along well enough with Kageyama's support. "I'm sure the next town will have supplies for us, for sure."

"Well, I don't think so," Tsukishima added in gruffly. "Think about it. As we get closer to Tokyo, the impact of the explosion has taken out more and more of the surroundings. Hell, Tokyo itself is probably one big crater right now. We're not gonna find anything anymore from this point on."

"You're such a pessimist, Tsukishima," Noya rolled his eyes. "You never know. There might be an exception somewhere."

"Yeah, something like that is called a miracle. And we don't get miracles. It just doesn't happen,"
Tsukishima replied without skipping a beat. And the entire party stopped talking, the words resonating with a kind of morbid truth in their minds. "What are we even going to do in Tokyo? If it's the epicentre of the blast, there won't be anything left. And the closer we get, the more radiation we get, so instead of going there, we should actually turn back and get as far away from Tokyo as possible."

"What you say makes sense, I'm not saying it doesn't," Daichi sighed, not looking back. Instead, he looked at the blood red sky, darkened due to the advancing evening. "But... it's our only lead so far. If it is the epicentre, there will definitely be professionals there to contain the radiation, or to conduct a test or another. So all we have to do is find somebody, anybody at this point, who is a professional, and they'll help us out."

"Hmph," Tsukishima curled his lip, glancing subtly at Yamaguchi, who seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, looking out at the barren land. "No they won't. There are two types of people left in this world now; us, and the ones who want to kill us."

Daichi found nothing to say to the pessimistic first-year.

And so they trudged on, not even knowing what they were walking for anymore.

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And suddenly, they knew.

They knew, and they knew they weren't wrong.

New hope surged within them, and their hearts soared at the sight that was slowly, but surely growing in front of their eyes with every step they took.

"It's a camp," Asahi confirmed what everybody had been telling themselves for the past five minutes. "I can see tents, and cars, and people. It's a camp. It's a refugee camp."

"Oh my god," Nishinoya whispered out, eyes wide. "It really is... We're saved."

"There's a Japanese flag on one of those tents. It's a governmental relief effort," Daichi announced, and relieved grins were suddenly on all of their faces.

"We're saved," Hinata laughed almost hysterically, trying to hobble faster as the pace of the group increased minutely. "We're not gonna die. We're saved."

Tsukishima wanted to say that it was too early to tell, but even he didn't have the heart to bring down the uplifting mood that had settled on them all. There was a new life to their faces that had died out when the bomb had exploded first.

Breathless in relief, smiles shining on their tired, sunken, dirty faces, Karasuno took its last steps alone in the wilderness, and approached one of the people—oh god, people, they hadn't seen people in so long— with barely-contained giddiness.

The man, dressed in an army uniform and holding a rifle, saw them coming, and waited for them to approach. And yet, despite his threatening presence, he felt more of a salvation than a danger to the wandering boys who'd been lost for so long.

"Hello," Daichi greeted as soon as they got close enough. "Sorry, but is this a refugee camp?"

"It sure is," the man answered amicably, smiling at them one by one. The boys noted how the man...
spoke with a slight accent, barely noticeable but evident in the way he mispronounced certain sounds, and realized that he wasn't native Japanese. However, his language was fluent, so they figured he was an exception. "Would you like to be admitted? You look like you've been on the road for so long already, you poor children."

"We can be admitted? Really?" Hinata asked, glancing behind the man. Hundreds of tents had been set up, the camp obviously a nomadic-type settlement, and people were bustling around, looking serene, and -dare they think it?- happy.

The man laughed at the tears that welled up in the teenagers' eyes, tears that they only realized were there when they began rolling down their cheeks.

"Yes, of course! We, at camp Omega-13, are dedicated to rescuing the citizens of Japan and escorting them to Hokkaido, where more organized relief efforts are currently located," the man explained. "If you would like, I can show you to the camp master's office. You may go through all the admittance processes there, and after that, you'll officially be welcome in our camp."

"Yes," Suga felt breathless as he furiously nodded, relief washing over him, and over all his friends like a wave on shore. "Please, please show us there."

"Of course," the man's smile was tight as he moved to indicate with a hand that they should follow him. "Come on in."

Karasuno followed the man into the confines of the camp.

They walked past citizens of the camp, most of whom were speaking in low tones and had vacated to complete a chore or another. Overall, though they were quiet, they seemed to be at peace, which was what mattered the most.

"Here." The soldier finally stopped in front of a tent, looking no different than the others. "Go on in, they'll tell you what to do in there."

"Thank you so much, really," Daichi spoke for all of them in gratitude, to which the man only smiled, again.

"No problem at all." His eyes crinkled as his smile stretched wider than before. "Just make sure that if you see someone you know inside the camp, you immediately tell an authority, okay?"

The request was bizarre, but the kids shrugged, too giddy to care.

With another show of gratitude, they entered the camp master's tent.

The process of admission took a few hours. At first, they were told to hand in all their weapons and food, which they did with no problem. Crowbars and bats and the two switchblades were set on the table without hesitation, followed by Noya's and Tanaka's backpacks. Once that was done, they received identity cards for the campgrounds, and were sent to a truck that carried the water reserves. There, they were allowed a bath -warm water, the first time in weeks, if not months, that they'd had any!-, and were given coupons for receiving water at a later time.

After that, to their immense surprise, and joy, they were allowed to see a doctor, who did a quick check-up to make sure they weren't in any life-threatening danger. Of course, all of them had a bit of lung expansion problems, had lost weight and were malnourished, but the doctor just reassured them, saying that they'd be eating better in the camp and that they'd also get better in no time. He paid special attention to Hinata's ankle, wrapping it up and giving him crutches for it, as well as medication. As well as Suga had done with pilfered anti-inflammatories from the pharmacy, the
doctor gave him something stronger, and advised him on physiotherapy exercises for it. He also took a look at Yamaguchi, trying to get him to talk, but he got nothing out of the young man. Later, as he examined Tsukishima, the blond confirmed that his friend had become something of a selective mute due to a traumatic incident.

"You poor, poor children," the doctor had sighed, something inside of Tsukishima flaring up in outrage at the tone that he used. However, the doctor was in the process of giving him his check-up, so he said nothing.

Finally, he moved to the angry red scar on his neck, and clicked his tongue in disapproval. Suddenly self-conscious, Tsukishima turned his head to block the doctor's sight of his injury.

"Who sewed that nasty cut up?" he asked, turned Tsukishima's head back a bit forcefully to look at it again. "The stitches weren't done well, so you'll probably have a lot of scarring around the area for a long time, if not for your whole life."

"My senpai did it," Tsukishima grumbled, glaring at the doctor. "Because we didn't have a doctor around to kindly sew it up like a real professional, so he tried his hand at it, you know, just opened a book and read up on theory and prayed that what he did was going to save my life when nothing else would. Shame he didn't do it like an actual medical professional."

"You don't have to get aggressive with me," the doctor got on the defensive, but then backed down. "It's fine. The surface seems to be irritated, probably due to your long-lasting, precarious hygienic conditions, but I'll give you a cream to minimize the scarring."

"Sure," Tsukishima grumbled, looking away, and hoping the topic of the scar would be dropped. He was still uncomfortable just thinking about it, and wasn't very enthusiastic to know that he'd be wearing a proof of his mistakes for the rest of his life.

Perhaps that was what he deserved, though.

"How'd you get it, anyway?" However, the topic wasn't dropped, and Tsukishima bristled instantly.

"Kei! Move!"

"None of your business!" he snapped, physically scooting away from the doctor, who put up a hand in a calming motion, frowning.

"Fine, fine, jeez..." He then said something that Tsukishima didn't quite catch, perhaps in another language, even, but he didn't care. The memories were hitting the front of his skull, giving him a headache, and he was eager to just get out of the tent, and back to his friends. His only constants.

Thankfully, after giving him a tube of cream, the doctor discharged him, as done with his attitude as Tsukishima was done with his, and so the teen was free to return to his friends, waiting for one another outside.

"We're all good?" Daichi asked, gazing over the shining faces looking up to him.

"Yup!" Suga nodded enthusiastically. "And if I'm not mistaken, since it's beginning to get dark out, so it should be dinner time soon. Should we head to the mess tent?"

"I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," Noya grinned. "Or this guy right here," he laughed, pointing at Asahi.

"Huh!?" the gentle giant exclaimed. "Are you saying I'm bigger than a horse, Noya? That's not
Laughing, the group of teens walked towards where they were told the mess tent was.

To their immense surprise, supper consisted of vegetable fried rice, and obviously, the meal was prepared with fresh ingredients. Not having tasted anything else than canned goods for so long, the boys may or may not have cried into their food. But nobody around them asked them why they were eating and sniffling loudly at once, and so the topic wasn't addressed.

Honestly, it all felt too good to be true. Perhaps it was. Tsukishima wondered if this was just a dream he'd come up with to cope with the desperation and loneliness he'd felt out in the field. Perhaps they were still all stuck under their makeshift tent, pressed against one another in a futile attempt to ward off the nightmares while one of them stood watch and prayed that nothing would come up.

But then, the food felt heavy and real in his stomach, and the cream felt sticky and cold on his scar, and the only thing that felt out of place was the clenching of his heart, for some reason.

"Let's head to our assigned tent and set up our sleeping bags," Daichi suggested after they had all cleaned their dishes and had handed them in to the cooks.

Too full and too tired and too blissful to argue, they all followed his lead as they tried to find their way around the small, but confusing camp. However, as they were surrounded with strangers, it didn't occur to them to ask for directions, and they wandered around for a while.

Until Tsukishima's eyes caught a flash of black, and he suddenly stopped in the middle of the dirt road to look where his eyes had frozen for a second and a half.

Just long enough to note the person sitting down on a crate next to a tent, cigarette in hand, looking both as if he had not a care in the world, and as if the weight of the entire world was burdening him.

His messy hair, surprisingly, had not changed one bit. And suddenly, there were surprising tears in Tsukishima's eyes as he realized that he was a constant, too.

"Kuroo," he called out weakly, leaving his group to step towards the captain of the Nekoma volleyball team, who didn't hear him at first.

"Tsukishima?" Kageyama called when he realized that the blond wasn't following them anymore, but then his eyes caught a sight of who Tsukishima had approached, and they widened drastically. "... No way..."

In a flurry of movement, all of Karasuno had crowded behind Tsukishima.

And at this point, Tetsurou Kuroo finally noticed them.

"Kuroo, is that you?" Tsukishima asked in a breathless voice, watching the black-haired boy's eyes grow wide, almost as if in horror, before looking away.

"Nah, sorry, got the wrong guy," he mumbled out, taking a drag off his cigarette.

"I wouldn't mistake your annoying face for anyone else's," Tsukishima mumbled, taken aback by the cold reception.

"Well, looks like you did, sorry kid." He still wasn't looking at any of them, weirdly enough. "Look, did you need help finding your way around?"
"Well, yes, but-"

"What do you wanna find?" Kuroo interrupted them, standing up. "You people are new around here, obviously, so lemme tell you. Next time you have a question, ask one of the soldiers walking around."

And almost as if cued, a soldier did approach them from behind Kuroo, seemingly noticing their little gathering. The man put a hand on Kuroo's shoulder, and Karasuno was stunned to see a flicker of panic flash across the other boy's face.

"Did you guys all know each other?" the soldier asked them amicably, his accent even stronger than the other ones they'd seen so far.

"Nah, these guys were just lost," Kuroo immediately replied, loudly enough to sound exasperated over the aura of panic he was giving out. "Asked me where their tent was. Where are you guys staying, again?"

"Uhh..." Daichi took a moment, speechlessly trying to figure out what was going on. "Tent... 7?"

"Right, well, it's all the way over there," the soldier immediately cut in, pushing past Kuroo in an unnecessarily rough movement to stand between Karasuno and the Nekoma captain. "Let me lead you!"

"Um... Well, thing is-" Tsukishima began, confused with the whole exchange, when Kuroo interrupted him from the back.

"Man, I told you, I'm not giving up my cigarette to you," he grunted. "Stop asking me, you got your damn directions, so just follow this guy and he'll show you around."

"Sir, please don't raise your tone," the soldier warned briskly, and all eyes were suddenly drawn to the rifle hanging on a strap, at his waist. There was a cold wind freezing them to the bone, for some reason.

"Yeah, sorry. The blond one was just really insisting," Kuroo shrugged, sitting back down on his crate and taking another puff of his almost-finished cigarette.

"You're not even allowed to smoke in camp, we've established this at least a hundred times before. You should put that out before I confiscate it," the soldier reprimanded, throwing Kuroo a dirty look.

"I'm almost done with it, see?" As if to prove his point, Kuroo took a large puff, and blew it out in the soldier's direction. He then threw the filter on the ground, and stomped on it with his foot. "There. Better?"

"Much." The soldier rolled his eyes, then turned to the other group of boys, who looked stunned at the display. "Right, well, if this is done, I'll lead you all to your tent," the soldier invited the Karasuno boys, his posture slightly threatening. To that, the boys could say nothing, and nodded in unison, silently following the soldier, away from Kuroo.

The Nekoma captain was looking elsewhere as they all left, but when Tsukishima glanced back one last time, their gazes met, and he was shocked to find a scared look plastered for the span of a second on the other boy's face.

The rest of the evening was spent in confusion, and perhaps some apprehension. Since the fear had
become just a constant for all of them, they didn't realize that they were afraid until night came, and they were woken by the sound of somebody opening their tent's flap.

None of them reacted, and there was the sound of somebody counting in another language. Once they hit what the boys figured was nine, they left the tent, leaving the boys to wonder what that was about.

Probably a head count, Tsukishima figured, trying to go back to sleep. However, the day's events had been overwhelming, and now his brain was in overdrive, probably much like that of the others. He couldn't find it in him to get some sleep, no matter how exhausted he was.

The tent flap opened again, a few minutes later, but this time, somebody entered their tent, steps making a bit of noise on the tarp covering the ground. At first, they thought it was just another soldier, but then, the person stopped and crouched down.

"Shoyo?"

"Who's there?" Tanaka was the first to react with lightning reflexes, grabbing the flashlight he liked to sleep with, and shining it in the general direction of the voice. All the Karasuno members slowly came out of their lethargy, just in time to direct their attention at the figure kneeling in the middle of their tent.

Their jaws dropped.

"Kenma?" Hinata was the first to exclaim, loudly at that, too, but was immediately hushed by the black-haired boy.

"Keep it down," he urged in a whisper, ears strained. Outside their tent, there was the thud of steps on the ground, and the Nekoma setter swore softly under his breath. "Get in your sleeping bag, Hinata. Quickly."

Thankfully, Hinata's reflexes hadn't dulled, and just as he slid completely into his sleeping bag, Kenma jumped over and slid in as well, sitting up in it. A second later, a soldier entered their tent noisily, glaring at them.

"Lights out was an hour ago," he admonished in his accented Japanese, glaring at Tanaka's flashlight. "What's the commotion?"

"I had a nightmare," Kenma answered in a shaky voice, surprising all of the boys with the realism of his act. "Sorry... I didn't mean to yell."

"And you're trying to wake everyone up?"

"We woke up when he yelled," Kageyama stepped in to the rescue of his fellow setter, trying to keep his face neutral.

"Yeah. We've been together for so long that it's like a reflex now," Noya added, grinning sheepishly.

"You guys are new around here, aren't you?" The soldier looked over their sheepish expressions with his flashlight, and then clicked his tongue. "Fine, I'll let it slip this once. But try to get some sleep."

"Yes sir," they all answered in unison. "Good night!"

Once Tanaka shut off his flashlight, the soldier left. They all waited a minute, and then, Kenma
moved so Hinata could come out.

"Wah, it was so hot in there," he complained, but then straightened out his sprained ankle, and grinned. "Nice acting back then."

"It comes with practice." The boy shifted and returned to his previous spot in the middle of their huddled group. "Anyway, I wanted to come here and talk to you all. Kuroo sent me."

"I knew it," Tsukishima hissed. "It was that bastard after all. Why did he pretend not to know us today?"

"The soldiers here don't want people getting friendly," Kenma began, but then interrupted himself with a sigh. "Sorry, I'm going to have to make it fast. The soldiers do the rounds in my tent in about half an hour, so I'm going to try and explain as much as possible before I have to leave."

"Sounds serious," Suga sighed, his eyes downcast. "Just when we thought that things were getting better..."

"Things are better around here, as long as you feign ignorance. Also, only up until a certain point in time."

"What do you mean?" Hinata asked, frowning.

"We're not in a governmental refugee camp," Kenma looked at them one by one, dead serious. "We're in a death camp."

"WHAT!?" the collective, harsh whisper came from all of them at once, eyes widening to the size of saucers. The air in the tent dropped several degrees, and there was a sudden welling of nausea in Tsukishima's throat. Just when he'd thought he'd found a constant. This world would be going to hell anyway.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Daichi asked, blanching. "What the hell...?"

"It means that this is a camp, like many others, which travels the island in search of survivors of the nuclear explosion, and that rounds them up under the pretense of escorting them to Hokkaido. But in reality, they're rounding us up to lead us somewhere else and kill us all," the setter explained, emotionless. As if he'd already gotten used to the news.

"W-Why?" Hinata sniffled out, grip painfully tight on Kageyama's long-sleeved shift. "Why would the government do this?"

"It's not the Japanese government." Kenma shook his head. "They are enemies of Japan, posing as the government. With the government in such disarray and the lack of communications between this island and Hokkaido, they probably don't even know about this initiative. You can tell they're foreigners if you listen to them talk."

"I knew something was off about the whole thing," Tsukishima hissed. "This was too good to be true."

"So we're all gonna die?" Nishinoya asked, strangely calm. As if he'd already given up. The sight of him was so pathetic that the entire team's mood dampened.

"No," Kenma immediately answered, confident, even if he was quiet. "Kuroo and I have an ally who's helping us devise a scheme to bust out. There are a few missing pieces, but... maybe with you guys around, it can finally work. We'll consult him tomorrow."
"Okay," Suga nodded, eyes downcast. "So... why is it such a bad thing to know other people around here?"

"To prevent what we're doing." Kenma's eyes had turned to steel. "An uprising. They want us to stay calm. Nobody knows the true purpose of these camps. I just happened to overhear some soldiers talking one night and since then, it's been an uphill battle to find allies with whom to fight this."

"This is horrible," Asahi whimpered, comical for a man his size, but also heartbreaking. "Why?"

"Dunno." The setter shrugged. "Probably wiping out the last bits of humanity. The Japanese population was already decimated by the bomb, and now they're trying to get rid of the rest, I guess."

"You're so casual about this," Kageyama remarked with some hesitation. "Aren't you afraid?"

"The first few weeks, I was, of course," Kenma shrugged as if there was nothing to it. "Not knowing if my next morning would be my last, not knowing where I was going and how I would die. It was stressful." But then, his eyes went pensively to the tarp ceiling, and to their surprise, he smiled softly. "Now, I don't think about those things so much. Stopped being scary after the first month altogether."

"What?" Hinata looked like he was about to cry. "How long have you been here?"

"Two months and a week," Kenma answered. "But anyway. Back on topic."

The weight of the information being shoved into their heads was astounding, and Tsukishima felt like he would die, just crushed under the burden of this new revelation.

"So when you see Kuroo and I, or if you see anybody else you know, don't come running to us to greet us. Pretend we're strangers," Kenma advised. "They separate groups of people who knew each other in the past. That's how we lost a few other guys from Nekoma, at the beginning."

"They killed them?" Hinata whimpered, now definitely crying in silent, tears rolling down his cheek even if he seemed not to notice them.

"I dunno." And finally, the passive expression on Kenma's face changed, and he bit his lip, closing his eyes in a show of pain that none of the Karasuno boys could claim to have known. "I just know that we were imprudent when a couple of guys from the team came to this camp. We revealed that we knew the other group, and the next day, the other guys weren't in camp anymore. Maybe..." his breath hitched, but he quickly regained control of himself. "Maybe they took them out to shoot them. Or maybe they just transferred them to another camp. And I want to believe that the guys made it out and headed to Hokkaido on their own."

It was probably what let the black-haired setter sleep at night. And that in itself was a heartbreaking thought.

"Anything else we should know?" Daichi asked, breaking the horrified silence smothering them.

"They tolerate people making friends inside the camp. So just stay put tomorrow at breakfast time, and Kuroo and I will come and see you guys somehow," Kenma advised them, and then fell silent. All of them did, and then held their breaths as a light passed by their tent, a soldier's footsteps almost as loud as their heartbeat in their ears. When he was gone, they all released their breaths in relief. "I have to go now if I want to make it back in time for rounds. Do you want me to tell Kuroo anything?"

"Yeah," Tsukishima found himself answering, crossing his arms and glaring at the black-haired boy.
"Since when does that annoying guy smoke? Tell him he survived the annihilation of his city, but he's gonna kill himself with cancer instead."

"He already knows," Kenma smiled sadly, getting up and going for the flap. "In fact, he says he smokes because he survived."

It left Karasuno speechless, and unable to reply to Kenma's quick good night wish. As the young setter left their tent, they fell back into silence, looking at each other in desperation, and a certain kind of weariness that they'd never felt before. Weariness stemming from their eternal running, all of their hiding and fighting and fearing for their lives.

Being alive was honestly exhausting, Tsukishima ended up concluding as Daichi solemnly prompted them to get some sleep. Maybe even, it wasn't worth the pain of being alive.

Those thoughts haunted him all the way to the morning light.

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At breakfast, a quick glance around the mess hall proved that the Nekoma players weren't around. Silently, the Karasuno group sat down at a table and ate their rice and eggs, hyperaware of everything around them. Tsukishima was sure that he wasn't the only one who could recite the positions of all the soldiers around the mess tent at that exact moment. He was sure he wasn't the only one taking careful bites, making sure that the taste or consistency of the food was not off. And he was sure he wasn't the only who was afraid, as if every breath could be his last.

"Hey."

Hinata squeaked loudly as a voice crept up behind them, and spun around. All eyes went to the owner of the voice, relief shining in their eyes for a second before they remembered that they were being watched.

Kuroo and Kenma were holding their plates of breakfast, and were standing awkwardly next to their table.

"My friend and I were late for breakfast and now there aren't any more seats around. Mind scooting over for us?" Kuroo asked in that overconfident voice of his.

"No problem," Daichi nodded, and the Karasuno boys scooted closer on the bench, trying not to show how eager they were.

"Thanks," Kuroo nodded briefly at them, and then sat down facing Kenma. Both of them dug into their food, and began making small talk.

All the eyes were on them for a while before remembering that the soldiers were watching them carefully, so Suga made a valiant effort to draw all of Karasuno into a casual conversation of their own. They weren't sure how they were supposed to approach the other two boys, sitting so close, but feeling so far from them. So they left it up to them.

Turns out, the Nekoma players didn't disappoint.

"Shit!" Kuroo suddenly exclaimed, a second before Tsukishima felt something cold on his pants.

"What the hell?" he frowned, glaring at Kuroo, who looked sheepish.

"Oh man, I'm so sorry," the black-haired captain apologized. "I knocked over my water bottle. Did I
"As a matter of fact, yeah, you did," Tsukishima glared at him not even caring about playing along. The rival team's captain had always pissed him off, and now he was making it worse.

"What a shame. I hope you have spare clothes," Kenma jumped into the conversation, chewing a mouthful of rice calmly.

"Ye-"

"No?" Kuroo interrupted loudly, drawing a few stares that turned away as soon as he became uninteresting again. "My, I really am sorry, then. Do you wanna come over to my tent? I've got plenty of spares and I don't mind giving you one for today."

"Uhh," Tsukishima glared at him, but then decided to play along begrudgingly. "Fine. Whatever."

"Cool," Kuroo chuckled. "Oh, I know. You can bring your whole gang, too. I've got a deck of cards, so we can play bullshit or something. That's always more fun with more people, and Kenma's a boring player."

The setter said nothing, but rolled his eyes.

"We'll take you up on that," Daichi nodded good-naturedly, perhaps a bit too much, but it was better than Tsukishima, who was unable to hide the unimpressed expression on his face. "There isn't much to do around here anyway. It's our second day here and we're not sure what to do."

"Well, if you ever get bored, you can ask the camp quartermaster for tasks to do around the camp. The more you work, the more extra food or water coupons you get. It's a pretty sweet deal for when you're bored," Kuroo informed them. "But hey. Sorry, I haven't even introduced myself. My manners, y'know." He saluted them with a flick of his wrist. "I'm Tetsurou Kuroo. And he's my friend, Kozume Kenma. We're both from Tokyo."

"Nice to meet you," Kenma nodded at them impassively, and Karasuno was actually freaked out by how well the two were playing their roles.

"Likewise," Daichi replied as smoothly as he could. "I'm Daichi Sawamura. These guys are my friends. We're all from the Miyagi prefecture."

One by one, the Karasuno guys (re)introduced themselves, some more awkwardly than others, knowing that they were just putting on a show. When Tsukishima finally finished by introducing Yamaguchi and himself (the former's silence momentarily shocking the two Nekoma players), they all stood up and went to the basins to do their dishes.

It was probably planned, but Kuroo filled the air with casual conversation about himself and Kenma, still playing the part of a stranger. In return, as the minutes went by, the Karasuno boys became more and more comfortable with playing dumb, and also threw in stories about their own lives.

When nobody questioned their familiarity with one another, they realized that they'd pulled it off.

The Nekoma players led them away from the mess tent, towards their tent after their dishes were done. The tension between all eleven of them began to rise the more they kept feigning ignorance, and at some point, it was even hard for Kuroo to keep making idle conversation. Needless to say, when the latter stopped in front of a tent just like all the others and indicated them inside, they were all eager to get away from prying eyes and drop the act.
And they did. Once they were inside the empty tent, with the flap closed behind them, they waited for a few seconds to make sure that nobody was coming in behind them.

And then, laughter came from them as the absurdity of their situation sunk in. They laughed for what seemed like forever, until their cheeks hurt and their sides cramped and their breaths heaved, trying to catch up. Kageyama had a fond smile on his face as he glanced at Hinata, who was wiping away tears of joy. Even Tsukishima had to hide his smile behind his hand, whilst Yamaguchi silently chuckled up at him.

"It's so good to see you guys," Kuroo finally laughed out, sounding incredibly relieved. "Man. I don't think I've ever been this happy to see you. Like... training camps don't even compare."

"I think these are some really different circumstances anyway," Daichi replied. "But likewise. I mean, we haven't seen anybody familiar since the Forty Fireworks, and it just had to be you two when we finally did."

"You almost sound disappointed," Kuroo quipped, but then the smile fell off his lips. "So. Kenma tell you everything last night?"

"Nice of you to doubt me, Kuro," Kenma replied to that, digging through his backpack in the corner of the tent to pull out a deck of cards that he opened up and began separating.

"I dunno, you're pretty airheaded," Kuroo shrugged amusedly, but then turned to the Karasuno boys. "Anyway. We're in trouble, as you all know. The good news is that we've been really quiet about our scheming. The other good news are that the mastermind of the plans we're setting up is really good at what he does. The bad news is that we don't have a plan at all, as of yet."

"You're contradicting yourself," Tsukishima rolled his eyes. "Do you have a plan, or not?"

"Well I mean. The plan is to get out of here. We just don't know how yet."

"How detailed."

"Save your sarcasm," Kuroo rolled his eyes. "Anyway, I'm sure you're looking forward to seeing the guy. Actually, if I'm not mistaken, he should be back from the mess tent soon to get some sleep."

"Sleep?" Asahi asked, cocking his head.

"Yeah. He works on his plans at night, when there's less chances of being disturbed, so he has to sleep during the day," Kuroo explained as Kenma handed out each of them a small stack of cards, and then messily arranged a face-down pile in the middle.

"Just hold the cards in your hands," he advised, doing the same.

Confused, the others picked up their cards as told, wondering what they were trying to do.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Kuroo continued in a lower voice. "We'll catch up once we leave this camp safe and sound. Until then, let's play it safe and stay separated. I'll send Kenma at night to update you."

"Isn't it dangerous to go out alone?" Hinata protested, looking over at his friend in worry.

"Not really. I've memorized the round patterns around the camp, so it's pretty easy for me to sneak around at night. Haven't gotten caught at all yet," Kenma shrugged.
"And you won't be," Kuroo insisted, and the tone of his voice was familiar to the Karasuno boys. It was the same tone used by Daichi, when he told them everything would be alright. It warmed them to the bottom of their hearts. "Seriously though, Kozume is like a freakin' ninja. I trust him to deliver the messages, no problem."

The amount of faith they put into one another was heartwarming. And perhaps even, impressive. Daichi knew he'd never let anybody leave his sight without being sure that another person was with him at all times. And here was his rival captain, sending out his best friend alone and trusting him to come back.

Perhaps Kuroo had much to teach Daichi after all.

Suddenly, the tenth flap opened, startling the Karasuno boys. Cold sweat broke out on their necks when they saw a soldier peek in, and all eyes went to Kuroo and Kenma. The two Nekoma players, though, looked absorbed in the cards they held in their hands, and Kuroo smirked as he set down two cards in the pile, face-down.

"Two threes," he announced, and Kenma put his hand on the pile.

"Bullshit," he called, and flipped around the two cards that Kuroo had set. A pair of threes came into sight, and Kenma clicked his tongue, taking the entire pack into his hand.

"Having fun, I see," the soldier smirked. "Just checking up on the new guys, since I didn't know they had friends in this camp."

"We met today, at breakfast," Kuroo explained calmly, impressing the newcomers once again. "I spilt my water on the annoying blond there and that was the start of a beautiful friendship."

"Your turn, uhh..." Kenma nodded at Kageyama, who looked around as if unsure if he was the one being called.

"Kageyama," he re-re-introduced himself, and then set down two cards. "Two jacks."

Catching on quickly, Hinata followed with two cards face down. "Two fives."

"Bullshit," Suga called next to him, and flipped Hinata's cards over. One of them was a five, but the other was a four, and Hinata groaned as he took the pile into his hands.

"Well, have a good time, then," the soldier sighed as he seemed to accept their claims. "And don't forget. It's always best to ask a camp soldier if you have questions. You don't know who you can trust around these parts nowadays."

It was ironic, and all of them knew it. However, Daichi just smiled at the soldier.

"Thanks for the information."

With that, the soldier nodded at them, and took his leave. They listened to him step away and then Kenma put down his cards, not looking bothered at all.

"You guys are so good at this," Tanaka groaned, wiping the nervous sweat off his forehead. "Man, every time they come in here, I feel like they're gonna figure everything out."

"Comes with practice," Kenma replied, and the thought in itself was sad. That they'd had to practice faking so many times before being able to lie so naturally.
"Mustn't have been easy for you guys..." Hinata remarked in a quiet voice, eyes downcast.

"Well, it hasn't been easy for anybody," Kuroo made a weird face, as if Hinata had only been stating the obvious. "But hey, we're still alive, aren't we?"

Tsukishima clicked his tongue softly in disapproval at that thoughts, eyes subtly glancing at Yamaguchi, whose lips were curved into a faint smile. He looked more alive than he had in days, but then again, he looked nothing like he used to, before the incident. They were alive, yes, but at what cost, he liked to ask himself time and time again.

And time and time again, the answer would be the same. That the cost of life was way too high in these conditions, and that one day, Tsukishima was going to give it all up.

Footsteps approached the tent, a vague outline of a shadow appearing on the tarp, and in a jittery nervousness, all the Karasuno players picked up their cards again, trying to look invested in their fictional game. To that, Kuroo laughed, and waved them off.

"It's not a soldier this time," he reassured them, and turned to the shadow. "What is it? Your pack of smokes?"

"You know me too well. Pass them to me?" A voice came from the outside, and as the boys set down their cards on the tarp, a familiar sensation welled up inside of them. That voice was familiar, they were sure of it...

"Come in first. I picked up some strays and I think you'll wanna see them. And they, you," Kuroo smirked, he and Kenma glancing at each other and then scooting back a bit.

"What's that about?" the voice grumbled, a hand grabbing the tarp.

The Karasuno boys held their breaths as the tarp opened up.

"I'm tired and I want a smoke before bed. Too much to ask?" the man grumbled as he opened up the entirety of the tarp entrance, and ducked in. And then, his chocolate brown eyes met the collective gaze that had been set on him, and his jaw dropped, mimicking the expression of the Karasuno boys.

Time froze for a few moments, or for a few eternities.

And then, Hinata broke the ice with a soft sniffle and a teary voice.

"C-Coach Ukai...?"

The brunet-blond at the entrance dropped to his knees at the sound of his name, as speechless as the rest of them.

And then, there were tears on his face, and there were tears on all of their faces.

"You guys..."

And suddenly, his arms were full with wriggling teenagers, all crying with varying intensities, but with the same relief in all of their tears. Keishin's hands hurt from drawing his players, his boys close to him, and he wasn't sure whose head he had set his cheek on, but he was crying, and there was nothing he could do to stop himself, being a responsible adult be damned.

From the corner, Kuroo grinned at Kenma, sharing a teary look with his partner at the heartwarming sight, and the smaller one slipped his hand into the other's, gripping tight.
Even if they hadn't been able to reunite with their friends, their team, their second family so wholly, they were genuinely happy to see that Karasuno had been able to get their closure.

And then, Keishin's arms opened just a little more, and his teary, grateful gaze went to the two Nekoma players, and the boys couldn't help it.

They were just teenagers, after all.

They found themselves joining in, tears of joy running down their faces as well as their hands fist in someone's shirt. Whoever's it was, Kuroo and Kenma could feel the warm body underneath, their pulse thudding with life, and there was nothing more freeing at that moment than the thought that they were all alive and together.

They were all just kids, after all.

Just kids, lost and terrified and so, so relieved to find solace in some sort of constant.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

The added stake of Karasuno's lives prompted Keishin to work even harder. He didn't go to sleep, but immediately pulled out his notebooks and worksheets and maps out of his sleeping bag, delving right back into work. After lunch, he and Kuroo went out for a smoke together, but then he was back into his plans, now motivated ten times more to work hard, and work fast.

The Karasuno boys were too relieved to find their coach once again to leave the tent, and no matter how suspicious it looked to spend the whole day in the others' tent, they stayed, and there was nothing more reassuring than the sight of their coach, and their friends, all together and alive.

In the afternoon, they all agreed to split up to do some work in order to get extra food to satisfy their rekindled appetites, and so each found themselves at a particular work station, doing some thing or another.

Tsukishima found himself on dish duty in the kitchen, the head chef handing him and the other workers all the big pots and pans before leaving on break. Silently, he delved into his work, trying not to think too much, when a person bumped into him to work on their pot next to him. When he raised his eyes, he found the comforting sight of his coach yawning loudly next to him.

"Hey," Keishin greeted him, smirking. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine," was all that Tsukishima could say, because the actual answer to that question was too convoluted to explain in the time it took to clean one pot.

"I had a question for you, Tsukishima."

"Sure," the blond frowned, looking up at his coach. The older man tied up his brown-blond hair in a bun, like Asahi did often, and then rolled his sleeves up to start his work.

"About Yamaguchi, actually."

"Oh." He should've known.

"I talked to Daichi earlier, trying to catch up on what happened. You guys have been through so much shit, I'm pleasantly surprised you made it through," he chuckled sadly, and then cast his sober gaze down at the pot he was working on. "I heard about Tadashi, too. How is he?"
"How should I know?" Tsukishima grumbled. "He hasn't talked to me since the night after we left the gym. Even then, he won't say much. Selective muteness, I think."

"Does he get nightmares?" the other blond frowned.

"No. He's really quiet. Most of the time, you can even forget he exists. Honestly, he's kinda wimpy, so I figured he'd cry and have lots of nightmares and ask for a lot of comfort, and..." Suddenly, he was blushing as he admitted the next bit. "And honestly, that wouldn't have bothered me. In fact, I'd really, really like him to cry, just once. Because I know he's holding it in, and he's stupid if he thinks that that'll be any help at all on the long run."

"Actually, just looking at him, I feel like the trauma caused him to close in on himself and repress all of his emotions. I don't think it's a matter of willingness anymore. I think... I think he just doesn't feel anything anymore," the older man theorized, and Tsukishima found himself nodding.

"Anyway. I'll confront him when the time is right. But right now, he's just not talking much at all, and we've got bigger problems to worry about. Namely, the danger of death at the hands of some psycho organization that wanted to wipe Japan off the map."

"True," Keishin sighed, and then returned to work. They both worked for a little while before he spoke up again. "And you? How are you holding up?"

Annoyance reared its ugly head in Tsukishima's heart once again, and he bristled.

"Why does everybody keep asking me that?" he hissed out, more for himself than for his coach, and then clenched his fist on the dirty sponge in his hand. "I'm fine, so stop looking like I'm gonna break at any moment."

Keishin just looked at him quietly, slightly surprised, but also worried, and then returned to his task. "It was just a general inquiry. I wasn't worried when I asked that."

The subliminal message was clear to Tsukishima, though, and his face burned in shame as he realized that he'd given himself away, in the sense that if Ukai hadn't been worried before, he definitely was worried now.

But even if he spoke up, how would Tsukishima explain the fact that he saw his dead brother behind his eyelids every time he closed his eyes?

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That night, Karasuno stayed up pretty late in their tent, waiting for Kenma to come with news. However, the black-haired boy never showed up. Instead, they were forced to fake sleep several times, as there seemed to be a slight bustle outside, causing the guards to double their rounds.

In the morning, the mess tent seemed to be a little less crowded than usual. Kenma and Kuroo avoided them, and Karasuno did the same in return.

After breakfast, since they'd received no indications from the Nekoma duo, they returned to their own tent and played some cards to pass the time. As expected, however, Kuroo and Kenma came over, and there was a spark in their eyes that immediately put the others on edge.

"We've got ourselves a plan," Kuroo announced with a grin, and yet none of them felt very enthusiastic about it.
He went through it real quick, just enough to instill a sense of dread in their stomachs, but it was Keishin, later on, after waking up from a long night of work, who gave them all the details and cues, only solidifying the fear they felt.

It was a very risky plan, and worst of all, it was a plan that encouraged every man to fight for himself, and none other. However, as terrifying as the concept seemed, their coach assured them that all would go well. As much as that was worth anyway.

The plan had risen after Kenma had reported to Keishin that people were being transported from the camp in cars during the night, which was the reason why he didn't visit Karasuno the night before. Too busy spying on the proceedings, he'd taken a mental note of the entire procedure, and had reported it fully to Keishin, who'd diligently come up with a plan, just like the good old days when he'd plan for volleyball matches.

However, there was a lot more at stake here than a silly tournament. Their lives were in danger now.

The plan was simple, but a single mishap would ruin all of their chances. Basically, it entailed that the two groups in each tent pretend to be called up during the night, and join into the group being transported. Kenma had reported that no actual headcount was done at any time, solidifying the terrifying thought that the people being loaded into the cars were being sent off to their deaths.

Once they were in with the group, Kuroo would cause a distraction. At first, such a vague directive put everyone on edge, but Kuroo assured them that he had a plan, or almost. It would depend on the circumstances, but he assured them also that he'd pull off his part of the plan without a hitch. Nobody could argue with that, so they let it slide.

The most terrifying bit was what came after. Essentially, that was when they would split up, and run away amidst the confusion, in different directions to meet up in a preset destination. Since security was lax, according to Kenma, there wouldn't be enough soldiers to pursue them all, especially considering that the other people who would be with them would also panic and attempt to run.

And then, they would just have to run as fast as their legs could possibly carry them (and in Hinata's case, let Kageyama carry him as far away as possible before limping as quickly as possible), and hide to wait until the commotion stopped. And then, they'd be free to regroup.

There were so many things that could go wrong, but they had no choice. They had to try their best, and hope they'd succeed.

And hope that all of them would remain constants in one another's lives after this.

Although the two groups would ultimately meet up at the cars, they both split up at night anyway, only exchanging Kenma into the Karasuno group in order to have an insider within that group as well. At first, there was a small debate as to who would switch with Kenma, but then, most surprisingly, Keishin had asked that Tsukishima come and take Kenma's place in their tent.

And so he ended up with his eyes wide open, sandwiched between Kuroo and Keishin as they waited in bated breath for the movement outside. They were silent and unmoving through the first round, the guard not seeing anything suspicious and moving on quickly from their tent, and then, right after the second round, sounds began to rise from the nearby tents.

"Here we go," Kuroo smirked in the darkness, seeming far too enthusiastic about the whole deal than any sane person should be. But then again, sanity was hard to define these days, so Tsukishima had
The three of them got up and grabbed their bags, packing their sleeping bags as well. Once they were done, they stepped outside the tent, where several other people were finishing up their packing. Now this was the tricky bit; passing off as people who had been chosen to leave.

"Sorry," Keishin whispered to a soldier watching the operations nearby. "Where are we supposed to go?"

"By the north command post. The rest are waiting there for you. You should listen closely when people give instructions, next time," the man sighed, and then looked at them. "I didn't know you two were called up, though." He tilted his head at Kuroo and Keishin, who were strategically positioned to shield Tsukishima a bit from the soldier's sight.

"Yeah, got the news this morning. I wonder where we're going," Kuroo grinned, though the morbid answer was known to them all.

"They'll explain at the north post. Hurry off now. We'll be missing your cigarette butts on the ground, you know," the guard laughed, but let them pass. "Have a safe trip."

"Thanks, man," Kuroo nodded at the guy, and confidently began walking forward.

And if Tsukishima was honest with himself, he was impressed by the captain's acting skills. He'd always been one to scheme, but this was a whole new level. He wasn't sure how to feel about the ease with which the other lied and played the people around him like fiddles.

They walked in silence to the north command post, slipping into another group of a few people to blend in. Their hearts beat fast, but their expressions betrayed nothing. Once at the northern command post, they blended into the small crowd, and immediately located the Karasuno group, getting closer.

"Everything okay?" Kuroo whispered to Kenma whilst the soldiers stood in a circle around them.

"Ace," Kenma replied briefly, and then the two left it at that, and turned their attentions to the man talking, standing in front of the crowd.

"Good news, everybody. If you were given the message to leave tonight, it's because the supply trucks are finally ready to take you to Hokkaido. So we'll do this real quick. The men will separate you into two groups, each one in one truck, and then, you'll be headed to Hokkaido, where you'll finally be safe and sound after such a long time of suffering," he announced cheerfully, and as the crowd whispered amongst themselves with excitement and elation, the group of friends could not help but feel like vomiting at the disgusting lies the man was spewing. The truth hurt worse than anything they could bring themselves to do in this situation.

"Come along," the soldiers began rounding them up, and the group stuck together, especially Kuroo and Kenma, who almost literally stuck themselves to the others in order to stay together. Tsukishima briefly wondered what that attitude was about, when he realized that that was probably how the two of them had been separated from their family and friends when the inhabitants of Tokyo had been herded into these death camps posing as refugee camps. His heart hurt at the thought of it, and he made sure to quietly follow the group and make sure the twelve of them were together in the end.

They did end up being loaded in the same truck, and Kuroo immediately rushed to sit at the very inner seat, right next to where the soldiers would sit. Keishin sat in the seat facing him, and Kenma stayed towards the edge of the truck, to be able to see the road go by. Once the two soldiers had also
gotten into the truck, and had sat right next to Kuroo and Keishin, it was only a matter of waiting.

Soon, the truck had begun moving, and their hearts leapt in their throats as they realized that the most dangerous leg of their plan had begun. Periodically, everybody would chance a glance at Kuroo, who seemed to be relaxed in his seat with his eyes closed. However, as people who'd seen him truly relax in the past, they could see the crispness in his limbs and the tension in his shoulders, and it was even a bit reassuring to know that the most daring and scheming person in their entire group was nervous about this bit.

However, he stayed silently seated, confusing Karasuno with his actions. The trucks left the fields and got onto the freeway, rolling on the opposite side as there were less cars jammed there, and even as the wind whipped through the open back of the truck, Kuroo did not move. If Tsukishima were to be honest, the lack of action was what made him the most nervous. Had Kuroo run out of ideas? Were they being herded off to their deaths after all? Would they have arrived at their destination even before Kuroo had a chance to act?

At some point, they'd stopped watching Kuroo like a hawk, and it was at that moment that Kenma, probably seeing some sort of clue on the road, sneezed. A few seconds later, Kuroo turned to the soldier next to him.

"Hey, man, I gotta pee," he announced nonchalantly, visibly getting on the soldier's nerves from the get-go.

"You had the chance to go back in camp," the soldier replied in accented Japanese. "Hold on for a few more hours."

"Man, Hokkaido's too far! I can't hold it in that long," Kuroo whined, making a crisped face as he held his groin. The display was amusing, and at that point, he had the entire truck's attention. "Please, come on, I'm gonna explode!" Getting up, he did a little ridiculous-looking dance on his tiptoes, swaying dangerously with the movements of the truck.

"Okay kid, sit down. Maybe we'll take a pit stop soon, and you'll be able to go pee," the other soldier told him gruffly.

"If I sit down, I'll pee my pants," Kuroo told them matter-of-factly, doubling over dramatically.

"Hey kiddo, maybe you should try and sit though," Ukai finally jumped into the conversation, getting up to support Kuroo's swaying body. "The truck's moving pretty fast, you could fall, you know."

"He's right, now come on, both of you, sit down," the soldiers sighed in unison, getting up to escort both of them back to their seats.

There was a flash in Kuroo's eyes, and then suddenly, he was standing upright, hand gripping the back of the soldier's neck. The guy had only a moment to cry out in surprise before Kuroo smashed his face down into his knee. The guy's nose broke with an audible snap, and he was on the floor of the truck writhing in a second.

"What the fuck?!" the other one swore, trying to grab Kuroo, but Keishin was too quick to loop his arms around his shoulders to hold him down. The teenager quickly pulled the first man's rifle over his head, and, holding it like a bat, hit the guy on the floor over the head. The soldier dropped like a sack of potatoes, motionless.

"Kuroo, quickly," the brunet-blond hissed, noting that the soldier was getting rowdy, and Kuroo
quickly -too quickly, too coldly- took care of him as well.

Once the two soldiers were on the ground, the truck's passengers all broke out of their daze and began talking all at once.

"What the hell?"

"What are you doing!?!"

"Are you guys terrorists!?!"

"Calm down, everybody," Ukai tried to get a reign on the situation. "You're all going to be okay. Right now, please bear with us. These trucks have to be stopped. It's a long story, but we're not headed to Hokkaido. This isn't a refugee camp. We're all in grave danger, so please quiet down and cooperate with us!"

The voices quieted down to murmurs, worried and confused, but the guys paid them no more heed. Instead, they looked at Kuroo, who was looking at the rifle curiously.

"So," he addressed his friends. "Any of you know how to handle a gun?"

And instinctively, there was a small movement done by all the Karasuno boys towards Yamaguchi, who was well-aware of the stares even if he didn't see them. However, Tsukishima bristled at the thought of handing his best friend any kind of firearm once again, and subtle shifted to press his thigh against Yamaguchi's.

"Coach Ukai is the oldest, he should technically know a thing or two about shooting," he defended, looking at their volleyball coach.

"Eh... not much, but I've gone hunting once before, so I guess that'll do," the man mumbled, but then bent down to retrieve the second gun from the soldier on the ground.

Karasuno did not mention how terrifying both of them looked with those rifles slung across their chests.

"Alright, let's blow out the tires of the truck in front of us," Kuroo walked up to the end of the truck, Keishin following him. "I'm gonna need a couple of people to hold me while I aim. Ukai, too."

Wordlessly, Karasuno snapped into action, nervousness instilling a slight tremble in their hands as their strongest members latched onto Kuroo and their coach as the two twisted their bodies out of the truck, aiming their rifles. The night was still dark, but the second truck's headlights gave them a clear view on the first truck's back tires.

"Ready?" Kuroo let out a deep breath, clicking his safety off as soon as Ukai did.

"Whenever you are," the coach nodded. "On three?"

The two counted to three, giving everybody a few seconds to plug their fingers into their ears unless their hands were occupied holding the two, and then, gunshots rang out in the night.

The second car began swerving with the first shot, probably out of surprise than anything else, and the two marksmen had a harder time getting the other car's tires. However, after a few seconds of non-stop firing, one of the tires went out audibly, and the other soon followed. The first car's remaining tires screeched as the drivers attempted to get it under control, only to lose it as the freeway made a steep turn.
"Brace yourselves!" Keishin warned them, the two of them being dragged back in just in time to hit
the ground and hold on as the car in front of them toppled over, their own truck ramming into its
side.

The entire operation had been noisy and terrifying, but then, as all sounds ceased, slowly, the
teenagers became aware of their erratic breathing and the cold sweat running down their necks.

"What the fuck," Tsukishima found himself saying, shakily sitting up once their truck had stopped as
well. "This is your idea of a distraction!? Crashing both cars!"

"It worked, didn't it?" Kuroo smirked a bit shakily as well, although he looked mighty proud of
himself.

"Can't say I'd have thought of that, but..." Ukai groaned, dropping his rifle to the ground. "Whatever.
You've always been a better field tactician than me."

"Okay, let's get out of here," Kenma reminded them in a low voice, and they all nodded as they
began exiting the truck, jumping down onto the ground.

The spectacle before them took their breath away, and not in a good way.

The other car had toppled over indeed, its side bashed in from where the second truck had rammed
into it. People were crawling out of the back, crying and screaming and bloody all over, holding
twisted limbs and limp bodies in their arms. The driver of the first truck was slumped over in his seat,
dead, or at least unconscious. The truck itself was destroyed, pieces of metal swimming in a puddle
of leaking fuel that gave the entire scene a more nightmarish feel.

"Kuroo," Daichi sucked in a terrified breath, looking at the other captain with wide eyes. "What have
you done...?"

They all noted how Kenma and Keishin both looked away from the black-haired teen just as he
broke out into a smirk, and a proud one at that.

"I saved our lives," he announced, to their collective horror.

"All those people," Suga began, but stopped when his breath hitched. "W-We have to help them-

"Nobody move!"

All eyes went to the driver and passenger of the second car, who looked pretty unharmed as they got
out of the truck with their guns pointing at the crowd.

"Nobody move a muscle, or we'll shoot all of you! Who's responsible for this!? Speak up, or we'll
kill you all!"

The panicked crowd began wriggling around in an attempt to get away, but the other soldiers coming
out of the wreckage circled them, pointing their guns at them as well, corralling them in.

"Shit," Tanaka swore, eyes wide as he pressed up against the rest of the group. "What do we do
now?"

"Kuro?" Kenma asked softly, glancing up at his best friend questioningly, and perhaps a bit sadly.

The bedheaded boy only thought for a moment before pulling out a packet of cigarettes from his
pocket, and putting one to his lips.
"At a time like this!?” Tsukishima exclaimed, though his voice did not carry above that of the wounded crying out and the soldiers threatening them. "What is wrong with you!?"

"I'm just enjoying a smoke," the other captain replied as if it was obvious, and then looked over at Ukai. "Got a light?"

"...Yeah," the older man nodded after giving him a weird look, and handed him a half-empty lighter that was in his pocket.

"Don't encourage him!" Noya exclaimed, bewildered by all the happenings, watching as Kuroo lit up his cigarette and took a puff.

"Kenma," he finally called without looking at his smaller friend. "What's our meeting point after we bolt?"

The reminder that their plan was only half-complete suddenly snapped them back into a more sober reality, minds sharpening as they listened for the new instructions that were to be given.

"The highway in the opposite direction has an exit leading into a town about a kilometre further from here. When we split, let's all head there. We'll wait until daybreak, and then move into town with whoever makes it there by then," the setter answered, subtly pointing in the direction of the exit, and the way he phrased that last bit sent shivers travelling down their spines. The Karasuno boys were sure of it now. Failure was not an option.

"Alright, everybody ready?” Kuroo asked, taking a large puff of his smoke. Around them, the soldiers were moving all the survivors with the group of people from the second truck, who were only shaken, at best, and then a few of them were working on pulling out people from the wreckage.

And if the team members were honest, they weren't ready to see what Kuroo had in mind next. But they had no choice, either.

"Good," Kuroo nodded, and then tapped the ashed off his cigarette. "Then duck, and then disperse. Let's meet back at the exit."

"Duck, and disperse...?” Hinata frowned questioningly as he leaned on Kageyama, who looked suspicious, but ready to run as well.

"Yeah. Might wanna hit the ground."

And with one last puff of his cigarette, Kuroo raised his hand high up in the air, and threw the lit cancer stick towards the toppled truck.

All eyes around him widened as the light fell right into the puddle of fuel leaking out of the tank, and cries suddenly burst from the crowd as fire burst from the vehicle. The crowd instinctively began to run away from the fire whilst the soldiers tried to control them, but to no avail.

The Karasuno boys only had a second to recover from their horrified shock before instincts of survival took over, and they all dropped to the ground, arms over their heads and eyes shut tightly.

The truck exploded.

Pieces of metal and other disturbingly soft pieces of debris rained upon the people who were standing close, although the ones who had been too close were already writhing in flames on the ground or were in pieces. Screams of terror permeated the air in the second it took for sound to return after the shocking explosion, and the team shakily stood up, trying to regain a control of their senses.
There was a ringing in all of their ears, vision blurred and swaying, but through it all, they all discerned their coach's voice, yelling above the crowd.

"Run! Run away, all of you! Disperse!"

And they did, despite the shaky legs, despite the tears on their dirt-smudged faces, despite the thumping of their hearts and the bits and pieces of flesh that had rained upon them. Because they'd come too far to be destroyed by something as horrifying as the spectacle before them.

But in their defence, the scene of death and destruction was pretty terrifying.

Even more so when Kuroo's smirking face was the only picture they could see in their minds, through it all.

Tsukishima lost Yamaguchi in the crowd, the shell-shock dulling his senses, even as he got up to bolt. However, he had no time to spare worrying about his friend, or any of his friends, because he knew he had to get out of there. The soldiers were now firing into the crowd, obviously having given up dealing with them civilly, and the blond was suddenly aware of how dangerous his situation was.

Last time he was in the line of fire...

"Duck, Kei!"

"Duck, Tsukishima!"

A scream tore out of his throat as someone barrelled into him, the two bodies tumbling to the ground in a heap. When he opened his eyes, he realized he had a faceful of black hair, and quickly stood up with Kuroo by his side.

"Watch out, they're shooting at the people running!" Kuroo warned him as they began running again, past the burning wreckage and the smell of charred flesh, past the bullets whizzing around and whistling in their ears.

"Kuroo...?" the blond squinted through his dusty glasses, his ears still ringing from the blast. "W-What...?"

"Hey! Hey, are you shell-shocked?" Kuroo stopped momentarily to analyze the unfocused look in his eyes, and swore. "Shit. Let's get out of here!"

"Don't need you to protect me..." Tsukishima grumbled, but followed as best as his tired feet could drag him on.

Last time someone protected him, that someone ended up dead. He didn't want that to happen anymore.

And suddenly, his knees buckled, a mixed sensation of physical pain and nausea combining with the realization of what Kuroo had done and what was going on around him, making an explosive mix that made him stumble, and stop to catch his breath. He was aware that he was standing in the crossfire, but maybe, just maybe, if he got lucky, one of those stray bullets would-

"Tsukishima!"

"Akiteru?" the blond glanced up as the figure running towards him, but then blond hair became black, and he realized that Kuroo had come back for him.
"Keep moving, why are you stopping!?” The captain looked more panicked than before, and strangely enough, Kei enjoyed that look on his face. He hated his cocky smirk, especially in a situation as terrifying as this, so seeing fear plastered all over his face was very satisfying.

"Don't help me,” Kei found himself saying. "I don't need your help. Who said I want to make it out of here, anyway?"

"I did!” Kuroo answered without an ounce of hesitation, pulling him forward by his wrist. "Come on now! I'll protect you if I have to, so hurry up!"

"No," Tsukishima breathed out, stumbling behind Kuroo, and struggling to get out of his grip. Nothing good ever happened to the people who got involved with him. Nothing good would happen to Kuroo if he bothered with him. He should just run, leave Tsukishima to his own devices, save himself...

"Move faster!” Kuroo prompted him, pushing him in front to force him to run faster, and all Tsukishima could think of was how Kuroo was making a grave mistake by caring.

"No,” he repeated again, eyes wide and unfocused. "Leave me. Leave me before you die!"

"I won't die, stupid!” Kuroo teased, and Tsukishima turned around just in time to see his nightmares come to life.

Though gunshots punctuated the night, there was one that seemed to be louder than the rest. And suddenly, like in a game of volleyball where his eyes always followed the ball, Tsukishima could see the bullet, flying, ripping through the air, coming right at him, at them, the whistling getting louder and louder as the bullet came closer-

"K...ei...

Blood splattered on Tsukishima, warm and sticky, and his eyes widened. In front of him, Kuroo let out a choked noise of pain and surprise, eyes just as wide, and stumbled into him, clutching his neck tightly.

The blond didn't need to pry his hand away to see the injury. He knew what it looked like. He knew what it had done. And by the look of all the blood escaping through Kuroo's fingers, he also knew how bad it was.

He knew it.

He was a curse on everybody he ever cared about.

"No!” he cried out, shaking Kuroo, whose breathing was getting erratic. "Get yourself together!

"I-I'm okay... Just a g-graze,” the bedheaded captain stammered, stumbling as he picked up his pace again, he and Tsukishima jogging to get away from the site. Although it really was just a graze, judging by all the blood, the bullet had nicked his carotid artery, pumping blood out of his body with every heavy heartbeat trying to burst out of his chest.

And the entire thing seemed so familiar to Tsukishima, so terrifyingly familiar, that he felt ready to faint just by thinking about it.

They made it out of the crossfire, running down the empty freeway, away from the fire and the screams and the terrifying reminder of how much this war had changed them all.
And suddenly, without warning, Kuroo collapsed.

Breath left Tsukishima's body as the black-haired boy fell to his knees, and then limply flopped to the ground. In a second, without even being able to justify his actions, the blond was at his knees, next to the other teenager, who was bleeding out in front of his eyes.

It reminded him of Akiteru.

"I-I'm gonna die, aren't I?" Kuroo asked, the words slurring as light-headedness took him over. "I- I'm not gonna make it..."

"Stupid! I told you not to help me!" Tsukishima cried out, almost hysterical, because he was a plague, he was a blight, he was a reaper who stole the lives of everyone around him. He brought nothing calamity, and he only killed the ones he cherished. Like he killed Akiteru.

He killed Akiteru.

"Damn it!" the blond hit his fist on the ground, a weak chuckle coming from Kuroo.

"Whatever. Guess we couldn't all make it out of here, huh blondie?" he smirked, as irritating as usual, and Tsukishima was overtaken by anger at that moment.

How dare he be so casual about it all? When Tsukishima had been the one to bring his life to an end?

"K-Kei... T-The vein... p-pinch-"

No, no, no, no, no. He wouldn't let anybody die under his watch anymore. Not because of him. He'd caused enough destruction in the lives of others for one lifetime.

"You're not gonna die!" he insisted, and suddenly, before even he knew what he was doing, his hands had pried Kuroo's hand away from his neck, fresh spurts of blood gushing rhythmically from the pumping artery, on his body and on the ground. "Now get up, and stop being stupid! We've got people to meet come morning light, and there is no way either of us is going to go see them alone!"

"W-Wha...?" Kuroo began as Tsukishima opened up the small wound, glancing into it. In the dark, it was hard to see anything, but the streetlamps overhead gave him enough light to be able to see the area of broken skin that was thumping up and down. And that's where he pinched the skin, going as deep as he could to grab as much of the artery as he could. Kuroo let out a pained yelp, moving his head a bit, but Tsukishima pressed him down until he calmed.

"You won't bleed out. I've got you," he reassured him, sweat beading on his forehead at the sight of the small amounts of blood escaping through the tightly pinched skin. Kuroo wouldn't bleed out immediately, but he needed to have the wound closed as quickly as possible, or he wouldn't make it. "Get up. We've gotta go."

"So bossy," Kuroo groaned, and then slowly, shakily, both of them stood up together. The senior of the two learned on the younger as the younger pinched the skin tighter, and together, they began walking towards their destination.

"You're too irritating to die," Tsukishima grunted as soon as Kuroo's steps began to falter, and with a chuckle, the black-haired boy picked up his pace.

"Where'd you even pick this stuff up?" he asked off-handedly, but Tsukishima froze at the mention, his fingers pinching tighter on reflex and drawing a yelp from Kuroo. "Fine, fine, forget I asked."
And Tsukishima wanted to forget. It was all he wanted. He didn't want Akiteru to show up in his dreams anymore, he didn't want to hear his voice in his ears every second of the day, he didn't want his hands to feel gritty no matter how many times he washed them. He wanted to let it all go.

But then as he glanced up at Kuroo curiously, noting the solemn, worried look in his eyes, he realized that perhaps to forget, he had to remember in the first place.

"I killed my brother the same way," he finally admitted.

"Like... picked up a gun and shot him?"

"Shut up," Tsukishima snapped at him, and fell silent. But then, words were tumbling out of his mouth, words he'd never told anybody but Yamaguchi before. "No... Like, he... Akiteru and I, we hid with our parents after the Forty Fireworks. But my mom got sick and my dad stayed with her, so Akiteru and I went on a raid for food one day, and..." His throat tightened at the memory.

They'd been so happy that nothing had happened to them on that raid. They'd come back with some food and pain pills, hoping to help their mother out, but then...

"But then, we got back home, and... And this guy was in the house, holding a gun, and... My mom and dad were..." He stopped there because he could feel his voice wavering, and he didn't want to seem weak.

However, Kuroo said nothing, and was listening attentively, hobbling along as they walked down the road together. So he pressed on, no matter how painful it was for him to remember.

"We took him by surprise. It didn't take much time at all, he just... spun around, and saw us, and aimed his gun at me, and... And Akiteru pushed me over to protect me, and the bullet cut through his throat, and grazed past mine."

He remembered everything now. How Akiteru's wary expression had turned to absolute terror as the gun's safety clicked off, the apology in his eyes as he cried out his little brother's name, tackling him to get him out of the way, and Tsukishima had felt weightless at that moment, falling and falling without ever hitting the ground. He hadn't even heard the bullet. He hadn't even felt the raider run past them, out the door, out the house, out into the world that would never again be the same for any of them.

Only when his back had finally hit the ground, he'd remembered blood splattering all over his face, his neck, his body. His own neck burned, but it was nothing compared to the horror of having Akiteru scrambling to grab his throat, murmuring about pinching the vein to stop the bleeding, and he'd been too shocked to do anything but cry.

Akiteru had spent his final moments comforting his little brother, murmuring his name until the light faded from his eyes. And then, the blood had stopped actively gushing from the wound in his neck, reduced to a passive dribble, and his hand had fallen from Tsukishima's neck, limply on the ground, and the blond had cried out his brother's name for hours and hours, tears streaming down his face, his brother's blood crusting on his skin and clothes and hair, pooling under him... And, too weak and shocked to move, he'd spent four hours stuck under Akiteru's dead body before Yamaguchi came around his house and found him, bathed in blood and bleeding out under his brother's corpse.

"-shima-"

It had been his fault. For not reacting. For not ducking. For not putting pressure on Akiteru's wound. For standing there and letting people die for him. It was his fault.
He only brought misery to the ones who hung around him. If he died, he'd stop being the cause for such horrible things. He had to die for others to live, and after all he'd done, it felt like such a small price to pay. He didn't deserve a constant in his life, because he was the one who was always pushing his constants away. Tsukishima wanted a constant, but he never realized that he was the one making everything around him into a variable.

"Oi, Kei!"

"Akiteru." The whisper left his lips without his consent, and when Kuroo laughed next to him, dragging him out of his thoughts, he blushed in embarrassment.

"No, I'm not your dead brother," Kuroo smirked, and Tsukishima pinched his throat tighter as a warning. "Hey!" When he finally loosened his grip on his friend, Kuroo huffed, but kept going. "I'm not your dead brother. Your brother is, obviously, dead and gone." Another warning pinch. "Ow! Just... drill that into your head. Your brother is dead, and you don't have to hold onto him any longer."

That didn't make sense to Tsukishima. At all.

"He's in your nightmares and in your head because you're foolishly trying to pretend he's still alive, just so you don't have to feel guilty anymore. But I've got a life hack for you." Surprised, Tsukishima looked up at the captain, hanging onto every word he was saying despite his earlier annoyance. "You're gonna move on, and I'm gonna tell you how. You're not going to feel guilty after this bit, and you're not going to hang onto old nightmares anymore, either."

"Sure, what's your miracle remedy to the fact that I killed him?" Tsukishima spat out bitterly, looking away.

"Well, as much as you need to hear this, you won't want to. But I'll say it anyway. It wasn't your fault." Tsukishima opened his mouth to interrupt, but Kuroo made a warning noise not to say anything. "I know. I know it feels like I'm lying to you and that I'm just saying this to make you feel better. But this isn't what it's about, trust me. There is a very clear distinction between the guilty of this world and the innocent. Trust me, I've seen this line for myself, and I promise, you're on the innocent end."

There was weight to his words, a weight so heavy that Tsukishima refused to delve into the connotations of that sentence at the moment.

"But," Kuroo continued. "You can't change the fact that Akiteru is dead. However, you saved my life, and probably that of your friends, too. Let go of the past and look forward to the future a bit. Your brother's never gonna leave you. What's going to leave you are the nightmares and the voices and the flashbacks. What won't leave you is his memory, his love for you, and his thought as a motivation to keep living in the world that he died to provide for you. And you've held on, come hell or high water, and I know you still will." And then, he was looking straight into Kei's eyes, and Kei felt tiny and insignificant next to him and his powerful words. Nekoma's captain had always been one for inspiring speeches, but never this personal, never this intimate. "Listen to me, Kei. Everything around you is changing. But you can be sure that the fact that you're alive will always be your most precious constant."

Tsukishima was left speechless for the rest of the journey, because it would take him more than one night to process the fact that he'd been looking for a constant in his life, only to realize that his life had been the only constant that had mattered all along.
Chapter End Notes

There's a Zankyou no Terror reference and a Fall Out Boy lyric in this chapter. I'm on fire. Can you spot them? Also, I really really love KuroTsuki, I'm not even sorry. But if there are any pairings in this fic, it's gonna be the ones tagged.

Kuroo wrote himself. He wasn't supposed to be a psychopath, I promise. But I think I like this route for him. I've got a good backstory idea for him now. I figured that since he was always so scheming in volleyball games, with experience he'd be able to put his tactical mind to the use of his situation and be a good field tactician. In that sense, Keishin designs plans, but he carries out the small details. Kenma is their informant. 3K, unite! :D Also, I know Kenma calls Kuroo "Kuro", but that's his nickname, so that's not a typo.

Finally took a look at Tsukishima's backstory omg. Now you know what the scar is, and why this poor bbie is losing his mind. I think the injuries I gave people this chapter were rather realistic. Akiteru bled out quickly because his wound was deep, probably blasted off a chunk of his vein and artery. However, Tsukishima got lucky, because with the angle, his vein was grazed (if his artery was grazed, it might've been different). Now, Kuroo's artery was nicked, but Tsukishima pinched it, which means that blood circulation is halted. Kuroo is probably feeling really light-headed since only one of his carotid arteries are supplying blood to his brain, but his system is still functioning, although he might be hypovolemic because of the blood loss.

Also, the enemies we're talking about are an unspecified group. I didn't really wanna get into the whole socio-political context of the nuclear war, but it's an outside threat for sure.

I don't really have much to say tbh? If you guys want to see anything in this fic, feel free to tell me in a review or something, and I'll be sure to try and include it. I've already included a couple of fan suggestions and am planning on including a couple more, so if you're down, I'm down :D

Thanks again for sticking with me through all of this endless text, and please comment with anything you'd like to say! (:
When Noya saw silhouettes in the distance, he expected the worst. Next to him, Yamaguchi and Kenma also looked up from where they sat worrying, all eyes going to the people approaching them through the darkness.

"Let's lay low, just in case," Noya whispered, and all three of them flattened out on the ground, holding their breaths.

The footsteps shuffled and dragged across the asphalt, and as the people got closer, small grunts of pain and exertion also punctuated the atmosphere. This was strange to Nishinoya, who got a bad feeling from the entire situation.

"Who's there...?" he called, rising off the ground, making a movement for Yamaguchi and Kenma to stay down.

"Noya-senpai?" a voice replied from the dark, and Nishinoya's heart skipped a beat as he immediately recognized the tone hidden underneath layers of nitty, gritty exhaustion.

"Tsukishima?" he answered, immediately flipping on a flashlight and shining it forward. As the sight came into view, his breath flew out of his lungs in shock. Behind him, Kenma and Yamaguchi also
stood, surprise melting into horror very quickly.

The blond's right arm was covered in blood from the fingertips to the shoulder, some of it also seeping into his shirt and over his collarbone. He himself had bits and pieces of flesh, blood, and dirt stuck all over his skin, clothes, and hair, and his tired eyes were sunken behind his lightly cracked glasses. His legs seemed to be on the verge of giving in, shaking as he struggled to stay upright and to support the weight practically dead on him.

Next to him, Kuroo's entire left side was soaked in blood, some of it splashed onto his jaw and pale, scarily pale face. His eyes were closed, eyelids fluttering softly, and his feet were dragging more than anything else. He was bent slightly at the waist, leaning into Tsukishima heavily with his arm on his shoulder. He looked bad, and where Tsukishima's fingers were clamped on his throat, Nishinoya could see blood seeping out lazily, through the gaps in the blond's tight grip.

Nishinoya opened his mouth to say something, but no sound could come out through the shock.

Of course something would go wrong with the plan. There was no way anything could ever go right with them.

And through the horror of it all, there was only one voice that surfaced.

"Kuro!"

Nishinoya stood horror-struck as a figure leapt past him, towards the newcomers, Kuroo lethargically reacting to his nickname by raising his head just slightly.

"K'nma..." he mumbled out, unable to keep his head up and letting it drop against Tsukishima just as Kenma took his jaw in his hands. Kuroo's skin was cold and pale under the light from Nishinoya's flashlight, glowing a sickly yellow that was probably not too off the mark from his actual colour.

"He's been losing it more and more for the past twenty minutes," Tsukishima grunted, beginning to walk again to go by Yamaguchi's side, in the dry grass. Nishinoya numbly followed the procession and watched as Tsukishima laid Kuroo down, his fingers never letting go of his neck.

"What happened?" Kenma asked softly, his voice quaking with underlying fear. His hand went to Kuroo's forehead, and then his cheek, and then his thumb rubbed a few circles on his pasty skin before it went to settle against his dirty hair.

"Bullet wound to the throat." Tsukishima seemed to be leaving a detail out, as betrayed by the conflict in his downcast eyes, but Kenma did not mind it as it was clear that he told the truth, whatever part of the truth he told. "Yamaguchi, can you do something?"

Behind him, the dark haired teen snapped to attention and fumbled to come closer with his backpack, beginning to take out medical supplies and laying them on the ground. Nishinoya watched them all bustle around busily, Kenma caressing Kuroo's sweaty cheek whilst Yamaguchi scrambled for something useful in his pack and Tsukishima literally held Kuroo's life in his hands.

The second-year felt incredibly useless, left standing there to shine a flashlight at them, and look around and pray for Suga to arrive already. There was nobody in sight yet, over half of their party still missing, lost somewhere in the night, and Nishinoya was suddenly struck by the terrifying thought that perhaps the others did not have somebody to keep them alive as they slowly bled out on the ground.

What if, come morning light, there were only four of them left, plus a body?
He was snapped out of his trance by the sight of Yamaguchi pulling out a few things out of the bag in a shaky but self-assured manner, and watched as the young man gently pushed Kenma aside, rubbing his hands together with hand sanitizer before snapping on a pair of gloves. If Noya remember correctly, compared to Sugawara, Yamaguchi was only a beginner in the medical field, but he'd nonetheless learned a lot from his senpai in the past few months, so that self-confidence could be seen in his movements as he grabbed a few alcohol wipes from his bag and began poking around Kuroo's arm.

Intrigued, just like every other witness to the scene, Nishinoya came closer and knelt, shining his flashlight directly onto Kuroo's arm to help the younger boy see what he was doing.

"What are you doing?" Kenma asked a bit breathlessly, watching cautiously, eyes darting back and forth between Yamaguchi's tight lips and his shaky hands.

Predictably, Yamaguchi did not reply, fully concentrated on his task of cleaning out Kuroo's elbow with more than just a few alcohol swabs.

"He won't reply to you. But he's been practicing a lot and he's brushed up on his medical knowledge since the beginning of the war, so he's going to do his best to save this idiot," Tsukishima translated the silence, and a faint trace of a smile bloomed on Yamaguchi's face as he finished cleaning. Next, he pulled out some tubes, and finally, a few bags of intravenous solution. He put them under Nishinoya's light and hesitated for a while before picking one that only made sense to him, and putting the others back in the bag.

There was an almost reverent silence as the young man, so traumatized and broken by his own struggles, struggled to save someone else's life. He tied a tourniquet around Kuroo's arm, and began prodding at the crook of his elbow. Curious, Nishinoya leaned in, and Yamaguchi gently redirected his flashlight at the spot where he was working, not even looking up at his senpai. His concentration was the like of which they'd never seen on him before, not even during the volleyball games for which he'd practiced so hard, dreaming to be a part of for so long.

For so long, their only dream had been to stand on the volleyball court and win.

Now, in some twisted parody of that, their only desire was to stay alive until morning in triumph.

Kenma seemed to be getting impatient with Yamaguchi's prodding, and even Tsukishima seemed weary and ready to let go of his neck, where small amounts of blood were still escaping his grip. However, before anybody could say anything, Yamaguchi finally stopped and put his finger on one spot, grabbing one last alcohol swab and swabbing that area meticulously.

They all watched in bated breath as the boy carefully opened a few packages, hesitating in some places, backtracking in others, but then there was an uncapped needle in his hand, and he was taking three deep breaths before pushing it into what they all realized was a protruding vein in Kuroo's arm.

After the puncture, Yamaguchi seemed a bit unsure of what to do, but finally decided on grabbing some gauze and putting it on top of the puncture site, and then put a bigger gauze on top of the whole IV catheter. He taped everything down and looked at his work, and then seemed to remember something, as he undid the whole setup.

Kenma's face showed doubt as he watched Yamaguchi tinker with the catheter, but the setter said nothing as the pinch server clicked a part of the catheter out, a needle falling into his hand. Yamaguchi carefully handled it and set it on the ground next to him before closing the gauze again and taping it all back up on Kuroo's arm. The tourniquet was then released, and blood suddenly welled into the small part of the tube that led up to the lock on it.
Yamaguchi let out a relieved sigh, for which he received a few incredulous looks. But still, no one said a thing as he carefully buried the used needle into the ground, and then changed his gloves.

He began anew, opening a tubing packet and carefully opening the IV bag he’d picked. In what the others realized was the proper sterile technique to hook up an IV, he very carefully pushed the tip of the tube into the bag, and unlocked the tubing to start priming it. Some of the fluid ran onto the ground, and Yamaguchi inspected the tube before locking it.

Then, he turned to Kenma, and silently gave him the bag, holding it up. Even without words, Kenma understood what was being asked, and silently nodded, taking the bag and holding it up by his head. In the meantime, Yamaguchi grabbed the port of the catheter he’d inserted, and briefly looked for an alcohol swab in his supplies, which he then used to disinfect the port. With only a moment taken to inspect his tubing, he pushed it into the port and screwed it in. Then, both the locks on the tubing and the catheter were open, and suddenly, there were drops of fluid dripping into the small plastic chamber at the top of the tubing.

Yamaguchi stepped back and discarded his gloves, running a hand through his hair.

"Hey," Nishinoya called, surprising himself with the lack of a quiver in his voice. Yamaguchi did not look up, so Nishinoya went by his side, and set a hand on his shoulder. The younger boy jerked, but did not pull away, and even briefly leaned into his senpai's protective hold. "You did amazing. Thank you."

"You've finally put all that hard-earned knowledge to good use. Good for you," Tsukishima grumbled, rolling his shoulder. "Though do you think you could sew him up, too? My fingers are hurting and he's still bleeding."

To that, Yamaguchi shook his head sadly, but he did snap on a new pair of gloves and gently touched his friend's bloodied finger to indicate him to move. Tsukishima hesitated a moment, glancing at Kuroo's strangely serene expression, before he let go, giving Yamaguchi some space.

Fresh blood spurted out of the thin wound, although the cut seemed to have started coagulating on the distal ends already. Yamaguchi inspected it for a moment, and then put one of his hands against the cut, the other reaching for a few packets of gauze in his bag. Putting them on Kuroo's chest, he pointed at them to Tsukishima, who, even without words, took them one by one and opened them without touching the gauze inside. Yamaguchi took the sterile gauze and pressed every one of them against Kuroo's neck to secure the wad of gauze, like a choker, as the adhesive slipped off the blood staining the majority of his skin. He then put his hand on top of the wad and made even more pressure, to which Kuroo responded by flinching with a sharp inhale.

"Kuro?" Kenma asked softly, worry obvious in his tone, but there was no more show of consciousness from the captain after that.

"Guess we'll just have to wait, then," Nishinoya sighed, watching as Kuroo's eyes moved under his eyelids, following some fevered hallucination.

He wanted to tell him kouhai to rest and to leave the rest to him, but somehow, seeing the determined look in Tsukki's and Yamaguchi's eyes, he could not get the words out. Like they were the ones in a position of authority around here, rather than him. Like they were stronger, and more effective, and more knowledgeable, and more in control than he was.

He suddenly felt inadequate, and horribly misplaced. Like he was a mistake, and like he was the body that would be discovered come morning light.
Hinata, Kageyama and Tanaka arrived second, Hinata up on his senpai's back whilst Kageyama opened the march, clearing out a path as all three of their dirty, gritty forms cut through the early morning light, advancing towards them. Yamaguchi gave them a quick once-over whilst they fretted over Kuroo, demanding the story from an exhausted Tsukki, who was now holding Kuroo's IV bag to let Kenma's arms rest up. Kenma had fallen asleep next to Kuroo, one hand gently pressed against his shoulder, as if to ground him to the reality where his friend was still alive no matter what he'd gone through. No one had the heart to disturb him, so after the newcomers were checked for injuries -other than their broken minds, but nobody seemed to have time for that nowadays-, Tsukki gave Kuroo's almost-empty bag to Yamaguchi so it could be changed, and then Yamaguchi gave it to Nishinoya.

Nishinoya quietly begged the two of them to go to sleep, to leave Nishinoya with at least a little bit of an illusion of control. Yamaguchi and Tsukishima both protested in their own manner, but in the end, as the early rays of the sun began burning their retinas, they finally gave in and fell asleep next to one another; both of them exhausted from saving lives.

Nishinoya couldn't help but envy their bravery, and find his own lacking in comparison.

Asahi and Daichi arrived next, both exhausted and covered in scrapes, but otherwise unharmed. Their immediate attention went to Kuroo as well, lips thinly pursed in worry as they watched the sun dawn upon Kuroo's pale, sickly face. Daichi, as per his usual attitude, tried to get everything under control, but Nishinoya told him to sit down and clean his scrapes, relishing the sudden surge of relief that dissipated the nausea welling in his throat when his command was taken to heart. Both the third years sat and disinfected their scrapes with alcohol swabs, wincing at the burning, but not complaining.

The morning light fell upon all of them, illuminating their sleeping faces, or otherwise, and Suga and Coach Ukai still had not returned. Just when they needed them the most.

Yamaguchi's intervention had obviously helped, but there was no denying that Kuroo was still losing blood, and that despite the pressure on his wound, it would have to be sewn up. And only Suga could manage that.

Kageyama had finally dozed off, lying flat on his back with an arm slung over his eyes to protect himself from the sun, with Hinata's head pillowed on his concave abdomen, when finally, finally, two more figures emerged from the horizon.

Nishinoya was on his feet in a second, startling Daichi, Asahi and Tanaka out of their tired daze. They only spared him a brief glance as they all stood, wondering how he still had energy to spare, and Nishinoya did not answer their silent question with the truth. It would be pathetic to admit that at this point, he'd do anything to be viewed as useful. Not essential, not important, but useful. As long as he could be of use, he'd be content.

"That's them," he announced, and even before he knew it, Daichi was running, away from them, towards the two figures stumbling down towards them.

Suga looked up from where he walked next to Keishin, and upon seeing Daichi, gave him a brilliant smile, brighter than the sun rising above their heads to announce a new day. And just as the captain reached his side, he collapsed, falling boneless into his arms.

Nishinoya's blood ran cold as the familiar feeling of helplessness overtook his senses again, freezing him in place. As Asahi and Tanaka ran to help Daichi support Suga, he was left behind to hold
Kuroo's IV, and be helpless in the face of yet another problem.

Suga hadn't seemed to lose consciousness, but his gait was weak and shuffling as he leaned on Daichi and Asahi to walk towards the small group sprawled out on the ground, mostly asleep. Behind him, Tanaka stayed by Keishin's side, even if the older man assured him in his tired, croaky voice that he was fine, and just utterly exhausted.

They all dropped to the ground for a breather, before Suga's attention -always so caring, always so self-sacrificial, always so noble- turned to Kuroo's form, and the almost-empty IV Nishinoya was holding up at chest level with his aching arms.

"What happened?" he asked, limbs trembling as he tried to get to his knees, at the very least.

"Suga, you're about to drop," Daichi warned him, gently taking him by his arms to steady him, unsure if he wanted to help his friend sit up, or lay back down. "Please take a rest."

"What happened?" the setter repeated, not minding Daichi's plea and instead dragging himself closer to the Nekoma captain's still form. The wad of gauze around his throat had a blooming red spot in the middle, which didn't bode well at all, but at least with Suga here, they'd be able to do something about it.

However, with Suga in this condition, how much good could he do?

"Tsukishima ran with him, Kuroo got shot, bullet grazed his carrot... carid? Anyway. His neck artery," Nishinoya explained tiredly. "Tsukishima got him here by pinching the artery to prevent him from bleeding out, but he's been totally unresponsive so far. Yamaguchi put an IV in him and this is the second bag right here, and his neck's been bandaged, but we needed you to sew it up."

Suga only hesitated for a second, which was longer than usual for him and his selfless spirit.

"Get me my bag."

"Suga," Daichi protested. "You're exhausted. You won't be able to do anything in this state. Please rest first."

"If I don't sew that wound up, he'll die," Suga murmured, sunken eyes glancing up at Daichi with a strange kind of determination. "Yamaguchi raised his survival rate by giving him fluids and preventing him from going into hypovolemic shock, but he's still losing blood. Even if IV fluids keep his blood pressure regular now, soon he won't have enough red blood cells to transport oxygen anymore and he'll slip into a coma and die." His eyes flashed with a barely-concealed warning. "Please. I have to do this."

"Take care of yourself first," Daichi begged, hating how fragile and sickly pale his dear friend looked, how sleep deprived and weak and faint he seemed. "Please, stop pushing yourself for the sake of others!"

"I have to do this," Suga grunted softly, turning around to grab his bag of medical supplies and dragging it to his side despite Daichi's warning grip tightening on his arm.

"Suga-

"I am taking care of myself by doing this," the setter tried to explain to Daichi, but the dubious look in the captain's eyes proved that he wasn't convinced. Instead, Suga turned his attention to Kuroo, and began unloading his sewing kit from his bag. "I need this, Dai."
And Nishinoya's heart froze in place at those words, because suddenly he knew what Sugawara was saying, suddenly he understood him better than anybody else, and he could empathize with those words.

They both needed this. This feeling of usefulness, of accomplishment.

They both needed to feel alive.

"I'll wake Yamaguchi to help you," the libero volunteered, and Suga briefly nodded, already busy disinfecting his simple cotton thread with alcohol swabs. Daichi voiced a brief protest, but Noya ignored his captain, just this once, in order to be useful.

Yamaguchi rose without a complaint and snapped to action, immediately at Suga's side to assist him. All of the witnesses to the procedure stayed silent throughout, not knowing how to react to a pair of teenagers performing the mock version of a procedure usually carried out by medical professionals with years of training in their pockets, whilst they had spent two months reading nursing textbooks.

But then again, Suga had already performed this procedure once, and it had gone off without a hitch. Or much of a hitch. The living proof seemed to be in a restless sleep right by Yamaguchi's side.

The younger teen seemed to understand the implications, and glanced periodically at Tsukishima to convince himself that he'd be able to pull this off.

They both began working in silence. That's all they ever seemed to do.

On his end, Ukai forced himself to keep looking at these teens, these children, still struggling to survive and adapt to a world that had chewed them out and spat them back out mercilessly, and he forced himself to swallow the horror of seeing his precious players, practically his own sons at this point, become different in a way that no child should ever be subjected to. So he watched and hoped that his players knew what they were doing, and hoped that he could do something to save them from the pinch they'd gotten stuck in. That's all he ever seemed to do.

Nishinoya only observed the others bustle busily around him. That's all he ever seemed to do.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Other than the occasional whimper of pain, Kuroo did not wake, even as Suga tied the last knot tight at the edge of the wound, and snapped his bloody gloves off. Next to him, Yamaguchi busied himself with cleaning the bloody wound site with some alcohol swabs, and then applied fresh, sterile gauze to the stitched incision, covering the reddened, swollen skin from view.

"You did great with that IV, Yamaguchi," the setter praised honestly as he began cleaning up his workspace. "All that practice and those bruised arms paid off, huh."

The boy nodded shyly, a small smile ghosting on the edge of his lips.

"What did you infuse at first? Nishinoya says this was the second bag. Was it NS?"

Yamaguchi shook his head, looking at Suga as he snapped his own gloves off.

"D5W and 1/2 NS?"

A nod.

"Good choice, I suppose. And it's NS infusing now?"
Another nod, and then Yamaguchi pulled out a new IV bag out of his backpack, gesturing for Nishinoya to hand the current bag over. The libero did, and Yamaguchi quickly and carefully changed the bag, Suga watching his every move carefully.

"Okay, good," the setter breathed once the new bag was dripping. "Let's reduce the drip rate for now, and see how he's doing. Let's get somewhere safe so I can check his blood pressure."

Yamaguchi obliged, and then stood back, quiet as ever. And there was newfound respect in all of the team members’ eyes, for this one traumatized teenager moving past his own limitations to save somebody else's life.

Yamaguchi may as well be the strongest of them all.

Nishinoya's mouth tasted bitter at the thought.

"We should move into town," Ukai suddenly suggested, glancing tiredly at all of his protegees, half of them asleep and the other half on the brink of passing out. "We can secure a house and just sleep all day long. We can't stay out here, anyway."

"Good idea." Ever the leader, Daichi was the first to agree, looking around him. "Now that Kuroo's more or less stable, we can get moving and take cover."

Nodding, all of the people who were awake began nudging the sleeping ones, so that after a few minutes of whining groans and exhausted begging, all eleven of their conscious members were awake and on their feet, more or less ready to go. A lot of them leaned on one another, and all of them were worn down to the bone, but looked ready to move out.

Kuroo was drifting in between unconsciousness and semi-consciousness, so with one arm around Tsukishima and another around Asahi, his feet instinctively began carrying him forward. And so, the small party set out.

They walked off the highway exit ramp, their tired feet dragging them towards the small buildings in the distance. The town itself was further away from the highway, but the road leading towards it had a few residential homes lined up in front of it. Most of them had been destroyed, now only a pile of rubble on the dusty ground, or looked like they were on the verge of falling. And so, despite the weariness in their bones, they walked on.

About twenty minutes later, Ukai pointed them at an upcoming house, just outside the town's outer bounds, that didn't look too eroded, and honestly, the teens did not have the energy to argue. Safe or not, they had to stop, lest their legs gave out underneath them.

With one last, almost superhuman effort, they forced their shaky limbs forward, into the small country house, and into every nook and cranny to make sure the house was safe. And then, when all three floors of the house were confirmed to be safe, they all crowded in the master bedroom and the two side bedrooms, laying out their sleeping bags and fighting to sleep on the dusty, ripped mattresses.

Only Suga, Daichi, Ukai and Nishinoya remained in the master bedroom, helping Kenma set Kuroo up on the bed.

"Kenma, could you help me out by writing down the vitals I get?" Suga asked, already busy pulling out his equipment from his bag, despite how exhausted he felt. Noya had to admire his bravery and persistence, but then, as Daichi turned towards their coach to discuss future plans, he couldn't help but feel isolated again.
Not sure where to go, where to make himself useful, who to run to anymore, he hovered in between the two groups, not sure why he was even there anymore.

"Temperature up at 38.2 degrees. Breathing 26 per minute, laboured and shallow. Heart rate is 124 beats per minute, and blood pressure has dropped to 98/68," Suga dictated, Kenma diligently, if not shakily jotting all of that down on a piece of paper that he handed to their unofficial medic. Suga made a few more notes on it and then taped it up on the wall behind the bed with a piece of medical tape.

"So?" Nishinoya asked, mouth dry as he watched Suga pull out a stethoscope and clean it with an alcohol swab. "Is he okay?"

"I can't really tell," Suga admitted, something akin to embarrassment flashing in his dropped gaze, although he had nothing to be ashamed of. "His temperature's a bit high, so I think that means he's fighting an infection... His breathing is fast and laboured, too, and his heart rate is really fast. However, his blood pressure is low, which kinda makes sense, since he lost so much blood... But Yamaguchi gave him a litre of fluid, so I don't understand how this is possible..."

"Is there anything you can do now?" the libero pressed on, eyes flickering to the Nekoma captain's pale face. "Like... to make sure he gets better?"

"I'm going to stay up a while longer and think. I don't have my textbooks with me anymore, but I have a drug guide and a pocket handbook of medical-surgical nursing, so I'm going to see if there's anything in there that can help me out," the silver-haired teen explained, smiling reassuringly at Nishinoya, although he looked like he was the one who needed the most comfort at that moment.

"Absolutely not," Daichi piped in, apparently having finished his discussion with Ukai just in time to hear Suga's report. "Suga, you're exhausted. You're about to fall over. Coach tells me you two ran all night trying to lose some soldiers, and you're probably on an adrenaline crash right now. You need to sleep, and you'll work it out when you wake up."

"When I wake up, Kuroo might be dead," Suga protested, softly but passionately, as if he didn't have the energy to be loud anymore. "Please, Dai, please let me make this last effort. We can't let him die. I need to figure out what's wrong with him, and how to take care of him."

"You're going to kill yourself in the process, Sugawara," Ukai commented, always the voice of reason. "I know your intentions are pure, heck, god knows they've always been, but you can't take care of everybody else if you're not taking care of yourself first."

"I can try," Suga whispered, eyes downcast, and then put his stethoscope in his ears, getting on the bed with Kuroo and pushing his dirty shirt up to listen to his frantic breathing.

"He's not going to listen to you," Nishinoya found himself saying, turning to look at their two leaders with a shake of his head. "He feels like he has a job to do, and you can't take that away from him. With all due respect, you're not in a position of authority on him."

"You don't have to apologize, Noya," Daichi reassured him, though a flash of hurt streaked across his eyes. "We're all equal here and we're going to get through this together. I just... don't want anybody to push themselves to the edge. If the nights start getting too cold, I'm not going to let anybody set themselves on fire to keep the others warm. We're in this together, and we're gonna make it out together."

"That's why you have to let him do this," Nishinoya argued, glancing back at Suga, whose gaunt, pale face was tilted down to concentrate on listening to Kuroo's heart. "Putting us to good use is the
best you can do for all of us right now. Letting us ease one another's burden, letting us work together to make it out, letting us be useful... that's all we need." And he spoke from experience, feeling horribly misplaced, even where he stood at the moment.

"Noya..." Daichi began, but seemed to be at a loss of words, for he shut his mouth quickly. "I'm sorry," he simply whispered, and left it at that.

Behind him, Keishin's lips, already in a frown, pursed together, and he set a comforting hand on Daichi's shoulder.

"You're all incredible. Every single one of you. To have lived this long and to have made it this far, and to have the will to keep going. I'm sorry this world has forced you to grow up so much faster than you should've. I'm sorry," he murmured, glancing solemnly at all of them, and then at the door, beyond which all their other friends were probably all asleep. Asleep, but barely so, not dreaming for they were too busy warding off the nightmares.

Nobody replied to Keishin, who was left to look like he was mourning some great tragedy.

"Okay, well... I guess you should all go to sleep for now..." Suga finally told them, yawning at the mention of sleep. This triggered a chain of yawns, at which all of them had to chuckle or crack a smile.

"You have to promise to get some sleep, too, Suga," Daichi sighed, tone fully business-like.

"I promise. Right after I read up on Kuroo's signs and symptoms, and a possible treatment. After I do my part, I'll go to sleep and leave the rest to you, okay?" Suga promised with a kind, stretched smile.

A bitter taste suddenly fell on the tip of Noya's tongue, at the thought of being useless once again. Even Suga didn't trust him with tasks right off the bat. He hadn't expected that, in the very least.

"Let's do as he says, then," Keishin sighed, knowing there was no winning against the stubborn setter. "Daichi, let's sleep in the other rooms with the other guys. They've already set out their sleeping bags."

"Right," Daichi nodded, getting ready to leave just as Kenma wordlessly climbed onto the bed, curling up on Kuroo's side, even in the tiny space between the edge and his friend. His eyes flickered softly over every single one of Kuroo's motionless features, as if analyzing him, remembering every single detail like he'd lose him the next time he blinked.

Kuroo would've looked like a porcelain doll, were he not covered in blood, dirt, and gore. Gore from the massacre he triggered himself.

There were too many thoughts circling Noya's brain, most of them unpleasant. The small player's head ached from the weight of all the current happenings, and it was only at that moment that the exhaustion of having escaped from a death camp finally hit him in the face. His knees buckled, and Keishin's hand was on his arm in a second to support him.

"Are you okay?" the coach asked, concern blatant in his tone, but Noya only felt bitter at that, gently pulling his arm out of his coach's grip.

He didn't deserve the concern. Someone as useless and powerless as him did not deserve concern. Not until he made himself useful.

"Fine. Tired," he bit out, throwing Suga one last glance before exiting the master bedroom. Keishin closed the door behind them, and began heading down the short hallway to get to the first bedroom. Asahi was already asleep on a couple of sleeping bags, Hinata and Kageyama both sharing the small
double bed, back to back but still looking so intimate in their sleep. Daichi was pulling himself under the covers of his own sleeping bag, and Keishin stopped at the door.

"I'll sleep here, you go with Ryuunosuke and your kouhai. We'll look over these two," the older man smiled fondly, glancing at the setter-spiker duo fast asleep on the mattress.

"Thanks. Good night," Nishinoya wished him tiredly, although it was bright daylight outside (as bright as the red sky could get, anyway). Once Keishin entered their room and closed the door, he made his way to his own room, closing theirs.

Tanaka turned in his sleeping bag to look at him as he came in, closing the blinds over the window and plunging them in darkness. Even then, he could see Yamaguchi and Tsukishima, both curled up on the double bed pushed against the wall, facing each other. Although they were not touching one another, they were only an inch away, just in case something happened, and there was something incredibly heartwarming and simultaneously heartbreaking about their posture.

"Yuu. Come sleep," Tanaka broke him out of his trance, and Nishinoya nodded, heading over to the sleeping bag laid out next to his friend and slipping in. "So. What's up in the master bedroom?"

"Kuroo's not looking so good, but Suga's gonna stay up to try and read up on his condition and figure something out," Noya explained, crossing his arms behind his head and staring at the ceiling. "We'll know tomorrow. Later today. Whatever."

"Man, our senpai is so cool," Tanaka groaned out. "Sacrificing himself like that... He's incredible. I really hope he finds what's wrong with Kuroo."

"He will," Noya replied quietly. Because at least one of them around here was useful for something. And it sure as hell wasn't him.

They fell into silence, which Noya took as a sign that his friend wanted to fall asleep. So he stayed quiet, stewing in his own doubts and self-deprecation as he turned his back to Tanaka's.

But then there were tears burning his bloodshot eyes, and he couldn't understand why. His fists clenched and he gritted his teeth, and he realized that is was because he was scared of being left behind. It was irrational. Daichi and the others had repeated it a million times, they'd promised with their every breath that nobody would be abandoned, and yet Noya felt so useless that he considered letting them leave him behind.

"Ryuu?" he found himself calling in the dark, holding his breath.

"Hmm?"

"It's nothing." His voice cracked at the end, and he bit his lip as some tears silently slid down his face, smothering into his dirty hair. "Just... I want to fix this. I promise I will protect you, and our kouhai, and our senpai, and our coach, and our friends. Everybody. I'll protect everybody."

"We're not worried," Tanaka chuckled softly in the dark, not moving, knowing to leave his friend be, and standing close enough to be of help should help be required. "After all, how can we be with Karasuno's Guardian Deity watching our backs?"

Noya let out a watery laugh, not sure how to feel about the statement. His old title applied to this situation seemed so liberating, and yet so condemning at the same time.
Later that morning, towards noontime, Noya found himself waking up, not quite jerking awake, but his heart fluttering uncomfortably nonetheless as he sat up. He'd only gotten a few hours of sleep, and that definitely wasn't enough to rest his sore limbs and exhausted core, but after tossing and turning unsuccessfully for a while after waking, he figured he wasn't getting any more sleep.

Careful not to disturb anybody sleeping in the same room, he tiptoed into the hall and towards the master bedroom. Entering it hesitantly, his eyes immediately fell upon Suga, who was fast asleep, head pillowed on his arms on the bed, legs spread out on the floor. The libero winced, knowing that couldn't be very healthy for his back, and approached, a smile growing on his face at the sound of his senpai's soft snoring.

On the bed, Kenma was still curled up next to Kuroo, the two Nekoma players still and seemingly lifeless in their sleep. It was almost scary, but after observing them both for a few seconds, Nishinoya found the faint rise and fall of their chests and breathed out in relief.

Feeling like he should do something, he went to the closet and opened it, wincing at the squeak the old hinges made, and pulled out a heavy comforter. Carrying it over to Suga, he unfolded it, and then gently draped it on the vice-captain's shoulders.

The silver-haired teen snorted and shifted, dragging the comforter with him as he rearranged himself. They were all light sleepers nowadays, so Noya was surprised he hadn't woken, but that only served to prove how utterly exhausted he was.

Deciding to let him sleep, he backed away and left the master bedroom, closing the door behind him. He was surprised to find Hinata standing in the hall, looking dazed and lost.

"Shouyo?" he asked, approaching carefully, and the small player turned his head to him, yawning.

"Senpai...?"

"What are you doing up?" the libero asked, concerned. The door to Hinata's room was open, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary inside.

"I forgot. I just woke up and thought I had something to do, but..." Hinata stretched, balancing his weight on both legs. "I dunno. Must've been nothing."

"You should get back to sleep, then," Noya suggested, and Hinata complied without complaint, turning back and heading into his room.

"Thanks, senpai," he mumbled, and Nishinoya was confused about the thanks. However, he followed Hinata in and waited for the boy to get comfortable under his blanket, back against Kageyama's, before he tucked him in and briefly ruffled his hair.

"Get some more rest, kouhai. The better your ankle heals, the better it is for you," he smiled softly, to which Hinata replied with a grateful smile of his own.

"Thank you."

Again with the gratitude, and Nishinoya still didn't understand the logic behind it. Shrugging, he checked to make sure that Hinata's eyes were closed before closing the door behind him.

Heading back down the hall, and having nothing to do, he headed to the bathroom, only to find that there was no running water. After some debating, he took a piss into the bathtub drain, and then returned to his room, at a loss of what to do.
Lying back down in his sleeping back, he curled up and closed his eyes, wishing for sleep. Next to him, Tanaka stirred in his sleep, rousing Yamaguchi, who sat up, looked around, and then went back to sleep, and through it all, Nishinoya could not find any peace.

But when the sound of breathing evened out in the room once again, he, too, felt the tug of unconsciousness on his eyelids, and gladly gave in. Anything to escape a world in which he was useless.

When he woke, it was to the sound of bustling in the other room. Eyesight too blurry to get up, he stayed laying down for as long as he could, listening to the others waking. Next to him, Tanaka sat up with a loud yawn and a stretch, and silent as ever, Tsukishima and Yamaguchi also sat up on the edge of the bed, the blond quietly asking questions to his friend.

A moment later, their door opened, and Hinata popped his head in, grinning at everyone.

"Hey, you're all awake already! Come to the master bedroom for lunch and briefing for today," he invited them, leaving their door wide open as he limped back the other way.

Groaning, all four of the room's inhabitants got to their feet, Tanaka opening the march by loudly proclaiming he had to pee. Yamaguchi followed him out silently, immediately heading for the master bedroom, leaving Nishinoya and Tsukishima.

The libero was just about to head out as well when the tall blond got up from bed, stumbling forward. With his ever-sharp reflexes, Noya grabbed his arms to steady him, wincing when crusted blood flaked off his right arm. Tsukishima took a second and then pulled away, huffing.

"You okay?"

"Fine," the first-year bit out, idly scratching some dried blood off of him. They were all filthy and disgusting, but at this point, unhygienic conditions seemed to be less of a bother than they were at the beginning of their adventure.

"Alright," Nishinoya shrugged, letting Tsukishima go first and watching him just in case he stumbled again. The blonde grabbed his glasses off the nightstand and stiffly walked out the door, sunken eyes giving no illusions as to how he felt. Worried, but not any more than usual, Noya followed him into the master bedroom, where their coach was already busy opening cans of beans in tomato sauce for lunchtime.

Once they were all together, each with a can in their hands, their unofficial meeting began.

"So. Is everyone alright?" Daichi inquired first of all, always as diligent with his team's health. A collective nod informed him that nothing was wrong, or at least was urgently wrong, so he nodded and turned to Suga, who had a smile on his cracked lips despite the exhaustion reflected in his face.

"First, I'll give you an update on Kuroo's condition, I guess," he began, briefly glancing at the third-year laying unconscious in the bed, right next to him. Kenma shifted, interested in the report, and can of beans all but forgotten. Next to him, Hinata made a small noise to try and coax him to eat, but the setter just shook his head, and turned his eyes back to Suga.

All breaths were held as Suga sighed.

"He's... not doing so well. I read up on his symptoms, and it makes sense that he's pretty hypovolemic, which means there's not enough blood circulating in his veins. He's breathing quickly and his heart is beating abnormally quick to try and compensate for the fact that there's less blood circulating, but his blood pressure got even lower this morning. 92/60. At this rate, if his heart keeps
beating even faster, it won't be able to keep up, and so if his blood pressure doesn't go up, at some point his heart will give up, and he'll go into cardiac arrest."

A collective breath was sucked in at the ultimatum, all eyes going to the limp figure laid on the bed, chest rising up and down in shallow, frantic breaths.

"So what can we do?" Asahi asked softly, eyes downcast as if he'd already given up.

"Well, if we could just get his blood pressure back up, his body would take care of itself... However, despite having gotten a litre and a half of fluids intravenously since Yamaguchi got to him last night, his blood pressure keeps dropping, so there's something going wrong here. The book is a pocket guide, so it didn't go into much detail about how he's doing it, but point is, the fluid we're giving him isn't staying in his veins. We're going to need some other type of fluid to help him expand his blood volume."

"And you know what that fluid is," Daichi finished for him, a spark of pride lit in his eyes.

"I do."

"And you know where to get it," Tanaka tried as well, sighing in relief when Suga nodded.

"Yes. I'll need our trusty captain's help with this, but... the intravenous solution I want to try giving him is called Ringer's Lactate, and the drug guide says that it's a blood volume expander, so I think it'll work in getting his pressure right back up. However, Ringer's Lactate is kind of... expensive. And rare. So it can probably only be found in hospitals, rather than in consult clinics. So..." he turned to Daichi. "Dai, can you find out if there are any hospitals around here? I don't even know where we are right now, so I can't say, but if we want to save Kuroo, he's going to need medical stock from a hospital. With what we have with us right now, he won't make it past dinnertime."

"No." Surprisingly, it was a whole new voice that immediately cut in, tense as if a single wrong breath would break him apart. "No. He'll make it. He'll wait for us to save him. He's going to be okay."

Kenma's eyes were tilted at the ground, but there was a saddened kind of disbelief in his gaze that tugged at all of their heartstrings.

"We'll all do all that we can. Kenma, since you were our informant before, would you mind taking at the maps with me? We can probably figure out where we are and locate nearby hospitals," Daichi suggested, the other team's setter nodding.

"Right. Thank you, you two. On my end, I'm going to need Yamaguchi's help," he looked at the first year, who hardly seemed surprised, if he was startled at all, even. "I hate to admit it, but I don't think I could even stand up right now. I crashed pretty badly after last night, so I won't be able to go. And just in case something happens to Kuroo, I want to stay here and do a continuous assessment on him. Yamaguchi, you're kind of well-oriented in medical things, so I'll give you a list of stuff to bring back, and you can orient the team accompanying you. Sounds okay?"

The teen thought about it for a moment, and then silently nodded.

"I'll get ready to leave with Yamaguchi," Tsukishima immediately announced. "I'll be able to help." He didn't say it out loud, but they all knew he meant to translate for Yamaguchi's silence, and keep an eye on his friend.

"My ankle's still busted," Hinata sighed, clicking his tongue. "So I'm kinda useless on long runs. On our way here, though, we did pass a few houses, so Kageyama and I can go see if they've got
anything useful, and any kind of water stocks."

"Don't volunteer me without asking," Kageyama groaned, rubbing his forehead. "I'll only come with you to make sure you don't fall down some stairs or something."

"I'll come with you two. You never know when you might need your trusty senpai's assistance!" Tanaka volunteered, pointing at Asahi, who jerked at the offending finger being shoved into his face. "And he'll come, too, if we do end up finding water stocks!"

"Good, then we're all settled," Keishin sighed, a fond smile crossing his face. "Daichi, let me take a look at those maps with you. When the team goes out, Kenma can accompany them on our behalf."

"Sounds good. Let's get to work, everybody," the captain prompted, clambering cries of acquiescence ringing out as they all rose to their feet to vacate to their tasks.

Nishinoya stayed on the side, frozen in shame and feeling more ignored and useless than ever.

"...-...-...-...-...-...

He later approached Daichi, just as he and their coach finished mapping out the travel trajectory for Kenma's group. Trying to keep the desperation out of his voice, he all but begged his captain to let him accompany the raiding party, if only to be a fourth man to escort them around. Daichi had hesitated over sending out someone else, but Keishin had stepped in like a saving grace and had backed Noya up.

That's how he ended up gearing for the expedition alongside Kenma, Yamaguchi and Tsukishima, throat tight in relief and apprehension. None of them spoke, most of all because they had nothing to say, and so their preparations at the front door were quick and silent. Fifteen minutes after receiving their destination, they were ready to journey towards it.

"Are you okay to make it?" Daichi asked, watching Noya scrutinize the map they'd been given to study the drawn route. "I hope it's not too confusing."

"It's fine," Noya nodded, following the marker trail across the town once more before folding the map and putting it inside his bag. "It's not that far. Bit less than two hours of walking, right?"

"Right," Keishin nodded, looking pensive. "Do you have enough water and some medical supplies just in case?"

"We've been at this for a long time, coach. We've got this," Noya assured him, although his proud smile faded when he say his coach's strangely sad expression turn pained. Insecurity roiled in his gut, but before he could apologize for whatever it was that had disturbed his coach, Daichi cut in.

"I know you'll be fine. In case you find any humans, just avoid them and lay low. We'll expect you back here in six hours, for dinner, that alright?"

"It's fine. We'll be back in less time than that," Noya nodded, looking at his team with confidence. "I... I'll bring them back for sure," he added softly, mostly for himself, but then there was a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up in surprise.

"I know you will," his captain grinned, tired and haggard but genuine, and Noya's heart swelled with emotion. Tears rose in his eyes, and he had to look away before the faith that Daichi was putting in him became too overwhelming.

"Yamaguchi," Suga called from the upper floor, tiredly making his way down the stairs to meet them
with a piece of paper. All eyes went to him instead, and Noya was glad for the distraction that allowed him to dry his eyes with a subtle swipe of his fingers. "Here's your list of things to bring back. You okay with all of these?"

The first-year gingerly took the paper and silently skimmed through it, then nodded and folded the paper, putting it in his backpack.

"Great. Just bring back any other medical equipment that might be harder to come by later on, too. The more you can carry, the better it is," he advised, and Yamaguchi nodded again, expression as flat as ever.

"We'll take care of it," Kenma vocalized what Yamaguchi was probably thinking. "Please take care of Kuro until we make it back."

"Leave him to us," Keishin assured him, though he didn't look too convinced. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

"Raids are a second nature by now, coach, so don't worry too much about us," Noya answered, shrugging.

"He's right," Daichi backed him up with a nod. "And these guys are good. With Kenma navigating, there's no way they'll get lost, and Tsukishima and Nishinoya are great escorts. Yamaguchi will be just fine gathering all the stuff we need with them around."

"If you say so..." And he left it at that, albeit a bit reluctantly.

"We should go," Tsukishima suggested, getting slightly impatient. "The sooner we're done, the sooner we can save that idiot's life."

"Alright, let's go," Noya acquiesced, opening the door before another insecurity could hold any of them back.

They left with brief goodbyes, and set out onto the asphalt road towards the town.

Making it to town took them half an hour, if their theory matched up to practice. As silent as always, they walked without conversation, only the occasional directive being given by one of them to the others. In any case, Noya was glad for the lack of action. The silence in the environment around them could have been unnerving, but at this point, it was only comforting.

They stopped for a water break in town, and then set back out. Their trek was uneventful, footsteps tapping lightly against the eroded concrete on the ground. The wind blew occasionally through the cracks and holes in the destroyed buildings around them, and the melody of the abandoned town carried them forward, towards the hospital.

'Hospital' was a strong word, in fact, Noya noticed as they finally came close to their destination, as indicated by Kenma. The building they were heading for on the side of the large street looked more like a big clinic than a hospital. About five stories high, Noya estimated, and clicked his tongue. He hoped that the place was stocked like a hospital, even if it didn't look like one.

"Okay, once we get in, let's be really careful," he reminded his team, twirling a crowbar they'd 'borrowed' from their hideout in his hand. "This place has a lot of supplies, so chances are high that survivors would flock here. If you see anybody, hide. If anybody sees you, run. Let's stick together until we reach the right floor."

"Tadashi will tell us which floor we'll take once we get inside," Tsukishima mumbled, hands tight
around his own crowbar. "We shouldn't stay in the open longer. Let's go."

"Right," Noya nodded, gulping down nervously, and his heart sank as he found himself falling behind the others' steps. Before he could subtly slip back in front, like a true leader, like a valuable ally would do, they reached the door, and slipped in.

The lobby of the tiny hospital was empty, dust covered front desk glaring them in the face. The air smelled stale and stuffy, making them clear their throats. They cleared the area with a sweeping glance, each on their side, and then Yamaguchi approached the front desk, reading the board nailed behind it detailing the floors.

"Do you know where to go?" Tsukishima asked, already knowing the answer, and expecting no less when Yamaguchi silently broke away, leading them towards the nearest emergency staircase.

They all followed, eyes and ears out for anybody lurking within the dark hospital, and were relieved when no sounds came from above in the looming staircase.

This time, Nishinoya insisted to be up front, with Tsukishima bringing in the back, because he had to make himself useful, even if he had to die first to achieve that.

They walked up six sets of stairs before Yamaguchi stopped him with a gentle tug on his sleeve. Noya turned to his kouhai, eyes questioning in the darkness, and then his gaze went to where Yamaguchi's was, on the door to the third floor.

"In there?" he asked, and with Yamaguchi's silent confirmation, motioned for them to follow him. As they approached the door, a funky smell began pervading the air, and scarily enough, it smelled familiar. Noya was almost afraid to identify the stench.

But in reality, they all knew. They all knew why the staircase smelled more and more putrid as they went up the stories.

Noya pushed the door in, and it budged slightly with a loud creak that rang in his ears.

"Damn it," he swore, pushing harder. In the darkness, he couldn't see the obstruction in front of the door, but when the nauseating smell of rotten flesh assaulted their nostrils, he knew that he didn't need to see it to know it.

The others looked just as disgusted as him, Kenma coughing in his sleeve to clear the putrid odour from where it was burned in his nostrils. For a second, Noya was tempted to shut the door right back and maybe cry, but despite the tears pricking his eyes, he pushed on, knowing that he'd have to guide his friends through the horrors of the present, so that one day, they find it in themselves to look forward to the future.

"Once inside, let's grab masks," Nishinoya suggested, grunting as he put his weight against the door again. It opened a bit more, and he almost backtracked at the horrifying gust of stench that slapped him in the face. "Won't do too much, but at least it might cover the smell a bit."

"I'll get the flashlights out," Tsukishima suggested through his pinched nose, and took a deep breath before he opened his bag and began rifling through it for their flashlights. Each one of them got one, and turned it on, and honestly, they did not know what they were expecting when they instinctively turned the light towards the door.

The rotten, red and black flesh of the corpse in front of the door came into view, its dried up eyes hanging out of their sockets and toothless mouth open in a scream, as if warning them.
They all turned their eyes away for a second, trying to quell the nausea in their upset stomachs, but then, Noya kept pushing through, despite the primal fear that had taken his heart captive. Finally, the corpse was pushed far enough to let them through, and they all slid onto the unit.

The lights were shut off, but from the afternoon light filtering in through the windows at each end of the hallway, they could all make out the bumpy outline of the floor. Bumpy with the mounds of corpses piled up left and right, one more rotten than the other.

Tsukishima let out a whimper that might've been embarrassing, had none of the others restrained themselves only by sheer horror.

The amount of bodies littering the unit floor was staggering. Of all shapes and sizes, there were bodies laying against walls, holding other bodies, stacked on top of one another, fallen awkwardly as if they'd died standing up. Clothed in ripped, dirty, stained civilian clothes, hospital gowns or nursing scrubs, the only thing common to all of the bodies was the advanced state of decay they were in. They must have been lying there, dead, for months.

"This must've been... after the bomb..." Noya reasoned, grabbing a mask out of a dispenser close by, encouraging the others to do the same. "They must've died by the radiation..."

"This is horrifying," Kenma breathed out from behind his mask, eyes shut as if willing the sight away. They all took a deep breath, but the only thing that achieved was tunnelling the stench of putrefaction further down into the creases of their lungs, as if making sure that they'd never forget what death smelled like. "Why did this happen to them? To us?"

And maybe in a few years, when they were all safe and reestablished in society, they'd wake up in the night screaming in terror, the backs of their eyelids burned with the gruesome images of a war that had ended up killing them anyway, and their nostrils bloated with the reminder that they, too, would someday die and decompose.

"I don't know..." Nishinoya answered, turning to gently place a hand on the setter's shoulder. "Let's... let's not think about it and get to work. Let's be careful, even if there might not be any... survivors on the floor."

"Right," Tsukishima and Kenma echoed, then turned to Yamaguchi for further directions.

The younger player looked to Noya for reassurance, and then took a deep breath before taking the lead. Empowered by the statement of trust, Noya fell into step right next to his kouhai, ready to hold his hand should he ever need it.

Yamaguchi led them forward, peering into the rooms, where they found more corpses, either in the beds or at the bedside chairs, or even on the floor. The entire scene was one right out of a horror movie, and for some reason, none of them could shake the eerie feeling that one of the corpses was bound to get up and attack them all of a sudden. The silence was the worst part. Silence suffocated in the heavy air, only punctuated by the squeaking of shoes on a floor covered in bodily fluids, and the squelching of the occasional body being toed out of the way.

Finally, Yamaguchi stopped and entered a small room on their left, a stock room by the looks of it. Only one corpse was by the shelves lining the small room, a putrid body dressed in a flesh-and-blood-stained nursing uniform, having fallen on the ground face first and having dropped its supplies.

Bearing with it, Yamaguchi hesitated a second before walking over it, and standing back a bit to look at the labeled shelves. He removed his list from his bag and began inspecting the rows of equipment, just as the other three looked curiously at all the medical equipment around them. Finally, after some
deliberation, Yamaguchi began picking out some equipment off the shelves, slowly at first, and then handfuls at a time.

Kenma was first to volunteer, stepping forward with his bag open so that Yamaguchi could drop all his equipment inside. The younger player practically threw in syringes and needles, alcohol and chlorehexidine swabs, gauze and bandage rolls, and whole boxes of gloves, sterile or otherwise. Kenma's backpack filled quickly with all the basic equipment they needed, and then Yamaguchi motioned Noya forward. The second-year repeated Kenma's earlier motion of presenting his bag, and this time, Yamaguchi began filling it up with some items after carefully checking out the packages.

Several times, he hesitated and bit his lip in thought, replaced items on shelves and grabbed others, compared them to one another, and Noya could not help but be blown away by how dedicated the younger boy had become to his impromptu role as assistant-medic in the months that they'd spent together. Both he and Suga had integrated knowledge that was generally taught over years of schooling in the span of a few months, not fully, but just the basics, which were impressive in themselves as well.

Yamaguchi seemed to be picking out tubes, mostly, and some bags, that he stuffed into Noya's backpack a bit carelessly. He also threw in what seemed to be a few oxygen masks of different kinds, having to stop and rearrange his space a bit at some point to fit in more of them. He seemed to recognize the equipment he needed without trouble, and again, they could not help but admire all of the knowledge the quiet first-year possessed.

Tadashi always seemed to surprise them when they least expected it.

Once he was done filling Noya's backpack, Yamaguchi stepped back, and thought to himself for a second before turning to Tsukishima. Looking him in the eye, he pointed at a box full of what seemed to be pre-packaged sterile kits, and stepped over to make space.

He then went for the exit, Noya diligently following.

"I guess you two should clear out this room, and I'll follow him. Holler when you're done so we can find one another again," Noya suggested. Tsukishima only hesitated one second, eyes falling on Yamaguchi's tense posture, before nodding with gritted teeth.

"Sure. Make it quick."

Nodding back, Noya followed after his kouhai as the latter led them back down the hall towards the nursing station, walking over the corpses blooming on the floor like the dead flowers they'd seen in the endless fields during their travels. They tried to keep their flashlights away from the floor and concentrated on looking forward, and it helped not to look at the mounds of flesh bumping against their ankles, and sometimes even their shins. And obviously, they tried not to think of the fact that they were almost knee-deep in a sea of month-old corpses.

Yamaguchi looked around the nursing station a bit, but his eyes fell on a large door next to the station that indicated that it was for staff members only. Surely enough, when he peeked in, asides from the bodies on the floor, he recognized the characteristics of a typical medication room. Pushing against the door to clear out a body slumped against it, both of them entered, and looked around.

The taller teen immediately spotted a shelf stacked with bags of IV solutions, and rushed towards it, looking over the available solutions. Noya watched him carefully as he took his bag off his back and handed it to him, then pointed at several different solution bags.
"Should I take about... 3 of each?" he asked, not sure how many he could fit in his bag. Yamaguchi thought for a while and then shook his head, approaching the bags.

And to Nishinoya's immense surprise, he spoke as he pointed to the stacks.

"Two. Four. Four. Five. Three."

"Oh." His eyebrows had risen in shock at the sound of his kouhai's scratchy voice, which he hadn't heard in over a week, but he composed himself quickly, setting out to fulfill his task. "Got it."

Nodding, Yamaguchi headed off without another word, as if he hadn't said anything at all in the first place. He instead headed deeper into the med room, out of Nishinoya's sight, hidden by a computer station lined with a bunch of patient charts.

Busy with his task, and faintly amused by the feeling of fluid in the squishy plastic bags, Noya carefully counted the bags and made sure he was taking as many as Yamaguchi ordered. The bags came in different sizes, and Noya had no idea what each one of them was supposed to be. They were all clear fluids, and again, he was impressed by Yamaguchi's ability to distinguish between them all.

Noise came down the hallway, and Noya momentarily exited the med room to wave his light at his two companions, now heading for him.

"You're good on your end?" he asked as the two approached, bags looking full and heavy.

"Yup. We fit as much as we could of everything," Tsukishima reported. "You?"

"Almost done gathering the IV solutions. Yamaguchi's in the back doing something else," Noya answered with a shrug.

And obviously, whatever they were expecting Yamaguchi to do did not involve screaming.

Because as soon as the words left his mouth, a cry came from inside the med room, making their hairs stand on end at how terrified it sounded.

Noya did not even have time to turn around that Tsukishima had already run past him, into the med room.

"Yamaguchi," he whispered breathlessly, watching as Kenma slipped in as well, and feeling strangely, familiarly left out. But then again, it was his fault for being useless.

Finally snapping to his senses, he jogged into the room, almost jumping over corpses as he went around the computer station to come face to face with Tsukishima steadying a crying Yamaguchi by the upper arms.

"Tadashi," the blond was whispering, not even bothering to hide how desperately worried he was for his friend, but also desperately relieved that he seemed unharmed. "What happened? Come on, talk to me..."

But the small teen seemed inconsolable, sniffling and whimpering. "Yamaguchi," he whispered breathlessly, watching as Kenma slipped in as well, feeling strangely, familiarly left out. But then again, it was his fault for being useless.

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Nishinoya had never seen Tsukishima be so openly concerned, and the feeling of powerlessness became even greater inside of him. He never should have left Yamaguchi alone.

He made a move to go after his kouhais, but a hand on his arm stopped him. He turned to look at Kenma in confusion, but the other just shook his head and pointed at the shelf Yamaguchi was busying himself on before he'd screamed.

"Let them talk. Let's pick up where he left off in the meantime," he suggested, and for a lack of better things to do, Noya nodded and followed him to the counter where Yamaguchi's equipment had been dropped in his surprise.

Gentle whispers reached their ears as they worked to figure out what Yamaguchi would need from the shelf of medication, and slowly, the sniffles died down.

"Tadashi, what happened?" Tsukishima finally asked, and even if he knew that despite not seeing them, their companions could hear them, there was not a single waver in his voice.

There were a few moment of silence, and finally, a croak rose out of the pinch server's throat.

"Corpse," he sobbed out. "At the narcotics cabinet."

There was a small shift as Tsukishima probably turned to look at the corpse in question, and then another as he returned.

"Did it scare you?"

"Looks like you," Tadashi sobbed out, and Noya's heart promptly broke into pieces. An acid aftertaste rose up in his throat and he clenched his fist on a small vial to calm down. "Blond... tall, slim... glasses..."

"You... you confused it with me," Tsukishima repeated, as if taken aback by that, and Yamaguchi broke out into a fresh wave of sobs.

"I'm sorry," he cried out, probably not caring who heard him at this point. "I'm sorry, Tsukki, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Nothing to apologize about."

"I'm sorry!" A desperate wail that almost made Nishinoya want to go and help out, but Kenma's insistent, if not downcast gaze held him back. "I'm weak and pathetic and useless, and when I finally get to help, I let you down by... by being scared!"

"Shut up," Tsukishima growled, and there was the sound of shifting chairs and clothes. "Shut up. Don't you dare say any of that."

And Tsukishima was so, so right to Noya's ears. Because the only weak, pathetic, and useless person around was himself.

"There's nothing wrong with being scared. Hell, this world is one big nightmare these days, so you'd have to be at some point. Don't apologize for something so normal," Tsukishima continued, the bite gone from his words. Now, they seemed soft, and soothing. And Noya finally saw why Yamaguchi was so attached to the rude, aloof teenager.

"For a second, I thought..." Yamaguchi sniffed loudly. "I thought of what it would be like... if that were you. If I were to lose you. And I just- I just remembered when it happened-"
"Stop. You don't have to think of it anymore, it's over-"

"But I do!"

All activity ceased in the room for a second. Even Noya and Kenma held their breaths, the latter probably not understanding much but knowing that the atmosphere was tense.

"I do have to think of it, every single second of the day." Yamaguchi continued, softer, more desperate. "I can't stop thinking of how I almost got you killed. I can't stop having nightmares of you, beaten, bloody, shot full of holes, mutilated, rotten, broken, dead and buried, or coming back to hate me for failing you. I can't stop seeing your face on every single one of these bodies. I can't stop thinking of what it'll be like the next time I'll fuck up, and you're not there to pick up the pieces. I can't stop thinking of how terrifying it'll be to live without you. And I'm so scared. I'm so, so scared of losing you... Tsukki..." And, even softer, almost a meek whimper of pure and simple terror. "Kei..."

And suddenly, Yamaguchi was cut off by the sound of ruffling fabric, and by the squeaking of chairs, Noya could only hazard a guess that Tsukishima had hugged his best friend.

It suddenly felt like they were intruding on a very intimate moment between two extremely intimate individuals, and more than feeling jealous, Noya felt horrible for assisting to their hearts laid so bare in front of one another.

"Fine then," Tsukki finally mumbled, so soft that Noya almost did not hear him. "If you're so scared, then I guess I'll have to make sure I never leave your side. You haven't spoken in forever, and the first thing you tell me when you do is that you are afraid. That's kind of pathetic, so I'll just have to make sure you never have to live without me."

And he sounded like he'd just made the suggestion to go take a walk. His words were airy, casual, and Noya wondered how he was so in control of his emotions.

"Tsukki..."

"Stop crying, Tadashi. There's nothing to cry about. I'm right here, I'm alive, and I'm not going to die. Our senpai is right here with us to protect us, too. We are going to go back to the others soon, and you'll save that idiot Kuroo's life. And you'll be okay. You'll be okay."

Another sniffle, and a weak laugh.

"Man... never thought you'd ever have to see me like this... I really am pathetic."

Noya was about to step in, just to remind him of the contrary, when the sound of two people getting up from their seats shut him up.

"Yeah," Tsukishima whispered, and in his outrage, Noya turned to protest, even if they were hidden from view by the station. However, clothing ruffled gently before he could say anything else, and after a small silence punctuated by the soothing sound of two people breathing in tandem, the two broke apart. "You kind of are pathetic. But we all are, and we're still alive nonetheless."

"So from here on, we can only get better," Yamaguchi whispered back, as if to complete the sentence, and they all fell into silence.

Noya could only stand there, completely taken aback by the conversation that had just transpired just beyond his sight, until Yamaguchi called out to him.
"Sorry about that, senpai. I'll... I'll be back to help you finish gathering things."

"T-Take your time," the libero stammered, and, heart beating fast, he turned back to the counter to pretend he was occupied. And when Yamaguchi joined him, inspecting the medications briefly before picking out vials for them to put in their bags, he pretended not to notice his bloodshot eyes, and the small smile tugging at his lips.

When a fair amount of medication of all sorts was stuffed into Yamaguchi's bag, he turned to Tsukishima, who was looking at him work with his usual impassiveness, and smiled softly to him.

"Tsukki... Could you take Kenma back to the stock room and grab two oxygen tanks? Just be careful not to drop them or they could explode," he instructed, finally sounding like his normal self, like he'd sounded before he got kidnapped and beaten and almost killed in front of his only remaining family. There was pain in the back of his tone, but that only seemed to make him stronger.

"Sure," the blond nodded, and with one last glance at his best friend, left the room with the ever-subdued Kenma in tow.

"What should I do?" Noya asked as Yamaguchi bent down to the lower cabinets to start pulling out IV tubing.

"Did you get all the IV bags?" the smaller teen asked, reading tubing packages to try and figure out which one he wanted.

"Ah, no... I'll go finish up," he nodded, and headed off, away from view again. But this time, he wasn't so worried. Yamaguchi had made it through the toughest part, and now, there was only recovery in store for him.

"Senpai?" Yamaguchi suddenly called out, feeling unsure.

"Is something wrong?" Noya suddenly perked, worried that something might have happened.

"No, no, just..." Yamaguchi sighed, and Noya deflated, heart beating fast in his ribcage. "I just... wanted to thank you. For everything."

"Everything?" Noya echoed, confused. "I... I haven't done anything."

"Of course you have," Yamaguchi protested softly. "You've been... the best senpai I could ask for. You've looked after me, taken care of me, made sure I was safe, stood up for me... I wanted to thank you for caring..."

"That's... kind of dumb," Noya frowned, immediately regretting his impulsive words. "I-I mean, not you! Not dumb! Sorry..." He groaned in frustration as words escaped him. "What I mean is... You don't need to thank me for something that's not commendable. Caring for you is not a feat I've achieved; it's my duty as your senpai, and a duty that I fulfill with pride."

"Well... thank you anyway. I think..." A pause that left a ball knotted in Noya's throat. "I think it's a lot thanks to you that I've made it so far."

And he really, genuinely had no idea what to say to that.

Because Yuu was useless. He was small and weak, and the only good thing about him were his reflexes. He was loud and too energetic and annoying, dim-witted and impulsive and terrible with words. He was a self-proclaimed senpai and sought attention, and never seemed to do the right thing despite his boasts of greatness.
But slowly, as Yamaguchi came over to see him, a small, genuine smile touching his lips, he realized that he'd been wrong. And that he was not useless.

And that he'd only believed he'd been useless, whilst all along, he'd been more helpful than he ever hoped to be.

He was a pillar of support, a shield against all forms of harm and a morale boost. He was a leader and a charismatic senior, and a caring friend. And though he'd never considered his presence as being an absolute necessity, in the end, it was what had kept so many of them together.

Yamaguchi did not say a single thing about the silent tears that rolled down his senpai's cheeks, nor the wobbling lips, nor the strangled whine that escaped his throat before he could catch it. Instead, he grabbed the last of the IV bags they needed and zipped up Noya's bag, giving just enough time for his precious senpai to compose himself before the other two came back in, one oxygen tank slung over each of their shoulders.

"Are we ready to go?" Tsukishima asked, not asking questions about his friends' red eyes and bright gazes.

"Yes," Nishinoya nodded, a confident grin blooming on his face. The expression was so familiar; it felt like he had finally returned home. To the place where he truly was himself. "Let's leave this all behind us."

And perhaps he was talking about the sea of bodies they waded through on their way to the staircase, after all. But deep inside, they all knew he was asking them to move on in a whole other way.

Silently, side by side, the four of them hauled all of their heavy equipment onto their backs, and headed out. With the added weight, it was even harder to step over the bodies, but somehow, they all felt lighter as well. The stench of death had even stopped being so suffocating, at least for the while it took them to get to the staircase.

Yamaguchi took a moment to recount everything in his head and make sure they'd forgotten nothing, and then stepped through the door that Noya held for him. And the latter's gaze was bright as he held the door for Tsukishima, whose softer-than-usual gaze was laid on the back of Yamaguchi's head, and Kenma, who looked more relieved than ever before.

There was hope. Even if there was none to be found, they'd made their own hope from scratch.

The flashlights were returned to whatever small spot could be found in the overstuffed bags once they reached the lobby of the small town hospital, and suddenly, as the door to the outside opened with a small push, the moist, slightly acrid air slapped them in the face and cleared out the rot from their lungs.

For now.

The bleeding sky accompanied them as they journeyed back towards their home.

...-...-...-...-...-...

This brave new world seemed to lack the concept of giving for the sake of giving. This was a fact that they'd all noted time and time again, but that would never cease to shock them.

Things were always too good to be true.

Half an hour into their trek back, just when they'd deemed it safe to drop their defenses a little bit,
they were finally met with an obstacle on what had been a smooth -too smooth- route so far.

And Nishinoya knew, as soon as he saw a figure moving in the distance, that this was what he was meant to do.

Halting his group, he stepped in front of them, crowbar at the ready, and tried to look as intimidating as his small stature would permit him. His companions followed his orders silently, if not out of fear than anything else.

"Who are you?" Noya called out to the person standing on the sidewalk at the corner of the street. The person looked at them briefly, gaze eerily fixated, and then slowly, silently began approaching.

The four of them took an instinctive step back.

"Tsukishima, survey the surroundings for more of them. I'll get the front," Noya commanded, throat tight and dry from the stress that was pumping his blood harshly through his veins. "You! Stop and identify yourself!"

However, the person did not stop. Instead, silent as ever, they advanced until they were close enough for Noya to distinguish them. Or her, more specifically.

The woman walking towards them was young, probably only a few years older than them, even, had the dirt smudged on her face and clothes not made her look older. She had black hair tied in a bun and dirty glasses, and a kind look in her eyes. The sway of her thin hips grabbed Noya's attention for just one second, and that second was all it took for him to suddenly find his vision blurry.

Shimizu...

"Who are you?" he asked again, throat aching from the withheld tears. The girl looked exactly like their precious manager, their precious, golden, beautiful manager whom Noya had adored so much... Oh god, he missed her...

The girl's innocent smile was a cruel reminder that despite having made it so far, they'd also lost so much.

"My name is Yukiko," she introduced herself in a soft, sweet voice, devoid of all ill intent. "I'm sorry if I scared you. I didn't mean to."

"Yukiko," Noya gritted his teeth, looking up at her with mixed feelings. She looked harmless enough, but at this point, he knew better than to underestimate the people he met. "What are you doing?"

"Huh? Well, I was just out to try and find some more blankets from these houses, to take back home. My little sister's caught a cold, so I'm trying to nurse her back to health like a good older sibling," she replied airily, startling the boys.

"There are more of you?" the libero asked, careful to mask the suspicion in his tone.

"Oh yeah, lots of us," Yukiko nodded enthusiastically. "In the downtown area of this town, actually. People have started rebuilding a society and trying to find some stability, so it's actually kinda nice down there. There are a lot of families, old or reconstructed, or just people who've decided to stick together... We're about a hundred in total, maybe? Maybe more? It's kind of hard to tell. In the beginning, it was basically just a bunch of people fleeing from Tokyo that made pit-stops in several towns on their way up to Hokkaido, and who gather survivors in every town to try and make a large party of survivors. They settle in towns a few weeks at a time, and then move on, taking everybody
"What?" Noya's eyebrows shot to his forehead in surprise. "You're... rebuilding society?"

"Yeah... I mean, it's not perfect or anything," the girl laughed sheepishly. "But there's a small militia, and people have small businesses where they trade goods for other goods, and all in all, it's not as bad as things could be. After being on the run for so long, it's nice to stay here and finally feel safe."

The four boys glanced at each other in a flash, the word 'safe' settling like poison on their tongues when they silently echoed it, and they turned to the girl.

"Right, then. We'll be going."

"Already?" the young girl pouted, clutching her backpack tightly. "Where are you headed?"

"Back home, to a friend in need. We're kind of in a hurry," Tsukishima finally interjected, reminding Noya that they were hard-pressed for time with Kuroo in such a precarious condition.

"That's true. We need to get back as soon as possible," he confirmed.

"Oh, is your friend sick, too?"

"Kinda. We have to go," Kenma pressed as well, noting the escalation of tension in the atmosphere.

"Then wait!" Finally, the girl swung her backpack to the front, and the boys instinctively dropped into a defensive position, taking a step back from her. Eyes following her every movement, they weren't even sure how they were supposed to react when she pulled out a couple of canned goods, handing them out to them. "Here! For your friend. I hope he gets better."

"Why are you giving these to us?" Noya asked suspiciously, not letting his guard down. "What's in it for you?"

"Nothing, really," the girl quieted a bit, looking sheepish. "It's just... I wanna return favours. I have plenty more of them at home, so I don't mind. The people from Tokyo who settled in this town were very kind to me and my sister, and the other survivors, so I'm just trying to pass along the kindness. Please accept this gift."

The four of them looked at one another suspiciously, debating in silence, before Noya nodded. He'd take them for now, but he'd have to ask Daichi's opinion before they consumed them.

"Thank you," he bit out, cautiously taking the cans from her hands and drawing right back, handing them to Yamaguchi so that the boy could put them away somewhere in his bag. "We really have to go, though."

"No problem. Take care!" the girl wished them, even stepping to the side to clear them a way to pass. And as they walked by, she waved to them, the sudden movement causing them all to flinch back. "And if you ever need anything, or a safe place to rest, or even a nice place to settle and rebuild, please come and see us. Talk to anybody in the downtown area and they'll help. There's safety in numbers, after all!"

"Sure," Noya mumbled, not knowing what to make of the offer, and his steps accelerated until all four of them had turned a corner and had vanished from the girl's sight.

"That was odd," Tsukishima commented as their steps regained their previous pace, and their hearts slowly began to return to a normal rate.
"You said it," Noya sighed, but dropped the subject there. Nobody seemed to object, and Kenma carefully began navigating them through the town's winding streets.

To their eternal relief, they encountered no more problems until they exited the town's boundaries, on the final stretch of road that would lead them right back to the house, right back to their family, and to Kuroo, whose only hope was half an hour's walk away.

Once the coast was clear and they were safely engaged on the home stretch, Tsukishima fell back with Noya subtly, letting Yamaguchi and Kenma get some advance on them. Noya noted the subtle indication and slowed down as well, waiting for Tsukishima to make the first move.

It took him a few minutes, but he finally did.

"Senpai."

Noya looked up, but seeing as Tsukishima was pointedly looking forward, he also turned his gaze away from the taller boy.

"I... I wanted to thank you."

"You, too?" Nishinoya asked, genuinely surprised before he realized he was being rude. "I mean... that's not a bad thing, don't feel bad or anything, sorry! Just... why?"

"It's... it's complicated," Tsukishima grunted, as anally retentive as always. "Just... thanks for looking after all of us like this."

"Sure," Noya answered with some hesitation, but fell into silence. Though it sounded like they'd dropped the subject there, it didn't feel like they had.

So they walked, ruined soles of their dirty shoes scratching on the asphalt, the gentle breeze letting Tsukishima gather his thoughts.

"I think about death a lot," the blond finally admitted in a quiet whisper, as if afraid.

"Is it because of all those bodies?" Noya asked softly, eyes sad. He wished his kouhai didn't have to suffer like this, but there was nothing he could do to steal their pain.

"No, like..." Tsukishima's voice caught in his throat, and Noya was surprised. Even for the blond, this was a whole new level of inability to communicate. "I meant like... my death, okay?"

"You're afraid of dying?"

"No. That's the thing." Tsukishima hesitated again, definitely looking away now. "I think about dying a lot. Often."

"What do you--" But then it clicked. The sad eyes. The nightmares and sleepless nights. The innocence tainted in blood. The broken arrogance. "Oh." The recklessness, the carelessness, the obvious disregard for personal safety. "Oh, you mean like..."

"Yeah," Tsukishima bit his lip, looking guilty. "Yeah, like suicide."

They fell into silence in words, but into a typhoon in thoughts. And Noya realized that he was nervous, but not scared. He wasn't scared.

"Thank you for confiding in me," he finally began, not sure how to go about it. Tsukishima seemed to be hanging onto every word of his, so he couldn't mess up now. "It's... probably not easy to
admit."

Tsukishima didn't reply.

"Have you..." He tried to word his next question carefully. "Have you tried...?"

"Not yet. Not consciously, at least," the blond answered with a small sigh. "It's more like... thinking like I wouldn't mind being shot. Or I wouldn't mind leaving the group if we began running out of supplies. When I get hurt, I don't feel the urgency to get treated, and things like that."

"And..." Another pregnant pause, and the next question was whispered out, almost. "Do you want to die...?"

"Yes."

Noya did not know how to respond. Thankfully, Tsukishima didn't seem to be done.

"I do want to die... But not enough to kill myself."

"That's good." The second-year's words were strangely calm. "I mean... that you're putting it into doubt. What's holding you back?"

"Seeing all of you fight so hard to hold on," Tsukishima grumbled, running a hand through his hair tiredly. "And... promising Tadashi I wouldn't leave him alone. And... And you."

"Me!?!" Nishinoya exclaimed, taken aback, and his loud exclamation drew momentary attention from their two other companions, walking a bit further from them. However, they soon turned back, as if knowing that the pair needed some time to talk.

"You've been an inspiration, I guess. Ish." The first-year seemed to be loathe to admit it. "You've got our backs, even now. So... So I guess it wouldn't make any sense to try and kill myself if I've got someone always looking out for me."

"Damn right," Noya exclaimed again, less loudly. "Damn right I'll protect you!" There was a sudden flare of pride and protectiveness in his chest, a feeling that made him burn up, as if he was getting ready to play an important volleyball game. There was no feeling like that of being needed. He really hadn't been useless all along. He was Karasuno's shield, and if that didn't make him feel proud as hell, he didn't know what else would. "As long as I'm here, nobody's ever going to die!"

"You're still as noisy and annoying as ever," Tsukishima grumbled, but it was half-hearted, as proven by the small smile that touched his lips right after. "But... thank you. Really. You saved my life, senpai."

"And I always will," Noya topped off with a huff. "You can count on your trusty senpai. And on the others. Everybody in our group is your ally, Tsukishima. If you need anything, anything at all... You know we're all there for you, right?"

"Yeah," the blond nodded. "I'll be fine."

"If you say so," But Noya knew better than to let it go. "Have you told anybody else?"

"No."

"Not even Yamaguchi?"

"Especially not him."
"When the whole Kuroo business is cleared up, maybe you should talk to him. Or Suga. Suga's a great listener," Noya suggested.

"But... I just said I was okay," Tsukishima frowned, as if not understanding. "I don't need to talk."

"You're talking to me right now," Nishinoya pointed out. "Don't you feel better?"

"... I... I guess."

"Then talk to someone else, too. The more you talk, the easier it'll be to let these feelings go." He would know, because talking to his kouhai had made him realize how much of a necessity he really was. And he never would have made it without them there to remind him that he was needed.

"I'll think about it," Tsukishima grumbled, an undertone of finality to his words. But Nishinoya didn't mind.

His mind was at ease.

"Good. Now let's catch up to the others. We're almost there," he prompted with a genuine grin up at his kouhai. The latter looked down at him, and a small twitch of his lips reciprocated the sentiment.

"Yeah. Let's go save a life."

They jogged towards the horizon.

Their return was heralded across the entire house by the sound of Hinata's excited yelling, and Noya was sure that by the time they made it upstairs, Suga already had begun setting up his workspace. However, as all four of them entered the master bedroom, they found Suga on the floor, a thin blanket thrown over his shoulders as he slept soundly, despite the frown marring his features. On the bed, Kuroo looked even paler than before, the rise and fall of his chest rapid, but almost indiscernible.

"Suga?" Nishinoya asked as they stepped in, dropping their heavy equipment next to the wall. Yamaguchi silently began opening the bags up, pulling out several pieces of their equipment and setting them aside, eyes occasionally glancing at his exhausted-looking senpai.

"Suga-senpai," Tsukishima called as well, stepping closer to take a better look at both Kuroo and the setter on the floor. "Wake up, we're back."

"Five more minutes..." the teen mumbled in his sleep, curling up tighter into a ball.

"Ah," Daichi called, popping his head in through the door. "He fell asleep about an hour ago, just go ahead and shake him awake."

"Are you sure?" Noya frowned, not wanting to disturb the hardworking, exhausted setter.

"Yeah. He'd never forgive himself if he didn't do something for Kuroo at this point, so just wake him up," Daichi smiled softly, albeit a bit sadly.

"Right," Noya nodded, and knelt, gently shaking Suga. "Suga, wake up. We're here."

"Dai...?" the silver-haired setter mumbled in his sleep, and only opened his eyes after the third shake. "Oh... Noya." Slowly pushing himself into a sitting position, he stretched and yawned, rubbing his eyes. "You're back..."
It took a couple of seconds for the implications to sink in, and suddenly, Suga was wrestling out of his blankets to his feet.

"You're all back safely! And you've brought the equipment!" he exclaimed, standing up too quickly and ending up swaying dangerously.

"Careful!" Noya warned, standing up to steady Suga, whose knees buckled slightly before he stood straight and closed his eyes, taking in deep breaths.

"Sorry... Stood up too quickly. I'm fine," he assured, smiling softly at Noya, and then putting his relieved gaze on all the people in the room.

"Suga, are you sure you're gonna be okay to do this?" Daichi asked from the doorway, looking at his vice-captain worriedly. "You can barely even stand..."

"I'll be fine. I read a lot about how to take care of hypovolemic patients, I'm sure we'll be fine. And Yamaguchi can help me, too," Suga smiled at the quiet boy, who was impassively busying himself with taking Kuroo's blood pressure with the manual cuff and stethoscope.

"Kuroo's survived this far, it's okay if you sleep a few more hours to be able to do things all right," Daichi tried again, but Suga shook his head and grinned, as if the grin would suddenly cover up the horrible dark circles he had around his eyes.

"I want to do this... I'm okay."

"Don't push yourself," the captain warned. "We don't need another casualty..."

"Don't worry."

But it wasn't Suga that had spoken up. And everybody in the room froze as Yamaguchi got up from Kuroo's side to go shuffle around with the equipment, as if he hadn't just said his first words in weeks to Daichi and Suga.

"I can help, too," he suggested very casually, finally standing up and taking one of the oxygen tanks with both hands, dragging it carefully across the floor to lay it flat on the ground by Kuroo's bedside.

"Uhh-" Daichi blinked, shocked beyond words, and from the corner of his eye, he could see Suga with the same shocked, gaping expression. "I, uhh- Tada-" Frustrated with the words that escaped him, he ran a hand over his face and threw a pointed look at Tsukishima, whose expression was very neutral. "Tsukishima, I need to talk to you, please."

"Sure," the blond shrugged, turning to look at his friend, who was untangling an oxygen tube. "Oi, Tadashi."

"Tsukki?" the dark-haired teen replied, looking up.

"Do your best. Don't forget, I'm right next door," he mumbled, probably confusing the heck out of Daichi and Suga. However, the soft smile that flitted across Noya's, Kenma's, and Yamaguchi's faces hinted that the words were incredibly important.

"I know," Yamaguchi nodded, and then turned to his work as Tsukishima followed Daichi out, closing the door behind him.

"I, uhh... I see you're talking again," Suga finally approached his kouhai, taking the hint and opening up a regular oxygen mask, handing it to Yamaguchi so it could be connected to the tubing. "I'm
"I guess I just didn't have anything to say until now," Yamaguchi shrugged after a bit of hesitation on his words. "Even now, it doesn't feel like I need to speak, but Tsukki and Noya-senpai helped me find my words again. I have to make an effort." Turning to the oxygen tank, he hesitantly fiddled around with it for a second, unsure how to work it.

Suddenly, there were hands on top of his, warm and comforting, squeezing just enough to make him feel safe. Yamaguchi looked up into Suga's kind, bright eyes, and looked like he was on the verge of tears once more.

"I'm so happy you're getting better," Suga whispered out, gently pushing his hands away from the tank to turn it on. The whistling of air became audible, and Yamaguchi briefly tested out the mask on his own face before nodding.

"Yeah." Standing up, he turned to Kuroo, and set the mask over his mouth and nose, looping the elastic behind his ear. He adjusted the nose strap, and then watched Kuroo take a few breaths before turning back to Suga. "Now. Let's go."

"Right." Suga's back straightened. "His most recent pressure was 82/54. Let's give him Ringer's Lactate until his blood pressure is acceptable again. He's third-spacing a lot of fluid, which is why the saline you gave him earlier didn't do much. Second priority is wound care, so I was thinking of checking the sutures? I'm just hoping they haven't gotten infected, it was a really really bad job done in really bad conditions, after all..."

"We'll see when we get there," Yamaguchi nodded. "He'll be very weak. Should we consider nasogastric tubing and catheterization?"

"Yeah. It's gonna be super important to keep a track of how much fluid he's retaining and how much he's excreting," Suga nodded. "And he'll need a lot of energy so I was thinking diluted mashed up food until he can eat by himself."

"It'll clog the tube, though," Yamaguchi clicked his tongue, grabbing a new set of IV tubing and a bag of Ringer's Lactate.

"We'll cut the tip of the tube just flush it a lot, I guess, and hope for the best," Suga gave him a tired smile, and then grabbed a syringe and a bottle of saline solution. Opening it up, he drew up some of it in the syringe, and grabbed some chlorhexidine swabs. "Anyway. Let's immediately get him hooked to the RL and see how he does."

"Well, I hope." There was a small silence, and then Yamaguchi sighed, beginning to prime the tube. "I mean... he has to. He can't die."

"He won't," Kenma finally added into the conversation, reminding them all of his presence.

"Ah, Kenma, if you want, you can sit on the other side with him, if you like. He might be asleep, or semi-conscious, but he can still hear you if you want to talk to him," Suga kindly informed him, flushing Kuroo's IV and wearing gloves to twist in the new line that Yamaguchi had primed.

Kenma nodded and wordlessly went to sit on the bed next to Kuroo, and nobody mentioned how he subtly slid his hand to the side of his head to brush a piece of unruly hair behind his ear.

And despite just standing there, Noya no longer felt like he was useless. Instead, he was incredibly proud to have been of help to the brave lot of teenagers fighting with all they had. The world did not revolve around him; he knew that he couldn't be a necessity to every single situation. However, if he
was a necessity to any situation at all, he'd be happy with that, and never again underestimate his contributions.

"Noya, Yamaguchi and I are going to wear sterile gloves in a little bit, so if you could, would you mind holding that book on the floor for us, in case we need something?" Suga directed, and Noya nodded, his steps light as he picked up the pocket handbook of medical-surgical nursing.

"Just ask, and I'll be there whenever you need me," he grinned, standing proudly next to the bustling players, knowing that every single one of his actions was a necessity to Kuroo's survival.

Nishinoya had been a sort of a runner between the inside of the master bedroom and the outside, helping Suga and Yamaguchi do their medical things and then carrying news of progress out to the people sitting in the hallway or sleeping in the rooms on the second floor.

The other party had gotten lucky with water stocks, having found a few gallons of water in the homes with water dispensers, and having rolled the large gallons all the way back to their hideout. Thanks to that, they'd all had enough water to give themselves a quick towel wash in the tub, but despite looking cleaner than usual, none of them looked any less tired and haggard.

Every single time Noya came out to give a progress report on what was happening inside the room, only silence greeted him.

It probably seemed like the two improvised medics took hours inside the room to finish up, but when Noya came out one last time to announce that Kuroo was stable, Daichi's watch only showed that just over 90 minutes had passed.

There was a collective cheer in the hallway as finally, finally, the crowd reacted to the news, swarming around Noya to ask for more information.

"Suga and Yamaguchi can probably give you more details than I can," Noya insisted, knowing to recognize the limits of his usefulness with a sheepish grin. "They said that you can go in to see Kuroo two at a time. Suga and Yamaguchi are gonna take turns watching him, so Suga's gonna go sleep first, for now. Kenma's asleep next to Kuroo, Yamaguchi's begun to talk again, and everybody-
" His breath hitched in emotion. "Everybody's gonna be okay."

All of them sighed and began deciding who'd go in first, and Noya took the opportunity to slip away, towards the back of the hallway.

"Noya," Daichi suddenly called him back, and all eyes were on him when he turned to answer.

"Yeah?" he asked, kind of intimidated by the stares.

"Are you holding up okay?" the captain asked, never missing a beat, never forgetting about any of his precious friends. And the libero's eyes burned with emotion and exhaustion when a large, genuine grin split his face.

"Better than ever," he announced with a small, almost hysterically relieved laugh, knowing that he'd only need sleep, a shower, and some food at this point to get back to normal again now.

However, a thought crossed his mind for a moment, dark hair fluttering in his mind's eye as he blinked, and suddenly, there was a whole new kind of apprehension welling up inside of him.

"Hey, captain?" he called, grabbing Daichi's attention again. "Can we talk?"
"What's up?" Daichi frowned, immediately concerned.

"Let's go in the room here. Coach, you come, too," Noya addressed the older man, who nodded, and followed the two teens into the nearby bedroom, to which they closed the door.

"Did something happen you didn't want others to know about?" Keishin asked first as Noya sat down on the bed with a tired sigh, to Daichi's visible concern.

"Are you hurt?" the captain asked in a tight voice, as if afraid of the answer.

"No, no, I'm fine! Just tired," Noya shook his head and then bit his lip. "No it's just... There was this girl. We met her on the way back from the hospital."

"A girl? In the town?" the coach frowned. "That's odd... Was she hostile?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, she was really, really nice and warm to us. She even gave us a few cans of food, but I wanted to mention them to you before we did anything with them."

"We'll take a look at them later," Daichi nodded, throwing his coach a side glance for confirmation. "What did she ask in return?"

"Nothing. We just mentioned that we were in a hurry to get back to a sick friend, and she got really concerned and gave us cans of food and wished us well. It was... weird," Noya sighed, not knowing how to describe the unpleasant mix of gratitude and suspicion, and the occasional pang of nostalgia, that gripped his thoughts every time he thought of long black hair.

"Okay... It's good you didn't trust her. We never know what her motives could've been," Daichi sighed, leaning against the wall.

"Well, I mean... She did tell us about the society they've started to rebuild in the town," Noya reported unsurely, watching as surprise, then fear, then determination, and finally, impassiveness flashed across his captain's and coach's faces. "She said that a bunch of people escaping from Tokyo have begun rebuilding a semi-nomadic society, going from town to town and gathering survivors to be stronger in numbers as they head for Hokkaido. She said they have food, safe houses, blankets, showers, maybe even electricity... They probably have a doctor, too..."

"Absolutely not," Daichi cut in. "Last time we trusted another group of humans, we almost got killed. We're not repeating the same mistake."

"But they're not a governmental organization," Noya argued. "They're just people, like us! The girl, Yukiko, she said they even have small businesses organized, that everyone's nice and helpful, and that we're welcome there if we need anything at all."

"Of course she'd say that, Yuu," Ukai sighed, putting a hand on his head to kill the headache sprouting in his brain. "If they want something from us, of course they'd look good to manipulate us into their hands."

"But what if it's for real this time?" Noya asked, throat scratchy. He clenched his fists as a strange kind of disappointment welled up inside of him. "What if this is finally someplace where we can be safe?"

"We don't know that."

"I'm tired of running." And Noya realized that it wasn't disappointment he felt, but emptiness. Emptiness, and a whole lot of sadness to try and fill the gap. He'd given up. "I don't want to be afraid
anymore." His throat was tight, and he realized that there were tears hanging off his eyelashes. And he couldn't bring himself to care. It didn't matter anymore. "Why is all of this happening to us? Why can't we be happy?"

"Noya..." Daichi seemed to recoil, as if in pain, and shut his eyes like looking at his friend would kill him. "I... I'm sorry..."

"Please, captain!" the libero continued in a wavering voice, one tear sliding down the side of his face as he looked at the other, begging, pleading to be looked at, to be acknowledged, but Daichi just looked away. "We can't do this anymore! The nightmares, the hunger, the insecurity of not knowing something as simple as whether or not we'll live to see the morning light, and the terror of being alive to see it... It's too much." One more drop, and then another, and then another, until Noya's face was wet with tears that he did not seem to care about.

"Yuu..." Keishin began, approaching him, but the teen in question just flinched, as if he was afraid. The older man immediately stopped in his tracks, a pained expression on his face. "Yuu, don't say that... We're all here and together..."

"It won't matter when we're dead!" Noya protested tearfully. "Please, coach! Please, please don't make us do this anymore. Please stop pretending that we're okay. How the hell could we be okay!? I just led three other kids my age through an abandoned building filled with rotting corpses piled up to our knees, all to find equipment that would help two high school students perform quasi-surgery on a friend who'd been dying after being shot by a genocidal organization. I had to stand there and listen to Yamaguchi cry because he'd hallucinated Tsukishima's face on one of those corpses. I had to pretend I didn't hear Kenma sobbing when Kuroo suddenly stopped breathing for a while earlier. Before, I had to abandon two kids I promised to protect in a death trap and pray they wouldn't be dying in slow and torturous agony by the time I came back for them. There is nothing normal with any of this, so why...?"

Noya looked up, but whilst Daichi looked guilty, Ukai just looked at him in pity. And Noya, who would've bristled at receiving pity before, now had no idea how to feel about it. So he put his face in his hands and hunched over, as if finally letting the weight of the world crush him.

"Why can't we just be happy...?"

"Yuu..." And suddenly, there were arms around him, and Noya felt guilty for indulging in the tight embrace that drew him out of his cocoon of pain and hopelessness, into the strong and comforting arms of the only adult he had left in his life.

"Coach, I-"

"Listen to me, okay, Yuu? This is important," Keishin interrupted him, unusually subdued, even in his seriousness. Noya wiped his eyes and looked up, aware that he probably looked pathetic. "I know you guys have been through a lot, and I know it hasn't been easy. None of you should've been forced to live like this. It's been so hard, and you've all been strong for so long, and I'm so proud of you all for having stuck together so far. But we have to keep pushing. We can't give up now, more than ever."

"I wish we could all just either be safe or die... It's so hard to keep fighting like this..." The libero's eyes glanced down at the floor, as if he was ashamed of his muttered confession.

"Noya, you're not a quitter," Ukai insisted softly, but firmly. "You're a fighter, you've always been, and I know you're going to keep fighting. Giving up just isn't something you have in that thick skull of yours."
"Then how come it feels like we've already lost?"

"Because you're letting yourself be defeated." His coach let him go, distancing himself a bit to be able to talk at eye-level with him. "You're so strong, Noya, taking care of your kouhai and helping your senpai all the time. But Daichi knows how much you're hurting. You don't have to tell him, he knows how miserable you all are, because he is just as miserable. But he's being strong for you all, because you're his team and his responsibility. Don't you think that as a senpai, you should be strong for your team and your charges as well?"

Noya hesitated a second and then nodded his head, wiping his eyes dry. Lifting his face, he glanced to the side, at Daichi, just a second too late to miss the telltale swipe of his hands under his eyes. When the captain looked at him, silent through gritted teeth. Noya saw his reddened and puffy eyes and the guilt reflected in his bloodshot sclera, and was immediately overcome by guilt as well.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just... I'm tired."

"We all are, but once we make it out of danger, and find ourselves truly safe, we'll think back of all the moments where we were tempted to give up but didn't, and we'll be glad that we kept fighting." Ukai flashed him a half-hearted grin. "Karasuno doesn't give up, remember?"

With one last glance at his broken-hearted captain, Noya nodded, and carefully slid off the bed, to his feet.

"I'm sorry for bothering you. I don't know what came over me," he mumbled.

"Don't apologize for letting out your stress. There's nothing wrong with that," Ukai corrected him gently.

"I didn't mean to complain, in any case. Daichi has been incredible so far, and it was wrong of me to make light of all his work and sacrifices."

"It's fine," the dark-haired teen grunted, nervously wringing his hands as if he still were on the verge of tears. Noya didn't know that for sure. Maybe he was.

He felt terrible for upsetting their precious captain and leader.

"I'm gonna... go see if Yamaguchi is okay. And then Hinata; he was really upset that Kenma was upset. I've got to talk to Tsukishima about something, as well. And I'll go make sure Kageyama ate his lunch instead of sneaking it to Hinata again," he volunteered, heading for the door.

"Hey, Yuu," Keishin called again, and the teen's hand froze on the knob as he turned it. "You're really, really strong. And you're a good guy. Don't give up."

"I won't," Nishinoya mumbled, opening the door. "Not when people still need me."

Because his kouhai needed him to support them. And his senpai needed him to help them take care of everything. Nishinoya had finally found a purpose, although he regretted the context.

However, he kept at it. When, later on, Yamaguchi accidentally fell asleep leaning on his shoulder, by Kuroo's bedside, he didn't move nor wake him up, because even if they were all miserable and broken, whatever remaining strength he had left was still a necessity to their futile survival efforts.
For once, the chapter's ending isn't uplifting. Variety is important, after all.

There is so much medical stuff in this chapter, I could explain it all but I won't unless you're really interested in which case comment and I'll explain in a reply! Anyway, it wasn't meant to be understood, it's just background blablabla that adds to character development. However, despite the vagueness of their interventions, let me assure you that Suga and Yamaguchi did several things wrong, several things that amateurs would do and that would compromise patient care. Cause they ain't perfect. Also, pocket handbooks of medical-surgical nursing are literally life, bless them for existing.

//EDIT:// So I finally wrote out the details for the bomb's effects and coverage, so if you're interested, please read below! If not, skip ahead to the next section marked by // to read the other notes.

I didn't spend much time researching the topic of nuclear weapons, so I didn't really come up with an actual, existing weapon to use that would fit all my criteria. So that's why I ended up creating a fictional one! Its impact parameters are as follow:

- **Ground zero (instant death zone):** Where it hit. I think I'd give it a radius of 500km, right off the side of Tokyo. Kuroo was in Tokyo when it happened, which explains his backstory (will develop next chapter), so that's fitting to me.

- **Danger zone (massive radiation poisoning+very badly destroyed buildings):** I think it'd go up to where they are this chapter. I was thinking that the danger zone would be capped off around the city of Fukushima to the north, around the city of Nagoya to the west. However, radiation has dispelled in this region in the two months since the explosion, so radiation poisoning is probably only a thing to long-term residents of the area. In my mind, the death camp was close to Otawara, in the Togichi prefecture, and when they took the trucks, they were taken west for a few hours, crashing close to the western border of the Fukushima prefecture. They then walked to regroup at the town of Mishima, in Fukushima as well, and the hospital they raided was the Fukushima Prefectural Miyashita Hospital (in Mishima). Although I have no idea if that hospital is actually as small as I described it to be ahahaha. Also, the buildings are pretty badly hit, but not nonviable since Mishima is close to the boundaries of the danger zone. However, they're still pretty bad: in contrast, the Miyagi prefecture (where Karasuno is) had a bunch of broken houses, parts of buildings destroyed, etc. So you can imagine that Mishima is pretty much in ruins anyway (and then, imagine Tokyo, which was ground zero).

- **Affected zone (hit by explosion or subsequent earthquakes or latent radiation):** This is Karasuno! So the guys lived here for two months after the explosion, and the buildings around them were mostly destroyed by the resulting earthquakes or the shockwaves of the blast (though they'd be weak at that point). I think the affected zone would end in Aomori to the north, and Okayama to the west.

- **Safe zone (not affected by blast, minimal exposure to latent radiation):** This would be the rest of Japan (and maybe a small bit of the south of South Korea), where most relief efforts would be centered. The safe zone includes the western half of the island of Shikoku and the island of Kyushu, but most people north of Tokyo go to Hokkaido because it's larger and closer (as opposed to people to the west of Tokyo, who have no choice but to seek help in Shikoku or Kyushu).
You're welcome to Google Map all of these places to help situate yourself! And in terms of danger, the boys are still in the danger zone, but they're on their way out. We'll have to wait and see how their trajectory pans out from here on out!

// Special attention to the fact that at the beginning, Noya felt useless and mentioned not wanting comfort because he didn't deserve it, but at the end, he just lets himself be held. I also made an extra effort to add in, throughout the chapter, small but several instances where Noya was a great senpai (helping out or looking out for his kouhai), or a very efficient kouhai (helping his senpai, etc), just to add to the fact that he's imperative to their survival.

Next chapter, Kuroo finally wakes up. Or does he? Jk, of course he wakes up. In what state, though? And how does this affect his friends, who have to take care of him? And how does this affect him, knowing that his state is the cause for having gotten all of them stuck in trouble again? And then, old nightmares return... Just what happened to Kuroo in Tokyo?

NEXT TIME ON CML AT 7/8 CENTRAL HAHAHA

Please comment, I'd really appreciate your thoughts on the matter! Thank you guys, ilu all~
Colour

Chapter Summary

Some artists prefer to paint in palettes. Others let loose all the colours they can imagine. Others prefer the shades of grey of a simple pencil. Some of them like the simplicity of black and white.

Kenma's world has always been painted in greyscale in careful, careful brush strokes. But then, Kuroo was gone, and suddenly, it felt like someone had violently taken an eraser through his life, leaving him colourless. Perhaps it was for the best. An achromatic world made him numb, whereas the opposite would leave him in a world splattered in red.

Chapter Notes

So much medical stuff in this chapter I am so sorry, I didn't mean to get so technical. I think I'm going through Medical/Surgical withdrawal (Pediatrics/Obstetrics is the worst). But there's a lot of angst, too! And hurt/comfort. Also, Kenma and Kuroo being so hella gay it's not even funny.

This chapter feels like one big filler, and if it feels like that to you, too, then I am so sorry. You know how it is; I plan to write something cool in the next chapter but then shit happens and I find myself with 20k words written before even reaching my cool event. But next chapter is more action/suspense-oriented, so yey ;u;

This chapter was written to the Haikyuu! OST, and lemme tell you, it was great.

Warnings: so much medical shit im so sorry. But after this chapter we're done with medical stuff.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kenma's world had always been in greyscale. As a child, he'd trudged silently through his endless days, finding solace nowhere but in his games and in his best friend. His world had always been in greyscale, until high school, where he finally saw the red of the Nekoma jackets and the orange of Hinata's hair and suddenly, everything felt a little bit brighter.

And then the war came, and his greyscale world became hued red. A violent, aggressive red that was nothing like the red of the Nekoma jackets. Kenma distinctively remembered preferring greyscale to the pervasive, disgusting red that haunted his every sight.

When the explosion rocked Tokyo to the core, wrecking his life and that of the ones he loved, his world turned black and white. Live or die. Fight or flight. And even then, despite the colourless world he lived in, there was always a swish of black hair in the corner of his eye that grounded him,
that reminded him that he was not alone and that he was not dead. But now... even the black had faded, and his world was colourless.

Sighing, Kenma opened his eyes to yet another colourless sight. Kuroo was still sleeping next to him, apparently undisturbed by his incessant shifting, and Kenma consoled himself with the fact that even when he was healthy, Kuroo was a heavy sleeper.

But somehow, this seemed different. The oxygen mask on his face whistled softly with the flowing air, and the wires coming out through his nose and the crook of his arm (and down below... it had taken Suga and Yamaguchi a whole lot of time to resolve themselves to get that one in) made him look terrifyingly sickly. Which was a bizarre look for Kuroo Tetsurou, captain of the Nekoma team, the strong, tall, proud, smug third-year that Kenma used to know. Now, he looked pale and in pain, and Kenma's entire world was colourless as a result.

He gently caressed the side of Kuroo's face, finger sliding over his clammy skin, sticky with cold sweat. Suga had given him towels and water earlier so that he could clean some of the dirt, blood and gore off of his best friend, but without a proper shower, all the towels had done was get the big pieces off his skin. He still felt gritty and unnatural under Kenma's touch.

"You need to wake up," he found himself murmuring, looking down at his face crisped in pain. Kuroo did not reply, and Kenma briefly threw a look at Suga, asleep on the floor against the bed, wondering if he should wake him up to ask him to take a look at Kuroo's vitals again. However, Suga had only just switched with Yamaguchi to stand guard over Kuroo, so he figured he should give the other teen a rest.

After all, the two Karasuno players had just single-handedly saved the life of his best friend, and his only family left. He owed everything to them. But then... perhaps he was a little bit selfish for wanting colour back in his colourless world.

Kuroo was alive. That should've been enough.

"Please wake up," he repeated softly, biting his lip. He hadn't cried for Kuroo yet. Crying felt like admitting defeat, like conceding that Kuroo would not pull through. Kuroo was fighting, and so Kenma would not cry.

Sighing, he laid back down with his head pillowed on his arm (momentarily envying the three pillows Kuroo had stacked under his head and neck), and watched his best friend's eyelashes flutter softly in the darkness. Moonlight streamed weakly through the window, the soft pitter-patter of rain hitting the miraculously unbroken window lulling Kenma's exhausted mind back to sleep. He wished he could stay up watching the rapid rise and fall of Kuroo's chest all night, he wished he could hang onto his every struggle to stay alive, but Kuroo was still asleep, and Kenma soon unwillingly found himself joining him.

At least he did not dream.

...~...~...~...~...~...

He woke up to the sound of shuffling next to him, and opened his eyes just in time to see Yamaguchi and Suga pulling Kuroo up into a semi-sitting position, leaning against Yamaguchi limply. Suga took the occasion to pull up the contents of a plastic bowl into a huge syringe, yellow and cloudy in what Kenma bleakly realized was chicken broth.

"What's going on?" he yawned softly, sitting up to help Yamaguchi support Kuroo's dead weight.
"We all just woke up and are getting ready for breakfast, so we figured we'd come give Kuroo his before getting started on the rest," Suga explained, turning off the valve on the almost-depleted oxygen tank and pulling the mask down Kuroo's face. He then took the tube hanging out of his nose and uncapped the end of it, fitting the syringe into the hole.

"What is that?" the setter asked again, curiously watching as the yellow liquid was pushed out of the syringe, into the tube.

"Just chicken broth. We added a few packets of sugar and a bit of protein powder, but it didn't dissolve well in cold water, so there isn't much of it in there," Suga sighed, pushing the syringe until all of its contents were gone. He pulled the empty syringe out, then, gasping when the tube overflowed a bit and spilled onto the bedsheets. Quickly reacting, Yamaguchi pinched the thin tube until Suga bent it to keep the rest of the broth in. With one hand, he then pulled up the rest of the broth with some difficulty, and then repeated the process until the second serving was all down.

"Yamaguchi, could you get a set of vitals?" Suga requested as he set down the syringe and the bowl, pouring some water from a bottle into the bowl and pulling up the water with the syringe. He then flushed the tube once.

Yamaguchi nodded, and vacated to his task. Suga then looked at Kenma.

"Would you mind holding Kuroo up like that a little bit? Just so that the water doesn't come back up."

"I got it," Kenma nodded, moving to kneel behind Kuroo to support him. At that moment, as Suga began flushing a second time and Yamaguchi began auscultating under the blood pressure cuff, the door opened, and the others walked in.

Whatever they were about to say died on their lips at the sight of Kuroo being handled by the three of them, and a grim silence blanketed the room. Yamaguchi seemed to appreciate the silence as he focused on getting the correct blood pressure reading, and Suga only briefly turned to smile at them before returning to flushing the tube in Kuroo's nose. Once that was capped, he restarted the flow of oxygen in the mask and replaced it, and then moved to go look at the IV. At the same time, Yamaguchi took the stethoscope out of his ears, mumbling to himself, and took the blood pressure cuff off of Kuroo's arm. Instead, he scribbled on the paper they kept at his bedside for vital signs and then proceeded to take his pulse.

The others looked uncomfortable with the display, and Kenma totally understood, because he, too, was afraid of all the medical procedures the two teens were doing. Hell, none of them even knew if what they were doing was right. However, they seemed confident enough, and Kuroo was still alive, so... it couldn't be that bad.

"Alright, so he's doing much better this morning," Suga finally began once Yamaguchi scribbled down all his results. The others all sat down on the floor for the upcoming breakfast time, and turned their rapt attention onto him. "Blood pressure has gone up to 106/76, and his heart rate is starting to calm down, down to 108 beats per minute. He's breathing a bit slower and deeper now, but his temperature's kind of worrying. 38.4 degrees Celsius. That's definitely a fever."

"Infection," Yamaguchi concluded grimly, his voice low and grave. Sighing as he replaced the almost-empty IV bag with another one, he reduced the drip rate and then backed off.

"Thanks, Kenma. You can lie him down again," Suga added off-handedly, seemingly having forgotten the younger boy.
Kenma nodded numbly, shifting to ease Kuroo back down on the pile of pillows again, and then gently pulled the covers back up to his chest. He thought he heard his best friend groan as he did so, but as he held his breath, he heard nothing else, and so brushed it off. Then, he slid off the bed to stretch his legs and arms, and then sat down next to Hinata, who threw him a worried glance before looking at Yamaguchi, who passed the paper to Suga.

"His vitals are still off balance, but hopefully, he's going to self-regulate with some more IV fluids and oxygen. He's made really great progress since last night. Though we're running out of oxygen, so I don't know how much longer we can help him with that," he shrugged, then headed for the bag of rations, throwing it to coach Ukai, who caught it and opened it up to start distributing breakfast.

"We'll do our best," Suga nodded. "Now. Let's have breakfast and discuss our plan of action for today."

"Daichi and I discussed moving out again, but it'd be impossible to get anywhere far with Kuroo in this state," Keishin began, popping open cans of mixed vegetables and passing them to the boys. "I can drive, but unless we find keys to a car, and a van, at that, to fit us all, we're not going anywhere."

"Should we maybe wait for him to get better before moving out?" Asahi suggested quietly, not looking too sure of his suggestion himself.

"We don't have a choice," Kageyama mumbled, mostly to himself.

"Should we get ready to live here for a while, then?" Hinata asked as well, not looking very sure with the decision.

"It's all we can do for now." There was a small silence. And suddenly, Kenma felt his heart be weighed down by the debilitating feeling that Kuroo and he were just burdens and bothers to the Karasuno group.

Nobody spoke for a while, the half-hearted scraping of plastic and metal utensils scraping the sides of cans filling the air with background noise. Everything seemed bland.

"We could always try to go to the group of survivors in the downtown area of this town," Nishinoya finally piped up, mostly mumbling and not daring to look up at anybody, especially not when all stares were suddenly on him.

"What!?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There are others here?"

"We met someone on our way back from the hospital. She told us about a society being rebuilt here, is all," Tsukishima sighed, as if already exasperated with the reactions. Kenma threw a glance at his fellow hospital-raider companions, only to note that Yamaguchi seemed unconcerned, whilst Noya refused to look up at anybody, attention rapt on his can of unappetizing, squished vegetables. Daichi seemed to be looking straight at him, just a bit disapprovingly, but mostly just tiredly.

"Why didn't you tell us this?" Tanaka asked, brows furrowed. "We should've known."

"Because I told him that there's now way we'd go to another group of people out here," Daichi cut in, tone firm and almost cold. "We barely escaped last time, and look what it did to Kuroo. We're not risking it again."
"But... they have a safe organization and they probably have food, water, electricity... medical
resources..." Kenma found himself muttering under his breath. Unfortunately, it wasn't as quiet as he
thought it was, because Hinata heard him, and immediately brought that up.

"But we don't know if that's true or not," Kageyama refuted pointedly.

"She looked pretty genuine to me..." Noya muttered, as if ashamed.

"Those people back at the camp looked pretty genuine, too," Yamaguchi added, somehow making it
sound like a fact rather than an opinion. It might have been because his voice was so flat and devoid
of emotion.

All the voices that began to rise and mingle hurt Kenma's head. And so, as Daichi and Ukai
struggled to get the frazzled teens under control, he managed to slip out of the master bedroom, and
headed to one of the other bedrooms to curl up on a sleeping bag and pull a blanket over his head to
drown out the noise. Closing his eyes felt soothing, if anything. The darkness behind his eyelids was
reminiscent of the black of Kuroo's hair, and seemed to be the only colour left in his achromatic
world.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Hinata was the one who came to him later on, after what felt like hours but what was probably just
half of one. Gently kneeling next to the sleeping bag and stretching his leg out, he didn't even trying
to pull the cover off of Kenma, which the black-haired boy appreciated.

They sat in silence for a while, and even though Hinata was not looking at him, Kenma suddenly felt
hot and under pressure. The silence, which had blanketed him so far, now felt oppressive, and the
blanket that had comforted him so far now tightened like a network of chains all over his body.

He sat up abruptly and looked at Hinata for something, anything to dispel the tension.

Thankfully, Hinata obliged.

"I just wanted to come see if you were okay," the younger boy smiled softly at him. "You left and
nobody realized until they'd calmed down, so I wanted to check up on you."

"I'm fine," Kenma answered to the thinly-veiled inquiry.

"Not really. Are you worried about Kuroo?"

"A little," Kenma answered quietly, sounding detached out of habit more than actually feeling
uninvolved. "Suga said that he had an infection and we don't really have any medication..."

"The guys won't let him die no matter what. We'll find a way," Hinata reassured him, gently placing
a hand on his shoulder. "Come on. True friends will never let one another down, no matter what."

Kenma kept his mouth shut, swallowing down a rude comment about friendship not mattering if one
of them ended up dead because of it. Instead, he hung his head, pensive.

But then, Hinata's hand was off his shoulder, and on his hand, and Kenma flinched as he entwined
their fingers. Looking up in shock, he immediately saw Hinata's bright, genuine grin. And if all else
was colourless, Hinata's grin was bright and blinding and comforting.

"Come on. Even when nothing else is going right, you know you'll always have a friend in me," the
spiker reassured him, and a strange warmth bloomed in the setter's chest.
And, as he squeezed Hinata’s fingers tightly, wordlessly, a risky thought bloomed in his mind.

Kenma still slept next to Kuroo in the master bedroom, cuddled under the covers and worried sick out of his mind, as usual. Kuroo only slept with the oxygen mask now that he was more stable and oxygen needed to be conserved, and so every time the piece of plastic closed around Kuroo’s nose and mouth, Kenma found it weird to look at him. At least, come morning light, he’d be able to remove the mask and pretend once again that everything was okay. Never mind the tube that still hung out of his nose, taped to his cheek, or the scary pallor of his skin.

He missed him.

Kenma was terrified of falling asleep next to his best friend and waking up to a corpse.

Since it felt like another sleepless night to him, he pushed himself out of bed and stretched, socked feet pitter-patterting on the wooden floor as he sneaked past Suga, who was curled into a ball on a sleeping bag by Kuroo’s bedside. Careful not to wake the older boy, he slid out of the master bedroom and into the hallway.

The hallway was clear at this time of the night and the doors to the other rooms were closed entirely. Kenma let his gaze linger a bit on the first door, behind which Hinata’s group was sound asleep, and then began walking to the other end of the hallway. He took the stairs down, wincing softly when they creaked a bit under his weight, but found himself reaching the first floor without any problems.

It was cooler on the first floor, and the sound of rain was stronger in the main entrance area. Through the broken windows, the setter could see the drops of sulfuric acid violently splashing down and eroding the structures they touched, and yet if he didn't think about it, the rain was soothing to listen to.

Remembering that the house had a covered porch, Kenma unlocked the triple-locked front door and stepped out. Carefully, he spotted all the places where the rain penetrated the cracked and collapsed wooden awning and finally settled in a well-protected spot, drawing his knees up to his chest and hoping that the wind wouldn't blow the drops towards him.

It was cool, and the outside air was refreshing. Kenma took a deep and long breath, filling his lungs with the slightly metallic-smelling air, and then exhaled softly through pursed lips. The action immediately released the tension in his shoulders, and he found himself feeling relaxed enough to yawn.

Sitting alone outside, on the front porch of a stranger's house, in the middle of an even stranger world, made Kenma feel so small and insignificant. After all, he was only just one more human being on this planet, just another casualty of this disaster that plagued almost all of Japan, just one more poor soul who would never be remembered after he died, and who would cease to exist outside of the numbers in history books. The thought depressed him; for them to have struggled all this time to stay alive, to have powered through the endless night, only to be forgotten come morning light. People liked survivors, but they loved victims even more.

Kenma hummed a tune, a melody from one of his favourite video games, and surprised himself by remembering the entire song. And, one melody after the other, he filled the air with the sound of his will to live, refusing to bow even as the heavens crashed down all around him.

And most of all, with every note that vibrated through his vocal cords, he promised to himself that he would save his best friend, his lifeline, his everything, no matter what he had to abandon in order to
win back Kuroo's life.

Kuroo finally woke up in the morning. If Kenma had a watch, he probably would have memorized the exact second where Kuroo's eyes opened, and the following second and a half in which he realized that he'd stopped breathing.

It took him four whole seconds to be able to command his diaphragm to dilate again, and suddenly, air was rushing into his lungs once more, making him dizzy.

"Kuro?" he tried to call out, but all that strangled out of his tight throat was a whimper.

His teammate turned his head at the sound of his name, eyes half-open and heavy with sleep. After all, he had just slept for almost three days, so Kenma would give him a second to wake up.

"Ken...ma...?" the boy rasped out, squinting at Kenma. The sight of Kenma's pale, shocked face took him a few second to register, and then, pain surged through him.

His entire body ached like no other, his bones grinding and his muscles seizing as he attempted to move. Kenma's hands were on his shoulders in a second, but then, there was excruciating pain on the side of his neck, and he grunted, pushing himself into a sitting position as fast as he could. His body and Kenma protested at the movement, but Kuroo was then doubled over, clutching at his neck and panting harshly, trying to see past the waves upon waves of pain that shocked his core and that made him want to throw up.

"Kuro... Kuro!" His friend was clutching his shoulders harshly, trying to get him to look up into his worried eyes. "Kuro, what's wrong!?"

Instead of replying, tiny whimpers and a staccato of small cries tumbled out of Kuroo's mouth, every single one of them going right through Kenma's heart.

