I Will Follow You Into the Dark

by knightswatch, shions_heart

Summary

When terrifying creatures mysteriously appear in downtown Sendai, destroying everything in their sight, the country’s leading scientists create a band of super soldiers to fight and destroy these monsters.

Kuroo Tetsurou is one of those soldiers.

Inspired by Eicinic's Superman!Kuroo AU
So this is another massive thing that came about as a result of this drabble I wrote for knightswatch. She ended up helping me plot out this whole thing, so I've placed her under the co-authors because a lot of her ideas went into this too. :)

I really hope you all enjoy it.

(Warning: There will be at least one death in this. It's in the tags, but I just wanted that to be clear.)
SS-415 – A serum created by Japanese scientists. The serum works over time to increase dexterity, stamina, strength, and speed in the user. It must be directly injected into the bloodstream with a syringe. The treatments must be taken once every three days, otherwise the body will begin to deteriorate. Symptoms of withdrawal include: mood swings, weakness of the body, exhaustion, insomnia, lack of appetite, seizures, and eventually, if the serum is not taken again within five days, death.

Possible side effects include: nausea, dry skin, muscle cramps, dizziness, and increased hunger . . .

Kuroo Tetsurou narrowly misses the backhand of the giant claw. He flips off the roof of the building, landing lightly on the next. The claw is the size of a Volkswagen, and Kuroo knows that even with his superior strength a swipe from that would hurt. He grimaces as it hits instead the side of the next building over, crashing through glass and metal with a screeeeech! Tapping the receiver in his ear, he crouches behind an A/C unit, attempting to control his racing heart.

“Bokuto, Akaashi, are your weapons having performance issues or what?” He attempts to keep his voice light, as that seems to be better than completely panicking.

“Fuck you, man,” Bokuto Koutarou’s voice comes crackling over the earpiece, sounding put-upon. “We’re almost set up, just give us a minute.”

“I don’t have a fucking minute,” Kuroo exclaims, leaping away, as the claw descends onto his hiding place. He curses once more under his breath, drawing his katana and spinning it experimentally.

The kaiju that looms in front of him is massive. Thirty stories high and at least ten stories wide, Kuroo doesn’t doubt it could swallow his entire apartment in one gulp. It has a pig-like snout, with bristles rising from the middle of its forehead, traveling down its back. It actually looks very much like a pig, except for the claws and the feathers sprouting on its arms. Scales cover it in patches here and there, and its mouth holds two large tusks.

“This thing is so fucking ugly,” Kuroo says, laughing because otherwise he’d be trembling. “What did Nishinoya call it again?”

He can hear Bokuto snickering over the receiver. “Boarasaurus.”

Kuroo shakes his head, jumping over the edge of the roof onto a balcony, looking down at the crowd below. The police had pushed them back to the perimeter of the block, not allowing anyone through aside from the military. He can see Captain Sawamura Daichi’s vehicle stationed near the blockade, and the normal soldiers stand in formation before the crowd, armed and ready to fire should the kaiju turn its attention onto the civilians.

He doesn’t understand why the people press so close, why cameras are flashing, and why news anchors stand with their backs to the action. Do they not realize the danger they’re in? He’s very glad that Kenma, at least, has the sense to stay indoors and far away from the center of the city.

Boarasaurus seems to realize that it’s lost its prey once more, and it bellows in rage, causing the
building to shake. Kuroo has to duck to avoid shattering glass. He slams his fingers against his earpiece once more.

“Guys?!”

“Got it! Let her blow, Akaashi!”

Kuroo glances over to where he knows Iwaizumi Hajime is lying in wait a couple buildings over, having remained out of sight until this point. He sees the glint of the other’s katana, flashing across the distance separating them.

*Ready?*

Kuroo tilts his own katana toward the sun, sending the same signal back back.

*Ready.*

**BOOM!**

The building shakes once more as the explosion rocks it toward the Boarasaurus. Kuroo turns, sprinting as fast as he can up the length of the building as it tilts, falling toward the kaiju with increasing velocity. He uses this to boost his momentum, though, and once the angle is right, he leaps into the air with a shout, his katana aimed directly for the creature’s left eye. He can hear Iwaizumi’s shout growing louder, and then his fellow soldier is beside him on Boarasaurus’s head, slamming his own katana into the right eye.