"Suga!" Kenma cried out desperately, the setter sleeping on the floor shooting up at the sound of his name. However, Kenma just kept crying out for whoever would hear him.

"Hinata! Keishin! Sawamura! Anybody!"

"What's going on?" Suga yawned out, dead tired but attentive, rushing to Kuroo's other side. The teen reacted suddenly to his presence, snapping up in fear, dread in his eyes as he flinched.

"He suddenly woke up and sat up and now he's like this," Kenma reported a bit breathlessly, colour draining from his face when Kuroo suddenly put a hand to his face and froze upon contact with the oxygen mask.

"No, no, no, no," he cried out, and suddenly, his struggles had regained intensity, trying to break through Kenma's hold on his shoulders and, as he suddenly pulled the oxygen mask off and began scrambling to get to the nasogastric tube taped to his cheek, Suga's hold on his forearms.

"Coach! Daichi! Asahi!" Suga cried out as well, grunting as he tried to restrain Kuroo, whose thrashing was getting wilder. Kenma was trying to speak to him, worry and fear coating every single one of his words, and it didn't seem to be helping the other teen, who seemed to be overreacting.

Thankfully, a second later, thundering footsteps arrived at their door and almost kicked it down, the third years and their coach running in to the bedside. Suga numbly noted Hinata and Kageyama watching from the doorframe, silent and worried, and heard the door to the other bedroom opening
as well. However, that's all the observations he could make before he had to turn his attention to the newcomers.

"He just woke up and he's hysterical." As if to confirm that, a small cry left Kuroo's lips, and his body went totally still for a second before the thrashing continued. "He's gonna hurt himself at this rate; he's trying to pull out his lines and he's not responding to any of us," he reported, giving space as Asahi immediately took Kuroo's shoulders from Kenma, pressing down. Suga gave place to Daichi, who nodded and wordlessly took his arms, pinning them down.

It was no easy feat. The Nekoma captain was tall and built strong, and so despite the restraints, he still tried to wiggle out of their grip.

"Lay him down," the coach instructed, he himself putting his hands on Kuroo's calves through the blanket to stop his weak kicking.

"Push!" Daichi grunted, and he and Asahi simultaneously began to push Kuroo back down on the mattress. When the other captain's head finally hit the pillow, they switched their hold as to put their entire weight on the other teen.

Through it all, the black-haired boy kept crying out, his mantra of "no, no, no, no" sounding less and less hysterical and more and more desperate.

"He's hyperventilating," Suga gasped, the words registering weakly in Kenma's ears. The younger teen, horrified by the development, was frozen on the spot, but when a sob tore out of Kuroo's throat, he knew he had to act.

"Kuro..." he whispered softly, kneeling over him to take his face in his hands. "Kuro, please breathe..."

"Let me go," the frantic teen cried out, his eyes clouded over as he gazed up at Kenma. The fear swimming in them tore the setter's heart out, and he bit his lip.

"You're gonna hurt yourself if we let you go. Try to calm down. Try to breathe slower," he prompted softly, rubbing circles into his hot, sweaty cheeks.

"Why is this happening?" Kuroo asked meekly, scared. His eyes were locked onto Kenma's, and although the latter heard Suga giving out orders in the background, he only registered the desperation in his best friend's gaze.

"You're okay, you're gonna be okay. Don't panic, you're in good hands. Just breathe slower, you're hyperventilating," he murmured, leaning forward down to encase all of Kuroo's face in his arms, leaning his forehead against the other's. His fingers carded through Kuroo's matted, greasy hair, his own longer hair, clean in comparison, falling down and framing their faces as if to give them a little bit of privacy as they worked it out.

"Help me," Kuroo finally squeaked out, one tear running down the side of his eye, soon followed by another from the other eye, until he was all-out crying. "Mom, dad... Coach... Yamamoto, Yaku... Bokuto..." A heaving breath left his mouth as he clenched his eyes shut. "Kenma... Please, somebody help me."

"Kuroo..." Kenma swallowed thickly, finally realizing that his best friend was not in the right state of mind. And that whatever he was seeing around him right now wasn't a room full of concerned friends, but something that made him more vulnerable than he'd ever been in his entire life before. "Kuroo, snap out of it... You're gonna be okay." And soon, Kenma found himself crying as well, fat
tears dripping down onto his best friend's fevered face and rolling down the sides. "Tetsuro, Tetsu... You're okay. Please calm down and let us help you. You're gonna be okay."

His words finally seemed to seep into Kuroo's muddled brain, and finally, finally the captain began to go limp under the restraints, his breathing evening out. When Kenma finally deemed it safe, he caressed Kuroo's feverish skin once more and wiped the last of the tears from his eyes before straightening out and wiping his own tears off as well.

"Kuroo?" Suga asked calmly, approaching him slowly so that the other teen would not be startled again. "Are you alright now? I'm just going to put this oxygen mask on your face to help you breathe, alright?"

Kuroo looked at him for a little while, scrutinizing him, and then, wordlessly, gave a tiny nod of his head. All the spectators watched in bated breath as Suga slipped the oxygen mask back on him and adjusted it, and Kuroo did not fight it this time.

"Can we let you go?" Daichi asked, waiting for Kuroo's delayed nodding to finally loosen his grip a little. His hands had left red marks on Kuroo's forearms, but he was careful to be sure that the other captain would not be making any abrupt movements before fully backing off. Following his lead, Asahi and Keishin did the same, until Kuroo was just limply laying there, passively breathing, his half-lidded eyes glancing around.

"Hurts..." he finally mumbled out, slowly reaching up to touch the dressing on his neck. There was a movement to grab his arm, but Suga was quick enough to stop Daichi from restraining Kuroo again.

"We'll try to give you stuff to help with the pain," he promised, turning to Daichi. "Can you please go and lead the morning routine for the others? I just need Yamaguchi in here for now. We'll make sure he's stable before calling you all back in."

"Be careful," Daichi nodded, as trusting as ever. "Call as soon as there's a problem."

"Don't worry. Please go," Suga nodded to him, and then turned to their coach. He looked strangely guilty, avoiding eye contact when Suga addressed him. "Take care of them."

"Definitely," the older man nodded, turning around to leave quickly. Suga watched him walk briskly to the door, making a motion to usher the others away. There were a few protests, but the boys were easily swayed, leaving back into the hallway. Only Yamaguchi came into the room, heading immediately for Suga.

His eyes were heavily lidded, but he cocked his head and glanced at Kuroo. He seemed alert and ready.

"He woke up suddenly, threw off his mask, and was violent and uncooperative," Suga reported, looking through one of their backpacks.

"I think... he was hallucinating, too," Kenma added, gently taking Kuroo's limp hand into his and rubbing the back of it soothingly. "He named people we haven't seen in over two months and a half, so I don't think he was all there."

"Could be the fever," Yamaguchi theorized.

"Thanks. He's in pain, so I'm gonna give him some acetaminophen," Suga nodded, getting back to his work as Yamaguchi gathered his equipment.

The mask was removed to pop in the thermometer, and Yamaguchi took his blood pressure next.
Kuroo reacted to nothing, passively glancing around at best, and was fully cooperative when Yamaguchi took his pulse, scribbling all of his values down on a piece of paper. Then, he got up to stick the piece of paper next to the others on the wall behind Kuroo's bed.

"How's your pain, Kuroo?" he asked softly. "On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being no pain at all and 10 being the worst pain in your life?"

The captain took a while to think about that, glancing at Kenma as if to look for confirmation. The setter just rubbed more circles on his hand and nodded, so Kuroo turned back to Yamaguchi.

"About a 7..." he mumbled. "Can I have a smoke?"

"That's not the best idea right now, Kuro," Kenma protested softly. "You're still not in good shape."

"Smoking helps with the pain," Kuroo mumbled in protest, eyes racing back to look at Suga as he approached with a large syringe. "What is that?" he asked, eyeing the cloudy, translucent liquid inside.

"It's the pain medication. You have a tube in your stomach so I crushed the medication and dissolved it in water, and I'm going to put it through the tube. It's the same as if you had swallowed a pill, but without the effort," Suga explained.

"Can I sit up for it?" Kuroo asked, and Suga and Yamaguchi shared a look before nodding.

"Yeah. Go easy, or you'll get dizzy," Suga instructed, going on the other side to help Yamaguchi and Kenma sit Kuroo up gently, leaning against a bunch of pillows stacked against the headboard.

When he was settled, Yamaguchi gently peeled the tube taped to his cheek and opened it, inserting the syringe that Suga handed him.

"You won't feel it, don't worry," Suga assured him as Yamaguchi began to inject.

"Whatever," Kuroo muttered, looking away, but the tightness in his tone hinted that it wasn't as casual as he passed it off to be.

Once the medication was pushed in entirely, Yamaguchi picked up a second syringe, filled with water this time, and pushed the entirety of it in as well, capping the tube and sticking it to Kuroo's cheek again after. The mask was placed back on, and then, Suga turned to Yamaguchi.

"Come, Tadashi. Let's go talk over there," he suggested, Yamaguchi nodding and leading him a bit further away to give his report.

While they did that, Kenma turned to Kuroo, who was looking straight ahead, stare frozen as if he was experiencing a memory.

"Kuroo?" he called, jerking when his friend flinched at the sound of his name, and then turned.

"Kenma?"

"How are you feeling?" the setter asked for a lack of a more specific question to ask.

"Umm... Like I'm about to die, honestly," Kuroo chuckled softly, a whine of pain escaping his lips right afterwards. "But I mean... If I have all this stuff on me, it must mean I'm not dying, right?" he thumbed the oxygen mask before leaving it alone. "It feels weird and kind of uncomfortable. I mean... come on. I feel like I have tubes in places where no man should ever have tubes," he
laughed, weakly lifting his blanket to glance downward.

Kenma couldn't help but snort when the smirk was suddenly wiped right off of Kuroo's face, replaced by an expression of shock as he numbly dropped the blanket over his waist again.

"Oh my god... I do have tubes in places where no man should ever have a tube," he spoke out slowly, as if unsure how to feel. "Why... How long was I out?"

"About three days," Kenma reported. "Everybody took really great care of you while you were unconscious. It was either the tube, or you peed yourself every few hours," he smiled softly.

"This is so embarrassing..." Kuroo groaned, shutting his eyes for a second. "I don't even want to know who put that in there."

"It wasn't such a big deal," Kenma shrugged. "At the time, the only thing everyone was concerned about was saving your life."

"Well, hopefully I can get it out myself, now that I'm awake," Kuroo laughed, and then fell silent. He looked pensive all of a sudden, so Kenma left him to formulate his thoughts.

Finally, when he looked up again, he looked confused and just a bit worried, biting his lip as he addressed Kenma.

"Just what happened to me...?"

"How much do you remember?" Suga cut in, both Nekoma players turning around to watch the two medics come towards them.

"I know I got shot while running with Tsukishima... And I think I remember limping all the way back to Kenma by our meeting point. But then, it's just a bunch of blacked out moments in my mind. I don't remember much else," Kuroo recalled.

"We sewed up your wound and carried you to a safe house after that. You'd lost a lot of blood, so you were dangerously close to crashing, but we sent a team to raid a hospital in the nearby town and brought back all the stuff we needed to save you," Suga explained.

"Please don't mind me," Yamaguchi mumbled as he sat on the side of the bed with his stethoscope in his ears. "I'm gonna go under your shirt, but it's just to listen to your lungs."

"Sure," Kuroo nodded, figuring that nothing could be worse than being catheterized. He was glad he'd been out of it when they did it. "Anyway. Thanks, I guess. I must've been a burden to you all."

"Well," Suga sighed, briefly glancing at Yamaguchi, who was invested in listening to Kuroo's lung sounds. A small smile touched his lips. "The experience wasn't all that bad. And besides, we leave no man behind."

"Wow. Thanks," Kuroo repeated. "So, doc. How are things looking up?"

"Well, better, but still not great," Suga shook his head sadly. "Your blood pressure gone miles in coming back up, but it's still not back to your usual. Your heart's still a bit fast too. You might feel a bit weak and dizzy for now, because even if your pressure's better, you're still anemic from losing so much blood, but it should get better in time. The most worrying is your fever. It's pretty high; 38.9 degrees Celsius. It indicates an infection, and although I don't like it, I can't say I'm surprised. We sewed you up on the field, so it was pretty unsanitary all around."
"Great. But leave it to me. I'll fight off the infection in no time," Kuroo assured him as cockily as he could in his weakened state, with his shaky voice and his shaky smirk and his shaky hands in all of his shaky glory. Kenma's heart ached just by looking at how he scrambled to keep himself together.

"Right, well... We don't have access to antibiotics, so we can only hope that's the case." Suga sighed. "In the meantime, we're gonna wait for the meds to kick in, and then I'll take a look at your wound to clean it and see how it's doing."

Kuroo just nodded at that, and then looked pensive for a while. Suga stayed silent, wondering what was on his mind, and let him formulate his thoughts.

"Sugawara..." Kuroo finally addressed, tone serious. The setter immediately straightened, back stiff in alert attentiveness, and the mood in the room sobered.

"What is it? Do you feel unwell? Are you going to be sick? Are you dizzy? Having trouble breathing?" the second-year asked, frowning.

"What?" Kuroo furrowed his brows, and then suddenly chuckled lowly. "No, no, nothing like that. I just wanted to ask if I could take the tube out of my dick yet, is all."

"Oh." There was a small silence, and then, all at once, everybody in the room was laughing. Even Kenma, who didn't even think he still knew how to laugh, felt his cheeks strain at the grin splitting his face.

It felt so incredible to have Kuroo back. Finally, finally there was a dash of black in his otherwise colourless world.

"We'll keep it in for now, until we're sure you can walk to the bathroom. You've been in bed for almost three days, so it might not be as easy as it sounds," Suga told him.

"Damn," the captain swore, but left it at that. "Guess we'll just have to make do."

"Right." Suga nodded, and then turned to Yamaguchi. "Sorry, Yamaguchi, but could you bring out a dressing tray and everything we need to redo his dressing? I think it's time we started."

"But I just got the pain meds," Kuroo stiffened suddenly.

"It's been a while already. Besides, we can't wait too long. We want to get everybody else in here, since they've all been worried sick. And I know it's no comfort, but they're just acetaminophen tablets. Extra strong, but if it hurts anyway, there's not much we could've done. We'll try to be careful," Suga sighed, looking genuinely regretful.

"Damn it," the captain mumbled, clenching his fists by his side. Kenma did not miss the small movement, and gently laid his hand on top of Kuroo's closed fist, as if his presence would do anything at all to steal his pain.

Despite the self-destructive thought, Kuroo seemed to appreciate the gesture and relaxed as his eyes went back to Kenma.

"Okay, we're gonna take the old dressing off," Suga began, his gloved hands working to pull the blood-soaked tape and gauze off of the ugly wound on the side of the other teen's neck. Kuroo hissed and closed his eyes, but didn't really react otherwise.

"How's it look?" he asked softly, refusing to glance at the two medics in case it was worse than it felt.
"Well..." Suga seemed unsure how to describe it. Yamaguchi took the dirty gauze from his hands, and Kenma had the time to spot dried blood and some yellow stuff on the gauze before it was thrown away.

Suddenly, he had to see. Leaning over Kuroo, he tried to get a good look at the wound, and was suddenly thrown off by the offensive stench that assailed his nostrils. The sight was not any more pleasant, either. The wound seemed nicely sutured to him, but he couldn't really tell with his untrained eye. What did look a bit worrying was the fact that the two flaps of skin were not completely touching each other, and that in the small, millimetre-wide slit between the two flaps, there was wet-looking red tissue, as well as some jelly-looking tan tissue. The wound itself was oozing a yellow liquid mixed with some pink discharge and, the skin around it was raised and puffy and worryingly red.

"That doesn't look normal," Kenma commented rather bluntly, before realizing that he'd said it out loud and gasped. "Sorry! I didn't... I didn't mean for it to come out like that-"

"It's fine, Kenma. Nothing can really go right on the first try, anyway, can it?" Kuroo dismissed him, and Kenma returned to his kneeling place by his side, his hand over his even tighter fist now.

"We'll clean it up and then make sure it's kept sterile, and then the rest is gonna be up to you," Suga bit his lip, and then discarded his gloves, beginning to open up the dressing tray. It took him a while to get it right, with Yamaguchi interjecting at certain moments to warn him of his almost-breaches of sterility, and finally, at some point, they had their tray set up with the cleaning solution poured in it and the extra gauze opened.

Kuroo clenched his eyes shut tightly as they put on their sterile gloves and began their work.

"You're gonna be fine," Kenma found himself muttering, not liking the way Kuroo's breath hitched every time they touched him. As if the mere presence of fingertips on his skin caused him great pain, no matter their intentions or actions. It made him wonder... when had Kuroo become so small and so scared and so broken?

It had been Coach Ukai who had helped them find one another in Tokyo again, and they'd been together from then on, and most of their time had been spent in the death camp, where they'd been treated well and fairly for people who were essentially headed for the firing squad. Had it been the ever-loomng fear of execution that had done him in? Kenma was sure that Kuroo was stronger than that...

But then again, when they'd reunited in Tokyo, Kuroo had not seemed like himself. And in the month between when they'd been separated into different atomic bunkers, and then had found each other on the surface after the bomb, Kuroo had picked up smoking and the bizarre habit of barricading the doors and first-floor windows at night, nevermind the fact that he'd lost some of his conscience when it involved other people versus their own wellbeing. Had something happened in that short amount of time?

Something that had made the ever-so-arrogant captain of the Nekoma volleyball team into a shell of his old character?

"Fight it, Kuroo. I know you'll come back to m- to us." He barely corrected himself in time, and then squeezed tighter. Kuroo's face was tight with pain, and Kenma did not know if he was asking Kuroo to stave off the physical pain, or the psychological damage that none of them could seem to pick up on.

"Tryin'..." his best friend grunted out, followed by a muffled cry of pain, and if that wasn't a
desperate cry for help at its best, Kenma didn't know what else to look out for anymore.

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After the dressing was cleaned, changed, and taped firmly in place, the oxygen mask was taken off of Kuroo's face, and the rest of Karasuno was finally allowed to come in to see him. Thoroughly exhausted by the procedure's toll on his already-weakened body, Kuroo only entertained them briefly, and leaned back against his pillows comfortably when they settled for breakfast.

There wasn't much conversation in the air, a fact that many of them seemed to be thankful for. Especially Kuroo, who, after attempting and failing to eat over five bites without getting exhausted, finally gave in to Suga's suggestion to tube-feed him. Kenma's heart still clenched at the tight expression that Kuroo had in his eyes when Suga came back with a syringe filled with yellowish liquid and pieces of mashed food floating around in it. The medic flushed down the mixture in the tube taped to his cheek, with some trouble at first, but then repeated the motion with a second syringe of water, clearing up the tube. Kuroo only settled when the medical equipment was far away from him, and then finally allowed himself to relax against his pillows.

When Kuroo fell asleep at the end of breakfast (rather abruptly, giving everyone a good scare trying to rush to find a pulse), they all decided to clear out and organize small raid parties to go try and find food in the nearest houses in town. The threat of the group nestled within the downtown area was still in the forefront of their minds, so the two teams of three that volunteered to go were aware not to stray too far. The rain had let up by the time they were ready to get going, and the clear, bloody sky guaranteed them that they wouldn't be caught in the rain again, at least for a while.

As usual, nobody questioned it when Kenma abstained from volunteering for a raid, reading the anguish in his eyes as he caressed Kuroo's limp hand as he slept, and deciding to leave him be. Except this changed nothing in Kenma's colourless world, and so at some point, when the loneliness and suffocating silence became too much for him, he all but fled from the master bedroom, leaving Kuroo under Yamaguchi's watchful eye.

His feet carried him the short distance down the hall, into the bathroom, where he shut the door, and leaned against it. For some reason, he was out of breath, and his heart was racing fast, and every time he blinked, an unfamiliar, suffocating black pervaded his vision. He couldn't stop thinking of Kuroo, even when he was away from him, he couldn't imagine himself living without him, or living with him in pain or in distress.

Kuroo was suffering, fighting an infection that everybody silently agreed he wouldn't be able to beat, weak and helpless in a bed in an abandoned house hundreds of miles away from home. And suddenly, Kenma was so afraid, so, so afraid that the next time he woke up, it would be to Kuroo's cold, dead body, his characteristically smug smirk wiped off his pale and blue face forever.

He couldn't imagine that. A world without Kuroo would not only be colourless, but unimaginable. Kuroo was the first person who, back when they were children, had finally given life to his stillborn existence. Kenma would return the life he'd so generously been gifted if Kuroo lost his, without an ounce of hesitation. He was already distraught with Kuroo so sick in bed, he couldn't fathom having to leave him six feet underground.

His hands were shaking, and his heart was racing at the mental image. And quickly, all too quickly, like a Big Bang in the making within his core, something inside of him swelled and swelled and exploded in the blink of an eye. A rush of uncomfortable heat rippled through his body, tremors overtaking all of his limbs, and the tears that began to roll down his fevered cheeks caught on the lips he was biting to keep the sobs inside of him.
Too weak to stand, Kenma slid to the ground, letting himself cry. Just this once, just for now, he wanted to let himself be weak, drown in the morbid satisfaction of being mortal and still being alive. The pain running up and down his mind, flooding the deepest recesses of his mind to the very tips of his toenails, was debilitating, so much that he had to lay down with his cheek pressed to the dirty bathroom tiles in order to cool down his head and avoid tipping over. His anxiety had been a part of him since he was a child, but he hadn't remembered it being this bad since middle school. Was it because Kuroo had saved him back in middle school, and now he was losing the only person who'd ever gotten him to feel comfortable being alive?

He couldn't breathe, chest heaving as he gasped for air through the weak sobs that spilled out of his mouth. Kenma was so afraid, he could have vomited, but his body was too distressed to coordinate even that. Instead, the teen found himself stuck in a perpetual state of dizziness and nausea, curling up on himself with his head cradled in his hands as if anything could protect him now from what he was feeling.

And suddenly, he was not drowning anymore. There was one hand on his shoulder, and then another, and Kenma was being pulled out of the depths of the ocean of despair he'd cried for himself.

Somebody pulled him up into a sitting position and pressed his teary, snotty, sweaty face into his shirt, rubbing soothing circles into his back, and when the weight of a protective hand was applied to the back of his head, pressing him closer, every wail Kenma bit out into the other person's shirt felt like a huge breath taken after breaking the surface of the freezing water.

The other person said nothing, but his body felt soothingly warm and protectively wound around Kenma's fragile limbs, and the hand on his back and gripping the back of his head were familiar weights that anchored him down to reality. Slowly but surely, Kenma felt the Big Bang recede, taking with it all the heat and all the crippling pain it had released, and the calm waves of serenity that began to wash over him finally cleared the fear from his paralyzed mind.

His breathing slowed, as did his heart, and Kenma was suddenly aware of how lethargic he felt. His limbs felt heavy now, hanging uselessly at his sides, and his knees hurt from kneeling on the tile for so long.

And yet the other person, who smelled so comfortingly of sweat and canned tomatoes and stale clothing, still had not moved, and had not let him go. Not until Kenma felt grounded enough to begin pulling away did the hands finally drop, gently taking his own hands instead. The teen took a moment, and then finally pulled his wet face out of the person's clothing.

Kenma's world had been colourless for a while, but suddenly, there was a spark, just one colour that basked his achromatic vision in a warm glow. And Kenma knew he looked like a mess, eyes puffy and red and face flushed and blotchy, but never before had he been so happy to be able to see the colour orange.

Hinata waited for Kenma to make eye contact with him, and then smiled softly.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, no expectation integrated in his tone. The question was genuinely concern from him, and Kenma was shocked into silence for a second as he thought of his answer.

"Not really," he finally muttered, looking away. "Sorry, I guess that wasn't what you were expecting..."

"I was expecting the truth, and I'm really happy you gave it to me," Hinata insisted gently, running his hands up and down Kenma's upper arms to try and get rid of the goosebumps under the other
teen's clothes. "If you need to keep going, and you'd like me to stay, I don't mind."

"No," Kenma shook his head, suddenly embarrassed. He looked away, drying his face in his sleeves, not knowing what else to say. "Sorry, I just-

"Kenma," Hinata interrupted him firmly, but kindly. The setter didn't even think that the orange-haired teen knew how to be so considerate of other's feelings. "You have nothing to apologize for. And you don't have to explain. We all know it's been incredibly hard for you especially, amongst all of us here. You've been really really strong for a long time now."

"I just..." Kenma's voice caught in his throat again as the words left him without his consent. "It just hurts to see him like that. He's... he's my everything, so I... I can't imagine..."

"I can't imagine what you're going through," Hinata sighed when it was clear that Kenma would not be able to articulate his thoughts. "You've been so incredible so far, keeping it together like you have. You haven't left his side even once, you've taken care of him, done his muscle tone exercises when he was unconscious, slept by him, waited for him to wake up... And even when he woke up, you were strong when he needed you, and you never once let him down. You're really incredible," he repeated for emphasis.

"I'm just doing everything I can to take care of him," Kenma muttered, not knowing how to accept the high praise.

"Take care of yourself, too, though," Hinata chided softly, without accusation in his tone. "He wouldn't be happy to see you so distressed because of him. And you don't deserve to be so stressed, not when we should all be celebrating the fact that he's still alive and fighting."

"I'm just scared of losing him," Kenma finally worded out, locking eyes with the other teen to attempt to convey how desperate he felt. "I'll do anything to keep him alive."

"I know you will. And honestly, if there's anything I can do to help you, or to take some of that burden off of you, anything at all, you can count on me," Hinata promised, putting his hands in his lap and playing with his fingers a bit nervously. "I want to help you, too. You mean a lot to me, so it hurts me, too, when you're feeling so unwell."

"Thank you, Shouyo," Kenma replied a bit breathlessly, but meant every single syllable that left his mouth.

"No need to thank me. I'm only looking out for a friend. One of the best friends I'll ever have," Hinata grinned, and suddenly with that one grin, Kenma's orange-hued world became ten times brighter, as if he were staring into a bright, promising sun casting its warm rays onto a brand new world.

It made Kenma's heart swell with gratitude that he did not know how to express.

"So if you ever need anything at all, don't hesitate to come to me," Hinata repeated again, and then stood up, offering a hand to Kenma. The setter looked at it briefly, and then took it, letting himself be pulled up. Hinata's expression was warm and kind and trustworthy, and Kenma knew that he could go to Hinata without a doubt when he had a plan of action in mind. "But for now," Hinata began again as if reading his exact thoughts, gently taking one of his hands and squeezing reassuringly, "I think you should go get some rest. Some actual rest in one of the other bedrooms, so that you can actually get some sleep without having to worry about your responsibilities."

"I can't do that," Kenma shook his head, but followed Hinata anyway when he was dragged out of
the bathroom. "What if Kuroo wakes up and he needs me?"

"We'll tell him you needed some time for yourself. Kuroo will understand. And if anything big happens, I'll come and wake you up," Hinata promised, pulling him into his bedroom. "Deal?"

"I'm not sure-"

"Deal, Kenma?"

"... Deal," the setter conceded, almost amused when Hinata cheered at the victory and ushered him to the bed. The bed had been made, probably by Tobio since Hinata was too much of a slop to make the bed in the morning, and Kenma felt slightly guilty for slipping under the covers.

However, for the first time in his life, not sleeping next to a warm body felt incredibly soothing. He didn't realize how much he'd needed his space until then, and the bright grin on Hinata's face showed that the younger teen understood that as well.

"Have a good rest," he wished him, and with a small wave of his hand, left the room, closing the door behind him.

Kenma waited a few seconds to be sure that Hinata had left after all, and then turned on his side to make himself comfortable. As if finally conceding to some hidden exhaustion that had been lurking in his bones all this time, he suddenly felt drained, and almost couldn't even muster the energy to pull the blankets up to his chest.

But he made it, and let himself drift off into a peaceful sleep, taking one baby step at a time to vanquish his limitations and the challenges set immovably in his path towards a world full of colours.

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Kuroo did not wake for lunch, so Yamaguchi flushed a mixture of broth and protein powder into his feeding tube and left it at that. The raiding parties had not returned yet, as they'd been given until before dinnertime, and so the five remaining conscious inhabitants of the house shared the two cans of beans they had left in their depleted reserves and hoped that the others would be lucky with their findings.

Thankfully, Kuroo woke up a couple of hours after lunch, still weak and lethargic, but feeling better than the morning. After some brief discussions about the plan of care, and some brief tests to see if he'd be able to function a bit more independently, Suga and Yamaguchi decided to remove the nasogastric tube (and taught Kuroo to remove his urinary catheter himself, which the captain was incredibly delighted to do). The IV that had been running at a slower rate for a while was also clamped, and the port was disconnected, although the two improvised medics insisted that he keep the catheter inserted, just in case they needed it again.

And then, to everybody's relief, Kuroo insisted on getting out of bed, to which they obliged gleefully. At first, it took both Kageyama and Suga to support him as he found his strength again, and it took him a few laps in the hallway to readjust his legs to weight-bearing again. But very soon, he did not need support anymore, and could walk by leaning on walls.

Except when his newfound energy suddenly left him, and it took all of Kenma's strength to catch him and lower him to the floor worryingly. Kuroo had laughed it off breathlessly, and Suga had assured him that it was because he'd been on bedrest for so long, so they made one last effort to get him back into bed, and let him rest.

The raid parties came back around dinnertime, with only meagre findings to report. The entire area
seemed to have been swept clean, probably by raiders, or maybe even by the society within the downtown area, and so they did not even have one can per person to present as the fruit of their labour. On top of everything, their water stores, which had seemed rather endless at first, finally began looking sparse, and it was then that alarm bells began ringing in their ears.

They ate whatever they'd scrounged up from the neighbouring houses, Kenma volunteering his meal to Kuroo and accepting some protein powder dissolved in water as dinner instead. The black-haired boy looked guilty about accepting the can of tuna, but looked too tired to object.

When they split for the evening, vacating to one task or another, Kuroo fell asleep, leaving his primary caretakers to find something else to do. Thankfully, Noya and Tanaka had found some board games lying around the house, so they were able to burn off a few hours by distracting themselves. Finally, as it became dark out and the flashlights were turned on, it was decided to call it an early night (9:37PM, according to Daichi's watch), and everybody returned to their assigned beds.

Kenma slept in the master bedroom again, although since Kuroo's condition had ameliorated, Suga and Yamaguchi had given up the guard watches, trusting Kenma to get one of them if anything went wrong. Kenma promised to keep an eye on Kuroo, although as the night advanced, and drowsiness overtook his system, he became less and less aware of his surroundings.

He had fallen asleep as some point, probably, because in the middle of the night, he woke up shuffling next to him. Lethargic and half-conscious, he turned around just in time to see Kuroo shakily getting out of bed, stabilizing himself on the wall.

"K'roo...?" he groaned, wondering what was up. His best friend whipped his head back at him, although Kenma could not really see him in the dark, and took a sharp breath.

"I just gotta pee," Kuroo mumbled, and if Kenma was all there, he would have noted the squeak in his voice and the pinched quality of his tone. But before he could follow up, Kuroo was limping away faster than he had earlier that afternoon, almost as if desperate to get out. The setter just laid in bed, too exhausted to think much about it, and almost fell asleep again until, only a few minutes later, he realized that Kuroo may need help walking back.

Yawning and slightly reluctantly getting out of bed, Kenma tested his legs before getting up and stretching. Half-asleep still, he padded over to the open door and exited into the hallway.

However, as he walked into the hallway, the air there a bit more frigid than in the rooms, he realized that the bathroom door was open, and so was one of the bedroom doors. Suddenly on high alert, he took a few more steps, trying to figure out the outline of the figure in the bathroom.

In the moonlight, he ended up discerning two figures; both of them on their knees. One of them was Kuroo for sure, and Kenma noted with a pang of his heart that it was probably the figure hunched over the toilet, forehead pressed against the porcelain for momentary respite. However, Kenma could not tell who the second figure was, holding Kuroo's sweaty hair back and rubbing circles into his back, and was about to call him out until the person spoke up.

"Kuroo, you have to tell them," the other figure spoke, and Kenma noted worriedly that it was coach Ukai with him. "It's important for them to know."

"Can't," Kuroo's feeble voice reached Kenma's ears, and his heart tore when he discerned a small sob within those words. "Can't tell them what I did."

"Doesn't matter what you did," Keishin insisted softly. "It matters what they did to you. And with the way you've been acting, your friends need to know that."
"Please don't tell them," Kuroo begged, sounding more vulnerable than ever. Kenma just wanted to crush him in his arms and protect him from whatever it was that was ailing him.

Whatever it was that he hadn't deemed important enough to tell him, but that coach Ukai knew.

"I won't tell them, but you have to," the older man told him.

"Please don't make me."

"I won't make you tell them, either. I want you to make that decision yourself."

A small retching sound followed the sentence, and then a larger one accompanied by the sound of fluid dripping into the toilet, and Kenma's throat went dry. He felt like he was assisting to a forbidden conversation, but at the same time, felt entitled to know what was burdening his best friend.

"Tetsuro... Please," Keishin begged softly once Kuroo was done retching, and was left heaving for breath. "You're in bad shape right now, and everybody's making incredible effort to help you get better. You can't keep lashing out at them every single time they try and help you, just because--"

"-please don't say it."

"-just because you had... bad experiences. But everyone here is a friend of yours, and they'd never do anything to hurt you. That's why you have to talk to people about what happened. You're losing touch with reality and mixing up the two circumstances, and you're hurting the people who care for you just because you're too proud to speak up."

"I'm not too proud," Kuroo muttered after a while, letting his head drop against the seat with a dull thud. "Just too scared..."

There was a sigh as Keishin finally seemed to concede, and the two men fell into silence. As for Kenma, who'd assisted to the conversation unnoticed, he stayed frozen on the spot for a second, before electing it wiser to leave before he was spotted. A thousand questions burning holes into his brain, he still managed to go back into the master bedroom and get back into bed without so much as a peep, and pretended to be asleep.

About five minutes later, Keishin escorted Kuroo back to bed and tucked him in with a brief "think about it", and then left, closing the door behind them.

Kenma listened to Kuroo shift, toss and turn, and pretended not to notice. And he especially pretended not to notice when, a moment of silence later, Kuroo began to cry, softly, gently, shoulders barely twitching with every heaving breath he took. Kenma wanted to turn around and hug the sadness right out of him, but if he did that, he'd give away that he'd heard the mysterious conversation. And he did not want to betray his best friend's trust like that.

So he let Kuroo cry himself to sleep. And he himself found no peace for the rest of the night.

In retrospect, he probably also stayed silent because he was too afraid of digging up the truth that Kuroo seemed so adamant to keep buried alive.

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Kuroo's fever got worse overnight. In the morning, he took a long time to react to his surroundings, and periodically fell asleep again. Kenma heard Keishin tipping Suga off on Kuroo throwing up during the night, so Suga spent some time consulting his drug guide and then gave Kuroo something against nausea through his IV before waking him up to get him to drink some water with protein
powder mixed in. Kuroo barely stayed awake through it, slipping back under as soon as Suga let him lie back down.

His fever had gone up to 39.0 degrees Celsius, and nobody needed a textbook to know how bad that was. They didn't even have ice packs to cool him down, so they could only wet towels with lukewarm water and place them on his forehead.

Since they'd also run out of food, two parties of three went out once more in the morning with the intention of going further into the city, and bringing back something, at least for dinner. The hunger gnawing at their very bones was a familiar feeling at that point, but it was still as unpleasant as always. And since nobody had energy to spare, the ones left at the house had nothing to do but lounge around and dream of a better world.

Kuroo dreamed, too, and Kenma hated how powerless he felt, just lying next to him and dreading the onset of the next fevered dream he'd have. Because his dreams didn't seem to be of a brighter future, but of some hidden past, judging by the way he thrashed often, and called out unintelligibly. Once in a while, some articulated words would leave his mouth, however, and Kenma hated hearing them.

"No."
"Stop!"
"Please..."

"Kuroo," Kenma called out for what felt like the thousandth time, unable to bear his best friend's fevered cries anymore. "Wake up." He shook him by the shoulder softly.

The captain took a few seconds to snap out of it, but when he did, his eyes opened abruptly in tandem with a sharp, gasping intake of breath.

"Calm down," Kenma sighed, wiping his sweaty face with the damp towel on his forehead. Kuroo's eyes followed the movement, and then fell half-lidded as he locked onto his face.

"K'nma..." he began, voice scratchy and dry, but they could not spare any more water unless absolutely necessary, so Kenma steeled himself against the rasping quality of his words. "I think... I think I'm g'nya die."

But nothing could have prepared him to hear that, to hear those words from Kuroo's own mouth, to hear the defeat in his tone and the sad acceptance in his words. "I think... I think I'm g'nya die."

But nothing could have prepared him to hear those words, to hear the defeat in his tone and the sad acceptance in his words. To him, the captain had always been a pillar of strength and the best friend he could ask for. And now, if even he conceded defeat... Then there really must have been no hope.

If Kuroo died, Kenma reminded himself, then he would die, too. The heart could survive a brain injury, but the brain would die if its heart broke.

But most of all, Kenma hated seeing Kuroo in pain. So there was no way in hell he'd let him die.

"Not on my watch," he promised, taking Kuroo's hand and squeezing it tightly enough to make it go white. Kuroo lethargically looked at his firm hold, and then up at him, and then his eyelids slid shut without another word, or even a confirmation that he'd heard what Kenma had said.

But Kenma didn't need him to hear his words. He just needed him to understand that he would not give up, no matter what. The only person who needed words right now was Kenma himself.
And so, alone in the master bedroom, sitting next to the dying body of the only person who kept Kenma alive, he swore to himself that he'd save Kuroo's life.


Hinata kept throwing him worried looks throughout dinnertime. An impromptu raincloud had separated the other group from the one at home for two extra hours, so they lost precious time they needed to gather more supplies during daylight hours. Now, as the bleeding sun gave way to the clouded moon, they all sat with whatever meagre rations they'd gathered and tried to ignore how hungry they still were after their single cans of chickpeas and the rationed gulps of water. Kuroo's can was left halfway finished as the feverish boy was unable to stay awake long enough to eat it all.

And through it all, Kenma's can remained untouched, cradled in his hands but all but forgotten as the black-haired setter kept a watchful eye on Kuroo's restless twitching. His eyes were moving rapidly under his eyelids, as if he was following some dream (or maybe a nightmare) frantically. The sheen of sweat that seemed to perpetually be wetting his brow was anything but a welcome sight, even if his earlier vitals showed a fever stable at 38.9 degrees.

"Kenma, please eat," Hinata whispered to him from his side when Noya opened up a conversation with Tanaka, thus taking everybody's attention away from them. Kenma appreciated the secrecy, but the roiling in his gut made him fear that he'd follow in Kuroo's footsteps and throw everything up if he ate now.

Maybe he could convince Suga to medicate him as well, he thought as he reluctantly took a spoonful of soggy lentils in his mouth. Drugs would probably be a better master of his body than he was, at any rate.

After dinner, the group left to go play cards in the other room while Yamaguchi changed Kuroo's dressing. Kenma stayed behind to watch, and maybe it was because he hadn't made a peep, but Hinata also stayed behind, uncharacteristically silently standing next to Kenma and watching his every move carefully. Not that Kenma made any moves. His eyes were stuck on the festering wound on Kuroo's neck, and he felt nauseous just at the sight of the offending foreign body on his best friend.

If only the infection hadn't caught. Kuroo wouldn't be suffering, he wouldn't be weak, or feverish, or desperate enough to throw in the towel. Kuroo had never given up before, no matter what. It was the infection that had changed him so irreparably.

Kenma needed to do something -anything- to get rid of it and save Kuroo. Anything. He needed Kuroo like he needed air.

He must have been extra tense at the thought, because when Hinata took his hand softly, he felt tension release from his shoulders. He turned to his friend, a bit surprised, but relaxed a bit more upon the sight of his soft, sad smile.

"Yamaguchi," he asked, unwilling to disturb the medic, but needing to know. "How are we going to help him? He's not getting any better."

The younger teen seemed to know this already, but did not react, continuing his work silently. Kenma waited patiently, neither of the two being of too many words, and finally, Yamaguchi sat back on his haunches on the floor and carefully stretched his back.
"I don't know," he shrugged, not looking nonchalant, but also not looking worried. All in all, as he always did these days, he looked empty. "We don't have antibiotics. We can give him acetaminophen for fever and pain, but when it comes down to it, he'll have to fight the infection himself. Best we can do is give him lots of fluids and good nutrition and plenty of rest."

But they all knew that water and food and peaceful sleep were luxuries that none of them had anymore.

"I see," Kenma nodded, knowing that Yamaguchi's explanation was a fancily-worded way of saying that Kuroo had no chance at survival now. Somehow, it didn't hurt as much as before, and Kenma realized with growing horror that he was beginning to accept the development.

But he would never. He would never give up on Kuroo. Not when Kuroo had never given up on him before.

"We have to do everything we can to save him," he added, throat dry as a plan dawned in the forefront of his mind, clear as the mornings that had dawned upon them back when they'd been careless and happy. "We have to save him, no matter what."

"Right," Yamaguchi nodded, and returned to his futile task.

By his side, Hinata flinched when Kenma's grip became frighteningly tight on his fingers.

Something had changed.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Something had changed, and Kenma liked whatever it was, because it gave him the final push to act. He had been hesitating a little bit, but when Kuroo began having small episodes of sleep apnea, causing alarm and getting him back on the oxygen mask while he slept, he knew it was time to act.

However, he also knew how risky it was to act independently as he planned. Nobody would listen to him now, no matter how much he begged, so he had to go about this on his own. They'd probably hate him after this, but then again, he didn't care what happened to him, as long as Kuroo lived.

With those thoughts in mind, he waited a couple of hours before sneaking into the first bedroom. Everybody was sound asleep, not even twitching as he carefully walked over the bodies. He froze momentarily as Keishin shifted over in his sleep, but kept going once it was clear that he wouldn't wake. He walked over to Hinata on the bed, sleeping back-to-back with Kageyama, and gently put a hand on his shoulder. Hinata grumbled, and Kenma put another hand on his mouth softly to hush him.

To that, Hinata woke with a jerk, and Kenma immediately lowered himself to his line of sight to reassure him.

"Kenma...?" the sleepy teen asked quietly, and the setter made a hushing motion with his finger before pointing him to the door.

As he walked away, Hinata just furrowed his brow and then silently got out from under the covers to tiptoe after him.

They exited the bedroom and Kenma led them back to the master bedroom, where he closed the door to give them some privacy.

"So... What is it?" Hinata asked, frowning worriedly. "Did you have a nightmare? Is something on
"I need your help," Kenma simply answered. "With Kuroo."

"Sure. What can I do for you?" Hinata asked immediately, perking up at the thought of being dependable.

"He's not going to make it at this rate, no matter how much Sugawara and Yamaguchi insist. He needs medical attention, he can't stay here anymore," Kenma began, glancing sideways to Kuroo's sweaty face, once again entrapped underneath the oxygen mask.

"What are you saying?" Hinata asked, trying to puzzle it out. "Do you want to raid the hospital again?"

"No, what I mean is..." Kenma took a deep breath, getting ready to drop the bomb. "He needs to see a doctor. And I want to take him downtown to seek medical help."

There was a small silence punctuated by Kuroo's heaving breaths in the background, and Kenma bit his lip at Hinata's pensive expression. If he refused, he'd also give out his intentions to the rest of the group, and then, Kuroo would have absolutely no chance at survival. He hoped he hadn't made the wrong decision by trusting Hinata.

"Downtown..." Hinata finally mused out loud. "But... the Captain said that it could be dangerous. And that the people there could be like the ones in the death camp. It's too risky to go."

"Please," Kenma tried again, nausea welling up in his throat. "Please, Shouyo, you're the only one I can count on to help me. I don't mind if you tell the others I forced you. I'll take all the blame and all the punishment. You don't even have to come all the way with me, but please. I can't do this alone."

"Kenma..." Hinata seemed to hesitate again. "The Captain was really against us going... Even the coach admitted it was a bad idea... I'm not sure we should do this."

So there really would be no help at all. Kenma had been wrong to think that he could depend on anybody but himself and Kuroo in this world. And now, even Kuroo had given up. He wasn't even sure what he was fighting for anymore.

"Fine," he finally conceded, tone defeated. "Fine, I'll do it alone. Sorry for disturbing you." Dejected, he turned to go to Kuroo's bedside, beginning to take the blanket off of him. "Just... if you're my friend, just as one last favour... don't tell anybody where I've gone."

"Kenma..." Hinata seemed speechless as he watched Kenma get Kuroo's dirty running shoes on, struggling to push them all the way in.

"Please, Shouyo," Kenma begged softly, tears pricking his eyes as he accepted that he would have to fight alone. His hands shook as he tied up the second shoelaces and then went for Kuroo's shoulders to try and pull him up.

Despite the weight loss, Kuroo was still as heavy as ever, and with the fever burning through his brain, he was too lethargic to react when Kenma used all of his weight to try and get him up. His back hurt at the strain, but he pulled and moved and pushed and maneuvered until Kuroo was in a sitting position with his feet flat on the floor, leaning fully into him.

Kenma attempted to then pull him up, but he could barely get him to budge. Kuroo was dead weight, and it wasn't easy to keep him steady. He tried again once more, to no avail, and then, right before he tried a third time, a hand was set on his shoulder.
Kenma turned in surprise to find Hinata still there, still looking indecisive and worried and guilty, but still there, still with his hand on Kenma's shoulder and his fingers digging slightly into his dirty hoodie, as if he was moments away from regretting his decision.

But Kenma said nothing, and Hinata said nothing. Instead, Kenma switched over to grab Kuroo's right arm, and Hinata took Kuroo's left.

"Kuroo, wake up," Kenma began, softly shaking the boy's arm. It took a few vigorous shakes, but then, Kuroo's eyes blinked open unevenly, and his clouded gaze locked onto his best friend's.

"K'nya...?"

"We're going to get you to a doctor," Kenma informed him. "But you need to walk with us."

"How f'r?" Kuroo slurred, making effort with a gasp to get out of bed, and put weight on his legs. Kenma supported him with one arm momentarily to grab the oxygen tank off the floor and sling it over his shoulder before returning his grip to Kuroo's body.

"A little while, I'm sorry," Kenma sighed. "A few hours, actually. But we'll take breaks, and once you're there, you're going to get medication and food and you're gonna get better. Please, Kuroo... please do your best to walk forward."

"Huh..." Kuroo replied blearily, looking the other way and spotting Hinata, who looked unsure, but who supported the tall teen anyway. However, he seemed too out of it to question it, and nodded. "Fine."

"Thank you." That's all that Kenma needed to start walking forward.

Wordlessly, they left the master bedroom, and headed down the hall to the staircase. The old stairs creaked slightly under their weight, but carefully listening to the sounds on the second floor, Kenma concluded that nobody had woken to the noise. They made it to the front door undisturbed, where they stopped for a moment for Hinata and Kenma to get their shoes on, and then the triple-lock on the door was opened. Kenma grabbed the keys by the door as they stepped out, just to lock at least one of the locks behind them, just to insure their group's protection, but then, with only minimal hesitation, they walked on.

"Kenma, I have a bad feeling about this," Hinata muttered unsurely as they descended the few steps off the front porch, onto the driveway, and then the road.

"Just keep walking, Shouyo," Kenma just answered, heart beating fast in the heat of the moment. Somehow, it felt like Hinata was right. But then again, he needed to save Kuroo, no matter what.

...-

It was hard to tell the time without Daichi's watch, and the sky, dark as ever, did not tell them anything about the passage of time, either. Silently, Hinata, Kenma and Kuroo trudged on, feet dragging tiredly on the asphalt, their stomachs growling fiercely in hunger, their throats dry from thirst and scratchy from the acrid smell of sulfur that seemed to permanently hang in the atmosphere. Several times, they had to stop for Kuroo to rest his shaky legs, and due to the interruptions, Kenma felt like they were getting no progress done. Plus, Kuroo was pushing himself even more, which didn't bode well for his condition, if his pasty white skin had anything to say about that.

He wasn't sure what else to do but push on.

The night was mostly silent, asides from the occasional ruffle of wind through dead tree branches, or
the shuffle of their feet on the ground. Kenma enjoyed the cool night air and the silence in that sense, letting it bring him some form of peace of mind.

But then, there was a noise in the distance, which Kenma rejected at first as a nocturnal animal. But then, the noise got closer, and closer, the rhythmic thumping of it reminding Kenma of a heartbeat, and he told himself that it was probably his own heartbeat that he heard in his own ears.

His breath began to come out in small puffs. His limbs began to shake.

And then, Hinata stopped dead in the middle of the road, and turned around.

The heartbeat-like noise was stronger than ever in Kenma's ears, and he turned as well.

A light was shined in his face, and when he recovered from the temporary blindness that swallowed him up, he found himself facing Karasuno's setter, Kageyama Tobio.

"Kageyama, what are you doing here?" Hinata squawked, and Kenma would be lying to say that he didn't hear the fear in his tone. "You shouldn't be out!"

"Neither should you, stupid!" Kageyama snapped harshly, and then turned around, pointing his flashlight down the road, where he came from. He flicked it on and off a few times in what Kenma realized was a signal, and his blood ran cold.

They'd been caught.

"Kageyama, let us go," Hinata protested half-heartedly, not knowing what to do. Kenma was frozen in horror, but at Hinata's words, his muscles were spurred into action again.

Desperate to make an escape, to get out before anyone could get a hold on him, he spun roughly and tugged Kuroo with him. Hinata's grip failed on the heavier boy, and both the smaller teen and the Nekoma player let out a cry of distress as the imbalanced motion caused Kuroo to trip, and then fall on Kenma. Barely able to hold him up, Kenma fell back, glad that he could at least cushion Kuroo's fall with his own body as his back hit the rough ground.

Breath escaped his body with the impact, and then was forced out again when Kuroo's entire weight fell on top of him as well.

"Kenma!" Hinata's voice reached the setter's ears, but Kenma was too buzzed by the fall to pay him any mind. Instead, he gently looked after Kuroo, ignoring his quiet mantra of "K'nma, K'nma, K'nma" as he pushed him off, and then flipped him on his back. Miraculously, the oxygen tank had not exploded upon impact with the ground, so Kenma counted his blessings and made sure Kuroo was still breathing before looking up.

Kageyama was looking down at him with a fury.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he asked harshly, startling Hinata.

"Kageyama, stop! Don't yell at him," he protested, but Kageyama brushed him off.

"Why did you run away? Answer me!" he demanded instead, glaring at the Nekoma player kneeling on the ground, trying to catch his breath.

"None of your business," Kenma grumbled, looking away.

"Like hell it isn't!" the black-haired boy sneered in response. "You could've gotten Hinata hurt. His
ankle's still not all better and you got him in on this plan! What were you doing!?

"Saving Kuroo's life." And suddenly, Kenma was angry. Angry at how unfair the world had to be and angry at himself for never being able to follow his plans through to the end. "I'll take all the blame if I have to, but I am going to save Kuroo's life, no matter what!"

"Even if it means endangering Hinata in the process?" the other boy spat, drawing a cried out protest from Hinata.

"Kageyama, it's not like that!"

"Fine then!" Kenma interrupted, clenching his fists, frustrated tears burning his eyes. "What would you have done, then? Put yourself in my shoes for just one second! If Hinata was the one dying, delirious with a fever and blood loss and hungry and in constant pain, if Hinata told you one day that he'd completely given up and wanted to die, what would you do!? Wouldn't you try and save him, too!?"

"Well, obviously, but-"

"There are no 'but's," Kenma cut him off sharply. "Kuroo is the most precious person in the world for me. If I'm the only one who wants to save him, then fine. I'll do it alone. You can't stop me, though."

"Kenma..." Hinata bit his lip, sinking to his knees next to his friend. By the muffled quality of his voice, Kenma realized that he had begun to cry, and that his ears were blocked with the pressure building up inside of him. He gulped down to pop his ears, and when he did, he heard more footsteps skidding to a stop next to them.

"They're here, they're safe," a voice sighed out in relief, and Kenma vaguely registered the voice as Keishin's. Their long-time companion's. Surely he would understand.

"Please, Keishin," Kenma begged, throat raw from the tears being held back. "Please, we can't let him die. Please let me take him downtown to see a doctor..."

"Kenma, that's... maybe that's not the best plan..." the older man hesitated, and the setter balked.

"Why do you all want him to die?" he asked once again, quieter this time, meeker, and confused. Just plainly, innocently confused as to what he did not see that others seemed to see in his logic. Why was nobody on his side?

"We don't, but... it's too risky," Keishin sighed. "If it's anything like the death camp..."

"Then so be it," Kenma replied in a heartbeat, his own reverberating loudly in his ears. "I won't give up before having tried everything in my options. And if we have to die, I'd rather we die quickly and painlessly, rather than..." His voice trailed off as he looked down at Kuroo's panting form. "Rather than waste away in agony until death is merciful enough to claim us. I won't let that happen to him. Not to Kuroo."

"Kenma, we understand, but..." A new voice jumped in, which the setter identified as Daichi's, the ever-so-responsible captain. "Running away in the middle of the night wasn't the solution. You should've spoken to us."

"Only to be rejected again and again," Kenma huffed, drying his tears. "Actions speak louder than words. If blood doesn't circulate, the heart can't pump and the brain can't function. It was either this, or Kuroo and I both died as early as tonight."
"You don't have to make this into an ultimatum," Keishin protested. "We should discuss this like reasonable adults."

"But we're not," Kenma commented, effectively shutting all of them up. Because no matter how much they denied it, it was true. "But I'm not discussing this anymore. I'm going to do this. I'm not asking for your approval, or your help. I'll take Kuroo myself and deal with the consequences for both of us. I won't even come back to you if all else fails. We'll leave you all alone and let you go on, and take care of ourselves. I just ask that you let me take him downtown to see a doctor so he can live to see the morning light."

There was a silence that settled over their heads, slightly pressuring, but mostly just peaceful. It was a nice kind of silence, one that they hadn't had in a long while, and it allowed them all to think about what had just transpired.

And then, Kuroo ruined the mood by making small retching noises. Kenma had just enough time to react by pulling his mask off his mouth and nose before the black-haired boy was vomiting up foul-smelling bile, his stomach having nothing else to regurgitate. The acid of the bile must have burned Kuroo's throat terribly, as tears rolled down his eyes when he finished, and Kenma did not even care to do otherwise as he wiped Kuroo's mouth with his sleeve, and then pulled the older teen against him in a tight hug.

"I won't let you die," he promised in a whisper just loud enough for the others to hear as well, rocking his best friend gently.

"And we won't, either," Daichi suddenly added, shocking everybody with his sudden declaration. Kageyama turned his flashlight to him, as if to make sure he'd heard right, and Daichi's face was set with its usual determination. "For now, let's get cover for the night in one of these closer houses. Kageyama, if you could run back and tell the others to pack up and migrate here, that would be great. We'll wait for the morning and then set out for the survivor society downtown."

"Daichi..." Keishin began, slightly speechless.

"It's fine," the captain assured him, eyes still locked on Kuroo's shaking frame, only held together by Kenma's protective arms. "Kuroo is one of us, so we have to do everything we can to help him."

"You can let me go alone... You don't have to do this with me..." Kenma mumbled, suddenly embarrassed from the show of dedication. Now that the tension had left the atmosphere, he realized how bold he'd been and blushed, ducking his head.

"Of course we have to do it with you," Daichi huffed as if the contrary idea was preposterous in itself. "You're family now. And family means that nobody gets left behind."

"Then... Then I will insist that you punish me for running away and putting Hinata in danger..." Kenma continued, not sure how to react to the sudden change in Daichi's temper.

"Hey." Suddenly, Daichi was walking towards him, hand outstretched, and Kenma flinched reflexively as the hand came close to him, pulling Kuroo tighter against him as if to protect him. His eyes were clenched shut in apprehension, breath held as he waited for whatever punishment would befall him.

But nothing came. Instead, Kenma felt a soft touch on top of his head, and hazarded a glance upwards to see Daichi smiling sadly at him before patting him once.

"I do not have the authority to punish you. We are all equal," the captain told him, drawing back.
"Plus, there is no reason to punish you for never giving up on one of us."

"But I-" Kenma began, only to be interrupted by Keishin this time.

"Kenma... Everybody knows that Kuroo is very important to you, but you also need to place a little trust in the rest of us," he insisted, looking a bit uncomfortable with the directive.

"Yeah." But upon seeing the melancholic expression on Daichi's face, Kenma realized that he, at least, was anything but uncomfortable. "Most of all, I want you to know that you are a part of us now, and so... you don't have to be alone anymore."

And the sky was dark, so Kenma didn’t see the change right away. But as the bigger guys in the group arrived and helped carry Kuroo to one of the nearby houses, and as the morning light rose upon their triumphant figures, Kenma realized that his colourless world had slowly begun to shift back into a soft greyscale.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

They set out for the downtown area without further ado as soon as the first hints of the red sky began to light up their broken world. Although a few of them had been able to fall asleep despite the agitation due to the night's events, most of them were still up, silently worrying about their treacherous advance into enemy territory, or just unable to sleep through the uncomfortable churning of their starving stomachs. Although they all agreed that they may as well be walking right into the lion's jaws, the prospect of food and safety and warm beds was appealing enough to convince at least a small part of each of them that this gamble would pay off.

Kenma was the most anxious of all, jittery and fidgety until the very moment when Asahi and Keishin came into the room he was sharing (see: confined to) with Kuroo to get him up. With the two strong group members in charge, Kuroo was loaded onto Keishin's back at first, and they set out.

The red sky was clear and cloudless, which bode well for their trek. They were able to go for an hour, Kuroo being switched between Keishin, Asahi and Daichi periodically, because Suga called for a stop to reassess Kuroo's vital signs. The fever was still spiking at 39.0 degrees Celsius, but although Kuroo had ended up sleeping without the oxygen, travelling with the oxygen mask seemed to help in tolerating the stress on his body. His breathing was a bit rapid and shallow, but nothing out of the ordinary for him. Deeming it fit to continue, they kept on walking.

Being unfamiliar to the town, they were not sure what the downtown area consisted of, so they kept heading deeper into the town, hoping to hit the area soon enough. And thankfully, with the use of maps on street corners and road signs, they were able to walk in the right direction.

Even before mid-morning, they'd finally made it to the fabled downtown area, and as soon as they spotted the first human figure in the distance, they knew that there was no turning back.

The person, who was dressed in civilian clothes and who was carrying a plastic bag in each hand, spotted them and approached them immediately. The group froze, even if the person (a man, they realized, as he came closer) did not seem threatening in the least. They all knew how appearances could hide horrifying secrets.

"Good morning to you all," the man greeted them, bowing his head lightly. "Haven't seen you around here at all... Don't tell me you've just stumbled upon our little community here by chance!"

"Well, actually," Noya began to explain, taking the lead. "We were bunked out on the edge of town and were raiding when we met a girl named Yukiko, who told us about this place. So we came to
"Well, we're all glad to have you here. Yukiko is such a nice young lady, of course she'd invite you all to come here," the man nodded with a gentle smile.

"Where is 'here', anyway?" Daichi asked, tone as business-like as always.

"Here? Our community?" The man thought for a second. "We're just a bunch of survivors, to be honest, trying to rebuild as best as we can. We don't really go by any names since we're semi-nomadic, but I guess that to refer to us as a whole, you can use the word 'shoukyo'. It means 'a little' or 'a few', and it's a term that a lot of people here like to use, since it emphasizes how small we are, but how strong we stand. So you can call it that, if you like."

"Shoukyo..." Keishin muttered out loud, pensive for a second, but then nodded. "Well, if you wouldn't mind... We heard rumours that you had an attending physician in Shoukyo? One of us is extremely sick and we want to get a consult..."

"Oh, of course," the man nodded, finally glancing at Kuroo, whose paper-white skin and oxygen mask did nothing to hide his condition. "Poor boy... Continue down this street and take the second left. Our hospital, if you wish, is actually just a recycled clinic, but our attending physician was able to fix it up into an acute care area."

"Thank you," Daichi nodded, pointing down the street. "We must get going to seek treatment for our friend, but you've been very informative to us, for which we thank you."

"Not at all, young man. It's nice to see such wonderful manners once in a while. If you ever need anything, feel free to ask anybody around here; they'd be glad to help!" The man nodded to them again, and the entire group bowed to him as he turned. "See you around!"

"Let's immediately go see that doctor, now," Suga quickly reminded them, taking Kuroo's pulse at his wrist and frowning. "He needs to lay down immediately. The transport jostled him way too much."

"Quickly, everybody. Let's get to that clinic," Daichi agreed, and the group hastened their pace towards Kuroo's one and only hope left.

As the clinic came into view after a few more minutes of brisk walking, Kenma felt his heart about to jump out of his chest. The palpitations and violent beating of the muscle were exaggerated; however, Kenma attributed them to the fact that he was literally standing a few steps away from what could be Kuroo's life or Kuroo's death.

The group entered the clinic at once, immediately heading for a small desk that had been set up against the wall. There were a few children running around the empty waiting room, and an older woman, dressed in faded teal scrubs that were clearly not hers, was playing with them.

"Excuse me?" Daichi addressed as soon as they stepped in, grabbing the woman's attention right off the bat. "We need assistance from the attending physician urgently, please."

"What's wrong?" the woman, probably just a bit older than Keishin, asked as she approached. Before anybody could reply, she spotted Kuroo draped on Asahi's back, and her face paled. "Oh... Oh no. Quickly, come with me!"

The group did not need to be told twice. Enervated by the nurse's reaction, they briskly followed her down the hallway, into one of the consulting rooms.
"Lay him down on the bed," she instructed, letting them all in. "Take off his shoes, his shirt and his pants and get him in a gown. The doctor is with another patient at the moment, so before I get him, I'll take a set of vital signs. Can anybody tell me what happened?"

"Well," Suga volunteered immediately. "He got shot in the neck and the bullet grazed his carotid. He survived by putting pressure, and was only sutured several hours later, on the field. By the time we were safe, he was badly hypovolemic, so we infused him with 1L of Ringer's Lactate, and then kept going with D5W & 1/2 NS. The hypovolemia was corrected over time, but then the wound got infected, so he's got a pretty bad fever right now, with decreased consciousness, sleep apnea, syncope, nausea and vomiting."

"That's some pretty professional lingo there, young man," the nurse chuckled, putting a clamp on Kuroo's finger and setting the connected machine on the bed. "Are you a nursing student?"

"No... my friend and I just read lots of textbooks so we could be our group's improvised medics," Suga mumbled, slightly embarrassed by the praise.

"That's a great initiative on your end," the nurse replied a bit distractedly, and then immediately got to work on Kuroo's blood pressure. Once that reading was taken as well, she jotted down all of her vitals, and then stepped back. "Alright, I'm going to get the doctor. Please get him into a gown so that it's easier for the doctor and I to make our assessments. I'm going to ask only two or three of you to stay in here, however, because the doctor will need all his space to work when he gets here." She headed for the door with her vitals in hand. "I'll be right back."

As soon as she left, the entire group let out a collective sigh of relief. It finally felt like a huge burden had been lifted from them. Despite the clinic looking rundown and destroyed by the circumstances, it had power, probably from a backup generator still active somewhere, so that was already a great indication that they were in good hands.

"Let's go wait outside," Tanaka suggested as Kenma began to work on taking Kuroo's shoes off.

"Who's going to stay in here with Kuroo and Kenma?" Suga asked, grabbing a gown from the clean linen pile and handing it to Yamaguchi.

"I... I'd want to stay, if Kenma wants me, of course..." Hinata mumbled, averting his gaze. Surprised, Kenma raised his, and nodded.

"Of course. I'd appreciate it if you stayed."

"Then I'll stay, too," Keishin decided. "Just in case they need adult consent or something."

"Good idea," Daichi nodded, and, noting that Suga looked about to protest, he put a hand on his vice-captain's shoulder softly. "Suga, you have done so much, I think you should get some rest. Leave it to the doctor and the nurse for now."

"Yeah, you and Yamaguchi were so cool!" Noya added on with a bright grin. "Yamaguchi! When we're out of this mess, remind me to buy you a popsicle at the corner store for being such a great kouhai!"

"Sure, senpai," Yamaguchi simply nodded, although the ghost of a smile floated amongst the sea of freckles on his face.

"Alright, out," Keishin ushered them as Kenma got to stripping Kuroo of his shirt, and then removed his pants. The gown was snapped on quickly, and then Kenma tucked him in under the covers, knowing that the doctor would probably pull the covers away as soon as he got in anyway. The
motion put him at ease, though.

"Everything's going to be okay now, Kenma," Hinata encouraged him as they both sat down on stools at the bedside. "Kuroo's gonna be fine."

And even if Kenma had trouble believing that entirely, he still wanted to admit that he already felt safer here. So he nodded, and allowed himself a small smile for the small victory.

Neither of them noticed Keishin's concerned gaze stuck on the captain's pained face, nor the biting of his lips, nor the whispered prayer he let tumble out of his mouth as the door was opened.

"The patient in room 3 is going to need levothyroxine 75 mcg from now on. Just be sure to give it two hours apart from dairy products, iron supplements and antacids," a voice entered the room before its owner, and all the conscious occupants of the room turned in time to see a middle-aged man walking into the room, the nurse following him and dutifully taking notes.

"Alright. And just to confirm for patient 1, I'm going to hold the bisoprolol until his BP goes over 100, but I'm giving the furosemide anyway and keeping an eye on oxygen saturation and resp rate," the nurse nodded, sounding pretty sure of herself even without the doctor's following confirmation.

"Yes. Thank you, Satsuki, you're wonderful," the doctor nodded at her, and smiled as she left, closing the door behind them.

Finally, his gaze turned to the three people in the room watching him like hawks, and his smile fell for just a second as he analyzed them. No words were spoken in that time, but then, the doctor smiled pleasantly again and bowed at the waist.

"Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Dr. Hayate, the attending physician for the inhabitants of Shoukyo," he introduced himself to Ukai. Unsure what to do, Hinata and Kenma stood back and sat silently, watching the doctor's movements like a pair of hawks.

"Nice to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to take a look at our companion," Ukai acknowledged, bowing back to him. "He would have died without you."

"Let's not be hasty, now," the doctor corrected him with practiced ease. "I will do my best."

Approaching Kuroo, he brought his stethoscope out and Hinata and Kenma moved to give him space. The man auscultated Kuroo's lungs quickly, and then his heart, then moved on to his abdomen. After that, he put his stethoscope away and palpated in a few places before drawing back.

"Alright, so I heard the case from the nurse. Infected gunshot wound to the right carotid, originally presenting with hypovolemia, which was corrected, and now he's presenting with a septic profile."

"Uhh... yeah," Ukai confirmed, not too familiar with the terminology. "We didn't have access to food or water like he needed so he couldn't get better on his own."

"And I see he's on oxygen," the doctor remarked, pointing at the nearly-empty oxygen tank resting on the floor.

"Yeah. Our medic put him on the mask on and off for a while, especially since he stopped breathing several times during the night lately," Ukai explained.

"I see." The doctor nodded pensively and then turned to the second door in the back of the room. "Alright, well, I'm going to have to take a look at the wound to see what I'm dealing with, and we'll take it from there."
"Right."

"Let me just go get the equipment I need. I'll come back with some meds for his fever, too, and some ice packs," the doctor told them, and then left through the back door.

A small silence stretched between the three remaining people in the room, until it was sure that the doctor was far away.

"He seems nice enough," Hinata commented, his sentence rising a bit at the end as if he was unsure of the reaction he'd get.

"Let's not stay here more than we have to," Kenma mumbled, not knowing how to feel about the man despite his friendliness.

"Agreed," Ukai nodded, and the conversation was dropped until the doctor came back through the same door.

"Alright," the man smiled at them, brandishing a few things up as if in triumph. "I'm just going to take a look for now to see the wound. It'll give me an idea of what kind of antibiotics to give him. You can put this icepack in a towel from the linen cart and then set it on his forehead in the meantime, if you like." He handed the item to Kenma, who immediately did as suggested.

The ice felt nice against his warm skin, so he could only imagine the relief it would bring to Kuroo.

The doctor set up his dressing tray on Kuroo's bedside table, and put on some gloves in order to take the old dressing off. Kenma was once again faced with the ugly wound, and he grit his teeth at the sight of the red and swollen skin.

"Nicely infected, isn't it?" the doctor sighed, taking a look at the dirty gauze before throwing it and his gloves out. He then opened a package of sterile gloves and put them on with practiced ease. "The sutures are nicely done, but the wound itself was not approximated before being sutured," he clicked his tongue, immediately getting to work. "Who sutured him?"

"Our medic did," Hinata mumbled, always quick to defend his senpai. "He's just a third-year who read a few nursing textbooks and did his best with what he had, though!"

"I acknowledge that he did his best with what he had," the doctor nodded, and grabbed scissors off his tray, immediately beginning to snip the sutures off and pulling them out. The three other occupants watched in fascination as the wound opened up a bit more upon being released, and Kenma's hand on Kuroo's tightened.

"Is it bad?" Ukai asked, concernedly leaning over to look at the wound.

"Not as bad as it could have been," Dr. Hayate conceded, wetting some gauze in the saline solution he'd poured and wiping the wound clean. Plenty of white discharge came off of it, along with some pink-tinged liquid, and Kenma scrunched his nose at the disgusting sight. "It's very superficial, although the infection has already made its way into his bloodstream."

"Oh." Ukai bit his lip. "So what's the plan?"

"I'm going to get him on antibiotics, since we're lucky enough to have a working fridge here to store them. I'm also going to surgically debride the wound -ah, I mean, remove dead tissues to allow for healing- and then re-suture it." Placing clean gauze on Kuroo's wound, the doctor taped it to his skin firmly and then took his gloves off, throwing out all of his equipment.
"And he's going to be fine?" Ukai asked again to reconfirm.

"He should recover well over the next week, yes," Dr. Hayate nodded pleasantly.

"Thank you," the three of them sighed out in relief at the same time, Kenma gripping Kuroo's hand tightly as if to convey the message to him, too. He would be fine. Kuroo would live. Kenma hadn't fucked up this time. His greyscale world seemed just a bit brighter now. It wasn't exactly a world of colour yet, but it was better than it had been in a long time. So he'd take what he could get.

"My pleasure. Now, please excuse me. I'll go write an order for an antibiotic and check up on my other patients before getting reading for debridement. Since we don't have an operation room, I'll have to do it at the bedside, but I will have the nurse with me, so it will be fine. However, I warn you; we don't have any strong pain medication like opioids, since we couldn't get the narcotics cabinet open. We do have, though, several sedatives. So although he'll be under during the procedure, he might still feel the pain, especially upon waking up," the doctor explained in one breath, already heading for the door.

"As long as he lives. Kuroo is a strong guy," Ukai chuckled good-naturedly. "Thank you, once again."

"My pleasure," the man repeated, and then he was gone.

"This is great," Hinata was the first to exclaim. "Kenma... he's going to live! Everything's gonna be okay!"

"I'm glad," Kenma simply replied, because he couldn't say anything else for certain.

"I'll go update the other guys," Ukai volunteered, heading for the door. "They'll be happy to hear the news."

"We could all use some cheering up right now, heh," Hinata chuckled sheepishly as Ukai left the room, leaving him and Kenma alone. "So... Kenma," he began again, turning to his friend, who was looking impassively at Kuroo's sleeping face. "You okay?"

"Well... yes," Kenma nodded with some thought. "Just... I don't know. I might be hungry or maybe I am actually nervous, but my stomach hurts, and I don't know what to make of it."

"If things do come up, we'll deal with them as they appear," Hinata hummed, his smile fading just a little as he placed a hand on Kenma's shoulder comfortingly. "Let's just enjoy the moment."

"Right," Kenma nodded, and wished it could be as easy as it sounded.

They gave Kuroo about twenty more minutes of rest before the nurse came back into the room to prep him for the small surgery. She washed his face and neck area entirely with soap and water, and then removed the IV that Yamaguchi had put in to instead open a new access on the other arm. She locked that port once it was patent. Lifting the head of Kuroo's bed just a little bit, she also placed the bedside table close to Kuroo's head, and left to bring back the equipment they'd need, as well as a new oxygen tank for Kuroo's practically empty one.

Finally, she ended by assessing Kuroo from head to toe, kind of like what the doctor had done, and then took a set of vital signs. She wrote down all of her findings, and then went for the door.

"The doctor and I will be prepping, so we'll be with you in about ten minutes. Only one of you can stay during the procedure, and the other will have to wait outside," she informed them, and left.
"I'll go," Hinata immediately volunteered, as if it was even a question that had to be asked. "You gonna be okay here?"

"Yeah," Kenma nodded. "Thank you for everything, Hinata."

"No problem!" The middle blocker grinned brightly, just as the door opened and the rest of Karasuno came in.

"We heard there was gonna be a surgery, so we wanted to see him before he went in," Daichi immediately explained, since they didn't have much time.

"I'll wake him up. He'll be glad for the update," Kenma mumbled, shaking his best friend's shoulders. "Hey, Kuroo... Get up. You're going in for surgery for your neck."

Kuroo groaned unintelligibly, and it took a few more shakes for him to open his bleary eyes. His gaze darted from one person to the other, until it finally settled on Kenma.

"What's going on?" he asked in a raspy voice. "Where are we?"

"Someplace safe," Keishin butted in. "So Kuroo... just relax and calm down, alright?"

"What's going on?" the captain asked again, slightly more alert all of a sudden.

"You're going to get surgery to clean up your wound so it can heal better," Kenma explained softly. "The doctor's going to give you antibiotics for it, too."

"Oh," Kuroo bit his lip, and then sank into his mattress. "As long as I don't get any more tubes in my peehole, I'm good."

To that, they all laughed, which seemed to alleviate the mood a bit. Even Kenma felt some of the tension drain out of his shoulders.

"So we'll see you on the other side," Suga smiled at him. "I'm sure everything will go well."

"Sure," the captain smirked weakly, just as the door opened again, letting the nurse in.

She was now dressed in an extra yellow gown over her scrubs and had her hair in a bun under a cap. A mask was hanging from her ear as she came forward and excused herself to pass through the crowd.

"Put all your hair under this cap, please," she addressed Kuroo directly, handing him a cap like hers. Kuroo sighed and took it in a shaky grip, grunting in effort as he did what he was told. In the meantime, the nurse hung up an IV, primed the tubing, and connected it to Kuroo's new port, regulating the drip factor like the trained professional she was. From next to him, Kenma heard Suga whispering to Yamaguchi, and smiled softly, knowing that the two boys were thrilled to witness an actual medical professional performing the skills they'd learned out of a book.

"Alright, so we'll wait outside," Keishin volunteered as the nurse kept up her work. "Let's go, everyone."

"Good luck, Kuroo," came the collective voice of the Karasuno team as they headed towards the door.

"Oi, don't die, stupid," Tsukishima added as if it was some incredibly important comment that absolutely had to be made.
"Just for you, I won't." Kuroo's pale face split into a shit-eating grin, and Tsukishima clicked his tongue in annoyance as he joined the group.

Just before they reached the exit, the doctor came in, dressed similarly to the nurse. Said professional was now grabbing some syringes out of a small basket on the bedside table, and was filling up a few of them with different medications. The Karasuno team greeted the doctor and let him pass, watching curiously as he headed towards Kuroo and Kenma.

"How's the prepping, Satsuki?" he asked to the nurse, who just nodded in response.

"The antibiotic has been hung on the primary IV line and his oxygen's turned to 5 liters. I just need to push the sedatives, and we're ready to go," she replied immediately, picking up her three syringes and heading for Kuroo.

The teen, who'd been looking up into Kenma's eyes all this time, relishing in his comforting touch, was startled by the new voices, and turned to blearily look at them. He didn't seem to make much out at first, but then, as the nurse and the doctor approached him at the same time, Kenma felt Kuroo's hand grab at his without warning.

"Hello," the man greeted him with a kind smile. "I'm Dr. Hayate, and I'll be conducting your debridement surgery."

And Kuroo actually stopped breathing for a second, just hanging tightly onto Kenma, whose latent sense of dread suddenly felt like it was about to explode.

And before he could ask, Kuroo screamed.

The howl that came from the teen was unprecedented, so violent and loud and desperate that the guys at the door backtracked immediately to see what was going on.

"Kuro!" Kenma's hand was going numb under Kuroo's vice-like grip. "Tetsu, what's wrong!?"

"Satsuki, give 5 mg of midazolam IM," the doctor's eyes hardened at the sight of Kuroo's distress, but he did not move from his spot. The nurse, on the other hand, rushed to Kuroo's side and stabbed his thigh with a long needle immediately.

"5 of midaz is given," she confirmed, pulling out the needle and dropping it into the sharps bin on the wall.

"No! No, no, no, please!" Kuroo cried out, turning to her as if she'd betrayed him as well. "Please... Kenma, don't do this!"

"Kuroo, calm down, please," Kenma begged him, tears pricking his eyes as he tried to make himself useful. "You're gonna be okay, the doctor's gonna take care of you..."

"Please don't-" Kuroo's breath hitched.

"He's hyperventilating," the nurse stated the obvious.

"Push 1 mg lorazepam. He'll calm down soon," the doctor ordered, still not disturbed by the display.

"No!" Kuroo screeched, struggling to get out of the nurse's grip on his arm. "Please, no!"

"Kuroo, stop!" someone cried out from the group in the back, but Kenma was too far gone in his own panic to figure out who it was.
"You're okay, Kuroo! Nobody's going to hurt you!"

"Please don't let them do this," Kuroo begged, the sedatives already taking effect on him. His grip was still strong on Kenma, as if he was trying to resist the effects of the drugs, and Kenma's heart broke at the sight of the terror in his eyes. Something had spooked the life out of Kuroo, and Kenma had no idea what.

"I'm not going to let anybody hurt you," he promised softly, because he didn't know what else to say. "I'm gonna hold your hand through the surgery and I'll be holding it when you wake up. I won't sleep until I make sure you're fine. Please let them help you."

"I'm gonna die," Kuroo sobbed out, tears leaking down his face and rolling around the fogged-up mask on his face. "Please, Kenma..."

"Not until I die first," Kenma promised him, and, despite the initial hesitation, bent down to put his forehead against his best friend's.

"Ketorolac 30 mg is in the bag now, infusing over 30 minutes," the nurse's voice reached their ears from behind Kenma, and the setter actually felt Kuroo's grip loosening on him.

"You're going to be okay," Kenma repeated again, his breath fogging up the top of Kuroo's oxygen mask as he let out a shaky sigh. "I promise you."

"Kenma..." the captain mumbled, his eyes drooping slowly, as if he was still fighting the medication. "Doctor... Please..."

"I know you're afraid of hospitals. I heard you and Keishin the other night," Kenma revealed, although Kuroo was too sedated to react. "I don't know why, and I'm hoping you'll tell me after. But until then, I'm going to protect you, so don't be afraid. Nothing and no one will hurt you if I'm here to help it."

Kuroo's mouth opened, as if to say one last thing, but then, his grip went lax, and he fell back into his mattress, completely limp. Kenma drew back upright, and watched him blink a few more times before definitely closing his eyes.

"There. Now that that's over," the doctor sighed, heading for his table.

"I'm so sorry not to have mentioned that," Keishin mumbled apologetically from the back, where he was corralling all the other players through Kuroo's panic attack. "He... he doesn't like medical procedures."

"That's fine. He won't remember a thing after he wakes up," the doctor shrugged it off. "I'll be beginning now. If you could wait outside? We should not be too long."

"Of course. Thank you, doctor," Keishin nodded again, and bit his lip as he opened the door. The players all filed out one by one, murmuring amongst themselves and throwing Kuroo worried looks, and Keishin himself made eye contact with Kenma.

The setter, more determined than ever, steeled his gaze and straightened his back, and returned Keishin's gaze confidently. The coach knew something about Kuroo that he did not, so if he was placing his trust in Kenma, then Kenma would have to be sure to be trustworthy.

The coach left without another word, and the nurse invited him to sit down on the other side of the bed, which he did silently. The doctor and nurse turned Kuroo's limp body on his side to get better access to the neck wound, and then began setting up their equipment, as Kenma took Kuroo's hand
once again and interlaced their fingers.

He was sad to see his best friend suffering like this, and had been even sadder that he'd withheld one of his biggest fears from Kenma. He couldn't even fathom what Kuroo, his strong, tough, incredibly charismatic Kuroo Tetsurou, could be scared of. And Kenma was even sadder that it felt like he'd never gain back the colour in his greyscale world, not until Kuroo was safe and sound. Seeing him so weak and defeated was heartbreaking.

But as the doctor and nurse moved into his field of vision, opening up the gauze and sliding their masks over their noses to begin the bedside surgery, Kenma watched them, and realized one important detail about himself.

He disliked greyscale, but missed his achromatic world even more. It had been better than the one he could see all around him right now, and a colourless world that made him numb was preferable to the painful pigmented world he existed in.

Despite the relief of having come so far, with one look at Kuroo's pale face, Kenma realized that he felt much too yellow to feel blue.

Chapter End Notes

Associate colours to psychological states to figure out the last sentence. It's actually inspired by a Fall Out Boy lyric. Oh, and if you were too lazy to research it, yellow means "fear" and blue can double as "calm" or "sadness", and both options apply to Kenma in this situation.

//EDIT//: I explained the whole colour analogy in a comment, so I copy+pasted the explanation below, at the very end of the notes. Read if you are interested!

I'd forgotten that Hinata and Kageyama get a hella gay moment, too. I miss them. After the Kuroo arc is over (aka next chapter), I want to write another chapter from Hinata's POV uwu (But if you want a specific character, please write to me somehow to tell me!). Also, Kuroo and Kenma are co-dependent, it's painfully obvious. And that's not good. Kenma's threatening to kill himself if Kuroo dies. That shit ain't healthy, yo. I wanna see that co-dependency a bit more and maybe work on it some?

Kuroo's gonna have a huge reveal next chapter, which will tie up all the mysteries around him as well. We'll be tying up some loose ends here and there, too, so it all comes together in the next chapter (I say this bc I wanna hype you up for it hahaha). There is a clue about the next chapter included several times throughout the chapter.

Thanks once again for your incredible support! I'm so thrilled that you are enjoying this as much as I am! Your comments encourage me to write, and so I will encourage you to write comments! :) Thanks!

THE COLOUR ANALOGY

Basically, the colours symbolize emotions. There are 5 kinds of "worlds" for Kenma: colour, monochrome, greyscale, black and white, and achromatic (think of this as just white). A world of colour would be an analogy where he feels actively and equally negative/positive/neutral emotions and where he is optimistic for the future. His "palette of emotions" consists of every shade of every colour ever. So far, Kenma has never lived in a colourful world. The monochrome world is one where he is dominated by one
emotion (colour) in particular, such as when he says that his world was hued with the red of the Nekoma jackets (energy, warmth, strength) or the red hue of his world after the war began (strain, aggression, anger). The last line plays on a monochrome world, as Kenma says that his world is hued too yellow (worry/fear/anxiety) to be blue (calm, or on the opposite end of the spectrum, sadness. Both calm and sad are fitting for this situation).

The greyscale world is just the world that he lives in when he is stuck in between being emotional (colour) and being empty (achromatic). He does feel emotions, but they feel distant to him, faded, and detached (hence the shades of grey, since these shades are lighter or darker depending on what colour they are mirroring). He is not to the point of having completely given up, but he finds no true excitement in his life. Kenma says that he's lived his entire childhood in greyscale; this is because he distanced himself from others, was shy, and introverted. He felt emotions, but was too detached from them to feel them at their best.

Black and white is his "fight or flight" world. Good or bad. Trust or mistrust. Kenma does not have a range of emotions anymore when he lives in this world. He's happy or sad. He's afraid or not. He's brave or cowardly. In his perspective, this means that he's under times of high stress and that he can't control his emotions well enough to be able to feel a range of mixed feelings. He doesn't care about feelings anymore, he just needs enough of them to survive. It's either 100% or 0%. This is the world he lived in after the nuclear explosion, where the world went to hell, so he stopped spending time feeling complex emotions and stuck to his survival instincts. If he's afraid, he runs. If he's anxious, he has a panic attack. He doesn't stop to assess if his fear is big enough to require running away, or control his anxiety to avoid a panic attack. In this world, he's a machine, and is not the master of his emotions anymore, because they don't matter past ensuring his survival. There is a play on "black and white world", too, because it puts Kuroo's hair as the "black" of it, aka, Kuroo is the only thing of "colour" (aka, the only lifeline to his emotions) left in his world. So when Kuroo's condition deteriorated, Kenma lost his "black", and his world went from black and white to achromatic.

The achromatic world is a state of numbness. Reflexes. Kenma is empty, totally unfeeling, uncaring, just moving because of electrical conduction in his cerebellum. His higher brain centers don't bother with emotions anymore and he can't bring himself to involve himself enough to feel them. He's like a dead man walking; he's lost everything and it doesn't matter anymore. His life has no more "colour", therefore, no more reason.
Time

Chapter Summary

The ticking of the clock always felt loud to his ears, and so far, he'd been unable to grasp the flow of time, instead letting it drag him along according to its cruel whims. But when time becomes of utmost importance to their survival, he comes to realize that it is not something that dictates his life, but something that he can twist and mould to extend his life.

There is only so much time between dusk and dawn. It's all the time it takes for them to either be killed, or to become stronger in order to overcome the new challenges they'll face come morning light.

Chapter Notes

//EDIT:// Tumblr user coco-code drew fanart for this chapter of CML! It's not blatantly spoilery, so I embedded it on top of this chapter. Please access it on Tumblr through the URL http://coco-code.tumblr.com/post/117169457797/in-shoukyo-the-monsters-come-out-to-play-at and give them some love!

24k. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I swear I've been trying to cut down on length, but the more I try, the longer the chapters seem to get. I'm sorry if some part of the chapter feel choppy; it's just me trying to reduce the word count a bit :C

By the way guys! Shout-out to everybody who left a kudos, or comment, or messaged me on my Tumblr (same name as on AO3). Your feedback gets me going without fail and I honestly couldn't write a single word without your kind encouragements! So thank you so much for your support! ;u;

Lol I promised this chapter by the end of the week but then blitzed the remaining 15k words today (while binge-listening to the HQ!!, KnB and Free! OSTs... like 3 times each). It's cause I wanna study during my March break + make my cosplays for Anime Boston. Anybody going to Anime Boston this year? We could meet up just to say hi! ^u^ Also, I want to try and write some KnB oneshots, so y'all might not get another chapter until after AB... We'll see how the muse goes.

Last chapter for the Nekoma arc, and this actually marks the halfway checkpoint through the story (if my estimations are correct). You're gonna see that the first half goes out with a bang. Hahahaha I'm so funny. Anyway, the premise of this chapter is actually based on something a commenter on here suggested. If you're still reading this, dear friend, you'll recognize yourself and give yourself a pat on the back for the success of this chapter! So everyone, if you wanna suggest something, leave a comment and I'll see if I can plug it in somewhere!

Warnings include: graphic imagery (we're kinda used to it by now) and plenty of hints of KuroKen. But that's about it. Please enjoy chapter 8 of CML!
Kuroo woke softly, slipping back into awareness smoothly as if he was just waking up from a nice, long, well-deserved nap. For all he knew at that moment, blinking his surroundings into view, it had been a nice, long nap he was waking from.

As he blinked, however, his previously blurred environment became sharp as it came into focus, and suddenly, Kuroo could remember.

He wasn't waking from a relaxing nap. No, he was still caught in a terrifying nightmare.

Whimpering, he wiggled a bit to test out his body, only to realize that it was still heavy from the effects of the sedatives. His hands were more or less numb when he tried to move them, and as he did, slight movement from his side alerted him that he had an IV attached to the port in his left forearm. Swearing, he tried to reach over and pull it out, but his vision blurred again and his hand just couldn't seem to grasp the IV correctly.

He was already tired from that brief exercise, and with no result to show for his efforts, he dropped his arms back down on the mattress and sighed heavily. At least he didn't have an oxygen mask anymore.

As he tried to gather himself again, the door finally opened, and Kuroo turned his head to look at the newcomer a little bit apprehensively. However, just as he turned his head, excruciating pain originating from his neck shot up his spine and he cried out, clutching the bandaged side of his neck and swearing.

"Kuroo!" the newcomer cried out, jogging to his side and immediately prying his hands away from the gauze. "It's okay, calm down. You're okay."
"Kenma...?" Kuroo tried, squinting through the pain at the person next to him. Indeed, the worried gaze cast upon him was none other than his best friend's. "You... Where were you?"

"The bathroom. I was only gone for two minutes, I promise," Kenma rushed to explain, gently touching Kuroo's hands in comfort. "Sorry I wasn't here when you woke."

"S'fine. I was worried," Kuroo huffed, feeling his heartbeat slow when he was convinced that Kenma was unharmed. "Where are the others?"

"The doctor demanded supplies as payment for the treatment, so they split up to raid the town for food and medical supplies," Kenma explained. "I'm the only one here for now."

"Shit," Kuroo swore again, readjusting himself in bed and ignoring the now-throbbing pain on the side of his neck. "Don't leave again, you hear me?"

"What?" Kenma frowned at him, sitting at his bedside. "You're being weird. Why are you so paranoid?"

"Just..." But the words wouldn't come to the black-haired teen. There was so much to say and yet his tongue felt heavy and he couldn't find the words to explain to Kenma why he did not want him out of his sight for even a second. "Nevermind." He finally settled with a sigh. "Can you just tell me what time it is?"

"It's..." Kenma trailed off, looking behind him at a clock mounted on top of the door. "Almost three in the afternoon. The others have been gone for a few hours so they're due back soon."

"Okay," Kuroo nodded, relief coursing through him. They still had time. "Did you guys secure a new safe house? We won't have much time to get there before dark..."

"What do you mean?" Kenma frowned, as if not understanding the question. "The others are gonna take the opportunity of the raids to find a place close to here to bunk out in, and you have to stay here for a few nights, since you're getting antibiotics."

"No." The response was immediate, and the captain tensed up. "No. No, no, no. I want to leave here as soon as possible. In fact, I want to leave right now." And he made good on his word, suddenly sitting up to try and get off the bed when Kenma's gentle but firm grip was on his shoulders again.

"No," he parroted, glaring at Kuroo. "You're really really sick, Kuro. You almost died out there. I'm not risking that. You have to stay here tonight."

"No," Kuroo shook his head, more pain shooting up his spine and giving him a headache. "I need to leave. We need to leave."

"Why are you so scared?" Kenma sighed. "You've never been this terrified before. What are you thinking?"

And Kuroo thought about a lot of things with the simple prompt of Kenma's words. And for a moment, he went rigid, because he was remembering so many things. He thought of pain, and he thought of fear, but worst of all, he thought of pleasure and of victory. And he'd forgotten those thoughts so long ago that remembering them now was unearthing a strangely primal terror that he'd buried deep inside of him.

"Nothing, then," he settled on answering, however, because Kenma could not know and would not know. Keishin already knew part of it, so he couldn't let anybody else know. Especially not his best friend. "Just promise me you'll be extra careful tonight and you'll be back as soon as the sun comes.
up."

"I wish you wouldn't hide things from me," Kenma muttered, a bit irritated, and Kuroo turned his gaze away, a bit ashamed, but also unapologetic. He needed to protect Kenma and the others, and to do that, he had to take whatever measures necessary. "I'm not stupid. I know you're scared of hospitals and other medical facilities, and that this is a newly-developed fear. I just wish you could tell me how to help you, and for god's sake, I wish you would stop hiding it."

"Just..." Kuroo trailed off for a second to swallow and moisten his throat that had suddenly gone dry. "Go to the safe house before dark, lock up, and be back in the morning."

"Kuroo..."

"Really. That's all," Kuroo promised, not meeting Kenma's eyes.

His body language screamed that this was only the tip of the iceberg, and Kenma could tell. However, damn him if Kuroo ever let slip how far down the iceberg went under the water.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

The other boys returned with good news that seemed to lift everybody's spirits. Apparently, their raid had been good, and they had leftover cans of food after paying the doctor his fee. Plus, Noya's group had gone through the inhabited areas and had encountered the girl from before -Yukiko-, who'd enthusiastically shown them to an uninhabited second-floor apartment that they could make into their safe house.

They all chatted by Kuroo's bedside for a while, eating a late lunch that would probably end up doubling as dinner, and for a moment, the black-haired captain was glad for the semblance of normalcy. He could feel the tension drain from his shoulders, replaced by genuine fatigue, and he even smiled a couple of times here and there. This seemed to put Kenma at ease as well, and Kuroo was glad that he'd taken his best friend's mind off of his odd behaviour.

However, time passed all too quickly, and soon enough, the nurse came back to hang another bag of antibiotics on Kuroo's IV, and informed them that the sun was beginning to set. This seemed like a rather innocent remark, but Kuroo immediately knew that it was time to kick them out.

"You guys should head to your safe house now," he suggested as soon as the nurse left the room again. "You still have to secure it, and that might take some time. Maybe if you're lucky, the people here have fixed the aqueducts so you can get running water for a shower."

"It won't take that much time to secure the house," Daichi waved him off. "It's not like there's anything to be afraid of here. We're in the heart of Shoukyo."

"No, no, you really should secure the house, though," Kuroo insisted firmly. "You never know when bandits can just raid the whole town. Pretend we're back in the wilderness and prepare the house like you do on the road."

"True," Suga nodded. "Better safe than sorry, after all."

"You have no idea," Kuroo snorted into his cup of water.

"Alright then, we should go," Keishin volunteered first. "You okay to stay here alone?"

"I can ask to stay with you," Kenma offered, worriedly looking at Kuroo.
"No, no, go with everyone else. You need a good place to sleep, too," Kuroo shook his head, suddenly feeling uneasy at the thought of having Kenma in the room with him through the night. Looking after himself was one thing, but being responsible for his best friend's wellbeing as well... He couldn't do that, or at least not in this condition.

"It won't be that bad, I can make a nest on the floor," Kenma suggested in a low voice, scrutinizing Kuroo for revealing factors in his body language. However, the black-haired teen did not react and stayed perfectly composed with the tiny smile on his face.

"Nah, I've got this. Go to the house with the others tonight and I'll see you in the morning," Kuroo insisted, and firmly this time. His tone left no room for argument, and both of them knew it.

"Alright," Kenma conceded a bit nervously, but then joined the crowd of Karasuno players as they all bid Kuroo a good night on their way out. Only Keishin remained at the end, exiting last to close the door behind them, and he threw Kuroo a worried glance that asked a thousand wordless questions.

"I'll be fine, I promise. You guys stay safe, alright?" Kuroo smiled at him, sustaining his calm expression just long enough for Keishin to be convinced and to leave with a brief goodbye.

And then, the smile fell right off his face, and he took three deep breaths to calm his thundering heart. He still had time to prepare, and he knew it, so he tried to conserve his energy and rest a little.

The clock on top of the door showed about 5:45PM when the nurse came back in one last time to check his IV and to push medication into the bag.

"Painkillers," she informed him briefly. "Since there is no medical staff in the facility through the night, this should keep you well until morning."

"Thank you," Kuroo nodded at her distractedly, instead looking around the room for the stuff he needed.

"Would you like the doctor to come see you before he leaves the clinic?" she asked kindly as she threw out her gloves.

"No," Kuroo immediately breathed, heart thundering anew at the thought of seeing the doctor again. "No, no, it's fine. I'm fine. Thanks for the offer."

"Alrighty then, you're all set," she nodded, heading for the door. "I'll wish you a good night for now, even though it is pretty early to say that. Would you like your door open or closed?"

"Closed," Kuroo replied without an ounce of hesitation, and looked her straight in the eye when he added the rest. "And please lock it from the outside."

The nurse suddenly stopped and looked at him, eyes narrowing as if she was trying to figure him out. Kuroo held her gaze confidently until she gave in and turned a bit more towards him.

"Are you sure? You won't be able to leave the room until we come back in the morning," she spoke slowly, in a calculated tone.

"Absolutely sure. I'll pee in a urinal if I have to," Kuroo nodded, his voice unwavering and his tone firm.

"Alright..." The nurse still seemed suspicious of him, and Kuroo knew exactly why. She was trying to figure him out, but he had an advantage over her because he knew exactly what she was thinking.
He'd been there before.

"Good night," he prompted, as if to snap her out of her daze, eyes periodically going to the clock ticking on and on above her head.

"Yes, good night," she nodded, her body language a bit more subdued, and bowed slightly before exiting. The door closed behind her, and Kuroo held his breath until he heard the jingling of keys and the click of a lock being turned.

Finally, when her footsteps faded, he let himself relax. For just a little while, however. As soon as the clock hit 6PM, he began to move again, this time trying to get out of bed. It was pretty challenging with the bedrails up on all sides, and everything was so much more awkward when he realized that he was only wearing his dirty boxers under the hospital gown, but somehow, he climbed over the bedrails and onto the ground.

His head spun for a moment as he stood upright, and he had to lean over the bed for support as he gathered his strength. Once his balance was returned, Kuroo circled the bed slowly to grab his IV pole, and painstakingly began pulling it along as his naked feet dragged across the cold tiles.

First, he went to the door at the back of the room, which led into the nursing station in the back hallways. He locked that door manually, and then went for the small drawers at the desk with the sink. After looking through them, he found a small stash of syringes and needles hiding under a bunch of paperwork, and grabbed a few of the needles at random. Then, returning to the door, he uncapped them, and then slid them one by one into the keyhole, as far as they would go.

That being secure, he then headed to the front door, grunting in pain when his neck burned, and dragged the guest chair over, carefully positioning it under the knob. Then, he pushed it inward until he felt the back legs jam against the floor.

"That should do it," he mumbled to himself, and stepped back to admire his work on both sides. Both doors seemed secure, and so he returned to his bed, putting down the lower bedrail on one side to facilitate getting in and out. And to prevent him from getting trapped in his bed- just in case.

And then, he waited. Time passed. Kuroo lied down in the silence, turning off the lights at some point. Around 8PM, he took a piss in the sink (definitely not as cool as he thought it would be) and then gathered a few syringes, twisting needles on them. However, leaving them capped, he took them to bed with him and hid them under his pillow. And then, he made himself comfortable and waited.

There was no noise coming from anywhere, and Kuroo wasn't sure if he was comforted or spooked by that. His hands were tight on the needles under his pillow, and his knuckles hurt from the grip after a while. However, even as he rolled around to try and get sleep, his ears were out for some sort of disturbance.

He almost fell asleep. Almost. In fact, it was his paranoia that kept him awake, even when common sense tugged down at his eyelids. He hoped that Kenma and the others were safe, at the very least. He didn't check the clock, but it must have been well in the night when he finally dozed off.

He woke to the sound of clanking, and immediately, his eyes shot open. In a second of panic, he fumbled under his pillow to grip the needles that had rolled away in his light sleep, and held his breath, listening. Finally, the noise returned, this time closer, and then, the door at the back of the room began to click.

Kuroo listened to his heart beat in his ears, mouth dry and fingers tight over his only weapons, and
he held his breath as the lock began to turn slightly, the ominous screech of metal on metal registering only slightly in his brain. His muscles tensed almost painfully and he went rigid, all of his senses active and on high alert. His pupils, already dilated by the darkness, were now so wide that they consumed the golden brown of his eyes as they darted from side to side. Though he logically knew that the noise was only coming from the back door, he suddenly felt like the terrifying clicking was emanating from within the walls trapping him inside this one room. If that door opened, he would have nowhere to run.

He vaguely registered himself trembling all over, cold sweat breaking out at the back of his neck, before the screeching sound stopped with a small click.

All noise stopped, and then the lock clicked again. And again. And again. And with each and every click, which then became insistent, Kuroo's heart calmed down, and he even let out an incredulous laugh at his success. Even when the lock began to be turned violently, the needles blocking all attempts at unlocking the door, and even when the doorknob began being shaken, Kuroo could not bring himself to be afraid, because he had won, and both him and the person on the other side of the door knew it.

Finally, the noise quieted, and the footsteps went away. Stilling, Kuroo listened, and a few minutes later, the same pattern of noises came from the front door. However, since the nurse had locked the door with a key, there was not much the person could do but shake the doorknob again, violently rattling the door and shaking the chair. However, the person gave up much quicker this time, and Kuroo felt like he could finally rest a bit easier now that the ordeal was over with.

He let the tension bleed out of his shoulders and turned on his left side to keep pressure off his wound while he slept. He knew that there would not be much sleeping going on, but he was confident that he'd wake up again if someone else tried the same stunts at the door tonight. However, by experience, he knew that a repeat was highly unlikely, for tonight, at least.

And so, lulled by the distant sound of another door being violently shaken somewhere in the facility, Kuroo let himself drift into a much-needed, and yet fragile sleep.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

"Did you know your neighbour down the hallway passed away last night?" Kenma informed him when they came to visit him in the morning with a light breakfast of canned spam. "The nurse was carrying a body out on a stretcher this morning when we came in."

"Did he now?" Kuroo hummed, feigning ignorance as he pretended that his spam was the most delicious thing in the world.

"You don't seem very concerned," Tsukishima grumbled from his spot on one of the counters.

"Nah. It happens. Plus, we've all seen our fair share of death. One more or one less, it's all the same," Kuroo shrugged, drinking some water to wash down the awful taste of... whatever spam was actually made of.

"I guess it can't be helped, then," Daichi sighed. "As long as it's not any of us..."

"For sure."

They fell into silence, the scraping of utensils on the metal bottoms of cans being the only noise breaking the tranquility in the air. Only when they were all done eating the tasteless breakfast was conversation attempted anew.
"So how was your night?" Kuroo asked in the most casual tone he could fake.

"It was fine," Keishin shrugged. "The place we got was a bit small, but we made it work. I think everyone was a bit too tired to care, anyway."

"Everyone slept like the dead," Suga laughed, prompting a round of chuckles that Kuroo joined into just to mask the hitch of his breath at the implications of the expression.

"Except Kenma," Hinata added after the laughter died down. "Kenma stayed up a long time."

"Shouyo," the other setter mumbled in a half-hearted warning, but Kuroo had already turned a shit-eating grin onto him.

"What's this? Were you worried about me?" the captain teased, loving the way Kenma refused to look at him.

"Not really."

"If you say so," Kuroo hummed. "But you shouldn't worry so much. I'm good as new, so I should be out of here in no time!"

"'No time' is a very subjective term to use, Kuroo," a new voice suddenly piped in, and they all turned to the back door, which had been left open slightly, where the nurse had come in. "It's all going to depend on how well you respond to your antibiotics," she continued, walking over with a new IV bag and a syringe in her hand.

Kuroo had been startled by her entrance, but in no way showed it. Instead, he smiled at her as she came near and began working on taking his vital signs.

"I'm pretty sure I'm doing great. I think I'd even be up for walking today," he suggested, knowing to be right since he'd been limping with some effort that night.

"Wonderful news. We can try that in a little while, if you'd like," the nurse -Satsuki, her name tag read- nodded, writing down the readings for his vital signs and then putting on her stethoscope to get his blood pressure. They all stayed silent to let her concentrate, but she quickly took her stethoscope out of her ears and the cuff of of Kuroo's arm, satisfied.

"How's his blood pressure?" Suga asked curiously, eyes bright in wonder as he watched her perform.

"116/78," the nurse reported calmly.

"That's great," Suga sighed out in relief, and even Yamaguchi, at Tsukishima's side, looked a bit relieved with that quiet smile on his face.

"I don't know what your baseline is, so I can't say if you're back to normal or not," the nurse explained, putting the temperature probe under Kuroo's tongue. "But you seem pretty fit to me, and athletes tend to have lower blood pressure readings, so I think you're doing well in that area."

"Sweet," Kuroo replied once the probe was out of his mouth. "Anything else?"

"Well, your temperature's gone down, back to 37.4 degrees Celsius," she reported, putting the thermometer back into its place on the wall. "But we're also giving you medication for your fever, so we can't really say if you're responding well to the antibiotics or not."
"I feel fine," Kuroo insisted. "Actually, I could probably leave here today!"

"A full course of antibiotics is a a few more days long, though," Satsuki argued softly, hanging up his new IV bag, and then injecting the contents of her syringe into it. "You're going to have to have this IV for a while still."

"We can take care of it," Suga immediately volunteered. "Yamaguchi and I know how to do all of this, and we did it for him so far, so... I mean, it would free you and the doctor up if we took him back with us!"

"Well..." she looked doubtful, having an internal debate with herself as to whether or not to discharge her patient.

"Please," Kuroo interrupted her train of thought in a quiet, subdued voice. Because he really did not want to stay here anymore. "Please. They saved my life a hundred times, so they can sure as hell maintain it for a week's time. Please discharge me."

"I'll..." she bit her lip, and then sighed. "I'll talk to the doctor, see what he wants to do."

"Okay." Kuroo's body tensed up at the thought of it, but then he breathed deep to relax a bit. "Can I try walking now?"

"If you feel up to it," the nurse nodded, putting down his bedrail. "Can you turn and dangle your feet over the bed?" she asked as she used the pedals on the side of the bed to lower it.

"Sure," the black-haired captain nodded, shuffling a bit and trying to ignore the dull throbbing on the side of his neck. He was able to scoot his way over to the side of the bed and swing his legs over, relishing the coolness of the tiles on the soles of his naked feet. "So... someone's gonna have to help me do up my gown in the back, though," he chuckled as the nurse went to grab his IV pole from the other side, rolling it to the front. "I know I have a nice ass, but I don't really feel like giving a show right now."

"Nurse, you might want to check the circumference of his head," Tsukishima grumbled from the side, looking pissed. "I think it suddenly grew at least three times larger."

There were varying degrees of laughter that rose from everybody in the room, and suddenly, Kuroo's head felt light, though it was probably in relief. His heart felt a bit lighter, too. Everything was going to be okay.

"Alright, let's get one of your friends to help you stand," Satsuki prompted, kneeling down to help Kuroo get his socks and shoes on.

"Thanks," Kuroo acknowledged, but then looked at the wall in front of him. "Though I'm pretty sure I can do this myself. I'm feeling alright."

"Don't push it," Keishin warned from the sidelines, glancing at Kenma, who went around the back to tie the gown ties as Kuroo began to stand. "You were almost dead just yesterday."

"I'm tougher than you give me credit for," Kuroo insisted amusedly, holding himself on the siderails and waiting for Kenma to finish tying his gown in the back before taking a first step forward.

"Are you dizzy, or feeling nauseous at all?" the nurse asked, watching his movements carefully. "Say something, anything at all, if you feel like you're going to fall."

"I'm fine," the captain insisted, hating how it still took quite a bit out of him to do something as
simple as walk around the room. He could feel Kenma's eyes on his back, and could hear his footsteps clicking almost inaudibly as he followed after him despite Kuroo's earlier protest.

He figured that it couldn't be helped.

"You're doing really great," Satsuki encouraged as they walked to the front door and back to the bed. "Are you still okay?"

"I'm fine. Can we go again?" Kuroo asked, wanting to stretch his legs a little bit more.

"If you think you can take it, sure."

"Of course," Kuroo smirked cockily, and put one foot in front of the other once again. He felt much better now that he was moving again, and if it wasn't for the heaviness of his limbs, he probably could have jogged around the room.

"You're going to have to exercise once you get out of here," Keishin remarked. "You lost some muscle mass from all the days you spent in bed."

"That was rude a bit, don't you think, Keishin?" Kuroo raised a brow mockingly. "Besides, I just need to get enough muscle tone back in order to keep up with you guys when you get back on the road again. For now, at least. And in that sense, I think I'm doing pretty well," he finished proudly.

"And that, you are."

The voice that interrupted anything the coach might have wanted to say was a new one, and Kuroo's brows furrowed. They all turned to the back door at once, and suddenly, Kuroo's vision blurred. His breath hitched, and suddenly his hands were sweaty and shaky, and for a second, all sound drowned out. And then, his knees buckled, and without warning, he fell to the ground.

"Kuroo!" Kenma's voice floated into his conscience a second later, and then there were hands on him, slowly lowering him down until he was lying on his back on the cold tiled floor.

"Kuroo, are you okay?" Daichi asked, brows furrowed, and as Kuroo's vision slowly sharpened back into normal, he realized that it was Daichi who had helped Kenma lower him down to the ground.

"I'm fine, I just..." There was a strange ringing in his ears and Kuroo winced, clutching his head.

"My, my," the new voice sighed out, and footsteps began clicking on the tile, getting closer and closer to Kuroo. The captain's eyes went wide and he turned his head again, pain spiking up his spine and making him clutch the bandage on his neck, before gritting his teeth and looking up.

The doctor looked down at him, slight concern etched on his face. And Kuroo's blood boiled at the sight of those worried eyes.

"Looks like you pushed it a little too far. Your friends were right, you just got through a few days bedbound, almost completely emptied of your blood. You shouldn't strain yourself."

"I'm fine, doc," Kuroo spat, instinctively flinching when the doctor took a step closer and knelt down next to him.

"Did you hit yourself when you fell?" the man asked as calmly as ever.

"No," Kuroo grunted, taking a deep breath to try and calm down. He had to stay composed.
Already, his temperament was about to get the best of him, and his friends seemed too worried.

He couldn't let them find out. He had to keep quiet.

Breathe in, breathe out. Everything would be fine. He'd gone through this before and he'd made it out. He could do it again.

"Alright, well, it's safe to say that you'll be spending another night here," the doctor sighed as Daichi and the nurse slowly helped Kuroo back to his feet, and then escorted him back into bed.

"Are you just saying that because you just want my friends to pay you even more?" Kuroo asked, a subtle poison slipping into his tone.

"Kuroo!" The entire crowd of bystanders exclaimed, astonished at his rudeness.

"So sorry about that," Keishin groaned out, embarrassed for the captain. "He's, uhh... probably cranky from his nicotine withdrawal. He hasn't smoked in a few days, so you can understand, heh..."

"That's fine," the doctor nodded calmly, looking not-at-all put off by Kuroo's attitude. "As a health care professional, I must discourage continuing to smoke, but, well... if you must, please step outside. If you ask, Satsuki can get you a wheelchair."

"I'm fine," Kuroo bit out once more. "I just want to leave."

"Doctor, can you please explain that he's on antibiotics and needs to stay? He won't listen to me," Satsuki sighed, rubbing her forehead tiredly.

"Please listen to Satsuki, Kuroo." The way the doctor said his name made him shudder, and for a moment, Kuroo was dizzy again. He never thought he'd ever feel this way again, but now... "She is right. At least stay here one more night, and we can consider discharge tomorrow. Obviously, your medic friends will have to make sure you take your antibiotics for the whole course if you don't stay, but even then. We can't let you go just yet."

"Fine, whatever," Kuroo grunted, just hoping that his dismissive attitude would prompt the man to leave. "I'll stay the night."

"Good," the man nodded. "Now actually, I came in to see how you were doing, but you seem to be pretty lively, so I guess that's that. Try to walk some more throughout the day, since it'll also promote circulation and help you get your pressure back up to whatever your normal is. Asides from that, Satsuki will hang another dose of antibiotics in the afternoon, so you're free otherwise. I think that if you do well the next time you walk, we'll also discontinue the continuous IV."

"That's wonderful news," Suga sighed out, obviously understanding all the subtle implications of the doctor's orders that Kuroo could not, for the life of him, bring himself to care about. "We'll be sure he tries to walk again before lunchtime."

"Don't push it," the pretty nurse reminded them, and Kuroo nodded, suddenly feeling tired. He just wanted them to leave, was that so much to ask for?

"I won't. Thanks."

"Alright, well," the doctor began once more, stepping back a bit. With every step, the load on Kuroo's heart lessened, until the doctor was at the back door, and he felt only minimally uncomfortable. "You seem to be doing alright. Satsuki, come. I have to talk to you about the patient in room 2."
"Of course," the nurse nodded, and then turned to Kuroo. "Send someone for me if you ever need anything. I'll be back later."

"Bye." It was only when both of them left that Kuroo let out a loud sigh of relief.

"What's up with you?" Kenma groaned when they were left to themselves. "Did you wake up wrong or something?"

"I just got tired, is all," Kuroo lied casually. "I feel kinda bad saying this, but I actually think I'm gonna take a nap right now."

"Don't feel bad about it," Suga insisted. "Take all the time you need to get better."

"Nah, I mean..." Kuroo groaned and rubbed his forehead, feeling his head and neck throb in pain. "You guys are out raiding in order to pay my hospital bills, and I'm just napping all day."

"Don't worry about all that," Daichi waved him off. "You're one of us, and we don't leave anybody behind."

"Besides, imagine how much leverage we have on you right now," Tsukishima smirked cockily at him. "You'll practically be our lapdog once you're well enough to be on your feet."

"Tsukishima, be nice," Tanaka warned half-heartedly, his tone barely high enough to cover Yamaguchi's muffled giggling.

"Sure, sure. If his highness wants his foot massaged, then I guess I'll just have to comply," Kuroo rolled his eyes dramatically and then lowered the head of his bed to lie almost flat for his nap.

"We'll head out already to start raiding," Daichi volunteered as soon as it was clear that Kuroo was getting ready to sleep.

"Yeah. And if we get enough, maybe we can come back here and spend the afternoon playing cards or something," Noya added, as energetic as always, even though his energy seemed to be duller and duller with every day that passed.

"Sounds like a plan," the Nekoma captain nodded, pulling the sheets up to his chest. "Kenma, you're going with them, right?"

"I want to stay," the boy shook his head.

"But I'm going to sleep."

"Then I'll make sure no one bothers you," the setter shrugged blankly.

"Fine. Can't stop you," Kuroo shrugged, as if Kenma's insistence wasn't the most comforting thing he had right now.

"We'll be back for lunch, then, hopefully," Daichi informed them, Hinata already heading towards the door to open it for them to file out.

"Rest well!"

Similar wishes came from the teens exiting the room, and Kuroo nodded to all of them as they left. Keishin was, as usual, the last one to leave, and whilst Kenma's attention was directed to Kuroo, he stopped and glared at the hospitalized teen, as if trying to figure him out.
With a glance that he hoped was appeasing, Kuroo promised him answers at a later time. Though Keishin did not seem convinced, he had to leave when somebody called him from outside the room, but Kuroo knew that he'd have to admit his deepest darkest fears at some point.

When Keishin left, he immediately turned his back to Kenma, and listened to his best friend's breathing to lull himself into a much-needed sleep. He tried not to think of any confrontations, because all of the scenarios for the ones he could think of right now always ended up in blood.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Thankfully, his confrontation with Keishin was not a violent one. In fact, it was pretty relaxed.

Though, Kuroo supposed as he puffed out some smoke from his cigarette, eyes set on the sunset painted on the horizon, it was probably the result of having a smoke after so many days of having held back.

Keishin was watching him, and he knew it. In fact, the older man had been silent since Kuroo had begun his first cigarette, and had only moved to offer him his lighter for the second one that was now dangling from his fingers as he tapped some ashes onto the floor. The air outside was chilly, but not chilly enough to make him go back inside the clinic. However, he did regret not having gotten a jacket or something over his gown. His butt was kind of cold, too, from sitting on the small bench too long, and he figured he would go back inside after his second smoke.

"I thought you weren't addicted to these things," Keishin finally began after a while, tapping his own cigarette against the bench's armrest before sticking it between his lips. "You came back from the dead and now you're craving to return?"

"Nah," Kuroo chuckled lowly. "My body's not addicted to them, so I can stop anytime I want. Except I don't want to."

"You're wrecking your lungs, kid."

"If I had a can of food for every single time someone has said that to me, I could probably single-handedly pay my hospital bill," the captain chuckled. "It's fine. They give me something to do. And... I wasn't meant to survive anyway, not for what I've done," he added as an afterthought, taking another drag that he blew out his nose, enjoying the burn in his nostrils. "Anyway. You want to ask me about what's happening, don't you?"

"I was kind of hoping I wouldn't have to ask, actually," Keishin sighed, as if hopeless. "Kuroo... Why won't you tell anybody anything?"

"You know why. We won't go through this again," Kuroo shook his head. "They can't know the reason why I'm still alive. And... you can't know more than you already know, either."

"I have a basic idea of what's happened, but you're going to have to help me out..." the coach rubbed his forehead tiredly. "Whatever happened to you in Tokyo... Does it have to do with your fear of hospitals?"

"Yeah," Kuroo nodded quietly, sighing. "You were the one who found me in Tokyo. You know that already, so don't ask again."

"No, no. But what I'm trying to figure out is something more specific." And suddenly, there was a piercing gaze set on him, and Kuroo felt scrutinized almost intimately. Refusing to look at the older man next to him, he turned his head and tapped his cigarette. "Kuroo, you panic when you see the doctor, don't you?"
"I told you, I'm afraid of hospitals," Kuroo rolled his eyes, wanting to play off how nervous he actually was.

"But... You're completely at ease with the nurse," Keishin remarked, and by the way that Kuroo's hand twitched in response to that, he probably realized that he had hit the nail on the head. The man had always been too observant for his own good.

"I'm afraid of doctors, then. White coat syndrome, I think it's called," Kuroo played it off, his response just a second too late to be believable. "Just drop it. I don't like him, that's the end of the story."

"Well, I'm pretty sure it's just the beginning," the brunet-blond remarked, but then shrugged. "But you know what? I'm not going to push you. Because you're responsible, and mature beyond your age, and I trust that you're not putting anybody in danger by withholding information from me, and especially from the rest of our group. At least I'm aware of what happened in Tokyo, but they're clueless. Throw them a bone, would you?"

"If I do throw them a bone about this situation, it's going to end up being my spine," Kuroo snorted, thinking himself funny for a second. His cigarette was almost completely burned up at this point, and he knew that he was almost done talking. "I can't let them know, even if I have to die for it."

"That's a bit excessive, isn't it?" Keishin frowned. "They just want to help."

"There is no helping me." And Kuroo's tone was so definitive that for a moment, he even believed himself.

But then, he didn't, because he knew, deep inside, that he wanted to be helped. And that he wanted to admit all of his deepest, darkest secrets and sins, and that he wanted to be told that he was forgiven. But he didn't deserve it. And now that they were in this situation, it sure as hell was not the time for it.

"I'm heading back inside," he announced, throwing the filter of his cigarette to the floor and crushing it with his shoe. "Go to the safe house and make sure everybody locks up real well. Come back in the morning."

"Kuroo," Keishin interrupted, helping him stand up. However, as soon as he was steady, the captain pushed him away, and began walking off without another word. "Kuroo!" Keishin called back from behind him, although he did not move to stop him. "You also know something about this place, don't you?"

But to that, Kuroo did stop, although he did not turn around. There was hesitation swimming in his eyes, and he knew that he could not let the other man see his moment of weakness.

"Yeah," he finally replied. "But we won't be staying here long enough for any of my information to be of use." And that was it. That was all the leads he was going to give to the other man. "Just go back and lock up tightly as soon as you're all inside."

"You owe me answers," Keishin grumbled from behind him, the captain ignoring him totally as he entered the clinic on his own, leaving the coach behind.

He owed everybody answers, that much was true. However, he wasn't sure if he was ready to pay his dues just yet.

That evening, as he finished eating half a can of mixed vegetables that the boys had left him, the nurse came in to give him his last dose of painkillers for the day, and then asked him if he was alright.
"Lock the door again tonight, please," Kuroo smiled pleasantly at her, not missing how her bright expression turned sour for a second. A mistake if he'd ever seen one, but she probably didn't know that he was in the loop about the happenings in Shoukyo.

"Of course," she answered with barely-concealed suspicion in her tone, and Kuroo listened very closely for the click of the lock as she left.

Even after she was gone, he waited about half an hour before going to test the door, and was happy to find that it was actually locked. However, taking no chances, he wedged the chair under the doorknob again, and then repeated his little trick with the needles in the other door's keyhole.

However, even as he stood back and re-checked his work a hundred times to make sure that there were no holes in his planning, he could not help the sense of dread that washed over him. He hated this feeling, he hated feeling so terrified, especially since he'd thought he had gotten over this apprehension a long time ago. Apparently, being around Kenma, Keishin, and the Karasuno boys had been a cathartic experience, although in this context, he probably would have wanted to retain the slightly sociopathic attributes he'd developed in order to survive in this godforsaken world.

But there was no use in dwelling on bygones now, and he just had to deal with whatever came his way in the best way that he could. So, taking his syringes into his hands and slipping them under his pillow as he returned to bed, he promised himself that come morning light, he would try to share a bit of information with someone, not only to save their life, but also his.

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Kuroo had developed the bad habit of being a light sleeper during the night, and a heavy sleeper during the day. This was pretty disruptive of his routine, especially when he woke up at night when somebody walked through the hallway to go pee, but now, as he woke up to the sound of a lock clicking, he could only be grateful for having developed this quirk.

The clock on top of the door showed some time around midnight, although it was too dark for Kuroo to confirm. Scooting further into his bed, he gripped the syringes tightly in his hands, ready to stab someone if he had to, and turned his gaze to the front door. The doorknob was making clicking noises, and then the telltale rattle of keys outside made Kuroo's heart jump in his throat. He was dealing with a new kind of adversary this time.

He swore when the doorknob clicked definitively, and then, began to turn with a low screech. The teen's heart beat ever-faster as his palms began to sweat, and the familiar feeling of full-blown panic that now pervaded his system was like an old friend, for a lack of a better description.

Kuroo's breath hitched and almost stopped when the doorknob turned to the maximum, and then the door was pushed.

However, to his relief, the door only opened a fraction before the chair wedged underneath lodged itself into the floor, causing it to stop abruptly. The person on the other side grunted in surprise, obviously not expecting the development, and Kuroo let out an incredulous chuckle when the person began rattling the door to try and push past the chair.

"Stop. You won't be able to change anything by doing that," he called out cockily, confidence renewed now that he knew that he was safe. "Just go home."

The person on the other side stopped, just as Kuroo had recommended, and he waited for signs of
life. He didn't mind - he had until sunrise.

"Who are you?" the voice - female, familiar - asked finally, venom poisoning its roots.

"Kuroo Tetsurou, just a regular teenager," he introduced himself, but then, he knew where he'd heard the voice before, and his eyes darkened. "But... you already know that, don't you, Satsuki?"

"You're no regular teenager," the nurse hissed from the other side of the door. "How did you know to lock your door? You would have been dead last night if you hadn't, so you knew..."

"Of course I did." Kuroo rolled his eyes, as if bored, although she couldn't see him. "Besides, it's always safer to barricade yourself, in any situation. I don't know how you sleep without protecting yourself. Oh, but you probably don't. Anybody's who's survived a night in this place - Shoukyo, you call it? - doesn't sleep with their windows open anymore."

"You've been here before," the nurse stated matter-of-factly, and Kuroo grimaced as memories of a darker time flooded back into his head.

"Not here, per se. But let's say that I've... learned to live in a place like this," he mumbled, not sure how to put it.

"Well, no matter." There was huffing at the door, and Kuroo chuckled. "I'll wait here for you to come out. You have to get out to pee at some point, or would you rather pee your pants so your friends see you in all your glory tomorrow morning?"

"I hope you know that I've only peed in the sink during the night so far," Kuroo informed her amusedly, chuckling when she let out an indignant squawk.

"That's unsanitary!"

"Please, like peeing in the sink is the worst thing that happens around here." And then, his eyes flashed dangerously and his tone dropped low, serious. "Besides, it's nighttime. I can do what I want."

"Tch," the woman at the door spat, kicking his door rather violently. "You play dirty."

"So do you," Kuroo whined, pretending that he wasn't nervous as hell just bantering with an armed and potentially dangerous person. "Giving me a false sense of security by locking the door, but using the keys to get in? Rude."

"It's not like I even got in."

"Why do you want to kill me, anyway?" the black-haired captain asked, finally stopping his playful teasing in order to get some answers. "Am I taking up too much space or something? I told you, I want to be discharged the hell out of here so I can finally sleep with both of my eyes closed for just one night."

"You're using up too many meds," the nurse clicked her tongue. "You were in critical condition and we expended a lot of resources on saving your life. Your friends are paying nicely for the treatment, but there's only so much they can repay us with. They can't get their hands on strong painkillers or antibiotics, and you're using up all of our stock all too quickly. You have to die."

"Yeah, no, I'm not really down for that," Kuroo sighed, glad to at least know why his head was wanted on a silver platter. "Look, I won't even ask for painkillers tomorrow. Just gimme my antibiotics for the minimum amount of time needed, and I'll leave you alone."
"Sorry, kiddo. But it's currently... half past one in the morning. So you may as well die," Satsuki told him, and Kuroo rolled his eyes.

"Sure. I'm waiting here to die, you know! That is, if you can get through the door, even."

"Fuck you."

"Try again tomorrow night, sweetheart. Maybe I'll forget to bar the door, if you're lucky. Or if you're even luckier, I'll be discharged before tomorrow night."

There was grumbling at the door, and Kuroo knew that he had won when there was no audible answer.

"Fine. If you're here tomorrow night, you can expect not to wake up the morning after," the nurse threatened, and Kuroo grinned.

"No problem," he sighed out in relief, swinging his legs over the bed to get on the floor, rolling his IV pole to the door. "So. Good night to you, nurse?"

"Yeah, yeah," the woman muttered, slamming the door shut in Kuroo's face.

"Lock it before you go, please!" the black-haired captain called through the thick wood, and smirked at the sound of swearing, and the jingling of keys before the lock clicked again. Kuroo listened through the door for the nurse's fading footsteps before arranging the moved chair firmly under the knob, and then returning to bed.

He'd probably be okay for the rest of the night, he decided as he laid down, and let his ever-light sleep drag him under as he tried to forget how absolutely terrified he'd just been in that confrontation.

Kuroo saw Satsuki the next morning, and was not at all surprised when she came in with a syringe in her hand, looking bright and chipper. Kuroo smiled at her, just to keep up pretenses in front of the Karasuno group.

"Is that pain medication?" he asked as she began to check his IV.

"Yes. It's the same thing you've been having so far," she informed him, uncapping the needle.

"It's fine," Kuroo interrupted her. "It doesn't hurt so much anymore so I'll just take some acetaminophen from our stash and be done with it."

"Are you sure?" Satsuki asked, looking genuinely concerned. "On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being no pain at all and 10 being the worst pain you've had in your life, how bad is your pain right now?"

"Oh, like a 1 or a 2," he replied casually, although as if to spite him, the side of his neck flared up in pain at his words. He resisted the urge to guard his wound, knowing that it'd give him away, and smiled at the nurse. "It's fine for pain meds."

"Alright," she conceded, recapping the needle and sliding it into the pocket of her scrubs.

"Oh, and I feel right as rain this morning. Think you could get the doctor to discharge me?" he tried while he was at it.

"I'll see if he has time to come and see you for your discharge evaluation," Satsuki nodded pleasantly, taking her leave with a brief smile.
Kuroo watched her go, and then turned to the Karasuno guys, who were sitting a bit everywhere in the room.

"So?" he began to try and dispel the silence in the room. "How was your night?"

"All was well, once again," Daichi volunteered. "It's a good thing. We really needed a break at this point."

"Everybody slept soundly," Keishin confirmed. "Despite the ruckus outside around two in the morning."

"It was probably nothing," Kuroo quickly waved him off.

"Well, it sounded like yelling and fighting to me," Keishin grumbled, though Kuroo forced out a loud to take his mind off of his thoughts.

"It was probably cats." And it was funny how at that, Kenma perked up, fully alert all of a sudden. "Satsuki told me they have lots of stray cats in Shoukyo, so it might've been a catfight. Kenma, you should try to catch one of them during the day," he suggested, though his best friend, despite the excitement in his eyes, shook his head.

"That's a waste of time," he mumbled, looking away.

"Come on. It's still morning," Kuroo smiled softly, and then looked towards the door beyond which waited his freedom. "We have nothing but time."

The discharge process was a lot quicker than he thought it'd be. To his usual apprehension, the doctor came in to take a look at his wound and evaluated that he needed three more days on IV antibiotics for the infection to be resolved fully. Once he finished his assessment, Satsuki took Suga and Yamaguchi and showed them how to properly clean Kuroo's wound and bandage it in a sterile way. And that was all.

He was allowed to get dressed and go around the clinic as he pleased, only returning to his room to receive his morning dose of antibiotics. The boys took him out for lunchtime, showing him around the immediate surroundings and took him to their safehouse, and Kuroo did his best to memorize every single street and the faces of every single person they met on their trip. He never knew where, and more importantly, when he would be seeing those faces next.

Kuroo also took the time to appreciate the setup of their safe house. It was great, with the heavy wooden entrance door having one bolt and one manual lock, and the living space actually being up the stairs, past a second door, on the second floor. Kuroo figured that if worst came to worst, fighting off enemies in the staircase would actually be to their advantage. The living space itself was a bit disorganized, but the boys had done well to prep it by covering the windows and laying the blankets and sleeping bags down in every inch of the tight, 1-bedroom flat. Kuroo honestly looked forward to sleeping in a cramped room full of snoring teenagers that night. He'd missed feeling the relief of being surrounded by people he knew would not hurt him.

And really, anything would be better than to sleep out in the open, where he could have his throat slit as soon as the sun stopped watching over him, by the people whom he least expected.

On their way back to the clinic for his afternoon dose of antibiotics, Kuroo finally met this 'Yukiko' person that the team had spoken so highly of. It was by chance that they ended up walking towards one another, and Noya spotted her and waved her over.
She came running enthusiastically, and the whole time, Kuroo observed her body language for any
tip-offs as to what kind of person she was, really. However, she just seemed sweet, smiling as Noya
introduced Kuroo to her.

"Yukiko, this is Kuroo, our friend who was hospitalized," he explained, and her bright brown eyes
lit up like the blood red sky.

"Oh, so you're Kuroo! It's nice to meet you. It's great to see you up and out of the hospital. It looks
like you're recovering well," she exclaimed, bowing to him. He bowed back, out of courtesy, but did
not reply to any of her claims.

"So I hear you've been helping the guys out a lot," he prompted instead, watching her closely as she
blushed and fumbled with her words.

"I haven't been doing much," she muttered, embarrassed, and squeaked when Noya clapped a hand
on her shoulder.

"Yeah right! She got us some blankets and told us where to raid for the most supplies. It's largely
thanks to Yukiko's tips that we could find enough stuff to pay your hospital bills!"

"Ah." Kuroo winced, not liking to be reminded of how much of a burden he'd been these past few
days. "Then it seems that I'm indebted to you."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed quickly, face red like a tomato. "I've just been doing the right thing and
I've been watching over them."

"Well," Kuroo began, calculating his words carefully. "If they're still in one piece, then it must mean
that you're been watching them pretty much all the time."

He laughed when Yukiko began to laugh, if only to blow his statement off as a joke, but then, the
girl looked into his eyes and nodded brightly.

"Yes! I've been watching over them all day!"

"Then you have my gratitude," Kuroo expressed sincerely, Tsukishima quietly mocking his chivalry
from behind him.

"It's okay. Getting settled in Shoukyo is hard at first, so I figured I may as well help out," she
explained, and Kuroo nodded, knowing her statement to be true. However, before he could answer,
and maybe pry a little bit more, Noya threw his arm around her and chuckled.

"Isn't she great? Man, I'm glad we met, Yukiko!"

"I feel the same way, Nishinoya," she chuckled, gently tearing away from the small libero.
"However, I must get going to run some errands, so if you'll excuse me..."

"Sure. We'll see you around, Yukiko. Thanks again," Daichi nodded at her as she began walking
away.

"Yeah. Thanks for everything," Kuroo added as an afterthought, and his steps were lighter on his
way to the clinic.

He received his antibiotics without a hitch, and was incredibly glad to be told that he was able to
leave as soon as the infusion was discontinued. The nurse handed him his antibiotic doses for the
next day, and then helped him clean up his room. The group was waiting for him outside, and only
Kenma had stayed in the room to silently help carry his stuff. The entire operation took only a few minutes, and as Kuroo began going for the door, Satsuki, who was making the bed for a future patient, stopped him by clearing her throat.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, Kuroo," she smiled, but her smile seemed strained. "I hope never to see you again around here."

"I sure hope I don't land myself in the hospital again," Kuroo laughed, acutely aware of Kenma's curious gaze on him. "But hey, Satsuki." His tone dropped warningly, and he nudged his head towards the clock on top of the door that showed 4:57PM. "You almost slipped. Be careful in the future."

The tense look on the nurse's face was all he needed as an answer. Turning around, he left without another word.

"What was that?" Kenma frowned. "What were you talking about?"

"Nothing," Kuroo grunted, and walked as fast as he could to get out of the clinic as quickly as possible. "Hey, let's go to the safe house before sunset. I think I'll exercise a bit before dinner."

And if Kenma was aware of his attempt at a sudden change of subject, he had no time to mention it for they had already reached the other guys who were waiting for them at the entrance.

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His first night out of the hospital was not easy. There indeed was noise outside, noise that he knew to recognize from experience, and he couldn’t sleep, listening to what he knew to be sounds of bad omens. However, it really was not that bad, being surrounded by his sleeping friends, and knowing that they were protected by their choice of location. So despite the happenings outside that sent a chill of fear trickling down his spine, he only had to take one look at the bodies curled up and spread out on the floor, and suddenly, the fear was obsolete.

At some point, he heard another person shuffle, and in the darkness, discerned Keishin as he sat up, and looked at him. His gaze was piercing in the small rays of moonlight that filtered through the blocked-out windows, and Kuroo only held it for a moment before silently laying back down, and trying to go to sleep. Keishin did not ask him any questions, and for that, he was grateful.

It was probably the silence that allowed him not to dream.

The next day, he began assessing how well he was doing, physically speaking. He didn't want to stay in Shoukyo a minute longer than he had to, but when his legs gave out on his way up the stairs after a walk around the block, he knew that there was no way he could push himself right now. It also didn't help that the stuff the boys brought back from their raids mostly went to paying for his antibiotics, so adequate food was off the table as a method of faster recovery (quite literally).

And Kenma seemed to notice his lower stamina and resulting depressed attitude, and Kuroo hated that he wasn't able to hide his pain from his best friend. Kenma looked troubled, and Kuroo didn't want to subject him to that. However, Kenma was also perceptive, and when, after his afternoon dose of antibiotics, he found himself weak and dizzy, he knew that he'd given out too much information already.

"I'm going to go look for food," the black-haired setter announced. "You're not going to get better if you don't eat properly."

"I had peas for lunch. We all have to make do with what we have," Kuroo mumbled, shivering at the
sight of the determination in Kenma's eyes.

"But you need more, and I can do more. I'm going to see if there's anything further away that I can bring back for you."

"Kenma, please stay," Kuroo begged, his throat going dry at the thought of letting Kenma go out on his own. "I need you here."

"You need to get better even more, so I'm going to go out and do my share," his best friend insisted, pulling on an extra hoodie.

"Please stay," Kuroo tried again. "I got my antibiotics an hour ago, so it's... Around 3PM now, isn't it? The daylight's almost gone, so please stay for today. It's fine. I'll be fine."

"Kuroo, you're not fine." Kenma's tone was suddenly sharp and reproachful, eyes glinting dangerous as he looked down at his weakened body. "You are on your way to getting back to full health, and there is no way I'm going to let you regress, not if there's anything I can do about it."

"Promise to be back before sunset, then," Kuroo begged him, his desperation conveying how serious he was. "Please don't be late."

"Then please tell me the truth. Of why you're acting like this," Kenma retorted, and Kuroo actually froze before averting his gaze, ashamed.

"I can't... Not yet."

"Then I, too, cannot promise that I won't do what I think is best for my best friend's safety," the setter mumbled, going for the door.

"What!?" Suddenly, Kuroo was on high alert, and he tried to shuffle out of his sleeping bag to go after Kenma. However, his limbs were still weak, and he couldn't find the strength to stand just yet. "Kenma, I'm serious-"

"I know." However, his best friend did not turn to face him, blindly grabbing an empty backpack from the doorway and swinging it on his back. "That's why I'll do my best. I trust you."

He left before Kuroo could insist that it wasn't a matter of trust anymore, but a matter of time.

Sometimes, he hated how his body had evolved to survive in this new world. His sleep was heavy when it wasn't nighttime, and so it shouldn't have been a surprise that he didn't wake up when the other guys came home after a long day of raiding further and further areas. He probably shouldn't have been surprised that he'd slept through their chatter and the sound of opening cans, and the ruffling of sleeping bags, and the passing of time, but when he finally woke to a dark room filled with casual chit-chat, there was a specific kind of fear that gripped his heart and squeezed the breath out of his lungs.

"Kuroo, you're awake," Suga was the first to note gleefully. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," Kuroo quickly answered, looking around him so quickly that he made himself dizzy. "What time is it?"

"Daichi? Time?" Suga called out, and the other captain casually strolled to where they were sitting, checking his wristwatch.
"It's... 6:37PM," he announced, drinking some water out of a bottle.

"Where's Kenma?" Kuroo's heart beat loudly in his chest, almost too loudly, almost so loudly that he didn't hear what came out of Suga's suddenly pursed lips.

"He's not back yet."

"No." And suddenly, Kuroo couldn't breathe. There was white hot panic branding the walls of his lungs and his throat and he suddenly felt like he was drowning. "No, no, no."

"Kuroo, calm down." Probably recognizing the signs of an impending panic attack, Suga's hands were on his in a second, and he was looking into his eyes. "Breathe in, breathe out."

"Kenma's not back yet," Kuroo choked out, taking heaving breaths and wiggling out of Suga's grasp. "It's past dark and he's not back yet."

"Well the sun only just set... we were going to give him a little bit of leeway before getting worried," Daichi frowned, not keeping up with his behaviour.

"No, no, you don't understand! Kenma is-"

"No, Kuroo, we don't understand." Finally, another voice cut in, and all eyes turned up to the newcomer, who was leaning on the wall with an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

"Keishin-"

"Kuroo, you need to tell us what the hell is going on around here, because something tells me everything's not as ideal as you're trying to make us believe," the coach sighed irritably, pacing over to Kuroo's side. The Nekoma captain scrambled to stand up, stabilizing his weak knees with the help of the nearby couch.

"Don't have time," Kuroo shook his head, trying to get his breathing under control. "I-I have to go. I have to find Kenma before it's too late."

"What the hell is going on out there, Kuroo?" Keishin insisted. "Enough lies!"

"I can't tell you!" Kuroo bit his lip, tears of frustration burning his eyes. "I-I can't-"

"This is related to why you're afraid of hospitals, isn't it?" Keishin grumbled, and Kuroo couldn't help the widening of his eyes. His friends knowing this bit of info was one thing, because they lacked the information about his past necessary to make connections. But Keishin knew more than them about what happened in Tokyo.

Keishin was connecting the dots too quickly, and Kuroo was suddenly very, very afraid.

"I have to go," he excused himself, jogging towards the door and trying to ignore the pain in his neck, in his legs, everywhere in his body.

"You're about to fall over!" Suga protested. "You can't go anywhere like this!"

"Well I can't stay here, either," Kuroo hissed, regretting the venom in his tone immediately as Suga's eyes widened in hurt. He was just trying to help. They were all just trying to help. But he didn't need help now; he needed time. And he didn't have any of that left, so he had to hurry. "I'm sorry. I really have to go."

"At least take someone with you," Daichi insisted, not understanding what was going on, but
knowing enough to realize that an urgent situation had come up. From the bedroom and the kitchen entrance, the other boys had poked their heads in and were listening with rapt attention to the exchange, and just the thought of putting any of them in further danger gnawed Kuroo's conscience down to the bone.

"Absolutely not!" he protested firmly. "I'm gonna go find Kenma. I won't be back tonight. Keishin." He turned to the coach with utmost seriousness etched into the premature lines plaguing his pale face. "Lock the door behind me. No matter what you hear, no matter what happens outside, do not, absolutely do NOT open this door until you can see the morning light out the window."

"What the hell, Kuroo!" Daichi and Keishin called out simultaneously behind him, but the other captain was way past the point of bargaining.

"Please. Just trust me," he begged, unbolting the door, and threw them all one last glance before exiting and running down the stairs to the main entrance. They had run out of time, so now, all that would be enough was trust.

His legs shook just from going downstairs and unlocking the front door. He heard footsteps coming down behind him, and turned briefly to see the coach following him. As he stepped out, he was relieved to see that the older man stayed at the door, and nodded at him to show him the respect he'd always had for the oldest of their group.

"I mean it," he repeated, taking a few steps backwards. "Don't open this door."

"I'm trusting you on this. Again," Keishin grunted, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "You owe all of us some answers when you return."

When he returned. That sounded nice to Kuroo's ears. So he nodded.

"I'll do my best."

And he was gone, glad to hear the loud click of a heavy bolt behind him as he began to jog.

However, as he checked the corner before turning, he realized that he had no idea where he was going. Kenma hadn't specified where he'd be headed, and he couldn't afford to run around blindly. His body was already terribly weak, and the adrenaline pumping through his veins wouldn't last forever. He had to grab Kenma, find a safe place to hide in, and pray to still be alive come morning light.

Checking another corner before turning, he tried to calm his breathing down. He'd done this before, he reminded himself, and so he could do it again. Even if it wasn't particularly appealing to him. He'd survived through this before, and now more than ever, he had to stay alive. For Kenma's sake. He just had to fall back into the patterns of those dark days (quite literally... the sun had completely gone down at this point, and dusk had settled nicely. He had to find Kenma, and quick).

Turning a corner blindly, he immediately realized he'd made a mistake when he came face-to-face with another person. The person was dressed in black and had a scarf tied around their nose, and Kuroo swore when he saw the gun in their hand.

He ducked back against the corner and flattened himself against the wall, trying to quiet his heaving breathing, and cursed himself for not grabbing some kind of weapon before going out, even if in his state of weakness, he wouldn't be able to swing anything for too long of a time. So instead of thinking of 'what if's, he just prayed that the figure would not pursue him, or he could be in some serious trouble.
"Who goes there?" the person called out, however, and Kuroo wasn't sure if he was comforted by the fact that it was a girl's voice, or not. In this world, nobody was less suspicious than the others.

He didn't respond, considering running. The street was empty, but with his heavy footsteps, he'd make too much noise running away. That, and he didn't have the stamina to outrun her if she decided to give chase.

"I saw you turn the corner," the girl continued, voice sharp and menacing, and oh-so very close.

He had to run and pray to his lucky stars. He didn't have time to wait anymore.

However, as he turned to break into a run, the girl finally came around the corner, gun up and aimed at him.

And suddenly, Kuroo was overwhelmed with memories he hadn't thought he'd ever have to relive. Of memories reeking of terror, that were dark and indistinct from one another, but in every one of them, he could hear himself panting, or crying, or screaming, and he hated it, he hated having to remember everything that he'd worked so tirelessly to bury. He thought he had stopped being afraid, he'd thought that he'd gotten rid of the crippling anxiety that those memories brought, but he'd been wrong. He was still weak, weak, weak and vulnerable and he was going to die, and oh god, Kenma, Kenma was out there but he was too pathetic, too weak, too weak to get him-

"Calm down!"

Suddenly, there were hands on his shoulders steadying him, and yet Kuroo only saw a threat and slapped the hands away. The violent motion caused him to step back and hit the wall, and breath flew out of his body. At the same time, his shaky knees buckled, and he found himself tumbling to the ground heavily, and he knew at that point, through the panic fogging up his senses, that he was dead.

"You're hyperventilating," the girl spoke to him again, and Kuroo morbidly acknowledged that she was right. "Please don't panic. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Hah," Kuroo let out a shaky laugh that turned into a pant for breath. "R-Right. It's almost 7PM now, so you can stop playing dumb."

"I'm not playing dumb," the girl muttered, sounding a bit offended, but finally pulled down her scarf to expose her face. And despite the darkness, Kuroo felt like he'd met her before. "Kuroo, I think, was it? Don't worry. Just calm down. I'm a friend."

"Oh." And all of a sudden, it made sense. "Y-You're that girl. Yoko, or something."

"Yukiko," the girl corrected him with a gentle smile. "It's okay, Kuroo. Just calm down. I'm a friend."

"Even past dark?" the black-haired boy asked shakily, not sure if he wanted to believe that or not.

"Especially past dark," she nodded. "Now breathe. One, two, three... Exhale, one, two, three, four..."

Reluctantly, Kuroo found himself following her lead, and watched her pursed lips with rapt attention in order to mimic her breathing patterns. And soon, he was no longer feeling overwhelmed, just incredibly tired.

"There," Yukiko sighed out in relief, and held out her hand, getting up. "Can you stand? I'll escort
"No," Kuroo grunted, taking her hand to stand up anyway. "I have to find Kenma."

"Kenma?" the girl frowned. "Which one is that? I'm not good with names."

"My best friend." Kuroo's voice was scratchy with worry, his throat dry and clogged by a ball of panic. And then, he realized that the description would not be enough for Yukiko to recognize Kenma. "He's not super tall, has kind of long black hair and the tips are blond."

"Oh, I know him!" Yukiko nodded. "I saw him in the streets a while back. Reminded him to be home before dark." Her lips came down into a straight line, conveying her concern. "He didn't make it?"

"No," Kuroo shook his head. "I need to find him. Do you know where he went?"

"Yeah. He asked me to point him to the highway, so he's probably in one of the southern districts," she answered, but stopped him with a wave of her hand when he made a move to walk away. "But you can't go."

"And why the hell not?" Kuroo hissed out through gritted teeth. "Every second you hold me back is another second where he could be killed."

"You don't have a weapon," Yukiko remarked matter-of-factly, and Kuroo blushed in embarrassment when he realized that her implications were right. He wouldn't make it out here without a weapon. "However, I do have one. I'll help you find him."

"Thank you," Kuroo nodded, knowing that he could trust her, and followed her when she began jogging, feet light and steps noiseless on the ground. The teen wished he could be as stealthy as her at the moment, and he probably could have been if he was in better shape, but he was too tired to be precise with his movements at that point. "Though I have to know," he began as Yukiko checked a corner before turning it. "Why are you protecting us like this? You're not even getting anything out of it."

"Shoukyo is a tough lifestyle to get used to," she explained, shaking her gun with a slight rattle for emphasis. "When a whole bunch of you came to get settled, I knew that I couldn't let you guys get wiped out on the first night. So I stood watch by the door and chased off one person who wanted to break in on the second night. I know I would have liked that kind of protection when I came to Shoukyo first."

"You should have killed them," Kuroo clicked his tongue before realizing that he was talking to a girl who seemed to be of his age, if not a bit older. "Sorry... I mean, it would've been in your best interest. They could come after you one of these nights."

"I'm... not used to the whole 'shoot-to-kill' mentality yet..." Yukiko muttered, seeming a bit uncomfortable talking about it. "I haven't been here long. Two months."

Two months. Kuroo had been broken in a lot less time than that. And he was pretty sure that that was nothing to be proud of.

"Well..." he began, not sure if he should go there. "If you... need someone eliminated... I do shoot to kill."

"You're really suspicious, you know," she immediately replied, sounding wary. "How do you know so much about Shoukyo anyway?"
"Shoukyo, though that wasn't what they called it earlier, began in Tokyo right after the nuclear explosion," Kuroo explained, and with every word that tumbled out of his mouth unbidden, he felt just a little bit lighter. So much that he craved the elation that had begun to bud in his heart and continued on. "I was a part of one of the first generations of people who tried out the lifestyle."

"Oh, god," she gasped softly, looking up at him with visible horror in her eyes. "That means you didn't have anybody to help you out, right?"

"I had one person... Though it wasn't exactly help." And at the memory, Kuroo suppressed another shudder of panic. "Anyway. Point is, I've known what's been going on here for a while, and I wish I wasn't such a burden to my team, because we would've gotten the hell out of here if I had any say in it. Wouldn't you?"

"I would," the girl frowned wistfully. "But... My sister is paralyzed waist-down. She got into an accident and Dr. Hayate saved her life, but she can't move anymore, so... There's nowhere we can go. I'm stuck here no matter what."

"I'm sorry," Kuroo offered sympathetically. "Wish I could help."

"It's fine. You have your hands full taking care of your friends, after all." She trailed off, before coming to a slow realization. "They don't know about Shoukyo, do they?" Yukiko sighed sadly. "I figured that they may have caught on, despite my protection, but..."

"No... They can't know," Kuroo bit his lip as they slowed down to catch their breaths a bit. "It's a bit selfish, but... if I explain Shoukyo to them, I'll also have to explain what happened in Tokyo, and... I don't want them to know that part of me."

"Your friends and you are a very close-knit group, though," Yukiko noted. "I can see it in the way you all care for one another so deeply. So in my opinion, if I'm imagining Tokyo right, then no matter what happened, they won't see you any differently. And maybe even, it'd make you guys even closer. Tragedies bring people closer, after all." She smiled sadly.

"Maybe if I have time," Kuroo mumbled dismissively, flattening himself against a wall when she motioned for him to. They both held their breaths as someone walked past them on the perpendicular street, and Kuroo was glad to see that the other person did not have any visible weapons on them.

"Well, if there's one thing that living in Shoukyo has taught me, it's this," Yukiko began once they kept going. "Time is a luxury, so we can't waste it by just following its flow. We have to take time into our own hands and control it, instead of it controlling us. So don't try and find the time. Instead, make the time."

Kuroo had almost forgotten about his hunger until then, but suddenly, there was a gaping void in his head, demanding food for thought. And so, Kuroo indulged himself. Taking Yukiko's words to heart, he fell silent, and followed her through the inky darkness covering the labyrinth that was Shoukyo.

...-

Yukiko informed him when they reached the bounds of where Kenma might still be. Of course, Kuroo prayed under his breath that Kenma would actually be found alive, and not in a dumpster, but the mental image was enough to induce him in panic, so he tried not to think of it.

"He might be hiding," Kuroo remarked as they surveyed the pitch black streets. "I'm gonna call out to him."
"Be careful. He might not be the only person around," Yukiko warned him, but Kuroo already knew that. And he was willing to take the risk. If Kenma was hiding, then he was afraid, and Kuroo couldn't stand the thought of leaving his best friend to suffer in silence, all alone like that.

"Kenma!" he called out briefly, ear out for any other disturbances. "Kenma, it's me! Where are you?"

There was no response, and so Kuroo and Yukiko moved on. The streets were eerily silent, and Kuroo figured that since they were a bit further away from the downtown area, there would be less people out here. All the better for them.

He tried again a block later, and then another block down. And with every street they passed, Kuroo became more and more worried, his tone turning more and more desperate for a sign of life. Just one would do.

"Kenma!" he called out again, feeling his voice crack. "Kenma, come on!"

At this rate, there would be no finding him. And although there was a chance that Kenma had found a safe place to hide, Kuroo wasn't willing to leave that up to chance.

"Kenma, please answer!" he cried out again, unwilling to give in to his shaking knees and heavy shoulders, unwilling to give up and cry and concede that his best friend, the closest person he had left, his sanity and lifeline, was-

"Kuroo!"

-n't dead. Wasn't dead. Wasn't dead, wasn't dead, Kenma was alive, Kenma was not dead-

"Kenma!" he called again, voice sharper than before, eyesight sharper than before, ears sharper than before as he suddenly stood up straight and looked around him to find the source of his name.

"Kenma, where are you?!"

"Here," the voice called out again, a bit softer this time, sounding much more like Kenma without the previous hint of hysteria in his tone. The black-haired teen turned his head a bit more before spotting a hand poking out of the darkness of one of the adjacent alleys, and was grateful that the hand began to move. Otherwise, he may have been consumed by the panic that he'd been able to keep at bay for so long.

"Kenma, thank god," Kuroo sighed out in relief, rushing into the darkness of the alley to meet his best friend, closely followed by a very silent Yukiko. Kenma was indeed there, wedged between a stack of broken crates and a trash can, and when he looked up at Kuroo like a believer would to the skies, Kuroo couldn't help but break.

He fell to his knees and gathered Kenma in his arms, pressing him close to his chest and not daring to breathe, hoping to stop time just for one second so he could convince himself that this was real, and that Kenma was truly safe and alive.

"Kuroo, I can't breathe." The illusion was finally shattered by Kenma's dull remark, and Kuroo pulled away with an incredulous laugh. However, he couldn't seem to tear his hands away from Kenma, as if letting him go would be to lose him for good. His fingers gripped his hoodie and his thumbs rubbed circles into the cloth until the pads of his fingers were numb from the friction. And he couldn't be happier.

"Geez, Kenma. I've been worried sick and that's all you have to say to me?" he laughed, and watched Kenma for signs of a reaction. His best friend just looked at him for a while, not sure what to do, and then finally cracked a small smile.
"It's because you took so long to find me."

"You're too good at hiding," Kuroo shook his head in mock exasperation, and pulled Kenma up to his feet.

The other boy stumbled a bit, but then held onto Kuroo's forearms to stabilize himself. Both of them turned their eyes down where their fingers were tangled in one another's clothing, and then looked up. Despite it being dark, they could see the stars in one another's eyes. And so they let go, and trusted one another not to drift away.

"Are you hurt?" Kuroo asked, reminding himself that there would be plenty of time for pleasantries later.

"No, I'm fine," Kenma shook his head, falling back into a serious tone. "But Kuroo, there's a murderer out here. We have to get out of here as fast as possible."

"Not a murderer," Yukiko finally piped up. "Just a monster."

"Yeah," Kuroo nodded grimly. "In Shoukyo, the monsters come out to play at night."

"W-What?" Kenma stammered, not understanding, and Kuroo didn't blame him. "Yukiko, what are you doing here?"

"Kuroo got lost, so I decided to show him around," the girl proclaimed proudly.

"And she's going to take us back to a place that we can lock ourselves in until morning light," Kuroo motioned to the street. "Let's get moving."

"Huh?" Kenma raised his brows. "We're not going home?"

"We can't risk returning to the safe house tonight, no," Kuroo explained, taking Kenma's hand as they began to jog, and squeezing hard enough to make him understand that his home was here, by his side.

"Why not?"

"Too dangerous. We can't put the others in danger, too," Kuroo clicked his tongue, and they turned a corner.

There was a man headed their way in a jog, and Kuroo's blood froze in his veins.

"Back up," Yukiko warned them, pulling out her gun and aiming it forward.

"Kenma, this way," Kuroo immediately pressed on, running down the other street.

"But Yukiko!"

"She'll take care of herself." Kuroo trusted her to. Behind them, there was the sound of a gunshot, and Kuroo tried to run faster, heart pumping restlessly to keep his body moving forward. Another gunshot rang out as they turned a corner and pressed themselves against the wall to catch their breath. However, they were still out in the open, and Kuroo did not want to waste a single moment.

Dragging Kenma along, he led them blindly down another street, not sure if he was going around in circles or not. However, he could not hear any gunshots or footsteps behind them, which meant that they were safe for now.
They ran past an alley when a figure coming through the alley ran into them, sending all three of them to the ground. Grunting in pain, Kuroo’s first reflex was to shield Kenma from the other person, but then quickly recognized Yukiko in the moonlight and stood up.

"Kuroo, good," she panted, all three of them breaking into a run again. "Thought I’d lost you. The guy's got a gun, so we gotta be careful."

"Shit. Did you lose him?" the captain swore, letting her take the lead.

"Probably not. He probably followed your voice when you called out to Kenma, so if he made it to us that quickly, he must know these streets by heart. We have to be careful."

"How much further to a safe place?" he asked her as she led them down a narrow alley and then into a street jammed with cars.

"Not much. I'm not taking you back downtown for now; it'll be crawling with people out to get one another. I'll leave you in an apartment close by and you can go back come morning light," she informed them. And a second after she finished talking, there was a bang, and a resounding clang of metal on metal. Something clattered to Kuroo's feet and he briefly recognized it as a bullet that had ricocheted off a car before he was running again.

"Damn it!" he grunted, a slow, familiar panic welling up inside of him and slowly but surely numbing his senses. Another gunshot rang out, the bullet whizzing by on Kuroo's left this time, and he dragged Kenma to the right to avoid the ricochet. At this point, Yukiko briefly turned around and shot one bullet of her own to the back, and they briefly hear it clang against a car before they were running again.

"He's not far behind," she told them in a panic of her own. "We're going to have to cut corners and go in circles to try and lose him before heading to our safe house."

"Kuroo, you're not okay to run too much more," Kenma stated more than asked, worriedly looking at the thin sheen of sweat covering Kuroo's face. His head hurt, his neck hurt, his stomach hurt, his legs hurt, but he couldn't let any of his pain drag him down. Not when Kenma's life was at risk, too.

"I'll be fine. Adrenaline is a miracle drug," he gulped down heavily to try and dislodge the ball of nerves stuck in his throat.

"Okay, here we go," Yukiko warned them, turning a corner sharply. "Follow closely, don't fall behind."

"Got it," the two boys replied simultaneously, and fell in step behind her.

Yukiko led them through a maze-like series of streets and alleys. They never ran on the same street for long, often taking the first turn they came across, and Kuroo's head began to spin from trying to stay oriented. Yukiko seemed to know exactly where she was going, even if Kuroo felt like they ran past several places he recognized from before.

But it seemed to be working. They seemed to have lost the man.

In retrospect, the timing was so uncanny that he probably jinxed it.

They turned a corner, and Yukiko literally ran into their pursuer.

There were mixed cries from both sides as the man and Yukiko fell, the two of them immediately snapping into action and trying to gain the upper hand in a wrestling match.
"Yukiko!" Kuroo cried out, taking a step to try and help her, but she stopped them with a protest.

"No, Kuroo! Run! I got this!"

"Yukiko, he'll kill you!" Kenma cried out, still as confused as ever. In response to that statement, she rolled the man over and punched him in the face, though the guy took a swing at her, too. The moonlight shone on top of both of them, and the man's pale face came into view, and although Kuroo didn't recognize him, Kenma seemed to know him, if the horrified gasp that escaped his lips was anything to go by.

"I got this!" the girl snapped them out of their horrified trance as she deflected another blow and tried to punch the guy again, only to have her fist caught, and to be rolled to the side. She stood up expertly, rushing to grab her fallen gun before her attacker could do the same. "Go! I'll see you at sunrise!"

"Damn it!" Kuroo swore, but knew, when the guy stood up with his gun in hand, that they had no more hope but to trust Yukiko. When time failed them, trust would have to be enough. "Don't die!"

"Don't take me lightly!" Yukiko grinned briefly at them, and then jumped at their assailant again.

"Yukiko!" Kenma cried out, but Kuroo was already dragging him away by force. "Kuroo, we can't leave her! That guy's gonna kill her!"

"And she's gonna kill that guy. I trust in her," Kuroo grunted, pulling him along until he finally fell into step next to him.

"Why is this happening?" Kenma asked, choking for a second, and Kuroo's heart broke. He thought about blowing it off once again as a freak accident, but then, he remembered what Yukiko had told him, and... he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Let's get through the night," he simply answered, voice solemn and rough. "I have a lot of explaining to do come morning light."

Kenma didn't reply. Probably a good thing, since they needed to save their breath.

Several gunshots ran out in quick succession behind them, and Kuroo tried not to look back. He'd learned the rules of the game long ago; turning back would bring them nothing but death.

However, his lungs were failing him, and at this rate, he wouldn't be able to lead them to safety. They had to stop and hope for the best, because his legs were just about to collapse.

"In here," he panted out, dragging Kenma into an abandoned-looking apartment complex. The doors were open and the glass was smashed, which Kuroo was thankful for, because it was an easy break in. They ran down the first hallway they came across, and Kuroo blindly pulled Kenma into a random apartment, slamming the door shut behind them.

The apartment smelled stale, and then there was a smell that was unfortunately familiar to both of them, even if it never failed to make them nauseous.

"Oh no," Kenma whimpered in terror as they ran into the small, 2-bedroom apartment, Kuroo leading them both to the western-style living room.

As expected, there were two bodies on the couch, black and red and melted flesh all over, maggots squirming in their empty eye sockets and toothless mouths. They would not have been recognizable, had they not both been lying down, a tiny body laying on top of the larger one. A parent and their
child, dead in their sleep.

Kenma looked like he was about to throw up, and Kuroo only resisted because he was so used to seeing sights like these. Instead, he quickly ushered Kenma to a decorative cabinet by the television, and opened the double doors to it to see that it was filled with DVDs and knick-knacks of all kinds. But they had no time to empty it.

"Get in, quick," Kuroo prompted him, getting in and stepping on the things, breaking several of them. The glass ornaments dug into his legs as he sat down, but he'd been through much worse pain, so it didn't bother him so much. He opened his arms to invite Kenma in with him, and the black-haired setter only hesitated a second before complying, sliding into his lap and pulling the cabinet doors shut behind them.

"I'm scared," Kenma choked out once they were locked in the tiny space, body heat stifling and the smell of rot choking the life out of them. "Kuroo, what's happening?"

"Shh, Kenma," Kuroo mumbled, trying to pretend that his heart wasn't breaking. He remembered being terrified the first few weeks, too, so even if he had no words of sympathy for Kenma, he hoped that the tightness of his arms around him were enough to convey his empathy.

He let Kenma cry a little bit, and sighed out in relief when the boy finally leaned back into his shoulder. They fell into silence, occasionally punctuated by shifting or sniffling, and Kuroo figured that it could have been worse.

Of course, the worst was yet to come. It always was. They never seemed to be able to get any respite. At some point, out of the blue, the front door opened with a slow creak, and Kenma's breath hitched. Kuroo's hand was on his mouth in a second, pulling his neck back until it was nicely hyperextended. He himself had no place to do the same, but Kenma was the one in most distress at the moment, so quieting his breathing was the utmost priority.

They listened to the footsteps prowl the apartment, occasionally throwing closet doors open, and there were no illusions as to who was the one who had followed them in. A few tears accumulated on the hand Kuroo had over Kenma's mouth, and he wished he could say something, anything to soothe his best friend. But they had to be extremely quiet if they were to stay alive.

The footsteps approached their hiding spot, and Kuroo began to register trembling from Kenma. Or it might've been himself. He wasn't sure which one of them was most terrified at the moment. But whether it was Kenma, for whom the experience was a first, or Kuroo, for whom the traumatic memories were being unearthed with every shuddering breath he took, both of them were frozen solid by the all-consuming terror of seeing somebody step in front of their cabinet.

The scariest thing probably wasn't the blood on the person's hands. The scariest thing was probably the sight of his gun in one hand, and Yukiko's gun in the other.

Kuroo shut his eyes and bit his lip in silent mourning.

"Gross," the man outside grumbled in a rough voice, probably aimed at the corpses on the couch, and, to their relief, turned around to leave. Kuroo did not dare move an inch until the front door was slammed shut, rattling one of the glass ornaments on top of the cabinet they were hiding in.

He counted to fifteen before taking his hand off of Kenma's mouth, and neither of them said anything about what had just happened. Their hands searched for one another blindly in the dark, and only when their fingers entwined did they allow themselves to cry.
It was incredibly uncomfortable, but Kuroo was too afraid to leave the cabinet before the sun came up. They both fell into a light and restless sleep while waiting, and Kuroo only dared to step out once there was a hint of sunrise filtering on the floor visible through the crack of the cabinet door. Their backs ached horribly, predictably, but Kuroo assured Kenma that they could now take their time and walk back to the safe house without worry.

Kenma did not seem convinced, but Kuroo led him through the streets until they recognized a part of downtown, and then oriented themselves towards the safe house from there.

It was Keishin who opened the door, warily at first, and then wide at the sight of their disheveled figures. He ushered them up, yelling something about being idiots and reckless and worrying the life out of all of them, but all of that seemed meaningless when Suga suddenly stepped forward and dragged both of them into a tight hug.

"You're both okay," he sighed out shakily with utmost relief, and clutched them close for a second before letting them go. Kuroo was surprised at the motion, never having been very friendly with Karasuno's backup setter, but that wasn't to say that he wasn't pleasantly surprised.

He belonged to their group now. And these people, his friends, his only family left, they would not let him go, no matter what.

"What happened?" Daichi asked, stepping forward to look them over. All the Karasuno boys stood from their places to approach them, and Hinata began to talk to Kenma in hushed tones as Kuroo tried to think of a way to put things.

"Yukiko is dead." He finally figured that it was easiest to break the news to them abruptly, without sugar coating. His story would not be sugar-coated at all.

Cries of disbelief and outrage came from the small crowd, and Kuroo let them yell their questions and protests out at him, because he wanted to accept the full responsibility of having let her down. She had died for him, and so he had to carry her memory on.

"What happened...?" Noya finally asked once the ruckus calmed, eyes brimming with unshed tears. Kuroo looked down at the tiny libero, then at Kenma, who was hugging himself whilst Hinata continuously patted one of his hands. Kenma locked gazes with him when he noted that he was being watched, and Kuroo realized, as he took in the regret and the fear in his best friend's eyes, that they did not have time for secrets anymore.

Yukiko had told him to make time if he couldn't find any. So he was making time.

"I have... some explaining to do," he finally huffed out, and just saying that made him feel so much lighter.

"Let's sit down for breakfast and you can tell us while getting your antibiotics," Keishin directed them, and the whole group stopped for a second before slowly lurching into action. Kuroo was about to go join them in breakfast preparations when the coach stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Kuroo turned to look at him, face set in a grim expression, which melted into surprise when he read the happiness on the older man's face.

"Keishin?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

"You and Kenma go wash up a little bit. The bathroom sink has running water, though it's cold." He patted his shoulder twice before turning to leave. "I'm proud of you, Kuroo."
"I'm not sure you'll feel the same way when I'm done talking," Kuroo mumbled, stomach clenching at the thought of exposing himself so intimately to the others. But it had to be done, like a bandaid being ripped off. One hell of a long bandaid over some very irritated skin, but a bandaid nonetheless. He could make time to rip one out and feel free of his old wounds.

Once they were all settled and his IV antibiotics were running, Kuroo steeled himself for the story he was about to tell, and reminded himself that the gazes trained upon him were not judgmental, but concerned and genuine. He could trust them all.

"So... First of all, I want to tell you about Shoukyo," he began, playing with his food a bit as he spoke. "Shoukyo is a new name for an organization that has existed since the nuclear bomb exploded in Tokyo. It originated in Tokyo right after the bomb, when the survivors came out of the shelters to find their entire city reduced to dust. The supplies were unbelievably scarce at that point, and whoever had no means of leaving the city ended up in a really tight situation. There simply weren't enough things for everybody to survive on. I'm not sure how the trend began, but at some point, somebody decided that only the fittest would survive. And so, the concept that we called Seizan in Tokyo, and that is called Shoukyo here, was born."

Everyone stayed respectfully silent as he tried to will down the awful memories of that time back down into his depths. He remembered how stepping out of the bunker to the dusty air had felt so unreal at first, and he remembered not believing his eyes when he saw that Tokyo had literally been flattened down into nothing. There had been no thoughts in his mind at that moment but the conviction that this was where he was meant to die.

"The concept is simple, but morbid," he finally continued, swallowing thickly. "During daylight hours, people cooperate to bring together all of their resources and bring cohesion to what is otherwise a broken society. People in daylight frown upon any type of negativity or violence, and will shun anyone who does not behave as is socially acceptable. People are helpful and generous and selfless during the day, but as soon as the sun goes down, the monsters come out. All the laws of Seizan are broken down after sunset, and no body of authority exists anymore. All is permitted, be it stealing, breaking in, killing, and there is no regulatory body to keep anybody under control. This system was meant to pool resources more efficiently whilst eliminating the weakest in order to ensure the survival of the fittest."

"That's horrifying," Daichi commented under his breath, and Kuroo briefly raised his gaze to see all of his friend looking at him in rapt attention, eyes wide in disbelief and mouths hanging open in varying degrees of horror, food all but forgotten.

"It's what we did. And it worked," Kuroo mumbled. "The strongest ones were able to kill the weakest and protect themselves during the nighttime hours, and so when morning came, they had more resources for themselves. And these two states of Seizan existed completely separately from one another. What happened during nighttime was completely disregarded during daytime, and vice versa. In order to avoid civil unrest and keep some semblance of normality, people literally became somebody else during the day and during the night. Everyone had two identities, and though over time, people came to recognize them, the daytime identities had to interact with the daytime identities, and the nighttime ones accordingly."

"So... If I understand right," Keishin cut in. "If something happened during the night, you couldn't talk about it during the day and had to wait until the next night to do it?"

"Exactly," Kuroo nodded. "If anyone spoke of nighttime activities during the day, or even hinted at them, the citizens were given the right to kill them on the spot. No questions asked by anybody, that person would be killed and the body would be taken away, and if anybody had anything to say
about the cold-blooded murders that resulted often from an accidental slip-up, they had to wait until
the night to exact their revenge. People would literally smile to each other during the day and then be
out for their blood by night."

"That's terrifying," Suga whispered, as if in disbelief. "W-Why... How did you end up there?"

"My mom and dad." And it hurt to remember. And it hurt to talk about it. But Kuroo knew that once
he'd begun explaining Shoukyo to them, there would be no hiding what had happened in Tokyo
during the Seizan days. "When we came out of the bunker, during the first days of Seizan, they were
attacked in the night and really badly wounded. There were a few attending physicians who were
taking in patients in exchange of supplies, and I agreed to put them in one of the doctors' care. They
were all I had left, and I... I didn't think before I did what I did, I just did-"

"Kuroo." And suddenly, there was a hand on his, and Kuroo turned to see Kenma look up at him,
squeezing his hand comfortingly. "It's alright. There is no need to justify yourself."

"I killed so many people," he whispered, his eyes not leaving Kenma's. "So many of them. I stabbed
mothers and shot fathers and strangled children because I-I just wanted- I just wanted to keep my
parents alive." That was all he could do. The dam broke.

Kuroo Tetsurou was 18 years old when he was forced to become a monster. There was no
redemption for him now. He could only hide his face in his hands and let the tears slip silently down
his face.

"I stole whatever supplies I could and took them to the doctor attending to my parents, but I'd also
get hurt a lot, and so a lot of my stuff went to treating my own wounds. And at some point, even if
there were less people left, the ones left were too strong, and I was getting more and more injured
and finding less and less supplies, and just-" He took a deep breath to compose himself before
blurting out the end of his story. "- the doctor killed them because I couldn't keep up with payments
anymore."

He wanted to leave it to that. He didn't want to tell them how he'd gotten shot and had required
surgery, and the doctor had done it before requesting payment. And he didn't want to tell them how
he'd cried and begged, knowing he had nothing left to offer anymore. And he didn't want to tell them
how, that night, the doctor came in and tied him down to his bed with the psychiatric restraints and
then injected his parents with a lethal dose of medication, even as he'd pleaded with him to kill him
instead. He didn't want to tell them how he'd been unable to mourn his parents as the bodies were
immediately taken away to be dumped out.

He didn't want to tell them how from that point on, Kuroo was forced to work for the doctor to keep
receiving the meds he needed after his surgery, doing nothing by day but going out by night
alongside all the other teenagers in his service to gather supplies. He'd be fed just before the morning
hours and then kicked out until the next night, when he'd receive his medications before going out,
and he didn't tell them how the cycle went on for 16 days before a passing survivor's camp had led
Keishin to find him, wounded and exhausted and laying in a hospital bed, waiting for death to come.
Kuroo had not told the man everything, but enough that he'd promised to keep a secret. A few days
later, Kenma was picked up by the travelling camp in a country house a ways off of Tokyo, and
Kuroo had sworn to swallow the experience and never bring it up again.

Except now. But he didn't say anything to anyone. And despite having no words, when he began to
cry in earnest, trying to hold back to no avail, trying not to remember every single painful detail of
what had happened in Tokyo, there were a pair of arms around him, and then another, and then
another pair, until Kuroo's fears were suffocated by the intense body heat emanating from the cocoon
of protection that his friends had built around him.
He took a moment to calm down, and when the entire group moved away from him, he composed himself before looking at them in all of his red-eyed glory.

"I'm sorry," he simply offered, and was glad to see the small smiles that bloomed on his audience's faces. There was a flutter in his heart, his bones feeling so hollow of the cancerous pain that had plagued him so far that he felt like he could just float off into the sky and never come back down.

"There is still time to redeem yourself," Keishin finally spoke up for all of them, and when Kenma's hand tightened on Kuroo's as if to reaffirm the truth of the statement, he knew that just this once, he hadn't run out of time to do the right thing.

Obviously, after Kuroo's story, nobody felt like staying in Shoukyo anymore. However, they were still bound to the place by Kuroo's medication (again, Kuroo would never forgive himself for doing the same thing twice), so it was decided to spend the day raiding to gather enough supplies to buy the remaining two days' worth of medication, and get the hell out of Shoukyo before dusk.

Kuroo and Kenma were both exhausted from the night's activities, but after a quick nap, they, too, jumped at the occasion of contributing to the cause. The whole group split up into teams of two or three in order to cover more ground, and targeted more strategic places than just residential homes during their raids.

They were apart for the whole day, which gave Kuroo some much-needed time to think and to give himself some closure, although this was easier said than done. There was one bit of information that he felt like he should have shared with the rest of them, but he'd already felt like he'd said too much. However, if all went well that night, he wouldn't have to worry about that anymore. Right now, he had to worry about getting enough supplies to buy his four remaining doses of antibiotics, and was not amused when they had to stop so that Kenma could give him his IV antibiotics like Suga had shown him in their crash-course that morning.

They rejoined one another around 5PM, an hour before sundown, right in front of the clinic. Satsuki, who had been watching their ever-growing group from the front desk inside, welcomed them with a smile when they entered.

"You boys are here late today. But I see that everyone's here!" She exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly. "It's nice to see you all. I assume you're here for tomorrow's dose of antibiotics?"

"Actually, Satsuki, we were wondering if it would be possible to receive tomorrow and after-tomorrow's doses right now. We'd like to leave soon, but we don't want to interrupt Kuroo's therapy, you see," Daichi explained as diplomatically as he could, and Kuroo had to give him props for being such a good speaker.

"Ahh... I'll have to verify with Dr. Hayate about that," Satsuki bit her lip pensively. "Why don't you wait here? I'll go get him."

"There's no need, is there?" Kuroo hurriedly cut in before she could leave. "You know how much the antibiotics cost, can't you just sell them to us?"

"Why, Kuroo..." Satsuki frowned, and Kuroo stepped back when he realized he'd been a bit too forceful to be natural. "Are you saying you have something against Dr. Hayate?"

"Not at all," Kuroo quickly corrected with a strained smile. "I am very grateful to him for all that he has done." The words felt bitter and disgusting on his tongue, and despite having lied to everybody's
face at least a thousand times, this was one lie that didn't sit well with him. "I just would regret to take him away from his important work. I'm sure he's extremely busy."

"That's very considerate of you. However, he's only got his evening assessments to make before closing up, so I'm sure he can spare you some time," she explained, already heading off before getting confirmation.

"Then if it's no bother, we'll accept," Daichi replied before Kuroo could say something again, and waved at the nurse as she backed off.

"Kuroo, you're the one who warned us against speaking out in broad daylight," Keishin hissed at him, frowning. "Control yourself. We'll be out in a second."

"Whatever," Kuroo huffed and crossed his arms until Dr. Hayate came into the waiting area, accompanied by the nurse.

"Ah, my favourite patient," the man greeted with a light smile. "How are you doing, Kuroo?"

"Fine," Kuroo replied hastily.

"Doctor," Keishin took the lead before they got into trouble. "We were wondering if it would be possible to buy all of Kuroo's medication in one go today, since we'd like to hit the road soon."

"My, my, but it's almost dark out. Don't you want to wait for tomorrow morning?" the doctor inquired.

"No, we'd like to leave as soon as possible as not to accumulate any more delays in our journey," Keishin replied as calmly as he could. "We'd hate to burden you even more, too."

"Well, then, let's see if you can pay for them at once. I offered to sell them day by day because they are so expensive, so let's see if you can afford them."

"I'm sure we'll be able to persuade you with this," Keishin offered with a good-natured smiled, motioning for Asahi, Kageyama and Tsukishima to show them the three backpacks filled with supplies of all sorts.

"Three bags of supplies," the doctor nodded. "My, that's quite a load! Unfortunately..." His tone dropped, and so did Kuroo's heart. "You're one bag short to afford the fourth dose."

"We're paying in advance, though. Can't we get a batch discount?" the coach groaned.

"The doctor's prices are fixed due to the limited supplies we have on our end," the nurse stepped in, explaining pleasantly. "We're sorry to do business like this, but we have to secure our own living, too."

"But-" Keishin began, but Kuroo was already done. There were chills running down his spine and goosebumps on his arms, and he wanted to get out as soon as possible.

"I can go out right now and then pay you tonight, how's that sound?" he offered as neutrally as he could, and everybody froze, knowing that he was playing with fire.

"I'm afraid I don't do business past 6PM," the doctor explained, his smile a bit more strained. "Please see me tomorrow morning for the rest of the payment. Oh, but please tell me you'll be able to afford your medication, Kuroo," he commented casually, but suddenly, there was a gripping pain in Kuroo's heart and he couldn't breathe anymore.
"Of course I can," he replied, feeling his hands shake. "I'll have everything ready for you in the morning, I promise."

But he wasn't thinking about the current time at that point. His thoughts had gone back to the Seizan days, when he remembered making that promise a thousand futile times, over and over again-

"We should leave."

And there was his saving grace, in the form of one small teen with badly dyed hair. Kenma looked up at him as if reading the distress in his eyes, and then looked back at the doctor impassively.

"It gets a bit chilly after dark, I find," he commented off-handedly. "We'll have more time to discuss this in the morning. Let's go home."

"Right," Daichi agreed swiftly, probably feeling how the atmosphere had suddenly dropped a degree or two. "We'll see you tomorrow morning, doctor."

"Of course," the man nodded at them, his smile still a bit strained. "You all have a nice night, now."

"Likewise," Keishin nodded, and led them all out.

On their way down the street towards the safe house, Kenma suddenly tugged on Kuroo's shirt, causing them both to stop, and thus alerting the whole party to stop.

"What is it?" Kuroo frowned, watching Kenma's eyes dart to the other side of the street where a man was standing, as if waiting.

"That's him," he blanched, subtly pointing at the man. "That's the guy who killed Yukiko."

"That's the man who showed us to the hospital on the first day!" Hinata exclaimed, eyes wide. "Why would he do something like that!?"

"Double identities, remember? Don't worry, he can't do anything to us in daylight," Kuroo immediately reminded them to quiet the outraged whispers that came from the rest of the group.

"But he killed Yukiko!" Noya hissed out, glaring at the man. "We can't just let that slide!"

"Keep your voice down!" Kuroo insisted urgently. "If anyone hears you, you'll be shot and nobody will ask questions!"

"Damn it!" Noya swore, fists clenching tightly. "Damn it! Why are we so powerless!?"

"It's the laws of Shoukyo," Kuroo mumbled, taking one last look at his would-be killer (one more face to add to an unending list, at this point) before ushering them the other way. "You either live by them or die by them."

As dark fell, the others began to get ready for an early sleep, although waking early wouldn't do them much good, either. If Kuroo's times were right, the darkness lasted between 6PM and 6AM, and so they were confined in their safe house for twelve whole hours.

Kuroo, however, was the only one who began to exercise, doing sit-ups and push-ups and shuttle running in the longest part of the apartment, back and forth until it was dizzying to see him go.

"What the hell are you doing, you idiot?" Tsukishima had drawled at him at some point, watching
his incessant movements uninterestedly. "You're tiring yourself out needlessly."

"I'm just exercising," Kuroo had replied innocently enough. "Gotta get my strength back somehow."

That sounded fine, and they all bought the alibi. They all decided to leave him to it and vacate to their own things to do, trying to ignore the distant noises outside that began after dark.

One by one, the younger ones began to fall asleep, more emotionally drained by the things they'd learned today than the older ones, who digested the information much more quickly, since they had to be the protectors of the younger ones. Once the first-years were all asleep, the second years followed, leaving the third years up. Suga changed Kuroo's dressing, noting how nice the wound looked now, the edges both fusing together, and all traces of yellow tissue gone. It was just a bit red around the edges, which Suga figured would be taken care of with the antibiotics left and in due time.

And then, he, too went to sleep, taking Asahi with him. This only left Daichi and Keishin up with Kuroo, and Kuroo knew them to be his biggest obstacles.

He lulled them to sleep with small talk, refusing to return to the thought of his parents for now. He'd have plenty of time to do that later, when they were all asleep. But sleep didn't come easy to the two other men, and as time went by, Kuroo felt like they were getting nowhere at all.

It was only thirty minutes to midnight that they finally gave in and fell asleep, and at that point, Kuroo had to fight to stay awake himself. The day had been most draining for him in emotional terms, and although he felt lighter, he also felt incredibly tired. Still, he had one more job to do. He waited a while, pretending to sleep, and then, at five minutes to midnight, he got out of bed as quietly as possible, and tiptoed to the entrance.

There, he slipped on his shoes and tied the frayed laces, glancing occasionally at the living room lined with the sleeping second and third years. The first years were in the bedroom, sharing the bed or the floor, and Kuroo was glad that they, at least, were sheltered from what happened outside.

He was just about to go for the door when a rustle from the sleeping bags caught his attention and he swore. But then again, he really should have expect it. The man had an uncanny ability to stick his nose in everybody's business, and actually help them out.

"Where are you headed so late?" Keishin asked, his voice free of grogginess giving away the fact that he'd never even fallen asleep in the first place. Kuroo had miscalculated that one big time.

"I've got to run an errand," Kuroo shrugged casually.

"Ain't many kinds of errands you can run at this time of the night," Keishin pointed out, stepping towards him. Kuroo suddenly felt caged, and bared his teeth threateningly, in an almost animalistic fashion.

"I'm gonna make sure we have access to those antibiotics tomorrow morning," he answered as if there was nothing to it.

"You're going to kill Dr. Hayate, aren't you?" But the way that Keishin said it sounds less like a question and more like a statement. Kuroo's eyes narrowed at him in the dark, and he huffed.

"So what if I am? The guy deserves to burn in hell for all he's done."

"Kuroo," Keishin began again. "I'm not stupid. I can connect the dots. Dr. Hayate was the one who killed your parents, wasn't he?"
Kuroo stiffened at that and said nothing. However, silence is often the biggest clue. And so, Keishin sighed sadly and looked at him with something akin to pity. Kuroo hated it.

"That's why you're so afraid of him, but not the nurse."

"You don't have to say it out loud, geez."

"Tetsuro."

It grated the teen's ears for his name to be said so gently, as if he was still worthy of being loved. His time had been cut short when he'd decided to kill his first victim to steal his food. The boy had been a bit younger than him, freshly admitted to high school, probably. Shaggy brown hair, wide grey eyes that had pleaded him not to pull the trigger, even after he had. He hadn't known his name, but he felt like he should've. He felt like he should've known the names of all of his victims. But now, he knew Dr. Hayate's name, and so he would at least know the name of his last victim. Kuroo would never forget his first time. But he'd also never forget his last.

"You admitted it yourself, that killing is not the answer," Keishin began, taking a step towards him. Kuroo took a step back, and his back hit the door. "Don't do this to yourself. There are better ways to cope."

"I've coped just fine all this time," Kuroo hissed. "This is just one last thing I have to do to find my closure and give my parents the peace they deserve."

"Imagine your mom and dad hearing this. You've already hurt yourself enough, Kuroo. Stop this."

"They can't hear me," Kuroo pointed out, throat locked. "That's why I have to do it."

"I won't let you," Keishin insisted. "Don't think I don't know how much this is destroying you. How much it's changing you. Every single time you do it, it's taking away a piece of you. Like that one time in the camp when a man was found suffocated in his tent? I know that was you, because the guy harassed Kenma the day before. But it didn't do you any good, did it?"

"He had it coming. Don't talk as if you know me," Kuroo frowned, though the words hit a chord inside of him. "I'm not going to regret this."

"Probably not. But you're also not going to feel any better by doing it."

And whilst that may have been true, there was something like a fire burning inside of Kuroo, something that he didn't know how to extinguish. But getting rid of the source of his worries would probably help. Probably. Maybe?

"I have to do it," he finally conceded, eyes downcast. "So I can rest easy, knowing that I've done everything I could to avenge my mom and dad."

"They wouldn't have wanted you to kill in their names, Kuroo. Enough killing. It's become too casual to you, and even if you have control over it, even if you feel like there's no other way, you can't let this become a quick way of cutting corners," Keishin stepped forward a bit more, and then put a hand on Kuroo's shoulder.

And the teen did not realize how much he needed that grounding presence until he had that hand pushing him down like gravity so that his feet remained on the ground and his head came down from the clouds.

"Life is hard, and problems are meant to be hard to deal with. But you've got a whole support system..."
around you. All of your friends, all of us here, we're here to help no matter what." And when Kuroo looked up, he read the protective concern on Keishin's face, and his heart swelled up with emotion. "So no more killing, Kuroo." The hand tightened on his shoulder, and Kuroo nodded fervently in understanding. "You still have time to figure out alternatives."

He had time. They all had time to figure things out.

The living room window suddenly broke, and as Kuroo turned his eyes to it, wide in surprise, it felt like they had no time left at all. It was midnight, and the world was about to come crashing down.

"Everyone get over here!" Keishin immediately took control, running back to where the boys were scrambling to get out of their sleeping bags. Kuroo was frozen in place as he watched a hand come through the smashed remains of the window and fumble for the lock on the side of the frame, opening it once it was unlocked, but as the second and third years rushed to huddle by the front door and in the kitchen, as far away from the living room window as possible, he pushed them all behind him and stood tall and proud at the front.

"Sawamura, get the first-years," he called, and the other captain nodded before rushing into the bedroom to protect the youngest of the group. The others stood behind Kuroo and Keishin in varying states of sleepiness, and watched with growing horror as a man stepped through the window, and brushed himself off of pieces of broken glass in the middle of their living room.

"But we're on the second floor, so how...?" Azumane whimpered, and Kuroo, for once, agreed with the cowardly ace.

"Well, that was some exercise," the man huffed out mockingly, glasses glinting in the moonlight filtering from the broken window, and they all recognized him immediately. Especially Kuroo.

"I see enough of you in the daylight, now you gotta bug us at night, too?" he mocked right back, glaring at the man dressed in sweatpants and a leather coat. He really looked different from in the clinic. "Dr. Hayate, I thought we'd agreed to meet in the morning."

"Ah, but in the morning, you won't be there to meet with me," the man chuckled as if he'd told a good joke. And just as Daichi opened the bedroom door to escort out the first years, the doctor pulled out a gun from his coat pocket, and clicked the safety off, effectively freezing everyone in place. "So. I figured I'd make a house call."

"How nice of you," Kuroo smiled, his tone dripping with vitriol. "But I'm fine. You can leave, and I won't hunt you down tonight."

"I'm afraid that won't do," the doctor sighed dramatically. "See, I figured something out. You're intending to buy off a large part of my stock of antibiotics, and you have a ready payment. So of course, win-win, I can do this Shoukyo style and get rid of you, as well as get your supplies."

"See, now that's a fallacy," Kuroo gritted his teeth. "Because you're dealing with someone who knows exactly how your Shoukyo business works, and I know how to take you down."

"Oh?" The doctor seemed genuinely concerned. "You've only been here a few days. Did you catch on that quickly, you smart boy?"

"No." Kuroo frowned, suddenly confused. "Don't you remember me?"

"Hmm? Was I supposed to?"

"I'm Kuroo," he told the older man, aware that everybody was listening to the mounting panic in his
"Ahhh, so no wonder you know how things work around here," the doctor made a comprehending noise. "What tipped you off about Shoukyo? Was it the name? I'm proud of it myself. The hiragana is the same, but the word has two kanji symbols. One of them means 'a few', like in 'we are few but we are strong', but it also can mean 'purge, elimination and dying out'. I'm sure you can figure that one out by yourself."

"That's sick," Daichi grunted, and the doctor suddenly pointed his gun at the other captain, a disapproving look on his face.

"I'm sorry, I'm having a conversation with Kuroo. This just got a little bit more interesting, so if you don't mind." He turned back to Kuroo, lowering his gun. "So. Was it the name?"

"No." Kuroo glared at him. "It was you. I saw you and I recognized you from back in Seizan."

"That's why you made such a big deal out of things. And here I thought you were afraid of needles," the doctor chuckled, but Kuroo found it much less amusing.

"You killed my parents, you heartless monster!" he yelled out, seething. "How dare you forget me, after all you did to me!? You blackmailed me and made me kill innocents for your profit and you don't even have the decency to remember me!?"

"Sorry, Kuroo, but I really don't," the man shrugged, actually looking apologetic, not that it mattered to the teen. "I had many teenagers bound by contract that way, and I have given lethal injections to many people as alternate compensation for a missed payment. You're one of many."

"You sick bastard," Keishin exclaimed suddenly. "That is nothing to be proud of!"

"Kuroo, control your crowd," the doctor sighed, warningly raising his gun at the coach, and all of them were reminded that the safety was already off. "What's a man gotta do to get a civilized conversation around here?"

"It's past dark. There's nothing civilized about any of this now," Kuroo remarked. "So just tell me. Why the hell are you here? To kill me so I don't have to take your goddamn antibiotics anymore?"

"Hmm, yes. That, too." There was a shrug, the motion of which clicked the gun again. "But mostly, I saw how many supplies you all had, and I figured I may as well kill all of you and take all of them for myself. I have more than enough bullets to do you all in, twice."

"You greedy, selfish, cruel, inhuman son of a bitch," Kuroo swore, fists clenching.

"I don't deny it," the doctor chuckled, finally raising his gun at Kuroo, aiming between his eyes. Kuroo felt sweat roll down the sides of his face as he stared down the barrel of death. "It's well past dark, after all."

The air was heavy with tension, and nobody seemed to dare to breathe, let alone move. And then, the doctor motioned Kuroo forward with a wave of his gun.

"Now, Kuroo. Step forward, would you? It'd polite to set the example for your friends."

"I'll step forward alright," Kuroo mumbled, and took a few calm steps before he pounced.

His strength was still sapped from the days spent in recovery and from the lack of sleep, but he was still quick enough to take the older man by surprise. He was glad to hear everybody hit the ground
when he tackled the doctor, because a second later, the gun went off accidentally, and Kuroo hoped that the lack of noise from the background was a good sign.

"Let it go!" he grunted, trying to wrestle the gun out of the doctor's hand and being wary of where the barrel was pointing. The two of them rolled on the ground, Kuroo taking the upper hand for a while before he was kneed in the stomach, and then pushed under the doctor. A second later, there was a gun shoved under his chin, digging into his skin, and every nervous swallow made him hyperaware of the humming metal pressed against him.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you," Dr. Hayate spat, Kuroo flinching unwillingly and trying not to tremble. Despite having been in this position several times before, it never stopped being terrifying to realize that his life could be over in the time it took for his brains to paint the floor pink.

"Let him go!" Kuroo recognized the voice as belonging to Daichi, but did not dare look.

"Don't rush all at once now, kids," the doctor chuckled without looking back, either. "You'll all have your turn to die."

"I'm not gonna say it again." And suddenly, there was the click of a second gun. And that was one sure-fire way to get the doctor's attention.

"What the...?" he mumbled, turning towards the source of the noise, as did Kuroo, as did everybody else in the room, only to realize that Daichi indeed had a gun in his shaking hands, cocked and ready to fire.

"Daichi!" Keishin exclaimed incredulously. "Where did you get that!!"

"That's..." Tsukishima exclaimed, eyes widening in realization at the same time as he pushed Yamaguchi behind him. The smaller boy frowned quietly, before his eyes caught the details on the gun, and if his brain didn't remember, his hands did. And he shrunk behind the tall blond because he'd thought that the chapter of his life that had been a bigger nightmare than the rest was over.

"That's the gun from back at the gym!" Noya completed Tsukishima's sentence, gaping.

"Captain, why do you still have it!?" Tanaka asked, voicing the mutual concern of everybody in the room.

"I forgot I'd brought it with me, I swear," the teen defended himself, eyes and line of fire never leaving the doctor's kneeling body with Kuroo pinned underneath. "It was at the bottom of my bag, and I didn't remember it when they asked for our weapons back at the death camp and I just- I just clicked-"

"Daichi, give it here!" Keishin quickly prompted, and without hesitation, Daichi turned to his coach to hand him the weapon.

However the doctor was faster, and there was the sound of a gunshot resonating in the living room before Daichi swore and doubled over, clutching his hand. The gun clattered to the ground, sliding until it hit the wall, but all eyes were on the captain, who seemed to be in pain.

"I'm okay!" he grunted out just as Suga began to say his name. "The impact jarred my hand, is all!"

"Damn it, stop meddling," the doctor grunted, but Kuroo took advantage of the moment of distraction to try and wrestle the gun out of his hands again. There were a few cries of protest as the gun was waved around dangerously, but Kuroo kept at it, trying to disarm the man. However, he must have slipped up somewhere because at one point, he found himself empty-handed, and the next
second, the butt of the gun was slammed into his head, making him black out and go limp for a second.

When he returned to consciousness, a blink of an eye later, Kenma was on his feet, as if uncaring of the consequences, and was running for him.

"Kuroo!"

"Stay back!" Kuroo warned him, but it was too late. The doctor leveled his gun at Kenma, and fired.

Kenma put his arms up to shield himself and shrunk on himself reflexively, but the damage had been done. Kuroo saw red when Kenma let out a brief scream and fell to the ground, and he didn't even look long enough to follow up on what happened to Kenma.

He just knew that the man in front of him had killed his parents first, and his best friend second.

Keishin had been right at the time about killing not being the answer. But now, he had run out of time, and options. It was time.

"Die!" he screeched almost hysterically, grabbing the doctor's collar and dragging him down to heatbutt him. There was an audible crack, and the man's nose began to bleed, and he swore, clutching it. Kuroo took the moment to try and wrestle the gun again from him, more fervently this time, and a gunshot rang out towards the ceiling, plaster raining down on them in small pieces.

"Kuroo, stop!" A voice called from behind them, but there was no more stopping him. This man had shot Kenma. This man had to die.

Another headbutt to the nose made the doctor swear even harder, and though Kuroo's forehead hurt as well, and his face was splattered with the doctor's blood, he did it once more in order to loosen the man's grip on the gun. It worked on the third time, and Kuroo was glad that the weapon flew away from them, although its impact against the couch did make it fire another bullet that whizzed past Kuroo's head and hit the television screen, which shattered loudly.

"Stop it!"

"You don't deserve to live!" Kuroo growled out, punching the doctor in the face, and then the throat, making the man choke. However, the older man was still better built than Kuroo, who'd been weakened by his days of inactivity, and soon, they were flipped over, and Kuroo was kneed in the stomach hard enough to almost vomit. He kept at his assault with almost feral fervor, though, even when he was punched once, twice, three times, too many times to count.

"You'll die first!" Dr. Hayate finally yelled out, words slurred by what was probably a few broken teeth, and Kuroo opened his eyes, one of which was bruised but not swelling, in time to see him pull out a Swiss knife and press its blade against his throat.

"Kuroo!" There was a chorus of voices that came from the back, and then, a few steps in their direction.

And then, there was a gunshot.

Before the blade could plunge into the soft cartilage of his trachea, before the boys who'd gotten up could reach them to wrestle the doctor away, before Kuroo could blink to realize what had happened, the bullet pierced the doctor's head, going through one ear, and coming out the other. And Kuroo almost did not even realize what had happened until there was blood and brain matter gushing on the sides of the doctor's face, and did not react until the dead weight of the body fell on him.
He carefully pushed the knife away from his throat before scrambling away from the body twitching on the floor, and then took a shaky breath.

One, two.

And all at the same time, everybody in the room turned to the person who had fired the bullet.

In all of his 162.8 cm glory, bright hair shining like a halo around his head, twinkling eyes glinting innocently in the moonlight, Hinata Shouyo lowered the gun he held in his hand, and looked at the coach, as if for approval.

"He hurt Kenma," he stated simply, as if that was enough reason in the world.

And Kuroo's heart was beating too loudly in his ears to register whatever happened next. One nightmare seemed to give place to the other, and he wasn't sure where to get a grip. His face hurt and his neck hurt but there seemed to be no greater pain than the emotional turmoil festering inside of him.

But then there were arms around him and a face pressed into the uninjured side of his neck, and Kuroo strained to look down to see who it was that had calmed the raging sea of emotions crashing upon the folds of his brain and woven into the valves of his heart with nothing but a touch.

Of course it was Kenma.

Of course it would be Kenma, smiling tearfully at him, his arm bloodied in two places where the bullet had grazed him as he protected himself, but Kenma was smiling, and Kenma was anchoring him down to their broken reality, and despite the agitation of being thrust into yet another hell, Kuroo found the time to breathe, once, twice, and then made the time to hold Kenma close and find solace in the timeless expanse of his arms.

Chapter End Notes

The KuroKen is strong in this one, my children. Too bad I don't actually ship it. On a more serious note, I hope you guys saw the hints of co-dependency in their relationship scattered across the chapter (some more obvious than others). It's a big part of their characterization. Another big part of characterization is Kuroo's backstory. It was meant to be this subtle horror, like "Oh, okay, he killed people for supplies. Everyone does that". But then you think about how he was 18, in a destroyed city full of people who could stab him at any moment, alone and trying to make ends meet unless he wanted to see his parents die. And imagine how terrifying it must've been to get hurt, not because he was in pain, but because he wouldn't be able to provide anymore and his parents would die. And when they were killed, imagine how suffocatingly lonely he must've felt, how guilty and how broken he must've felt thinking he'd failed them, and how unfulfilled he must've been by not having the opportunity to mourn them. Yes, the big secret is "Kuroo killed people for supplies", but dig a little deeper to see what that did to his psyche, and there's the true horror. That explains the violent/sociopathic tendencies! Shoukyo was the hint scattered across the last chapter. If you googled its meaning, you'd find out that it meant "purge/extermination" as well. This chapter is actually very much inspired by the movie "The Purge", in which once a year all laws are broken down and nothing is illegal, so people kill each other at will, etc. The idea was suggested by a
I want opinions on which POV you want next. Asahi's been suggested a couple of times, but idk if you've noticed but Asahi's my least fav. So I'm trying to put off his POV haha. I'm thinking Ukai? Since the ones I haven't written yet are Ukai, Tanaka and Asahi. Suga, too, if you consider chapter 2 as being exclusively Daichi's POV. I really wanna rewrite Hinata's POV too though. Urgh, so many options to choose from :C

Tiny notes for this chapter's content include the following. Hyperextension of the neck opens up the airways, so breathing becomes even quieter. I wanted to give the nurse an ending, too, but it would've been an extra 2k words and I'm not down for that. Also, thought I'd forgotten about the gun? Nope, I purposely didn't write it during the intro scene in the death camp chapter.

As for the lethal injection, it can just be large amounts of potassium chloride injections (which can commonly be found in any nursing station). Too much potassium can cause heart arrhythmias, which eventually lead to death. So for extra horror, you can imagine that Kuroo watched his parents convulse and struggle to breathe and clutch their chests before they died. Whatuppp psychological horror!

One last thing, guys! If you wanna ask me about progress on the next chapters, please send me an ask on Tumblr (same URL as on here). I'm not super comfortable with replying to comments on here (since they add to the comment count on the story), so if you want to ask small questions like "when's the next chapter due?" or "whose POV is it?" or something, please ask me on Tumblr and I'll gladly answer! ^u^ However, if you post a comment and ask a question/include a point I'd like to discuss, for sure I am gonna reply to you on here. I'm reluctant but not totally adverse to replying to comments on AO3!

Please comment with your thoughts, criticism, and also, suggestions! Interaction with readers is the best part of a fanfic!
Name

Chapter Summary

A name is not unique. A name is unique to a person, however, and is the embodiment of everything that they stand for.

There are ghosts wearing the skin of people long gone, or so he thought before he realized that he was the one who refused to see these people for who they actually were: the same people that he thought he'd lost, but who came back to life as easily as by calling their names.

Chapter Notes

Oh my god. I took over a month to update this. The delay is unacceptable, and for that I would like to apologize ;A; Especially since this chapter is kind of underwhelming in comparison... Fuck, I really am sorry, guys. Your comments still keep me going every day though and I would like to thank you all for your incredible support.

(Aaaaaand as soon as I posted this, I got hit with a tidal wave of insecurity. I am so sorry if this chapter is a letdown, I promise the next one has more in store).

Okay, so chapter 9 is Ukai's point of view. It's kind of a transition chapter between two arcs, so please excuse how slow it is and how messy it may look. The theme of the chapter is really prevalent as well, and you'll notice it right off the bat, but I'd really like you guys to follow the change in the names! It'll help you understand what's going on in Ukai's head.

No warnings on this one. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was something weird, almost foreign about the teenagers, now that Keishin thought about it. It was obvious that the war and the quasi-apocalypse had changed them, but Keishin had never noted the tiny details until now, until the moment when it hit him that he had misjudged these children and their willingness to survive.

He'd never noticed how they made themselves small when they slept, or how their shoulders were tense, even in their sleep. He'd never noticed the way their hands always seemed to be out towards the nearest object that could be turned into a weapon. He'd never noticed how they all breathed so softly, one could mistake them for corpses lined up in front of the funeral pyre. It was haunting to see them so still, so dead even when they fought to stay alive.

Somehow, Keishin had been able to turn a blind eye to the fragility of these teenagers, these innocent kids who, only a few months ago, were only concerned about making it to the high school-level boys' volleyball nationals, and who were now concerned with the fact that they may not even wake up to see the morning light. And somehow, he'd managed to convince himself that things were not as
bad as they actually were.

But Kuroo and Kozume were still holding one another just as tightly as when they fell asleep, and Sawamura's face was unhealthily pale but for the purple bags under his eyes, and Nishinoya's cheekbones were unnaturally prominent, and Tsukishima's glasses were badly cracked, and Yamaguchi was selectively mute, and Hinata just shot and killed a man with a straight face.

From the tiniest details to the most obvious ones, every single one of them had changed, and that was probably the scariest thing about this entire situation. Keishin could tell them how to overcome an opponent on the court. Could he tell them how to overcome the demons haunting their every waking moment, though?

Moreover, did they even need to be supported like that, at this point? Or were they already all too far gone, too drastically changed to bear similarities to the people they used to be?

It hurt, not only his head when he asked himself these questions without answers, or his eyes as he watched the players sleep in simili-peace, or his heart when he saw how much the circumstances had changed his beloved players. They practically weren't even the same people anymore.

But the souls that had worn these bodies sleeping at his feet, before this disaster, before the war, those gentle and innocent souls had given Keishin a reason to be. And he wondered now if it was too late to get those people back.

Ukai Keishin was 26 years old, and felt like he was 80, when he finally learned that his life had not amounted to nothing.

Day in, day out, he worked at his parents' convenience store, smoked half a pack a day, and got mad at the Karasuno volleyball team for not taking care of themselves on a daily basis. It was routine, and he liked it that way. And then, that pesky Takeda (Ittetsu, oh god, he missed the stubborn teacher. He would've known what to do here) had dragged him into a whole new world, and had broken his boring, repetitive routine.

He'd taken him into the world of the Karasuno volleyball team, where kids a decade younger than him looked up to him and respected him and asked him to guide them through their challenges. And no amount of work on the farm or in the store would ever be equal to how productive he felt when he taught them to overcome their limits and win no matter what. His entire adult life felt like nothing when compared to the mere months he'd spent as the coach for Karasuno's boys' volleyball club. And instead of feeling like he was 80 and ready to die, when his boys cheered, when his boys cried, when his boys fought until they cried sweat and sweat blood, Keishin lived with them in that moment, and felt so, so alive.

His boys. His wonderful, persevering, hard-working, kind, talented, courageous boys.

The smile that had dawned on his face at the warm memories disappeared in a moment like a match that had gone out moments after being lit. The boys sleeping in front of him were not the same people who'd given him a new passion for being alive. They couldn't be.

These people were just wearing the skins of people who were long dead. And just like any foreign substance, the bodies were rejecting their new masters, and were wasting away more and more every day.

Keishin could not help but wonder who would die first, at this rate, done in by the cruel circumstances that they'd hoped, for a single moment, that they could overcome like any other challenge they'd accepted before.
There was a soft creaking noise that pulled Keishin from his tired musing. He lazily turned his eyes to the bedroom door, that gently opened to let a small figure through. Keishin did not even need to squint to recognize the person as Hinata.

The small boy silently made him way to the bathroom and returned briefly after, feet still shuffling as if his body was too heavy for him to support anymore. Keishin did not bother him, and let him return to the bedroom.

Only if Hinata got up for a fourteenth time to go to the bathroom, would he intervene, he told himself.

...~...~...~...~...

In the end, he did nothing, figuring that nothing he did would matter, anyway. The bubbly Hinata he knew so well was dead and gone.

While he prepared breakfast, giving the boys enough time to get ready, Kageyama came to him and asked him if he had tips on how to approach Hinata.

"I wouldn't know..." he mumbled, honestly not knowing how to deal with the innocence that still shone brightly in the kid's eyes, but that still felt tainted somehow. "I'm sure you'll know how to deal with things as they come."

Kageyama did not seem satisfied with his answer, but left it at that. Keishin watched him leave, wishing he could've said something more constructive, since the smart, astute Kageyama he knew was probably already dead and gone. But he knew nothing about Hinata, and did not know how to talk to Kageyama.

"We have to get out of here," Kuroo announced over breakfast. "The folks around here are definitely gonna hear about what happened to the doctor, and they won't take kindly to us eliminating their only health care provider. But the good news is that we don't have to worry about anything until dusk."

Which Keishin would have agreed with, if it wasn't Kuroo who suggested it. Kuroo, the person who'd rolled up his sleeves and had dragged the profusely bleeding body of the doctor into the dumpster behind the building as if he was simply taking out the trash. Kuroo, the person wearing the skin of the brilliant, caring Nekoma captain that Keishin knew to be long dead and gone.

So even as everybody else agreed, Keishin remained silent, and watched.

"We still have to pass by the clinic and get the antibiotics for Kuroo," Sawamura remarked. "But we still don't have four bags of supplies..."

"We'll manage," Kuroo shrugged. "At worst, Satsuki is no threat."

"If you can keep her attention, I can probably sneak into the med room and 'pick up' the missing dose," Sugawara suggested nonchalantly, and Keishin actually turned his eyes away, unable to stomach the thought of the honest, kind Sugawara he knew being dead and gone.

"Good idea. And if worse comes to worst, and if I understand Shoukyo right, by what Kuroo told us... Then we'll just have to make sure nobody sees us if we have to lock her in a closet or something," Sawamura added, and although the rest of them looked a bit uncomfortable, they nodded in assent. Keishin stayed silent, trying to convince himself that the ruthless Sawamura in front of him was not the same one as the Sawamura he knew to be dead and gone.
"I think I could handle physically holding her back," Azumane shyly offered, looking uncomfortable, especially when Kuroo nodded at him.

"Yes. If it comes to that, you're going to be invaluable to keeping her out of the way. As soon as we declare our ill intentions, she has every right to pull a weapon on us and kill us all, and may actually get support from people who may be around us at the time," he reminded them grimly, and the whole crowd of dirty, exhausted teenagers shuddered collectively.

"Then I'll do it," the ace gulped down, though the nervousness in his voice did not match the fire in his eyes.

Even the cowardly, kind Azumane was dead and gone.

"If there are other people around, Noya and I can make a distraction, right?"

"For sure! Leave it to your senpai to clear the coast!"

Even the goofy, childish Nishinoya and Tanaka were dead and gone.

"Then I could take Tsukki to the doctor's office with me."

"True... That guy was pretty greedy with his supplies, so there might be extras there that we could 'borrow', since he won't be needing them anymore."

Even the innocent Yamaguchi and the careless Tsukishima that Keishin had grown to know and love were dead and gone.

"Alright, then, that's a plan," Kuroo grinned, as if he was proud of their inhumane deeds. "Kenma, do you have anything for us?"

"I noticed that most people have a morning routine at this hour, to go out and buy food, do their laundry, and such. The streets are emptiest around mid-morning, so we'll have less chances of dealing with unwanted company at that time," Kozume answered quietly, picking at the bandages on his arm.

Even the unmotivated, passive Kozume was dead and gone.

Keishin felt like he'd truly lost everybody.

"Alright, then, we're free until then," Sawamura sighed, stretching. "Should we go out for a walk or something?"

"I would actually like to go by Yukiko's place and see her sister," Kuroo mused out loud. "Yukiko did die for us, so the least we could do is bring her some food from the vendors on the main street, or something. We can pass it off as a random act of kindness, which wouldn't be seen as suspicious in a 'harmonious' society like Shoukyo."

"Let's do it! I want to see Yukiko's sister," Nishinoya cheered, getting up to get the blood flowing in his legs a bit.

Slowly, the kids got up and cleaned up, packing their things into their bags as if they were born to be nomadic survivors of a nuclear fallout. One more trip to the much-loved bathroom with running water, and they were ready to bid this place of nightmares goodbye. No matter how well the living room table covered the stain where the doctor had bled out on the carpet, some marks of the event that took place in there would never be covered up.
Some of them now staining the forefront of Hinata's mind, though it was a mystery as to how the young teen had not reacted at all to his actions yet.

"Let's go," Sawamura announced, everybody doing one last check to be sure that they hadn't left anything behind (but the bits and pieces of their innocence that they dropped like Hansel and Gretel, that this cruel world ate up greedily so that they may never return home). And then, in a single file line, they all went down the stairs, and exited into a bright, sunny day.

The pink of the bleeding sky looked less violent than the other days. That must have counted for something.

They walked down the street together, waving at some people who greeted them (and maybe wondering how many people that kind-looking woman or that silent teenager had killed during the night), and made their way to the main street. The stalls were already out for the day, Kenma having been right with his predictions of people's routine. Many buyers were out perusing the (scavenged) wares on the folding tables lining the street, and for just one second, Shoukyo looked like a normal village on a lazy Saturday morning.

Not like a death trap hidden under layers and layers of lies.

The boys traded in a bottle of acetaminophen for canned fruit salad for Yukiko's sister, and then traded some tomato paste and olives for a few cans of mushroom soup ("Is this your idea of celebrating escaping the death trap or something?" "Oi, four-eyes, do you have a death wish? Not in public.") before deciding to leave. By that time, Sawamura's watch showed 9:34AM, and they had another half-hour to waste until they could put their plan into motion, so they very casually split up to ask the vendors where Yukiko's house would be.

Keishin ended up getting the answer from a nice lady balancing a toddler on one hip and a basket of laundry on the other, and thanked her before going around and gathering the other boys. Once the twelve of them were reunited, they made their way through the streets that were full of life in the day, but that became the graves of many in the night, and tried to concentrate on the fact that by noontime, they'd be far away from this nightmarish place.

The address Keishin had been given was that of an apartment building with a door that was held open by a doorstop, as if inviting them in. They all filed in, mostly excited chatter filling the silence, and headed down the hall to the apartment number they'd been given.

"Alright, so who's going in first?" Noya asked, playing with the canned fruit salad idly.

"Well, since she saved Kenma's life and mine, I guess we should go..." Kuroo pursed his lips. "But she has been helpful to you all..."

"Let's all just go in and say hi," Azumane suggested quietly. "Yukiko was a nice person from day one, so we all owe her the gratitude..."

"But Yukiko said her sister was pretty sick. We shouldn't overwhelm her," Sugawara mused out loud.

"Alright, alright," Keishin sighed, breaking through their debate. "I'll go in and see how she is, and if she's willing to take visitors. Seeing an adult might make her more comfortable than a bunch of teenagers dropping into her home."

"Coach, you're barely an adult, though," Nishinoya joked, yelping amusedly when Sawamura grabbed his ear and pulled in warning. And Keishin gave him a sad smile, flashing back for just one
moment to the good old days, where he would have complained about kids' impertinence to a comment like that, but the smile faded quickly when he remembered that there were no more 'good old days'. Just bleak outlooks on the future.

"Alright, give me that," he prompted, holding his hand out for the can of fruits, and the group cleared to give him a passage to the door. He breathed once, wondering why he had such a bad feeling about this, and then knocked.

He knocked twice, but nobody answered.

"Maybe she's asleep," Hinata suggested.

"Probably. Yukiko said that her sister was pretty autonomous, even if her legs are paralyzed, so it's not like she can't answer the door," Sawamura agreed.

"Well," Kageyama began, casually putting his hand on the doorknob, that turned easily. "Ah... it's not even locked. Go on, coach."

Keishin glanced at them for a moment, slightly shocked that none of them were opposed to breaking and entering, but then sighed and indulged them.

"Fine. Stay here, I'll tell you how she is," he sighed, and entered the house.

The whole place was pretty dark, what with the windows barricaded like every good Shoukyo home was, but that only made the unlocked door seem even weirder. Keishin took a few steps in, feeling eyes at the back of his neck, and cold sweat broke out on his forehead for some reason.

"Hello?" he called out, receiving no answer. "I'm sorry for intruding. I came by with a gift."

Still no answer. Perhaps Yukiko's sister had gone out for groceries?

And yet, Keishin's legs took him even further into the apartment, past the opening to the kitchen, which looked a bit messy, like a kitchen used by two teenaged girls should be, and then headed past the bathroom door to the two doors leading to the bedrooms.

One of them was open, the other, closed. Keishin ventured into the open one first, figuring he was less likely to intrude there, but was disappointed to find that nobody inhabited the messy bedroom.

Turning back, he briefly considered just leaving it be, but for some reason, the closed door of the other room seemed strangely alluring. He weighed his decision for a few seconds before heading to it, and knocking.

As expected, there was no answer, and although Keishin could have left, there was something about the room that made him want to explore it. So, trusting his instincts, he took a deep breath, and entered.

There was only one thing to notice about the otherwise-ordinary room, and that was its only inhabitant.

Keishin found himself speechless and wide-eyed as he looked at the figure laid out in the bed, black hair framing her pale, too pale face, and a very subtle, but permanent smile etched on her face forevermore.

The girl in the bed had very visibly died in her sleep, and Keishin was grateful that she hadn't had to suffer. Had she learned of Yukiko's death before passing? How cruel for her life to have ended this
way, in any case.

She was the same age as the boys waiting outside the apartment, and Keishin knew this for a fact. He knew it for a fact, and it wasn't because of the long eyelashes or the slim body or the folded glasses on the table or the fine hands limp on the sheets.

There was a ball stuck in his throat, and he was unable to process the visual information that was hammering the back of his brain incessantly. The can may have fallen from his hands at some point, though when time began to blur, he forgot everything but the girl in the bed, smiling through death.

Although his eyes stung, however, he quickly caught himself and rubbed them dry, reminding himself that he didn't have to mourn people he did not know.

"Sleep well, princess," he choked out in a whisper, making one last effort to push past the knot in his throat to honour her as he pulled the sheet over her face, just so that her beauty could be preserved even when her body rotted like every other human being laying six feet under or walking the world above these days.

He stepped back, and though he could hardly even breathe, he managed to murmur a prayer under his breath. His tears almost fell this time around, when he turned to leave the room, but he took a few deep breaths and reminded himself that he did not have to cry for a stranger.

She was a stranger. Everything he had known was dead and gone.

However, stranger or not, Keishin still had to take some time to compose himself and be sure that nothing showed on his face before he exited the apartment with the same attitude with which he entered it.

"So?" Tanaka asked excitedly.

"She really can't take visitors," Keishin mumbled. "She could hardly even talk to me, but appreciated the gift very much and told me to tell you all that you have her blessing." They would have gotten her blessing, if she were alive to tell them that, so Keishin was sure that he was not lying.

"Shame... Even just for a second?" Nishinoya pouted hopefully, but Sugawara put a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head.

"If coach Ukai says she's not up for visitors, then she must be in bad shape. Let's leave her to her rest."

"Right," Keishin nodded, feeling the ball in his throat make its return, and decided not to drag on the conversation. "We should get going. It's quite a walk until the clinic from here."

"True," Sawamura agreed, and Keishin was glad that he so readily switched the subject. "Alright, so like we discussed while the coach was in there. Everybody, just remember what to do if worse comes to worst, and we'll be fine. Let's just be very careful."

"Got it!" The cry came out from every single one of them, and Keishin bit his lip, astounded at how much these people resembled the boys -his boys- that he was mourning.

Almost as if they were one and the same...

But he refused to believe that. Because if he did believe that he had not lost everything, then he would have an entire life to lead in mourning for what could have been.
The trip to the clinic was uneventful, but as they got closer and closer, the amount of conversation between them decreased, and the tension in the air increased. Despite having been toughened up by the world that sought to bite their heads off at any moment's notice, the teens could not help but be a bit nervous for what they were about to do. The thought that they could be killed in plain sight if they got caught was also a huge fear factor, but at this point, they had no choice.

Kuroo and Sawamura led the march into the clinic, and they were all glad to see that there was nobody in the lobby. Nishinoya and Tanaka, who were on lookout duty for the outside of the building, exited again after nodding, and Hinata and Kageyama, looking out for the inside, placed themselves at strategic spots of the waiting room, trying to look inconspicuous.

The rest of them progressed further into the clinic, listening for any noise from the hallways around them, and briefly stopped at every examination room to listen through the door for the nurse. When they reached a door labelled 'Dr. Hayate', Yamaguchi listened through for any signs of anybody being in it, and then pushed the door in, entering with Tsukishima. Kozume stayed outside to watch the hallway while they raided the doctor's office, and the rest progressed.

When they reached the last examination room in the hallway, Sawamura listened through the door for any noise, and finding none, he entered, leading everyone but Kuroo behind him, the latter of whom took his place as sentinel by the door. The room was empty, thankfully, so it was easy to cross to the open back door, which led into the nursing station in the back. They walked into the nursing station quietly, and ducked under the nearest shelf.

Satsuki was indeed there, silently preparing medication on the counter with her back turned to them. They held their breaths, waiting for her to finish and leave towards an examination room before Sawamura pushed them out from behind the shelf.

"Quickly, grab the antibiotics, Suga!"

"They should be in the fridge," the silver-haired teen informed him, and then took off running, his feet silently bouncing off the tiled floor. Sawamura and Azumane followed behind him, just in case something happened, and Keishin was the only left by the door they came through, figuring he may as well stay there to secure it.

Sugawara quickly opened the fridge, eyes scouring over the contents of it. Even from this distance, Keishin could tell how overwhelmed he was by all the different medication, but they did not have time to shop. They had to grab Kuroo's antibiotics and leave ASAP, preferably before-

"-what the... hey!"

Shit. Absolute fucking shit.

The four of them froze as Satsuki came back in mere moments after she left, full syringe still in her hand. Keishin realized that she might have forgotten something, and his blood froze. There was no way they could play this off.

"H- Hey, nurse!" Sawamura chuckled nervously, waving at her a bit awkwardly. "Funny thing, we were actually just looking for-"

"You killed Dr. Hayate," she breathed out without even hesitating, and then closed the door behind her, gripping her syringe tighter. Her face became scrunched up in furious grief, and quicker than anyone would have expected her to move, she vaulted over the counter, swinging her needle at...
Sawamura with a heartbroken cry.

"What the hell!" Sawamura exclaimed, barely ducking on time, obviously not having expected her to be so nimble. Azumane screeched a bit, but as soon as Satsuki was back to trying to stab Sawamura, he grabbed her from behind, and lifted her slightly off the ground.

"I'm sorry!" he repeated a few times just for good measure, but did not loosen his grip, even as the nurse thrashed violently.

"You killed him! How could you do that!? You killed Dr. Hayate!" she spat out, livid, and even though all the doors to patient rooms were closed, it would not be long until people noticed her voice. They had to end this now.

"Suga, the meds!" Sawamura cried out, wrestling the syringe out of her grip and then clamping a hand on her mouth.

"Got it," Sugawara nodded without hesitation, and returned to looking for Kuroo's medication.

"There's a utility closet there. Put her in there," Sawamura quickly led Azumane to the closet by the side of the nursing station, the tall teen nervously dragging the thrashing nurse with him. Keishin considered helping, but he didn't know what he could do for them. And if he would do something for them. By helping them, would he be encouraging their violent acts?

He never wanted to see his boys like this.

And then reminded himself that all of the boys he knew were already dead and gone.

"Go, Asahi!" Sawamura rushed, grunting as he tried to restrain Satsuki's flailing with one hand, just long enough for Asahi to mumble another weak apology and then quite literally throw her into the utility closet.

Sawamura barely closed it on time before she was banging on the door, muffled screeching and swearing coming from behind it.

"How do we keep her in there?" Azumane asked, looking paler than he'd ever looked before, putting all of his body weight against the door along with Sawamura.

"Uhh..." Sawamura looked around for a saving grace, and his eyes fell upon the chair by the computer station. "Got it! Let's block the doorknob."

"But that only works in movies!" Azumane cried out, looking like he was about to faint.

"Trust me, it'll work. Just hold the door!" Sawamura instructed, and took off, leaving Azumane to battle against the nurse on the other side of the door with a squawk of surprise.

"I'm done!" Sugawara announced as Sawamura grabbed the chair, rushing to him with four intravenous solution bags in his hands.

"Okay, go to the coach and begin evacuation. We'll lock her in and follow you out!" Sawamura instructed, rushing back to the door with the chair in tow.

"Got it!" Sugawara nodded seriously, and then ran to Keishin, looking at him square in the eye. The brunet-blond noted how serious the teen looked, and how determined he was to fight alongside his comrades, and figured that that part of Sugawara had not changed. "Let's go, coach!"
"Right," the man nodded, glancing unsurely at the two who were struggling to properly place the chair under the doorknob as to block the opening of the door, and decided to trust them, whoever the two people wearing Daichi's and Asahi's skins were.

 Escorting Sugawara out in a brisk jog, they grabbed Kuroo, who threw them a questioning glance.

 "They're locking Satsuki in a closet." Sugawara quickly informed him. "Let's get going, quickly."

 "Got it," Kuroo nodded in utmost seriousness, not even hesitating to put his trust in Sawamura and Azumane and briskly walking down to where Kozume was guarding the office door. "Kenma, call them out. We gotta go."

 Kozume nodded and knocked in a pattern that indicated a signal of some sort on the door, and then turned to them.

 "Go. Shouyo came by here earlier, I think he's waiting to give you information. I'll bring up the rear," he told them.

 "Right. Let's move," Kuroo led them forward, just as the office door opened, Yamaguchi's and Tsukishima's voices filtering through.

 They turned the corner leading down to the lobby, and Hinata was indeed there, joining them in a brisk walk as soon as they got to his side.

 "There's a mother and her two kids in the lobby. She looks harmless to me, but Bakayama says that she could have a weapon in her clothes because she's wearing so many layers," he reported, and Keishin was mildly surprised at how efficient he was.

 "And what's up outside?" Kuroo asked, not even looking down at Hinata, and instead squinting towards the lobby to make out the shapes of the people there.

 "Noya-senpai came in to tell us that the street is empty mostly and Tanaka-senpai cleared a backup escape route if we have to run out of sight," Hinata continued confidently.

 "Good job, shrimpy," Kuroo smirked, patting Hinata's head, the latter squawking indignantly and pushed his hand off. By that time, Tsukishima, Yamaguchi and Kozume had joined them, though Sawamura and Azumane were nowhere to be seen. "Okay, shrimpy, get Tobio and casually make your way to the exit. We're going to wait for Daichi and the rest to join us first. And all of you, remember." His eyes glinted in the light, making him look dead serious and dangerous. "Whatever happens, don't react to anything. We have a witness in the lobby, so violence may be avoided, but don't take anything for granted. And just be casual, no matter what. Do. Not. React."

 "Right," they all replied in unison, and Hinata broke off to go get Kageyama.

 The group waited in silence, beginning to walk again when the sound of jogging footsteps came from the hallway behind them. Soon, Sawamura and Azumane turned the corner and joined them, heaving.

 "How'd it go?" Kuroo asked, all-business as always.

 "We don't have much time. The floor is tile, so the chair is sliding every time she knocks against the door. We have to go, now," Sawamura reported, hissing under his breath.

 "Okay. Just whatever happens from here on out, don't react. We have a witness in the lobby and a clear escape route outside the building," Kuroo informed him in a whisper, just as they got to the
Hinata and Kageyama were making their way towards the exit, talking quietly between themselves, and they really did look natural at that point, so Keishin had to give them props for the great acting. In fact, everybody's acting was on-point, no matter how stressful the situation. His boys, the ones from Karasuno, would never have been able to take the pressure.

In fact, right about now, Hinata would be getting a bad stomach ache and would run to the bathroom...

They almost made it out, to their credit. They almost, almost made it out.

They were barely a few metres from the front door when one of the patient rooms facing the lobby burst open, and Satsuki came running out with her needle in hand, still enraged.

"You killed him!" she screeched, beyond all reason, and though none of them turned, they did freeze.

"Don't. React," Kuroo reminded them in a sharp hiss, and kept walking.

"You killed him, you monsters!" she screeched again, breaking into a run towards them. "I'll kill you all for what you-"

Keishin saw the exact moment that Kuroo shut his eyes as if to brace himself. As if he knew from the beginning that this would happen.

As if he had seen this coming from the start. As if he'd guessed that the woman playing with her children in the lobby would have a gun and would shoot Satsuki through her pretty little head as soon as she gave chase.

Kuroo terrified Keishin sometimes. But he really had become something else. Just... maybe not something great.

"Don't. React," Kuroo repeated even more tensely than before, punctuating his sentence with the thud of a body hitting the ground. "Keep walking."

And they did. Trying to ignore the babbling of the children behind them (oh my god, they weren't even crying, they weren't even confused or scared, what the hell had this society done to them?), they kept going.

And they did very well under the pressure.

Until they didn't anymore.

Their hearts were beating in sync at this point, and Hinata must have begun to scream during a simultaneous contraction of all of their hearts together, for they only registered the absolute terrified wailing coming from the teen once the sound of their own pulse receded from their ears.

It only took a millisecond for it to happen, and it was a millisecond too late.

"Oi, dumbass!" Kageyama hissed dangerously, turning to face the teen, who was frozen a few feet behind them, looking at the nurse now down on the ground with blood pooling all around her, her limbs twitching and her desperate attempts to take her last few breaths drowning under the sound of his loud, scratchy screaming.
"Shouyo, come here!" Sugawara called out, but Hinata did not move, he did not even breathe, just looked at the body and screamed, and screamed, and screamed-

"Shouyo!" Sawamura cried out, diving at the younger teen and tackling him to the ground, curling over him. A second later, a shot came from out of sight with another terrifying bang, and Hinata's screaming doubled in intensity.

"Run!" There was a slight tinge of panic on Kuroo's face, but he kept his cool, as always. "Tell Noya that we're taking route A out of town, but that we have to run through it!"

"Right!" A good chunk of the teens rushed out, leaving only a few behind.

"Go, all of you!" Sawamura yelled, dragging the screaming teenager up to his feet. Hinata was supporting himself, but was not moving at all, eyes glazed over as if he didn't even realize where they were anymore. And he just kept screaming, though as his voice became more and more raw, the screams degenerated into sobbing.

"Asahi, take Shouyo!" Sugawara ordered, screeching when another shot ricocheted off next to Sawamura's feet, making the latter fumble forward to hand the first-year to Azumane.

"Go!" Kuroo hissed urgently as the woman turned the corner and came in full sight of them, raising her gun slowly. Her children watched curiously from behind her, not even fazed, and there was something so twisted about the whole situation that Keishin briefly considered putting himself in the line of fire and just finishing it all for good.

But he couldn't do that. These boys weren't his boys, but they still wore the skins of those who had been so precious to him once upon a time. He wanted to stick with them until the end.

The bunch of them practically stumbled out of the building, just as the next bullet broke through the glass door and sent shards raining all over the ones closest to it. Hinata was still sobbing in earnest, not responding to any attempt to calm him down, but they did not have time to deal with it now. They had to run, especially since the noise would definitely have attracted more witnesses, who would shoot them on sight just by looking at their suspicious behaviour.

"This way!" Nishinoya led the front of the group, Tanaka falling to the back to make sure that nobody fell behind and to escort Hinata and Azumane. The orange-haired boy's sobbing was thankfully a bit more muffled in Azumane's back now, but he still had not stopped, and aside from the fear of being shot down at any moment's notice, the fear of seeing Hinata have such a violent reaction to the events was also huge.

They ran through the streets, saving their breath to make it as far as possible before slowing down. They got bizarre looks from people, especially due to Hinata's screaming (which had now become a series of hoarse, intermittent whimpers as his voice was worn down), but never once stopped, until they were well out of sight.

"Let's take a rest for a couple of minutes here," Kuroo decided, panting heavily as he led them into a tight alley. "We're not out of the city yet, so we're not safe. But this kid needs to stop screaming and we need to plan our next immediate move."

"Can anybody think of anything?" Azumane asked worriedly, setting Hinata down against the wall. "He won't stop!"

"Daichi, Kenma, Suga, Keishin," Kuroo grabbed their attention quickly. "They'll deal with it. Let's talk planning."
"Let's head north," Sawamura suggested confidently. "There's a highway to the north, and it's our best bet if we want to find our way around."

"It's true. We're in the middle of nowhere right now, if I remember my maps correctly," Kozume confirmed, shrugging to ruffle his backpack where all his maps were. "We need to find a highway and the nearest one is kind of far from here."

"We'll head there. We have camping gear, though not ideal, so we'll make it on the road if we walk in the wild," Sugawara mused out loud.

"Alright, then, it's settled," Kuroo nodded, and then turned to Keishin. "What do you think?"

"Huh...?" Keishin blinked in surprise, still trying to catch his breath and let him mind reel in from all the stuff that was happening around him. "Uhh... That makes sense. You know better than me."

"No we don't. We need you." And the way Kuroo said it was so casual, like he was putting a very objective fact out there for consideration, that Keishin could not help but be taken aback by the faith they put in him. "Anyway, let's get out of the city first. Once we hit the roads out of town, we'll be able to stop and think about a clearer trajectory. For now, we should concentrate on..." But then he stopped. "Huh?"

They all turned around, all noticing the same thing at the same time.

Hinata had stopped.

And they quickly noticed that the person (see: saviour) to whom they owed the silence was Kageyama.

In all of his socially inept glory, Kageyama had wound his arms tightly around Hinata and had pulled him to his chest, letting him muffle his crying into his shoulder. However, as the others quickly noticed as they approached the guys circling the two, Hinata was not even making a single peep anymore, just letting the tears flow passively down his cheeks and drip on Kageyama's shoulder.

"Whoa, you... you're hugging Shouyo," Nishinoya blinked, as if incredulous, and Kageyama glared at them all, blushing heavily.

"He stopped screaming, and that's what matters, right? Stop staring," he huffed, looking away.

"Alright, well, thank you for your generous contribution," Kuroo sighed out, wiping sweat off his forehead. "But we need to go, now."

"Let's go, everyone," Sawamura added, waving them to the exit of the alley.

As the crowd dispersed, Keishin just stayed back to observe how Hinata and Kageyama were doing, and was surprised to see the black-haired setter murmur some things into Hinata's ear that would cause the smaller boy to either nod or shake his head, still as quiet as ever. Finally, they stood and Kageyama let him go, but dragged him by the arm to Azumane.

"Sorry, Asahi-senpai, but could you carry this idiot until the edge of town? I'll take him after that," he volunteered, his tone fully business-like.

"Ah, no need to apologize," the gentle giant chuckled nervously, bending to let Kageyama help Hinata onto his back. "There we go. You feeling okay there?"

Hinata merely nodded silently and then put his face against Azumane's back.
"Let's get going," Sawamura reminded them, and they returned into their previous formation as they began to jog, away from the place of old nightmares resolved and new nightmares born.

They jogged until the outskirts of town, unwilling to take the risk of ending up like the hare and the tortoise by taking their time, and once Kuroo announced that they'd be safe to settle into a walk, Kageyama took Hinata from Azumane, and the party kept moving.

It took them about two hours of non-stop walking to reach the expressway, after one of which Hinata had returned to his usual self inexplicably, and that is where they finally stopped for lunch, to reorient themselves as well as to map out their next movements.

In the end, it was decided that they would head to Niigata, since the fastest way to head up to Hokkaido from where they were was through that big city.

(And when Keishin sensed the uncomfortable atmosphere that suddenly circled them when they briefly mentioned going through the east coast, he quickly realized that they wanted to avoid having to return to the Miyagi prefecture. Whether it was because they did not want to see their home again, or because they knew they would never leave if they saw it again, he would never know).

"It'll take us about a whole day to get to Niigata from here," Kozume reported, finishing up his calculation scribbles on the corner of their map. "22 hours of walking if we're really regular."

"Which we won't be," Sugawara shook his head sadly, glancing behind them at the others, who were inspecting Tsukishima's and Yamaguchi's findings from their raid of the doctor's office. "Most of us won't be able to keep it up for more than a few hours at a time. Back when we were out in the wild on our own, the most we walked in one shot was 5 hours, before we were due for a 15-minute break. And that was back then."

"Mhm," Sawamura confirmed his friend's thoughts. "We spent almost a week that way, walking 14 hours a day, and from the second day on, everybody was having trouble keeping up. I can't imagine any of us doing that now, when we're so exhausted."

"Then what if we get a few hours in today, and set up camp early? If we do, say... five hours today, we can split the rest over two days so we'll end up in Niigata in the evening," Kuroo calculated and then turned to Keishin. "What are your thoughts? I'm thinking separating it 5-9-8."

"I... I guess," the coach replied unhelpfully, still feeling weird answering to the Nekoma captain. "Come on, Keishin," the black-haired boy clicked his tongue, crossing his arms. "What's up with you? You're being weird and anything but involved in these plans these days. It's almost like you don't even want us to get out of this alive."

"No, I... I do." But how would he explain to them that he felt a disconnect between all of them, and himself? How did he explain that he felt like he didn't even know them anymore? "I'm just distracted. Sorry. So..." he shook his head as if to clear his thought (which stubbornly remained bogged down in the forefront of his mind). "5-9-8... Well, that would work if you consider that we're spending every walking hour at the speed that Kozume calculated."

"4 kilometres an hour," Kozume provided helpfully, although he did seem weirded out by the coach calling him by his last name. "That's the average speed of walking."

"Right. But I'm willing to bet that we'll be going slower than average because these past few days have worn us out so much." At that, Kuroo may or may not have scoffed out something like 'more
like the past few months', but Keishin let it slide. "What if we, on average, spent every hour walking at, say... 3 kilometres an hour?"

"Then it would take us..." Kozume paused, and shut his eyes in thought for a second. "A little less than 30 hours of walk.

"We'd have to split that over 3, even 4 days," Sawamura clicked his tongue. "I'm all for slow and steady wins the race, but we also have to take into consideration the fact that we may not have enough supplies to sustain us on the road that long. Plus, the longer we walk without reaching our destination, no matter how slow we're going, team morale is going to fall and so will the energy, which will slow us down even more."

"Kenma, are we going by any small villages on our way to Niigata?" Sugawara asked the other setter, who glanced down at his map and followed their planned trajectory with his finger.

"As we get closer, we will go through some more inhabited areas. However..." He turned to show them the map, pointing to their current location. "We're in the middle of nowhere right now. As soon as we move away from here, we have a lot of walking to do through wilderness in the regioning mountain area before hitting the next inhabited zone." Using his fingers to measure the road and then scale it up to its actually size, he muttered numbers under his breath until he came up with the answer. "About 14 hours."

"So from here on out, we have to walk for 14 hours before reaching the next inhabited zone," Sawamura repeated, just for clarification, and then sighed. "14 hours... That's at least two days of walking."

"We can always diverge from the road, but again, the expressway goes through the mountains, so the nearest villages, even in the surrounding area, would be hours away," Kozume continued.

"We'll want to avoid that. Going to a village an hour away sacrifices two hours of walking for that day, which is already 30 percent of the projected time spent walking for that day," Kuroo groaned. "Seems like we'll be stuck going through this without outside help."

"Well... we'll just have to ration before leaving this spot, so that if we realize that there is no way we're making it through, we can spend some time here to gather supplies before we push on," Sugawara suggested.

"Good idea," Sawamura agreed. "Suga, wanna come and do inventory with me? Bedhead and Kenma can explain our plan to the others while we do."

"Hey, I'll have you know that I style my hair this way because I like it," Kuroo huffed, though they could sense that the indignant expression he wore was weak.

"No, you don't. You just can't fix the bedhead look so you live with it," Kozume argued very passively, drawing a squawk from Kuroo.

"Don't say it out loud! I thought we were friends, Kenma."

"Come on," Sawamura chuckled, waving at Sugawara. "Let's go get this done so we can move on."

"Wait." Suddenly, Keishin found himself stopping them, and the four of them quieted, turning to look at him questioningly. Their eyes were full of the same curious shine that he had grown to know and love, but... his boys were dead and gone, weren't they? "Umm... I just wanted to commend you. All of you did a wonderful job out there, but you four in particular... You're the backbone of this team. We wouldn't be anywhere without your hard work and skill."
The captains and their trusty setters. In the end, they had always been the backbone of any team they led. Their ability to inspire confidence and strength in others had not changed from the good old days, at least.

"Don't mention it," Sawamura mumbled, not sure how to take the praise. "We do it for the sake of the team."

"Yep," Kuroo nodded. "Besides. There's no point if we come this far just to give up. We'll give it our all and push through."

"Right," Sugawara grinned brightly, Kozume nodding along to agree to everything that had been said.

Keishin nodded right back at them as they dispersed, sensing that the conversation was over, and as he watched the four of them take control of the situation expertly, he wondered if he truly was the adult here in the end. Whilst he was still having trouble swallowing the changes that had taken place in the world around him, these boys -his boys? Were they his boys, after all?- had adapted and were best suited to protect one another, more than Keishin would ever be.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Sawamura and Sugawara estimated that if they shared a can between two people at every meal, they should be alright to make it through the mountain pass. It was tight rationing, but they were loathe to put off their progress, so they all agreed to moving on without going back for supplies.

The terrain changed as they walked on, the flat plains quickly giving way to quiet forests, and the road slowly becoming steeper and steeper, until a few hours later, they were all practically walking uphill. The forests surrounding the road also became denser and darker as the afternoon dragged on, and finally, when the looming treetops and the cloudy skies made it too dark to keep pushing on, the boys decided to stop for the night.

"It looks like it's gonna rain," Sawamura commented as they began setting up their tents. "We haven't had any in a while."

"As we get closer to the coast, we might get it more and more frequently," Kozume mumbled, struggling to tighten the knot on a rope until Kuroo swung by and helped him out with a chuckle.

"Hopefully that won't mean stopping more and more frequently, either," Azumane complained tiredly, handing a strand of rope to Hinata, who had climbed a low tree and was tying some ropes into the branches for more stability.

"Yeah, forests are creepy! What if there are monsters here? Or even worse, bears!?" Hinata whined, tying his last piece of rope and then swinging down from the tree, drawing a squawk from Kageyama.

"Dumbass, you're too reckless! You'll hurt yourself again!" he insisted, grabbing Hinata by the hair to make his point.

"Ow, ow, stupid! Don't do that, I'm fine! My ankle got better a while ago!"

"Oi, keep it down, you two bird-brains," Tsukishima huffed, carrying some blankets into one of the two tents that was already set up. Yamaguchi shook his head at the two other first-years with a slightly amused smile and followed behind him to set up inside the tent.

"Yo, captain!" Nishinoya called out as he and Tanaka stretched the tarp over the tent so that
Sugawara could nail it down. "Ryuu and I are gonna go and gather some wood to make a fire. Hope we still have matches."

"We do. Take a flashlight and don't go further than where you can hear us," Sawamura instructed them, and they both left in a hurry as soon as their job was done.

"I'll take the first watch tonight," Keishin volunteered, seeing as everybody was already working hard. Sawamura nodded to him appreciatively.

"Thank you, it's kind of you to volunteer. I think nobody's gonna be up for night watch without at least a few hours of sleep beforehand," he chuckled quietly. "I'm gonna go see how everybody's doing. We should be done soon."

"Right. Good luck," Keishin nodded, watching him go and grab Kageyama and Hinata, who were bickering as they worked. He watched as their captain's firm but caring expression calmed them down and got them back into line, and he discussed something with them before leaving them to go talk to Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. The latter of the two only spoke briefly when asked, but the blond mostly spoke for both of them.

Having taken care of his kouhai, Sawamura then headed to Sugawara to help him nail the last edge of the tarp into the ground, and a fond smile split his face as he watched them laugh together at something the silver-haired teen had said. Everything sounded so familiar, though nothing was the same as back then. But if Keishin closed his eyes, it almost felt like nothing had changed at all.

By the time the entire camp was set up, Nishinoya and Tanaka returned with their arms full with branches of varying sizes and thickness. They carried them a bit further away from the tents and began building a fire pit, their fluid motions hinting that they'd done this before.

Honestly, Keishin couldn't even begin to imagine what they'd been through, for them to have changed so much.

But they were all laughing and having a good time working together to overcome this struggle, and again, Keishin got the strange feeling that perhaps they had not changed all that much, either.

Kuroo used one of their matches to light a fire on a piece of cloth that he threw into the pit, setting fire to a bunch of twigs. Getting to work immediately, Hinata and Kageyama fanned the small fire with some spare clothes until the rest of the branches caught fire, all the while competing to see which one of them could fan harder. Whilst the two of them made inane amounts of noise for people simply fanning a fire, Sugawara and Yamaguchi opened up cans of food and distributed them along with utensils to the guys who lined up for food.

"Suga, do we still have those pieces of rubber we cut from a rain boot back when we left Karasuno?" Sawamura asked, receiving the can of tomato soup that he and Keishin would be sharing, along with two spoons.

"If we kept them, they're going to be in Asahi's bag," the setter informed him, opening a can of potatoes for Kuroo and Kozume.

"Whoa!" Hinata exclaimed, turning his sparkling eyes away from the fire. "Does that mean we get to have warm food tonight!?"

"If we kept them, yeah," Sawamura chuckled at the spiker's enthusiasm, digging through the front pockets of Azumane's bag and pulling out a stack of thick rubber pieces that were of unequal shapes and sizes. "There we go. Looks like we're eating hot tonight."
"Yeah!" Nishinoya and Tanaka high-fived, huge grins splitting their faces in their excitement. "Suga, can we have the tomato sauce beans? Those are the best when they're warm!"

"Here you go, senpai," Yamaguchi calmly called out, handing the two over-excited players a can of what they asked for and watching them cheer with amused exasperation.

"Calm down, you two," Sawamura chuckled, handing them three pieces of rubber. "Now be careful with that. We're on a very tight ration, so you can't afford to waste anything."

"Promise," Tanaka nodded, he and Nishinoya rushing to sit by the fire.

Once the food was distributed to the groups of two, along with utensils, Sugawara handed out two knives to all of the groups that Sawamura had handed three pieces of rubber to, and Keishin watched in quiet awe as the ones who'd received the utensils immediately got to work on warming their food.

Ripping the label off the cans first, one of the two took the knives and held them with a piece of rubber, holding the tips out over the fire. Then, the second one carefully balanced the can on the flat parts of the knives, and then sat back to wait excitedly.

"You'd better not drop it," Hinata huffed at Kageyama as the latter's tired hands made their can of beef stew shake.

"And you'd better not drop it when it's done," Kageyama huffed back, his arms surprisingly steady despite the shaking hands.

"Oi, Shouyo, can we have some of that when it's done?" Nishinoya asked excitedly, putting their can of beans on the knives that Tanaka held over the fire.

"Yeah!" Hinata nodded brightly. "Warm beans make my tummy feel all full, anyway."

"Should I hold them, Tsukki?" Yamaguchi asked quietly as the blond struggled to keep a grip on the knives with the thick pieces of rubber.

"It's fine, I got it," Tsukishima insisted, putting out the knives over the fire. "Just put it there."

"This is really ingenious," Kuroo admitted, watching the three groups do their work and waiting for his turn with Kozume. "I've never heard of anyone heating food this way."

"It's not generally something you'd do when you're out camping for fun," Azumane chuckled sheepishly. "Daichi came up with it."

"You're really outdoing yourself, Sawamura," Keishin commented, throwing an impressed glance at the captain, who only glanced back with an embarrassed blush. "Really." His voice dropped lower as the voice of the teens around them sparked to life, and Sawamura leaned in, sensing that this wasn't a public conversation anymore.

"I'm just looking out for them," Sawamura shrugged as if he wasn't the one practically leading these kids through all of their battles. "It's the least I can do."

"No. The least you could have done was nothing, and yet you rose up to the challenge and led all of your teammates through this tough time," Keishin insisted, his heart aching at the thought that this is what the old Sawamura would have done as well. "The burden you carry is that of 10 other people, and if that's not worth commending, then nothing is. And they still see you as their captain, their pillar and omnipresent support, and you're only as old as they are, so I think that's very admirable."
"No it's not," Sawamura grinned sheepishly, just like he used to do when Keishin discussed volleyball with him. "They're not just my teammates anymore, they're the only family I have left. They mean a lot to me, all of them, and if I can do anything to keep the fire burning inside of them to push them on, towards victory, then I will. That's always been my job as captain, and now, it's my job as leader of our band of survivors."

"Daichi," Keishin found himself saying, surprising himself when the name slipped out of his mouth. His throat locked up at the thought of the old Daichi, the old captain of the volleyball team, back before all of this happened, and yet the Daichi of the past smiled like the one in front of him, and had been driven by the same motivations as the one before him.

Maybe the captain wasn't a stranger after all. Perhaps... perhaps all that he had known about the teen was not dead and gone after all.

"Daichi... You're still much better than me at handling these guys," Keishin finally chuckled a bit self-deprecatingly. "You always were."

"Don't worry about it, coach. They're a handful," the teen grinned, turning his eyes towards the fire where Hinata was carefully pulling the can off the fire with the third piece of rubber to avoid burning himself, and then started loudly cheering when the bubbling hot stew was set on the ground in front of him and Kageyama.

"Daichi, here. Your turn," Nishinoya held out the knives and pieces of rubber to the captain, who leaned over and carefully took them.

"I'll hold the knives, you can put the can on them," Daichi suggested, and Keishin nodded, his lips twitching upwards just a little bit as he did what he was told to do.

"Senpai, here," Tsukishima indicated, carefully tossing his hot knives and pieces of rubber to Sugawara once Yamaguchi had pulled their can from the fire.

"Here, Kenma! Try it out," Hinata handed their utensils to the Nekoma duo, who silently mimicked what Karasuno had done.

Soon, all of them were sitting with their burning hot cans stuck in the ground, occasionally leaning over or getting up to go taste someone else's food. And as Keishin watched them laugh and talk and grin like they did not have a single care in the world, he began to realize that just like Daichi, perhaps the rest of them had not changed that much after all.

They chatted a little bit, voices filling the silence shepherded by the advancing darkness blanketing the forest, until the fire began to die down. At that point, with their bellies as full as they could be in these circumstances, they slowly began to call it a night.

"Hey, captain!" Nishinoya called, approaching him where he stood by Keishin once they began breaking apart. "I'll take the first watch."

"That's nice of you to offer, Noya. But the coach already took the first watch," Daichi shrugged sheepishly.

"Ah... then I'll take second watch," he volunteered. "It's cause Shouyo still looks kinda scared and I figured if he knew he had his senpai watching his back, he'd be less likely to have another breakdown."

"You're a model senpai, Yuu," Keishin patted his head, and when the libero's grin widened exponentially, he took a moment to realize that he'd called him by his name.
First Daichi and now Yuu. Their charisma, their kindness and their unchanging personalities seemed to grip Keishin's heart and reminded him that these kids had already left their mark on him a long time ago. And that he had thought it faded until one by one, the players began showing him otherwise.

"Nah, I'm just looking out for my kouhai. I'm still worried about Shouyo, so I'll keep an eye on him tonight."

"Coach Ukai can wake you when it's your turn to take over. I'll see who wants to take third watch. We're projecting walking seven to eight hours tomorrow, so we have to get as much rest as we can. Three shifts of two and a half would be fine. Nobody's gonna sleep for more than 8 hours anyway." Daichi calculated quickly.

"Alright, no problem!" Yuu nodded. "So I'll go set up in the small tent, and I'll sleep by the entrance so it's easy to wake me up when it's my turn."

"Thanks," Daichi nodded, and then turned to Keishin when Noya left. "I'm gonna go set up in the large tent. Could you go ask Suga if he'd be willing to take the third watch?"

"I'll do that right now," Keishin nodded, and clapped Daichi on the shoulder before heading off.

Whilst the group had split into two in order to set up their two tents, one smaller in size for the shortest members, and the other larger one for the rest, Keishin found Sugawara sitting on the ground a bit further away from the fire, facing Kuroo with a flashlight in his hand.

"Sugawara," he called, approaching curiously. "Can I ask you a favour?"

"Sure," the setter nodded, always as pleasant and good-natured as before. "Just let me finish checking his incision and I'm all yours."

"How's it look?" Kuroo asked, extending his neck to give Sugawara better access to the wound hiding under the white gauze.

"It's looking better. All infection has regressed, visually at least." He prodded the edges of the wound with his gloved hands. "I'll give you your antibiotics right now so it'll be done running by the time you finish setting up your spot in the large tent."

"Sweet. Thanks, Suga," Kuroo nodded. "Are you going to clean it?"

"Tomorrow morning, so I'll clean it and change the dressing right before your morning dose of antibiotics."

"Sounds good."

"You're so good at this, Sugawara," Keishin whistled in admiration. "You've picked up a lot since you began."

"I've had to." Sugawara shrugged with an indulgent smile playing on his lips. "These guys have a knack for getting themselves in trouble, and somebody's gotta clean up after them."

"That is such a Suga thing to do," Keishin chortled. "Seriously, you're always cleaning up behind them. Where would they be without you?"

"Not here, that's for sure," Suga snickered right back, Kuroo huffing at the subtle insinuation in his words.
"You're kind of like a mom, let's be honest," Kuroo muttered under his breath, and Keishin couldn't help but laugh. Because if there was one word he'd always thought of using but never dared to use to describe the silver-haired setter, it was 'mother'.

(In his defense, Suga's instinct was probably the most protective one of the whole bunch).

"Koushi," he found himself saying, the name slipping off his tongue unbidden, almost foreign, but delightful nonetheless. "Thank you for everything. You've done so much for this team. All of you have, but you've gone as far as to learn how to save lives for this team, and you've probably been the best support they could've asked for."

"I've always been best at supporting from the sidelines," Suga admitted, taping the gauze back on Kuroo's neck. "But I have no intention of falling behind and being useless to the team, even if I'm just incidental support."

"I know you don't," Keishin nodded approvingly. "It's not in your nature."

It had never been in his nature to sit by and do nothing.

"Anyway, Koushi, I wanted to ask you for a favour."

"Sure!" His eyes lit up at being addressed so intimately, and Keishin was taken aback yet again at how important it seemed to be for these kids to destroy every barrier of formality between them and become one united entity.

"Do you think you could take the third watch today, after Noya?"

"Of course. I'd much rather take the last watch anyway. I get to sleep longer," Suga laughed. "I'm set up in the small tent so Noya won't even have to disturb the majority to wake me up."

"Great. I'll go tell Daichi," Keishin nodded.

"Alright, good night!" Koushi and Kuroo waved him off as he headed off. Even though a cold breeze blew, ruffling the tarp over the tents and announcing rain, he kind of felt warm. Being proven wrong had never felt this good.

(And nothing would ever feel as good as being shown that the boys he knew and loved were still there. Scared, different, indefinitely changed, but still there).

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

It did end up raining, for the first time in days. None of them could say that they'd missed it, since other than the soothing pitter-patter of raindrops, the constant threat of their setup being burned to bits by the acid was still prevalent. However, their minds had become habituated to the constant dread that plagued their every waking (and sleeping) moment, and so they were able to drown out the rumbling of the sky and the crashing of the rain and somehow slip into an uneasy sleep.

Watch was kind of pointless, considering that nobody in their right mind would go out (or even survive) in this rain, but Keishin did it anyway, if only because the faces of the boys he knew so well looked so relaxed in their sleep, knowing that somebody was protecting them. Ever since he became Karasuno's volleyball coach, Keishin's one and only goal had been to support them through their battles, and if he thought about it, this was just one more struggle they had to get through.

Periodically, the older man would feel his eyelids droop and his shoulders sag, but he'd only indulge in the occasional yawn and keep an eye out for any improbable disturbance.
But as improbable as it was, it came. As if luck had ever been on their side in the first place.

The storm seemed to pick up minutely, the violent wind ruffling the tent noisily and making Keishin's heart skip a beat. Though they were shielded from much of the rain and the wind by the tall treetops above, they were still not isolated from the booming crash of thunder that followed, a lightning flash briefly illuminating the outside of the tent. And when the impressively loud noise died down, along with the ringing in Keishin's ears, he suddenly became aware of a new source of noise.

Screaming.

He could not lie and pretend that the screaming was not loud enough to be heard over the rain. However, it took him a moment to register that he wasn't hallucinating it, and that someone was actually screaming.

It was probably the sound of more voices coming from the other tent that finally hammered the point home. Someone was screaming, and Keishin had a pretty good idea of who it was.

"Hinata!"

"Coach, what do we do?" a voice that Keishin recognized as Yuu's broke through the crashing of the rain.

"What's happening?" he called right back, glad that the tents only had a few feet of distance between them. Then again, it meant that Hinata's screaming was loud enough to be heard in theirs, and slowly but surely, the others began to stir.

"He's just screaming and he won't respond," Koushi answered. "Kind of like it the alley-"

"He's having a flashback," a voice suddenly interrupted, and Keishin turned to see Kageyama sitting up, eyes sharp despite the tired look in them. "Suga, you have to hold him to pull him out. He doesn't know where he is right now!"

"Kenma has his arms around him but he's not doing anything. Noya, you give it a shot!"

A few seconds lapsed and there still was no change. As per the last time Hinata had become so hysteric, his voice was becoming raw, and his screaming was wavering into loud, heartbreaking wails, and with Kageyama's newly revealed information, it was even more horrible to imagine what the small teen was going through.

"He won't stop." This time, it was Yuu who called out, and Keishin figured that the four other boys in the small tent were taking turns trying to pull Hinata out of his waking nightmare.

"Talk to him, hold him, do something!" Kageyama protested again, Keishin momentarily surprised at the sudden display of fierce concern.

"He won't do anything else- oh my god, stop it, Shouyo!"

"What's happening?" Daichi called out in his usual firmly authoritative voice. "Suga, what's going on?"

"Shouyo is scratching his arms hard enough to cut himself, and we're trying to restrain him but he's still not out of it." Kozume took up the report position, and Keishin heard Daichi swear under his breath.

"Try to wrap his hands in blankets until he calms down," Kuroo suggested, frowning as well. "And
be careful, Kenma. If he's actually hallucinating, he may not even know it's you and might hurt you, too."

"I'll be careful," Kozume answered, and stopped when Suga's voice rose again.

"Daichi, what do we do?" he asked in a slightly more panicked tone. "He won't stop, there's nothing else we can do…"

"Knock him out," Tsukishima huffed from behind Keishin, and although he got a nasty glare from both Kageyama and Daichi for suggesting it, he had to admit that the blond's extreme plan would have to be put into action if they really couldn't find anything else to do.

They were lost in thought, all of them together, for one second. And in that second, Kageyama had scrambled to his knees and was crawling quickly towards the tent flap.

"What are you doing?" Daichi frowned, grabbing Kageyama's shirt. "You're not doing what I think you're doing, right?"

"He won't stop like this, and he could seriously hurt himself or the others," the black-haired boy frowned, flicking Daichi's hand off. "Let me go."

"If you hadn't noticed, it's raining buckets outside," Tsukishima raised his eyebrow. "If you're stupid enough to go out there and get burnt to ashes for that shrimpy's sake, then go at it."

"I'm gonna have to agree with Tsukki on this one," Kuroo nodded, drawing a 'don't call me that' from the blond, who huffed. "Stay here. We'll figure something out."

"No you won't," Kageyama clicked his tongue, and grabbed the tent flap.

"Kageyama, stop!" Keishin tried as well, making a move to grab him, but true to his nature, the setter was stubborn as a pack mule, and his desire to do only the best thing in every situation still had not changed.

It was actually slightly irritating how little Kageyama hesitated before throwing the flap open and jumping out, into the rain.

"Tobio!"

The voices from the other tent very quickly echoed the name in a horrified screech as Keishin guessed that the setter made it to the other side. And although his heart was about to leap out of his throat, he still listened carefully, as did the others in the tent with him, waiting in bated breath. And soon, Hinata's screaming lowered until it was inaudible behind the curtain of raindrops, and instead, Suga's quasi-hysteric voice arose.

"Noya, Kenma, blankets! We have to dry him off! Tobio, take your clothes off, I'm not kidding! Noya, get me a water bottle to rinse him off! This isn't funny, what the heck were you thinking?"

"Are you all okay?" Daichi frowned, biting his lip.

"Well… Hinata is not screaming anymore," Kenma's voice floated over to them, as if it was the biggest concern, but Keishin supposed that it was progress.

"This suicidal idiot is going to burn where he's sitting and he's gonna burn Shouyo too if he doesn't take his wet clothes off right now!" Suga screeched, and despite the gravity of the situation, Keishin couldn't help but find Suga's motherly concern endearing.
"Tobio, listen to him and take your contaminated clothes off," Keishin called through the numerous barriers separating them.

"He won't let go of Shouyo long enough to do that," Suga reported with a frustrated groan. "Tadashi, pass me the cloth scissors. Noya, rinse him off as soon as his shirt is off."

The scene must've been semi-comical at least, and Keishin imagined the teens rushing to try and get the stubborn setter undressed in time to avoid severe chemical burns all over his body. His imagination went past that, though, and he suddenly had the image of Tobio squeezing Hinata in his arms, murmuring in his ear like he was doing in the alley, and the small spiker trembling and crying, whimpering apologies as he snapped out of whatever nightmare he was seeing in his mind's eye. It was probably what was happening, and why Tobio seemed to be loathe to let him go, even long enough to save himself.

"You're all red now, look at you!" Suga's scolding tone broke through his mental images once again. "You'd better hope this doesn't get worse!"

Someone must've said something to him after that, because he let out an audibly loud huff of frustration, one that Daichi, Azumane and Tanaka could not help but laugh at. As if this was the Suga that none of them but they knew.

"Of course he didn't react to the water. He only reacts to things that don't matter, so that part of him hasn't changed since the high school days."

A lot of things had changed, but Suga was right. A lot of things also had not changed about these kids. Instead of becoming totally different people, they'd adapted to their circumstances whilst keeping the essentials parts of them alive, and Keishin was regretful not to have seen that before.

"Are they both okay now?" he called out, still trying to be serious despite the humorous way the situation had turned out.

"Yeah, yeah. We're drying him off, and Shouyo is kinda out of it, so if they stay together for tonight, things should be fine," Yuu ended up reporting. "It's under control... for now. We should go back to sleep."

"After all of that, sure," Tsukishima huffed and laid back down, apparently satisfied with the resolution of the event despite not showing it.

"Alright everyone, back to bed," Daichi called out, laying down himself, soon mimicked by the other boys in the tent.

"Hey, Coach," Noya called out again one last time. "It's almost my turn for watch, so just go ahead and go to sleep. I'll take it from here."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely." Keishin could imagine Noya grinning wide like he always did. A soft smile touched his lips at the thought of his bright expression, tired beyond his years but still so alive.

"Alright then, I'll leave it to you," he conceded, lying down.

"Got it! Good night, everyone."

"Good night," the voices from both tents answered one another, and fell into silence. Soon, Keishin could only hear the shifting of the boys in his own tent, the rain masking the sound of whatever was
happening on the other side, and he somehow felt at ease enough to let his eyes close and let Morpheus drag him off.

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In the morning, when Suga made the wake-up call by popping his head into their tent, the first thing Keishin did was get out and go check on Hinata. He was still asleep, pressed securely against Tobio's chest, and the setter only noticed him staring when he stared just a bit too long.

"What?" the dark-haired teen grumbled, a faint blush touching his already-red cheeks. His entire body had a reddened tint to it, like a bad sunburn, but Keishin was glad to see that he didn't have any visible burns on him per se.

"Nothing. I'm just glad you're both okay," Keishin shrugged, deciding not to mention how tenderly the teen was holding the other one in his sleep. "You're good at this, to have figured out what was happening to him."

"Not really." Tobio averted his eyes. "He whispered it to me the first time he had a flashback, back in that alley. He told me that he's reliving the moment he shot the doctor and he can't seem to get out of it on his own."

"Damn it..." Keishin clicked his tongue, suddenly aware of the gravity of the situation. "I... I guess I'll talk to him when he wakes up. Just to try and figure things out. It won't do for him to be terrified every second of the day, and as supportive as we are, this is also disrupting our routines. We'll try and get to the bottom of this as soon as possible."

"Sounds good," Tobio nodded, and then shut his eyes again. "I'll get up now. He'll wake up when I let him go."

"I'll leave you to it," Keishin nodded, suddenly feeling a bit awkward at being the witness of such intimacy. He wasn't sure what the relationship between the two teenagers was, but just by being around them, he could tell that it was something deep and personal.

Indeed, when Tobio began pulling away, Hinata made a small noise in his sleep, and that was all Keishin needed to hightail it out of the tent.

He joined Daichi in his work to tear down the second tent, briefly glancing at Suga, who was giving Kuroo his morning antibiotics. That evening would be his last dose, and hopefully after that, he'd be okay.

"Morning," he greeted vaguely to everybody that was already up and bustling, and then ducked into his tent to see the progress that had been made so far.

"Oh, coach," Daichi greeted him from where he was rolling his sleeping bag. "Great timing. Could you start tearing down the tent? We're moving out very soon."

"Where to today?" Keishin asked casually, exiting to start pulling the nails from the rain-softened ground to undo the ropes holding the tent up.

"We just keep walking. If all goes well, we should set up camp tonight only a few kilometres away from the nearest village," Daichi reported.

"And how are we doing, supplies-wise?" he asked, working on the ropes tied to the tree branches.

"Still on schedule, for now," Daichi answered. "But we're very tightly scheduled for meals and for
water breaks, so we can't afford to fall back."

"Everyone seems to be in good shape, relatively, so we should have no problems staying on track," the coach mused out loud, nodding at Tanaka when the second-year came over to help him tear down.

"I can only hope that's the case," the captain mumbled from within the tent, so low that Keishin believed for a moment that it wasn't meant for his ears. But then, he looked around him at the teens sitting around or sleepily packing up, or looking haggard and tired and just ready to lie down and die, and he realized that Daichi made a morbid, but valid point.

Silence had been a companion of theirs throughout their adventure, from the beginning onwards, but it was even more disturbing to be walking through a completely silent forest. Not a single bird chirped, not a single animal ran through the bushes, not a single living being seemed to exist in this world alongside them. The deeper they went into the forest, the thicker the trees became and the steeper the slope of the mountainside became. Soon enough, too soon, the teens were out of breath, worn out from their sleepless nights and empty tummies and broken spirit, and Daichi called for a break.

"That sky's not looking too good." Kuroo remarked as they sat down on the road winding through the mountain, catching a breather. "I think it's going to rain again."

"Damn it," Keishin clicked his tongue. "How are we doing on progress?"

"We've walked six kilometres so far, so I suppose we're keeping up. We could do a bit better, though, especially if our goal today is 7 hours, and so fifteen more kilometres," Kozume calculated in his head.

"It's so far," Hinata whined softly. "I wish we could fly."

"Don't wish for the impossible, stupid," Tobio clicked his tongue, earning him a dirty glare from his orange-haired companion.

"Should we set up to outwait the rain, or should we keep going?" Noya asked, looking unsure.

"I suppose we could keep going a little bit more, see if it actually begins to rain or not," Suga mused out loud, and yelped when suddenly, there was a rumbling noise that rolled across the skies, as if chastising him for taking things at face value. "Or not."

Instinctively, Keishin's eyes went to where Hinata was, and he glanced away immediately when he saw Tobio extend his hand and grab his companion's, as if to ground him down to reality.

"Okay, quickly, let's set up," Daichi sighed, rubbing his forehead wearily. "And let's hope this rain won't last long."

He jinxed it. Or maybe they were cursed to begin with.

It rained for four hours and a half, according to Daichi's watch, four hours in which the boys huddled under the big tent and tried to play cards in the tight space or talked in low, hushed voices, as if afraid that if the heavens heard them, they'd try and strike them down as the last survivors.

Finally, when the rain let up, they were set back almost a whole day's worth of walking, and after quickly packing up, they tried to push on.
However, exhaustion and hunger got to them too quickly, and three hours later, they were too tired to keep shuffling forward. And so, the tents came out, and after a quick and meagre dinner, they all split into their respective tents to call it an early night.

(This time, Tobio very inconspicuously switched places with Suga in order to sleep in the small tent).

It rained through the night. And when Keishin woke up to more rain the next morning, a part of his heart, which he'd been trying to ignore so far, finally began succumbing to despair.

That day wasn't clement to them, either. The rain was intermittent, coming and going to its own leisure and forcing the boys to stop way too many times and for way too long. Noya and Tanaka voiced concern when their backpacks began feeling a bit dangerously light, but Daichi, despite his stricken expression, promised them that they'd make it.

They doubted it.

"Let's keep going," Suga had smiled at them when Daichi had gotten some lead, away from earshot, his smile wavering with the effort it took for him to keep it up. "If the captain says that we'll be alright, then we will be."

Keishin admired the way their shoulders straightened and their steps became more self-assured at the encouragement, but still could not help but mourn the lethargy in their eyes. Later on, they tightened the rations for lunch, one can per three people, and if they kept walking after getting so little energy, it was probably because they were feeding their spirits to their bodies at this point.

Keishin watched, completely helpless, as he found his boys again, only to watch the light behind their eyes dim with every painstaking step they took forward.

It rained. It stopped. It rained. It stopped. Somewhere along the line, the boys only ended up making four hours of progress. Which didn't seem that bad, until Kozume informed them, over dinner consisting of the very last cans they had left, that they'd been walking too slowly to be able to cover the mountain area in 14 hours, as previously planned.

Breaking hearts and rumbling stomachs accompanied the sound of the rain falling upon them like a blight punishing them for being alive that night.

The next morning, day three in the inhospitable mountain range, everybody made a point not to mention how they set out immediately after packing and taking a few gulps of water. The remaining protein powder was mixed into the few water bottles they had left, and with that, all of their supplies were depleted.

To their credit, the boys really did try to make it look like they weren't affected by the weakness of their limbs and the nausea perpetually stuck in their throats.

As if mocking them, it did not rain in the morning, and so the boys ended up taking a no-lunch lunch break at noon despite the weather not forcing them to stop. They didn't have much to do but to rest their legs and have a drink of water, but it was well-needed, considering their rapidly falling energy levels.

Keishin took the opportunity to go talk to Hinata, who looked like he was fidgeting and aching to ask something to Daichi, the latter lying down on the asphalt with his eyes closed for a breather.

"Hey, Hinata," he called, approaching him slowly. "Mind if I talk to you for a bit?"
"Nope," the energetic teen shook his head, walking up to meet him. "What did you need?"

"I wanted to ask you about your, uhh..." he wasn't sure how to put it. "Your flashbacks, I guess."

"Ah." Hinata's face took a pinched look. "Yeah, I thought so. I'm sorry about them..."

"No, no, don't be sorry," Keishin quickly corrected, wincing. "It's not your fault you're having them."

"I'm sorry about them being so disruptive, then," Hinata sighed, walking with him as they strayed from the group a bit, just to give themselves some privacy.

"You can't control them, either. It's okay," Keishin assured him. "But we don't want this to happen to you, especially since it's hurting you so much so... Would you like to... talk about it?"

"Really?" the spiker asked, frowning a bit incredulously at his coach, who'd never been the gentle kind, although he had his own brand of caring. "Well, I mean... there's not much to say... It's like this feeling in the back of my mind that's always there. When I think about what I did, my brain does this funny tingling thing, but that's about it. I don't really feel anything."

"But then, what triggers the flashbacks?" Keishin frowned as well, not understanding.

"I think..." Hinata bit his lip. "I think it's loud, sudden noises. I don't really remember it, but Bakayama told me I had my first flashback after a gunshot, and my second one after a crash of thunder. I think it reminds me of... of the moment I shot the doctor, and... I-I dunno."

"It's okay," Ukai comforted him with a hand on his shoulder. "Take your time. It's fine. You were traumatized by your experience, so it's okay to be uneasy."

"I'm not a glass figurine, you know," the teen huffed. "I just... I just feel like I'm not supposed to be doing this. This whole 'flashback' thing. Especially since I've got so many friends who care for me and are protecting me. Bakayama promised that as long as we're together, then we're invincible, and I told him that as long as we kept our family alive, we'd be safe. So I don't know. I feel like I lied to him and to everyone else and to myself, and it feels wrong to be having these flashbacks because of it."

"You're not wrong. You're just trying to cope with what happened to you, alright?"

"But that's the thing. Nothing happened to me. I brought this upon myself. I chose to pick up that gun, I chose to kill that guy. At the time, it seemed like the only action left to take, so I did it, but now I'm... I'm not so sure..." Hinata chewed on his lip continuously, wringing his hands. "I see him sometimes. In my dreams, I mean. Sometimes he'll come back to life and kill me instead. Other times, I'll shoot, only to see that I've shot a friend instead. And whatever happens, when I wake up, I always feel like there's a gun pointed at my head, too. Sometimes, it's scary, but sometimes, it's just really really peaceful as well." He looked up worriedly. "Does that make sense? Or am I just crazy?"

"You're not crazy," Keishin assured him, sad to see him so concerned, so innocent and yet so scared at the same time. And yet, he never gave up. Despite the circumstances being bleak, he pushed on and he fought for victory without looking back, and lived in the present with everything he had left. "Shouyo... You're amazing."

"I'm not," the teen cracked a self-deprecating smile. "Nothing happened to me, and I'm still scared like some big baby or something."

"It's not every day that you kill somebody, especially not somebody who was going to kill your
friends and you if you let him go,” Keishin reminded him a bit sarcastically. "It's not easy to deal with blood on yours hands. Look at Yamaguchi. He killed someone, and you know better than me how much that changed him. So won't you acknowledge that the same happened to you?"

"But it's different. He wasn't screaming and crying the entire time..." Shouyo muttered, embarrassed.

"Everybody copes in different ways, do you understand what I'm saying?" Keishin took a chance and put both of his hands on Hinata's shoulders to get his full attention. "You have to believe me, Shouyo. Your guilt, your fear, your anger, whatever it is that you're feeling, they're all valid. And that's why you have to talk to someone about what happened, because the only way you'll avoid these flashbacks is by acknowledging that there is a problem, and by facing it. And you won't be alone throughout it. If you need anybody's help at all, you just have to ask."

"I talk to Bakayama," Shouyo muttered, looking even more embarrassed. "He says dumb things but it helps. I don't know how he does it, but when I'm having a flashback, or when I can feel one crawling up on me, he's the one who's always pulling me back."

"Good. That's... good," Keishin replied, now getting second-hand embarrassment, and let go of Shouyo to step back. "Just... keep fighting and don't give up no matter what. The Hinata Shouyo I know is invincible, after all."

"I'll do my best," Shouyo laughed, and although he did not even sound like a ghost of his past self, it still warmed Keishin's heart that he had the energy to smile. "Are we, uhh... done, though?"

"Sure. As long as you're okay," Keishin nodded, sticking his hands in his pocket, and wondering if he could ask for a smoke from Kuroo. If he had any left, of course. It would probably help him calm his nerves after this strangely heart-to-heart conversation.

"Okay. I'm gonna get that dumbass over there and go have a stroll in the forest. I wanna explore a bit, while we're still here," Shouyo motioned to Tobio, who was sitting against a tree by the roadside, arms crossed.

"Don't go too far and be back in time to set out," Keishin reminded him, and walked back to the group with him.

"Of course," Shouyo nodded, and then jogged to his friend, leaving Keishin alone to return to the main group.

"What were you guys doing?" Suga asked pleasantly as he returned. "Shouyo seems to be in a good mood."

"I talked to him about his flashbacks. Got a better idea of what's going on," he shrugged, purposefully leaving his words vague. "Hey, Kuroo, got a smoke? I'm getting a stress headache," he asked, turning to the other captain who was sitting with them.

"Yeah. Here. One of the last ones," he cicked his tongue, extending a crumpled packet from his pocket towards the coach, who took one, and lit it. Kuroo followed him, borrowing his light to start his own cigarette, and then jokingly extended the packet and lighter towards the rest of the group. "So. Anybody else wanna join the cancer club?"

"Kuro, stop that," Kozume muttered, scrunching his nose at the smell that wafted from his lit smoke. "Yeah, man, that's kinda gross," Tanaka pouted. "You're gonna give us second-hand cancer, too!"

"It'll be better than dying out here, anyway," Kuroo shrugged amusedly, puffing out some smoke.
"More like it'd be anticlimactic as hell," Tsukishima muttered, looking taken aback when everybody around him laughed.

"Alright, alright, Mr Smartass. I get the point," Kuroo rolled his eyes. "Nobody for smokes? Going once, going twice?"

They all rolled their eyes exasperatedly at him, smiles playing on their lips. Smiles that promptly fell when there was a suddenly shuffling noise by Suga's side, drawing everybody's attention.

Daichi rose into a sitting position, not even hesitating, nor looking at anybody as he picked a cigarette out of the carton, and stuck it in his mouth before lighting it and handing the lighter back to a dumbfounded-looking Kuroo.

He then laid back down and turned on his side, away from the incredulous looks being thrown at him, and even the coughing that followed his first few inhales could not bring them to laugh.

Kuroo silently put the smokes and lighter away, looking just a little bit guilty as he did so, and an uncomfortable silence blanketed them all, none of them knowing what to say.

And if Daichi realized that all eyes were on him in various shades of concern, then he did not react, and only moved to get up once his cigarette was smoked down to the filter.

They set out once Karasuno's freaky setter-spiker duo returned from their walk, most of them silent and contemplative as they picked up their bags and began to walk down the winding mountain road again.

"There was a deer!" Shouyo was filling up the silence by excitedly talking to Yamaguchi, who was only nodding to him once in a while. "I mean, it was dead, and like, half eaten, but it was pretty cool."

"Don't say stupid things," Tobio huffed irritably. "At least it wasn't decaying or anything just yet, or that would've been a hundred times more gross."

"I wonder if there are other deers around here, still," Shouyo mused out loud, poor Yamaguchi tolerating him in silence. "Maybe we should go hunting!"

"Yeah, I'll throw you at the deers and hope you knock them out!"

"Stupid, I'm too heavy to be thrown."

"I'm pretty sure you're light enough, considering your head's so empty."

"Stupid idiot!" Shouyo huffed, although there was a grin on his face.

"Shut up, you two," Tsukishima groaned by Yamaguchi's side. "You're wasting your energy yelling like that."

"You wanna fight?" Shouyo glared at him. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Sure. Get up here and fight me," Tsukishima smirked mockingly at him. "Oh wait, you can't because you're so small."

"I'll jump and punch you in the face," the spiker threatened without any real venom to his words.

"Yeah right. The only thing you can do even remotely right is spike freaky impossible balls. Don't kid yourself."
"I'll spike your face, then!"

"Kei, stop aggravating him," Keishin rolled his eyes, partly having missed the blond's sarcastic nature, and partly not having missed it at all.

"Uh..." Kei frowned at the sound of his name, and then turned his face away. "Whatever. Not worth my time anyway." Next to him, Yamaguchi chuckled under his breath and jogged to catch up with his best friend when he took a few steps away from the setter-spiker duo glaring at him.

The small conversation died down very quickly, but the reminder that they still had fire inside their veins was enough to push them forward, until another loud rumble of thunder forced them to set up shelter from the rain yet again. The rain lasted 3 hours this time, but afterwards, the boys walked for the entire afternoon and covered a satisfactory amount of distance before being forced to set up for the night.

They all slept, lulled by the rain, and the loud physiological reminder that it had already been 24 hours since they'd last eaten anything.

The human body was tenacious, and they knew it. The human mind... not so much.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

It was hard to wake up the next morning, physically challenging to push the sleeping bags off of themselves and find the strength in their lethargic limbs to pack up. They set out without many words, hoping, praying that somehow, some way, they'd make it out of the woods soon (quite literally).

Everybody seemed worse for wear. Back in the old days, it probably wouldn't have affected them so much to skip on so many meals, but they were already malnourished and weakened, and buried under stress and fear and tons of strenuous exercise a day, and so it wasn't a surprise when the entire party gladly stopped to set up camp a mere hour after setting out.

The thunderstorm that followed shook their tent violently, at several moments convincing them that this was the moment when the tarp would break, the ropes would give in, or they would somehow be compromised and end up burning alive under the rain. But it didn't. Shouyo whimpered at a particularly loud crash of thunder, but Tobio had his hand on top of his in a second, and there was silence for the rest of the storm.

They almost did not feel like setting out again afterwards. Maybe it would be better if they just laid there until they died.

However, to their surprise, and yet not to their surprise at all, Daichi was the first one to weakly, exhaustedly suggest they start moving again, and somehow, if Daichi was the one pushing them forward, it became a lot easier to keep going. It always had been.

Daichi opened the march, with the others following a few steps in the back, and Keishin bringing up the rear, and he couldn't help but feel a clench in his chest as he watched Daichi's back walk further and further away from him. The captain of the team was a leader like no other, a leader that he would never be for these kids. And although he might've been a bit jealous, he was mostly just relieved that the boys, these mere children, had found solace and safety in someone as strong and invincible as Daichi.

It was half past noon. The skies were grey. The trees towered above their hunched, shuffling figures.

Daichi took one step, two steps, three, and then collapsed.
All eyes turned to the tent flap when it opened, Suga walking in with a desperate sadness reflected in his bloodshot eyes. He silently sat down where Noya scooted over to give him space, and took a deep breath before answering the silent question.

"He's resting," he sighed sadly. "He woke up and tried to insist he was fine, but he's really not."

"What happened?" Azumane asked worriedly, biting his fingernails. "He just dropped so suddenly..."

"He's just exhausted," Suga shook his head. "With the extra stress of trying to be an impeccable leader, on top of the circumstances... He's under a lot of pressure and he finally just gave in."

"We never should have let it get this bad," Yuu muttered guiltily, hugging his legs to his chest.

"We didn't know. None of us are at fault here," Tanaka bit his lip, putting a hand on his best friend's shoulder. "But our captain is strong. He'll make it in no time."

"I hope he does..." Suga hung his head and buried his face in his hands. "He needs peace and quiet right now, and plenty of rest, but that's hard to do out here... Never mind that he needs to eat something or he'll get even worse... And hell, even now, he's still stressed about his responsibilities."

He sniffled. "I wish this didn't happen to him. I wish we could do something. God, it feels like we're stuck and there's nothing we can do to break the momentum of our unlucky fate."

They all stayed silent to give him a moment, all painfully aware that his voice was choked although there were no tears in his eyes. He, too, was strong, and Keishin was momentarily overcome with the gripping fear of losing Koushi to the incredible stress he was under, especially with Daichi out of commission.

"Senpai," a new voice finally piped in, one that the group still had not gotten used to. All eyes turned to Yamaguchi, who shifted to sit on his knees. "You're tired, too. Go and take a rest with our captain. I'll take care of him until then. I'll see what IV solutions we have left too, and I'll infuse dextrose if we have any, at least to get his blood sugar levels up a bit."

"You'd... You'd do that?" Suga asked, eyes brimming with gratitude and hopelessness. "Thank you..."

"Tadashi... You really are a light in the dark," Keishin praised him honestly, astounded at how far he'd come in leaps and bounds. He may as well have been the strongest of them all. And the way he just kept learning and fighting and never gave up was incredible, and strangely reminiscent of the old spark the young player had in him back in the day, before this world tore him to shreds.

"Our kouhai is so cool!" Noya and Tanaka exclaimed at the same time, all but throwing themselves at Tadashi, who simply leaned sideaways into Kei's side to avoid them before sitting upright again.

"Well, I've always been good at bailing you guys out of pinches," he smiled softly, as if telling a joke, and Keishin took a moment to appreciate his sense of humour as well. However, by then, he was already hobbling towards Suga, ushering his senpai towards the tent flap.

"Let's stay here for a while until we know what to do," Suga suggested weakly as he was pushed out, shooting them all a semi-solid grin before Tadashi accompanied him out towards the smaller tent.

This left the rest of them in the large tent, sitting and having nothing to do but stew in their thoughts.
Everyone stuck to their own musings, all burdened enough on their own already. Nobody dared to say a single thing to disrupt the silence.

"Tobio..." Shouyo finally squeaked out, almost inaudible. "Are we going to die here...?"

The setter never replied. But the next time Keishin's gaze landed on their hands, he found their fingers entwined.

"Fuck." Unsurprisingly, the less-than-polite speech came from Kuroo, the other captain running a hand through his hair unexpectedly, as if coming to terms with his thoughts. "I can't just sit here and do nothing. I'm gonna go out."

"What for?" Keishin frowned. "The skies are still grey, so you never know when it'll rain. Save your energy, too."

"No. I'm gonna go out and try something," the black-haired captain clicked his tongue, the familiar spark of intelligence in his eyes revealing that he was deep in thought about something. Knowing his naturally scheming attitude, Keishin had no doubt that he was thinking about something to fix the situation. "Kenma, come with me. And..." he looked at the guys around him before his eyes landed on Azumane. The gentle giant shrunk under the piercing gaze, trying to disappear, but did not succeed. "And you. Asahi." His eyes went to the side, to Tanaka. "And Baldy over there. Come with me."

"Where are we headed?" Tanaka asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion. "There's nowhere to go. And why us?"

"I think I'd got an idea, but I want to try it out before explaining it," Kuroo spoke as if discussing the weather, and then began to crawl towards the tent flap, grabbing his backpack on the way. "But come with me. I'll explain a bit outside."

"What about the rest of us?" Yuu asked, frowning.

"Stay here. Hold down the fort while we're gone," Kuroo recommended.

"Don't go far, Kuroo," Keishin frowned as well, knowing how independent (and dangerously so) the scheming captain could get with his plans. "Stay nearby and run back here at the first sign of rain."

"Can do," the black-haired boy grinned reassuringly, but somehow, Keishin didn't trust him.

(It was a bit hard to trust Kuroo after everything that had happened in Shoukyo).

"I'm serious."

"Don't worry," Kuroo rolled his eyes, holding the flap open to let Azumane, Kozume and Tanaka exit. "We'll be back before you know it."

And Keishin dared to believe him.

And then, he dared to feel disappointed when, thirty minutes later, when the rain began, the party of four did not return.

At first, he tried to convince himself that he was hearing things. No way could the quiet dripping overhead be that of rain. It just didn't work that way, since Kuroo and his group weren't back yet. It couldn't rain. It couldn't be raining yet. Kuroo had promised.
But more than the disappointment and the slight feeling of betrayal, as the rain began in earnest, softly pitter-pattering outside on the tarp of their tent, he could only bring himself to feel scared of losing the boys he worked so hard to protect. Again. Again and again and again. It felt like he existed in a world of terror and nothing else.

"They're not back yet," Yuu whispered, mostly to himself. However, with the funeral silence reigning within the large tent amongst the few of them left, they all heard it.

"Maybe they found shelter and are outwaiting the rain," Shouyo hazarded a guess, making it sounds more like a question than anything else.

"We're in the middle of a forest. What shelter can there be?" Noya asked worriedly, probably not intending on freaking them out even more, but definitely achieving that result.

"Drop it, Yuu. They probably found a thick tree or something," Keishin mumbled, trying to ignore how the rest of them averted their eyes. As if they could smell the doubt in his words. The older man figured he should have been stronger for the sake of these kids, but he was human, too, and it had become too hard for him as well to keep up pretenses.

"We'll ask them when the rain stops and they come back," Shouyo tried to smile reassuringly at them all, but it ended up fading into a sad sort of expression.

They all nodded, and fell silent again, not willing to vocalize what they all had begun to believe. They seemed to be doing that a lot nowadays. As if there was nothing left for them to do but sit and wait for death to come, one way or another.

The rain stopped after an hour or so, which gave Tadashi the opportunity to switch tents and give report to the ones in the big tent about the ones in the smaller tent.

"They both slept a bit," he shrugged. "I got the captain on an IV to at least give him a bit of sugar to help, but he's definitely not gonna last long without proper food, water, and sleep. Suga-senpai is under a lot of stress as well, but since he hasn't collapsed yet, I told him to take it easy and rest as well."

"Thank you for reporting, Tadashi," Keishin nodded to him. "You've become so dependable."

"Like he wasn't dependable before," Kei raised a brow at his coach. "He's actually kind of cool now. About time, anyway."

Tadashi just rolled his eyes and smacked his arm lightly.

Keishin watched the back-and-forth between the two best friends for a few seconds, for a brief respite from the gloom of death hovering overhead, before the tent flap opened again, letting Suga duck in. He looked as haggard as ever, and despite Tadashi claiming that he'd slept a bit, looked even worse than before.

"Hey," he greeted, tiredly sitting down next to Noya, who looked at him just as worriedly as everyone else. "What's going on around here?"

"Nothing much," Yuu answered. "We're just... chilling..."

"Where are the others?" the setter asked, frowning.

"They went out," Keishin replied to him, feeling his heart clench. He hoped that Suga wouldn't push it, but true to his nature, he did. Probably because he saw the faces around him fall at the mention of
"Oh? When are they coming back? Daichi's slowly getting back on his feet, so we should keep moving."

"We don't know," Shouyo answered the question himself, hanging his head. "They... they left before the rain and still haven't come back."

"Before the rain?" Suga frowned, but then, Keishin watched the realization sink into the premature lines on his gaunt face, and his eyes widened in horror. "They went out in the rain and haven't come back!"

"Yeah." Keishin bit his lip. "But don't worry. I'm sure they're fine."

"Fine?" Suga looked at him incredulously. "How can they be fine!? There's no shelter out here, and if they got caught under the rain... oh god."

Suga seemed to be reacting for them all, as if they'd been the ones in denial, and he was the one who knew the truth. He took a sharp breath and clamped a hand over his mouth. From the sheet-white quality of the faces of everyone in the circle, Keishin could tell that they were all imagining something similar in their mind's eye, and something horrifying at that, too. And Keishin didn't need to be a mind reader to know what they were thinking.

"You have to trust them, Suga. Trust them to come back," Keishin weakly encouraged him, barely even believing himself.

"They're not coming back," he shook his head. "It rained for a whole hour. They're out there somewhere, either severely burned and in pain and waiting to die, or they're dead already. They're not coming back." He bit his lip. "God... we never should have come here..."

"Don't say that!" Yuu protested loudly, but then a sob caught in his voice and his lower lip wobbled. "Don't... don't say that... Ryuu wouldn't just die like that... Asahi, too... And they've got the Nekoma guys with them... there's no way..."

"Damn it." Kei clicked his tongue, looking away pointedly and gritting his teeth. "Damn it. This can't be it."

"Our senpai wouldn't just die like that!" Shouyo protested loudly, tears welling up in his eyes at the mere thought. "They... they can't... They're our senpai...And Kenma, too..."

"Not after coming so far," Tobio whispered under his breath. "Not after surviving so many things. They can't just... give up here..."

"Hey, all of you!" Keishin stopped their morbid train of thought right in its tracks, getting their full attention. "Look at you. You're the ones giving up too quickly."

"We're not giving up," Suga tiredly protested. "We're being realistic. Being optimistic isn't a luxury we have."

"Just do it for them," Keishin encouraged them all with a sad smile. "Give them a chance. You're a team, you know? And you've never thrown in the towel before, never, no matter what challenge you faced. So it's time to reflect that. Just believe that they'll come back, and they will."

"You... you kinda sounded like Daichi, there," Suga commented, not indicating whether or not he believed Keishin. "But we're paralyzed here until Daichi can walk again. So whatever happens,
we're not moving anyway." He shrugged, looking like the life had completely left him already. "I'm gonna... go check on him."

Wordlessly, he got up, and left the tent under their gazes, and when he was gone, Shouyo turned into Tobio's side and began to cry, softly, silently, mournfully. Yuu pulled his legs to his chest and then hid his face against his knees, his frame shaking so silently that Keishin could not tell if he was crying or not. On his end, Kei stiffly grabbed his backpack and retreated to a corner of the tent, setting his head down on his bag like a pillow and then curling up over himself, completely silent. Tadashi just shook his head and silently left the tent, probably to go check on the other tent. However, he came back just as quickly as he left, as if having changed his mind, and retreated near Kei to lie down as well.

The silence was suffocating to Keishin. But at the sight of his boys, his precious, wonderful boys, so broken and so hopeless, he couldn't help but feel like his one and only duty was there, in that tent, by their side to the end.

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It did not rain again that day, as if the sky was letting them grieve their loss just this once. The news had taken their toll on their morale, however, and none of them could move to pack up, let alone set out again. Daichi had not been informed at first, Suga being too concerned about his mental stability when he was so vulnerable to handle the shocking news of not one, but four casualties in their group. However, as Suga had begun discussing the possibility of a roadside memorial for the friends they'd lost with Yuu (who was now the temporary second in command after Suga, the poor boy), Daichi had unintentionally eavesdropped, and had demanded the full story.

When it finally sunk in, he sunk to his knees, and threw up.

Keishin could only watch as all of them broke right before his eyes, the pieces of their shattered willpower slipping out of his hands before he could even attempt to grasp on and pull it back.

He couldn't do this. The whole 'position of authority' thing. Daichi had been so incredible to have upheld it so far, and from the amount of pressure he'd needed to bear, it was surprising that he'd only collapsed now. But Keishin didn't know how to lead these mere children into an unending battle against the whims of life itself. He wasn't made to be a leader, just an adviser. He couldn't do a single thing without Daichi, or Kuroo, both of whom had enough charisma to lead a hundred thousand men into battle.

And he couldn't even save a dozen children.

But Kuroo was dead and Daichi was broken, and despite Suga's good intentions, the setter was not able to single-handedly fill the huge gap left by those two. They were doomed, and Keishin could do nothing to help them now.

It was unofficially decided that they'd be making no more progress that day, and without anybody even calling a curfew, after dark fell, they all slowly went to sleep. Seeing as it still hadn't rained, ever since the other team had gotten caught under it, Keishin silently volunteered to take watch through the night and sat outside the tents, laying on the road and watching the stars in the clear sky above.

It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps the heavens were playing a game, a game of trying to kill them off, and had finally stopped playing after they'd won. Either way, the sky was cloudless and whatever part of the horizon he could see above the tall treetops was clear, and so Keishin figured it would be safe to assume that no more rain would plague them for a while.
He walked around their small camp a bit, listening for any noises coming from within the tents, but the silence of the teens was like the silence of the dead, and so he soon found himself returning to his spot on the road and laying back down to stargaze.

He craved a cigarette, but Kuroo had gone off and died with them in his pocket.

It was something as stupid as that that finally sent him over the edge. He didn't know why, how he could get upset over something so insignificant, but suddenly, the 0.001 was added to his 99.999, and he finally felt the despair of acceptance flow into him.

Asahi, Ryuunosuke, Tetsuro and Kenma would not be coming back. They would stay out there for their bodies to rot into the ground, and would become four more digits to the statistics that ended up in history books years from then. Eight people in the world would know them for the brave, selfless, witty, smart, good-natured teenagers they were up until the very end. The rest would forget them, or would never know their struggles, their hopes, their dreams, their goals, and their tears, be it happy or sad.

He did not cry for them. He had no right. But as he gazed up at the stars peppering the night sky, he could not help but whisper their names, over and over again, as if it was the only thing he had left to remind him of them.

Keishin was woken up a bit roughly, shaken by the shoulders. Groggy from the exhaustion, the hunger, and the crippling grief of yesterday's loss, he groaned against whoever was shaking him awake and tried to swat his hands away.

"Go 'way..."

"Man, seriously?" the person laughed in genuine amusement. "I'd feel so safe knowing my night watchman fell asleep instead of doing his job."

"Leave m' alone," Keishin grumbled moodily, turning around and hissing when his arms scratched the asphalt.

"Nah, come on. Get up." Slowly, as Keishin's hearing drifted back, he came to realize that the voice was out of the ordinary for some reason. It sounded familiar, but also foreign. Now too curious to stay asleep, he blinked against the contrast of the bright red sky until he could make out the face of the person looming over him. "We've got a surprise for you guys," the person continued, putting his hand out, which Keishin took mostly by instinct.

But he knew. As soon as his hand slipped into the other person's, blurry vision be damned, he knew who it was. By mere muscle memory, he knew, he recognized the rough skin from the number of times he'd pried weapons and plans from those hands, from the number of times he'd held them to pull their owner out of a nightmare, from the number of times he'd placed his faith and his hopes in them.

"W-What the...?" Keishin stuttered as he stood up to full height to face the newcomer, who had his irritating, soothingly familiar shit-eating grin on his face.

"Yo," Kuroo grinned at him as if he hadn't been presumed dead for almost a whole 24 hour period. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

And Keishin punched him in the arm. But then, he put his hands on his shoulders, as if making sure he was actually real, and then let out an incredulous laugh.
"The hell is up with you?" the teen frowned, unsure about the coach's attitude.

"Never mind that," Keishin shook his head. "You need to go see the others. Where are Azumane, Tanaka and Kozume?"

"They're following. They're bringing something over." Still confused, Kuroo still did not object when he was ushered towards the big tent, and entered through the flap slowly.

The people sleeping in the tent were not sleeping, probably woken by the commotion outside. They all slept so lightly nowadays, Keishin wasn't even surprised. However, he was glad that as soon as they entered, their bleary gazes turned to them, and were suddenly that much brighter.

"Look at what the cat dragged in," Keishin announced, unable to help the smile that bloomed on his face as he knelt along with Kuroo.

"I dragged myself in," Kuroo rolled his eyes, but then chuckled a bit confusedly as he realized that all of the teenagers in the tent were looking at him with their mouths hanging open in shock. "What is it? Do I have something on my face...?"

"You stupid, stupid idiot," Kei finally stuttered out, regaining his eloquence first amongst them. "I should have known you wouldn't keel over that easily."

"No way. It's not in my plans for the near future to die," Kuroo snorted. "Seriously? What happened? Did you guys think we were dead?"

"Well I don't know," Tobio began second, narrowing his eyes angrily at Kuroo. "Since you were out in the rain and then disappeared for almost a whole day, it was kind of hard to assume otherwise."

"So harsh," Kuroo laughed sheepishly. "Nah, we found shelter in a cave in the mountainside. But hey, come outside. We'll tell you everything when the others get here with our surprise."

"Is Kenma okay? And our senpai?" Shouyo asked immediately, biting his lip nervously.

"Everyone is alright," Kuroo reassured him good-naturedly, but then, as he noticed the incredulous and partly irritated looks he was getting, had the decency to duck his head in apology. "Sorry we worried you. We're all okay, though. Better than that. Come on outside."

As in on cue, the tent flap opened, and a familiar pudding-headed teen poked his head in, the blond tips of his medium-long black hair tied up in a ponytail.

"Yo, Kuro," Kozume called to him, pointing outside. "We're here."

"Kenma!" Shouyo all but screeched, scrambling to hug his friend's legs as if his life depended on it.

"Hey..." the black-haired teen protested awkwardly, looking at Kuroo for some sort of hint. However, the captain just shook his head and shooed him with a wave of his hand.

"Let's just get outside."

Keishin let the kids exit the tent first, and then closed behind Tadashi, who exited last. Outside, they found Azumane and Tanaka heading for the camp with twin grins on their bright faces, waving at their friends as they stepped closer, pulling something behind them.

"Ryu!" Noya exclaimed loudly, excitement dawning on his face at the sight of his best friend returning. "Asahi! You're not dead!"
"Without Captain Tactician over here, we would've been," Tanaka laughed. "Sometimes, I don't even know what goes on in this guy's head."

"Alright, let's save the chit-chat for later," Kuroo called attention back to him, where he was building a fire pit with Kozume's help. "Help us build a fire. We're having breakfast!"

In retrospect, Suga and Daichi probably woke up in the small tent after all six of the people in the big tent (see: Shouyo) expressed their surprise rather loudly, and then began chatting loudly with the returning party as they built the fire.

However, Keishin would never forget how Koushi came out of the small tent first, squinting at the bright morning light before seeing the others and looking shocked for a whole three seconds before Tanaka waved to him excitedly. That seemed to snap him out of his confusion, and he grinned so widely, Keishin thought his face might split in half. The next second, he had ducked into the tent and had helped Daichi out, excitedly whispering to the pale, sickly-looking teen's ear as he brought him out into the light. And Keishin never forgot how Daichi's face immediately regained some of its colour, how he straightened up as if he'd never let the world beat him down for a second, and how a wide, disbelieving grin stretched out on his face.

"Captain! Suga!" Shouyo grinned at them when he noticed them, thus turning all of the heads towards the two other teens. "Come have breakfast!"

As if on cue, the fire that Kuroo was trying to light finally caught on the bundle of wood, and the campfire slowly crackled to life, kind of like the new hope that had seemed to dawn on their faces.

"Man, I can't believe you thought we were dead," Ryuunosuke exclaimed loudly as he chewed on his piece of roasted meat. Next to him, Asahi nodded to that in slight amusement, glancing at the carcass of the deer they'd brought back behind him periodically, as if afraid it'd disappear.

"Well it rained for a whole hour, and you guys never gave signs of life for a whole day after that. What else were we supposed to conclude?" Suga sighed, too busy devouring his portion of meat to actually be bitter at anybody.

"You're not very trustworthy," Kei huffed, trying to pretend he was above digging into his meal, but failing miserably, if the sight of juices staining his face and shirt was anything to go by.

"He did get us back, though," Kenma shrugged, taking baby bites out of his piece of roasted meat on a stick. "That has to count for something."

"How did you do it, anyway?" Daichi asked between bites, looking so much more lively already. "Live through the rain and even bring back a whole deer?"

"Well, honestly, I got the idea from listening to shrimpy talk," Tetsuro mused out loud, drawing a squawk from Shouyo at the mention of him. "He mentioned a half-eaten deer freshly left by some predator, and for a moment, I figured that fauna may still be edible. Still, it didn't really cross my mind that it'd be worth pursuing until our beloved captain fainted."

"I didn't faint..." Daichi mumbled, blushing in embarrassment, but everybody pretended they didn't hear it.

"So I figured I'd need strong guys, as well as Kenma, if I wanted to go and kill something edible and
be able to bring it back... And I mean, I'm not stupid. I knew we wouldn't be back in a matter of hours."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Suga frowned. "You worried us so much!"

"You wouldn't have let us go if I told you right off the bat that we wanted to go out for half a day," Tetsuro shrugged.

"Anyway," Ryuu continued, eager to tell a bit of the story, too. "The first thing we did was go deeper and find a safe spot in case of rain. We found a small cavern in the mountainside, probably a bear's nest or something, but it was uninhabited, so we made that our headquarters temporarily. And then, we were like ninjas and we stalked out our prey in the night!"

"Well, less dramatically than that," Tetsuro agreed. "We just sat there and tried to shoot anything that came too close with the gun we got from Dr. Hayate back in Shoukyo. There were enough bullets in it, but after the first few tries, we realized it wouldn't be that easy, and took a different approach."

"It wasn't that hard to find prey," Asahi quietly picked up the explanation. "I think... considering we haven't seen a single animal so far in our travels, it's safe to assume that all of the fauna fled to areas where food is abundant, like forests and lakes or whatnot. We had a lot of wildlife pass us by."

"There was a cat," Kenma interjected as if his comment was vital. "It was black and roughed up, but when I tried to approach it, it fled. I think even the city fauna fled to the wild and tried to adapt, though it's probably not going that great."

"Point is, we're only this late because we actually laid low in a popular area by a muddy spring and waited for wildlife to come and go. It was probably around last night that this injured deer came around for a drink, and I shot it," Tetsuro finished calmly, as if he hadn't pumped the poor animal so full of holes that the gun had run out of ammo.

"He aims really well," Asahi praised shyly. "He got the first one through a leg to slow it down and then took it down."

"It was gross and cruel," Kenma huffed. "The poor thing cried."

"But at least we're not starving anymore, Kenma," Tetsuro hummed pleasantly, and the rest of the group willingly turned a blind eye to how overly-proud he seemed of his actions.

"And after that, we wanted to come back, but it was already too dark, and even with Kenma's help, we wouldn't have found our way back. So we spent the night in the cave and came here this morning," Ryuu finished triumphantly. "It's not a viable option since it takes way too much time to hunt an animal, let alone kill it without guns, but it did save our butts this once!"

"Well, don't ever do it again anyway," Daichi chastised them, though he didn't sound very convincing with a mouth full of meat and eyes sparkling in pure, undiluted joy.

"Sure, sure, captain almighty," the other captain chuckled. "But at least now, we can push on. Kenma, how far to the nearest village?"

"We'll make it out of the mountain range in a few hours," the other teen mumbled, chewing as he thought. "We should be at the small village at the foot of the mountain sometime in the afternoon."

"Oh man, I cannot wait to sleep in a real bed," Yuu hummed, closing his eyes to imagine the blissful scene. "And wash up, maybe..."
"And take a piss in something that isn't a tree," Ryuu supplied helpfully, drawing a laugh from them all.

"We'll spend a day there and try to gather our supplies again before leaving," Daichi promised them. "And after that, we're clear to head for Niigata!"

"Let's do it!" Shouyo cheered excitedly, jumping from his seat and startling Tadashi, who was very quietly picking at his food.

"Sit down and eat!" Tobio pulled him back down onto the ground with an irritated huff. "Don't waste all your energy now."

"You're no fun, Bakayama!"

"Urgh, you two idiots need to shut up."

"Come on, guys, don't fight!"

"This is fun to watch, though!"

"Our kouhai are the best."

"Guys... I think Daichi's mad..."

"Look at him. He looks so constipated!"

"Kuro, that's gross."

"Enough fighting! Eat more and talk less!"

Keishin couldn't help but laugh. Not because their antics were humourous, but mostly because their energy also kept Keishin alive. And it astounded him how time and time again, despite being knocked down, they kept rising back up and fought with everything they had. That was the Karasuno he knew and loved. Names be damned, actions be damned, at heart, all of his boys were still the very same as he once knew them to be. They had changed, but not enough to become unrecognizable. Just enough to adapt to their new world and fight to survive.

"Daichi is right, as always," he called out to the lot of them, who were still squabbling. "Koushi! Asahi! Tetsuro! Yuu! Kenma! Ryuunosuke! Tobio! Kei! Tadashi! Shouyo!" One by one, all eyes turned to him, shining brightly with the life of a soul that had been beaten a hundred times but that had refused to be shattered, and Keishin couldn't help but grin at them. "You guys have to eat more and get stronger so you can keep fighting. Get in line for seconds, no objections!"

"Thank you, Keishin!" the whole group recited simultaneously, as if they'd rehearsed this single moment of exhilaration for the time when it would come to pass, and rushed to get in line to get another portion of meat.

Ukai Keishin found no bigger joy than having the privilege of serving the teens their breakfasts, knowing that the simple, supportive actions were just as important to victory than the rest. And he was so glad to be able to protect his boys with the best of his abilities, by looking out for them, by talking to them, and by helping them push forward when they hit a brick wall.

The history books would never remember their names. But there was more to it than that. The only way that the memory of their struggles and victories, their laughter and tears, their rises and falls would live on would be through them. Nobody knew any member of their group better than the very
same members of the group did.

Therefore, if even only one of them ended up making it out alive, he would be the one to carry on the memory of their torturous journey and the eleven others who had not made it out. And even if his companions were not around anymore, that person would be able to bring their memory, their goals, their hopes and their dreams back to life simply by saying their name.

Chapter End Notes

(I feel like I have so much to justify myself for this chapter ahhh I'm sorry ;-; If you feel like something was done badly, please message me here/on Tumblr and let's discuss it! I'd really love to have an open dialogue about my writing and how to improve it ;A; )

I've always felt like Ukai, even in canon, was like the young adult who never knew what to do in life. He works and lives with his parents and doesn't seem to have any intention of doing anything more with his life until he starts coaching Karasuno. And then, you see a new life inside of him, like he's finally found a purpose. So in this chapter, I wanted to address Ukai losing his purpose, and then realizing that he'd never lost it for good, just lost it from sight. Keishin is a great example of a character who's setting himself back rather than being set back by the circumstances. Now Daichi is the contrary. Daichi pushes through no matter what, and hardly even cares what the circumstances are. However, by doing that, he burdens himself immensely, feeling like he's responsible for 12 people's safety and wellbeing, and so coupled with physical stress, Daichi's sanity was a time-bomb ticking down to zero, ever since chapter 1. If you ever find yourself re-reading CML, note how Daichi seems more and more exhausted and weak as the chapters progress. That is the curse of a leader.

That's probably why Daichi, Kuroo, and Keishin need to exist together, or not exist at all. Daichi's a leader: he is charismatic, has a way with words, and has the popular vote, but he is nothing more than that. Kuroo is a tactician: he is great at planning/scheming, and has great charisma, but his slippery personality and the uncertainty of his thoughts doesn't make him a very reliable leader. Keishin is an adviser: he doesn't have the talent to rally people together, but is the rational thought guiding the leader through the challenges they face.

Also, unrelated, but someone please tell me you saw what I did with Yukiko's sister oh my god please (though the fic's tags might give it away...). It was actually suggested by a commenter on AO3, but I purposefully left it up to interpretation. The whole KageHina setup was also suggested by a Tumblr user, and I liked the idea of Hinata having flashback-type PTSD, a trigger being loud noises (reminding him of the gunshot in close quarters) and his comfort being Kageyama (with whom he has a strong emotional bond, ever since chapter 4). As you may have noticed, I'm trying to avoid making the pairings canon-canon, but we can all agree that they're all a kiss short of canon. Also, I kinda liked Satsuki the psycho nurse, but I think I liked this ending for her. It just comes to show how dysfunctional Shoukyo is, since people shoot first and think later. The abruptness of her death was what drove home the fact that Shoukyo is an absolutely insane concept, I personally think. The city is fucked now, though, having lost its two primary health care workers. It will probably fall into a state of nature (Hobbes' theory rather than Locke's), not just during nighttime but during daylight as well, and will ultimately collapse.
(The names for some of the characters fucked me up haha. They were only referred to that way because it was from Keishin's point of view, but from the next chapter on, the names will be back to 'normal'). Also, the part right after Daichi collapses reminds me of Mulan for some reason. And finally, the whole "fauna" bit also came from an AO3 commenter who very validly wondered where the fuck all the animals in this fic disappeared to??? So here ya go.

Enough notes. That will be all. I will try to write faster for the next chapter, I promise! If you have any comments or suggestions, please feel free to review, or to ask me stuff on Tumblr (same URL as on here). Otherwise, thank you so much for reading!
The news hit them like a cannonball to the gut.

And at that moment, they all knew, all eleven of them knew, that they wouldn't be making it out.

..."..."..."..."..."...

They'd made it out.

"I still can't believe we made it out," Hinata hummed pleasantly, voicing the thought that was
running loops around all of their brains ever since they set foot outside the forest, and into the nearest village at the foot of the mountain range.

"Let's agree to never do something like that again," Tanaka groaned, flopping onto his sleeping bag wearily once he'd opened it up in the corner of the bedroom he'd picked.

"We don't get to choose," Kageyama interjected grumpily, already lying down on his sleeping bag with his back facing his friends. "Not in this life, anyway."

"So cheerful, Bakayama," Hinata blew his turned back a raspberry, and then returned to setting up his own sleeping corner.

"Are you all done blabbering in here?" Keishin's voice preceded his arrival into the room. "I said it's bedtime, so just shut up and rest up!" He glared at them for a second before popping back into the hallway.

"Sure, sure, grandpa," Hinata mumbled, scurrying into his sleeping bag when Keishin's head almost immediately popped back in, the smug look in his eyes practically challenging Hinata.

"What was that, you little brat?" he raised his brows, daring Hinata to repeat what he said.

"I said-"

"Both of you are behaving like children," Sugawara's chiding voice cut what Hinata was about to say, and the two concerned parties turned to the third-year setter, who appeared in the doorway and who was nonetheless smiling indulgently at them.

"I was gonna go to sleep anyway," Hinata argued, making himself comfortable in his spot.

"Right. Sleep tight," Ukai wished them all, and left the room as quickly as he came.

"Are you guys okay?" Suga asked, ruffling his dirty hair to air the matted strands out.

"I would be if these idiots just shut their mouths," Tsukishima groaned from his end, turning around in his sleeping bag to glare at the idiots in question.

"You shut up, Tsukishima!" Hinata bit back. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm trying," the blond rolled his eyes and turned back around to face Yamaguchi, who was already fast asleep.

"Alright, get some rest," Suga cut them off before they could keep arguing. "Tomorrow's a big day once again. We're making our way to Niigata so we'll need all the energy we can get."

"Are we stopping for food somewhere?" Hinata asked, rubbing his belly. They hadn't eaten since that morning, but considering that they'd all gone through much worse, it didn't seem to bother any of them so much anymore.

"We'll see what we can find in the village," the setter answered, and then began closing the door.

"Night."

"Night, senpai!" Hinata hummed, and waited for Suga to leave to lay down in his sleeping bag, next to Kageyama's. "Night, everyone."

"Good night, Hinata," Tanaka wished him right back through the darkness, and Hinata immediately relaxed in his spot, knowing he was safe.
"Good night, Kageyama," he whispered after a bit of thought, eyes wide in the darkness to try and catch a glimpse of his friend's face.

"Go to sleep, Hinata," the setter whispered back in the dark, perhaps with a bit less bite to his words than he used to have. "It's almost already morning."

"I know."

They were almost there.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Hinata woke up with a flutter in his heart and a gurgle in his tummy. Turning around a bit to try and fall back asleep, he gave up very soon and got up, stretching with a yawn. Kageyama was still fast asleep next to him, and on the other end of the room, Tsukishima was, too. In contrast, Yamaguchi was already awake, staring at the ceiling pensively, and briefly smiling at Hinata when he noticed that he was up.

"Morning," Hinata whispered brightly to his friend, and then looked down where Tanaka's sleeping bag was abandoned. He must've gone out for some time alone, he figured. His senpai liked to do that nowadays.

Maybe he should try it, too. He needed the peace and quiet once in a while. Figuring he'd do just that, he quietly tip-toed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

It was almost mid-morning, if Hinata judged right from the position of the sun, and Hinata knew that Daichi liked to set out around noontime in order to get enough walking time in before dark. That meant that they had a couple of hours still in the small house they'd hijacked.

The great thing about the house they'd picked was that it had a balcony on the second floor. It was a small spot, just a place for a smoker to step out on, but Hinata knew that if Tanaka was anywhere, it would be there.

And he was right. When he opened the door to the small balcony, the first sight he saw was that of his senpai leaning against the railing, looking out towards the empty streets of the small village they'd taken refuge in.

"Morning," he whispered, carefully closing the door behind him and stepping out next to his senpai, quiet as if not to disturb his peace.

"Hey, Shouyo," Tanaka replied after a second, briefly glancing at him with a small smile before looking out again.

"It's kinda early, considering our schedule. What are you doing out here?" he asked again, looking at his senpai for answers.

"I like to get some fresh air and some time alone in the morning. It helps get me ready for the day," Tanaka explained.

"Cool," Hinata looked up at his senior with admiration. "So this is like... meditation or something? You just stay out here and like... reflect?"

"Yeah. The point is to keep quiet, though," Tanaka snickered in amusement, ruffling Hinata's hair briefly.
"Oh, sorry," Hinata put a hand on his mouth to stifle a grin, and turned back to stare at whatever Tanaka was staring at.

He wasn't sure what that was. He wasn't sure what Tanaka saw in the dusty, abandoned streets that made him look so wistful. He wasn't sure what Tanaka thought about when his neutral expression momentarily dipped down. He wasn't sure of anything except the fact that his senpai was a pillar of strength, and always seemed to push them forward, even when they wanted to stop.

"You're so strong, senpai," he whispered almost unconsciously, turning just in time to see Tanaka's eyes glance down at the ground and his Adam's apple bob with a heavy swallow.

"Yeah."

They left it at that for the day.

The rest of them got up right before noon, exhausted and out of energy but still willing to keep moving forward. With all the willpower they had left, they packed up and set out, stopping in stores with shattered displays and homes with overgrown yards for a bite to eat. Their haul was significantly larger than what they'd gathered in a long time, and so by the beginning of the afternoon, they were able to sit out in someone's front yard, amongst the withered plants and yellowed grass, and pass around all the cans they'd found.

They'd long since gotten used to eating tasteless peas or hard bamboo shoots, and washing it down with cans of coconut milk, so their lunch felt like a feast just that once. It felt like a good omen to Hinata. He was sure that something good would happen to them soon.

"We're not far from Niigata anymore," Kenma informed them as they stepped out on a stretch of highway yet again. Their feet hurt and their legs screamed for some respite, as they always had, but it was easier to ignore the pain this once. They were almost saved, and so they had to push on. "At this rate, we'll make it there tomorrow, before noon."

"Onward!" Noya cheered excitedly, and opened up their march towards their final destination.

Considering that they had only just begun to gather their strength after their devastating few days in the mountains, and not wanting a repeat of what happened to Daichi, they took breaks often and tried to snack on a can of beans between all of them, just to keep their energy levels constant. They stopped to rest and raid some villages that the freeway led them past, but otherwise pressed on.

It was almost comforting to have had an uneventful day on the road. These days, it felt like they could hardly get a moment without something happening to them.

As the roads got bigger and the shadows of the buildings got taller and taller, they left the countryside behind, and engaged further into the abandoned skeletons of towns and cities that once squirmed with human life and that now thrived with overgrown weeds and broken homes.

Sometimes, it occurred to Hinata that there used to be a life before all of this happened. Before all the fear and all the uncertainty. Before the friction burns on his feet from the days he walked without rest. Before the heaviness in his arms where his muscles had wasted away to feed a heart that was already crumbling under the blood-tinged sky. Before the ache in his cheeks where his muscles had imprinted the motion for a frown. Before the heavy bag weighing on his back and the heavy burdens weighing on his shoulders.

But then, it hurt a little too much to think back to what used to be. If he thought about the past for a
second too long, he'd begin to remember all of the ghosts he'd stopped seeing in his dreams, and he couldn't repeat the experience again. He couldn't lose his mother, his sister, his friends and family a second time.

And so he walked onward, never looking back, and hoping to never repeat the same mistakes again.

(There was a saying he'd heard once, back in the day. 'History repeats itself', someone had said. Hinata left that in the past as well, though he never could get rid of the lingering apprehension that the saying left imprinted on his brain).

And suddenly, they were there.

"Here we are..." Daichi announced as they finally passed by the sign that officially welcomed them to the city of Niigata.

"We're here," Hinata repeated in awe, almost unwilling to believe the sight that graced his eyes.

Niigata, just like every other city on the island, had been disfigured by the horrible bombings of the night of the Forty Fireworks, and the evidence from the massacre was carved in the concrete of the fallen towers and in the rubble of the razed residential sectors. Nonetheless, Niigata felt like a symbol of hope.

The expressway led them through the suburbs, and they took a short pause when the skies got ugly, outwaiting the light rain in the relative safety of some cars that were abandoned on the road. Once the rain stopped about half an hour later, according to Daichi's watch, they set back out on the road, not sure where they were headed, but also sure that they were headed the right way.

With strong leadership at their head, they pressed on, walking on the opposite lanes of the highway towards the heart of the city, where they felt like they'd hit gold.

"If anything is here, it's going to be there," Kenma assured them on one of their breaks.

"We're going to find salvation here," Daichi had concurred, raking his eyes over every single one of their tired, haggard faces. "I know it."

And the boys believed him. They'd always believed him. When Daichi said that everything would be alright, then they knew that everything definitely would be.

And they knew, when they saw the truck casually heading down the highway on their lane, that they would definitely be okay.

There was a silent consensus to stop, and to wait, to observe the truck's next movements. As it got closer, the boys noticed that it was a pickup truck flying a Japanese flag, and unpleasant memories of their last adventure with the 'Japanese army' came into mind. However, they stood still, since they had nowhere to go anyway, almost rigid in their place, until the truck hesitantly slowed down. Once it was close enough for Daichi to see the pinched look on the driver's face, he slowly raised his hands up in the universal gesture of giving in and the others mimicked him.

"Please be legit this time," Hinata heard Tanaka mutter under his breath, and couldn't help but chuckle slightly. It was good to have something to break the tension in the air, which seemed to want to triple in thickness when the truck stopped entirely, and the doors in the back opened loudly. Two soldiers in military attire jumped out, and immediately aimed their guns at their group.
Hinata felt his blood freeze in his veins as he glanced down the barrel of the rifle.

"Identify yourselves," one of the soldiers ordered, his accent flawless. Either this foreigner was very very talented at languages, or he was the real deal.

"Just a band of survivors," Daichi answered slowly, probably hoping for the latter as much as they all did. "We're looking for shelter."

"Are you a bandit group?" the soldier asked again, gun still unwaveringly pointed at them.

"No," Keishin answered this time dragging the attention to himself. "We mean no harm."

"Would you be willing to turn over your weapons and be placed into custody?" the soldier asked finally, and despite the uncanny resemblance to their previous unfortunate adventure, the boys felt like they could relax a bit. Just a bit, though.

"Yes," Keishin nodded. "We mean no harm."

"Empty yourselves of anything that can be used as a weapon," the soldier ordered after a second of sizing them up.

"Are you guys the Japanese army?" Hinata found himself asking as he patted his pockets for anything he may be carrying.

"Whatever's left of it," the second soldier finally replied. "Most forces are out fighting on foreign soil. And most of homeland security was scattered when the nuclear explosion hit Tokyo. Now we're trying to regroup and get some order back into the country."

"What a relief," Kuroo sighed out in relief, throwing on the ground a knife that Hinata didn't even know he had on him in the first place.

"So does this mean we're safe?" Noya asked hopefully.

"After you're cleared by the authorities in Niigata and deemed harmless, then yes. You will be safe."

"Alright!" Tanaka crowed, punching the air in excitement. Immediately, and probably by reflex, the soldiers' guns went to him, and he froze before relaxing. "Sorry. I got a bit excited. It's been a while and we've all been waiting to hear those words, after all that's happened."

"Anyway, that's the last of it," Kuroo indicated, motioning at the ground, where all of their rudimentary weapons were thrown. "The rest is all our personal stuff... Or whatever's left of it."

"Alright then." The soldiers seemed to be sizing them up. "You can get in the back of the pickup. There are two places on the back seat, and the rest of you are gonna have to squeeze and hold on tight."

"Daichi and I can sit with the soldiers," Keishin immediately decided, although Daichi seemed a bit unsure. "Suga, make sure everything's okay in the back. Everybody stay seated during the ride. Hinata, if you need to puke, it's over the side."

"Yes, coach," they all laughed, and waited for the soldiers to put down their gun in order to make a move for the car.

With every step they took, a load seemed to tumble off their shoulders, until the point where they jumped into the back of the truck easily, as if they could fly.
Once they were all squeezed in tight, the driver turned the ignition back on, and the rumble of the machine under them seemed like the most comforting sound they could have heard at the moment.

Hinata could feel his heartbeat in the soles of his feet and the sulci of his brain and realized, as the car maneuvered to return from where it came, that there was something akin to a war drum in his heartbeat, a loud and empowering feeling that gave him all the willpower he needed to keep standing strong.

He never would've been able to feel the war drums right up to his core if he didn't have his army standing beside him. His twelve-man army, that somehow made him feel like he could conquer the world.

He refused to fall asleep, no matter how exhausted he was. No matter how much his shoulders ached and his feet burned, he refused to give up a single moment of elation or a single second of relief. He watched the destroyed city landscape cycle by, finding hope in the grass growing in the cracks in the cement, and finding solace in the wind whistling in his ears. He almost stood up to let the wind tangle within his hair, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He turned to see both of his trusty senpai looking at him, sporting similar nostalgic smiles on their faces. Tanaka had a hand on him and Noya was looking at him like an older sibling would look at their younger one when they were happy with their happiness.

(Hinata would know. He used to look at Natsu that way. He missed his baby sister sometimes. But at least he learned from her in order to protect his new family again, and to never have a repeat of what had happened to her).

"Sorry," he whispered, sitting back down with his body squished between Kageyama and Tanaka, and only then noted that his cheeks were hurting.

It took him a moment to realize that he was smiling, something that his muscles had obviously forgotten, and that they were obviously re-learning to do.

He smiled. He smiled until they reached an impressive gated fence that had been set up in the middle of the street as if to delimit a safe perimeter, and the car slowed down.

"I think we're here," Hinata whispered excitedly, peering over the side of the car. A soldier at the gate, with his rifle hanging by his shoulder, walked over to the truck that had now stopped completely, and the driver rolled down his window to talk to him in low, hushed tones. Occasionally, the gate guard would glance at the back of the truck, where ten teenagers were piled one on top of the other and were curiously trying to catch bits and pieces of the exchange.

Finally, the gate guard seemed to concede, and backed away from the car, still looking suspiciously at the teenagers. However, the car began to move again, so they all settled back down, and watched as the gate swung open with a creak for them.

They entered the gated city of Niigata, finally, after so many days of being lost and cold and hungry and tired and hopeless and homeless and forsaken, it finally felt like they could breathe again. Just seeing the streets pass them by felt different. Weird. It made them feel all choked up and emotional, as if they'd reached their final destination already.

(But they hadn't. They still had to make it to Hokkaido. They still weren't done. But almost. They could rest for now).

'We're home,' Hinata wanted to say, but as he looked at the bright eyes of all of his friends tightly packed in the back of the truck with him, he knew that he had already been home all this time.
They stopped in front of a building that had the government's logo on it, and the soldiers were out of the car before the driver had even killed the engine.

"Alright, so single-file, you're going to go through the identification process," one of them began to explain. "We have the governmental database in this office, so we're going to check your background and identify you so we can remove you from the missing persons database. Once you're done, you're also allowed to search in the missing persons database for a maximum of two people per individual, in order to locate your loved ones or know of their status."

"For real?" Suga breathed, his breath hitching. "That's... that's wonderful! I can finally find out if my dad's okay..."

"And I, if my granny is still out there," Noya nodded. "She's like a mother to me, so I gotta find out!"

"And I gotta find out about Saeko," Tanaka clenched his fists. "I hope she's okay."

"Whatever," Tsukishima grunted as everyone began to whisper about people they wanted to look for, and Hinata only heard the pain in his voice because he was standing so close.

He knew exactly how Tsukishima was feeling. And although he and the tall blond had never been on the best of terms, he didn't think anyone needed to feel extra lonely like they did. So he pinched Tsukishima's arm, just hard enough to earn himself a glare, and then pursed his lips, embarrassed to say whatever he had to say.

"Hey... it's okay if you don't have anyone to look for. Just consider that everyone you could have been looking for is right here," he mumbled, looking at Yamaguchi's quiet, giddy smile instead of Tsukishima's slightly wide eyes. His usual holier-than-thou expression fell quickly back into place on his face, though, and Hinata couldn't even say he didn't see it coming.

"Tch... Well I'm still looking for you. You're hard to find since you're so damn small," he snickered, and Hinata promptly glared at him, without much venom. They'd been at this game for a long time now. Despite being a little pissy about his constantly degrading commentary, he didn't take it to heart, and let Tsukishima off with the usual sour look on his face.

"I'm gonna fight you one day," he promised, falling in line when the soldiers began leading them towards the office. Tsukishima merely smirked cockily at him, and that was that for their extremely constructive conversation.

They kept silent as they entered the office, as if for respect, and sat down on the slightly torn seats lining the hallway. The soldiers accompanying them nodded to a security guard by the cubicles where people were seated, typing away at their computers, and then left without another word.

The boys were left to sit in relative silence, occasionally hearing one of the people in the cubicles speak, but otherwise hearing nothing more than the typing punctuating the air.

Finally, after a few minutes, the guard moved to motion to Kenma, who was the first in line.

"Proceed to cubicle 4," he indicated, and Kenma threw a quiet glance at Kuroo, looking for encouragement before he stood up to go where he was pointed.

One by one, they were called to a cubicle or another, all gone in silence, and suddenly, Hinata was nervous. What if something went wrong? What if they weren't allowed to stay? What if this was another death camp? What if they couldn't make it to Hokkaido from here? What if everything they'd worked so hard to achieve all failed at this point in time? He hated having to doubt himself like this.
"Next," the guard repeated for what seemed like the hundredth time, and suddenly, Hinata was up. He looked next to him for support, and found Tanaka's and Nishinoya's gaves on him. They smiled comfortingly at him, as if feeling his nervousness, and although it was not enough to steal the ball of nerves blocking Hinata's windpipe, it was enough to loosen it up enough for him to talk.

"Hello," the receptionist greeted him as he approached cubicle number 2 and sat down. "What's your full legal name?"

"Hinata Shouyo," he answered quietly, fidgeting in his seat a bit.

"Where are you from?"

"Miyagi."

"What's your date of birth?"

As the receptionist spoke in his rather neutral tone, Hinata began to relax and answered the questions with increasing confidence. The entire process took about a minute, and the receptionist already had his governmental file in front of him.

"So. Hinata..." he read something on his screen. "No criminal record. No employment status. So none of this is applicable to you?"

"Nope," Hinata shook his head.

"Alright. Your location has been marked as the Niigata military outpost. If anyone accesses the Japanese governmental database to search for you, this is the location that will show up until you register elsewhere," the receptionist explained.

"Awesome," Hinata grinned.

"Finally, do you have anybody you would like to search for in the missing persons database? A loved one, perhaps?" the receptionist asked, finally looking at Hinata, just in time to see his face fall.

"Umm... not really. I already know what happened to my loved ones," he admitted.

"So sorry," the receptionist replied quickly, as if he'd rehearsed and repeated that one line a hundred times before. "Do you have any friends or relations you might wanna know about?"

"Not really," Hinata muttered. "All my friends are here with me."

"Alright. Well, if you think of someone, you're allowed to come back here and ask at any time," he concluded, typing a last couple of things on Hinata's file. "You can proceed to the back. A security guard will escort you to your bunker to get you settled in."

"Awesome," Hinata grinned, his heart fluttering. "Will all my friends be there?"

"Probably," the receptionist shrugged. "Have a nice day."

Feeling like it was the perfect moment to leave, Hinata got up and bowed to the receptionist, and then walked out of the cubicle. As ordered, he followed the small passage between the other cubicles until he got to the back, where there was a door with an Exit sign on top. A guard was waiting in front of it, and smiled to Hinata when he approached. Encouraged by the show of warmth, he accelerated until he reached him.
"Hi," he bowed lightly in greeting. "I need to go to my bunker, I think."

"Yeah. We're just going to wait for another person to load the car and then we'll be off," the guard explained amicably. Instantly finding it easy to strike a conversation with the man, Hinata stood a little closer, and tried to think of something to say. He wouldn't lie to himself and pretend he wasn't excited about talking to someone who wasn't with him 24/7.

"So hey, why the tight security around here?" he asked, glancing back at where he came from.

"You don't know about the situation in Japan right now?" the man asked, eyes widening fractionally when Hinata shook his head. "It's a mess. The army's a mess and the government's a mess. The government's provisionally set up in Seoul, in South Korea, right now, and is having a hard time dividing its resources. Part of the government and the Emperor himself are pushing for military action towards our enemies, so that we can get rid of the threat before they strike again. The other part and quite frankly, most of the army, though, is pushing for more defensive action, to pool resources into relief efforts for survivors and are pressuring the President into calling a temporary ceasefire at the very least. And then..." His expression suddenly soured. "There's a smaller part of the army that's gone rogue."

"What do you mean?" Hinata frowned, perking up at the sound of something interesting, if not scary. "They're like... rebels now?"

"Pretty much," the soldier nodded. "They are a very traditional group that stick by very traditional values. They believe that Japan has been disgraced and has fallen from glory, and in order to keep whatever honour it still has intact, they've resorted to a purge of some sort. They're killing everybody, indiscriminately and very intentionally. And when it's all done, when every Japanese survivor is dead, they intend to kill themselves, too."

"Like committing seppuku, but on a national level..." Hinata's jaw dropped. "That's scary! Why would they do that?"

"Like I said, it's a matter of honour above all for them," the guard shook his head. "It's crazy how good people can become demons when they go to war."

"That's insane," Hinata whispered, but found that he was surprisingly not that shocked by the news.

After all, ever since the beginning of their journey, they'd met such fucked up people that it didn't even seem to bother him anymore to be told that yet another homicidal organization was on the loose.

"Yeah." The guard crossed his arms. "That's what the hypervigilance was about. We're super super careful about letting people in. Anybody that even remotely looks like a bandit, or someone who could cause trouble, is taken into custody and is profiled. Thankfully, we're backed by the government and they're not, so we still have more information than they do. Though they probably have hackers that we should be afraid of..."

"There haven't been any around here, right?" Hinata asked hopefully, weary of having to abandon safe places over and over again.

"We had a couple of people try and infiltrate in the past, but it's been a while since we've even heard of them." The security guard shrugged. "The camp director thinks they're preparing, but we're ready for them. We do have most of the army on our side, anyway."

"That's a relief..." Hinata sighed out softly. "We've been on the run for a long, long time, me and my
friends. We're really tired and we just wanna be safe."

"Then you've come to the right place," the guard smiled to him comfortingly. "Niigata is the safest stronghold on the northwestern coast of Japan. You're gonna be okay here."

"I really hope so," the spiker hummed thoughtfully, and their conversation died down.

Thankfully, it was half a minute later that Yamaguchi came out of a cubicle and headed for him with a smile.

"Hey," Hinata greeted the taller boy as he approached. "Everything okay?"

Yamaguchi nodded, the peaceful smile on his lips reassuring, but also slightly disturbing. Hinata figured he'd ask him about it, but the guard motioned to the door behind them as if to lead them away, and he figured that there would be a time and place for everything later.

"Come over here," he motioned into what was obviously a maintenance hallway. "Head down the hall to that door there. There's somebody there to load you into the car. Good luck with everything!" He wished. With a simultaneous nod of their heads, the two boys entered, with the guard closing behind them.

The hallway was a bit dim but the light from the door at the end lit up their path to the outside. Once they got there, there was indeed another security guard that was waiting for them, and who wordlessly led them into a van, where Tsukishima, Kuroo, Kenma and Suga were already seated, talking. Well, Suga was wordlessly crying, and the others seemed to have agreed to leave him alone, so the newcomers felt like they should do the same.

"Alright, you're all loaded up," the security guard informed the driver, a soldier in military uniform who started up the car.

"Are our friends coming?" Hinata inquired anxiously, eyeing the door to the inside of the building.

"All newcomers to Niigata go through the same admission process. Don't worry, you'll find them again somewhere down the line," the soldier at the wheel explained, backing out of the alleyway, and engaging on the street.

"Good," Hinata sighed out in relief, and then turned to Kenma, who was quietly leaning into Kuroo's side as the car swayed. "Hey, Kenma. Everything go okay?"

"Yeah," the other boy nodded, eyes briefly flicking to Hinata before flicking back to Kuroo's lap. "My mom and dad are safe. They're in a South Korean refugee camp right now."

"That's so great to hear," Hinata grinned excitedly. "I'm glad they're safe. Maybe you'll be able to rejoin with them soon!"

"I guess so," Kenma nodded, closing his eyes for a bit, as if the news had exhausted him. Seeing this, and seeing how Kuroo put an arm around Kenma's shoulders to steady him in the sway of their ride, Hinata understood that he really was relieved to exhaustion by the development, and left him to think with a supportive pat of his hand.

"What about you, Kuroo?" he asked a bit more hesitantly, since the Nekoma captain had always been a bit more intimidating.

"I asked for Bokuto," Kuroo hummed. "He's fine. He's safe in a Shikoku refugee camp."
"That's so great," Hinata sighed out in genuine relief, glad that the energetic ace of Fukurodani was still alive and well.

"And Yaku's in Russia. I don't know where, but his passport was registered at the Russian border about a month ago." Kuroo chuckled to himself. "He's probably with Lev if he's in Russia. How predictable. I'm glad they're both safe though."

"That's a relief," Hinata agreed. "It's nice to know that everyone's alive."

"Well..." Suga finally turned, eyes dry but bloodshot. Hinata's breath caught in his throat. "My, uhh... My father. He was in Tokyo to secure the bunkers when the bomb dropped. He was killed in action later on. Probably got caught in Seizan, now that I think of it."

"Oh no..." Hinata's good mood suddenly fell. "I'm really sorry for your loss..."

"Thanks. We promised, when he left for Tokyo, that when he came back, him, my little brother and I would go to the countryside to escape the war. Guess the war caught up faster than we expected," Suga explained, eyes downcast.

"And your brother?" Hinata asked again, enraptured by Suga's story, which seemed to be a repeat of his own.

"Dunno. Still missing," he frowned. "He was at a friend's house during the Forty Fireworks and I haven't seen him since."

Hinata nodded, but had otherwise no idea what to say. He didn't wanna worsen Suga's mood by giving him his sympathies that may not even be valid, nor did he want to give him false reassurances by telling him everything would be alright. After all, he would never know until tomorrow came.

"We're all here for you anyway, senpai," Hinata assured him in the end, hoping that if his words faltered, his presence would be enough to soothe Suga.

"Thank you," the silver-haired boy smiled sadly at him, as if the words had done their intended job, and then turned to look back out of the window.

Tsukishima was as unapproachable as always, and Yamaguchi seemed way too concerned in watching him gaze out the window impassively to be able to hold a conversation (whatever conversation he decided to hold nowadays). With some regret, Hinata resigned himself to the fact that there would be no more talking on this ride.

He didn't really pay attention to his surroundings as they drove across the secured part of the city, his head elsewhere as he thought of the future. That train of thought never failed to give him a headache, but he couldn't help but follow it. In the end, they reached a middle school, and by the time they parked in front of it, Hinata's head was throbbing.

"This school's been converted into a bunker of some sort," the soldier began to explain as he undid his belt. "Most people live in the gymnasium. It's one of the few bunkers we have in Niigata, and as the secured perimeter grows, we'll hopefully be able to convert more large buildings into bunkers."

"That's nice," Suga nodded, eyes still bloodshot and exhausted. His body language spoke volumes as he held himself and shivered, as if ice was pumping through his veins rather than blood.

"We can't say we won't fall into this routine quickly enough, though," Hinata snickered at the irony of their situation. To end up where they began and to repeat their entire struggle again would be a sight to behold.
If the nostalgia didn't kill them first.

All seemed to be well when they all found each other at the school once again. Despite having arrived at the same time, many of them were assigned sleeping spots scattered around the gymnasium. It was a large gymnasium, at that, so they couldn't even see one another's sleeping spots amongst the crowd of refugees in the gym with them.

They soon were given appointments to see a doctor and were given each a small kit containing hygiene supplies. Hinata found that his teeth practically shed a layer when he brushed them, and that may as well have been the case, judging by the yellowish liquid he spat out after the first brushing. Needless to say, he soon ran out of toothpaste.

But although it may have been a trick of the light hitting their newly-cleaned teeth, Hinata felt like everybody smiled just a bit brighter after that.

"We should settle into a routine around here," Daichi suggested when they sat for dinner that night, watered-down miso soup and rice with a bit of fried tofu on the side. Nonetheless, it was the most delicious thing they'd eaten in a long, long time, and they did not even think of complaining once.

"Well, as they said at the admission office after we passed by the clinic in the afternoon, work is not obligatory around here, but does get you privileges. I think I'll pick up a job," Kuroo decided.

"Good idea," Noya acquiesced enthusiastically. "It'll give me something to do during the day."

"I wonder if I can get a job at the clinic," Suga mused out loud. "Or at least, I hope they can let me stick around to learn more about the medical arts. I think that's what I'm gonna do when we all go back to school at some point."

"Cool," Tanaka nodded. "But I think I'll pass. I want to take a break and just get my energy back. It's been exhausting."

"Me too," Kenma decided. "I'm aching all over and I want to sleep."

"Well, we've got time, and we're anchored down here for a little while still. We're all free to do whatever we want," Keishin reminded them.

"Yup," Hinata piped in. "And we're here for a little while, too. Though we're eligible for transport to Hokkaido, there's still many people before us, and the transport caravans only come and go once a week, since they're supply caravans. It'll be a bit before we're called up."

"But we're gonna be called up at some point," Kageyama completed his train of thought. "We're finally going to get out of this hell."

"We'll see the day," Tsukishima completed as optimistically as ever, and they all fell silent, although there was a new kind of fire that lit up in their eyes. One fuelled by hope.

Soon after, once they finished their meal, they split to vacate to their activity of choice. Suga and Yamaguchi went to the clinic to ask about job openings, along with Noya, who hadn't been booked for a checkup until after dinner. Kuroo managed to rope Tsukishima and Daichi into going to the military command center with him in order to ask if there were any chances of them getting any kind of military training. Keishin briefly considered going with them, mostly to ensure the safety of the center's staff once Kuroo let loose, but figured he wanted some time to go read in the library as well, and decided to do just that. Kenma promptly joined him at the promise of an activity away from
crowds and noise.

Asahi and Kageyama headed back towards the government centre, Asahi with a mind to look for some kind of physical job at the admission centre, probably to move supply boxes and pack ration bags. On his end, Kageyama mumbled something unclear about asking for a receptionist job and helping people find their lost families, but nobody commented on it and let them leave.

That only left Hinata with Tanaka, and both of them agreed to head back to the bunker to do something that didn't require much moving around. As they walked through the streets bathed in the dying orange light of the sunset, a new sense of serenity overcame Hinata, and he breathed in deeply, as if the air here was cleaner than the air elsewhere. The sky here was pink, miles away from the ghastly red that had hung overhead since the beginning of their journey. Soon, their skies would be blue.

"Are you happy that we're going to be heading for Hokkaido soon?" Hinata suddenly asked his senpai, gazing up at him with bright eyes.

"You have no idea," Tanaka laughed, probably for the first time in forever, really. "It's not that I dislike it here, now that I know that we're safe, but I have someone waiting for me in Hokkaido."

"Saeko, right?" Hinata guessed, giddy with Tanaka's happiness when he grinned brightly. "I'm so happy she's okay."

"Mhm," Tanaka nodded. "I asked for her at the office. I just wish I could let her know that I'm right here and that I'm okay. I haven't spoken to her since the Forty Fireworks and I hope she doesn't think I'm dead."

"She's probably just like you; staying hopeful until proven otherwise," Hinata hummed, thinking back to the strong woman he'd met once or twice already. "It must run in your family."

"It does. We're all headstrong and we never ever give up," Tanaka boasted proudly. "Saeko's no exception. She's amazing. She's been like a mother to me ever since I was a kiddo, and she's the one who taught me to be strong. Half the time, she was the one raising me. I'd be nowhere without her."

"She's an incredible older sibling," Hinata assured him, feeling a pang in his heart at the thought of his missed opportunity at being a great older sibling. He'd never have a chance at making it up to Natsu. Some experiences he just couldn't repeat, no matter how much he ached for it.

"She is," Tanaka agreed, but then turned his eyes to the ground. "She's... She's the one who's kept me going so long. Just the thought of being reunited with her is what gets me up on my feet in the morning. It's the thought that was in my head when I pushed forward back in the mountains, and the thought that let me keep my cool in Shoukyo. Without even being here, she's been with me all this time, and I don't think I'd have made it if I knew she was dead."

"That's amazing," Hinata marvelled, eyes wide as he listened to his senpai speak with a serene expression on his face.

"She's amazing," Tanaka agreed, and then turned his head away for a second. Hinata halted in his walk and turned to Tanaka, who slowed and stopped as well, and suddenly, the orange-haired teen knew that something had changed.

"Senpai?"

"Sorry," Tanaka apologized softly, his voice a tone lower than a moment ago. "I think I'll take a walk. I want to be alone for a bit."
"Alright. I'm going back to the bunker," Hinata nodded, knowing that Tanaka liked his alone time.

"See you later, then," the rough-looking teen wished him in a small voice before beginning to head away abruptly.

"Hey senpai?" Hinata called, his heart fluttering when Tanaka stopped just long enough to listen to him. "Thank you for everything. For being strong. You don't know it maybe, but your strength is one of the reasons why we can still keep going."

Tanaka said nothing. But the way his shoulders seemed to relax as he headed away told Hinata that he'd understood nonetheless.

Coach Ukai had once said that Tanaka was the next possible candidate to be the ace of Karasuno because he has the incredible mental strength to break past all of his own barriers.

If anybody was to stay strong and inspire them in these tough times, it would have to be Tanaka.

They settled into a new, but old routine. Wake up, breakfast, daily activities, lunch, daily activities, dinner, daily activities, sleep. It was a routine that was not unknown to them, especially when they woke up and faced the ceiling of the gymnasium they’d found themselves back in.

But nonetheless, it was a routine that they needed to repeat, not just because it provided stability for their physical needs, but also because it provided them with the psychological stability they had lost when they spent so many weeks on the road, never finding a constant, never finding a rock to anchor them in place as they drifted across the stormy seas.

Repetition brought them peace. Their routine was mundane, but not unpleasant.

Kuroo began to learn mixed martial arts from a retired police officer at the army headquarters. Said something about preferring to be up close and personal when he fought for his life. Somehow similarly finding his place, Tsukishima picked up on firearms astonishingly quickly, although his aim had much to improve. Under the flabbergasted looks he got from his friends when he announced it, he said it was to be able to protect whatever family he had left, and to never be afraid of not making it on time.

Daichi found as job as an office clerk with the camp director, an army general posted in Niigata when the bomb hit and who then secured and fortified the city. Daichi was elated when the man taught him about leadership and management of human resources on the side, between a photocopy job and a retyping job or two. Kenma hit the books at the library and practically lived there, reading up on hundreds and thousands of different subjects for the hell of it, as if he was thirsty for knowledge after erring throughout the barren land. His favourite topic, endearingly enough, seemed to be zoology.

Keishin volunteered to be a tutor at a small school that had been improvised for the young children in Niigata. It was nice to see him try to teach kanji to a six year-old, but there was nothing more uplifting than to see him teach them how to play volleyball with a rubber ball they used to play every and any sport. Asahi, on his end, found his place at their bunker's kitchen, where he put his heart into every soup he poured for the hungry refugees of Niigata. Nobody complained about the extra rice or miso he brought back occasionally.

Suga and Yamaguchi got, very obviously, two positions in the clinic. Considering they’d never actually studied in the profession and had close to no clinical experience, the clinic director assigned
them to be nursing assistants. The position suited both of them very well, as they could work, and
learn from their co-assigned nurse at the same time. Suga soon found an affinity for medical nursing,
whilst Yamaguchi began to specialize in trauma nursing. That last one had everybody in shock for a
little while, and they never could look at Yamaguchi the same way again. Especially not when he
came to dinner with blood staining his borrowed scrubs. Suga just found it amusing, and sometimes
slept at the clinic in order to keep working and learning all day long.

Kageyama, very surprisingly, found that he enjoyed being a receptionist at the government office,
even if his attempts at smiles sometimes caused small children to cry. He didn't like being seated all
day, typing away at the computer, but seeing someone's face light up when he announced that their
loved ones were alive never failed to make his heart flutter. He sometimes found the corners of his
lips twitching upwards into something serene, but as soon as he tried to deconstruct how he was
doing that, his expression flattened again on its own, as if his body was trying to keep his peace a
dirty little secret. Noya, on the other hand, spent his days with a huge grin slapped on his face,
mostly because he got a job at a daycare where the kids seemed to ignore that the world was falling
apart at the seams all around them. Noya didn't mind; their innocence seemed to clear his own mind
of its own insecurities.

Tanaka did a bit of everything. He seemed to want to share his energy and enthusiasm with as many
people as he could. One day, he'd help fill ration bags. The next day, he'd help the owner of the
corner store. The one after, he'd deliver mail. He seemed to be happy with the variety he had at his
fingertips. And finally, two weeks after they first reached Niigata, Hinata got a second chance, and
swore never to repeat the happenings of the past again.

She had black hair, but the brownest eyes Hinata had ever seen since he'd last seen Natsu.

"What's your name?" he'd asked when he'd found her begging for scraps of food one afternoon.

"Tomoe," the little girl had replied hastily. "Do you have anything to eat?"

"I'm Hinata Shouyo," he'd introduced himself right back, entranced by the brown of her eyes.
"Come with me. I know someone who can maybe get you some extras."

"Wow," she'd exclaimed, and had hopped up to cling to Hinata's hand gratefully. "Thank you, big
brother Shouyo!"

He swore to never again let her go. His second chance. His redemption.

Tomoe was a 6 year-old girl who hailed from Fukushima. She and her family had been picked up by
initial rescue crews and had been dropped off in Niigata. However, when her father passed away
from cancer, her mother became depressive, and attempted suicide by hanging. Tomoe had called for
help upon finding her swinging, and they'd brought her down, only to find that half her body was
paralyzed by a stroke triggered by the stress of her attempt. Even worse off now, she and her
daughter had been taken off the wait list to be taken to Hokkaido, and were doomed to live here until
she either passed away, or they both did. Later on, the bruises and cigarette burns unashamedly
painted across Tomoe's baby skin gave Hinata an idea of how much his protection meant to her.

He liked to call her Natsu in his head. He liked to pretend her hair was the same shade as his. He
liked to pretend she didn't remind him of ghosts he'd long since stopped seeing in his nightmares.

The other boys didn't comment when Hinata brought her over to sit with them at meal times and
shared his food with her. However, if Hinata bothered to look away from Tomoe sometimes, he'd
notice the questioning, or uncomfortable glances sent his way. Kageyama once tried to ask him about Tomoe, and what he intended to do by practically adopting her, and Hinata had merely replied that he was making amends.

Nobody really talked to him about Tomoe again. And slowly but surely, as he spent more and more time with Tomoe, he spent less and less time with the Karasuno group. Along with the fact that they slept in separate spots of the gym, Hinata soon found himself spending days where he totally lost track of his friends.

But he had Tomoe. He would always have her.

He played with Natsu when he had time. He taught her more kanji, despite being bad at it himself, and tried to teach her math. He held her when she cried and cleaned up the particularly nasty burns. On rainy days, which came often in Niigata, he stashed himself away for the day with her and played, listened to her speak, and just enjoyed all the time he spent with Tomoe. The more of her he saw, the better he felt about himself.

He spent two weeks with Tomoe. At that point, they'd settled into Niigata for a whole month already, and things seemed to be going well. At some point, when he decided to sit with the guys again at lunch, Daichi announced that they were getting closer and closer to the top of the waiting list, and that they would probably be near the top by the following week.

The news were extremely uplifting. Hinata began to wonder if he'd be able to bring Natsu to Hokkaido with him if he asked. Maybe he could convince Daichi to talk to the camp director for him. Ah, but he didn't remember Daichi's schedule. In fact, he didn't even know where Daichi slept in the gym, to be able to ask him outside of work hours.

Maybe he could visit Daichi at his work during the daytime hours and take a chance. The office was halfway across the secured zone, though. He wondered if Tomoe would want to walk with him...

"Oi, Hinata!"

Snapping out of his train of thought at the sound of his name, Hinata turned to answer, and found himself face to face with a very irate-looking Kageyama.

"What's up, Bakayama?" he asked, frowning at the frustration etched into his face.

"You haven't been listening at all," Kageyama huffed. "I called you at least three times to ask you if you wanted to go do the laundry together. I'm off work this evening."

"No thanks," Hinata replied calmly. "I'm going to go to the park with Tomoe."

"You always do," Kageyama frowned. "Do something different for once."

"Nah, I don't wanna," Hinata shook his head.

"Hinata," Kageyama snarled. "Snap out of it. It's been two weeks since you've met Tomoe and you've literally never left her side, ever. You need to stop!"

"No, I don't." Hinata looked affronted by the mere thought of it. Why would Kageyama even say that? "I'll do whatever I wanna do."

"Do you ever wanna do something else than stick with Tomoe?" Kageyama shot back, taking a step towards him. At that moment, Hinata considered all of his escape routes at once. They were in the street, so there were many, but just the reflex of having looked for an out surprised him for a second.
Long enough for Kageyama to continue. "I think you need Tomoe more than she needs you."

That hit a nerve. The truth hit a nerve.

"No I don't!" Hinata bristled. "She needs me! I help her and I give her food when her mother takes her share! I bandage her burns and let her cry on me! I teach her stuff and play with her! She needs me!"

"You're not being you, idiot!" Kageyama shot back, taking another step forward. "Even Suga said it; you're acting weird! You're almost scary!"

"You're the scary one, Bakayama!"

"Prove it to me!" Kageyama challenged. "Prove to me you're not totally obsessed with this little girl because you still feel guilty about your sister! Spend one day without her, I dare you!"

"Fuck off," Hinata seethed at Kageyama, bristling immediately at the thought of leaving Natsu's side. "There's nothing you can do to stop me. I'll do whatever I want." And with that, he turned around to leave.

"No, you won't," Kageyama interrupted, however, unwilling to let him go. Instead, he stepped forward and grabbed his wrist, pulling him towards him before he could head off.

Hinata saw red.

"Let go!" he growled, trying to get loose from Kageyama, who held fast. "You don't know anything! You don't know anything about Tomoe!"

"Of course I don't!" Kageyama frowned, trying to grab Hinata's other arm, too. "I know you, though. And this isn't you!"

"You don't know me!" Hinata shook his head, swinging his other arm at Kageyama to get him to release his grip. It didn't work, and soon, Kageyama had him pinned against a wall as he flailed. "Let go, stupid! You don't know anything about me! Why the hell would you care?"

"I do know!" Kageyama raised his tone minutely. "And I do care because we're... we're like family. And you showed me that in the first place!"

"We're not family," Hinata glared at him venomously, and at that, Kageyama did release him, just enough for him to tug himself out of his hold. Hinata couldn't even bring himself to feel guilty for the shock on Kageyama's face. "Face it. We're just people who met at school in a club, and we stuck together because we had no one else we knew around us at the time. We're nothing like family. We're just... acquaintances."

"What is wrong with you?" Kageyama asked softly, still a bit in shock. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing happened to me!" Hinata wrestled himself away from Kageyama and glared at him as he turned to head away. "I'm gonna go see Tomoe. She's my family, and she needs my protection. Leave me alone!"

"Hinata, don't walk away!" Kageyama warned him, albeit half-heartedly, but Hinata did not listen.

Nobody would be able to stop him from redeeming himself. He had to do this for his little sister. For himself. So that he could finally sleep a dreamless sleep at night.
So he did join Tomoe, and though his gut wrenched him away from her, his heart tugged him closer, and he let her fall into his arms again. Again and again. As many times as it took for him to feel clean again.

He met with the guys again in the evening. And by that, he meant a few of them, as they approached his sleeping spot just as he made up his sleeping bag for the night. He saw them coming, with Kageyama amongst them, and bristled, not turning to greet them.

"Hey Hinata." Suga was the first to greet him. "How are you?"

"Fine," Hinata snapped irritably, glad to see them wince at his hostility.

"What are you up to?" he continued regardless.

"What's it look like?" Hinata mumbled rudely, glaring down at his sleeping bag. "I'm gonna go sleep."

"Before you do, we just wanted to talk a little," Daichi stepped in, as authoritative as ever. "About Tomoe."

"This again?" Hinata huffed at them. "I told you. She's my family. I need to take care of her."

"We understand. But there's a difference between taking care of someone and being totally obsessed with them," Suga replied carefully. "We think you're acting a bit too obsessive with Tomoe."

"I'm not obsessive. I'm just being a good older brother," Hinata argued, insulted that they thought he was going overboard in protecting Natsu. He was just doing what was expected of him in order to never repeat the experience of losing Natsu again.

"You just met her," Kageyama bristled again with all the tact he had in him. Which wasn't much at all. "You barely even know her and yet you're protecting her like you owe her something."

"I do owe her something," Hinata protested. "A second chance. I don't ever want to repeat what happened before. This time, I'm going to protect my little sister!"

"She's not-" Suga began, but suddenly, Hinata was on his feet with fury in his eyes.

"Why are you trying to keep me away from her!?" he yelled, grabbing the attention of a few strangers around them, who quickly turned their eyes away in disinterest. "She's done nothing to you and she deserves better. I have to save her this time!"

"Hinata-" Daichi began, reaching out, but Hinata pushed his hand away and grabbed his shoes instead.

"Leave me alone! You have no idea how I feel," he seethed with a terrifying calm, a terrifying resignation that suddenly bared the entire contents of his soul to the people watching him in horrified realization. "I'm leaving. I'm gonna go sleep with Natsu tonight."

And he didn't understand. He didn't understand why his so-called friends suddenly looked at him in horror, and why they tried to call his name. He didn't understand why his body commanded for his legs to run, quickly carry him out of there, as if he was subconsciously afraid of what he would hear if he stayed.

He ran, out on the streets where he finally deemed it safe to put his shoes on, and then jogged on forward through the darkness. Despite it being dark, he knew the way to Natsu's bunker by heart,
and so he pressed on. Thankfully, the security at the bunkers was lax, at least, as far as Hinata was concerned. He was confused as to why there were armed guards at the door to Natsu's bunker, a community centre, but slowed down and tried to play it cool.

"Hey. I wanna go in. Can I?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"Yeah," one of the guards looked at him weirdly, as if wondering why he was asking that question. "Go right on ahead."

"Thanks," Hinata bowed as he passed, and made his way in.

It was weird how he even knew his way to Natsu's spot, by mere muscle memory.

The black-haired child slept next to her mother, a woman in her late thirties probably, and Hinata had no trouble finding them both. Thankfully, the mother was asleep when he got there, Natsu sitting on her sleeping bag and doodling to pass the time.

"Hey, kiddo," Hinata greeted her with a smile as he approached. Natsu immediately looked up and grinned brightly.

"Big bro!" she exclaimed, getting up to rush over and hug his waist tightly. "You're here!"

"Yeah," Hinata nodded, hugging her back and then leading her by her hand to her sleeping bag. "My friends got a bit annoying tonight so I wanted to come sleep next to you instead."

"Sure!" the little girl nodded. "Tell me a bedtime story?"

"Of course," Hinata nodded enthusiastically, and twirled one of the strands of her short orange hair with his finger. He loved it when he looked into the brown of her eyes and saw galaxies come to life.

He told her a story that reminded him of Kageyama. The story of the demon and his club. But the more he went into the story, the more he felt off. As if something had gone horribly wrong and he hadn't even realized it. But he couldn't, for the life of him, figure it out.

So he put his arms around Natsu when the lights-out was called, and tried to relish in the feeling of his little sister nestling herself within his arms to sleep.

...-

Hinata did not wake up to the sound of gunfire. Nor did he wake up to the sound of screaming all around him.

Instead, he woke up with a gasp for air as he sat up abruptly, because something in his gut felt so wrong, it hurt.

In retrospect, it was probably the familiar smell of blood that woke him up.

Blood. So much blood. And then, the gunshots filtered into his ears.

He could feel his breathing picking up, even if he consciously tried to suppress it. He couldn't panic. He couldn't panic. His consciousness was blanking out in places and spots began to grow in front of his eyes as he blinked in an effort to keep holding on. The first scream began to claw its way up his throat, digging its sharp nails in the tender walls of his trachea.

"Kageyama?" he whimpered, eyes darting to the side and seeing nothing but a panicking crowd. "Tanaka-senpai?" Still, nobody answered him. "Nishinoya-senpai?" None of his friends were there,
none of them, none of them, none of them-

"Big brother!"

Someone was screaming, but Hinata had no idea who. The person apparently had other ideas, because he soon had an armful of little girl, with long black hair and teary brown eyes, splattered in blood.

"Big brother," she cried. "I'm scared! I'm scared, let's get away!"

"What's happening?" Hinata asked, totally confused, and dropping the girl in order to clutch his head in pain.

"There are mean people with guns," the little girl cried. "I'm scared! They're killing everybody!"

"Shit," Hinata swore, his survival instinct getting the best of him. He tried to rise to his feet, but found himself shaking in terror. The continuous bangs of the gunfire raining upon them was taking its toll on his sanity and he could feel the last bits of his control slipping away.

The crowd parted momentarily, and Dr. Hayate was right there, a manic grin on his blood-splattered face, raising a gun at Hinata.

He screamed.

"Big bro!" the little girl screeched out as well, jumping on him to give him a hug. Unable to control himself anymore, Hinata fell, hitting his head against the floor, and cried out as well, then curling up on himself.

"Why?" he sobbed out, daring to glance next to him, and finding Kenma's lifeless body staring right back at him.

He screamed again and cried. He cried loudly, even as someone tugged on his arm, even as the little girl cried his name, even as Tomoe begged him to get up.

And it came back to him. Tomoe. Tomoe. The little girl he'd sworn to protect as his second chance at Natsu. He couldn't let her be a repeat of Natsu, too.

But the more he thought, the less resolve he had. Tomoe was begging him to move, asking him to protect her, crying out for his help, but Hinata was frozen in place.

"Big brother Shouyo," she finally begged, eyes filled with tears that rolled down her pale cheeks, taking her innocence along with them. "Please get up. Please. I need you."

"Tobio," Hinata called out instead, eyes darting from side and fearing what he would see.

First, he saw Tanaka on the ground with a bullet through his brain, and his blood froze in his veins. Soon after, Nishinoya's body fell on top of him.

There was a bang and Hinata felt someone fall on top of him. With a hysterical screech, he pushed the person off, only to find Yamaguchi gurgling blood and blaming him with his eyes until the light in them faded.

Hinata wanted to die.

"Get up!" Another voice began to scream, and Hinata felt like it was for him. "Get up! We have to move!"
Lifting his eyes, he saw Kageyama running for him, panic clear in his eyes, reaching out for him.

Hinata reached his on back and locked eyes with Kageyama's light brown eyes. Only for a second before a bullet went through his head and painted the corpses piled on the floor with his brains.

Hinata felt faint. Only the touch of someone's tiny hand in his kept him awake. Tomoe kept him awake. But Hinata didn't care. He wanted to die.

"Big brother," she began as well, calming down as all her energy and will to live left her. "Please. I don't want to die. Please save me," she begged in a terrified whisper.

And as hell came to life around them and bodies dropped like flies, Hinata curled up on himself, and smiled.

"Come morning light," he promised softly to himself, and then looked up to smile at Tomoe. "Come morning light."

She didn't seem to understand. So when the bullet pierced through the side of her head, out the other side, she fell with a look of confusion and of betrayal etched on her face forevermore. Strangely enough, the thud of her dead weight on the ground sounded like every other body dropping around him.

Hinata fell as well, mostly out of exhaustion and hopelessness, and stared into Tomoe's glazed look as if he'd find answers in them. Her blood leaked out and soaked his clothing and his face. Out of reflex, he put his hand out and held hers, but found that her hand was foreign to him.

She wasn't Natsu.

Soon, the gunfire began to lessen, and Hinata closed his eyes, waiting for it to end. He closed his eyes, figuring he wouldn't have to see the dead bodies of his friends if he could see nothing, and waited for a gunshot to off him as well.

Dying felt peaceful. Hinata didn't know why he'd feared it so much to start with.

Soon, the gunfire totally died down, and orders began being barked left and right. At some point, footsteps came closer to him, and he held his breath, mostly out of anticipation than anything else. However, as soon as they came, the footsteps were gone, not even having stopped near him. Something very similar to disappointment overcame him, and he had half a mind to get up and reveal himself, just to let it be done and be over with it. But his legs shook from the aftermath of the bloodbath, and his ears rang with the fading echo of gunshots, and he was too afraid to open his eyes and find something he wouldn't like.

So he laid still. He laid still until the voices called a retreat, and the community centre hallways fell silent.