The kaiju bellows, tossing its head back and forth, attempting to shake them off. Kuroo holds on grimly, sweat trickling down his face, catching on the edge of his mouth. His boots start to slide, and he shifts his pose, pressing firmer into the hard flesh of the beast. He blinks quickly to keep the stinging liquid out of his eyes, and looks over at Iwaizumi to see how he’s fairing. His partner is wearing a similar expression: lips turned downward, eyebrows furrowed.

Briefly, Kuroo lifts his hands off the sword, grinning crookedly. “Look, Iwaizumi. No hands.”

Iwaizumi doesn’t look amused, so Kuroo grips the handle of his katana once more, pushing down until the hilt touches the eyeball. It’s gushing blood, thick and red, and it’s disgusting and *smells*, but Kuroo can’t help but laugh because it’s dying and he isn’t and once more they’ve *won*.

The kaiju pitches forward, stumbling, falling, and Kuroo and Iwaizumi scramble to pull their katanas from its eyes, hopping up and dashing toward the bristles on its scalp. Kuroo grabs one, holding on tight, as Iwaizumi slides past him. They’re both slick with blood, and Kuroo’s grip on the smooth bristle falters slightly. He readjusts, quickly sheaths his katana, and reaches for Iwaizumi. Their hands catch and then hold. Kuroo grimaces as the slight twinge in his shoulder. He’s strong, but the serum takes its toll. He’ll have to inject himself sooner than scheduled to make up for this.

He looks down at Iwaizumi, swinging from his hand. His partner has his eyes closed tightly, and he doesn’t try to pull himself up, as the kaiju lands with a *thud*, a tremor shaking the ground below, causing the spectators to stumble, some to fall over completely.

Kuroo breathes easier once the dust settles, and the Boarasaurus lies still beneath him. Iwaizumi opens his eyes, frowning up at Kuroo.

“You can let go now,” he says.

Kuroo glances toward the ground, gauging the distance. It’s close enough for them both to jump and
land without injury. Still, he looks back at Iwaizumi with a smirk.

“I’ll never let go, Jack,” he says, in as solemn and serious a voice he can muster.

Iwaizumi punches his arm, hard. With a yelp, Kuroo lets go, watching as Iwaizumi lands in a roll, popping back up quickly. Kuroo shakes his head, hopping off after him, landing in a crouch, which he feels is much more graceful. He straightens, patting his hair self-consciously, not sure if he’s relieved or not that it’s maintained its bedhead state, despite the copious amounts of blood and sweat that covers him.

The crowd has regained their feet, and they applaud loudly, shouting and waving. Kuroo waves back briefly, knowing Iwaizumi won’t.

Bokuto and his partner and friend, Akaashi Keiji, come running toward them from down the street, their bags of explosives bouncing at their sides. Kuroo wonders briefly if that’s safe, before he’s engulfed in an enthusiastic hug. He spits gray and black hair out of his mouth and pats Bokuto’s back lightly.

“Holy shit, man! Like, holy shit! That was awesome!” Bokuto pulls back, grinning and not seeming to mind the blood that now stains the front of his uniform. “How did you know to go for its eyes?”

“Oikawa,” Iwaizumi says, by way of explanation.

Bokuto nods vigorously. “Of course, of course.” He holds up his hand then with a grin. “High-five!”

Iwaizumi looks at the blood-covered hand blankly, before turning away. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

Kuroo looks down at his own gory state of disarray and chuckles to himself. “Kenma is going to kill me.”

Bokuto pats his back sympathetically, but before he can say anything, the rush of news reporters break through the barricade. Now that the kaiju is incapacitated, the crowd seems to think that they are free to get a closer look and they surge forward, as the police scramble to try and convince them all to go home. Behind Kuroo, he can hear the military trucks rumbling to life, and he knows they’re driving over to the kaiju to take photos and work on collecting samples before disposing of the body.

Kuroo blinks as a news camera is thrust into his face.

“Kuroo-san, what an amazing display of courage and bravery! What do you have to say to your fans out there?” a peppy lady asks, seemingly unaffected by the oozing liquid dripping from his hands, the edges of his jacket, dripping onto his shoes and the ground around him.