Only then did Hinata let his breath hitch and his shoulders shake and his body curl up in the pool of blood in which he laid, and only then did he allow himself to cry.

He didn't care about anything anymore. He didn't feel guilty about Tomoe. He didn't feel sad. He didn't feel angry at himself or at anybody else. He just wanted to see his friends. He just wanted to return to his family.

Soon after, as he allowed himself to cry, new footsteps entered the area, and new voices filtered in. His shoulders shook uncontrollably, so despite his survival instincts telling him to shut up and play dead again, he just couldn't. He couldn't do it anymore.
"Head out, triage team!"

Triage for what? Triage for who'd died with a bullet to the brain and who'd died with a bullet to the heart? Were they triaging the survivors to be able to get rid of the last of them?

"Red here!" Someone called somewhere close to Hinata, and he figured he should open his eyes. Still, his eyelids were sticky with tears, and he was still too afraid to try anything. So he stood still and sobbed in silence.

Finally, the footsteps crouched next to him, and by the way Tomoe's limp hand moved in his, he figured the man was examining the body of the little girl.

"Tch," the man sighed, moving away from Tomoe, and finally going to Hinata, who was very obviously very much alive and very much in distress. "Heyo kid. Are you hurt?"

Hinata did not reply, too afraid to open his eyes.

"Hey, look at me," the man softly shook him by the shoulder, and then turned him so he laid on his back. "Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?"

"I'm scared," Hinata hiccupped, putting his hands on his eyes. "I don't wanna look."

"I know it's scary, but you made it," the man assured him, as if it was supposed to make him feel better. "But now I have to know if you can open your eyes or not. Can you?"

"I can. I don't wanna," Hinata insisted, shaking his head and feeling the blood on the ground seeping into the strands of his hair.

"Green here, for anyone who has time," the man called out with a sigh, and then patted Hinata's arm comfortingly. "You made it, kid. You're okay."

Hinata whined in response, exhausted and stressed and scared. The man moved away from him, leaving to check for other survivors, and he was alone again. However, it was not for long. Soon enough, someone approached him again and crouched next to him. Hinata felt himself be pulled upwards into a sitting position, and a blanket was wrapped around his shoulders.

"Hey, kiddo," the man greeted gently. "I'm a soldier. I'm gonna carry you out for the medics to take a look at you, okay?"

"I don't wanna see," Hinata begged again in a soft whisper. "I don't wanna see them dead. Don't make me."

"It'll be alright," the man promised, sounding like he didn't even believe himself to begin with, but gathered Hinata in his arms in a fireman carry anyway. The only thing Hinata could do was pull the blanket tighter around him and shake, even after all the tears left him.

They walked for a little bit, voices occasionally filtering in and out of hearing, and finally, it was a gust of fresh air that tipped Hinata off on the fact that they'd stepped outside.

There was a commotion outside, though, and Hinata soon found himself regretting not staying inside, where there had been a silence of the dead. Outside, people were screaming and crying, some lamenting and others trying to keep a semblance of order. There were orders being barked as well, and Hinata finally, finally hazarded opening his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the face of the soldier carrying him. And then, when he turned his head,
the first face he recognized in the hysteric crowd was Kageyama's. Time slowed down as soon as he saw him, and Hinata's breath hitched, frozen.

And this time, it wasn't a delusion. It wasn't a hallucination. Kageyama was there, and was screaming his name in desperation, trying to get past the soldiers trying to keep a perimeter, but Hinata could only see him mouth it with panic and relief in his eyes. Time was sluggish, all sound filtering into a dull buzz in Hinata's ears, and his eyes widened minutely at Kageyama's presence before they shut again to squeeze more tears out, and Hinata began to cry loudly.

The soldier carrying him didn't seem alarmed, but did pick up his pace until he set him down somewhere safe.

"This one's hyperventilating. He's in shock," the soldier called out to someone unknown, but Hinata could only tangle himself up in his own panic and try and breathe and cry and pray Kageyama's name at the same time. Quickly enough, he found himself dizzy, and that only panicked him even more.

"Look at me and breathe with me," someone called to him, and Hinata opened his eyes to find a kind-looking paramedic smiling at him, her breathing very conspicuous so he could follow.

So he did. His hitching, heaving breaths became deeper until he found himself calming down and his heart slowing down a bit. Only then did the paramedic put an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth and let him breathe some oxygen out of a tank.

"Keep the blanket for a bit," she prompted him kindly. "You'll warm up. You're in shock now so you need to stabilize before I can let you go."

"Mhm," Hinata nodded, drained of all energy. He glanced to the side, where the small crowd was roaring, and found Kageyama staring at him, desperation and relief shining through his expression. "Can he...?" he asked shakily, pointing at Kageyama unsteadily.

"I'll get him," the paramedic offered, leaving Hinata for a second. Hinata saw her talk to Kageyama real quick, and then escort him past the perimeter, to Hinata's side in a brisk walk.


"I'm okay," Hinata laughed nervously, recognizing the relief in Kageyama's voice despite his words. "I'm okay."

Searching for his hand blindly, he found it when Kageyama held his out and entwined their fingers. A moment later, he sat down next to Hinata and tugged the blanket tighter around him with a shaky sigh.

Hinata didn't see his expression, but he could imagine it. Instead, he leaned into his side, and closed his eyes. Finding solace within Kageyama's presence was something he'd never tire of repeating, in any case.

...~*~...~*~...~*~...

There had been shootings at two of the three bunkers of Niigata. The third one, the school gymnasium, had been thwarted by the authorities, but unfortunately, the two others had gone off without a hitch. Daichi later confirmed, through his job, that the shooters were the rogue soldiers that wanted to eliminate all life on Japan and who had slipped past security after months and months of execution.
The third bunker had been locked down once news of the shooting reached them, but one relative per person in the other bunkers had been let out to go find their loved one. Apparently, when Suga retold the story to Hinata later on, nobody had even argued when Kageyama had immediately stood up to volunteer.

Hinata had sat down to talk with Suga and Daichi once the whole ordeal was over, and he was back amongst them. After all the hugs and after all the panic dissipated, Suga and Daichi had taken him into a corner to talk to him about what had happened. Namely, about Tomoe.

The name should’ve left some kind of emotion in Hinata, but he literally felt nothing when they’d attacked the subject with him.

"I know Tomoe meant a lot to you," Suga had said, looking genuinely upset for him. "But she wasn't Natsu. And you don't have to feel guilty for either of them."

"I don't," Hinata had surprised himself in answering. "I don't feel guilty for Tomoe. I don't feel sad. I don't really feel anything."

"You don’t?" Daichi had frowned. "Earlier, you were absolutely obsessed with her and with protecting her. You sure you're okay?"

"I... I hallucinated stuff," Hinata had admitted. "Natsu."

"We realized," Suga had nodded.

"But she isn't Natsu. Natsu isn't coming back."

"No, she isn't."

"And I don't have to feel guilty about that," he had finished, eyes downcast. "I just have to feel guilty for trying to replace her, and for replacing you guys. You're my real family, nobody else."

"It's okay," Suga had smiled at him a bit sadly. "It's okay. You were upset and seeing things and saw a second chance in a little girl that reminded you of your sister. You're gonna be okay, though. Take your time to mourn her."

"I don't need to," Hinata had shaken his head. "She's a stranger. I don't know what came over me for me to be so attached to her, but... I borderline don't even care about her. She was just another person."

"But she cared for you," Suga had raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Not really. I really wasn't that attached."

"But you were attached to her. You spent two weeks with her," Daichi had insisted. "Anybody would've been upset with anyone they'd known for two weeks."

"I spent two weeks with Natsu," Hinata had insisted, understanding himself even if nobody else did. "I don't know Tomoe. I don't have to mourn strangers. I'm just glad I'm back with you guys. I'm sorry."

"You should probably apologize to Kageyama, though," Suga had suggested. "He was the most upset with your attitude, even if he didn't show it."

So Hinata had apologized to him. He had taken back everything he'd said in a fit of rage and had
assured him that he hadn't meant a word of it. That Kageyama was still like family to him, and that nobody would ever take his place.

And even if Kageyama had told him off, the small glint in his eyes and the less steep slope of his eyebrows spoke volumes to Hinata about how much he'd needed those words.

Everyone was just as relieved to hear that Hinata was okay, and was back to normal. Many of them confessed their frustration to him, and he apologized to every single one of them.

And he made it. With the support of his true family, he pulled through the ordeal, and fell back into his routine.

However, the event lingered in the back of his mind in the week that followed. It felt eerily like a repeat of his circumstances back at the very beginning of his adventure. And if history followed this pattern of repetition, Hinata was sure that they were fucked.

...~...~...~...~...

If the 'Bloodbath of Niigata', as the massacre of half of Niigata's population came to be known on the streets, had served one purpose, it was to bump up the survivors on the waiting list to leave towards Hokkaido. Hinata felt guilty for having survived the ordeal and having taken profit from it, but at the same time, didn't feel guilty at all. It was a tough world out here and only the fittest (or luckiest) made it through alive.

Daichi was the one who brought them news later on, that they would probably be able to fit on the next caravan leaving for Aomori, from where a ferry would take them to Hokkaido. The news seemed to light a new spark in everyone. Already, the near month-and-a-half they'd spent in Niigata had invigorated them, both physically and mentally, but there would always be a lingering fear or doubt in their minds, inevitably until they reached a truly safe place.

That truly safe place was Hokkaido. Nowhere else would provide them with that kind of safety.

The hype built up during the next week. The boys helped clean up in the aftermath of the Bloodbath, working themselves to the bone in order to make the days pass faster. And soon, Asahi told them that they were waiting on a new stock of rations the next day, and the boys knew that it was their time to shine.

They packed their bags that night, absolutely confident that tomorrow, they'd be sleeping in Hokkaido instead. Their adventure was finally coming to an end, after so many twists and turns and horrors around every corner.

The arrival of the transport caravans was always a big deal to the inhabitants of Niigata. Hinata had never personally liked to be present for it, simply because he hated being given false hope, but this time, there was no false hope. This was true hope shining through. So this time, he did attend, along with the other boys, bags packed and strapped to their backs and looking eagerly as the first truck parked.

The supplies were unloaded first, clearing up space for the survivors to ride in. And then, half an hour later, when all the supplies were taken away to be distributed, a soldier broke away from the crowd to go stand in front of the first supply caravan. Hinata's heart skipped a beat when he looked at some papers he had on his clipboard, and caught in his throat when the soldier demanded attention.

"We'll now list off the individuals who have been allotted seats in the caravan, according to the
revised waiting list. This time, there are 90 places. When you are called, you have fifteen minutes to confirm your place, and then an hour to pack up and meet back here for departure. Failure to comply may earn you a loss of your spot. Due to revision being done to our supplies, following the events of last week, we still have not received information about when our next supply run will be. Therefore, it is unknown when the people who aren't chosen today will leave for Aomori next. Rest assured that we will do our best to ensure your safety and comfort until then," the soldier rattled off. Most of his speech went in through one ear and left through the other for Hinata. Most of all, he looked forward to the reading of the names.

"It's gonna be us," he whispered under his breath, mostly for himself, but then turned to the person next to him, who was Tanaka, and repeated it. "It's gonna be us."

"I know," Tanaka hummed, tense in anticipation, and Hinata saw his fists clench. He must've been just as excited as he was, or even more, to get to Hokkaido.

The thought of their adventure being over brought immeasurable joy to Hinata. So he grinned as the soldier rattled off the names.

As the list went on, and none of them were called up, though, Hinata's hands began to shake. His hands shook first, and as the soldier reached what looked like the last page of his list, and when the crowd around Hinata thinned considerably, his entire body began to shake.

He refused to let his hope go. But his heart was plummeting with every foreign name being spoken, and there was suddenly the very real and very present fear inside of him that they were not going to make it.

They'd come too far and suffered for too long not to make it, though. If any god existed out there, Hinata was sure that they would take pity on them and spare them any more misery. They needed to be on the next trip to Hokkaido. They had to be.

A glance sideways at his companions showed that they, too, were feeling the pressure as the names were rattled off and people broke away from the crowd around them with cries of relief or murmured prayers. Not just one pair of hands were tight on their backpack straps in apprehension. Suddenly, Hinata felt stupid for getting worked up.

They weren't going to make it. That was just the way things were.

"Hinata Shouyo."

But things could change. Destiny could change.

"Hinataaaaa!" Nishinoya was the first to scream in utter relief and joy in response to the name the soldier called, jumping on him and almost dragging him down when his jelly knees wobbled dangerously.

"Oh god," Hinata whispered, and then laughed unstably. "Oh... Oh wow! That's me!"

"Yamaguchi Tadashi," the soldier continued, and everyone turned to congratulate the quiet boy, who was suddenly beaming.

This was it. Their escape. Their freedom. It was finally within reach.

"Nishinoya Yuu."

"Your senpai would never leave you behind, of course!" Nishinoya grinned widely, ruffling both
Hinata's and Yamaguchi's hair in excitement.

"Tanaka Ryunosuke."

"Saeko, here I come," Tanaka whispered, taking a deep breath, and letting a wide grin bloom on his face. "Allllllright!"

"Kozume Kenma."

"We're gonna make it!" Hinata cheered, grinning brightly at his black-haired friend, who softly smiled back.

Destiny could change. Destiny was a very, very changeable thing.

"And that is all," the soldier finished with a tap of his pen against the clipboard, and then closed all of the papers he'd rifled through.

Hinata, who had been standing on top of the world so far, felt it very abruptly shatter beneath his feet. Reality smacked him in the face with a gust of wind that announced rain very soon.

"That's it?" Suga was the first to repeat, voicing something that most of them had refused to hear the first time.

"All those who were named have fifteen minutes to check in with an officer to confirm their departure, and will meet back here in an hour to leave," the soldier reminded them, and then bowed to the crowd before backing away and leaving towards the caravan to start registering people.

As the remaining people dispersed with a disillusioned slump of their shoulders and a heartbroken sigh of acceptance, the boys of Karasuno stood in place, as if standing strong this time would change anything at all.

(It always felt like their destiny was set. No matter how much the course of it changed, they always ended up in the same way. In despair).

"Well... I guess it's better than nothing," Daichi choked out, his voice strangled as if it took everything for him to say those words. "As they always say, women and children first."

Nobody wanted to say it because it would break all of their hearts into pieces. Nobody wanted to remind him again and again that they were all children. Nobody wanted to say out loud that they all deserved to be saved.

"It's alright," Ukai tried to comfort them, looking absolutely heartbroken, but also grimly accepting of their fate. And just looking tired. So, so tired. "The rest of us will take the next one. It can't take THAT long for another caravan to come."

"He's right," Kuroo nodded along, a sad smile on his face as he glanced momentarily at Kenma's stricken expression. "At least half of us are safe for now. The rest of us will follow, I know it."

"It's not the end of the world," Tsukishima surprisingly pitched in, looking tense, but trying to play it off as the usual impassivity. "We'll just take a little more time to get there. No big deal."

"Yeah," Kageyama surprisingly agreed, glaring at Hinata specifically. "Stop looking like we just died."

And Hinata realized that tears had been pooling in his eyes since the announcement, and that they
were ready to tip over anytime.

"But... But we don't know when you'll be able to join us," he insisted, his eyes burning and his throat locking up almost painfully.

"We know." At those words, all of the ones who hadn't been named shared a look. Only Suga, who had spoken first, felt it was alright to keep talking. "You don't have to repeat it. But this isn't the end, either."

"Yeah." All heads turned to Noya, who had a new fire burning in his eyes. Sometimes, his determination seemed like a bit too much, but they needed the reassurance, no matter how empty or false it was. "We're just opening up the way for them. They'll join us soon and we'll have everything set up and ready for them when they get there. It'll be alright."

"We should go confirm our names," Tanaka reminded them hesitantly. "We shouldn't miss our chance."

"But-" Hinata tried to interject again, but then there was a hand on his shoulder to stop him. Hinata turned to find Kenma shaking his head at him solemnly.

"Shouyo, we should go. There's no use being sad about what's already done. We should just be happy about what we have. Goodness knows it's more than we've had in a long time," he remarked, striking a chord inside Hinata's heart.

"Okay," he agreed, and rubbed the tears out of his eyes. Except the more he rubbed, the more of them came, until he was sniffling and rubbing his eyes red. "Let's go."

"It'll be okay, Hinata," Daichi promised as the lucky ones turned to go sign up, and just this once, just this one time, Hinata did not feel like everything would be alright, even if Daichi said it would be.

One hour was not nearly enough time to prepare for this great departure. Hinata felt like he had a hundred thousand things to say just pending in his brain, just hanging off the tip of his tongue, but nothing came out. He wanted to say 'thank you', he wanted to say 'sorry', he wanted to say so many things he couldn't even begin to explore in the span of an hour.

Time passed too quickly. Before he knew it, Hinata had only just begun to say hello, and it was already time to say goodbye. And suddenly, Hinata regretted not having said all of the things he wanted to say in the time he had to spend with his friends. His family. His only loved ones left in the world.

He hadn't lost his loved ones. He knew exactly where they were, but he was still about to lose them.

"I don't wanna go..." he found himself saying as the final goodbyes were being exchanged, shocking himself more than anyone else with the confession.

"You don't mean that," Daichi quickly rectified, as if he was trying to hurry and correct him before he began to believe him, too.

"No, I don't," Hinata agreed hesitantly. "I do want to go. But I also don't want to leave you behind."

"You aren't leaving us behind, Hinata," Suga jumped in, letting Yamaguchi go towards Tsukishima to instead turn to Hinata. "You're clearing the way for us. Take this as another raid where you get to
"You're right," Hinata nodded, and threw a glance at Kageyama, who was being loudly spoken to by Nishinoya and Tanaka simultaneously and who didn't seem to be very happy about it. "I just... don't want to be separated, after all this time of having made it through all together. It feels like we won't be able to make it if every single one of us isn't accounted for."

"Well, there really is nothing that can be said to smooth this departure out," Kuroo butted in, joining their circle. "But if you won't take this as a challenge, take this as a promise. A promise that the two groups will be reunited again, just because there's no way that we can be pulled apart after being welded so tightly together."

"The caravan will depart in 5 minutes! Please take your places!" a soldier announced from behind them, making Hinata's heart skip a beat. This was it. This was where they diverged from one another.

"Everyone, come closer," Ukai motioned them, and the little groups of people who were talking came closer to make one big circle of twelve people who had been one another's crutches when the world kicked them behind their knees. "This is it. It's goodbye, but it's not farewell."

"So cheesy, coach," Nishinoya chuckled a bit tensely, trying to diffuse the atmosphere.

"But it's true," Ukai continued. "This isn't an end, just another adventure. Just another hurdle to clear before we're home-bound free. Take this as yet another circumstances, and move past it, just like we did in the death camp, just like we did in Shoukyo, just like we did in the forest. Just like you'd already done a hundred times before we joined your group."

"Coach Ukai is right," Daichi stepped in, everyone's hearts swelling at his inspiring, comforting voice. "No one is alone in this. Though we are separated, we are not apart. And just like magnets, just like lost souls heading home, we will repeatedly and systematically find ourselves returning to one another."

"Three minutes, everyone! Please load up the trucks!"

"Group hug," Suga called, and Noya enthusiastically repeated it, drawing everyone closer. And in the moment, in the small moment where they were all pressed against one another and felt one another alive and breathing and still standing no matter what, in that small moment, they felt the tears surface in their eyes.

So when they drew back, unwilling but forced to lest they suffocate in the comforting body heat emanating from the nest of crows, they were none too surprised to see several of them crying quietly, stone-faced if not for the tears rolling down their reddened cheeks.

"It's been an honour traveling with you," Kuroo swallowed heavily. "Thank you for having us. And please take care of Kenma while I'm not around to do it."

"Noya, Tanaka, you guys, too," Suga laughed, wiping some tears out of his eyes before they could fall. "You're the senpai, so take good care of our kouhai for us."

"Don't be mean to our senpai, either!" Kageyama huffed out loud, not targeting anyone, but Hinata feeling like he was being targeted anyway.

"Yeah, yeah, Bakayama. Try not to smile anyone to death," the orange-haired player snickered instead.
"Safe trip to Aomori," Asahi wished them, smiling in genuine happiness for all of them. "And be careful."

"We will be," Noya assured him, grinning wide despite the tears staining his cheeks.

"One minute, the trucks will be departing soon!"

"Alright, go." Surprisingly, it was Tsukishima who pushed them on. "Stop wasting time and just go," he repeated, and that was all the group needed.

"Goodbye!" They all waved simultaneously, stepping back as if putting some distance between them would ease the separation process. It didn't. Heartstrings pulling in every direction, Hinata took the painstaking steps away from his beloved family, and captured the image of them all smiling, as if afraid that this would be the last time he saw them.

He couldn't help the fear that gripped his heart then. This goodbye felt like a farewell to him, for some ominous reason. His gut roiled at the thought of leaving, all of a sudden. Something felt off.

But the others were already leaving, and Hinata couldn't keep them waiting. And to be very honest, somewhere deep inside, he couldn't help but be glad that he was heading to a safe place. He just wished it didn't have to be like this.

"I'm scared," he whispered to himself, mostly musing out loud at this point, but then turned to the person next to him, who was Tanaka, standing tall and strong despite the torn look on his face. "Senpai, I'm scared."

"I know," Tanaka nodded, and then turned to give him a tired smile. "But it's gonna be okay. We're finally going to Hokkaido. We're gonna be okay."

Hinata wanted to believe him. So as he climbed into the truck and took his place between Yamaguchi and Tanaka, he repeated the sentence over and over again in his head, and hoped that repetition wasn't what ended up killing him in the end.

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Daichi watched the group leave towards the trucks, and their group stayed to watch until the trucks all left in a caravan, turning street corners until they were out of sight. Even when they were, they stayed, as if staring long enough would bring their friends back.

It didn't. So at some point, when the skies began to turn grey and a cold breeze shot through their veins, they decided to call it a day.

None of them really spoke on the way back to the bunker. There was nothing left to say, after all, not when half of them were missing, and had taken half of their energy with them when they left.

"Should we go have lunch?" Suga suggested quietly, walking faster as the clouds massed overhead.

"I'm gonna go take a nap," Kuroo declined quietly, quieter than he'd been since Shoukyo. It was worrisome.

"Me, too," Tsukishima decided, looking away from all of them.

"I'll head back to work immediately," Daichi mimicked Kuroo's tone of voice.

"I'm not very hungry," Asahi apologized, eyes all red, but no tears still flowing.
"Maybe later," Ukai hummed, deep in thought as always.

"No, thanks," Kageyama grunted, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Alright," Suga smiled a bit sadly, letting the last of his tears fall before he decided that he would not cry anymore. "I'll head to the clinic, see if they need any help. What time is it, Daichi?"

"It's half past noon," Daichi reported, checking his trusty watch and looking at the hands tick a few seconds before looking back up. "I suppose we could meet for dinner, though."

"Sounds good," Suga nodded, waving to all of them as they split. "Just remember, everyone. Just because the others are gone, doesn't mean that we have to be separated as well."

"Right," came the resounding response from all of them, and as he watched everyone go their own way, Suga felt like that was exactly what was going to happen.

They were falling apart because of a dent in their armour. Suga had never realized how truly fragile they all were until this very moment, where he felt the energy leave his body as he watched the backs of his remaining friends turn on him.

...-

Dinner was a bit tense. They all met up at the mess hall set up at the soup kitchen Asahi worked at and sat down for a quiet dinner. Occasionally, one of them would try to make conversation, but none of it really flowed. It really did feel like a piece of them had gone missing when they went from twelve to seven people.

"I got updates at work today. There are rumours flying around that something big is going to happen on the military scale sometime soon," Daichi mumbled, trying to grab their attention, but all he got were tired nods.

"Just let this war end already," Asahi voiced what they all felt, and they all fell silent once more, trying to concentrate on their meal as if glaring enough at the soup would make it more appetizing.

At that moment, they looked less like survivors and more like refugees of the end of the world. Dirty clothes and dirty hair, tired, pale faces that looked a hundred times older than their age, hunched backs as if the weight of the world was slowly but surely crushing them, playing with their food with their appetite having flown out of the window a long time ago... they looked pathetic, and sad.

It felt like all the joy had left with the ones who took the trucks earlier today. It felt unreal that they were not here anymore, too. It felt like the ghost of them still lingered, still sat by their side and laughed, still patted their shoulders and reminded them that they were going to make it, despite not being sure of it. When Daichi sipped his soup, he could hear Hinata's excited rambling and Noya's doubly excited response. They'd always have something to say. In fact, if someone like Tanaka was still around to see them right now, moping in silence, Daichi would bet that he would say something like-

"Why the long faces?"

It wasn't Tanaka.

But turning to see Hinata grin at them was just as good.

"Hinata?" they all exclaimed at once, blinking to be sure they'd seen right, and when their friend didn't disappear, they had to concede that he was real. And he was right there.
"Hey!" Hinata waved excitedly. "We're back!"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Kuroo asked, eyes wide in genuine surprise.

"We came back, all of us," Hinata hummed, looking incredibly happy with his words. "We couldn't do this after all, and we decided that we'd rather stay here than go without you."

They took thirty seconds to process those words. And when they all did, Daichi felt something weird welling up inside of him.

Something strangely akin to anger.

"What do you mean, you came back?" he repeated, his eyes wide. "You had your chance to get away from here, to be safe for good, and you came back?"

"Well, yeah-"

"What the hell is wrong with you!?"

"Daichi, calm down!" Suga immediately stepped in, grabbing Daichi's arm. Thankfully, that immediately seemed to have the intended effect, and he deflated, rubbing his face wearily.

"Hinata, why did you come back?" he asked weakly, wanting to hear the reasoning again, as if repeating it would make it more believable.

"We... we decided that it wasn't worth being safe if we weren't safe with the people who helped us get there," Hinata deflated as well, looking a bit guilty. "I mean, most of us did. Tanaka-senpai didn't seem very happy to come back, and Yamaguchi didn't say anything... But they came along when we asked the truck to drop us off. We hadn't gone far, so we walked back."

"You idiots," Ukai shook his head in amazement. "I can't believe you did something like that."

"We... we thought it would be a good idea," Hinata mumbled, suddenly seeming unsure.

"Hinata, don't take it badly," Suga jumped in, always ready to comfort. "It's just that, well... you had your chance to head to safety. Your ultimate chance, and you threw it away. Plus, it gave us peace of mind to know you were safe."

"I'm sorry," Hinata's breath hitched. "It... It was my idea. Because I don't have anybody left, so I thought, 'why is it even worth going someplace where there are nobody but strangers when I could be home still fighting every day with the only family I have left?' and it really, really seemed like the logical thing to do-"

"Calm down," Daichi grunted. "Where are the others?"

"Getting dinner. They'll join us soon," Hinata replied, eyes downcast. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of it that way."

"It's okay," Suga assured him weakly. "It's okay, we'll deal with this later. Right now, we're all glad to have you back safely."

"We're-" Hinata began, but interrupted himself quickly. "I'm happy to be back, anyway."

"Sit down," Ukai sighed, motioning for Kageyama to make space on the bench at his side for Hinata. "Everyone was fine with returning?"
"Noya-senpai was behind me all the way. Kenma said he didn't care. Yamaguchi didn't say anything. Tanaka-senpai was upset, though, because he was looking forward to seeing Saeko in Hokkaido. He even said he'd keep going alone because she meant so much to him, but in the end, when we asked to get off, he got off with us. We haven't asked him about it. He's not feeling very good, though."

"Hinata..." Ukai groaned, and the small spiker shrunk back, almost like a child afraid of being scolded. Seeing this reaction, Ukai just deflated, and ate a spoonful of cold soup. "Alright, alright, what's done is done. Let's just... relax for tonight. It's been a hard day. We'll think things through another day."

"Mhm," they all agreed, some more guiltily than others, and made space for the four other returning players who took their place in silence, blending right into the tense atmosphere of the group.

Hinata regretted the decision when he saw how quiet everyone was being, despite the fact that they'd been reunited. But then again, on a more selfish note, he really wasn't that sorry at all to be back amongst his family.

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They were still a bit tense for the next couple of days, but soon relaxed back into their routine. Daichi and Asahi did not get any news of any other caravans heading towards Niigata anytime soon, so there was still a little bit of doubt floating overhead about the rightness of their actions. Tanaka seemed to take it the hardest, moping around a little bit before slipping back into his routine, albeit with a little less energy.

Hinata didn't feel bad at all. Except when he saw the dark circles under his senpai's eyes. Then he felt a little guilty. But not that much.

Still, for all his senpai had done for him, Hinata felt like he owed him an explanation, and maybe an apology. Just to make things right. So three days after they got back to Niigata, he woke up early in the morning, and made his way out of the bunker, stepping over the countless bodies sleeping on the floor around him. Sleeping, not dead. Some images he'd never forget.

The air was fresh, and Hinata shivered, the breeze blowing through the holes in his sweater. The air in Niigata was generally colder, anyway, seeing as they were on the coastline, so Hinata knew that with the uncertainty of their next departure, he'd have to get used to spending time in this temperature. He only wished they had warmer clothes. The second-hand ones they'd been granted with the arrival of the supply caravans were not ideal.

In any case, braving the early-morning temperature outside, he began to walk, knowing exactly where he was going despite never having been there.

Niigata had been hit very harshly by the Forty Fireworks, just like every other large city of Japan, and the holes carved in its landscape at every street corner were testaments of how it bent but did not break. Until now, at least. Erring through the abandoned, dusty streets, Hinata could not help but mourn a little bit for the lives and the life that had been lost in this city, and every other one like it. His feet shuffled forward, kicking up dirt and debris as they carried him far away from the bunker. It would almost have been foreign soil if he didn't see Tanaka's figure in the distance a few street corners later.

Niigata was a port town back in the day, and in its glorious days, one could see the boats floating peacefully across the vast expanse of the sea. Now, the sea was dark and stormy, orange in the reflection of the pink sky, black in the reflection of the grey clouds announcing foreboding rain. The
boats were few now, most of them either docked, or sunken at sea. One ship was sailing off, but Hinata didn't care enough to go down to the docks and explore what it was about. Overall, it was a desolate sight to see. But none was as desolate as the sight of Hinata's senpai, sitting on the edge of a cliff, legs dangling in the air idly, and his eyes looking like he didn't have anything left to think about.

Hinata quietly approached, dragging his feet slightly to announce his arrival anyway, and though Tanaka didn't turn to greet him, he knew he'd acknowledged him.

The cliff was man-made, simply a crumbled part of the city that had been destroyed by a nearby bomb blast. It was pretty high up, but at the bottom was a vast sea of trees, most bent or burnt by the blast, but many still standing. Further on was the sea that Hinata was a bit too scared of to look at, but overall, it was a gorgeous view, as gorgeous as things could get in this apocalyptic world. He could understand why Tanaka chose to come here early in the morning.

Stepping closer to him, he sat down next to his senpai, trying to dispel the vertigo that grabbed hold of him when he swung his legs over the edge. And then, he tried to think of something to say. Anything. He really hadn't thought this through.

Thankfully, Tanaka spoke for him.

"I feel like the days are getting longer here," he began, his eyes still on the horizon.

Hinata didn't know how to reply to that, because he'd long since lost the track of time. The days had been long ever since he lost his family to the Forty Fireworks a few months ago. Only Daichi's watch gave him a sense of time nowadays; without it, it would feel like the world had stopped turning.

"It's getting harder and harder to just sit by and tell myself that I'll return to her someday, whenever that day is," Tanaka continued, as if spurred on by Hinata's silence. "You guys are awesome, really. I wouldn't be alive without you. But Saeko is my family; she's always been very important to me, and knowing that she's just beyond my reach is just... tearing me apart. She's so close, the closest she's been in months, but I'm still so far away from her."

"We're going to get there sometime, though. We're next in line. We're definitely going to go to Hokkaido and you'll definitely get to see her again," Hinata mumbled, not too good with comforting speech, not since his own emotions were more or less absent these days.

"That's the only thought that keeps me going," Tanaka admitted, finally turning to give Hinata a small, sad smile. A smile by someone who was done fighting, but who knew he still needed to stay strong. There was a pang in Hinata's heart at the sight of it.

"You're doing a great job at it," Hinata mumbled awkwardly, not knowing what to say. "Coach Ukai said once that you had the quality of a future ace because you had the mental strength to overcome all of your own barriers, and that doesn't just apply to volleyball. In real life, too, you're probably one of the strongest people in this group. And you keep others going thanks to your presence."

"I wish you wouldn't put so much faith in me," Tanaka laughed, sounding a bit forced and hollow. "This world has changed a lot of people. Including me. Including all of us. But I can't do this anymore. I want to go home. I want to go home to Saeko and pretend this is all just one big nightmare and that none of this actually happened."

(Hinata was suddenly stricken by the fact that his senpai was only 17 years old. He was 16. The third-years were 18 at best. They were kids. They were just kids. They were just kids expected to
stay alive when the world around them was set on fire. And suddenly, he understood why his senpai had so many dark circles, why his shoulders slumped and why he wanted to go to Hokkaido so much).

"The only thing I have that even resembles a family is here," Hinata answered himself out loud. "That's why I want to stay. But your real family is still alive, and there's no one who can replace that. To me, nobody can replace my mom. Nobody can replace Natsu. So for you, I understand that nobody can replace Saeko. So I'm sorry I made you get off that caravan when you were finally going home."

"I made the choice to get off, too," Tanaka sighed, turning his eyes away, back towards the sunrise. "But... It was because I was afraid. What if it was all lies? What if I didn't find Saeko? What if I got lost? You guys have been a part of this adventure every step of the way and without you, and without Saeko, I'd be all alone. I got scared. So I got off with you," Tanaka finished. "But... I still keep wondering if that was a good idea or not. It's not that you guys don't mean a lot to me. You do. But I had my chance and I can't stop wondering if I threw it all away."

The hidden meaning was clear. Tanaka couldn't stop wondering if traveling with this group was holding him back.

But Hinata didn't want to answer. If he did, the word that'd come out of his mouth would be 'yes'.

"Even if you threw it away now," Hinata began carefully, not sure how to act with someone this conflicted. In his mind, his own struggles had always been black or white. But Tanaka was someone who thought in shades of grey and Hinata was too flat to see the world from his perspective. "There will always be a second chance to take it back. And next time, you'll grab your opportunity and never let it go again."

"Well..." Tanaka sighed, stretching. A small smile dawned on his face as the bloody light of the rising sun hit them head on. The ship on the sea, all alone and bobbing peacefully on the waves, seemed to be getting further and further away from them in the blink of an eye. Soon, they, too, would leave this place and go somewhere safe, where they wouldn't have to be afraid anymore.

"Well...?" Hinata prompted when Tanaka didn't continue, hanging onto his every word, hoping that talking to him had worked.

And in a twisted sense of the term, it had.

"Let's just hope there is a next time, then," his senpai shrugged, and smiled at him like someone would smile when they had nothing left to smile for.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

"The military command center is getting rowdy lately," Daichi spoke to them at suppertime over their bowl of yakisoba. As they ate well and slept well, their energy seemed to come back and they all visibly gained weight, and it was this kind of progress that encouraged them to keep going.

"What's happening? We didn't get any news of a supply caravan heading our way," Asahi frowned, blowing on his noodles.

"It's probably not a supply caravan they're getting so worked up about," Daichi shrugged. "It's classified information, so I don't even get to handle those files. But my boss doesn't look very happy with it."

"That doesn't sound good," Noya remarked, voicing the obvious. "I hope it's nothing in regards to
"Well, we can only hope," Daichi sighed, his shoulders dropping. Ever since they settled in the Karasuno gymnasium, he'd begun to look a hundred times older than his actual age. It didn't suit him much. "I hope they're just upset about the political situation or something."

"Yeah," Hinata nodded, slurping his noodles without much care in the world. As long as he still had these guys by his side, he didn't feel like he was threatened by anything. Now, the only thing he had to be worried about was losing these guys. And logically, that could only happen if something happened within the camp. And so far, he could only think of one instance where that would have been a problem. So he hoped for the only thing he knew how to hope for. "Let's just hope it's not a repeat of what happened..."

(He should have been more specific. And he should have knocked on wood. But the walls around them were concrete, and none of them had ever felt this trapped before).

It happened five days after Daichi first reported the disturbances at the headquarters. Five days of waiting in apprehension, and finally, they were answered. Perhaps this time, they would have preferred to stay in the dark.

Hinata was taking a nap amongst the dead grass of the park when he was rudely woken by the shrill sound of an alarm.

His heart leapt in his throat as he shot up, freezing in place and trying to breathe. The loud, winding noise of the alarm went in through one ear and ricocheted inside his skull until he was seeing black spots in front of his eyes, and he was feeling his consciousness waver. He slapped his hands over his ears to try and block the loud noise out, but the longer it went on, the faster his heart beat, the more he saw nothing, and soon, he was panting for breath.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, I'm okay," he repeated to himself, feeling violent shivers racking his body as he curled up in a ball and tried to picture something else in his mind. He wasn't in distress. He wasn't panicking. He was going to be okay-

And the noise stopped.

Hinata was left with the loud beating of his heart in his ears and in his throat. It took him a little bit of time to calm down, but when he finally felt well enough to breathe again, he registered the alarm as being of utmost importance.

They'd only been told about the alarm upon their admission. It was said to be the indicator of a wide-scale emergency, and that everybody, upon hearing the alarm, immediately had to return to their assigned bunker for further instructions.

Not knowing what the emergency was felt like the most terrifying bit for Hinata. They didn't need something else looming overhead, they really didn't. Not now, not when everything was so unstable already.

Before he knew it, he'd gotten up, his ears ringing still, and was half-walking, half-jogging towards the school gymnasium he slept in. As he got nearer, more people began to appear, until they were a whole crowd heading back. And amongst the crowd, Hinata could only hear whispers of uncertainty, of fear and of hopelessness. He didn't like it. He wanted to leave, he wanted to escape. Anything but be caught in the whirling maelstrom of despair that was slowly but surely crashing
down upon the refugees of Niigata.

Once inside the bunker, his name was checked off a list and he was hurriedly told by a soldier to regain his sleeping spot. Apprehensively, he wove his way through the crowd and sat down on his sleeping bag, wondering if everything was okay.

Soon enough, Yamaguchi, who was sleeping next to him, arrived, and sat down on his sleeping bag without a word.

"What's going on? Do you know?" Hinata asked him a bit worriedly.

Yamaguchi just shrugged, though his eyes betrayed the worry he felt.

"I hope it's nothing bad," Hinata murmured, mostly to himself.

"It always is," Yamaguchi rasped, his voice broken by disuse, and shrugged.

"Thanks, Yamaguchi. Really," Hinata rolled his eyes, looking unimpressed. Yamaguchi just smirked back at him. Tsukishima was rubbing off on him even in these times, it seemed.

They kept silent until everybody was inside the gymnasium. Hinata tried to spot the others, but there were too many people and he couldn't see them. Once everyone was settled and the whispers turned loud, the doors opened once more and a soldier stepped in, his posture practically demanding attention. And he got it. As soon as he was handed a megaphone, everyone quieted and looked up at him anxiously.

"Refugees of bunker number two," he began in utmost seriousness. "We've recently received alarming rumours of a new nuclear strike on the island."

A collective cry of horrified surprise rose from the crowd at the news, and Hinata just felt numbness spread across his body until he couldn't feel a thing anymore. The soldiers at the front immediately tried to calm the crowd, yelling out and trying to keep some form or order, but were unable to control the suddenly frenzied crowd just begging for their suffering to end, one way or another.

"Everyone, please!" The announcer finally called, a hush falling across the rowdy crowd. And they listened, if only for a little bit of hope. "Although the strike is unconfirmed, we've received orders to prepare for it. For this reason, please pack your strictly necessary belongings in the next five minutes and proceed in a single file outside. You will be directed to trucks that will shuttle you to Niigata's underground bunker. Please proceed in utmost calm and do not panic. You are in safe hands, here in Niigata."

Hinata wanted to say something. And the only thing that came out was 'fuck'. And then he shut his mouth.

He was done fighting.

The people around him began to buzz in alarm, rushing to gather their belongings and find their loved ones. But Hinata couldn't move. He was done. Spent. Absolutely hopeless.

Yamaguchi put a hand on his shoulder to try and snap him out of it, but he didn't move. Even when he shook him a little bit more insistently, Hinata didn't move, just because he didn't feel like it anymore. It didn't even matter anyway.

"Come on," Yamaguchi rasped, whisking his backpack off the ground and practically shoving it at Hinata, who barely caught it. Finally, he mechanically began to gather his things, only being able to
grab some scattered clothes and hygiene supplies before the crowd around him began to move
towards the exit, forcibly dragging him into the current of this sea of panicked humans.

He lost sight of Yamaguchi, too, but couldn't bring himself to care. At this rate, they would all die
anyway. Whether he was alone or with the others would be of little importance when they all ended
up dumped in the mass grave that would become the country of Japan.

The closer he got to the exit, the more anxious the crowd seemed to get. Hinata began to feel
uncomfortably hot being tossed around and stuck to strangers who were buzzing around him, and a
scream clawed its way up his throat. He wanted to yell at all of them to shut up, to stop, to stop and
shut up and just stop, but he grit his teeth and breathed out through his nose. Someone might have
called his name in the back, but he didn't care enough to turn to see. Instead, he just followed the ebb
and flow of the tide until it pushed him outside the gym, towards the military trucks in the street.

It was utter chaos. People who came outside suddenly seemed to be terrified without the illusory
protection of the four walls around them. They screamed and yelled and pleaded with the soldiers,
who seemed at a loss of what to do. Some of them tried to run, and though some soldiers seemed to
want to chase them, the announcer, who was obviously a high-grade commander, told them to let
them go and concentrate on the evacuation. The people were clawing at one another in their haste to
come out and get into the trucks. And the noise. The cries of despair coming from all around Hinata were
deafening, to the point where they were ringing in his ears and echoing in his skull. And it was
driving him mad.

Hinata suddenly regretted not getting on the first caravan to Hokkaido. It felt like he'd have given
anything not to be stuck here in this nightmare once again. Many people pushed past him to get on
the trucks first, but in the end, Hinata was hoisted up on a large white truck by a soldier and vaguely
registered being told to sit down on the floor. He ended up squished between a pregnant lady who
kept whispering words of false comfort to her taut belly and an old man who only said one thing
once in a while, and it was 'just let it end'. Hinata figured he could have been stuck with worse. But
since he didn't see any of his friends on board the same truck as him, he supposed he could have
been stuck with better as well.

The ride was uncomfortably hot. The truck was obviously not made to carry human beings, but
merchandise that obviously did not need refrigeration. The metal walls around them rang with every
pothole they hit and jostled the entire pack of people practically stacked on top of one another like
livestock. Somewhere, a child began to cry, but otherwise, most people were too distressed to make
for much conversation.

They rode for a little while, about twenty minutes. However, time was sluggish, and the ride felt like
hours long. Hinata was so glad when they finally opened the sliding exit of the truck to let them out.
When the gust of fresh, humid air hit him in the face, he couldn't have been more grateful. Still, more
than anything, he was numb.

They were led out into an inconspicuous building in a single-file line, and a soldier at the entrance
asked them their names. After having confirmed his identity, Hinata was led down a corridor, and
through a door that led down a dark staircase.

It began to look foreboding. The further down he went the winding set of stairs, the more he tensed,
and the more apprehensive he felt. The people around him didn't seem so sure either, and the
whispering got louder the further down they went. The walls began to turn from cement to reinforced
metal, and the whirring of machines began to be heard. And finally, they hit the bottom, where a
vault had been opened and where all the people were going.

Inside the vault was an extremely large space illuminated by neons on the high ceiling. Hinata
figured that if he could jump three times higher, he'd be able to touch the ceiling. Otherwise, the vault was rather large, but totally devoid of any furniture, as if its sole purpose was to contain as many people as possible. That was probably it, now that Hinata thought of it. They were being herded like cattle into a vault that they would hope protected them from whatever was out there.

"Hinata!"

The orange-haired boy didn't acknowledge the first call of his name, but when it was repeated, he finally turned. And he was so glad to finally see a familiar face that he immediately broke away from the people picking a spot to settle in and ran towards his friends.

"Noya-senpai!" he cried in relief as he reached the libero's side, glad to see he was okay. Next to him, Kenma, who looked very worried, finally relaxed.

"You're okay," he simply sighed out in relief, and Hinata nodded, a smile finally dawning on your face.

"You, too. I'm so glad," he returned.

"There are a lot of us already here," Noya explained. "We're just waiting on some stragglers. Namely, Yamaguchi and Kuroo."

"Yamaguchi was behind me. He should be here any time," Hinata informed him.

"Good. Everybody's getting settled, and with the number of people we are, it'll be a bit tight, but we'll definitely have our own corner to ourselves," Noya hummed.

They fell in silence, not mentioning why they were here in the first place. They didn't need it to be repeated. As if a repeat of the experience wasn't enough already.

Soon enough, Yamaguchi joined them to the call of his name, and though there were no words, the look of relief on his face expressed all the gratitude he could've put into words. And finally, when they finally began to think that they'd just missed Kuroo, the bed-headed captain came in, immediately spotting them and rushing towards them.

"We have to find a spot quickly, or all the good ones will be gone and we'll be squished between a ton of people," he immediately began to rattle off, continuing even as Noya began to lead them away. "The floor gets cold after a long time so either we unroll some sleeping bags, or we stand up once in a while. Food is only given twice a day, once in the morning and once at night, and you have to eat it immediately or else someone else will steal it. The bathrooms are always jammed with people so having a spot close, but not too close to them is helpful. Best time for a piss is the middle of the night, or during a meal."

"Kuroo, calm down," Kenma intervened before his friend could run himself out of breath. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay. You're not alone this time."

"Right," Hinata hummed in thought. "You were in a bunker like this is Tokyo during the first strike, weren't you?"

"Yeah," Kuroo nodded, his gaze lost, as if he wasn't even there with them anymore. "I spent a week in a bunker with my mom and dad. Not knowing what was going on outside and what I would find when they let us out -if they let us out- was the worst part. But the Tokyo bunkers were more packed than this one. There, you had to stand most of the time, because if you sat you'd be stuck too close to someone else. It looks like we'll have no problem sitting here."
"Kuroo, it's okay," Kenma repeated, probably seeing something the others weren't. "It's okay. It's not the same. You don't have to go back there. This time it's gonna be better."

"I hope so," the black-haired captain muttered, blinking quickly until the dazed look was gone, and the usual, undecipherable one returned. "It's... it's not gonna be that bad this time around..."

"Right," Kenma hummed, and Hinata thought he saw him brush Kuroo's hand with his. However, they had joined the other group before they knew it, so his attention turned to his friends who were already settled on the tiled floor.

"Good call, picking a spot by a wall," Kuroo commented, and Ukai gave him a cocky smirk.

"Nuclear bunkers 101. Pick a spot where you're far from everyone else. We wanted a corner, but the corners were already taken when we got here. The wall will do."

"Is everyone alright?" Daichi asked quickly, wanting to make sure of his team's wellbeing above all else.

"As fine as we can be, considering," Tsukishima grumbled, looking uncomfortable with being in such close proximity with others. The nearest strangers were a few feet from them, and though neither group acknowledged one another, it was still uncomfortable being so close.

"It's okay, this time we're in an actual bunker," Suga tried to cheer them up. "No more dark, mouldy hallways below the school."

"Oh yeah, that was horrible," Noya made a face at the memory. "Almost got a lung infection from that place."

"What's the story behind that?" Ukai asked as Hinata put his bag down and settled next to Tanaka.

"I suppose we do have a ton of time to spare now," Daichi mused out loud. As if to back his point, the vault doors finally closed with a resounding clang that drew their attention for a few seconds, before they gave it back to their unofficial leader. Mostly because they were trying to ignore the claustrophobia slowly settling in over them. "We should tell some stories from before the time we met. After all this time, maybe it's time to share."

"We should. I suppose I do have some to tell, too," Kuroo nodded in agreement.

"The mouldy hallways story first," Hinata chimed in, if only to speak up and prove to himself that he still existed.

"Alright. Tsukishima should tell it, since he backed the idea!" Suga suggested with a grin that was obviously meant to put them at ease.

"No way. I don't wanna tell a story like that," the blond adjusted his cracked glasses with a huff.

"Be a sport, Tsukki," Kuroo teased, earning himself a glare. "We're here for a while, anyway."

The reality of the words sunk in relatively and surprisingly quickly. As if all of them knew better than to expect things to go well for them these days.

It sometimes seemed like still being together, the twelve of them, was the only good thing that would ever happen to them nowadays.
Hinata lost track of time. It was easy to do down in a bunker with a tiled floor and metal walls. Even the meals were the same; a portion of rice and a serving of watered-down miso soup, twice a day. They slept sitting up against the wall or lying down on one another, as they didn't have place to lie down fully, and shared the sleeping bags that several of them had brought along to huddle together when it got cold.

Hinata quickly grew into the routine, but also grew tired of the routine. Only Daichi's trusty watch could tell them how much time had elapsed.

And if Daichi calculated right later on, they were in there for a total of 56 hours and 27 minutes.

56 hours and 27 minutes until something changed.

It came quickly and it disappeared just as quickly. A rumbling noise that seemed to come from the depths of the earth and that came closer and closer until the floor began to vibrate.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and held their breaths. Nobody dared to even speak. And then, as the vibrations got stronger, cries arose, and people began to panic.

"It's okay," Kuroo simply offered, eyes lost as he gazed up at the flickering neon lights. "It's over. It's done."

And they didn't know if that was supposed to be comforting, or absolutely disheartening.

The vibrations, like a small earthquake, shook them for another second or two before fading out. The lights flickered once more before going out, and then coming back on, probably due to a backup generator.

The people began to whisper, wondering what was going on up on the surface. Hinata could feel the tension radiating from the crowd of dirty, sweaty, tired refugees huddled together in the bunker, and it began to affect him, too. He began to feel a ball in his throat and a clench in his chest. He bit his lip and swallowed heavily, but found that his limbs were too heavy to move around.

The news spread across the large room like a wave. Soon, people were whispering about the bomb having gone off, about it having destroyed everything, about it having killed millions of people again. Soon, the rumours reached the Karasuno group's ears, and they, too, began to doubt the future.

"Are we going to die?" A woman next to them asked to the members of her own group. Thanks to their proximity, though, they heard the foreboding question, and even heard the foreboding lack of an answer that followed.

"Nah," Kuroo replied with all of his desensitized nonchalance. "Someone out there is dead, though. But it's not gonna be us."

Hinata didn't know how good of a thing that was, in this case.

They stayed in there for a little while longer. Two meals later, in fact, the vault finally opened again, and the same military commander as in the gym stepped in. At first, not many people paid attention to him, but when he cleared his throat into the megaphone he held up, everybody hushed and turned to face him with pleading gazes. Pleading for any kind of update. Any.

"Refugees of Niigata," he began, as if not knowing how to continue. This didn't bode well at all. "Twenty-three hours ago, there was a second nuclear strike on Japan. This time, the epicentre was the island of Hokkaido."
Breath seemed to leave Hinata's lungs as if he'd been punched in the throat.

"The state of the island is as of yet unknown. The same can be said of its inhabitants. The radiation has slightly dissipated, however, so it is relatively safe to evacuate to the surface. From there, it might take a few more weeks to get orders and enough supplies to transfer you to a new refugee camp in the south of Japan, but until that time comes, you will be safe in Niigata."

It all felt like a lie. First, a shooting, and then, a nuclear explosion. Niigata seemed like anything but a safe place. However, they had nowhere else to go, not anymore. And so they were stuck, trapped in what claimed to be a haven but was just another prison in the end.

"It's never gonna end," Hinata concluded, and promptly burst into tears.

(And it was okay, because as usual, he was not alone).

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

They returned to the surface thirty-five hours after the explosion. And upon leaving the building that housed the bunker underneath it, they came face to face with the same bloody sky as they'd seen the first time. The familiar, yet unwelcome sight was anything but comforting. In fact, it was so disheartening that Hinata forgot to breathe for a few seconds.

"It's just like back then," he whimpered, letting the crowd drag him along as they were loaded back into the trucks, with less chaos this time. Everyone seemed to be defeated.

"It is," Noya agreed, tears still clinging to his lashes. "It's just like back then. It's an endless nightmare."

"It's only gonna end when we die," Tanaka corrected, and then curled up on himself as if to smother all the pain he bore inside of him.

"We're not gonna have to do everything all over, will we?" Kenma asked uncertainly, looking up at Kuroo for answers he didn't have.

"They have to find a way for us. They have to," Asahi bit his lip, white as a sheet ever since the explosion.

"What do they care?" Tsukishima clicked his tongue, glaring at the people who sat down next to him, squished too close for comfort. "We don't really matter to them. Who cares what happens to lowly survivors like us?"

"Why do we have to live like this?" Kageyama asked, an honest question rather than a lament. As usual, his dark blue eyes were uncomprehending, asking the obvious he still did not understand. And nobody had an answer for him, because they were all asking themselves the same thing.

What had they done to deserve so much suffering? Why were they victims of this apocalypse without end? Time and time again, why could they never be saved? Why was nobody trying to save them?

"Did we do anything wrong?" Yamaguchi ended up asking in a voice just above a whisper, just in case that was the answer to all of their woes. But it wasn't. More than anything, it was another uncertainty, and it was another pang in their hearts.

Their only crime had been to be alive. And if that was a crime in this godforsaken world, then they should have stayed innocent.
But if the theory of evolution was true, then they were the ones best fit for survival. This experience would literally be a repeat of the last, as morbid as it had been. They’d have to beware the rain. They’d have to eat canned food. They’d have to stay inside. The usual. The same.

It was like a nightmare all over again.

But, even if they had to go through the aftermath of a nuclear explosion all over again, this time, there were also novelties.

They discovered it when people began to get sick out of thin air. Random people, totally unrelated, totally different, and yet they all got sick with a fever, randomly timed vomiting, and general malaise. At first, it was thought that it was a bug running around the camp. But then, as the scientists got to work on busting the case, they quickly realized that people were getting radiation poisoning from being so close to the epicentre of the blast.

In that sense, it was different this time around. Mostly because Kageyama, Kenma and Suga got poisoned by the radiation, so it was another struggle watching them vomit their guts out and become delirious with fever. They had been so strong so far, and yet even they were bending to the circumstances of their world.

And then, the food they were able to eat became scarce, and the familiar pangs of hunger returned to claw at their insides. It was almost comforting, how they fell back into a pattern of rationing and sharing canned goods. Comforting considering the fact that it felt like it was all they knew to do anymore.

The authorities centralized the resources, and put everyone into one bunker so they could pool human resources and simplify the administration of the camp. The added people made everything even tighter, but at least the guys were able to play around with the sleeping spots a bit to end up close to one another. Still, the nights were long and unforgiving, especially when one person didn't want to shut up, or another vomited the meagre contents of their stomach, or another began to cry. Sleepless nights had never been a problem to them since they'd always been exhausted throughout their journey, but now, at the bunker, they were about to be.

Outside, the city of Niigata had fallen. The buildings had crumbled due to the earthquake and small tsunami following the blast, and even the fence delimiting the safe zone had been torn down by nature, as if nature itself was slowly but surely crawling its way towards the survivors to eradicate them. One part of the city had become waterlogged; the other part of the city had been flattened. Their bunker had sustained some damage, but with the impending threat of acid rain melting the skin off their bones at the smallest contact, the authorities immediately prioritized plugging all the holes that had been made before the first rain.

The first rain came twelve hours after they reintegrated their bunker. The boys huddled up next to one another and listened to the sky come undone overhead. At the first crash of lighting, the noise was so loud and so close that Hinata did not even need to say anything for Kageyama to immediately hold his hand, despite being feverish and confused half the time. He hid his face against Tanaka throughout the thunderstorm and refused to look elsewhere.

When it stopped, and he finally looked up to see a commotion at the exit, Tsukishima informed him that a couple of people had willingly run outside into the rain and had died. The expression he wore as he numbly told the story looked like one of longing. And for some reason, Hinata could understand him on a deeper level than just words.

It was the small things. It was the combination of all of these small things that made the biggest impact, and left the biggest mark on these kids. So when Hinata had a nervous breakdown, a couple
of days later, the only thing that surprised anyone that knew him, including himself, was that it took so long to happen.

And from there, from the moment Hinata spontaneously burst into loud tears over a can of corn for breakfast, everything went downhill way too quickly.

Kenma's fever got so high he had to be hospitalized. Kuroo by proxy was too worried sick to be of any comfort. Suga had only just recovered, but insisted on working to help the clinic deal with Kenma and the other victims of the poisoning, and only wore himself out in the process. Kageyama's fever broke but his sporadic vomiting persisted, until he was teetering on the brink of hospitalization for severe dehydration. Yamaguchi fell silent once again and stopped sleeping. Tsukishima, on the other hand, isolated himself and stopped eating. Nishinoya slept all day and all night curled up in his sleeping bag, facing the wall. Asahi slowly went from kind-hearted to cold-hearted, until his expression was flat and his words were distant, no matter who he spoke to. Daichi decided that numbing himself with work would be better than spending time mourning, and picked up longer shifts at work, which often meant that he did not return to the bunker at night. Ukai's smoking habits changed drastically, to the point where he'd smoke a pack a day, and then stop for a couple of days, just to distract himself with the struggle that was withdrawal.

And Hinata refused to leave the bunker, no matter what. Whatever he did was inside the bunker. He refused to go outside and see that same bloody sky that had spelt misfortune for them time and time again. The skies had almost returned to their regular blue before this. Almost. They'd almost made it, and yet history was doomed to repeat itself, and they were doomed to be its victims every single time.

But one person refused to be a victim. Only one of them refused to bend to the whims of their necrotic destiny and fought on with will that none of them had left.

He visited the hospital regularly and brought updates about Kenma. He reminded Kuroo to take care of himself. He forced Suga to sit down and stop for a bit. He held back Kageyama's grown-out hair when he vomited bile into the dirty toilets in the middle of the night. He spoke to Yamaguchi and slept next to him at night. He sat with Tsukishima at mealtimes and pushed him to eat. He periodically woke Nishinoya up to remind him to do something else. He refused to let Asahi's attitude push him back as he tried to make a dent in the steel wall he'd put up around his heart. He brought Daichi's rations to him at work and tried to get him to come back to the bunker to sleep at night. And finally, on a bright, sunny day, he convinced Hinata to step outside for the first time in a while, and when Hinata began to cry upon seeing the sky as red as he remembered it to be, he sat with him and wearyly hushed him until there was nothing left in Hinata to mourn.

Time and time again, Tanaka stood on top, strong in the face of adversity and refusing to let their circumstances drag him down.

(Except when they did. When Hinata went to find him one day to vent to him, he found him alone and crying his eyes out quietly, as if afraid of being heard in his moment of weakness. And Hinata suddenly got a shocking reminder than his senpai, too, was human, and was hurting).

But if there was one thing he did not understand about his senpai, it was his motivation. He didn't understand how time and time again, he repeatedly rushed to another's aid, despite living the same hardships as them. He didn't understand where that strength came from.

(Another saying Hinata had once heard was: 'you never know what you have until it's gone'. It was another saying he never hoped to understand through experience, and it was another saying that he did).
Finally, after a whole week of restlessness and of uncertainty, news reached the camp director's ears, about the condition of the country. And whatever reached the camp director's ears generally reached Daichi's, too, since he worked so closely with him (mostly his documents, but that was a detail).

And so, a week after the explosion, Daichi came to the Karasuno group with those news, and decided that it was time they were put up to date with the situation.

"It's not very pretty up in Hokkaido, apparently," he began the next morning over breakfast, grabbing everyone's attention immediately. "The government finally got in touch with them and got news, which have only just reached us."

"And?" Hinata asked hurriedly.

"Not good," Daichi shook his head. "A large part of the island was flattened. It's nothing but a radioactive wasteland, apparently. Thankfully, the government has finally begun the process of signing a ceasefire, so for now, at least, we're still safe from a third strike."

"It's about time they did," Kuroo grumbled, the dark circles under his eyes and the apparent lack of a certain black-haired setter at his side saying a lot about him.

"It only took them forty cities destroyed in a single night and two nuclear explosions that wiped out over three quarters of the country to get going," Asahi grunted, still surprising everybody with his newly-developed apathy.

"Any news on a rescue?" Suga asked, still clinging onto a little bit of hope.

"Not yet. I suppose that once they realize Hokkaido isn't salvageable, they'll turn their efforts and resources towards people who are actually still alive," Daichi rolled his eyes.

"What do you mean?" Tanaka suddenly piped in, eyes wide. The boys stopped for a second before it dawned on them that Tanaka had a very good reason for inquiring after the state of Hokkaido.

"Well... It was a nuclear explosion, so..." Daichi began a bit uncomfortably, suddenly hyperaware of all the words he chose to use.

"Daichi," Tanaka interrupted, not in the mood for games. "How many people died in that explosion?"

There was a tense silence. But the longer Daichi dragged it on, looking for the words he needed to use, the worse Tanaka's agitation seemed to get.

"Daichi!" he demanded a second time, clenching his fists. "How many?"

"A lot," Daichi finally announced, not knowing how else to put it. "86 percent of the population, whether from the blast or from radiation."

"86 percent..." Ukai repeated, floored by the sheer destruction that the single bomb had caused.

But nobody seemed more shocked than Tanaka, whose face betrayed nothing but the disbelief he surely felt.

"No way," he insisted, shaking his head slowly, as if numb. "No way. That's too much."

"I'm sorry, Tanaka... 86 percent of the population is dead," Daichi apologized with his eyes as well, lowering his gaze sadly.
"That's not right," Tanaka continued. "That can't be right. That's not true!"

"Ryuu, sit down. You're making a scene!" Noya grumbled, still lethargic after having been just woken up.

"No," the second-year whimpered this time, as if acceptance was pushing its way into him though he wanted to stay in denial. "No... That can't be... I had to... Saeko..."

"I'm sorry," Daichi apologized, honest and truly sorrowful at this turn of events.

"No," Tanaka repeated, tears welling up in his eyes and then spilling over unashamedly. "She can't be..."

"Tanaka," Suga tried, putting a comforting hand on his kouhai's shoulder. Howeber, Tanaka shrugged it off immediately.

"Damn it..." he swore, wiping his face with a trembling hand. "It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing matters anymore. She's gone. Saeko is gone."

"You're not alone, though," Suga tried to convince him. "We're here for you. We won't replace Saeko, but we'll do our best to take care of you like she would've."

"No!" But Tanaka was not swayed so easily. "It's not the same. She was my sister... And I could've seen her! I could've seen her if I'd left! It's too late now..."

"It's never too late," Daichi tried to calm him down.

"That's bullshit! Time stopped the moment that fucking bomb dropped!" Tanaka bit back, surprising everyone with his aggressive attitude. "And we're all just sitting and waiting to die now, that's all we have left!"

"Tanaka-" Suga began anew, but this time, Tanaka did not want to hear a word of it.

At the sound of his name, as if it was a cursed word, he got up and fled.

"Damn it!" Daichi swore, getting up as well. "I'll bring him back."

"I'll come with you," Hinata felt compelled to offer after having seen everything happen. And though he strangely lacked a feeling of guilt, he still felt like he had a responsibility towards his senpai. He'd always supported Hinata no matter what, so now it was Hinata's turn to support him.

"Hinata, stay here," Daichi bit back as the tension began to escalate.

"No way. He's my senpai and I owe it to him to go after him," Hinata frowned. "Besides, I know where he's going."

"You do?" Daichi asked, surprised.

"Yup," Hinata nodded, getting up. "I'll take you."

"Please bring him home," Ukai pleaded, looking tired and haggard and absolutely done with everything.

Daichi did not reply. He clenched his fists and bit his lip, and left it at that as he took off with Hinata by his side.
Hinata led him through the streets of the city in a brisk jog. Having to slow down to catch their
breaths several times, they had the opportunity to see the broken homes and the torn-down buildings,
as well as the plants growing in cracks in the asphalt roads. It was a desolate sight, but not once that
was new to them. The whole world seemed to be abandoned, to their eyes.

Neither of them said a word, mostly because they wanted to save their breaths, but also because there
was nothing to be said in this situation. Their thoughts were enough to keep them company, never
mind one another. Daichi often looked like he was about to object when Hinata led him one way or
another, but in the end, he said nothing, so Hinata didn't justify himself. Instead, he concentrated on
retracing his steps, until they finally made it on the outskirts of the city, where the land itself had
collapsed on itself.

Tanaka was indeed there, in the same spot that he had been at the last time Hinata had come here,
and in the same spot that he probably always came to in the morning to relax. But now, standing on
the edge of the cliff with the bent trees looming a hundred feet below him, chest heaving in exertion
as he'd probably ran here, a spark of insanity in his eyes, Tanaka was anything but relaxed.

Hinata knew he should be taking it easy but he couldn't help it. The sight itself sent his heart racing.
"Senpai!" he cried out, giving a last burst of energy to his legs to carry him closer.

"Tanaka!" Daichi mimicked the initiative, rushing to his side.

The other boy didn't reply to them, only looked out at the horizon. The mid-morning sun was high in
the sky, albeit a fiery orange colour that almost blended into the bloody sky overhead. The sea was
violent today, and the people who were getting on a boat by the shore seemed to be hesitating.

Hinata wondered what they were doing. Probably escaping, taking their chances with the sea rather
than this doomed land. They were doing it right. He wanted to join them.

But now, he had to call his senpai back to them.

"Senpai," he began, panting as he stopped a few feet from Tanaka, too afraid to get closer. "Senpai,
it's hard for you to accept your loss, and it's okay. We're all here for you. Please come back."

"Tanaka," Daichi continued a bit more firmly, but just as worriedly. "You're strong. You're so, so
strong, stronger than any of us, even. You can't let something like this get to you. You're human, you
can grieve, you can cry, but you're stronger than whatever is going on in your head right now."

"She was everything," Tanaka rasped, as if he'd been screaming. "From day 1, ever since I set foot
into the gym, I knew I had to find her, wherever she'd gone. She was what got me up in the morning
and what let me sleep at night. She was what got me up in the morning and what let me sleep at night. She was what got me up in the morning and what let me sleep at night. She was what got me up in the morning and what let me sleep at night. She was what got me up in the morning and what let me sleep at night. She was what got me up in the morning and what let me sleep at night. She was what got me up in the morning and what let me sleep at night."

"It's not over," Daichi insisted. "86 percent is not 100. She may have survived, Tanaka. You can't
make this assumption."

"What are the chances of her being in that measly 14 percent, hmm?" Tanaka bit out, glaring at them
briefly before turning back. His entire body seemed to be shaking. "I don't care that she's dead. We're
all gonna die anyway, so who cares? It's the fact that I never got to say goodbye that's killing me."

And to that, they could say nothing. Because there really was nothing to say.

"If I'd stayed on that caravan, I would've been there now," he continued, new tears leaking out of his
eyes. His tone went from angry to just plain sad. "I would've been with her when the world went to
hell. I would've held her hand and she would've told me she loved me. We wouldn't have cared about dying because we'd found one another before death did. But now..."

"I'm sorry," Hinata felt like he should say, mostly out of principle than actual guilt. "I wanted to stay, and you wanted to go, and in the end, I made you stay. You would've been happy if you left, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Tanaka nodded. "All I would've wanted would have been to die by her side. To tell her I loved her and that I was sorry and that I was grateful for everything. Saeko... Saeko was so, so important to me... And I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"She's probably watching over you, Tanaka," Daichi tried. "She's going to keep protecting you, and she can probably even hear you. Believe me when I say that she knows how much she means to you. And believe me when I say that I know how hard it is to lose someone so precious to you. I know! We all know! But we have to keep moving onward!"

"I don't want to!"

"Saeko would've wanted you to!" Daichi countered, taking a step forward. Instinctively, Tanaka took a step back, but when half of his foot landed on thin air, he retracted it quickly.

"You don't know that! I don't know what she would've wanted!" Tanaka sobbed out. "All this time, I've been wondering, and I'll never get my answer. I'll never find any closure or peace of mind. She kept me going and now she's gone. There's no reason to keep pushing forward."

"There is!" Hinata's heart jumped in his throat at the admission. "You have to keep going, because that's who you are! You're strong, you don't give up, and you can't let your grief take over your life. There's still hope somewhere out there, senpai. There has to be! All we have to do is keep fighting 'till we find it."

"I'm tired of fighting," Tanaka shook his head. "I'm done. I don't wanna live like this anymore."

"It's gonna get better," Daichi weakly promised, because it wasn't something he could ensure. Not yet, anyway. "You have to believe that things will get better."

"I'm done believing," the other boy shook his head. "I've lived in my fantasies for long enough."

"Tanaka, please just come over here," Daichi pleaded, done with trying to reason with him. His mind was clouded with grief and he would not listen to reason right now. They just had to secure his safety.

"No."

"Tanaka, please. You mean a lot to all of us and we don't want you to get hurt."

"I don't want to live for other people's sake," Tanaka shook his head.

"You're not living for our sake, though," Hinata shook his head. "You're living for yourself, you know you want to. Saeko was very important to you. I know she was. Natsu was extremely important to me, and I did something stupid in my grief. Don't repeat the same mistake."

"This is what I want. I've thought about this for a long time now, and I know it's what I want," Tanaka sniffled, listening nonetheless.

"Senpai," Hinata kept going, his heart beating a thousand miles a minute. "Come back with us. You
can cry, you can get angry, you can mourn your sister. Nobody will judge you for it. But you need to come back, because you're not alone."

"Yes, I am now."

"No, you're not," Hinata retorted challengingly. "You're with us. Saeko was your first and foremost family, and we are just your friends. But with everything that's happened, everything we've gone through together, I think we can say that we're your second family. And even if we aren't the ones who raised you and loved you throughout your life, we're the ones who bled with you, cried with you, fought with you and made it through a nuclear war with you. We may not have been there since the beginning of your life, but we're the ones who are going to be there until the end of it. And for that, we need you to come back. For that, you need to come back with us. Not because we owe one another something, but because we've lived through too much just to let you suffer like this. We may not be blood-related like Saeko was, but we still love you, senpai. Just like Saeko did."

Tanaka seemed to think about it. In fact, he looked at Hinata throughout his speech, and slowly, his mouth opened in surprise until he was gaping. The tears running down his cheeks were silent for a little while, until his nose scrunch up and his eyes crinkled, and his lips trembled and he began to cry again, loudly, unashamedly, with such a display of emotion that Hinata was led to believe that this is all the hurt that his kind-hearted, self-sacrificing, strong senpai had bottled up inside of him.

"Come back, senpai," he repeated, just for emphasis. One last time. And then he waited for Tanaka's answer.

It never came. Intentionally or not, Tanaka took a step to turn around to face Hinata head on, and as he did, his foot missed solid ground, and caught a piece of the ledge that quickly crumbled under his weight.

Hinata's eyes widened. Daichi's mouth dropped. And Tanaka just looked confused, as if he'd just woken up, and did not even know how he'd gotten there. And then, he was losing balance and falling backwards, and at some point, Hinata must've screamed, because the scream he heard was too loud and too hysteric to be just his alone.

He was never alone. He had never been alone, all this time. And he wasn't gonna be alone, until the moment he died.

Hinata almost jumped after Tanaka, and probably would have if it weren't for Daichi holding him back, barely, but just enough to keep him from doing anything stupid. His limbs were jelly, anyway, not obeying him as he tried to crawl to the ledge where his senpai had stood and only ended up falling to his knees. And then his arms. And then he cried.

Daichi cried, too, silently, as if defeated. And Hinata cried in despair, loud enough for both of them, loud enough to express how powerless and meaningless they'd been. Soon, Daichi, too, was on his knees, dragged down by the immense weight that leadership had pushed onto his young shoulders, and silently watched in total shock the place where Tanaka had stood not a minute ago.

And then he crawled, dragging his knees through the dirt and the rocks, scraping his palms as he pulled himself towards the edge, and peered over. Vertigo took him by surprise and he fell on his back, letting out a choked sob of defeat, as if seeing the height of the fall had hammered the point home.

Their numbers had fallen. They'd been unable to prevent a tragedy from happening, and now, they'd lost one of theirs to their circumstances. It took a few months of rough and tumble, but finally, the cruel world had gotten the best of the group of fragile teenagers. Because they were fragile. They
were kids, kids who were concerned with grades, not their survival. They were supposed to be afraid of failing an exam, not be afraid of starvation. They were supposed to want to play volleyball, not want to wake up in one piece come morning light. They were supposed to be carefree, not burdened with enough responsibilities and nightmares to drive a war veteran insane.

And this was it. The culminating point of their powerlessness. The moment when finally, finally, they stopped defying the odds and gave in to their wretched destiny.

Something inside both of them had definitely died upon seeing Tanaka, their strong, trusty, amazing Ryuunosuke fall off the ledge. And when they would bring the news back to the others, something inside of them would definitely die as well. Slowly but surely, they would decay from the inside out until there was nothing left for them to lose.

Hinata and Daichi stayed there for what felt like forever, not finding it within themselves to get up and carry along as if they were strong enough to keep going after this. But finally, when the blazing sun sank behind foreboding clouds, they both knew it was time to go. As if of a common accord, they both stood up at once, and began to amble towards the city once again, leaving behind the cliff, the sea, the people on the boats, the bent trees, the flooded land, and Tanaka.

Just thinking about him hurt so much it robbed Hinata of breath. So instead of thinking of his senpai's smile, his senpai's kindness and courage, his senpai's hopes and dreams and goals and unfulfilled life, he turned to Daichi, who seemed just as exhausted.

"Captain," he rasped, not knowing how else to call him. Calling him 'senpai' was too painful, for now. "What time is it?"

Wordlessly, Daichi took a moment to process the request, and put his wrist up to read his watch for the first time since the second nuclear strike. He looked at it for a little while, as if not understanding, or not impressed, and then showed his watch to Hinata instead of telling him the time.

Hinata quickly understood why.

Daichi’s trusty watch had finally broken, stuck at the time when the bomb had exploded. The hands were showing midnight on the dot, and the second hand was trying to tick past it, to no avail. Every time it broke away from midnight, something dragged it back to its starting point.

And it repeated the motion endlessly.

Chapter End Notes

Repetition was probably what wore them down to the breaking point. Repeatedly having the control of their life taken away from them did a lot more to their psyche than you might think. Also, being in Niigata is a double-edged sword. On one end, they're provided for. On the other end, being trapped with other survivors puts them in an environment of despair in close-quarters, and is probably wearing them out even if they don't realize it. Before, they used to be able to take their own lives in their own hands and do whatever they wanted to ensure their survival. Now, their lives are in other people's hands, and they're basically, want it or not, treated like livestock, just because it's impossible to guarantee individuality in refugee camps with so many people and so little staff.
Tomoe might've seemed like a random addition in this fic, but she was very important in Hinata's character development. Obviously, she was an indicator that Hinata is maybe... not super duper sane? Hallucinating his little sister in someone else? But pay attention to how Hinata behaves in regards to guilt nowadays. (Hint: he doesn't. He doesn't feel guilty anymore, and more than indicating psychological damage, that's more significant when you put his lack of guilt in relation with his desire to stay with the Karasuno group. Logically, this means he'll literally do anything to keep the group together, and with him. That's called dependency, folks, and that ain't healthy).

Also, the bit about the rogue army group is not a random addition either. They'll make their presence known again, and they'll be super important in precipitating an event next chapter. Also, I really wanted to leave the Wilds of Japan for a second and return to whatever civilization is left, and explore how the structure of the country has changed as well. And finally, speaking of which, it has been brought to my attention that not enough nitty-gritty of human nature has really been addressed in this fic just yet. So it will be addressed very obviously next chapter. Because if human beings can do one thing absolutely right, it's making other human beings suffer.

No pun intended, but the second nuclear explosion hit them hard. What they're all exhibiting are different types, or different symptoms of depression. Be it vegetative (Noya) or reverse-vegetative (Tsukishima/Yamaguchi), their circumstances are twisting them into whole new individuals, and they don't have the help they need to cope healthily with the events.

This chapter was in Hinata's point of view, but it was a lot about Tanaka, since he didn't get his POV chapter. Tanaka has always been an underrated character to me. He's one of the most headstrong boys in the whole anime and yet to most, he's just the baldy senpai. He deserves more credit than that for being really strong (the line about him having the mental strength to move past his own barriers is taken, or at least adapted from the anime itself), and so having a character so strong finally give out is probably something akin to a final nail in the coffin. Also, suicide is a very real possibility in this forsaken world, just because it's a desperate measure for desperate people, and I wanted to address it sometime, and I'm gonna keep addressing it in the next chapter as well.

And finally, I wanna apologize for inaccuracies with Niigata. I don't have access to Google Maps (barely have access to internet around here) so I can't look at it to make sure it's actually by the waterside, or how far it is from Hokkaido, etc.

Your comments keep me going! I'm astounded at how many people are backing me on this project and I'm so, so grateful for everyone's support! I hope I won't disappoint! Please do leave me your thoughts on here, or on tumblr, where my URL is the same as on here. I'd love to hear from you!
Loss

Chapter Summary

Things that are lost can be replaced. Places that are lost can be reclaimed. Time that is lost can be made up. And people who are lost can always be found.

Loss can change a person, shape them into someone completely different, but no matter how devastating, loss will never define them.

Chapter Notes

(I got lazy with the chapter summary, sue me).

One of my fav Haikyuu! fanfics updated the other day, and it had like a massive, 28k chapter, and I just freaked out because the author publishes every 3 weeks with these gigantic chapters. And then I'm here, taking 3 months per chapter. I have no idea how the author does it. I'm not sure if I respect them, or am scared of them. Probably both.

Well, this is a 33k chapter. It's so long that I figured I'd number the line breaks so you can take breaks and know where to pick up again. IDK how I did it but I procrastinated for 2 months and then blitzed this in a week and a half. Probably because I'm so happy HQ!! season 2 is out. Bokuto's gonna be animated, guys, you don't understand how much I cried at that opening.

This chapter is the heaviest one yet. Longest one, and the one with the most heavy content. Remember, kids, this is war. War is horrifying, and there's a lot we don't like to talk about when we talk about war. I did my research to try and incorporate as many elements of war as I could, and when I came up with this idea, I knew that the reception to CML would change drastically. But this is fiction, and it's also entertainment. So although the topics covered in this chapter are horrifying, please remember to read this as the work of fiction is was meant to be. Also, remember that this WILL have a happy ending! And things will look up as soon as next chapter, I promise :u; <3

Here are the warnings, which might also be spoilers, so as usual, if you don't wanna read the warnings, just skip to the next paragraph. Warnings include permanent character disability, violent imagery, human trafficking, mentions of suicide, self-harm, manifestations of mental illness, and yeah that's about it. I'm just gonna add some words here to avoid having anyone catch their eye on a word they wanted to avoid and I'm gonna wish you luck with this chapter.

I got many questions asking about the permanence of Tanaka's 'death'. I was split about it up until the point where I began to write, and then I realized that these boys needed a death to hammer the final nail into their character development. So yes, Tanaka's really dead. I hesitated a lot, but I think this is for the best, because their coping process is going to be vital to their development. On another note, the POV of this chapter is none is particular, simply to go with the theme of "loss" and being lost.

The tag on Tumblr to follow this fic is not "#fic: come morning light" anymore, but
thanks to the funniest anon ever, it's now "#CMLmorelikeFML". Follow that if you want extra content and updates for the chapters, or tag your own posts related to CML with this tag so all the fans (and me!) can see it. Please enjoy CML chapter 11. Sorry for making you wait so long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hinata had expected the panic. He'd expected the devastation, the denial, the anger. He'd expected the wailing and the quasi-hysteric protests.

But even if he'd expected it, he hadn't been ready for it. His own nerves were frazzled and his own eyes burned with unshed tears, and at such a point in time where he felt numb and empty, he wasn't ready for the reactions of his friends when Daichi announced the grim news.

"That can't be right," somebody protested, but Hinata didn't know who it was. His vision was blurring again and he tried to remind himself that he had to breathe.

"You're lying," another voice protested, and this time, Hinata associated the breathless desperation to Nishinoya. When he looked in his general direction, he found the older boy standing up, fists clenched until the knuckles turned white. "You're lying!"

Daichi looked like he wanted to say something, but he couldn't find the words. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. Hinata totally understood the feeling.

"Where's Ryuu!?" Noya's tone escalated, and no one stopped him, too shell-shocked. "You promised, Daichi! You promised you'd bring him back! Where is he!?"

Daichi seemed like he wanted to answer, he really did, and he looked both frustrated at his own silence and frustrated at Noya's insistence. He'd almost formed the words before Noya's hysteria drowned him out.

"Daichi, where's Ryuu!?!"

"He's not here, Noya! He's not here! Stop asking, he's not here!" the captain finally exploded, his voice high and distressed as well, nails digging in the palms of his hands as he clenched them.

"You can't say that!" Noya yelled back, both aggravated by Daichi's rising voice and sounding grateful for the opportunity to vent. "You promised to bring him back, so bring him back!"

"I'm not a god, Noya! I can't do that! I couldn't do it!" Daichi argued back aggressively, and Hinata could tell that he was yelling because he was disappointed, and he was taking Noya's painful words to heart. But it wasn't his fault. It wasn't any of their faults.

(Except for not noticing that their friend, their reliable Tanaka, had been suffering in silence all this time. They were all guilty for letting things get this far).

He wanted to intervene, but his hands and knees were shaking.

"Stop!" Finally, it was Ukai who stepped in, actually getting up to stand between the two teenagers. "Stop... Just stop, both of you."

"I'm not gonna stop!" Noya almost screeched before his words caught in his throat, and he made a sound of distress when he almost choked on his own spit. "I can't stop... For Ryuu..."
They all saw it coming, silently observing the libero's shaking form and his hitching breath and the hanging of his head as he let the weight of the revelation crash down upon him. They all saw it coming, and yet none of them commented when Noya absolutely fell apart.

He fell to his knees, forehead pressed to the ground to try and quell the rising nausea, and held his stomach to contain the wail clawing its way up his throat. The sight of their strong, reliable libero now so broken was distressing, and the ones who hadn't already shed the tears swimming in their eyes were driven to the edge by his raw display of agony.

He cried out loudly, and though all of them cried with him, and with one another, nobody shook as hard and despaired as violently as Nishinoya did.

They'd all lost someone dear to them, but Noya seemed to have lost a piece of himself as well.

And nobody could comfort him or hold his hand, no one could quell his guilt and appease his fear, no one could stop him when he began to scratch his arms in a desperate attempt to free the anguish from his pores, because they all felt the same.

Nishinoya disappeared for a few days after Daichi and Hinata came back empty handed from their search and rescue mission. He left in a flurry of tears and snot and half-coherent sentences, and nobody had enough energy to stop him. In the following days, nobody had enough energy to even go and look for him, not when they were all mourning in their own ways.

Strangely enough, none of them isolated themselves. On the contrary, more than ever, they all seemed to cling to one another's presence, finding some sort of solace in the proximity of the people who were going through the same process of grieving as they were. All of them took time off from their jobs, if only because their hands shook too much and their limbs were too heavy, and all of them spent day in, day out in silence, busy with their own thoughts.

But once the denial and the anger had passed, depression set in, and none of them had the energy to remind each other to talk, or to eat, or to sleep. When they'd decided to become a unit, one entity composed of several individuals, they'd also taken the risk of being paralyzed in their entirety by the loss of a single member. Being invincible so far, they'd fooled themselves into believing that they were immortal, and forgot that they were really just kids.

Just kids, first losing their families, then losing their homes, then finding both of these just to lose them again.

Slowly, as the shroud of hopelessness lifted, and apathy blanketed them instead, they began to regain their senses, although not their emotions. Sometimes, in a quiet voice, someone would remind them that it was time for lunch. Other times, one of them would begin to cry out of the blue, and another would silently reach over to touch their clenched hands. They didn't pull themselves together, not yet. However, they did silently resolve themselves to grieving together.

Noya returned to them during dinner, four days after Tanaka's death. He showed up in the cafeteria, spotting their table isolated from the others, and he walked forward. The ones who saw him coming later noted that he looked resolute and that his gait was confident.

They couldn't fathom how he'd done it, but after that devastating loss, he'd begun to heal.

"Kageyama," he addressed, putting a hand on his kouhai's shoulder softly, surprising him into dropping the spoon he was using to play with his soup. All eyes went to him, and with a serious look
on his face, Noya nudged his head towards his food. "Eat a little more."

Kageyama looked surprised, but nodded hesitantly, and grabbed his utensil. Noya didn't let go of him until he took another small sip of miso, and then, he saw down next to Yamaguchi.

There was plenty of space on the bench. This was a table for twelve, after all.

"Noya...?" Asahi asked softly, glancing at him unsurely. "What-"

"I don't want anybody to be alone anymore."

They all stopped what they were doing and looked at the small teen. He was looking at his hands, down on his lap, and steeled his expression for what he would say next.

"I never... I never want to lose someone to loneliness ever again."

"Noya..." Ukai began tiredly, but Noya suddenly glanced up at them, shocking them with the fire that burned in his gaze.

"If isolation is what will get the best of us, then I will not stand by and watch it happen again. From now on, I don't want anybody to hide their pain anymore. I don't want to see anyone faking a smile anymore. I don't want anyone being overwhelmed by the weight of the secrets they've chosen to keep. Never again. I never want to lose a friend to their own demons again."

"You've thought about this," Suga remarked breathily. "Noya... but you've been alone these past few days."

"I was," the teen agreed. "But I could feel myself slipping, my pain overwhelming me without anything to keep me anchored. I began to spiral down into my own mind, but I decided not to let it happen to me, nor to anyone else ever again." His gaze was sharp. "We... we were too late to save Ryuu. But I think... I think he'd have liked it if he knew that we'd learned from him. So I don't want anyone to be consumed by their own feelings of loneliness anymore. I want to help, and I want to prevent this from happening ever again."

"Senpai, you-" Hinata interrupted himself, the first word echoing in his head endlessly. A grinning face showed up in his mind's eye and his breath hitched again.

"Yeah," Noya gulped down, but nodded. "Yeah. I'm your senpai. And as your senpai, it's my duty to protect you." He then turned to the older ones. "And I may not be your senpai, but I am your friend, and you are my only family left, and damn it if I'll let anybody suffer anymore."

"What are you suggesting, senpai?" Kageyama asked quietly, liking the way the word did not seem so heavy anymore.

"I want to talk," Noya simply offered. "I want to be there for anybody who needs to talk, to confide, to feel like they are not alone, to let me carry some of their burdens for them. I want to make sure we don't lose anything else, not when we've come so far and already lost so much."

"This is sudden," Daichi commented, still a bit careful after their little conflict.

"Ryuu... Ryuuu's death was sudden." Noya's posture tensed. "And it made me realize how anything can happen at any time, and how easy it is to take loved ones for granted. I don't want anyone to suffer anymore. I was blind to my best friend's pain, and he's dead because of something I could've prevented if I'd only taken the initiative."
"So you're taking the initiative," Kuroo mumbled out, a small smile playing on his thin lips.

"Exactly," the libero nodded with utmost conviction. "Too little too late, but it's something."

They all fell silent, thinking about Noya's proposition. They'd all spent months in close quarters, sharing a living space and a routine, but they'd always been a bit reluctant to share their lives with one another. Did a devastating loss mark a period of renewal for them? A time when they'd be due to change their habits for the better?

Was Noya's suggestion a new beginning? Hope in its simplest form?

"Thank you, senpai."

It was all that the ever-silent Yamaguchi needed to say in order to express their collective thoughts.

"Anytime," Noya replied, and he meant it. He didn't grin, but the forlorn smile blooming on his lips was enough.

Later on that night, as they all retreated to the bunker, Noya joined them, still looking as pensive as ever. He said nothing when the others made an effort to make small talk, the first empty conversations they'd had since the incident, but followed with a passive expression on his face.

Noting his state of deep thought, Suga hung back with him and let the others get a bit of advance on them before turning to Noya.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"I want to go see Ryuü," Noya replied in a mumble.

"What?" Suga jerked in response, suddenly alarmed. "Noya, no. You said it yourself."

"Relax, Suga. I didn't mean it like that," Noya gave him a sheepish smile. "I want... I want to go see where it is that he... he died. The last place where he stood. I want to go visit him, just in case he got lonely waiting for us to return."

"I see," Suga nodded, relaxing a bit. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Absolutely. Last I saw him, he was upset." Noya's words caught in his throat. "I want to go see him now that he's at peace. I bet he's just waiting for us to visit to get the hell off this planet and go join Saeko and the rest of his family."

"Then I think that it's a good idea. Maybe you can ask Hinata to take you there, if he's up to it," Suga suggested.

"No," Noya chuckled to himself. "I want to ask Daichi."

"Really?" the medic bit his lip doubtfully. "You're not mad at him?"

"No. Not anymore," Noya shook his head. "I never had a right to be. It wasn't Daichi's fault, nor Hinata's. I don't know the whole story, but from what I understand, it was an accident. I just got angry because I needed to be, is all. But I wasn't angry at Daichi in particular." His eyes darkened. "I want to make sure he knows that. I said some pretty hurtful things, and I don't want him to take them to heart."

"It's good that you realize it," Suga hummed supportively. "You're a good guy, Noya, looking out for everyone like this."
"I'm going to do my best from now on," he promised under his breath, and Suga smiled when he heard him, without a doubt that he'd follow through with the promise.

Daichi agreed to take him to the cliff where Tanaka stood last the next morning. Though his rapport with Noya still seemed a bit shaky, the two of them good-naturedly arranged a small expedition.

It took them a while to get there by foot, and Daichi noted that he'd forgotten how far it was when he wasn't running as fast as he could in a desperate race against time. Still, it felt like a good experience to walk down the same path with time to think about what had happened and his role within it all.

Noya seemed to be in the very same process of deliberation, quiet and contemplative as they left the cracked asphalt roads and stepped onto the beaten earth of the wilderness around them. The sounds around them had quieted. It seemed like even the occasional bird in the trees paused to let them proceed in peace.

The path they'd chosen was apparently carved through the nature, and though anyone could have explored further down it, nobody from the outpost seemed to be interested. They kicked up dust with their worn-down shoes as they steered clear of the clustered trees and headed right towards the cliff to their left. Noya hadn't been here before, admittedly, but seeing the wonderful sights before him stole his breath away.

The sun had risen out from behind the horizon, casting a warm glow on the shining waters of the sea before them. At the foot of the cliff, the flooded lands populated by thick trees went as far as the coast, where a rocky beach served as headquarters to a boat anchored to the shore. There were birds flying towards them, and birds flying towards the horizon where the shape of a small island was visible. Everything looked amazing.

If only Tanaka had not fallen off to his premature end. This was a gorgeous place to sit and appreciate how the world still had parts of it unforsaken.

Noya sat on the edge with his legs dangling over, a masochistic joy coming from the vertigo that blurred his vision. Daichi seemed to want to protest but kept quiet, instead opting to sit next to him with his legs crossed. They watched the horizon in companionable silence, letting the breeze cool them down when their thoughts became too heated.

"Daichi," Noya finally split the silence, though he didn't turn to look at his friend. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," Daichi mumbled, hanging his head. "I didn't... I couldn't..."

"But you helped," Noya cut him off softly. "Ryuu died knowing he wasn't alone. I can't imagine how painful it would have been if he'd fallen or jumped with nobody to tell him he was loved."

"I couldn't save him..." Daichi shook his head.

"None of us could," Noya replied without hesitation, and then gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. "But I know you believe that it's your duty to save everyone, so I know you're blaming yourself. Don't. His death isn't a burden you bear alone."

He did not apologize, but Daichi seemed to understand the subliminal regret, and didn't seem to know how to respond. He opened his mouth once, twice, a strangled sound coming from the depths of his lungs, and then he was crying.

Daichi had not cried for Tanaka on the day of the accident. He had been too angry, too panicked, too
shocked to weep for his friend. He'd cried for Hinata, he'd cried for Nishinoya, but he had not cried for Tanaka. But now, finally, he seemed to be able to muster the tears, no longer held back by the strange belief that he was not allowed to cry for someone he let die in the first place.

He was quiet for the most part, sniffling once in a while. Noya watched as he furiously rubbed his eyes, as if willing himself to stop, and tears came to his own eyes as he watched their strong, too strong captain fall apart. But he did not cry. It was Daichi's turn to grieve now, and all Noya had wanted to do was to make him realize that he was allowed to mourn.

He felt strangely at ease, sitting with his legs dangling off the cliff that took his best friend's life, listening to his captain shed his guilt. Noya had never been the type to appreciate calm moments of introspection, but the more he went on, the more he felt like he needed time to think.

A breeze hailing from the sea swirled around them both, and for a moment, Noya thought he felt a hand on his shoulder.

But then it was gone, and Noya closed his eyes with a smile, knowing that they would be watched over on their long journey of bereavement.

They stayed there for a little while, enjoying the serenity of the wilderness as opposed to the bustle of the outpost. Finally, when Daichi made a quiet suggestion to head back, they got up, taking a last look at Tanaka's resting place.

It didn't seem adequate to leave him like this, in the open, though.

"Daichi," Noya hummed in thought. "I want to erect a grave for him."

"But... there's no body to bury," Daichi mumbled regretfully.

"Then we'll just make him a shrine. Right here, so the world won't forget him," Noya continued with utmost conviction.

"What do you suggest, then?" the black-haired boy asked, agreeing to the plan quietly.

"Let's just grab some rocks and some wood and make him a spot right here," Noya pointed to the ground close to the cliff. "Next time we come visit, we can bring some fabric with his name on it and complete it."

"Let's do it, then."

They split for a while, Daichi tasked with finding a large branch and Noya gathering rocks. They met back by the cliff to set up the shrine, sticking the waist-high thick branch that Daichi had picked in the ground. The two of them then got busy arranging the stones around the stick in a circular pattern.

"He'll be happy with this, I know it," Noya hummed, a serene smile touching his lips as he pushed some of the stones into the dusty ground.

"I'm sure he appreciates everything you're doing in his memory," Daichi agreed.

"We," Noya corrected. "Everything we're doing in his memory. All of us."

"Right."
"It's just a shame we don't have a body to bury," Noya continued, shifting some of his stones.

"Well, he did fall off a tall cliff. I'm not sure having a body would be the best for us," Daichi frowned. However, at the sight of Noya's hurt gaze, he sighed. "But I guess it might give us closure."

"I wonder if there's any way we can make it down there to look," Noya continued, glancing over the side of the cliff, into the flooded forest below.

"I can ask my boss if he can spare some men to go retrieve it," Daichi suggested without really thinking of it.

"You can?" Noya perked up. "Really?"

"I can ask," Daichi made a face. "It was just a thought off the top of my head, really."

"That'd be really great," Noya smiled, the first real smile he'd given since the announcement of the accident, and Daichi's heart fluttered with relief. "Thank you for everything, Daichi."

"Anytime," the captain nodded back to him, and knew that he meant it.

Losing one of their own didn't mean that he'd abandon the rest. Now more than ever, they needed him, and he would not let them down. Not again. Not anymore.

There was a general consensus for Daichi to put in the request with the military, but even with that, the organization was busy with the aftermath of the second explosion, and they were told that their request would take a while to be fulfilled.

In the meantime, the boys slowly but surely began to move forward again. They all visited the shrine together to complete it with a piece of fabric they'd written on, and in front of the words 'Tanaka Ryunosuke. Go forward with unwavering strength', they all took a moment to pray to their friend.

After that, the return to the outpost was filled with light chatter, not quite as light as they used to be, but enough to reflect the decreasing weight on their hearts.

A week later, Daichi's supervisor finally announced that their request would be granted soon, and surely enough, they received an official document on that evening. The military would spare some personnel to retrieve the body of their deceased friend. More than joy, it was relief that coursed through them when Ukai read the document out loud, relief that closure was only a few days away.

The next day, at work, Daichi himself filed away the documents pertaining to the mission, and eagerly went through his day with energy he hadn't had since the accident.

However, the skip in his step had to wait when the soldiers returned from the search and retrieve mission late, with news that set the entire base abuzz. Daichi himself did not catch wind of the news as it seems that they were immediately kept under wraps by the higher ups, but something had happened on that mission, and it was important.

News circulated quickly in the small outpost, though. Two days later, Tsukishima came across the rumours as he walked down the street to go find Yamaguchi at the library. There were a couple of women dressed in some sort of uniform who were heading down the street towards him and were in some kind of animated discussion. The blond scooted a bit to let them pass by him, but couldn't help but watch them as they spoke to one another in low tones, eyes wide in disbelief. For people trying to keep their conversation a secret, they stuck out like sore thumbs, and didn't even walk that
hurriedly.

As he passed them, he only caught a small but alarming segment of their conversation.

"...those traffickers, and they're even taking people from Niigata..."

Tsukishima almost froze, but he had much more subtlety than that. He briefly thought of following them, but he'd probably get the military called on his ass, so he discarded the idea. He simply watched them go, a weird uneasiness knotting in his stomach, and then figured he may as well keep walking. He wanted to take the small sliver of conversation as simple gossip, but the news were too specific to be just rumours.

Plus, Niigata had the uncanny ability to make its residents' worst nightmares a reality.

Ukai got a mission report two days later, too late for it to fool them about the benign nature of the mission. The military regrettably announced to them in the letter that no body was found despite extensive searching, and the entire group deflated upon hearing it. However, they didn't have delusions as to the usefulness of the mission. The agitation of the military seemed to be enough proof.

Two days later, Daichi filed away the document on a new search and destroy mission heading out the next day. And though it went against the terms of his contract, he couldn't help but throw a furtive glance around him, and then look through the mission files.

The words on the papers blurred as he scanned the document in front of him, aware of the fact that if he was caught reading confidential files, he'd be fired, or would even face disciplinary action. However, the curiosity that was being sated with every line he read controlled him, and the horror and disbelief rising up inside of him were addictive.

By the time he filed the document away into its appropriate folder, his hands were shaking. Of course, he'd been bearer of bad news before, and they'd all gone through some horrible stuff, but... This was a whole new level of horrible.

He wasn't sure he wanted the others to know it. He didn't want to scare them unnecessarily.

He made the decision, and filed the document away. They'd all know at one point of another, through other sources probably. He himself wouldn't tell them about it, yet. They didn't need to worry about something as horrifying as human trafficking on top of their other problems.

They all got wind of the rumour somehow, be it in the streets, or at work. All they got were disconnected pieces of information, but they never spoke about it, simply because talking about it made it feel like it was actually real and happening.

Because it couldn't be, right? Something so twisted could not exist in the nature of human beings, right?

They were soon proven wrong, though. A day later, Kuroo and Tsukishima were called to the military base for a meeting, and the only detail given on their letter was that it was for a briefing for a mission that would involve even the reserve.

They both went there together after some encouragement from their friends, and found a place to sit
in the large atrium where about a hundred soldiers were already seated. There was a buzz in the air, and snippets of conversations that floated up to their ears proved that everyone already knew what they were here for.

Finally, the base commander walked in, and a hush fell upon them.

"Good morning, soldiers," the man began, facing the crowd, and the boys straightened their backs a bit nervously. "The briefing today is about a large-scale rescue-type mission we're organizing after we found some troubling evidence on a small mission conducted a while ago."

The crowd whispered to one another briefly before turning their attention back to the commander.

"Our scouts have investigated by the seaside, where there seemed to have been evidence of human encampments. As we were not threatened by these encampments, they were of no concern to us. However, with further exploration, it was revealed that these camps contained an estimate of a hundred people, most of whom were abducted or imprisoned for the purpose of trafficking of unknown nature."

"Shit, I knew it," Kuroo mumbled under his breath, mimicking the grim expression set on Tsukki's face. "That's just fucked up."

"Furthermore, it seems that the disappearances from Niigata are linked to it. First thought to have been people gone AWOL from Niigata, it is now theorized that they were taken from the outpost from inside agents. For that reason, this problem now concerns us."

"Permission to speak, sir!" A man from the crowd called out, all eyes going to him.

"Granted," the commander nodded.

"Will we be carrying out this rescue independently from the main forces of the army?" he asked, a perfectly valid question according to Tsukishima. Niigata's military was only about a couple of hundred people. Would they be enough to overwhelm such a large camp?

"Unfortunately, a request put in for additional forces has been denied for the moment," the commander answered regretfully. "We could have waited to be granted those men, but there is no time to waste. We must move in as quickly as we can. For that reason, the mission will begin tomorrow."

"On such short notice?" Kuroo whistled, seeming to share the opinion of the uneasy crowd. "Damn. They really are in a rush."

"As they should be," Tsukishima commented, frowning. "That's not something that should be allowed to happen even for a single day longer."

"Kinda feels like it's not real, huh?" the black-haired teen hummed, glancing at his companion. "I mean, come on. This feels like it's something that would happen just in a movie or something."

"I'm surprised, but not that surprised either," the blond shrugged. "Human beings can only do one things right, after all, and that is to hurt other human beings."

"So optimistic."

"No. Just realistic."

"The main forces will be mobilized for this mission, primarily," the commander continued, and they
all hushed down to listen. "However, there are twenty-five spots for people from the reserve as well. The rest of the reserve will have to take care of upholding the security of Niigata whilst the main forces are gone. This mission is on a volunteer basis, unless there are not enough applicants. The briefing for the rescue mission will take place in half an hour, so if you sign up here at the front, stay to attend that meeting, too. If you do not sign up, you may leave, and you will receive your assignments tonight around dinnertime. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" the crowd answered in unison.

"Dismissed."

The soldiers began to get up, discussing what they'd been told. Tsukishima and Kuroo did the same, letting the flow of the crowd take them down the steps.

"Are you going to volunteer?" Kuroo asked as they walked.

"No way," Tsukishima huffed. "It's too dangerous." He paused, however, and turned to Kuroo. "You're considering it, aren't you?"

"It'd be different, something new. Plus, I'd be helping out a lot," he thought out loud.

"You're too inexperienced to do anything about it," Tsukishima bluntly stated. "We have training, but we haven't been on missions. Besides, we're too young. Just let the adults take care of it."

"But I've been there," Kuroo mumbled, a bit more lowly this time. "The helplessness of having your life in someone's hands... Being powerless as to what you do with your own body... Believing you can't be saved... I've been there, and I want to help others who are feeling like that. I want to go."

"Stay," Tsukishima insisted. "You can help by protecting everyone who's still here. Don't go risk your life for a thrill or two."

"Tsukki..." Kuroo bit his lip in deep deliberation, eyeing the sign-up sheet not too far from them now. The crowd was taking them down the steps to the door, so if Kuroo broke away from them, he'd be able to go sign up.

He knew it was dangerous. Hell, he could even die out there, trying to play hero. He was just a kid, barely 18, and taking this risk could easily be the end of him. But he wanted to save people, he wanted to be useful, and he wanted to feel alive in the rush of the moment. He needed something to jump-start him again and helping take down a trafficking ring could be exactly what he needed.

He made a move to break away from the flow of the crowd, to go sign up, but a tugging on his sleeve stopped him. Turning in mild surprise, he found Tsukishima pinching his hoodie sleeve to hold him back, not enough to physically hold him back should he pull away, but enough to pass the message on. Kuroo's eyes widened, and Tsukishima gave him a meaningful glance that spoke volumes.

"Stay," he finally spoke, his words seeming like an order more than anything else, and Kuroo found himself obeying despite his hesitation.

They walked past the sign-up sheet and out of the door, Kuroo looking back once or twice, but not a third time.

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The structure of Niigata's institutions shifted slightly starting after the meeting. Military trucks were
seen more often in the streets, heading towards their departure point to prepare. The hospital began shifting its floors around to provide a unit specially for the survivors who would be coming in. Kuroo and Tsukishima got a notice at dinner that they would be manning the west gate in tomorrow’s morning rotation, along with many of the other reserve soldiers who had not served in a single operation since their training. Asahi’s team in the kitchen was told to make dinner portions smaller in anticipation for the crowd of survivors they’d be receiving soon.

The next morning, the chain of military trucks all loaded up with soldiers and supplies left through the west gate, Kuroo and Tsukishima watching them go with their rifles heavy in their arms.

And thus began the waiting game.

All of Niigata seemed to be aware that something big was happening. At this point, the news had gone around, and everyone more or less knew what they were dealing with. Early in the morning, announcements were also made to recruit volunteers to create admission kits for the survivors who would be coming in. Kageyama was scheduled an extra two hours at work to help admit the newcomers. The setup in the bunkers was switched around a bit, with new space to accommodate the expected crowd.

And then, they waited in bated breath.

Kuroo felt like he was some sort of privileged witness to the arrival of the trucks when they returned on that evening, voices crackling to life on the walkie-talkie they all had at their waists even before the trucks came up in the horizon.

"This is Captain Shigino of the Niigata military corps, leader of mission Sunshine. Our mission was successful but we have critical military and civilian casualties. Please clear a way to the hospital," he requested, all the soldiers snapping into action.

"Squad three, stay to man the gate! All other squads, disperse to the streets and clear the way!" Their own captain ordered from where he stood by the gate, and with a clamouring cry of 'yes sir!', they'd all moved.

Kuroo joined Tsukishima in the small cabin where they divested themselves of their weapons quickly, and the two of them wordlessly jogged out to carry out their mission.

Heading down the streets, they stopped at every soldier they came across and passed on the order, they and several other soldiers warning civilians to clear the street and stick to the sidewalk. Soon enough, a new message came into their radios from their captain, the boys having to raise the radio to their faces to hear the transmission over the clamour of the agitated crowd.

"The trucks have entered Niigata, please finalize crowd control."

"You take the left side of the street, Tsukki," Kuroo motioned to him, and they split to take their spots. Kuroo himself stood in the intersection, keeping some people behind him and mainly clearing the corner for the trucks to turn into. All the other soldiers also placed themselves on the sides of the street or in intersections, clearing out the last of the crowd from the winding trajectory of the trucks.

People tried to ask him questions, as they always did, but Kuroo kept a straight face, and simply answered that they’d be told when the information was publicly released over and over again until the first truck turned into his street, and headed for him. It was going faster than usual, so Kuroo’s eyes narrowed as he made out that there were people in there that were on the brink of death. It made his job even more so important, as small as it was.
He moved his arms to motion the truck to turning left, and when it was close enough to him, Kuroo saw the driver nod to him, and turn down the next street indicated.

"One more truck is heading down to the hospital," the voice of one of Kuroo's comrades crackled over the walkie-talkie, and Kuroo nodded to himself. He waited for the next truck to arrive and repeated the motion, nodding to the truck driver, and waited for the vehicle to disappear down the next street to finally let the crowd out from behind him.

"Privates on crowd control, return to your assigned positions," the voice of their captain ordered over the radio once it was over.

The civilians kept bombarding them with questions, but the soldiers quickly regrouped and headed back down to the gate in a brisk jog. The big part of their job was over, but now they had to watch the gate not only as per usual, but also to spot any stragglers, be it friend or foe.

The excitement had decreased once the trucks had dispersed to their target services, and the gate was back to its usual, quiet environment when the men made it back. They all picked up their weapons from the cabin again and climbed up to their posts for another few hours of watch before their shift ended.

Tsukishima joined Kuroo, switching spots with another soldier, if only because he was bored. And maybe, just maybe, because he was also a little bit worried. They exchanged few words, contrarily to the usual nature of their relationship, and immediately guessed of the other's agitation in the silence left between their sentences.

They weren't the only ones shaken by the sudden return of the military operation. In all the spheres of life in Niigata, something seemed to have shifted. The people were restless, a low buzz rising overhead in the cafeteria during dinnertime as the people began to talk. The boys in the Karasuno group were no exception, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Kuroo, Tsukishima, Daichi, Suga, and Yamaguchi to catch up on what had happened.

They all revealed what they knew, which wasn't much. The reports of the mission's conclusion still hadn't been submitted, so Daichi hadn't gotten them for photocopy and filing. Suga and Yamaguchi weren't working on the unit reserved for the survivors, so they did not have news other than the fact that all of their best doctors were there, which meant that their work on their own wards had become a bit more troublesome. Kuroo more than Tsukishima had spoken to some of the soldiers on the mission, but soon, their descriptions got the best of him, and he'd excused himself to quell the nausea inside of him.

Hinata had cautiously asked him what he'd heard, but after some internal deliberation, Kuroo had given him a strained smirk and had told him that some things were best left unsaid.

And so, they didn't stay out of the loop, but did not really know what was happening either. They all went about their days as usual, sometimes dropping by to help the volunteer centre make admission kits for the newcomers, or helping serve food at the kitchen. Kageyama slowly but surely began to meet the survivors to register them in the system and help them find their loved ones.

He was the first one who had contact with those forsaken human beings, and though he didn't speak much of his experience in interviewing them, the fact that he could not sleep that night was enough to give them a clue.

Suga was having trouble sleeping as well, and had heard the quiet shifting from Kageyama's spot, and then the deep breaths. There was more shifting, and though Suga couldn't see, he knew that it was Hinata who'd shifted, as he always did when he felt that Kageyama was in distress.
Surely enough, Suga heard his fellow setter's whispers in the dark afterwards. "They're broken, Hinata," he murmured, his voice tight, and Suga's heart had clenched. "They're so alone."

Hinata hadn't replied. But Kageyama had quieted down quickly, and Suga knew he'd sleep through the night.

His job had become a bit tougher because of the survivors' arrival, as well, though it wasn't directly related like Kageyama's had been. In his case, the creation of a whole new unit had pulled many experienced staff members off of other floors, and Suga had found himself with a higher patient load, and with less references for when he did not know what to do. It was tough, but satisfying in all its harshness, and Suga tried to stay optimistic and just kept breathing through it all.

To everyone's surprise, Nishinoya was the next one to have direct contact with them. After much thought, he volunteered at the hospital and specified that he'd wanted to work on the ward for the survivors, and cheerily went off on his first day soon enough.

At dinnertime, he looked burnt out and burdened, and when the others asked, he seemed hesitant to tell them anything. Still, not wanting to seem like a hypocrite, he took his own advice and shared his disturbing experiences, if only because he did feel better after getting the load off his chest.

He mentioned the teenaged boy he had to spoon feed because he was in a post-traumatic catatonic state. He mentioned the full-grown adult woman who'd cried against him for a whole twenty minutes. He didn't mention the young girl who'd almost bitten off her nurse's fingers in some rapid onset psychosis. He didn't mention the young man who'd strangled himself with his IV tubing.

There was much relief over the safe arrival of these individuals into a society where they'd be able to heal and rebuild their lives after their traumatic experiences. But there was also fear, and a lot of stigma associated to the mental states of these people, and inevitably, the inhabitants of Niigata began to skirt around the survivors who reintegrated in society.

The third contact was Yamaguchi's, two days after the conclusion of the mission, and it may as well have been the most significant.

He was the first, after Noya, to go to the specialized unit for the survivors, only because he was called to transfer one of the survivors who had severe facial trauma up to his trauma floor for specialized care. As he stood at the front desk, waiting for the unit coordinator to hand him the patient's chart, he could not help but feel observed by the people laid out in the beds in the rooms, or even in the hallways. The screaming of human beings had long since stopped affecting him, but there was something bizarre, something disturbing about the anguished crying he heard somewhere off in the background. The staff, too, seemed weary, but kept up their work diligently.

"Here," the unit coordinator finally handed him the thick chart he needed. "The nurse is going to bring your patient up front in a second."

Yamaguchi simply nodded and opened the chart to scan it quickly until his patient was brought to him for transport. It read that he'd had facial bone and cranial bone fractures after being severely beaten, and had to be intubated. A scan had shown a hematoma in his skull and the surgery to drain it had been too late to prevent left side motor weakness. With all of that information in mind, Yamaguchi immediately began tailoring a plan of care in his mind, until his patient came to him in a stretcher.

"Here you go," the nurse handed her patient off with a sad smile. "Take good care of him. He's a
really good guy, and if he asks for his sister, just hold his hand for a little bit and he'll quiet down.”

Yamaguchi nodded again, giving her a reassuring smile, and put the chart on the patient's stretcher. As expected, his patient had a grotesque and deformed face, blood staining the numerous bandages on him, but Yamaguchi worked in trauma and he'd seen worse already. The patient whimpered in pain, or confusion, or both, but Yamaguchi just put a comforting hand on his shoulder for a second before snapping back into action.

He turned the stretcher to wheel it out of the unit, only scooting over to let another stretcher pass by, the patient on it seeming slightly agitated. Yamaguchi took one more look at his own patient as the stretcher passed by, and when the other patient was out of the way, he began to move.

However, he'd only taken a few steps forward before he heard something he didn't think he'd hear in a place like this.

"Yamaguchi!"

He froze, his heart skipping a beat. He didn't recognize the voice. He couldn't think of anyone who'd call his name on this unit. Maybe Noya had caught a cold and was in to volunteer today? But Noya had gone to the library that morning to read up on therapeutic communication techniques, he'd said.

It wasn't Noya.

"Hey, hey, stop taking me away! I know him!" the voice repeated, and Yamaguchi lifted his gaze, dreading what he'd find when he looked at the patient in the stretcher that passed him by. The young man was twisted over the side, glaring at the orderly wheeling him away, and looked back at Yamaguchi with some sort of strange relief blooming on his face when their gazes met. "You're Yamaguchi, aren't you!? From Karasuno?"

Yamaguchi's eyes widened, and his mouth fell open into a soft gasp, his heart accelerating to a hundred miles a minute. He looked straight at the boy with dark green eyes, almost grey at this distance, and something inside of him built up until it burnt out.

He gave his patient's stretcher a strong push and hurried to leave the unit as quickly as he possibly could. He didn't want to stay anymore. He didn't want to stay.

"Hey, stop! Come back!" The boy called behind him, but Yamaguchi could hardly hear him over the sound of his heart beating in his ears. He exited the unit and went for the elevators, his heart only calming down once he was back on his unit and doing the admission paperwork for his new patient.

He knew the young man. He knew him from back when they were still carefree and happy and innocent. He knew him from his past life. And he couldn't imagine how he'd become in this life.

He wanted not to talk about it. He wanted to forget it happened, brush it off as a hallucination from sleep deprivation. However, he knew it wouldn't be possible. He knew that those eyes would haunt him, that he'd keep hearing the desperate calls in his head if he took this experience home with him. He knew he had to do something about it, for he now had one more person counting on him.

So he took his senpai's advice, and spoke about it.

Of course, it was hard for him to express it. He hardly even spoke in the first place, most of the time, so with the added stress of the situation, it was terribly hard to muster the words. Over dinner, with all eleven of them gathered at the table, he decided he wanted to share, but the words just wouldn't come out, no matter how hard he pushed air against his larynx.
His face must have made a weird expression, because soon enough, Tsukishima had put his chopsticks down and was looking at him intently.

"Did you want to say something?" he frowned, looking at the way his best friend chewed his lip incessantly.

Yamaguchi hesitated again, gulping down nervously, and then slowly nodded.

"What is it, then?" Tsukishima asked, carelessly to the outsider watching them, but with rapt attention to anyone who knew him well. There was a small conversation on the other side of the table, so only few eyes were on them, and somehow, that made Yamaguchi a bit more at ease.

Leaning over, he tried to make the words he needed to express, and Tsukishima leaned a bit more to encourage him to speak.

From the other end of the table, Ukai, who was tuning into Hinata's and Noya's conversation, also noticed them whispering, and tried to figure out what they were discussing in such silence. He figured it may have been private, until Tsukishima drew back with a grim expression on his face. At that moment, Ukai knew that something was wrong.

"Tsukishima, Yamaguchi," he called, not meaning for all the gazes to go to them as well. Yamaguchi looked a bit startled to be put on the spot, but Tsukishima simply turned to him with an unreadable expression. "You look grim. Did something happen?"

A quiet hush fell across the table, all of the boys turning to the blond, who seemed to be most likely to speak up. The two of them were visibly hesitating to share, though. A few seconds of silence later, Tsukishima turned to give Yamaguchi a glance, and the freckled boy nodded to his silent request.

"There's someone we know on the special unit of the hospital," Tsukishima finally revealed, turning back to face the slowly-widening eyes of his teammates. He could practically hear their hearts beating stronger against their ribcages, and knew of the cold sweat on the back of their necks, for he could feel a drop rolling down his own spine as well. "It's Iwaizumi Hajime."

The next two days were hell to go through. The high-strung anxiety from Yamaguchi's revelation was affecting all of their lives, the promise of finding a lost friend overshadowed by the thought of him having changed. The special unit was off-limits to the public, and Noya had not opted to volunteer on those two days, instead reading at the library, so they had to wait for Iwaizumi to be transferred to another floor to be able to see him.

Two days after being discovered in the special unit, Iwaizumi Hajime was transferred to Suga's acute medical unit. Suga only found out about his admission during the shift-end report, when he sat with the nurses of the day shift and night shift alike to pass on the care of his patients. He was quietly waiting for his turn to give report when the nurse across from him began giving hers.

"So... Haruka, you have room 5B as well, right?" she asked to her colleague, who nodded while writing down on her notepad. "Okay, so 5B is a new admission. His name's Iwaizumi, 18 year old male, transferred from the special care unit downstairs for pneumonia."

Suga perked up, listening with wide eyes and rapt attention.

"He's malnourished and dehydrated, but it was mostly corrected before his transfer," the nurse continued, checking her notes. "He's mostly independent, but needs to be encouraged to eat. Also, be careful with him. He has a tendency to rip out IVs he gets in his arms. Right now, we put an IV in
his foot for his antibiotics and for continuous D5W+1/2NS infusion, but he likes to walk around the unit in the daytime, so it's not ideal. He has two missing fingers on his right hand and the loss is new, so he's showing signs of having difficulty coping with his new loss."

"And what about his behaviour?" Haruka asked, Suga knowing that the question was generic with people they got from the special care unit.

"He's calm most of the time. He looks depressed, but doesn't have a diagnosis. He can get agitated a lot, though, sometimes without reason, and mostly when you try to get an IV in him, but he's never gotten aggressive so far. He has a PRN haloperidol injection ordered in case he gets extremely agitated. Otherwise, he's okay. He has a PRN abdominal restraint at night if he tries to leave, but restraints generally make him panic, so it's only to be used as a last resort. They used to have wrist restraints when he was ripping out all the IVs they got and kept scratching himself, but those got discontinued because he went into a full-blown panic attack when they were applied. Anyway, he takes lorazepam to sleep and it said that he has nightmares often, but that's like everyone else in this hospital," the nurse laughed, a few of her colleagues chuckling with her.

Suga did not laugh. His heart was constricting at the thought of strong, valiant Iwaizumi Hajime being reduced to all this.

"Okay, good. And right now?" Haruka asked, writing down all the necessary information.

"He's in his bed. Keeps asking about someone called Yamaguchi, but I checked in the unit he was on and on this unit, and there's no one with that name. Apparently, he's been asking about this guy for a couple of days. The doctor ordered a psychiatry consult to try and figure out if he's having post-traumatic hallucinations, but it hasn't been done yet."

"It's not a hallucination," Suga finally stepped in, getting the attention of all the nurses in the report room. "Yamaguchi is a nursing assistant who works mostly day shifts on 13NW, in trauma. He's my friend."

"Oh, good!" the first nurse, Rin, grinned. "Haruka, you can pass on the message to the day shift since I'm off tomorrow. Maybe they can get this Yamaguchi guy to come see him and figure out why he's calling for him."

"He's calling for Yamaguchi because he saw him on the special unit and recognized him as someone he knew from before the war," Suga explained, now getting suspicious glances from the staff. "I know him," he cleared up. "He's from a high school we played volleyball against."

"Sugawara," the head nurse nodded comprehensively. "It's great that you know him. Perhaps you can help us talk to him. But that means you also can't take care of him. It's just for your, and our protection, you know."

"I know," Suga nodded. "It's okay. I'd rather not take care of him either. But I'm just saying, I knew him from before, if you needed a reference."

"You're in tomorrow, right?" Haruka asked him.

"Yeah."

"I'll tell the day shift nurse that you know 5B if she has any questions, then," the dark-haired woman nodded, and wrote a final note on her paper.

"Okay, let's move on," the head nurse called, and they left the topic of Iwaizumi to get started on another patient. Only Suga kept thinking of him, giving his report and then anxiously waiting for
report to be over to get out of the small meeting room.

He hesitated as he grabbed his things from the break room, waving goodbye to his coworkers when he stepped out, and finally figured he might as well just see Iwaizumi before leaving.

He made his way to room 5, peeking into the 4-bedded room, and past the moaning patient in bed A, he saw his old acquaintance lying in bed B, head turned to look out of the window. He definitely looked more tired, and paler, and the IV line running into his foot peeking out from under the covers didn't help. There was the dinner tray on his table, only half eaten, but Iwaizumi didn't seem too concerned about it. He simply looked out of the window and occasionally scratched at the bruised crook of his elbows.

Suga didn't have the heart to go disturb him just yet. Instead, he backed out of the room, and left the unit with a tight expression on his face.

He told everybody else the news when he joined them after dinner, but the insecurity in his tight-lipped expression held them back from celebrating this new development. Instead, Daichi quietly suggested that they drop in for a visit tomorrow morning, and they all tiredly agreed.

They seemed to be doing that a lot, lately. Being tired, that is.

Suga and Yamaguchi left for work very early in the morning, so the boys had to resign themselves to skipping breakfast in order to follow them. They all went to the hospital together, still groggy and half-asleep when they made it there. Suga suggested they buy themselves something from the cafeteria while he got to the locker rooms with Yamaguchi to get changed, and they all happily complied, the boys who worked lending funds to those who didn't have any to spend.

When the two medics came back in full uniform, they all following them into the elevator. They got off on the 6th floor to follow Suga, leaving Yamaguchi to go up to the 13th alone after wishing him a nice day.

The night shift was finishing up in time for report when they got there, and Suga approached the unit coordinator, who looked busy as ever.

"Good morning, Mako," he called her by her nickname as he approached.

"Suga," she replied, looking up from her paperwork to smirk at him. "You're sweet-talking me. You need something, don't you?"

"I should have called you by your full name," Suga laughed, and leaned on the counter. "I need a favour. I just need you to let 5B have visitors today."

"Okay," the woman cocked her head. "It's earlier than allowed visiting hours, if that's what you're asking me to overlook."

"That, and the fact that they're 9 visitors," Suga added sheepishly.

"Nine!" the coordinator's eyes widened. "Suga, it's a maximum of 3 at a time so we don't disturb the patients!"

"I know, I know. Please just do this for me though? 5B is a friend of our and we really wanna make sure he's okay," Suga pleaded. "They won't take long, Makoto. They'll be in and out, just to see how he's doing. He just got transferred from the special unit, so we're all worried."
"Even more reason not to overwhelm him. The special unit patients are so agitated all the time..." she sighed. "If he gets aggressive, you'll be blamed!"

"He won't be, I promise you," Suga assured her. "So can he get his visitors?"

The unit coordinator sighed, and shrugged.

"Fine. Just don't let the head nurse catch you."

"She's coming in at 9 o' clock today. They'll be long gone by then," Suga laughed, and bowed his head to her. "Thank you, Mako!"

"Yeah, yeah, just go," she rolled her eyes, and returned to her work.

Suga hurried back to his friends, who were waiting anxiously by the elevators.

"She said yes," he grinned. "He's in room 5, the bed in the back, at the left. Just be careful with him and don't overwhelm him. I'm gonna go get report from the morning shift and I'll join you there."

"Thank you, Suga," Daichi smiled. "Have a good report."

"Thanks."

They all headed for the unit together, but split when Suga went to the report room, and the boys made their way to room 5 as it was pointed out by the amused-looking unit coordinator. They were very careful in opening the door and entering the dark room, following Suga's instructions to go past the first two beds, curtains closed around them, and then stopping in front of the curtain for the bed at the back left.

That's where they stopped in hesitation before Kageyama stepped up.

"Let's wake him up," he suggested quietly, and opened the curtain.

Iwaizumi was right there, curled up on his side, left hand fisted in his sheets in a way that promised soreness upon waking up. His right hand was hidden under the sheets, though thought they saw it moving back and forth in the obscurity. The young man didn't have a peaceful expression on his face, but he also did not look like the haunted victims that had been retrieved by the military. That in itself was reassuring.

Kageyama approached his old senpai, the rest of the team dispersing around the bed to watch as the setter gently touched the ace's shoulder to wake him.

"Iwaizumi," he called out softly, not sure what to expect.

He sure as hell didn't expect Iwaizumi's eyes to snap open, and his hand to go up and grab his wrist in an almost-bruising grip.

Kageyama's breath hitched, and he put his other hand on Iwaizumi's to try and pry the painful grip off of him, but the older teen was looking at him as if he wasn't real, and was breathing heavily.

"Iwaizumi," Kageyama repeated, a bit more hesitantly. "Let me go. You're hurting me."

"Iwaizumi," Daichi stepped in to protect his kouhai, but the boy in the bed whipped around to look at him, too.

As if finally realizing that he wasn't dreaming, he let go of Kageyama and shot up into a sitting
position, touching his elbows hurriedly. Even in the darkness, the team noted his bandaged right hand, and the very visibly missing phalanges on his pinky and ring fingers.

Nausea rose up inside of Kageyama, and strangely enough, the only thing he could think of was the fact that Iwaizumi would not be able to play volleyball anymore.

"Iwaizumi," he called again, getting his attention. "You're okay."

"I'm..." Iwaizumi finally began to speak, seemingly not finding his words. "Kageyama... What... Where am I?"

"You're at the hospital in Niigata, remember?" Asahi volunteered the information, everyone quietly agreeing that his voice was the most soothing of them all. "You got transferred to this floor yesterday."

"Yamaguchi," Iwaizumi gasped, looking around for said freckled boy.

"He's working on another floor. You're on Suga's floor now," Asahi continued.

Iwaizumi seemed to take a moment to absorb the new information and then pressed the buttons on the side of his bed to raise the head to ninety degrees. He then flopped back into his pillows, and sighed tiredly.

"How... Why are you here?" he finally asked. "All of you..."

"We've come so far together and we found refuge in Niigata after leaving Miyagi," Daichi explained. "It's a total coincidence we learned of your arrival in Niigata."

"Oh," Iwaizumi simply nodded, and fell silent, as if not knowing what to say. His intact hand played idly with the bandages on the other hand. There seemed to be something he wasn't saying, and it was very obvious. Still, he said nothing.

"We just came to see how you were doing," Kageyama continued.

"I'm okay," Iwaizumi mumbled. "I'm tired."

He obviously did not want to talk about himself. Still, there was a reason for him having changed so much, and all of them itched to know.

"Senpai," Kageyama finally called him, getting his attention as well as everyone else's. "What happened to you?"

It seemed to be a very touchy question to ask, and everyone mentally gave Kageyama their respect for having attempted it. Even if half the time, Kageyama said and did things without thinking anyway. Iwaizumi, too, seemed to hesitate, wringing his hands and then stopping when he winced in pain.

"I was travelling with some people," he began lowly, his voice tight. "We were heading towards Shikoku after the second explosion. We were caught on the road by the... the people... And even if we were together at first, we were separated and taken to different places for different reasons. I ended up near Niigata."

He seemed reluctant to say certain words, even if he knew that they were all aware of what had happened to him. Still, they all respected that, and backed off a bit.
"We're just glad you're safe now," Asahi spoke for them all. "It's good to see a familiar face."

"Yeah," he croaked out, and it was almost painfully sincere. "It really is."

There was something final to his words, and especially to the underlying emotions. As they stood in silence a little longer, it was obvious that their visit was over.

"Alright," Daichi decided. "We'll leave you to rest. Sorry for waking you up so early."

"That's okay. I don't sleep much anyway," Iwaizumi mumbled, glancing at all of them one by one, as if trying to re-familiarize himself to their faces. "Thanks for coming to see me."

"We'll be back some other time," Kageyama promised. "Talk to Suga-senpai if you need anything."

"Mhm."

With that, they excused themselves one by one from the boy in the bed, until Noya and Kageyama were left.

"Excuse me, senpai," Kageyama bowed his head lightly to the ace, and then left.

At that point, Iwaizumi did not even seem to be listening anymore, opting to look out of the window instead. Noya observed him for a second, watched him scratch idly at his elbow once, and then watched him gingerly touch the place where his fingers used to be. He saw the twitch of his lips, heard the hitch of his breathing, and then saw him relax back into bed, boneless.

He left without saying anything and joined his friends outside.

"I'm heading to work right now," Daichi was saying. "If anyone wants to head down that way."

"I'm going with Kenma to do some zootherapy sessions with the residents of an elder care house, so I'm heading east," Kuroo added.

"Zootherapy? Like kittens and puppies!" Hinata crowed out as they walked to the elevators. "That's so cool! Kenma, let me come!"

"No," the black-haired boy simply replied, tying his long hair into a ponytail and letting the blond ends brush his shoulders. "You need a pass to get into the home and I had trouble getting one for Kuroo."

"Aw man," Hinata pouted.

"I have scheduled volunteer hours today," Noya popped in, hoping his lie would go unnoticed. "So I'm actually going to go have a coffee at the caf before my hours start."

"Ah. Have fun with that, and don't let anyone get to you, okay?" Ukai reminded him as they squeezed into the elevator.

"I won't," Noya promised, though he wasn't sure he could uphold that promise. Not after seeing everything that had been done to the victims of the trafficking ring. "I just want to help."

"You're a good guy, Noya," Ukai repeated, and Noya flashed him a crooked smile as the elevator stopped on his floor.

"Have a nice day, everyone," he wished, and stepped off. However, he didn't go to the cafeteria for coffee. Instead, he sat on a bench for a while, watching the day shift come in and the night shift
leave, and about twenty minutes later, went back up to the sixth floor.

The nurses on the unit were already bustling, getting to work on preparing their morning medication. Trying to make himself as unseen as possible, Noya snuck by the staff and casually headed down to Iwaizumi's room. He ducked in and returned to bed B, where Iwaizumi was still sitting and looking out of the window.

This time, Iwaizumi saw him coming, and frowned.

"Yes?" he asked, confused.

"I just wanted to talk to you for a bit," Noya reassured him.

"Why?" Iwaizumi asked suspiciously.

"Because," Noya began. "I know we haven't been super close in the past. Hell, I don't think we've even spoken face to face before. But I know you, and I know the person you are, and I don't want to see you lose that."

"What do you mean?"

"My best friend died," Noya breathed out, taking a moment to calm his rushing heart. "He died because he thought he was alone, and because he thought he'd lost everything. He was close to doing it himself when he changed his mind, although an accident did end up taking his life anyway. He died because nobody asked him how he was doing, and everyone thought that he'd speak up if he needed to. But he didn't. He didn't give us the opportunity to save him, and we didn't take the initiative."

"I... I'm sorry for your loss," Iwaizumi mumbled, lowering his eyes guiltily. "Tanaka, correct?"

"Yeah. Tanaka Ryuunosuke," Noya nodded, swallowing the tears that sprang up at the sound of his best friend's name. "And with his death, I made a promise to myself. That I would never let anything like that happen again. That I would never let anyone lose themselves like that. I don't want anyone to lose a friend like that."

"That's... that's good," Iwaizumi muttered, seemingly at a loss of what to reply.

"I want to ask you," Noya continued, headstrong as ever. "How you're actually doing. Not the 'I'm fine, just tired', but how you're actually doing. You're hurting, anyone can see that, and somehow, this pain will get the better of you if you don't get help for it. So I'm offering, but I'm not forcing. If you wanna talk to someone else, that's fine by me. But you've just come back to a place where you are not alone, and I want to make sure that though you know you're not alone, you can also feel like you're not alone."

Iwaizumi's eyes widened with every word, and he just stared at Noya in surprise once he was done. And then, a bitter smile slid onto his face, and he scoffed.

"I won't let anything get the better of me. I have to stay strong, even if I don't feel like it." The smile quickly faded. "Even if I can't be, I have to be. Even if it's hard to keep going through every single day, I have to."

"You don't have to. Cut yourself some slack," Noya replied, paying close attention to his body language.

"I can't. Even if I'm on the edge of a breakdown, I can't ease up. I have to be strong no matter what."
The conviction in his own words was strong, and Noya knew there was something underneath that resolution.

"You don't have to hide, then," he rephrased. "You don't need to feel like you'll be less of a person if you don't hide what you're feeling. Hiding killed my best friend, so don't let it happen to you, too."

Iwaizumi seemed to hesitate again, and turned his eyes away.

"I saw him, you know," he finally muttered under his breath, so low that Noya thought he heard things at first. "Tanaka. I saw him."

"W-What?" It was now Noya's turn to be breathless. "What... How come?"

"They found him outside," Iwaizumi began, wringing his hands nervously together. "Near the cliff. He'd fallen through the trees and into the water, and they fished him out. He'd been there for a day or so. He had a lot of trauma, but was still alive, so they brought him back. They... The... They..."

"You don't have to say it," Noya whispered, his own voice tight with emotion at the new knowledge. It was partly for him, too, for he didn't want to hear who picked up his best friend according to Iwaizumi's story.

"The traffickers," Iwaizumi finally choked out, his fists clenching. "He looked young and strong and healthy asides from the trauma, so they picked him up and brought him back because he could still be of use if he healed a little."

"Be of use...?" Noya asked, plunging somewhat half-heartedly into the nitty gritty of the topic. "What does that mean...?"

Iwaizumi bit his lip, debating whether or not he should tell Noya, of all people. But he owed it to him. He couldn't stop now, not after he'd volunteered to start talking. He couldn't keep this information about his best friend from him.

"Organ trafficking for sale outside of Japan," he revealed, and pulled his legs to his chest as if feeling safer with all of himself in one place.

The news hit Noya in the gut like a punch, and he almost staggered back. He had to put a hand on the bedrails to steady himself as a sudden vertigo took a hold of him, hundreds and thousands of thought and emotions whirling inside his head like a maelstrom. It hadn't seemed to hit him how disgusting and horrifying and inhumane the actions of the trafficking ring were until the moment when he heard what they actually did. Organ harvest for illegal sale.

They had taken his best friend with the intention of cutting out his heart and selling it.

There was anger, white hot rage that mixed in with the pent-up frustration and exploded. He banged his fist on the bedrail, a dull pain shooting up his arm, and Iwaizumi actually flinched at the display of emotion.

"Disgusting scum." There were tears of rage in his eyes, his entire body shaking as it was consumed by the ugly anger born from the news. "Fucking primitive monkeys. I can't believe it... Why would they...? Why would anyone...?" he took a deep breath to complete his sentence. "Why would any human being even think for a second that that's an okay thing to do to someone else!?"

"Well..." Iwaizumi answered, as if he was expected to. "I'm not even surprised. If there are people who can launch bombs that wiped out half a nation, there are also people who will keep captive a hundred people in order to use them for their own gain." He shrugged, as if he'd already gotten used
to the notion and had accepted it.

"Still... it's inhuman!"

"Mankind is inhumane," Iwaizumi mumbled, looking straight into Noya's eyes with the utmost conviction. "If there is one thing that human beings can do entirely right, it's to harm other human beings."

"Damn it... Damn them all..." Noya swore, running a hand through his hair to evacuate the last of the anger shaking him to the core. "Shit... Then what happened to Ryuu? Did they...?"

"No." Iwaizumi was quick to swoop in with a response that helped put Noya's nerves at ease. "His organs were too damaged by the fall, so in the end, they retracted care from him and let him pass away."

"Shit..." Hearing all of this pushed Noya to the edge, but he had no more anger to give. Just sorrow. He tried to speak past the ball in his throat, but as soon as he dislodged the ball, he also opened the gates for the tears waiting to be shed. "Did he... did he pass peacefully?"

"He was very critically injured," Iwaizumi answered a bit vaguely. "We weren't really allowed pain medication, either..." But seeing Noya's face scrunch up in pain, he quickly tried to correct himself. "But he died with a smile on his face, and he said he felt at ease before passing."

"You spoke to him!?!" Noya gasped, glancing up at him with a sudden desperation to know more. "Please, tell me what he said!"

"He didn't say much. He was mostly delirious from the pain," Iwaizumi winced, wishing he could give better news. "But I spoke to him once when I was in the med bay. He mostly spoke of you guys, and the stuff you'd done and gone through. He was mostly reminiscing, as if he could feel himself slipping away."

"He probably could. Damn it, Ryuu," Noya laughed through the tears, but then lapsed in a fresh round of sobs.

"But he was at peace," Iwaizumi assured him. "He was very calm and rarely expressed being in pain."

"Did he... did he say anything for us...?!" Noya asked hopefully, but his shoulders sagged when Iwaizumi shook his head.

"He probably didn't think it served a purpose. Hell, I didn't even know you were all in Niigata. But although he didn't say anything in particular, he always said stuff about being really grateful for having gotten to know you all, and for having lived and died knowing you had his back," Iwaizumi tried to give him a small, reassuring smile, although Noya's heartbroken sobbing got to him, too. "He was happy."

"We should have saved him."

"In the end, you did," Iwaizumi finished. "He passed away smiling in his sleep, and I'm sure he was dreaming of you."

Noya could not reply, for there was nothing that could be said. Words could not express the immensity of the grief and regret he felt, but words could also not describe the immeasurable relief and gratefulness he felt at the knowledge that his best friend had passed away in peace. Losing him had been horribly painful and still was, but it helped to know that they hadn't totally lost him, even at
the very end.

Iwaizumi let him cry, actually seeming more alert now that he was able to talk about things he'd seen and done. Noya was acutely aware that he'd come back with the intention of helping Iwaizumi heal, and that he'd instead had a chance to stitch himself back together. He would only grieve for a minute longer, he promised himself, and then he would go back to helping Iwaizumi. It was the least he could do for the man who'd put his uncertainty to rest.

Finally, he calmed down one way or another, drying his tears on his shirt. His eyes were heavily rimmed red, but he didn't seem to care when he lifted his gaze to drill his gaze into Iwaizumi's.

"Thank you," he croaked out, his voice still rough from crying, but his spirit unwavering. "Thank you for telling me this."

"I had to. I think he would've wanted me to," the ace nodded.

"Yeah... You helped me feel whole again, Iwaizumi. I really needed it." He hesitated, and then hazarded a grin. "So there's no way I'm going to let you feel incomplete. Not after you've put me back together."

Iwaizumi seemed genuinely shocked by the fire in the small libero's eyes. But more than anything, when his eyes darkened and his lip wobbled, Noya thought he looked stricken, probably by something he said. He actually looked more distressed now than ever before. There was something that wasn't being said.

And then it was said.

"I can't." Iwaizumi croaked out, biting his nails on his left hand. "There's no way to save me from my loneliness. After so much time feeling like a part of me is missing, I'm never going to feel whole again." He clenched his eyes shut as a sudden wave of pain coursed through him. "Not unless I find him again."

"Him...?" Noya asked, already knowing what Iwaizumi was talking about, but wanting confirmation.

"Oikawa," Iwaizumi breathed almost reverently, gritting his teeth. "I lost him when we got caught, and I haven't felt whole ever since."

Noya didn't argue with that. He couldn't imagine having someone who'd shared his life since they were very young being taken away from him in such cruel circumstances. The bond between Oikawa and Iwaizumi was something that made them an incredibly potent duo, so understandably, there would be a hole in the other person's place when they were separated. Plus, not being able to guarantee his best friend's safety and sanity was probably the worst part to the rough-and-tumble teen.

"You lost him when you got caught?" Noya repeated, looking for more elaboration.

"Yeah..." Iwaizumi nodded. "We... We got sent to different sectors of the same trafficking ring. I haven't seen him since. I don't even know where he is..." He seemed to be getting a bit agitated.

Noya was about to continue when a nurse stepped into the room, some equipment in her arms.

"Good morning, Iwaizumi," she greeted, glancing briefly at Noya and nodding to him as well. "My name is Akane, and I'm your nurse for today. I'm going to be taking care of you," she introduced herself before heading for his IV pump. "How did you sleep?"
"I was... fine," he grumbled, cooling off a little.

"Did you have any nightmares?"

"I can't remember," Iwaizumi shrugged.

"Okay," she began setting up his antibiotic on the line already running. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"You're going to have to make some effort to eat this morning, though," she hummed pleasantly, pulling a machine on wheels next to her, and undoing the blood pressure cuff to put it around Iwaizumi's arm. "Do you have any pain?"

"My... hand hurts a bit," he mumbled, briefly glancing down to his amputated appendages and then looking away. Noya did the same.

"Okay then," she nodded. "I'll get you some medication soon. Put this under your tongue and close your mouth," she ordered, giving him a temperature probe.

Iwaizumi complied, and soon enough, she had all of the readings she needed. She wrote them down on a flowsheet on a clipboard by the head of the bed, and then verified the IV line again before backing out.

"I'll be back with your medications soon!"

"Thanks," Iwaizumi nodded to her, and let her leave.

"She seems nice enough," Noya mumbled, not sure how to get back on the train of conversation they'd begun to explore.

"Nishinoya," Iwaizumi interrupted. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, I really do. It's helped to talk about things so far, but... I don't want to talk about him just yet."

"Does it bother you?" Noya asked out of curiosity.

"I'm just... not ready. I'd like to be left alone."

"Okay," Noya recognized this as a cue to leave, and broke away from Iwaizumi's bed. "Okay. If you need anything, just let Suga know. He works here on day shifts mostly. We'll come back and see you some other time, okay?"

"Mhm," Iwaizumi nodded. "Have a good day."

Noya left down the hall, avoiding the staff as much as possible, and watched Suga prepare medication on his cart at the end of the hallway before leaving the unit, much, much lighter than he came in.

He, of course, did not tell the others everything that had transpired between him and Iwaizumi, but over dinner, he suggested that they try and find Oikawa's location, just to put Iwaizumi at ease a little bit. They all agreed, and Kageyama was the one who volunteered to check the system once he returned to work the next day.

With new hope and answers, a few of them who were available the next day got together and went to visit Iwaizumi again. Kageyama opened up the march, with Noya eagerly following, Kuroo sticking along because he was bored. Daichi had a day off from work and came with them, with
Hinata following Kageyama for the hell of it. The lot of them made their familiar way up to Suga's unit, a couple of them bypassing the front desk to slink into Iwaizumi's room. Hinata went to announce their presence before joining them by Iwaizumi's bedside, just as the young man had finished having lunch.

They all eyed the barely-touched tray, but none of them commented. Instead, they turned to Iwaizumi, who hadn't said anything yet.

"Is this a good time?" Noya asked on all of their behalf, feeling like they may have walked in on something.

"It's fine," Iwaizumi waved them off. "Did you need something?"

"We came to visit," Daichi replied.

"And we have news for you," Kageyama added. "Noya said you were looking for Oikawa..."

Noya might have shrunk a little under Iwaizumi's glare, but the steady look he gave back to him promised that he hadn't told them anything else.

"I work at the admission office, so I took the liberty of looking up Oikawa's name in the database," Kageyama continued, getting Iwaizumi's attention.

"Is he registered somewhere?" Iwaizumi held his breath.

"He was last registered in Nagoya a couple of weeks ago, but went MIA. That's all that is known," Kageyama reported a bit regretfully.

"So he was last seen in Nagoya..." Iwaizumi repeated, mostly for himself. "Nagoya..."

"That's a few hours of car ride from here," Kuroo commented offhandedly. "But if he's MIA..."

"I'm going to go look for him," Iwaizumi interrupted, straightening his back. "I'm going to Nagoya."

"But he was last seen there two weeks ago, and was reported missing," Kageyama repeated, wondering if Iwaizumi had misunderstood him. "He's not there."

"But he was there last. It's the closest I'll get to finding him," Iwaizumi continued on. "Even if he's not there anymore. Even if he's... he's dead. I need to go there. I need to be as close to him as I possibly can be."

"Iwaizumi, I don't suggest you go anywhere," Daichi shook his head. "You've come out of a really bad situation and you're still recovering. The journey to Nagoya is long and hard, and you can't do it like this."

"I have to go, though!" Iwaizumi repeated, a bit louder. "I have to go and try to find him!"

"Senpai," Kageyama frowned, putting a hand on Iwaizumi's shoulder. It was briskly pushed off as Iwaizumi became more and more agitated.

"Don't stop me! You can't keep me from leaving. I have to go find him!" he protested, baring his teeth like some sort of threatened wild animal. It made all of the teenagers step back a bit.

"Is everything okay?" a new voice asked, and a pretty red-haired nurse popped her head in to check on them. "I heard yelling."
"Let me go!" Iwaizumi protested, and the more he began to get agitated, the less it seemed like he was all there anymore. There was an emptiness in his eyes that was scary, as if he didn't even know where he was anymore.

"Iwaizumi, stop!" Hinata tried to calm him down, but Iwaizumi had already kicked his legs over the side of the bedrails and was awkwardly trying to climb over them to get out of his bed.

"Oh no," the nurse clicked her tongue. "I'm going to get a tranquilizer. Please hold him a little longer." She left in a brisk jog.

"Okay, Iwaizumi, calm down. You're okay. You're safe," Kuroo stepped in, definitely recognizing the outburst as being abnormal. He, too, was familiar with Seijoh's ace, although not like Karasuno's players were, and he knew this wasn't something he'd do.

Plus, he'd already been there. He'd already lived through the panic of thinking he was being confined, and the terror of having his life taken away from him. He totally understood what the dark-haired boy was going through, which is why he didn't try to hold him back. He did, however, try to reason with him.


"I need to go find Oikawa," Iwaizumi's breath hitched. "Let me out of here! I don't want to... I don't want this!"

The players seemed torn about what to do, definitely too scared to try and hold him back physically. Kuroo was standing in his way, but if he could climb over the side of his bed even with the rails up, he'd be able to push past Kuroo without a problem.

An orderly came running in, and the boys reluctantly parted to let him through to Iwaizumi. Seeing the tall man in scrubs, Iwaizumi shrunk back, his breathing getting heavier and heavier by the second, and he made a futile movement to try and get past him. The orderly restrained him without trouble under the arms, speaking in low tones to try and calm him down.

"Iwaizumi... Iwaizumi, you're okay," he whispered into his ear, though it didn't seem to help. Being restrained seemed to make the boy even more agitated, and he tried to kick the man out of desperation.

"Iwaizumi, stop!" Daichi pleaded.

"What's his first name?" Kuroo asked to his friends, since he had no clue himself.

"Hajime," Kageyama answered quickly, and Kuroo turned back to the ace.

"Hajime, you're safe here. No one is going to hurt you. Calm down," he tried to convince him.

Iwaizumi did stop for a second, but just for a second before he was weakly struggling again, with tears now running down his cheeks.

"Oikawa... Oikawa calls me that sometimes," he sniffled out, looking absolutely broken and desperate in the arms of the orderly. "Please, stop... Please don't do this, let go of me... Oikawa, I... I need to go and find him..." He tried to tug himself out of the orderly’s grip, the latter who mumbled something akin to 'where the hell is Rin with her shot?' but held fast.

No one had the heart to tell him that Oikawa was probably dead if he went MIA from a perfectly well-protected outpost. No one could promise him that such a journey wouldn't prove to be futile.
"I'm here," the nurse announced, briskly walking into the room with a capped needle in her hand. "This will calm him down very quickly," she assured them as she approached.

"No!" Iwaizumi almost screeched at the sight of tranquilizer. "No, don't! Please, no! Stop! Stop!" The force with which he was trying to tug his limbs out of the orderly's grip must have been painful, but he didn't relent in all of his desperation. Even when the nurse tried to get close to him to inject him, he kicked out at her, his expression twisted in terror, if nothing else.

Nobody knew how to get him to calm down at this point. And Kuroo just shut his eyes, apologizing mentally to the hysteric teen for not being able to save him from a tranquilizer injection.

"Wait!" Noya suddenly cried out, just as the nurse seemed to have formulated a plan to get close enough to him for the injection. "Iwaizumi, listen!"

He didn't stop, but he did turn his head towards Noya as if praying for some sort of help. And Noya took a deep breath, because this is all he could do.

"I'll go with you!" he promised, fists clenching at his sides. "To Nagoya! I'll go with you!"

"What!?" Iwaizumi spat out, but then the words seemed to sink, and he seemed to think about it. He stopped kicking too much, enough for the nurse to move in and safely uncap the needle. "You... why?"

"Because I don't want you to be alone anymore!" Noya reminded him, bearing his gaze fully. "You helped fill a hole in my heart, and I promised I would help you feel the same. So I'll go to Nagoya with you. I'll help you try to find Oikawa. You don't have to suffer all alone anymore."

"Nishinoya..." Iwaizumi's eyes went wide, tears leaking out passively now, and he relaxed a bit, if only out of shock at the news. "You..."

He didn't allow himself to finish. The nurse pushed his gown up a little bit and jabbed the needle into the muscle of his thigh, eliciting a cry of protest from him. He tried to kick again, but she'd injected the small volume of medication quickly and had pulled back to avoid a needlestick injury.

"No!" Iwaizumi shook his head, looking down at his leg as if it would fall off. "No, no, no, no, no-"

"Iwaizumi," the nurse, Rin, soothed him, seeing him relax. She stepped forward and brushed some hair out of his face, motioning for the orderly to slowly let him go. "Shh, sweetheart... you're okay now... you're okay..."

"I'm sorry..." the young man rasped out, not sobbing anymore, but the tears still falling down his cheeks. "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay, sweetie... Now let's get you back into bed..." she coaxed him, lowering a bedrail to make it easier for the orderly to help him climb back in. Iwaizumi did so obediently, having considerably calmed down, either because of the injection, or Noya's promise, or both. Rin tucked him back in, making him comfortable, and soothingly brushing some hair out of his face again before stepping away.

"We're sorry we riled him up," Daichi apologized to the nurse, bowing to her as she made a move to leave.

"That's fine," she waved them off a bit sadly. "He's so young... These people have been through so much... it's very easy to say something that'll make them relive unpleasant memories, or have flashbacks. Some of them even hallucinate things when they begin to get agitated. It wasn't your, or
his fault. We just have to deal with these unhealthy defense mechanisms that their bodies have, and help them cope with the pain they've been through."

"Thank you," Daichi bowed to her once more, and she left with a sad smile.

They then turned back to Iwaizumi, who seemed to be back to his senses, although a bit more sedated than before.

"Sorry about that, Iwaizumi," Kageyama mumbled, feeling slightly guilty, despite what the nurse had said.

"Are you okay?" Hinata asked, not sure what else to say.

Iwaizumi looked at him, and then at the others, and then slowly nodded.

"Noya..." he called, turning his head to the side. "Are you serious...?"

"Wouldn't have suggested it if I wasn't," the libero forced a grin. "Of course I'm serious. I want to help you, and everyone else who's feeling like they're isolated from everyone who cares for them."

"Noya, you can't actually be considering leaving Niigata," Daichi frowned at him. "We're safe here, and you're asking us to compromise our safety to get back on the road?"

"I'm not asking you to come with me. I can go alone with Iwaizumi," Noya shrugged like it was common sense.

"No way. You're not going out there alone," Daichi shook his head.

"Senpai, Daichi is right," Hinata piped in pleadingly. "We've crossed the island to find somewhere safe. We can't go back out there."

"I promised. I'm going if he's going," Noya stood fast, unwavering.

"No one is going to agree to this plan, Noya. It's su-" Daichi interrupted himself, his heart jumping violently at what he was about to say.

"It isn't," Noya shook his head, biting his lip. "It isn't suicide. I'm choosing to move forward rather than to stay in my comfort zone. Who knows what I'll find out there. Maybe it'll be better than here."

"In fact..." Kuroo piped in, looking pensive, and Daichi felt aggravation rise up inside of him even before he completed his sentence. "I think Noya's on to something."

"You know, Kuroo, I have a question for you," Daichi sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly. "How come you're always on board with the most dangerous plans?"

"I see potential in them," Kuroo chuckled lazily, crossing his arms. "Noya's got a good point. What's out there could be better than what's here. Think about it. Hokkaido is a wasteland, so we need to move back towards southern Japan if we want to find someplace safe to stay. I've been itching to get out of here, so I'm on board with Noya's and Iwaizumi's expedition. Who knows; we might find greener pastures in Nagoya."

"See? Even Kuroo's with me," Noya mumbled a bit unclearly.

"That's not the ultimate proof that this plan is perfect," Daichi glared at Noya's childish comment.

"Stop it," Iwaizumi mumbled from where he laid, and all eyes went to him again, looking so small
and so tired in that powder blue hospital gown, buried under the sheets. "Stop. I'll go on my own. I
don't need anybody to come with me."

"But I want to," Noya insisted. "I want to come with you and help you find Oikawa. He's a jerk, but
he's someone precious to you. You helped me find closure with my best friend, so I'm going to help
you find closure with yours."

"Not if it's going to create a conflict," Iwaizumi glared at them one by one. "Don't do that for me."

"No. It's good to try and put new ideas forward," Daichi quickly corrected himself. "I'm just...
reluctant to suggest that we hit the road again, especially since we now know that there's a homicidal
organization on the loose, on top of the usual human trafficking ring looking for new victims. There's
so much out there we could encounter, whilst we could just stay in Niigata and be safe."

"For how long, though?" Kuroo countered. "Said homicidal organization can hit Niigata again
tomorrow, for all we know. It happened once, and half the population was massacred. We're not
impervious to any disaster, not here, not out there. Not until we get to Shikoku or Kyuushuu and
preferably get out of this damned country for good."

"I know..." Daichi frowned. "It's just... I don't want to put everyone at risk again..."

"Let them decide, then," Noya pleaded with him. "Please, Daichi. Let everyone put in their two
cents and vote. Whatever happens, I'm heading to Nagoya, though."

"Same here," Kuroo hummed, as aggravating as ever.

"What about you two?" Daichi asked hesitantly, glancing at Hinata and Kageyama, who'd been
mostly quiet so far.

The freaky setter-spiker duo glanced at one another, seemingly exchanging words with their gazes,
and then turned to Daichi, their expressions set.

"We'll go!" they both announced in unison.

"We're not leaving anyone to go out there alone," Kageyama commented.

"And if there's somewhere out there where we can truly be safe, then that's where we want to go."
Hinata finished off.

Daichi looked at them for a little while, and then sighed.

"Then, I suppose it's a vote after all. I'll ask everyone at dinner today, and we'll go from there."

"Thank you, Daichi!" Noya crowed excitedly.

"Stop that," the captain groaned, blinking tiredly. "I'm not the authority here. I don't call the shots.
I'm just trying to be the voice of common sense since nobody around here seems to be playing that
role."

"Thank you anyway, Daichi," Iwaizumi muttered, a bit embarrassed, but played with the hem of his
covers idly. "You don't have to."

"Well, these idiots want to," Daichi rolled his eyes, sighing before smiling fondly at his teammates,
his friends, his family. They all returned the exasperated smile with a grin. "And when they want
something, the devil himself would be too weak to hold them back."
Predictably, there was a resistance. The boys who hadn't come with them to see Iwaizumi's psychotic episode were opposed to the idea of leaving, mostly because they didn't seem to see the logic behind leaving their safe spot to go and adventuring out in the lethal wilderness once again. And all that, just to find someone who was barely even an acquaintance to them for one of their other acquaintances' sake.

It didn't seem logical to half of them, and seemed perfectly logical to the other half.

Kuroo pushed the idea that they'd have to leave eventually to make their way down to the safer spots, but Tsukishima argued that they could just wait in the relative safety of Niigata until supply caravans came up and they got a turn to catch a ride down.

In turn, Kuroo got Kenma to draw a trajectory and calculate the expedition to Nagoya. With twelve hours of slow walk scheduled a day, they'd take twelve days to get there by foot, so they rounded it up to two weeks in the wasteland that the country had become. In two weeks, they could be well on their way to salvation, versus still being stagnant in a place that could become their grave as well.

The main concern seemed to be with the dangers of being alone out there. They'd seen them all already; sickness, hunger, injury, hopelessness, weather... They were familiar with the game that was survival on the road. They were practically veterans at this particular type of warfare, the fight to stay alive and push back against their environment.

And then, Kuroo reminded them that they'd all gained more skills and more knowledge throughout their many weeks in Niigata, and reminded them that they were not the same people who entered through the gates of the city, disheveled and starving and broken. They were stronger now, made tougher by tragedies and victories that they'd experienced.

They were all much stronger now, so if they'd survived before, they could definitely survive again.

Suga was the first to concede, agreeing that maybe they would get more luck in the south. Yamaguchi quickly followed in Suga's footsteps with a quiet 'I'll go, too'. Of course, Tsukishima grumbled something about all of them being idiots with no sense of self-preservation, and volunteered as well.

Asahi sighed and said he probably had no choice anyway. Kenma said nothing until all eyes turned to him for his answer, and he frowned, having considered that by helping Kuroo make a plan, he'd already agreed to it. Ukai also shrugged and said that it might be worth a shot, if they thought they could take it.

Finally, Daichi, who had still been on the fence, gave in, figuring that after losing one of theirs already, he wasn't willing to lose the others. He wasn't willing to let go of what he still had after their devastating loss.

With the whole team unified in this decision (some of them seeming like they'd been defeated somehow), they began to prepare to set out again. The promise of adventure on the road was both thrilling and chilling, old memories coming back to haunt them as they slept that night. The phantom pain of burning thighs and chafed shoulders came back to haunt them as they began their conditioning the next day, all of them filling up backpacks with whatever they could find and walking around the town to get their bodies ready to fall back into their uncanny routine.

Encouraged, if not surprised by their support, Iwaizumi also trained himself in his own way. He ate all of his meals, even if he was not hungry, and behaved himself. As soon as he felt like he was
falling into a flashback, he called the nurses for his medication, and slept throughout the night. He also allowed the staff to put an IV in his left hand, wary about it at first, but stopping himself every time he went to rip it out. He walked around the unit all day, finding the same old walls and nurses and screaming patients boring, but wanting to recondition his body for the long and arduous journey waiting for him.

Weakened by his captivity in mind and body, he knew that even if he could not get his body back in good shape by the time their departure date came, he would at least be able to get his mind in good shape. He picked up a book to read and some puzzles, just to keep himself busy. His psychiatrist expressed great satisfaction in his progress, but Iwaizumi didn't tell her that it was because he needed to be in his best shape in order to go and find his best friend.

The thought of finding Oikawa again made him giddy, but also worried. He didn't know how he'd find him, and if he ever did, in what state he'd find him. Oikawa, too, had been with him when they'd been picked off the road with a few other people they'd met on their way out of Miyagi. They'd been captured together, but soon had been separated. Iwaizumi had been taken away alone, whilst Oikawa had been taken with the only young woman in their group. The two other men, two older adults, had been taken away separately.

Iwaizumi had spoken to the traumatized victims stuck in the traffickers' camp with him. They came from all over Japan to be taken by boat to wherever the traffickers took their 'goods'. That meant that if he'd been separated from Oikawa, then Oikawa hadn't been captured for the same purpose of organ harvest. That relieved him a little bit. He wouldn't forgive anyone who disrespected Oikawa like that.

However, not knowing where he'd been taken was scarier than anything else. He needed to find him as quickly as possible. He'd already spent weeks away from him; he couldn't wait to find the only thing he had that mattered to him, and the only thing he'd lost that mattered to him.

The final dressing was taken off his amputated fingers a day later for the stumps to heal, open to air, and Iwaizumi knew that he was almost done there. His antibiotics course had finished a day earlier, and he didn't have so much trouble breathing anymore. On one of his walks by the nursing station, he could hear the nurses discussing his discharge plans, and his heart fluttered. He'd of course asked Suga, but the setter had been vague, telling him that his plans weren't consolidated yet.

The physiotherapist told him a day later that he didn't need his help anymore, as he was good to go on his own. The occupational therapist also had the same verdict, deeming him moderately well-adapted to his missing digits. His psychiatrist told him he'd see him in two weeks, but Iwaizumi didn't tell her either that he probably wouldn't be here anymore by then.

And then, one morning, the nurse who came in to take his vital signs announced that he'd be discharged that evening.

Iwaizumi's heart flipped in his chest. This was it.

(He tried not to look too excited to leave. He knew he was still under observation for a risk of self-harm, homicide and suicide, so if he behaved too brightly, the staff might interpret it as suspicious and keep him longer).

Of course, Suga knew of his discharge plans, and helped him gather whatever little possessions he had. He even picked up his discharge prescription after his shift, putting the numerous little pills in the backpack he'd brought for him, alongside his toothbrush and book. He got some volunteers to bring Iwaizumi some street clothes from the donation centre, and even accompanied him to the shower stall on the unit to let him give himself a good cleanup before leaving.
That evening, at 7:15PM, Suga went into report to pass on his patients to the night shift. At 7:45PM, he came out, and Iwaizumi was waiting by the unit coordinator's counter, fully dressed, all IVs and dressings off, backpack on his back, and looking fully ready to get the hell out of there.

Suga waved goodbye to his fellow staff members, and left with Iwaizumi in tow.

And if Suga had been doubting the justice of their actions thus far, taking a look at Iwaizumi as they stepped out into the cool evening air was enough to convince him. The young man stopped for a second, breathed in deep with his newly-healed lungs, and then let his exhale shape his lips into a small, hopeful smile. Nothing big, nothing extravagant, nothing radiant, but Iwaizumi smiled, and Suga had no doubt that they'd made the right choice to the very end.

...-...-...11...-...-....

The boys somehow managed to pull some strings around Niigata, all having connections somehow thanks to their seniority in their workplaces. Daichi got them some maps, backpacks and sleeping bags from the army storehouse. Kuroo managed to get a few knives by calling in favours from soldiers he'd helped previously. Tsukishima refused to make the effort of getting his hands on a gun, even if he had gotten very good at using them, but was able to gather camping equipment to add to their survival kits.

Suga and Yamaguchi sneaked out a ton of medical equipment from their floors, now much more educated in terms of using supplies efficiently, and thus being able to grab only what they anticipated to use. They may or may not have gotten incredulous looks every time they came back to the bunker still dressed in their scrubs, pulling gauze, syringes, and stock medication from the many, many pockets their uniforms had.

Asahi claimed a corner in the cafeteria's freezer and began to stockpile leftover food in plastic bags. He was uncomfortable sneaking out cans, so the boys agreed that they should put a large part of their meagre income into buying food before leaving. They also gathered empty bottles and filled them with water, keeping copious amounts of water available for their journey.

Kenma surprised everyone by bringing books from the library to take with them, arguing softly that they shouldn't let boredom get the best of them. Hinata managed to get some hygiene supplies by grabbing the extras from the ration kits he volunteered to make. Ukai and Noya set out a whole day to go outside of the fenced-off zone, and explore the desolate city of Niigata for warmer clothing to bring back. Fall was advancing and winter would soon be upon them, and the hoodies they wore soon wouldn't be enough to ward off the chill anymore.

They took two days to prepare, and even when their bags were all packed and they were ready to go, they still spent a whole day skirting around the issue of leaving. There was always some uncertainty surrounding the decision.

But one night, Daichi finally drew the line, and asked everybody to give in their resignation letters the next morning. He also asked Kageyama to change their information in the system to mark them all down as 'last known to be heading for Nagoya', so that they could have a backup in case they didn't make it to Nagoya. They wouldn't be announcing that they were leaving, just to avoid the administrative setbacks, but would be using connections in the military to cross the gates without being prevented from leaving.

(Their whole operation was a bit shady and in many ways illegal. But laws had not protected them when they needed protection the most, and so they felt no inclination to follow them when they held them back.)
It wasn't easy to say goodbye to the stability their lives in Niigata provided them. Coworkers and colleagues were sad to see them resign, and promising to stay in touch was something that many of them avoided doing, mostly out of guilt. A few of them in important positions were even offered boosts of privilege to convince them to stay, but there was nothing they would accept at this point. They'd made their choice, and there was no going back now.

One week after the initial proposition of the travel plan, early in the morning, even before the sun rose, they left Niigata. The last thing they needed to do was to wait for Kuroo to drop a stack of bills into the gate guard's hand, and then they were free to step into the outside world, still blanketed by the darkness of the night, inviting them to venture out into the unknown once again in their unending struggle to find safety.

The beaten earth path they took kicked up dust all around them as they took their very first steps. It was familiar and dreadful, both comfortable and disturbing that they'd inexorably found themselves back on the road, as if wanderlust was an integral part of their identity.

But something was wrong, and their steps were heavy. The first few meters were easy to clear, but then there was something tugging them back to Niigata, holding them captive in its invisible grip.

Hinata halted first, standing in the middle of the road pensively, and the rest of the team stopped when they noticed.

"Hinata?" Kageyama asked, frowning.

"What about Tanaka-senpai?" he asked innocently, looking up at them for an answer to a difficult question. "Are we... leaving Tanaka-senpai?"

There was a sudden sense that Hinata had hit the nail on the head, and that many of them were still hesitating, bound emotionally to the place where they'd lost a reliable friend and strong support. They felt like the past was holding them back, preventing them from moving on. And it was understandable if they thought about it. Tanaka had been with them throughout everything, and losing him was still a fresh wound.

Iwaizumi watched them hesitate. He saw the way their hands tightened on their backpack straps and how they began to glance at one another. And he understood. He had been through the loss of strong social support, but he'd been saved from the process of grief by uncertainty and personal suffering. He hadn't had time to wonder if his friends and family were still alive, not when he'd been too busy staying alive.

He scratched at his elbows idly as he thought, and realized that he needed Karasuno to find Oikawa. He wouldn't be able to make the journey on his own, and he needed their presence to keep him sane, their supplies to keep him healthy, and their expertise to keep him alive. He needed them to journey with him, and just like they'd given him hope, he had to give them closure.

"I'll take you to him," he found himself suggesting, getting their undivided attention as a reaction. "I'll take you to Tanaka, where he's buried. So you can, you know... say goodbye."

"You would?" Suga breathed out, surprised. "You know where he is?"

"Yes." Iwaizumi licked his lips, suddenly feeling like they'd gone dry. "He's buried a little offways from the traffickers' camp, with all the other casualties."

He saw their stricken faces, he saw their expressions fall at the thought of finding their friend in such a place. He didn't want to return to that damned place of nightmares, either, but perhaps, once he
thought about it, revisiting one last time before leaving would give him his needed closure as well.

"It's about an hour of walk towards the west. It's a bit of a deviation into the countryside, but not much. We can go and be back on our trajectory come morning light," he suggested, briefly asking himself if he was ready to go back there, but realizing that he would never be ready to do something he had to do nonetheless.

"That would be... very much appreciated," Daichi nodded, gulping down heavily. "I think... I think it's something that will help."

"Are you ready to take us, though, Iwaizumi?" Noya asked, astute as ever, more astute now that he had the motivation to open his eyes to the world around him.

Iwaizumi cringed at the attention he got, but didn't falter. He looked Noya straight in the eye, held his breath, and nodded firmly.

"Yes. Let's go."

He took the lead, taking them off the path, into the small streets of Niigata. As if guided by some invisible arrow towards his destination, he led them out of the residential areas, and into the wilderness. The birds began to sing by the time their path sloped downwards through the trees, and soon enough, the air became chillier, announcing their arrival near the sea. They couldn't see any bodies of water, but they were definitely close.

Iwaizumi surprisingly didn't falter as he led them towards the traffickers' hideout. He was anxious about his return, but pushed forward anyway.

The term 'hideout' was more appropriate than anything to describe the place where the organ traffickers conducted their operations before the military took them down. Now abandoned, the previously heavily-guarded wooden gate hidden in the trees welcomed Iwaizumi back to the place of his nightmares.

He pushed on, still standing as strong as he wanted to pretend he was. He could feel the tension radiating from the group behind him, all of whom seemed reluctant to enter the area. The soil was muddy, squishing under their boots as they walked, filling the silence when nothing else did. There were many tents flapping in the breeze, set up in all shapes and sizes, all of them dispersed through the thick trees as to provide concealment should the camp be seen from above. The boys guessed that if they could see past the canopy, they'd spot the cliff where Tanaka had fallen a bit further away.

Knowing what had transpired in this camp once made it hard for them to walk through it unaffected. The occasional blood stain on a tent tarp or scratch marks on the tree bark spoke volumes about the environment the captives had lived in, and there was a newfound respect for the young man walking before them.

Iwaizumi almost forgot to breathe once in a while, but refused to let himself get overwhelmed. It was clear in his mind now that he was free; he only had his subconscious left to tame. He'd come here with a missive, and he'd carry it out to its end. And the end was near, as near as the small cabin a ways out into the woods, which Iwaizumi recognized as the medical bay. He'd been there a few times only, and so the place did not bother him any more than the rest of the camp did. He led the team behind the cabin, where there was a small clearing, and finally stopped in a spot where the breaking dawn created a dramatic chiaroscuro of his torn expression.

"It's here," he simply announced, and pointed at the soft, muddy ground, letting the boys guess the rest.
They were sharp, and caught on quickly. The earth was soft, almost too soft, but if their feet sunk only a little into the soil, they definitely began to feel the resistance of soil impacted against something solid.

It was nauseating to be standing there, on the edge of the massive cemetery, never mind seeing Iwaizumi stand in the very middle of it all with his eyes turned skyward.

"Here?" Daichi sought confirmation with a certain reluctance, grimacing at the thought of the things hidden in the ground.

"Yeah," Iwaizumi nodded solemnly. "It's a mass grave for anyone who dies within the camp. Most people unfortunately stay alive throughout their transit period in this camp, but there are nonetheless at least a hundred bodies piled up underneath us, stowed away in layers over time."

"This is disgusting," Kuroo clicked his tongue, gritting his teeth. Next to him, Kenma put a hand on his shaking shoulder, squeezing softly, and Kuroo let the rage evaporate out of him. He hated seeing such inhumanity done to innocents. It wasn't fair to the survivors, to have to deal with such profound trauma they never asked to receive.

"This is the human race," Iwaizumi mirrored. "But this is also where Tanaka is buried, probably near the top."

The thought of stepping on their friend took everyone aback, and they backed out of the clearing a little more. However, this was what they'd come so far for, and as shocked as they were, they had something to do by being here.

"Let's offer a prayer for him," Suga suggested quietly, and slowly, they all nodded. Iwaizumi watched as the group silently left their parting thoughts to their friend, and took their example, silently bidding goodbye to this place of nightmares as well. They would all be moving on after this.

They raised their heads once they were finished, many of them with tears glistening in their eyes. Iwaizumi joined them again, fully intent on leaving as quickly as they'd arrived, and waited for their signal to march on.

There was a breeze that ruffled the trees around them, carrying a promise of a brighter tomorrow, and it was Noya who spoke first.

"He's in the wind and in the ground, and he's watching over us. I can feel it," he mumbled, a peaceful smile dawning on his face. "But he wouldn't want us to stay. It's time to set out."

"In that case," Daichi smiled at him, willing himself not to shed any tears for this goodbye. "Let's go."

Setting back out on the road was a familiar pattern to settle into. The days that stretched on and the hours spent kicking rocks on the road were known to them, as if a second instinct by now. Kageyama couldn't lie to himself. There was something relieving about leaving the confines of a single place and walking out towards a new horizon. As much as he'd gotten used to his quiet, comfortable routine in Niigata, he still had missed the silence on the road and the shuffling on his companions' steps as his only indication that they were still standing tall.

He hadn't missed the rationing of their food stores, but he had admittedly missed sharing food with Hinata. He hadn't missed the rainy nights spent praying that the tarp over them would keep them dry, but he had missed sleeping stuck to everyone else's side to ward off the chill of the late autumn air.
He hadn't missed walking unholy numbers of hours a day, but he had missed stopping around a campfire for the night to tell stories and relax before sleep. He hadn't missed the oftentimes blinding pain in their legs that forced the entire group to stop for one person, but he had missed the feeling of getting somewhere, of passing the signs on the highway that announced an exit in two kilometres, one kilometre, and then the town serviced by the exit. He hadn't missed throwing himself into the ditch on the side of the highway at a moment's notice if they thought they heard a car heading their way, but he had missed the loud giggling Noya and Hinata would inevitably and recurrently share once the danger had passed and they could all untangle themselves from the pile they'd thrown themselves into.

He hadn't missed a lot of things about being on the road, but he also hadn't lost the energy he needed to keep moving forward with his family by his side.

And now, his family seemed to be headed in a totally different direction, having lost one of its invaluable members, and having added one more amongst them. Not to fill a hole, but to create more opportunities and more happiness all around. Kageyama couldn't qualify Iwaizumi as being a part of his family just yet. He'd briefly been his senpai in middle school and his opponent in high school, but the two of them had never been especially close, not as much as Kageyama felt close to Oikawa (for much more different reasons, admittedly). Still, he was a familiar face, and in this vast, broken world of theirs, any familiar face was worth a hundred strangers.

Kageyama wanted to get to know Iwaizumi again. Back in the day, he'd been the dependable ace of Seijoh. Even before that, he'd been the strong senpai of Kitagawa Daiichi. But after seeing his psychotic break at the hospital, watching him have violent nightmares and scratching his elbows once in a while, looking surprised when he hit air where he should have hit fingers, Kageyama knew that he had a lot to relearn about the tanned boy. He, too, had changed, and had been changed by his tragic circumstances.

The thought of his experiences brought a bitter taste to Kageyama, and he almost spit out the mouthful of vegetable soup he had taken from the bowl he shared with Hinata. It was now day 8 on the road, 8 out of 14, already halfway down their journey, and Iwaizumi still had not shared much about himself. He still hadn't explained what he saw when he shot awake at 3AM, cold sweat making his clothes stick to his deconditioned body. He still didn't stop scratching himself, even though he hadn't had an IV anywhere on him in a week, and didn't even seem like he was aware of it. He still didn't eat too much on his own and needed a subtle nudge from Suga to keep spooning the small bites of food into his mouth reluctantly. He still took his pills at night with hesitant, often shaky hands, and always looked pained after they slid down his throat. And he never shared.

They all seemed to want to give him his space. But Iwaizumi had never been one to confide his problems to others (unless it was Oikawa, and even then...), and Kageyama just wanted to understand him.

He had no malicious intent when he glared at Iwaizumi throughout dinner that night, piercing him with his gaze and noting the way he sometimes fumbled when his spoon went through the spot where he used to have fingers, as if he still wasn't used to his loss just yet.

It was understandable. A loss like that couldn't heal easily.

He must have stared too intently, for he suddenly felt stared at in return. He raised his eyes from Iwaizumi's missing digits and found that the owner of said missing digits was looking right back at him with a frown.

"Were you looking at my hands?" Iwaizumi asked, his tone of voice pretty neutral. Kageyama wasn't sure how to respond, so he turned his head to the side too hastily to be natural.
"No."

Iwaizumi sighed in exasperation, rubbing his face. At this point, he'd gotten some of the attention of the group, the others surprised to see him behaving so... normally.

"You don't have to walk on eggshells around me," he finally groaned out. "I can see you looking at my fingers and I know you notice when I scratch myself. Just say it. Say that you want to know what that's all about."

"No, I..." Kageyama hesitated, embarrassed. "You... It's your business, I can't-"

"Just say it, idiot," Iwaizumi grumbled, crossing his arms. "Just say it upfront instead of treating me like a porcelain figure, though."

"I'm sorry..." Kageyama looked down, and said nothing more. He didn't need to say anything more. His dejected, but receptive body language said it all.

Iwaizumi sighed and rolled his eyes, and then put up his right hand. The ring and pinky fingers had been amputated down to the last phalange, and the short stumps were still red and healing to open air. It took some courage for the boys to look at his mutilated limb, but when he had all eyes on him, Iwaizumi took a deep breath and jumped into the topic.

"They cut off my fingers as punishment," he admitted without any sign of remorse, although there was still some bitterness behind his words. "Organ traffickers don't need limbs intact, just viscera. It was routine practice to amputate fingers or toes, even hands sometimes to keep people in line."

"Shit," someone swore, but Kageyama had no idea who. He was too busy trying not to vomit at the simple thought of such a horrifying act being done not once, but twice to his friend.

"You... you aren't scared?" Hinata asked, eyes wide in horror.

"Not anymore." His wording left much unsaid, but plenty understood. There was a ripple around the campfire and a tidal wave of empathy almost crashed onto the young man they'd only just retrieved.

"Are you... adjusting?" Kuroo asked, pursing his lips without any surprise on his face.

"Yeah... It's getting easier, but I still have a long way to go." The glint in his eyes proved that he knew exactly what that entailed, and their hearts all ached for him and his loss.

"Does it hurt...?" Kageyama asked carefully.

"Sometimes. Especially if it's cold. Sometimes, it feels like my fingers are still there, and they're the ones hurting, and that's the toughest pain because there's nothing but air where I perceive my pain to be," Iwaizumi explained plainly.

There were a few murmurs of shock, or admiration, or both, but Kageyama still wanted to know more. Iwaizumi seemed to be more open than usual, probably due to exhaustion, probably because part of him had given up, and probably because part of him wanted to be saved. He'd take advantage of that to get his senpai to open up.

"And your elbows?" he asked briefly, keeping the question broad.

"I scratch because it always feels like there's a needle in my arms," Iwaizumi answered, looking down at his elbows, red with fingernail marks, though the bruises had disappeared a while back. "Organs also include blood. While we waited for transit at the camp, we also had a routine number
of days, usually every four or five days, when they'd come around and take blood from us." He
didn't mention the chemical sedation, and he didn't mention the restraints. He didn't mention how
some people were unable to replenish their supply in time and slipped into comas with the following
harvest. He didn't mention how poor catheterization hygiene sometimes gave people infections in
their blood or clots that ended up causing a heart attack in young men and women. He didn't mention
any of that because he wasn't ready to share that much with people he barely knew, and because he
knew that they'd probably thought of those things themselves, if the blanching look on their faces
was anything to go by.

"Why are they doing all this?" Kenma asked in a low voice, mostly for himself than anyone else,
shaken with the horrifying images he was getting.

"Money," Iwaizumi shrugged, long since used to the idea that his life was worth a stack of paper.
"The organ trade on the black market is booming this days, with a war going on and plenty of people
needing transplants. These things existed before the war, and now their economic activities are
booming."

"That's just disgusting." Surprisingly, it was Tsukishima who spoke through gritted teeth. "They are
pathetic excuses for human beings. They're monsters. Disgusting pieces of trash."

"Tsukki..." Yamaguchi murmured, taking his hand, and the blond had clicked his tongue bitterly
before stepping down.

"You're so strong," Ukai murmured, his heart wrenching at the thought of this young man, the same
age as his beloved boys, going through so much horror. No wonder he seemed to have nightmares
every night. Kuroo had been in the same type of situation, where his life was taken out of his control
under cruel circumstances, and he'd had nightmares for months. There was nothing surprising about
Iwaizumi's instability. "Iwaizumi. You're a survivor, and you're so incredibly strong."

"I had to be." Something changed in a split second, and the strong, collected young man was gone.
Instead, Iwaizumi's shoulders drooped tiredly, and he dropped his gaze. "I had to make it through.
Even when others around me cracked and killed themselves with their blood tubing and IV needles, I
knew I had to stay strong so that I could have a shot at getting out, and... and finding Oikawa."

They all knew by the way he choked at the name that he had gotten to the nitty gritty of the subject,
no matter how nitty and gritty it may have seemed so far.

"We were separated, so I know he's not being used for organ harvest. That's a relief. But I don't... I
don't know where he is, and what's being done to him, and I can't rest easy until I find him again."

"We're gonna find him," Noya promised with such fervent ferocity that he surprised everyone
around him. "Damn it, Iwaizumi, we're going to find that bastard Oikawa because he's the only thing
that kept you alive through all of that and there's no way I'm letting you go on feeling so incomplete.
And Oikawa's a pompous asshole, but nobody in the world deserves this kind of suffering, so
wherever he is, we're gonna save him for his sake, too."

Iwaizumi looked shocked with no words left to say, and actually looked a bit embarrassed by Noya's
outburst. There was a healthy blush on his pale face as he looked at the ground, rubbing the back of
his neck.

"No need to be so aggressive about it... Jeez, Oikawa was right. You Karasuno guys really do have
too much energy to waste."