Kuroo stares at the microphone that is suddenly beside his mouth, and then at the camera. His mind completely blanks, so he says the first words that come to him. Clicking his tongue, he winks and points a finger-gun at the camera.

“Stay in school, kids. And, uh, don’t do drugs,” he says, before quickly ducking away, allowing Bokuto to continue the interview with an enthusiasm he doesn’t share. Exhaustion is beginning to creep into him; his muscles feel heavy, and his shoulder aches. He rolls it experimentally. What he wouldn’t give for a nice hot bath just then.

Akaashi managed to escape the reporters as well, and he’s standing beside their motorcycles, military-issued, sleek and shiny. Kuroo almost doesn’t want to ride his home, knowing that the black leather seat will be ruined by blood. He glances toward Akaashi surreptitiously, staring at his dark
Jean jacket, as Akaashi settles down on his bike. He pauses, turning his head to meet Kuroo’s gaze.

“No,” he says calmly, and Kuroo jolts.

“I didn’t even say anything!”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Please? I promise I’ll wash it.”

“Do you even know how to do laundry?”

Kuroo pauses. “I promise Kenma will wash it?”

“Have a good night, Kuroo-san,” Akaashi says, pulling on his helmet and roaring off down the street.

Kuroo pouts, wondering if there’s some way he can stand on his bike the entire way back to the apartment. Bokuto arrives then, grinning and stretching his arms over his head. “Wow, that anchor lady sure was nice! She even gave me her phone number!”

He’s wearing the same type of jacket as Akaashi (the exact same type actually), and Kuroo grins slowly.

“Hey, Bokuto. Can I borrow your jacket?”

“Sure!” Bokuto says without hesitation. He shrugs off the jacket, handing it over to Kuroo. “Hey, where did Akaashi go?” His head whips to and fro, as he searches for Akaashi’s bike on the very obviously empty street.

“Home, probably.” Kuroo says, as he lays the jacket over the seat, smoothing it out. Nodding in satisfaction, he sits, pulling his keys from his pocket. He rubs his thumb over the cat-head keychain once, an old habit, before leaning forward to start the ignition.

Home sounds amazing just then. He doesn’t wait for Bokuto’s follow-up question, or his farewell. He revs the engine and then pulls out into the street, heading toward the edge of the downtown quadrant. The sounds of the cleanup crew and curious crowd fall away behind him, replaced by the whistling of the wind, and the rumbling of the machine beneath him.

He rides through deserted streets, littered with scraps of paper and tin cans that roll away as he passes. Twenty years ago, the first kaiju appeared out of the sewers of downtown Sendai, attacking everything in sight, and the area was immediately evacuated and sectioned off from the rest of the city. For a while the creatures had roamed free, until a pair of scientists in Tokyo came up with the idea of the Super Solider Program.

It only became a viable option five years ago, with the creation of the SS-415 serum, and anyone aged twenty or above was allowed to register for the program. Two scientists approached Kuroo at college two days after his twentieth birthday, a man named Oikawa Tooru and his lab assistant Kageyama Tobio. They told him that they’d noticed Kuroo’s athletic scores, and his interest in the military. They explained the program to him, pressed on the urgency of the situation, talked about how the country needed people like him. How he could be the one to save the world.

By that time everyone knew about the kaiju living in Sendai. The threat of them leaving the downtown quadrant and continuing through the prefecture was very real and terrifying. How could Kuroo refuse when the stakes were so high?
When Kenma heard his decision, he called him an idiot. Perhaps he was.

But Kenma was his responsibility, perhaps he always had been, and that meant Kuroo needed to protect him, no matter what the cost.

He doesn’t regret signing the papers. He doesn’t regret subjecting his body to painful experimentation.

Not when that means he can stop the kaiju from progressing further into Miyagi. Into Tokyo. Into the rest of the Japan.

And there are perks, of course. Extra rations for him and Kenma, this amazing motorcycle, and all the cool clothes he can ask for. The military even offered him a massive luxury apartment in Iwanuma.

“Fit for an emperor,” they said.

But Kuroo took one look at Kenma and declined. He liked their tiny apartment, and he couldn’t imagine how lonely it would be for Kenma in a giant, lavish apartment. Besides, Hinata Shouyou, Kenma’s other best friend, lived within walking distance of their current place, and Kuroo couldn’t bring himself to separate the two.