"You bet we do!" Noya grinned widely, a few people from the ring around the campfire hazarding
smiles as well. "And when you're reunited with Oikawa, you'll feel the same way."

"Stop it with your optimism. You'll keep at it come morning light," Iwaizumi gave him a small, grateful smile, and then turned the smile to Kageyama as well. "We should go to sleep for now. We can sleep in tonight and leave a bit later tomorrow."

"Well, I think that sounds like a wonderful idea," Suga breathed out, glad that the mood had lightened. They all needed a restful sleep tonight. "Let's set up our tent and hit the hay, everyone."

They all bustled into action, each vacating to their routine duties, and as Kageyama got up, he approached Iwaizumi hesitantly, and put a hand on his arm.

"Senpai." His tongue was dry in nervousness. "Thank you. For sharing."

"And you," Iwaizumi flashed him a weak smirk, shrugging off his hand not unkindly. He seemed to think before he added. "For staring."

Kageyama couldn't help it. He watched Iwaizumi walk away with a smile.

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Two uneventful weeks of hiding from rain and cars on the highway finally ended with them leaving the fields and stepping into an inhabited area once again. The suburban areas were as desolate as they expected them to be, and the very familiar sight of a fenced gate set up around the heart of the city soon greeted them, welcoming them back to civilization.

(Of whatever was left of it).

It seemed like their arrival to Niigata had been done with more fanfare, so their arrival to Nagoya wasn't anything they celebrated past the relief of resting their exhausted legs and aching shoulders. Their hearts were light, just as were their backpacks, when they finally reached the gate, which was being guarded in several spots by several armed soldiers.

The one at the very front welcomed them to Nagoya, and just like before, the gate had opened to let them in.

Entering the sheltered expanse of a secluded society once again put them at ease, and though their journey had been uneventful, they were glad it was over.

The very first thing they did, while waiting for their turn at the admission centre, was write a formal report to the commander of Nagoya to report human trafficking activities being carried out next to their outpost. They presented their evidence, shaky as it was, and reported Oikawa's disappearance as linked to this operation. They got Ukai to act out the part of a serious adult (something that none of them could do) and the older man played his part to perfection, stressing the urgency of the report as something that could mean life or death for the inhabitants of Nagoya. The receptionist who transferred his claim to the command centre, at the very least, seemed very alarmed at his alarm.

The admission process was the very same as the one in Niigata, though the boys found it important to mention their individual skills and experiences so that they could easily find employment or volunteering opportunities within the community. The people they searched for on the system were only for show, a classmate or a cousin, just to give them something to concentrate on as they thought of Iwaizumi, who was probably getting important news at the moment.

Indeed, after registering, Iwaizumi asked the receptionist to verify Oikawa's last registered location, and held his breath as she typed his name.
"It was here in Nagoya, about a month ago," she told him, but squinted at her screen. "But it seems like he was allegedly recently spotted wandering around the fenced perimeter with other people. It was around the same time as a few young people living in Nagoya also disappeared, and the military is investigating them as abductions. Maybe your friend was a part of that group."

"Are you sure?" Iwaizumi's eyebrows shot to his hairline in anticipation.

"The military kept tabs on the roaming group, just in case they were a part of the rogue division of the army taking the Japanese survivor outposts by storm, but they did not move into Nagoya, and disappeared, along with the few young men and women who were reported missing a few days later," the receptionist shrugged. "He's still registered as MIA."

So Oikawa had been here. Iwaizumi was so close, he could feel himself shaking. Oikawa was just out of his reach now. He was almost there. He'd almost gotten to him.

He left the admission centre with the news that he shakily shared to the group, and that night, as they settled into their assigned bunker spots, could not sleep a wink. This time, it wasn't the nightmares that kept him awake. It was hope.

Very quickly, the boys sunk their roots deep into the lifestyle of Nagoya. Just like in Niigata, they set out to find places to keep themselves occupied. Tsukishima, Kuroo and Daichi re-enlisted for the reserve Nagoya militia. Suga and Yamaguchi re-applied to work at the hospital as a nurse and nursing assistant. This time, Kenma and Nishinoya tagged along with them, both of them asking to volunteer with patients. Kageyama returned to his job as a receptionist for the admission centre, and Hinata picked up a part-time errand boy post at the nearest general store. Asahi applied to volunteer at the communal kitchen, but with his experience and pleasant attitude, he got hired for paid work. Ukai re-applied to the primary school to tutor kids and coach games during their free periods.

And Iwaizumi searched.

It took all his time. He designed a whole plan to try and gather information about Oikawa's presence. He went to stores he would have visited when he was still in Nagoya and asked about him. He asked the bunker staff if they'd seen him. He asked the communal kitchen staff. He waited a few days for the boys to settle into their jobs to ask them to ask about Oikawa.

Nobody seemed to have seen the phantom boy, but Iwaizumi knew that he was close-by and just out of his grasp. He just needed to try harder.

Kenma was able to stick with the hospital's only occupational therapist to learn the details of the profession from her, as it seemed to interest him. Hinata quickly got asked by other neighbouring stores for his help and got known as the whole street's delivery boy. Hell, Kuroo and Tsukishima even got groupies, two young women who latched onto them during their first shift in uniform on the streets, and who fawned incessantly over them.

And as these developments happened to the other boys, Iwaizumi still kept searching.

Once he got settled into Nagoya's routine, three days after their arrival, he began to leave the perimeter to search close-by outside the gate. The soldiers at the different gates leading out of Nagoya's safe zone came to recognize him as the boy who obsessively searched for his imaginary friend, but Iwaizumi could not care less what they thought of him.

His pill bottles shook in his hands when he took his colourful medication at night, hoping that they would help make him lucid enough to continue his search the next day. And then, he began to forget, too busy running hypotheses through his mind at night to remember his medication. The nightmares
began to return, and the scratching became frantic, and as it had to happen, on the eighth day after they'd settled into Nagoya, Iwaizumi had a burnout.

Thankfully, it happened in the evening, when most of the boys were off of their shifts and were back at the bunker. They were playing a game of cards, tired, but content with their days, when Iwaizumi joined them, quietly dropping onto his sleeping bag instead of greeting them.

And, without warning, he curled up on himself, and burst into tears.

When Noya asked him why he was crying out of the blue like that, Iwaizumi had stuttered something about not being good enough to save the one who mattered to him the most, and had scratched his arms so hard he'd bled.

That's when they knew they had to expedite the process of getting their request considered. Iwaizumi was slowly breaking down, as if distance had made him strong, and proximity had worn down his last defenses. If his self-harming behaviour was anything to go by, they all knew he wouldn't last much longer. They wanted to help, they really did, but post-traumatic stress disorder was not something they were trained to handle, despite several of them having suffered from it already, and psychotic episodes were definitely not something that they, as untrained teenagers, mere kids, were fit to manage.

Daichi, who worked in the administrative branch of the command centre, promised to write an e-mail to the commander and ask him to call the Niigata commander for further evidence towards their claim of a human trafficking ring operating around Nagoya. It would be done first thing in the morning, he promised to everyone who sat with him before bed, glancing between his grave expression, and Iwaizumi's sleeping face.

He looked peaceful, but right before going to sleep, he'd looked like he'd given up.

The next morning, Suga stayed with Iwaizumi to make sure he was okay, counting on Daichi to do his best to contact the Nagoya commander. He instead took the time to talk to Iwaizumi, despite the other boy not responding much to him, and took him for a walk to try and get him to change his ideas. Iwaizumi still looked deep in thought, if not lost in thought, and hardly touched his meals, despite Suga's encouragements.

The medic did his best to explore the reason for Iwaizumi's sudden change in behaviour, but nothing really came up. He could only deduce that Iwaizumi was depressed from his lack of progress towards finding Oikawa, and just stuck around to make sure of his safety.

They returned to the bunker in the afternoon to perhaps get Iwaizumi to nap a bit, and Suga was glad he'd stayed with him when he sat down on his sleeping bag, and looked him straight in the eye as if he was considering something deeply.

"Suga," he mumbled, the first time he'd initiated a conversation with Suga rather than the other way around.

"Yes?" the setter acknowledged him, not liking the empty look in his eyes. Hinata used to look a bit like that when he heard thunder, so many months back, after they'd escaped from Shoukyo. That look was never a good sign.

"I have a knife under my pillow," Iwaizumi recited, as if he didn't even care about the words leaving his mouth. "I want to cut one of my fingers off."

Suga's heart leapt in his throat, sunk down to his bowels, rose into his stomach, moved to his lungs,
and after a deep, steadying breath, returned hammering into its rightful place.

He was at a loss of what to do or what to say. This was definitely out of his control.

But Iwaizumi's fingers were twitching, as if he could imagine himself doing it, and the alleged knife was a foot away from him, under his pillow, and Suga did not have time to hesitate. He had to do what he thought he needed to do. Stop him in any way he could.

"Don't do that, Iwaizumi," he breathed out shakily.

"I have to."

"Why do you think you have to cut one of your fingers off?" Suga asked again, trying to understand, trying to figure out what to do with this crisis.

"I can't do it," the former ace mumbled, looking defeated and broken inside out. "I can't find him. I have to be punished."

Suga was no psychiatric expert, but he determined quickly that his current feelings were mixing with past traumatic memories, and that the explosive mixture was bound to boil over at some point. He had no idea what to say, though.

"You don't have to punish yourself. You didn't fail. You're trying very hard, and we're helping you. Together, we'll find Oikawa," he tried to explain, hoping, praying that none of his words would trigger something in Iwaizumi.

But his demeanor didn't change. His affect remained flat, and he stared at the ground.

"Iwaizumi," Suga repeated, desperate at this point. "You are safe here. You did nothing wrong. We will find Oikawa, and nobody will hurt you. Do you understand? You are safe here." He didn't know how many times he had to repeat it. He was scared that a hundred times wouldn't be enough.

The pillow was right there. One false move, one wrong word, and Iwaizumi would just need to reach over to hurt himself.

"Iwaizumi," he called again, taking a deep breath and hazarding a hand on one of his knees. Iwaizumi flinched, and Suga was sure that this was it, and that he'd made his final mistake, but the other boy did not move, cautiously observing him. Suga took a moment to catch his breath.

"Iwaizumi, can I... Can I take the knife?"

The dark-haired boy did not answer him, but simply looked at him. Suga knew he was being observed, and somehow, this was harder than saving anybody's life on any emergency room bed.

"I want to keep you safe," he continued, trying to fill the oppressive silence. "I don't want you to hurt yourself. You don't have to hurt yourself, and no one will hurt you, either. Iwaizumi, I want to take the knife away from you. Will you let me?"

He knew his sentences were beginning to sound shaky. He was having a breakdown of his own. But he had to stay strong. He'd vowed to save people's lives, and whether they were bleeding out in front of him or admitting their intention to commit self-harm, it was his responsibility, not just as a medical professional, but also as a human being and as a friend to save that person's life.

"Will you let me take the knife?" he repeated one last time, and Iwaizumi slowly, hesitantly nodded.

Suga's heart flipped in his chest, and he slowly reached for Iwaizumi's pillow, the latter watching his
movements carefully. He reached under the pillow, and surely enough, one of Kuroo's sheathed
knives was underneath it. Suga tried not to panic too much now that the crisis was all but averted,
and pulled it out, holding it in his hand firmly, as if afraid to drop it.

"I'm going to give this back to Kuroo," he gulped down. "Are you going to try and get it back to hurt
yourself again?"

Iwaizumi seemed to think about it, and then, to Suga's relief, shook his head.

"Are you going to try and find other ways of hurting yourself?"

A negative shake of his head.

"Are you going to try and hurt others?"

A definite shake of his head.

With every negative response, the tension was de-escalating, and Suga could feel his blood pressure
return to normal. He sighed out in relief, letting the tension flow out of his shoulders.

"Iwaizumi." He just had one last question, to try and determine the cause of the sudden psychosis.
"Did you take your medication lately?"

Iwaizumi thought about it for a while, and then, just like his other answers, shook his head no.

Suga bit his lip, glad he'd pinpointed the issue.

"The medications you take help you stabilize your mood and prevent you from hallucinating,
triggering flashbacks, or getting delusions. You have to take them, you know that?" he asked as
calmly as he could, carefully reaching for Iwaizumi's backpack. Iwaizumi let him, nodding simply to
his question, and watching as Suga pulled out his several pill bottles.

He didn't know how many pills were supposed to be left in the bottles, but they were only halfway
empty, and Suga trusted Iwaizumi to be honest with him at this point.

"How long has it been since you took your medication last?" he asked, opening the pill bottles one
by one, and grabbing the necessary dose of each, which he deposited in the hand Iwaizumi
reflexively stretched out.

"I don't know," he shrugged, popping the pills into his mouth and visibly milking his saliva to dry-
swallow them at once. "Three or four days."

"Okay," Suga breathed out. "Okay. But you can't forget anymore, okay? These pills are really going
to help you."

"Okay."

"And if you ever think about harming yourself again, I want you to tell someone, okay?" Suga stared
at him in utmost seriousness. "I'm not kidding. You have to tell somebody. And if nobody is around,
I want you to promise me that you'll go to the hospital emergency, or that you'll ask a soldier on the
street to take you to the hospital if you don't think you can get there safely all alone. Can you promise
me that, Iwaizumi?"

Some lucidity seemed to have returned to Iwaizumi's thoughts, not because of the medication, but
because of Suga's speech. His affect changed and his back straightened, and he scanned Suga for a
little bit before sighing out in defeat.

"Yeah. I promise," he mumbled, running a hand through his hair.

"Good." And now, Suga was exhausted. Absolutely drained. He needed a fucking break, and that was exactly what he was going to do. "Now get some rest, okay? I'm going to go on a walk. Let's meet with the rest of the guys for dinner at the communal cafeteria. 6PM sharp, okay?"

"Yeah," Iwaizumi nodded, kicking his shoes off and slipping into his sleeping bag. "Suga, uhh... I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

"It's okay," Suga assured him, though he had scared the living crap out of him. "It's not your fault. I just want you to be honest so that we can help you, too. And I promise you that Daichi is doing his best to reach the higher ups with our request. You just need to be strong on your end as well."

"I will be," Iwaizumi quietly promised, weary and seemingly unwilling to be strong anymore, but promising it anyway. "Thank you. You don't have to do any of this, but you're all pulling together, and we're not... we were never even friends, or anything..."

"It doesn't matter what we used to be," Suga assured him soothingly. "Journeying out of a dark place, through countless hardships and struggles to find a way towards a brighter future is something that can make a family out of any bunch of strangers. We're all pulled together by our shared experiences. And now that you've stuck with us, you're inevitably a part of our group as well."

Silent tears leaked out of Iwaizumi's eyes, the young man too exhausted to make any noise at all. Suga flashed him a small smile, and without another word, left him to take his nap.

He walked outside steadily, and once he'd turned into the first street that had less people on it, he stumbled to his knees, dropping the knife he still clutched in his hand, and rocked himself as he cried.

There was something profoundly disturbing about talking somebody out of an active intention of self-harm. But despite being shaken to his very core, Suga could not come for a single second to regret anything of what he did or said.

He just wished Daichi would hurry up and get that request passed.

……...14...………

Daichi promised that he'd gotten the message to the high-ups, and the only thing they could do was believe him. Seeing as Iwaizumi seemed like he was back to normal over dinner, if not a bit distracted, they dropped the topics revolving around Oikawa, and spoke of other things. Noya spoke about his lengthy conversations with an elderly lady at the hospital that day. Kageyama spoke of a newly admitted couple who burst into tears when he announced that their young child was safe in an orphanage in Kyuushuu. Kuroo gloated about the girl who practically worshiped the ground he walked on, and Tsukishima just commented about his own fangirl with a nice choice of words similar to 'obsessive' and 'crazy'.

"She keeps asking me for a date, but I gotta keep turning her down," Kuroo shook his head with mock regret. "I gotta let her know that the great Kuroo is not interested in dating."

"If you do that, she might interpret it as you trying to play hard to get," Tsukishima snorted. "Mine is doing that. I've told her to fuck off at least a dozen times, and she keeps coming back to ask me out."

"Life is hard when you're boys of the military, huh," Noya commented offhandedly, and they all laughed at the interesting shade of red that coloured Tsukki's pale face.
Finally, two days later, they received updates on their request. The letter that came to them was under Ukai's name, since he'd been the one to make the request in the first place, but they all crowded around him when he read it out loud.

"... and following verification of the allegation of illegal activities that breech the rights and liberties of men, your request for investigation of a possible ring of human traffickers operating around Nagoya has been approved," Ukai read off, relief evident in his tone. "They said yes!"

"Yes!"

The cry of triumph was unanimous amongst them, and when Noya glanced briefly at Iwaizumi from the corner of his eyes, he saw him smile, a soft, genuine smile of relief at the promise that things were well under way.

Thing could only get better from there. They had to.

Tsukishima sometimes wondered why he even waited for Kuroo after work, especially after evening shifts. Maybe because he didn't like walking back to the bunker alone when dusk fell and the air became frigid. It wasn't because he was scared, obviously. He figured he may have to pull Kuroo along, though, if he wanted the other boy to even make it home.

Still, taking so much time to change out of his uniform was ridiculous.

Leaning against the fence with his eyes closed for some respite, Tsukishima only heard someone approach him from behind in the relative darkness of the evening because their footsteps clicked on the asphalt.

He turned to see who was approaching him, and wasn't surprised (though was exasperated) to see that it was the girl who'd been following him for at least a whole week now.

"Go away," he immediately grunted at the gorgeous brunet who smiled at him nonetheless.

To anyone else, she would have looked delectable. To him, she looked like a stupid little girl trying too hard, even if she did admit to being a few years older than him.

"Tsukki," she cooed, not hesitating in her approach. The blond bristled, hating how she used his nickname.

"Don't fucking call me that," he growled at her, breaking away from the fence to start walking away. Kuroo could make his own way home, for all he cared.

"Come on, Tsukki... It's been over a week since we've met... please go out on a date with me!" she pouted.

"No way."

"You military men are always so cold to us ladies," she sighed dramatically, rushing to stick to his side. Tsukishima pulled away with a sneer of disgust and accelerated his pace to try and leave her behind. "But you're so attractive..."

"Go away." Her behaviour had always been creepy and obsessive, but now, things were getting out of hand. Tsukishima regretted leaving the military centre. If he'd gone back in, she wouldn't have been able to follow. Now, alone with her in the desolate, dark streets of Nagoya, he didn't feel so
"Come on, Tsukki," she repeated, huffing as she tried to keep up with him. "You and your dark-haired friend, with me and my girlfriend Sakuya. Something like a double-date sound good to you?"

"Leave," Tsukishima warned. "Or I will tell the next soldier I see on patrol that you're harassing me."

"Or maybe you wanna skip the date and go straight home," she hummed in thought. "I don't mind if you wanna bring your dark-haired friend, too."

"Okay, what the fuck do you not understand!?" Tsukishima finally halted, turning around to confront her. She was seriously freaking him out now, and though he was too proud to admit it, he was getting a little bit scared. Usually, when he brushed her off, she left. This was the first time she'd followed him for so long, and there was something wrong about her behaviour. It wasn't the first time she'd made forceful or inappropriate comments, but it was the first time she'd insisted so much.

"I don't understand why you gotta push me away all the time, sweetheart," she sighed dramatically. "All I want is one date..."

"You're not getting it!" the blond spat out, taking a step back and turning around to leave, to jog away if need be. "Go home and don't come near me anymore!"

"Tsukki, you don't understand," she suddenly sighed, as if in resignation, and a cold feeling of dread immediately sunk into Tsukishima's gut. Now, turning his back felt like a terrible mistake.

It was confirmed to be the mistake of the year when he suddenly heard a click from behind him, and his weeks of military training immediately provided him with information about the nature of the sound.

"I just want to go on a date with you," the girl repeated innocently, her heels clicking forward as she approached, and Tsukishima froze on the spot, unable to move until the barrel of the gun was jammed into his spine. "In fact," she continued with a fake giggle. "Let's go right now. I've got just the place."

"Shit," the blond swore, his heart racing. This was very sudden. And highly abnormal. He didn't know why this was happening, or what the nature of this exchange was. He only knew that his survival instincts were kicking in, and he had to get the fuck out of there ASAP.

"Don't be rude, hon," she sighed. "Walk forward."

Tsukishima hesitated, but the shove of cold steel on his back got him walking anyway. He knew that by leading him off on a calculated route, she would be able to isolate him from all help and do whatever it is she was planning to do with him. He couldn't let that happen.

He had military training, for hell's sake, training that Kuroo had forced him into but that he'd come to enjoy. He had training with firearms of all shapes and sizes, usually behind the trigger, but also in front of it.

If only he hadn't turned his back.

He hated what he had to do for the sake of his survival. But then again, he had already done so many more degrading things that it didn't seem to matter, ultimately.

"Okay, you want a date. I get it," he began carefully, trying not to sound as angry as he felt. "Put the gun down, and we'll go on a date."
"No can do, honey. I like it when things get a bit rough."

"Then you'll need to keep up with what I can give you," Tsukishima continued, absolutely awkward with his attempts at flirting. However, when he slowly turned around to face her, with the barrel of the gun still jammed against his sternum, he knew that it had somehow worked.

"Ooh, now you're speaking my language," she swooned and winked, but her grip did not falter on her gun. "But unfortunately, we're way past third base. We're headed for a homerun, baby. Keep walking and stop talking."

In retrospect, she should have stopped talking. Tsukishima enjoyed seeing the split second of panic on her face as he moved in the blink of an eye, and painfully twisted the gun out of her hand to disarm her. Just like his instructors showed him during his training in Niigata.

She gave a cry of pain as her fingers got caught against the trigger guard, but Tsukishima ripped the weapon away, and despite being aware of the unlocked safety, only thought of kicking it away as far from them as he could.

"Shit! You fucking pest!" the girl growled at him, and Tsukishima's heart accelerated, wondering if he'd have to defend himself in combat. However, the girl sized him up quickly, and spat at his feet before turning tail and running away.

Tsukishima stood frozen in his spot for a second before realizing that he was not out of danger yet. He was, per se, but the girl hadn't been acting alone.

He had to warn Kuroo without further ado.

He swept the gun off the street and clicked the safety back on it before racing as quickly as his legs could take him back to the military command centre.

The streetlights only functioned once in a while, and Tsukishima absolutely detested how they flickered like in some cliché horror movie as he ran himself ragged towards the centre. The worst case scenarios popped up in his head, but he refused to believe in their veracity, concentrating on reaching Kuroo before it was too late.

He took the service entrance to the centre, bounding down the staircase to where the staff's locker rooms were, and praying that Kuroo had taken his sweet damn time getting ready to leave. Nobody was in the hallways at this time of the evening, either all on shift already, or gone to their bunkers. The outcome seemed bleak for Tsukishima, who feared the worst for a second.

Thankfully, when he skidded into the men's locker room, he heard humming coming from the back. And surely enough, when he rushed to turn the last corner, totally out of breath, he came face to face with a half-naked Kuroo, who only had his jeans on and who was toweling his wet hair.

"Oh, Tsukki," Kuroo greeted him, immediately noting his state. "Did something happen? I thought I told you to head home without me."

"Oh thank god you're here," the blond let out a surprisingly relieved sigh, and doubled over to catch his breath.

"Well, yeah... Didn't I say I'd be taking a shower after all?" Kuroo frowned as his unusual show of concern. "Kei, did something happen?"

"The girls," Tsukishima tried to articulate part his heaving breaths. "They're fucked up-"
"I know. You've said it a hundred times before, and I don't like my groupie as much as I look like I do," Kuroo frowned. "Did yours give you trouble?"

"Like hell she did!" Tsukishima groaned out, frustrated at being unable to express himself. "She pulled a fucking gun on me!"

"Oh." Kuroo stopped towelling his hair for a second. "Well. That's problematic."

"You think!?"

"What happened to her? Are you okay?" Kuroo asked, suddenly back to what he called 'work mode'.

"I'm fine. I disarmed her, and she ran away." He waved him off. "But these girls are not right in their heads. And mine wanted to lead me off someplace... Kuroo, I think we should get someone to apprehend yours if she's still around."

"What are you thinking?" Kuroo asked, recognizing the spark of genius in the blond's eyes and immediately pulling on his shirt, throwing his jacket over his shoulders, and not even bothering to lock his locker before leaving. Tsukishima fell in step quickly.

"I think they might be related to the abductions we're supposed to be investigating," Tsukishima's eyes darted around as he calculated his answer. "I think they're also related to the trafficking ring."

"That's a stretch, Tsukki. How can you be sure?" Kuroo asked, bounding up the stairs with Tsukishima in tow.

"I can't be. But it's a gut feeling. These girls know something. One of them should be apprehended, at the very least, for questioning."

"Then get backup. I'll go see if my girl is still outside, and if she is, I'll distract her," Kuroo nodded.

"Be careful, they're armed," Tsukishima warned him, pulling his handgun from the waistband of his pants at the back and throwing it to Kuroo just as they parted.

"No worries, Tsukki!" Kuroo grinned at him, catching the weapon and hiding it under his jacket before rushing towards the exit.

He moved quickly, only taking a moment to run his hand through his messy, damp hair, before exiting the centre's front doors with his usual swagger.

He thanked his lucky stars when the black-haired girl that had been following him around for the past week looked up from where she was sitting on the steps, waiting for him.

Good think he was a regular casanova.

"Sakuya," he barely recalled her name. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I took a shower and forgot you were out here waiting for me."

"That's okay, Tetsu," she hummed, getting up to greet him. The nickname angered Kuroo, but he smiled it off expertly. "Did you have a good day at work?"

"It was fine. Tiring. I just want to relax a bit, you know?" he smirked lazily at her, knowing exactly which buttons to push.

Her eyes widened a bit before falling half-lidded, and she raised an eyebrow, amused.
"Did you have something in mind?" she asked.

"I think... I've come to appreciate the things you've done for me so far, Sakuya," Kuroo made up, stalling. He took the girl by the arms and gently spun her around, as if playing with her a bit, if only to get her back to the centre so that he could see when Tsukishima arrived with backup. "You're always supporting me, and you even brought a bento to me the other day." He hadn't eaten it, not trusting anything the girl gave him.

"It was made with all my love and admiration for you, Tetsu," she giggled, blushing lightly. There was a jingle, and she gasped, looking down at the cellphone in her pocket that rang with a new text message. People didn't have cellphones in Nagoya, though, so keeping hers in plain sight was the first clue that something was definitely fishy.

Kuroo couldn't let her read that text. It was probably from her accomplice.

"I really appreciate it," he continued, grasping her shoulder.

"My pleasure. Let me just answer this text," she smiled sweetly at him, and reached into her pocket.

"Sakuya!" Kuroo interrupted, taking her hand in his, slightly panicking now. Why was Tsukki taking so long? "I've come to realize how much you mean to me, and I want to try something with you!"

"Tetsu..." she gasped, giving him a sweet smile. "I'm so... so happy you're saying this to me... You're saying we should..."

"Let's go out for dinner tonight," Kuroo hastily suggested. "My treat."

"Could we maybe... head home together after dinner, then?" she asked innocently, Kuroo immediately recognizing this as her backup plan to isolate him and threaten him into leaving.

"That actually sounds like something I would've suggested," Kuroo faked a wide grin.

"Then let's skip dinner altogether," she suggested with a sudden hitch of her breath, her pupils blown wide. A violent shiver ran across Kuroo's body, and he actually almost let go of her. But he had to pull through this.

"Yeah, let's do that," he nodded anyway, his mind racing to try and come up with new things to keep her occupied.

"Okay. That sounds really good, Tetsu," she purred, and Kuroo almost took a step back. From behind her, silhouettes were reflecting against the sliding glass doors of the centre, and Kuroo knew he only had to hold on a bit longer. However, she was reaching for her phone again. "Okay, Tetsu... I just need to text my mom and tell her I'm not coming back tonight."

"Sakuya!" Kuroo interrupted her again, pulling her hand away, and panicked when he saw the light of suspicion spark in her dark eyes.

He couldn't fuck up here. Not when he was so close.

"Tetsu-umf!"

He'd need a lot of toothpaste and therapy to get over this, but the only thing he could do at this point was grab her by the waist and pull her in for a kiss that was more violent than he'd intended it to be. But it kept her occupied for the seconds it took for Tsukki to arrive with two soldiers in tow.
"Kuroo!"

"Shit," Sakuya growled, all pretenses dropped, and aggressively pushed herself away from Kuroo. She reached under her knee-length skirt for what Kuroo figured was a gun, but he was quicker, drawing his own and pointing it between her eyes.

"Put your hands in the air," he warned in all seriousness, shoving the point of the barrel into the soft flesh of her forehead when she didn't pull away. "Do what I say!"

"You're an even worse liar than I am, playing with a woman's feelings like that," she growled at him, hesitantly putting her hands up. The next second, the two soldiers had grabbed her arms and were cuffing them behind her back.

Kuroo didn't even dignify her with a response. Wiping his lips and spitting to the side, he sneered at her, and then turned to meet Tsukki, who ran up to him.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a rare show of concern.

"Not a moment too soon, Tsukki," he sighed in relief. "If you'd taken a bit longer, I'd probably have to have gone home with her."

"Don't pretend you wouldn't have wanted to, you lazy player," Tsukki insulted him casually, falling back into his usual pattern once Kuroo wordlessly assured him he was fine.

"I'm not into the whole gunplay fetish this chick seemed to have," he joked, heading back inside with Tsukki in tow to gather his things. "But hey. We made a pretty good team out there, and got rid of our obsessive Fangirls in one fell swoop. Today has been productive."

"Just get your stuff and let's go," Tsukishima grumbled, nonetheless waiting patiently for him to pack up, and walking close to him on their return home through the dark streets of Nagoya.

...-...-...-..16..-...-...-...

Tsukishima turned out to have been right. At first, their story got them concern, and maybe some teasing, but nobody realized how important their contribution had been until two days later, the military base was in uproar about new information regarding the abductions. When Daichi inquired about the details, he was told that they'd gotten a tip on a location for the abductions from Nagoya, and that they'd found strong evidence linking the abductions to the human trafficking ring they'd begun to investigate.

It wasn't hard to put two and two together. At first, their story got them concern, and maybe some teasing, but nobody realized how important their contribution had been until two days later, the military base was in uproar about new information regarding the abductions. When Daichi inquired about the details, he was told that they'd gotten a tip on a location for the abductions from Nagoya, and that they'd found strong evidence linking the abductions to the human trafficking ring they'd begun to investigate.

It wasn't hard to put two and two together. That evening, the boys announced the news to the others, and they all celebrated. The end of their present adventure was almost here.

The most rewarding thing of all was to see the hope and apprehension dawn anew in Iwaizumi's dulled eyes.

The search-destroy-and-rescue mission was set to depart the next day, and they all hoped, as they went to sleep that night, that they'd finally get the answers they'd been chasing come morning light.

Iwaizumi didn't sleep that night, predictably, but instead of being a nightmare that kept him from sleeping, it was a dream. A dream that he'd find his long-lost best friend tomorrow, and feel whole again.

The sun took too long to dawn, and the hours ticked by too slowly for comfort. However, by noontime, Kuroo and Tsukishima were assigned to their backup duties, and the active military
personnel who usually occupied those posts was loaded up into trucks. Just like in Niigata, they watched the trucks roll off into the distance, and vacated to their duties.

This time, they'd been separated, Tsukishima tasked with patrol of the north side of the fenced-off safe zone, and Kuroo tasked with the hospital's emergency room security. They knew their days would be uneventful for a while still, as missions as extensive as the one that had departed earlier did not resolve in an hour.

Tsukishima helped a lost boy find his sister again, and Kuroo escorted out an angry patient who was about to assault a nurse. That was the highlight of their days until evening rolled in.

Finally, in the evening, Kuroo got a transmission on his walkie-talkie that the trucks were heading back to Nagoya with a successful mission to boast, so he immediately let the emergency room staff know.

The nurses and the doctors thus began the challenging puzzle of clearing beds in the emergency for the people they were expecting. Kuroo did not get any reports of their condition and couldn't tell the staff what to anticipate, but if they were anything like Iwaizumi, they'd need a lot of care. He suggested that the staff clear some space in the psychiatric emergency, too, just in case.

He had to hold back a hysterical woman with her child when the nurses told the waiting crowd that the emergency room would be closed to all cases but priority cases until the survivors coming in were all triaged. Aside from that, the people seemed discontent, but comprehensive of the situation, and Kuroo mentally thanked them for making his job easier.

His radio crackled to life soon enough, and a soldier on the streets reported that the trucks would arrive to the hospital in a few minutes. Kuroo let the staff know, and then stepped outside to wait with the few other soldiers who were assigned to hospital security and could spare some time to help.

Surely enough, a chain of trucks arrived soon, stopping right before Kuroo, and the soldiers in the trucks first unloaded the military personnel that had gotten wounded in the mission. Kuroo prayed that none of them were critical, and then immediately began to work on unloading the civilians inside the trucks.

Surprisingly, honestly surprisingly, many of them seemed like they were in relatively good health. As the first young men and women stepped off the trucks, helped by the military personnel, Kuroo immediately noted how the extent of their injuries were limited to the occasional cut or bruise. But he was more astute than that, especially since he'd been shaped by trauma as well.

One of the girls walking past Kuroo suddenly stumbled, her knees giving in, and Kuroo reflexively reached out to steady her. He drew back immediately when she flinched and pulled away from him, and the look he got was one of confusion, and of fear. He still hadn't observed much on any of the victims other than their body language, but he was slowly but surely coming to a conclusion he disliked more and more with every second he considered it.

He did not see Oikawa in the crowd, and for a second, he was relieved. But knowing his alternatives, he wasn't sure if he wanted to be relieved or not.
Anyway, as the last of the survivors was escorted into the emergency, Kuroo's job was done. He switched places with one of the soldiers who was taking his place, and hopped onto the trucks to return to the command centre. Now, only time would tell if their efforts came to fruition.

They had no news that day, nor the morning after. Iwaizumi had begun to fidget anxiously, wanting to tear the hospital in half to try and find him, but the boys stopped him because they weren't even sure if Oikawa had been amongst them. The possibility of the futility of their efforts made all of their hearts heavy, but they stayed strong until proven otherwise.

Suga and Yamaguchi reported that they each had some of the victims on their floor, but unlike in Niigata, the survivors weren't critical enough to have a whole unit to themselves. The hospital in Nagoya was much larger as well, and better equipped, so soon enough, every unit got some ER overflow beds to take care of. Still no news.

The next morning, the admission receptionists who'd been sent to collect admission data from the victims returned with all of their files, and Kageyama got busy all day creating new folders for people who hadn't been registered in the system yet, and updating files for people who'd been registered before disappearing. Between the cramps in his fingers from all the typing he was doing and the ringing in his ears from the phone calls he had to make to other outposts to let them know of the changes made to files of families, he had no time to take a breather. Still, he wasn't unhappy, glad he could help people find one another again. This was exactly the reason he'd began working as a receptionist in the first place; to make broken people feel whole again.

Finally, as he grabbed a sheet off his slowly-shortening stack of admissions to enter, he knew that he had reached the apotheosis of his work.

There was a small printed picture on the corner of the sheet, a generic one that the receptionists quickly snapped of every person in the hospital when filling out their admission information, and Kageyama had to glance back a second time at the face on the picture, despite recognizing the soft brown hair the first time around.

It was his eyes. Kageyama did a double-take because although the person on the picture looked like Oikawa Tooru, he didn't feel like Oikawa Tooru.

His file said that he was medically active and kept on one of the rehabilitation floors of the hospital, and Kageyama took care to scan the file for any other useful information. There was none, the bare-minimum admission files meant to be completed once the victims were discharged and could come to the admission office to complete them themselves. Still, Kageyama now knew for sure that Oikawa had been found.

Their struggles had finally come to an end.

(Or so he thought.)

There was no doubt in mind when Kageyama announced to them that he'd found Oikawa over dinner that Iwaizumi would want to go at that moment. However, Suga stopped him, telling him that it was too late for that day, and that he should get a good night's rest to go tomorrow. Iwaizumi protested, but they all insisted he take care of himself, too.

Plus, although they didn't say it out loud, they all knew that Oikawa would need to settle in his new
environment a bit before living the shock of confronting his best friend again.

So they left it for that day, and everyone was a bit anxious going to sleep that night.

The longest wait was for visiting hours to come the next day. Iwaizumi could not sit still at breakfast and looked a bit angry as he paced around, waiting for the hours to pass. The ones of them who had work that day left him with wishes of luck, and the ones who didn't have work promised to drop by on him when he went to visit Oikawa.

As early as he could, Iwaizumi set out towards the hospital. His heart beat faster with each and every step he took, until he crossed the threshold to the hospital lobby feeling like he'd run a marathon.

He hesitated a bit at that point. He sat down, wrung his hands, paced a bit, tried to look at the gift shop wares, wondering if he should surprise him with anything. Oikawa had always had a weakness for ugly teddy bears, after all.

But he didn't get him anything, too nervous to concentrate. He wanted to go see him, but at the same time, did not dare. He had to come to admit that he was scared of what he'd find in that bed instead of his best friend. Because he wasn't going to kid himself- he had lived alongside traumatized, abused people for weeks before being saved, and he was a traumatized, abused person himself. He knew he wouldn't find Oikawa in one piece.

But he'd find him, and he'd feel whole again nonetheless.

With that thought in mind, Iwaizumi took a deep breath, and asked the information desk clerk where the rehabilitation unit was. She gave him directions with a sympathetic wish for good luck, and Iwaizumi nodded gratefully to her, letting his feet take him there.

He took the final elevator with a heavy weight in his heart, and when he got onto the unit, he almost turned back around to leave. He stood frozen in front of the unit doors, so long that a nurse finally approached him with a concerned look on her face.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Are you looking for something?"

"I'm just here to visit," he waved her off shakily. "I'm just..."

"It's okay," she smiled supportively. "Take your time. When you're ready, just tell the unit coordinator at the desk who it is you're visiting."

Iwaizumi appreciated her kindness, but he couldn't put this off anymore. He had to do it. Steeling his nerves, he approached the front desk, and leaned over to talk to the woman stamping paperwork behind it.

"Good morning," he greeted, a ball caught in his throat choking his words. "I'm here to visit Oikawa Tooru."

"Of course," she nodded pleasantly, checking her list. "He's in room 14A. He's awake, but the doctor's orders say that he shouldn't drink water or eat anything without supervision. So just don't give him anything without asking a nurse first, okay?" she explained.

"Oh... Why?" Iwaizumi frowned, feeling his heart speed up again. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure, but if he's on this floor, he's being rehabilitated for something. If you have any questions, pull the call bell and the nurse will come answer your concerns," she instructed.
"Okay," Iwaizumi nodded, swallowing his fear, and slowly making his way to room 14A down the hallway. Every step he took made him feel more sluggish, as if he was progressively sinking into a thick bog, but he pushed on. He had to.

Somehow, he made it to the doorway of the room. He was glad to note that it was a 2-person room. Peering in, he saw that the curtains were closed around bed B, and that a nurse was working on the patient in bed A.

She shifted a little bit, and Iwaizumi finally caught a glimpse of the person he'd been searching for what seemed like a lifetime.

Oikawa looked tired and haggard and broken, sitting up in his bed like that, swallowed up by the blue hospital gown that Iwaizumi had become so accustomed to. The nurse was chatting in low tone to him, and he occasionally nodded or shook his head, not saying anything. An IV was running into his left forearm, yellow liquid and a white substance in a smaller bag infusing steadily. There was a tray on his bedside table that hadn't even been touched.

He watched from the doorway as the nurse spooned some applesauce and tried to get Oikawa to swallow it. He turned his gaze away from the spoon, refusing to try it until gentle coaxing and reassurances from the nurse finally drew his gaze back to it. Iwaizumi was silently relieved when Oikawa hesitantly opened his mouth, taking a little bit of what was probably medication crushed in applesauce.

But then, his heart broke when Oikawa made an effort to swallow it, and ended up spitting half of it back out. As he took wheezing breaths to try and calm down, the nurse wiped off what had fallen on his gown and kindly comforted him to try and encourage him to try the rest.

Oikawa took a moment, and then took another bit of his medication, repeating the process of letting some of it fall onto his bedsheets.

Iwaizumi wanted to cry, and he wanted to run in to help, hold his hand, touch his hair, speak to him, assure him that everything would be okay.

He hadn't heard his stupid, annoying voice in so long. Iwaizumi had never thought he'd wanted to hear Oikawa call him 'Iwa-chan' more than he did now.

Before he could even take a step in, Oikawa's stare went to the front door, and their eyes met. There was something akin to shock that rippled across Iwaizumi's entire body when his best friend saw him. He saw him take a moment to register that he was actually there, and was actually Iwaizumi, and the dark-haired boy was just about to take a step in when Oikawa's mouth opened in what Iwaizumi figured was a whimper, since he heard nothing.

A second later, he had scooted as far back into his bed as he could and had thrown his sheets over him in panic, knocking the small cup of applesauce and medication from the nurse's hands.

"Oikawa, honey, what's wrong?" she asked, immediately trying to get the covers off of him, but he resisted fervently.

Iwaizumi made a move to step in, Oikawa popped his head out just enough to let Iwaizumi see the tears running from his eyes, and to give the nurse a cue as to what had triggered his outburst. She immediately turned to the doorway to see Iwaizumi in a similar state of semi-shock, semi-panic, and gave him an apologetic glance.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'll ask you to leave for a bit," she requested calmly, putting a hand on Oikawa's
figure shaking under his covers. "Once he calms down, I'll call you back in."

Iwaizumi did not reply, but pivoted so he was back against the wall next to the door.

His own breath hitched. Inside, he heard the nurse trying to coax Oikawa out of hiding, and her initially soothing voice became a bit louder as the sound of a struggle reached Iwaizumi's ears. Strangely enough, Oikawa did not make a single sound through it all, even when the struggling became so loud that even Iwaizumi could hear the bed springs creak.

The nurse popped her head out of the room, disregarding Iwaizumi totally, and flagging down another staff member in scrubs hastily.

"Amamiya!" she called to the dark-haired man who was restocking a medication cabinet. "I need you!"

"I'm coming," the male nodded calmly, jogging over to her, and entering Oikawa's room with her.

Iwaizumi couldn't stand there anymore. He felt like he was going to vomit if he listened to one more second of the nurse trying to get who he guessed was an orderly to restrain his best friend. He couldn't stay there anymore, not when it hurt him to see his best friend in that state, and not when it made him feel like he was back in the hospital as well.

He had to leave before he lost it.

He knew he wasn't supposed to run in the hospital, but he sped away from the room and only stopped once he'd reached the elevators again. That's where he almost fell down onto the bench, and buried his face in his hands to try and catch his breath and dispel the confusion that was beginning to set in his mind, ushered in by panic he'd come to know very well.

He stood there for a while, and he must have been there longer than he thought he did, for the next thing he knew, there was someone's hand on his shoulder, and Iwaizumi looked up to see Noya looking down at him in concern.

"Iwaizumi," he greeted worriedly. "You didn't go see Oikawa? Did something happen?"

"He saw me and panicked," Iwaizumi muttered, glancing behind Noya to see Daichi, Kuroo and Kageyama staring back at him. "I don't want to see him anymore."

"Of course you do," Noya shook his head. "You've been waiting for this since we met you in Niigata. You've come this far, and he's around the corner now. You don't mean that."

"No, I don't," Iwaizumi admitted. "But I... I'm scared that..."

"You won't hurt him," Kuroo quietly assured him. "He was probably just shocked to see you. He's probably gone through a lot, and you can definitely relate, so give him a chance to adapt. Now that he knows you're here, it'll probably be easier to go see him."

"What if I remind him of something bad? What if I cause a relapse or something?"

"He won't confuse you for something that would harm him," Kuroo assured him again, knowing exactly what he was talking about. "He's hurt, of course, but he will break through any hallucination or flashback when he sees someone he trusts so much. We have all been hurt somehow. We've all been through rough times that have changed us. But you have to keep this in mind. Our past guilt and our past traumas shape us, but they do not define us."
There was something powerful and final about Kuroo's words, something that pushed Iwaizumi to take them to heart. And he did.

"He needs you, Iwaizumi," Noya assured him, extending his hand to get him to stand. "And you need him."

The ace looked at the proffered hand, and hesitantly took it to get back up.

"I want..." he began, licking his dry lips. "I'd like to go see him first. On my own."

"We weren't intending to let you do otherwise. That's why we let you come here alone earlier today," Daichi reassured him. "We'll wait outside and you tell us when to come in."

"Okay." Iwaizumi took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

"Then let's go," Noya grinned, and let him open the march back onto the unit.

On their way down to room 14A, Iwaizumi came across Oikawa's nurse, who was preparing medication on a cart. She looked up as well and waved him over to give him news.

"Are you going to see Oikawa in 14A?" she asked kindly, stuffing her medication packets into her pocket. "I'll go see him with you."

"Is he okay?" Iwaizumi frowned. "I'm sorry for earlier."

"That's okay. It must've been scary for you, too," she hummed. "He just had a little panic attack. He's been through some traumatic experiences and he's not very keen on letting anyone see him or touch him."

"Did he have to be injected?"

"No, no, he calmed down with some coaching and oxygen. He doesn't get very agitated or aggressive, but he does disconnect with reality when he panics."

"What happened to him?" Iwaizumi asked, throat locked. He was painfully aware of the other boys listening in on their conversation.

"Are you his family?"

"I'm his best friend," Iwaizumi nodded. "Yeah. He's like my family. He's the only family I have left."

"I see," she nodded with an empathetic smile on her face. "Come. Let's go see him, and I'll explain in the room. The doctor will probably want to meet you afterwards, but I'll just give you a rundown for now."

"Thank you," Iwaizumi choked out, freezing when they reached Oikawa's room.

"Go for it, senpai," Kageyama encouraged him quietly from behind him, and Noya gave him a small shove in his back.

He couldn't hesitate anymore. He had to face his demons, and save Oikawa from his. This was what he'd survived through the endless suffering for.

He stepped into the room with the nurse, and they both entered past the curtains around Oikawa's bed.
Oikawa immediately turned to see who'd come in, and Iwaizumi held his breath when their gazes locked once again. For a second, Oikawa's breath hitched, and Iwaizumi was scared that he'd panic again, but he held his gaze this time, and said nothing.


Oikawa didn't smile. He didn't say anything. But his nose twitched like it always did before he started to cry, and Iwaizumi anticipated the tears before they even welled up. The corners of his mouth twitched down, some burnt, red patches of scarred skin around his lips crinkling when he broke.

"Please say something," he begged quietly. "I'm sorry I left you on your own for so long. I'm so sorry."

"Unfortunately, Oikawa has lost his voice," the nurse quietly informed him, going on the other side of Oikawa's bed to rub his shoulder in support.

"For how long?" Iwaizumi asked, gulping down nervously. He hadn't gathered much about Oikawa just yet, and he felt like the answer to this question would piece together the puzzle that was his best friend.

And that's why he didn't want to hear it. He regretted asking his question, but it was too late to retract it.

"Probably permanently," the nurse announced solemnly. "He swallowed sulfuric acid. His stomach took minimal damage, so he probably threw it up as soon as he ingested it, but as a result, his esophagus, larynx, and pharynx were badly burned, not just once, but twice. He's on this unit because he needs to get swallowing rehabilitation, since the scarring of his throat is keeping him from eating normally, and he's risking getting food or water in his lungs by not swallowing right."

There was a ringing in his ears, and Iwaizumi felt like he was falling. He held the bedrails to steady himself, but could physically feel himself swaying with the weight of the news he'd gotten.

"Sit down," the nurse half-suggested, half-ordered, seeing that he was going into shock.

But Iwaizumi did not sit. He did not want to leave Oikawa's side for even a second from now on. He'd been gone too long, and his best friend had lost too much as a result.

The scars around his mouth were telltale. And Iwaizumi did not want to keep asking, he did not want to keep uncovering the dark secrets that stood behind the information coming to light, but he had to ask. He had to know. And he had to mourn Oikawa's loss with him.

"Did someone force you to swallow it?" Iwaizumi asked in a small, shaking voice, dreading the response. He had an inkling feeling that he'd been forced, but to consider the alternative, that he'd swallowed it on purpose to try and... Iwaizumi absolutely did not want to consider it.

To his relief, or not, Oikawa nodded, sniffling and wiping his tears on his hands.

But that brought up another question to which Iwaizumi already anticipated the answer. But he had to ask anyway.

"Was it punishment for something you did?" he croaked out, the words leaving his throat seeming like they weighed a ton. And this time, his hands began to shake when Oikawa nodded again.

It wasn't fair for this to have happened to him. To them. To anybody who'd been subjected to these
inhumane practices. It wasn't fair that they were the ones who had to pick up the pieces now. It wasn't fair.

But they had to do it. They had to stay strong, for no other reason than to prove the world wrong.

Iwaizumi realized he was crying, too, grieving for what he'd lost, what Oikawa had lost, what both of them had, or had not lost. But Oikawa was right there, and despite being broken and despaired, he was right there. They were both right there, next to one another, almost touching, and even if they'd lost everything else, they hadn't lost one another.

Iwaizumi bridged the infinite gap that seemed to extend between them. He put up his hands to cup Oikawa's face, and Oikawa's hands immediately flew up to touch his hands as well. His teary eyes widened when his fingers closed around empty space where there should have been warm skin and strong bones, and Oikawa pulled his hands back a little bit to glance at the missing digits on Iwaizumi's right hand.

Iwaizumi did not let him dwell on it. Not now. They'd have a lot of time to discuss later, and they'd figure something out. For now, it didn't matter what they'd been through. For now, they just needed to feel like they were both whole again.

The nurse probably left when Iwaizumi drew Oikawa close, setting his forehead against his. Their noses brushed lightly, and more than anything, the feeling of their proximity was what they cherished most. Both of them were still crying, both quietly, as if not to disturb the strangely peaceful moment, and after taking turns tracing one another's jaws and cheekbones as if to map out territory they were scared to forget, they closed their eyes.

Oikawa put their hands down into his lap, and tightly entwined their fingers together. He gripped tightly, enough to turn their skin white, as if begging Iwaizumi through his actions, rather than his words, not to let him go ever again. And it didn't matter that their fingers didn't fit perfectly together, it didn't matter that they didn't lock like they used to, leaving a gap where a part of Iwaizumi was missing, too.

It didn't matter what they had lost, for the only thing that mattered to them had finally been found.

Chapter End Notes

There so much to explain that I'll use headings.

Oikawa and Iwaizumi: Mixed feelings about including them. They're in my top favs so I wanted to, but I didn't want to make this story unrealistic with too many coincidences, either. I hope their introduction was logical. They're important, too, because they're the first characters with permanent physical disability, which is another facet of war survivors that I haven't explored until now. Iwaizumi and Oikawa also have very different types of PTSD, though Iwa-chan's is obviously the more aggressive, delusion/flashback/hallucination kind of PTSD. The pills he takes are antipsychotics (Seroquel or Haldol), anxiolytics/hypnotics (Ativan or Valium), antidepressants (Zoloft or Prozac) and anticonvulsants (probably Lyrica) to help with the phantom pain of his amputated fingers. Oikawa needs rehab to learn to swallow again, because the heavy scarring of his esophagus makes it almost impossible for him to initiate the swallowing reflex anymore. I haven't mentioned it, but he probably has a tube going into his stomach to give him liquid feedings, on top of the nutrients and lipids he's getting IV
Human trafficking: It’s not something exclusive to war, and is a prominent part of any country's black market economy at any time. It's just plenty easier to get 'goods' for trafficking when the country's in total disarray. The victims are rounded up all over the island and are transferred to bases near the ocean/sea and await transit to other countries from there. There are several types of human trafficking, but the most common types are sexual slavery, forced labour, or commercial exploitation (including organ harvest for the purpose of sale). Iwa's organs are precious because he's a healthy, athletic young man. I couldn't mention what type of trafficking ring Oikawa was victim of, but from the choices above, I think you can guess. The traffickers could have physically scarred him, like they did for Iwa-chan, but they didn't for a reason. Also, Yachi totally saw it coming in the manga omfg. If you consider that this fic is an alternate timeline of the canon AU, this is actually kinda freaky.

Psychotic breaks: I honestly did not mean to make this chapter so much about mental illness, but it just happened, and it was wholly appropriate. I'm going into psychiatric nursing now, so the situations of psychosis in the fic are situations I'm learning to handle myself, so I guess I kind of wanted to write about it. Suga did several things right and wrong in his conversation with Iwa, for example, but people with intentions of self-harm or suicide risk often present that way. Haloperidol (or Haldol, same thing) is also an injectable antipsychotic (also called tranquilizer) that is indicated if a patient becomes extremely agitated or aggressive.

Noya: I liked seeing Noya differentiate into a definitive individual this chapter. Shaped by his experiences, he's decided to prevent people from sinking deep into their own minds anymore, so I think that at this point, Noya is interested in psychology. Not psychiatry, but psychology, to help people cope with their problems and give them strategies to find hope where they've lost it. The point of this fic is to make a unity out of isolated individuals, which is why it's weird that Noya, of all people, is talking to Iwaizumi, but it's necessary because everything they do is a team effort. Also, small mention to Kenma with his zootherapy. I figured he'd be a good occupational therapist uwu

Groupies: I wanted to elaborate more on them and give them more time with Kuroo and Tsukishima, but this chapter was getting ridiculously long, so I rushed it a bit. Basically, they were inside agents with the trafficking ring, either out of their own will or were coerced into their role. Their job is to find attractive young people in Niigata and seduce them into following them. Then, they take them to a place where other agents of the ring wait, and they abduct the person.

Thank you so much for still so diligently reading CML! I just hope you're enjoying it as much as I do haha. And if you're finding that it's getting a bit too heavy, no worries! To every bad thing, there is a good thing, and our boys will find hope again as soon as next chapter! ;u; Anyway. Please comment, your feedback helps me write better. And please tell me whose POV you want next chapter, or if you have suggestions for stuff you wanna see in the story! My Tumblr URL is the same as on here if you prefer to HMU there (:}
Home

Chapter Summary

Home is the smiles they give you when you wake up in the morning. Home is the smell of dust that is common to your clothes and theirs. Home is the way they always listen to you with rapt attention, no matter what you have to say. Home is the knowledge that you are safe, you are loved, you are needed, you are alive. A house keeps the rain out, but home is the relief of being dry and warm and sheltered from the cruel world shattering with each raindrop hitting the pavement.

Home is them. They are your home. And you are theirs.

Chapter Notes

You're welcome to ask me where the fuck I've been lately. You'll get either or all of the following answers: trying not to die in school, working 4 days/week in the emergency department, Katsucon-ing, turning 21 years old, burning up in Xenoblade Chronicles and/or Fire Emblem Fates hell. Oh, and also, playing Organ Trail with my friends whilst drunk with the Gym 3 members as the protagonists. Where I haven't been: in front of my tablet/laptop writing CML.

Okay so sorry about this chapter. Yet another bridge chapter to the next arc, which is titled... "Wasteland"! And it will probably span another 3 chapters, after which CML is done. But anyway, point being, nothing too exciting this chapter. At least, not as exciting as anything in the past chapters. It's Iwaizumi's POV.

A few people have drawn fanart for CML, btw! Please go see all these lovely drawings on tumblr and love the artists as much as I love them (: You can access all the art I know of and reblogged by going on my blog (sharkbaitseikki) and checking the fanfic's tag (#CMLmorelikeFML). I'm so overwhelmed by the incredible support and enthusiasm you guys are showing CML, I'm actually gonna cry I love you so much, and the last thing I wanna do is disappoint you :C

Without further ado, I present to you the long-awaited, not-beta'ed, (seriously underwhelming) chapter 12! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was something eerie about the silence that always hung around Oikawa. Iwaizumi would have thought that after all this time spent around his best friend, he'd get used to anything he threw his way, but he didn't think he'd ever get used to this. As a small blessing, the other man in the room, a middle-aged construction worker who needed walking rehabilitation after a femur fracture, always had his wife on the phone, so whenever he was around there would be a constant background noise to distract Iwaizumi.
Otherwise, when they were alone, there would be silence, and it was the hardest thing for Iwaizumi to do. Just sit by Oikawa and read, or nap, or hold his hand. But he never spoke. They never spoke anymore, because they did not have the means. The closest they got was the mismatched entwining of their fingers speaking volumes when their voices couldn't.

Iwaizumi could speak, but it didn't feel fair if Oikawa could not respond. Despite it, he still came every day, from beginning to end of visiting hours, greeted the nurses who looked at him with awe and pity, and always waited for Oikawa to finish breakfast and his morning medications before entering into the room that would keep them both captive all day. Somebody had stolen Oikawa's voice, and now they just sat in silence.

The other boys did visit sometimes, slowly at first as not to shock Oikawa, and then regularly. Suga, Noya and Yamaguchi were particularly prone to swinging by to say hello, as all three of them worked or volunteered in the hospital and oftentimes took a little time to visit the Seijou players on the unit every day. Iwaizumi liked it when Noya came because he would fill the silence with his energetic retellings of stuff he saw during his volunteering hours. Suga was a pleasant presence as well, as he would soothe them both with his calm small talk and tactful inquiries of Oikawa's progress, to which the brunet would only respond to with a shake or nod of his head. Yamaguchi provided an entirely different experience, and Iwaizumi didn't know how much he liked his silence. The younger boy would usually come in and greet them with a nod of his head, and then sit by the bed for a while in total silence, and yet it felt like the two silences cancelled each other out somehow, putting them all at ease.

The first few days, Oikawa refused to have Iwaizumi in the room during mealtimes. Straight up starved himself the first day before Iwaizumi understood that he was embarrassed with him around. It hurt his heart, but the next couple of days, when he heard the meal trays rolling down the hallway, he always made up an alibi to leave for a while, and returned afterwards. They both knew he was only making up reasons to leave for Oikawa's sake, however. Therefore, on day 4 of Oikawa's hospitalization, as he got up to leave for lunch, faking a headache he wanted to get some air for, Oikawa did not let go of his hand. Iwaizumi stayed.

He stayed when the nurse raised the head of his bed, he stayed when she opened up the containers of cream soup and pudding and applesauce, and he stayed as she coached him through every single miserable bite, every painstaking swallow of the soft foods, every gentle command to bear down after each disappearing spoonful of food, everything. He stayed, and he held Oikawa's hand, and only cried once he returned to the bunker overnight.

The next day, he came back, and was the one who coached Oikawa as the nurse had done between the exercises she asked him to perform. He asked the nurse to teach him those exercises so he could do them with his best friend between meals. When the speech-language pathologist came on rounds to check on him, he found him and Iwaizumi making faces at the mirror in the bathroom together, Iwaizumi laughing hard enough for the both of them.

Things seemed to get better. Oikawa was released after 9 days of hospitalization and was put on an outpatient program so the speech-language pathologist could follow up with him. Oikawa got his registration filled out quickly thanks to Kageyama expediting the process, and pretended not to be excited when Iwaizumi took him to the bunker where they were all staying.

But for the first time since they found him, since Iwaizumi last saw him before they were caught and separated, Oikawa's eyes were bright despite the grey clouds blanketing the bleeding sun.

If only he had a voice to express how truly grateful he was to still be alive. The pen and paper he carried all the time could not express the inflections of his voice when he called Iwaizumi's name.
Written words would never be able to mimic the sing-song sentences and light laughter between his lines. Both of them missed Oikawa's voice, and Iwaizumi felt selfish for believing he missed it the most.

The boys unanimously accepted Oikawa's return amongst them, no matter how tense their relationships had been in the past. And despite being a bit awkward at first, the Seijou setter quickly returned to the way they knew him to be, all grins (with scars stretching on his lips) and eccentric mannerisms (and he never again stuck out his tongue in his signature move. Getting a glimpse of his mouth when he choked on his saliva once, the boys quickly realized it was because his tongue was burned and scarred by the acid as well). At the very least, he still gave Kageyama the stink eye indiscriminately, and it was a relief to see that his playfulness had not been extinguished by his experiences.

Life got better for a whole week of furious scribbling and constant searching for pieces of scrap paper to write snide comments on. At the very least, Oikawa's kanji got a whole lot better. And then, the hospital bills came in.

They only needed to pay for the outpatient rehabilitation service, but even that turned out to be incredibly expensive. Oikawa immediately set out to look for a job, despite the odds stacked against him, and even without having to ask (he would not have anyway), the boys who worked also pitched in to try and pay for his treatment. They all tried to believe they'd be able to work it out. They probably figured that if they believed hard enough, the load on all of them, Oikawa especially, would seem less crushing than it actually was.

"Finding a job that doesn't require you to speak is easier said than done," Iwaizumi complained as they walked down the main street again, weaving their way past chattering civilians and armed military men. Despite it being the morning, the sky was the same shade of red it had been since the second explosion, as if the world had ended one more time just yesterday. The practically permanent clouds always hung heavy with rain, but at this point, being afraid of the rain would sabotage their efforts before they even began.

Oikawa did not reply, obviously, just pouted and strode by Iwaizumi's side as they headed away from the admission centre, where Oikawa had just had an interview for a job as a receptionist that Kageyama had gotten him. Unfortunately, as receptionists also had to make phone calls to other strongholds, Oikawa was unqualified for the position and was gently refused. They'd all seen it coming, so it wasn't that upsetting. Just a bit dreadful, only a bit.

The familiar scratching of pencil on paper stopped Iwaizumi, who turned to peer at the symbols appearing on Oikawa's scrap paper. He craned his neck to read the short word with a raised brow.

"What about Kuroo?" he asked, cocking his head. Oikawa gave him a glare, as if blaming him for not remembering something important, and Iwaizumi thought for a second. "Oh, you mean the job he suggested you get?"

Oikawa sarcastically clapped a couple of times and then nodded, to Iwaizumi's unending irritation.

"Kuroo suggested you join the militia. The infantry. The cannon fodder. If he wants to do it, power to him. But hell if I'll let you."

Oikawa's next words popped up in Iwaizumi's mind even before Oikawa scribbled them down, ringing in his ears like they always used to, and a sudden wave of painful nostalgia came over him.

"Are you my mom, Iwa-chan?"
On some days, Iwaizumi almost forgot about Oikawa's voice, just as the world had forgotten to grant it to him. And on some days, he could not forget.

"No. But someone's gotta knock some sense into that empty head of yours," he shrugged, flinching slightly when a rolling sound of thunder interrupted their walk. "Come on, let's duck into a coffee place nearby. I have some change on me so we can outwait the rain."

Oikawa nodded and followed along, since he couldn't have contested it anyway. Writing things on his paper always took too much time, so he tried not to say anything pointless, but then again, he was the type to chatter his days away, so it was a tough thing to do. Holding the pencil and scrounging up pieces of paper to write on only served to remind him of what he had lost. However, all his tears had been spent when his throat still burned and refused to open. He was doing much better now with all the exercises that his doctor had shown him to help rehabilitate his swallowing. He did not need to mourn his voice anymore, not until he woke up deep in the night and realized that he couldn't play volleyball anymore, couldn't continue his schooling, couldn't imagine his future without his voice. Couldn't say Iwaizumi's name anymore. And only in those times did he cry once again, grieve for his loss as if the acid had only freshly scalded the walls of his pharynx.

The coffee shop was a small place that was run-down and clearly unbothered by its pitiful state. It did not seem to bother the girl behind the counter, nor the few customers sitting at the chipped wooden tables in the room, as all buildings were in varying degrees of disrepair these days and nothing much could be done to fix their aesthetic appearance. The blackboard with the very short drink menu was broken and the snacks behind the cracked glass display were simple and few, but there was lukewarm coffee available and the pound cake in the display looked better than any dessert the soup kitchen ever provided.

"Two small mochas, please," Iwaizumi ordered, hoping to diminish the cost of the sweet drink by diluting the hot chocolate with coffee. He put the money on the counter and made a mental note to try and pick up a steady job as well. He ran errands for the stores on the main street for now, but that was not reliable and never granted him a good income. If he wanted to help pay for Oikawa's medical expenses, he had to find a job as well.

They waited in silence for the two hot drinks to be prepared in chipped mugs, and then made their way to a table on the farther side of the café, where less people were sitting. Outside, the rain had begun in a light drizzle, and yet somehow, they both knew it was only going to get harder. They sat and blew on their coffee idly, watching the smoke curl and then fade into the air.

Finally, Oikawa put his paper on the table, and began writing again, showing it to Iwaizumi once he was done.

"Don't think like that," Iwaizumi immediately frowned. "Of course you'll find a job. There's gotta be someone in all of Nagoya that needs help. We're a couple of thousand people in this stronghold, we'll get you a job."

Another scribble.

"No," Iwaizumi firmly interrupted Oikawa's scribbling, to the brunet's obvious annoyance. "We're not stopping your treatment. You need to get better. There's no other option. Whatever it takes, we'll get the money."

Oikawa seemed to think, and then shakily wrote out Iwaizumi's last sentence as a question. His friend didn't like the grim shadow that fell across his face, but let him finish.

"Yeah," he confirmed, repeating once more. "Whatever it takes."
Oikawa seemed to want to write something else, but then set his pencil down and returned his hands to his mug, probably to warm his hands. Iwaizumi mimicked him, and took a few sips of his drinks while Oikawa tested out his lukewarm coffee, and then carefully took a sip. The doctor had allowed him to start having unthickened liquids a couple of days ago, but had told them to be very careful that he doesn't aspirate and end up with soup in his lungs. Iwaizumi watched him like a hawk, to Oikawa's visible displeasure, and relaxed when the mug was set down, and Oikawa held his breath to force his epiglottis to close over his trachea. No coughing. He really was getting better and better at his exercises every day.

They sat in silence as they always did, looking out the window once in a while. Nobody in the café moved, unable to get anywhere due to the rain, and they both listened to the background droning of the customers and the pitter-patter of the raindrops on the pavement. If all was quiet, and they were closer to the window, they could probably even hear the metal sizzling as it rusted away.

Finally, Oikawa began to write again, slowly, as if gauging Iwaizumi's reaction.

"What have you been thinking about?" Iwaizumi hummed, taking another sip of his drink while Oikawa toiled and troubled to express himself. "Oh... you've got an idea of where to look for a job?"

Oikawa nodded, and bit his lip. Iwaizumi knew him well enough to know that he was hesitating, and tensed, guessing he wouldn't like what followed. Oikawa knew it, too, and seemed to be stalling by telling Iwaizumi as such.

"I don't appreciate half the shit you tell me, nothing different here," he tried teasing, but stopped when he saw Oikawa's face fall as he wrote out a messy comment. "Okay, okay, I get it. You're serious. What's up?"

Oikawa hid the paper as he replied, and then read over his writing before showing it to Iwaizumi with some hesitation. Iwaizumi's eyes scoured over the long string of kanji, occasionally having to think about particularly hard characters (Oikawa had always been the better writer of the two... maybe he could get involved in some scientific research?), and the more he went on, the more his face darkened and his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Oikawa," he began carefully, looking up at his best friend who was now avoiding his gaze pointedly. "You're wrong. Those men took your voice to prevent you from being something. Not to make you into something. They... silenced you because you were defiant, not because they wanted to make you one of their... uhh..."

He couldn't say it. Oikawa understood that it was hard. They'd never spoken about it specifically, but both of them knew that the other knew what had happened.

"Besides," Iwaizumi continued with a nervous tremble in his voice, his eyes darting as he tried to lighten the mood set on them like a heavy blanket. "If you did end up following the original plan they had for you and all the others like you, you'd have to get a job in that shady stripper joint on Mountain street," he smirked lazily.

But Oikawa did not smile back. Iwaizumi's blood ran cold.

"Oi. Shittykawa." He tried to convince himself that his tone was still steady. "You're... you're not actually..."

He trailed off, waiting for Oikawa to look up at him with his eyes full of guilt and shame to start breathing again.
"... No."

Scribbling. Oikawa was actually arguing back. Iwaizumi couldn't believe it.

"No," he continued without even looking at Oikawa's writing. "There's no way I... you could... You can't..."

There had to be another way. Shitty, cocky, arrogant, fragile, precious Oikawa Tooru did not deserve to be so demeaned.

"You're being stupid," he continued, ignoring the way Oikawa rushed more and more to respond to the things he was saying. He put a hand over Oikawa's pencil, but his friend glared at him and kept writing. "Come on, you're not that desperate. We're not that desperate. There are other ways, I know it. You write well, maybe you can be a transcriber for reports at the military base, or a research assistant at the hospital. You don't need your voice for those, maybe just reading up on the domain at the library or something..."

The page was slowly getting filled up by furious scribbles as Oikawa rushed to answer and argue back, never even completing a sentence before having to write another for another one of Iwaizumi's ideas. His best friend put a hand on his a second time, but Oikawa pushed it off again, a bit rougher this time, and tried not to look too frustrated by his inability to defend himself.

"Why would you think you have to do that kind of stuff?" Iwaizumi bit his lip, now less critical and more pitying, and never before had Oikawa wanted to hit Iwaizumi Hajime, his best friend, so hard. "You're an asshole, but you don't deserve that. You didn't deserve this."

Oikawa seemed to give up and flipped his page over to write in big characters his final argument. The only words he could think of. The words he wanted Iwaizumi to accept, and yet refute, the words that Oikawa wanted Iwaizumi to shoot down and deny as the truth.

"There is a reason they took my voice, and not my fingers, or my eye, or something. Even without a voice, I could still accomplish what they wanted of me. It's the only thing they intended for me to do. It's all I can do anymore."

"No." Iwaizumi's vision clouded for a second, and he stared, wide-eyed, at the meek acceptance in Oikawa's chocolate brown irises. "No way. That's not... That's absolutely not true. Hell no."

Oikawa expected the disbelief, the shock, and the anger. He didn't expect the murderous rage rolling off of his best friend in waves.

"I'll fucking kill them for doing this to you," he seethed, so out of character for a moment that Oikawa was suddenly afraid that he was losing his grip on reality. A deep breath reminded him that Iwaizumi's medication was in his bag, at the bottom, and that the yellow pill was an antipsychotic. "How dare they... Fuck. Fuck them. Fuck all of this."

Oikawa sighed noiselessly, and watched Iwaizumi struggle to contain his temper before starting to write again. Quickly, Iwaizumi's right hand stopped him, and he pushed off the three fingers on his hand bitterly, hating that his best friend wouldn't even let him finish. His own irritation was rising quickly to his head, and along with the violent rainfall outside, he could feel a headache coming on.

"I won't let you become something you're not. What's done is done, and what they did to you was wrong! You don't have to go back to them. You're not theirs anymore, Tooru, you never have been. Don't succeed in doing to yourself what they attempted and failed to do to you. Break you."

Iwaizumi was beginning to calm down now, the anger pouring out to leave its place to sadness.
"Don't."

The sound of his name made Oikawa shiver. One last time, he reached for the paper.

"Don't," Iwaizumi repeated firmly, and put a hand on his to stop him.

It was the last straw. Oikawa saw red.

He slapped Iwaizumi's hand away as hard as he could, dragging his along in the process. His pencil went right through the paper and dragged, ripping it in half loudly, before clattering onto the floor when Oikawa dropped it and stood up, trying to yell at him to stop.

But all that came out was a strangled whistle, although Iwaizumi read the word on Oikawa's lips. He didn't have a choice, what with the brunet repeating it, over and over again until both of them got the message. So they stopped. They both paused, and breathed, and waited.

When Iwaizumi looked at Oikawa next, there were tears hanging on his eyelashes.

"Hey..." His voice cracked, and he stood up with his hand out. Oikawa shied away from it, and Iwaizumi recoiled visibly. "Hey, come on, don't cry, you big baby... Oikawa... For goodness' sake..." He didn't know what to say.

The mumbled words seemed to upset Oikawa even more, and Iwaizumi began to discern the tiny trembles of his shoulders that indicated that he was holding in a sob. He knew Oikawa far too well at this point, and despite not having any words, he could still understand that he'd said something wrong.

"I'm sorry," he frowned, not knowing what else he could say. "Just... sit down. Don't cry, come on... I'm sorry. Look, I'll go see if the barista has a piece of paper for you, just sit down and calm down, okay?"

Oikawa didn't look at him, but nodded, and slowly slid back onto his seat. Sighing in frustration, Iwaizumi left for the counter, where he was able to get his hands on an old promotional flyer printed on one side. He brought it back and slid it in front of Oikawa, who just stared at the piece of paper.

"So now, you've got nothing to say?" Iwaizumi raised a brow, flinching when Oikawa glared murderously at him, and then began to write again, harshly, with the pencil he'd picked up. "Sorry."

He had another reason to apologize when Oikawa finally showed him the piece of paper, and Iwaizumi understood what he'd done wrong. In retrospect, of course he'd fucked up. His cheeks reddened in shame.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I... I didn't mean to make you feel like you were being silenced. I just... I know it's harder for you to communicate now that you have to write everything down, so I shouldn't have stopped you, but... I just... I just don't want to see you like this. I don't want you to think like that, you idiot. I know I should let you finish, and wait for you to show me what you wrote before I continue, but... I just wanted..."

But it wasn't fair. If Oikawa could speak, it would be like cutting him off all the time. He didn't want to infantilise him and take away whatever independence he'd regained in terms of communication. That hadn't been his intention.

But neither of them had ever needed words to understand one another. Oikawa's finger gently brushed Iwaizumi's, going through thin air where his missing digits were, and they both knew that the storm had passed.
The rain lasted three more hours, which they spent pensively in near-perfect silence that somehow seemed different from all the silence that usually surrounded them. When the terrible weather finally let up and they decided to keep going, Iwaizumi downed the last of his cold coffee, and Oikawa guiltily stared at his full cup for a second before following his best friend out.

Unexpectedly enough, Nishinoya had become one of the closest members of their group to Iwaizumi. In the past, nothing would have drawn them together, but after the libero vouched for him in Niigata, Iwaizumi had a newfound respect and fondness for him. Therefore, when the two of them ended up meeting at the hospital while Iwaizumi waited outside for Oikawa to finish at the doctor's, they ended up sticking around for a while.

"Did you have hours today?" Iwaizumi asked, leaning against the wall and taking a deep breath. Noya leaned next to him and rifled through his papers.

"Yeah. A few. I'm more often at the library these days reading up on all this psychology stuff," he hummed, re-reading his notes. "I had a good case today. You might be interested, actually. She was a traumatic amputation after a building collapse and wasn't doing so well with a loss of limb."

"Are you saying I'm not dealing with my missing fingers?" Iwaizumi teased.

"No, no. You're coping alright with permanent injury," Noya smiled up at him, a bit half-heartedly if anything. "With yours, anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Iwaizumi frowned, furrowing his brows pensively. Noya just looked at him for a few moments, and then shook his head, waving behind him.

"Nevermind. Hey, Yamaguchi, over here!" he called, Iwaizumi turning to see the younger Karasuno player walk towards them, a small smile on his thinned face. His borrowed stethoscope poked out of the bag he held in his hand. "Good day at work?"

Yamaguchi nodded, his tired, lively expression reminiscent of Oikawa's. His silence was the uncanniest part.

"Are you headed to the bunker?" Iwaizumi asked them.

"Nah. We're gonna spend the afternoon in the library. I'm doing a research assignment for the chief psychologist on staff. He's nice enough to tutor me once in a while and says that after I have a good grasp on human psychology, he'll let me sit in on patient interviews. For now, I just talk to patients at the bedside and ask how they're holding up," Noya explained excitedly.

"Nice. You're practically a certified psychologist at this point," Iwaizumi ruffled his hair, to Noya's protest. "You, Yamaguchi? Still reading those medical textbooks? I figure you know everything at this point."

Yamaguchi chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, and shook his head.

"He's working on a secret project he won't even let me in on. Has been since Niigata, I think, but recently he's been more intense about it." Noya suddenly grabbed Yamaguchi under his arm and dragged him down for a noogie. "Or maybe he has a girlfriend and won't tell us!"

"Stop that," Yamaguchi rasped out, a small laugh slipping from his lips when he drew away from his senpai. The sound of his voice always surprised Iwaizumi, and it made him sad (and maybe a bit angry) because Yamaguchi could speak and chose not to, whilst his best friend only wished he could
speak again. But he knew better than anybody that the mind was the ultimate trickster, and did not blame Yamaguchi for his selective mutism. In fact, he was glad that he wasn't alone in dealing with Oikawa's loss of voice.

"What about you? Waiting on Oikawa to get out of the SLP outpatient department?" Noya asked, clearly hoping to keep Iwaizumi company for a while. Since he spent so much time with Oikawa nowadays, the other boys didn't usually see him solo like this.

"Yeah..." Iwaizumi nodded. "We went job hunting this morning but were cut off by the rain, so we figured we might as well come to his appointment early. It's almost been an hour, so he should be out any time now."

"Are you gonna continue job hunting today, or are you taking the afternoon off?"

"Ah." The spiker winced. "I don't know. He and I had... an argument this morning, and I think he needs some space for now. I've been too much around him, too, and he's always been the independent type, so I figured I'd let him choose where to go from here."

"What happened?" Noya asked, cocking his head curiously. Even Yamaguchi was tuning in finely at this point.

"I think... Oikawa's having a hard time communicating, and I'm having a hard time remembering that he's having trouble." He pressed his lips together gravely. "Our relationship has been very stable, I suppose, since we were kids. So this huge change in the way we interact is something we're having trouble adapting to. I can't remember to let him finish writing and he can't write everything he wants to say. It's just a pain in the ass, and both of us are pretty much... I'm pretty sure both of us are discouraged and scared that this is how things are gonna be for the rest of our lives."

"I'm sure it won't be..." Noya quickly intervened, though he winced as soon as he said it. "Sorry. Habit. Rule of thumb says not to use false reassurances."

"That's such a textbook thing to say," Iwaizumi huffed in vague amusement. "It's fine."

"Nah, but what I mean is that maybe Oikawa will regain some of his voice with all the rehab, and once his vocal cords have healed. I'm sure there's some kind of surgery out there, like... a vocal cord transplant or something. Yamaguchi, is there something like that?" he asked, turning to his kouhai, who shrugged to admit his lack of knowledge. "Hmm... I don't know. Maybe he'll get faster at writing?"

They all fell silent, the half-hearted suggestion falling flat. Yamaguchi looked pensive.

"Practice makes perfect, right?" Noya weakly suggested, chuckling awkwardly when Iwaizumi looked at him doubtfully.

"We'll see. For now, I'd like for him to stop breathing his food. We'll see about speech later." That was all they had to say about the topic, so Iwaizumi changed the subject. "So. I haven't been in the loop lately. What's our long-term looking like?"

"So far, it's not looking too different. We might be staying here a while," Noya shrugged, pulling a packet of gum and offering some to his friends before popping one in his mouth.

"Does the government have an evacuation plan? Somewhere safe to go?" Iwaizumi continued, wincing at the strong peppermint taste of the gum.

"Not as far as we know. Daichi is following up on policies and plans coming in, but so far, the
government is in total disarray. Still hasn't gotten over Hokkaido, so we lowly survivors of the main island aren't the priority right now. Who knows when we'll get backup, and a way to get out of here." The libero shrugged. "Maybe we never will."

"There has to be somewhere to go," Iwaizumi frowned in protest. "If the North is compromised, shouldn't we be heading West?"

"I dunno. We haven't heard much from the West since this whole war began."

"Kuroo once said that Bokuto's location was marked as a Shikoku refugee camp," Yamaguchi provided helpfully.

"Right. But that's all the mention of the West that we've gotten so far. Who knows what's out there," Noya looked up and sighed.

"Salvation?" Iwaizumi suggested, not even believing himself.

"Maybe." Nishinoya looked older than he actually was. All of their gaunt, dirty, slimmed faces held years beyond theirs within their pores. What a shame. "Or maybe it's death." A pregnant silence. "Either way is fine, at this point."

The truth was morbid enough to keep them quiet. They chewed gum and waited, and Iwaizumi counted to 117 before the doors opened, and Oikawa came out. He spotted the others quickly and waved to them, coming towards them with a smile on his face.

"Hey. Everything go alright?" Iwaizumi asked, conscientious to give him the time to write out his confirmation on a piece of paper crammed in his pocket.

"You're looking good, too," Noya remarked, glancing at his fuller cheeks and brighter eyes.

"Before you write it out, no. You do not always look good," Iwaizumi interrupted, but froze when he realized he'd interrupted Oikawa again. He really couldn't help himself.

However, Oikawa just laughed noiselessly, scribbling out an amused response that made Iwaizumi's shoulders loosen in relief.

"Of course I know you too well," he hummed. "Fifteen-whatnot years have been enough time to learn to tolerate you."

Oikawa smirked challengingly at him, and scribbled out a very small response, which he slid to him so that Noya and Yamaguchi wouldn't see. Iwaizumi glanced at it, blushed, and shoved the paper back to Oikawa hurriedly, to the sound of Noya's amused huffing.

"Alright, alright. We'll be leaving now for the library. We'll see you two tonight," he waved at them, beginning to head away.

"See you," Iwaizumi waved back, starting to head the other way as well. However, he stopped quickly when he realized that Oikawa wasn't following, and turned back to see him standing there with Yamaguchi clutching his upper arm.

"Yamaguchi?" Nishinoya asked, stopping as well. He and Iwaizumi exchanged confused glances, just as the two others were staring confusedly at one another in silence.

It was almost magical how they seemed to communicate between mutes with nothing but their eyes. Yamaguchi finally tugged his sleeve gently, and Oikawa nodded, taking a step towards him.
Iwaizumi's heart jumped in his chest.

"Is Oikawa coming with us?" Nishinoya asked, cocking his head curiously.

Yamaguchi and Oikawa nodded simultaneously, the latter more hesitant than the former.

"Oh, so he gets to know about your super secret experiment, but not us? Rude," Noya stuck a tongue out at Yamaguchi, who just smiled a bit mysteriously. It seemed like they didn't have telepathy after all, since Oikawa seemed perplexed by this statement. Iwaizumi couldn't help but feel left out, but after what had happened this morning, he figured he owed Oikawa a bit of time off.

"Okay, well..." He tried not to sound put off, but Oikawa knew him just as well, and could probably tell. "Just stay with them and come back to the bunker with them tonight."

He expected Oikawa's scribbled answer and cocky, annoying, familiar grin. It was the second time he'd gotten this response today, and he'd missed it. He'd missed Oikawa.

"Of course I'm not your mom, idiot," he teased, rolling his eyes. "I'm the guy who didn't give up on finding you, so don't go ahead and get your dumb ass lost in the street and frozen to death."

Oikawa saluted, and left with the Karasuno players. With nothing left to do, Iwaizumi figured he might as well just go to the bunker and lie down. Think about their next move. Consider the possibilities and opportunities in their future.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Oikawa spent a lot of time with Yamaguchi after that one time, after which he came back smiling widely. Iwaizumi was curious of what he was up to, but also was just relieved, knowing that his best friend was doing alright. The two mute boys did not seem like they were in distress, so Iwaizumi let them be, and watched them disappear together every day to do whatever it was that made them so giddy.

The winter had definitely settled at this point, with a light January snow dusting the ground once in a while before the rain drowned the powdery flakes. The weather forecast predicted colder temperatures than usual, but none of the boys had ever been this south on the island, so they didn't have a point of comparison. All they knew was that it was pretty darn chilly, and that the wind whistling through the cracks in the bunker walls at night was to be avoided at all costs.

The weeks flew by. Unable to get a desk job because of his fingers, Iwaizumi ended up getting a position as a busboy in the communal cafeteria, thus guaranteeing himself stable employment. However, Oikawa still could not find a job, his handicap preventing him from accessing any position that dealt with people, and the positions of manual labour long since having been filled by the healthier survivors of the trafficking ring that had flooded the already-imbalanced internal market of Nagoya. With the sudden surge of people that the large-scale rescue had brought in, the entire lifestyle in Nagoya had changed, in fact.

More people meant that more jobs were filled and more services became efficient. A new life came to Nagoya, and the streets became just a tiny bit more crowded. However, more people meant less open positions, less resources, and less circulating currency. Supply caravans did not come often, and with communication lines compromised, and the relief efforts still in total disarray even almost half a year after the initial nuclear onslaught, Nagoya soon saw something else than rain clouds looming on the horizon.

Decay.
Decay came in the form of many things. Crumbling buildings that gave up under the onslaught of the vicious weather. Corpses dumped in dark alleys. Ripped clothing that had been mended countless times already. Growling stomachs of children crying as their mothers picked up whatever they could afford off the barely-stocked shelves. The acrid smell of smoke that rose from the barrel of a soldier's gun as he regretfully shot down a comrade holding civilians at gunpoint for supplies. The blank, resigned look on the faces of both the hostages, and the crowd watching the event, as if they had all known, deep inside, that this had been bound to happen some day.

People began to get jumped in the night, for money, but even preferably for food. Kuroo and Tsukishima spent their night shifts patrolling the streets and praying not to have to stop a mugging. Shoppers hid their scarce supplies and made sure nobody saw their pitiful, overpriced cans of beans. Iwaizumi always accompanied Oikawa to his SLP visits to make sure nobody stabbed him in the street, and tried not to pay attention to the bruises he tried to cover up on his way out of the doctor's office. When money began to run out, people began trading goods and services for goods and services, and for a few days, as the collapse of Nagoya's economic structure halted, they all allowed themselves to believe that they would be okay.

They were wrong.

On the day that supplies came in by caravan, people literally trampled one another to death to access the stores and the communal kitchen, and chaos broke out when stores began being looted. Fire was set on a clothing shop that day, injuring many shoppers fighting inside, and the communal kitchen was closed in light of the violence taking place outside.

The people cried, and when the streets flooded with angry, desperate men and women who just wanted to live, they all knew that revolt was upon them.

More than anyone, Kuroo knew what anarchy looked like. So when they were put on standby to do some crowd control on short notice, he knew to recognize the danger that was upon them.

Shamelessly, he notified Tsukishima to help him gather the others, and abandoned his post to run away. In the massive fuckery that the streets, squirming with dirty, hungry people, had become, it was quite easy for them to slip away unnoticed, and run. Kuroo went towards the hospital, and Tsukishima went towards the bunker.

The hospital was where Kuroo grabbed a bunch of their own at the same time. The building had been locked down to protect the staff and patients as much as possible, and he pretended to be a security guard assigned to the psychiatry unit in order to get in. Once inside, he rushed up to the floors he knew his friends to be on, and gathered Suga, Noya, Kenma and Yamaguchi, and by extension of the latter, Oikawa and Iwaizumi. They all gathered in one of the empty staircases, and caught their breath to the sound of panicked footsteps on the floors above and below them.

"What's going on out there?" Noya asked worriedly, glancing at Kuroo's more-dishevelled-than-usual look.

"Rioting," Kenma guessed, clicking his tongue when Kuroo nodded. "It had to happen."

"I did notice that the tension had been building up these past few weeks..." Suga frowned pensively. "But I didn't think anyone would actually riot!"

"The supply caravans came in today, and the stores they restocked were totally ransacked. The people don't care about civility anymore; they just have to survive," Kuroo explained. "It started in the shopping district, and the crowd is headed towards the command centre, probably to try and break in. As if that will change anything. If only they knew that even the commander of Nagoya
doesn't have breakfast anymore."

"The command centre?" Suga's face blanched. "Daichi is in danger, then! We have to go get him out of there before he gets hurt!"

"Chill, Suga!" Kuroo halted his escalating anxiety with a wave of his hand. "Tsukki is taking care of it." At the sound of his name, Yamaguchi clearly perked up, eyebrows furrowed in hope and worry. "I asked him to go to the bunker. Whoever isn't already there will be sent there by their employer, or will go there when their employer fucking runs into the streets to riot. He'll round them up and take them to our safe spot."

"We have a safe spot?" Iwaizumi frowned, leaning closer to Oikawa instinctively. "Where? How?"

"Tsukki and I spotted one during one of our rounds and said it'd be our headquarters in case of an emergency. Like the one outside." He nudged his head towards the concrete walls around them. "I'll explain on the way. Suga, can you get us out of this hospital without going through the front entrance?"

"Yeah. We can go through the ambulance bay. It's not really used these days so no one should be there," the medic nodded seriously, the gravity of the situation not escaping him. "Let's keep going down."

"You okay?" Iwaizumi asked Oikawa, who opened his mouth as if to say something, and then stopped himself with a sad smile. He nodded, and the two of them followed Kuroo's and Suga's lead down the staircase.

Iwaizumi had known that Nagoya would no longer sustain them at some point. He just didn't think that the end of their stay would be heralded by the screaming of the dying. He was rooting more for a departure in silence.

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The safe house turned out to be the attic of an abandoned house. The door had been busted open, so the house itself did not offer any protection, but the attic was only reachable with a retractable ladder, so the boys felt a bit safer than usual once they were up there.

The only inconvenience was its proximity to the streets. Although no protests were going on right in front of the house itself, the clamour of the crowd on the nearby avenue was still reachable to their ears. It was like a constant background noise that reminded them of how dire the situation was.

"You're safe!" Suga was the first to say when they all got upstairs, where Tsukishima's group was already gathered. Subsequently, he threw himself in Daichi's arms and squeezed his shoulders tightly, before realizing he was still wearing his dirty scrubs and loosening his grip. "Dai... I was worried. I heard central command was being targeted, and..."

"It's okay. As soon as the commander heard about the riots, he sent all non-military personnel home," Daichi assured him, squeezing for a few more seconds before letting him go. "I grabbed Asahi from the kitchen around the corner and we went to the bunker."

"Mhm. The streets were too crowded today so I spent the day at Kageyama's workplace," Hinata added. "We quickly left when the news of the riots reached us. Tsukishima came to get us at the bunker."

"What the hell is gonna happen now?" Noya asked for the collective. Behind him, Yamaguchi slid next to Tsukishima and gently held his hand, as if to be sure he was still there, and closed his eyes.
"I don't know..." Daichi muttered, glancing away. "I guess the commander will attempt to get things under control, but I don't know how he'll do that."

"Um..."

All eyes went to Yamaguchi, who looked taken aback at the sudden attention. Iwaizumi had long since learned to pay attention when the boy spoke, since the rare times he did, it always ended up being extremely relevant. He wondered what the selective mute would say now. He hoped he had a plan for their safety. They all waited for his next stuttered words anxiously.

"...We're... missing someone, aren't we...?"

All of their breaths hitched at once, and surprisingly in-sync they all turned their heads, frantically looking for anyone who might be missing, and counting their numbers.

"Twelve..." Kuroo finally announced, biting his lip. "Shit. Keishin is missing."

"Coach?" Hinata repeated in disbelief, eyes wide. "You mean he's still out there in the streets?"

"He might have ducked in a house or gone back to the bunker. He's an adult and he's come this far already, he knows what to do. He'll be fine," Daichi tried to convince them, though he hardly convinced himself.

"He's been distant lately. I really hope he's okay," Kenma muttered, clutching the sleeves of his hoodie tensely.

"We'll worry about him when we get out of here." Iwaizumi was reluctant to play the bad guy, since he was rather fond of Ukai himself, but they needed an action plan. In his peripheral vision, he saw Oikawa turn to him, and wondered if his best friend had important knowledge locked up in his scarred voice box.

"He's right." Ever the voice of reason, but rarely that of empathy, Kuroo backed him up immediately, sitting down finally. They adjusted themselves to be sitting in a circle where everyone could see one another in the dust floating up from the ground.

"What plan are we talking about here?" Suga asked. "I mean, we all agree that we should outwait the riots and then return to the bunker, right?"

"Right..." Hinata nodded, not seeming to keep up.

"But this doesn't end there. It won't end so simply," Kageyama clarified for his partner. "The riots will have changed the social order drastically once they're done. There will be tension in the air and society will become unstable. It could then collapse at any moment."

"I didn't even know you had so many words in your vocabulary," Tsukishima smirked provocatively, huffing when Yamaguchi tapped his arm in reprimand, as if telling him that it wasn't the time. "Fine, fine. Jeez... Let's just leave, then."

The noise from the crowd suddenly stopped, an uncanny coincidence with the last of the blond's words. They reverberated on the dust kicked up and lodged themselves in their ears. Their eyes widened before they even computed the meaning of the words, because by instinct, they could tell that something was wrong.

The noise drowned out as if sucked into a vacuum, and for a second, Iwaizumi couldn't even breathe.
"We always end up leaving, anyway."

And just as the white noise returned, echoing around Tsukishima's words, they breathed in unison.

Outside, the crowd let out a piercing, horrifying screech, one so primal and terrified that the boys could not help but let out whimpers of their own.

"Oh, what now!?!" Noya let out a frustrated cry, stomping towards the small window on the edge, and peering out.

"No, Noya!" Iwaizumi found himself crying out before he even knew why. "Don't!"

A hand on his arm stopped him from getting up, and Iwaizumi turned to see Oikawa's panicked expression. He only had time to mirror it before Nishinoya screeched as well. His cry was drowned out by the mortifying noise outside, which only rose in volume until it was all they could hear. Either the crowd was outdoing themselves, or they were coming closer.

"Noya!" Asahi gasped out in worry, but Hinata was quicker to run to him, and pull him back. He chanced glancing out of the window as well, and when he turned to lead the wide-eyed libero away, his face had blanched as well.

"Hinata! What's wrong?!" Kageyama pressed urgently, ready to get up as well. He didn't have to, however, as Hinata was very straightforward with his horrified answer.

"It's raining." He stumbled back to his place by Kageyama's side and sat down numbly. "It's raining, and those people are screaming because they're still outside."

"Oh god." Someone must've said it, or all of them at once, or perhaps the horrified gasps came from all of them at once. All they knew was that they were safe and sound, and front-seat spectators to a brutal mass murder.

The screams outside began to disperse, probably as people ran to hide and nurse their burnt bodies. Some high-pitched screams came uncomfortably close to them, some people seeking refuge in nearby houses, and then in their own. Frantic footsteps and pleading cries reached their ears from right below them, and for a moment, Suga made a move to get up. Firmly, however, Daichi held him back, and sat him back down. To his friend's look of disbelief and mild betrayal, he could only shake his head sadly.

As the raindrops crashed onward even harder, attempting to drown the screeches of the damned, the noise seemed to get even louder, until it was all the boys could hear. Noya whimpered and clamped his hands over his ears, and Hinata and Kenma held one another tightly. Daichi rubbed Suga's back as he mourned the loss of all those people, and Yamaguchi buried his face in his drawn-up knees. Tsukishima leaned his head against the wall, and pursed his lips as he watched Kuroo pace nervously. Asahi was crying already, and Daichi put a hand on his knee as well to calm him down.

As for himself, Iwaizumi found himself struck in place by the horror of listening to the masses die. The masses weren't just masses- they were individuals. With loved ones to return to, the people screeching outside were in pain, agonizing as the flesh melted off their bones and their thoughts of their families became their last. Every one of them had a story, and they were just being slaughtered out there, like mere livestock to satisfy Mother Nature's glutton taste for death.

In fact, all of Japan had been slaughtered that way. Hundreds of thousands of families had been broken in the Forty Fireworks, innumerable millions of dreams had been lost during the nuclear bombings, thousands and thousands of despairing souls were roaming the beaten earth where their
starved bodies had been laid to rest. So many people with a life to live had been robbed of it. So many individuals, with different names and looks and personalities and aspirations but the same naive innocence had fallen prey to the horrors that this war had brought upon them. They hadn't deserved to die. No one deserved to die like this, whether it had been in a flash of fire, or in the agony of injury, or the downpour of something as benign as rain. And nobody deserved to be left behind to die, or to live with the loneliness that stemmed from the death of their loved ones.

He couldn't imagine that happening to him. What if he'd come so far, only to lose Oikawa here? What if he was out there, crying as he agonized and wishing he could see his best friend one last time? What if he never even found him? What if Oikawa died before he could even get to him?

Those people out there, every single one of them, had an Oikawa waiting for them to return home. And they never would. None of those people would ever return home again.

The loneliness that rang in his heart at that thought drove him over the edge. Putting an arm over his eyes, he began to cry.

"Why is this happening...?" he sniffled pitifully, heartbroken before the anger welled up. "Why is this happening!? What have any of us, any of these people, ever done to deserve this!?"

Nobody replied, though Hinata's sobbing rose in volume slightly.

"And why can't anyone give me an answer, damn it?" The more he wiped his tears, the more ran down his cheeks. "Why!? Is it because there is no answer!?”

"No." Kuroo's face was pained, in that perpetually resigned look of his. "There is no answer."

"Then there is no reason for this..." Iwaizumi's breath hitched, and he let out a sob bottled up in his throat. "... this mindless slaughter... All of it... This shouldn't be happening...

The screeches were winding down, but Iwaizumi's anger only festered, because it only meant that the victims were dying, one by one in horrible agony, making guttural noises that were less and less recognizable the more sulphur eroded into their throats.

The sudden pressure of a hand on his shoulder made him snap his head to the side. As always, it was Oikawa. Like the past fifteen years, it was Oikawa, standing by his side, his nose running and his cheeks wet with tears, but still strong enough to voluntarily support Hajime.

Iwaizumi looked into his pained eyes, and wondered if Oikawa's screeches had been so animalistic and unrestrained when his handlers strapped him down and forced the acid down his throat.

He clamped his hands over his mouth to hold back the sudden retch that forced its way up, and turned away, his head spinning.

"Why?" he asked again, the mental image enough to shake him to the core. "Why do we have to fight a war we didn't start?"

"Iwaizumi..." Noya joined in, trying to comfort him, but Iwaizumi was tired of paying for sins that weren't even his.

"I don't want to be here," he whimpered, so small and broken that it seemed pathetic coming from him. Everyone in the room looked away from him, unable to look at the miserable picture. Only Oikawa watched him, and cried in silence. "I don't want to be afraid. I don't want anyone to suffer anymore. I want to see my mom and go to school and play volleyball. I don't want to do this anymore. I want to go home."
Someone was crying loudly at this point, and being hushed by the others sobbing around him, but Iwaizumi didn't know who it was. Oikawa was still gripping his shoulder with his shaking hand, but Iwaizumi was past noticing it. He could only curl up on himself and will away the nausea and physical pain of his gut clenching to hold in his sobs. Soon enough, he couldn't hear anything else than the anguish of his friends around him, the crashing of the rain, and the extinguished voices of the innocents on death row.

He didn't realize that Oikawa had let him go to get up until he returned, and sat down in front of him. Iwaizumi did not look up at first, too busy sniffling, but Oikawa gently tapped his cheek, and drew his teary gaze up to meet his.

Despite the clear anguish in his eyes, Oikawa had his usual determined look about him, the one that had Iwaizumi unable to pull away. So he blinked, tears rolling down his cheeks, and watched as Oikawa took a deep breath, and looked up. Yamaguchi, who was standing by him, knelt down as well, and nodded to Oikawa.

Oikawa put his hands up, and hesitated slightly before his fingers moved into a bizarre position. And then they switched configuration, the brunet looking extremely concentrated on the task at hand. Now curious, Iwaizumi tried to figure out what he was doing.

"Hajime."

He suddenly jumped at the sound of his given name, eyes wide as he gazed at Yamaguchi, who smiled lightly at him.

"... What...?"

"Hajime," Yamaguchi repeated with self-assurance. "That's what he's saying." And he looked at Oikawa, who had dropped his hands in his lap.

"Oh my god." The ringing returned to Iwaizumi's ears, this time from the shocking realization of what Oikawa, reliable, strong, courageous Oikawa Tooru, was currently doing. His vision blurred with more tears, but he blinked them away to be able to watch the slender dance of his fingers as they morphed into different configurations that changed slowly, but that flowed into one another. As he went along, Yamaguchi pronounced the words he was creating in thin air.

"Don't... cry."

There was no way he couldn't, not at this revelation. He was aware of everyone else getting closer to watch Yamaguchi's and Oikawa's ultimate scheme unravel before their flabbergasted expressions, but could not control the shock that commanded his body to keep crying. The overload of information was almost too much for him to handle, but the sight of Oikawa's brows furrowed in concentration and his tongue poking out slightly between his lips kept him anchored to reality. He watched in fascinated reverence as Oikawa spelled out his longest message yet, Yamaguchi struggling to keep up, but ultimately translating Oikawa's first actual words since he lost his voice.

"Your home... is with me... here."

With a final sweep of his fingers, Oikawa destroyed Iwaizumi in his entirety, and when he glanced up with a small, insecure smile, he put Iwaizumi back together again as he had always done before.

Hajime felt like he was five years old again when he let out a sob and melted into Tooru's awaiting arms. Feeling his best friend's warm breath in the crook of his neck, he squeezed him tight and tried not to imagine a world without him. A world where he had no home to return to.
"I know," he choked out, and let the sound of Oikawa's breathing drown out the requiem of the dying.

They stayed in the attic overnight. The rain lasted quite long, as if to hammer its point home, and even when it stopped, none of them suggested leaving. The prospect of ambling down streets littered with bodies burnt beyond recognition was not the most appealing, so they all quietly agreed to stay until they saw the morning light filtering in from the small window, refracting on the small particles of dust floating around them. Even when they woke up, groggily moving off of the thighs and shoulders that they had used as pillows, they didn't make a move to leave just yet.

Tsukishima's previous words reverberated within all of their skulls, and even before discussing it and voting, they knew that the suggestion would hold. It seemed like the only constant in their adventure so far was that they were not sedentary. They had no home. No matter how stable their lives became, they never seemed to be able to settle down. It wasn't necessarily bad, just... inconvenient to have to rebuild a life over and over again.

But yesterday's display between Oikawa and Iwaizumi (with Yamaguchi's help) had not only moved them, but had also made them realize that they didn't mind the nomadic lifestyle so much as long as the people close to them remained. Their home was not a building in particular, not as they had always defined it to be. Their home was more of the safety they found when they were together.

Iwaizumi opened his eyes to the sight of Oikawa struggling to write on a piece of cardboard. He smiled when he noticed his awakening, and showed him his written well-wishes for the day.

"Good morning to you, too," he yawned. "How are you feeling today?"

Oikawa gave him a thumbs up, and then turned his eyes to the others, who were waking up just as slowly. Iwaizumi watched the fluttering of his eyelashes for a moment and then sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"Hey." He waited for Oikawa to turn his bright gaze onto him curiously. "Yesterday... the... sign language thing... that was cool," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck shyly. He turned his eyes away when Oikawa grinned, almost blinding him with the genuineness of his smile. "Shut up. I didn't know you could do that."

The familiar scribbling drew his gaze up to Oikawa, who was struggling to get his blue pen to show up on the thick piece of cardboard. He leaned over to read his writing and guessed the end of the sentence himself.

"Yamaguchi, huh?" he smirked, nodding at the boy who turned to him at the sound of his name. "I should've known you guys were bonding over something like this."

Oikawa laughed quietly, and Iwaizumi briefly grieved the fact that even hand symbols would never replace Oikawa's obnoxious, unique laughter.

"Teach me."

Oikawa's silent laughter faded, and he looked at Iwaizumi's determined expression, as if gauging him. His eyes flickered over Iwaizumi's eyes, and then over his hands, and where his fingers were missing. He then turned to tap Yamaguchi and drag his attention towards them, and began slowly signing something to him. The younger player observed his movements quietly, and once Oikawa was done, he took a moment to think before looking at Iwaizumi.
"He's worried about your fingers," Yamaguchi mumbled.

"I can make do. I still have small stumps. It's not like there's nothing for me to work with," Iwaizumi shrugged, turning to Oikawa. "I just want to talk to you again. And I know Yamaguchi doesn't like talking, so I don't want him having to translate all the time."

Yamaguchi chuckled softly at that, and nodded his appreciation. Oikawa signed to him again.

"He says we're not very good yet," Yamaguchi translated, turning to Iwaizumi. "It's true. It's been a week only. We don't know words, just radicals, so we spell out our sentences."

"Well, teach me to spell," Iwaizumi asked of them, shifting to get on his knees, and bowed his head lightly. "Please. I want to connect with you two. I don't want to let you live in your isolated world of silence. I want to be your voices. So teach me how to spell, and we can all learn to speak together."

But he'd forgotten how little words meant in his relationship with Oikawa. When he raised his head again, he saw the shit-eating grin on his best friend's face, and his expression fell into a pissed frown.

"So you think it's funny?" he grumbled, pinching Oikawa's cheeks and enjoying the dramatic (silent) whining coming from him. "I'll show you funny, Shittykawa."

Letting him go, he turned to Yamaguchi and crossed his arms.

"Show me how to spell his stupid name," he demanded, making the quiet boy flinch at the gruff tone of his voice.

Yamaguchi made a couple of signs, and Iwaizumi paid attention.

"Again."

Yamaguchi repeated the motion pleasantly, glancing back at Tsukishima when he realized that he was being observed. The blond's gaze flickered away, feigning boredom, but he was too curious to pretend and soon looked back at his best friend expectantly. Yamaguchi repeated the symbols just for the hell of it.

"Okay," Iwaizumi concluded, and put his hands up. He thought for a second, and then mimicked Yamaguchi's previous movements, concentrated on his own movements. When he looked up, Oikawa was chuckling at him, and he blushed at the attention. "What? Why are you still laughing?"

"You signed 'towa' instead," Yamaguchi clarified with a gentle smile. "You raised the wrong three fingers."

"Towa?" Iwaizumi frowned, just as Oikawa grabbed his paper to write a quick note. He didn't have a clear understanding of the word. He thought he'd heard it in a history lecture once...

Oikawa raised his paper to show him the single word on it. His smile was milder this time, shyer, but one of the most genuine ones he'd seen in all his years of knowing him. Iwaizumi looked at the word, and then looked back to him. Oikawa's smile definitely felt like home.

"Eternity."

Kuroo and Daichi went on recon downstairs, taking the opportunity of their isolation to talk about their next move. The others waited upstairs, watching Yamaguchi and Oikawa try to teach hiragana...
in Japanese sign language to Iwaizumi and Tsukishima. The pinch server seemed to have exhausted his voice, as he was now writing the symbols before signing them, and the two students were mimicking their movements. The others were either watching them curiously, or in Hinata's case, had fallen back asleep.

When their leaders came back, they all sat down in a circle to discuss their next move.

"It's going to be a mess out there," Daichi began, looking at Kuroo for confirmation. "I think we should avoid the bunker until it settles down."

"Where will we go, then? We can't stay here, Dai. The dust here probably has mould growing on it," Suga pursed his lips gravely, ignoring Noya's exclamation of disgust.

"We haven't figured it out yet. Maybe we can use a regular house and post guards during the night," Kuroo answered him. "But that's just a Band-Aid on a punctured artery. We need to get out of here, and fast."

"Get out of here, as in..." Kageyama trailed off unsurely, turning to look at Tsukishima, whose eyes hardened behind his cracked lenses.

"So we are gonna leave, after all," the blond mumbled. "I threw that out there, knowing it had to happen sometime, but... this suddenly..."

"We have no choice," Daichi replied. "What we saw yesterday was total anarchy. The ones who survived will not return to order, and a fight for power will begin. If the government wins, they will win with guns and more innocent blood spilt to keep people in line. If the people win, there will be no more laws, and it will be as if we have returned to Shoukyo, without the daylight to keep us safe this time."

"Tsukki, Daichi and I will not be a part of the government's drastic attempts to quell the riots," Kuroo hummed, trying to sound light-hearted, but only seeming anxious. "There's no way we'll stay here if the government succeeds in re-establishing order. You can all stay and hide until a bizarre kind of peace is restored, but we can't."

"Don't be stupid," Kenma rolled his eyes. "Of course we're coming with you, wherever you go."

"Oikawa and Iwaizumi were melodramatic in pointing it out yesterday, but..." Noya piped up, ignoring Iwaizumi's embarrassed protest. "They're right! Home is where all of us are together, so if you leave, there is nothing keeping us in Nagoya anymore!"

"Plus, I'm pretty sure that all of us are itching to hit the road again," Suga mused out loud, raising his hands in a defensive position when he got more than one questioning frown. "What? Don't tell me you're going to deny it. Ever since we first ended up in that death camp, it's been all about moving from one place to another. I don't think we've ever considered getting settled, not even in Niigata."

"I guess you're right," Daichi admitted. "But it's also because it's always felt like there is somewhere out there that is waiting for us. Where we will finally, truly be safe and sound. So far, no place has felt like it could provide for us that way."

"And that's why we've gotta keep going and find it, wherever it is."

"How will we know when we've found it?" Asahi asked softly, nervous about the whole prospect of leaving again.

"Sometimes, you don't need to know that something is right if it just feels right," Iwaizumi hummed.
"I haven't been with you for long, but for whatever it's worth, I think it's a good idea to keep moving. We need to find someplace safe to end our journey. And we'll know we've gotten there where we get there, I'm sure."

"Then let's vote. To leave Nagoya as soon as possible, and head back out on the road. All in favour, raise your hands," Kuroo instructed.

"Where would we be going, though?" Hinata piped in with the question weighing heavily on their minds.

"He's right," Kageyama backed him up. "We came from the North, and we know it has nothing left for us. Hokkaido is gone, and there's no point in returning to Niigata in the West, or to Sendai on the Eastern coast. We'd have to keep going southwest... which doesn't leave us much room for manoeuvre."

"Kenma, what are our options from here?" Kuroo turned to the black-haired boy, who ran a hand through his matted, faded bleached roots in thought.

"Not many. The island narrows a bit as it curves towards Kyuushu in the west. We'd have to go around lake Biwa, either from the North or the South, depending on what kind of time we have and what kind of environment we want to go through. Past lake Biwa, there's Kyoto, and Osaka waiting for us. They are the closest cities from here. If not, right past Osaka, there's also Shikoku to the southwest," Kenma explained, closing his eyes periodically to imagine the map in his mind's eye.

"Gwaaaah!" Hinata exclaimed, making Kenma jump at the sudden screech of admiration. "Kenma, that was so cool! You know everything!"

"Not really..." Kenma mumbled, looking at Kuroo and hoping he'd take some of the attention off of him. Thankfully, his best friend obliged, though not without smirking at him first.

"We just happen to have a very talented geographer with us. Kenma knows all of Japan like the back of his hand!" he boasted, getting a sigh from Kenma in response.

"Not really..." he repeated in light exasperation, but at that point, the conversation had begun to move again.

"Okay, so we have to keep heading west no matter what, right?" Daichi picked up the train of thought and rolled with it. "Does anyone know if the West is viable?"

"I remember calling a refugee centre in Kyuushu a while back," Kageyama answered, chewing on his lip in thought. "In Nagasaki, or something, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know if it's viable, but I do know that someone picked up the phone, at the very least."

"How long ago?" Kuroo asked him, getting up to pace around a bit.

"I dunno. A week or two."

"Okay, so we know that there is still life on Kyuushu," Noya hummed in thought. "What about Shikoku?"

"In Niigata..." Kuroo clicked his tongue, and then snapped his finger, as if trying to spark a candle in his mind. "I asked to check Bokuto's whereabouts upon admission. I remember hearing that he was last registered somewhere on Shikoku, but that was months before. A bit after the first nuclear explosion, actually. So it's been a very long time since then."
"Okay, so there is life on Kyuushu, and Bokuto on Shikoku," Noya summarized, drawing a few chuckles from the group around him. "But we don't know if either location is still viable or not."

"We'd have to do some research. Contact registered centres on those islands, and whatnot. Kageyama, what do our options for strongholds to the West look like?" Daichi asked his first-year setter.

"There are a few listed on our phone lists, like Kyoto, Hiroshima, Kitakyuushu, Nagasaki... Miyazaki also, I think, but I might be wrong..." the receptionist chewed on his lip and counted off on his fingers.

"That's quite a few to choose from," Asahi smiled, hoping to lift their spirits.

"Except... I haven't heard from any of them in a while. Most phone calls I have to make are to camps on international territory. Most inhabitants had already left the island of Honshu before the second explosion, so it's rare to see internal transfers of survivors. Most of the time, they're either admitted to a stronghold and stay there for good, or are transported out of the country," Kageyama explained.

"That might actually be the first constructive thing you've said in months," Tsukishima provoked, his cheeky grin widening when Kageyama turned to glare at him. However, before they could get into a fight, Daichi stepped in and shot both of them down with a disapproving glare.

"Tsukishima, not now," he reprimanded, and then turned to Kuroo, analyzing the look on his face. "So if I understand right, these outposts may not even be active anymore..."

"That wouldn't make sense," Kuroo grumbled, more to himself than to anyone else, and at that moment, Oikawa's grip tightened on Iwaizumi. The latter didn't have to look at him to know that they'd come to the same conclusion.

"So that would mean that..." Iwaizumi swallowed thickly. "That... we're alone out here. That the North is all gone already, and that the Southwest is empty, and that Nagoya is all that we have left. All that anybody has left. It means that... if Nagoya is off the map, then we are all alone in an entirely empty country."

"Well, we could always go back to Niigata in a pinch," Suga offered. "Though we ran out on them so I'm not sure how well we'd be received..."

"We're not going back to Niigata," Noya cut him off firmly, and the downcast look in his eyes told every one of them why he refused to return to that place. A wave of grief ran across them, and they silently agreed to keep a moment of silence before continuing.

"So we keep moving," Kuroo announced solemnly. "We should find out if there are any outposts, or even just settlements in nearby cities, and go from there."

"How soon are we setting out?" Asahi asked, the cogs already turning in his head. "We're gonna have to grab some supplies, and in this situation, it's going to be pretty hard."

"Let's find ourselves another safe spot that has less chances of giving us all pneumonia," Daichi suggested with a small smile meant to lighten the mood. "Then, we can have several teams heading out to grab our stuff from wherever we've left them, and once we meet back at our HQ, we can plan out the entire journey in detail."

"Ideally, we should leave by tomorrow," Kuroo concurred. "So that gives us less than 48 hours to prepare yet another journey. Anybody not up to the challenge is welcome to stay here," he teased, grinning when he got determined smiles from everybody in response. "Okay then. Let's make our
teams and get out of this attic."

"I'll head to the hospital with Yamaguchi. We have our stuff in our lockers there and if we're lucky, we can sneak onto our units and grab some supplies before leaving," Suga volunteered.

"As bad as this sounds, I can go to the kitchen and... well, I guess I have no choice but to grab some food and water that came here by caravan. I'll need someone to carry things with me, though, and maybe even distract my coworkers while I get the stuff we need," Asahi mumbled. "The security in the stock room is pretty tight, though, so..."

"I'm up for a challenge," Noya put his thumbs up with a bright grin. "This is kinda exciting, actually." He then turned and glared at Tsukishima, who was watching them all with a calculating look in his eyes. "Tsukishima! You're still in your military uniform, so you should come with us and be the distraction!"

"Sure. Maybe if I glare hard enough, they'll all faint," the blond rolled his eyes.

"Tsukishima, maybe you can pretend you're doing a headcount to tally the losses from yesterday? And ask the workers and volunteers to identify victims, and stuff?" Asahi suggested hesitantly.

"While you guys do that, I'll head to the military HQ and get some news, and then grab stuff we may need for the journey, like maps, matches, you know the drill," Daichi then turned to Kuroo. "I'll go alone so that I don't arouse suspicion. You and Tsukishima should stay away from the HQ, because if anyone sees you in your military uniform, they might assign you to a post, or if they know you deserted yesterday, they might even attempt to detain you."

"Copy that." Kuroo did not seem the least bit put off, as if being threatened with violence was a regular part of his life. After all he'd been through, it probably felt like it was.

"Kenma and I can just head to the bunker," Hinata suggested. "It'll probably be a mess, but we're dressed as civilians, so we can pass unnoticed, and grab our sleeping bags. Then, we'll retrieve all of our backpacks from our common locker, and get the hell out. Bakayama can come with us to carry stuff and smile at people to drive them off if they get too close."

"I-I'm not scary!" Kageyama spluttered indignantly, crossing his arms. "Besides, I wouldn't want to stick around you, dumbass. I've got better things to do!"

"Like what?" Hinata challenged cockily.

"I'm gonna go to the admission centre and call up all the outposts we have listed on our phone. See if anyone picks up, and try to pinpoint the best one to go to," he huffed and turned his head before being aware of Daichi's appreciative glance.

"Very good idea, Kageyama," he praised. "You are the cornerstone of this expedition. I wish you luck."

"T-Thank you, Captain," the setter stuttered out, not expecting the praise.

"T-Thank you, Captain," the setter stuttered out, not expecting the praise.

"I guess I'll go with Tobio and be the lookout while he works," Iwaizumi finally volunteered, figuring he was well-suited to the task of protecting his old kouhai. "I'll babysit Oikawa as well, while I'm at it."

He was rewarded with a smack to the arm, and, irked, immediately turned to Oikawa to grab the offending hand and wrestle it around. The brunet next to him fought back playfully, though not a single whine came from his mouth as he did it.
"This is gonna be a pretty big party, then," Kuroo hummed in thought. "Because I was intending to go with Kageyama as well. The admission centre has a lot of files on strongholds and missing persons. I want to browse through them and see if I can identify any patterns or information that may help us identify our final destination. In particular, I want to try and rule out places that look dangerous, and I want to see what our options are to leave the country."

The long-term that Kuroo was already planning was the determining point of their future, and one that none of them had even begun to think about. All the time, their plans boiled down to what they could do in the near future to guarantee a temporary reprieve. However, Kuroo was thinking ahead, of a far-off future that would mark the end of their struggle. Their plans were only painkillers for the problem, but Kuroo's plan was surgery in comparison. Much more complex, but definitive.

They all held their breaths for a second, thinking of what could be if the Nekoma player planned out their entire journey already.

Iwaizumi stopped wrestling Oikawa for a second, and a solemn look slid onto his face as he briefly imagined what it would feel like to feel safe again. He hadn't felt truly safe in a long time, and he wondered if he ever would again. Maybe not. Or maybe the future that Kuroo was envisioning for them was the answer to that problem.

"Good luck, Kuroo," Kenma whispered with a certain quiet reverence, and they all nodded in unison to that.

"Thanks," he flashed a small smile, as if he already knew how important his contribution was. "Now. If we all have a task to accomplish, let's head out without further ado."

"And let's keep an eye out for Ukai," Kenma reminded them. "He might try to find us as well, so let's be on the lookout."

"Good call," Daichi nodded, him and Asahi opening the trap door and beginning to lower the ladder.

"I hope he's okay," Hinata mumbled, getting up and dusting himself off. "Ever since we left Niigata, he hasn't said much at all."

"He's probably just as tired as we are of this entire venture," Suga defended their coach. "He might have a lot on his mind, but he's still here, so we have to trust that he is still okay."

"I wonder where he could be," Kenma joined the conversation, watching Daichi test out the ladder rungs before going down first to sweep the area. "He was at the school, last I heard, so maybe he stayed locked in with the kids and returned to the bunker when the rain let up."

"Let's just try and find him, okay? He might try and find us as well," Suga closed the topic, moving towards the ladder to go down once Daichi gave the all-clear.

Iwaizumi got up as well and followed with Oikawa in tow, wondering if they were all consciously avoiding the topic of their coach not having made it to safety before the rain hit. He had no right to comment, however.

Soon enough, Daichi called up that it was safe to leave the attic, and they all abandoned their dusty safe spot. The cool air that rushed in through the torn-down front door was a relief, though it held the subtle scent of metal on it.

Suddenly, they did not want to leave. All of them froze in their collective movement towards the outside world once it hit them that they were about to venture through a cemetery, and for a second, Iwaizumi considered staying back. Everything would be much easier if they hid and toughed it out.
until the government took control again. But that wasn't an option for them. Their only option was to leave Nagoya entirely and never look back. All they had to do was not look back.

Luckily, the number of casualties on their street was minimal. They proceeded as a group for a while, eyes darting around to catch a glimpse of the stray corpse up ahead so that they could avoid looking at it as they passed by.

And then, they reached the main street, and their composure fell apart.

The streets were littered -blanketed- with bodies. The more they proceeded, the more corpses they had to go around, until there was no way to avoid them but to step over them. The area was quiet, scarily so. Their feet scuffed against the eroded asphalt and provided them with one last sound to hold onto.

"I'm going to puke," Hinata announced soon enough, and echoed their sentiment exactly.

"We should split up," Iwaizumi suggested, hoping to get some privacy to deal with the nauseating sight of the sea of the dead that had flooded the streets of Nagoya.

"Good call," Kuroo agreed more quietly than usual, and they all moved into their respective teams slowly, hesitantly.

"Where should we meet, then?" Hinata asked, standing close to Kenma as if afraid to lose him in the swarm of bodies.

"There is a house with a missing roof in the street parallel to the grocery store," Tsukishima piped in. "I patrol that area often and I've never seen anyone there. It's a house that they never finished reconstructing, so some parts of it are sheltered, but most aren't. It'll be fine temporarily."

"Sounds like a plan," Suga nodded, glancing at Yamaguchi's unbothered expression next to him. The kid probably saw cases like those on the ground daily, although he'd never had so many to deal with at once. He was probably overwhelmed, too, although his flat expression did not show it.

"Let's hurry on and meet there in a couple of hours," Noya prompted them, as if trying to get their frozen leg muscles moving.

"Stay safe, everyone," Iwaizumi tied up their goodbyes promptly, and they split up, if not a bit anxiously.

His group, consisting of Oikawa, Kuroo and Kageyama, headed west with Daichi for a little while. Soon enough, Daichi broke away from them with a quiet goodbye, and began to head down his own path towards the military HQ. Steering very clear from it (and the bodies of civilians and soldiers scattered on the ground), the rest of them headed towards the admission centre.

The more they headed towards the populated areas, the more living beings they began to spot amongst the mass of the dead. Mostly consisting of military men (whom they avoided rather well) tallying up and identifying the dead with a solemn look on all of their faces, the people standing out from the rest of the bodies on the ground seemed like some bizarre survivors wandering the streets without purpose after the apocalypse blew over. The saddest part was the silence that pervaded not only the dead, but also the living. Everybody seemed defeated. Everyone seemed to have died a little bit after the tragedy that struck Nagoya overnight.

Suddenly, a screech pierced the air, and the hair on the back of Iwaizumi's neck stood on end when he heard it. The scream, almost a lament of some sort, had given them all goosebumps, and they could not help but pause in their trek to face the direction of the screech.
A young woman had screamed, and was now running towards something in their general direction, messily sprinting and stumbling over the bodies before she reached her target and fell to her knees with a reckless abandon. Iwaizumi only watched as she cried out with all the pain in her soul, and gathered up a small body burnt beyond recognition into her arms. Its flesh squelched as she squeezed the body against her bosom, seemingly unaware of its advanced state of decay, and she cried loudly, mourning her loss.

Iwaizumi turned his eyes away, unsure how she could stand to hold the body so close to her, and even more unsure how it was that she had identified the corpse that was quite disfigured by the acid rain. He supposed that a mother's instinct really was powerful enough to distinguish her dead child amongst the other bodies peppering the pavement. He wondered if he would be able to do that. If he would have that kind of instinct regarding his own mother, his father, any of his friends, Oikawa...

As if reading his mind, Oikawa gently touched his arm, and Iwaizumi briefly relished in the feeling of his warm presence before moving on.

"Let's not linger," he mumbled, noticing that nausea welled up in his chest when he spoke.

"Yeah. She's not the first, and she won't be the last," Kuroo agreed, as if his words made anything better, and nudged his head towards the end of the street. "Come on. We've got work to do to leave before any of us end up like that."

Iwaizumi didn't know if he was referring to the child, or the mother now crumpled over his still form in grief. He supposed it didn't matter. Should something happen to them, they'd end up like either one, anyway. He didn't say anything, though, feeling like he'd be sick to the stomach soon, and began his pace again, stepping over another corpse, of a woman this time.

(Whose girlfriend or wife was she? Whose daughter was she? Whose mother or aunt or sister was she? Whose friend or coworker or acquaintance was she? Who was this woman, who had nobody crying over her, who had died so pointlessly in the mass murder brought upon them by this war, and whose death would only be another number in the history books printed years from now? Which one of her loved ones would never be able to return home to her anymore?)

Iwaizumi sometimes hated being so conscious of the people around him. Sometimes, he envied Kuroo, who seemed to be mostly unaffected by all the death he witnessed. Sometimes, he hoped never to become like Kuroo, and never to lose his sense of conscience and guilt. He wasn't sure which one he wanted most.

They walked onward, with the grieving mother's anguish still ringing in their ears and punctuating their every step until they were far enough to leave her behind, too. Thankfully, as they turned off of the main street, they came across less and less living humans, and soon, there were no more crying mothers and stone faced soldiers to see them. Only they existed amongst the graveyard at their feet.

As they got further away, the number of dead bodies lessened, until there were only one or two unlucky stragglers left on some pavement or another. At that point, the number of living humans was beginning to rise, as people were outside to inspect the damage and meet one another after the tragedy struck. The silence gave way to crying again, this time from broken families for broken homes, and the boys hurried along yet again, if only to escape the relief and guilt that they felt from having survived yet another calamity.

Soon, they reached the admission centre, and once close enough, realized that the lights were out.

"Damn it, it's closed," Iwaizumi swore, trying the locked door nonetheless, with no success.
"Do we break in?" Kuroo mused out loud, clearly not adverse to the use of violence, as usual.

"No," Kageyama frowned, disapproving of Kuroo's methods. "I still have my access card. Maybe we can go in through the service entrance in the back."

"Good call." Iwaizumi preferred this method a lot more than climbing through a broken window.

They all followed Kageyama as he circled the building, leading them to an inconspicuous door in the back, next to the dumpster. The door had a chip scanner by its handle, and Kageyama pulled on the access card clipped at his waistband to tap it onto the scanner.

They all waited as the machine processed for a second, and made a contented noise when the small LED on the scanner turned green. Kageyama opened the door, and they all stepped into the darkness of the unlit building.

"So," Iwaizumi began speaking as they reached the central staircase. "What do we do from here?"

"Kageyama, you should head to your cubicle and pull up your programs. If the landline works, make as many calls as possible and take notes as much as possible," Kuroo instructed. "That's on the first floor, down the hall, I believe. As for myself, I'm off to the second floor, since that's probably where the archives are located. I just hope they're not under lock and key."

"What about us?" Iwaizumi asked, glancing at Oikawa's attentive face. He knew that look; it was the concentrated look he had when a strong player was about to serve.

"Let's see..." Kuroo hummed in thought, scratching his chin. "Pretty boy, you can come with me."

"Why?" Iwaizumi immediately bristled, but backed down when he realized that he was being clingy.

"Well, you're patrolling for security purposes, aren't you?" Kuroo cocked his head. "No offense, but having someone who can't call for help on a patrol isn't much help. I'm gonna need a lot of assistance to go through all the files, so I'd rather he come with me."

"Tch." Iwaizumi hated to admit that the captain's plan made sense. "Fine. Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

Oikawa gave him an affronted look, and signed two sounds to him. Iwaizumi frowned so he repeated it, but his friend couldn't recall his hand signs at the moment, so he gave up with a sigh. Instead, he mouthed the word, a couple of times until Iwaizumi read it on his lips.

"Stupid yourself, stupid," Iwaizumi huffed, glaring at him, and idly memorizing the hand signs for the word that he felt like he would use frequently when it came to Oikawa.

"Alright, let's split. Be careful everyone. Let's meet back here if anything happens," Kuroo called off their banter and climbed the first step of the staircase. Oikawa diligently followed.

"Right," Iwaizumi and Kageyama acquiesced simultaneously, and waited for the two others to go up the steps before turning to leave as well.

"I'll escort you to your work space," Iwaizumi volunteered, accompanying Kageyama as he walked. "That way, I can start my patrol in the front."

Strangely silent, as if pensive, Kageyama nodded without looking at him. His senpai figured that he was just planning his approach to his task, and let him be.
They entered the dark, open space where the many cubicles with the receptionists' workstations were set up. The computers they walked past were all turned off, so it seemed like this place had been evacuated urgently, but not emergently.

Kageyama led them down a couple of rows of cubicles and then walked down the aisle to his own, which was labelled with the number 19. He slid into his seat and started up his computer, pulling the phone to himself as well as a notepad.

"Your eyes are gonna hurt if you try to read in this darkness," Iwaizumi commented idly, watching him set up as professionally as he did every day.

"It's fine. I'll use the computer's light," Kageyama remarked, opening a drawer and pulling out a small notebook as well.

"Alright," Iwaizumi shrugged, figuring that he was concentrating already. He took a few steps back and surveyed the office, deciding to start his rounds at the entrance. With one last glance at his kouhai, who was now logging into his desktop, he made his way towards the entrance.

The waiting room was clear, and Iwaizumi glanced out of the windows, to the streets bathed with the blood red light of the mid-morning sun. Nobody seemed to be in the perimeter of the centre, asides from the body of an office worker lying against the wall of the building across the street. The rare leaves left on the dead trees lining the street fluttered in the cold wind of January, snapping Iwaizumi out of his trance. Briskly, he made sure that the front door was still locked shut, and then made his way back into the area with the cubicles, locking the door to the waiting room behind him.

The dark room was lit only by Kageyama's monitor and another monitor that was open a bit further off. Someone must've forgotten to shut down before evacuating, Iwaizumi supposed as he walked past it. Kageyama was still at his desk when he approached, glaring at the phone he was using as if glaring hard enough would make the line connect. Iwaizumi left him to it, and moved on.

Past the cubicles was a hallway lined with doors. A quick peek inside each of them gave Iwaizumi a glimpse of a few individual offices, as well as a broom cupboard and a kitchenette from which he retrieved a few packets of instant coffee. It was probably wrong to steal, but they'd be leaving Nagoya soon anyway, so it didn't really matter. He liked his coffee in the morning regardless of where he was.

The first floor was empty asides from them, so he took a leisurely walk up the stairs to the second floor, figuring he might go check up on Kuroo and Oikawa. The staircase was dark, and he tripped on one of the steps, but he wasn't as freaked out as he thought he would be. In fact, he was at ease. Too much so. It was almost as if his instinct could pick up on small details that his conscious couldn't pick up, so he had no proof that he was in danger.

He wouldn't let his guard down.

Upstairs, he headed towards the only door under which light was filtering. The closer he got, the more he heard stuff being moved, and Kuroo occasionally speaking to himself or Oikawa. He knocked lightly on the door as not to frighten them and entered without waiting for permission.

"Hey," he greeted, poking his head in. His eyes immediately went to Kuroo, who was sitting on the desk and flipping through a notebook. Near the document rack by the wall, Oikawa had looked up from the folder he was browsing, and had smiled at him. Iwaizumi just turned his head, refusing to look at the carefree expression on his thinned face.

"Hey hey," Kuroo echoed, finishing his diagonal reading and throwing the notebook on top of a few
other discarded records on the floor. "What's up?"

"Just checking up, making sure you haven't driven each other crazy," Iwaizumi glanced between

"Not at all. We're getting along quite well, you'll be happy to hear," Kuroo hummed, picking up a
folder from the small pile Oikawa was preparing for him on the desk. "It's as good as any
opportunity to start learning sign language, too, so we're working and practicing at the same time."

"Didn't know you were joining the sign language bandwagon."

"I figured it'd be useful in case we got caught in a situation where we couldn't talk. Or like... for
military operations." Kuroo flipped through a few of the files in the folder, then dropped it on top of
the discard pile again. "Also, Tsukki is learning it, and someone has to tease him in sign language
around here. Oikawa agreed to help me do it," he grinned, turning to the brunet, who just raised his
fingers in that aggravating peace sign.

"Ugh, I can't decide which one of you I dislike more," Iwaizumi clicked his tongue, glaring at
Oikawa's light-hearted expression. Underneath, however, he could see the exhaustion and the
determination to pull through with his task, and was glad that his best friend had not lost his resolve.
"I'm gonna sweep the second floor and pop back in here before heading back downstairs, okay? Get
some stuff done in the time I take to come back."

"Who died and made you king?" Kuroo sneered, though he thumbed at a new folder, and delved
back into his work diligently. "Fine, fine. Just you watch us, we'll be done before you know it."

"Hope so," Iwaizumi mumbled, and stepped back out into the unlit hallway, closing the door behind
him. His shadow melted into the darkness as he moved away from the light filtering underneath the
door, and his footsteps clicking on the tiled floor echoed off the empty walls. The feeling of unease
returned, and Iwaizumi held his breath for a second, trying to stay on the lookout for anything
suspicious.

Nothing moved in the hallway, not even a shadow, and Iwaizumi had no reason to stop moving
forward. He headed towards the next door down the hallway. The next rooms were almost the same
as the one Kuroo and Oikawa were investigating. Iwaizumi couldn't tell how they'd made their
decision to investigate that room in particular, but he figured he ought to give Kuroo some more
credit. That guy was pretty sharp, more than he looked, in any case.

He also tried to look through some of the files in the other rooms, just in case he got his hands on
something useful, but the archives he found weren't exactly useful. He found the whole section for
the budget for the Nagoya stronghold, and another section entirely about the military operations
based in Nagoya since the beginning of the war, but nothing of use to them.

Every room he passed was dark, the frosted glass betraying the similar layout behind the doors, and
after the third one, Iwaizumi figured it wasn't even worth checking out the contents of the room. His
breathing was whistling in his own ears, the background clanking of water pipes the only sounds that
accompanied his search. Even if there were people close by, Iwaizumi suddenly felt like he had been
left behind. In this cold hallway forsaken by the daylight, he suddenly felt alone and lost, hundreds of
miles away from safety even though his home was merely a few doors down.

The walls were beginning to close upon him, spiralling towards him with a certain destructive intent,
but Iwaizumi remembered taking his pills this morning, and thus knew that this was simply a trick of
the light. His steps were muffled as he slowed down, breathing deep to dispel the uncanny feeling
creeping up on him and to straighten out the walls seemingly suffocating him. He strode past the
doors lining the hallway, noticing nothing out of the ordinary, and once at the end of the hallway, turned to return to Oikawa. His slow pace and occasional browsing had given them about fifteen minutes to work, so they must have come up with something, at the very least. Idly, his eyes swept the corridor, if only to give himself something to do, and he was a few doors down from the lit room where his friends were when something flashed in his peripheral vision.

He had long since learned to fear sudden movement. As soon as his eyes caught a glimpse of whatever had swung within sight, he froze, and almost jumped to stick his back to the wall, and wait. He held his breath, eyes wildly sweeping the hallway for whatever he'd seen, but he could neither see nor hear anything. He began to wonder if he was hallucinating again, and the thought of his medication losing their effectiveness was a sudden punch to the gut that made him release his breath in panic.

He waited for another minute, but without another movement to act upon, he detached his back from the wall, and cautiously began to walk again. He took a total of 5 steps before the movement returned, and this time, Iwaizumi saw it well enough to be able to deduce two things; one, that the movement was a flicker of light. Two, that it shone through the frosted glass of the door only a few metres away from where he stood, now frozen in apprehension.

He tried to rationalize it. Perhaps it was a flickering computer monitor, like the one left open downstairs. But then again... it could also not be a computer monitor. The alternative made Iwaizumi tense for a second, and he was acutely aware that he didn't have anything on hand that could be used as a weapon. He suddenly felt stupid for suggesting to go on patrol if he hadn't been ready for the eventuality that he'd encounter someone.

The light flashed again and he took a deep breath, knowing he couldn't turn a blind eye to this. Someone was in that office, and it was his task to make sure he had no harmful intentions. In the best case scenario, the two of them would declare a truce and just do their own things without bothering the other party. In the worst case scenario, the guy would have a gun and a very short temper.

He took cautious steps towards the door, and stopped before it, debating the futility of knocking before doing it anyway. He gave the glass a couple of solid knocks and listened for any movement before entering.

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting. However, bathed in the red light filtering in from the window behind the desk, the panicked face of Ukai Keishin was the last thing he could have seen coming.

Oddly enough, the first thing Iwaizumi thought of was that he was the wrong person to be confronting him.

"Hello," he greeted awkwardly, not sure how to address the coach. He hadn't known him for very long, and hadn't spoken much to him in the two weeks they spent on the road, so he wasn't sure where he was going with all this.

"What are you doing here, Iwaizumi?" Ukai immediately skipped to the point, putting down the flashlight in his hand and closing the report he'd been reading.

"Umm... We were just coming around here to check a few things," he answered vaguely, but figured he might as well clarify. "About our next destination. We've decided to leave tomorrow."

"Tch." That wasn't the reaction that Iwaizumi was expecting from the brunet.

"What's with that?" Iwaizumi bristled, before realizing what he'd barked out. "Sir?"
"No need for that, Iwaizumi," Ukai shook his head, sighing heavily. "Look... I understand that Nagoya is not where you'll be staying, not after what happened yesterday... But you also don't know where you'll be going next."

"We're thinking about Kyuushu or Shikoku. Tobio is downstairs doing some research to check," Iwaizumi answered, not liking the older man's tone of voice. There was something wrong with it.

He, too, seemed to be hesitating in what he would be saying next, and the teen had a bad feeling when he finally took a breath to talk.

"Well, I wish you the best of luck."

It took a moment for Iwaizumi to process all this. And then, he pursed his lips, frowning.

"You... made it sound as if we're on our own in this one," he carefully noted, noticing the way the older man flinched slightly at the accusation in his tone,

"It's not that I don't care about you all, not at all," he fumbled with his words a little, looking flustered. "It's just that... this time... I won't be coming along."

Iwaizumi did not know Ukai very well. He was not very attached to him. But he was attached to the other boys, and so the fear that welled up in his heart was not his own, but that of all his other travel companions.

"Why?" His voice was shakier than he would have liked it to be.

"It's complicated."

"So you want to stay here?" Iwaizumi hadn't meant to sound so accusing, but he couldn't help it. He knew the others wouldn't take these news too well.

"No."

"Then what is it?" Iwaizumi frowned, not understanding. "You know that everyone else isn't going to take this as an answer."

"Look, Iwaizumi..." Ukai sighed, leaning on the desk and rubbing the bridge of his nose wearily. "I know you mean well, I know you all do, but..."

"But what?" Iwaizumi cut in, feeling the pressure mounting.

"You punks thrive on change. You need to move, to challenge your luck and the odds. You find stability in motion." He seemed to be beating around the bush, and this only served to irritate Iwaizumi more. "What I'm saying is... I can't do this anymore with you guys. Moving around without any foreseeable end to it all. For better or for worse, I've decided where my adventure ends."

"So you're giving up," Iwaizumi concluded, if only a little bit judgementally.

"Will you stop?" Ukai groaned in exasperation. "If you're not gonna listen to me, I'm not gonna say anything."

"What do you have to say that's going to make your team listen to you?" Iwaizumi challenged, crossing his arms. "I respect you, I really do, so I can't imagine how much you mean to the Karasuno boys. I may not have the right to say these things to you, but they do, and I guarantee that they'd say the same thing if they were the ones hearing you."
"I bet they would, and that's why I didn't want to face them." And now, the older man turned his eyes away, as if regretful. Iwaizumi's harsh gaze softened. "It's complicated. I don't expect you to understand."

"What's there not to understand?" Iwaizumi asked, carefully controlling his tone so that the coach didn't mistake it for disdain.

"Home." As he said the word, only one image flashed in Iwaizumi's head, and something must have flickered in his eyes, because Ukai gave him a sad, knowing smile. "The boys and I have been through a lot of things together, but through it all, the only thing we haven't shared is our definition of what we consider to be a home."

"What's your home, then?" Iwaizumi chanced, more curious than anything. Ukai was a mystery to him for the most part, so the more he listened to him, the more he began to understand.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but..." The brunet clicked his tongue, running a hand through his greasy hair. "My family isn't here. The boys, you boys mean a lot to me. You really do. I'm grateful to have been such an intimate part of your journey. But also, I... I can't keep following you and pretending I don't have my own interests to pursue."

"What interests?" Iwaizumi frowned, finding this worded a bit weird. "What brought this on?"

"Ever since we left Niigata, I've been thinking about this," Ukai admitted. "It's not your fault, don't think it for a second, but... when the boys packed up to leave a perfectly safe place for the sake of someone they barely knew, I started to ask myself some questions about what truly drove everyone to work so hard."

"They didn't have to follow me," Iwaizumi mumbled defensively, feeling guilty regardless. "They volunteered. All of them. You, too, with all due respect."

"I know. You didn't force anyone to follow you, but they still did. Even if they had stable jobs and a stable place in the society of Niigata, they all reasoned that there might be greener pastures on the other side of the fence and left in search for something better than stability. Except stability is the best we can hope for right now, so I couldn't understand why they were suddenly so driven to leave everything behind."

He stopped there for a second to think, and Iwaizumi let him. He wanted to hear what he had to say the more he went on. And then, he would judge if his arguments were believable or not.

"But I think I understand why they did it," the coach continued, turning his gaze out of the window behind him. "I think that... more than the destination, it is the journey that has come to feel like home to these boys. Their home is in the wasteland, on every road that crisscrosses this entire country. They don't feel like home is something contained within the fences of a stronghold."

"Well, clearly," Iwaizumi couldn't help but interject. "These days, no physical space can quite be called home. Everything's wrong, twisted, so of course we wouldn't feel at home in a precarious setup like a stronghold. The true control comes from being free to continue our own lives on our own terms."

"And that's where it gets complicated," Ukai sighed. "Because you now all know what's it's like to be totally free, out there on the road, and you're looking for that same freedom within a society. You're never gonna find it, and so the need to keep searching for a better place is going to become compulsive. No matter where you are, you'll never be satisfied. You will always instinctively heed the call of wanderlust. Your home doesn't exist. You have no home."
And as outrageous as his words were, Iwaizumi tried to be objective and consider them. He thought of his life before the war. He recalled a memory of sitting with his mother and father at the dinner table and his heart swelled with the reminder that he would never have that feeling of serenity ever again. But then, he recalled what it felt like to hold Oikawa's hands after having found him, and the very same feeling sent a pang through his chest.

"You're wrong," he found himself saying, his hands twitching lightly. "Home isn't necessarily a place. It's whatever can make you feel missed when you're gone and like you belong when you're there. Everyone has a home, whether they know it or not. Everyone has someone out there who is waiting for them to return."

"And my family is out there, waiting for me to return," Ukai added almost solemnly. "My family, like my mother, my father, my grandfather... They're out there as well. And they're still alive."

"They are?" Iwaizumi echoed with more surprise than he probably should have felt at the idea of people still being alive out here.

"Yes. I knew they were since we first arrived in Niigata, but Niigata had seemed like a fine place to get settled, so I figured I would find them again later. But then we moved to Nagoya, and I started asking questions about whether this was beneficial for me or not, and... I don't know, I guess I figured that I was better off not following you further," Ukai explained.

"So your plan is to stay in Nagoya?" Iwaizumi pressed, crossing his arms. "Especially after all this?"

"No way," Ukai huffed amusedly. "This place is a mess, and I'm getting out of here just as quickly as you are, but I've got someplace else to be. Unless you're heading in that direction, I... I'm afraid that this is where we'll part ways."

"Maybe we are going in the same direction."

"I highly doubt it," Ukai flashed him a pained smile. "I'm... going towards the Chiba prefecture. I'm sure you aren't headed the same way."

"You're going back towards Tokyo?" Iwaizumi frowned. "Why? That makes no sense. Help is never going to come for the East coast. Right now, we've determined that our best bet is to-"

"My family is there," Ukai interrupted, his voice trembling slightly. "I looked them up in the database when I broke in here. The survivors from Tokyo have created a small, unregistered refugee camp somewhere in Chiba, and I just need to find where exactly they might be settled. My best bet right now is to go back to them. Even if help never comes, I just want to go see my parents and my grandfather again."

He was young, too, and sometimes it was easy to forget that. But the pain in his eyes was the same as that in any of their eyes, and Iwaizumi backed down a little bit and tried to soften his accusatory undertones. There wasn't much that he could say about that last part. So he focused in on the first part, especially since his gut told him to investigate further on the coach's claims.

"So you don't actually know where you're going?" he asked, more curious than anything else.

"I was trying to piece it together by looking through the archives here," Ukai waved the file in his hand idly. "I wanted to see about all the people who were last registered somewhere in Chiba. See if they all have something in common. Maybe I can pinpoint an area where they might be settled."

"Do you think there are more of these?" Iwaizumi frowned. " Seems a bit sketchy if you ask me."
"Who knows." And for a second, the tension around them melted, and it felt once more like they were simply discussing their days around the dinner table.

But then, there was a knock on the door, and Iwaizumi remembered where they were and what position they were in.

"Iwaizumi?" The door opened a sliver without him saying anything, letting Kuroo's head poke in. His face lightened up as soon as his saw him, and then tightened again when he saw Ukai standing by the desk. "Oh. Keishin. Hey there."

"You look a bit... less than enthusiastic to see me," Ukai flashed him a weak smile.

"In any other circumstance, I probably would have been much more glad. But right now, there are too many questions," Kuroo explained in an almost embarrassingly straightforward manner. Iwaizumi even threw him an incredulous look, as if asking him if he was being serious.

"Wow, hasn't anyone ever taught you to respect your elders?" Ukai teased, seeming glad to get a small smirk from Kuroo.

"I am respecting you by waiting for you to explain," he insisted, stepping in and closing the door. "Abridged, though. I told Oikawa I was going to look for Iwaizumi, so he's expecting me back soon. And something tells me you don't want anyone to know you're here."

"Iwaizumi can tell you whatever concerns your group," Ukai shrugged, his face falling slightly.

"Our group?" Kuroo pursed his lips.

"Ukai will be parting ways with us from now on," Iwaizumi summarized. "He's going towards Chiba to try and find his family. He thinks they might be in an unregistered encampment for survivors."

Kuroo processed the news for a few moments, letting nothing show on his face. They all stayed silent until the information finished running through his brain, and his calculations led to the exact answer.

"What leads you to believe that there is anything to find in Chiba?" he asked, of all the questions he could ask.

"Always with business in mind, as always, Tetsurou," Ukai laughed, genuinely amused, before sobering again. "I searched my relatives in the database downstairs. Their location is simply marked as Chiba, but they're listed MIA. That means that the government has not verified that they are in Chiba, especially since there are no strongholds in Chiba. Why would their location be marked there if they have no business being there?"

"So you think that they somehow altered their own information to mention that they were in Chiba, but that their current location is unknown to the government?" Kuroo's pupils widened in the dim light as he thought.

"Exactly. And if you filter results by location, you can see that they're often the ones marked as MIA, with their last known location as Chiba, "Ukai nodded, watching with some pride as the other boy's eyes glinted intelligently. Iwaizumi just let his eyes dart between the two, trying to understand what was going on. It felt like he wasn't even being paid attention to anymore.

"So why are you in the archives for the files of individuals? Shouldn't you be in the room we were searching? For the locations?" Kuroo asked again.
"No use. Wherever they are isn't registered. I'm trying to see if the other people who headed to Chiba have something in common. I'll probably have to drive all over a bit, but if I can narrow their possible location down, that would be ideal. I've been talking to the people here since we got to Nagoya, and it seems like the travel information is passed along orally, so there are no written records regarding this place."

"I see," Kuroo hummed. "And when were you going to tell us this?"

Now, Ukai had the decency to look ashamed.

"I... I don't know. It was mostly a thought... I didn't think I'd have to put it into motion so quickly. But since what happened yesterday, I..."

"Yeah. It's best to leave whilst everyone is still disorganized," Kuroo agreed. "It's just a bit disappointing that you didn't tell anyone about this."

"I appreciate that you boys made a lot of effort to promote teamwork and support between you all, but some things, like this, I preferred to keep to keep to myself," Ukai defended himself. "It's not that I'm giving up on you. I'm not. I don't regret coming this far by your side, and I am honoured that I could be a part of your journey. But this is where we part ways."

Kuroo said nothing, and Ukai neither. Both of them were still looking at each other, as if sizing one another up. From what Iwaizumi understood from campfire retellings, Ukai had been the one to help Kuroo get out of Tokyo, where he was being held captive by his debt to this weird doctor who murdered his parents. They had gone through a lot together, so Iwaizumi understood that both of them were reluctant to let go.

But they had to, and even Iwaizumi recognized it. They just needed someone to say it out loud.

"All of us just want to go home," he finally said, drawing their attention to his impassive expression. "Wherever our home is, we all just want to find it. It isn't our right to keep someone from returning home, just like we can't let anything stop us from going home."

Both of them thought about it for a while, and then looked back at one another with resolution.

"The others will be heartbroken to hear that you're gone," Kuroo murmured, much quieter now that acceptance had settled within him.

"Don't tell them you saw me, then," Ukai answered, just as quiet. "You don't have to carry the burden. I don't want them to think I betrayed them, either. I just need to do this. Please understand."

"I do," Kuroo nodded, his expression finally crumpling. Without the unreadable expression on his tired face, he looked much younger, reminding Iwaizumi once again that he was just a kid, like them all. He seemed to be holding back on something, chewing on his lip. Then, he finally bowed his head, bending lightly at the waist in front of the older man.

"Kuroo?" Ukai asked in confusion.

"Thank you," Kuroo simply muttered under his breath. "For everything you've done for us. For me. In Seizan. In Camp Omega-13. In Shoukyo. In Niigata. We would never have come this far without you."

"Uhh..." the brunet ran a hand through his long hair, flustered. "No problem... I didn't do that much..."
"You taught me a lot. And a lot of your knowledge will be necessary to keep going out there,"
Kuroo insisted, looking up at him. Iwaizumi saw his lips twitching, but he bit them to keep them still.
The sight of him trying to stay strong was one that they were all very familiar with, although they
didn't often have the heart to call him out on it.

Ukai saw it, too, and sighed in exasperation.

"Idiot. Half the time, I can tell you're trying too hard to be something you're not." He put one arm
slightly to the side. "Here."

With nothing else said between them, Kuroo took a few steps forward, past Iwaizumi, and into his
mentor's embrace. Ukai, giving him a one-armed hug, smiled lightly and patted his back a few times
before letting him go.

"You're good. You've been through a lot and you've learned a lot, and I know you'll be able to take
everyone home," Ukai assured him. "And you're not alone. Daichi has learned a lot as well.
Together, both of you have often had better ideas than I have, so I'm not worried about you. You
also have everyone else, Tetsurou. You aren't alone in this. And you don't need me to keep going."

Iwaizumi wondered for a second why Kuroo suddenly looked so stricken by the news before
realizing that with Ukai's departure, a large part of the decision-making process would fall upon his
shoulders. He and Daichi would have to work twice as hard to make up for the experience and
knowledge that Ukai would take with him when he left. It was not an easy position to be in, and
Iwaizumi had to acknowledge the strength that Kuroo and Daichi both possessed to accept the
responsibility of leading 10 other kids to safety in a world that could easily get the better of them.

He stayed silent out of respect until Ukai gathered some files in his arms, snapping Kuroo back to
reality.

"I guess this is it, then," Kuroo mumbled. "I should wish you the best of luck for your journey."

"And I for yours," Ukai returned, swinging his backpack on his back. "Both of you stay safe. I hope
you all make it together."

"Of course we will," Kuroo bit out, eyes downcast. Ukai huffed in exasperation, and maybe a bit
sadly, patting his shoulder as he stepped past him, and saluted Iwaizumi as well on his way out.
Iwaizumi bowed his head to him in respect, saluting his departure.

"I wouldn't expect any less from you," the older man murmured, his voice breaking lightly. He put
his hand on the doorknob, back turned to them, but Iwaizumi could see him hesitating. Kuroo still
had not turned to see him go, as if looking at him leave would make his departure feel more real.

"The others are going to mourn you when we leave without you, you know," Kuroo mumbled, so
low that they almost did not hear him.

However, Ukai turned, and at the same time, Kuroo did too, staring at him with determination
brimming in the tears in his eyes.

"So you're gonna have to explain why you left whenever we meet again," Kuroo insisted, his voice
wavering slightly.

Ukai just laughed, a kind of nervous, sad laugh that spoke volumes about how much he needed to
hear that last sentence. And he nodded, turning quickly so that neither of them could see his tearful
expression.
"I wasn't intending on doing it any differently."

He waited a second for a reply, but he got none. Nothing more could be said between them. So he turned the doorknob and the door swung open with a grinding noise that heralded the beginning of his brand new adventure, on his own this time.

Kuroo and Iwaizumi let him go in silence, and trusted that they would see him again one day.

Only when the door swung shut and he counted to ten did Iwaizumi dare to breathe again. It felt like his companion, still standing by the desk, needed the dark and the quiet to think for a while. The bloody light that filtered through the window behind him accentuated the gravity of his expression, and there was yet again an unreadable look in his eyes. He wasn't crying, however. Going by that, Iwaizumi judged that he would be okay.

"I'll go find Oikawa," he quietly volunteered, taking any opportunity to leave Kuroo to his thoughts.

"I'll join you soon," Kuroo replied just as quietly, biting his lip in thought. "Get Kageyama as well. We're... we're switching gears. We're gonna try something else."

Iwaizumi waited for him to elaborate, but the calculating look was back in his eyes, as if working harder was the only way he knew to cope with loss.

"Fair enough. Take your time," he added nonetheless, knowing that despite wearing his mask of aloofness, Kuroo was still human.

He got no reply, as expected, so he quickly took his leave to go do as he was asked. After all, when Kuroo Tetsurou had an idea, he'd been told that it would always either end up a victory or a disaster. And that in either instance, it would be worth pursuing.

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The work that Kuroo had assigned them in light of their new plan was long and tedious, but satisfying. It took them longer than expected, and they had to take a few breaks when the exhaustion and hunger got too bad, but by the late afternoon hours, they were done. And they absolutely could not wait to share their results with the rest of their group.

Kuroo kept Kageyama a bit later, and sent Oikawa with Iwaizumi to their safe house to tell the others about their change of plan. The two of them set out as the sun began to sink on the horizon, stepping onto the dusty streets with a certain reluctance to yet again be faced with the catacomb-like streets of Nagoya. As a small reprieve, the cold winter wind had blown the dark clouds off into the horizon, and there was no sign of imminent precipitation anytime soon.

They tried to avoid the main street, if only to avoid the bodies that were slowly being cleaned up off the sidewalks and roads by the military men. Once or twice, some pickup trucks rolled by them, a couple of soldiers sitting in the back with a solemn look on their face, guarding what the boys realized was a pile of bodies hidden under a tarp, but aside from that, all they encountered were family members crying out for their loved ones, and some dragging away corpses in improvised body bags.

Nagoya was a mess. The entire stronghold had become a den of mourning, and yet the boys knew that once the veil of immediate grief had been lifted from the eyes of the inhabitants, their anger would supersede any devastation they felt and would turn the streets into yet another battlefield. Time would be of the essence in their operation.

Despite that, as they got closer to their safe house, Oikawa suddenly tugged at Iwaizumi's sleeve,
halting them both as they turned a corner.

"What is it?" Iwaizumi asked, cocking his head to the side and instinctively trying to find signs of distress on Oikawa's relaxed features. The latter simply pointed to their left. "No, the way to the HQ is down the street. The house we're meeting in is close to HQ."

Oikawa shook his head and pointed again, more insistently.

"What are you trying to show me?"

Oikawa beckoned him forward and began walking towards the direction in which he'd pointed. Iwaizumi quickly fell in step.

"Are you leading me somewhere?" he tried again, a small smile touching his lips when Oikawa's face lit up in happiness at having been understood. He nodded. "Alright. But let's not take too long. We're already late to the rendez-vous and Kuroo wanted us back stat."

Oikawa simply nodded and led him further down. They walked in silence, keeping their eyes set on the horizon rather than on the ground, and fifteen uneventful minutes later, they had reached their destination.

(It was sort of sad that seeing dead bodies on the street had become encompassed in their definition of 'uneventful' at this point).

Confidently, Oikawa led him towards the library, and Iwaizumi simultaneously understood, and didn't.

"What do you need from the library?" he frowned, not understanding. Oikawa silently laughed in his face and mouthed a few brief words, which Iwaizumi read off his lips as 'Books, duh, Iwa-chan!'.

He rolled his eyes and followed him up the steps.

"Let's just make this quick."

However, as it had to be, the doors were locked, and no matter how much they forced them, they wouldn't budge. But Iwaizumi did not call the whole thing off. Especially not when Oikawa stepped back and glanced around him with the same look in his eyes than when he scanned the volleyball court to size up the competition. It was almost comical how his pupils dilated when his eyes fell upon whatever he'd been looking for, and Iwaizumi was yet again entranced by the calculated satisfaction that dawned upon his thin features.

"What do you need from me?" he asked without even waiting, because if Oikawa was a king, then Iwaizumi would always be his sword and his shield.

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"Oikawa!" Noya heralded their entrance into the safe house with relief tinting his tone. Relief soon turned to worry, though. "Iwaizumi! What happened?"

"It's fine, it's fine," the latter waved him off, his gait steady despite the piece of cloth tightly wound around his left calf, already soaked in blood. "Just had a mishap involving a broken window. It's a superficial cut."

"So what do you have there?" Hinata asked curiously, poking in from behind his senpai to look at what the two Seijou players were carrying.
"Sign language books," Iwaizumi answered just as Oikawa showed one of the books in his arms to Hinata, who crowed in admiration.

"Cool!"

"We figured we would really get serious about learning it," Iwaizumi hummed casually, although he felt like everyone could tell how much reconnecting with Oikawa meant to him.

"And where's Bakayama?" Hinata asked, quieter.

"With Kuroo at the admission centre. They should meet us here anytime now," Iwaizumi informed him, following them into the house. "Is everyone else here already?"

"Yeah. Most of us were done very early, so we got busy packing and doing the inventory. A few people went out to search for coach Ukai, but they didn't find him," Noya pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I don't know what we'll do about this situation. Even Daichi is at a loss..."

"Let's keep planning our journey first," Iwaizumi diverted the topic of conversation, feeling a bit awkward at the thought of his earlier confrontation with the older man. He'd promised not to tell, but really, he felt like Karasuno deserved the truth.

It was not his call to make, though. Besides, they had more pressing matters to attend to.

"So. Anything new on your end?" Iwaizumi changed the subject smoothly as they entered the kitchen area, which was not furnished yet, offering them a wide space with a roof overhead under which to organize their belongings. Everyone was bustling around, tending to their inventory diligently.

"Not really. We weren't sure how long our journey would last, so Daichi doesn't know how to ration the food. We're really just waiting on Kuroo's call now," Noya reported.

"We're headed towards Kyuushu," Iwaizumi announced, and it seemed like at that exact moment, all the noise around them died down, so that his voice rang out in the open.

"We're going for Kyuushu?" Suga repeated attentively, looking up from where he was counting their medical equipment with Yamaguchi.

"Where exactly are we headed?" Daichi asked almost impatiently, looking relieved more than anything else.

"Well, okay," Iwaizumi sheepishly corrected himself. "We're not headed to Kyuushu just yet. First, we're stopping in Osaka. There, we'll be able to find the route to take to get to our final destination of Nagasaki, in Kyuushu.

"How'd you determine this?" Noya jumped in.

"We'll have to go through a lot of checkpoints to restock our rations," Kenma remarked. "It'll be a long journey. What's Kuroo thinking?"

"Ask him when he gets here," Iwaizumi shrugged. "I don't wanna misinform you and say something totally off the mark, so I prefer he presents his plan himself."

"And that I will do." Speak of the devil, and he shall appear. With the sly grin plastered over his thin face, he may as well have been. "I've got the best timing, don't I?"
"Here we go," Tsukishima rolled his eyes without any real animosity in his tone.

"How about we sit for this?" Kuroo suggested, walking fully into the room, followed with Kageyama, who looked pensive. "Kenma, can you pull out the map real quick? I'll run us through the beautiful plan that Tobio-chan and I designed."

"Oi, don't call me that," Kageyama glared at him, but sat down next to a relieved-looking Hinata without further complaint.

"Yes, yes," Kuroo hummed playfully, clearly in a good mood. They all crowded around him curiously, especially when he had Kenma hold the map so that they could all see it. "So. How much has Iwaizumi told you so far?"

"Just that our final destination is Nagasaki, and that we have to go through Osaka first to clear things up about the trajectory," Daichi quickly summarized. "You wanna shed some light?"

"Absolutely," Kuroo nodded, pointing at Nagoya on the worn map. It had already been circled in black marker by Kenma, so it was easy to spot. "So basically, Kageyama ran into a lot of interference while trying to communicate with the other strongholds. Thankfully, we got through to a few, namely Nagasaki, Osaka, and Kyoto. From the small amount of data we gathered from those broken-up phonecalls and the archives, my hypothesis is that our best bet is to head to Nagasaki. It seems to be the most organized in terms of helping survivors leave the country, and is one of the main supply points for the strongholds of the western part of the country. It's a solid point of reference, if nothing else."

"So why the pit-stop in Osaka?" Daichi questioned, ideas and plans already running through his mind.

"Osaka is the last stronghold before the wasteland of Honshu. From there until..." Kuroo scanned the map thoughtfully for a second, and then circled the junction between Honshu and Kyushu. "Until the area of Kitakyushu... There seems to be nothing at all. Or at least, no archives and no data have come up in any of our searches regarding what's out there. Everyone just seems to agree that it's empty, which is why it's called the wasteland of Honshu."

"So it's basically a re-stocking point before the longest leg of our journey," Suga clarified.

"Basically," Kuroo shrugged, crossing his arms. "I'm hoping someone over there will be able to tell us what the best route to take to Nagasaki would be."

"What about Shikoku?" Iwaizumi threw out there, just as a thought, since Kuroo had seemed particularly interested in it during their secret impromptu meeting with Ukai.

"Cutting through Shikoku to reach Kyushu would indeed cut a bit off of our travel time," Kenma estimated, his eyes just as calculating as his best friend's. In fact, they were so calculating that there was something almost suspicious in the way he glanced at Kuroo. "Can't we do that?"

"Shikoku is an island, so crossing from the mainland to an island is an extra mile we may not need to undertake," Kuroo reminded them, but the mysterious air still about him said that there was much going through his mind regardless. "But it will definitely be something to ask about when we get to Osaka."

"A lot seems to be dependent on the info we get in Osaka," Daichi concluded, giving a once-over to everyone in the room. Outside, the freezing wind picked up momentarily, rushing into the roofless house and chilling them to the bone, but the determination burning in their eyes was enough to ward
off the cold. Everyone stood still, waiting on their next orders.

"Then we should get going," Iwaizumi suggested, his hands balling into fists at the thought of hitting the road yet again, as they always seemed to end up doing. "The people are still quiet, but it might not be too long until they rise again, and we shouldn't stay long enough to get caught up in that."

"You're right. That's why we're leaving tonight." Kuroo's tone held no leeway for negotiation, and they all wondered at once if there was something that even Kuroo Tetsurou could ever be unprepared for. But, knowing what it had taken for him to become this way, none of them could say that they felt even a twinge of envy.

"It will be a long walk," Kenma reminded them, his eyes scouring over the map to try and estimate the distance. "At least a few days. Give me a second to get the accurate measurements."

None of them thought that the Cheshire-like smirk on Kuroo's face could get even wider than before. But somehow, it did. And Iwaizumi could only feel a ripple of admiration, and maybe some dread, at the thought of being part of yet another scheme.

"It'll be easier this time," he promised, digging into his uniform pant pocket and pulling out something that jingled lightly. None of them saw it before it was being tossed in Iwaizumi's general direction. "Here. Catch."

The small projectile arched down, past Iwaizumi, and the tell-tale sound of it smacking flesh told him that someone had caught it.

"We have a ride this time," Kuroo hummed, pleased with himself, and they all turned to the back of the group, where Oikawa had just barely caught the car keys thrown at him. He blinked once, twice, crossed glances with Iwaizumi, and then his face morphed into the most exasperated look that Iwaizumi had ever seen in over the decade he had known his best friend.

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"I can't believe you got the keys to a vehicle large enough for all of us," Kenma repeated for what must have been at least the fourth time since they began packing their things into their backpacks.

"I keep telling you, Kenma. The best thing to do when you get settled in a new place is to start collecting favours from people," Kuroo hummed, tightening the straps on one of their backpacks while humming a little tune. "All I had to do was sneak into the command centre and grab Mizuki and ask for access to the garage. Easy-peasy!"

"Easy-peasy for you, at least, you damn adrenaline junkie," Suga muttered as he passed by on his way to help Noya with some sleeping bags.

"Is he still salty because I dragged Kageyama along when I went back to HQ?" Kuroo raised an eyebrow, watching him go with some irritation. "Kid's fine, isn't he? Besides, he could have backed out, but he didn't, so it's not like I forced him into anything, either."

"Suga takes his role as a senpai very seriously, and with good reason," Daichi defended, though he did look a bit sheepish. "He's just worried."

"Asides from that, Kuro," Kenma kept going, busying his hands on their map. "I see a pattern here with all these favours. You called upon favours a few times in Niigata, and then in Nagoya, too."

"Sounds like you're just stating a fact," Kuroo shrugged. "But really, this all pays off. I've learned the hard way that holding something over someone's head is the best way to get them to do something."
There was a small pause, and a slightly awkward one at that, as they all recalled what Kuroo had meant by that. But then, in his usual light-heartedness, the scheming captain steered the conversation away from the topic of blackmail and holding somebody's life in the palm of your hands, and returned to the topic on hand.

"But anyway, I'm sure it works out on your end, too," he remarked, glancing at Oikawa, who was silently listening to him talk. "I'm sure no one misses having to walk such incredible distances. It'll be much easier with someone driving us."

"I didn't know you drove, Oikawa-senpai," Hinata hummed thoughtfully.

"He doesn't. He has a learner's permit," Iwaizumi clarified with a bit of annoyance.

"Shame," was all that Kuroo replied with that aggravating smirk of his. "Guess we'll just have to be careful not to be pulled over on the highway."

Admittedly, that was funny, and the small quip let them all relax a bit and even crack a smile here and there. At that point, they were all but ready to go, and the stacked-up backpacks in the corner of the kitchen area reminded them that they had yet another journey ahead of them, to find a house and preserve their home.

"I wish we could've done this earlier," Noya bemoaned, joining the conversation once he was done with his stuff. Slowly, they all gathered in a circle to take a breather with some light conversation.

"But we only just welcomed Oikawa amongst us," Asahi sheepishly reminded him. "Before him, only coach Ukai knew how to drive, and we couldn't get a car that fit us all."

Though it was a simple comment, the mood considerably dropped after that. They all fell silent for a moment, wondering who would be the one to say it first.

It was Hinata.

"I wonder where the coach is now..." he mumbled, voicing their collective worry. "I hope he's not hurt..."

"He is fine. He has to be," Noya tried to lift their spirits.

"But we can't just leave it at that!" Hinata protested. "What if he's looking for us?"

"And what if he isn't?" Tsukishima interjected, always the voice of reason no matter how harsh the truth may be. "Let it go, pipsqueak. We're working with what we've got here and now, and the coach isn't here right now."

"Tsukishima, you bastard!" Hinata bristled immediately. Iwaizumi saw the way his fists clenched, and knew, at that moment, that Hinata was aware of the veracity of the blond's harsh words. "How could you forget about him so quickly!?"

"I haven't forgotten about the coach, stop twisting my words, idiot!" Tsukishima barked back. "I'm just saying that we've been all round town at our own risk and peril to try and find him, and nothing's come up. We have to leave now if we want to make it, so we can't let ourselves be held back by this."

"Well 'this' just happens to be our coach, who supported us before the war and who has supported us when the world went to shit!" A few people visibly flinched when Hinata swore.
"I'm not saying he hasn't been there for us so far," Tsukishima clicked his tongue in annoyance. It looked like he'd be much louder if it weren't for Yamaguchi's soothing hand on his elbow, holding him back. "I'm just saying he isn't here now. We've done our part looking for him, and we can't sacrifice all of our efforts because he didn't do his part looking for us."

Tsukishima let his words ring out in the silence for a little while and Iwaizumi wondered for a moment if the blond actually knew the truth about Ukai somehow. But he couldn't have. Neither he nor Kuroo had shared their encounter with anybody else.

"What you just said is..." Noya didn't seem to find his words. "You're making it sound like he doesn't want to be found."

"Tsukishima," Hinata addressed him with wide eyes, and perhaps the most sincerity he'd shown to him yet. "Are you saying he... that coach Ukai betrayed us?"

"Stop." Daichi quickly stepped in, immediately dispelling the doubt that washed over their circle at a moment's notice. "Nobody's betraying anybody here. The stronghold is in disarray right now, we can't expect to find him in this mess. But we can't let this hold us back, either, like Tsukishima said."

"It sure feels like we're the ones betraying him now..." Hinata muttered casting his eyes downward, unable to face the rest of his companions anymore.

Iwaizumi briefly considered intervening, if only because the Karasuno group was just pitiful now all caught up in their turmoil. But he couldn't tell them about Ukai either-it wasn't his right. He was an outsider. He didn't feel what they felt right now. He didn't know what to say to them. He just had to go for it, and hope for the best, he supposed.

"Look," he began, immediately getting everyone's undivided attention. He supposed that no one was expecting him to tackle the sensitive topic, of all people. "I haven't been with your group long enough to make an educated comment about the matter. I can't even pretend that this is as big of a dilemma for me as it is for you... but..." he took a deep breath. "In the few weeks I've spent with Ukai, I've come to know him as someone who only wants the best for all of you. So believe in him, wherever he is right now. Believe that this is the best for you, and that he wants you all to move on without him."

At least, that's as vague as he could get without letting slip that he knew something they didn't.

"Iwaizumi is right." Of course he was, and Kuroo knew it, probably why he picked up where the Seijou player had left off. "Keishin has been with us a long time, and throughout our journey, he's only strived to get us to safety. That's all he wants for everybody in our group; to go home. So let's not let him down by stagnating here. Our home may be with one another, but we need to find someplace safe to settle. I guarantee you that wherever he is now, Keishin wants us to get moving and seize every chance we get to make it."

They all listened to Kuroo with rapt attention, eyes wide as his words rang within their ears like the truth they represented. It seemed like nobody wanted to refute any longer.

"Does that make sense to you, Hinata?" Iwaizumi asked the small teen, noting his hunched posture. The spiker flinched at the sound of his name, probably not expecting to be addressed personally, but nodded.

"Yeah. It's okay now." His frown said otherwise, however, but there was nothing left for them to do but let time heal this wound. "I just wish we could've said thank you, or sorry, or goodbye. I just want to promise him that we will meet again someday."
"He knows we will," Kuroo answered cryptically, but his tone carried an air of finality. They had to go. "And he's holding us onto that promise. I promise you. Now. Let's go home, everyone."

"Is this the level of suicidality that is included in every single one of your plans, Kuroo?"

To Iwaizumi's question Kuroo did not reply, if only because he was too busy watching the rotating security camera anchored to the wall for an opening. His eyes were focused on the task at hand, and despite it being a pretty damn dangerous operation, Iwaizumi had to admit that the captain had a good head on his shoulders. Or just some really big balls, but that wasn't something he was interested in exploring.

Oikawa on the other hand, looked absolutely immersed in their operation as well, mimicking Kuroo's body language as they gauged the best time to sneak past the camera. Really, Iwaizumi was only there for security (and maybe his own peace of mind).

"Now," Kuroo finally whispered, darting out of their hiding spot, Oikawa diligently following. Iwaizumi caught up to them with a roll of his eyes, ducking again when they did at the hand signal from Kuroo.

"Is this really necessary, Kuroo?"

"Shhh!"

"Kuroo, we are literally in the dumpster alley. There is nobody here."

"Way to ruin the mood, Ha-ji-me!" Kuroo finally sighed, stressing Iwaizumi's name, straightening out and glaring at him. "There's no one here but there might be in the garage so I'm just trying to get us into the rhythm!"

"Hmph." Iwaizumi turned to Oikawa for some kind of support, but Oikawa just smirked at him irritatingly. "Fine. Carry on. Are we there yet?"

"Yes, it's right here," Kuroo huffed, striding casually right up to a reinforced steel door and knocking on it lightly to signal their arrival.

"And how do we get in?"

"So many questions! Chill, man, I've got this under control," Kuroo rolled his eyes. "You're too stiff. Relax a bit or else you won't be able to concentrate."

"I'm just making sure you've got everything planned out," Iwaizumi defended, eyes darting to the side to survey the small alley. "I don't want you to put any of us in danger."

"We've got a small party, and two of us are on bodyguard duty," Kuroo reassured him, punching in a code on the small keypad by the door and smirking when the sound of a large latch unlocking rang out. "We'll be fine. But from here on out, stick close, and keep your eyes peeled."

"If we get shot at, I'm pushing you in the line of fire," Iwaizumi mumbled half-heartedly, letting the other captain go in first before putting his hand in the small of Oikawa's back to escort him further.

The silent boy glanced at him softly, as if pleading him not to worry, and then gave him the most reassuring smile he could manage with his cracked, scarred lips. And if Iwaizumi's heart jumped in his throat at the sight of his resolve, he didn't say anything about it.
He pushed him forward lightly and made sure they weren't followed before entering and closing the heavy door behind them.

The garage was large, with many cars, trucks, and motorcycles parked haphazardly around it. It was mostly quiet, except for the sound of maintenance being done further away, and Iwaizumi had to admit that Kuroo had planned this out very well when he came by first with Kageyama to scout the area.

"At this time of the evening, people usually go for coffee in the break room, so there shouldn't be too many people around," Kuroo whispered, surveying the open area. "Iwaizumi, take Oikawa down that side. Stick to the wall and you shouldn't have any problems. The vehicle you have keys for has the license plate 'Tsu-46-49'. Find it, and then follow the floor signals to drive to the exit as quickly as possible. I'll wait there and have the door open for you when you get there."

"Are you sure it's wise for you to go alone?" Iwaizumi frowned, glancing around. Although the garage was mostly empty, they could never touch wood enough to ward off their bad luck at unexpected moments.

"Now you're worried about me?" Kuroo teased, patting his shoulder lightly. "It'll be fine. I've been in more dangerous situations before. Watch over Tooru instead, won't you, worrywart?"

"Tch." Iwaizumi absolutely was not blushing, not even a little. "Didn't know you were on first-name basis."

"Don't be jealous, Ha-ji-me!"

"I hate you," Iwaizumi concluded, turning to Oikawa. "Let's go. Try to spot the car, I'll keep an eye out for anyone around."

"Oh hey. About that," Kuroo seemed to want to add something, but Iwaizumi was done listening to his teasing.

"Save it. Get going. We won't be long."

"Alrighty then, if that's how it's gonna be." Rather than be offended however, Kuroo just looked mildly amused. "It's go time!"

Iwaizumi needed no more prompting. He took the lead, motioning for Oikawa to follow, and they left Kuroo behind to go the other way.

"Are you sure you're ready to do this?" Iwaizumi whispered as they ducked against a truck. "Don't do something stupid just because you're being forced into it."

Oikawa just shook his head, rolling his eyes at his best friend in light amusement at his thinly veiled concern, and then waved him off.

"Fine." Iwaizumi figured they may as well stay silent the whole way, and kept moving.

They surveyed their surroundings, each for their own objective, and kept laying low against the walls and vehicles, ears out for any disturbances.

Finally, as Iwaizumi began to bemoan the fact that Kuroo had not given them a physical description of the car they were looking for, his sleeve was tugged by Oikawa and he came to a stop.

"Do you see it?" he whispered urgently, glancing around amongst the military trucks. Oikawa
pointed ahead, and his gaze went immediately to a large military truck about a dozen feet in front of
them.

It was large and painted entirely camo green, its heavy wheels and reinforced steel body giving it a
highly imposing structure. The back of it was covered with an arching tarp, flaps of cloth rolled
open on either side to give access to the large deck where there was enough space for all twelve of
them if they huddled close enough.

The license plate read 'Tsu-46-49', and Iwaizumi was both horrified and impressed that this is what
they were expected to steal from the garage. Just the two of them, and that daring idiot waiting for
them by the gate. This could not end well.

"Wait." Oikawa made a move towards it, but Iwaizumi held him back quickly by the wrist. "On my
signal, go unlock the door and jump in. Duck and wait for me."

He only waited for Oikawa to nod to let him go and advanced slowly. He poked his head out from
behind the truck they had ducked against and glanced down the open path between the parked
vehicles to make sure no one was patrolling. Once the coast was clear, he nodded to Oikawa again.

"Go!"

The brunet darted out from their hiding spot as quietly as he always did, sprinting towards the truck
and jumping onto the high step to unlock the door on the passenger side. The door opened with a
loud clang, and Oikawa ducked inside stealthily.

Unfortunately, they weren't as stealthy as they would've liked to be. Iwaizumi was about to join him
when suddenly, footsteps rushed towards his general direction, freezing his blood in his veins. He
turned around just in time to see a soldier skid around the truck to spot him with that deer-in-
headlights look in his eyes.

"You there! Halt!"

Iwaizumi's breath caught in his throat and he froze. He didn't actually think he'd have to face
someone upfront.

"Identify yourself!" the soldier demanded, approaching carefully. Iwaizumi figured he didn't look too
menacing in his hoodie and jeans, especially since he didn't seem to be carrying any weapons (or
expertise in combat, by the looks of his frightened expression, either).

He said nothing, however, just stood still, trying to think of what to do next. His feet took a step back
on their own, and he took a few more when the soldier began approaching quicker.

"Come back here!" he demanded accelerating his pace, and Iwaizumi turned tail to run. "Hey kid!
Stop right there!"

But he couldn't get too many steps in. The soldier had burst into a sprint as soon as it had become
clear that Iwaizumi was trying to get away, and he had just run past the truck in which Oikawa was
hiding before he found himself hitting the ground with an added weight on top of him.

"Get off!" he cried out lightly, struggling to get free. However the soldier quickly got a grip on both
of his wrists, pinning him down to the ground fully when he put a knee in his abdomen to keep him
still. Breath was knocked right out of Iwaizumi's body, nausea welling up when his brutalized
stomach cried out in protest at the mistreatment, and he almost missed the soldier's next words.

"Just calm down and tell me what you're doing here, okay?" the man demanded a bit more roughly
than intended, shaking him and effectively scrambling his brains some when his head dragged across the cold concrete floor.

"Let go!" Iwaizumi only realized that he was sounding more and more desperate when the squeak came out of his mouth. The grip on his wrists was painfully tight and the knee in his stomach was cutting his breath off, leaving him heaving and choking on nothing. Tears welled up in his eyes at the burning pain in his chest, his lungs fighting to expand under the pressure. He tried to kick out, but the weak hits he landed with his knees into the soldier's thighs didn't do anything to get him to budge.

As the panic settled in, his vision blurred and his ears began to ring, and through the soldier's demands for his cooperation and the sound of his own heavy gasping in his ears, he heard the sound of metal clanking.

Two seconds later, another weight suddenly fell on top of him, knocking all breath out of his body at the impact and making his vision go black momentarily. The soldier fell face-first against him, his chin knocking into Iwaizumi's forehead, but thankfully the pressure was off of him in the following second, because Iwaizumi promptly rolled away, and threw up.

His stomach spasmed as it emptied itself, burning tears coursing down his cheeks as he tried to catch his breath and control his panic at once. Next to him, sound began to filter in, and Iwaizumi registered the tell-tale noise of a scuffle happening by his side. He cracked his eyes open lightly, still clutching his abdomen and occasionally gasping to alleviate the pain, and his vision immediately cleared when he saw what had happened.

The soldier was now the one being restrained face-down against the ground, with Oikawa sitting on top of him and trying to restrain him as best as he could. His clothes were ripped from when he rolled around to gain the upper hand on the soldier, and his lip was split and bleeding, but he still looked determined to win, under all that uncertainty.

Seeing Hajime move, Oikawa looked up at him with pleading eyes and mouthed a single word. Even if he could speak, Iwaizumi would not have registered his voice through the ringing in his ears, but he could still read his lips and feel his intent. And even if he had said nothing at all, Iwaizumi still saw the blood on his face and felt the pain pulsing through his best friend, and saw red.

"Help."

Nobody would be allowed to harm Oikawa. He would not let such a thing happen anymore.

He pushed himself up painfully and was running for the soldier before he even knew it. One hand still clamped on his midsection, he took a running start, and aimed at the soldier's head as he approached.

He held back at the last second, if only because his thoughts cleared momentarily, but his leg had already raised up, and there was nowhere for it to swing but right back down.

Oikawa must've seen the terror in his eyes, because he looked away. Iwaizumi closed his eyes, too. He didn't need to see what happened next. The ripples from the bones in the soldier's skull and neck cracking went through his foot as the kick connected, and that was all he needed to know.

His foot kept going through the air to slow down and then he set it back down. All movement had ceased. His thoughts were swimming and he was almost tempted not to open his eyes. But then there was movement, and hands on his shoulders, and he could not help but face reality upfront.

The first thing he focused in on was Oikawa's face, his split lip and bleeding nose and every emotion
flitting across his eyes, from the relief to the terror to the horrified realization of what they'd done. He basked in his comforting presence for a second before glancing past him at the still body behind him.

There was no blood to be seen, which Iwaizumi was grateful for, but one look over the bizarre configuration of his neck was enough to speak volumes. Iwaizumi turned his eyes away, new nausea welling within him though he had nothing left to throw up.

And then Oikawa was leading him away, urgently and shakily and just as horrified as he was. His foot throbbed where it had connected with the innocent man's skull, and the further they got from the body, the more realization sunk in.

"Oikawa," he rasped out, his vision focusing in and out as his thoughts became muddled. His best friend's grip on his shoulder tightened, giving his a semblance of retention to reality, but he was having trouble seeing straight at this point. "I... I..."

A hand swiped across his cheek, saying something that Oikawa couldn't say with words, and tears began to roll anew down Iwaizumi's scratched cheeks.

"Oh god... oh my god... Tooru..."

He wanted to look at Oikawa, make sure he was okay, but his body was not obeying him anymore. He was disconnecting with reality, and fast, and the familiarly terrifying feeling of dissociation settled in him slowly, insidiously. He only realized that he was losing it when his hands refused to lift to wipe away the tears clouding his vision.

Oikawa seemed to realize the urgency of getting him to safety before he fully disconnected. Though he had never seen him dissociate before, he had heard the retellings from Suga, and they couldn't afford to stop now.

Numbly, Iwaizumi registered being helped up the tall step to the passenger side of the truck, and stumbled onto the leathery cushion. Oikawa then closed the door and passed over him, sitting down on the driver's side. With every ounce of willpower he had left, Iwaizumi forced his head to turn so he could watch the conflicted emotions flicker across Oikawa's face as he put the key into the ignition, and started the truck.

They were way past subtlety now. The vehicle rumbled aggressively as it woke, the vibrations of the engine running under the seat and shaking Iwaizumi to the core. It at least helped him hold on a little longer. The truck then lurched as Oikawa hesitantly pulled it into a slow drive, and maneuvered it around the other parked vehicles to the cleared alley that led to the exit. The duct tape arrows on the floor said as much, in any case.

The plan seemed to be going off without a hitch now that they had murdered someone for it. They rolled past some other soldiers on their way out, who didn't seem to realize that the driver was a teenaged civilian before said teenaged civilian awkwardly rolled the massive vehicle past them. Shouts of protest only began to arise a few moments later, but by that time, they had gotten a substantial head start already. Turning a corner rather closely, as Oikawa's momentarily panicked breathing gave away, the red glow of the eerie sun outside finally greeted them as it filtered in from the garage door which was wide-open onto the streets of Nagoya. The soldier knocked out and propped against the control panel at least proved that Kuroo had succeeded on his end of the mission. Now they just had to pick him up.

Which wasn't the biggest problem they encountered throughout the whole thing. In fact, it was almost comically easy how Kuroo popped out from behind a large steel container and began to run towards the exit as well. Iwaizumi couldn't understand what he was trying to do, but thankfully,
adrenaline was still working through Oikawa's mind, and at least he seemed to understand.

They rolled past Kuroo, slowing down momentarily for Oikawa to give him a hand signal, and then seemingly left him behind just as they exited the garage, onto the street. Seemingly. A second after they lost sight of him, a loud clang echoed in the back of the truck, and the triumphant grin on Oikawa's face told Iwaizumi all he needed to know about the success of their operation. He pushed himself to glance at the rearview mirror on his side, and relief settled within him, too, at the sight of a certain black-haired, suicidally brilliant genius sticking his head out of the tarp flaps sheltering the back of the truck, letting the winds of their newfound freedom whip past his cheeks flushed by the cold and by the genuine relief of having made it.

That was all that Iwaizumi registered before blanking out. They had succeeded indeed, but there was now a new stain on his conscience that he would not be able to wipe too easily.

He wondered if the horror on Oikawa's face had been worth it. He wondered if the relief in Oikawa's eyes had been worth it.

He didn't know.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

The next time Iwaizumi came to, the car had stopped. Though his eyes had been open all the time, he just now seemed to focus in on the face in front of his, and on to the voice droning in his ears from behind him.

Oikawa was gently holding onto his right hand, caressing the knuckles as if to avoid his fingers, and was worriedly looking at him from where he sat next to him on the passenger side of the three-person front seat of the truck they'd stolen. However, it clearly was not Oikawa's voice breaking through the cloudiness of his conscience.

"You're safe. You're safe here. Hajime, you are safe."

Through the rhythmic caresses of his hand and the soothing words drifting into his ears from behind him, Iwaizumi slowly but surely began to regain control of himself. It took another minute for him to finally glance up, and then turn to look at Kuroo, who was whispering to him as he leaned onto the steering wheel on the driver's side of the bench. As soon as their eyes locked, Kuroo's -dare he think it?- concerned expression morphed into his usual shit-eating grin, and he saluted him sarcastically.

"Welcome back."

By the look of Oikawa's stink eye, the comment was unrequited, but Iwaizumi was too tired to get annoyed.

"Where are we?" he asked immediately, rubbing his eyes. They felt dry. He mustn't have blinked much.

"You don't remember?" Kuroo cocked his head. "That's some pretty intense dissociation."

"Yes, I know." Now, Iwaizumi was annoyed. He didn't like being reminded of these things. "I don't often lose time when I dissociate but this time was..."

His throat suddenly locked up, and all the painful thoughts came rushing back at him like a river, submerging him instantly. He must have frozen up, because the next thing he knew, Oikawa was shaking him by the shoulders, distress clearly etched into the lines of his tired face.
"Hey, hey, don't go away again," Kuroo verbalized what they were both thinking. "It's okay. You're fine. We did well out there. Everyone is okay."

"It's not okay," Iwaizumi's voice trembled as the flashes of his earlier actions began to give him a pounding headache. "That guy did nothing wrong. He roughed us up, sure, but... he wasn't all bad. And I... I..."

His hands were shaking as the weight of his actions dropped upon him. Earlier mourning all the innocent lives lost in the war, he now felt like a hypocrite.

"But thanks to you, we're finally going home," Kuroo reminded him, and Iwaizumi wondered if he should feel comforted by those words or not. "I know it's hard for you right now, but you have to keep looking straight up, towards the horizon. I won't tell you to forget what happened. I promise you that I know how hard it is to forget. But you have to accept it and move on." His eyes darkened momentarily. "The first time is not the hardest, unlike what people will tell you. The second time is. So until that time comes, and pray it never comes, just keep walking. Don't stop. Don't give up."

"Your words are strangely motivational, and yet eerie," Iwaizumi bit his lip in thought. "I shouldn't have done it. He didn't deserve it. But he had hurt Tooru and he would hurt us again if he got free, and I wasn't thinking..."

This time, Oikawa's warm hand on his shoulder halted his rambling, and he turned to look at his best friend, not knowing what to expect. He certainly didn't expect forgiveness. And yet he got it, clear as day in the shadows of the evening dancing on Oikawa's thin face.

His ears were still ringing with the realization that he was now a cold-blooded killer. But somehow, basking in Oikawa's pardon, he managed to store that information to bring up later on in his worst nightmares. But not right now, not when his reality was miles away from the daydream he would have liked it to be.

"We should go," he murmured, hanging his head. "The others will worry that we took so long."

"We're just taking the long way around to avoid the main roads," Kuroo explained, snapping into action without questioning the change of subject, something that Iwaizumi was grateful for. "We'll be there in ten minutes. Rest up while Oikawa takes us."

Said brunet glared at him, still looking exasperated at the fact that they'd stolen not a car, but a goddamn fortified military truck, but cooperated when they maneuvered awkwardly over Iwaizumi to switch places, so that Oikawa ended up on the driver's side, and Kuroo plopped down next to Iwaizumi on the passenger side. It took a full minute for Oikawa to re-figure out how to start the vehicle, now that adrenaline wasn't moving his neurons at the speed of light, but soon enough the wheels were turning and they were moving forward once more.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

They were welcomed with cheers and praise for having pulled the dangerous plan off, but amidst the quiet celebration, none of them said what price had been paid in exchange. Kuroo, Yamaguchi, Hinata... They had enough murderers amongst them already, so there was no need to add another onto their collective conscience. Like the silence had been kept over the true nature of Ukai's disappearance, silence was also drawn over the true nature of Iwaizumi's success, and they all smiled like none of them were broken already.

Despite their success, the entire group was exhausted, the stress of the past few days exacerbating the emotional agony they lived alongside every day. Despite the half-hearted congratulations and the
tired smile, Iwaizumi could see the way their backs bowed under the weight of their backpacks and their worries. He could see their arms shaking and their feet dragging, their gazes lingering on one another a second too long, as if hoping to realize that they were not the only ones hanging by a thread anymore.

They tossed most of their things into the back of the truck and shoved them into the corners, and then unrolled the sleeping bags and blankets when the wind picked up. Despite the protection of the noisy tarp which flapped loudly when the smallest breeze brushed past it, it was chilly on the inside, and their runny noses just begged them to stay warm.

According to Kenma, their trajectory was about 185km away, since they would circle Nagoya in order to exit it without being seen, and so their travel time would slightly exceed two hours, at the very least. Suga prepared them all to brave the cold in the back, whilst Daichi debated who got to sit up front with him and Oikawa.

No one was in the mood to argue, not even Kuroo, who only briefly protested when Kenma was elected to ride in the front instead of him, so that he could give Oikawa directions. Soon enough, too soon, the bloody sun had sunk beyond the horizon, and they knew they had to go.

No bittersweet goodbyes were made to Nagoya like they had been done to Niigata. This place held bad memories for the most part, and although the exhaustion of setting out on the road yet again had already nestled deep within their bones, they all silently agreed to be glad to be leaving Nagoya behind.

Iwaizumi made himself a nest of sleeping bags next to Nishinoya in the back, settling down to get some sleep in the two-hour ride they were taking. Most of their group had elected to do the same, curling up close to one another in the relatively small space, murmuring in hushed tones if they hadn't fallen asleep already. The low rumbling of the truck's motor was almost like a lullaby, the occasional pothole rocking them in a mockery of a mother's cradled hold, and so surprisingly enough, it was not hard to fall asleep amongst the nine other warm bodies pressed close to him.

They kept saying that they would be heading home from now on, but Iwaizumi felt like he could spend an eternity, even in a place like this, as long as he had these very same bodies to keep him warm and to breathe next to him to remind him of his own existence.

The last sight he saw from the outside was when Kuroo pulled a flap open, letting an unpleasantly cold breeze into the sheltered space. It was too dark to make out much, but the nearest lights were further away, and so Iwaizumi guessed that they were already edging on the borders of Nagoya.

And then, Kuroo solemnly shut the tarp flap and zipped it, the clouded look in his eyes dancing in the light cast by Noya's flashlight lying on the wooden flooring. His lips were pressed in a thin line, in that perpetually pensive and troubled expression of his, and Iwaizumi felt himself being strangely soothed by the thought that even Kuroo felt the uncertainty of their future from now on.

That final thought was what let him close his eyes. Lulled by the truck engine and the warm feeling of belonging amongst the bodies pressed together, he slept.

...~*~...~*~...~*~...~*~...

When he woke, the truck had stopped moving and all was silent. Also, Iwaizumi noted as a violent chill ran down his spine, unpleasantly forcing him awake, it was substantially colder now. It was still dark, and a quick glance around him proved that most people were still asleep.

However, the more he woke, the more he tuned into some faint voices coming from the outside. He
could've fallen right back asleep regardless of them, but, needing to inquire after Oikawa, he pushed himself up, dragging a dusty blanket around his shoulders like a cape as he went for the tarp.

As soon as he pulled the flap open, a winter wind slapped him in the face, jolting him into awareness. He still couldn't see much in the darkness but when he jumped off the truck, his boots crunched into a few inches of snow, which was surprising in itself considering that Nagoya had an inch at best at any given time.

He circled the truck, going blindly towards the voices, and stopped when he finally reached the small party by the side of the truck, huddled around a map and a flashlight, speaking in low tones.

"Is everything okay?" he rasped out, shivering as he approached them, getting their attention unanimously.

"I guess so..." Daichi was the one who answered him, not sounding too sure. "How about on your end? Did something happen?"

"No, no. I just woke up cause it was cold," Iwaizumi shook his head, joining the small group which consisted of Oikawa, Kenma, Kuroo, and Daichi. "Where are we?"

"Ah, yes," Kuroo hummed, his voice taking its irritating sing-song pitch immediately. Iwaizumi knew to expect a sarcastic comment. "About that. We've run into a... bit of a setback."

"A setback?" That sounded terrible, and had terrible timing to boot. Iwaizumi sighed, not even sure if he wanted to know what it was about. "Alright, shoot. What is it?"

"Our trip's gonna last a bit longer than expected. And we're not as well-prepared as we first thought we were," Daichi sheepishly elaborated, not explaining much regardless. It felt like they were beating around the bush with their hands stuck in their armpits in a desperate attempt to warm themselves up in this cruel weather.

"Stop skipping the point. What's the setback?" Iwaizumi frowned, not in the mood for games, especially not when his stumps began to throb in the cold, his bones beginning to ache and stiffen.

"Oikawa?" Daichi turned to the brunet, who nodded, and motioned Iwaizumi away from the group. The two of them circled the truck to the front, where Oikawa climbed the high step into the driver's seat whilst his best friend watched with unamused curiosity.

Oikawa turned the truck's headlights on, and then jumped back down to the snowy ground just as Iwaizumi got his eyes used to the sudden light. Once his pupils readjusted, he focused in on Oikawa, who was moving his hands in the familiar configurations of hiragana characters in sign language.

His tired and frozen brain cells did not appreciate having to work overtime to decipher whatever Oikawa was trying to communicate in this new foreign language of theirs, but somewhere in there, he recognized his name being signed. It warmed him up, if only a little bit.

And then Oikawa pointed in the direction of the light, and Iwaizumi realized why he didn't even need to understand sign language to figure out what was unexpectedly holding them back in this frozen stretch of the country.

As they stood upon a road on top of a hill, the truck's strong headlights gave them a good view of the landscape all around them, and down below. Or more exactly, the lack of a landscape. There was only so much he could see underneath the literal foot upon foot of snow stacked up and swallowing the entire environment like a sea of white. Thankfully, the road was still mostly clear, since the snow accumulated on the asphalt had mostly turned to slush. Not so thankfully, when the light reflected
back off what was supposed to be very wet rock, Iwaizumi realized what the biggest of their problems was right now other than the fact that he may lose another two fingers if he stayed out here too long.

The road going down the hill was just one long stretch of black ice hiding beneath thin snow and slush. It would be easier to navigate come morning light, if the treacherous terrain could even be easier to navigate at all at any point in time. And just to spite them, a bone-chilling wind blew past them, promising them a blizzard snowing them in overnight as if to welcome them to the west of the island.

"Oh," Iwaizumi finally said, pulling his pitifully thin blanket around his shoulders numbly. "Well. Shit."

Chapter End Notes

Researching Japanese Sign Language was very very interesting. The signs for 'ru' and 'wa' are similar, which is why Iwa-chan made that VERY convenient mistake. Also, I just liked the idea of the two bbies communicating in sign language, plus Yamaguchi being hella down to be in on it (and you gotta include the boyfriends, aka Tsukki and Kuroo).

Quick note on Iwaizumi: I wanted a character who is still very very human. Iwaizumi has been 'sheltered' in a certain sense. He's been kept captive in a camp for a long time, so he hasn't had much experience on the field. Yes, he's seen his fair share of death and injustice, and has suffered an incredible lot. However, he hasn't experienced the stress of survival the way the boys have done it, so I wanted to make him into someone who still hasn't been steeled against the horrors out there. But hey. NOW HE IS, LMAO.

So I wanted to make the boys experience a different type of loss this time; betrayal. It wasn't really a betrayal, but the fact is that they were left behind (though they don't know the truth!), which may feel like a betrayal on either end. Plus, I just needed to bring the body count back down to an even number. For reasons. Finally, I also wanted to include the loss of someone who walked away because of conflicting ideologies, because so far, their group has been mostly cohesive and has moved as a unit. So what if a part of the group began to disagree? So much that they couldn't be a part of the group anymore? I wanted to take a look at that with the concept of 'home' and 'family', because although the boys are mostly orphaned or alienated from their family, and have constructed a new home for themselves amongst one another, Ukai still has his blood relatives somewhere out there. So I wanted to touch a bit upon nature VS nurture, and create a conflict between people who value experiences shared over bloodlines shared. (Kind of like in Fire Emblem Fates, oh god slay me, this game will be the end of me).

As for all the plot holes you probably see... I promise to tie them up next chapter, which is the beginning of the next and final arc, "Wasteland". This includes Ukai's theory, the weather, radiation, and... the reappearance of an unlikely character we lost extremely early on in the story! If you wanna know more, hit me up on Tumblr. I often post update information and spoilers or extras that aren't posted on either FFN or AO3! Or you can check out the fic tag, #CMLmorelikeFML (or '#fic: come morning light' for you old
fashioned ones out there). Huge thanks once again to everyone who contributes to the growth and development of CML, be it via fanart or headcanons or suggestions or the incredible comments you spoil me with! Thank you so much, and I hope you will keep enjoying CML until the very end <3
Temperature

Chapter Summary

Water freezes at zero degrees. Outside these walls, it is colder than that, and a human body, 70% water, will freeze very quickly. The world is cold, and the new world order is even colder.

And yet, warmth can be found in small pockets of resistance. And most of all, warmth can be found when many bodies press against one another, when frostbitten fingers interlock and when stiff limbs entwine, when many people come together as one to brave the cold, cold world around them. And even when the temperature drops and the future looks bleak, keeping that small, warm spark of hope alive inside will do wonders to thaw out their frozen souls in due time.

Chapter Notes

This update took forever because I finished school, graduated, moved out, got a job, didn't get a job, and played a lot of Fire Emblem. No regrets. But srsly, sorry for the delay.

OK. So. The final arc, titled "Wasteland", is a go. Shit's getting a bit sci-fi here but I'm trying to stick as close to reality as possible. Clearly, though, I've been influenced by one specific video game, 11/10 if you can guess what it is. And although one segment of this chapter contains a bunch of cameos from Fire Emblem Fates, it's not FE.

Warnings don't include shit, because compared to earlier chapters, this one is a walk in the park. Honestly. This might actually be the happiest chapter ever. LET THESE SMOL KIDS BE HAPPY OK. Happy smol kids chapter is in Hinata's POV.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's cold."

"Totally freezing"

"Positively chilling."

The truck rumbled beneath them as it rolled on slowly, the occasionally bump in the road jostling the huddled pack of humans in the corner furthest from the zipped-up exit. Asides from the sound of machinery, occasional voices were the only thing punctuating the silence of the dead landscape buried beneath the snow outside.

"Very much below zero degrees."
"Definitely not warm."

"Quite frosty."

"Incredibly icy."

The truck swerved all of a sudden, only slightly before the driver put it back on course, and the breath that they collectively held was released once more as fog into the air. It wasn't the first time in the last hours that Oikawa had caught black ice underneath his tires, and it probably wouldn't be the last time, either.

"Fully frigid."

"Absolutely glacial."

"Extremely cool."

"I thought we were qualifying the weather, not me."

"Shut up, Noya."

A weak laugh rippled across them, followed by the sound of clattering teeth and cloth on cloth as they huddled closer and rubbed their arms in a desperate attempt to warm themselves up. It was dark within the back of the truck, but the weak rays of sun filtering through the gap at the bottom of the tarp let them know that it was actually morning out there.

"Do you think they have the heating on in the front?" Noya whined out loud. "Either way, it must be at least a little warmer in the cabin."

"We're trying not to expend much fuel, so they aren't heating the cabin," Suga answered. "Though I must admit that not having a wind current must also be a plus."

"I say we all huddle up in the cabin, who's with me?" Hinata groaned, pushing his hands between his thighs in a desperate attempt to save his fingers from frostbite.

"It barely fit three of us during the Great Escape," Kuroo coughed out. "Not sure we'd have room to breathe with all twelve of us in there."

"At least we'd be warm while we slowly suffocate to death," Iwaizumi grunted, exhaling on his finger stumps to try and warm them before the ache in his bones got even worse.

"I'm on board with that," Kageyama indirectly answered his senpai, blowing into his hands and rubbing them together.

"How much further? Does anybody know?" Asahi inquired in a tone that he somehow managed to keep whine-free.

"We were headed to Osaka, which is supposedly a couple of hours from Nagoya, but we've been on the road forever," Noya added.

"Well, we took the northern route to Osaka, but as you can see, we ran by some... interference at the level of Kyoto," Kuroo gestured his thumb out of the truck. "Since it's so icy, Oikawa has to drive really slow. That multiplies our travel time by at least two, maybe even three since we waited through the night a little and then briefly got stuck in a snow bank."

"Aw man..." Hinata pouted in dissatisfaction at the news.
"Oh, stop whining, pipsqueak. At least we're not walking," Tsukishima glared at him, although he looked just as miserable with his runny nose.

"Since when are you the optimist, Tsukishima?" Suga teased softly, ruffling his kouhai's hair and chuckling when the blond turned his head away. Next to him, Yamaguchi stifled a grin.

"Maybe we can ask the cabin," Kageyama suggested innocently enough. "Maybe the captain can tell us something."

"Right," Kuroo nodded, and then suddenly knocked on the metal divider against which they were huddling. "Oi, Sawamura! We're freezing back here and we've got questions for you!"

"We already said 'freezing'," Noya hummed in victory, though mostly to himself. "You lose!"

Another moment passed by before the truck slowed down even more, if that was even possible with how sluggish their pace already was, and the sound of a door opening in the front was heard. Soon after, snow outside crunched as someone walked into it, and when the truck advanced another meter forward, a light clang told them that someone had climbed back onto it. Two consecutive knocks announced to the driver to speed up again, and they picked up their pace just as the tarp zipper was pulled open.

"Good morning, everyone," Daichi wished them, stepping into the back of the truck and scattering the snow clinging to his running shoes on the wooden deck. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, other than being victims of this frightfully gelid weather!" Noya dramatically reported.

"What the fuck," Tsukishima deadpanned at his senpai, who was beaming proudly at his choice of words. "When did you vocabulary get large enough to encompass the word 'gelid'?"

"Since we started this game. I've been thinking of this one for a while, okay?"

"Sorry about the cold," Daichi apologized genuinely. "We're doing our best to go as fast as possible, but the roads are thick with snow, and even this truck can't cross banks that easily."

"But the wheels are so big! Can't you just... drive over everything?" Hinata suggested innocently.

"I wish we could, but that's not how it works," Daichi chuckled sheepishly. "Sorry. We really weren't expecting this kind of setback."

"When we were told that the west of the island was cold, I didn't think this was what they meant," Kageyama mused out loud. "This is too much. There's no way the weather could change so abruptly within a few hours."

"And yet here we are."

"Keep your salt for when we're warm enough to take it, Tsukki," Kuroo stuck his tongue out at the blond, who made a face of disgust at him.

"Asides from the snow, how are we doing?" Asahi brought the train of conversation back. "Progress-wise, I mean. How far are we?"

"We're about midway between Kyoto and Osaka, if Kenma's estimations are correct," Daichi answered. "At this rate, we should see Osaka within the next hour."

"That's good."
"Well, that is, unless we run out of fuel," Daichi muttered, wincing at the thought of it.

"That's not good."

"I thought we'd be okay for the journey," Iwaizumi interjected with a frown, and they were all suddenly aware of every grinding and huffing noise the engine beneath them was making.

"That was...before we accounted for the time it takes to navigate the snow and ice," Daichi muttered, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. When he sighed, his breath rose in a mist into the air. "In fact, I'll be honest with you. There are large chances that we'll have to stop before we make it to Osaka."

"And you were gonna tell us this when exactly?" Suga raised an eyebrow critically, though only half-serious.

"When we stopped," Daichi admitted. "No sense in stressing you out further. You've got enough on your mind right now."

"That's fair, I guess," Asahi defended him with a weak smile. "We'll make do. For now, let's just go as far as we can like this."

"Right," they all nodded in unison, and then huddled closer as a strand of freezing wind infiltrated the wagon through the slit at the bottom of the tarp.

"At this rate, I won't be the only one missing two fingers." Surprisingly, the frustrated quip came from Iwaizumi, who blew into his hands to warm them up. Not having expected it, the others could only dissolve into a weak laughter, voices shaking with the exertion of cold air through their vocal cords and the steady rolling of the truck carrying them. At the very least, mirth warmed their cheeks, if only momentarily.

As Daichi had predicted, the truck made some insistent sputtering noises and then had slowed before coming to a full stop soon after. In retrospect, Hinata admitted that it had worried him less to expect it than to have it happen out of the blue.

"Well, that's that!" Noya announced, although he made no movement to disentangle himself from the bunched up sleeping bags, covers, and human companions he had all around him.

Soon after, the front doors audibly opened, and then shut, snow crunching when the two people up front waded through to get to the back. Another gust slapped them in the face when Kenma and Oikawa opened the tarp and slipped in, sprinkling snow on the wooden floorboards as they stomped their feet.

"I'm sure Daichi explained to you why we stopped," Kenma began first, approaching the group with Oikawa in tow. The latter looked a bit pale, mouth set in a tired frown.

Hinata pulled off one of the extra blankets he had on him and handed it wordlessly to Kenma. He accepted it with a grateful nod, and sat down next to Hinata. On the other side, Oikawa huddled close to Iwaizumi, who made a low noise of protest, and then adjusted the blankets over the brunet's shoulders.

"So. How bad is it?" Suga asked first.

"Could've been worse," Kenma answered in a surprisingly airy tone. "Oikawa's been driving non-
stop for a few hours, so we covered a lot of ground."

At the sound of his name, the Seijoh player had opened his heavy eyes, and nodded to the group. They all smiled to him in silent thanks before their designated driver returned his cheek to Iwaizumi's shoulder and shut his eyes again to rest.

"Where are we now, then?" Hinata asked, and as if reading his mind, Kenma had already begun pulling his map out before he even finished his question.

"Can we have some light, please?" Kuroo called out to the open as Kenma unfolded the worn, torn map, and Asahi was quick to respond by clicking on his flashlight.

"Here we are," Kenma continued seamlessly, pointing at a black ink dot drawn just off the side of Osaka. "Osaka is half a finger away on the map, so roughly another half-hour walk. Forty-five minutes, maybe, depending on how fast we go in the snow."

"That's not too bad," Daichi evaluated. "The sun rose a couple of hours ago, which means it's still pretty early in daylight. If I estimate correctly, that should mean that we'd make it to Osaka in the mid-morning." Clearly, Daichi was still mourning the loss of his trusty watch. It was still wound around his wrist, although Hinata vividly remembered the eerie way in which the hands ticked back and forth, unable to cross past midnight.

Sudden grief squeezed his lungs as Tanaka's grinning face returned to mind. He indulged in the painful memory briefly before returning his attention to the present. Kuroo and Daichi seemed to be debating something out loud.

"We're all exhausted, though," Kuroo was saying pensively. "Especially you three in the cabin. I doubt you had much rest since we left Nagoya."

"I agree," Daichi nodded. "But what would be the purpose of sending out a remote party ahead of us?"

"I don't know," Kuroo admitted. "Finding human help? Fuel, maybe?"

"That won't be super evident to find," Iwaizumi piped in. "You'd have to break into an abandoned gas station, or siphon off of a car. Both those options are a bit improbable and require material that you may not come across easily."

"Human help it is, then," Kuroo conceded.

"Why don't we all just walk to Osaka together, then?" Asahi asked. "Instead of wasting time waiting for a rescue party to return, or risk losing half of us on the road, we can all just stick together and reach Osaka at the same time."

"If possible, though, I'd rather not give up our truck," Kenma argued, pensively glancing at the map. "We're headed across the island, towards Kyuushu next, and if the weather on the middle part of the country is anything like this, we'll be safer with a vehicle to shelter us."

"Besides," surprisingly, Kageyama jumped into the conversation, "Oikawa-senpai would have to drive, and it doesn't seem like he'll be able to do anything without proper rest first."

Nobody knew whether they should address the fact that Kageyama called Oikawa his senpai, or that he obviously worried about his wellbeing. Oikawa himself only roused to snicker at Kageyama, who blushed lightly, and then signed a series of characters to Yamaguchi, who was cuddling next to Tsukishima a few paces away.
"So you can be cute sometimes, after all, Tobio-chan," Yamaguchi enunciated with a scratchy voice, unable to contain his own grin, especially when Kageyama bristled in embarrassment.

"Huh!? What's that supposed to mean?" he challenged, but Oikawa only flashed him a V with his fingers, and then returned to resting on an exasperated-looking Iwaizumi.

"Well, Tobio isn't wrong," Kuroo picked up before a fight could start somewhere. "Oikawa probably can't walk in this weather, and Kenma is probably tired as well. You, too, Daichi. You three have been working overnight while we've been freezing our butts off in our sleep back here. Instead of waiting for you to recuperate so we can all leave together, we can send off a few people to reach Osaka and find help."

"If the weather wasn't so bad, I would probably have had another opinion," Suga mused out loud, turning to Daichi. "But right now, with the very real risk of freezing to death, I'm gonna agree with Kuroo. We need to move as quickly as possible to secure a way out for all of us. In these circumstances, a small party is ideal."

"And the rest of us will remain here and wait for them to return," Iwaizumi clarified, already intent on staying in the truck with Oikawa, obviously.

"Right," Kuroo decided, untangling himself from the blankets and limbs around him and standing up in the obscurity. The faint rays of sunlight filtering in from the slit in the tarp illuminated his triumphant expression. "So. I can take, say... two or three more people with me. Any volunteers?"

"I have a question," Tsukishima spoke up wryly, raising his hand in obvious sarcasm. "Who the hell decided you were going?"

"What's wrong, Tsukki? Can't stay away from me?" Kuroo teased with his iconic shit-eating grin.

"My hands can't stay away from your throat, no."

"Don't worry. You can come with me," Kuroo continued on as if Tsukishima wasn't currently trying to piece him full of holes with his glare.

"I never said I wanted to come!"

"Who else?" Kuroo continued on, clearly enjoying the frustration etched on Tsukishima's face.

"I'll come!" Hinata volunteered, eager to get off his butt and do something already.

"Alright, Shrimpy!" Kuroo gave him a thumbs-up. "And one more."

Nobody spoke up.

"Seriously?" Kuroo sighed. "Don't make me become that one teacher we've all had once who picks on people when no one volunteers. Going once, going twice...?"

"I'll go." Whilst Kuroo cheered, most of them turned to Asahi instead, who seemed to quiver under all the gazes thrown at him so suddenly.

"Really?" Nishinoya raised an eyebrow. "You're going?"

"Is there something wrong with that?" Asahi frowned, but continued on without giving Noya a chance to answer. "I mean... I'm just trying to be helpful."

"Of course!" Kuroo didn't seem as dubious about him as the others. And if he was, he didn't show it.
"Come on, my trusty sidekicks. Let's gear up and go as soon as possible."

"It's nice outside for now, but be careful of the weather turning sour all of a sudden," Daichi warned them.

"Don't worry about it," Kuroo waved him off as Hinata stood to join him. "I'm hot enough to keep us all toasty during the trip."

Hinata was just surprised that he didn't squawk louder when Tsukishima inevitably punched him in the arm.

They pulled on a few extra layers, and at Asahi's quiet insistence, took a pair of spare socks with them. Hinata was sure they wouldn't regret the decision when they unzipped the tarp and came face to face with two feet of snow piled upon the road. Something told him that he wouldn't be keeping his running shoes after this trek.

"Be safe out there," Noya called out, huddling closer in his blanket as he said it.

"Just follow the road, and the occasional sign, if they're not too covered in snow," Kenma reminded them. "It's approximately a two-kilometre walk to Osaka, which means that it should take you forty-five minutes to an hour."

"Just get human help and come right back," Daichi instructed them, mouth set in a firm line. "We'll give you four hours before we send another group out."

"Sounds good!" Kuroo saluted him ironically. "Don't miss us too much." And then, he turned to the three others coming with him, and motioned towards the outside. "We should get going."

"Right," Hinata and Asahi echoed together, Tsukishima instead opting to glare at Kuroo in silence.

The captain nodded to them, and then jumped off the truck. The thick snow crunched under his landing, and he waded through it for a few steps to give Asahi place to jump. Tsukishima went third, and Hinata closed the march. Behind them, Suga waited a bit, and smiled as he zipped the tarp back up. Now, the waiting game would begin for them, and Hinata and the others would try and beat the countdown clock in return.

It took fifteen minutes for the cold to finally seep into Hinata's bones, finding entry through his soaked feet and legs. Despite the two layers of pants and socks they'd pulled on, wading through snow that was as times shin-height quickly put them at the mercy of their soaked feet, and then their lower legs, which in turn sent chills dancing across their skin with every movement. Walking by a road sign that indicated their entry into the general area of Osaka was welcoming, but also discouraging, simply because Hinata knew that they still had much to walk until they reached the actual city, and until they found help.

At some point in time, they all fell into silence, all meagre conversation freezing solid between them. The sounds of the winter provided enough words for their brains to process, and Hinata even found a certain serenity in listening to the snow crunch beneath their step, the wind whistling lightly through cracks in the buildings around them and their huffing breaths rising like mist into the air. Perhaps if they were in a forest, they would have heard wildlife adventuring out into the snow. In the city, however, not a single noise indicating life was heard.

There was something soothing, and yet chilling about the silence. Icicles hanging from roofs gleamed in the morning light but also gave houses an abandoned air. Dark windows conferred a sense of solitude, and Hinata didn't know if he felt introspective and meditative, or just unbearably lonely.
Perhaps in another life, children might have used sleds to rush down the mountains of snow covering cars in the street, but in this one, all the children were dead.

If Hinata closed his eyes, he could perhaps imagine the crystalline ringing of their would-be laughter, but that would just make him sad. Instead, he watched the crystalline snowflakes hover down to rest upon Kuroo's hair, Tsukishima's clothes and Asahi's skin, and blinked the flakes resting on his eyelashes away as a reminder that his will to live had not been frozen just yet.

Next to him, Asahi sneezed, breaking through the trance Hinata had found himself in.

"Bless you," he rasped, voice cracking from his previous silence and the cold. Asahi turned to him with a sheepish smile and bowed his head lightly.

"Thanks." It was the first thing any of them had said since they set out, other than Kuroo's occasional directions.

Briefly, Kuroo and Tsukishima, who were walking a few meters in front of them, turned to check on them, but then returned to their own silence. Having spoken, however, Hinata felt like he couldn't go back to their deafeningly quiet march.

"Senpai," he started, getting a bit closer to speak lower to Asahi, as if afraid of disturbing the sanctity of the silence. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Asahi frowned at him, almost like he was wary of what Hinata would say.

"I just was wondering..." Hinata continued on, looking forward. "I mean... I mean nothing bad by it, but..."

"You're asking me why I tagged along," Asahi completed, his pursed lips telling Hinata that he saw it coming a mile away. Hinata's silence only made him frown deeper. "It's fine. I'm sure everyone is asking themselves the same question."

"It's just curiosity," Hinata defended himself. "You don't usually volunteer to do things like these."

"Like what?"

"You know. Missions with a purpose," Hinata tried to elaborate without sounding rude. "Or like... the critical, dangerous stuff Kuroo usually comes up with."

"You're right. I don't do them usually, but it seems that today, I am," Asahi concluded.

"I was just wondering why," Hinata insisted. "It's not... like you. Did something happen?"

Asahi seemed to think about it for a moment. In front of them, Tsukishima and Kuroo were involved in their own whispered conversation. The crisp air still burned Hinata's nostrils, and the sounds of the environment still gave him a sense of peace. Nothing seemed to have changed, except maybe Asahi's composure.

He slumped over lightly and rubbed his eyes, dry from the wind.

"Hinata," he began once more. "What do you think of Kuroo?"

"Kuroo?" It was Hinata's turn to frown, not understanding what that had to do with his question.

"Yes. What's your impression of him?"
"Hmm..." Hinata let the surprise out of his system with a long exhale, and glanced at the teen in question, walking further up front. "Kuroo... well, since he joined us at the camp, he's been an invaluable ally of ours. He's seen a lot of horrible stuff and has done a lot of horrible stuff, but using his experiences, he's been able to strategize ways for us to survive. Without him to plan for us, we probably wouldn't have made it so far."

"Very true," Asahi agreed neutrally. "What do you think of, say... Yamaguchi?"

"Hmm... Yamaguchi is really strong. When we used to play volleyball, he was kind of wimpy, but now, he's become incredible. He's smart and has learned a lot about being a medic, and he's saved our lives so many times. It's a shame he doesn't want to talk, but he's been through a lot as well, so I don't blame him," Hinata explained, grinning briefly. "He even learned sign language! How cool is that?"

"Right." Asahi nodded again, not seemingly sharing in his enthusiasm. "And what do you think of Oikawa?"

"Are you gonna ask me about everyone?"

"No. Just one more after this."

"Oikawa... I don't really know him much, to be honest," Hinata admitted. "I know he used to be irritatingly talented at volleyball... and everything else, as a matter of fact. He's still kind of cocky sometimes, but... since he's gone silent, he's become much less pronounced. I can tell he tries to help, though. Especially since he can drive. He's pretty much the only reason we were able to make it here from Nagoya."

"Last one." Asahi fell silent, making Hinata insanely curious about the reason for this sudden interrogation. He looked at his senpai until he spoke next. "What do you think of me?"

Somehow, he'd seen that coming. And yet, he hadn't been able to prepare for the question.

"You?" Hinata cocked his head, thinking hard. What did he think of the older boy? "Well... you're my senpai!" Asahi's silence let him know that he was expecting much more. "Umm... you're kind and gentle and reliable... you care for our wellbeing and try hard to help everybody out..." Hinata thought for another second and a half. "Oh, and you're strong!"

"And that right there is why I decided to come," Asahi finally concluded.

Hinata didn't get it.

"Because you're strong?" he repeated, confused.

"Because strong is apparently all that I am," Asahi corrected solemnly.

"No it isn't!" Hinata protested. "I just said that you're kind and reliable, and all that!"

"Kind and reliable never saved anyone."

"That's a lie!" Hinata crossed his arms, glaring at his senpai. His glare softened when he realized how resigned he looked. "Senpai... don't tell me you feel like you're useless..."

"It's complicated to explain how I feel. How I've been feeling all this time."

"Well you can't just give me an answer like that and expect me to be satisfied," Hinata softly protested
"Senpai... how have you been feeling all this time?"

"It's funny that I'm the one being confronted about this," Asahi laughed a bit self-deprecatingly. "But you asked, so it's only fair that I answer truthfully." Though he said that, he paused, unsure how to keep going.

"So... you feel like you're not doing much, is that it?" Hinata tried helping him out.

"No, no, I know I've been helpful around the group," Asahi shook his head. "The only thing is that... after all this time and all these experiences, it still doesn't feel like I've accomplished anything. It doesn't feel like I've achieved a place within our group that nobody else can achieve."

"So..." Hinata tried to logic it out, though his freezing toes were doing a great job at diverting his attention. "You... feel like you're not doing good enough?"

"Right," Asahi nodded, scratching his head idly. "It just doesn't feel like I am indispensable. Irreplaceable in our group."

"But you're the only Asahi! No one else can be Asahi," Hinata frowned.

"But what if being Azumane Asahi isn't useful?" Asahi tried explaining. "What if it doesn't matter to the survival of our group if I exist or not?"

"Don't tell me you think we'd be better off without you," Hinata bluntly told him, looking affronted. "Don't you dare say that."

"But the truth is... what if it is?" Asahi sighed, apparently having unloaded his demons. "Kuroo is a tactician. Daichi is a leader. Yamaguchi is a medic. Tsukishima can handle a firearm. Kageyama knows how to locate people on the island. Iwaizumi can fight. What can I do?"

Hinata's silence spoke volumes, and Asahi's face fell. He sighed and kicked a block of ice in his way, just to watch it shatter.

"You don't have to try and comfort me," he mumbled. "I'm getting over it. Over not amounting to anything useful."

"Please don't leave us," Hinata gasped out meekly, all of a sudden as if he had been holding it in. "Tanaka-senpai passed away and Coach Ukai left. Please don't leave us behind, too."

"Hinata..." Asahi looked down at him, genuinely surprised by how pained he seemed, and then put a hand on his hair to ruffle his snow-sprinkled strands fondly. "I won't. I promise. I was thinking of it at some point, but then, after Tanaka's passing, I saw how much I would hurt people if I were to leave. I never want to do that to any of you. You've been all I've had, and I..." his voice cracked with emotion, his hand falling away. He took a deep breath, and Hinata found himself imitating him, eyes riveted on his sorrowful face. "I just... I just wish I could've become something more for you all, like the rest of you have."

Hinata thought about that in full. Asahi wasn't wrong. Most of them had developed skills essential to surviving in this new world order of theirs, and had been through many experiences that changed them. Most of them had become accustomed to doing things that they never could've -or would've- done before the war. Of course they had changed. In many ways, all of them had changed, indiscriminately. Perhaps what Asahi was saying was that he felt like he'd remained immovable whilst they all progressed.

Whilst Kuroo murdered countless innocents and learned strategy to survive. Whilst Daichi took the
heavy burden of a dozen lives on his young shoulders of a leader. Whilst Yamaguchi turned his trauma into motivation to learn and save lives, whilst Tsukishima watched his friends fall apart and vowed to learn to protect them, whilst Kageyama mourned his family more than once and strived to spare others the very same suffering, whilst Iwaizumi's body was taken from him and he fought to forget how powerless he felt.

Hinata didn't feel like that was progress at all.

"It's a good thing you haven't changed, at least," he finally spoke up after a couple of minutes of silence. Asahi, who looked like he'd dropped the conversation already, turned to him in surprise, as if wondering what he was going on about.

Hinata looked back at him, as if not realizing that he'd spoken, but picked up when he saw that Asahi was waiting for him to continue.

"I mean, look what the war has done to us," the younger of the two shrugged. "Many of us have learned new skills because we've felt some kind of pain that has changed us at the very core. We've seen people die, some of us have even..." he swallowed heavily, his mouth suddenly dry. "... We've killed people. We've done some terrible things to survive out here, things we never would have done back before the war."

Understanding was beginning to light up in the brown of Asahi's eyes, and although he looked conflicted, it gave Hinata hope.

"Sure, we've changed. We've changed a lot. But we've been through so much to get to where we are now, as individuals and as a team, that sometimes I wonder if it would've been better for all of us to die innocent than live on to become..." he hesitated, before gesturing to themselves, "this."

"Hinata..." Asahi seemed pained, and Hinata bit his lip, for he hadn't intended to make him feel bad, or tell him that his concerns were not valid. "I... understand what you're saying..."

"And I understand what you said earlier," Hinata quickly jumped in to clarify. "I understand how painful it is to feel like you are never going to be good enough. I understand what it's like to want to belong somewhere, to know you're not expendable and that people are counting on you. I understand." His fists, which had been clenched without him realizing it, loosened as he took a deep breath of frigid air. "But just this once... if you haven't changed, then... we hope you never do."

"I'm sorry, Hinata," Asahi apologized with all his sincerity, and yet Hinata didn't understand why he apologized. Asahi did not clarify, either.

"I think we need someone like you," he continued on, a little less sure now that all the passionate protests were out of the way. "Someone who hasn't changed too much, and who hopefully never will. We would never wish any harm upon you, and that would include any situation that you'd have to solve by ruining a part of you that's already there."

"You're right," Asahi breathed out heavily, as if a load was coming off his shoulders. "I had never thought about it like that. When I think of it, rationally, you're right. I should be grateful that I haven't gone through something incredibly traumatizing that changed me as the very person I am. And yet..." he bit his lip, looking guilty, and hesitated to continue. "And yet, I... Emotionally, I'm not convinced, because I really just want to feel like I have a purpose. That like we have an informant and a psychologist, we also have a position in our group that only I can fill. I'm sorry."

"Well, let's find you a position, then!" Hinata cheerfully suggested, stunning Asahi with the amount of innocence he still seemed to possess despite the rough times. "Let's see... you're like a part of us
that hasn't gone through the war yet, so you're like... a history book. Or a time machine?"

"None of those sound cool," Asahi laughed, a genuine and ringing laughter that immediately lifted Hinata's spirits. "It's okay, I'll make do without a title."

"No, no, we definitely have to find one for you now," Hinata hummed out loud, trying to think of some ideas, but coming up short. Until he didn't anymore.

His face lit up, almost radiating like sunshine, and Asahi suddenly felt warm, so warm that he almost forgot his drenched socks and frostbitten toes, so warm that the snow suddenly felt easier to wade through. Hinata's smile was like a brilliant sun in this harsh, frigid desert.

"You're our legacy!"

And he suddenly couldn't breathe, overcome by the sudden realization of what Hinata meant, overcome with so much gratitude and happiness that he felt he could cry. But Hinata was grinning up at him, and the scenery around them was changing to a more urban setting, and he knew it was too cold outside to cry right now.

"Thank you," he simply said, bowing his head lightly, to Hinata's visible surprise. "The legacy, huh? It's a lot to ask of me, to carry on the memory of what we used to be when the world forgets us."

"Think you're up to the challenge, senpai?" Hinata chuckled, his heart lightening by a couple of pounds when Asahi smiled back, carefree.

"There's nobody better suited than me."

They laughed together lightly, and then stopped to clatter their teeth when a cold gust swept right through their chilled bodies, and yet, somehow, they both still felt warm. Just a little.

Later on, as a fence came into view, just like the fences circling the other strongholds, Kuroo motioned for Tsukishima and Hinata to switch places. When Hinata reached his side, the third-year fondly patted his hair, confusing him for a second.

"You did a great job back there," he praised. "Tsukki kept being shocked by the extent of your vocabulary, but I'm just proud of you for knowing what to say. You may not know it yet, but you may have saved someone today."

And Hinata just grinned, too happy to be turned off by the admittance of the others eavesdropping and of Tsukishima's sarcastic criticism. If he could do something else like that, he'd do it anytime, for anyone. Anytime, in a final attempt to save his soul.

The fence had been torn open, a clear indication that the stronghold was no longer in active use. In regards to that, it was a miracle that they'd found signs of life within half an hour of searching the streets of the stronghold.

They first heard the snow crunching, before seeing anyone, and Kuroo stopped their advance accordingly. They waited and listened in the silence, the other person clearly having stopped as well after hearing their own footsteps. After a whole minute of silence, it became clear that neither party was moving.

"Okay, come on out," Kuroo finally called out, fearless as ever. Tsukishima froze next to him but made no noise. "We're not bandits. Heck, we're not even armed." That was a lie. Kuroo always went
around his a knife under his shirt. "We're just lost and need a little help."

It took another minute, and then, crunching announced the arrival of another person. Said person turned a corner on an adjacent alley and confronted them, sizing them up.

"What if he's hostile?" Tsukishima whispered to Kuroo through gritted teeth. "Didn't you think of that?"

Kuroo had no time to respond, though if he had, Hinata was sure he'd have said something as smart-assed as ever.

"Hey there!" The person waved to them. It was hard to tell with the large winter jacket he wore, especially with his scarf, ski goggles and hat covering his face entirely, but by the sound of his muffled voice, it was a man.

The two parties approached one another and met in the middle, the man making no move to hurt them. He didn't even look suspicious of them.

"Hello," Kuroo greeted him, bowing as much as his stiff joints would let him. "Sorry to ask out of the blue, but is there someplace we could ask about supplies here?"

"Of course, of course," the man nodded eagerly, removing his scarf and goggles to expose his face. He seemed to be in his older forties, but looked like he didn't have a care in the world. "Please excuse me if I am probing, but you young people seem to be drenched and freezing. Why don't you follow me someplace you can get warm?"

"Such cordiality," Kuroo kept his composure, despite visibly freezing. "What do we have to exchange for your hospitality?"

"Ah, nothing," the older man waved them off, slipping his winter gear back on. "We hardly get visitors here, so when we do get 'em, why not treat 'em?"

"Alright, then," Kuroo agreed, motioning to the rest of the group. "We will follow. Unless you are suspicious of us and want us to walk in the front. I wouldn't blame you."

"Nonsense," the man snickered as if Kuroo had told a really good joke. "Who's gonna come all the way out here just to get to our little band of survivors? Crazy people, that's who. You're not crazy, are you?"

"We'd like to think we're not," Kuroo laughed, relaxing a little.

On his end, Hinata blew onto his bare fingers, almost blue by now, and hoped their rest stop wasn't far.

The man, who soon introduced himself as Izana, led them through a straightforward path of main streets, occasionally making small talk with Kuroo to fill the time. Just as Hinata resolved himself to losing a toe or two to the cold, they reached their destination, which, by the looks of the shovelled entrance and the light inside, was pretty populated. Izana didn't even knock before entering.

"Elise, I'm back!" he called out as they all stepped into a well-warmed building that seemed to be, upon further inspection, a restaurant. They copied Izana in tapping their shoes free of snow, and walked in, just as a young lady popped in from behind the wall, and grinned upon seeing them.

"Izana," she greeted, her accent in Japanese painfully European. Hinata couldn't tell which part of Europe, however. "I thought you came back pretty fast for a supply run, but I see you have good
"Elise, these children are Kuroo, Hinata, Tsukishima and Asahi," their guide introduced them. "They wanted to ask about supplies and looked about to freeze to death, so I invited them here to warm up."

"Great idea," Elise cheered, motioning for them to approach. "Come on in! A bunch of people are already in, but don’t be shy. Most of us are friendly."

"Is Leo here as well?" Izana asked, hesitating a little on the pronunciation of the name.

"Yes, he is," the woman nodded pleasantly, leading them in through the passage she came from, which opened up into a large dining hall. Many tables were set up, with a little less than a dozen people lounging around, chatting and laughing or enjoying a meal. Hinata even spotted a small child bouncing on the lap of a woman.

"Whoa," his eyes widened as he glanced around the lively room. It was so warm, his cheeks finally regained some sensation in them. "What is this place?"

"This tiny old place?" Izana grinned, unzipping his jacket. "This is Shirasagi, a family restaurant turned headquarters. It's all that remains of the stronghold of Osaka."

They tried not to dawdle, they really did, but Shirasagi had a fire that a gentle young woman named Sakura stoked right as they arrived, and their limbs were crying out for a reprieve from the cold. It was even warmer when the wind blew harshly outside, rattling the windowpanes, and reminding Hinata that he wasn't out there anymore. The fire crackling had never felt warmer.

"Excuse me?" Hinata turned away from the fire to face the woman from before, Sakura, standing there with a platter in her hands. "Ah, sorry to bother you. I made you all some tea!"

"We don't have anything to pay with," Kuroo stepped in. "Thanks for the thought."

"It's on the house, you troublemakers," another woman, slightly older, laughed as she passed by and clapped Sakura on the shoulder. "Just warm up first. I'm sure everyone is eager to meet you."

"Here you go," Sakura continued good-naturedly, serving a cup of tea to each of them and bowing on her way back to the kitchen.

"Why is everyone here so friendly?" Hinata whispered to Kuroo, eyeing his drink warily.

"They might be cannibals," Tsukishima hummed, holding his cup in his hands to warm himself. The tea smelled good. Genmaicha.

"What? Do you really think so?" Asahi gasped, paling.

"No, I don't think so," Kuroo shrugged, sloshing his drink around his cup. "I honestly don't know what to say. I haven't let my entire guard down, but so far, I haven't seen anything suspicious."

"Hey, travellers!" Izana called from a table further away. All heads suddenly turned to them, making them a bit self-conscious. "Stop whispering amongst yourselves and come over here to meet everyone!"

"Remember our goal first and foremost," Kuroo reminded them as he got up. They followed, as always. "We must've spent at least two hours already. We can't waste time anymore."
"It's so strange to have travellers around here," another young man with a European accent greeted them as they came closer. "Usually, people run away from here, not the opposite."

"And why is that?" Kuroo asked smoothly, only to earn himself a laugh from everyone around.

"Well, don't look out the window, kid. You might be shocked by what you see," the man replied, chuckling once more before holding out his hand. "Sorry, I'm teasing you. My name's Cyrus!"

"Kuroo. And my friends, Tsukishima, Hinata and Asahi." Hinata watched his friend shake hands with the young man, and oddly enough, did not feel anything off about the whole situation.

"Nice to meet you all," Cyrus nodded to each of them.

"Can you tell us about this place, Cyrus?" Hinata asked him immediately, not wanting to stay in the dark. "It's weird to find people out here, buried under all this snow."

"I guess we are the weird ones, huh," Cyrus quipped, people laughing around him as if he'd told a really good joke. "Well, there isn't much to say. Osaka used to be a really pleasant stronghold to live in. When the weather turned more sour than usual, though, almost everybody hightailed it out of here. Except us, as you can see." He motioned around him. "We're a really small community. Less than fifty people who refused to leave Osaka during the evacuation and managed on our own."

"How come some of you don't sound native Japanese?" Tsukishima challenged, clearly wary of them. Kuroo threw him a glare clearly telling him to simmer down a bit.

"Well," Izana continued. "When the war broke out, we got help from European wartime relief foundations in Osaka. Most of the volunteers from those organizations were caught in the first nuclear blast and were unable to go home, so they lived with us in the strongholds. Most of them left during the evacuation, too, but others, like Elise's family and Cyrus, decided to stay with us. They're like family to us now," he explained fondly.

"It's quite a community we've built," Cyrus agreed. "And we're pretty self-sufficient, so I guess we're just gonna try and last out the war here."

"This is wonderful," Asahi complimented.

"Mhm." And for the first time since they entered Shirasagi, they felt a chill. The flat voice belonged to the young woman from before, and she had a stern look about her that made Hinata uncomfortable. "It's very stable like this. And we want to keep it this way. Unfortunately, travellers, if you were thinking of seeking refuge with us, we will have to turn you down."

"H-Hinoka!" Sakura protested with a soft gasp from where she joined the circle. "I am so sorry for my sister's rudeness!" she bowed to them.

"Oh, goodness," Kuroo laughed lightly, waving her off. "Don't worry about it. You had such a stern tone that I was scared for a second that you'd declare yourselves cannibals or something."

"We're lucky enough to make our own produce and scavenge a lot, so you don't have to worry about that," Cyrus assured them. "But unfortunately, Hinoka is right. We can offer you rest and company, but we cannot permit you to stay."

"We won't ask you to," Kuroo shook his head. "Actually, we came to the stronghold of Osaka hoping to get help for our friends."

"What do you need help with?" Izana asked, curious.
"We were driving a military truck to Osaka when the fuel ran out. Our friends—eight of them—are stuck there while we went out to look for help," Kuroo explained.

"They gave us four hours before sounding the alarm and it's been two hours already, so we're trying to get back to them quickly," Hinata hinted on the slide.

"I understand." Cyrus nodded, looking out of the window where snow was beginning to fall again. "It mustn't be easy for them, either. It's pretty cold out, and if they're all dressed like you are, it won't be very pleasant for them."

"We just need to know if you have any fuel to trade with us," Kuroo cut to the chase. "We're going to try and cross the Honshu wasteland and we're trying to stock up on supplies."

"You're better off driving off a cliff right now, kiddo."

"Hinoka!"

"It's true!" the young woman, in her mid-thirties, frowned. "The wasteland can't be crossed. It's all snow and ice. No roads for any vehicles at all. Walking is dangerous already, so imagine driving through. It can't be done."

"Well, we'd at least need fuel to get the truck moving until the next checkpoint," Kuroo frowned as well, suddenly losing his confident attitude. Hinata got nervous just because Kuroo was losing his composure. "I don't know where that would be, but we at least have to move our friends out from the middle of nowhere."

"Leo, Elise's brother, usually keeps track of all of our resources," Izana remarked. "Maybe he could offer you a deal? It'll depend on what you're offering, however."

"How big is this truck of yours?" Cyrus asked, turning the topic of conversation around. "It fit... twelve people, if I counted correctly, right?"

"Twelve, including the driver and two companions in the front." Kuroo turned to him, obviously interested by his tone of voice. Hinata wished he could read people just half as finely as Kuroo could. "There was space in the back, too. Maybe enough to fit another two or three. Why?"

"Just asking," Cyrus shrugged. "I might be interested in trading for it."

"Trading for our truck?" Hinata squinted at him. "No way!"

"No, no," Kuroo shook his head, an irritatingly calm expression on his face. "Let's let the good man speak. Because trading towards a truck might come quite expensively, so I'm interested to know what he's offering in return."

"Well, I mean," Cyrus huffed, not at all set back by the group's attitude, "Leo is going to have to join the conversation if I want to make an offer. He'll be able to give you more information on what we can trade for your truck."

"Any reason why you want it so badly?" Tsukishima asked, always as suspicious.

"It'll be great for supply runs!" Izana clicked his tongue in understanding. "Good thinking, Cyrus! You see," he turned to them to explain, "we have a bit of a problem regarding the number of able-bodied members of our community. Many of them are able to work, but many of them also run the place, like Leo, or care for children, like Camilla. So with a truck, we could transport supplies much quicker, and with less hands required!"
"Exactly!" Cyrus proudly agreed.

"Sounds ideal for you," Kuroo agreed as well. "But what about us? What will we do once you take our truck from us?"

"Well, you're not crossing the wasteland either way," Hinoka mused out loud, and despite the rough edge to her voice, she seemed sincere. "So unless you wanna head back up to Nagoya, I'd suggest you take your chances going southwest to Shikoku."

"What's in Shikoku?" Kuroo asked, always on top of things. His eyes held a glint of suspicion, though, as if he already suspected an answer.

"Who knows," Hinoka shrugged. "A lot of the evacuees set out for Shikoku instead of following the government back to the north. Nothing clear was ever said about it, but apparently, there are unregistered camps of survivors on Shikoku that the government doesn't know about, and that's where they were headed."

"Interesting." Something about Kuroo wasn't right. It was at times like these that Hinata wondered how many secrets the black-haired boy kept from them. His eyes were cold, and his voice was warm. He seemed to understand much more than what he let on. "It could be a good place for us to try seeking refuge. Would you happen to have any information regarding these camps? Shikoku is a large place, especially for a group on foot."

"I don't know much more, sorry." Hinoka seemed sincere. "You can ask around, see if anyone knows anything."

"We don't have time to ask around," Asahi dutifully reminded Kuroo. "Daichi is waiting for us."

Before he could respond, a door opened rather loudly at the end of the room, letting in a tired-looking man in his early forties with his hair tied back. He seemed exasperated.

"Has anyone seen Shiro?" he asked to everybody in the room, not even noticing the strangers.

"He might be playing in the kitchen," the woman bouncing a baby at the next table suggested.

"I'll run and check!" Sakura volunteered. "I'm sorry, I should have closed the door to the kitchen when I left!"

"Hey, Ryoma!" Hinoka called out, grabbing the man's attention. "Come over for a second. We might have a job for you."

"What is it?" he asked, stepping over and scrutinizing the group carefully. He seemed to be the wary type, understandably.

"Our travelling friends here would like to head to one of those supposed Shikoku unregistered camps," she explained. "But we've got nothing to go on. You knew some people who left for Shikoku during the evacuation. Would you happen to know more about the topic?"

"It's been a while," Ryoma mused out loud. "I don't know much, either. Honestly, I don't think they knew where they were going, either. They just packed up enough for a few days and set out, hoping for the best."

"This is one big mystery, huh?" Izana sighed out.

"Well, maybe we can make some safe assumptions," Ryoma continued. "Osaka Bay may be frozen
solid, but I don't think anyone would risk walking kilometres on ice. It's more likely that they first went west, towards Kobe, and took the bridges to go through Awaji Island, onto Shikoku."

"That makes sense, I think," Kuroo turned to Tsukishima. "You're good at geography, Tsukki. How does that sound to you?"

"It's fine," Tsukishima grunted. "The highway through Awaji Island leads directly to Tokushima, the first large city of Shikoku, so that's probably a good place to start looking."

"That sounds like a plan to me," Kuroo grinned in satisfaction. "It's the best one we've got so far, at any rate."

"Now that we know where we're headed next, then, we should go back to the others and tell them," Hinata pressed.

"Very impatient, this one," Izana laughed. "But I suppose it's understandable. If your friends are all outfitted like you, they might freeze to death at any moment!"

Hinata suddenly felt cold, because there was no lie in that statement.

"Forgive Izana," Hinoka sighed as the man laughed. "He doesn't always make the most appropriate jokes."

"Well, we should head out to get the truck and your friends without wasting any more time," Cyrus suggested. "I can definitely go. Leo should come as well to evaluate the truck. Ryoma, you're a pretty good driver in this weather, so you could drive this truck back, right?"

"I could," Ryoma agreed. "I'll go grab some containers of fuel from the garage. I'll meet you up front afterwards."

"I'll go find Leo," Hinoka volunteered, walking away.

"Well, I suppose you should all enjoy the warmth a little longer before you head out. It'll be a challenging journey from here on out," Izana recommended.

"We will," Asahi accepted, then bowed to him. "Thank you for all this, Izana. Without you, we would never have gotten here."

"Not at all," the man grinned. "It's sad to see the world end like this, buried in snow and hate and the blood of all the people suffering in this war. So once in a while, kindness is quite a treat to enjoy."

"Very true," Cyrus agreed quietly, turning his glance to the kitchen entrance when Sakura finally exited, carrying a carefree-looking toddler. They were both laughing. "There's enough pain and hardship in this world already. At this rate, kindness is what will be remembered in the history books, not war."

When they left Shirasagi, its occupants unanimously wished them well and waved them goodbye, and as Hinata waved back enthusiastically, he realized that this was the first time that he was truly sad to be leaving a place. He would miss the warmth he'd found amongst the inhabitants of Shirasagi, especially since he'd seen first-hand how the rest of the world was so cold.

Cyrus introduced them to a marvellous innovation in winter survival, one that they had never known of until the moment they were made to wear some; snowshoes.
The rectangular pieces of plastic that Cyrus instructed them to attach to their shoes were foreign to Hinata, and walking in them took some getting-used-to. However, the snowshoes made their travel incredibly smooth, allowing them to walk on top of snow instead of sinking into it. Seeing their amazement, Cyrus had cheerfully explained that the snow equipment, which was originally invented in North America, was something that the Europeans had requested of the government of Osaka once the snow fell in large quantities. The government took quite a liking to snowshoes and immediately did their best to gather as much as possible, mostly from outside the country and northern parts of it like Hokkaido.

Hinata wished they had enough snowshoes for all of them. Travel would be so much easier if they didn't have to expend so much energy and body temperature carving a path through knee-depth snow all the time.

They followed the road right back up to where the truck had stopped, Kuroo making small talk with Cyrus, Hinata occasionally adding in when Kuroo told stories of their adventures so far. Cyrus, Leo, and Ryoma seemed actually quite fascinated with his retellings, probably glad to learn what became of the country outside their snowy landscape, although Leo said nothing substantial and just clutched his backpack straps.

The snow falling gently from the sky, almost pink with so many clouds shading the red hue that apparently affected skies across the country indiscriminately, was not too cold. Even the wind occasionally swirling snow up from underneath their feet was not too bothersome, but Hinata supposed that it was because they had warmed up well in Shirasagi before hitting the road again.

Aided by the snowshoes and the invigoration of having rested, they reached the truck within the hour. It was lightly covered in snow, still looking abandoned in the middle of the road, although as soon as they approached, their voices provoked some movement within the truck.

"Kuroo?" It was Daichi who called out first, loudly, even before they reached the truck.

"It's us!" Hinata confirmed, excitedly sprinting -as best as possible, considering the large snowshoes-towards the truck. He rounded it and faced the back just as the tarp zipper came up, letting Daichi's pale face peak through.

"Oh, thank goodness," he sighed out, his breath curling into mist. "You're back!"

"And we've got help!" Hinata added, turning to the rest of the group as they reached the truck. "Daichi, meet Cyrus, Ryoma and Leo! They're here to help us out."

"Great!" Daichi smiled weakly, probably exhausted from fighting the cold. He smiled as the rest of the party joined up at the back, and bowed to the newcomers. "Thank you so much for your help. You're saving all of our lives here."

"Our pleasure," Cyrus nodded to him. "You are Sawamura, correct?" Daichi nodded, weirded out by the sound of his family name. "Kuroo says that you and he are the leaders of this group. It's great to meet you! We were told that we could negotiate our deal with you."

"What deal?" Daichi turned to Kuroo sharply, although he already looked pretty exasperated with him, even before hearing him out.

"I agreed to trade the truck for some stuff," Kuroo hummed, not looking put off at all. "Cyrus and Leo will negotiate with us!"

"I'll already begin filling the tank," Ryoma notified them, nodding to Asahi, who was helping him
carry the second gallon of fuel.

"We'll be right back!" the brunet assured them, following the older man around the truck to the fuel tank.

"Leo, do you have a good idea what this truck is worth?" Cyrus asked, watching his younger friend evaluate the vehicle meticulously.

"I believe so," he nodded. "I have our inventory papers in my bag. Perhaps we can speak of our trade inside your truck as we drive?"

"Until where will you drive us?" Kuroo asked, undoing his snowshoes to get back into the truck. Hinata and Tsukishima imitated him.

"Until our warehouse, where we will be able to hand you the stock we agree on," Leo answered, also undoing his snowshoes, with more dexterity than them, however. "It's about a ten-minute drive from Shirasagi."

"That's fair," Kuroo agreed, waiting for Hinata to hop in, aided by Daichi, before getting in himself.

"How are you guys holding up?" Hinata asked as he approached his friends cuddling against the corner. He sat down but didn't join them yet, as his clothes were probably cold.

"We're still alive," Kageyama grumbled.

"And perhaps mildly hypothermic," Suga added, laughing softly. "But you've done a good job getting help, Hinata. Thank you."

"So Shrimpy gets all the recognition?" Kuroo quipped as he helped Tsukishima hop in, joining their huddle. "Rude. I'll have you know, I arranged for a wonderful deal with the survivors of Osaka!"

"Get your head out of your own ass," Tsukishima criticized. "Cyrus and Leo are the ones who were kind enough to agree to a deal. They could've just killed us and made off with the truck."

"Considering that none of us are armed, you'd probably outnumber us easily," Cyrus laughed as he jumped in as well, bowing to the group. It was now a bit tight, with so many people trying to fit inside the back. "I am Cyrus. Thank you for having us!"

Hinata wondered if Cyrus was aware of all the envious glares he was getting in regards to his heavy winter jacket and equipment. He seemed to be the oblivious type, though.

The door to the cabin of the truck opened up with a loud bang, and soon, Asahi jumped into the back as well. Daichi made sure everyone was accounted for before zipping the tarp up, and then lighting the flashlight to get some light into the closed space.

"Is Ryoma driving?" he asked, returning to huddle next to Suga.

"Ryoma is a very skilled winter driver. We used to have cars, back when the snow wasn't so thick, and he was the best at manoeuvring them," Cyrus reassured them. "He'll get us there in one piece." As if to confirm, the truck rumbled to life beneath them, and gave a warning lurch.

"Here," Kuroo indicated to Leo and Cyrus, scooting over to make space on the wood. "I know it's a bit tight, but sit down so you don't fall. We can talk business then."

"Thanks." They both sat, Leo unzipping his backpack to pull out his documents.
Hinata left them to their business, and instead busied himself with rubbing heat back into his limbs. Once he was warmed enough, he wiggled closer to the group until Noya opened up the blanket to let him back in. There, stuck between his senpai and Kageyama, Hinata felt warm again. It was a different warmth from the one he felt by the fireplace in Shirasagi, but somehow, it felt even better. Hinata was glad to be back.

Negotiations didn't last very long. Both parties were rather flexible with their demands, so an agreement was quickly struck. From what Hinata understood when Leo read back their terms to everybody, and shook hands with Daichi, was that they were all going to be outfitted with winter gear. Kuroo had pushed for snowshoes as well, but Leo had let them know that there were not enough for the people in Osaka, so they were unwilling to part with them. The rest of the terms were lost on Hinata as he immediately began to daydream about wearing a warm, puffy jacket like Cyrus.

He imagined all of them wearing a puffy jacket, and laughed to himself at the picture of Noya wearing one, tiny and engulfed by the jacket entirely.

"What are you laughing about to yourself, stupid?" Kageyama glared daggers at him, obviously pissy because of the cold. A rattle of the truck shook them, and that clearly didn't help his mood.

"Noya-senpai is going to look like a volleyball," Hinata answered, still laughing, and not explaining why when Noya asked him to elaborate confusedly.

They settled down after that and began some light-hearted conversation with the newcomers. Leo seemed to clamp up now that his job was done, but Cyrus was happily participating in conversation, telling a story about Osaka and its survivors for every story of survival that the boys told him. The joviality of the back of the truck made the whole atmosphere a bit warmer and welcoming, and Hinata suspected that a lot of the good mood came from finally meeting strangers who didn't want to kill them.

"Cyrus," he suddenly asked, reminding himself of something as Kageyama sneezed next to him. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure!" the young man nodded. "If it's something I have an answer for, of course."

"I was just wondering if you knew why the weather is so weird around here," Hinata asked. "We drove two hours from Nagoya, and suddenly, there's more snow than we've ever seen before, and everywhere!"

"That's right, we forgot to ask," Suga hummed. "It's weird that there's no snow at all in the northern parts, and suddenly, we're buried in snow in the southwest!"

"Ah, that's true," Cyrus began. "I forgot that the rest of the country doesn't look like this. Honestly, I didn't even know that the rest of the country wasn't buried in snow until Kuroo told us stories of your travels! It must have come as quite a shock to you all."

They all nodded in unison, interested in his answer.

"It's been like this since the first nuclear strike, truthfully," Cyrus began. "At first, it wasn't bad, but with time, the weather took a turn for the worst, and people had to evacuate. That's why the stretch up until Kitakyuuushu is called the 'Wasteland', because it's a place that is impossible to live in."

"But if this is because of the nuclear explosion, how come the rest of the country didn't become like this?" Iwaizumi asked, shifting Oikawa's head on his shoulder to make it more comfortable for his best friend. "And since a second bomb went off in Hokkaido, does that mean that Hokkaido is
"That, I wouldn't know," Cyrus laughed sheepishly. "However, I do know that the weather here is not a normal winter. It's actually a phenomenon caused by the explosion, and the radiation that followed."

"Stop trying to make it sound like a movie announcement," Leo suddenly piped up, looking ticked. "It's called a nuclear winter, and it's caused by the dust and soot kicked up by nuclear explosions, which rise into the sky and block the rays of the sun from entering the atmosphere. This results in a drop in temperatures, sure as this. I'm not sure quite how to explain it in Japanese, but this is pretty much the concept of it."

He then addressed Cyrus in another language, one that Hinata did not identify as being English, but Cyrus seemed to be at a loss as well.

"I can't really translate what he's trying to say, either, but it is pretty scientific, so I guess it doesn't really matter," he shrugged off. "Point is, the first nuclear blast had some catastrophic effects on the southwest of Honshu. Right along the coast to the North of Osaka, there is an aggregation of five nuclear fusion plants. After the first blast, the radiation and earthquakes caused these plants to explode, one by one. Much of the radiation was contained by their security measures, thankfully, but the explosions themselves kicked up a tremendous amount of soot. Wind currents moved the clouds of soot towards the wasteland, where they now hang in majority and cause some of the coldest weather we've ever seen in Japan."

"And the Shimane nuclear plant, along the coast halfway through the wasteland, is the next to blow," Leo grimly continued. "Workers have abandoned it, and activities were suspended, but that also means that it is unmanned in the case of an emergency. It might actually be a devastating incident, if it were to happen."

"Won't anyone do something about it?" Daichi frowned, clearly shaken by the news.

"If anyone finds out how to cross the wasteland to get to it, sure," Cyrus laughed a bit sadly.

"And anyway, the government of this country has better things to do than worry about a plant that may or may not explode at all," Leo scoffed a bit bitterly. "More than half the population is already dead, so what's another few thousands off their backs?"

"Leo, don't be bitter," Cyrus sighed, suddenly looking sad. "It's true that it might happen at any time and we won't be able to protect ourselves, but it's better not to live in fear like that. It might never happen, for all we know."

"Well, if it does explode, on the bright side, the extra radiation probably won't do anything more to us than we already have." Hinata didn't feel like Leo's point was a pretty bright one.

"What do you mean?" he asked, intrigued nonetheless.

"He's talking about radiation poisoning," Cyrus answered.

"Oh, we've been through that before," Suga muttered grimly, and Hinata felt Kageyama stiffen next to him. "When the second bomb dropped, we were in Niigata, much closer to Hokkaido. Some of the radiation got to us and made a few of us sick."

"Whoever got sick then should probably be careful now," Cyrus advised. "In any case, by being in this area, you're all being exposed to a lot of latent radiation from the first explosion, and the plant explosions. Radiation sickness is actually quite common in Osaka, and the government had measures
to fight it. Leo and I have both had it, when the third plant exploded. But it's not as bad now that a lot of the radiation has dissipated."

"That's a relief," Suga sighed out, not sounding very relieved.

"Well, the first signs of radiation sickness aren't too bad," Cyrus went on. "Headache, fever, dizziness... Nausea and vomiting... oh, you throw up a lot."

"Radiation alters the DNA of rapidly-dividing cells in your body, which are most often the cells of the gastrointestinal mucosa," Leo recited, arching an eyebrow when he saw the looks of confusion he was being thrown by most of them. "Basically, your stomach and intestines are especially vulnerable to being destroyed by radiation, which is why you might throw up a lot when you get the sickness. In fact, we all probably have the sickness to varying degrees, but our bodies are still compensating by regenerating. For a while."

"Wow, are you always this science-y and pessimistic?" Kuroo remarked mockingly, laughing when Leo exclaimed something indignant in his native language. Cyrus quickly calmed him down, looking sheepish.

"I was just trying to explain. See if I care," he huffed, turning his head away to sulk, kind of like a child.

"Just be sure to cover up when you go outside," Cyrus recommended. "It might seem ridiculous, but just the simple act of wearing a scarf over your nose can help you avoid inhaling radioactive dust particles in the air. It's not a lot, but I suppose every effort counts."

Hinata noticed he wasn't the only one who huddled his face under the blankets, all of a sudden.

"We shouldn't be too paranoid about it, though," Daichi tried to reassure them weakly.

"Right. Once we get to Shikoku, we'll also be further away from the plants, so that'll help us a lot, too," Kuroo agreed.

"So we're going to Shikoku now?" Noya piped up. "What happened to crossing the wasteland to get to Kyuushu?"

"It's impossible," Kuroo shook his head. "So we're gonna head to Shikoku in search of some rumoured unregistered survivor camps and settle there."

Hinata saw Iwaizumi frown from the corner of his eye, and wondered if he'd thought of something. His expression soon flattened again, though, so he figured it wasn't that important after all.

"Give me all the details when we hit the road," Daichi just sighed, used to Kuroo's weird, impulsive plans. He also clearly knew better than to question his reasoning, since most of it tended to be sound. If not occasionally sociopathic.

"You guys seem like you're a very closely-welded group," Cyrus remarked fondly. "From what I gather, you've been through a lot together. I'm sorry we can't offer you refuge in Osaka, but we definitely will help you get to Shikoku. And everyone in Shirasagi will be praying for you guys to find one of those unregistered camps."

As if to punctuate his closing sentence, the truck slowed, and then, making a sharp turn, stopped.

"Ah, we must have arrived," Cyrus got up, proving himself right when the rumbling turned off, leaving their butts sore from sitting through the journey. The cabin door opened shortly after, and feet
crunched as they hit the snow.

Leo exited first, bowing politely to all of them before undoing the zipper, and jumping out. The snow seemed to have been cleared recently from the area, so he didn't sink too deeply in. He called out to Ryoma, and the two of them headed off, speaking in low tones.

"Come. You should all come into the warehouse. Not only is it warmer, but we can get you outfitted," Cyrus invited them, jumping out of the truck.

Begrudgingly, the boys began to untangle themselves, the lucky ones being able to keep a blanket around their shoulders as they braved the cold air. Hinata jumped down after Noya, watching Kageyama closely as he stiffly made his way down as well, and then, for a lack of better things to do, watched Iwaizumi help a very sleepy-looking Oikawa down as well.

"This way," Cyrus motioned, walking off towards what seemed to be a regular civilian house. Ryoma and Leo were already entering, closing the door behind them, and the boys rushed towards it as well, eager to get away from the cold.

As soon as Cyrus opened the door to let them in, they were hit in the face by a blast of warm air. Hinata noted that by comparison, it wasn't as warm as in the Shirasagi restaurant, but that in contrast to the biting weather outside, it was wonderful. The sighs of content the other boys let out proved as much.

They closed the door as soon as they were all in, and followed Cyrus, who led them into the house. Hinata noted, as they walked, that this was a warehouse in the sense that the rooms were piled up with categorized objects, which were all clearly scavenged. In the living room, a fire was burning brightly in the fireplace, beckoning the boys to get closer.

"You can stay here for a while after you're outfitted, if you like," Cyrus laughed, noticing their longing stares. "Leo's going to have to stay to re-inventorize things, and another one of us, Tsubaki, is working here today. So you can warm up here for an hour before hitting the road, they won't mind."

"Thank you so much, Cyrus," Daichi nodded to him, sincerely grateful. "Your kindness will never be forgotten."

"No biggie!" the man laughed out in English, drawing smiles from all of them, now that their frozen face muscles were thawed out.

"In here," Leo called from one of the bedrooms, and Cyrus hummed as he led them into it.

The room had clothing stacked up everywhere, hung and folded and stowed in every nook and cranny possible. Leo was reading off his notebook, and Ryoma was nowhere to be seen.

"So, according to our agreement, you're all going to be outfitted with winter gear, and can switch an item of your current clothing for one of ours," Leo reminded them. "You're welcome to browse and find something to your liking in this room. Just try not to make a mess. Once we're done here, we'll go get the winter gear."

"Thank you so much!" they all echoed together, Yamaguchi and Oikawa opting to bow at the waist in gratitude instead.

"You guys are kind of like kids, y'know?" Cyrus laughed as they all dispersed excitedly to find clothes that would suit them better.
Hinata thought about that casual statement as he began to look through a stack of sweaters, something not sitting right with him about it.

"Well..." he frowned, not too sure what to say, either. Cyrus turned to him curiously. "I mean... we are kids after all, aren't we?"

And he watched as Cyrus froze, processing the information. Slowly, the warm smile fell off his face, and he was left to look at Hinata as if he was finally seeing him for the first time. He looked shocked, and maybe a bit sad.

Hinata turned his head to look back at the sweaters, not wanting to let his painfully truthful words drop the temperature in the room. He focused on the excited voices of his friends around him, and tried to forget how stricken Cyrus looked. As if he'd only just realized that they were a lifetime too young to be orphans, abandoned out there in such a cold, unforgiving world.

..."..."..."..."..."...

The boys said a hundred grateful goodbyes to Cyrus and Ryoma as the two left, the rumbling of the truck outside heralding their departure. As convened, they sat in the living room, huddled close to the fireplace, admiring their new gear and planning their route. The more they talked about the last leg of their journey, the more confident Hinata felt about it. Of course, that had a lot to do with all their new equipment.

They'd each been given a winter jacket and snowpants, with boots, gloves, a hat, and a scarf. Leo threw in a few ski goggles as well, letting them decide on who would wear them. Asides from that, they'd exchanged all their wet clothes for newer ones, Cyrus having assured them that they had people assigned to do the laundry, and had thus all ended up with a couple of new sweaters, pants, underwear, and socks. It felt incredible to be in dry, clean clothes after all this time. Hinata just wished he could take a shower, too, but that felt like pushing it.

Other than their new winter-appropriate clothes, they'd been given a few miscellaneous items that Cyrus felt would be necessary to their trek across the snowy land. Most notably, he'd suggested they take a sled, a small one meant to carry children, but that they could fill with supplies instead as the residents of Osaka routinely did on supply runs. The boys filled it up with their blankets and sleeping bags, all wrapped up in a large tarp they could use to create an emergency tent if the weather got especially bad. They sled could be pulled by a rope, so it was easy to maneuver and was a welcome piece of equipment.

Daichi also made a small list of necessities, most of which Leo agreed to give to him, mostly things such as matches, rope, soap, kitchen knives and a new watch. In exchange for some of Suga's medical equipment, they were also given a fireman's axe in a sheath, which Cyrus recommended for chopping wood for campfires. Before leaving, Ryoma also slipped them a water bottle full of fuel, winking clandestinely and telling them to use some to kickstart their campfires.

All in all, Hinata felt a lot better about their trek than he had ever felt before. This was the most prepared they'd ever been, and although the elements were no longer on their side, they had equipment, and the blessing of the Osaka survivors to back them up. It was more than they'd ever had before. Especially the blessings.

He was almost impatient to hit the road. Almost.

They ate very small amounts of rations around the fireplace, only to curb the hunger that was a constant tormentor, and then packed up to leave for good. Daichi volunteered to go thank Leo once more before they left, and they all geared up in their new winter clothes while they waited for him. A
lot of zippers were involved, and by the end of it, Hinata felt like a marshmallow.

"Noya-senpai... you don't look like a volleyball after all," he hummed in thought as he watched his senpai wind his scarf around his face. "Just fat."

"What's that supposed to mean!?" Noya reddened, drawing laughter from the people around him.

"Oh, Noya. We're all fat in these," Iwaizumi chuckled good-naturedly, his almost permanent frown gone under their fortunate circumstances. A smile did him well. Oikawa's fond expression said as much. "Fat, and extremely cozy."

"I'm almost hot in these, wow," Suga huffed, fanning himself.

"You look hot in anything, Suga," Kuroo teased, laughing at the withering glare he got from the medic. "What? I'm sure Daichi would agree."

"Agree to what?" Daichi asked, coming in from an adjacent room. "Don't tell me you're making deals behind my back again, Kuroo."

"I'm sure you'd say the same thing in my place," Kuroo chuckled, pulling his hat over his unruly locks. "But, let's not make this a debate and just set out before we lose any more daylight."

"I still don't know what 'it' is."

"Let's set out!" Suga pressed, making a move for the door, and laughter accompanied him.

The biting chill that hit Hinata in the face as soon as the door opened reminded him that not everything was okay just yet. But then, he pulled his scarf over his nose, and watched as all the others did the same before venturing out in the white landscape, and felt the chill disappear as simply as that.

With Oikawa taking the first shift trailing the sled behind them, they all set out once again to find the safe haven that they had never been promised, but that they were entitled to regardless.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

The walk to Kobe was seven hours long, seven grueling hours that probably would have been impossible to make without the warm clothes they were wearing. However, by the time they stumbled into Kobe, exhausted, wet, breathless and cold despite all their equipment, they began to wonder if their trek was even possible. If walking to a single city had taken this much out of them, would they even be able to continue onward?

But they wouldn't know until they tried. So they tried.

It was night time when they arrived into the first residential district of Kobe, dragging their feet through the untouched banks of snow and gasping, for breath they did not have anymore. The sled being dragged behind them scraped against the hard snow to remind them that they were still progressing, but other than that, it felt like they had become frozen in time. The weather had become substantially colder now that the sun had gone below the horizon, their teeth clattering once in a while as if reminding them to keep moving to stay warm.

"Let's stop in one of these houses for the night," Daichi rasped out to the others, picking a house at random and walking towards it. They all followed, too tired to reply.

With superhuman effort, they used the axe to break one of the first-floor windows, and helped one
another crawl in, their thick jackets catching stray pieces of glass before they could pierce them. They tumbled into what seemed to be a living room, unlit and cold and sparsely furnished, all decorations missing from what should have been a nice family home. It just felt empty now.

Hinata suspected that they all had half a mind just to lay in the living room and sleep, but the snow blowing in from the broken window deterred them. Instead, at Suga's suggestion, they retreated as far back into the house as possible, closing every door they could between them and the living room to keep the wind out. There was a bedroom for children which was too small to keep them all, but they left their wet jackets, snowpants and boots there to air out during the night.

They ended up deciding to settle in the master bedroom, mostly since is was carpeted and would keep them warmer than sleeping on the floor. To their glee, the bed also had heavy covers thrown open on it, and so four of them fit along the width and slept huddled underneath the covers. Hinata found himself on the carpet, sharing a sleeping bag with Yamaguchi, who did not mind cuddling for warmth.

Daichi tiredly told them to sleep as much as possible, as they would only walk during daylight hours tomorrow, and a collective yawn swept across them just as he said it. Good night wishes were sparse, as most of them had already become drowsy, drained by the heavy activity of the day.

Strangely enough, Hinata found himself having trouble sleeping, his mind occupied by wild thoughts. He thought of Shirasagi, of the kind inhabitants of Osaka and their continued survival in the place they called home. He thought of Nagoya, probably destroyed and in ruins, abandoned or struggling with a civil war. He thought of Niigata, of Tanaka, whose body rested in a cold mass grave, with nothing but the shrine they'd built and their memories to remember him by. Of Tomoe, whose face he hardly recalled anymore, of the hundreds of innocents killed in the Bloodbath orchestrated by the rogue division of the army. He thought of Shoukyo, of Yukiko, of Yukiko's sister whom they never got to meet but that Hinata hoped was doing alright to this day. He thought of camp Omega-13, wondering if it still stood, if it had moved locations, or if the organization behind it had been stopped by whatever army Japan had left. And he thought of Karasuno, of where it all began, of the familiarity of warm gym walls around them, protecting them, keeping them safe until they didn't anymore. He thought of home, of Natsu buried under rubble, of his mother's hand waving him off to another adventure. He wondered if she knew he'd get so far.

Yamaguchi shifted sleepily next to him, as if hearing him think so loudly, and Hinata tried to take a deep breath and relax. His memories of the past did nothing to comfort him, not when so many of them resulted in more suffering and bloodshed, but the feeling of warm bodies against and around him was more than enough to compensate. He closed his eyes, listening to their quiet breathing and to the wild wind outside rattling the windowpane occasionally, and breathed deep until he fell asleep as well.

In the morning, they woke up around nine, well rested and ready to face another day, whether they actually were ready or not. Whilst they took turns in the bathroom with frozen tiles and frozen water pipes, Tsukishima and Iwaizumi raided the kitchen, surprising them with a good amount of edible food left behind by the last inhabitants. It made sense, since nobody would come around these parts in this weather to raid a pantry.

They ate a better breakfast than they'd had in quite a while, and then geared up in their damp snow gear. Kuroo came up with the ingenious idea of wearing plastic bags around their feet before wearing their boots when Kenma quietly complained about his dry socks getting wet in his squelching footwear. The rest of their morning was punctuated by the rustling of plastic bags in everybody's boots, and Hinata could not help but find that amusing.
They set out through the door this time, enjoying the crisp morning air and the weak sunshine through the clouds before they inevitably got sick of it. Hinata volunteered to drag the sled first, figuring he may as well do it when he felt in good shape.

Kenma stood amongst the head of the group, consulting his ripped-up paper map for their next target location. It would be a four-hour walk to the Akashi-Kaikyo bridge, which would take them across the water, to Awaji Island, their halfway point towards Shikoku. With such clement weather, four hours did not feel like much, as long as the gentle snowfall didn't turn into a flurry until then. Hinata wondered if the wasteland looked anything like this. Everyone kept telling them that it was impossible to cross, but if it was like the waterfront between Osaka and Kobe, then it really wasn't that bad.

Their travels on foot had long since become silent. Most of them had run out of conversation topics a long time back, so they mostly saved their breath for exercise rather than discussion. Yamaguchi, Iwaizumi and Oikawa would walk close by oftentimes in order to practice sign language, with Kuroo and Tsukishima occasionally popping by to observe them or learn a few characters. Sometimes, Suga even hummed some pop song or another, occasionally dragging Noya into humming as well, but that was about the extent of the noise that came from their group. Otherwise, it was just shuffling, sniffling, and sighing. It was quite depressing, to say the least.

Despite their damp clothing, they were able to keep a large part of the cold at bay, so much that when they stopped for a break, Noya convinced Hinata and Kageyama to help him make snow angels all around their resting spot. The sky was gorgeous when they laid below it like that, and Hinata briefly pulled down his scarf to take a burning breath of frigid air, taking pleasure in how pure it felt in his lungs.

They reached the bridge in the early afternoon, feeling the chill of the waterfront before seeing the bridge itself. The clouds hanging above their head slowly became denser as they approached, sunlight all but fading and leaving them in a world of white and grey by the time they reached the city. As they left the streets lined with snowed-in buildings and walked onto the expressway to the bridge, they noted how the wind picked up, kicking snowflakes up to whip them in the face. Hinata envied the ones whose turn it was to wear ski goggles today.

The bridge was long, so long and shrouded in fog that it may as well have led to nowhere. If Hinata squinted, he could spot a hint of land across the channel they were crossing, but he wasn't sure. The hanging design of the bridge was spectacular, but also a bit scary, and Hinata shuddered at the idea of walking long distances on a piece of metal that was suspended in the air by wires. Beneath the bridge, the channel -or the Akashi Straight, as Kenma identified- was frozen solid, its surface unevenly iced, and snow being blown by the wind into tiny whirlwinds that broke against the coast.

"Do you think we can walk on that ice?" he asked curiously to Suga, who was walking near him, eyes trained on an occasional hole in the ice here and there.

"Even if we can, let's hope we never have to," his senpai chuckled, patting his head. "It's kind of scary, don't you think?"

"It feels scarier to be walking across this bridge right now," Hinata pouted, though Suga wouldn't see it, hidden behind his scarf. "Won't all the snow and stuck cars make it too heavy? It can't just... snap... right?"

"Don't worry yourself!" Noya cheered him up as they engaged onto the bridge, aware of all the clinking noises it made as its structures withstood the wind. "It's not our weight that's gonna make this huge thing buckle!"

"Besides, we probably won't be on it for a long time, right, Kenma?" Asahi asked, turning to their living equivalent of a GPS for answers. Kenma looked unimpressed by their discussions.

"An hour," he shrugged. "The bridge is almost four kilometres long, so we'll be on Awaji Island before 3PM."

"An hour on a bridge!?" Noya exclaimed incredulously. "That's long. Anything can happen in an hour, you know."

"Don't jinx it, Noya," Iwaizumi shook his head in exasperation. "We'll be fine. An hour isn't that long, compared to what we've done so far."

They didn't think it would be too bad, until they heard the thunder rolling across the heavy clouds in the sky.

"Noya, you jinxed it, you really jinxed it, oh god-"

"I didn't jinx it!" Noya screeched right back at Asahi, holding onto his hat when a rough gust of wind almost pushed him over. "For all we know, Iwaizumi jinxed it when he told me not to jinx it!"

"Hey! I was warding off bad luck when I said that!" Iwaizumi protested, hanging on tightly to Oikawa, as the same gust made them stumble back.

The bridge creaked and Hinata swore that it swung a bit when the violent wind whistled past them again. His own hands found themselves gripping Kageyama's arm tightly, as if it would help either of them withstand the wind.

"Okay, enough!" Daichi interrupted, yelling to be heard over the oncoming storm. "We can't progress like this. This is becoming a thunderstorm, so we're gonna have to outlast it!"

"On the bridge!?!" Hinata cried out, getting nauseous when said structure seemed to sway again, the cable holding it up clinking loudly together.

"Where else, stupid? Down there on the ice?" Tsukishima grunted to him, shielding his eyes. "We should find cover!"

"Or make cover!" Kuroo suggested. "Let's dig a hole and duck into it!"

"That's not cover," Hinata frowned, squawking when the next gust forced him to stumble back. Kageyama's hands were holding him up in a second.

"Let's just do it!" the setter yelled out, straightening Hinata out. "It's better than staying here, and I don't see any other alternatives!"

"Here!" Kuroo motioned towards a supply truck a bit to the front that was snowed in like all the other vehicles on the bridge. Snow had piled high enough to hide its tires entirely, so if they dug deep, they could probably make a sizeable hideout to crouch in. The body of the truck would also help cut some of the wind pushing against them.

"Alright, everyone!" Daichi called out, motioning them forward. They all painstakingly rushed towards the truck Kuroo had identified, gritting their teeth against the violent storm that was kicking up. As if on cue, thunder rolled across the skies once more, booming deafeningly. "Dig!"
As soon as Hinata reached the spot behind the truck, he dropped to his knees, and like everybody else, frantically began to dig snow out. It almost felt like they were kids again, except this time, this wasn't nearly as fun. When Hinata made it out, he swore he never wanted to see another snowflake again in his life.

Soon, the hole was an inch in depth, then two, then five, and a foot. The snow they pushed out of the hole also helped make barriers around them, and a few of them got out of the hole digging to build up the small walls of snow and ice.

Digging seemed to take forever, and Hinata almost lost his hat to the winds at least twice. His fingers hurt from where he scratched the hard snow to get it out, and he quickly opted to use Kageyama's technique of kicking snow out of the hole.

They were waist-deep into the hole, almost hitting the bottom, when lightning boomed, and struck one of the two bridge towers. Many of them cried out in surprise at the sudden loud noise, hearts beating a mile a minute.

"That's enough!" Daichi ordered, glancing up at the heavy clouds crackling with electricity. "Get in, and stay close!"

None of them disagreed, swinging off their backpacks and immediately jumping into the hole, crouching until their heads were below snow level. The sled was left outside, the rope tied to a handle on the truck, and they all hoped it wouldn't fly away.

The hole was tight, and Hinata's legs almost immediately cramped up, and it wasn't hard to feel claustrophobic with Noya's legs between his, Kenma's shoulder pushing painfully against his, and Oikawa pressing himself close to him to make space for the boys next to him. Hinata kind of felt like livestock. Very cold livestock.

"It's okay," Suga assured them, hugging his backpack to his chest. "Just breathe and try to stay warm. It won't go on forever."

"Any experts on meteorology here?" Kuroo called out, coughing when the dry air irritated his throat. "Tsukki? You're smart, aren't you?"

"I never really liked environmental science," the blond answered, his teeth audibly chattering. "I know that the waterfront usually causes the weather to lose its shit. Not like this, though."

Hinata felt Oikawa tap him on the shoulder, at that. He turned to remind him that he couldn't understand sign language, but Oikawa just pointed at Iwaizumi, who was hiding his face in his backpack, squeezed in across from them. He seemed to be in distress.

"Iwaizumi," Hinata called, relieved when the other boy reacted immediately to his name. He didn't looked distressed, just red all over his face. "Oikawa called for you."

"What is it?" the ace asked, watching carefully as Oikawa slowly signed a message to him. Impressively enough, he seemed to understand it fully. "Oikawa says that considering how fast the winds are, it shouldn't last for more than half an hour. The clouds are heavy, but are moving fast."

"Is Oikawa a meteorological expert?" Kuroo quipped, nodding his thanks to the Seijoh player regardless.

"He has learned to gauge storms, yeah," Iwaizumi rolled his eyes, and that was clearly not what Kuroo was expecting. "We get a lot of thundershowers in the summer, right? So he's the type to want to try and estimate how much time he has to spend indoors before going back to practicing
"Now that's dedication," Kuroo whistled appreciatively. "Well, thanks. Guess we'll just camp out here for thirty minutes, and see how it goes. Hopefully, we won't be snowed in."

"I'm not gonna say anything this time," Iwaizumi huffed, putting his face back down onto his backpack. Wise decision. A few in the tight circle imitated him, and in an effort to keep his mind off the horrible aching of his bent knees, Hinata did, too. He drew all his limbs close around the backpack and ducked his head away from the whirling snow and winds around them.

The wind howled violently as it ran through the metal fixtures of the bridge, rattling the wires and the chain links noisily. Their hideout protected them from the gusts picking up snow all around them, but did not protect them from the snow falling on top of them and soon covering them all in a thin layer of white. Above, the sky was grey, a dark and broody grey that was accented by the brilliance of dancing snowflakes. Occasionally, thunder would sound in the distance, and a jump of lightning across the clouds would illuminate the heavens, thick with the anger of Mother Nature.

It was strangely beautiful. Hinata raised his head to the sky and mourned not having ski goggles to watch the sky come undone above them. His vision, blurred by snow and the dryness of his eyes, made him privy to the wrath of the storm clouds above, and it felt like a strangely intimate experience to share with only himself and the gods above. With nothing but silence from the bodies pressed up uncomfortably against his, he turned to the sky for a sign of life and breathed deeply when thunder crackled as if in response.

Other than the introspective experience he'd been having, however, he also felt like the cold was trying to snap his bones at this point. It crept in slowly, but by the time Hinata gave a violent shiver that startled Oikawa next to him, he already felt his legs -or didn't feel them, to be accurate- freezing over, from his toes up to his knees. He just hoped he got to keep all twenty of his digits by the end of this experience.

The storm lasted unbearably long, although Daichi declared later on that it had lasted about a half hour, like Oikawa had predicted. It felt longer than that, at any rate. In fact, it was so long that when it began to calm down, and the flurries became milder, Hinata wondered if he was finally beginning to die. But then, heads popped up from underneath the inch-thick blanket of snow that had fallen over them, and hushed voices began to wonder if it was over, and Hinata joined them in daring to believe that they'd once again made it against all odds.

He shook his head when they all began to rise from their hibernation, splattering clumps of snow onto everyone around him. They repaid the favour, of course, and Hinata found himself hit from several directions by snow that didn't even bother him, at this point.

"We're alive," Kenma murmured in awe, combing out the snowflakes contrasting against his dark strands with his thick mittens.

"You bet we are," Hinata confirmed with all the relief he could muster, his words warped by the chattering of his teeth. "We were pretty much buried alive but somehow still made it."

"Yup," Iwaizumi grunted. "Compared to earlier, the wind now feels like a breeze."

"Don't overdo it," Kuroo laughed shakily, hazarding a movement to get up. His face immediately scrunched up in pain, and a small cry left his lips unbidden.

"Are you okay?" Daichi immediately asked, turning his attention to the agony on the other captain's traits.
"M'fine," Kuroo grunted, trembling as he used the sides of their pit to hoist himself to his feet. "Oh god. My knees are so cramped, they're on fire."

"At least that is keeping you warm," Asahi quipped, carefully getting up as well, and discovering Kuroo's pain for himself rather quickly.

"Yeah, I wish," Kuroo groaned, pushing himself out of the pit and stretching his legs out on the snow around them. "I'm so cold, I can't even bring myself to shiver anymore."

"That's not good," Suga frowned in alarm. "We're probably all mildly hypothermic, but your body only loses the reflex to shiver when you're headed towards moderate hypothermia. You should keep moving, Kuroo. Get the blood flowing in your veins again."

"I hear ya," Kuroo nodded, rolling around in the snow to stretch out the last of the ache, then standing up.

Hinata waited for a few more people to rise out of their little hideaway, and then hazarded himself up as well. As his knees unflexed from the position they'd forcibly held for the past half hour, heat, and then pain began to shoot up Hinata's legs, so bad that he lost his breath in a gasp at first. He could feel the sweat drops pearling on his forehead as he strained to stand up, every inch of extension of his cramped ligaments overwhelming him with a fresh wave of pain. It was enough to make him nauseous.

"You're all white, Shouyo," Kenma quietly remarked, also stretching his knees out before hoisting himself out with Kuroo's help. "Are you gonna faint?"

"I'm fine," Hinata gritted out, riding out the last painful spasms of his knees before straightening fully. Daichi held out his hand, and Hinata gratefully took it to climb out of the hole.

Most of them had already toughed it out and were now stretching their legs by walking in circles on the fresh snow or were actually stretching their limbs out. Within the hole itself, Kageyama was slowly getting up, with Yamaguchi and Tsukishima mutually holding onto each other as they rose. From outside, Kuroo was now helping Oikawa crawl out, leaving Iwaizumi to shake Noya awake from his curled-up napping position. Everyone seemed to be okay.

"Noya won't wake up," Iwaizumi suddenly announced, and the deep breath Hinata was preparing to take flew right out of his lungs.

"Noya?" Daichi immediately called out, and all eyes went to the small teen, whom Iwaizumi was shaking by the shoulders without a response.

"There's nothing!" Iwaizumi repeated, and they all knew to move out of the way as Suga practically vaulted into the hole again, by Noya's side.

Wordlessly, but rushed, Suga unzipped Noya's jacket, putting two fingers to his neck. He visibly held his own breath as he watched the smaller boy, doing something that Hinata couldn't figure out.

"He's alive," he finally announced, zipping the jacket up again, and rubbing Noya's arms up and down. "Nishinoya, wake up!"

"Why is he so sleepy?" Hinata asked, a sudden fear gripping his heart. He couldn't lose another of his senpai. He wouldn't be able to take it.

"He's severely hypothermic," Suga commented without looking at him, pulling his glove off and pinching Noya's cheeks. That elicited a reaction from him, and he groaned. "When your body gets
too cold, you get lethargic, and eventually fall into a coma."

"A coma!?” A collective cry of panic rose from a few of them as they watched Suga proceed with pinching. Thankfully, by the time Suga's nails had left pink crescents on Noya's pale face, the latter had begun to stir, his eyelids fighting to flutter open.

"He's still awake, though. That's good. He's reacting to pain," Suga explained, then snapped his fingers in front of Noya. "Noya! Wake up!"

Nishinoya watched him blankly for a second, then blinked slowly.

"M'awake," he rasped, not registering when Iwaizumi stood up next to him.

"What should we do? We need to warm him up!" he insisted.

"We need to get him somewhere dry. He's soaked really badly," Suga decided. "We need to get out of the wind. Like this, he'll only lose more and more body heat. He's very small in stature, so he'll lose heat easier than most of us."

"We have to get moving, then," Kuroo stated the obvious. "Let's clear the bridge and stop in the first building we see.

"We need a fire. There's no other way to make this work," Suga judged, tugging Noya up. Iwaizumi immediately jumped to help, but their friend was boneless, and drifting away again. "Come on, Noya! Stand up!"

"I'll get him!" Asahi volunteered, jumping back down and crouching so that Noya could be helped on him.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Hinata asked, almost as pale as his senpai as he watched him fall against Asahi's back. "We're all cold, but none of us fainted because of it!"

"Suga-senpai is taking care of him," Kageyama grunted, clutching himself fruitlessly as he shivered, which was apparently a good sign. "You have to believe that he will be alright."

"We have to get moving and clear this bridge," Daichi reminded them. "Let's get walking and retrieve the sled while they make their way up. The sooner we find shelter, the better chances we all have."

"That's not a very encouraging statement," Tsukishima remarked, though he did reach out to assist Yamaguchi in helping a very pale-looking Oikawa walk. It felt like they were all falling apart at the seams and that they were haphazardly attempting to keep one another in one piece in any way they could. Hinata found himself yet again wondering if adventuring out here had been a good idea. Sometimes, he wondered if leaving the Karasuno gym had been a good idea. They'd gained a lot by roaming the country in search of a haven to call home, and had gained a home within their family's hearts in the process, but they had all suffered so much, that sometimes, Hinata wondered if it was even worth it.

He painstakingly dragged his feet through the fresh-fallen snow and felt tears well in his eyes, because he was just so tired. So tired. He just wanted to stop, just like the world around them, just like the cursed landscape that had been frozen solid. Even the sight of his shivering comrades next to him didn't warm his heart anymore. He felt just too cold.

He stumbled, and Kageyama's weak grip on his upper arm somehow kept him standing. Snow crunched underneath their weight. Hinata glanced at his friend, and could not even find comfort in
They trudged on painstakingly. One foot in front of the other, one inch into the snow, then two inches. One more step, one more chance for any of them to just give it up, but somehow, none of them did. The sight of all of them shuffling on side by side somehow kept precious, fleeting vitality in their muscles and bones, and kept them moving, slowly but surely, until the creaking of the swaying bridge beneath them faded out into the howling of the wind.

Every tendon in Hinata's body begged to snap. Every ligament died to tear. Every joint sobbed in agony. Every nerve screamed until the cold cryogenized the entirety of his brain. And yet, even when his head became heavy and the receptors under his skin learned to exist beyond the cold seeping through his soaked clothes, he kept moving, as if pushed by some primal instinct to survive.

It was probably that primal instinct that pushed all of them forward, through the desolate climate, past the barren landscape forsaken by gods and humans alike. It was probably what kept them clinging onto their sanity through the silence of the graveyard of a town, through the howling of the wicked wind reminding them of all the ghosts haunting these once-prosperous streets. Their primal instinct to keep on living kept the tiny, dying flame inside of them burning. They kept on moving.

They moved until they reached the next house in its grave of snow, and without even saying a word out loud, all of them made a beeline for it. Hinata had the opportunity to watch as Asahi passed Noya's still, limp body to Daichi so that he could help open the door. He reminded himself to breathe, and that the blue of his senpai's skin would disappear when he got warmed up.

The butt of the axe made short work of the glass pane above the door, and with that, Asahi was able to slip his hand through and fiddle with the lock until it clicked open. He removed his arm, catching bits of glass on the way out, and slammed the door open, letting in all the snow that was stacked against it.

None of them cared as they practically trampled one another in their haste to get inside, dragging even more slush in with their wet boots. Hinata let everyone else go in first, and then clicked the door shut behind them, though it did little because of the broken window. He figured he'd bring it up later.

When he entered the living room, many of them had already thrown off their coats, boots and snowpants, and were huddling underneath the few blankets they had. Suga and Yamaguchi were fussing after Noya, who was still out of it, Daichi rushing to bring out all their supplies to start a fire with.

"Kuroo, do we have any wood?" Daichi called out to the other boy, rifling through their backpacks quickly.

"None on hand," Kuroo replied with a click of his tongue, pulling a blanket over Oikawa's shivering frame. "If these people have a fireplace, they should have some logs lying around, though."

"I'll go try and find some," Kageyama volunteered, nonetheless taking his blanket with him as he left.

"We can chop the legs off the coffee table in the meantime," Hinata suggested offhandedly, taking his soaking gear off.

"I'll do it," Asahi answered, as he was already holding the axe, and shuffled quickly over to the coffee table, flipping it over.
"Can't get more makeshift than this," Kuroo only had time to comment before the loud thud of an axe on wood made all of them jump.

Asahi made short work of the table, tossing Daichi the legs before working on the body.

"Thank you," Daichi called out, immediately working on setting up the fireplace. Hinata watched him hesitate briefly before dripping a few lines of gasoline onto the wood.

When he cracked a match, Hinata prepared himself for the sparks.

The flame took a moment to catch, but when it did, it reminded Hinata of how Kuroo had set the truck on fire back in camp Omega-13. Ironically similarly, the gasoline burst into large flames, and the smell of burning plastic rose into the air. At least it didn't smell of human flesh this time. It took another moment for the wood to catch, but when it did, the flames died a bit, and the wood began to splinter. Even though the stench of treated wood burning was unpleasant, everybody made a common move towards the fireplace.

Hinata watched as Noya's clothes were removed, until he was shirtless and wrapped up in a dry blanket. The young man seemed to be fighting the lethargy possessing him, helping Suga and Yamaguchi move him closer to the fireplace and pulling the blanket closer to himself as he mumbled some low words. The others gave him priority, but did not hesitate to divest themselves of their wet clothes as well before huddling as close to the fire as they could.

The more he warmed up, the more feeling returned to his frozen limbs. It was painful, more painful than just freezing in the wind, and Hinata also rushed to the fire when it became clear that he was about to regain all the lost sensation at once.

He sat next to Kenma, who immediately opened his blanket up to invite him under it. Hinata laid his head against Kenma's shoulder, enjoying the feeling of his friend's chilled skin against his, and closed his eyes.

Soon after, Kageyama returned with as many logs as his thinned, shaking arms could carry, and dropped them noisily by the fireplace before gratefully slipping in next to Hinata. Daichi arranged a few into the crackling fire, and then finally joined the semi-circle around it. Nestling himself in between Suga and Kuroo, he was the last to sit down, and after he did, they all slowly settled down until they had stopped moving.

Hinata's nose warmed up quickly, and the heat radiating on his face and spreading down his body lulled him into giving into his exhaustion. As he drifted off, wedged between two of his best friends, he vaguely heard Kuroo suggesting that they all rest up. Very happily, he complied, and fell asleep.

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Even Hinata's dreams had been warm. He only wished he could remember them as he woke to yet another dreary, snowy day outside the window. It was early in the morning, judging by the light reflecting off the untouched snow banks. Most of his friends were still huddled around the fire, which seemed to have been stoked recently. Kageyama had fallen asleep in his lap, so it was a struggle to extricate himself without waking him. Next to him, Kenma roused lightly from the movement, but with a few whispered words, Hinata coaxed him back to sleep.

Not sure what to do now, he stretched out, relishing in the warmth on his skin, before setting out. Without a blanket, he felt the chill of the hallway, but compared to what he'd felt the day before, stuck in the snowstorm, it was nothing. He instinctively made his way to the kitchen, and was relieved to hear muffled voices as he approached it.
He poked his head in through the doorway, and smiled when he saw a few familiar faces hanging around the kitchen and adjacent dining room.

"Ah, Hinata." It was Daichi who noticed him first, moving from where he busied himself by the sink to wave at him. "Good morning."

"Hello," Hinata greeted him, also nodding to Kuroo and Oikawa, who were next to him. In the dining room, Suga briefly lifted his head and nodded to him, then returned to whispering to Noya, who was clutching a mug, huddled in blankets.

"You're sure you don't wanna catch some more sleep while you still can, Shrimpy?" Kuroo inquired, nonetheless letting them join their circle near the sink. Hinata took his place next to Oikawa, and then scrunched his nose at an offensive smell of gasoline wafting around.

"It's fine. I don't wanna go back to sleep for an hour," he waved his hand in front of his nose. "What's that smell anyway?"

"Oh." Daichi looked a bit sheepish. "We started a fire in the sink."

"With good reason," Kuroo defended with an amused smirk.

"I'm interested to hear about it," Hinata frowned, glancing in the sink. Indeed, there was faint smoke coming from underneath the large pot in the sink. The window above the sink had been shattered to air out the kitchen, a faint breeze curling around Hinata's shoulders.

"We're melting snow and boiling it to make drinkable water," Daichi explained, waving at the pot. "Oikawa's idea."

"Good thing I can understand sign language," Kuroo boasted.

Oikawa promptly grabbed a pen and paper he'd obviously purposefully left on the counter and scribbled him a message, throwing him the stink-eye while he was at it.

"Okay, so maybe you did have to write down most of it," Kuroo continued, handing the paper back to Oikawa. "But I kind of understood a few sounds you were signing to me."

Oikawa rolled his eyes, crossing his arms, and Hinata laughed.

"That's a great idea," he complimented, learning to be less intimidated by the imposing volleyball player he'd only recently befriended.

"If you want there's a bit of water left from earlier. We made tea for Noya, so you can have what's left," Daichi suggested.

"Sure!" Hinata grinned brightly, enthusiastically accepting the mug that Daichi quickly prepared for him. For a lack of proper tea, they'd boiled some spices, and Hinata enjoyed the strangely tasty combination of mint, cardamom and cinnamon in the lukewarm water. "It's good. Thank you."

"No problem," Daichi replied, returning to his pot and lifting the cover to stir the contents, which sloshed around noisily. "This shouldn't take long to melt, so we'll have some more ready soon."

"How is Noya?" Hinata asked, diverting the conversation as he glanced over at his senpai in the dining room. Colour seemed to have come back to his pale cheeks a bit.

"Better than yesterday, obviously," Kuroo hummed. "Sugawara worked very hard to warm him up."
He wasn't nearly as lethargic as yesterday when he woke up this morning. He's being evaluated to see how bad the hypothermia is."

"He's looking much less pale, at any rate," Daichi nodded. "I just hope none of us have to go through that again. We'll have to be more careful when we head out."

"When will that be?" Hinata asked, glancing out of the small window towering the sink. It gave him no answers, as it was blocked out by piled snow.

"Later on today, maybe by noon," Kuroo replied. "We're gonna try and dry all of our stuff as quickly as possible by the fire, and set out before it's too late. We need to use as many daylight hours as possible to walk."

"We're gonna head almost halfway through Awaji Island today," Daichi completed. "The walk is long; it's another twelve hours at least to Shikoku. I'll have to ask Kenma when he wakes up, but that's what we deduced basically."

"It doesn't look that far when we look at it on paper," Hinata groaned, sipping more of his tea. "It's hard to believe that we've crossed an entire country on foot, actually. Japan doesn't look that big on a map."

"We have been on the road for over half a year, Hinata," Daichi reminded him. "It may not feel like it because we're all together in this, but it's been more than six months since we've left the gym in search for safety."

"And we still haven't found it," the smaller teen sighed heavily, draining his mug in one shot to avoid seeing how Daichi's face immediately fell.

"We're getting there," Kuroo replied grimly in his captain's stead, and Hinata nodded.

"I know."

They may have gotten a bit enthusiastic about fire, in retrospect. They did, after all, end up lighting small fires in every sink in the house, as well as in the oven. They soon found out that opening windows (or breaking them, in some cases) was a necessary evil so that they would not choke on the smoke, but the wind outside had calmed, and it seemed to be a nice, grey day outside.

It was quite a comical sight, actually, to see teens huddled around the bathroom sinks, pressed against the oven door, and otherwise huddled in blankets as if trying to catch up on all the temperature they'd lost over the last leg of their journey. Their wet clothes were hung up to dry in the warmest room in the house, thus the living room, and a few of them were periodically heading to the living room to move the clothes around and make sure they were all drying equally, or to stoke the large fire in the hearth.

Many of them had a blast with their newfound ability to make fires. With the extra water left over from tea, a few of them washed their hair and then laid down against the oven to dry off. The atmosphere had become warmer all of a sudden, if not heavy with the smoke that inevitably accumulated on the ceiling, and not just because of the fires lit all around the household. It probably had something to do with the smiles on their faces. Hinata watched everybody chatter and laugh as if they hadn't almost frozen to death less than a day ago, and couldn't help but have a good feeling
about the rest of their journey.

They set out again before noon hit the hour, the exhilaration from having survived yet another trial carrying them on their aching feet as they waded through the fresh snow piled on the old banks. Kenma had calculated another twelve hours to the next bridge taking them off Awaji Island, onto Shikoku, and so by taking breaks into account, they gave themselves fifteen hours, which they separated over three days.

The weather almost seemed apologetic over the next leg of their journey. As if trying to atone for almost freezing them to death—quite literally in Noya's case—, the heavy clouds overhead stayed their wrath and simply hung overhead as they toiled and troubled across the desolate landscape.

Hinata wondered how much effort and energy they could have saved if they had snowshoes on, like back in Shirasagi.

The weather remained clement throughout the next few days, which accounted for a mostly uneventful trek across the island. Considering that 'uneventful' was not a word they normally used to describe their travels, they all carefully avoided jinxing it and simply enjoyed the crisp, cool air in their lungs. It felt fresh and pure and invigorating, as long as they didn't think of all the radiation they were being exposed to at the same time.

The winds were mild as they crossed the island, but by midday on the third day, as they neared the coast, they picked up yet again. Hinata almost felt the low ripple of exasperation that went through their group as they followed the signs to the next bridge they had to cross, the Onaruto bridge that would take them directly onto Shikoku. The thought of yet another unstable metal death trap suspended in the air and swinging at the whims of the sea air currents was indeed exasperating, but there was no other choice. After this, besides, they'd be home-bound free. Or... as well as that could get, considering they still had no clear idea of where they were headed.

"This bridge is shorter than the last one," Kenma explained as they left the houses behind and walked onto the expressway clogged up by snowed-in cars. "It's less than a kilometre long, so it actually shouldn't take more than twenty minutes to cross it on foot."

"Oh, thank goodness," Nishinoya whined. "I am so not mentally prepared to be snowed in on a hanging bridge again!"

"I would've preferred never having to cross another bridge again..." Asahi replied, clutching his stomach. "I hope this one doesn't sway. I'm getting sick just thinking about it."

"Let's just not think about it and cross it as quickly as possible, okay?" Daichi sighed out, sheepishly attempting to comfort them. "The weather is being nice to us. Let's get this over with before it changes."

"Oh no," Nishinoya groaned out. "You had to go and say it, captain! Just like Iwaizumi did earlier! You jinxed it!"

"No, I didn't!" Daichi balked, strangely defensive.

"Uh, guys?" Speaking of Iwaizumi, the Seijoh ace lowly called out, as if unsure how to go about what he was about to say. "I just... I don't think we'll be able to cross the bridge, actually."

"There he goes," Noya continued on with exaggerated dramatization of his movements. "The jinx master is back at it again with the terrible luck! We'll never make it through at this rate."

"This has nothing to do with jinxing, this time," Iwaizumi huffed, clearly frowning underneath his
"The longer we stay here arguing about it, the more chances we have of the weather going sour," Daichi remarked, looking just about done with their attitudes.

"Then we'd better run for it!"

"Well, if you'd kindly listen to me for a second, I'm telling you we can't."

"Is there another storm coming in? Because I do not feel like living the life of a popsicle for another whole day."

"Noya, you need to shut up for a second and just let me-"

"Wow! So rude, Iwaizumi! And here I thought we were friends."

"Don't push it. Being friends is gonna be hard when I strangle you!"

"Try it!"

"Both of you, stop arguing!"

"We can't get across the bridge," a new voice suddenly piped in quietly, although hearing it shocked everyone into immediate silence. They all turned around to watch mild annoyance flicker across Yamaguchi's eyes before he turned back to watch Oikawa sign. Nobody dared speak.

Oikawa finished signing, getting faster and faster with every day that he spent practicing, and then pointed into the distance. All eyes went to his wordless argument.

"The wires have snapped," Yamaguchi finished decisively. "The bridge is broken."

And indeed, if Hinata squinted, he could definitely see the second bridge tower, or the lack thereof, in the general direction of Oikawa's finger.

"No way," Suga groaned out, and almost as if coordinated, they all broke into a sprint towards the waterfront. They only skidded to a stop once they reached the beginning of the actual bridge.

Oikawa had not been wrong.

"You have got to be kidding me," Kuroo deadpanned, seriously unimpressed by this setback. "Really? A whole tower has gone down?"

"Told you you would jinx it," Nishinoya whispered conspiratorially to Iwaizumi, who punched him lightly in the arm.

"There is no way in hell that I could have jinxed this!"

"Alright, listen," Daichi's voice boomed out, and everybody shut up immediately watch as their captain tore his scarf down his face to make his voice louder. As if the anger in his eyes wasn't loud enough. Hinata suddenly felt hot, burning, and it wasn't pleasant anymore. "Enough fooling around! Both of you, stop arguing! For the sake of all that is holy, our only way off this god-forsaken island is right in front of us, and yet there's no way across it, and all you two can do is argue!"

"Daichi, calm down," Suga stepped in, putting a hand on his shoulder, and gripping tight enough to crinkle his jacket. "Yelling won't help. Breathe."
"Sorry," Iwaizumi mumbled half-heartedly, glancing away from their group leader.

"Yeah," Noya also glanced away, looking mildly guilty. "Sorry. We were just… arguing for kicks, I guess."

"We just need to stop and think for a second," Daichi continued on as if he hadn't even heard them. "The entire bridge is out of use if the middle segment has collapsed. But there has to be another way around, I'm sure of it!"

"Daichi, stop." Suga firmly repeated, now gripping both of his shoulders tightly and spinning him around forcefully. "Stop it. You're panicking. Stop thinking for a second and breathe."

Daichi breathed, and they all saw his shoulders fall, as if bowing underneath a great weight. Hinata could not imagine bearing the world on himself like Daichi did. Silently, he watched as their trusty captain attempted to regain his bearings.

"Okay," Kuroo's voice interrupted their moment of uncertain silence. They all turned to watch their second leader step up next to Daichi and put a hand on his back as well. "I think we're gonna have to think this one through. Suga, take Daichi to the side for a bit."

"Right," their medic nodded dutifully and, whispering words to Daichi, who seemed drained of all energy now, he pulled him a bit further away.

"Kenma, with me. Let's see what alternatives we have."

"Okay," their informant nodded, visibly shaken by Daichi's outburst, but obediently sidling along next to his best friend regardless.

"Oikawa." The mute teenager jumped at the call of his name, as if he wasn't expecting it. He looked at Kuroo questioningly, although his spine straightened, as if he was expecting to receive a great responsibility. "Find someplace where you can start a fire and settle everybody down. We're going to take an hour's rest here, just to recompose ourselves and figure out what to do from here."

Oikawa nodded, and turned around to nod also at the rest of them, who were clearly waiting for his instructions now.

"Don't head too far out," Kuroo finished, stepping off towards where Suga had led Daichi. "We'll join you once we're good on our end."

"Will you be okay?" Asahi asked, worried for Daichi, clearly.

"Of course," Kuroo hummed with all the confidence in the world that he was right. "This is just another setback. Like we haven't had any of those before."

He let the words fall between all of them for a second, and then motioned for Kenma to follow him. On his end, Oikawa made a hand motion for everybody to follow him as well. They parted ways in order to find a place to set up their fire.

They ended up starting a campfire with some difficulty at the entrance point to the bridge. Shielded on one side by a cement wall, they tried to get the wood to catch on top of snow and managed to melt themselves a spot where they left out a small fire. It was mostly so that they were given something to do while the other group settled their nerves as well. Oikawa took his job very seriously though, and through Iwaizumi's voice led them into setting up a spot to rest on. It almost felt like everything was alright.
And then the bridge whined and groaned as the wind pushed against its broken wires and hinges, and Hinata remembered that things were not alright. They were stuck. After coming this far, they were stuck.

He wanted to feel disheartened, but he couldn't. Not with all of them still bustling around, following Oikawa's confident instructions and getting ready to settle for the next hour. At least the grey skies above did not rumble with thunder, or become heavy with upcoming snowfall. Their grey afternoon remained grey, if only made a little warmer by the company they had as they rested around the fire that still smelled heavily of gasoline.

A while later, Kuroo returned, bringing with him Kenma, and a tired-looking Daichi who was being worriedly overseen by his vice-captain. The rest of them silently made space around the small, dying campfire for them to join as they approached.

"How's everybody holding up?" Kuroo asked lightly as he sat down next to Tsukishima, probably on purpose to annoy him.

Oikawa signed to Iwaizumi in rapid movements, and Hinata watched with utmost fascination as Iwaizumi yet again read exactly what he was writing in thin air.

"We're fine on our end," he translated calmly. "The wind's not too bad, so we don't need a bigger fire, but we won't get anything bigger than this without a proper fire pit."

"That's good," Kuroo hummed, obviously letting slide the fact that Oikawa had not answered his question.

"And you guys?" Noya asked, clearly still guilty about early. He glanced furtively at Daichi, who seemed tired as he sat down next to Asahi.

"We're fine," their captain replied, breathing deeply into the burning cold air accented by gasoline and smoke. "Sorry for my outburst earlier."

"We're all a bit stressed lately," Kuroo continued on calmly. "And this is definitely a shitty situation. But it's a shitty situation we're gonna deal with, one step at a time, all together. Just like how we've dealt with every shitty situation before this one."

"Have you found a way around the bridge?" Tsukishima asked him, seeming enraptured by his words despite himself. "You sound very sure of yourself."

"No, we haven't," Kenma took upon himself the responsibility of breaking the news to them. The map in his hands crinkled as he clenched his fists, and Hinata felt a pang in his heart as he imagined how guilty his friend must be feeling not to have found a solution. He probably would have felt Kenma's guilt as his own, too, if only he didn't have a problem with empathy since their last night in Shoukyo. It seemed like so long ago since he held something so heavy in his own two hands, and yet the repercussions of that one curled finger on the trigger were still affecting him to this day.

He wondered idly how many of the events they were living every single day would have repercussions on them in the years to come. It seemed crazy for them to carry that kind of emotional and psychological baggage for so long. Daichi's outburst was unsurprising in that context; it was bound to happen to all of them if they were all time bombs ticking.

"What's the plan for now?" Iwaizumi translated for Oikawa, who seemed calm, as he should be. He seemed to have carefully chosen his words as to make them hopeful, rather than condemning.

"We debate what the plan is," Kuroo answered, taking his mittens off to make a show of warming
his hands near the fire, as tiny as it was.

"The bridge is the only one linking Honshu to Shikoku, especially near these parts," Kenma picked up with his explanation. "Our options to get off this island now are limited to crossing the wasteland, towards Kyuushu, which we all know to be impossible in this state. The next bridge to cross to Shikoku is in Okayama, but that would entail walking right back up to Honshu-" Kenma traced the trajectory with his finger on the map "-and heading west until we reach Okayama. However, Okayama is also located in the area delimited as the wasteland, so it's probably inaccessible. That doesn't leave us many options. All the other conventional ways of reaching Shikoku are via boats, and we certainly won't find ferries operating at this time."

"Does that even leave us with any options at all?" Kageyama asked his fellow setter, frowning. He looked worried. "It seems to me like this bridge was our last chance."

"Per se, yes it was our last chance," Kenma shrugged, seeming more pensive than worried.

"What are the unconventional ways of reaching Shikoku, then?" Hinata piped up, hoping to get an answer from someone, anyone at this point.

Unfortunately for them all, nobody answered. They all remained silent, lost in thoughts. It was in moments like these, when all Hinata heard was the howling of the wind and the popping of burning wood that he felt all alone. Even if he knew he wasn't.

"Oh no," Iwaizumi suddenly groaned, and they all turned to him.

"What's wrong?" Noya asked, immediately on high alert.

"Oh, nothing." Iwaizumi waved him off casually. "I mean, I don't know. I'm just translating what this guy just signed to me." He pointed to Oikawa, who, strangely enough, had a look of total exasperation and annoyance on his face.

"Oikawa?" Hinata asked, not liking his expression for some reason.

The Seijoh captain blinked himself out of his annoyed stupor and signed to Iwaizumi. The ace analysed his words, and strangely enough, the same exasperation caught onto his expression quicker than a cold.

"What's up?" Suga also asked, now worried.

"Look at Kuroo," Iwaizumi groaned, pointing to the teen next to Kenma. He seemed to be deep in thought, but a small smile was slowly dawning on his face. With his eyebrows furrowed as such, it made for a very ominous picture.

Hinata suddenly felt cold as he ran Kuroo's innumerable expressions through his mental catalogue and finally fell upon the one he was displaying right now. His blood froze in his veins as he recognized it.

"Oh no," Tsukishima echoed, sounding extremely tired all of a sudden. "He looks suicidal again."

A low groan rippled across all of them, although it was half-hearted, as though they knew that this was coming. The grumbling snapped Kuroo out of his daze, and his usual shit-eating grin stretched across his face.

"Tsukki," he began in a sing-song voice, drawing another groan from the blond. "I would have you know that suicidal feelings do not come from an intense desire to die, but an intense longing for
change required to keep on living."

"And near-certain death is just unfortunate collateral damage in all the suicidal plans you've ever had before," Tsukishima mocked with a disapproving plan, although his comment did draw a chuckle here and there from those who had first-hand witnessed his plans worthy of daredevils.

"Unfortunate collateral indeed," Kuroo hummed in good spirits, which made Hinata even more curious about what he was about to tell them. "But just hear me out."

"Knowing that your plans are half the reason we're still here, I unfortunately have to agree to let you continue," Daichi chuckled, lightening the mood by displaying good nature once more.

"Here we go…"

"Alright, so!" Kuroo exclaimed, making a few of them jump lightly. "Long story short, and details aside, I suggest we walk across the strait to Shikoku."

They all remained silent, if not letting out a collective sigh before they kept their peace.

"What, no protests? Nobody calling me an idiot?" Kuroo mock-pouted. "I guess you've finally figured out that I'm a genius, huh?"

"No," Tsukishima shoved him lightly with his shoulder. "We're silent because we know that no matter what logical protest we end up making, you're still gonna find a way to shoot them down, and we're gonna go with your dumb plan anyway."

"There's no way that's happened enough times for you to tell that so quickly," Kuroo flinched lightly.

"Yeah, it has," Kenma quietly added, making Kuroo deflate.

"Gee, thanks, o' best friend of mine."

"Kuroo, just tell us why you think that walking a kilometre on ice in one of the most turbulent waterways in the country is a sound idea," Daichi prompted him so neutrally that if it wasn't for his choice of words, they could've sworn he wasn't sceptical about the plan.

"Cause it's all we have," Kuroo argued lightly, and they all knew at once that he was right. It was the only option they had left.

"How do we know that the ice is thick enough?" Suga asked, glancing over the side of the bridge as if to check the ice underneath. From their spot, they couldn't see anything, though.

"We don't," Kuroo shrugged. "It looks thick because it's white, but we won't know until we actually try to make our way across it."

"That seems like the least safe thing to do," Iwaizumi frowned. "If we distribute our weight by crawling, though, it shouldn't be too bad."

"You're on his side now?" Tsukishima's eyebrows rose high on his forehead before he frowned. "I guess it had to happen."

"Just admit I'm the best, Tsukki."

"It would be best to separate our weight by staggering ourselves across the ice," Tsukishima continued as if Kuroo's cocky remark hadn't ticked him off. It clearly had. "In triangular formation, maybe, so that we don't focus all of our weight on one piece of ice at the same time."
"Good idea," Daichi continued. "And at worst, if someone feels the ice become unsteady under them, they can let everyone else know, and we can move the whole formation to the side."

"That's gonna take a lot of coordination," Kageyama pitched in. "We're going to need someone to lead at the front who will be able to keep us on a straight path towards the other shore and make sure to adjust course necessarily."

"Following by eyesight alone might be a challenge, too," Noya hypothesized. "The wind is whipping the snow off the ice, so we don't have to crawl through snow, but there are still small whirlwinds here and there that could blind us. If one of us gets out of formation, we could lose the whole thing in a second."

"Well…" Hinata added, eager to make himself useful, even if it was just to brainstorm. "If we had a way to keep ourselves close together, or at least had a way to tell one another where we are, so we can keep our relative positions in mind…"

They all fell silent in thought at his suggestion, and Hinata felt slightly proud of himself for contributing.

Suddenly, Oikawa moved. His sudden jerking caught everybody's attention, and they turned to watch him unzip his backpack and dig through it. He smiled when he found what he was looking for, the thin scars on his lips crinkling when he did.

He tossed them a bundle of rope, which landed in the snow with a thud, right next to the dying fire.

"Paracord!" Suga exclaimed, immediately catching on. "Great idea, Oikawa! Paracord is strong enough to keep us all tied together and aware of our positions, and is probably strong enough to bear weight, also, in case we need to pull someone across the ice."

"What if someone falls through the ice?" Asahi asked worriedly. "God forbid that happens!"

"In that case, just swim right up from where you came and don't panic, no matter what," Kuroo shrugged. "If we're tied with paracord, even if it's not strong enough to pull someone out of the water entirely, it'll allow us to follow our way back to the person and maybe fish them to the surface before pulling them out."

"If someone falls through, though, and we're all tied, won't that drag all of us in?" Hinata gasped. "That would be horrible!"

"And that's why you can't panic if you fall through," Daichi dictated with utmost seriousness. By the tone of his voice, Hinata realized that this was no longer a possibility, but a sure-fire plan that they were going to carry out no matter what. They didn't have any other choice. "Breathe, rise to the surface, and don't panic. We'll all be around each other, and there's no way we won't notice someone falling through. If it happens, we'll deal with it when we get there. But nobody is going to die here."

"Then that settles it," Kenma sighed, folding his map. "I guess we're making our way across the strait. It's about a kilometre long, so if we go slowly, it should take us about half an hour to crawl across it."

Half an hour on the ice. A half-hour window where anything could happen at a moment's notice and they could run the risk of losing someone in the blink of an eye.

Hinata felt the sudden urge to hold everybody around him and reassure himself, and all of them, that they would be okay. Or would he hold them to say goodbye, just in case?
It was a morbid thought that didn't suit the hopeful undertones of their dangerous plan. Hinata tried not to think about it and refocused on the conversation at hand, especially since everybody suddenly seemed conflicted.

"I was out of it for a second," he whispered to Kageyama, leaning in. "Did something come up?"

"We're wondering who's going to be taking the lead at the head of the triangle," Kageyama answered. "It'd have to be someone light, so that there's a minimal risk of falling through on thin ice, and someone quick to react and redirect the other columns if he feels the ice become unstable on their current course."

"And who are we considering?" Hinata asked, perhaps too loudly, because everybody suddenly turned to him.

And then he realized that they hadn't turned to him because he'd spoken up.

"… Oh no."

"Oh yes, Shrimpy."

"If we die, I reject all responsibility!" Hinata whined, raising his arms when Suga began to struggle to tighten the knot around his waist. "You were the ones who decided I was going first."

"You'll be fine," Noya chimed in, tugging the ends of the knot at his waist as if tightening the rope would do anything to improve their survival chances. "I'll be right by your side to lead the right side of the triangle. Just focus on the left side and don't think of anything else."

"The other shore looks so far away…" Asahi fumbled with his hands, accepting the paracord that Daichi handed him once he'd finished tying a knot around himself. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Any other well-timed epiphanies anyone wants to have right now?" Kuroo offered sarcastically, tying the paracord around his own waist as well. When no one replied, he shrugged and handed the rope to Iwaizumi. "Yup. Thought so. Ice-crawling it is!"

"Look, the less we think about it, the easier it'll be," Iwaizumi huffed, reading Oikawa's hands to transmit his exasperated message as well. "This ice looks thick, in any case."

"We'll be perfectly fine!" Tsukishima groaned out, tapping his foot impatiently on the powdery snow dusting the shore. "Now let's stop wasting our breath and get on with this."

"Patience, Tsukishima," Daichi rolled his eyes, used to his temper already. "Once everybody is tied up and ready, we're going to head out. How are we doing?" he asked to the group as a whole.

"I think everyone is just tightening knots now," Suga reported back, glancing over them all to make sure they were all connected by the long, relatively thin-looking rope. Although they all knew paracord to be a very strong synthetic rope material, the look of it wasn't too reassuring.

"Then let's go," Noya bumped Hinata's shoulder encouragingly, shrugging him towards the nearby ice. The ice seemed thinner on the shore and it made Hinata nervous, but he nodded in understanding.

"Okay… Left side, follow me," he motioned to the people tied behind him and hesitated only slightly
before stepping forward, putting a first foot lightly onto the ice.

"Oi, you have to crawl, stupid," Kageyama grunted from behind him, following when the rope at his waist tugged.

"I'm sorry, gosh," Hinata tensed, hesitating a little longer before gently getting onto his knees. The ice whined underneath him, but did not give. He laid on his stomach when he was sure he wouldn't fall in, dragging Kageyama into a similar position. "Okay. Here we go."

Putting one arm in front of the other, and one knee bent up after the other, he began to crawl. The ice was smooth underneath him, the wind brushing all snow out of his way, so that when he moved, he only grasped onto ice and slid himself across.

Noya soon joined next to him, a few arms of distance apart, leading the right column across the ice as well. Every crawl forward only took them a few inches towards their goal, and by the time everybody had gotten on the ice, Hinata already felt like he'd been crawling forever.

Pulling his entire weight across the ice wasn't easy on his upper body. Although the slippery surface helped in lessening the load, Hinata was tense, and his muscles were rigid with cold and the chilling fear of what could happen if something went wrong here. With every breath, he tried to feel the ice beneath him, test for any weakness, for any sign that it would give in, and listen for any cracks or groans of strain, anything he could do to warn the others on time. The stench of the sea wafted on the wind, and despite pulling his scarf up to cover his nose, Hinata soon got sick of smelling the salt in the air. It was nauseating.

Once in a while, the boys behind him, now dispersed in a diagonal to the left, yelled shifts in formation to one another. Noya, too, shifted his position a few times, calling out the shift to the boys behind him so they could follow when he moved more to the right. Hinata watched them do all that and could not help but wonder if he was doing something wrong. So far, the ice seemed strong enough to him... Was he missing something?

"How are you holding up, Shouyo?" As in sensing his discomfort, Noya was the one who called out to him first, moving a bit closer to him when he could.

"I'm fine," Hinata gritted out, his heart beating so hard against the ice that he wondered for a moment if it could actually crack.

"You're very tense," Noya remarked offhandedly. "It's better if you try to relax. Being too rigid is going to cost you more energy on the long run."

"How are you relaxed when we could fall through the ice at any moment?" Hinata raised an eyebrow, his senpai's casual attitude doing him a bit of good nonetheless.

"It doesn't feel that thin right now," Noya shrugged. "I figured I'd worry when the time to worry came. It's important to focus and move quickly, nothing else."

"Fair enough," Hinata mumbled, somewhat embarrassed that he was so stressed, unlike everybody else, apparently. "I'll try."

"Good," Noya nodded at him, and surely, if his face wasn't covered by a scarf, he would've been smiling encouragingly.

Hinata tried to calm his palpitating heart and took a deep breath before crawling forward once again. His eyes stayed fixed in front of him, where, in the distance, the opposite shore seemed to get further and further away. There was mist and snow clouding up the view, and it wasn't very encouraging to
feel like they were making no progress at all.

But he pushed on, one arm and one leg, then the others, one in front of the other as his clothes scratched the surface of the ice and his panting breaths moistened the inside of his scarf. He pushed on, and only stopped when a sudden, strong gust of wind threatened to send him sliding across the ice. He grasped onto whatever grip he could get and braced, just as his companions behind him struggled as well. He heard a few of them crying out in surprise, and Hinata's rope tugged a bit, but a quick look backward after the wind had passed reassured him that they were all still there and getting back into formation.

"Are you all okay?" he called out to his column.

"We're all fine," Kageyama grunted in response, crawling back into formation from where the wind had pushed him.

"Whoa, Hinata!" Noya suddenly called, getting his rapt attention immediately. The alarm in his tone was what captivated Hinata's attention most. "I think we're going to have to brace!"

"What is that supposed to mean!?" Hinata suddenly felt cold, trying to make heads and tails of his senpai's worry.

"The bridge!" Noya pointed at the large structure, which they had left a bit to their right. It was quite a vague indication, and yet Hinata immediately saw what Noya was pointing to.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" he gasped, his eyes going to the part of the bridge that was broken. A large piece of rubble was hanging off a wire, swinging at the wind's leisure, and every oscillation had Hinata's breathing hitching.

"It's far away, though," Noya continued. "I don't know if it'll affect us if it falls."

"Let's not take any chances!" Hinata suggested urgently. "Let's get moving and get off this ice as soon as possible!"

They both began moving in unison, every crawl forward just a little more hurried, just a little more tense, just a little more unnerving as their eyes darted frequently towards the rubble threatening to fall. The other shore seemed so far away, and returning on their steps now seemed not only impossible, but also inconceivable.

They pushed on, and perhaps their wordless prayers were heard by whatever god was left beyond the bleeding sky. When the rubble finally fell with one last groan on its metal support wires, Hinata's heart fell with it. And yet, as he numbly listened to someone amongst them screaming to brace themselves, the sweat rolling down his neck made him feel hot and cold all at once, and he felt like it would not get worse than this.

The rubble crashed into the ice a few dozen feet away from them, and the reverberations of the impact shook the surface underneath their bellies so hard that Hinata heard the ice groan in protest. With a majestic crack, the ice around the point of impact had shattered, letting the turbulent water underneath rise and drench the cracking surface around the hole. The surrounding areas were beginning to splinter too, possibly because the water was abusing their weak cracks and dragging more pieces into the gaping hole left by the rubble.

However, Hinata realized, over the loud beating of his heart against his sternum, that the ice underneath them had not given in, and new hope, as well as wordless gratitude to the odds welled within him.
"We have to keep moving!" he called out, making good on his order and putting an arm in front of him. The wind now carried droplets of water from the hole as it whipped the occasionally exposed skin of his face, and by the sound of crackling and groaning still rising from where more pieces of ice were swirling down into the water, the ice wasn't yet done giving into the currents.

Noya had called a similar order to his column, and with aching abdomens and necks, they crawled onward. A gentle mist obstructed their view of the opposite shore, but Hinata could feel it getting closer now. With a disaster averted, it always felt like things would get better from then on.

The water underneath them seemed to get more turbulent as they proceeded. It just felt like something was pushing against the ice, roaming right underneath the surface and occasionally rising to force against it, as if to break it. Hinata hated to let his imagination off its leash, especially in a dire situation such as his current one, but he could not help but dream of what laid below the ice. Of all the creatures swimming in the black water, stalking their blurry silhouettes above and hoping to catch them should they fall below. Of all the currents crisscrossing under the guise of a gentle surface, eager to grab him and drag him down until he, too, ultimately rested on the seabed for anemones to consume. Of the rocky depths, of the underwater canyons and valleys, of the cave systems that would drag him out of the Onaruto strait and violently spit him out into the ocean to err until his lungs became ponds themselves.

He shivered when it felt like a shadow swam by underneath him, and this time, it wasn't because he was cold.

"Let's hurry and get off the water," he murmured, mostly to himself, and kept his eyes riveted on the opposite shore instead of the scintillating ice separating him from the unknown depths below.

Despite the movement underneath the surface, the ice itself remained strong as they progressed across it, dutifully and slowly, but with all the determination in the world to make it across. Even when the chill radiated through their heavy, damp clothing and seeped into their bones, they gritted their clattering teeth and pushed onward. The snow gently fluttering onto their bodies felt almost pleasant at this point, if not for the wind sweeping the flakes right off of them in gusts of varying violence.

"Land ho!" Noya laughed breathlessly as they approached the opposite shore, finally. The nearest landing point seemed to be a slope of rocks that rose up to become a snowy hill, and then what must have been a border walk, back in the day.

"We're almost there, everyone!" Hinata echoed with all the enthusiasm he had left, and found his energy in the cheers that echoed his, all the way from the front to the back of both columns.

They crawled over the ice, which got whiter in colour the shallower the waters became, and passed through the small area where the looming bridge cast a shadow that dropped the local temperature by a few more degrees. Hinata could almost feel solid land underneath his feet at this point, and was looking forward to getting his frostbitten belly off the ice.

"Here we are!" he announced as his hands curled around the first rocks lining the shore, and he gave one last pull to slide his entire body onto the shore. The rope around his waist tugged at the sudden movement, and Hinata dropped to his knees as soon as the last of his toes had gotten off the ice. "We made it!"

"We did it!" Noya echoed enthusiastically, mimicking Hinata's move to find himself on (relatively) dry land as well.

"Pull us forward!" Kageyama called out from where he still laid on the ice. His nose was red, like
everyone else's, and with Hinata's sudden burst of good mood, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Come on, idiot! Do I have to do everything for you?" he teased, sitting on the snowy rocks and tugging on the rope at his waist. Noya imitated him to drag his column towards him as well, and soon enough, Kageyama and Yamaguchi were on the shore as well.

One by one, the newcomers helped pull their friends across the last of the icy expanse, until all of them were resting on the snow, exhausted.

"Did we actually just crawl a whole kilometre across a frozen river?" Iwaizumi panted out, helpless to mimic Oikawa when his best friend began to laugh, noiseless but laughing all the same. Hinata was helpless, too. Their mirth was contagious. One by one, they all began to laugh, as if no longer afraid of expanding their lungs and pushing against ice that could easily break. They had conquered yet another obstacle. It was a reminder that despite all their setbacks and standstills, all their losses and tragedies, all their despair and hopelessness, they had yet to stop moving forward.

"It wasn't a river, it was a strait," Tsukishima corrected, if not with a touch of humour.

"Spare us your nerdiness, Mr. Tall-blondie-and-nerdy," Kuroo teased, playfully throwing a fistful of powdery snow on him just to hear him squawk. "Point is, we made it."

"Did you see how that piece of the bridge fell, though?" Noya exclaimed, sitting up to take a look at the bridge extending back to the island of Awaji. "That was some scary stuff! It was really loud and the ice just- bam! Splintered and flew off everywhere!"

"I was really sure the ice under us would break as well," Asahi let out a loud huff of relief as he pillowxed his hair against a mound of snow. "The water in the hole was dragging everything into it. Maybe it would've dragged us in as well!"

"If this was a movie, it might have," Daichi chuckled. "But we were a bit far from the whirlpool near the impact site to have it affect the ice under us."

"There was a whirlpool?" Hinata asked curiously. "That's so cool!"

"Yes. In fact, the Onaruto strait is known as a touristic location for its whirlpools," Daichi nodded in a self-satisfied manner. "My parents used to be huge fans of travel and visited them once. They're really impressive. The whirlpools are the reason why the water is so turbulent here. If we fell, it would be a monumental task to get out of the water, if not impossible."

"But you said-!"

"I wasn't going to tell you that before we set out," Daichi frowned at Iwaizumi, who seemed distressed by this information. "What was I going to say? Best of luck crossing the ice, and if you fall, there's no hope for you?!"

They all went silent for a moment, listening to the wind howling through the metal fixtures of the bridge above their heads. Despite the secrecy, he was right. He had been right.

"Looks like I'm not the only mastermind around these parts," Kuroo quipped lightly, and got up, dusting snow off his snowpants. "We should get moving so we don't lose daylight hours."

"Right," Daichi seconded a bit more quietly, and also got up. They all followed their move to rise, and began undoing the paracord around their waists.

Once the paracord was wrapped in a bundle and shoved back into Oikawa's backpack, they climbed
the small hill to the board walk and followed the railings mostly buried under snow to find their way to the road again. They went around the buried cars frozen in their journey onto the bridge and left the waterfront behind them as they entered the next town.

They walked only for another half hour before the adrenaline of their ice-walking experience drained their energy, and they elected to stop in a house to eat and rest. It was a bit earlier than their usual stopping time, but it gave them an opportunity to fix up the house for their stay and raid the surrounding houses for supplies before the sun went down and the chill of darkness wrapped itself around the walls of the building yet again.

With their clothes hanging to dry by the fire in the living room, they slept together in the master bedroom once more, as they always did nowadays, as if afraid that one of them might be taken from them in the cover of the night. Hinata found himself sharing with Kenma, and held him tightly, so very tightly, so grateful and so relieved to have him. His mind went back to what Daichi had said about the strait and its impressive whirlpools, and wasn't surprised when his nightmares starred his companions as they were swallowed up by the swirling water's greedy maws.

He woke to darkness, and spent the rest of his sleepless night matching the rise and fall of Kenma's chest.

They set out in the morning as usual, the bags under their eyes painting exhaustion on the pale canvas of their faces despite the long hours of sleep they were allowing themselves to get. At this point, the only rest that would cure their exhaustion would be peace, or death.

The snowy landscape welcomed them back into its frozen arms as soon as they stepped out, peppering them with kisses of snow and embraces of wind. As they moved away from the waterfront, they were rewarded with more clement weather, and perhaps a grey sky that lightened a shade from its usual dreariness.

Soon enough, snowy signs (and a snowy Kenma) let them know that they had entered the region of Naruto. The expressway that had become their guiding path now curved south, towards Tokushima, and they eagerly took the split towards their destination, which was not too far now.

It took them the rest of the day to head to the city of Tokushima, slowly but surely carving their existence through the banks of untouched snow on their way there. Unlike all the other places that had been their homes for a night, they elected to stay overnight in a house further within the city, as opposed to its edge. They weren't sure what they were looking for, but if there was something to be found, it would be found at the heart of the city.

Something new -and slightly foreign- kept Hinata up that night. Kageyama seemed to sense it when he slept with his arms around his smaller companion, who fidgeted and changed position often, and woke multiple times just long enough to grunt at him to go back to sleep. Hinata tried hard to sleep and suppress the bizarre emotion running laps in the sulci of his forebrain.

It was excitement. He was looking forward to tomorrow, just this once.

When they woke, Kuroo, Daichi and Oikawa, who had woken before them, debriefed them on the plan of action. Since they did not know what they were looking for, they would split up into teams of two and cover more territory, and explore the city centre for anything that could tip them off about the unregistered survivor camps. Hinata spent a while thinking of what he was supposed to look for, since there clearly weren't going to be flyers about the camp lying around.

He was paired with Kageyama, unsurprisingly, and the two of them set out with nothing but a vague goal in mind.
In retrospect, not knowing what they were looking for was probably the biggest reason why all the teams returned fruitless from their searches as dusk fell. The lack of results was mildly disappointing, but as they prepped for the night, they were kept hopeful by the promise of trying again tomorrow.

Hinata slept soundly that night, hoping to find an answer, or at least a clue, anything that could help them find the safety they craved.

Hope gave him the energy to stand in the morning, and standing gave him the opportunity to find the answer he wanted.

Kageyama was the one to notice it, actually, but Hinata made sure to mention that it was a joint effort when they reported back to the rest that evening. It wasn’t anything incredible, or even a clue that gave away all they needed to know. In fact, it may not even have been related to their current objective, but it was all they had to go on.

Finally, other than being annoying, the snow had become helpful. Kageyama had noticed that snow had been displaced in front of an apartment building that they had seen yesterday, which raised questions about how the snow had been moved. It seemed like it had been moved in order to clear the entrance to the building so that the access to the building was unhindered by stacked snow.

Kuroo especially had gotten excited at this observation, since he always liked the more subtle clues and trusted them more than outward, obvious clues. It was largely due to his enthusiasm over this observation (and the subsequent hair-ruffling that had both Hinata and Kageyama struggling to comb down their unruly locks afterwards) that the team changed spots for the night, and migrated over to a store facing the apartment building so that they could observe. Battening down the hatches in a store was much more different than prepping a house, and sleeping on the cold tiles between the mostly-empty shelves was less pleasant that it sounded.

They took guard shifts that night to observe the apartment building for any activity, an hour for each of them so that they would not exhaust themselves. However, when the sun rose, nobody had anything to report, and a snowstorm had begun to brew outside.

They moved back to the previous house, if only because they would freeze if they stayed in the store during the snowstorm, and huddled around the fireplace as nature came undone outside. The wind rattling the windowpanes made them anxious, but was also strangely soothing in the sense that it promised that nobody would be outside until the snowstorm subsided.

It lasted overnight, forcing them to stay inside. It was weird to spend a whole day cooped up, especially since they’d been on the road for a couple of weeks now, and a strange itch began to bother Hinata as he paced around the house, one that he couldn’t locate, and that he sure as hell could not scratch.

Some of them took the confinement better than others. Iwaizumi and Oikawa seemed content to enjoy a calm moment, and Hinata noted that they spent the whole evening in front of the fireplace, sipping snow-tea and practicing their sign language with the book open in front of them. Asahi had fun working in the kitchen, melting a bunch of snow over the sink fire for drinking and bathing water. Tsukishima seemed in a less foul mood than usual, especially when he washed his hair with warm water and laid out to dry in front of the fireplace.

In contrast, Kuroo seemed fidgety and paced around quite often, and Hinata thought he even saw him exercising in one of the bedrooms. Noya, too, was buzzing around from group to group, trying to find something to do. Surprisingly, Kageyama seemed restless as well, ending up opting for an early night if only to stop having to find something to occupy himself. Hinata didn’t feel the same anxiety at their confinement. He was very happy just watching his friends go about their usual day.
and enjoy the warmth of the house they'd appropriated for themselves.

He briefly wondered if it would've been possible for them to create some kind of Shirasagi for themselves. If, given more experience and resources, they could've created their own safe haven rather than run around trying to find an existing one, just like Cyrus and the others from Osaka had done.

However, just watching some of their group members get restless made Hinata realize that there was a certain wanderlust within their hearts that they just could not silence. They would not be able to settle in a place and call it home.

And that got him thinking about where they were headed, and whether or not there really was a final destination out there for them to reach.

They slept huddled as usual under covers and sleeping bags, listening to the wind howl outside. And when it quieted, the ones left awake listened to the soothing breathing of those sleeping, and easily joined them in their dreams.

It still snowed in the morning, but it definitely wasn't the snowstorm they'd experienced overnight. With that in mind, they all packed up again and returned to the store, which was now blocked off by a few feet of snow that they needed to clear before reaching. The apartment building facing them still remained as they'd last seen it, with its entrance piled high with untouched snow.

They settled down for yet another cold, long day of observation. At least the store still carried many untouched books and magazines, which were a welcome distraction for most of them, whether they were drawing faces on skin mags, playing crossword puzzles, or just enjoying learning about Galapagos turtles. Other than Noya being incredibly fascinated by the latter, there was not much excitement in the daytime.

Excitement came at nighttime, when Hinata was shaken awake by Tsukishima, who looked more jittery than ever before. In fact, Hinata realized as he slowly regained his spirits, he probably had never shown them this much energy at once ever before.

"It's not my turn to keep watch already, is it?" Hinata yawned as he rose to sit up.

"Wake up the others," Tsukishima immediately ordered, sounding tense, and yet somehow excited. "There's a car outside."

"I'm on it," Hinata breathed out, immediately jumping up. They split up, Tsukishima returning to his guard post and Hinata heading towards Daichi to rouse him first.

Daichi rose with very little effort, being a notoriously light sleeper, and the look on Hinata's face had him snapping to attention without a wasted moment. He threw the covers off of himself, making sure not to bother Suga sleeping next to him, and looked at Hinata firmly.

"Did something happen?" he asked, as if he'd been ready to ask this question since the moment he fell asleep.

"Tsukishima said that there is a car outside," Hinata reported in a whisper, kneeling next to his captain. "He told me to wake everyone, but I wanted to wake you first."

"Thank you, Hinata," Daichi nodded, urgently standing. Unsure what to do, Hinata stood as well making a move to follow him. He was stopped by a wave of Daichi's hand. "Go wake Kuroo and Oikawa for me. Please."
"Okay," Hinata nodded unsurely, hesitating a bit before letting Daichi jog away to get dressed. Instead, he went for two lumps huddled in the next aisle, next to the dish soap, and shook them both.

"Huh...? What'zzat...?" Kuroo yawned as he jerked awake, Oikawa next to him rising a bit more gracefully and stretching. Hinata recalled that they'd slept together because Iwaizumi had tucked in with Noya for an early night. He hadn't imagined that the two would get along so well, actually.

"Tsukki woke me and told me to wake the captain, who told me to wake you two," Hinata quickly briefed them. "There's a car outside."

"Well, we should go check it out, then, right?" Kuroo stretched as well, not seeming rushed as Daichi had been. In fact, Oikawa was the one who rolled his eyes and tugged on his arm to get him to stand.

They headed off in a brisk step without any other orders for Hinata, who stood in the dark aisle and wondered what he should do next. He could just go back to sleep. The store was not well insulated, so the air was chilly, and he missed the warmth of his shared sleeping bag. The thought of Kageyama's arms beckoned him back to his sleeping spot. But then again, nobody had outwardly rejected his presence at whatever was happening outside, and curiosity overrode whatever common sense had thawed out of his frozen head.

Against his better judgment, he lightly jogged over to where he kept his coat, and began getting dressed.

Hinata had forgotten how cold the nights were on the southwest of the island. If the temperature during the day dropped below zero, then the night must have dropped below... well... a lot less than zero. All of this, point being that Hinata immediately began to shiver as soon as he stepped foot outside. He had forgone the snowpants, since he didn't intend on staying out long, but when a gust of wind knocked his thin knees together, he began to regret his decision.

He immediately worked on spotting his friends. They were standing on the other side of the street, where a large truck with huge wheels was parked. It was even larger than the truck they'd jacked from Nagoya. No wonder they all looked amazed by it. Hinata jogged towards them.

"Who owns the truck?" he asked the small group as he joined in, noting how Daichi jumped in surprise at his sudden appearance.

"Hinata!" he gasped. "What are you doing out here?"

"Well, nobody told me not to come. So what's with the truck?"

"No clue," Kuroo answered instead, glancing up at the vehicle with that usual incalculable look in his eyes. "Tsukki says he ran in to report it as soon as it came down the street. By the time he got back, it was parked and its owners were gone."

"They couldn't have gone far in this cold," Tsukishima continued. "If only the wind would settle, we could probably find tracks in the snow."

"So we're gonna try and find the owners of the vehicle?" Hinata deduced.

Oikawa nodded, nudging Kuroo to read his hands. With him, he seemed to be making simpler and slower hand movements.
"Yeah," Kuroo nodded. "If they own a truck around these parts, they're definitely used to living here. They're our best bet for information."

"Nice!" Hinata exclaimed, glancing up at the truck again. Amidst the flurries kicked up by the whistling wind, it looked tall, dark, and imposing. A sudden thought accompanied the shiver that ran down his spine. "Can I ask a question, though?"

"It better not be dumb," Tsukishima huffed, crossing his arms.

"I mean, it probably isn't..." Hinata pouted thoughtfully, but decided to ask anyway. "How can we be sure that these people are the good guys?"

There was the sound of a door slamming open, and even through the screeching wind, Hinata heard the telltale click of a loaded gun. The blood in his veins suddenly turned to ice.

"Halt! Put your hands in the air right now!" There was the sound of many footsteps pounding in the snow, and Hinata had his arms up by reflex even before the newcomers pulled into their sight, shoulders squared and guns blazing.

"Well..." Kuroo sighed in exasperation, slowly putting his arms up in defeat. He didn't even seem surprised. "I guess we have our answer."

"Did I fucking stutter?" the same man at the lead of the group barked out, taking large steps towards them. Hinata noted the snowshoes tied to his feet before his gaze turned back to the man's scarf-wound face. "Get on your fucking knees, all of you! Now!"

"Fuck," Daichi groaned, slowly complying. Hinata followed his example and seriously regretted not wearing snowpants now. By the looks on all of their faces, they all had the same thought as they knelt in the snow. Strangely enough, both Oikawa and Kuroo looked resigned and complied quietly.

"What the fuck were you snooping around our truck for?" the same man with the gun asked, nudging Oikawa with the barrel of his very much loaded and very much un-safety'd weapon. Oikawa seemed unfazed. "Fuckin' answer me, you ice cold bitch, or I'll shoot you!"

"He doesn't speak," Kuroo interrupted him coldly. "He can't."

"Okay then, hot shot." The gun turned to Kuroo, who turned his empty gaze to it. Hinata always hated that glassy look in his eyes. "You fuckin' tell me what the deal is, then!"

"Look, we mean you no harm-" Daichi began, an involuntary whimper escaping his throat when the man levelled his gun towards him, and fired. The warning shot boomed out deafeningly into the open and buried itself in the snow right next to Daichi's thigh.

The next time the man spoke, Hinata could not hear him past the ringing in his ears and the painfully cold air hyperventilating his lungs. His head felt light and his hands shook violently in his attempt to keep them up. He felt nauseous and he didn't know why. Tears were burning his eyes as they welled up. His back hunched over, slightly, and then all of a sudden as he doubled over, face-first into the snow, clutching his stomach. Voices rose from around him, but he was busy trying not to throw up, imagining the bullet, his own fingers on the trigger, what if Daichi had died? What if he'd killed him? It had been so easy that one time, such a mindless act to pull the trigger and end a man's life, so what if his fingers found another trigger and his mind found another victim and his conscience drew another blank?

There were arms around him, holding him firmly around the shoulders, gently coaxing his burnt face out of the snow. Hinata still felt sick to the stomach, but as the touch grounded him, his head stopped
spinning, and voices filtered in slowly.

"Look, I don't think these guys are rogues-"

"You know better than I do that appearances can be deceiving. We've lost to them before."

Hinata glanced up behind him instead, the arms loosening and drawing back as soon as he moved. He only just had time to see his unlikely saviour draw back, glancing away.

"Tsukishima...?" he grunted out, his throat raw from hyperventilating on freezing air. "You...?"

"Stay calm, idiot. Now's not the time to have a flashback," the blond muttered, burying his nose in his scarf and refusing to meet his eyes. His words were said with a lot less edge than usual, though, and Hinata's heart warmed at the expression of sincerity from the aloof blond.

"Thank you," he murmured back, still clutching his stomach and willing the nausea away. He glanced around him and found the rest of their party looking at him worriedly but silently, and he nodded shakily to appease their worries.

"Look!" a female voice suddenly exclaimed over the sound of rushing wind, and they all turned to the woman to get back in tune with the crisis at hand. Hinata's heart considerably slowed when he noted that the man threatening them had lowered his gun. "They have a kid with them. Would the rogues have a kid amongst their ranks?"

"Well they could-"

"That was rhetorical, Kizuna. Don't answer. Of course they wouldn't!" the woman groaned out.

"I-I'm not a kid," Hinata interrupted, feeling mildly insulted despite the fading anxiety still freezing him in his place in the snow.

"Hinata-" Daichi began with a worried warning, but was interrupted yet again by the newcomers, who turned to them, without their guns blazing this time. Thankfully.

"Well you look like a kid to me," the unnamed woman shrugged, approaching him. At the sight of the gun clutched to her chest, Hinata could not help but tense and swallow heavily. She made no move to grab it, though, unlike the man accompanying her. "What are you, like.. twelve? Thirteen? I'm sorry my friend here scared you with his gun. He's a bit trigger happy."

"Am not."

"I'm sixteen," Hinata frowned, a bit insulted.

"Sixteen." The woman whistled in disbelief. "Incredible. What's a kid like you doing out here?"

"Well, we'd be more than happy to explain," Kuroo jumped in, perhaps a bit annoyed. His voice warped when his teeth clattered together. "Perhaps you'd be as kind as to let us off the cold-ass ground and inside for our explanation?"

"Sure," the woman nodded, motioning them up. It was with mild hesitation and severe relief that Hinata jumped to his feet and brushed the snow off his drenched sweatpants. His companions mimicked him just as eagerly.

"You're just gonna let them walk?" the man, Kizuna, grunted in dissatisfaction. He still seemed wary of them. Ironically, Hinata couldn't fault him for that specifically. Almost blowing Daichi's leg off,
yes. But not trusting strangers snooping around? He kind of understood.

"Get over it, Kizu," the woman groaned, turning her back and heading towards the apartment building, clearly as an invitation. "I don't see anyone else complaining."

Begrudgingly, Kizuna seemed to agree, and turned around to briskly walk back to the building. That left the five teens to wade through the snow in their wet pants and follow, if only a bit slowly.

Hinata was glad to find himself out of the flurries and wind once he stepped into the apartment building lobby, and he immediately began to work on rubbing feeling back into his frozen arms. Nevermind his legs.

"You're really underdressed for this weather, you know," the woman remarked obviously, removing her scarf, goggles and hat and letting her long hair fall down her back. "You'll catch a cold."

"Thanks for the tip," Kuroo laughed a bit breathily, his vocal cords too cold to function properly. "Next time, we'll stay inside and turn the heating up."

"Touché."

"Why are you here?" the man, Kizuna, barked out, seemingly unbothered by the fact that he'd very rudely interrupted. "Tokushima is supposed to be empty."

"Kizu, calm down!" the woman rolled her eyes in exasperation, then turned to Daichi, bowing lightly. "Sorry about him. This is his first mission outside, and he's a bit nervous."

"I'm not nervous, for fuck's sake!"

"I'm Satoko," the woman introduced herself, wholly ignoring her fuming companion, who had yet to take his hat, goggles and scarf off. The tumble of her black hair was elegant, and her dark eyes faded into the shadows of the lobby, and yet, she looked gorgeous. Hinata couldn't stop staring. She could easily be his mother, though, probably. "Sorry for the rude introduction earlier."

"It's a pleasure, Satoko," Daichi nodded to her a bit cautiously. "I'm Daichi. My friends here are Kuroo, Oikawa, Tsukishima and Hinata."

Hinata joined the others in a simultaneous bow, curiously observing the proceedings and saying nothing. His earlier panic attack had drained him of most of his energy.

"So, Daichi," she continued calmly, putting her hands on her hips. "Tell us why you're around these parts. From what we're told, there shouldn't be any life on Shikoku other than in the camps."

"You know of the camps?" Kuroo choked out in a rush. "Please, tell us all you can."


"Well, we actually travelled to Shikoku in hopes of finding one of these aforementioned camps," Daichi explained, sounding just as anxious as Kuroo. "We've come a long way with the rest of our companions and along our journey, gathered that we should look in Tokushima for clues about these camps first."

"We just happened to stumble across your tracks a few days ago and waited out here in hopes of meeting you," Kuroo completed. "Now, it's your turn."

"So impatient," Satoko giggled in genuine amusement. "You really are a hot shot."
Kuroo stayed mercifully silent.

"Well, I guess I'll indulge you," Satoko shrugged. "Depends which camp you're trying to find, though."

"Any one of them," Kuroo assured her. "The nearest one."

"Well, that would be Camp Awa, in the nearby city of the same name," Satoko answered, a sly glint in her eyes. "What luck. That's where Kizuna and I are from."

"Thank you," Daichi breathed out a sigh of relief and bowed to her gratefully. Hinata only found it proper to bow as well.

"What would you like in return for this information?" Kuroo suddenly asked, his tone flat and serious. They all flinched at the sound of it.

"Kuroo-"

"Ah, ah," Satoko teased, waggling her finger. "An answer for an answer, hot shot! So tell me. Why do you want to find this camp so badly?"

"We just want to settle somewhere safe." Hinata murmured, dropping his head as energy left him with every word. "We just want this whole journey to end."

"We've come a long way, always looking for a safe place to call home, but so far, everywhere we've been has fallen short," Daichi clarified, sadly glancing at his kouhai. "The camps of Shikoku were our final hope. We would either make it there, or die trying."

"Fair enough," Satoko nodded, losing a hit of joviality to a hint of respect. "Sounds like you've come a long way."

"From Miyagi, actually, with many detours along the way."

"Damn."

"Now," Kuroo stepped in. "How about my answer?"

"Are you always this anxious?" Satoko flinched. "You've clearly been through some shit, kiddo."

"You don't really make it this far if you haven't been through some shit," Kuroo replied, his expression still flat. "Look. I know there's no such thing as free lunch out here. So just tell me what you want."

"Another answer," Satoko crossed her arms over her chest, a soft smile touching her lips. "Without a paranoid question in return."

"Let's hear it," Daichi answered instead, not wanting Kuroo to instigate anything.

"You said 'we' earlier on," Satoko noted gently. "Are there more of you?"

"Seven others," Daichi nodded. "We're a total of twelve."

"All kids? Any adults with you?"

Coach Ukai's grinning face flashed painfully in Hinata's mind, leaving him breathless. His heart lurched. He missed him.
"No," Kuroo choked out, sounding just as overwhelmed. "Just us."

"Well shit," Satoko huffed out, running a hand through her hair. It glistened with sweat and sebum and melted snow and yet she still seemed radiant in the dark. It might've been her calming, almost motherly tone that made her radiate such a warm aura.

"Yeah," Daichi nodded. "So you understand why we have to get to a camp."

"You're incredible to have made it this far," Satoko murmured with all the sincerity in the world, and this time, Hinata was overcome with a warm feeling of relief at the recognition they were finally handed. New tears welled in his eyes. "But you won't make it much further towards the west if you're all dressed like that."

"W-What?" Hinata whimpered, clinging onto the newfound warmth with desperate abandon. He didn't want to return to his world of despair and desolation yet.

"Well, you'll freeze before ever coming near Awa if you're walking there," Satoko noted, glancing across their thin, shivering forms with a sad look in her eyes.

They all remained silent, mostly to digest yet another failure, yet another instance of the fate they fought so hard to accomplish slipping through the cracks.

Hinata tried, but with the added stress of the panic attack on top of the despair of yet another heartbreak, he could not hold back his tears anymore. They rolled off his cheeks in silence, the only proof of their existence the tell-tale swipe of his hand across his face.

"Don't cry, sweetheart," Satoko choked out, now sounding distressed as well. She made a move for Hinata. "Oh gosh, I'm terrible with kids."

"Hinata," Daichi approached him, putting a firm hand on his shoulder, clearly faking the show of strength. "It's okay. We'll figure something out, like we always have."

"To get to Awa?" Satoko piped in. "Like I told you, you won't make it if you walk."

There was a jingling sound, however, and suddenly, Satoko was dangling keys from her fingers, and there was a shit-eating grin on her face.

"So hey. It's a good thing I can drive."

When Hinata jumped forward to sob openly against the kind stranger, the warmth of her arms around him reminded him of his mother, of home, and of hope.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Kizuna and Satoko left them to rouse their party and pack up whilst they finished whatever task they’d come here to do. As they left, Hinata could not help but have a smidgen of doubt that they would return, but he was proven wrong when, a few hours later, Satoko sauntered into their store-turned-hideout to let them know that they were ready to go.

The drive was a bit less than an hour long. Most of them elected to sleep through it in order to escape the chill of the night, and Hinata tried to join them, with little results. Instead, he just lied down and listened to Satoko chat up the few boys left awake, wondering how she was in such a good mood in light of the desolate place she called home. He especially liked the way she soothed them when she promised them a safe, warm place that they could find peace in. She promised them that Camp Awa would be everything they ever needed.
They had been promised that quite a few times before, and clearly, it had never worked out. There always seemed to be a catch, be it unbearable living conditions, or simply that someone was out to kill them. But Satoko had a warm aura around her, and more than ever, Hinata felt like he could believe in her. Lulled by her crystalline giggle and her soothing voice, he dozed off into a light sleep.

When he woke, the truck had stopped moving, and Yamaguchi was gently shaking his shoulders. He took a deep breath of the crisp, cold air, and sat up, stretching.

"Are we here?" he asked, glancing around him. Half of their party seemed to be missing, the other half rousing from their naps as he was. Yamaguchi nodded, and pointed to the doors at the back of the truck. Hinata figured it meant that he was being kicked out.

He rolled up his sleeping bag and tied it like he always did to his backpack, which he had used as a pillow. He slipped on whatever gear he had taken off to sleep, and when he was fully outfitted, went for the doors to brave the cold world outside.

The chill immediately nipped at his exposed cheeks when he opened the truck door, but he found that he was quickly getting used to this kind of temperature. Between the buildings around them, the faint rays of dawn were illuminating the scintillating snow. Soon, a brand new day would be upon them. Even the heavy clouds perpetually hanging above seemed to have thinned for the occasion.

Hinata took a deep breath to the bottom of his lungs until they felt like they would explode, enjoying how the chill burned on its way through his body. It felt different than before. It felt lighter. He felt lighter.

"Hinata, come this way," Daichi called him from a few steps away, and Hinata jumped into the knee-deep snow to go to him. "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"I'm better," Hinata assured him. "I'm sorry for what happened earlier."

"You already know that those things happen, and that they're not your fault," Daichi shook his head and clapped him on the shoulder. "Now. Go on and head inside this store over here. Satoko is inside and she will tell you what to do."

"Thank you, captain," Hinata hummed, smiling at him as he walked off towards the store he mentioned.

The building itself looked like every other store in the vicinity of the shopping district, with snow piled up in front of it and a metal fence protecting its empty store-front window. Hinata only realized what made it special when he stepped inside, stomping the snow off his boots.

The inside was completely different than what the store presented as on the outside. Reminiscent of Kageyama's workplaces in both Niigata and Nagoya, it was set up as an office, with several people, bundled in warm clothing, sitting at desks and rifling through their stacks and stacks of paper. They seemed to be engrossed by their work, so Hinata wasn't surprised when they totally ignored him as he walked past them, towards Satoko, who was writing something on her clipboard.

"Sorry," he addressed her, not sure how formal he expected to be. "Daichi told me to come see you."

"Of course," Satoko glanced at him, and smiled softly. "Oh, you're the one who freaked out earlier. I'm so sorry for Kizuna's behaviour. We didn't think it would scare you so badly."

"It's okay," Hinata mumbled, looking away in shame. "It... it happens sometimes when there are really loud noises, like gunshots."
"I'm sorry," Satoko repeated, the look in her eyes knowing. "Anyway. I'm glad you're okay."

"Thank you for all your help."

"Okay, darling. So just write your name on this board here," Satoko handed him the clipboard and a pen. Hinata hurriedly scribbled his name down and handed it back to her. "Thanks. This is just to create your ID card. We have one computer in all of Awa, and miraculously, we have a shaky access to the government database of persons, so we'll look you up to create your card. You'll get it in a few days."

"Satoko," Hinata suddenly interrupted, looking at the older woman unsurely. "What is it that you do around here? It looks like you're the boss of something!"

"I'm not really a boss," Satoko laughed. "Just a veteran. I've been here a long time, so I coach the new generation of wastelanders by teaching and training them. I just have a lot of experience."

"What's a wastelander?" Hinata asked, intrigued.

"Everything will be explained to you when you're given a tour of the main building," Satoko replied lightly, shrugging. "You can go and join the rest of your friends on the second floor. You'll have to meet our camp overseer because she officially accepts new members, but you don't have to worry. You all seem like a capable bunch to me, so she'll accept you for sure."

"Alright." There was a touch of uneasiness in the back of his mind, but Hinata elected to ignore it. It couldn't be too bad from here on out.

He climbed up to the second floor, where a few people were waiting already, and quietly slid in next to Tsukishima. The blond glanced briefly at him, and then continued on ignoring him. Satoko's and his conversation still burned brightly in the forefront of his mind.

"Hey, Tsukishima," he muttered a bit awkwardly, making very brief eye contact with his companion before glancing away. "Thanks for what you did earlier, by the way."

He didn't look up, sure that the blond wouldn't even answer him. But Tsukishima seemed to be full of surprises.

"Don't mention it," he replied quietly, his face betraying nothing. He didn't, however, move away from Hinata, which was always a good thing.

Hinata grinned as joy welled up inside of him, and silently basked in the warm presence of all his friends around him.

Once they all arrived on the second floor, Daichi did a quick head count and made sure everyone was alright before volunteering to knock on the office door that Satoko had indicated to them. They had to wait only briefly before they were beckoned in.

Hinata entered the room, which soon became cramped with all the bodies squished in. It wasn't like they were strangers to losing their personal space, at this point, especially since most of the current leg of their journey had been about huddling close for warmth. Separated from their group by a desk, covered with binders and papers, a woman sat typing away at the only computer that Camp Awa apparently possessed. She finished her sentence before turning her attention to them.

"Hello," she greeted simply, her face stern. "Welcome to Camp Awa. Satoko tells me you were wandering in Tokushima in search of a camp like ours, correct?"
"That's right," Daichi nodded. "We're very grateful that you are meeting with us."

"Not at all," the woman shook her head, grabbing a stray piece of paper and a pen and writing something down. "Now, I hope you don't mind, but for quality assurance purposes, I'm going to conduct our meeting like an interview."

"Quality assurance?" Kuroo repeated with suspicion strung in his voice. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, in such inhospitable conditions, we have no choice but to tightly control the population of Camp Awa. That's why only productive individuals are allowed in," the overseer explained. "But you all seem like strong young men to me, so there shouldn't be a problem."

"Sure," Kuroo mumbled, glancing subtly at Oikawa. Hinata noted how everyone seemed to be a bit more nervous.

"We'll keep it short and sweet," she continued. "You are twelve people in your party. Are all twelve of you staying?"

"Yes," Daichi firmly nodded, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Do any of you have any physical or mental handicaps?"

There was an uneasy silence, with everyone glancing at one another awkwardly, wondering what to answer. Hinata saw Oikawa signing to Iwaizumi from the corner of his eye.

"My friend is mute," Iwaizumi answered, eyes downcast. "I have two missing fingers."

"And everyone has a bucket load of PTSD, but you probably guessed that already," Kuroo added with a chuckle, trying to lighten the atmosphere. The woman scribbled something down, but said nothing else. Compared to Satoko, she seemed colder than ice.

"Do any of you have any significant employment experience?" she continued on as if she had barely even heard them.

"Plenty," Suga offered if not a little bit bitterly. "We've stayed in two governmental strongholds for months and have occupied a position of employment within the communities."

"Amongst others, we've got guys with experience in the army, in hospitals, in psychology, in the kitchen, in offices..." Daichi added on. "We've got a lot of skills to offer."

"That's good," the overseer nodded, jotting another few notes down on her pad before rereading what she wrote. It took a minute before she turned her eyes to them again. "Alright, join Satoko downstairs. She will show you to the main building, where the quartermaster will take you in charge."

"So..." Kuroo trailed off, glancing around him to see if anyone else had an answer to his silent question. "Does that mean we're registered?"

"Yes you are." And the woman suddenly cracked what felt like a miraculous smile, which faded as soon as it came. "Congratulations."

"Thank you so much," Daichi bowed deeply to her, and the others followed suit. "Have a great day."
With that, they left the room, filing out in a line and following one another all the way down to the first floor, where Satoko was chatting up one of the workers at the desk. She ended her conversation as soon as she saw them, and bid the worker goodbye before heading to them.

"Did all go well?" she asked lightly as she met up with them.

"Great, if we look past the fact that the overseer is colder than ice," Kuroo joked.

"Well, I can't say you're wrong," Satoko laughed, surprisingly, seeming unsurprised. "My sister tends to be a bit less expressive than me, especially since she got this job."

"The overseer is your sister?" Hinata crowed, eyes widening. "That's so cool! You must be super important around here, then!"

"Not that much," Satoko waved him off. "Like I said, I am but a humble teacher and trainer of the future generation."

Nothing was said about that, so she led them to the exit.

"Now, come. The main building is a short drive down. It's too early for it to be bustling with activity so at least your transition will be smooth."

They loaded up into the truck again, Satoko going to sit in the front with Kizuna this time, but they barely had time to settle that the truck stopped again. It really was a short drive after all.

When they stepped out, the sun illuminated the large building in front of them. Upon closer inspection of the snow-crusted windows lining the front and the faded banners hanging in all their soggy glory, Hinata came to the conclusion that the building used to be a huge commercial complex, a mall on several levels at the very least. It looked unremarkable on the outside, the store-front windows all boarded shut since before the weather even turned sour.

Hinata looked around him, wondering if they were targeting another building instead. However, Satoko confidently marched towards the abandoned-looking mall, letting their entire party wonder what she was up to.

She walked over to a boarded up window and easily tugged on a large, but light and brittle-looking board of wood. When she removed it, they saw a hole in the glass that had been reinforced by duct tape for safety.

"In through here," she motioned for them as if it had been obvious. "This is the main building of Camp Awa."

"An abandoned mall?" Kuroo seemed dubious.

"It's anything but abandoned, child," Satoko teased. "Just get inside. You'll get what I mean once you see it for yourself."

"Now with mysterious claims like that, there's no way we can refuse," Kuroo chuckled right back, although none of them moved towards the hole. Kuroo looked around him before sighing. "Fine, I guess I'll do the honours."

He stepped forward and slipped in through the hole in the glass without another glance back. He disappeared into the darkness beyond.

"Next?" Satoko motioned on, still smiling warmly.
Hinata couldn't refuse a smile like that. He sauntered forward.

"Hey, idiot!" Kageyama jerked to stop him, probably surprised by his sudden willingness.

"Don't worry, Bakayama," Hinata grinned back at him, still walking towards the hole. "We'll be fine!"

He stepped into the hole, one leg at a time, and ducked his head to step in fully, leaving the light, the cold, and his friends behind.

He stepped into a chilly, closed room that was entirely dark. There was no sign of Kuroo, until a flashlight a bit further away beckoned him.

"Hello?" he called as he approached the light.

"Shrimpy!" Kuroo immediately exclaimed. "I didn't think you'd be second to volunteer."

"Where are we?" Hinata asked, a bit unnerved. Shuffling clothes notified him that they weren't alone in the darkness.

"Well, this guard here says that this is like an antechamber," Kuroo explained. "It's so that they can isolate the inside from the outside, and conduct security checks on people who come in here."

"That's pretty cool," Suga's voice came, with the medic soon joining their side. "It's a pretty advanced system they've got here."

"I can't wait to see what's inside," Hinata crowed, now more excited than ever.