Hinata is there now, actually; Kuroo can see his bike resting against the rack in the parking lot. He parks his motorcycle in his designated spot. Getting off, he allows a small chuckle at the ass-shaped stain on the jean jacket. Akaashi was going to murder him.

Draping it over his arm, Kuroo climbs the stairs of the building to the second floor, unlocking the door to step inside the apartment. He pulls off his weapons belt and katana, setting them on the hat rack mounted on the wall, unused since he and Kenma never wore hats. Technically he’s supposed to return the weapons to the base after every fight, but more often than not he forgets. He’s become a pro at cleaning them himself and sneaking them back into the equipment room on base.

“I’m home!” he calls, bracing himself for the hurling ball of Kenma that he knows will come barreling around the corner.

But Kenma stops short before he can launch himself into Kuroo’s chest, pursing his lips, as his nose scrunches up.

Kuroo freezes with his arms out to the side, having been ready to receive the tackle. He lowers them, tilting his head. “What’s that face for?”

“You’re filthy.”

Kuroo suddenly remembers that he’s covered in kaiju eye juice and blood. He rubs the back of his neck with a sheepish grin. “Ah, right. Bath first, huh?”

Kenma moves to the side, and Kuroo kicks off his boots before stepping further into the hall. As he passes Kenma, he can’t resist reaching out to swipe his finger down Kenma’s nose, causing him to hiss and bat his sleeve at his face quickly to remove any blood Kuroo might’ve left there. Kuroo laughs, because of course Kenma’s face is clean, and walks past Hinata in the living room.

“Hey Hinata,” he calls.

Hinata waves distractedly, his focus on the game he’s attempting to win by pressing the controller buttons as quickly and fiercely as he can. There are a few kaiju related games that were released back
when people decided it was a good idea to capitalize on people’s fear, but the game Hinata is playing looks like Pokémon, which comes as a relief to Kuroo.

He doesn’t want Kenma exposed to the horrors of the kaiju any more than he already has to be.

Once in the bathroom, he starts the shower first, stripping out of his clothes, though it’s difficult. The material has grown stiff with the dried blood, and it sticks to his skin. He peels off his shirt gingerly, despairing at the state of his leather jacket, and then works out of his pants. He draws a stick of mint gum from one of the pockets, unwrapping it to pop into his mouth, before he finishes with his boxers and steps under the water.

The heat feels amazing on his sore muscles, and he’s tempted to simply stand there for a while, but he knows they have to share hot water with the entire complex, so he keeps it short, running his fingers through his hair, and running the soap quickly over his arms to rid them of the blood. Once the water falls clear from his body, he switches to the faucet, allowing the tub to fill. He grabs some of Kenma’s bubble bath, because bubbles sound like fun, and pours probably more than he needs to into the water, watching gleefully as the foam starts to form and engulf him.

He settles back into the water, resting his head back against the rim of the tub, as he allows his body to relax. His shoulder is still aching, so he presses his other hand against it, kneading the muscle gingerly. A twisting, aching feeling curls in his stomach, but he tries to ignore it.

Closing his eyes, he breathes a soft sigh. But even as he tries to think of what he should attempt for dinner, the image of Iwaizumi’s face rises unbidden to the forefront of his mind. He sees the tightness of his skin; the way Iwaizumi’s eyes had squeezed shut, as he dangled over open air. Had he been afraid? Was Iwaizumi afraid of heights?

Kuroo can’t really imagine Iwaizumi being afraid of anything, but then again he doesn’t know the man as well as say, Bokuto. Even after working with him for three years, Iwaizumi is extremely reserved, and never speaks of his home life, or much of anything really. The only one quieter than he was Akaashi.

As he contemplates on this comparison, wondering what a private conversation between the two of them would look like, he hears a soft squeak. Immediately his eyes open, muscles clenching. Kenma is perched on the closed toilet seat. His knees are pulled to his chest, and he’s gripping his toes gently. He stares at Kuroo, blinking slowly.

“Shit, Kenma!” Kuroo chokes briefly on his gum, before he’s able to swallow it down. He frowns, attempting to calm his racing heart. Pulling his own knees up, he’s very much aware of his nakedness, despite the fact that he has mountains of bubbles hiding anything embarrassing.