Once they were all in, huddling around the guard's flashlight as a rally point, Satoko stepped in, and pulled the wooden plank back into its place over the hole, cutting off most of their light, and the draft of cold air seeping in.

"It's Satoko," she called to the guard, the boys parting to let her through when she approached.

"These boys are new admissions. The overseer will have their IDs done in a couple of days."

"Go on," the guard nodded, and stepped to the side. His flashlight was turned to a door handle next to him.

"Now, boys..." Satoko grabbed the handle, putting her weight against it. "Prepare to be amazed."

She pushed, and bright light filtered in.

Hinata squawked in surprise, shielding his eyes like all the others, and only took his arms off his face once his eyes got accustomed to the sudden change in lighting. Even before he looked at the sight before him, he felt warmth, overwhelmingly pleasant warmth overcome him.

His jaw dropped when his arms did, and he blinked several times to make sure he was seeing things right.

The mall had been turned into a huge garden. Illuminated by the glass ceiling, light filtered down onto rows and rows of crops planted in soil spread on the floor. Plants and vines hung off the banisters and railings, snaking up the broken escalators. The air itself was warm, so warm that Hinata began to sweat. He took off his hat, and then his scarf, and then unzipped his jacket, and still felt warm.

It felt amazing.
Hundreds of people were bustling across all the levels of the building, working the fields with light chatter in the air. Covered in soil and sweat, the men and women, all dressed in short-sleeved clothing, toiled on with bright smiles on their faces. They seemed content and carefree.

Hinata had never seen anything quite like it.

"Impressive, isn’t it?" Satoko murmured, letting them have their moment of awe in peace. She gave them another few minutes of silence to admire the main building, and then stepped in front of them to get their attention.

"This is... beyond incredible," Daichi breathed out, amazed. "You've created a sustainable environment within these walls... Fresh food, fresh air... this is fantastic."

"It's not all we have," Satoko winked, then motioned them over to the nearest broken escalator. They followed, if not a bit numbly. "Camp Awa has a couple of other buildings around these parts, but this mall is the main one. The quartermaster will tell you more during your orientation, but for now, just stick to the main building."

"Wouldn't wanna be anywhere else, anyway," Iwaizumi commented, dragging a few snickers from their group.

"Most of these floors have been repurposed for farming," Satoko continued, leading them up the escalator stairs. "In the underground levels, we prioritized other things, like water filtration, power generators, the mess hall and all the services for the inhabitants. On the uppermost level, which is where we’re headed, is the quartermaster's office, the rest lounge for workers, and the transmission station."

"Transmission station?" Kageyama asked, curious. "You can communicate?"

"Well, that might be too fancy of a word to use here," Satoko winced sheepishly. "Pretty much like everything else I told you. Everything we do here is kind of... rag-tag. But anyway, our transmission station is our pride and joy, because it not only helps keep us safe, but the guys who work there really know how to keep our spirits up."

"Sounds cool," Noya huffed, slightly out of breath from the climb up the unmoving steps. They seemed to be at the top, however, since the hallway wasn't covered in soil and plants.

"Yup!" Satoko nodded proudly, leading them down the hallway. "In fact, if I'm not wrong, they might be on air right now. It'll be a nice introduction to the place if you met them. Come on!"

She led them down the hall and knocked at a door, walking in without waiting for an answer. They all followed, silent and curious.

The next room was large and empty. A guy sitting in the corner on a chair, right next to a door, looked up when they entered. He grinned when he saw Satoko.

"Satoko, sweetheart!" he called her jovially, getting up to hug her when she came close. "I thought you were out for the next few days."

"I was out training wastelanders and I found us some strays!" she chuckled, waving to the boys behind her. "We were just on our way to see the quartermaster, but I figured we'd stop and meet the stars of Camp Awa first. Are they on air?"

"Nah, they are prepping for the next segment," the man shook his head. "If you wanna go in, you can. Just be sure not to let the cats out. Midori especially loves to try and run out as soon as you open
"The door."

"Roger that."

"There are cats?" Kenma gasped, more excited than Hinata had seen him since they got here. He seemed to be thrumming with excitement, even.

"We'll go see the cats, Kenma," Kuroo laughed, shaking his head as if he'd been expecting this.

Satoko opened the door, and invited them in.

The next room was huge, and filled with a lot of boxes, and furniture and a bunch of circuitry wires and other electrical gear. There weren't many voices rising in the air here, only a few in the back and... the shrill mewling of kittens in the front.

"They're so cute," Kenma gasped, dropping to his knees immediately to cuddle the nearest of the two kittens bunching around their feet. "Kuro, look at this one. It's all black."

"You're so predictable," Kuroo laughed, kneeling next to his best friend to pet the cats as well. "You guys go on, we'll catch up once Kenma is done indulging."

"Well, the guys I was talking about are in the back there. Go see them, and join me when you're done," Satoko offered, standing by the door.

"Thanks," they all nodded, and the ten remaining of their party headed off in that direction.

As they neared the back of the room, the single voice speaking got louder and louder, until it was right before them. Hinata turned one more room divider to find a young man pacing in the room, reading off a paper.

"... and the younger inhabitants of Camp Awa are getting ready to return to school. In other news, the latest wastelander expedition contacted back with favourable results, promising to return home soon with favourable results."

The boy interrupted himself and sighed.

"No, I already said that," he sighed, rubbing his eyes and crumpling his paper slightly in his grip.

"Why don't you use the word 'promising' somewhere in there instead?" Daichi suggested, chuckling when the boy flinched and looked up at them as if only just noticing them. His expression was flat, though, and betrayed nothing even close to surprise. He seemed bored, actually.

"Thank you," he answered carefully, not making any movement. "Now may I help you all?"

"Sorry to bother you. We were just listening. We're new to the camp and Satoko told us that there was no better way to feel welcomed than to come see you," Suga explained.

"You do have a way with words," Asahi nodded eagerly. "It's soothing."

"Thank you," the boy, probably even their age, replied. His features seemed to soften, though. "I get that a lot, being the main voice of the radio around these parts, and that's probably why I keep doing it. People find peace in listening to the radio while they work, so I'm happy to oblige."

"Well, you're good at it," Daichi complimented, if not with a bit of an edge to his voice. "Say... have you ever done this before? Like before the war, or something? I feel like I know you."
"I went to high school before the war," the boy finally smiled softly, as if truly finding Daichi's statement amusing. "When the war began, though, my friend and I started a project to create a radio station to let everyone know what was going on outside. We doubled our efforts after the Forty Fireworks, but unfortunately, our homes were destroyed when the nuclear bomb fell on Tokyo. We couldn't continue after that."

"You broadcasted from Tokyo?"

"Yes," the boy nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"After the Fireworks, and before the bomb, we..." Daichi paused. "We used to listen to the radio a lot... Tune in to catch whatever information we could from any station ever... You wouldn't happen to have broadcasted on AM frequency, right?"

"Yes." The boy suddenly looked excited. "Yes, that was me and my friend. Thank you for listening to us. It feels great to know we accomplished something."

"So you were the infamous radio guy!" Suga laughed. "Wow, we would've been dead without you. Really!"

"Yeah, we used to listen for you all the time," Asahi sheepishly added. "You warned us about the nuclear strike in time for us to find cover. Thank you!"

"We owe you our lives," Daichi bowed to him, and all of the Karasuno boys followed suit. "Thank you."

"N-Not at all," the boy seemed a bit overwhelmed by the praise, and stepped back lightly. "I am glad that we could be of service to you, and that fate has brought us back together."

"We are from Karasuno, from the Miyagi prefecture," Daichi continued. "Except those two in the back. They're from Aoba Josai."

"It's great to meet you all."

"What's your name, radio guy?" Hinata piped in, excited at the prospect of making a new friend. "I'm Hinata Shouyo!"

"But you can call him Shrimpy," another voice piped in, and they all turned to see Kuroo and Kenma waltz into sight, Kenma looking more blissful than ever. "Because of his small size, you know."

He interrupted himself, and Hinata saw the exact moment where shock spread itself across his face. He had never seen Kuroo so genuinely shocked in their entire adventure so far. Strangely enough, Kenma had the same look on his face.

And most strangely, the radio guy was mimicking them.

"Kenma...?" the boy called out, his voice wavering slightly with emotion. Kenma took a few steps forward numbly and then jogged to the other boy.

"Oh god," the Nekoma teen breathed out, stopping right in front of the other boy and lightly touching his hair. "Oh my god. It's you. It's... it's really you."

"Wait. You know each other?" Daichi asked, turning to Kuroo, whose eyes were still wide with surprise.
"Yeah," Kuroo nodded numbly, licking his dry lips before stepping forward, and gently touching the boy's shoulder. "Yeah. He's a friend. His name is Akaashi Keiji, and he's from a school in Tokyo that we used to play volleyball with."

"Kuroo," the boy -Akaashi- breathed out in disbelief, ghosting his hand over Kuroo's on his shoulder, as if making sure he was real. His eyes were wide as well, and all three of them seemed astonished to find one another again.

Hinata's heart warmed at the sight of them.

"I'm glad you've found one another again," he whispered, not even minding that they probably didn't hear him. Nothing could ruin this for any of them now. The cold days of misery felt long gone now that they'd found yet another familiar face out here in this wasteland.

Akaashi's face suddenly dropped, all too quickly, so unexpectedly that Hinata was suddenly worried that something was wrong. He looked concerned.

"Oh no..." he murmured, mostly to himself. "If you're here, Kuroo, then..."

"Akaashi!" Almost on cue, another voice loudly crowed from the back of the circuitry boards lined up behind them. "Why'd you stop? Did you hit a creative block? Maybe I can help!"

"No fucking way," Kuroo laughed, dropping his hand, and pushing his hair out of his face in disbelief. "This day just keeps getting better and better."

"Worse and worse," Akaashi groaned, hiding his face in his hands.

"Oh?" Hinata asked, not understanding what was happening.

Suddenly, a face popped out from behind the circuit board-wall.

"Ohoho?"

"Ohohoho!" Kuroo added loudly, and let out a loud laugh that was frantic and manic and disbelieving and relieved all at once.

"No way," the newcomer echoed, turning his eyes to Kuroo. Eerily similar to the latter's, his eyes widened. He let out a loud screech.

Kuroo screeched as well.

Hinata couldn't understand what was going on.

They all watched in stunned silence as Kuroo and the newcomer charged at each other and hugged each other with the force of a perfect spike, laughing and still screeching incoherently, as if words wouldn't come to either of them.

And then they were crying, and Kenma and Akaashi were crying, and Hinata didn't understand but he was crying, too, weeping for the warm air and the warm clothes and the warm feeling in his chest. He had never felt anything quite like this before. Home had never felt more complete than this before.

"Bokuto!" Kuroo sobbed out, still holding the other boy tightly. "No way! You're actually here!"

"Bro, you will never believe how I made it out of Tokyo after the explosion, bro you gotta listen to this, I-" Bokuto, with the strange black hair streaked with white at the tips, interrupted himself to sob
and jump excitedly and hold Kuroo tighter, all three at the same time.

He was a whirlwind, and Kuroo was a hurricane, and they all stood in the middle of a sunshower watching everything unfold and waiting for the rainbow in the end.

At least, Hinata figured, there would be no more snowstorms for them.

Chapter End Notes

Writing Bokuto was exciting because he is excited and putting him down in words on a page makes me excited too. Imma write him more as fanon Bokuto, though, where he and Kuroo are best bros 5ever. Oh man. So, to all the people who toiled and troubled and tried so hard to guess who the returning character was... the underwhelming answer is... the radio guy from chapters 1 and 2! The less underwhelming answer, which wasn't planned at first but that I came up with halfway through writing, is that the voices on the radio were Bokuto and Akaashi. Karasuno doesn't know them, since in this timeline, the war begins before they have a chance to go to the training camp. Also, do you see all my pairings lowkey making an appearance this chapter? My rarepairs especially, hooooo boy.

In writing this fic, I've done a lot of research and I've learned a lot about a bunch of stuff. This chapter made me an expert meteorologist apparently, because I spent FOREVER researching what conditions could create storms on the waterfront (cumulonimbus clouds always fuck shit up, apparently), and how nuclear winters worked. Clearly, creative liberties were taken, but the weather conditions are mostly scientifically accurate. Also, the whirlpools in the Onaruto (hahaha... Naruto...) strait are real things and they look terrifying omg.

If you guessed what video game inspired a lot of this arc and guessed "Fallout"... you are correct. I've been playing a lot of Fallout Shelter on my tablet, and my roomie plays Fallout 4 all the time (partly for my viewing pleasure hahaha), and I just really love the concept of Fallout ok. So if you wanna start speculating about what will happen in this arc titled "Wasteland" and know that it's inspired by Fallout... be my guest.

Also, this is the closest I'll come to giving Asahi a POV. By popular request, I've included a segment about him and have worked on a lot of points you've identified as being his character, and I am satisfied with what I've done with him. A legacy. I can totally see the ace being that kind of steadfast presence.

I just want to make a quick mention to all the people who sent me asks on Tumblr regarding this chapter. I was overwhelmed by how interested you guys are and how supportive you are of this project of mine. I'm honestly so grateful to all of you for following through this fic for me, and every ask, every comment, every review you send me does mean the world to me. Please know that none of this would be possible without your incredible enthusiasm and support. Remember when, in chapter 1’s A/Ns, I said I might leave this fic as a oneshot? And now, look at how far we've come together. This is all thanks to you guys, and I am so grateful that we are living through the ups and downs of CML together.

Emotional moment over. Feel free to let me know your thoughts about the chapter, and
PLEASE FOR FRICK’S SAKE. Let me know whose POV you want next chapter. It took me forever to think of who to write in this one. Anyway. Thanks once again for reading, everyone! Send me a comment or an ask on Tumblr if you want to discuss stuff, and remember to tag your posts regarding CML as "#CMLmorelikeFML" so that everyone (and I) can see it! Love you all (: 

-SS
Silence

Chapter Summary

Their world was swallowed in silence. Even when they found new ways to voice their hearts, they were made to be mute. When they found hope, they also found emptiness. Where they found laughter, they also found hopelessness.

No matter how much they screamed, how loudly they raised their voices, no matter what they did or how hard they tried, all they ever got in return was silence.

Chapter Notes

Three months and a half in the making. It's the usual culprits: Persona 3, school, and work. Speaking of which, I know I've been screaming about it on Tumblr but imma say it here too. I PASSED MY NCLEX. I GOT MY NURSING LICENSE.

Speaking of screaming things on Tumblr, the CML community on there has been really active lately. People have been asking me a bunch of interesting questions and have been playing along to a bunch of ask memes I've been posting. Thanks for your participation guys! This is so much fun when we're doing it together o: If you want, you're welcome to visit the fic tag, #CMLmorelikeFML, to view all of these posts about what's coming up next in CML!

Alright, so here we go for the warnings. As usual, I'm gonna put words before and after the warnings so that anybody who doesn't want to catch one on the corner of their eye by accident can skip this paragraph entirely. Basically, the warnings that are included in here are brief but rather flagrant. I want to warn you guys about a semi-main character death. Ish. You'll see when you get there. But this doesn't have a happy ending. I'm sorry. It's for a good reason tho! I'll just write a little more to provide some space to skip for the ones who didn't read the warnings, and thus, with this, we can begin.

Please enjoy CML chapter 14, the before-last installment of their adventure. Since it's in Oikawa's POV, I had no choice but to give him dialogue, so anything in italics is sign language. It's 38k words long, the longest one yet by far, but since you guys told me on chapter 13 that you read the whole thing in a single sitting, I didn't bother with numbered breaks again. Fun fact: This chapter's Word document is titled "Chapter Takes-Four-Ever-Teen".

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Awa woke every morning with voices filling the air until the entire mall complex was bustling with activity, slowly, and then all at once. The first few days, it was staggering to witness the long hallways filling with people in boots and dirty shirts, mesmerizing to see life growing within the walls of the run-down building. And then, by day three, they were no longer in awe, but were a part of the life thriving in the halls and rooms of the mall complex.
Their work assignments reached them on the morning of the third day, in the mail destined to the house they shared as a dorm with many other families. The letter, addressed firstly to Daichi, detailed which position they’d be occupying and directed them to their specific posts that morning of. It also contained their ID cards, which made everything feel that much more official.

Oikawa grabbed his own card and slipped it into his pocket unceremoniously, patiently waiting for Hinata to stop crowing about ‘how cool’ this all was so that they could all make their way to the front and get dressed to brave the weather outside. As relieved as he was to finally have gotten someplace where they could find stability, he still only saw Awa as a pit-stop, a temporary solution to a permanent problem; that of their country being in ruins. That thought in itself was enough to sober him up.

They got dressed quickly, and were out of the house with the rest of their housemates, all of them making the ten-minute walk to the mall complex for work. Getting nearer, they found themselves waiting in line to enter through the hole in the glass, and were particularly proud to flash their new IDs at the guard at the door.

Inside, Oikawa removed his winter clothing and left it in a pile with the rest of his team’s gear, shaking his hair out and smoothing out his shirt.

“We should go have breakfast right now, so that we have a bit of time to get situated before our work shift starts,” Daichi suggested, everyone nodding in assent. They waited for one another to be done changing, and then took the stairs all the way down to the lowest floor, where the mall’s food court once was, and which was now used as a giant cafeteria.

A couple of counters were open to serve the morning shift coming in to work, and the group split up between them so they could go through faster. Oikawa stuck with Daichi, Kuroo and Iwaizumi in line, idly drumming his fingers against his thigh when the line halted.

“What are your work assignments?” Kuroo asked lightly, trying to kick up a conversation.

“I’m working in the power generator on the topmost level,” Daichi answered, looking at the back of his ID card, where his assignment was written. “I wonder how they generate power around here. Solar power, maybe? Definitely not hydroelectricity…”

“Maybe it’ll require you to pedal a bike all day,” Kuroo snickered.

“That sounds like fun,” Iwaizumi mumbled, glancing at his ID card. “I’m doing agriculture. The second floor. I wasn’t really looking forward to being a farmer, but I guess I can’t complain.”

Oikawa laughed to himself at that, and thought up of the symbols for what he wanted to say. He was getting better at signing words rather than spelling them, and he liked to practice (see: show off) any chance he could get.

“You’d look so handsome with a farmer’s tan, though!”

“Oh, shut it,” Iwaizumi grumbled, putting his ID card away. “How about you?”

Oikawa shrugged, his face falling lightly.

“Maintenance. Basically a handiman, I guess,” he signed, not too thrilled, but also not surprised. “Can’t do much more without a voice. I should be grateful they didn’t kick me out.”

“Stop that,” Iwaizumi muttered, glancing away from him, towards Daichi, who was the only one amongst them who didn’t know how to read sign language, and who looked decidedly lost.
“Maintenance is the backbone of a community that runs smoothly. It might not be as glamorous as you want it to be, but it’s important.”

“It probably doesn’t have much to do with your voice,” Kuroo piped in lightly, flashing his ID card at them. “Since I was assigned to maintenance as well.”

Oikawa couldn’t hide the surprise that flashed across his face. Why they would assign Kuroo to maintenance went right above his head. Strong, athletic, smart, cunning Kuroo belonged anywhere but in maintenance.

“Maybe they’re taking the best-looking ones of the bunch as maintenance guys,” Kuroo hummed good-naturedly, apparently not at all bothered by his assignment.

“Now that just makes it sound like you’ll be doing more than just cleaning around here,” Daichi frowned, not meaning anything by it, although a smile cracked across Oikawa’s face regardless at the implications.

“Sounds kinky,” he signed smugly. “The maintenance guy comes over to your work station… You’re all alone… He leans against the door and says ‘I heard you needed help fixing a leak’…”

“Stop that, that’s obscene,” Iwaizumi slapped his hands away lightly, just as Kuroo burst into laughter.

“Is that why everyone looks so happy around here?” he chuckled, wiping a tear that beaded in the corner of his eye. “Cause the maintenance guys are servicing the general population?”

There was a violent flash through Oikawa’s mind and he swallowed down the terrifying feeling of acceptance that suddenly blanketed his mind. He blinked a few times and swallowed to draw his thoughts out from the void. He no longer had to think like that. Kuroo was just joking.

“Okay, I don’t even know what’s going through your minds, but it’s time to stop,” Daichi chided, clearly noticing that he’d lost Oikawa. “It sounds lewd. Just grab a tray and shut up.”

Kuroo glanced at Oikawa conspiratorially, and Oikawa couldn’t help but grin, despite the mildly disturbing undertone to their conversation. He was used to it, for better or for worst. They reached out for a high-five between them before grabbing their trays, looking self-satisfied to their companions’ despair.

The cafeteria attendants looked chipper this morning, as they did the morning before, as they probably did every morning, and Oikawa couldn’t help but wonder why everyone seemed so happy around these parts. When he put his tray in front of one of them, she smiled at him warmly and dipped her head in greeting.

“Good morning, sweetheart. Do you want rice?” she asked him, and Oikawa nodded lightly, accepting the small bowl she offered him. “And would you prefer vegetable curry or tomato beans with that?”

Oikawa raised one of his fingers, indicating he preferred the first choice. She seemed throwed off but gave him a helping of vegetable curry regardless.

“Not very talkative this morning, are we?” she joked, handing him the faded porcelain bowl. Oikawa tried not to let his smile fall, and accepted the food, now hoping to leave as quickly as possible.

“That’s fine, we all have those mornings. Cheer up, sweetheart, and have a nice day!”

Knowing she meant well, and had no means of knowing Oikawa’s circumstances, the brunet just
nodded at her, and left down the counter to grab a small cup of tea. With his tray full, he turned and went for the table where half of their increasingly-large group was situated.

“I wish we had spicy sauce for the curry,” Noya whined as Oikawa pulled out the chair between him and Hinata, who looked just as disappointed with his breakfast.

“It’s hard enough to come across breakfast foods as it is,” Suga admonished, pushing his tray a bit to make space for Tsukishima, who came by accompanied by Kageyama, the latter’s frown deep enough to wrinkle his chin. “Make an effort and eat it bland so you don’t irritate your stomach so early in the morning.”

“Do you think they have eggs?” Hinata asked, pushing his rice around the bowl without really eating it. “What I wouldn’t give for a bowl of tamago kake gohan in the morning… With soy sauce…”

“Eat your food and don’t complain,” Daichi hushed him, looked resolved as he shovelled a large bite of bland rice in his mouth. “I have yet to see animals here, so I doubt they’d have any sort of produce, other than stuff they can scavenge.”

“Does that mean there’s no milk?” Kageyama huffed, already knowing the answer. Oikawa couldn’t help but chuckle now that the intense frown had been explained.

“We’ve all made do without all these things for a long time, guys,” Suga laughed sheepishly. “Just because we’re in a better place now, it doesn’t mean everything is perfect. Let’s not take things for granted and enjoy everything we’re gifted, okay?”

Somehow, Suga’s pure smile seemed to light up the whole table, and by the time everyone else joined them, they were all eating and chattering lightly.

Oikawa was almost at the bottom of his curry when a loud screech from the other end of the cafeteria grabbed their attention. They all turned in time to see Bokuto, accompanied by Akaashi, coming down the stairs and spotting them. Bokuto waved wildly at them, and Kuroo immediately waved back, which seemed to be the signal for Bokuto to break into a run and vault over a table in his haste to get to them. Kuroo got up in time to intercept his collision with the table, and they embraced one another almost violently before stepping back, grinning.

“Morning!” Bokuto greeted cheerfully, waving at them all. “What’s for breakfast?”

“What it always is, I’m supposing,” Kuroo shrugged. “Beans or curry.”

“Well, I love tomato beans, so I’m not complaining,” Bokuto hummed, his good mood infectious. Oikawa felt a spark of energy inside of him and suddenly felt the urge to go run laps. He wondered if they had a gym around these parts to burn off energy.

“Good morning.” Akaashi greeted as he arrived, waving lightly to them. Kenma finally looked up to smile softly at him.

“Morning,” he greeted, the first words Oikawa had heard from him today.

“Bokuto, let’s not bother them and go get breakfast,” he prompted, tugging lightly at Bokuto’s sleeve.

“You’re no bother at all,” Daichi assured them. “It’s just that today is our first day on assignment, so we wanted to get going a bit early to get situated.”

“Ooh, that’s exciting,” Bokuto cocked his head. “Where are you guys assigned? Maybe we can
“I think most of us have instructions and floor numbers,” Kenma declined politely.

“Well, I wanted to know where the water plant was,” Hinata asked. “Sounds big. And it doesn’t sound like it fits in this building.”

“It’s not as big as you think,” Akaashi shrugged. “It’s the building down the street, by the corner. It’s a community center, so they use the pool as a water reservoir. Get dressed warmly; if they have you shovelling, you’ll be outside all day.”

“Thanks,” Noya nodded. “We’ll try not to get lost.”

“Is anyone in the power plant?” Bokuto asked. “It’s a ton of fun! I’ve never actually been, but I’ve heard of it and it sounds like a blast!”

“I am,” Kageyama nodded, the glint in his eye proving that he was interested in finding out what the other boy meant.

“You’ll love it!” Bokuto promised, and then turned to survey the table. “I’m guessing the rest of you are growing vegetables?”

“Yamaguchi and I are in the health services,” Suga smiled lightly. “But I’m sure no one saw that coming.”

“And Oikawa and I have the best jobs in the world,” Kuroo proclaimed proudly, swiping his ID card out to show them. “Maintenance. I’m gonna be king of the mop!”

Oikawa raised an eyebrow amusedly at Kuroo’s antics, but the more time went on, the more he realized that everyone was silent. Akaashi and Bokuto were not saying anything. A quick glance showed that they were simply looking at the card in deep thought.

“Is something wrong?” Oikawa signed to Iwaizumi, who frowned, and relayed the question out loud.

“No, no,” Akaashi quickly stood back, a neutral expression still on his face. However, Bokuto was more transparent, and Oikawa clearly read the torn look on his face. Akaashi was lying to them. “Just… take care, okay? It’s a very strenuous job.”

“And don’t be a show-off, bro,” Bokuto added hastily. “Just take it easy, and relax.”

“Alright,” Kuroo hummed, looking contented, although the inflection of his voice was familiar to Oikawa after all this time. He, too, was suspicious. “In that case, I guess we should head off, then. If it’s that tough of a job, I wanna warm up before I wield my weapon of choice.”

With no choice but to follow, Oikawa got up, picking up his tray. Hinata scooted quietly to the side to let him pass, his bright gaze proving that he didn’t suspect a thing. However, as he passed next to Iwaizumi, his best friend clandestinely set a hand against his knee, out of sight of the others. Oikawa stopped for a second and glanced at him, taking in the confusion in his face. It wasn’t quite worry, and Oikawa was relieved. It wouldn’t help to worry now, when there was nothing to worry about.

His silence spoke volumes these days, but just to hammer the point home, he set a hand against Iwaizumi’s shoulder, and brushed it off when the hand fell away from his knee.

He left without another word, not that he had a choice in the matter. Kuroo waved everyone off for
them both, and they left side-by-side to go find wherever they were supposed to report.

“If it does turn out that maintenance guys are doing some shady business, I’m busting you out of here,” Kuroo murmured softly as they walked, and despite the chill that went down Oikawa’s spine at the thought of it, he appreciated the concern for his wellbeing, and nodded. It couldn’t be that bad, whatever it was.

Oikawa wondered if he had missed a memo. By the end of the day, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He and Kuroo had teamed up to fix a leaky pipe (with duct tape, until their superior showed them how to actually change the pipe) and had spent most of their day just mopping the cafeteria, climbing to outrageous heights to wash grime off the windows that allowed natural light in, and restocking the washrooms with toilet paper. It was a physically exhausting job, but nothing they couldn’t handle.

Which was why Oikawa’s suspicions didn’t decrease after everything went well the first day. He had long-ago learned that he shouldn’t take good things for granted. When Iwaizumi asked him how his day had been that night, he simply replied that there was nothing out of the ordinary, and coaxed his best friend to sleep.

He didn’t want to jinx it, but he fell asleep with the impending feeling that a nightmare was upon him.

The next days were the same. The more time went on without anything suspicious happening, the more Oikawa became high-strung about it all. Kuroo never showed it outwardly, but when Oikawa asked him in the quiet of their table-wiping after lunchtime, Kuroo simply replied by signing the sentence “just watch and wait”. Oikawa couldn’t remember the last time Kuroo had signed anything to him.

Four days passed, and then five. Bland breakfasts and long sessions of mopping melted snow in the antechamber melded into one another until Oikawa almost forgot to be on his guard.

However, on day 5, as he was locking up for the evening, someone came for him. At first, Oikawa thought the quiet footsteps were Kuroo, coming back to grab something he’d forgotten. Oikawa turned to tell him that the door was already locked for the night, but he did not come face to face with his friend.

Instead, he found himself facing a man wearing a bandana over his nose and a suspicious-looking hood. Immediately, he stiffened, not liking this situation.

“Oikawa Tooru,” the man grunted out, taking a step forward. Oikawa took a step back, his back hitting the (locked) doors of the storage room. The hallway was tight. He had nowhere to run.

“Come quietly and we won’t have a problem.”

Oikawa wanted to snort and tell him there’s no way he couldn’t come quietly, but even if he did have his voice, it would have been stuck in the ball in his throat.

He shook his head, however, his heart skipping a beat when the man took a step forward again. As he repeated his demand, Oikawa glanced around him, wondering if there was any way he could make a break for it. The hallway wasn’t long; if he slipped past the guy, it wouldn’t take him long to
reach some place with more people.

The guy took another step forward, and Oikawa sprung into desperate action. A weak feint to the right proved to be mostly ineffective, as the guy immediately saw through it, and twisted to grab Oikawa as he slipped past him on the left. His hand closed around Oikawa’s wrist tightly and squeezed, and even though it didn’t hurt, Oikawa found a whistling scream tearing out of his burned throat.

He was in a dark basement, in a moving cargo truck, in a damp cave covered in moss, he was anywhere but not in Awa. His mind lost itself for a second, and the grip on his wrist felt like a heavy shackle, the heaviness of it promising punishment. He couldn’t get caught again. Not this time.

There was a certain frenzy to his moves as he spun and attempted to kick his assailant in the plexus. However, the man, clearly trained for combat, caught his leg, throwing Oikawa off-balance. With his legs out of commission, all he could do was bite down on the man’s arm, hard, until he felt skin crunch underneath his canines and a lightly metallic taste flow onto his tongue.

The man let him go, and Oikawa bolted away from him, faster than he’d ever run before. Getting caught a second time could spell death for him, and he wasn’t ready to die, nor to return into captivity. Not now, not when he’d finally found everything he’d stayed alive for.

He was almost out of the hallway, looking back as he ran, his heart beating harder when he realized that his assailant wasn’t pursuing him. He couldn’t understand why he was just watching him get away. Was it because he had an ace up his sleeve? Or had Oikawa actually managed to trump him?

He turned his head back up front just in time to see the person standing in the exit, and the surprise tore yet another semblance of a scream out of his mouth. Eyes wide, he skidded to a stop and then stumbled back before he realized that he knew the person in front of him. He didn’t know how to feel about that, and tried to ground himself in the present, waving off the memories of a darker past in an attempt not to let history repeat itself. He found stability in the person in front of him, though her smile didn’t feel very comforting.

Satoko let him stop and take in his surroundings for a second before putting her arm up.

“It’s okay, Oikawa,” she soothed him, placating him with the gentle gesture. “Just breathe, it’s all fine.”

Oikawa wanted to yell at her that they wouldn’t take him away again, but the last time he had, they’d taken his voice. He couldn’t yell anymore. Satoko just observed him as he tried to breathe. When his chest continued to heave up and down after a minute, she finally seemed to realize that something was wrong, though.

“Oikawa?” she asked, taking a step towards him, and just pushing him a step back. His attacker was at the end of the hallway, still not moving, but Oikawa felt just as trapped as before. “Oikawa, what’s wrong? Calm down, just breathe. It was just a test, and you passed. It’s okay now.”

The words didn’t register at first, and Oikawa re-ran her worried voice in his head a few more times before he realized that she had called this whole setup a test.

What kind of test was this supposed to be, anyway? How quickly they could force him into panic? The thought of this whole thing being unnecessary made him angrier than anything else, and he clutched his chest when pain began to rise with every breath.

“Oh, hell.” Satoko was at his side in a second, helping him towards the wall, where he thankfully
found an anchor by sliding up against it. “Oikawa, just breathe. You’re okay. You’re safe. No one is here to get you for real. It was just a test. Take deeper breaths. Do you want me to get someone for you?”

Oikawa briefly considered nodding, but he didn’t want to worry anybody. And, if he was being honest with himself, he didn’t want anyone seeing him like this. Ever since his return amongst the group of people he now considered a semblance of a family, he had done very well reigning in his nightmares and flashbacks and traumatic memories, and he didn’t want people to worry about him – or pity him– all of a sudden. As if spiralling within his own destructive thoughts and memories made him a lesser person.

No. He’d handle this himself. All those weeks he spent in so many places, not even knowing if he’d be alive the next day, he’d handled everything himself. This was just one more occurrence to add to the ever-growing list.

He shook his head and closed his eyes, twisting the fabric of his shirt in his grasp as he tried to force his lungs to stop hyperventilating. He already felt light-headed, and attempted to retain more carbon dioxide by holding his breath.

“Okay.” Satoko’s voice was gentle now, as if she had realized that she’d made a mistake. She was still close to him, and as much as Oikawa hated it, it didn’t bother him. “I can’t tell what’s going on with you. I didn’t know this would happen. But I want to help if you’re panicking, or if you’re seeing things that are long gone. So… Will you let me hold you so I can ground you?”

Her voice was grounding enough to dissipate the last memories out of the corners of Oikawa’s mind. And yet, she sounded soft, so soft that for a moment, Oikawa forgot that he was talking to a perfect stranger and not to his mother.

He found himself nodding. Before he could take it back, however, she had closed the gap between them, and had put her arms on either side of his head against the wall, encasing him between the wall, her arms, and her body.

“Breathe,” she ordered gently, and Oikawa burst into tears, because his body was reacting to her command, easing out and regulating itself without him doing anything about it. He felt powerless to control himself, and having to depend on someone else to pull himself together was probably the worst part. Once again, he was not in control of his own body. It didn’t feel like he would ever own himself ever again.

He put his hands up to cover his face and dipped it lightly, hiding against her collarbones to cry. He was ashamed of himself.

There was only silence when she pushed herself even closer, only barely touching him, but just enough to make him feel grounded. He felt safe with her presence around him, her warmth radiating against the goosebumps on his skin. If it wasn’t for her being tall and lithe, Oikawa would surely have mistaken Satoko for his mother. The wall behind him was cold and Satoko was warm, and her arms blocked everything out so that Oikawa only needed to focus on himself.

Soon, his breathing had evened out, and Oikawa was exhausted. He barely even wanted to pull away from her, but at some point, he did, and supported himself against the wall to look at Satoko with his red-rimmed eyes. No more tears were coming to him, and the anger had dulled. He just wanted to curl up with a blanket and sleep now.

“Should I let you go?” Satoko murmured softly, and after a brief moment of hesitation, Oikawa nodded. She stepped back immediately, although within arm’s reach if he fell forward, though
Oikawa stood upright without her support. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t indicate that he’d acknowledged the apology, and Satoko sighed, having realized that fact.

“I’m sorry. I guess I should have asked about your history before having tried a stunt like that.” No, that would definitely have made things worse, Oikawa thought to himself. He didn’t need a total stranger knowing what had happened to him. She took his silence as a cue to continue. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I only meant to test you.”

She let the silence hang for a bit until Oikawa finally nodded at her to continue, crossing his arms (or holding himself together, he didn’t know, either).

“How do you want to hear about the test?” she asked gently, making it clear that she wouldn’t continue if he refused. But Oikawa had come this far, and he didn’t want to back down.

He nodded.

“It’s a test to see your reaction when faced with danger,” Satoko began. “You were scouted out as one of the most capable people in your group as soon as you entered Awa, and this test is just the final step in the selection process.”

Oikawa frowned, cocking his head. He wasn’t quite sure he understood, and he wanted to ask her a million questions, and now, the frustration of having lost his voice was back to hitting him full-force. He just wanted to make himself heard, but he couldn’t.

Satoko, infuriatingly enough, seemed to understand him despite his silence.

“It’s the selection process for a special kind of training… if you agree, that is, of course.” She finally smiled at him, as if she was announcing something wonderful. “Wastelander training. Congratulations. You’re eligible to become a wastelander.”

It didn’t sound as wonderful as she made it seem. Not at the current moment, in any case. Oikawa did not even know what a wastelander was and what they did.

He raised an eyebrow at her, unimpressed. She just smiled softly, sadly.

“I know it’s confusing. And you probably want to think about it a little bit. I’d be happy to explain to you, but I think you’d prefer to join your friends now. The two radio stars, Bokuto and Akaashi, are your friends, right? I think you’ll get a sufficient explanation from them if you ask. I’ll come ask you for your answer tomorrow, regarding whether or not you want to become a wastelander or not.”

It was all shot at him in rapid-fire, and Oikawa wasn’t even sure he understood it all. But she was right regarding one thing—that he just wanted to go home. To his friends. To his family. Whatever family he had left.

She seemed to see it in his eyes and stepped back to give him an out.

“I’ll come back tomorrow by the end of your shift to ask you again,” she informed him, giving him an encouraging smile. “Think about it really well. This could be the start of something great for you.”

Oikawa didn’t listen to her after that. When he saw that the coast was clear, he pushed away from the way, and walked off without looking back. She said nothing more, and Oikawa didn’t want her to. He just indulged in the silence between them.

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Iwaizumi was visibly stressed all night long, noticing how silent Oikawa was (no pun intended) after he returned from work. He didn’t communicate at all during dinner, lost in thought, and Oikawa was actually scared for a moment that Iwaizumi had noticed the lingering redness around his eyes. He didn’t need his best friend hovering around him like a worried parent. In the past, he might have enjoyed Iwaizumi worrying over him, but in the past, his concerns were usual trivial in comparison to now.

“Stop brooding, grumpy-pants,” he finally signed as they made their way back to their dorm room, leaving their winter gear behind. The rest of their group, some of whom slept in the same room as theirs, were preceding them, and when Oikawa signed to him for the first time of the night, Iwaizumi put some space between them and the rest of the group to whisper at him.

“I’m not brooding,” he insisted. “Besides, you’re more broody than me tonight. Did something happen at work?”

“My brooding is much more attractive than yours, though,” Oikawa signed, trying to avoid answering. Iwaizumi didn’t let him get away with that shit.

“Did something happen at work?” he pressed softly, as if afraid of what he’d hear. The mute quality of his voice ticked Oikawa off, as if Iwaizumi was softening his voice in fear of Oikawa’s reaction. He wasn’t a porcelain doll to be treated gently. He missed the Iwaizumi who would unashamedly call him out for his silence and maybe push him around a bit.

Both of them had changed after their experiences at the hands of the traffickers, but somehow, more than missing fingers or a voice gone for good, the rift in their relationship was what Oikawa mourned the most. He couldn’t blame Iwaizumi for behaving differently, even though he dearly wished he could.

“I just…” His hands paused in the middle of the next symbol, as Oikawa’s mind buffered for what to say next. He didn’t know how to explain what had happened, nor did he know if he wanted to explain it. “Iwa-chan…” The gestures that spelled out Iwaizumi’s pet name were comforting, and Oikawa’s muscles relaxed as his fingers curled and straightened to create the word in thin air. Iwaizumi’s name was like a breath of fresh air regardless of all else on Oikawa’s mind.

“I’m here,” Iwaizumi gruffly answered, looking away from Oikawa to give him the privacy to think. And in that moment, Oikawa felt safer than anywhere else and with anyone else in the world.

“What would you think of me being a wastelander?” Oikawa finally asked, leaving out the whole part about the recruitment activities. He had to spell that last word, and it took Iwaizumi a while to piece it together.

“A… wastelander? What’s that?” he frowned as they walked up the stairs to their assigned dorm room. Inside, the six other people they roomed with were getting cozy in the tight space, and Oikawa elected to stay outside to talk with Iwaizumi. From the corner of his eye, he saw Kuroo lightly teasing Tsukishima and wondered if he had gone through the recruitment test as well. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to him in private yet.

“You weren’t with us when we met Kizuna,” Oikawa explained. “From what I can tell, it’s like… people who are trained to go outside the camp on missions.”

“Why would you go outside?” Iwaizumi frowned, genuinely confused. “It’s cold, and there’s nothing out there.”

“There must be something important, though, if they’re training people for it.”
“So you’re after the adrenaline,” Iwaizumi concluded, and Oikawa couldn’t help but feel like he was being scolded somehow. “Oikawa, haven’t you had enough adrenaline for one lifetime? Just stay where it’s safe.”

“Don’t you mean that you want me to stay with you?” Oikawa frowned. However, when Iwaizumi’s eyes grew wide at what he was implying, he blushed and quickly rushed to correct himself. “I mean, so that you can keep an eye on me. Are you my mom, Iwa-chan?”

“Hadn’t heard you say that in a long time,” Iwaizumi snorted softly, though it hit them both at the same time that it had been a long time since he’d heard Oikawa say anything at all. “But I don’t want to keep you tied down. You’re your own person. I’m not gonna take your independence from you.”

Oikawa appreciated the sentiment, though deep down, he knew that it was because Iwaizumi knew first-hand that the power to make their own choices about their own bodies was the most important thing for them. He was grateful for his surprising thoughtfulness.

“I just… I’m thinking that maybe I can be more of use to everyone by being out there,” Oikawa kept explaining. “There is not much I can do here without a voice… Other than mopping the tiles, but I don’t… I don’t want to spend the rest of my days mopping tiles. I want to be something greater. I want to help. I want to matter.”

His train of thought was becoming more and more personal, and he was glad that Iwaizumi didn’t interrupt him. He needed to get this out there. He needed his feelings to cross the chasm of silence that alienated him from the rest of the world. A whirlwind of emotions constantly roared inside of him, but never seemed to go fast enough to break the barrier of sound.

He felt trapped and helpless, and he just needed someone—anyone—to understand that he needed to feel needed.

Thankfully, Iwaizumi had gotten many years to learn to read him, and saw right through him. Making no sound, he crossed the moat of silence that barricaded Oikawa within his own walls, and ghosted his three remaining fingers across his best friend’s cheek lightly to draw his attention.

Oikawa looked up, his breath catching in his throat when he saw the sincerity in Iwaizumi’s eyes. His heart clenched before Iwaizumi even spoke, because at this point, they no longer communicated through words, but through silence.

“You’d spend your days lying down and watching the stars and you would still matter,” Iwaizumi whispered to him, and a strange sadness welled up inside Oikawa when he realized that he still didn’t believe him.

“I appreciate it,” he simply signed, indulging in their proximity for just another second before pulling away slightly. Iwaizumi took the hint and withdrew his arm, stepping back. “I’m going to sleep. It’s been a long day. I’ll think more tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” Iwaizumi agreed, following him into their bedroom. Everyone was situated in their sleeping bags already, squeezing in tightly into the small bedroom as usual and light pillow-talk filling the air as they dozed off one by one.

Oikawa slid into his own sleeping bag and pulled the extra blanket over him. A few bodies away, Iwaizumi did the same, and they both settled to sleep without another word.

With the aftermath of his recruitment test still running in the forefront of his mind, it wasn’t hard for Oikawa to fall asleep. He was drained, after all, and no amount of muted regrets and hushed secrets
could keep him awake now.

What did surprise him, however, was how easily he woke soon after falling asleep, to someone prodding him softly in the side. Huffing lightly in annoyance, Oikawa turned around, just to see Kuroo leaning over Tsukishima’s sleeping body just to poke him awake.

Once he woke, the other captain returned to his sleeping bag, and put his hands up at chest-level. Oikawa also sat up and frowned at him, rubbing his eyes to watch him sign.

“Did you get recruited, too?”

Oikawa’s breath caught in his throat, and he was suddenly very much awake. A quick glance around them proved that they were the only ones up at this time. He returned his attention to Kuroo, hesitating. He nodded, unsure.

“I’m going to accept,” Kuroo continued without hesitation. “Come with me.”

“I don’t know,” Oikawa pressed his lips into a thin line, trying to drag the appropriate symbols out of his sleep-addled brain. “Why are you accepting?”

“For the adventure, of course.” A small chuckle escaped Kuroo’s lips, and Tsukishima shifted sleepily between them, though he didn’t wake. “That, and, I still feel a responsibility for these guys. Daichi and I, we’ve been watching out for them since we met, even more since Ukai left.” His sentence was a mouthful (handful?) and Oikawa took a moment to reconstruct it all, but when he did, he felt a ball rise in his throat. Kuroo’s thoughts were extremely similar to his.

“So you’re doing it for them?” Oikawa asked to clarify, watching the moonlight glint off Kuroo’s pitch-black irises. In the darkness, they seemed dilated enough to swallow up his eyes entirely.

“We’ve got something good going here,” Kuroo nodded lightly, a soft smile crossing his face as a secret thought crossed his mind. He glanced down at the bodies around them fondly. “I don’t want anyone to ruin it—not me, not anybody else.”

Oikawa didn’t exactly know what he meant by that, but he knew what it was like to express only the surface of iceberg thoughts, and didn’t push it. Besides, he understood Kuroo’s motives, and the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. He would be doing this because he had a responsibility to protect his friends and family. People knew him to be a natural-born leader, a timeless model to follow. Even if he did not contribute much by actually going outside, he had to look invincible and untouchable so that he appeared as a beacon of strength for those who looked to him for guidance.

No longer human. Oikawa was no longer human. But he could still be useful.

Daichi did it every time he opened his mouth to make a decision. Kuroo did it when he orchestrated crazy plans to save their lives over and over again. And Oikawa needed to do it, too. And if he could accomplish it by becoming a wastelander, then he’d do it in a heartbeat.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Kuroo assured him, noticing that he was deep in thought. “Get some sleep.”

Oikawa nodded, flashing him a small, painfully sincere smile before he laid back down. The shuffling of sheets told him that Kuroo had done the same, and soon, they had ceased all movement. The only noise left was the buzzing of Oikawa’s thoughts across the silence in his ears.
Iwaizumi watched him like a hawk the next day, but said nothing, which was what Oikawa was most grateful for. His late-night conversation with Kuroo still reverberated in his head as they headed down for breakfast with the rest of their team, and although he desperately wished for a moment alone with the Nekoma player, he knew that it would look extremely out of place, at the very least. He had to wait until after breakfast.

He had curry again, if only because his appetite felt like shit no matter what. He’d long since gotten used to eating whatever was placed in front of him, anyway. Chewing mindlessly on his food helped him control his worries, as the lingering difficulty swallowing kept his mind grounded and wired on something else.

Of course, when the sound of their casual conversation began to drown in the rising noise from the rest of the cafeteria, Oikawa was forced to take his mind off his food, and to whatever was happening around him.

“What’s going on?” Hinata asked, noticing that the cafeteria was beginning to buzz.

“No idea, but it looks like everyone is in on it except us,” Suga shrugged, unbothered. In places like these, they were used to being the outsiders. Oikawa noted that they looked nonchalant, but slightly on edge. He wondered what misfortunes they’d been through to be conditioned to behave that way.

“Excuse me,” Daichi turned to address a man from the table adjacent to theirs. “Could you tell us why everyone is suddenly so excited?”

“Oh!” the man exclaimed, turning to their table good-naturedly. “There’s an announcement going around that there’s going to be a special radio report this morning. Everybody is tuning in to hear it any time now!”

“Any chance we could listen in with you?” Kuroo asked smoothly, eyeing the battery-powered portable radio that the man held in his hands. All that came from it was low static for now.

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“Of course, of course!” the man nodded hurriedly and slipped onto the empty spot next to Tsukishima to make himself comfortable. He put his radio in the middle of the table, and turned the volume up. The static got louder.

The adjacent tables were doing the same thing, until everyone, even the cafeteria employees, were seemingly impatiently waiting for the fabled news report. Oikawa even began to believe it was just a rumour when suddenly, the static gave way to a flat tone.

It was almost scary how the entire cafeteria fell silent at once.

The flat tone persisted a few seconds longer, and then a very familiar voiced tuned in.

“Good morning, citizens of Awa.” The soft voice on the other end could be no one but Akaashi. “We hope you’ve had a pleasant day so far. We come this morning with a special news report that we’re very excited to present to you.” He didn’t sound very excited, though Oikawa didn’t expect much from him.

In contrast, the next person to take the mic blew them away with enthusiasm.

“Yesterday night, around 3AM, the latest team of wastelanders made a triumphant return to our camp with many good news to share!” Bokuto was crowing excitedly in the mic, and though Kuroo was chuckling softly at this, he and the stranger were the only ones seemingly amused by his loud voice. “We have their team leader here with us right now to say a few words about their month-long trek across the wasteland. Please welcome Nakamura Daisuke, everyone!”
Oikawa wasn’t sure what to think of everyone in the cafeteria actually bursting into applause, and only suddenly quieting when the man, Daisuke, cleared his throat to speak.

“I appreciate this opportunity to speak.” The man’s voice was gravelly and rough, his throat probably scratched by the cold winds outside. “I’ll keep it brief. I mainly want to thank my team who made it through thick and thin with me; Kogane Souji, my trusty fieldwork partner, Hasegawa Kotori, our fighter specialist, and Kondo Naomi, our lovely field medic. Nothing would’ve been possible without Souji’s quick thinking, Kotori’s reassuring protectiveness and Naomi’s unquestionable medical skill. I’m really blessed to have had the opportunity to work with them.”

“Can you tell us a little bit more about your journey, Nakamura?” Akaashi asked, with Bokuto clearly whispering furiously in the background.

“We left Awa a month ago and had our driver take us as far as possible. I believe he actually took us as far as Sakaide, actually, but we did have to clear the bridge to the mainland on our own. I’d like to thank him, actually, because our driver, Saito Ayumu, was very prompt in both delivering us and extracting us, and was able to push relatively far into hostile territory before being forced to disembark us.”

“So if I understand correctly, you crossed to the mainland from Sakaide. Where did you go from there?” Akaashi kept asking.

“Our mission as a single squad was mostly to conduct research on radiation levels in the southern wasteland and to gather some highly specific technological supplies from the big cities on our way back. We gathered data for over a month before returning, which is why it took so long, but we believe that our data will help advance our knowledge of radiation and how it is affecting us. Naomi’s theory is that we can use this data to create new protocols for the treatment of radiation sickness and cancer prevention.”

“That’s so cool!” Bokuto crowed, and a few people –mostly girls- from the cafeteria squeaked at the sound of his voice. “You’ve helped our community gain levels regarding its healthcare, which is a huge win in my book! On behalf of all the citizens of Awa, thank you, Nakamura!”

“Anything for the people,” the wastelander chuckled lightly.

“What a good man,” the citizen sitting with them commented idly, humming to himself as he listened to the rest.

“Did you encounter any obstacles during your journey?” Akaashi pushed on.

“Many, of course. The weather being the biggest one, yet only one on the list,” the man answered. “Thankfully, we avoided altercations with any other people we met. Kotori wasn’t too happy about it, but it’s really for the best of the team. Out there in the wasteland, nobody can be trusted but your own team, after all. We relied heavily on one another out there, naturally. For example, Souji got caught in an avalanche when we were doing fieldwork on a steep slope, but our combined knowledge of wasteland survival and Naomi’s rapid interventions saved his life. If that was anyone else, they might not have made it, but I had absolute faith in my team and knew that we’d make it through.”

“That’s very admirable. We’re all grateful that you’ve returned to us. When will you be leaving on your next assignment?” Akaashi asked him next.

“In a week. As wastelanders, our job is to protect the community by working outside of it, so we cannot stay long within these walls. We love what we do, though, and it is our pleasure and our
honour to return to the wasteland yet again. During our stay, however, we will be giving guest-lectures to the wastelander trainees and meeting citizens, so work’s not done for us yet!”

“That’s gonna be exciting for the trainees,” Bokuto remarked, and Oikawa quickly noted that his cheeriness seemed to have fallen a bit. Come to think of it, he had been less than enthusiastic when he heard of him and Bokuto being assigned to maintenance. Had he known? And what else did he know? “Nakamura, you’re one of the best wastelanders we have, and you and your team are practically legends in your field. Do you have anything to say to the younger generations who are training so hard to reach you where you are right now?”

“Listen in class,” the wastelander laughed, dragging a bit of laughter from the crowd in the cafeteria as well. “But honestly, instinct will do you more good than brains out there. The wild isn’t testing your book-smarts. It’s testing your endurance, your critical thinking, and your strength, both physical and mental fortitude. And when your gut tells you something out there, you know you gotta listen to it more than anything else in the world. It might just save a life.”

“Can’t say I disagree with that,” Kuroo hummed, and there was a general nod of agreement that rippled across their group.

“Well, that’s fantastic. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today, Nakamura. Everyone here in Awa has been awaiting your return impatiently and we’re very glad to have you back. Keep working hard,” Akaashi concluded with a tone of finality.

“Thank you, all. I hope to meet some citizens while I’m still in Awa over the week. Otherwise, thank you for listening in, everyone. Have a wonderful day, knowing that the wastelanders have your back.”

“And that was Nakamura Daisuke, everyone, leader of what is only the greatest wastelander team Awa has to offer! Wouldn’t it be so great if all of us could be as cool as him? As we speak, our next generation of wastelanders are working hard to live up to their legacy… But not everyone is destined for a life of adventure and danger! Next, around 11AM, tune in for an interview with the representative of the educational organization of Awa, where we will be discussing the new options for education for all ages being offered in our very own community. Thanks for tuning in, and we’ll catch you on the radio waves later!”

Akaashi barely had time to mumble a goodbye of his own before the noise of the chattering crowd had drowned him out. The radio went to static once again.

“They’re so admirable, those young men and women,” the citizen sighed, collecting his portable radio now that the segment was over. “Wastelanders are something else.”

“What do you mean?” Kuroo asked immediately.

“Well, they’re the backbone of our community!” the man replied, as if this was common knowledge. “You must be new, so you don’t really know, but wastelanders are the ones who are in charge of protecting us from outside threats, scavenging resources for the population or to rebuild infrastructures, conducting field research, and rumour has it that some wastelanders are even being trained to go try and stop the implosion of the remaining nuclear plants on the northern coast of the wasteland! Imagine how fantastic that would be!”

“Sounds like wastelanders are pretty popular, aren’t they?” Kuroo clarified, though it didn’t sound like much of a question. Thankfully, the man didn’t think much of it and nodded fervently.

“Oh yes, they’re a noble bunch. Everybody loves them. They’re the closest thing we’ve got to
heroes. And half the time, we sleep better at night because we know that they’re protecting us and the ones that we love.”

Oikawa listened closely, and at this point, realized that there was nothing more to be said. He turned to glance at Kuroo, but caught Iwaizumi’s eyes on the way. They shared a glance, but no words. Oikawa could see everything Iwaizumi had to say, anyway.


But he looked at Oikawa like he now expected something of him, and that’s all that Oikawa needed.

“Let’s go,” he signed to Kuroo as soon as he looked over, and the two of them briskly left for work as soon as they could slip away.

He signed the very same thing to Kuroo when, after their shift, Satoko showed up again to take their answer. There was no doubt in his mind now. Oikawa would be a wastelander, and he would regain a purpose for his existence, or die trying.

Satoko smiled and gave them direction for where to go next. With a flutter in his heart and a ball in his throat, Oikawa trailed behind Kuroo as they entered the small back passages of the mall, and weaved their way towards something new and promising.

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Oikawa didn’t know what he expected, but it sure wasn’t what he was given. When the guy at the door let him and Kuroo in, he figured he was about to be met with some incredible phenomenon or an unbelievable sight.

Instead, what he got was a classroom-like area, filled up halfway by bored looking boys and girls of various ages, most of whom seemed unsurprised when they walked in. They were hardly even paid a glance, in fact.

“What a warm welcome,” Kuroo grumbled, weaving his way through the seats. Oikawa followed, scanning the room to try and spot a familiar figure. Thankfully, a familiar figure did wave back.

Oikawa tugged on Kuroo’s sleeve to get his attention and pointed at the other boy. Kuroo glanced over inquisitively, and then his face absolutely erupted into a cheerful smile when he spotted Yamaguchi.

“This is gonna be so good,” he commented, and sauntered over to sit by the silent boy. Yamaguchi did not seem to mind, so Oikawa did so as well, thankful that, at least, there was someone fluent in his own language to keep him company.

They did not speak, aside from the signed pleasantries. Only low murmuring swept through the class once in a while, and despite the silence feeling so familiar, Oikawa began to feel uneasy.

As if hearing his heart beginning to pound harder, the door swung open, and a woman walked in. She seemed older than most people in the class, and Oikawa suspected, from the way that all the others stood from their chairs, that she was their teacher.

The three of them rose hesitantly, just in time for the others to sit down. They sat as well.

The woman stayed silent for a while, scanning the class. Her eyes were sharp and knowing, as if she could see through every one of them.
“Shinji,” she suddenly called, her tone firm. “What is your responsibility in the event of a Code White?”

The student called upon perked up and sat straight.

“My responsibility is to ensure the safety of the surrounding citizens by controlling the crowd and creating a perimeter,” he answered, so self-assured that Oikawa wondered if he knew he would be asked that question.

“Natsuko, tell us what happened last weekend in one of the residential complexes,” she continued without blinking.

“There was a Code White in the evening, perpetrated by a citizen who was under the influence of illicit drugs,” a girl replied just as quickly, as if she, too, had rehearsed this. “One bystander got hurt in the altercation between the citizen and security.”

“Kanji, why did the bystander become a casualty of a simple, unarmed Code White?” she continued without acknowledging the other responses.

“The trainee assigned to the night guard of the residential complex did not ensure the perimeter and attempted to take on the perpetrator herself. She delayed the radio call for backup and by the time security arrived, a bystander had gotten caught in the crossfire while trying to be helpful to the trainee,” the boy recited flatly, as if this was not new to anyone.

“Good,” the woman finally praised, nodding, and then falling silent. Oikawa watched her pace without saying a word, feeling unnerved by her stern face.

She stayed quiet a moment longer, and in the corner of his eye, Oikawa saw Kuroo glancing around, clearly locating all the possible exits to escape the situation. Oikawa did not blame him. She made him feel caged as well.

“Everything you learn in your training is based on evidence,” she finally began, drawing attention back to herself. “When I tell you to do something, it’s because our community has gone through many phases of trial and error to determine that such an intervention is to be done. Not following these protocols can and will result in incidents that would otherwise have been fully preventable. Mistakes are necessary to achieve perfection; yet at some point, we must stop making mistakes and we must become perfect.”

Oikawa found himself drawn to her words. His natural inclination to aim for perfection had been crushed during his months in captivity, but with a few simple sentences, this woman was drawing his will back out. He wanted to become perfect. He wanted to become useful.

He wanted to become something. Anything. Anything else than the nothing he felt right now.

“This is what your training is about. Our world order has changed. We no longer exist to live. We no longer have the luxury of imperfection, because our new world order will pinpoint every one of our cracks and will infiltrate us from every single weak point we offer it. We live to exist.”

That resonated within Oikawa once again. He wanted to be something. He wanted to exist. He wanted to feel like there was a reason for him to be alive.

Next to him, Kuroo’s expression was unreadable.

“We are fundamental, and we are primal,” the teacher continued, pacing some more. Her eyes went to the boarded up windows that let slip a few dim rays of sun between the cracks. “We exist so that
others may live. We are the last wall erected between this community and the odds. We are the ones who will retake the wasteland in the name of our loved ones who have fallen, and who’ve yet to fall. We are hope and we are the future.”

She finally turned to sweep her eyes over the class, and her gaze softened, if only minutely.

“Welcome back to your Wastelander’s Survival Theory class. May what you learn here today help you protect someone tomorrow.”

Oikawa didn’t realize he was holding his breath until it hitched. Iwaizumi’s smile flashed through his mind’s eye and disappeared, fast enough for Oikawa to realize that he was forgetting what it looked like. He didn’t want to forget.

He couldn’t forget. Not when he’d already lost so much of himself to despair.

“We’ve got new recruits joining us today,” the woman continued, turning her eyes to their group in the back. As the students turned to them, seemingly sizing them up, Oikawa straightened his back to try and look more confident than he felt. “They haven’t been in Awa for long, but they do show much promise. Would you boys like to say a few things to introduce yourselves?”

“Nothing much to say,” Kuroo replied for all of them. “We came here with the rest of our group after traveling the entire island in search of sanctuary. I’m Kuroo Tetsurou, and these are my friends, Yamaguchi Tadashi and Oikawa Tooru.”

“Our recruiting team was impressed by your story of survival. We hope you will contribute to the growth of our community,” the woman nodded. “You may call me Kaoru. I will be your instructor for the theory sections of your training. We will begin shortly.” She walked towards them, and sat down on Kuroo’s desk, glancing at Yamaguchi. “Can you briefly describe why you accepted to become a wastelander? Despite the glory associated to it, it is a rigorous, arduous, and dangerous job. What drew you in?”

Yamaguchi looked up at her, and said nothing. Oikawa wasn’t surprised, until he realized that it may have been considered as rude, or defiant. Two things that Yamaguchi was absolutely not.

“I’m in it for the adventure,” Kuroo hummed. “Dunno about them.”

Kaoru turned to Oikawa expectantly, and Oikawa didn’t know how to answer. He glanced at Kuroo, who was looking back at him knowingly, and supportively. He took a deep breath, and put his hands up.

“For purpose,” he signed, and never before had he felt like he was lying and telling the truth simultaneously like he had just done now.

Kuroo’s gaze stayed on him for a moment, scrutinizing, and then turned to Yamaguchi. The class had gone absolutely silent.

“They’re here because they want to protect the people they love,” Kuroo finally translated, and Oikawa tried not to show the surprise on his face at Kuroo’s lie. He probably had a reason for it. He’d ask later.

“Right,” their instructor nodded, though she did look a bit uncomfortable now. She slid off of Kuroo’s desk slowly. Her eyes darted between Yamaguchi and Oikawa, both of whom were still very relaxed, and perhaps mildly confused by her hesitancy.

Kuroo piped up again.
“They’re mute,” he simply offered, nothing more and nothing less. Oikawa appreciated that.

The trainees around them got a bit restless, though to their credit, none of them spoke up. They simply exchanged glances and confused expressions.

“I see.” Kaoru now seemed a bit unsure, but to her credit, did not voice her insecurities about having disabled recruits on board. “Alright, well… Welcome to the program regardless.” She turned her back, and began pacing to the front of the class again. “Let’s move on. We’ll review our basic principles of energy conservation, and then we’ll move on to the ground rules of physical exertion in winter territory.”

The other trainees took another moment to glance furtively at the newcomers, and then turned their attention to the lesson. Some of them already had pen and paper pulled out and ready to jot notes, and at the very least, despite the weird vibe he was getting from them, Oikawa could appreciate their diligence.

He wanted to be like them.

Next to him, Kuroo’s expression was unreadable, as usual. But as the class went on, Oikawa did feel his eyes on him every so often, and didn’t know how to feel about that.

…———…———…———…———…———…

Kuroo cornered him after the class, as they split from Yamaguchi under the pretense of having extra work to do after hours. Yamaguchi didn’t seem to believe them, but didn’t question them and left.

Kuroo led him away from the common areas, and they settled for their talk in the middle of a shadowed hallway. Being alone with him left a weird taste on Oikawa’s tongue. He wanted to trust Kuroo, but didn’t know if that was even objectively possible anymore.

“I want you to be careful,” was all Kuroo told him at first, his voice low and flat.

“What’s this about?” Oikawa frowned, despite the skip in his heartbeat.

“I can see it in your eyes when you’re focused. You want to become one of them,” Kuroo extrapolated, though Oikawa still didn’t understand why that was an issue.

“Well, yes. That’s the point of having accepted the recruitment offer.”

“I get that,” Kuroo sighed, rolling his shoulders as he loosened up a bit. “But there’s something weird about the way Kaoru talks to her students, and the way they behave. They’re like machines.”

Oikawa still didn’t see a problem there. Discipline would make him efficient.

“You said you wanted to find a purpose by becoming a wastelander,” Kuroo continued. “That’s fine. I get it. But keep it to yourself. Don’t tell them that you’re a blank slate. Otherwise, they will take advantage of that and train you to become what they want you to become for their purposes.”

Oikawa still didn’t see the issue. It must have shown in his eyes, because Kuroo’s gaze dropped to the ground in a strange show of sadness.

“Do you understand why you shouldn’t tell them that you’ve given them the power to change you?” he asked softly, just trying to understand. Oikawa decided to break his silence and throw him a bone. He answered in the only way he knew how.
“I didn’t give them anything,” he tried to express what was on his mind. “I don’t have that power. Anyone who wants to condition me automatically gets it. There’s not much I can do to change that.”

He didn’t know which part of his answer made Kuroo’s eyebrows dip, but he hated it. He hated the way he was being looked at. With pity. Sadness. He didn’t deserve any of that.

“Oikawa,” Kuroo murmured, as if finally at a loss of words. His tone of voice got on Oikawa’s nerves. He was getting antsy (and perhaps a bit anxious). “You’re not… you’re not anybody’s prisoner anymore.”

Something violent jolted in Oikawa’s chest, and he stepped back. His heart was suddenly racing. He didn’t want to hear this right now.

“You’re not anyone else’s,” Kuroo continued, taking a step forward when Oikawa stepped back. His words were getting fiercer, and perhaps a bit more desperate to drive the point home.

Oikawa didn’t see the point. When Kuroo put his hand up to touch him, he flinched. Kuroo put his hand down with light shock reflecting in his eyes.

“Nobody decides what happens to you but you,” Kuroo added, clearly not sure what to say anymore either. Oikawa just wanted him to shut up. “You’re your own person, Oikawa. Don’t let them take that away from you.”

He paused, and Oikawa held his breath. He wanted to run. He wanted to go. He wanted to leave.

“Again,” Kuroo added in a heavy exhale, and Oikawa ran.

He ran because he didn’t want to hear this anymore. He didn’t want to be reminded of what he’d lost. Kuroo said it like it was so easy but he didn’t understand. Nobody understood. Iwaizumi didn’t understand, either, nobody did. Oikawa barely understood it himself.

He ran, his chest so tight it hurt, so tight he couldn’t breathe, his heart beating so fast it could explode. Nobody understood that Oikawa had nothing left to give, nor had he the power to take back. He had nothing and he was nothing.

He didn’t know what to do anymore. He turned a corner and ducked into a utility closet, intending on catching his breath, but ended up doubling over and smothering his angry, confused sobbing in the sleeve of his sweater.

He just wanted to become something again. Purpose. He wanted to be given purpose. He wanted someone to tell him what to do and make him feel like he was useful. He would do anything just to feel like he was worthy of being alive. He needed his heart to beat for a reason.

He just wanted to be something again. Anything. Anything but nothing.

He couldn’t handle being nothing once more.

A box of cleaning products dug painfully into his ribs when he drew his knees closer to himself to try and disappear. He didn’t move away. He felt no better than the cardboard.

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They did physical training the next day, and Oikawa appreciated that the exercise got his mind off of Kuroo’s veiled worry. Conditioning his body like this also helped a lot. He was used to people telling him when to exercise to keep in shape. The routine felt familiar, if not mildly disturbing.
Kuroo didn’t try to talk to him again, and Oikawa appreciated that, too. He followed his instructor’s words to the letter and tried not to let envy consume him when he noticed that the other students were doing better than him. He’d catch up. Of course he would. He wouldn’t let himself lose an opportunity like this.

The third day, the captain of the squad that was interviewed on the radio showed up to give them a lecture about wasteland survival.

And, as the uncanny would have it, he was not the only newcomer in the class.

When Oikawa walked in, scanning the room for a free seat, his eyes fell upon a new face. A face he didn’t think he’d see in a place like this. His expression morphed into a grimace as he froze in place.

“What’s the holdup?” Kuroo hummed from behind him as he entered, peeking past Oikawa.

At the sound of his voice amongst the silence in the class, the newcomer turned to gaze at them, and his face erupted into a huge grin. The movement stretched a small, coagulated scar on his left cheek.

“Kuroo!” Bokuto called out, waving excitedly. “I saved you a seat! Come here!”

“Bo, what are you doing here?” Kuroo exclaimed, nonetheless skipping over to plop down in the seat next to Bokuto. That got Oikawa moving, and he went to sit nearby, not wanting to be too close to the dynamic duo.

“Oh, I asked to become a wastelander trainee,” Bokuto simply shrugged.

“What did you say you did?” Kuroo was taken aback a bit. “Bo, you can’t do that.”

“Pretty sure I can, cause I’m here right now.”

“No, I mean… did you get recruited?” Kuroo asked, confused.

“No. I fought someone to get into the program,” Bokuto hummed. That explained the scar. “Like, literally fought.”

“Why?”

“I knew, when you guys were assigned to maintenance, that you’d be getting evaluated for a position in the wastelander training program. So I started thinking of what I could do if you did get in. It’s dangerous out there, right? So all that’s left for me to do is to protect you!” Bokuto proudly explained. Kuroo did not seem convinced, but the expression of disbelief on his face seemed so natural that Oikawa figured this wasn’t the first time Bokuto had said something so outrageous.

“And they agreed to that weird logic of yours?” he questioned, still unsure.

“Sure! They had to let me in! I’m super important, so I can pull strings, and stuff!”

“Exactly,” Kuroo sighed. “You’re super important! You’re the famous radio guy! You don’t need to be a wastelander, because you’re already famous.”

“I’m not doing it for fame,” Bokuto shrugged. “I’m doing it for you, bro! If you’re going out there, I wanna come with you, too!”

“At this point, I’ve heard that sentence so many times that I won’t even object,” Kuroo sighed, and Oikawa was the defeated sag of his shoulders as he leaned onto his desk. “Does Akaashi know?”
It was now Bokuto’s turn to look sheepish.

“Well… not exactly. I didn’t really tell him I’d be going through with this.” He was fiddling with his thumbs a bit more quietly, at least a little bit ashamed of his spontaneous decision.

“Bokuto, may you rest in peace.”

Oikawa did not think that the quiet teen could even get angry, but then again, imagining someone so composed get angry sounded scary. He also found himself praying for Bokuto’s safety when the news ultimately came out.

“I’ll be fine!” Bokuto tried to brush it off, if only a bit nervously. At that point, the classroom door opened, and both the teacher and their guest speaker walked in, commanding silence. Oikawa sat upright as everyone quieted.

The teacher gazed at them sternly for a moment before beginning to present their guest speaker. That’s when Bokuto leaned over to Kuroo to whisper conspiratorially.

“He’s a chill guy. He’ll be pissed, but he’ll understand.”

“I doubt that, Bo. He’s gonna be angry.”

“What’s he gonna do, hit me?”

“Bo!” Kuroo waved brightly the next morning, when Bokuto came to sit next to them at lunchtime. Their party was smaller this time, as many of the boys had inconsistent work schedules in their respective departments. This left more space for Bokuto’s dramatics, as he approached their table with his tray, and splayed himself down in his seat.

“What’s wrong?” Daichi asked from where he was reading a couple of sheets of paper, glancing curiously at the unusually quiet boy.

“He hit me.”

“I called it,” Kuroo shrugged like it was nothing, and Oikawa couldn’t help but snort a bit at that.


“Akaashi,” Bokuto whined, not at all seeming in pain. Oikawa saw Kuroo waving Daichi’s concern off with an amused smile. “He wasn’t very happy when I told him I was gonna be a wastelander. I tried to convince him, honestly, but he just smacked me and kicked me out of the studio.”

“Don’t take it too badly,” Kuroo patted his shoulders lightly, not seeming too concerned. Indeed, as if he’d seen it coming, Bokuto perked right up, and pulled his tray closer to himself.

“True! He’ll get over it. It’s probably just the initial shock that got him.”

Oikawa somehow doubted that that was the end of it.

From the table next to them, a man suddenly fiddled with the volume on his portable radio, and tuned in attentively to the series of static noises that were attempting to dissipate.

“What’s on the radio this morning?” Kuroo asked, glancing over at the man, and then at Bokuto. Strangely enough, he seemed rather perplexed as well.
“I dunno. We didn’t have anything lined up for this morning, as far as I know.” He seemed to think for a second. “Then again, Akaashi did kick me out, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Good morning, residents of Awa,” the radio suddenly began, Akaashi’s voice filtering through the static. Almost immediately, all the tables turned the volume up on their radios. “I hope you are all having a fine morning today. The weather is mild out, so it’s actually quite a lovely day to relax and take it easy and do your best.”

“Is it just me, or does he sound different?” Daichi frowned, idly munching on his breakfast.

“Maybe he’s congested?” Bokuto winced lightly when he noted the edge to Akaashi’s voice.

“This broadcast is short and sweet, and an unplanned one to get you thinking on this fine day,” Akaashi continued, his voice sounding soft, almost too soft. So soft it felt fake. Oikawa didn’t know the other boy too much, but his tone was making his skin crawl.

“What’s he doing?” Kuroo frowned as well, finally noting that something felt off.

“I would like everyone this morning to think of the people they love. Take a moment,” Akaashi encouraged, letting a few second elapse. A few faces flashed through Oikawa’s mind. He couldn’t help it. “These people you thought of are the ones who matter in this world. As sad as it is, our world no longer can be saved. But the people we love… they are the ones who can be saved. And it is our individual responsibility to ensure that we do our utmost to keep our loved ones safe and sound.”

“Where’s this coming from?” Bokuto frowned, toying with his rice idly. Oikawa couldn’t tell if he was being oblivious on purpose, or if he was just thick. It was painfully obvious why Akaashi was doing this sort of thing now.

“Take a moment to tell your loved ones that you want the best for them. Tell them you love them, and that you are worried for their safety. Tell your parents and children and siblings and friends that you cannot bear to lose them, too. Remind them that they can find solace at your side, and that there is nowhere else in this god-forsaken world that will provide the same safety. Let them know. Make them understand. If your feelings remain silent, you risk losing the ones you love to everything left unsaid. Don’t work yourself up to regret withholding your feelings later. Break the silence. Give your emotions a voice. Tell your loved ones today that you-”

And Akaashi’s voice broke in a strange lilt. Oikawa’s heart lurched, and by the looks on Bokuto’s and Kuroo’s faces, the uncharacteristic change in his tone spoke volumes. They looked stricken, and maybe a little bit heartbroken. Kuroo looked at Bokuto somberly, and Bokuto turned his eyes to the ground, something akin to shame rising to fill the premature lines etched onto his innocent face.

“Tell them that you need them,” Akaashi continued when he composed himself. “And that being by their side is the only thing that can keep you going out in this world. Tell them, and make sure they never forget. Make sure that you never have to end up thinking that you did not do enough to keep your loved ones safe.”

A woman was softly sobbing on a table nearby. The entire cafeteria had been plunged in a heavy silence. The man with the radio next to them had bowed his head with his eyes closed. Two people nearby were embracing tightly, intimately, as if afraid to let go. Akaashi’s deep and meaningful speech had somehow gotten to everybody, despite the fact that Oikawa could tell that it was personal, and that he was simply venting out on the airwaves instead of in person.

He wondered for a second if that was Akaashi’s real voice. Both of them seemed to be surrounded by an oppressive silence, and yet, where Oikawa found sign language to speak, Akaashi had found
radio broadcasting to make himself heard. They were similar in the end, both of them just trying so hard to make their thoughts known, and struggling to do so without a proper voice.

“Thank you,” Akaashi concluded softly, quietly, vulnerable. It made Oikawa’s heartstrings tug painfully. The pinched look on Bokuto’s face spoke volumes about how much he was hurting, too. “Have a fantastic day. Spend it knowing that you are still here, and that you are still someone. You matter. Goodbye.”

And then, there was a silence.

The atmosphere stayed morose for a while, almost scarily so. It was almost as if people were afraid to be the first ones to speak up. The static from the radios was turned off one by one, until all that remained in the entire cafeteria was the sound of occasional sniffling.

And then, all of a sudden, everyone got up, and chaos erupted.

People began to walk up to each other to talk, hold one another, laugh, cry, bask in the fact that, as Akaashi had said, they were still alive, and they still mattered. Only the four at Oikawa’s table remained seated, not sure what to do next. Bokuto still hadn’t spoken.

“Bo?” Kuroo called softly, noticing that his friend was out of it. “Hey. Earth to Bo.” He waited for Bokuto to raise his head and look at him, his eyes a bit blank. “You okay, man?”

“I… I’m fine,” he nodded, his usual energy having evaporated with every syllable that had vibrated through his eardrums.

“Don’t look like it,” Kuroo challenged softly, not pushing too much, but not letting him get away with the obvious lie either. He reminded Oikawa of Iwaizumi, if only a little… less rough than his best friend’s usual mannerisms.

Bokuto did not reply, still deep in thought. His face was impassible, and Oikawa could not tell if he was sad, worried, regretful, or just plain empty. Goodness knew they all had a bit of emptiness inside of them these days.

Oikawa tapped Kuroo’s forearm gently to grab his attention and pointed to Bokuto.

“Tell him something for me,” he instructed, trying to do his best to help. “Tell him that he should probably talk to Akaashi.” He found himself thinking of how he’d feel if Iwaizumi was the one saying all this. “I know I would if my best friend sounded so broken.”

“Bo.” Kuroo nodded at Oikawa, carefully reading off his fingers. “You should probably talk to Akaashi. He sounded upset, and I’m pretty sure it has to do with the fact that you enlisted yourself in the wastelanders.”

“He’s mad at me, isn’t he?” Bokuto sighed, dejected. “I didn’t mean to make him upset…”

“He’s not mad at you, just worried,” Kuroo rolled his eyes lightly, as if expecting this development. “You should go see him.”

“He’s all I had for a long time,” Bokuto continued, as if not even hearing Kuroo speak. “I never meant to make him mad… not after he’s done so much for me.”

“Oh my god,” Kuroo groaned softly, and Oikawa was briefly thrown off at the mildly inappropriate reaction to what was clearly a boy having a breakdown.
“After he saved my life and tried to save my parents… after he took care of me… after he helped me get my memory back…” Bokuto’s tone was slowly escalating, until he suddenly stood up, slamming his hands on the table. His face was crisped with pain (if only a bit dramatically). “I don’t deserve him! I can’t face him after all this!”

Oikawa began to realize why Kuroo was sighing. Even Daichi, quiet so far, seemed thrown off.

“Look, at least go see if he’s okay by himself in the recording studio,” Kuroo tried, shaking his head lightly. “He needs you right now, Bokuto. You’re the only one who can make him feel better. You saw how sad he sounded… And you heard him. You need to save the ones who are closest to you in this world… So go. Go save him.”

Bokuto slowly considered his words, and the desperate expression quickly gave way to determination.

“You’re right!” he nodded, his strange salt-and-pepper hair whipping around with the force of his nod. It hurt Oikawa’s neck just looking at it. “Thanks, Kuroo! I’m gonna go fix things!”

“You do that, bud,” Kuroo smirked, watching amusedly as Bokuto grabbed his tray, and briefly wished them a good day before rushing off.

When the whirlwind teenager was gone, Oikawa strangely felt like there was a vacuum left in his place.

“He’s always like that,” Kuroo offered simply, and got up as well, grabbing his tray. Around them, people were beginning to leave also, sentimentality giving way to practicality as they all left for work. “Come on, Oikawa. We need to get going for training.”

They didn’t have training scheduled so early in the day. They never did. But Oikawa just smiled, and got up as well. He also had questions for Kuroo.

He waved goodbye to Daichi, who looked mildly amused and mildly concerned, and headed off behind Kuroo. They remained silent until they’d disposed of their lunch, and Kuroo only spoke up when they were on the stairwell up to the ground floor.

“I heard a lot of interesting things, you know,” he began cryptically, already bothering Oikawa with all the mystery he tried to shroud himself in.

“Drop the bullshit and tell me what’s on your mind now,” Oikawa rolled his eyes, making sure Kuroo could understand the skepticism interwoven between his delicate fingers.

“So straightforward,” Kuroo hummed lightly, though his eyes were hard. He was clearly deep in thought. “Alright. I’ll tell you. But you tell me first. Did you notice something off about the words Akaashi was using?”

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“I thought you were going to talk about everything Bokuto said about owing Akaashi his life,” Oikawa signed in genuine surprise.


“Well…” Oikawa tried to recall what he’d heard, but mostly, how he’d felt hearing those words. “Akaashi sounded sad. Upset, more like. Bokuto’s impulse was genuinely distressing for him.”

“Right. What else?”
“Is this a game show? Math class, maybe?”

“Okay, smart ass. Very funny. Tell me what else you got from it,” Kuroo’s eyes turned serious. “I have a hypothesis. But I need a second opinion.”

Oikawa’s throat locked up tight at the look of his eyes. Cold, and steely. As if he anticipated for something to go horribly wrong.

“Well…” he continued, trying to regain his bearings and remember how to sign. He looked away from Kuroo. His gaze was unnerving. “I had the impression that this was impulsive on Akaashi’s part. He definitely didn’t have a script ready.”

“Mhm.” Kuroo’s eyes were riveted on his hands as he processed every single symbol Oikawa chose to create.

“He was definitely worried about Bokuto, but it was as if he didn’t know how to express it.” The more he went over his thoughts, the more he, too, began constructing the same impression as Kuroo. Something was fishy here. “It was as if he would explode if he didn’t get it out, so he grabbed the first medium available, which was the radio.”

“I knew Akaashi before the war,” Kuroo nodded, stopping them on a landing in the staircase where they could be alone to talk. “He was never the impulsive type. He always thought an action through three times before doing it. He was analytical, rational, and collected. What we heard on the radio was anything but him.”

“But what would drive him to become impulsive as such when Bokuto’s safety is threatened with compromise?” Oikawa mused. “It was as if he was desperate for not only Bokuto to hear his feelings, but…” It began to dawn on him. “But himself, too. He needed to hear himself, too.”

“There’s only one emotion that is strong enough to do that,” Kuroo nodded grimly.

They gave each other a second of silence, their eyes doing the talking. Oikawa didn’t like the look in Kuroo’s eyes, but he understood.

“Guilt.”

“Exactly,” Kuroo nodded, as if he’d already thought all of this up. “Bokuto’s putting himself in a dangerous situation, and of all things, Akaashi is suddenly feeling overwhelmingly and desperately guilty. That’s a very strange reaction. Tie in what Bokuto said about owing Akaashi his life, and this is becoming one hell of a bizarre situation.”

“How do you even come up with this stuff?” Oikawa rubbed his forehead as a headache began to come forth. It didn’t seem like they were quite done with the mysteries just yet. “You’re literally basing a whole psychological analysis on a radio broadcast that was more static than anything else.”

“I like to give these things some thought.”

“More like you need to know everything about everyone around you.” If Oikawa could grumble, he would. Kuroo gave that some thought, too, as he began ascending the stairs once more. Oikawa closely followed.

“Well…” he began, elongating his syllable in thought. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re not wrong. I want to know what’s going on around me.”
"You’re wrong," Oikawa challenged with a raise of his brow. "You don’t want you need. You need to know what’s happening. Like you’re afraid that any unknown variable will be your downfall. Why do you need so much control over everything around you?"

"Unknown variables have been my downfall so far," Kuroo hissed right back, and Oikawa flinched, realizing that he’d pinched a nerve. He hadn’t expected that. "I’m just trying to avoid any more of those. Besides, I thought you would understand the need for control. Don’t you? Aren’t you the same as me?"

Oikawa attempted to sign the words ‘what do you mean?’, but his hands had begun to shake. Kuroo read it out of the nervousness lighting up in his eyes, however.

"You need control, too, don’t you?" Kuroo continued, his voice carrying a certain edge to it that felt like it would cut Oikawa if he pushed too far. "You should need it. After all the time when it was taken away from you, aren’t you craving to have it back? Aren’t you afraid that you won’t be able to be independent without absolute control?"

The words made Oikawa feel weird. He was in control, wasn’t he?

Wasn’t he?

"I…” he hesitated. "I don’t think I can be independent anymore. I can’t do it. So I... I shouldn’t need to control anything around me.” He wasn’t sure he was saying the right thing, especially judging by the impassible look in Kuroo’s eyes, but he tried. Oh, he did try. He wasn’t even sure what he believed anymore. “If someone else controls the variables around me, then… that’s okay, right? I don’t need to have control over my own life, as long as someone does.”

… Right?

"Your hands are shaking," Kuroo noted, a bit softer this time, as if he saw something that Oikawa didn’t. He looked away. Shame was beginning to well up inside of him once again. “Hey. Don’t think too much about it. I’m sorry for bringing it up.” They reached the top of the staircase, and opened the door to the ground floor. “Take it easy. I’ll see you later, for work. And then we can go to training together in the evening. Hopefully, Bo will have sorted himself out by then.”

Oikawa nodded, if only with a slight delay. Kuroo patted his shoulder as he walked off.

"Take care, Oikawa."

He left the brunet in silence, standing there with many more questions and insecurities than he had before. Oikawa felt weird about it. Every conversation he had with Kuroo seemed to end on a mixed note.

…

Bokuto did not say much after his talk with Akaashi, but considering that the two were back to behaving as usual (whatever their usual was), they had settled things. Akaashi still seemed a bit hesitant when Bokuto mentioned going to his training sessions or classes with Yamaguchi, Kuroo and Oikawa, but never again made a big deal out of it. Oikawa noticed that Kuroo still seemed a bit suspicious, but he brushed it off as Kuroo being paranoid. He still wasn’t sure what his story was (they never really spoke of it), but it must have been fucked up for him to be like this all the time.

Oikawa thought back often to what he told him over and over again.

That he needed to regain the control he’d lost.
He didn’t even know where to start looking, or if it was even something he could look for. He couldn’t even remember when he lost it. His days in captivity melded together in his recollections, so blurry and so vivid at once that all he could remember were unending cycles of terror and emptiness. If he took the time to think about it, he probably didn’t lose control all at once. No, it had probably slipped off gradually, whittled away by the small freedoms that were routinely forbidden to him.

*Eat,* they’d say, and Oikawa would have no choice but to do it, whether or not he was hungry. *Go running,* they’d say, and Oikawa would do it, not because he wanted to exercise the frustration away, but because he was told to. *Sleep,* they’d say, and Oikawa would have to pretend to sleep until the fear in the forefront of his mind actually dissipated enough for him to fall asleep. *Stop squirming,* they’d say, and Oikawa would do it, because he was scared, and because he was told to.

His heart jumped in his throat, and the uncomfortable feeling of nausea snapped him out of his recollection. When he came to, he found himself at the dinner table with everybody else, not even sure how he got there in the first place. There was an untouched bowl of cheap ramen cooling in front of him, and a quick glance at the others informed him that he had been off in his memories for quite a while.

The next thing he noticed was that Iwaizumi had set his hand against his thigh, not actually touching him, but rather brushing his leg to let him know that he knew something was wrong. Iwaizumi himself was calmly slurping his noodles, tuning into Hinata’s excited conversation nearby. Oikawa appreciated him not being overprotective, and moved lightly to indicate that he was back. As expected, Iwaizumi immediately turned to him, drawing his hand away, and scanned his tired features.

“Hello,” he greeted softly, too quietly for anyone else to hear. “How are you feeling?”

Oikawa just nodded with a small smile, too tired to bother signing.

“Do you want to say something?” Iwaizumi continued, his face betraying nothing of how he felt. There was a smack of broth on his cheek, and Oikawa honed in on it to avoid discerning the worry subtly etched in his expression.

He shook his head. He didn’t want to talk about it, whatever it was. He still wasn’t sure how to go about the subject matter of regaining control on his life.

“Okay,” Iwaizumi nodded softly. “Please eat a little bit.”

*Eat,* they’d say, and Oikawa would have to do it. If he didn’t, they’d make him. And they’d yell at him when he threw up afterwards.

His breathing must’ve been shaky, because he saw Iwaizumi moving in the periphery. He immediately zoned back in to watch his movements like a hawk, and his best friend must have noticed it, because he moved slower.

“Do you want to eat anything?” he adjusted the question slightly, knowing that he’d hit the nail on the head when Oikawa took a deeper breath to calm down. Oikawa shook his head after a moment of thought, and fully expected Iwaizumi to try and gently coerce him into taking a few bites at least. However, to his apparent surprise, Iwaizumi shrugged, and pushed his bowl away from him.

The shock must’ve shown as clearly as day, because Iwaizumi patted his shoulder supportively.
before returning to his own dish.

“No point in trying to get you to do something you don’t want to do,” he explained regarding the silent question. “The Oikawa I know is mule-headed enough to get away with it.”

The Oikawa he knew seemed like a fantastic person. Unlike the person Oikawa had become through his ordeal, he would stand up for himself, and so much more.

When Oikawa saw Iwaizumi casually return to his food without another word of objection, his heart leapt, and he promised himself that, if only for Iwaizumi, if only for his memories of his past self, he would go back to the man he was before.

Somewhere inside of him, he still had the power to change himself. The thought sent a shiver down his spine, and the shiver reflexively drove his fists to clench. And when his nails dug into his palms, he thought that he felt, for just one second, an invisible string in his grip. And though the next second, it was gone, he knew now that his life was within his reach. He had to grasp thin air, and believe hard enough for the string to be in his hand when he opened his eyes.

He glanced over to the other side of the table, and caught Kuroo side-eyeing him, as if he’d been watching him. Kuroo didn’t break eye contact, just smiled lightly to Oikawa before turning back to the ongoing conversation. It irritated Oikawa that he acted so omniscient and untouchable, but it irritated him even more than he had been right so far. It irritated him that he was grateful.

He looked away from Kuroo, but knew that he’d turn back to him sooner or later. And as irritating as that thought was, it helped calm a bit of Oikawa’s uncertainty regarding the future.

He had Iwaizumi. He had Kuroo. And someday, hopefully someday soon, he would have himself.

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A week passed before their very first practice mission. A week of evening classes and daytime practice and exercise prepped them to step outside the boundaries of Awa for the first time ever since they arrived there.

Their first practice mission was a simulation of the practical evaluation they’d be doing later on. It was a simple raid-type mission, where the boys would have to demonstrate the proper techniques of safety and survival as they raided a house set-up by their instructors prior to their arrival.

None of them were worried about it. In fact, Oikawa found that the worst part of it all was that he had to step back out in the chill of nuclear winter yet again. He already had enough of it commuting from their residence to the main complex every day, never mind going outside for long periods of time again. It felt like his body had forgotten how much it had taken for them to trek to Awa, and had regressed into its old state of getting irritated at any long exposure to the cold.

He was going to be a wastelander though. He figured he may as well start to train himself in that sense.

For all the hype, the simulation was nothing. Clearly, Kuroo and Yamaguchi had done this a hundred times, and with Bokuto’s quick reflexes and Oikawa’s precious common sense, they made a very good team.

They were so good, they even saw coming the incident that was bound to happen to them, knowing their luck.

It wasn’t anything major. Midway through the steps to the second floor, Kuroo stepped on one that
must’ve been loose, because it gave way, causing him to fall backwards. He caught himself quickly, but did end up tumbling down, into the wooden screen that their instructors had used to delimit the area of the house to be used for the exercise. It, too, toppled over and fell on him, but Kuroo was able to catch it and slow its descent before it knocked the breath out of his lungs a second time.

By the time their instructor rushed in to help them with this unplanned occurrence, Bokuto had already lifted the divider from off of Kuroo and was securing the surroundings. Yamaguchi was already at Kuroo’s side and assessing him for any head injuries or broken bones, and Oikawa was kneeling behind his head, hands on his neck to preserve spinal alignment in case of a head injury.

In front of their speechless instructor, Yamaguchi cleared Kuroo’s spine, and Bokuto helped him and Oikawa up just in time for all of them to start laughing about it. They finished the exercise without further ado, and returned to the relative warmth of the transport truck for a debrief.

Oikawa knew to expect their instructor’s praise on a mission well done. They had gone through so much worse together, after all. He was only excited to hear that they would be returning to the compound for their theoretical classes of the evening, and that they’d be getting assigned more practice missions throughout the next few weeks. Getting his body and mind moving had done him a load of good.

A week later, they passed their practical examination with flying colours. It was no surprise to anyone, neither the teachers, nor the team members themselves. Oikawa figured that they were a mild annoyance to the other students, though, considering that they had waltzed in several weeks into the new term and were now nailing all the examinations, but nobody ever said anything about it. Or anything at all, in fact. The other students never really spoke to any of them, which was fine by Oikawa. He didn’t feel like being reminded of what he’d lost, anyway.

The familiar feeling of getting settled into a lifestyle returned over the next few weeks. They all began to find their place within the community. They began to rebuild a routine in Awa. On some days when the sun poked through the dense grey clouds and illuminated the irradiated land, Oikawa felt like they were actually beginning to rebuild a life in Awa, too.

The spring semester of school began halfway through March, about a month after they found salvation in Awa. The setup was rudimentary; inhabitants with a teaching degree or higher education in a certain topic would offer classes about it, and anyone who wanted to attend could enroll. At first, the concept of school seemed a bit ludicrous. After all, did homework really have a role to play after the apocalypse?

Oikawa was unconcerned anyway, since he was in wastelander training to begin with. That already counted as a form of education. Besides, he didn’t fancy himself anything more than a military man now. Without a voice, he wasn’t worth much anymore. Just enough to offer his body to whoever could still make use of it.

On the other hand, Daichi insisted that they all sign up for at least one or two classes. His reasoning was that they wouldn’t live the war for the rest of their lives and that they may as well begin to rebuild upon their lives from before. There were a few objections raised. The thought of homework somehow seemed more chilling than the weather. But nobody really acted upon it, and within the next week, most of them were sitting in a thrown-together classroom environment, scribbling notes about mathematics and history. Physics and history. Biology and language. The very same things they would have been studying at this point in an alternate lifetime, when all they would worry about was the next volleyball tournament. The next midterm exam. What they’d be having for dinner.

Oikawa didn’t like reminiscing. It reminded him of everything that he had been, and that he now was not. The Oikawa who wanted to beat Ushijima Wakatoshi and play on the national volleyball team
was dead. He had died long ago. Only a silent shell of his body had remained.

For that reason, Oikawa didn’t restart his high school education and just kept focusing on wastelander training. However, when he lied sleepless at night, he had to admit that somehow, it felt wrong.

Of course, Iwaizumi could tell.

Oikawa knew he could, even before he sat up from where he slept, a few bodies away from him. Oikawa didn’t sit up himself, but when Iwaizumi threw his covers off, he knew he was about to abandon the warmth of his sleeping bag for a little while.

He sighed mutely, and did the same. They proceeded out of the door to their room, and headed down the hallway. Though they stayed close, neither of them spoke. Oikawa enjoyed this kind of silence.

Iwaizumi stopped them in the living room area, which had been repurposed as giant closet for all the winter clothing for the inhabitants of their dorm. Past the racks and racks of damp coats and soggy boots, a large window cast a faint moonlight upon the macerated hardwood floor. Iwaizumi took him to it.

The clouds usually cleared in the later hours, because of the high winds that made the nights so freezing. Oikawa liked that about the weather, at the very least. Despite the painful cold that pervaded their bones every step of the way, it was times like these that made this entire trip worth it. The powdery snow scintillating in tall mounds made it seem like the stars had fallen from the sky, only to find a foothold on Earth. Standing in the soft moonlight filtering in, feet curling with the chill and the anticipation of the situation, body leaning close to Iwaizumi’s, Oikawa breathed. He breathed, his heart beat, and his fingers twitched with the urge to reach out and touch the frosty glass. In the thin film fogging the window, Oikawa saw his reflection’s mouth open in a soft gasp. For a second, he saw the man he’d been before the war.

“You better have a good reason for making me stay up like this,” Iwaizumi began in his rumbling, soothing voice. He spared Oikawa a glance that lasted three whole seconds, and then he, too, turned his eyes to the world outside. He gave Oikawa the time and space to think, which he appreciated.

Lately, he’d begun to forget what troubled him and what didn’t. All he knew was that he felt haunted, like there was something in the back of his mind that told him that he was hurt, though he himself couldn’t see nor feel a wound. He pondered if perhaps he still felt like the issue of regaining his control was out of his control. Deep inside, there was still a little voice that yelled at him to relinquish his will to others. He never responded to its desperate cries, hoping to ignore it until it went away, but periodically questioned if it stayed for a reason. Perhaps there was some truth to it.

“Iwa-chan,” he signed, his fingers sliding against one another as if to feel the comfort brought by the name. Iwaizumi didn’t turn to him, giving him space, but did look down at his hands. “*What do you think I’m good for?*”

“This again?” Iwaizumi groaned. “I told you. You’re irreplaceable.”

“*Why do you have to be such a brute when I pour my heart out to you like this?*” Oikawa teased, gently bumping his friend’s shoulder with his. “*I want to know the answer.*”

“The answer is something you’re supposed to come up with yourself,” Iwaizumi sighed. “It’s called having a self-concept.”

That made Oikawa feel a bit worse. A bit. He knew he was supposed to have it, but he still couldn’t
find it inside of him. Iwaizumi made it seem so easy. Although he didn’t mean to hurt him even more, the comment did pinch a little bit.

“Well, what’s your self-concept like?” he reversed the question, halfway trying to prove a point, and halfway just trying to understand. Iwaizumi had been through a lot as well. Surely he had lost something irretrievably as well.

The silence confirmed it. A glance at his friend proved that he was thinking about the question deeply.

“I’m a good person,” Iwaizumi murmured after a moment of thought, so quickly that Oikawa almost missed it. He said it as if to get it out of the way, or to express it before he forgot it. It broke Oikawa’s heart. “I allow people to lean on me and depend on me when they need to get something done. I’ll do anything to help.” His voice cracked a little bit and he coughed to cover it up. A pathetic effort that Oikawa commended regardless, for he would have done the same. “Anything.”

“And that’s who you are?” Oikawa continued, his glance straying down to Iwaizumi’s right hand. His description sounded very much like the Iwaizumi before the war, but Oikawa felt like there should have been something else. Something less. Iwaizumi had been broken by the war, and both of them knew it for a fact.

“Yeah.” Iwaizumi frowned lightly, as if not understanding what Oikawa wasn’t understanding. “You’ve known me for too long to get away with disbelief. What are you thinking?”

“You really wanna know?” Oikawa smirked, though it was weak. Iwaizumi saw right through it.

“You’ve never held back on me before, stupid. Just tell me.”

“I’m just...” he wondered how to formulate it. His fingers hovered at his chest level, tingling with the cold radiating off the frosty glass. He turned towards Iwaizumi to get away from the chill, and Iwaizumi immediately followed. “I’m just trying to understand how you came up with the answer. It sounds very similar to the thick Iwa-chan I knew before the war,” he hesitated, then added, “as if you haven’t changed.”

“It’s not that I haven’t changed,” Iwaizumi frowned deeper. “Of course I have. But my experiences didn’t change the person that I am. They changed the way I behave and the way I think about things, but deep inside, I’ve always been and always will be me. Whether I’m Seijoh’s dependable ace, or this group’s dependable friend, I’m still Iwaizumi Hajime, the guy that people can count on.”

“Of course you are.” Oikawa meant it as a quip, but his hands quivered. There was something about his best friend’s statement that made him feel like he was about to cry. “You’ve always been the voice of reason, too.”

“Tried to be, in your case. You say that, but you’ve never listened to me,” Iwaizumi threw right back, the familiar banter creating a comfortable cocoon in the atmosphere around them.

“It’s cause you’re not my mom, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa threw right back, and for a second, their faces brightened. They both allowed themselves to chuckle at their ridiculous antics for a second, just to relieve the heaviness that the conversation had spread upon their hearts.

The silence returned after they quieted down, though it simply felt like a buffer between their thoughts and their words. It was comfortable, as always. It lulled Oikawa’s mind down to a point where he felt like if he lied down, he could fall asleep.

But being with Iwaizumi felt like something else entirely. He didn’t want to fall asleep just yet, not
when the moonlight still cast harsh shadows across his young face for Oikawa to admire. His eyelashes, long and dark, fluttered when the chill dried his dulled eyes out, and Oikawa knew that although Iwaizumi had not changed as a person, there were still parts of him that would be affected forever by his experience.

A shiver ran down his spine, and he couldn’t help but inch closer to Iwaizumi. The warmth he provided wasn’t physical, per se, but although a blanket would’ve been very welcome right now, he still found solace within his aura.

“I don’t know if that has helped me figure out my own self-concept,” he suddenly admitted. “You… You haven’t let your experiences change the person you are, but I… My voice…”

“I know,” Iwaizumi mumbled softly, looking sad.

“Do you really?” Oikawa stressed, not angrily, but desperately, feeling a bit desperate to have himself understood. “My entire life revolved around my voice. I wanted to study in law, but I can’t be someone’s advocate if I can’t talk. I can’t play volleyball if I can’t communicate with my teammates. I can’t work a part-time job if I can’t talk to customers. I can’t do anything…”

He sighed deeply, though all that came out was the whistle of air. Not a trace of his voice to be found. It made him feel broken from the very depth of his being.

“I can’t even tell people how much they mean to me anymore…” he added as a second, more hidden thought. “All I’ve got are the symbols in my hands, and they won’t say how I feel like my voice would’ve. Nobody even understands sign language. It’s frustrating because it always feels like I’m alone.”

Iwaizumi looked at him, and then put his hands up. Oikawa’s eyes immediately went to his fingers, which curved elegantly as he made the choice to answer by signing. It was a considerate, and very empathetic gesture.

“But you’re not.” His fingers hovered in mid air for a second as he buffered what to sign next, but all he did was put his right hand over Oikawa’s heart. The pressure was uneven, but somehow, it felt that much more comforting to him. He was damaged, but he wasn’t the only one. “Though you may feel lonely sometimes, you’re never alone. I know that… I know that better than anyone. When the worst comes to get you, there’s always someone there for you. You may not expect it. You may not believe it. But there will always be someone there for you when you need them most.” His hand fell off after a second of thought. “I… I want to be that person for you.” He swallowed heavily, and Oikawa noticed how he turned his gaze away, mildly embarrassed. “I’m the dependable one, after all, right?”

Oikawa never thought his heart could swell so much. After everything he’d been through, he still found it in himself to trust in Iwaizumi’s quiet passion. But then again, he’d never, not even for a second, ever doubted Iwaizumi. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise. His choice of words, though, let something like a bitter taste linger in Oikawa’s mouth. There was a story behind all this, and he wanted to hear it.

“And who was that person for you, when you needed them the most?” he asked after some hesitation.

“I knew you were going to ask,” Iwaizumi chuckled softly, genuinely amused. As the laughter dissipated, though, there only remained a heavy silence. By the looks of his stricken expression, it wasn’t an easy story to tell. “I guess I had to tell someone sometime.”
“You haven’t told anyone about it?” Oikawa asked, mildly surprised. His curiosity was beginning to poke his head out from behind the curtain of self-doubt. “I thought you told those Karasuno guys everything.”

“Not everything.” Iwaizumi seemed mildly affronted. “Just the basics. I guess I didn’t want to get emotional in front of them.”

“Are you gonna get emotional in front of me, Iwa-chan?” Oikawa asked, but without the lull of his voice, it didn’t sound teasing. It just felt like a genuine question.

“Probably,” Iwaizumi admitted after a moment of swallowing his pride. “I know you won’t think lesser of me regardless of what I say.”

Oikawa flinched lightly at such an honest statement, but never in a thousand lifetimes would he even joke about it otherwise.

Iwaizumi took his silence as a stepping stone towards his story. He didn’t hesitate, however, as if he’d already been preparing this for a while. Perhaps he had. Oikawa was glad, because he now knew that this was something that his best friend had to get out of his system. And if his use was to be receptive to his emotions, then so be it. He would gladly devote a lifetime to bearing Iwaizumi Hajime’s burdens.

“It’s how I lost my fingers.” Iwaizumi clenched his fist, the moonlight casting a bizarre shadow on his palm through the gap in his digits. “It was punishment, too.”

Oikawa had a feeling that that was what it was, but hearing it made his heart hurt that much more. With so few words and so much left unsaid, he already understood and empathized. He wanted to touch Iwaizumi, but knew that sometimes, distance said much more than anything else.

“There was a girl in the camp with me,” Iwaizumi continued. “Younger than us. First-year, I think. Her name was Mayumi Sonozaki. She was an O minus.”

Confusion must’ve shown on Oikawa’s face because Iwaizumi let out a small noise of realization and backtracked.

“That’s her blood type,” he clarified. “Age and blood type were the biggest determinants of identity in the camp. Most people didn’t know any names, just blood types.” He chuckled lightly in a rare moment of genuine nostalgia. “Mayumi called me the A+ A-plus. She thought it was funny because I’m very fit and my blood type is A-positive.”

“You seemed close to her,” Oikawa commented, with just a bit of bitterness. He wished he could’ve been there for Iwaizumi instead of some random girl. He felt powerless again.

“I needed something to hold onto,” Iwaizumi shrugged. He seemed to be getting lost in his memories. “She had been there before me, so she eased my transition into the camp. It was… it was really terrifying at first. Lots of baseline tests, interviews, stuff like that. She told me what to expect and how to take care of myself after the procedures.”

“I’m glad you had someone to help out,” Oikawa still replied, unable to imagine how scared Iwaizumi must’ve been. He didn’t want to imagine it. The simple thought broke his heart.

“She helped everyone out, really, not just me.” Iwaizumi shrugged, looking away. “One of her kidneys had already been taken out, so she fancied herself a veteran in the camp.”

“Are you okay to talk about this right now?” Oikawa immediately asked, shivering lightly. He
worried for Iwaizumi, but also was worried that he wouldn’t be able to bear what he would be told. He just hoped that he would be enough. “It’s a very heavy topic. You don’t have to.”

“I need to,” Iwaizumi protested softly, his eyes shutting lightly in resignation. He took a deep breath. “I want to.”

Oikawa remained silent in acceptance. Iwaizumi flashed him a grateful look, then continued.

“We wore bracelets on our wrists that showed our blood type and age. It became clear very quickly that there wasn’t much organization behind the operation. When someone was needed, an overseer would literally just walk by and check wristbands until he found what he wanted. As far as we knew, documentation wasn’t kept. Once an organ was harvested, it was labelled with the blood type, age, and sex of the person and was stored away. So it was easy to slip through the cracks once in a while.”

“What happened?” Oikawa asked, his heart tugging at the stricken look that was dawning on Iwaizumi’s face. He wanted to cry in his stead. Something terrible was about to happen in his story, and he knew it.

“I got sick. Pneumonia,” Iwaizumi’s words came out clipped with emotion. Frustration. Remorse. Oikawa began to feel his frustration himself. “They gave me aspirins for pain and whatnot, but apparently didn’t know -or care- that aspirin makes blood more liquid. The next time they took blood from me, I couldn’t clot, and lost almost twice what they usually take. I was really in bad shape for the next couple of days. Mayumi kept saying I would die if they took anything else from me at that point. She was angry.”

“I’d be, too!” Oikawa’s fingers were crisped with the white-hot rage that was filling up his lungs. “I hope they’re all dead or suffering for their crimes... How dare they do this kind of thing to people?” There were tears in his eyes, blurring his view of his fingers. He struggled to spell out his next sentence. “Why’d they have to do it to you...?”

“I ask myself that every day,” Iwaizumi mumbled, and gently took Oikawa’s trembling hands in his. His grip was warm and firm, and Oikawa couldn’t help it. Grounded by his presence, he let the tears fall, letting the anger roll down his cheeks and leave cold trails of bitterness. “I’ve figured out that there’s no answer. So I’ve stopped being angry about it.”

He hated that they had both become so pliant when it came to the way they’d been treated. Oikawa knew he would have said the same thing if he were the one telling the story, though. Somehow, that shed some light on his own problem. If he was angry about Iwaizumi’s mistreatment, then why couldn’t he be angry about the way he’d been treated?

“Are you okay?” Iwaizumi asked in a low voice, gripping tighter when Oikawa’s entire body shook with a mute sob. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Oikawa immediately shook his head, pulling his hands out of Iwaizumi’s grip to wipe his tears away. He then stared Iwaizumi straight in the eyes, and pursed his lips.

“Don’t be sorry. Please continue.”

“If you say so,” Iwaizumi shrugged, but Oikawa did notice his traits relaxing a bit. He needed this, and Oikawa would die to give it to him. “Anyway. Turns out that they get an urgent order for A-type blood a couple of days later. People of A type were systematically picked up and whisked away for whatever. Mayumi knew, and she knew I would die if I underwent any procedure. She kept me in the dark about this, told me to rest, and switched our bracelets when I slept.”
“So instead of you…” Oikawa trailed off, guessing the rest of the story.

“She probably thought it was another blood harvest.” Iwaizumi’s voice suddenly cracked. “She wouldn’t have done that if she knew that they were going all in. She should’ve let me take what was meant for me.”

Oikawa was secretly, selfishly glad that she had switched the bracelets. It was a terrible situation, but thanks to her, he had Iwaizumi back at his side.

“From what I heard afterwards, they anesthetized her for surgery, but as they made the incision, the surgeon noticed the scar from her previous surgery. They did an ultrasound and realized that she only had one kidney. Since the anesthetic dosage hadn’t been adjusted to someone missing a kidney, she never came out from the anesthesia. They couldn’t get her to wake up, so they had no choice but to take all her other organs out and let her die.” Iwaizumi’s eyes reflected how much the remorse still haunted him. Oikawa wanted to take his pain away from him, but he knew that he couldn’t magically do that. He still wished it, though. He wished for righteous, strong Iwaizumi to break free from his guilt.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Oikawa signed, and then put a hand on Iwaizumi’s shoulder.

“I know that now,” Iwaizumi smiled sadly, and put his right hand on top of Oikawa’s, squeezing gratefully. “But back when I heard the news, all I could believe was that I had killed her. So when they found out about the switch and came to get retribution, I…”

Oikawa almost didn’t want to hear it. Iwaizumi’s voice said enough. He didn’t want to watch him relive this anymore.

“I willingly gave them my hand,” he rasped out. “Because I thought I deserved it. But most of all, because I wanted to suffer enough to believe that I was absolved. Because I was scared of living with guilt and wanted to believe that sacrificing a piece of me would make me innocent again. I offered them my first finger.”

Oikawa couldn’t stand there anymore. When Iwaizumi’s nose scrunched and his lips pursed tightly, he pulled him into his arms, and squeezed hard enough to draw the pain out of his pores. He hoped. He tried. He held him until his arms shook with exertion and Iwaizumi’s shoulders shook with emotion.

“I regret just one thing,” Iwaizumi murmured into Oikawa’s shoulder, his voice quivering in his inner battle with self-control. “That one of my fingers was taken from me afterwards, but that the other I gave. I could live with two reminders that I fought back. But now, I have to spend my life knowing that I gave up. That I gave them what they wanted and complied. That one part of me was a martyr, but that the other part of me was a victim.”

Oikawa would have done anything to have his voice back. Just to hold him and tell him everything he had on his heart at the same time. It was so frustrating because he wanted to reassure Iwaizumi and tear down his self-blaming commentary, but couldn’t do so without letting him go. He never seemed to be able to do anything without letting something else go first.

Frustration welled up in his throat, and he fought back the ball choking him by gripping Iwaizumi tighter. One of his hands snaked to the nape of his neck and tangled itself within his elongated strands of hair. The other hand went under his arm, to his opposite shoulder, so that when he pulled Iwaizumi in close, he felt his heart beat in sync with his. The few inches Iwaizumi had less than him gave him enough maneuver range to comfortably settle him into his shoulder. His best friend had always fit perfectly with him.
He almost forgot, in the heat of the emotionally heavy moment, that he and Iwaizumi had never really needed words to communicate.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Iwaizumi murmured again after a while. “That being a victim doesn’t make me a worse person. That it wasn’t my fault. That I never deserved any of this. That I was physically coerced into the second finger, but psychologically coerced into the first one. I know. I know.”

A bit of tension did leave Oikawa’s aching shoulders, though his grip did not falter. He turned his eyes out to the night sky and traced the outline of the moon behind the clouds with his gaze.

“I’ve finally come to understand all of that,” Iwaizumi continued, and his tone clearly expressed that he wasn’t done saying everything on his mind, even if his story was chronologically over. “It took me time and a lot of support to believe all that.”

Oikawa knew where he was going with this now. So when Iwaizumi drew back lightly, just enough to glare fiercely into his eyes, he somehow felt like he was breathing anew.

“If I made it, then so can you,” he delivered swiftly, straight to the punchline without another word wasted. “I know that stuff has been happening lately, with all the wastelander training going on. I don’t know what’s going through your mind exactly, but I can tell you’re troubled. And I just want you to know that the first step is to accept what’s happened to you, and that you had no part to play in it.”

Oikawa looked at him, waiting to hear what he had to say next. He wanted to give him a chance to convince him.

“Something terrible happened to you, too,” Iwaizumi continued, hesitating for a second before reaching up to swipe his thumb lightly over the scars on his lips. Oikawa shuddered as pain spiked in the back of his throat. He hated remembering. “But you fought. You didn’t give in then. You fought, and you threatened them. That’s why they tried to break you. That’s why they tried to break me. But we made it. You made it. So if you didn’t give in back then, you can’t give in now that they’ve got nothing left on you. You’ve won. You’re the king of the court.” A small smile dawned on his face as if he had clandestinely let slip an inside joke. Oikawa couldn’t help but laugh at it softly, genuinely. As his chuckling faded, he put a hand on top of Iwaizumi’s, and then slowly took it down, away from his scars. He knew they were there, but as they faded, he didn’t want to explore them anymore. He wanted to let them become a part of him and make him strong, rather than make him stand out.

“I didn’t know you were so good at motivational speeches, Iwa-chan,” he signed lightly, throwing him a grateful look regardless.

“But you sure know what to say sometimes. I can’t keep believing that they’ve won long after they’d lost. I have to keep moving and better myself. Slowly but surely. But I can’t stop anymore, and I refuse to turn back.”

Iwaizumi watched him sign intently, and then, to the feeling of a flutter in his chest, he smiled.

“That’s the Tooru I know,” he simply responded, and it was all that Oikawa needed.

He grinned wide, giddy, so brightly that his scars ached. They ached and reminded him of what he’d lost, and reminded him of what he’d fought to protect.

He would never let himself forget ever again.

He had won.
Motivation returned to him after that. The next morning, he smelled of humidity and his hair had frizzed, but his heart was three kilos lighter. There was a new spring in his step, and he wasn’t even pissed when he tripped on the stairs on his way to class.

He wasn’t even pissed when he caught a cold.

(Yamaguchi was pissed, though, when Oikawa gave it to him a few days later).

Thankfully, his nose was down to combating the sniffles when the first missions began to roll in. The squads with the best grades on their practical exams got an assignment for a small, uncomplicated mission to carry out first. Of course, that included their squad. They had been some of the best, after all.

Their briefing was on Friday morning, and on Thursday evening, Yamaguchi got sick. Like really, really sick.

To Asahi’s horror and ruined pants, really sick like in projectile vomiting.

Unfortunately, from the look on Kuroo’s face, it didn’t seem like Yamaguchi had gotten simple food poisoning.

Oikawa actually woke up to the sound of the poor boy dry-retching into a plastic bag in the middle of the night. He was about to get up to help him to the bathroom, but Suga beat him to it, getting up in a flash to support him in his quest to hobble to the bathroom without tripping or puking over anyone’s body.

The next morning, neither he nor Suga were there to accompany the first batch to the complex. When they settled for breakfast in the cafeteria, Suga joined them, looking as if he’d been awake for quite a while now.

“How’s Yamaguchi?” Tsukishima asked, his tone neutral. “Sounded pretty violent last night.”

“He’s stopped retching,” Suga sighed out. “He fell asleep an hour ago. I got him a clinic bed because he dehydrated himself pretty badly, and we’re concerned about his heart.”

“His heart?” Daichi piped up worriedly. “What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing too bad,” Suga corrected himself. “Sometimes, when you dehydrate yourself too badly, you lose the electrolytes that keep your heart beating normally. He’s just being monitored upstairs to make sure nothing happens. He’s fine.”

“So… he’s gonna be okay?” Tsukishima grunted out, hesitating a moment too long to feign proper indifference.

“Yes. He’ll be out in the evening and will be back to normal by tomorrow,” Suga assured him kindly.

“That’s a relief,” Noya sighed out. “I’ll go visit him later, cheer him up. I know you guys were supposed to go on your first real mission today,” he added, turning to Kuroo.

“Yeah… about that…” Kuroo groaned, running a hand through his messy hair. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to run it, since we’re missing a member of our team. It wasn’t a big mission with huge risks, so Yamaguchi could’ve just stuck back anyway, but if he’s in the hospital…” he sighed.
“Guess we’ll have to call it off.”

Oikawa’s face must have visibly dropped because Iwaizumi patted his shoulder lightly.

“Come on, there will be other missions. It’s okay,” he mumbled, not sure how to address the issue, probably since he knew about Oikawa’s search for purpose.

Oikawa just shrugged, feeling a little bit empty, like he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Would it be possible for me to come with you instead, then?” Suga asked very casually, in such a light tone that it took everyone a moment to register it.

“Come again?” Kuroo cocked his head, looking genuinely confused.

“Like… Maybe I could replace Yamaguchi,” Suga clarified, looking a bit sheepish. “I mean, you guys just need a medic, right? I’ve been a field medic ever since we left the gym back in Miyagi, so it shouldn’t be too hard to stand in for Yamaguchi.”

Seeing as there were some unconvinced stares thrown his way, Suga rushed to complete his thoughts.

“I mean, you said it yourself, Kuroo,” he turned to the captain, relying on him for support. “It’s not a big mission, and it doesn’t have big risks. I’ll mostly be a figure rather than an actual participant. There shouldn’t be an issue there.”

“I don’t know.” Surprisingly, Kuroo objected. “We get a lot of special training in preparation to go outside. I don’t know if it would be okay for you to go out without that knowledge.”

“I’ll be fine,” Suga waved him off casually. “I’ve got experience to make up for knowledge. And, like we agreed already, I probably won’t do much anyway. I’ll just be there for security. And if something does happen, you know you can count on me to fix it.”

“Suga…” Daichi began in a tone that led on that he knew more than what was being said. Oikawa didn’t mind it. Goodness knew he had his own secrets to keep.

“It’ll be fine,” Suga huffed. “Come on. Do you want to go on this mission or not?”

At that, Kuroo glanced at Oikawa, and they shared their silent impressions. Both of them really looked forward to the mission; Kuroo for adrenaline, Oikawa for purpose. Hell, Bokuto was probably getting hyped up at this very moment and was probably threatening to ruin the radio broadcast he was doing with Akaashi. All of them had really wanted to take this first step outside today.

That thought sparked something within them. Oikawa closed his eyes and turned away, whilst Kuroo turned to Suga.

“Alright,” he agreed. “We were supposed to leave at noon. I’ll go talk to our supervisor to let him know. Be at the exit upstairs by noon.”

“Gotchaa!” Suga grinned brightly, seeming so full of energy and enthusiasm. And then, a bit more controlled, he added, “thank you”.

Oikawa didn’t know what he was thanking them for, but he nodded to him regardless. They all returned to their meals once the case was closed, some more hesitantly than others, but the subject was dropped. Instead, Noya began to complain about the boring math class he was enrolled in, and
for a moment frozen in time, it felt like they were back before the war.

Oikawa didn’t revel in the illusion. He preferred to remain in reality, where he wouldn’t risk another heartbreak when waking from a wishful dream.

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They met at the exit at five to noon. Bokuto was not there yet, since his program with Akaashi was running a bit late, but their instructor was there to give them the final debrief before sending them out.

Kuroo was pulling on his boots when Oikawa arrived, accompanied by Suga. Both of them waved as they stopped next to the instructor. Suga bowed in greeting, seeing as he didn’t know their instructor.

“Thank you for allowing me to participate,” he smiled, charming as always. Oikawa saw a bit of his old self within his attitude. Did Suga ever consider manipulating others with his attractive body language? He could probably pull it off.

“It’s an exception,” the instructor shook his head. “Since this mission is a very low risk mission, we’ll allow it. That, and, according to Miss Satoko, one of our most valued members, you have a lot of field experience, without which we wouldn’t have allowed you to venture out.”

“I appreciate the opportunity to be of help to my friends,” Suga simply responded. “I won’t overstep my boundaries.”

“Alright,” the instructor nodded, and turned to the others, who were getting dressed. “Where is your fourth member?”

“He should be here any time,” Kuroo answered passively, zipping his jacket’s first layer. “Akaashi was going to bring him down as soon as they finished their broadcast.”

“Well, until he gets here, remind me of a few things,” the instructor continued, checking off a few things on his clipboard. “Who will be leading this mission?”

Oikawa immediately turned to point at Kuroo, but was surprised to see Kuroo looking back at him. However, he kept silent, and shrugged.

“I guess it will be me,” he agreed nonchalantly. “I will lead. Oikawa will navigate, and Bokuto will be in charge of physical work. Sugawara will be our medical backup, but I don’t know who our driver is.”

“Drivers are usually randomly assigned, depending on availability and knowledge of the area covered by the mission. Yours will be Katsuya Junichi, a relatively senior driver. He’s been at it for 2 months now, so you’ll be fine,” their instructor explained. “Your driver will drive you to your mission point and will remain there to extract you once you are done. For this mission, Katsuya is instructed to wait for two hours. Honestly, with the small job you’ve got on your hands, it shouldn’t take you more than one hour.”

“Considering that all goes well,” Kuroo mumbled, though it seemed that only Oikawa, who was next to him, heard. If Suga or the instructor heard, they didn’t react.

“Wait for me!” A loud voice suddenly boomed from behind them, and they all simultaneously spun to see Bokuto sprinting towards them with desperate abandon, Akaashi jogging lightly to keep up behind him. “Don’t start the briefing without me!”
“All you had to do was not be late, bro,” Kuroo teased as Bokuto slid to a stop next to them, panting.

“Our program ran late! It’s not my fault!” Bokuto protested, catching his breath.

“Well, we hadn’t gotten far, at least,” Kuroo chuckled lightly, patting Bokuto’s heard jokingly to get him to pay attention. “Let’s keep going.”

“Well, that was all there was to this quick briefing anyway,” their instructor continued. “Most of it was said yesterday. In the truck, you will find the GPS device that will allow you to track down the other team who vanished a few days ago. Remember that they most likely ran out of fuel and are probably sheltered in their truck, waiting for help. Your job is to bring back the people on the mission first, and if possible, pinpoint the location of their truck so that it can be retrieved at a later date. Your mission is a find-and-retrieve type. Nothing more, nothing less. Come back as soon as you can.”

“Yes sir,” the four of them snapped at once, just as Akaashi arrived by their side, lightly panting.

“Are we ready to head out?” Kuroo asked, looking at the others for confirmation.

“I just need to get dressed, but I have my stuff in the antechamber,” Bokuto hummed, going towards the exit to access the antechamber.

“Go on ahead, Bokuto,” Akaashi encouraged. “Good luck, and stay safe.”

“Suga, you should go ahead as well,” Kuroo suggested over the sound of Bokuto’s excited goodbye-wishes. Their instructor, probably having contracted a headache from Bokuto’s crowing, was already turning to leave with a grumbled wish for good luck.

“Alright,” Suga nodded, asking no questions as he made his way out.

“Oikawa, perhaps you should go make sure Bokuto wears his jacket on the right way,” Akaashi suggested softly, though his intentions were crystal clear.

“You could be a little less obvious about the fact that you want to talk to me in private, Keiji.” Akaashi’s name rolled off of Kuroo’s tongue with a strangely chilling lilt. Kuroo cocked his head amusedly, watching Akaashi’s next move, but Oikawa could tell that he was on guard.

“Well, if it’s no trouble, Oikawa, then I’d like to do just that,” Akaashi turned to him with a strange smile that made Oikawa more uncomfortable than anything. Just to escape Akaashi’s contradictory presence, he nodded, and backed a hasty retreat towards the exit.

Considering that he was already dressed, he simply had to pull on his hat, goggles and gloves, and help Bokuto tighten his own ski goggles around his face. By the time Kuroo came back, his face as impassible as always, they were all ready to go.

“All right,” he began without further ado. “Let’s get going.”

To the sound of Bokuto’s excitement, they made their way to the hole in the glass storefront and exited through it. Oikawa helped everyone out and slid the wooden boards over the hole once they were all outside. Then, he followed Kuroo, who led them all forward, towards the truck waiting nearby.

The snow crunched under Oikawa’s boots, reminding him of what he’d escaped by finding solace within the walls of Awa. Despite making the short trek from their dorm to the main complex every morning and night, walking out into the cold with purpose made everything seem much more
meaningful. And Oikawa would not lie to himself. It felt good to be back out where he could be free.

Bokuto and Kuroo were making small talk in the front, so Oikawa caught up to Suga, though he didn’t have much to say to him.

“How are you doing?” Suga asked him regardless, glancing at him expectantly through his goggles.

Oikawa simply nodded, since he couldn’t do much else. Suga didn’t know how to use sign language, unfortunately.

“Good to know,” Suga smiled, his radiant happiness much warmer than the mild sun poking through the clouds above. “How is your throat? Healing, I hope. Are you still having difficulty swallowing?”

Oikawa shook his head. He’d successfully rehabilitated his swallowing reflex to the best of his abilities, so he didn’t have much trouble with that anymore, thankfully.

“Fantastic,” Suga hummed again, seemingly always in a good mood. “You know, I’ve been watching you lately… in a purely professional manner, of course.” That still made it weird, but Oikawa overlooked it. There was a promise hanging at the end of Suga’s sentence. “And I know that something is going on inside your head lately. I won’t pry if you don’t want me to, but… I just wanted to try and alleviate your worries a little bit.”

Oikawa cocked his head, curious. How did Mr. Refreshing intend to help him with something he didn’t know about?

“I have been asking around my workplace for any information regarding surgery for your vocal cords,” he cut straight to the chase. “I was wondering if it would be possible to give you your speech back somehow, so I dug around… Unfortunately, since we don’t have much medical literature lying around, I couldn’t really read up on head and neck surgery… and there aren’t any head and neck specialists working anywhere in the Awa clinic… but I do think that maybe… maybe there’s a way to fix your vocal cords.”

Hearing such a prognosis was more underwhelming than Oikawa thought it would be. Here Suga was, telling him that he may have a chance to regain his voice, and Oikawa couldn’t bring himself to be excited or curious about his claims. He wondered why.

Was it because he had given up already?

“I hear you sometimes,” Suga continued. “When you sigh. Some of your sighs are in different pitches from one another. That has to mean that your vocal cords are still at least a little bit flexible, right?”

Oikawa shrugged, and then realized that he hadn’t given up. On the contrary. He had come to accept his loss as a part of himself, and was now more concerned about coping with the consequences of his loss than with reversing it. The revelation surprised him, and Suga must’ve interpreted the surprise on his face as a reaction to his claims.

“Medicine is a fantastic world of discoveries,” he assured him as they neared the truck, Kuroo climbing into the front, and Bokuto opening the tarp to slip into the back. “I’m sure there’s something out there for you.”

Oikawa really appreciated the sentiment, so he smiled, and nodded. But when Suga slipped into the back, the smile fell off his face, and he sighed. And maybe he did try to consciously alter the pitch, just out of curiosity.
He couldn’t really hear anything in his own ears, though, and decided to forgo the experiments right now in favour of focusing on the mission. In charge of navigation, he slipped into the front with Kuroo and the driver.

Kuroo was already striking up an amicable conversation with Katsuya, though their driver looked mostly thrown off by Kuroo’s loud mouth. Oikawa enjoyed this for another moment before tapping Kuroo’s shoulder to get his attention.

“Do you have the files on the team we’re out to retrieve?” he asked, the truck rumbling beneath them as the driver gratefully glanced over at him, and started the engine.

“They’re supposed to be here somewhere,” Kuroo shrugged, glancing around before checking the glovebox. As they should’ve been, the files were there, poking out of a plain folder. “Here.” He threw Oikawa the files, though he did look at him expectantly afterwards.

Oikawa rolled his eyes, and opened the folder.

The first file had a picture on it that was a bit too recognizable. Though they’d only seen the guy once, the highly emotional encounter had been enough to burn his frown into Oikawa’s mind for a lifetime.

“Isn’t that the guy who shot at us when we met Satoko in Tokushima?” Kuroo remarked what they both had noticed. “What’s his name…? Kizuna, right. We’re out to rescue this dick?”

“Just imagine his face when he realizes that he owes us.” Oikawa put down the folder to sign, and Kuroo snatched it away immediately to thumb at the other files.

“It’ll be a fun sight to see. From what I remember of him, he’ll get angry. Maybe shoot at us again.” He snapped the folder shut, clearly indicating that nothing else of importance was in there, and threw it back into the glovebox. “You’re the one in charge of keeping us bullet hole-free, Leader.”

“Leader?” Oikawa cocked his head. “When did this happen, mister High-and-Mighty?”

“I figured you may as well be leader everywhere but on paper,” Kuroo chose to sign instead of talking, probably considering the driver. Oikawa always felt apprehensive when that happened. “Since you can’t talk, the higher ups may not agree, but…” Kuroo hesitated on which symbols to make next. His sign language wasn’t as good as Iwaizumi’s. “I still think you’re our best candidate to lead.”

“What happened to you coming up with the best plans ever?” Oikawa asked, disappointed not to be able to slip in an indication of cynicism.

“I think people are getting tired of my recklessness.”

“Acceptance is the first step to recovery.”

“Shut up,” Kuroo laughed, drawing a bizarre look from Katsuya, who must have wondered about their silent conversation. “But seriously. I think the team needs someone with stability in mind as their leader. Not just our wastelander team, but our entire team, back in Awa, too.”

“And I’m that person?” Oikawa raised an eyebrow dubitatively. “Kuroo, I can’t talk. I am hardly fit to give orders.”

“Well, I’d be happy to step back and spread the orders you give. Maybe offer a consultation once in a while,” Kuroo smirked provocatively, as always. “But I think I need to take some responsibility off
Oikawa flinched back, surprised. Kuroo had never been one to back down from a challenge before. Why was he hesitating now?

Kuroo must have read his disbelief in his eyes, and shrugged in what seemed like a casual manner.

“I’m just taking some time off from the spotlight, is all,” he attempted to explain, though Oikawa was finely attuned to facades, and could tell there was some uneasiness in his traits.

“Something else happened,” he stated, rather than asked. “Did you find something out?” A sudden, terrifying thought sparked through his mind, and his breath hitched. “Are you in danger?”

“No, no, nothing like that!” Kuroo’s just-as-frantic signing was accompanied by a heavy shake of his head. “Jeez, relax…” he mumbled, running a hand through his hair. “Can’t you take things at face value? I just need to take some load off my shoulders.”

“With you, nothing is to be taken at face value,” Oikawa reminded him of his own philosophy, then glanced over at the driver. He seemed unconcerned by their conversation, focused on clearing a path through the thick snow. “I know you’re a ball of paranoia and hyperacuity. Something happened to make you change your mind. Tell me.”

Kuroo just watched him impassively for a few seconds, then sighed in defeat. A new exhaustion came over his young face and he rubbed the weariness out of his premature wrinkles. Oikawa patiently waited for him to recollect himself.

“Akaashi threatened me,” he simply signed at first, leaving Oikawa in disbelief. How could tiny, soft-spoken Akaashi even appear imposing to someone as confident and strong as Kuroo?

Then again, the small ones were always the tiny balls of fury. Oikawa could picture how much temper Akaashi was hiding behind his impassive façade.

“What did he tell you?” he asked, slowly, repeating his question when Kuroo clearly didn’t catch all of it.

“It was about Bokuto.” Kuroo glanced to the metal separation between the cabin and the back. He looked vulnerable, for once. Oikawa knew it was a rare sight, and revelled in it with a certain sadistic pleasure. “He didn’t say much. Just told me to guarantee his safety and bring him back unharmed if I wanted to remain unharmed. I have never known him to be so aggressive, honestly.”

“He’s worried.”

“He’s different,” Kuroo insisted out loud, using his voice to inflect in an order to drive the point home.

“War changes everyone. You said it yourself. Something must have happened to change the way he behaves around Bokuto,” Oikawa shrugged, not too concerned. To him, Akaashi just sounded a bit like a pushover. Nothing too bad.

“I knew that already, ever since his broadcast,” Kuroo nodded, his eyes losing their vulnerable spark and glossing over as his steely persona resurfaced. “But this is different. What I got from him was borderline hostility. It’s like… he was so scared, he projected his anxiety on me as anger.”

“Here you go again, psychoanalyzing everyone,” Oikawa sighed. “If you already know this, why concern yourself with it?”
“Because I hate it when things are hidden from me,” Kuroo growled out, sounding a bit frantic to get his point across. “I hate it when I can’t see every facet of the situation. He’s hiding something, and it’s making me uneasy, because if I don’t know what it is, I can’t have control over it. And I can’t do anything to prepare in anticipation for the day it comes to bite me in the ass!”

Oikawa just listened to his frustration—and dare he think, insecurity—and let him wind down from it. Honestly, he agreed. However, unlike Kuroo, he didn’t feel extra safe by knowing what was going on around him. In fact, quite the opposite. He liked to deal with things as they came, rather than burden himself with hidden knowledge. Kuroo, however, seemed to find control in knowledge, and Oikawa was the last person who would discourage someone from regaining control over their life.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Katsuya suddenly piped up, and though they both turned to him in surprise, he didn’t look back to them, instead focusing on the road. “I have no idea what you’re referring to, but if you’re having teammate trouble, all I can say is that from experience, I’ll suggest you talk to your teammate. Out here, they’re all you have. If you’re putting your life in their hands, you may as well know what you’re getting into.”

Oikawa could almost see physical cogs turning over Kuroo’s head as he considered Katsuya’s words.

“Not that it’s any of my business,” the driver added quickly, a bit sheepish. “Sorry for prying.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kuroo quickly assured him. “Thanks for the suggestion. I think I’ll do just that, actually, once we return from the mission.”

“Well, prep yourself, then,” Katsuya replied, a bit more at ease now. He looked young, not as young as them, but young enough to look like a victim of circumstances as they were when he smiled apologetically at them. “ETA is 30 minutes. You still have a while to think of what to say.”

Kuroo just settled back in his seat wordlessly, and the small smirk on his face told Oikawa that he already knew exactly what to say to Akaashi once they got back.

He wasn’t sure whether he was ready for some drama, or apprehensive about the shitstorm.

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The rest of the ride was spent in silence. Kuroo actually napped for a while with his feet propped up on the dashboard (to Katsuya’s very obvious displeasure), and Oikawa went from dozing off to dog-earing the corners of the files, to dozing off yet again. If the cabin hadn’t been cold as all hell, he would’ve taken his gloves off to pick at his nails. His GPS tracker still wasn’t getting any signals, and that said a lot about their progress.

Finally, as they began to ascend into the more mountainous parts of the region, Oikawa’s tracker made a faint beeping sound, indicating that the other team’s receptor was within range. Far, but within range. That was promising. Katsuya briefly asked him to confirm the direction he was heading into, and then engaged the loudly-rumbling vehicle into a few slopes to drive them up the hill.

Kuroo woke when the beeping on Oikawa’s tracker became a bit louder, though Oikawa suspected that he had been awake the whole time. The sun outside glinted off the pearly snow lining the road winding up the side of the hill, and Oikawa was glad that his ski goggles were tinted when a ray of light reflected off the snow and blinded him momentarily. It was a beautiful day to be outside, despite the freezing temperature.
Finally, Katsuya rolled the truck to a stop on the side of the road halfway up the mountain. Oikawa checked his tracker, and estimated that the receptor’s location was a fifteen-minute walk away. Not too far. The only pain in the butt would be to walk though the knee-high snow and be careful to stay away from the edge of the hill. Oikawa actually wondered if someone who fell off the side would roll into a large snowball by the time he reached the bottom.

“Alright, go,” Katsuya prompted them as he pulled the handbrake up. “I’m instructed to wait for two hours before I leave. Sorry, but it’s procedure.”

“We’ll be back in less than an hour,” Kuroo assured him, opening the door to jump out. “Just get cozy, and we’ll be back before you know it.”

“Have at it,” Katsuya wished them, actually pulling out a magazine from the side of the door. That was the last Oikawa saw of him before he jumped out as well with a small laugh.

Bokuto had already come out from the back, and was helping Suga into the snow. Kuroo was joining them, so Oikawa did, too.

“Are we all okay?” Kuroo asked as they adjusted their goggles over their eyes.

“Yes,” Suga nodded softly, looking genuinely happy to be out in the chill. Oikawa had to admit that there was something freeing about being out here, essentially all alone.

“Alrighty then. Let’s get going,” Kuroo decided. “Oh, also. Oikawa is our leader now. So he’ll decide when we go.”

“We’re changing leaders?” Bokuto perked up. “I want to lead!”

“You can’t do that, Bo. Oikawa is leader,” Kuroo snickered, patting Bokuto’s back lightly when he slumped dejectedly. “Anyway, you’re the strong guy around here. We need your arms in the line of fire.”

“You only love me for my arms!” Bokuto whined, but dropped the subject nonetheless, playfully shoving Kuroo off.

“Well, we should move out,” Oikawa repeated once Kuroo’s eyes finally came to him. He pulled his tracker out and checked it carefully before slipping it into his jacket pocket. “Let’s follow the road. Their truck seems to be a little way up on the hill.”

“He says we’re marching our asses up the hill,” Kuroo translated, pointing at the winding road. At least it wasn’t too steep. “Let’s go!”

“At least this isn’t a mountain, like back on the way to Niigata,” Suga recalled with mild laughter, which Kuroo echoed with a snicker. Oikawa didn’t get the reference, but figured that a mountain trek, versus a hillside trek, would be much less fun. Their legs would have killed them if they trekked on a mountainside in so much snow.

“So! Suga!” Bokuto piped up. “Here’s the basics of survival in the snow. “You conserve energy by keeping your extremities warm.”

“Mostly, however, heat escapes from your armpits, head, and groin,” Kuroo corrected. “It’s just that when extremities get cold, it’s a lot less fun than a cold groin.”

“Cold groin sounds like a weird fancy food,” Bokuto remarked. “Like… Hello! Would you like to try the chef’s special today? It’s cold groin on a bed of lettuce and a peppercorn drizzle.”
“What the hell is that?” Kuroo guffawed, actually amused by Bokuto’s dumb antics, which is what made the whole situation much more ridiculous. Oikawa couldn’t help but crack a smile. Even Suga was smiling widely, although by the looks of him, scanning the landscape, he was mostly enjoying his time outside more than anything else.

With a gentle wind blowing the crisp air into his lungs, Oikawa simply felt at peace out here, lost in the wilderness. The snow already soaking through his snowpants grounded him to this vast expanse where nobody could hurt him. If he chose to disappear, no one would even find him. He wouldn’t need to exist for others anymore. He wouldn’t even need to keep holding onto the purpose he searched for so arduously. He could just lie down and watch the grey clouds travel at the whims of the wind, breathing the crystalline air until his lungs froze and he slipped away in total peace.

Whether they resisted or not, nature would always outlive them, and would always reclaim their bodies after they passed. There was something elegant, something attractive about laying still and finding his inner peace whilst nature did its work and sucked the suffering out of his veins.

But that would be for another time, another lifetime. Right now, Oikawa had a job to do. A job that he cherished well enough. And he had people to return to. People he held onto even when his vision turned as bleak as the winter nights.

He snapped out of his thoughts just in time to see Kuroo and Bokuto drag one another down into the snow, rolling dangerously close to the hillside. Though the drop wouldn’t harm them at such a low angle, having them roll to the very bottom of the hillside would be a pain in the ass for retrieval. So, he tapped Suga on the shoulder, and pointed at the two of them, who were laughing too hard for wastelanders on an actual mission.

“Come on, guys, stop playing around!” Suga admonished. “Your leader is telling you to get away from the edge!”

“Well, if the leader says it, we probably should do it,” Kuroo continued, slamming a handful of snow into Bokuto’s face, and then screeching when Bokuto shoved snow past his scarf, against his neck.

“I win!” Bokuto exclaimed, getting up and running back to Oikawa and Suga, Kuroo closely following with vengeance clearly on his mind.

Oikawa was glad they weren’t being evaluated. Katsuya had already been left far enough behind not to be able to see or hear them, either, which really meant that they were alone out here.

“So much for heat and energy conservation,” Oikawa commented, glancing at Kuroo’s soaked snow gear a bit judgmentally.

“Learn to live a little,” Kuroo taunted him right back, shoving him just enough for Oikawa to stumble a bit through the snow.

When Oikawa regained his balance, he made a move to shove Kuroo back, but his tracker made a loud beeping noise, which caught his attention instead.

“What’s up?” Bokuto asked curiously, glancing over when Oikawa removed the tracker from his pocket. The grid on it was clear now, and the scale ratio had become much smaller, which meant that they were getting closer. Oikawa’s eyes went to the emitter signal on his grid, and he glanced in front of him. The road kept winding up the hill, so if the receptor was sending signals from their left, they just had to follow the road up a little more, and they’d be okay.

“Let’s keep going. We should be able to see their truck soon,” Oikawa ordered, which Kuroo
translated out loud, to Bokuto’s excited whooping.

“Do you think we get hot chocolate when we go back?” Bokuto asked, his voice full of awe. “Imagine! I’d do a hundred missions a day if it meant a cup of hot chocolate afterwards!”

“I’m just happy to get some nice leverage over these guys,” Kuroo hummed, to Suga exasperated groaning. “I could pull a few favours from them when the time comes… maybe even some hot chocolate.”

To each their own, Oikawa figured, and rolled his eyes as he pressed on. His nose was already red and numb, and in an effort to relieve the burning of his skin, he pulled his scarf over his face and exhaled into the fabric. It warmed his nose up a little, at least.

Bokuto and Kuroo entertained them with mindless small talk just a little bit longer. As they began to take a winding turn, the truck stopped a ways off on the road slowly appeared in their vision field.

“There it is!” Bokuto pointed out the obvious.

“Stay with the group,” Oikawa warned, which Kuroo put into practice immediately by grabbing Bokuto’s arm before he could run off.

Once Bokuto’s impulsiveness was under control, Oikawa removed the tracker from his pocket, and glanced at it. The truck in front of them was indeed where the now-strong signal came from. He put his tracker in his pocket and zipped it now that he didn’t need it anymore.

“The game plan is to get to the guys, who are probably all holed up in the back of the truck, do a quick triage of injuries or needs, and then help them back to Katsuya as soon as possible,” Oikawa signed out, which Kuroo dutifully translated as they walked closer and closer.

“If anyone finds the receptor, just put it somewhere safe in the truck so we can retrace it back when the next team comes to retrieve the equipment.”

“Aye aye, captain,” Bokuto saluted sarcastically.

Instead of responding, Oikawa took a good look at his surroundings as they cleared the last hundred meters between them and the truck. He was mildly surprised that their loud, crunching footsteps hadn’t alerted anyone, but they were probably sleeping to conserve energy, so it wasn’t all that surprising in the end.

“Call,” he instructed simply to Kuroo.

“Hello?” Kuroo called out immediately. “Kizuna? Someone else? We’re a team of wastelanders here to help you out. You good in there?”

Still no answer. Oikawa frowned, beginning to fear that hypothermia may have affected the team they were sent to rescue.

“Hot packs,” he signed.

“Suga, get some hot packs ready,” Kuroo relayed. “They may be badly hypothermic.”

“Got it,” Suga nodded. “The best thing for them right now is to return them to Katsuya. There are plenty of blankets in the truck I can use to rewarm them.

“Alright, I’m going in, then,” Kuroo decided.
“I’ll come, too!” Bokuto immediately volunteered, and Oikawa didn’t comment on the fact that his hand immediately went to a knife he had strapped to his belt.

Kuroo opened the tarp and swung himself into the back of the truck, dragging snow everywhere. Bokuto followed. Oikawa glanced at Suga, and then also went in.

“Oikawa,” Kuroo immediately called him over to the first body, kneeling with his ungloved hand pressed to his neck. Kuroo’s face was grave. Oikawa’s blood chilled. “They’ve been here a while, I suppose. This one is very cold.”

“They froze to death?” Suga murmured knowingly, climbing into the truck just in time to glance at the four bodies on the floor. Why they hadn’t huddled together was a mystery. Oikawa knew he would’ve.

“Check the others, too,” Oikawa ordered, heading for the body in the corner. Kuroo relayed his order dutifully, then took a bit of time to search his first guy’s pockets.

“Here. I thought I felt something vibrating. I’ve got the receptor.”

Oikawa would’ve praised him, if not for obvious reasons. Instead, he focused on his own body. Which, with growing pangs in his heart, he realized was familiar. Kizuna.

He didn’t need to check for a pulse to know he was already gone. His face was ashen, pale even in the darkness of the tarp-covered truck, and somehow, such a crisped expression, even in death, did not suit him. Despite having been a bitch to them the only time they ever interacted, it still hurt to see someone die like this, especially so young.

If only by principle, Oikawa removed his glove to take a pulse, though he knew he’d find nothing. He slipped his hand under Kizuna’s scarf, and put his fingers to his neck.

However, something felt wrong. Instead of leathery skin, Oikawa’s fingers found something gelatinous and cold. It felt really, really wrong. He quickly divested the body of the scarf, and took a better look with his hand up in the light.

Blood. Congealed blood.

Apprehension slowly rose within him. The others around him had not noticed anything, so Oikawa quickly looked back down to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. However, now without his scarf covering his neck, Oikawa could see the large patch of blood that had congealed on Kizuna’s skin and clothes. In the middle of it all, a gaping flap of skin, sharply dug into the side of his neck, stood out alarmingly.

Oikawa did not hesitate.

He spun around and grabbed Kuroo, dragging a cry from him, and only mourned the loss of his voice for a second before his fingers were moving rapidly.

“Get Suga far from here! These guys were murdered!”

Kuroo blinked as he struggled to keep up with the rapid signing, but the alarm on his face was enough to convey the message.

“Suga, get out of here!” he immediately cried out.
“What?” Suga was thrown aback, looking up from where he knelt next to Bokuto. “Why?”

“Run as far away as possible towards Katsuya! Go!” Kuroo insisted, making a move to push Suga out.

Thankfully, push didn’t come to shove, because Suga’s face immediately steeled, and he asked no more questions. He grabbed his backpack, and swung down from the truck.

“Got it!” he confirmed, and then broke into a jog bogged down by the snow.

“What happened?” Bokuto asked, alert.

Oikawa just raised his hand as an answer, and the other two suddenly got grim when they saw the blood.

“They were killed.” Kuroo’s face darkened. “Someone else is here.”

“Is it fresh?” Bokuto asked, his hand returning to his knife.

Oikawa shook his head. By the looks of it, the blood had clotted, cooled, and congealed. The team had gone missing for 24 hours, so they must have died at least half a day ago.

“Do you think it was a roadside raid?” Kuroo asked grimly, glancing at all the bodies with a new sense of understanding.

“There’s no other explanation,” Oikawa signed, hating how the jellied blood rolled off his hands. “Unless they were left here for a reason.”

His inner musings seemed to snap all of them to alert all at once. They all thought the same thing, suddenly, and it wasn’t good.

“We’ve gotta get back to the truck!” Kuroo called out even before Oikawa signed it to him, and Bokuto was jumping out of the truck even before the order was given.

Oikawa closed the march. As soon as his feet crunched into the snow, though, a horrifying noise tore through the air.

The sound they all heard was a booming noise, like an explosion, and it came from the top, wrapping around the entire hill and echoing from everywhere. It took Oikawa’s breath away.

“Go!” Kuroo prompted, and they broke out into a run. At the same time, the ground beneath them began to quiver. Oikawa’s blood ran cold even when he tried to run away.

However, the snow was slowing all of them down. Oikawa’s mind ran a hundred miles an hour trying to remember his theory, trying to find the minute ways in which he could make himself run faster, just a second faster. The quaking of the ground became more intense, and suddenly, a loud noise, continuous in the background, began to roll towards them.

Oikawa made the mistake of looking up. A quick look at his companions, and at Suga who was about a hundred meters in front of them, showed that they were all captivated by the horrifying spectacle as well.

Oikawa indulged in a moment of terror, and let the waves of snow rolling down the hillside, towards them, take his breath away. For just one moment.

Then, he was running again, with a new goal in mind, because the snow was descending rapidly and
gaining velocity, and he couldn’t even cry out to warn Suga.

He made a frantic motion with his hands for Suga to come back towards them as he ran towards him, and by a blessed miracle, Suga immediately understood, changing course and stumbling through the snow towards Oikawa. The rumbling sound was now deafening, and the sheer size of the wave of snow was becoming apparent as it reached them. Oikawa had no time to check on Kuroo and Bokuto, but they had gotten the same training as he had. He trusted them to get the upper edge on the situation.

Suga, however, had not gotten any training. He was vulnerable, and Oikawa needed to protect him.

“Oikawa!” Suga called out, his voice high and worried, and reached out. Oikawa pumped his legs just a little harder, just a little more for the person who was counting on him and who had put his trust in him. He pushed hard enough for his legs to spasm with pain, and reached out as well.

Their hands caught one another, and the avalanche was upon them.

They had learned about avalanches in theory classes. They were told that it was an uncommon, but very real possibility, considering that most of the snow piled around the southwest of the country was fresh and untouched, which made it unstable. However, considering that it took a large shift in snow to trigger them, the risk was low. The mountains in the area weren’t extremely steep, and they weren’t going around snowboarding and displacing snow everywhere they went.

But this… this hadn’t been something they had caused. The large noise before, whatever it had been, had been the cause of the avalanche for sure. And Oikawa had no doubt in his mind that it had been deliberate. The bodies. The avalanche. They were related somehow.

He didn’t have time to think of any of that, though, as the sheer force of the rolling snow slammed into him, rattling his entire body with pain. When they had spoken of avalanches, they had also not mentioned how massive and terrifying they could be. Oikawa had not expected this. He could never have expected something like this.

For a second, he heard himself scream. And then, he realized that he wasn’t the one screaming. And that his hand, which had been gripped tightly around Suga’s a second ago, was now empty.

His heart jumped in his throat, but it was soon overshadowed by the dizzying tumbling of his body. The snow was harsh, merciless when it threw him left, right, and upside down, rolling him down the hill with massive force. One second, it was dark, and the next, it was brighter, the only constant in Oikawa’s environment being the freezing snow that was slipping through every crack in his clothing. He was panting, breathing hard enough to freeze his lungs and choke on the snow that made its way into his throat.

He didn’t know how long he panicked, but it felt like an eternity before the sound of reason snapped in his mind, and he began to remember his training. As hard as it was to be rational in a situation like this, he tried to calm himself, and swim to the top of the wave as they had been instructed to do in training.

The process was challenging. Clearly, the person who had designed this plan had never tried to control his movements when being dragged down by the sheer chaos of an avalanche. Or maybe he had. Either way, despite the pain in his limbs, Oikawa made the effort to pull himself up through the layers of snow, and his hand actually broke through the surface of the wave for a second before being dragged back down. He just kept trying, again and again, because if he gave up now, he would die for sure.
It felt like an eternity before the wave calmed down. When it began to lose velocity, though, it did so at an astonishing rate. If the tumble down had felt like a lifetime, then the halt felt like the split-second of death.

But Oikawa was not dead. He came to realize this when his body stopped moving, and all that was left was the shaking of his limbs from the sheer terror and cold of the environment around him. Oikawa could hear himself panting in his own ears, but nothing else. The entirety of his world, plunged into the dark, was silent.

It took him a second to realize that he was panting because he was choking. The oppressive snow packed all around him had immobilized his body and caged him in its embrace. There was snow in his nostrils and in his mouth, and his lungs, already hyperventilating in panic, were burning. Oikawa had almost suffocated when they forced the acid into his throat. He knew what that was like.

And he was terrified.

If there were tears rolling down his eyes, collecting in his ski mask, he didn’t realize it. As the pain increased, so did his desire to live, and he quickly scrolled through his frantic mind for the next step in avalanche survival.

A pocket of air. He had to make a pocket of air.

He opened his mouth wider and began to grab greedy bites out of the snow around him. His teeth ached and his lips froze all too quickly, but at least he gave himself room to breathe another two breaths. Then, he was moving again, this time, trying to bring his hands up through the impacted snow to widen the pocket. The oppressive darkness all around him prevented him from seeing much of his progress, but he knew he had been able to clear some of the snow, at least, when his breathing began to ease. It was only temporary, though. Sooner rather than later, he would have used up all the oxygen in his pocket. He had to climb out.

His center of gravity felt a bit off, which meant that he was probably diagonally suspended in the snow. At least he wasn’t upside down. With that in mind, he used his pocket of air as a hold to start digging. Keeping his hands close to his body, he cleared small bits of snow first, and then, as the snow loosened around him, he began to claw out larger amounts, impacting them all against his lower body to make space.

Thankfully, the snow loosened easily. Oikawa only had to dig for about a minute to finally hit the point where he pulled some snow to chest level, and the rest of the snow just crumbled. After the initial surprise of another face-full of snow, Oikawa gasped in relief at the small hole that was filtering light upon him. He was doing well. With that in mind, he continued.

He couldn’t feel his body by the time he had pushed enough snow off of him to put his arms out of the hole. The snow he was in was relatively shallow, but the lack of traction in grip or foothold made the task a hundred times harder. He felt himself shivering violently as he worked, and wondered if it would be pathetic for him to die of hypothermia before he even pulled himself out.

But he couldn’t die. Not yet. His team was counting on him. Everyone back home was counting on him. Iwaizumi counted on him to return. He couldn’t let them all down.

He kicked with his legs to loosen up some of the snow on his lower limbs, and used the impacting snow around him to help pull himself out. The surface snow was also soft, so the more he pulled himself up, the more his hands sunk back in, but he could feel that he was gaining ground. He also felt frustrated enough to burst, but that was another story altogether.
When his upper body came out of the hole, he elected instead to throw himself onto the snow, and use the leverage he got by supporting half his body to pull out the rest. Compared to the beginning, finally pulling himself out felt like a breeze.

He only gave himself a second to lie down and catch his breath, blinded by the last tears blurring his vision. His entire body was racked by violent shivers, which felt wholly unpleasant, but that snapped him into action to warm himself up, and of course, find the others.

However, when he glanced around him, he saw nothing but white. They had been dragged down to the bottom of the hill and were now resting on a flat area, but that didn’t help him much in terms of locating his teammates.

Some leader he turned out to be.

Self-deprecation burned hot in his brain, but he decided not to let it get to him. Not right now. Right now, he had a job to do. If only he could call out to the others, he could’ve perhaps gotten a clue about their location, but he couldn’t even do that. He forced himself to think, instead. What other tool did he have to help him locate the others?

Standing up, he brushed the snow off of himself roughly, figuring he may as well begin looking blindly, in the absence of any leads. However, as he patted the snow off of himself, his hand dragged over something solid in his pocket. Oikawa’s eyes took a moment to light up.

The GPS tracker. It was still in his pocket. And last he’d seen, Kuroo was holding the receptor.

He pulled it out with renewed urgency and checked the grid. The breath he’d been holding in apprehension left his body instantly when he saw a small blip on the grid, not far from here, which indicated the still-functional receptor’s location.

He began to jog through the snow, sinking down to his ankles with every step, and not letting anything stop him from reaching the blip on his screen. He could see nothing in front of him, though, which was the scariest part. The receptor only gave him an approximate location; the rest would be up to him.

When he reached the general area of the blip, he put his tracker away, and scanned the area in front of him. His eyes went across every mound in the glistening snow, trying to catch a clue, when he finally noticed something off.

The snow in a spot nearby had been depressed in a circular pattern, as if it had impacted against something moving underneath. His breath catching, Oikawa immediately went for the spot, and put his hands into the snow.

With his first handful, he pulled out snow that had become slushy with blood.

His movements became even more frantic afterwards as he dug, thankfully not needing to go far to find the source of the blood. It was hard to see at first, but he quickly recognized the black streaks of Bokuto’s hair, and his heart leapt with anticipation. Especially when, after clearing a little bit more snow, Bokuto’s head began to move. All Oikawa could do is pat his matted hair and continue to dig.

Soon, he found the source of the blood. It, too, was coming from Bokuto’s head. When Oikawa pushed most of the bloodied snow away, he found the gash. That’s when he hastened his efforts to clear Bokuto’s head from the snow.

Bokuto was beginning to help him with it, wiggling and clearing some of the snow around him. When Oikawa had done enough, he cleared the snow around his own face, and finally broke
through.

“God, I’m suffocating in here!” he exclaimed, and then realized something. “Shit… Kuroo is actually suffocating!”

Oikawa mouthed him ‘where?’, but Bokuto clearly didn’t get it, his pupils dilated and his eyes frantic with worry. However, he did get the emotion, and wiggled a little more to clear his shoulders.

“I’ve got him in my arms,” Bokuto answered, fear very obvious on his features. Oikawa hadn’t seen such an emotional display in a while. “I grabbed onto him when the avalanche came. He’s against me at waist level!”

Oikawa nodded, and immediately began to dig in front of Bokuto, trying to get to his waist.

Bokuto helped, too, probably letting go of Kuroo with one hand to dig with the other. What worried Oikawa was that Kuroo wasn’t moving to help them from wherever he was, despite feeling Bokuto squirm.

When the snow was thin enough, Bokuto began to strain his arms, and grunted as he tried to pull Kuroo’s body out from under the snow. Oikawa tried to dig a little more, and sighed in relief when he saw a flash of black hair. A little more effort from both sides, and Kuroo’s head was clear.

Now, the next most worrisome part was the way it lolled back heavily, Kuroo’s lips open lightly and blue when Oikawa saw him. His heart skipped beat, and he made a motion at Bokuto to hurry.

He looped his arms under Kuroo’s, and then began to pull, with Bokuto trying to push from underneath. Snow fell off of Kuroo’s unconscious body in clumps, and the more he was removed from the snow, the more snow fell away from Bokuto and into the cavity he’d left. By the time Oikawa had fully pulled out Kuroo’s body and had laid him out flat on the surface, Bokuto was already pulling himself out.

“Is he okay?” he asked immediately, quivering in cold, and probably shock, and by the sight of his bloodied face, blood loss. Oikawa made a mental note to check his wound out, and then unzipped Kuroo’s jacket, practically slamming his ear against his chest.

He could hear a heartbeat, but his chest did not rise and fall.

Oikawa did not hesitate, immediately tilting Kuroo’s head back and pinching his nose before sealing his lips over his and breathing until his chest lifted.

“No…” Bokuto whimpered, watching him uselessly. “Is he dead? He’s not dead, is he? Please, he can’t be dead!”

Oikawa gave another rescue breath, and then glared at Bokuto, shaking his head. He didn’t know how to explain it without his words, but didn’t need to. Kuroo just needed some incentive to breathe.

However, they still had someone else to find. Oikawa couldn’t dawdle here while Suga’s life slipped away.

He motioned at Bokuto to come close, and pointed at him, then at Kuroo. He then demonstrated a rescue breath, one large enough for Kuroo’s chest wall to expand visibly. He then drew back, and tapped at his wrist, as if on a watch, five times at the rhythm of seconds, and then gave another breath.

For his airheaded personality, Bokuto caught on quickly.
“One breath per five second. Got it,” he nodded urgently, and knelt next to Kuroo to take over.

Oikawa stood up, and glanced behind him. Now, to find Suga.

Suga didn’t have a locator on him. He also hadn’t had the training they’d gotten. The more Oikawa thought about it, the scarier it seemed. He had to think, fast.

He jogged over to where he had been buried. Suga had been on his right (or his left? He had tumbled a whole lot on the way down), so his best bet would be to delimit the area that Suga could possibly be in.

He still felt Suga’s phantom touch in his right hand. So he decided to look on the right side of where he ended up. Suga should not have gotten too far either, considering how close they were when the wave hit.

He was still shivering when he began his search, now trembling not only with cold but with slowly rising dread. He walked around the area, but nothing felt weird under his feet. Just snow. Endless expanses of snow. But he couldn’t give up. His heart began to hurt, both from the physical exertion and the mental fortitude he was forcing to keep his mind and eyes clear. He couldn’t cry now. Suga still needed help.

He kept searching, kicking snow over as he went, trying to cleave a path to find their friend. His mind kept going to the worst-case scenarios, but he refused to indulge in them until he found Suga.

Suddenly, a loud cry of agony rang out in the air, and the hairs on the back of Oikawa’s drenched neck stood. It was terrifying and animalistic, and he immediately spun around to look back at Bokuto.

Who, all heavens be praised, was now supporting Kuroo’s back as he sat up, doubled over himself and shaking. Noticing Oikawa’s concern, Bokuto glanced up at him and waved him off.

“He’s back!” he announced with thinly veiled panic. “His shoulder is busted, though. But he’s back! He’s okay!” Then, noticing Oikawa’s posture, his eyes seemed to darken. “I got things here. Find Suga!”

Oikawa doubled his effort at that. He had saved Kuroo and Bokuto. He could save Suga, too.

He didn’t give up. A few minutes later, Bokuto joined him, supporting a trembling Kuroo who was cradling his left arm against him, pain all too obvious in the crisped lines of his face. Without saying a word, the two of them also got to work on trying to find Suga.

They didn’t speak as they worked, their hearts heavy with apprehension. Oikawa didn’t know how long it had been since he’d emerged from the snow, and he didn’t want to know, either. He just wanted to find Suga, and return home safe and sound. And the more he thought about how much time had elapsed since he’d lost Suga under the snow, the more panicked he felt. What if… they were too late?

The sound of a truck engine interrupted his musings, which were going in a rather dark direction at this rate. Simply by reflex, Oikawa’s heart leapt in his throat and he dropped to the ground, making himself as flat as possible. Noticing him, Bokuto and Kuroo both followed his lead, Kuroo letting out a few groans of pain as he laid down.

“Is it a hostile vehicle?” Kuroo gritted out from his clenched teeth.

“I don’t know,” Bokuto glanced at Oikawa for guidance, but Oikawa was back to it. He didn’t
know. Bokuto instead looked up, towards the road. And Oikawa almost cried when his eyes lit up. “It’s Katsuya!” he jumped up, and began to wave. “Katsuya! Katsuya, over here!”

“He isn’t supposed to be here,” Kuroo grunted, shakily getting up on his knees and watching the truck slow down warily. “He’s supposed to be at the extraction point.”

Oikawa wasn’t paranoid about it, though. He got up, and, considering that Bokuto was taking care of calling Katsuya, he persevered in trying to find Suga.

“Katsuya!” Bokuto called out again as their driver stopped the truck, and immediately jumped out. “Katsuya, help! We need help!”

Katsuya broke into a jog at that, and Oikawa was partly relieved that they had some more backup.

“What happened to you?” Katsuya asked, panting as he arrived by their side. “That was one hell of an avalanche! Are you okay? You’re bleeding everywhere!”

“One at a time,” Kuroo grunted, still cradling his arm. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, there was an avalanche!” Katsuya replied, almost petulantly, even though he seemed to be in his early thirties. “And you guys were in it. I wasn’t gonna wait at the extraction point for you to come back! I had to find you.”

“That avalanche was deliberate, wasn’t it?” Kuroo continued suspiciously.

“I did hear an explosion. You must have heard it, too.” Katsuya’s face became grim. “Let’s not linger any longer than we should. If this is what I think it is… We should go right now.”

Just the thought of leaving without all his family made Oikawa’s blood boil. He kicked the snow angrily. That seemed to get him some attention.

“We need to find Suga, first!” Bokuto urgently translated, immediately getting to it. Kuroo followed, too, using his feet to dig into the snow.

“Please help us,” Kuroo mumbled pleadingly, looking at their driver with hope, panic, and sadness all mixed up with the pain he felt. Oikawa had never seen Kuroo so distressed. His heart hurt. He was leader of this mission; he had to take care of his teammates somehow.

“Alright,” Katsuya agreed quietly, glancing around quickly before getting closer to them. “But let’s not linger. Every minute we spend out here is another minute where we are in danger.”

They all put their backs into it, at that. Not just for their personal safety, but for Suga’s. A little voice in the back of Oikawa’s mind screamed that it had been at least 20 minutes since Suga had been buried. He didn’t want to think of it. He kept digging.

It was another two minutes before he kicked some snow, and his booted foot slammed into something solid. His heart leapt in his throat, and he immediately fell to his knees to investigate by clearing the snow with his hands. He dug for ten seconds, and finally, from under over a foot of snow, he spotted Suga’s snowpants.

He glanced up and waved at Kuroo until he noted the movement, directing everyone’s gaze at it.

“He’s got him!” Kuroo announced, jogging over, Bokuto and Katsuya imitating him. “Quick, let’s get him out!”
Oikawa had already begun to dig, a bit off to the side. He’d found Suga’s hip, but the most important thing right now was to get his head above the surface so he could breathe. The more Oikawa dug up, though, the less optimistic he felt. Suga had not even twitched in response to their efforts.

With that horrifying thought in mind, he doubled his efforts, and breathed a sigh of relief when he finally cleared Suga’s face.

He was pale. Pale, so pale he was almost grey. The entire area surrounding his lips was a worrying shade of blue. By his mouth stood a discarded oxygen mask with an empty canister of compressed oxygen attached. Oikawa found some comfort in the thought that Suga had gotten some oxygen until his small canister ran out. Perhaps they weren’t too late after all.

“I’ll pull him out,” Bokuto volunteered, still surprisingly lucid despite the blood that was now actually running down the arm of his coat. He looked pale, too, and Oikawa decided that after they dealt with Suga, Bokuto was the first one he’d get medical attention to.

He helped Bokuto pull Suga out, and laid him out on the snow, his body limp and lifeless. It was scary, but Oikawa held his breath and unzipped his jacket to check for a heartbeat.

He didn’t need to look up to give orders to the others. The sight of him scrambling to get his hands on his chest and beginning his compressions was enough to get the message across.

“No.” The word escaped Kuroo’s throat like a whimper. Oikawa didn’t look up, too busy counting his compressions, but he could tell that Kuroo was genuinely distressed. “No, he can’t be gone.”

“It’s okay, bro, we’ll bring him back like we brought you back,” Bokuto tried to cheer him up, though there was a real fear weighing heavily on his sunken face.

“He’s been under for a long time,” Kuroo continued, his voice hitching. “What if we’re too late? God, what if… what if there’s nothing we can do?”

Oikawa tilted Suga’s head back to give two rescue breaths, and then, as he rose, kicked Kuroo’s ankles roughly. Kuroo let out a squawk of pain, almost crumbling, but shut up after seeing Oikawa’s piercing glare.

He returned to his compressions.

He went for two more rounds before Kuroo’s worries began to seep into him. His arms were becoming tired, too, and his compressions felt like they were doing nothing. Suga’s body sunk into the snow with every pump, and suddenly, he wondered if everything they were doing was futile.

That was the thought that brought the first tears to his eyes.

Before beginning his next round of compressions, he turned to Katsuya, and pointed at the truck.

“Should we get going?” Kuroo attempted, his perception slightly off as he dealt with his difficult emotions.

Oikawa nodded to confirm, trying to appear strong in front of his teammates. Even if every second he spent over Suga’s lifeless body made everything seem bleaker and bleaker.

“Let’s move!” Katsuya ordered, crouching to grab Suga from under the arms. Oikawa immediately turned around and pointed at his back, and Katsuya hesitated a second before draping him on Oikawa’s back.
The added dead weight was not the easiest thing for Oikawa’s exhausted body to deal with, but Bokuto helped him get up, which was the hardest part. From there, they all began their rapid march back to the truck.

Katsuya ran up ahead to get it started as they caught up, and by the time they were loading Suga into the back, the truck had already rumbled to life.

Oikawa breathed, and then began compressions again.

On the side, Kuroo took care of Bokuto’s head wound, finally, simply putting pressure on it with some pads from the first aid kit. Oikawa wished they hadn’t lost their backpack full of advanced medical supplies, but it hadn’t been with Suga, and they weren’t going to spend more time looking for it. The Band-aids in the truck’s kit would have to be enough.

He switched with Bokuto when his arms and knees began to ache fiercely. Bokuto’s compressions were much rougher, much more frantic, but his boundless energy seemed to work in their favour when Suga’s entire chest wall recoiled with every pump. In a moment of respite, Oikawa fell back, his heart beating rapidly on the adrenaline, and his limbs numb with emotion.

His hands were shaking, and he wasn’t sure that it was because of the cold anymore.

Kuroo crawled to him on his good arm to hold one of his shaking hands. The human touch, unaccompanied by words, made Oikawa realize what the situation was. All he could hear was the sound of Suga’s body thudding against the floor of the truck rhythmically, and the sound of his own heartbeat, much faster.

And suddenly, aware of his own life, still holding strong, he realized that Suga might not even make it out.

He pulled his hat and ski goggles off when he began to cry, quiet and pained, repressing all of his anger and powerless desperation until his entire body was quaking violently. Kuroo just dragged him to his side with his good arm, tilting his head to his shoulder and putting a hand to his ear. Oikawa appreciated it when he closed his eyes to sob. Not hearing nor seeing Bokuto try so hard to revive Suga’s limp body made it easier for him to repress his guilt.

“I need a break,” Bokuto called out after two minutes, his face getting paler and paler. The gauze on his head was already stained with blood. He was visibly sweating, despite the fact that he was clearly hypothermic and drenched. That didn’t bode well.

Oikawa got up to go replace him at Suga’s side, despite the fact that tears were still running down his face freely. Kuroo just watched him go, silent and apologetic with his eyes for not being able to help.

Oikawa took over after Bokuto’s two rescue breaths, and channelled all of his feelings of helplessness into each compression. This seemed to give him renewed strength, if not for a short burst of time.

He and Bokuto switched often, though by the end of their ride, Kuroo was also stepping in to do a couple of rounds as best as he could with a single functional arm, as they were both too exhausted to keep going. It felt like they were driving forever, and Oikawa wondered for a second if it even mattered for them to continue CPR. The car ride itself was longer than most time limits for good CPR outcomes. His body and mind cried at him to call it, and to cease efforts. But when Bokuto looked at him pleadingly for a switch, for the hundredth time, his heart told him that he could do nothing else than continue. Persevere. That’s what he’d always done in everything. He wouldn’t give up now.
He didn’t quit. He compressed with renewed energy, over and over again until he couldn’t even hear anyone else, not Kuroo, calling faint encouragements to him, not Bokuto, who half-heartedly asked if he needed a switch, not even the truck rumbling beneath him. All that existed with him in his bubble was Suga’s lifeless body. He had to save him.

He carried out the last round of compressions before the truck stopped. Even before the engine turned off, someone had unzipped the tarp from the outside, and Oikawa barely had time to finish his rescue breaths before people were rushing in with more equipment and barked orders to one another. He embarked on a new round of compressions, not willing to give up just yet, hoping that his next compression would be the one that brought Suga back to life, and didn’t stop, even when two hands on his shoulders began to draw him back.

“We’ll take it from here,” someone was saying, and Oikawa looked up through teary eyes to see a few paramedics setting up their equipment. A defibrillator was charging on the side. Kuroo and Bokuto were both holding onto him, trying to get him to let go, but his arms felt glued to Suga’s chest.

“Let go,” someone else said, just as the paramedics tilted Suga’s head to begin their intubation. “It’s okay, let go.”

He couldn’t let go. He was the leader of this team, he had to protect his teammates and do everything in his power to save them. He couldn’t give in.

“Oikawa, it’s alright,” Kuroo whispered next to his ear, which seemed to snap him back to reality. “We’re okay. They’ll take it from here.” He tugged on Oikawa’s arms, and this time, Oikawa gave.

The paramedic nearest to him immediately began compressing again, hard and fast, better than any of them could do right now. Numb, Oikawa just fell back into Kuroo’s grasp. Bokuto put a hand on his knee, gripping tightly to comfort both of them when the defibrillator came out.

“There’s equal air entry bilaterally,” one of the paramedics, with the stethoscope called out. “The intubation is good, we need a shock now.”

“I need the shock pads,” another one called, using large scissors to cut open all the layers of clothing on Suga’s upper half. When Oikawa caught a peek at his pale skin, he saw it mottled with bruises around his left ribcage. It helped him convince himself that they had done everything they could. “Shock pads are on, everyone clear for the shock.”

“Clear,” the three paramedics called out, putting their hands in the air as the fourth one shocked. There was a slight discharging noise, and Suga’s body jolted before falling motionless again.

“We’ll transport him to the unit after the second shock. Prep the stretcher,” the one by the defibrillator called, and they all continued CPR.

At this point, a fifth person peeked into the back, and Oikawa recognized Katsuya through the fog in his mind coming off the adrenaline.

“Come on,” he called, motioning them over. “I’ll help you guys to the infirmary. You’re seriously hurt, too.”

“Thank you,” Kuroo murmured, though he didn’t make a move to go. Too shocked, Oikawa didn’t move, either. Bokuto was the one who got up and helped Oikawa stand, and who then helped Kuroo up.

With no choice but to leave, Oikawa took one last look at Suga’s lifeless body, and let himself be
escorted out.

As soon as his feet hit the ground in front of the complex, he stumbled. Katsuya caught him, even when he doubled over, heaving. He felt like he would vomit. He couldn’t face anyone right now.

“Come on,” their driver mumbled, glancing at Bokuto, who was supporting Kuroo as they walked, and half-dragged Oikawa towards the hole in the glass to go in. Behind them, another general cry of “clear!” was heard, and then, the noise of electrical discharge.

Oikawa didn’t want to hear it anymore. He just needed to know that Suga would be okay.

He followed Katsuya, if only because his limbs weren’t his own anymore. There was a silence of death in his mind, as if despite his conscious hope, he knew, deep down inside, that this story did not have a happy ending.

The nurses in the infirmary wing assigned him a bed in the clinic area, just long enough for him to regain his bearings, but he didn’t want to be there. He felt misplaced, like he was using up resources he didn’t deserve. He wasn’t the one who died out there. He wasn’t the one who was supposed to be on that bed.

On the bed next to him, Bokuto was sitting with his legs dangling off the side, idly making small talk to Kuroo, who was lying down on his right side, shirtless under the covers. Oikawa could see bandages swathing his left shoulder under the heavy blankets warming him up. Bokuto also had a large blanket drawn around his shoulders, bandages rolled around his head, a large piece of gauze on the spot where they had stitched up his rather large gash. Apparently, from what he understood, the two of them had hit resistance on the way down the hill, a tree or a boulder, busting Bokuto’s head open and dislocating Kuroo’s left shoulder.

Oikawa felt guilty for having gotten out of it unscathed.

The silence in the infirmary was only disturbed by Bokuto’s occasional conversation starters that quickly fell through, considering that Kuroo was not too responsive. The poor boy seemed to want the covers to swallow him up. Oikawa hadn’t seen him cry again since they dug Suga out, but he could tell that he was repressing the tears. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that Kuroo was also eighteen years old, just like Oikawa, just like many of them, and that his self-imposed responsibilities were so heavy that full-grown men with military training sometimes couldn’t bear them.

He was a part of Oikawa’s team, too, and Oikawa wanted to help him, too.

He couldn’t do much, though, stuck in a hospital bed feeling empty and helpless. He needed to hear about Suga. It had already been almost an hour since they’d returned. There must have been some sort of development with Suga.

The silence was shattered all of a sudden when the front door to the clinic area was suddenly thrown open, so hard that it slammed into the wall. All three of them sharply turned to the door, just in time to lock gazes with the frazzled newcomer.

Oikawa’s heart melted, and fell into his stomach when he saw the way Iwaizumi’s face shifted from terror to relief.

“God,” Iwaizumi shakily breathed out, covering his face in the move that Oikawa recognized as the one he made when he tried to hold back tears. He was visibly shaking, even from so far away. “Oh god. You’re okay. It wasn’t you.”
Oikawa said nothing. He waited for Iwaizumi to compose himself and run towards him, a little less panicked, but still on edge.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a quivering voice, hesitating with his hands, as if he didn’t know whether or not to touch Oikawa.

Oikawa looked at him, and shrugged, not sure how to answer.

“My body’s okay,” he replied simply.

“What happened?” Iwaizumi asked right back. Oikawa was grateful that he was signing, as they could have a private conversation even when there were others in the room.

“The mission went bad. Someone tried to kill us.” Suga’s lifeless body flashed in his mind’s eye, and he actually shut his eyes to hold the tears back.

“I was so scared.” Iwaizumi continued, his eyes wide. Oikawa hated seeing such open fear in his expression. Iwaizumi had never been honest about his feelings, until the war. And sometimes, seeing emotions on their dependable ace’s face was the hardest part. “When they said someone had died... And they called me to the infirmary as your emergency contact…”

“Someone died!?” Oikawa’s breath flew from his lungs, and in that moment, nothing else existed. Nothing but the knowledge that he had failed.

That everything they had done was for naught.

He couldn’t help himself anymore, and burst into tears.

He sobbed openly, soundlessly into his hands, fat tears drenching his face all too quickly. His heart was broken; there was nothing else to it. As if knowing exactly what he was thinking, Iwaizumi immediately drew him into his arms, letting Oikawa cry into his chest. He held him tightly, trying to keep all of his pieces together as he fell apart.

“What’s going on?” Kuroo asked, noticing that they’d been talking.

Oikawa indulged in another minute within Iwaizumi’s protective hold before pushing back and facing the facts. His hands trembled as he turned to sign to Kuroo.

“He’s dead.”

“God,” Kuroo choked out breathlessly, and turned to Bokuto, who hadn’t understood. “He’s... he’s not…”

“No!” Bokuto immediately exclaimed. “No, stop that! You can’t say that. You don’t know that for sure!”

“They announced your return on the radio,” Iwaizumi continued, not sure what they were referring to. “They said... They said that the two wastelander teams had returned with several casualties. And then, my boss told me to go to the infirmary immediately, and that it was about you…” His face fell. “I was so worried that something had happened to you…”

“Maybe they’re referring to Kizuna’s team only,” Kuroo gasped. “It could be!”

“Maybe he’s still okay, then,” Bokuto breathed out in relief. “Told you!”

“Who are you talking about?” Iwaizumi asked, getting a bit frustrated. “Oikawa... What happened
out there? Is this something I should know?”

Oikawa just looked at him, saw him trying to see through his stricken, teary face, and just shook his head. This wasn’t his burden to bear. Plus, they’d all probably find out in due time.

“All you should know is that I’m okay,” he answered. “For now, let that knowledge be enough.”

Iwaizumi’s response was to embrace him again, tighter, as if he knew that he was hiding a heavy secret. He probably did. But Oikawa was grateful that he didn’t push it.

Their moment was interrupted when someone else walked into the infirmary. Unlike Iwaizumi, though, his steps were calculated, fast, and decisive. Oikawa heard him coming before he saw him, and his blood felt cold all of a sudden. When Akaashi Keiji strode into view, they all stopped.

And then, Akaashi was taking large steps towards Kuroo and Bokuto, his face impassible.

“Told you I’d bring him back,” Kuroo huffed with forced amusement. “Don’t hit me.”

Akaashi didn’t stop on his way towards him, and the closer he came, the more Oikawa noticed Kuroo’s face twist into genuine worry.

“Umm, Akaashi?” he called. “Didn’t you hear the part where I said that Bokuto’s safe?”

“Yeah, I’m safe,” Bokuto backed up, hopping off the bed to go towards Akaashi. “I’m fine, see? Please don’t hit Kuroo.”

“You’re hurt,” Akaashi stated, halting in front of him and twisting his jaw to inspect the gauze on his head. “You split your head open.”

“It was an accident!” Bokuto insisted. “Come on, Akaashi. It’s not that bad.”

“You promised not to get yourself hurt,” Akaashi finally hissed, his voice low and dangerous. “That’s the only reason we agreed you’d go out as a wastelander; if you came back unharmed.”

“You can’t foresee everything, Akaashi,” Kuroo grumbled. “If we’d known that someone would try to kill us, we wouldn’t have gone either.”

It took another moment for the fire in Akaashi’s eyes to die down. Then, he sighed softly, and patted Bokuto’s shoulder.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re back.” He casted his gaze to the floor guiltily. “I refused to despair when I heard the news of your return on the radio. I’m relieved.”

“You can thank Oikawa for it,” Kuroo shrugged, motioning over at the mute. Oikawa cocked his head, as if trying to figure out what he meant by it. “He was the mission leader, after all.”

“Iwaizumi piped in, turning to his best friend with a spark of concern in his eyes.

“He’s good at it,” Kuroo defended. “Better than any other one of us.”

“People need me, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa simply offered. “Whether it’s you, Kuroo, someone else… If people need me, I’ll be there.”

Iwaizumi’s gaze lingered on him, unreadable for once, and then, to Oikawa’s genuine surprise, he smiled.
“Good for you, then,” he hummed, ruffling Oikawa’s hair teasingly. “Just… stay safe, okay?”

“Are you my mom, Iwa-chan?” Oikawa challenged, crossing his arms.

“I may as well be,” Iwaizumi sighed in defeat, at least a little bit amused.

“So listen,” Kuroo continued, his tone just a tick too airy to sound innocent. “I’m kind of hungry. Bo, would you mind trying to see if you can find anything to munch on ‘till dinner?”

“Ask your emergency contact when he gets here,” Akaashi challenged. “Bokuto needs his rest, too.”

“I don’t have an emergency contact,” Kuroo shrugged in mock-innocence. “Oops. Must’ve left that part of the admission paper blank.”

“I can go, then!” Bokuto perked up at the thought of food. “I’m hungry, too. Come on, Akaashi, let’s go see!”

“Well, I’d rather if Akaashi stays here,” Kuroo hummed lightly.

“Iwa-chan can go,” Oikawa immediately picked up, seeing where Kuroo was going with this, despite being uneasy with it.

“I’m hungry, too.”

“Are you sure?” Iwaizumi asked. “You don’t need me here, do you?”

“I can make do without you for a little while,” Oikawa rolled his eyes. “I’m okay. Please don’t worry.”

“Except… Iwaizumi was still hesitating, but with a wave from Oikawa, decided to comply. “I’ll be back.”

“Thank you,” Kuroo called out for both of them.

They waited until Iwaizumi and Bokuto had left. Then, Akaashi turned to Kuroo.

“You could’ve been a bit subtler about wanting to talk to me alone,” Akaashi mimicked Kuroo’s words from before the mission, at least a little bit amused. Oikawa still didn’t know how to gauge this guy. One second, he was making quips with his resting bitch face, and the other, he was getting mad at Kuroo for not protecting Bokuto.

“I’m returning the favour,” Kuroo threw right back.

“What do you want, then?” Akaashi asked, jumping straight to the point. “If you want an apology, I’m not giving it to you.”

“None of that,” Kuroo waved him off. “We actually were curious about something, and were wondering if you could shed some light.”

“Go ahead.” Akaashi seemed mildly confused.

“Bokuto,” Kuroo continued without skipping a beat. “You’re very protective of Bokuto. More than you were before the war.”

“Well, yes.” Akaashi cocked his head, like he didn’t understand. “The war changed the way I view him. I want him to be safe.”

“More than that, though, you need him to remain safe,” Kuroo clarified. “Some of the things you’ve
been saying had struck me as odd. It’s coming off to me that you need Bokuto a lot for your own sake, too.”

“Are you saying I’m using him?” Akaashi balked, clearly offended despite his face remaining impassible. “That’s just plain disrespectful.”

“No, no, I know you care for him.” Kuroo continued, still nonchalant. Oikawa was beginning to see how people thought he was annoying. “But what I mean is that you’re hiding a secret regarding him. And you need him to stay alive because if he died, you wouldn’t be able to live with yourself.”

And surprisingly, Akaashi said nothing. He did glare sharply at Kuroo, but he said nothing. The silence was greater of an answer than anything he could’ve said.

“On the radio,” Kuroo continued with absolute confidence. “When you called Bokuto out on the radio, you said some things that felt off. Mostly, I thought you sounded guilty.”

“I wasn’t feeling guilty,” Akaashi quickly huffed, looking away. Again, his body language said a lot.

“Guilt is a bizarre feeling to have when your best friend is about to be thrown into a dangerous situation out of his own free will,” Kuroo pushed on. “Bokuto also said that he owed you his life. So forgive me for prying, but this whole thing sounds fucked up to me. You’re keeping secrets from us, but now I’m wondering if you’re keeping secrets from him, too.”

“That’s none of your business,” Akaashi grumbled. “I don’t have to answer to anything you ask me.”

“No, you don’t. But your silence is giving me all the answers regardless.”

“I hate you,” Akaashi glared at Kuroo venomously. Oikawa began to wonder if he’d have to break them up.

“You say that now.” Kuroo laughed lightly before sobering again. “I care for Bokuto, too. He’s my best friend. Finding him safe and sound has been one of the only good things that has happened to me so far in this journey of ours. So forgive me if I’m trying to ensure the best for him. If there is something you’re not telling him, I want to know.”

“There’s a reason I’m not telling him,” Akaashi bit back before realizing that he’d fallen into Kuroo’s trap. He shut up immediately.

To his credit, Kuroo didn’t push it, despite having an in and confirming his hypothesis.

Akaashi glanced at him, then at Oikawa, then at the door, as if hoping for the other two to come back and save him. But they didn’t. The room remained plunged in silence.

“It’s just…” Akaashi finally began, lower this time. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other uncomfortably, and held his arms close to himself. “I don’t… I don’t want him to hate me.”

Oikawa frowned, quickly running through every interaction he’d seen of the duo so far. Bokuto hung onto Akaashi like a lifeline. It didn’t even seem possible for either of them to hate the other.

“You know him as well as I do,” Kuroo encouraged him, his voice softer now that he knew he’d won. “You know he wouldn’t hate you.”

“Even if he found out that I killed his parents?” Akaashi grumbled, glancing at the door worriedly. His young face looked tired and overwhelmed. Oikawa was sure that he hadn’t been ready to talk
about this when he came here with every intention of beating Kuroo up, or whatever his initial plans
were.

Kuroo seemed lightly thrown aback by his confession, but Oikawa didn’t as much as blink. He’d
seen horrifying things be done to people all around him with his own two eyes. He was past the
point of revulsion. Besides, he was sure that Akaashi had a reason. Whether it was a valid one or not,
he’d judge later, however.

“I’m sure it was an accident,” Kuroo picked up the conversation a bit awkwardly. Oikawa enjoyed
his discomfort. It wasn’t often that Kuroo seemed less than sure of himself.

His earlier moment of distress flashed through Oikawa’s mind, however, and he decided never to
think that again. He preferred Kuroo’s paranoid, controlling persona over his vulnerable, panicking
heart any day. He didn’t want him to suffer any more than he had already.

“It wasn’t an accident, Kuroo,” Akaashi continued, coming closer so he could lower his voice. He
glanced over at Oikawa, as if unsure what to do with him around, but Oikawa didn’t flinch. That
seemed to put Akaashi at ease, somehow. “I killed them, and made him think it was an accident.”

“You’re gonna have to start at the beginning.” Kuroo’s tone was cold, but his eyes were not unkind.
He was giving Akaashi a chance. That’s probably why Akaashi looked down and away from him,
ashamed.

“It was for his own good…” he muttered, sounding so desperate to believe in himself that it hurt
Oikawa’s heart. The sadness on his pretty face didn’t suit him. “I had no other choice…”

“Tell me what happened.” Kuroo encouraged, swinging to sit on the side of the bed and be closer to
Akaashi. He dragged his blankets over his bare shoulders with his functional arm, and then extended
his hand to his friend. “Akaashi. It sounds like you have a lot on your mind. Please tell me what
happened so I can take some of your burdens away.”

At this point, Oikawa didn’t even know if Kuroo was going at this interrogation with the intent to
manipulate Akaashi or not. From the way his brows creased worriedly when Akaashi physically
withdrew, however, he figured that Kuroo still had some manner of emotion somewhere behind the
steel of his heart.

“I can’t…” the young man shook his head. “This is my burden to bear. I killed them, and he’ll never
know.”

“Keiji,” Kuroo called, so soft that for a moment, Oikawa mistook him for someone else entirely. This
much empathy radiating from him was a first. “I’ve known you for years now. And I’ve known
Bokuto longer than that. I’m your friend. I really just want to help.”

Akaashi took another moment to shuffle his feet, and just this once, Oikawa felt like he saw the real
Akaashi, the one behind the cool, steely front, the one who was a boy just trying to make it in the
wild, the Akaashi who was lost and scared like every single one of them. Then, he looked up, eyes
wide and worried, in the biggest show of emotion that Oikawa had seen from him so far. He looked
like he was about to cry.

“I really missed you,” he admitted, his voice catching in his throat. “You, Kenma… When Tokyo
didn’t fall, I was so scared that I would never see you again…” he glanced away, and Oikawa saw how
Kuroo’s face fell at that. “And now… now that you’re here, I’m scared of seeing you.”

“Am I doing something wrong?” Kuroo asked immediately, genuinely distressed by the statement.
“Akaashi, you and Bokuto are way up there on the list of people I care about. I don’t want any secrets to be between us. Whether it’s about you and me, or… or you and Bokuto.”

“I’m just scared that you won’t see me as the same guy as before the war,” Akaashi mumbled insecurely. “I’ve been trying to live like a regular person, but the truth is that… I’ve killed people. I killed two people. Two people who meant the world to the person who means the world to me.” He hid his face in his hands. “I’m scared that he’ll hate me. That you’ll hate me. That after all this time spent being strong, one moment of vulnerability is going to destroy everything I love.”

“It won’t,” Oikawa found himself signing too quickly, as if Akaashi’s lament had resonated within him. Kuroo turned to him when he detected the movement in his peripheral vision, and Oikawa repeated it.

“He says that it won’t,” he translated, putting a hand on Akaashi’s arm for comfort. “And honestly, I agree.”

Akaashi turned to him, as if only now acknowledging that he was a part of the conversation, too. He glanced over Oikawa, and Oikawa knew that he was being appraised. Akaashi didn’t know him, didn’t know this story, though, so he probably didn’t know how much they had in common.

He, too, had been afraid that Iwaizumi would reject him after finding out what he had done under the control of the traffickers. But his fear had been misplaced. Iwaizumi had never, not even for a second, seen him as a lesser person for it. And Oikawa saw a lot of himself in both Akaashi and Bokuto, and knew that he could safely draw that parallel.

“Bokuto is your best friend,” Oikawa continued, more self-assured with every word he signed. As he signed, Kuroo translated, and for a moment, Oikawa felt like he was actually talking again.

It was a fantastic feeling that inspired him to push harder.

“Your best friend sticks with you because he knows everything that you are at your core, and everything that you will never be. And then, it doesn’t matter what you do, because he’ll always recognize why you’ve done those things, and why, whether it was misguided or not, you have made that choice. And your best friend loves you. He’ll always guide you forward. Even if he has moments of doubt, even if both of you have doubts, your hearts already know one another.” The more he spoke, the lighter he felt. A small smile was dawning on his face, and he was conscious of it. “Even when the radio silence persists in your brain and your own heart begins to reject you, know that you’ll always find your true self within your best friend’s heart.”

Oikawa let Kuroo finish, noting how even he was having enunciating now, stumbling over the emotional words. He figured that all of them could relate to some degree. After Kuroo hammered the point home, though, no one said a word. Oikawa didn’t mind it. The silence felt more comforting than the blanket hugging his shoulders.

And then, Akaashi slowly put his hands to his eyes, and pressed on the corners, as if to stop the tears from accumulating. When he removed his hands, Oikawa saw that his eyes were puffy and red, despite him not having shed a single tear yet. His glance over at him was glossy, though, and Oikawa proudly held eye contact with him until he turned to Kuroo again.

“I’m scared,” he repeated. “But I know that I can never stop feeling so afraid if I don’t tell him the truth.”

“You’re not a bad guy, Akaashi,” Kuroo encouraged him, rubbing his arm lightly. “He’ll forgive you. All of us will forgive you. Whatever the reason was, you’ll be forgiven. Because we know that
“what you’ve done doesn’t dictate who you are.”

“Right,” Akaashi’s voice broke, and he did not resist when Kuroo dragged him close for a hug. If Oikawa had any doubts about the genuineness of their friendship before, he had none now. The two clearly cared a lot for one another.

They indulged in the silence for a few minutes, Kuroo and Akaashi immobile in their embrace, if not for the slight hitch of the latter’s shoulders once in a while. Oikawa did not feel awkward at the display. In fact, it was comforting to know that they were all rebuilding their lives from the debris left by the war, and that they were all slowly but surely finding home again within the expanse of one another’s arms.

The moment broke when the door to the infirmary opened again, a bit less violently than the last time. They all looked up to see Bokuto and Iwaizumi stride in, looking a bit more sober than before.

“Akaashi-” Bokuto began, glancing over at him just as he untangled himself from Kuroo’s arms, eyes clearly red. “Whoa. Did I miss something?”

“Not at all, Bokuto. What were you saying?” Akaashi immediately answered, wiping his eyes conspicuously.

“Why are you crying?” Bokuto frowned, jogging over to him, and without hesitation, pulling him close by the shoulders. “Akaashi? Is everything alright?”

Akaashi looked at him for a second longer with his eyes wide, and then lapsed into a fresh round of quiet tears, burying his face into Bokuto’s chest. Bokuto just held him, confused, and looked at Kuroo for guidance. Kuroo said nothing.

“Is it because you already heard?” Bokuto asked, then, shakily. “Did the nurse come and tell you, too?”

“Tell us what?” Kuroo frowned.

“About Suga,” Iwaizumi was the one who answered, stepping forward to join them. “The nurse stopped us in the hallway to tell us that he was ready to be seen in the intensive care room.”

Oikawa heart leapt so harshly he felt like he would vomit. Iwaizumi must’ve seen the blood drain from his face, because he approached him, frowning deeper.

“Oikawa, what’s going on?” he demanded. “I thought Suga was missing because he was busy doing nurse stuff after the mission. Did something happen?”

Unfortunately, the silence said it all.

“Oikawa.” Iwaizumi’s breath caught audibly. “Please… please don’t say nothing.” His eyes widened slowly, and then all at once, until the look in them was pleading. “God… Nothing happened to him, right?”

Oikawa didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t sure about Suga’s condition either. Last time he’d seen him, he was dead. He really hoped that there was an update to his situation.

“Let’s go see him at once,” Oikawa decided, jumping off the bed impatiently. As soon as his bare feet touched the cold tiles, he shivered, but mostly because his heart was beginning to beat faster. The others watched him as he drew his blanket around his shoulders and began to walk to the door.
“You’ll get sick! Wear some slippers!” Iwaizumi called after him, jogging to catch up after the initial shock tided over. “Oikawa… If something happened to Suga, it’s no reason for you to get careless.”

But Oikawa was the leader of his team. He had to put his team before anything else. They’d been in the dark about Suga for the last few hours; now, with a new development arising, he wouldn’t stop until he got news from him.

His steps were decisive and steady, despite the apprehension that was welling in his chest with every breath. Kuroo, Bokuto and Akaashi had also jogged to catch up with them, all of their faces betraying how concerned they felt.

“If he’s in the intensive care room, that means he’s alive, right?” Bokuto asked out loud.

“What?” Iwaizumi spun to look at him sharply. “He could be dead!?”

“Not now, guys,” Kuroo placated them both. “Let’s not make any assumptions until we see him.”

“What happened for him to end up there?” Akaashi asked, concerned despite not knowing Suga very well. “On the radio, they only mentioned an accident… But what happened, really?”

No one answered. Oikawa blamed no one. He wouldn’t have been able to clear things out in his frazzled mind right now, either. He just needed to see his teammate. His teammate, who hadn’t even been his teammate.

Suga hadn’t even been supposed to be there with them. If only they had put off the mission while waiting for Yamaguchi to recover, this wouldn’t have happened.

With the dangerous ‘what if’s beginning to pop up in the forefront of his mind, Oikawa weaved his way through the med bay hallways and walked straight into the intensive care room without even bothering to knock.

There were two things to notice as soon as they stepped in, hushed.

Of course, the first thing to notice was Suga.

Suga was laid out on a hospital bed, swaddled with blankets. His hospital gown, peeking from underneath the sheets, was draped loosely on him, making him look tiny and fragile. His arms were spread on top of the blanket, IV tubes running fluids in the crooks of both his elbows, a blood pressure cuff on his bicep and an oxygen monitor on his finger. His eyes were closed, his face serene underneath the large oxygen mask sealed over his mouth and nose. He was pale, his complexion sickly in the bright light. At least he was not blue, nor grey anymore. And his chest seemed to be rising and falling independently. Behind his bed, a heart monitor was silently operating, the spikes of his heartbeat clear on the screen.

Oikawa could cry. His knees felt so weak that at some point, he just stumbled, and Iwaizumi was the one who caught him to straighten him out. When Oikawa glanced at him in thanks, he noticed that Iwaizumi was shaking, too.

“Oh my god, he’s alive!” Bokuto broke the silence with a loud cry of relief. He jogged to Suga’s side and immediately put a hand on his shoulder to shake him awake. “Suga! Suga, wake up! You scared us so much! Man, do we owe you an apology for dragging you into this… That was scary!”

“Bokuto, let him rest,” Kuroo sighed in absolute relief, running his hands over his face to rub life back into his concerned expression. “You’ll gush over him all your want when he wakes up.”
“He’s not gonna wake up.”

And then, Oikawa turned his eyes to the second thing to be noticed in the room.

Daichi, who had been quiet so far, pushed himself away from the far wall where he’d been leaning, and approached the bed somberly, his eyes never leaving Suga’s still form. Something about his demeanour threw Oikawa off. He wasn’t sure he wanted to stay to hear the rest anymore.

“Wh-What?” Bokuto asked, thrown aback by the cold edge to Daichi’s voice. “What do you-?”

“He was under the snow for too long,” Daichi simply recited, as if reading off of a paper. He approached Suga’s face, and hesitated only for a second before putting a hand on his cheek, caressing it tenderly. His expression remained flat, scaredly blank. “They successfully resuscitated him because the cold preserved his organs. Using his oxygen tank saved his brain stem, but the rest of his brain died asphyxiated. There’s nothing left of him to wake up.”

Daichi’s words hung in the air, and then dissipated. As they faded, Oikawa became aware of ringing in his ears.

He wasn’t sure who cried out first. It was probably Bokuto. Then again, Kuroo had been rather mentally unstable lately, and had known Suga longer than Bokuto. It surely wasn’t Akaashi. Maybe Iwaizumi? Suga had saved his life back in Niigata and Nagoya, after all.

All he knew was that Daichi was silent, and it was terrifying.

Someone was crying. Oikawa was numbly aware of Iwaizumi stumbling to hit the wall for support. There seemed to be a flurry of activity as Bokuto began to shake Suga, and Akaashi rushed to stop him, ending up having to hold Bokuto when the other boy began to crumble into tiny little pieces. Oikawa had no idea where Kuroo was. He was probably the one crying.

But Daichi was saying nothing. In fact, he looked like porcelain, his limbs rigid and his jaw squared, his eyes unblinking as he gazed down at Suga’s still form. He didn’t move, even when the rest of them began to fall apart for the friend they’d gained only a few months ago.

Daichi had known Suga for at least three years. From what Oikawa had seen of them back in the days when volleyball was the only struggle they knew, they were closer to one another than to anyone else.

So Daichi’s silence was terrifying. Even when everyone else ripped at the seams, Oikawa tuned out their anguish, and focused in on the absolute silence of death that was surrounding Daichi. So far, he’d learned to live with silence and find comfort within its simplicity. But this silence was anything but simple, anything but comforting.

It was heavy, suffocating, asphyxiating like the snow that should have, by all rights, become their final resting place. And even when Oikawa’s legs gave out under the pressure of shock, and he fell painfully to his knees, his eyes never left Daichi’s steely, resolved expression. Still, he heard nothing, basked in the silence of loss yet again, in the silence of a cruel fate that always succeeded in ripping more away from them.

Frozen in time and space, his gaze remained on Daichi for what seemed like forever. And when he began to cry, his hitching breaths inaudible to his own ears, it was only because Daichi still hadn’t moved, still hadn’t spoken. He despaired in the quiet of his own mind, already aware that one more bitter loss had beaten yet another one of them into eternal silence.
Sorry? I really am. This was a tough decision. The overwhelming majority of people on Tumblr did tell me to go for it, though, if I had a good reason for it. I do have a good reason for it. It's elaborated next chapter, but Suga's death is actually very important to provide the boys with closure, not only for Tanaka, but also for all of their individual losses, and for Daichi's character development, which has been rather steady so far. As a leader, I want Daichi to be a more ambivalent character, like Kuroo, and this is the turning point for him, clearly. Also, Suga's incapacitated state is a plot point for the ending of the fic. So yeah. I'm sorry. It had to be done.

The before-last chapter doesn't mean that everything is being wrapped up. In fact, there's a lot of new plot points peeking from under the surface. What was that explosion on the hill? What is this about Akaashi having killed Bokuto's parents? Kuroo actually has feelings? Daichi is going through the most overwhelming loss he's had since his parents died last summer? Lots of stuff coming up in the grand finale.

I enjoyed writing Oikawa, especially since he exists in relation to other people at this point. Notice how he has two voices: Iwaizumi and Kuroo. Iwaizumi voices the part of him that is emotional, and that is the person he is right now. Kuroo voices the more rational part of him and shows him the person that he could become. Both of them are important for Oikawa, who is quickly rising up to become a leader of their group as well, and who must mix these two identities together to become an effective leader. Also, I loved writing Oikawa because he's my son, my child, and him and Iwaizumi are the lights of my life. I went into their backstories more, and with that, I feel like the major part of their trauma has ben laid out on the table and is now being dealt with. The themes with Oikawa are always the same: gaining purpose and control of his life. If you go on the CML tag on Tumblr, you can actually find an ask where I was asked to describe Oikawa's time in captivity. I feel like his psyche took quite a hit in the trafficking ring, and that post explains it better than the fic.

I had quite a troublesome time characterizing Akaashi. I wanted him to be a character who appears calm and collected, but who harbours horrifying secrets, but I can't write a teenager with terrible secrets without having him get frustrated and sad. I'm gonna do my best to stick with his canon personality, but yeah. Get ready for a lot of Akaashi emotions. As a recap, he apparently killed Bokuto's parents and made it seem like an accident. That doesn't sound foreboding or suspicious at all :U

I thought I'd have more notes to write for such a long chapter, but apparently not. I'll probably remember at some point and add them in. If you ever have any questions or felt that I addressed something badly, you're welcome to talk to me on Tumblr. Otherwise, I hope you enjoyed (some parts of) the chapter, and I really hope you're looking forward to the next one, the last one. I was hoping to have it out by February 22nd, which is my birthday, but at the rate this chapter went at, I'm not so sure. I might spend another Katsucon writing at 4am under the gazebo :I In any case. In the words of Madeon in his song, "Finale" (which I highly recommend you listen to!);

"Brace yourself for the grand finale!"
Apotheosis

Chapter Summary

a·poth·e·o·sis (noun)
the highest point in the development of something; culmination or climax.

Once at the top, for those who have made it, there is nothing left to do but admire the view.

Chapter Notes

Here it is. Here it fucking is. Exactly one year later, I give you CML 15. And with that, I give you the end of our journey together.

I'm really emotional right now, what the fuck.

Please watch this cosplay music video that I made with my friends to commemorate three years of CML. If you don't remember what happened in the fic, it's a good way to jog your memory (and your tears).

No warnings, just tears. Enjoy, for the last time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The grey smoke curled delicately as it rose into the air, dissipating with the crisp wind responsible for the horrid chill. Kuroo often thought that he'd be able to survive out here in the winter deadlands if he only had to worry about snowfalls, rather than the freezing flurries and storms. The tips of his bare fingers were numb, and Kuroo swore softly when the half-smoked cigarette he was manipulating escaped his grip and fell into the snow with a quiet sizzle. It disappeared next to the three other butts Kuroo had dropped in the last quarter hour.

Unsatisfied, he blew out the last of the warm smoke in his lungs, and then pulled another stick from the smashed-up carton in his jacket pocket. He stuck it between his lips almost mechanically and cupped his hand around his face as he lit it, briefly enjoying the warmth of the lighter's small flame on his reddened cheeks. He inhaled deeply, hating the acrid taste of tar on his tongue but soothed by the heat travelling down to his core. When he exhaled, it came out like a sigh.

He rinsed and repeated wordlessly, twirling the cigarette between his frozen fingers between puffs as he'd been doing for a while now. The repetitive movement kept his mind off his thoughts. If birds of a feather flocked together, then Kuroo felt right at home in this icy, barren wasteland.

"Is it going to take catching the flu for you to wear a damn hat?"

A voice ripped through the silence hanging around Kuroo, although the young man didn't have to turn to know who'd decided to join him. He leaned forward against the railing in front of him, taking another puff of smoke while the newcomer approached.
"I'd ruin my hair if I wore one," he chuckled, cigarette smoke punctuating each weak laugh. "Better dead than ugly."

"Surprising that you're not dead already, then," the young man behind him retorted without much bite to his words. The fresh snow crunched under his boots as he took self-assured steps towards Kuroo, only to stop next to him. He eyed the cigarette between his lips distastefully. "Maybe you will if you finish that packet in your pocket."

"If only it were that easy," Kuroo sighed, hanging his head. His companion took it as an opportunity to snatch the cigarette from his shaking fingers, and throw it into the snow with the rest. It sizzled as it went out, accompanied by Kuroo's whine of disappointment.

"Tsukki!" he sighed, glaring at his friend, who looked guiltlessly onward, into the barren street. "I won't even have the chance to get cancer if you throw out all my cigarettes like that."

"What are you trying to do?" Tsukki interrupted him, his breath fogging up his cracked glasses lightly. "You haven't touched a single smoke since the forest. Since we got to Niigata. Why start again now?"

"Are you concerned for me, Tsukki?" Kuroo hummed teasingly, lighting another cigarette with ease. His dislocated shoulder ached when he cupped a hand around his face, but the cold numbed the inflamed joint despite the layers of clothing and bandages.

"Stop avoiding the topic. Answer me." Tsukishima coughed when Kuroo blew the smoke towards him, waving the cloud away from his face with a grimace. "And keep that away from me."

"I'm just trying to feel alive again, is all," Kuroo shrugged nonchalantly, leaning back against the railing. "Haven't felt this empty in a while."

The air around them settled, and it became clear that Kuroo was done joking around. His serious countenance made Tsukishima's hairs stand on end, but he pushed through.

"Remember when we found you guys in camp Omega-Thirteen?" It felt like it was a lifetime ago, for all it was worth. Each one of their trials felt like it had lasted a decade. "You smoked a lot, then. We asked Kenma about it. He said you did it because you were still alive, when everyone else is dead."

"Kenma's always been too bright for his own good," Kuroo shrugged. "It's true. This is my punishment for outliving everybody else."

"Makes no sense."

"Not a lot of things do, these days." Kuroo took a long drag, and exhaled in a loud sigh. "Like why Suga, of all people, was the one who ended up dead because of us."

Tsukishima said nothing. His heart sank as they reached the core of the matter, what he'd come to talk about when he realized that nobody had seen Kuroo for the ten hours following their tragic return.

"You're terrible at therapy, Tsukki. Consider a career outside of human relations, would you? You're too antisocial," Kuroo chuckled at his friend's silence.

"It takes one to know one, and that's why you're gonna tell me what's got you so hung up," Tsukishima retorted, hugging himself for warmth when a chilly gust ran through them. Kuroo's
fingers were a bright red around the dirty white of the cigarette.

"Touché." Kuroo took another drag and counted off a few seconds. "How's Daichi?"

"The same as before." Tsukishima nudged him with his elbow. "That wasn't my question, though."

"I'll be fine if you stop reminding me that I'm not." There was the smallest tinge of annoyance in the teasing lilt of his voice, but Tsukishima remained undeterred.

"Don't be a drama queen," Tsukishima clicked his tongue. "Just answer the damn question."

"Don't get mad, Tsukki," Kuroo laughed lightly, then sobered. "I'm... I'm going to be fine. I just need some time to think."

"What are you thinking about?"

"A lot of things." He twirled the cigarette in his hands, eyes drawn to the idle action. "What happened out there. Why it happened the way it did. What we could've done differently to prevent this outcome." He hung his head, letting his greasy hair obscure his face. "If we could have saved Suga. If we could've done anything... anything at all..."

"Hey..." Tsukishima felt awkward now, not expecting this kind of heartfelt confession from Kuroo. He expected teasing, light comments about dark matters, but no actual conversation. "There's nothing you could've-"

"But what if there was?" Kuroo interrupted brusquely, his fists clenched in silent suffering. The cigarette in his fingers snapped with an audible crunch, and Kuroo yelped when the scorching ashes singed his skin. While he shook his hand in pain, Tsukki bent to pick up a handful of snow, which he pressed to Kuroo's palm, holding onto his wrist with his other hand. He realized that Kuroo was shaking. And that it was much too fine of a tremble to be from pain or from cold.

"Kuroo..." he began, eyes riveted to the snow melting off his chilled skin.

"What if there was...?" Kuroo repeated, quieting down. "What if we could've done something to save him, and we didn't? We shouldn't have let him come in the first place. This responsibility is on us."

"You don't have to bear it alone."

"Daichi will expect us to," Kuroo shook his head. "You saw what he was like. He hasn't spoken a single word, hasn't left Suga's bedside since we saw him. This is going to change him."

"Enough for him to forsake everybody else for Suga-senpai's sake?" Tsukishima frowned. "The captain isn't that kind of person. He still has everybody else on his mind, no matter what."

"He used to. But now..." Kuroo shook his hand free from the snow, but Tsukishima held strong onto his wrist. He didn't fight it. "I saw it in his eyes, right from the start. Suga's gone, and a part of him has, too. He's not the Daichi we know anymore."

"Don't say it like that," Tsukishima mumbled uncomfortably.

"It's true, though," Kuroo sighed, finally pulling away from Tsukishima. "Something's changed. I don't know what has, but he's changed. And that makes it especially difficult to plan for the future."

"Is that what you were doing, out here all alone? Thinking about the future?" Tsukishima sighed.
"You've never had trouble coming up with plans before."

"That was before Daichi turned into a wild card," Kuroo shrugged, heading off towards the interior of the mall complex. "All my plans so far have been successful because I knew the materials I had to work with. But we've got a variable amongst us now, and the future has never been more uncertain."

Tsukishima watched him leave, a strange nausea roiling in his gut at the confession. Though their present had always been rocky, their future had always seemed simple, and clear cut; stay together, survive, find safety.

But it seemed like they couldn't even count on that plan anymore.

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Nishinoya was loathe to admit that he recognized Hinata's loud sobbing all the way from down the hall. It nearly stopped his advance as he made his way towards the intensive care room, if only because seeing his kouhai in so much pain risked breaking him.

But the younger ones had just lost another senpai, another leading figure and person of reference. More than ever, Noya had to be strong for them.

Faking self-assurance as best as he could, he knocked lightly on the door, and entered.

The small room was crowded with people and the rare advanced medical machinery that Awa had salvaged from the city. Hinata, whose cries blanketed any other hushed conversation in the room, was crumpled in a corner with his face in his hands, Kenma doing his best to support him with his arms. Asahi stood at the foot of the bed, his face pale and sorrowful, although he, too, seemed to be making an effort to stay strong. Kageyama was leaning against the wall, eyes wide and lips pursed, as if he was absolutely lost in the flurry of activity and emotion in the room. Yamaguchi, on the contrary, was by the monitors and the ventilator, eyes riveted on the numbers and graphs tracing on the screen, understanding things about Suga's condition that none of them could. Oikawa sat in one of the chairs next to Suga's bed, hunched over with his elbows on his thighs to support what he probably felt as the weight of the world on his shoulders. Iwaizumi, steadfast as always, stood next to him with his hand on his shoulder, and his eyes on Suga, his glossy eyes sorrowful beyond words. The only person who seemed unbothered by the close quarters was Suga, laid out and swathed by blankets, his silver hair blending in with the white pillow like a dissipating halo.

His eyes were closed, and under the blankets, Noya could make out the light rise of his chest. Daichi, sitting next to him and holding his hand, seemed to be following the same movement with his eyes. It was all he did as all hell seemed to break loose around him.

He was the first one that Noya approached, because despite his silence, he seemed to be the most haunted by the incident.

"Daichi," he called, weaving his way around a worried-looking Asahi to reach his side. Daichi didn't turn to look at him, so Noya repeated. "Daichi."

"He hasn't spoken a word since everybody got here," Iwaizumi informed him softly, glancing worrily at the captain. Indeed, Daichi did not even react to being mentioned. His gaze seemed frozen on the breath fogging up the mask on Suga's face in regular intervals.

"I guess it's not much use trying to get to him now..." Noya sighed, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I remember when Ryuu died. I couldn't be reached for days afterwards. I can definitely understand what he's going through."
At that, nobody commented, though Asahi did glance away guiltily, as if everything was his fault somehow.

Nothing was their fault, and they all wanted to believe it. But they had nobody else to blame. It was a dangerous game to play.

"We should clear the room. Give him some space," Noya suggested, turning to Kageyama, who still looked lost. "Kageyama. Let's leave."

"Right…" Kageyama nodded hesitantly, glancing over at Hinata. "With him?"

"Yeah…" Noya approached Hinata, whose wails had died down to hoarse whimpers. "Shouyou… come on. You need a break."

"But… S-Suga-senpai…" Hinata protested weakly, and Kenma's arms tightened around him. "We can't l-leave him!"

"We're not," Noya convinced him, putting his hand out for Hinata to take. "But you need to get some air. We all do."

"How many more, senpai…?" Hinata hid his face in his hands, his shoulder trembling. Kenma's eyes were glossy with barely-repressed tears, probably infected by Hinata's anguish.

"Come on, Hinata," Noya dodged the question, squatting to pry Hinata's hands away from his face. Hinata's pleading expression, eyes rimmed red and leaking heavy tears, was nothing short of heartbreaking. Noya felt nauseous, and clenched his hands tightly. "Let's take a walk."

"Mhm," Hinata nodded, swallowing heavily as if trying to swallow back his tears. He pulled one of his hands out of Noya's firm grip to wipe his face dry, and then accepted Noya's help to pull himself up. Kenma rose with him, his fingers weaving through Hinata's to support him more subtly as they stood. His shoulders were hunched, too, and Noya could see the way he glanced at the floor, then at Hinata, then back to the floor. He said nothing, but was clearly hurting.

"Yamaguchi, you come, too," Noya turned to the other boy, who was lifting Suga's eyelids to flash a penlight into his eyes. Yamaguchi finished his assessment, and then turned to Suga, indecisive. "Let the nurses assigned to Suga do all of this work. You need a break from the medical stuff."

Yamaguchi considered it, glancing at the cardiac monitor, then adjusting the small white clamp on Suga's index finger. He brushed over Daichi's hand by accident when he did so, but Daichi didn't react. Yamaguchi seemed slightly perturbed by that, and retreated his hand to his chest with a worried glance to his captain. He then glanced at Noya, and slowly nodded.

"Come on," Noya invited him with a wave of his hand, ruffling Yamaguchi's hair affectionately when his kouhai got close enough. Yamaguchi flinched, but relaxed against his senpai's touch. His eyes were sad.

"Senpai," Kageyama called as he approached the cluster of distraught teens, because he belonged there as well. He seemed as clueless as ever, though, when he asked his question. "Suga-senpai isn't going to wake up, is he?"

Hinata choked another sob, and Oikawa's hunched shoulders tensed. Perhaps that was enough of Kageyama's brutal honesty for one day.

"We won't know for a while." He simply left it at a safe answer, and ushered them towards the door. "Let's go."
Nobody said a word as they began to leave, only interrupted by the opening of the door from the outside. As if the room wasn't cramped enough already, Kuroo strode in, followed closely by Tsukishima.

"Hey," Kuroo greeted the general assembly, glancing at the tight group on their way out. "You guys okay?"

"I'm taking them on a walk. They need some air." Noya glanced at his little group of followers worriedly.

"Good idea," Kuroo nodded. "Just came back from the outside myself. It did me a world of good."

"You smell like cigarette smoke," Iwaizumi pointed out.

"It did me a world of good," Kuroo repeated casually.

Noya was mildly alarmed at that, but said nothing. He hadn't seen Kuroo smoke since they made it out of the mountain pass towards Niigata, and didn't know why he would pick up the bad habit again after months of cessation, but he wasn't in any place to criticize. They all had their ways to cope.

Instead of commenting, he led his group towards the door, swerving around Kuroo and Tsukishima. However, as they reached Tsukishima, Yamaguchi stopped, and slowly pinched a piece of his sleeves to grab his attention.

"What is it?" Tsukishima asked gruffly, turning to Yamaguchi, who didn't let go. "Go get some air with Noya-senpai."

Yamaguchi cocked his head softly, looking at Tsukishima as if he expected something of him. Tsukishima glanced back in silence, and then sighed, pulling his arm out of Yamaguchi's grip.

"Fine, I'm coming," he grumbled, and Yamaguchi's expression lit up.

"Later, Tsukki," Kuroo waved to him, and Noya waited for Tsukki to fall in line to lead them out.

The door closed behind them, and, surrounded by the silence of the hallway, Noya felt a little better.

"We'll get through this, just like we have everything else," he murmured mostly to himself, but the others seemed to hear it, and agree silently. They followed their senpai out.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...-...-...-...

Inside the room, Iwaizumi let out a heavy sigh as the door closed behind Noya. It's not that he didn't appreciate the smaller boy, not at all. In fact, Noya was one of his closest friends in this group. But at this moment, the way things were, Iwaizumi didn't want anybody else in the room with Daichi.

That included Oikawa, but Oikawa had categorically refused to leave, and he categorically refused to leave Oikawa.

It all sounded a bit ridiculous to him.

"And then, there were five," Kuroo rumbled out in a weak attempt as a joke, approaching Asahi, and clapping his hand on his shoulder. "You wanna go take a breather, too?"

"I'm staying," Asahi shook his head, glancing at Kuroo with more determination than he ever seemed to show. "I have to."
"Okay, big guy," Kuroo shrugged, patting Asahi's back supportively. He nodded back at Kuroo and backed up against the wall, leaving his place to Kuroo, who leaned onto the foot of the bed.

That's when Oikawa finally looked up, his face wrinkled by a deep frown.

He signed something that Iwaizumi quickly interpreted as questioning his sudden appearance.

"I'm here for the same reason as you, pretty boy." Kuroo answered vaguely, but that had Oikawa backing off regardless in understanding. Iwaizumi, however, didn't understand. Kuroo externalized feelings of guilt much more differently than Oikawa did.

To each their own, he supposed.

They fell into a silence that was neither tense, nor comfortable. In fact, Iwaizumi had a hard time describing it, even though he'd gotten very good at sensing the intentions behind silences. It felt a bit uncanny to him. He didn't know what to expect.

He flinched when Daichi finally spoke, because he hadn't been expecting it at all.

"Someone did this to him, didn't they?" His voice was rough, his words ground out against his teeth.

Oikawa turned to Kuroo, and the two of them exchanged glances. Iwaizumi saw Oikawa's eyes fall to the floor soon thereafter. He nodded slowly.

Daichi said nothing, simply stared at Oikawa as if very sluggishly processing his motion. Kuroo seemed to be watching his every move carefully, carefully like he did with people he didn't trust.

Iwaizumi himself almost flinched when Daichi suddenly stood, his free hand going to Suga's pale forehead. He combed a few stray hairs out of his face, tucking them behind his ears, and then cupped his cheek tenderly. His eyes were as steely as ever, his harsh gaze dissociated from his tender actions.

"Kuroo," Daichi finally called, rubbing a few circled into Suga's cheek that left little blanching spots. His grip tightened on Suga's free hand, so hard that the oxygen monitor on his finger began to show dropping values. "I want you to promise me something."

To his credit, Kuroo said nothing. No snarky comments, no taunting, nothing. He, too, seemed disturbed by how suddenly Daichi had changed.

"Promise me. When you find the people that did this…" Daichi's caresses halted. "Kill them."

Iwaizumi wasn't the only one whose eyes widened at the harsh command. Oikawa turned to him with barely-veiled alarm on his face, and Iwaizumi simply reciprocated the sentiment. He couldn't say anything. Even Kuroo the Unshakeable seemed shaken.

"We'll leave you with Suga," Kuroo finally decided, pulling away from the foot of the bed. He hid his trembling hands into his pockets in a semblance of nonchalance. Oikawa followed his lead, also standing up from his chair. "When you realize that I can't do that, come see us."

Iwaizumi had always been a bit afraid of Kuroo. As he watched his back retreat towards the door, he realized that it was because he would follow him, despite never understanding what went on in his head.

Surprisingly enough, it was Asahi who approached Kuroo next, catching him on the side after a
tense lunch with the rest of the group, minus Daichi. As soon as Asahi got up to leave after him, Kuroo suspected he was coming to talk to him about just that.

"Daichi isn't a bad person."

Kuroo sighed, turning around to face Asahi. They were alone in a hallway that wound around the main mall walkway, the only witness to their conversation a creepy, dilapidated mascot in the display of what used to be a sweets shop before the world turned sour. For Asahi to confront him one-on-one in this isolated place, he must've had something pretty important to say.

"You know…" Kuroo simply began, shoving his hands in his pockets casually. "When someone begins a conversation with a defensive statement, I tend to believe the opposite."

"He really isn't."

"There you go again. I have a problem with authority, you know."

"Please don't joke about this." Asahi's firm tone finally wiped the budding smirk off Kuroo's face. He stayed quiet now, waiting for Asahi to continue. "You've worked very closely with Daichi all this time, and you know how he's all-business… But you didn't know him before the war. So please… don't think that his anguish is all that defines him."

"I know it doesn't," Kuroo answered him soberly. "I only knew him briefly before the war, and I know he was a strong, steadfast pillar for you all, kind-hearted and fiercely protective of those he loved- his team. After the war, Daichi was one of the rare ones who didn't change; he just rewired himself. He directed his protectiveness in a different direction, applied his heart of gold to new situations revolving around the same individuals he wanted to protect before the war."

"That's… that's right," Asahi blinked a few times, seemingly thrown aback that Kuroo had grasped Daichi's feelings. It wasn't that Kuroo was unempathetic, after all. He just chose to discard emotions in favour of rational thought, is all.

"I also know that through all of these events in our journey, Daichi has had an anchor of his own," he lowered his tone. "He's been able to keep a clear head because someone has been holding onto his heart for him."

"Don't think that because Suga is gone that Daichi is going to break," Asahi interrupted him briskly, shocking Kuroo with his temerity. "He's stronger than this. It's true that Suga has always been one of the most important people in his life, and it's true that right now, his mind and his heart are a mess, but…"

Kuroo respectfully gave him the silence as buffer time for his next words.

"But… when he gets back up -and he will-, he will be stronger than ever," Asahi concluded. His voice was steadfast, his conviction more grounded than Kuroo had ever seen it before, and he couldn't help it- he believed him.

"I know," he murmured. "But until then…"

"Until then, we support him," Asahi cut in. "We hold up his heart until he learns to hold it himself once again, and until then, we can't judge him for anything he says."

"I wasn't going to take his request seriously," Kuroo defended himself, realizing what this conversation was about, finally. "I'm not a hitman, if you haven't noticed. I can't just find out who did this to Suga and waltz into their top-secret base inside a mountain and shoot them all up by
myself. Even if I could, I wouldn't." He'd already killed enough people to last him several lifetimes. When old horrors came back to haunt him on quiet nights, he still woke up with the smell of gasoline in his nostrils, the echoes of screaming in his ears, and sweat rolling off his shoulders like pieces of bloody flesh raining down his body.

He shivered in recollection and tugged his mind back towards the present. Asahi was looking at him weird.

"Point is, there's nothing I can do about anything right now." And that was the worst part of it all for someone like him who thrived on holding the reigns. "We're gonna have to let time run its course."

"Right…" Asahi looked down and wrung his hands. "Umm… thanks for understanding. Daichi means a lot to me, and…"

"We won't give up on him," Kuroo assured him, completing his unfinished thoughts. "He's our family, too."

"Thank you," Asahi choked out, and Kuroo took it as his cue to leave. He spun around and walked off and didn't know if Asahi started crying or not, because he had other things in mind.

His feet led him away from Asahi, away from his friends, out into the bitter cold that stung his cheeks with every painstaking step. He roamed with no specific destination in mind, boots dragging through the thick snow like an uncanny simile for the way time seemed to drag on endlessly around these parts.

...-...-...-...-...-...-

And time did drag on, days stretching a hundred times longer than they usually did, time's arrow soaring through molasses. Kuroo was afraid of looking at the clock sometimes, afraid that if he looked too fast, he would see the hands ticking backwards. The days seemed never-ending, and the loss of one of their own -again- was at the source of it.

Their wastelander training instructors gave Kuroo and his team some time off to mourn their friend. Kuroo would much rather have stayed in training, kept his mind focused on things he could control, but with insistence on all sides, he desisted. He and Oikawa returned to their regular duties as maintenance workers, Bokuto returned to the radio with Akaashi, and Yamaguchi bravely volunteered to plug the gap that Suga had left in the medical team.

(When Kuroo saw him next, he seemed to have lost weight and colour to his cheeks.)

Meals were a quiet affair. They usually all convened at dinnertime because their schedules almost only lined up after work hours, but the get-togethers were no longer an opportunity for solace as they were before. Instead, the silence made it obvious that there was a hole in the group that wouldn't be filled again.

Again.

Kuroo wished he could say that going through the loss a first time had steeled them for a second time, but that would be wildly false. Losing Tanaka had been a tragedy, and losing Suga was a whole other ordeal. Nothing could have prepared them to cope with this.

Time healed all wounds, Kuroo figured, although he wasn't sure how that worked if time stopped moving entirely.

If Suga was there with them, he would've explained the healing process like resuscitating someone
who's already dead. Compress, breathe, defibrillate; buy time, stay alive, and jumpstart your life again.

The metaphorical defibrillator charged during the two weeks that followed the fateful incident. For two weeks, all of them just trudged through their days, grief and insecurity clinging to their bodies like a second layer of skin. Stayed alive and bought time, bought time for something to happen although none of them knew what they were waiting for.

A dead man doesn't usually expect the shock, just like they didn't expect the event that pulled them out of bereavement.

It happened on just another night, as life-changing events usually did. Kuroo sat at the dinner table with everyone else, letting his eyes trail over them more often than they did over his fried rice. Noya sat diagonally from him, discussing the intricacy of perfectly-made fried rice with Iwaizumi, whose opinion bordered on 'if it's edible, it's good'. Next to him, Oikawa was taking small bites of food and chewing twice as long as any of them did, and when he noticed Kuroo staring at Iwaizumi, he grinned and signed something about Iwaizumi being a brute and not refined at all.

It was a rare moment of peace.

And then, a man came barreling down the nearby set of twisting stairs, the loud clanging of his boots on thin metal grabbing their collective attention. Kuroo noticed more than a few shoulders tensing up at the frazzled man landed, and saw a few people shift when he headed hurriedly for them.

"Sorry to interrupt!" he called before he even got near them. It drew a few looks from the tables around them, though rumours spread fast in small communities and their group was no stranger to being gawked at.

"Can we help you?" Hinata asked, glancing at the rest of the table for answers they didn't have.

"There's an emergency broadcast to be made," the man explained, catching his breath. "I need Bokuto and Akaashi to come with me right away!"

"What's going on?" Asahi piped up, worry already etched into his face. "Is something wrong?"

"No time to explain," the man adjusted his glasses as they slid off his nose with the sweat glistening on his face. "Please, hurry!"

"Let's go, Akaashi!" Bokuto nudged his partner with his usual energy, though he didn't seem too enthusiastic.

"Lead the way, please," Akaashi sighed, taking one last bite of fried rice before standing up.

"Akaashi," Daichi suddenly called, surprising everyone by speaking up. "You'll tell us if anything is wrong, right?"

"Yeah," Akaashi assured him, glancing at Bokuto, who was already heading off in a jog. He turned his body to follow them. "Tune in, and then we can meet after the broadcast."

"Good luck," Noya waved at him, lips pursed in concern. Akaashi nodded, and sprinted off to catch up with Bokuto.

"What's this all about this time?" Iwaizumi sighed, glancing at Kuroo.
"Let's find out at the same time as everyone else, I guess," Kuroo shrugged, glancing over at Daichi. "Hey. You still have our radio?"

Daichi nodded and rifled through his knapsack, pulling out an antiquated radio that they'd inherited when an elderly man from the agriculture district passed away. They didn't use it often, seeing as the radio hosts tended to tell them important information directly, so it took a while for him to fiddle with it and turn it on.

When the static cleared, background music wafted into the air. It was an old, classical tune, meant to be soothing, though its purpose was defeated when a jarring voice interrupted the music out of the blue.

"Please stand-by for an emergency broadcast."

The music began again from where it'd left off, making everybody uneasy. Now catching onto the flow of events, nearby tables were also turning their radios on, until the crackling of the classical tune had become the background to the cafeteria's regular chatter. The voice announcing the emergency broadcast repeated a few more times, each time only adding to the tension settling over the inhabitants of Awa.

"Arghhh, this is making me anxious!" Noya suddenly exclaimed, ruffling his hair to let some tension out of his shoulder. "I wish they'd just get on with it!"

"Relax," Iwaizumi sighed, remorselessly stealing a ball of rice from Noya's plate and sticking it in his mouth. "They'll get to it when they get to it."

"That doesn't even mean anything!" Noya pulled his bowl away from him. "And don't steal my food. I thought you didn't care for fried rice."

"I said I don't mind, as long as it's edible," Iwaizumi shrugged, speaking through mouthfuls of rice. Next to him, Oikawa silently laughed, and signed the word 'brute' with a long-suffering expression on his face.

Sitting across from him, Yamaguchi let a tiny smile of genuine amusement etch on his lips. It was the first that Kuroo had seen from him in a while.

Suddenly, the music stopped, and the clattering of equipment came over the air.

A terrifying, deathly silence fell across the entire cafeteria as everybody listened in on the radio with bated breath.

"Citizens of Awa," Akaashi came on the air first, tone firm and controlled. "We apologize for interrupting your regular schedule and come to you with an urgent broadcast."

"Tonight, we'll be setting a curfew, so right after dinner, please go to your dorms and cover all the windows and doors as inconspicuously as you can!" Bokuto chimed in, his energy converted into hurry. "I mean… we're not declaring a state of emergency, or anything, but it's pretty close."

"An hour ago, Awa received grim news of its most famous wastelanders, Nakamura Daisuke and his team, under terrible circumstances. Kondo Naomi, the field medic of Nakamura's team, was returned to us by her driver, who escorted her back when the team got caught in an explosion out in the field."

The people around them began to talk, a few gasps and shuddered breaths audible above all else. The silence of death fell upon them again as Akaashi continued.
"According to Kondo, Nakamura Daisuke and Kogane Souji, his partner, were immediately killed in the blast."

Voices rose to wails around them, and Daichi winced, turning the volume up a little louder. They all huddled closer around the radio, to hear better, and to hold each other together.

"Hasegawa Kotori, the combat specialist, attempted to escort Kondo away as she had gotten close to try and get to Nakamura and Kogane, but a second explosion was set off, injuring the women as well. According to Kondo, Hasegawa sustained a severe head injury, but Kondo herself had lost her left leg in the explosion, and so it fell upon Hasegawa to take her to safety."

"Oh god," Hinata whimpered, covering his mouth with his hand. "This is a horror story… it can't be real."

"An explosion that targeted the wastelanders, huh…" Tsukishima muttered out loud, eyes hidden by the reflection of the light on his cracked glasses. He looked pensive.

"Hasegawa dragged Kondo to their extraction point, at which point point their driver, Saito Ayumu, transported them back as fast as possible. Tragically, on the trip back, Hasegawa, who had possibly been bleeding into her brain since the explosion, passed away, leaving Kondo as the sole survivor of the team." Akaashi's voice was choked up, but admirably enough, he kept himself steady as he spoke. Some people around the cafeteria had already begun to cry and wail, pray or curse the gods again for the continued misfortunes that were cast upon them.

But their table remained silent.

Somehow, they had nothing to say.

"Kondo is going to be fine, though!" Bokuto added in as side-commentary, trying to prevent the newscast from spiralling into a dark void of despair. "Hasegawa had prevented her from bleeding out, and so our medical team, led by an ex-ICU nurse and an ex-surgical intern, are currently operating on Kondo as best as they can to tie off her leg. Once she has recovered, Kondo has agreed to receive visitors."

"Following the strike of yet another tragedy to the people of Awa tonight, the overseer and her advisors have determined that further investigation has to be conducted before the security of Awa can be reconfirmed," Akaashi began again. "A curfew for sundown has been set for all inhabitants, and so we ask for your own safety that you return to your dorms before it's dark outside and lock up. Should you have to stay inside the main complex after hours, bedding will be provided to you so that you may remain here overnight."

"People of Awa, listen to me," Bokuto continued, his voice low, and uncharacteristically serious. "This is a horrifying tragedy, and not the first that we've seen. Being a wastelander is a dangerous job, but the series of incidents that have targeted our brave men and women lately have nothing to do with chance. According to Kondo, the explosions were deliberate, rigged and set off by people who were observing their advance. Someone out there is attempting to hurt our community, and until we can be better protected, we can't take any chances. Stay together. Stay inside. Report all suspicious findings to the appropriate authorities. And most of all, be kind to one another. Awa needs to stick together in these trying times."

"More information will be released as Kondo recovers from surgery," Akaashi concluded. "We apologize for delivering such grim news, but we, as well as the governance of Awa, beg that you all remain safe. Support each other in these terrible times. You have made it this far, and together, you will make it yet again."
"This concludes the emergency broadcast commissioned by the governance of Awa, presented to you by myself, Bokuto Koutaro, and my partner, Akaashi Keiji," Bokuto finished. "Thanks for listening in, for all it's worth."

The radio cut off with a shrill tone, and then, static.

The loss of Bokuto's and Akaashi's voices left Kuroo devoid of anything to focus on, and so, he became acutely aware of the absolute chaos in the cafeteria around them.

"Let's leave," he beckoned, unable to stand the commotion of people crying and falling to their knees and expressing anguish and terror alike in their desperation.

Nobody said anything in response, but the tension in their muscles showed that they were all like-minded.

"We should go find Bokuto and Akaashi," Iwaizumi suggested, getting up from his seat with everybody else. "Maybe they'll be able to tell us what the hell just happened."

"I'm not sure there's much else left to say," Noya commented in a whisper next to him, and Kuroo couldn't help but agree.

They migrated upwards as a group, climbing the stairs and stationary escalators until they reached the topmost floor of the mall complex. It was empty, save for the store that had been repurposed as the entrance towards the broadcast studio. As they approached, Kuroo made out two figures sitting close at a desk inside the store, hunched over one another. The eccentric hairstyle gave it away before Kuroo got too close; Bokuto's hair had gone black at the roots but he still insisted on spiking it up with gel he had the lunch ladies make from dietary gelatin. At a closer range, it seemed like Bokuto was leaning over Akaashi, who was completely doubled over in his seat.

"Bo?" Kuroo called as they approached, frowning. Bokuto immediately whipped his head up in surprise, but Akaashi didn't move. Kenma was the first to break from their group and jog to his side, hands hovering over his still form.

"Hey," Bokuto sighed as they arrived, giving them a tired smile. "So. Tough news, huh?"

"'Infuriating' is the word you're looking for," Tsukishima provided unhelpfully. "Ugh. Enough is enough."

"You'd think people would think like you after all this time…" Daichi shoved his hands in his pockets. "There's no humanity left to preserve in this world."

"Hey, come on," Bokuto frowned, glancing over at Akaashi, whom Kenma was trying to coax out of his cocoon. "There's always something worth holding onto, no matter what. Right?"

"Right." Iwaizumi clenched his fists, biting his lip in thought. "But… my question is… who's been doing all this? It's clear that this was deliberate, and that it was… it was the same occurrence as…"

"… as with Suga," Daichi completed, not noticing how nervous glances were thrown at him. "I thought so as well. Two such events in close timing with one another… for them to be unrelated coincidences would be a fool's thought."

"That doesn't get us anywhere, though," Hinata crossed his arms. "If we're gonna do something about these bad guys, we have to know more about all this!"

"We're not doing anything, idiot!" Kageyama smacked him on the arm immediately. "We're kids!
There's no way we can go up against evil guys who killed an entire group of professional wastelanders."

"Ow, no need to be violent..." Hinata pouted, rubbing his arm. "I was just saying... there's no way we can just sit down and do nothing. Not after this has happened. Not if it could happen again."

"We should leave it to the adults," Asahi suggested hesitantly. "I'm sure they'll ask Kondo about the incident some more once she gets out of surgery."

"Well, we will, too," Bokuto announced, glancing back at Akaashi. "That's what Akaashi is upset about. The overseer asked us to interview Kondo once she's well enough to get more information, if only to help ease the population's worries."

"Tension is running high enough as is already," Akaashi finally added in, unwrapping himself and looking towards their group with his eyes rimmed red. He didn't meet anyone's gaze. "And for us to harass that poor woman for a scoop when she should be resting and mourning... It's wrong. I..." His voice broke. "I can't. I can't imagine doing that to her when I couldn't imagine doing that to Daichi when Suga..."

"Thank you," Daichi sighed when it became clear that Akaashi couldn't continue. "You're very kind, Akaashi. Perhaps it's time you rested for tonight."

"You should come over to our dorms," Hinata suggested hopefully. "You and Bokuto can squish in with us. It'll be safer to stay together, and you won't have to be alone."

"What's this? A logical idea?" Tsukishima teased, grinning widely when Hinata squawked and tried to pick a fight with him. Yamaguchi was the one to break it up with a firm hand on each of them and a long-suffering expression on his face.

"Come on," Kenma coaxed Akaashi, helping him stand. "Shouyo is right. Don't stay alone tonight."

"In that case, let's get going," Noya motioned towards the escalators. "We should make it back before curfew."

"Better start getting suited up right now," Kuroo hummed half-heartedly, shoving his hands into his pockets as they began to walk. "I heard there's a storm coming."

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

The next day, Kuroo was surprised to find himself being approached by Daichi out of the blue. The young man, who'd been detached somewhat since Suga's accident, didn't tend to speak much to him these days, especially not by cornering him on the way out of the bathroom like this. They were alone in the dimly-lit hallway of their dormitory house, light chatter from the common rooms below rising to their ears in whispers. At this time of day, people were most likely to already be getting dressed to go outside for another day at work.

"Thanks for waiting for me," Kuroo greeted Daichi mockingly, stopping next to him. Daichi, who'd been leaning against the wall, uncrossed his arms and pursed his lips.

"I'm going to go see Kondo today." He skipped all the formalities and went directly to the point. "She's been out of surgery since late last night and Bokuto said they were going to interview her today. I'm going to go visit her and ask her some questions before he and Akaashi get there."

"And you're telling me this because...?"
"Come with me," Daichi responded flatly. "You were there when Suga… when we lost Suga. You should hear the answers to my questions, if she has any."

"Very considerate of you to offer," Kuroo hummed in genuine surprise. "Any reason why you're doing this on the down-low?"

Daichi did wince lightly at that, diverting his gaze in a tell-tale admission of undercover motives.

"I just… don't think she'd give out the answers I want to anyone and everyone. I figured I might have more of a chance if I went alone. With you, of course."

"Well, if I'm to uphold the reputation that people associate with me, I have to say yes to your shady offer," Kuroo shrugged in good humour. "Alright, I'll be there. Besides, I'm much too curious to find out what it is that you have to ask her that can't be said around others."

"Whatever you say, Kuroo," Daichi rolled his eyes, turning around to leave. "Though I can't help but wonder if you're only doing it for the kicks this time, too."

"Give me some credit," Kuroo raised an eyebrow. "I may not look like it, but I have our group's best interest at heart. Not just the group's, at that, too, but every person in the community is important to me as well." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You're important to me, too."

Daichi didn't reply. Kuroo figured there wasn't much that anybody could say to such a blatant admission of concern. However, he'd lost too many of his loved ones to mince his words and hide his feelings behind embarrassment any longer. He couldn't live with any more regrets.

"See you there," he simply offered, and brushed past Daichi without a glance back.

When Kuroo turned the bend that led to the infirmary, he saw that Daichi was already there, as expected, loitering around the entrance to the area. The guy didn't have a subtle bone in his body, and Kuroo was almost glad he tagged along. Daichi looked a bit relieved to see him, too, and began to walk towards him with a tiny upwards tug of his lips, before his eyes fell upon the two people who trailed after Kuroo. His smile fell, a frown immediately sliding in its place.

"Good morning, captain," Kuroo saluted teasingly. "Here I am, as promised. I hope you don't mind if I brought a couple of others along."

"Well..." Daichi seemed at a loss of words, running his gaze over Kuroo's companions hesitantly. Almost as if sensing his discomfort, Oikawa, to Kuroo's right, flashed him a cheerful greeting. Yamaguchi, on Kuroo's left, simply indulged in Daichi's discomfort and hung his head, fiddling with the ripped seams of his sweater.

"They're filled in already, no worries." Seeing as Daichi seemed to be boggled down, Kuroo jumpstarted the conversation. "I really want them with us, seeing as they were a part of the original squad. They deserve closure as well."

Daichi glanced at them dubitatively, but then sighed, conceding.

"Fine. Let's go. We don't have a lot of time before the nurse checks up on her."

"You did your research," Kuroo translated, eyes on Oikawa's moving fingers as they walked.

"I just… don't want anybody to know I went to see her," Daichi tried to explain, leaving it vague.
"Ooh, the anticipation is killing me," Kuroo whistled mockingly, drawing a tiny chuckle from Yamaguchi. They walked in silence through the halls of the medical wing, ignoring the regular patient rooms and making a beeline for the acute care rooms. Kuroo noted how Daichi completely turned his gaze away from the hallway that led to the only intensive care room, where Suga spent his days existing on machines, and quickly paced towards the other branch of the hallway, which led to the acute care rooms.

The noise in the rooms was a bit louder on that side, moaning and crying commonly rising above the voices filtering out from under the doors. Daichi led them past a few of those rooms, and then abruptly stopped in front of an unlabeled door. He took a breath, exhaled calmly, and then knocked. "Enter," a voice beckoned from within, and Daichi glanced back at the rest of their group only once before entering the room.

The woman in the bed seemed surprised to see them come in, and they took advantage of her surprise to file into the room and close the door behind them.

"I apologize, but may I ask who you are?" she immediately questioned, her frown dragging down some gauze that was taped over her face. "Nobody is allowed here but the nurses…"

"We are very sorry to come in unannounced, but we really wanted to visit you, Kondo," Daichi began, slowly approaching her. As he got nearer, he slowly began to make out all the scars and bruises littering her thin arms, the circles under her eyes and the haunted look in them. His eyes briefly flickered to the blanket, where, instead of a lump where her left leg should've been, there was nothing. "We just had some questions."

"I do not want visitors presently," she sighed, glancing down at her lap, and then immediately away, as if the mere sight of her missing leg burned her. "I apologize. Please leave."

"We won't take up your time," Daichi shook his head. "Please. We are a group of young wastelanders, in reality, and we very much look up to you, even more so with the incident. We wanted to offer our condolences." Kuroo smirked next to him, but Daichi was grateful that he didn't call him out on the obvious lies. They seemed to want the same thing, after all.

"I see," Kondo raked her gaze across them. "Thank you."

"Our friend recently passed away in similar circumstances," Daichi continued, shuddering visibly at the admission that Suga was gone. Though… he wasn't really. He supposed that this was just another lie he'd have to spin. "He went out in the field for a search and rescue, and an explosive set off an avalanche in which he was asphyxiated."

"I return the condolences to you."

"Naomi's eyes widened. "I am very sorry. In fact, I had heard in passing that another wastelander had gotten caught in a trap like this recently, but I hadn't heard the whole story. Your friend is in the ICU currently, right?"

"Right," Daichi nodded, although his mind stuck on one thing that Naomi said. "But… about what you just said… you are saying that these explosives are all deliberate setups?"

"Oh." Naomi seemed to clamp down. "I apologize. I cannot really talk about that."

"I understand," Daichi soothed her, though he really didn't. "It's unfortunately much too big of a coincidence to have two teams attacked like this, so I've been entertaining the idea of it being planned. Do you have any idea who could be behind them?"
"Even if there was somebody doing this, I wouldn't be able to tell you about them," Naomi shook her head harder, getting visibly uncomfortable. Daichi felt like she wouldn't be very cooperative any longer.

"Please, please help us out," he lowered his voice and his eyes, hunching his shoulders inward like he remembered Kuroo doing when he was trying to manipulate someone. It made him look smaller and more defenseless. "Why are they doing this to us? Why did our friend have to die? What wrong have we done?"

"I… I…” Naomi seemed at a loss of what to say. Daichi wondered how far he'd have to push until suddenly, her eyes flashed next to Daichi, widening.

Daichi followed her gaze, towards Oikawa's flushed face as genuine tears rolled down his cheeks. Yamaguchi was at his side in a second, drawing him sideways into a hug.

"I apologize for my friend," Kuroo butted in, his voice quieter than Daichi had ever heard it before. "He's been having nightmares lately, reliving the avalanche over and over again, wondering if he could've saved our friend… It's just… we've had such a hard time getting over him when we just can't understand why anyone would do that to him."

When Daichi turned to Naomi again, he noticed that there were tears in her eyes as well.

"I…” her voice broke and she looked away in embarrassment, wiping the unshed tears away. "I'm very sorry. I didn't think mere children would get dragged into this. It's a horrible tragedy what happened to Daisuke and my team, but I… I can't believe they would go for children as well…"

"Please, tell us who they are," Daichi begged again. "Please… we just want to make things right for our friend."

"No. No, don't," Naomi suddenly looked terrified. "Don't do anything rash. The only thing you can do now is move on." She dried her tears, and straightened her spine. Her lips pursed into a thin line and Daichi saw that she'd regained all the composure she'd lost earlier. "As wastelander recruits, you are the hope of Awa. Your teammate was precious to you, as mine were precious to me, but their death is not the end for you. Daisuke would've asked me to keep moving on after he died, and that's exactly what I will do. I know for a fact that your teammate wouldn't have wanted you to grieve for him."

"How? How do we move on?" Kuroo translated for Oikawa, who shakily signed the message.

"Find your new beginning, recruits," she advised them. "Ask yourselves why you joined the wastelanders. For me, it was to better the lives of the people strong enough to have made it this far, and though I am no longer fit for the field, I will continue my work by doing medical research and will continue the mission that my team and I carried out since we started together. I cannot tell you what your future will bring, but you and the other young wastelanders must remember one thing; you are a beacon of hope for our community, and you must never falter. For the memory of your fallen comrades and the sake of those who still live."

"I… I see…” Daichi nodded, acknowledging that he'd lost control of the conversation he was hoping to manipulate. Naomi had seemed to have put her guard back up, and even Oikawa had dried his tears, figuring that they couldn't work her over anymore.

At that moment, the door opened, and Daichi turned right in time to see Satoko, their unofficial guardian angel, walk in.
"Hey Naomi, I was just gonna come see-" she interrupted herself and immediately glared at Kuroo when she noticed that he was in the room. Kuroo at least had the decency to look ashamed, unable to meet her eyes.

Shame was an expression that Daichi rarely saw on Kuroo, so he figured that he should enjoy it. That is, until he realized that he, too, should be ashamed right now.

"What are you guys doing here?" Satoko asked, frowning. She didn't seem as playful as she used to be every other time they'd been with her. "Nobody is supposed to be in here yet. Naomi is meeting the interview team for the radio, and that's all the visit she's agreed to get for now."

"Sorry, Satoko…" Daichi began. "We just wanted to-"

"Please leave." It was Naomi who interrupted them now, biting her lip. "I would like to be alone with my friend right now. Thank you for your visit."

"Alright, let's go," Kuroo motioned his head at the door before Daichi could speak. "Thank you for your time, Kondo. We wish you the best."

"Thank you," Daichi parroted, bowing. Oikawa and Yamaguchi also silently bowed to her, and then turned to leave.

Satoko watched them file out of the room with a slightly disapproving look in her eye. Daichi didn't dare look at her as he walked past. She was kind, but also terrifying.

They gathered outside the room, and Yamaguchi clicked the door shut behind them. Daichi waited for one breaths, then two, then…

"Good job in there," Kuroo praised, turning to Oikawa for a high-five. Oikawa, whose eyes were entirely dry, and who smiled back, returning his high-five enthusiastically.

"Incredible," Daichi deadpanned. "You can't take a break and be genuine, just for once?"

"Look who's talking. I'm not the one who told the most lies in there, you know," Kuroo shrugged. "I was trying to get answers out of her."

"So were we."

"You didn't bring them in for closure, did you?"

"Not entirely," Kuroo smirked, and nudged his head at Yamaguchi, who nodded back, and got on his knees. "I brought them in for their individual talents in finding out what we need to know."

"What…?" Daichi began, eyes trained of Yamaguchi as the younger boy pulled his stethoscope out of his pants' cargo pocket and put it in his ears. He then got on all-fours, and slipped the head of the stethoscope through the opening under the door.

"Holy shit," Daichi found himself saying, baffled. Kuroo grinned widely, probably at his incredulous expression, but motioned for him to pipe down.

Daichi held his silence, watching Yamaguchi shift the stethoscope until he got a good listen of the amplified conversation inside. Then, he motioned for Oikawa, and as if this was all rehearsed, Oikawa headed over and put his hands on Yamaguchi's stethoscope to hold it steady. Once it was secure, Yamaguchi began to move his fingers, signing out whatever he heard inside the room.
Daichi couldn't help but be impressed.

"They're talking about rogues..." Kuroo translated in a low voice, attentive to every flick of Yamaguchi's wrists. "Some sort of rogue group holed up at the nuclear power plant." He watched Yamaguchi struggle to catch up and spell some words that he didn't know how to sign. "They're guarding it... they're planning to use it to wipe out the west of Japan."

A certain time elapsed as Kuroo took in many of Yamaguchi's symbols at once.

"They know people are in the wasteland... but don't have enough manpower to hunt them down to their bases. They want to detonate the power plant as a fast-track." Kuroo's eyes darkened as Yamaguchi's lips fell into a frown. He diligently kept reporting what he heard. "What happened to Suga is probably their doing. Wastelanders are more in danger now than ever before."

Daichi's heart might have stuttered in his chest, but he'd never admit it.

Yamaguchi listened a little longer, hesitating, and then shook his head. Oikawa let go of his stethoscope, and they both rose from the floor, dislodging the stethoscope from underneath the door.

"Done?" Kuroo confirmed, and Yamaguchi nodded, folding his stethoscope and storing it back in its place. "Okay. Let's break for today. Stay away from each other to avoid drawing suspicion, in case Satoko wants to follow up. We'll discuss this tomorrow at lunchtime."

Everyone nodded, all business, and Daichi couldn't help but be impressed once more. Kuroo did definitely have a talent for pulling out the best (and worst) in people. He was glad he'd asked him to tag along.

"Good job, everybody," he acknowledged, and they split.

Daichi immediately headed to the intensive care room to tell Suga that they'd identified his murderer.

...-...-...-...-...-...

Kuroo casually avoided Oikawa, Yamaguchi and Daichi for the rest of the day, only letting himself get close to them when others were around. He didn't know if they were being watched, but he preferred not to take any chances. The information they'd gotten was highly concerning, and he couldn't wait to dig deeper into it, but he couldn't afford to slip up in his haste.

Still, he couldn't help but let Yamaguchi's report run laps around his head, over and over again through the day and even through the night, preventing him from getting much sleep. There was a lot that had been lost in translation, and listening in with a stethoscope didn't provide the best quality when they tested it out the first time that Yamaguchi suggested it, so Kuroo was sure that some vital information was missing from what they'd found out. He still didn't know who the rogues were, and he didn't understand their plot involving the power plant. There were so many questions he still had for Kondo Naomi, not that she would ever answer them. Kuroo briefly wondered if Bokuto and Akaashi had been able to get good stuff for their interview, or if they'd gotten apologies and half-hearted answers as well.

Until lunchtime, however, he couldn't take any steps forward. Metaphorically, at least, since in wastelander training, he didn't hesitate to outrun half the class during warmups. All the thoughts in his head were building up to become a pressure to be relieved by sweating it out. Bokuto ran alongside him, not sure why he was suddenly so motivated to do laps, but following all the same. Oikawa avoided him, perhaps more than usual, but Kuroo didn't confront him, as the only thing more suspicious than suspicious behaviour was correcting said suspicious behaviour.
Perhaps he'd been trying too hard. In retrospect, acting normal would've probably been the best thing to do, not that it would've made much difference in the end. Satoko would probably never have let them off the hook either way.

As he'd guessed, she didn't.

The group of trainees broke for a short break around the mid-morning, and Kuroo headed to the water station to quench his parched throat. Keeping his mind on his work helped the time pass quicker, although he had a feeling that he'd be exhausted by the end of today at this rate. He grabbed a paper cup of room-temperature water from the large container that the kitchen put at their disposal, and sipped it calmly on his way back to the group.

"Kuroo!"

Interrupted, Kuroo slowed to a stop and sipped the last of the water, eyes turning to the side to whoever called him. To his left, Satoko was leaning against the open shutters of the footwear-store-turned-gymnasium, arms crossed, fingers tapping against her elbow. Her face was impassive.

"Satoko," Kuroo greeted with a movement of his head. "Good to see you. I've gotta run back to training right now, but maybe-"

"Come with me," Satoko interrupted him without even letting him finish his mild-mannered façade. "It won't take long."

Kuroo's lips pursed, and he crushed the paper cup, throwing it into a nearby garbage bin. He didn't answer her, but the way she looked at him expectantly made it feel like he didn't have a choice in the matter. She simply waited, unmoving and unflinching, until Kuroo finally made a move to walk. At that point, she waited for him to start walking in front of her before she followed.

It made Kuroo nervous, but he refused to show it. Cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck but didn't quite roll down his spine. He tried to breathe in deep and square his shoulders as Satoko led him off.

Finally, they reached an adjacent hallway, empty save for a clanking ventilation shaft overhead. Kuroo wondered if he should keep going, before he heard Satoko's footsteps halt. He stopped at well, unsure what to do. He had a feeling that he was in a bit of trouble.

"So," he began, turning around slowly as not to startle her. "What can I do for you?"

Satoko said nothing. However, before Kuroo turned entirely, she had rushed to his side. He only had a second to flinch before she had him by the collar, slamming his back against the wall. Breath left Kuroo's body in a gasp, and out of reflex more than anything else, he tried to twist and break her hold immediately. Still, Satoko must have seen it coming, because she immediately countered his desperate move for freedom, and slammed him a second time against the wall, this time with her forearm pressed against his throat. Kuroo's head swam with the impact, and when his vision cleared of the black dots, he glared right down into Satoko's steeled eyes.

"What the hell is this about…?" he choked, Adam's apple uncomfortably bobbing against the bones of Satoko's arm.

"Don't play dumb with me," Satoko threatened in a low tone, momentarily pressing on Kuroo's throat, just to emphasize the position he was in. Kuroo cleared his throat in an attempt to calm his nerves, though it didn't do much for him.

"What is it that you want?" he asked instead, narrowing his eyes at her. "I know it's about us
snooping around the infirmary, but asides from asking Kondo questions that she didn't want to answer, I don't think we did anything wrong."

"Please don't take me for a fool," she rolled her eyes, although she seemed entirely unamused. "I was facing the door. I saw the stethoscope. I know you were listening in after you left."

Kuroo didn't respond immediately, taking a few deep breaths through his nose to try and quell the anxiety slowly rising within him. His discomfort must've been plain on his face because it was at that point that Satoko finally released him.

Kuroo stumbled away from her, rubbing his neck to ease the residual ache from Satoko's hold. She hadn't pressed hard, but it was hard enough to make Kuroo's skin crawl uncomfortably at the memory of the sensation. Satoko herself did not move, giving Kuroo the space he needed to recover and recompose himself. Once he was ready, he stood up and squared his shoulders again.

"I know you know things you're not supposed to know," Satoko finally continued, keeping her distance. Kuroo felt confident that she wouldn't try to restrain him again. "I should've seen it coming."

"I wasn't even the one who listened in," Kuroo huffed off-handedly.

"Then who was it?"

"I'm not selling out a friend, if that's what you're asking," Kuroo winked playfully at her, his usual confidence returning to him with every word. Satoko still looked unamused, but she hadn't moved, nor reacted, which Kuroo took as a good sign.

"Regardless," she pursed her lips. "You spied on me and Naomi, two of the highest-ranked officials in Awa, and got away with classified information. You do know that according to Awa's civil code, forcing access to regulated information is punishable, right?"

"Now I do," Kuroo hummed, not threatened at all. Something about Satoko's demeanour told him that he wasn't in trouble, despite her earlier actions towards him. "But I don't think you're here to place me under arrest, or anything."

"What makes you so sure?" It was Satoko's turn to sound playful. She probably enjoyed Kuroo's fiery attitude as much as it ticked her off.

"Well, if you saw the stethoscope under the door the moment we slid it through, you would have stopped us," Kuroo countered confidently. "If you didn't stop us, I can only assume that it's because you had reason for us to know the information Kondo was withholding from us. Am I right?"

To that, Satoko remained silent for half a minute, although Kuroo's smug expression never left his face. Finally, she let out a scoff, and crossed her arms again.

"You piss me off, always acting like you know you're right," she grumbled. "In a way, you still are, too. I did intentionally let you listen in on Naomi's and my conversation, because I need you to be aware of the information she gave me for the next service I'm about to ask you."

"A service?" That threw Kuroo aback, as he wasn't quite sure what he could accomplish other than provoke people into acting in his favour. He was rather powerless in the traditional sense of the word, if he thought about it.

"Right."
Satoko paused for a moment, scrutinizing Kuroo, as if making the final call on whether or not to be having this conversation with him. Bit too late, Kuroo figured, because even if she left it at that right now, he would stop at nothing to pursue the truth, if only to satisfy his curiosity. He had to know what kind of leverage he held against Satoko, again, simply for informational purposes.

"I'm organizing an expedition into the wasteland," Satoko finally announced, rushing through her words without taking a breath, almost as if afraid that if she stopped, she would not pick up where she left off. "Remember the rogues? It's what we call the division of the Japanese army that has gone rogue and is now on some holy mission to purge Japan of its 'unworthy' people. They want to kill-

"Oh, I know of them," Kuroo piped up. "Haven't heard of them in a really long time, though. Almost thought they'd disappeared. But I know them, better than I care to admit; they're psychotic zealots who want to commit seppuku on a national scale to avenge Japan's fallen reputation."

"Exactly. Have you met them before?"

"Uncomfortably so." The smell of gasoline and burned flesh singed Kuroo's nostrils again for a second. He swallowed heavily to dispel it. "No matter. We know about them, is all you need to know. Continue with your proposal."

"If you say so." Satoko didn't seem convinced but at least seemed to know when to stop pushing someone on a clearly sensitive topic. "The goal of this mission is to put a halt to their plans, and hopefully drive them out of the wasteland as a collateral effect. It's a large-scale mission targeting the nuclear plant in Shimane, and I'm planning to get a group of people across the wasteland to go shut it down once and for all, before the rogues have a chance to use it to their ends. I want you guys to come with."

"Can I just immediately point out that not everybody in my group will agree to go?" Kuroo argued almost instantaneously. He could name off the top of his head a couple of people who would outright refuse to participate in this expedition without a doubt.

"I don't need everybody," Satoko assured him. "I know you guys rather well. I know that you are all very capable young men, and as much as I'd love to bring you all, I would actually be alright with only a few. You, of course, because you wouldn't sit still if we left you behind…" She seemed to muse out loud. "Perhaps that Daichi boy, too. It would give him the opportunity to get revenge for his friend in the coma."

"If that's what you honestly think, then you don't know us at all." Kuroo's smirk fell into a dead-serious expression. "Daichi would never do that. If you think that he would abandon everything he holds dear on some pointless journey to 'avenge' Suga, you're absolutely wrong."

"I apologize."

"Don't make assumptions about us anymore," Kuroo warned her lightly. "You may know us more than anybody else in Awa, but you still don't know us. Our group has been through so much… there is no way you could understand what motivates us to rise to see another day." He clenched his fists tightly. "You can't understand."

"I'm sorry," Satoko frowned, and the sadness on her face only served to tick Kuroo off even more. "I spoke out of turn. I know you've all been through a lot, but… I believe you came out of it better people, and better survivors. And that's why I'm asking for your help."

"I'll think about it," Kuroo answered vaguely. "Like I said, not everybody will agree to this plan, and if there is one thing we don't do in this reconstructed family of ours, it's leave one another behind. I'll
talk to them, explain your plan, but I can't guarantee that anyone will agree."

"It's more than I could ask of you already." Satoko still looked sad for some reason. "I apologize again, Kuroo. With the way you hold yourself, you and some of the others, it's... easy to forget, sometimes, that you're still just kids."

"I know." He knew better than anyone how even they, themselves, oftentimes forgot about their unfortunate circumstances, if only to make them a bit more bearable. "I... I should get back to training. I'll talk to the others about this tonight and give you news when I get them."

"Thank you," Satoko called, but Kuroo was already brushing past her. He felt her eyes on his back as he retreated, still rather ambivalent about the encounter. "Tetsuro, I mean it. Thank you."

"Don't thank me just yet," Kuroo simply grumbled, and walked away from her without a glance backward.

Hinata had not stopped crowing about their "secret meeting" that night, but try as he might, he never got a word out of Kuroo as to what it entailed. Kuroo made sure not to let anything slip during their dinner hour, not sure how confidential this information was supposed to be. Consequentially, he waited for that night to arrive to gather the others in their dormitory house's living room-turned-storage closet.

The rows and rows of winter coats and snowpants belonging to the inhabitants of the house were dripping with melting snow, the hardwood floor swollen and uneven from all the moisture. Boots in innumerable quantity, matching or otherwise, snaked along the walls all around the room, floating on puddles of muddy water. The sole window in the room, wide and tall, allowed the darkness of the incoming night to contaminate the inside of the house. A particularly violent gust of wind ruffled the tarp covering one part of the glass, duct-taped over the hole that one of the children had accidentally made by throwing a ball through the window. The entire room smelled of humidity, although the tendrils of cold air leaking through the gaps in the duct-taped window made the smell a bit more bearable.

There, in the midst of darkened rows of damp clothing, Kuroo gathered them and waited.

"What are we waiting for, anyway...?" Noya asked, yawning. "I've had a long day. I wanna sleep."

"Won't be long now. Bokuto and Akaashi are supposed to join us after they get their stuff. They're sleeping here tonight, remember?" Asahi reminded him patiently, patting his back.

"Can't you just tell us what's going on so we can all get some rest?" Of course, Tsukishima was the one to complain, and Kuroo saw it coming a mile away.

"Hold your horses, Tsukki," he clicked his tongue playfully. "It's important. I really want everyone to be here right now."

There was a rasping noise, and everybody turned to Oikawa, who finished his wide yawn and then realized that he was being gawked at.

"Cover your mouth when you do that," Iwaizumi sighed, shoving his shoulder lightly. Oikawa ducked his head, seeming overwhelmed by the attention.

Their attention was taken away from Oikawa when footsteps began to head down the stairs, and all eyes instead turned to the newcomer into the living room.
"Oh!" It was a young woman, slightly older than them, and her uniform spoke of her role in the community. "Good evening. What are you all doing down here? Are you alright?"

"Yes, we're fine, officer," Daichi assured the peace officer. "We just wanted to talk away from the ears around us in the dorms."

"It is crowded in those rooms, isn't it?" The woman smiled indulgently at them. "Alright, just don't make too much noise. There are people sleeping already. And I'm the officer on duty tonight, so if you need anything, you can find me in the officers' usual spot."

"Thank you." Daichi nodded at her, and she returned the greeting before heading downstairs to check on the basement dorms.

"Isn't it weird that they have officers in every house now?" Hinata mused out loud. "It used to be a head of the house, usually a nice older lady, but now the head of the house is a peace officer. Are they expecting us to be in danger?"

"Use your brain," Kageyama clicked his tongue at him. "They're probably bringing up the security around here because of what happened to that wastelander whose entire team was killed."

"Well, if whoever did that to them decide to blow up this house, one officer isn't gonna stop it," Hinata protested, if only to spite Kageyama. "Use your brain."

Kageyama's hand soon found itself on Hinata's head, and Hinata squawked when his grip tightened.

"You wanna say that again?"

"Enough," Daichi sighed tiredly, and that was enough to tear them apart. Silence fell across them for a second. The command felt foreign coming out of Daichi's mouth.

In a better world, Suga would have been the one to break them up.

Morbid thoughts gave way to relief as the front door suddenly opened. A cold gust of wind and snow rushed in to herald the arrival of both Bokuto and Akaashi, who shook off all the snow piled on them and let it join the puddles already on the floor. Bokuto removed his hat and his mittens immediately, but almost dropped them when he turned his head and realized that the group was already there.

"Kuroo!" Bokuto greeted in excitement, rushing towards him as soon as he spotted their group in the corner.

"Bokuto, take your boots off," Akaashi sighed behind him, kicking his own boots off against the wall and then avoiding the wet footsteps that Bokuto had left in his hurry.

"Oh, sorry." Now mindful of his winter gear, Bokuto unzipped his jacket and kicked off his boots, and handed his jacket to Akaashi whilst he busied himself with unbuttoning his snowpants.

"Hello, Akaashi," Kuroo greeted him, seeing as Bokuto was struggling with the stuck zipper.

"Good evening, everyone." Akaashi swept his eyes across the group and then inclined his head in greeting. His hands busied himself with shoving Bokuto's accessories in his coat sleeves and then hanging it up in a practiced motion.

"So, what's this super secret meeting about?" Bokuto immediately skipped to the point, throwing off his sweatpants and handing them to Akaashi as well. Akaashi hung them up like he'd done it for a
"Sit down, relax." Kuroo tapped the floor in between him and Yamaguchi, and the entire circle scooted to make place for the newcomers. "Let's wait for Akaashi to hang up his own stuff, first."

"There's one heck of a storm brewing outside," Bokuto noted idly, sitting down cross-legged next to Kuroo. "Good thing we're staying here tonight!"

"It's a little bit tight, but we'll make it work," Asahi informed them sheepishly. "We share our room with a family of four, and they take the corner, so we just have to squeeze ourselves into the rest of the room."

"Kenma can share with me tonight," Hinata suggested, turning his bright gaze to Kenma, who seemed lost in thought.

"I have no objections," the young man agreed. "Kuroo moves too much in his sleep anyway."

"I do not!"

"Let's keep this argument for another time," Daichi interrupted them with a wave of his hand. "It's true that it's late, and we have another full day tomorrow. Let's get this meeting over with."

"I'm ready now," Akaashi prompted, sliding to his knees next to Bokuto. "Apologies for the wait."

"Alright." It was only one word, but it had everybody sobering immediately. Kuroo's tone of voice spoke volumes about the importance of their upcoming conversation, and yet his face spoke volumes about his hesitation. "How should I tell you this?"

"Straightforward," Iwaizumi immediately answered, lips pursed. "We've been through enough already to have to beat around the bush."

"You're right." And yet, Kuroo didn't seem too convinced. "And yet, for some reason… it's so damn hard."

"Well… if it's bothering you so much, you should just spit it out so that we can share your burden," Noya reminded him intently. "We promised each other that we wouldn't let our burdens consume us ever again."

"You're right." Kuroo closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Concern had begun to creep upon the faces looking at him, and he was nervous to face them. But, he opened his eyes, and he did.

Daichi sat across from him, and he looked straight at him as he opened his mouth to explain.

"I'm leaving Awa."

There were no words, but Kuroo felt a ripple of anxiety run across them like a wave. Nobody dared to speak. Not even Bokuto, who seemed to be entirely confused by Kuroo's confession.

"What do you mean, Kuroo?" he finally asked, breaking through the silence. All heads turned to him, and then back to Kuroo. "Where are you going?"

"What's happened?" Kenma corrected the question, knowing him better than most.

"Is something wrong?" Asahi frowned concernedly.

"No, no, nothing is wrong," Kuroo bit his bottom lip pensively. "At least, not yet."
"I told you not to beat around the bush, and here you are doing it again," Iwaizumi huffed, crossing his arms. Next to him, Oikawa put a hand on his knee to calm him down, frowning. "Tell us what's happened."

"Satoko spoke to me this morning," Kuroo found himself admitting, figuring that he may as well keep going. He wrung his hands in an uncharacteristic show of nervousness. "What happened to those wastelanders was no incident. It was a deliberate attack, orchestrated by the rogue division of the army."

"The rogue division?" Kageyama frowned, glancing subtly at Hinata, whose eyebrows had creased at a painful memory all of a sudden. "We haven't heard of them in so long. Since… Since Niigata."

"They're still kicking?" Noya sighed in frustration. "I thought we were done with them when we left Niigata!"

"Still kicking," Kuroo confirmed with a sigh. "And they are on the move again, this time towards the nuclear power plants near here, notably the one in Shimane. The wasteland has been too rough for them to cross it in search of survivors, so they're apparently intending to detonate the power plant to wipe out everybody else on the mainland."

"Incredible," Tsukishima deadpanned. "Just… incredible."

"I know," Kuroo sighed, linking his fingers together in an uncharacteristic show of anxiety. The movement did not go unnoticed by most parties, who threw glances around them uncomfortably. "That's not all."

"What else is there to say?" Asahi asked, genuinely confused. "They're on the move, and they want all of us dead. There's nothing more to it, right?"

"Wish I could say so, big guy," Kuroo shook his head, snorting amusedly. "No, there is more. Satoko didn't approach me just to announce that there's a genocidal organization on the loose- again. She… she also approached me to offer me a solution."

"Kuroo." Daichi's voice was suddenly sharp, his breath hitching. Everyone turned to him as he sat up with his spine erect, almost painfully straight. His face was set gravely. "What have you done…?"

"Nothing!" Kuroo defended himself with a confused fervour. "At least, not yet. I told her we'd think about it…"

"You're beating around the bush again," Iwaizumi warned him lightly. "Spit it out."

Kuroo glanced at him quietly, and then glanced around the circle of people he called his family. The moonlight fell upon them and cast warped shadows intermingled on the moisture-swollen hardwood. The wind blew harshly outside, ruffling the tarp taped to the broken window. It momentarily covered the sounds of Kuroo's heavily-beating heart.

"Satoko is putting together a team of people to cross the wasteland and go shut down the power plant once and for all," he finally announced, taking a deep breath. "She's asked us to be a part of it. And I'm going to go."

He shut his eyes, ready to receive a verbal whiplash, although, a few seconds later, nobody had spoken just yet. When he opened his eyes again, he realized that it was because all eyes were on Daichi, who seemed stone-faced under all the attention.

The silence continued for another while. Glances were exchanged, silent conversations flying all
over the place. Hinata leaned over to whisper something brief to Kageyama, who in return just shook his head grimly. Oikawa signed a few things to Iwaizumi, which Kuroo didn't read in time, but he did read Iwaizumi's hesitant response.

I don't know.

Kuroo felt like it was the only response any of them had in mind right now.

"I'm going to go with her," Kuroo finally reiterated, just to break the silence that wasn't tense per se, but just uncomfortable enough to make his skin crawl. "I feel like a sitting duck just staying here. I can't… I can't do nothing when there's another threat out there just waiting to-"

"Kuroo." Finally, Daichi interrupted him in a firm tone.

All eyes went to him. His face was unreadable, and Kuroo shut his mouth in respect for his answer.

"I won't go. I can't." He sighed, and his shoulders sagged under the weight of yet another dilemma he was much too young to face. "Suga can never leave this place, and I will never leave him."

"I…" Kuroo frowned lightly, suddenly feeling guilty about his proposition. "I wouldn't ask you to… I just…"

"Awa is the safety we've been searching for all this time," Daichi continued, still steeled in his response. "We left the Karasuno gymnasium because it was no longer safe to stay there. We entered camp Omega-Thirteen because we thought it was our salvation. When we left the death camp with you and Kenma, it was in an attempt to find a safe place to save your life. We left Shoukyo because safety would never be guaranteed to us there. We crossed mountains and forests towards Niigata and almost died trying to reach our safety. Even then, even when we thought we were safe, the second bomb exploded and brought terrible loss upon us. We brought Iwaizumi to safety, and even then, we left Niigata and travelled to Nagoya for something better. In Nagoya, we could've been safe, but the situation became precarious, and we left for Awa, leaving one of ours behind. We almost froze to death getting here. We lost another one of our own once we did. But we're safe. We're finally safe."

The retelling of their entire journey over the past months seemed to sober up several people in the circle who seemed undecided. The atmosphere turned sad, in recollection of the hardships they'd endured and the people they'd lost.

"Daichi-"

"We finally made it into a self-sustaining society with enough supplies, a functioning social order, and natural defenses against outside threats, not to mention that the people here will not try to kill us once night falls." At that, Kuroo visibly flinched, his hand flying to his neck where his scar had very largely healed into a raised line of flesh. "This is the ideal place we've been trying to find all this time. This is what we envisioned when we left behind our hometown and our past lives. We've sacrificed so much to get this far, but we have."

"And now, I'm trying to take it all away- again," Kuroo completed, hanging his head. "I know. I know, Daichi, believe me. I just… I can't stay here anymore, not when I know that things are happening out there, beyond our tiny community."

"You and I, and everyone else in this circle knows that you're not doing it out of the good of your heart," Daichi frowned. Kuroo visibly flinched, now looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Daichi," Kenma interrupted him, clenching his fists. "Please stop making Kuroo look like a bad
"No, Kenma. He's right." Kuroo gave his best friend a faint smile, though it fell apart quickly. "You're right. I'm not doing it out of the goodness of my heart. I don't even know what that means anymore."

"We've all been through so much, Kuroo." Finally, Daichi's tone softened, and his expression fell sadly. "We've all been through so many horrors and traumas, more than any person should ever have to endure, and we finally have a chance to heal. I know you think you're not worth it. We all know it. But please, you need to cease this self-destructive behaviour. You need to stay."

"I can't." Kuroo's voice choked, and he dipped his head suddenly.

"Kuroo?" Bokuto raised his voice in alarm. "Are you okay?"

"Hush," Akaashi prompted him, putting a hand on his upper arm gently. "Let him be."

"I can't stay here anymore," Kuroo continued, lifting his head. Tears had massed in his eyes, glinting in the moonlight. A noticeably uncomfortable ripple went through the circle, as Kuroo had never been one to show such raw emotion. He'd been so guarded since Shoukyo that it was rare to be witness to his vulnerability. "I'm going to go crazy if I have to hand off control of my life to someone else again."

Oikawa visibly froze at that, hand flying to his scarred lips self-consciously. Nobody commented when Iwaizumi linked his remaining fingers together with Oikawa's silently and squeezed. If anybody could empathize with Kuroo at that moment, it as the two of them.

"Maybe I am crazy for wanting to throw myself head-first into danger again, but staying here doesn't feel like safety to me," Kuroo continued, using his thumb to wipe the tears out of his eyes before they fell. "Ever since we got here, I've been afraid, afraid that whatever stability we find will be torn down again like it has in every other place we've settled in. I've been afraid that getting complacent would get me killed, even if people assured me it wouldn't. I've been afraid that I would wake up one morning and everything we have here today would be gone, just like it has time and time again. In a way, knowing that there's a new danger out there is comforting; at least I don't have to live my life pretending that everything is alright."

"This is no longer our problem, Kuroo. We should let others take care of it, others who are better qualified for dangerous things like these," Daichi sighed. "We've made it this far by sheer force of will and sheer luck. Most of the people in this circle aren't even legal adults, and you're asking them to risk their lives again to fight a war that never should've been theirs to fight? We're all tired, Kuroo. You are, too."

"I'm tired, but not of fighting," Kuroo corrected. "I'm tired of wondering if another disaster will strike us though we've done our best to avoid them. I'm tired of running away, and I'm tired of making plans to run away. I'm a leader, Daichi, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are," Daichi nodded, looking straight at Kuroo. The glance they shared was soft, intimate, carrying a weight that only the two of them could comprehend as leaders in their own right. "And time and time again, you've led us out of the flames. Your heart's in the right place, Kuroo. But you… you're addicted to the wanderlust that was been fuelling our journey across the country. Like any addiction, it's going to be your downfall."

"I may be addicted, but it's how I hold myself together," Kuroo admitted, and let out a heavy sigh to rid himself of all the insecurity this debate was sowing across his mind. "I'm going to go. I am a
leader, and I want to save us one last time. The people in this circle are the only people left in the world for me. I won't let any of their suffering- our suffering- be for nothing in the end."

"At the end of the day, I can't do anything to stop you," Daichi sighed, shrugging. "But I will not go with you. And nobody here should feel pressured to go with you."

"I'm not asking anybody to come with me." Finally, Kuroo glanced around the circle, meeting the eyes of each and every one of the brave souls standing at his side. "I'm doing this because I want to. Ask yourselves; do you want this, too?" He then turned to Daichi, and inclined his head lightly in respect. "You asked something of me when Suga first came back from that expedition, Daichi, and I don't think I can ever forget it. You asked me to kill the people who took Suga away from you, and I… I was at a loss, because I can't do that, especially when I have a choice. And so, this is my choice. I will not kill for your revenge, but I will fight for your future. Yours, Suga's, and everybody else's."

"Let nobody ever tell you that you don't have your heart in the right place," Daichi chuckled sadly, glancing at Kuroo softly. "Tetsuro… It hasn't been easy for you either, and I apologize for the burdens I set upon your shoulders all this time. I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you."

"You've saved me so many times that I've lost count," Kuroo snorted, but his expression softened as well. "But, thank you. This team would not have made it without you."

"Not at all," Daichi shook his head. "We made it through thick and thin together. That's why I wish we could stay together until the very end. Truthfully, when Suga was brought back, I saw red. I wanted to go out there and hurt the people who did this to him, because he didn't deserve this terrible fate. I wasn't in a good place those first few days, and if you had asked me then, I would not have hesitated. Yet now, my mind is clearer. My heart is lighter. Suga is never coming back, and vengeance will not make me feel any better, nor any cleaner. And so, my place is here, at his side until the very end. And you… your place is out there, unrestrained and free and in control of your own fate."

"It is." The smile on Kuroo's face was bittersweet, and he glanced at Daichi just a little bit longer before turning to the others. "I'm sorry. I... didn't mean for things to get so heavy. And I don't mean to pressure any of you, but... we've made our choice."

"We have to make a choice too now, don't we?" Noya mumbled, eyes downcast. "And whatever happens... we're not staying together, isn't that right?"

"I'm sorry," Kuroo apologized again, for anything and everything. "I could've turned Satoko down immediately, and never have spoken to any of you about this... But if I have any trust left to put in this world, it's to be put in all of you. I want you all to know, and I want you all to make your decisions."

"I think we're all glad that you didn't keep this to yourself," Iwaizumi glanced around the circle to confirm. "Still... if only there was some other way..."

"I don't think there is," Tsukishima sighed, crossing his arms. "Kuroo. How much time do we have to decide?"

"A few days. Satoko didn't mention it exactly, but she understands that this is a tough decision to make." He glanced around the circle again, taking in the shadow-cloaked figures of the people he fought to protect. Many of them looked torn, both in mind and in heart. "I know I'm asking you for a lot, and I know it's selfish. I'm asking you to pick whether you want to stay here with Daichi, or come out to the wasteland with me. If you stay here, you'll be safe. If you come with me, you'll be in
danger again. There's more to it than that, but I only ask you to follow your instincts. Pick whichever option your heart favours."

"If you stay here, you will be powerless to control your fate, whilst the wasteland will give you freedom to lead your own life," Daichi added. "It's not an easy decision. I never expected it to come down to this, but now that it has, there's no running away from it."

"We can't just leave each other behind, though!" Hinata protested. "We've fought so hard to stay together, and now we have to fall apart?"

"We're not falling apart," Daichi soothed his worries. "Hinata. Everything we've been through, we've been through together. Nothing can pull us apart anymore; not distance, not death. Nobody is leaving anyone behind; we're just doing things in the way we each feel is right. And that's why it's important to make your own decision, without letting others influence you. This is your life. Lead it the way you want."

"What about a compromise?" Bokuto piped up, his usual energy dampened by the nature of the conversation. "Kuroo, why don't you lead expeditions into the wasteland while Satoko is gone? You get to go outside, and you return to us one way or another."

"No." The shake of Kuroo's head was definitive. "There is no compromise."

Somehow, it seemed like the kids around him already knew that. When Kuroo glanced at them one by one, he saw indecisiveness and he saw sadness, but he did not see hopelessness. In that sense, he was not worried. He trusted them all, even when he trusted nobody else, and he knew that they would surmount this obstacle like they'd surmounted everything else that had stood in their way thus far.

"This is the hardest thing we've ever done, and we've done a lot of tough things to get this far." All eyes turned to him again, but Kuroo felt light, and free of all his anxieties. He felt liberated. "There are no more shades of grey in which you can hide. I'm asking you to decide between black and white, left and right, and to spend the rest of your life without regrets. This is your journey's apotheosis. It's time to decide how your life culminates."

They agreed to give each other a few days of space regarding the issue, just so that they could all think about it on their own and come up with their unbiased decision. However, and unsurprisingly in retrospect, Kuroo was approached the very next day by Bokuto, who seemed way too enthusiastic to talk to him.

"Kuroo!" he called, sliding to a stop next to the bench where Kuroo was lifting a dumbbell.

"You're supposed to be training," Kuroo reminded his absent-minded best friend, putting his weight down and stretching his sore fingers. "Free training time doesn't mean you get to slack off."

"I'm not slacking off," Bokuto huffed, pouting. "I'm here to talk to you about what you said last night!"

"Bo," Kuroo frowned. "It's a tough decision. It's not something you can make overni-"

"I'm coming with you!" Bokuto interrupted him cheerfully, a bright grin plastered on his face. "No way am I letting you go at this all alone."

"Bo." Kuroo groaned and massaged his forehead. "The entire point of that fancy speech last night was
to stress the fact that you shouldn't be making this decision on account of someone else's. It doesn't matter what I do. I want you to choose for yourself."

"I am." Strangely enough, Bokuto's voice was levelled. "This is my choice. I've spent my entire time here in Awa and I've never seen what's out there. I want to know what you've been through. I want to understand what's on your mind. You look like you're all alone in your own head, and I want to keep you company. I can't do that 'till I understand what it is you've lived through."

"Bokuto..." Kuroo's eyes went wide at the heartfelt confession, and he bit his lip. "I, uhh... didn't think you had it in you to be so... empathetic...?"

"Of course I do! I'm the best at everything, after all," Bokuto grinned, although his smile died down into a softer one as he glanced fondly at Kuroo. "I lost everything in the Forty Fireworks. My home, my parents, some of my memories..." He caressed the tiny scar on his right brow pensively. "It doesn't feel like I'm doing anything worthwhile these days. It feels like I'm just living for the sake of being alive. I want to be someone that you can depend on once more. Akaashi treats me like a kid, and I'm only in Awa to entertain the people and keep up their morale... but it really feels as if a part of me is missing. I want to find it. And I bet I'll find it out there."

"I see..." It was sound reasoning, not that Kuroo had the right to judge. It was simply surprising for Bokuto to have so much insight and to have thought of so many aspects of his decision. Kuroo had to respect it.

There was only one minor problem.

"Have you told Akaashi...?" he ventured, sighing when Bokuto flinched. "You haven't? Come on. Remember how that ended the last time you did something stupidly dangerous without telling him?"

"He waxed sad poetry on the radio, it'll be fine." Bokuto looked sheepish nonetheless. "Besides, this is my decision to make, not his. You said so yourself."

"Of course it is. I'm just saying, I don't want to get yelled at again," Kuroo snorted, picking up his weight again. "Come on, snap to your training. We'll go talk to him together afterwards."

"Alright!" Bokuto punched the air in triumph. "I can't wait! This is gonna be so good!"

"Sure," Kuroo hazarded a tiny smile, watching Bokuto rush off excitedly to burn his energy on wastelander training. As airheaded as his friend was, he was still dear to him, and Kuroo hoped that their talk with Akaashi didn't end up in disaster- again.

They trained in separate teams for the rest of the morning, and when they were given a break for lunch, Bokuto rejoined Kuroo excitedly.

"Akaashi is in the studio, rehearsing for tonight's programme," he explained giddily. "Let's go see him!"

"Don't get too excited," Kuroo tried warning him, but his friend was already off, jetting away towards the staircase. Where he got that boundless energy, Kuroo would never know. At least their venture into the wasteland would not be boring if he came.

They entered the studio antechamber, greeting the man at the door, and petting the two cats curled up on the basket bed at the entrance on their way in. Akaashi was already there, reading his script, and turned his eyes up when they came in.

"Ah, Kuroo, Bokuto," he greeted with a light incline of his head. "I thought you'd be eager for lunch
after your training. What brings you here?"

"We wanna talk to you about something, Akaashi!" Bokuto announced, sauntering over to slip into
his seat by Akaashi's side. "It's about yesterday night."

"Oh." Akaashi seemed to know where this was going, and his face had fallen into a pensive frown
by the time Kuroo got to his side. "I see."

"Bokuto wants to come with me to the wasteland," Kuroo broke the ice, watching Akaashi's brow
twitch minutely. "We wanted to let you know beforehand, so you don't try to shank me in a corner
this time."

"I thought so." Akaashi didn't seem to find the quip funny, instead letting his eyes trail down at his
paper. "I suppose I did see this coming."

"You did?" Bokuto cocked his head.

"I had a feeling that these walls wouldn't be able to keep you contained one day," he sighed. "I guess
that this is your ticket out."

"So…?" Bokuto prompted, leaning into Akaashi. "Are you going to freak out again? Because I'm
going, no matter what you say."

"I'm not going to freak out, as you say, Bokuto." At least Akaashi had the decency to sound miffed.
Kuroo bit his lip to stifle a chuckle. "You're free to go. But then, that means that I am free to follow
you."

"Alright!" Bokuto threw his hands up, cheering loudly. The cats at the door got out of their bed and
walked off to find somewhere quieter to rest. "This is gonna be so great!"

"Of course," Kuroo hummed, although Bokuto's enthusiasm wasn't infectious to him. Instead, he
was stuck glancing at Akaashi, trying to decipher the sea of emotions raging in his eyes. He seemed
stricken, conflicted, but not surprised. His body language spoke of acceptance, of defeat.

Most of all, he offered no other explanation for willingly endangering his life than to follow Bokuto.
Kuroo smelled fish, and it sure didn't feel like lunch to him.

"Great!" he suddenly interrupted Bokuto's victory fanfare, startling Akaashi visibly. "Now that that's
over with, let's go have lunch. Bokuto, can you go on ahead? I want to play with the cats a little
more."

"Sure, I'll save you a seat," Bokuto nodded, jumping out of his seat. "Tama loves cuddles, so you're
better off trying to grab her over Midori. Midori is a master ninja and will escape your grip no matter
what."

"Duly noted," Kuroo snorted, walking Bokuto to the door. "I'll join you in a second."

"Later!" Bokuto nodded, opening the door. "Later, Akaashi!"

He quickly closed the door behind him, just in time for Midori to come running out from under a set
of technical equipment, mewling pathetically at the closed door.

"No can do, little man," Kuroo chuckled, petting the cat once before he arched away from Kuroo's
hands and walked off again.
"What is it, Kuroo?" Akaashi dragged his attention back to the subject matter at hand. "Bokuto isn't stupid. He knows you want to talk to me alone. So do us both a favour and be straightforward about what you want from me. You already got my opinion on the matter."

"I want answers, but I don't think you'll be very happy to provide them to me," Kuroo shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets as he advanced back towards Akaashi.

"Enlighten me." Dropping his script on his work table, Akaashi slid off his seat and met Kuroo halfway. "What are you scheming?"

"I should ask you that, Akaashi," Kuroo reflected to him. "You've been acting weird the entire time we've been here, but this is something entirely new. Right now, when we were talking about Bokuto, you looked like something was wrong." Putting a hand on Akaashi's shoulder, he squeezed gently. "I'm being genuine, Akaashi. You're my friend, and you're not alone. Something is on your mind, and I'm tired of it plaguing you."

"I have nothing to say to you, or anyone else," Akaashi bristled, though he looked more fearful than anything else. "I'm fine."

"Akaashi, you're not," Kuroo insisted. "What's wrong with you? What's going on?"

"Leave me alone." Shrugging Kuroo's hand off, Akaashi took hurried steps away from him. He wasn't running away, but it really felt like he was.

"Akaashi!" To no avail, Kuroo's call fell on deaf ears as Akaashi exited the studio. Midori came running out of his hiding spot, mewling, but Kuroo had no time for him. He had to catch up to Akaashi.

He exited into the antechamber, where the doorman was sitting down, magazine hanging from his hand.

"Hey, what's going on?" he asked, clearly confused. "Akaashi left so suddenly…"

"It's nothing," Kuroo assured him, rushing out of the studio.

He closed the door behind him and ended up on the topmost level of the mall complex. Below them, the makeshift fields were sparsely occupied, most workers having taken a break for lunch. The bleeding sky shone through the overhead windows, casting a reddish hue over the entire place. And amongst the bright view before him, Kuroo spotted Akaashi quickly making his way off.

He would not let him get away once more.

He burst into a sprint, his muscles already warm from wastelander training. By the time his rhythmic footsteps alerted Akaashi of his approaching presence, Kuroo had already gained on him.

"Akaashi!" he called, hating how his long-time friend froze in place, and then backed off, like an animal being cornered by a fearsome predator. "Hey, come on. I just want to talk to you!"

"I don't want to tell you anything, why can't you understand?" Suddenly, Akaashi sounded desperate. He didn't make a move to run away, and Kuroo slowed down, mostly because the cracks in the otherwise-impassive boy's mask were beginning to show. He knew better than anyone how heavy the burden of a façade could be. What burden was Akaashi carrying that was so unspeakable in nature?

"Akaashi, I'm not going to judge you," Kuroo assured him, taking a few steps forward. Akaashi took
a few steps back. "I'm the last person on this planet who would. I have no right, after all I've done. So please, you have to tell me what's going on with you?"

"I can't." Akaashi's voice cracked. "I can't, Kuroo, I can't. This is my burden, my secret to bear. It's my fault, and I'm the only one who has to repent for it."

"What did you do…?" Kuroo pursed his lips, taking another step. Akaashi backed up again. There wasn't much of the hallway left for him to run into, and they both knew it. "Akaashi, talk to me. You're outright telling me that something is wrong, so tell me what it is and I can help you."

"Nobody can help me," Akaashi snapped. "Nobody should."

"I will," Kuroo promised. "I don't know what's weighing on you, but I swear to you that I've been there. Akaashi… I have more blood on my hands than any other person in our group. I've… I've done so many things I'm not proud of…" Seizan, the death camp, Shoukyo… He'd had so many demons to battle at some point that he'd almost lost himself. "But the other guys forced this burden out of me and carried it by my side. I still have nightmares about the things I've done, but now I know I'm not alone through it all."

To his credit, Akaashi seemed to weigh Kuroo's words, debating. And Kuroo let him be indecisive just for a moment, because he knew he would've been, too. Hell, his team had practically torn his darkest secrets away from him against his will that fateful night in Shoukyo. But he didn't regret any part of it.

"I won't tell anyone," Kuroo promised, taking a step closer. This time, Akaashi remained still, contemplative. "I won't tell Bokuto."

It must've been the keyword that triggered Akaashi to react. In the second it took Kuroo to blink, tears were rolling down Akaashi's haggard face.

"Please… please don't tell him…" Putting his hands to his face, Akaashi tried to wipe it free of tears. "I did it for him… It's all for him…"

"Hey." Carefully, Kuroo approached Akaashi, who seemed to be lost in himself for a second. "I'm here."

"I regret it every single day…" Akaashi murmured, sniffing. He looked small and tired when he curled up on himself, another grim reminder that he, too, was but a child. "And yet, a part of me would do it all over again."

"Tell me what happened," Kuroo ordered, firmly, but not unkindly. His hands hesitantly fell upon Akaashi's burdened shoulders, and when he didn't shrug them off, Kuroo caressed his upper arms supportively. "Akaashi… Let me help you."

"I've been lying to Bokuto all this time," Akaashi admitted. "He lost his memories when the Forty Fireworks hit Tokyo and I've been lying to him about what really happened."

"He didn't tell me much about what happened in Tokyo," Kuroo admitted. "I just know that you guys got out of there after the Fireworks and that you weren't in the Tokyo bunkers during the nuclear strike. Bokuto also implied that the scar on his eyebrow is a result of it. What happened?"

"The night of the Forty Fireworks, I was staying over at his house. When the bombs hit, his house fell apart, his parents were killed, and Bokuto cracked his head on rubble, losing his short-term memory. I got him out and sought out some help for both of us, and we were taken to a relief camp on the outskirts of Tokyo, where Daichi most likely heard us on the radio for the first time." Still,
Akaashi hadn't relaxed, his muscles still tense under Kuroo's fingers. He didn't need to speak any further for Kuroo to guess that he was lying.

"That's what you've told Bokuto, right?" he asked in a low voice, briefly glancing around to make sure they were alone. "That's the lie."

"Yes." The answer was clipped, breathy. Akaashi seemed to be hesitating still, sniffing occasionally. Kuroo let him come to terms with himself instead of pushing him. They had all the time in the world.

"Will you tell me the truth?" he prompted after a minute of silence, his hands still caressing Akaashi's shoulders reassuringly.

"The truth..." Akaashi didn't dare meet his eyes. "The truth is that... I did it. I killed Bokuto's parents."

Kuroo's hands froze in place for just a second, but it was a second too long. Akaashi pushed himself out of his arms, wiping his face on his sleeve.

"I shouldn't have told you."

"No, Akaashi," Kuroo shook his head. "I'm just surprised. But I know there's more to it than that. Please tell me what happened in Tokyo, what makes you think their death was your fault."

"It wasn't just my fault, it was my intention," Akaashi bit back viciously, although he cooled off quickly. "I apologize... I shouldn't be lashing out at you."

"It's okay. I don't mind," Kuroo snorted self-deprecatingly. "What makes you say that?"

"Like I said, I was at Bokuto's house on the night of the Fireworks. When the bombs hit, his house fell apart, and we fell under the rubble. Bokuto and I were together, so I got to him quickly, but his parents were elsewhere in the rubble." He seemed to hesitate at that point. Kuroo let him move at his own pace. "Bokuto was scratched up, but nothing grave. Still, he insisted on going back in to find his parents. I followed him, even though the remaining house was set to fall at any time."

"You found them?" Kuroo asked gently, hazarding a hand on Akaashi's shoulder again. He wasn't pushed away.

"Yes. They were buried under the rubble, both of them, but they were alive." Akaashi shut his eyes tightly, as if the mere memory was painful. "They called out to us, begged us for help, and Koutaro just rushed in, trying to dig them out, trying so, so hard to save his parents..."

He interrupted himself with a choked sob, burying his face in his hands.

"He tried so hard. He wanted to save them, and they asked to be saved. I should have helped him," he sniffled into his hands. "But the house was going to fall apart, and no matter how many times I told Koutaro that we had to go, he insisted that they couldn't leave his mom and dad behind..."

Kuroo could see where this was going, but he let Akaashi continue, tightening his supportive grip on his shoulder.

"The house was going to fall... I had no choice..." he seemed to be trying to convince himself through repetition. "There was... there was a plank of wood nearby. And Bokuto just wouldn't agree to leave, not willingly. I was going to lose him, too. I couldn't... I didn't think, I just... picked up the plank, and..."
His shoulders hunched as the weight of his guilt fell upon him, and a stifled cry left his lips.

"Oh, what have I done…?" he lamented. "The house collapsed shortly thereafter. I condemned them, Kuroo… Even as I dragged Bokuto away, they cried for us, begged us not to leave them… They were my second family, and I betrayed their trust and left them to die, all because I was selfish. I couldn't bear to lose Koutaro, not in the heat of the moment… I didn't think…"

"Akaashi…" Kuroo murmured, putting a hand on his head. "Akaashi, it's alright…"

"No, it's not!" Raising his teary face, Akaashi put the entirety of his troubled soul on display. "It's not okay! I killed them, Kuroo. I killed them, and I was ready to pay for my sins when Bokuto regained consciousness… but he didn't remember what happened, and I… I just couldn't…" he choked on his guilt again. "I couldn't betray his trust. He was all I had left. I couldn't tell him what I'd done. I lied to him. I lied to him to keep him close to me… what have I done…?"

Akaashi curled his shoulders in on himself again, and sobbed quietly. Sighing, Kuroo stepped forward, and when Akaashi didn't step away, he pulled him into his arms.

"You did what you thought was right," Kuroo murmured. "The heavens know that sometimes, it's the best you can do."

"I killed them," Akaashi repeated, muffling his cries against Kuroo's shirt. "I killed them and I lied to him about it. All because I was selfish. I can't forget it and I won't let myself. Koutaro is my responsibility. I have to stay with him and finish what I began by… by murdering his parents."

"Hey," Kuroo warned in a clipped tone, pulling him away just enough to look straight into his eyes. "You didn't murder them. You acted in Bokuto's best interest, and that ended up in collateral casualties. You can't bring his parents back to life, but you can tell him the truth."

"I can't lose him. Please, don't make me tell him. I can't lose him," Akaashi sobbed out, his breath hitching. "Please. He's all I have left."

"I won't tell him, and I won't make you," Kuroo murmured, loosely gathering him in his arms again. "But you have to tell him. You can't let go of this guilt until you do. And knowing Bo, he'll forgive you. He might take some time, but he will. You mean the world to him, Akaashi. He won't give you up so easily."

"Is that how I get rid of it?" Akaashi asked, his tone almost innocent in comparison. "This guilt. Is that how I'll forget what I've done?"

"You'll never forget." Kuroo's grip tightened on him, and he gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry. Decades from now, you'll be lying in bed and you'll remember the faces of the people whose blood will always be on your hands. You'll never forget the people you've killed. But Bokuto is alive. Bokuto is alive, and it's all thanks to you. Even if he doesn't know it, he is here today because of your sin and your sacrifice. When the guilt becomes too much to bear, remember that, and it'll get better."

"I just want it all to go away…" Akaashi mumbled, wiping his face on his damp sleeve and then returning it to Kuroo's shirt. "I'm sorry. For you to see me like this…"

"Hey." Kuroo pulled him away so that Akaashi could see the serene smile on his face. "It's alright. Believe me when I tell you that I know exactly how you feel. And when I drowned in my guilt the first few times, nobody was there to pull me out. You mean a lot to me, Keiji. I don't want you to suffocate any longer."

"Thank you," Akaashi sniffled, raising his red-rimmed eyes to Kuroo to attempt a small smile. "I… I
will try to tell Bokuto the truth. Maybe not today, nor tomorrow. Maybe not even this year. But someday, I will. I must not allow this guilt to cloud my judgment any longer."

"That's my boy," Kuroo chuckled, ruffling his hair affectionately. Akaashi smacked it away and rolled his eyes.

"I think I will go rest before the evening programme," he murmured, stepping away from Kuroo. "I… I have much to think about."

"Good idea," Kuroo nodded, stepping out of his way. "Take care of yourself."

"I will." Stepping past Kuroo, Akaashi only distanced himself by a few feet before stopping again. "Kuroo?"

"Hmm?"

"I will come with you and Bokuto on your journey across the wasteland regardless." He didn't turn to face Kuroo, but his back was straight, and his fists were clenched. He seemed determined. "No longer because I feel I must atone for my wrongdoings, but because I want to cherish every moment of life that my sins have granted my best friend. With the same heart that killed his parents, with the same hands that saved his life, I want to stand by his side and watch him live. That is why I will come with you."

Kuroo smiled. He could do nothing else.

"I look forward to it," he promised quietly, because he truly did.

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The alarms on the bedside monitors were turned off, which made the small room much quieter than it should've been. For Daichi, hospitals had always been full of noise, rushing people, screaming alarms, and crying victims. This- the white room and white sheets and white noise- was something he had not entirely processed yet.

Sugawara had lost weight. It was easy to note even from a glance that his cheeks had begun to sink, his skin thinning and bruising more easily. His colour had gone from a healthy pink to a sickening white, as if his body was trying to camouflage within the swaths of blankets on him. The tubes coming out of him each kept him alive in their own way, but looked completely out of place on someone who used to be as lively as him. The oxygen mask remained on his face at all times, and Daichi sometimes felt like Suga still had hope when he watched his slow breaths fog up the interior of the mask.

And then, the nurse walked in. She checked his pupils. Moved his arms. Pinched the bed of his nails. Quietly wished Daichi a good day, and left as quickly as she came.

It was always the same. They never said it out loud, but Daichi knew that they were always on the edge of telling him that Suga was dead. That he should begin to mourn and try to move on.

But Suga still breathed on his own. That must've counted for something. He was still fighting, and so, Daichi couldn't give up on him.

The door opened again with a creak, but Daichi did not move from where he'd laid his head down on the blankets, idly playing with Suga's limp fingers. He figured that the nurse had returned, perhaps to give him the rare medications they gave him nowadays.
However, when the newcomer did not approach, Daichi finally lifted his head, and turned around.

Kageyama met his eyes nervously, and glanced away, fidgeting. He was alone, which was a surprise.

"Hello, Tobio," Daichi greeted, attempting a small smile. Breathing seemed to be a tedious task when he was around Suga these days.

"Hello, captain," Kageyama greeted awkwardly. "I… Am I interrupting?"

"No. Come over," Daichi invited him, patting the bed.

Kageyama nodded, and then made his way over, hesitantly sitting next to Suga's hip.

For a while, both of them just watched Suga's chest rise in rhythmic pattern. Daichi didn't know what Kageyama had come here to do, but the younger boy seemed to be contemplating something rather deeply, scrutinizing Suga's still face. He didn't seem to have the words for whatever he wanted to express, however, and so, Daichi let him think in silence.

"I will stay here," Kageyama finally spoke, his voice booming through the stark silence of the white room.

There seemed to be more to it than that, judging by his expression. Daichi watched several emotions flit across his face before he spoke up.

"What made you decide that?"

"I want to protect you for a change," Kageyama answered, not sounding quite sure of himself. "My senpais have always done the protecting around here. You, Suga, Tanaka, Nishinoya… You've always looked out for us, from the very beginning. I've taken that for granted. So now, I want to protect you, before I'm too late to do that, too."

"I don't want you to feel like you owe me anything, Tobio. Do what you want to do for yourself," Daichi advised him.

"I don't feel that way," Kageyama grimaced. "It's just… Captain. You've led me through the darkness so many times. Many times, when it seemed hopeless, you were there to lead us out. And now that the darkness has come for you, I… want to fight for you. I want to."

"That's very kind of you, Tobio," Daichi offered him a soft, fond smile. "If you really do want to stay, I will not stop you. Just be sure that it's what you truly want. You'll probably live more adventures if you decide to go with Kuroo, after all."

"I don't want any more adventures," Kageyama shook his head. "Not for the sake of having adventures, anyway. Wherever I go now, I want to make a difference, and I think I can make the impact I want to make by staying here with you and Suga."

"That's a sound argument. I won't try to dissuade you."

Kageyama nodded, and fell silent again. Daichi watched him, even when he glanced away, noting that he still seemed deep in thought. However, he didn't push. If Kageyama had something to say, he would on his own terms.

The silence stretched. Daichi's eyes went from Kageyama, to Suga, back to Kageyama. Finally, when he shifted in his seat, Kageyama seemed to snap back to reality, and blinked several times.
"Um… one more thing," he added, turning his questioning gaze to Daichi again. "I… I also want to stay because I don't want to live any more new journeys. Instead… I want to stop, and recollect the one that's taken me this far."

"Right. We have been through a lot to get here," Daichi acquiesced. They had been on the road for almost nine months, after all, and in those nine months, a lifetime of struggles had plagued them.

"I know we're going to split up," Kageyama admitted, his face falling slightly at that. "Some people are going to go with Kuroo. Others will stay with us. But… if we've come this far together, it feels wrong to leave each other behind. That's why… before we go, before we have a chance to be separated, I want to try to do something."

"What's that?" Daichi cocked his head, interested. Kageyama seemed to have given his words a lot of thought.

"I want to try and… talk to everyone." He seemed uncomfortable with the simple notion of it, which was slightly comical to Daichi. "I want to get their stories, their recollections of our journey together. That way, at least even when we are apart, none of us will be forgotten."

"I doubt we could forget each other, even if we tried," Daichi remarked, but the fond expression melted back on his face, effortlessly this time. "It's a wonderful initiative. You're growing by the day, Tobio."

"T-Thank you." The younger boy seemed to be embarrassed by the praise, glancing away sheepishly. His eyes landed on Suga, and his sheepishness melted into something warmer, softer.

Daichi smiled, and glanced at Suga. In a better world, he would have smiled, too.

Two days passed, and nobody spoke of the ultimatum that had been placed upon their shoulders. It was better that way, to let one another debate their decisions without the influence of others around them. Unity had been their greatest strength until now, but they needed some time alone to consider the important decision they were about to make.

At dinnertime, they sat together, as they always did, and spoke about everything and nothing. The mood was jovial, and the atmosphere was light, perhaps even lighter than usual. Perhaps it was the calm before the storm. Perhaps they all innately knew that the time had come to make their choice.

When the bowls of fried rice were empty and the conversation had died down, they seemed to know that it was time. It was only a matter of who would start the conversation.

And, as they always did when they were at a loss, they turned to their trusty captain for guidance.

"Have you all decided?" Daichi finally breached the subject when it became obvious that no one else would.

There were quiet glances around the table, smiles falling flat. Nobody seemed to be able to answer that upright, and several of the boys looked uncomfortable with the silence.

"It's alright if you need more time," Daichi continued, seeing as nobody else did. Nobody seemed comforted by that idea, however.

"I don't think the decision will get any easier to make, no matter how much time we have to make it," Noya finally admitted, sighing. He ran a hand through his hair pensively.
"True," Kuroo hummed. "And as much as we'd like to put it off, we can't. So. Tell us now. Will you stay, or will you go?"

Still, nobody spoke. It felt like they were afraid of breaking the ice, of spilling the depths of their hearts to everybody around them. Still... they were family. All of them had suffered and grown to become a family, and if there was one thing they could each count on from their family, it was undying love and support.

"I'm staying."

The silence splintered and snapped, quicker than any of them expected it to when an unlikely participant to the conversation spoke up first. All eyes went to him, at the edge of the table, so quiet and meek in his corner, and suddenly, it felt like a weight had been lifted off their shoulders.

All thanks to Kenma.

"I'm staying," Kenma repeated, his voice steady and his fists clenched.

Kuroo's face did not reflect it, but everybody could guess that he was a bit heartbroken.

"I am not like you, Kuro," Kenma shook his head, a sad smile slipping onto his lips. "I'm not brave, nor strong, nor cunning the way you are. Out there, I'm no good. I can't create plans on the spot, and I can't react quickly to things around me. Truthfully, the uncertainty that has followed us across the country always made me anxious, and I don't think I can do it again- not when I know that staying here will keep my fears away. I have made my place here, in Awa. You mean the world to me, Tetsu, you do, but... I'm too scared to go out there again, even for you."

He glanced at Kuroo, and Kuroo bravely upheld his gaze, lips pursed. Tsukishima, sitting next to him, could see his fists ball up the cloth of his sweatpants under the table.

"You've done well in thinking this through," Kuroo finally acknowledged, nodding his head. "I'm glad... you're doing what you know is best for you, regardless of all else. And I... when I go out there... I'll be fighting for you, too."

The promise settled on all of them like a warm blanket, and after a round of slow glances between the two childhood friends, all eyes went to the person sitting next to Kenma.

Hinata responded to the looks with a bite of his lip.

"It's my turn, huh...?" he chuckled mirthlessly, throwing Kenma an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Kenma. I'm gonna go."

"Oh." Kenma looked down at his lap, long hair obscuring his face. Hinata visibly snuck his hand under the table to hold his. For him to lose the two people that meant the world to him would take a period of adjustment.

It almost made Hinata reconsider. Almost.

"I want to see the world, Kenma," Hinata continued, turning to the rest of the table for support. "This... this journey we've been on... it's been an adventure through and through. And sure, we had our scary moments, the times when we thought we would not make it, and all the times we've suffered, but in retrospect, it's been pretty cool. We've all learned a lot and come a long way, right? I can't stop now."

"Shouyo," Daichi called him unsurely. "It's going to be dangerous out there. You're going to be
scared, and you'll suffer, and you once again might begin to think you'll never make it. Are you sure you want to go?"

"Yeah." The determination stone-set on his face hammered it home. "When I left the rubble of my house behind me, my mom… she seemed to be waving me off and wishing me luck. She died in there. Natsu did, too. And I thought I would die. I wanted it, even." The difficult topic seemed to be one he'd already come to terms with, for his expression never wavered. "But I lived. I lived, no matter what happened, and when I go to meet my mom and my sister in the afterlife, I want to be able to tell them that I lived for them, too. That's why I have to go. Staying alive is no good if I'm not gonna live my life."

"You're right," Daichi conceded. "You're a good kid, Shouyo, and you do deserve to live your life to its fullest, whatever that means to you. When we first brought you back to the Karasuno gym, admittedly, we didn't think you'd make it. But you proved us wrong, and here you are. I am sure that you can beat the odds again. After all, you've always had a talent for doing the impossible."

That sent a round of chuckles across the table, the mood lightening with every person that spoke. Hinata seemed to brighten up just a little, and that seemed to draw Kenma out of his slump, if only a little.

"Alright," Kageyama spoke up next, taking a deep breath. "I already told the captain, but I'm staying. I want to stay where I can make a difference, and I want to support Daichi and Suga just as they have supported me all this time."

"That's not all there is to it, right, Tobio?" Daichi prompted him kindly. "Tell everyone the project you're working on. It's a lovely thought."

"What project?" Hinata asked excitedly, grabbing his arm and shaking it. "What is it? What are you planning?"

"Let me go and I'll tell you, stupid!" Kageyama huffed, pushing Hinata back and glaring at him.

"No need to be rude, Bakayama," Hinata crossed his arms.

"Please don't fight," Asahi sighed, sounding so tired that it was comical.

"I want to stay here because I don't want to live any new journeys, but I want to recollect about the one that's taken us this far," Kageyama explained. "I guess… I guess I want to keep the memories of our time together alive, even when all of us are apart. I'm gonna make sure nothing about us is ever forgotten."

"It's an excellent project, Kageyama," Kuroo nodded. "Can't say I expected this of you, but hey. I guess we've all changed somehow, right?"

"Right…" Kageyama nodded, trailing off.

"Well, I will stay as well," Asahi picked up where he left off. "Awa is a wonderful place. It's self-sustaining, and peaceful, and I… I think I can grow by planting my roots here." He looked embarrassed to go on, but the silence seemed to give him the push he needed. "Hinata once told me something that's changed my entire outlook on my life."

"I did?" Hinata cocked his head, though he was promptly hushed by Kageyama.

"You did," Asahi laughed lightly. "You told me… you told me that I was Karasuno's legacy. That I… I would carry on the memory of who we were before strife changed us. When I felt useless and
left behind, you told me that I was your constant, your guiding post, your home to return to. I've never taken that lightly. And if I want to continue being that steady pillar for everybody here, then I have to stay here."

"Hinata actually said that?" Noya asked, though it came out a bit less flattering than he probably intended.

"Hey!"

"Yeah, he did," Tsukishima nodded, though he sounded like he was mocking him. "I know, I was surprised, too."

"What's that supposed to mean? Come over here and fight me, Tsukishima!"

"Enough, enough," Daichi appeased them, mildly amused. "Go on, Tsukishima."

"I'm leaving," he answered rather briefly. "I'm gonna be stuck with a lot of unpleasant people," he threw Kuroo a dirty glance, and received a sleazy grin in return, "but I want to go back out there and keep searching for something more. Staying here, to me, feels like giving up… and I… I promised that I would never stop moving forward."

He pushed his cracked glasses up his nose, catching a glint of the light in them. A shit-eating grin spread across his face.

"That, and, when I inevitably die and my body becomes worm food, I at least want to know that I died doing more than Shrimpy ever will."

"Tsukishima, you bastard-"

"Oh boy…" Kuroo sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It'll be fun, traveling with these two."

"What about you, Tadashi?" Daichi moved on to the younger boy sitting next to Tsukishima. However, the look on his face was conflicted. He seemed to have a lot to say.

Noticing the same thing, Tsukishima turned away from antagonizing Hinata, and glanced at Yamaguchi. His friend exchanged a worried look with him, and began signing.

"He says he's going," Tsukishima translated, and clicked his tongue when he continued to read Yamaguchi's fingers. "Says he feels guilty if he stays here. Every day he spends in Awa is another reminder that Suga-senpai died in his place."

"Yamaguchi, no…" Noya frowned.

Suddenly, the mood was somber again.

"Tadashi, this isn't anybody's fault," Daichi assured him, lips pressed together in a thin line. "If anyone is to blame, it's those rogues."

Yamaguchi seemed to consider this before he continued.

"Then that gives me another reason to go," Tsukishima translated dutifully. "He's basically going on about repenting for Suga-senpai by doing everything he can to fight those rogues."

"Vengeance shouldn't be your motivator, Yamaguchi," Kuroo advised him, experienced in that particular department himself. "There's no emptier feeling than that of living for revenge. You're welcome to come with us regardless of motive, but please, for your own sake, reconsider."
"I can't," Yamaguchi finally spoke, his voice raspy from disuse. Several people around the table flinched in surprise at hearing him talk, especially the ones who hadn't heard him yet. Yamaguchi cleared his throat a few times, and glanced at Daichi. "Suga-senpai was my teacher and my friend. We were going to be doctors together after the war. And I can't help but feel that I killed him. So now, I have to live our dream for both of us."

"I see…" Daichi's face fell, and he glanced away. "Thank you, Tadashi. If Suga lives on within any one of us, it'll have to be you. I still wish for you to reconsider your vengeful feelings, but that's your decision to make in due time. For now, you have my thanks, and my blessing."

Yamaguchi nodded, and signed a simple end to his admittance. Even without Tsukishima's whispered 'thank you', Daichi knew that Yamaguchi would be okay.

They all took a second to digest what they'd been told, and then the eyes went to Oikawa, who sat next to Yamaguchi. Similarly to the latter, he turned to Iwaizumi to make himself heard. However, Iwaizumi seemed to know already.

"Both of us are staying," he announced, lips pursed in thought.

That seemed to come as a shock to a lot of them around the table. Kuroo seemed thrown aback, even.

"We were going to go at first thought, but… then we realized that here in Awa, we have something that we don't have out there on the road," Iwaizumi explained. "Control. Control over our lives, over our decisions. Staying in Awa might be less than ideal, but… Tooru and I are tired of being dragged across the country against our will."

There was a respectful silence for the two boys who had been through things that nobody should ever experience in their lifetime. Their argument was sound.

"On some nights, it's still hard to believe that we're not there anymore," Iwaizumi admitted. "Sometimes, none of this feels real. The power to make tiny choices is so important to both of us… it's something that we have here in Awa."

Oikawa signed something with a sad smile on his face, and by the looks of Yamaguchi's expression, it wasn't anything nice.

"He says that… Sometimes, it's as small as being able to decide what to have for dinner," Iwaizumi translated. "On days where it once again feels like our bodies aren't our own, it takes that sort of small freedom to remind us that we're still people, and we're still here."

"Even though you're staying, the road ahead of you is a tough one," Kuroo nodded quietly. "Iwaizumi. Oikawa. You've both been incredible despite the terrible things that have been done to you. I wish you all the best."

"And if you ever need anything, you know you can count on me, and everybody else that is staying," Daichi reminded them, getting a small smile from Oikawa in return. The scars etched around his lips had begun to fade, but they would always be there, and in the back of his mind, Oikawa would always feel like he didn't own his body. Similarly, Iwaizumi would never regain his fingers, would always be afraid of his bouts of psychosis. Still, both of them seemed to be adamant on healing. All that the others could do was support their every effort.

"Sorry for making things depressing," Iwaizumi laughed mirthlessly, rubbing the back of his head. "It just… felt important for us to justify the reason we're staying."
"By all means, dude!" Noya patted him on the back. "Don't apologize for any of it. In fact, I'm glad you've said it out loud. It always helps to externalize your feelings!"

"Don't you start with that psychology crap on me," Iwaizumi teased him, pinching Noya's cheek and eliciting a squawk from him.

"I'm serious!" Noya protested, pulling away from him. "That's why I wanna stay, too. A bunch of people are going to be leaving, people who mean everything to us, and they'll be heading into danger. We'll probably never know if something happens to them. It's gonna be a stressful time, and I know that my place is here amongst you guys to be a beacon of support during that transition. I think I'll be of better use here, acting like someone you can lean on. Ever since Tanaka passed away, it's been my goal to support everybody going through a rough time... and I won't let anybody staying here feel like they've been left behind!"

"I can think of no one better to do that than you. Thank you, Nishinoya," Daichi nodded to him. "I think it's already a huge relief to see that the war hasn't taken your spirit away from you. We're lucky to have someone like you to pick us up when we fall."

"It's no trouble," Nishinoya grinned brightly, pointing his thumb to himself proudly. "You can call me the Guardian Deity of Awa!"

"We'll work on that," Iwaizumi snorted, pressing down on his head. "Start by growing a bit taller, first, you Midget Deity of Awa."

Oikawa let out a silent laugh and signed something to Yamaguchi, which made him snicker as well.

"Don't you dare talk about being short, Iwa-chan," he translated, which brought Iwaizumi's blazing anger crashing down upon Oikawa all over again.

"We'll never leave, at this rate," Kuroo quipped, watching them fight with amusement specked in his eyes. Still, despite saying that, he didn't move to stop them.

They indulged in the fight just a little longer before Daichi stepped in to calm them down. They only had Bokuto and Akaashi left to go through, and after that, their mentally exhausting day would draw to a close.

"Alright, Bo. You're up," Kuroo prompted his friend next, watching Bokuto's eyes light up.

"We're going, definitely! Absolutely! For sure!" he crowed loudly. "It's going to be so cool, being on the road with you, bro! I haven't seen any of the world out there yet, and it's really making me feel inadequate... which doesn't work, because I'm totally the best."

"What Bokuto is trying to express is that he wants to learn more about the world outside of these walls," Akaashi translated tiredly, although he seemed unbothered by Bokuto's loud mannerisms. "He developed a taste for wasteland exploration since enrolling with your team, and he wants to do more exploring. Going out with a team of professionals and his friends is the best opportunity for him."

"Mhm. What Akaashi said," Bokuto nodded vigorously. "Really, though... it feels like my place here in Awa is as an icon of entertainment. And it's fine, we need those. But I know I'm destined for greatness, so I gotta go out there and see what it's like!"

"Okay, calm that fire, hot shot," Kuroo chuckled. "Welcome aboard."

"Yes!"
"As for me, I will also be leaving alongside Kuroo," Akaashi finished. "My reasons are very personal and I’d rather not share. All I will say is that my heart is out there, in the wasteland. I once put up barriers between myself and it, and I intend not to make that same mistake again."

"If that's what you think is best for you, then you don't have to say any more," Daichi assured him kindly. Then, he slowly glanced around the table. "I guess that's everyone."

"Wow… so this is really happening, huh…?" Hinata chuckled mirthlessly. "I guess it didn't feel real until now."

"We still have a few days to digest this information," Kuroo assured him. "I'll give the names to Satoko tonight. Until I get back to you with more news, you don't have to worry about it. Spend your days like you would've, had we never had to make this choice."

"Kuroo is right," Daichi agreed confidently. "The time for goodbyes has not come yet. And until it does, there's no use in thinking about it. Let's just enjoy our time together like we have forever ahead of us."

And as always, the group trusted their captain to lead them onward. Letting out a rallying cry of agreement, the atmosphere around the group settled, and conversation returned to lighter topics.

Daichi was proud of every single one of them, and took a moment to imprint the scene before him into his memories, to return to it on future days when the hole in his heart would be gaping wide open.

He wouldn't say it to them, not when they tried to stay strong for one another in these dire times, but Daichi would miss them. As individuals, and as the people who'd grown to become family together.

The decision was made a few days later, and was announced over the radio, so that by noontime, all of Awa knew what risks they faced now, and what their dedicated wastelanders were doing about it. It was announced that the mission would begin in seven days after the announcement. It seemed like much too long of a time when the power plant could explode at any time.

Yet somehow, the following week seemed to pass by in a flash. Daichi's group did their best to reintegrate their daily routines without the looming knowledge of their friends' departure holding them back. On the other hand, Kuroo's group were put through rigorous training alongside other members of the mission team as a sort of crash-course to surviving the wasteland. Bittersweetly enough, the courses took up the entirety of their days, effectively cutting short the remaining time they had to spend with their friends.

It seemed like such a waste, in the end. Each side reconsidered their stance more than once.

In the end, though, they stayed firm to their beliefs, and each and every one of the boys worked hard to make the most of their last days together.

Kageyama worked most tirelessly of all, doing his utmost to get some private time with each member of Kuroo's group to talk to them about their experiences. Everybody seemed to realize how important this was for their survival as a group, even when they were apart, and put effort into the interviews. Even Tsukishima kept his sarcasm to a minimum when Kageyama asked him to describe his point of view of the events that had brought them all the way here. Through it all, Kageyama scribbled notes furiously in his notebook, which he was seen carrying everywhere in the next week or so. Once he was done with the members of Kuroo's group, he began interviewing the people who decided to stay...
behind. All in all, he did a surprising job of preserving their memories and giving them an opportunity to accept the idea that they would leave one another soon.

Seven days had been much too short of a time to prepare to say goodbye, in retrospect.

But, then again, a lifetime would have been a day too short for their family to prepare to part ways.

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The day before their departure seemed to be the easiest of all. Perhaps their instructors were giving them leeway in their training efforts, Kuroo figured, because he was much less tired after their morning session than usual.

The others seemed to be thinking the same, just barely out of breath when they finished their laps around the mall complex. Their breaths puffed rhythmically as clouds in the cold air, but Kuroo's body was still warm.

Bokuto joined Kuroo behind the finish line a few seconds later, huffing lightly.

"Is it just me, or is walking around in the snow getting easier?" he asked, excitement glinting in his eyes. "I have a good feeling about our plan."

"That makes one of us," Kuroo grumbled, pushing his ski goggles up on his head to look at his best friend.

"What's got you worried?" Bokuto asked, nodding at Yamaguchi, who slowed to a stop next to them soon enough.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm still a bit hesitant about leaving the others behind," Kuroo admitted.

"It's too late to go back on your word, though," Bokuto shook his head. "You already promised the others that you would do your best to fight for them and protect them with all you had."

"Right," Kuroo let out a half-smile, and turned to Yamaguchi. "Well, I guess I should be putting more effort into training than worrying."

Yamaguchi just shrugged, though he did throw Kuroo an understanding look.

"What are you talking about?" Tsukishima arrived as well, panting lightly as he stopped and stretched his back. "You're the one who got us into this. Don't you dare lose sight of your goal now."

"Is that your strange way of cheering me up, Tsukki?" Kuroo teased, poking Tsukishima's abdomen as he stretched, and immediately earning him a smack to the hand.

"I don't know how I'm going to survive around you every single day," Tsukishima grumbled, throwing him a sharp warning glance.

"I will also be suffering, if you need any moral support." Appearing from around the corner, Akaashi also jogged over to them, and patted Tsukishima's arm. "When Bokuto and Kuroo are within sight of one another, they both simultaneously lose twenty points of I.Q."

"That's not true!" Bokuto pouted and squared his shoulders, his puffy winter coat making him look like an angry bird.

"Yeah, at least make it ten," Kuroo added, snickering and putting a hand on Bokuto's shoulder. "We're a dream team together!"
"I'm here!" The last member of their team came running from behind the corner, huffing. Skidding to a stop right next to Yamaguchi, Hinata pulled his hat right off his head, shaking his hair free of the sweat that matted his strands. "Phew, running in snow is so much tougher than running on the ground. My endurance took a hit there!"

"It wasn't even that long of a run, Shrimpy," Tsukishima commented, readjusting his glasses on his reddened nose. "You sure you're gonna be able to keep up with us?"

"Of course I will!" Hinata insisted, slapping his hat back on over his ears. "I'm going to be the best in the whole group!"

"I'm gonna be the best!" Bokuto rose to the challenge too quickly. "Even better than all the other people in the traveling party!"

Yamaguchi looked unsure at that, and signed a quick comment to Tsukishima.

"Tadashi is right," the blond nodded, turning to Bokuto and Hinata with a disapproving frown. "Most, if not all of the people in the group with us are adults. They know how to do this a lot better than we do."

Yamaguchi nodded, and continued to sign.

"Yeah…" Tsukishima nodded, glancing away.

"What did he say?" Hinata cocked his head curiously.

"He was wondering if we should be going on this mission with them after all," Kuroo translated instead, lips pursed in a thin line. "And I… I'm still not fully convinced that we're an indispensable asset to the traveling party. They've got scientists, soldiers and experienced wastelanders in there, so… I don't know what it is that we've got to offer. Still." He took a deep breath. "Satoko asked for us personally, and I want to believe that there is something for us to do out there."

"The contribution you will bring will be different from the rest's."

They all turned around to watch the newcomer appear from around the corner, waving happily to their group as she approached. Her long hair blew with the wind, her scarf tangled within. Her tired eyes seemed to be alit with fondness, or perhaps it was just the light reflecting off the snow.

"What do you mean, Satoko?" Akaashi asked curiously. "What can we bring to the table?"

"Psychological baggage of all sorts," Satoko answered, stopping with a decisive crunch of her boots on snow. "Your group has travelled across the country, and you know how to carry out long journeys that may seem bleak at their destination. We need the type of moral support that experienced members of your group can provide. You'll essentially be living proof that our venture will not be fruitless."

"Ah, figureheads," Kuroo nodded wisely. "I always love being an illusion of virtue instead of actually being a good person."

"Shut it, would you?" Satoko rolled her eyes, slapping Kuroo's arm without actual aggressiveness. "You're always so negative."

"Satoko," Hinata cut in, looking a bit nervous. All eyes went to him, and suddenly, he seemed doubly nervous. "Umm… I just… I just wanted to know if you thought about that thing I asked you the other day."
"Oya?" Bokuto perked up. "What thing? Is it a secret?"

"It won't be for long," Satoko chuckled, patting Hinata's head fondly. "Hinata's gonna tell you what that's all about. I just came to tell you that everything is arranged for you, and that you're excused from training for the rest of the day."

"What?" Tsukishima's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure it's a good idea to cut training short on the last day before we set out? If anything, we should be making double the effort today."

"You may as well take it easy," Satoko shrugged. "You've been working really hard lately, and nothing about this situation can be light on your hearts, what with leaving your friends behind and all. That's why Hinata asked me to help him organize something for you guys, so that you can wind down and enjoy your last day together."

"Now you've got me curious," Kuroo chuckled, pulling his ski goggles back on. "I definitely see what this is about!"

"Ahh... you'll see!" Hinata fidgeted with his hands, glancing at Satoko. "Thank you, miss! I really appreciate you helping me put this thing together."

"No problem." Satoko shooed them off with her hands. "Now go, while the sun is still high in the sky."

"Right!" Hinata nodded, enthusiasm leaking into his voice. His smile erupted into a wide grin. "Follow me, everyone! We're going to head back to the mall. Everybody should already be waiting for us there!"

"The others are going to join us?" Akaashi asked, falling into step as they joined behind Hinata in a light jog.

"Yeah. It's something that everybody needs to be together for," Hinata nodded, then stopped talking to save his breath.

The rest followed his example, and they all jogged for a few minutes through the thick snow to return to the entrance of the mall complex.

There, huddled and dressed in full winter gear, were all the other members of their group, standing around like they were waiting for something.

"Hey!" Hinata called enthusiastically as he sped up, a bright grin blooming on his face. "Over here!"

"Good afternoon, Hinata," Daichi greeted him, his group turning to face the newcomers as Hinata caught up to them. "What's going on? Satoko suddenly gathered all of us and told to wait for you out here."

"Did something happen?" Asahi asked, wringing his hands together. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah," Hinata assured them with a nod. "It's nothing bad. Actually, I had a surprise for everybody, and I wanted us to be together for it!"

"What have you got up your sleeve, Shouyo?" Noya asked, his excitement clearly shining through.

"I can't spoil it until we get there," Hinata shook his head. "Now, just follow me! We have to make the most of the daylight."
Light chatter came up as Hinata led them away from the mall complex, mostly about the nature of Hinata's surprise, which Hinata managed to hide for the most part. They walked for almost half an hour as such, further away from the commercial district of Awa, and more towards the untouched residential areas. Light snowfall accompanied them on their way, but the winds had calmed just enough for them to walk without freezing their cheeks off. The snow continued to pile as they ventured through neighbourhoods ravaged by the war and untouched by the fallout.

Ultimately, as Hinata led them past another series of houses and a large building came into view, it became clear that it was their ultimate goal.

The building was nondescript, although its layout in wings marked it as being an establishment of some sort. A part of it had crumbled recently, rubble mixed with snow piled high against the side. Snow had blocked passage towards it, except for a thin passage that had been carved through, just wide enough to let one person through at a time. It seemed to have been made recently.

"We're going to this middle school," Hinata finally clarified their destination, although it didn't quite clarify its purpose. "Let's get inside, and I'll tell you more after!"

"You're gonna kill me with this suspense!" Noya sighed dramatically, wading through the snow that came up to his hips in places.

"It better be worth it," Kageyama grumbled, teeth clattering audibly when he shivered.

"You, of all people, is going to enjoy it. Stop complaining, Bakayama," Hinata teased him, taking the lead.

They got in a single-file to go through the path cleared in the snow, and one by one made their way in through the busted front door. Inside, the hallways were dark and cold, although that did not deter Hinata from confidently strolling down the one on the right.

"Come on," he urged the rest of them, pulling his mittens off. "You're gonna love this!"

With nothing else to do but follow, the others made their way down the hallway after Hinata. The air remained cool, although being cut off from the wind and snow did warm them up a little bit. The lockers lining the hallways blurred past them as they advanced, trying not to glance around at the dilapidated posters and signs decorating the walls that spoke of an innocence long-gone. Being inside this school made something ache inside of every single one of them. It felt like a yearning for a life they used to have, and that they knew they'd never find again.

Finally, Hinata stopped in front of a set of sliding doors, practically buzzing with excitement. When he turned to glance at them, they could practically see the anticipation spelled out in his eyes.

"We're here!" he announced, putting a hand on the sliding doors. "Watch this."

Without giving them time to get any more consumed by their own curiosity, Hinata threw the sliding door open, and strode in.

When the rest of them filed in, they were met with the nostalgic sight of a dim gymnasium, waxed wooden floors dusty and illuminated only by the filtering of sunlight through the high window panes. Numerous sports team banners hung on the walls, decorating the otherwise-monotone beige room. Dust particles floated in the air, cool but stuffy from months and months of stagnation.

In the middle of it all, the sun shone down on a volleyball net precariously set up on poles with what seemed to be duct tape.
"Wha… What's this…?" Iwaizumi asked first, glancing around at the others in confusion. They all seemed to be as lost as him.

"What's all this about, Shrimpy?" Kuroo turned to Hinata, who had walked a bit off to the side while they marvelled at the sight before them.

"Well… it's our last day together, right?" Hinata answered a bit sadly, kneeling and reaching underneath a bench against the wall. "So… I figured that maybe… Maybe we could spend our last moments together doing something we've always done together."

He seemed to hesitate, but then pulled out a volleyball for all of them to see.

"Satoko helped me set this all up. It can be our way of saying goodbye," he suggested, suddenly losing all his confidence and looking shy underneath the eleven gazes on him. "Our last memory together should be something we'll cherish forever, whether we find one another again in the future or not."

Nobody spoke for a while. Hinata didn't dare meet their eyes for fear of having said something dumb, and fidgeted where he stood, fingers tightening on the volleyball in his hands. The dust seemed to settle around them.

And then, Kenma suddenly had his arms around Hinata, squeezing so tightly that Hinata was afraid he might break.

"Shouyo… Thank you," Kenma sniffled, and Hinata felt the chill of tears being smudged against his bare neck.

"W-What…?" Taken aback, Hinata pulled away from Kenma and looked at him as if to be sure that he was actually crying. "No, it's nothing! Please don't cry!"

Glancing up at everybody else, though, showed that Kenma was not the only one crying. Tears were glistening in the eyes of several occupants of the room, some of whom had let them flow, and some of whom made furious efforts to hold them back.

It was humbling and heartwarming, and Hinata suddenly felt like crying, too.

"Shouyo…" Daichi murmured, eyes rimmed red despite not shedding any tears. "This is such a considerate gift to all of us. Thank you."

"I don't want to be sad anymore," Hinata hazarded a smile, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. "I guess this is the closest I can be to saying goodbye with a smile."

"In that case…" Noya sniffled loudly and wiped very obvious tears from his eyes. "What are we waiting for!? We shouldn't be standing here getting sentimental. Let's play while the sun is still up!"

"Alright!" Bokuto cheered, unzipping his jacket. "I haven't played in so long, this is gonna be so good!"

"Come on, Tsukki. Let's see if you still have it in you," Kuroo taunted, grabbing Tsukishima's wrist to drag him towards the court.

"Don't be annoying, or I'll block the hell out of you." Even Tsukishima seemed to be excited, which only hyped everybody else up.

"I'm curious to see what's changed with my hand like this," Iwaizumi mused out loud, clenching and
unclenching his three remaining fingers experimentally.

"Don't forget to warm up!" Asahi reminded them, pulling his hat off and tossing it in a corner. "Don't pull any muscles in your excitement."

Yamaguchi approached Oikawa and enthusiastically signed something to him, to which Oikawa replied with a fervent nod and a rush to get out of his snow gear.

"Your kouhai has a good heart," Akaashi commented to Daichi, expression relaxed in a light smile. "I feel confident in being a part of your traveling party."

"All my kouhais are incredible," Daichi proclaimed in a rare moment of overt pride. He then turned to Hinata. "Thank you, Shouyo. You may not know it, but you've perhaps hammered the last nail in. Nobody will be leaving with doubt now. This is the closure we needed."

"I'm happy to have been of service," Hinata nodded cheerily, and tossed him the volleyball so that they could get started already.

Finally, as everybody got busy getting undressed and warmed up, Hinata turned to Kageyama, who hadn't said much so far.

"Hey." He nudged his side. "You okay? You haven't said anything."

"I…" Kageyama seemed to be struggling with words, burying his face in his scarf. "I… I don't know how to…" He let out a frustrated grunt and fiddled with his fingers nervously. "All this… it makes me feel…"

"Tobio." When Kageyama looked at Hinata, the young man was beaming at him, his expression bright enough to part the clouds perpetually hanging overhead and shining sunlight upon the court.

On the court, everybody was already getting placed, waving one another over excitedly. Overlapping voices filled the air that seemed to have been quiet ever since they left Karasuno at the very beginning of their journey.

That's exactly what it felt like, in retrospect; a return to the beginning. Closing their adventure with the way they began it. The world ended with them.

"You're welcome," Hinata simply murmured to Kageyama, and threw his arms around him.

Kageyama did not hesitate in returning the embrace, and engraving every last detail of this last scene in his memory and in his heart forevermore.

They played volleyball until they were exhausted, until the sun began to fall through the sky and the red light bleeding into the gymnasium began to dim, until their legs ached and their heart beat fast enough to burst.

And then, once the last rally was over, they all flopped to the cool wooden floor and laughed, laughed until their sides ached and they cried. They laughed for all the times that they had cried so far, for all the times that they had mourned, for all the times when they had forbidden themselves from being happy. They laughed for the memories they'd made and for the memories they'd keep close to warm them up on cold nights spent apart. They laughed for the friends they'd made and the friends they'd lost, for the people they loved waiting for them either in this life or the next.
Their laughter became the apotheosis of their existence together, filling the silence that perpetually haunted them, freeing the heavy burdens in their hearts, and promising that regardless of what came, there would always be hope to be found in the memory of their laughter.

"Let's make another promise," Daichi suddenly suggested, when they all lay breathless and contented.

"Captain, that's cheesy," Noya quipped, only to earn himself a stern hush from Asahi.

"It might be. But it's still something we should do." Pushing himself up, Daichi gripped the volleyball, turning it over in his hands. "Let's sign this volleyball with our names, so we never forget this moment."

"Like we did at the Karasuno gym!" Hinata crowed. "So cool! Let's do it!"

"It'll be kind of like a progress record," Kuroo agreed. "You guys started by yourselves, and now here you are, with more people and less people than you began with. I think it's a good idea to keep a record of that. It's our entire adventure in one memento."

Oikawa quickly signed to Iwaizumi, and then got up, heading off.

"He's going to go find a marker in the teacher's office," Iwaizumi translated, sitting up as well. "Let's do this."

"We should head out soon, though," Akaashi recommended, glancing at the high glass panes. "It'll be dark soon, and it gets substantially colder then."

"Let's do this first, please, Akaashi?" Bokuto pleaded, making doe eyes at Akaashi, who simply sighed.

"I didn't say we couldn't. I'm all for it."

By the time Oikawa returned, they had all gathered into a circle, and were debating where to write their names on the ball. Kenma made space for Oikawa to sit down between him and Asahi, and Oikawa put down a black permanent marker, which Noya immediately made a grab for.

"Okay!" he announced, taking the ball from Bokuto. "Here we go!"

Just like the boys of Karasuno had done so long ago, the ball and marker were passed around the circle. In Noya's hands, it was white, and by the time it got to Tsukishima, black characters had been scribbled all over it. Careful not to smudge the drying ink, Tsukishima inscribed his own name in a remaining blank spot, and then set the ball down in the middle of the circle again.

"It's done," Hinata marveled.

"Yeah. And with this, we have proof that we lived, and that we will someday meet again." Picking up the ball, Daichi stood up. "Let's go get some rest, everybody. Tomorrow, we're going to rise early for a big day."

"Stretch so your muscles don't freeze up in the cold!" Kuroo reminded them as they all rose to go get dressed.

"And stay warm," Daichi added as an afterthought. However, it felt like a useless comment to make. From the looks on each one of their faces, he could tell that they would never truly feel cold ever
That night, they all unzipped and layered their sleeping bags so that they all slept close to one another. Just for one last time, for one last chance to imprint the feeling of belonging amongst warm bodies into their hearts and their bones.

...-...-...-...-...-

"Today, citizens of Awa, a new dawn is rising above us."

The sky was clear, the sun only barely shining through the horizon. Bleeding reds and fiery oranges cast light upon the mall complex, and the shadow of the building extended far beyond it.

"Led by our overseer's trusted advisor and older sister, Satoko Niijima, a group of twenty-two wastelanders is setting out to cross the Honshu wasteland, a feat that has never before been accomplished, in order to reach the Shimane nuclear power plant."

The air was crisp and cool, filled only by the sound of orders being barked and the beeping of trucks backing up. The crunch of boots in fresh snow was overshadowed by the voices on the radio, who were clearly not Bokuto and Akaashi as one might guess.

"After recent tragedy struck Awa, this team—the largest team of wastelanders in the history of Awa—will attempt to reach the power plant and shut it down before the rogues have a chance to use it to bring more harm to the survivors on the mainland. Their mission is a dangerous, but necessary one to accomplish."

Off on one side, the trucks were being loaded with supplies for their journey. On another side, the science division of their traveling party was huddled up and discussing things that nobody else would understand. Satoko stood in the middle of it all, long hair tied up in a high ponytail and fluttering in the gentle breeze as she commanded her team with practiced ease.

"The wastelanders that are setting out on this mission are estimated to be gone for a long time, several months at best, and never to return at worst."

"Of course you'll return."

A collective breath was released as Daichi finally spoke, rising into the still morning atmosphere as white mist. Once tension had bled from their shoulders, they all turned to him, and Daichi turned off the radio.

That only left them to fill the silence.

"This is it, then, huh?" Kuroo sighed, glancing up at the sky. Tiny snowflakes danced in the air and landed on his eyelashes. "We're going to be leaving soon."

"Yeah," Daichi nodded. "All of you… take care. And remember. No matter how long it takes for you to return, you have to return regardless."

"It's kind of hard to believe that this is the end, isn't it?" Noya snorted mirthlessly. "It really felt like our adventure would just… keep going forever. But this is it."

"It's not over yet," Hinata tried to correct him. "It's just… put on hold. We'll meet again for sure."

"I guess this is a good time to thank everybody. For everything they've ever done." Kuroo's admission was a bit of a shock, but nobody wanted to spend time mulling over that right now.
"Yeah," Asahi nodded, biting his lip. "Nothing would've been possible to accomplish without everybody's strength and devotion."

"We came a long way and accomplished many things," Iwaizumi added. "I think that we can be proud of the things we've gained, regardless of the things we've lost."

"And the people," Yamaguchi murmured, his voice ringing out too loudly in the crystalline air. "And the people that we've lost."

"Wherever they are, they're all watching over us and wishing us well," Akaashi reminded him. "The memories of the ones we love will be the wind at our backs out there."

"And we won't let them down!" Bokuto promised, glancing around their circle. "We won't let you down!"

"We know you won't," Iwaizumi translated for Oikawa, who signed, and then slipped his hand into his best friend's for support.

"Just promise to take care," Kenma whispered, gently touching Kuroo's arm and raising a pleading gaze at him. "I know we've all done some really outlandish stuff to get here, but none of us are superhuman. We're still human, and we're still just kids. So… rely on the adults around you to do the hard stuff, please."

"Yeah," Kageyama nodded, the frown on his face characteristic of his moments of deep thought. "You all gave me your stories. I wrote them down. Don't let them end just yet."

"Don't worry too much. It's annoying." Tsukishima grumbled, pouting lightly. "At least pretend you trust us to return unharmed and successful."

"Of course we do, Tsukishima," Noya rolled his eyes. "You don't have to worry about us either."

"I'm not worried."

"Sure."

In the distance, one of the trucks beeped loudly.

"Okay, wastelanders!" Satoko's voice rang out loudly over all of the other voices. Suddenly, a hush fell over everybody gathered outside, and all eyes went to her.

It was so quiet that one could almost hear the thumping of frantic hearts racing in unison.

"It's time to head out!" Satoko announced, pointing to the trucks. "The trucks are loaded, just hop onto the one you are assigned to! From here on out, we're going out to protect the ones we love, so when you say goodbye to the lives you leave behind, say it with pride!"

A resounding rallying cry rose from the small crowd amassed outside the mall complex, and soon enough, a throng of people were breaking away from the others, who stayed behind. Several other wastelanders had their families and friends out to wave them goodbye, so at least the boys that remained behind did not feel too lonely in their heartbreak.

"I guess this is it," Kuroo finally decided, outstretching his hand at Daichi. "From here on out, I leave them all in your care."

"And I, in yours." Daichi grabbed Kuroo's hand firmly, not so much a handshake as it was an
embrace. "Just don't do anything stupid."

"None of this formal stuff, you guys!" Noya booed them both, jumping on Daichi. "Group hug!"

"Group hug!"

With comfortable laughter, all twelve of the boys found themselves holding each other tight, and after the laughter faded, perhaps for one second, they indulged in grief. Embracing for a moment longer than they should've, they then split and let the lingering warmth in their limbs melt the frost beginning to creep on their hearts.

They would not give in to despair.

"Good luck," Daichi wished quietly, deciding to wave them off with a fond smile.

"You, too." Kuroo returned the smile, without any smugness, without any arrogance, without any ulterior motives.

"And be careful. It's an ugly world out there, and every time we thought we'd seen it at its worst, we were always proven wrong." Daichi let his eyes trail over the boys lined up next to Kuroo, watching Hinata, Tsukishima, Yamaguchi, Bokuto and Akaashi square their shoulders in response to his statement. "Whatever you do, don't lose your way, even when the world turns dark once more."

"We won't," Kuroo assured him confidently, taking in one last sight of the boys he was leaving behind with Daichi. As he made contact with each and every one of them, Oikawa, Iwaizumi, Noya, Kageyama, Kenma and Asahi nodded at him. "We'll fight on through the night, and we'll see you again come morning light."

And with that promise, it was goodbye.

There were no more words to exchange, not if both parties wanted to keep their eyes dry.

"Let's move out," Kuroo ordered, and somehow, nobody managed to say a word past the ball in their throats.

Turning their backs, the first group left towards the trucks. And though they glanced behind and waved a few more goodbyes, they never stopped in their advance.

It put Daichi's mind at ease, and he straightened his back as he watched them load into the trucks.

Around them, families and friends of the other wastelanders were crying, yelling out goodbyes and whispering fervent prayers for their continued safety. Yet somehow, Daichi couldn't bring himself to do any of those. For some reason, he knew in his heart that Kuroo and his team would be safe.

The trucks were loaded without fanfare, and rumbled to life. The first one turned into the passage that led out of Awa, towards Tokushima, and the second one followed closely. The crunching of snow under tires made the entire thing feel that much more real.

Those trucks were taking their friends away from them, possibly for good. That alone should have been enough for Daichi to step in, call them back, but he didn't. Next to him, the other boys who were now his to protect stayed silent, though perhaps one or two of them had begun to cry.

He didn't know, for he did not turn around to check, eyes riveted on the horizon.

He remained standing there until the trucks completely disappeared from his view, until his toes
began to go numb from the cold and until the crying families around him began to quiet down. At that moment, he was aware of the loud beating of his own heart and of the swell of sadness in his chest. He had promised not to cry, but this goodbye was just too bittersweet.

"Let's get back inside," he finally decided, and nobody mentioned if he choked on a word or two. "We have work today, and we might already be late for our shifts."

"Ironic that we have to go to work after all this…” Iwaizumi chuckled sadly, his expression downcast. Oikawa mirrored his expression and put his head on his shoulder to support both of them. "Life goes on, I guess."

"Absolutely." And with every word he filled with whatever resolution he had left, Daichi found his strength and his conviction returning to him. He could do this. He, and everybody else he still had with him, could do this. "Life goes on, even without them. And until we meet again, it's our responsibility to keep their memory alive by living our lives the way we would've if they were still here next to us."

Behind him, Kenma sniffled lightly and wiped his nose on his mittens. Noya put a gentle hand on his shoulder in support, though his eyes were wet as well. Oikawa turned into Iwaizumi's chest to hide his face, and Iwaizumi tangled his fingers in the hairs at the base of his neck to pull him closer. Kageyama hunched his shoulders inwards like he was caving in, and Asahi set his hand on his head to anchor him with the weight.

Daichi stood tall, and repeated to himself that this pain, too, would someday come to pass.

"Let's get inside," he prompted them all, and when their steps towards the mall complex became shaky, he herded them forward with a strong hand across their backs.

He could only imagine that somewhere out there, Kuroo was doing the same.

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And thus, life went on.

Satoko and the wastelanders never returned to Awa.

The volleyball remained untouched, gathering dust until the day they would meet again.

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EPILOGUE

When the sun shone across the floorboards, it shone gold.

It made for quite a dramatic sight in the abandoned gymnasium, particles of dust dancing visibly in the path carved in the air by the light. The air was stable, heavy, untouched, and it almost seemed like a travesty to disturb the stillness of the room. It felt like this place was a pocket of time and space that had stopped long ago, its history visible in every nick and mark on the floors and on the walls.

The gymnasium itself was a mess. All lined up against the back wall, many different objects gathered thick layers of dust. Mattresses and pillows were strewn around, as were poles, clothes, tools, ropes, and countless other miscellaneous items. Anyone who did not know the history of the place would be tempted to describe it as a dragon's den; anyone who did would know that it was a rabbit's
When the golden light lit up the room in a warm glow, the gym seemed to come to life once more, and the walls whispered the story of survival that had taken place within its bounds. Undisturbed by time and nature, in the middle of it all, a testament stood naked for all to see; black marker on wood.

"Remember that we lived."

The silence gave way to the voice that rose, peace disturbed by the sound of clicking heels on wood. The woman standing by the door did not seem concerned that her voice was violating the serenity of this sanctuary, instead shuffling across the room with a camera following her.

"That is the last message that the survivors of Karasuno High School inscribed before they left to set out into the dangerous world outside," the woman continued, talking to the camera. "Now, six years later, we have a chance to revisit the place that they called home, and shed light on the struggles of the victims of the terrible war that ravaged the country."

"Plug the title in somewhere," the cameraman recommended to her.

"Got it," the woman nodded, and the serious mask slipped back on her face. "Six years ago, with the advent of the war, these children were forced to leave their homes and travel across the country in a desperate search for safety. Ever since, the war has been resolved, Japan capitulating in the best interest of its remaining citizenry and beginning its reconstruction efforts. Now, in the fifth year of rebuilding, we are slowly uncovering the stories of horror and hope that were written during this brief, but devastating conflict. The Karasuno High children are only one of the many groups that outlasted the war and wrote these stories, and for the future of our nation, in the interest of the next generation, these are stories that must never be forgotten. Today, the Karasuno High School gymnasium, where the boys first set up their pocket of resistance, is considered a protected patrimonial site, and in the years to come as the Miyagi prefecture is given new life, it will be transformed into a museum. This is a testament of hardship and hope. It once stood as a last bastion of defense; today, it is their story's apotheosis."

"Whew. Took you look enough to get that one out," the cameraman laughed, putting his camera down.

"It's a complicated word, Hitoshi," the woman groaned out, rubbing her forehead tiredly. "The director of our documentary insisted that it be titled 'Apotheosis'. Apparently, the kid collaborating with him on production and narration wanted it that way."

"Speaking of which, shouldn't we talk to him?" Hitoshi glanced to the end of the gymnasium, where a lone figure was sitting on a rickety plastic chair, glancing at the walls. "He is one of the Karasuno survivors, after all. He could be an interesting addition to the documentary.

"He's a special character..." the woman rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. "You're right, though. Let's go see if he'll talk to us."

The camera began rolling again, and the film crew headed towards the young man in the corner.

"Excuse me," the woman called when she got close enough, waving slightly at the boy. It took a few seconds for him to notice her, and when he did, he looked a bit caught off guard. "Apologies for disturbing you. My name is Mitsuki Hagakure, and I am filming a documentary about the Karasuno survivors. It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." The boy seemed to be one without too many words to spare, and he bowed his head
lightly to Mitsuki. "I know about the documentary. I'm co-writing it."

"Oh!" Mitsuki's cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and she turned to the camera. "Please cut that part out."

"No worries," Hitoshi snickered.

"Alright, I apologize for not recognizing you." Back to business, Mitsuki pulled a foldable chair over and sat down next to the boy. "If you don't mind, I would like to ask you some questions."

"Go ahead."

"Firstly, could you please tell us about yourself?"

"Ah." Again, the boy's dark blue eyes darted around nervously, and he pushed a few strands of black hair behind his ears. "My name is Kageyama Tobio. When I was sixteen years old, I was one of the Karasuno survivors. Ever since the end of the war, I've been working on a project to release the story of our struggle to the public so that it can maybe someday help this conflict from happening again."

"Your story is a heart-wrenching one to tell, Kageyama," Mitsuki nodded empathetically, eyes going sad. "Could you tell us what happened to you and your friends in the war?"

"A lot of things happened," Kageyama frowned, as if not understanding the purpose of the question. "We left Miyagi after the first nuclear explosion and travelled across the country to search for safety. We picked up some people along the way. We outlasted the second explosion in Niigata. Then, we travelled down to Tokushima, where we settled in a refugee-organized camp called Awa. We stayed there a while before about half of our group left to cross the wasteland on a mission. They did not come back before the end of the war four months later, and none of us from Awa have heard from them since."

"It's an extensive tale that spans across exactly a year," Mitsuki continued, turning to the camera. "At the young age of twenty-two, Kageyama Tobio is the author of a bestselling novel about the war and the story of the Karasuno survivors. He worked on it for a couple of years before publishing it, and it's the novel that drew attention to the story of the Karasuno survivors and made the government declare this gym a national heritage site. Due to funding issues, the official inauguration is only being done tonight, but it is nonetheless exciting to see all of this stem from one novel. Kageyama," she turned to him again. "Could you please tell us about your work?"

"I mean… it's about what I told you already," Kageyama frowned. "It's a collection of our memoirs from the war. It goes from the moment we gathered in the Karasuno gym, to the moment we left one another in Awa, and it details everything that happened to us and every person we picked up and let go throughout our journey. I spoke to all of the boys in my group to get their point of view and their stories, and put it all together in a way that made sure that people could feel the pain and hardships we endured. War affects lives, real, individual lives, and destroys people in horrible ways. I just hope that our story can help avoid a repeat of this terrible event."

"Your novel has a very graphic style. It's shocking, actually, that you included all of the nitty-gritty details in your writing, but I suppose that is the point of it."

"Yeah, it's intentional. I wanted to make people feel disgusted and outraged at whatever they read," Kageyama confirmed. "This isn't a fiction novel. It's a recollection of real events, and it denounces the atrocities of war, the psychological and physical consequences of it. I hope that it makes people worldwide realize that casualties of war aren't just numbers in history books. They are real people
who struggle and crawl in pain, made to kneel by forces stronger than they could ever be, and yet
who fight because they have people that they love."

"Funny, seeing as you had a more withdrawn personality back then, from what I can tell from the
way you depicted yourself in your novel."

"Perhaps." A light tinge of red coloured Kageyama's cheeks, and he fiddled with his fingers in a
show of nervousness like the old days the reporter spoke of.

"Now, I'm very interested to know about the writing on the floor there," Mitsuki jumped to the next
topic, hitting a dead end on the book. "It's a message written in black marker on the gym's
floorboards, and it says 'Remember Karasuno. Remember that we lived', along with some names,
including yours. Tell us more about that."

"We wrote that before we left the gym for good." Kageyama's expression fell slightly. "One of my
closest friends suggested it as a way to preserve our memory. At the time, we genuinely weren't sure
what awaited us out there in the rest of the country, and we were afraid. Just in case we died out
there, we wanted to leave our mark, and so we signed off on the place that had kept us safe since the
Forty Fireworks." Sighing, Kageyama lifted his gaze again. "The names are those of my teammates
who were with me then. Some of them are still alive today, some of them aren't. Some of them, I
don't know. The nation's been in disarray since the war, even if it's been five years, and I haven't
heard from the boys with whom I've lost contact."

"A lot of attention is being brought to this place by the media recently," Mitsuki noted. "Do you
think that'll help you find your friends again?"

"I sure hope so." Finally, Kageyama etched a small smile, though it was sadder than anything else. "I
have to admit that… writing this book, it was also my way of calling out for them. I want them,
wherever they are now, to know that there is still a place for them here. Me, and everybody who is
still with me, we all want to find each other again and get back together."

"It's a very good idea to reach out to them via the media. Today is the official inauguration of the
Karasuno gym as a national heritage site," Mitsuki reminded him, though he probably didn't need to
be reminded. "Tonight, there will be a ceremony and a cocktail in the honour of the Karasuno gym,
and I heard that your friends were attending, is that correct?"

"Yes. The ones who are with me have all been invited by the government to attend and make a
speech," Kageyama confirmed. "I already called out to the ones that I've lost from my sight. I'm
hoping that the publicity this place is getting will also attract them all back here tonight, so that we
can finally reunite."

"I wish it with all my heart," Mitsuki smiled at him, partly fond and partly sad. "Now, a few more
questions about your book. Could you please explain the cover image for it? I'm sure it's confusing
for many people, because it's not visibly related to the topic of your book."

"The cover is a picture of a volleyball, I know," Kageyama confirmed. "But that volleyball is one
that has all the names of the boys who survived by the time we parted in Awa. It's a parallel to what
we did here in the gym, in order to highlight how far we'd come and how much we'd lost. Volleyball
is important to all of us, since we all met through the club in high school, and even the boys with us
who weren't from Karasuno were familiar to us from rival volleyball clubs. That volleyball was a
way for us to remember what we used to be, and I chose it as my cover image because it carries such
a bittersweet emotional weight for us all."
"You really thought of everything, didn't you?" Mitsuki nodded, eyes wide, clearly impressed. "One last question for you, Kageyama, before we let you go. The title to your book is also a very peculiar one, and the meaning behind it doesn't jump out immediately. Could you tell us why your novel is titled the way it is?"

"Here, I have a copy in my bag," Kageyama huffed, rifling through the shoulder bag at his feet. After a few seconds, he pulled out a worn, dog-eared, bent copy of the book, and presented it to the camera. On the cover page, the volleyball, signed with the names of all the survivors, stood proudly on display. "Umm… the book is titled 'Come Morning Light'." He seemed wistful, and turned the book to run his finger across the title embossed on the front page.

He fell silent for a moment, and both Mitsuki and Hitoshi respected his silence. He seemed to be living something far beyond what the eye could see, and seemed to be feeling something far beyond what their hearts could feel. For a moment, the camera caught sight of the broken boy that had loved, lived, and lost. For a moment, they saw a young man who'd been forced to grow up too fast, too much. The golden sun fell upon Kageyama's eyelashes, and the next time he blinked, his eyes turned glossy.

"It's a promise," he simply stated, his gaze still on the book. His finger rhythmically caressed the title, as if he kept repeating the promise to himself. His voice seemed just a bit tighter, just a bit quieter. Broken and patched up, but never to be whole again. "It's a title that represents hope. It's a promise to look forward to the end of the night. Despite all the horrors that the darkness brings, over, and over, and over again… come morning light, we still live, and we still rise."

Chapter End Notes

In a certain way, this is our journey's apotheosis as well. You, as readers, and I, as the author, are going to have to say goodbye to this fanfic. We'll always have the memories we've made together, but now, we part. I'm, uhh... I'm really emotional right now. I don't know what I want to write in these ANs. I don't know if I want to explain some stuff from the fic or if I want to cry or if I want to talk about the work. It really feels like there's not enough time to get stuff out there, so uhh... those goodbyes were super relatable, lol.

Well, I left the ending up to interpretation for you guys, as I usually do with long fanfics. I dislike setting endings in stone because the end is never really the place where everything stops. An ending is supposed to be a gateway to a new beginning, so I want to let you guys imagine for yourselves how the fic actually finishes. If it wasn't clear, the war lasted 4 months after Kuroo left Awa, an armistice was signed, and 5 years later, we have the epilogue, where Kageyama presents his cleverly-titled book. If you didn't get it, uhh... this fic is Kageyama's book. Yeah. So anyway. Who shows up to the inauguration from Daichi's group? Who shows up from Kuroo's group? What's happened to the people who showed up? What happened to those who didn't? Those are all questions I want you guys to answer for yourselves so that this fic can be just a little more personal to you. Talk to me on tumblr and let me know what you think! Also, I'm pretty sure I tied up all the loose plot ends, but this fic is three years in the making and despite my detailed (not-so detailed) notes, I can forget stuff. Let me know if I have!
Otherwise, I'm going to do all my long-winded post-mortem notes on Tumblr bc they don't really belong here, but I just... I want to thank everyone who gave this fic a chance, from the bottom of my heart. Whether you just discovered it or you were following since chapter 1, whether you really loved it or just skimmed through it, whether you made it this far or let go halfway, I want to thank you for your incredible support, your boundless enthusiasm, and all the encouraging feedback you've ever given me.

Thank you a thousand times over, and may we meet again!
(At Katsucon 2017 if any of you are attending!!)

(watch the video, just fckin do it)

-SharkbaitSekki (Cin)

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