“I’m going to have that gum stuck in my stomach for seven years now, thanks,” he says once he can breathe normally.

Kenma only looks vaguely apologetic. “Don’t do drugs?” he says, his expression passive aside from a single eyebrow quirked upwards.

“I panicked,” Kuroo says, quick to defend himself, as he remembers his words to the reporter with acute mortification. “If I’d known I was going to be interviewed, I would’ve prepared something.”

“I just think it’s a little hypocritical,” Kenma says, and now he’s staring down at his toes. “Considering . . .”

Kuroo feels as though that gum is trying to make its way back up his throat. He swallows hard,
patting absently at the mound of bubbles over his stomach. He scoops up a handful, spreading it over his mouth and chin, forming a beard. Taking another scoop, he blows it towards Kenma, grinning faintly as it hits the side of his cheek and catches in his hair.

Kenma swats it away, looking over at Kuroo with a small frown. “Kuro.”

Kuroo blinks innocently at him. “Kenma.”

“You’re twenty-three years old.”

“And you’re twenty-two. What’s your point?”

Kenma sighs, lowering his feet to the floor. He reaches over to flick some of the foam off the top of Kuroo’s mountain and into Kuroo’s face. Before he can think better of it, Kuroo reaches up and grabs Kenma’s hand before he can pull it away. Kenma grows extremely still, watching Kuroo from behind his hair. Kuroo can’t resist pushing those strands away with his free hand, looking up into those large, gold eyes and feeling his chest ache with a different type of pain than he’s used to.

“If you have something you want to say, just say it,” he says quietly, able to see the unease lingering behind Kenma’s gaze. It’s the look he always gets when he isn’t sure if he what he wants to say will upset Kuroo or not.

Kenma bites his lip, his eyes sliding to the side. “All the cheering and interviews . . . they make it seem like it’s just a sport. Like nobody is truly in danger.”

Kuroo sighs, wiping off the beard and moving the suds back into the water. “It’s just a smokescreen, you know that. So nobody panics. They’re not supposed to fear our deaths; they’re supposed to feel safe in our victory.”

Kenma draws his hand back in order to pick up Kuroo’s discarded jacket from the floor. It’s splattered with dried blood, dark stains spread over black leather, but he pulls it close anyway, fingers lightly drifting over the insignia: two katanas crossed behind the silhouette of a soaring black crow. He murmurs something indistinct under his breath, and Kuroo tilts his head, trying to catch the words.

“I’m afraid.”

A cold hand reaches into Kuroo’s chest, clenching around his heart. Again, he reaches for Kenma, but the other bends to pick up the rest of the clothes on the floor, not seeing the gesture. Kuroo hesitates, before pulling his hand back. Kenma straightens and regards him with a thoughtful look.

“What?” Kuroo asks, his heart still struggling to beat inside that icy grip.

“Nothing.”

Kenma turns away then, carrying the laundry out of the bathroom. Kuroo watches him go, before ducking beneath the water to finish his bath, not feeling very relaxed anymore.

Before he goes to bed, Kuroo always wipes down and polishes his motorcycle. It’s a ritual that began soon after he received her. A 2011 black and red Kawasaki Ninja 1000, he named her Nekoma, after his old high school where he’d spent some of the best years of his life. Kuroo finds that working on the bike, cleaning her down with long, smooth strokes is soothing, especially after a long day of fighting kaiju.
He sits on the faded asphalt, still warm from the day’s sunlight, listening to his favorite playlist on his phone, set beside him and out of the way of the chemicals. He hums along under his breath, nodding his head in tune with the music, as his hand moves up and down, side to side, rubbing off any and all dust, dirt, and blood.

Hearing a door open, Kuroo lifts his head, catching sight of a black and blond head making its way across the patio and down the stairs. He smiles at the sight of Kenma, swamped in a sweatshirt of Kuroo’s, faded and soft with age. It’s difficult to make out the logo, but Kuroo can tell in an instant that it’s from Nekoma. In Kenma’s hands he holds a steaming mug, which he holds out to Kuroo.

“Thanks,” Kuroo says gratefully, setting down his cleaning rag in order to take the mug from Kenma. It’s cocoa, hot and sweet, and he sips at it appreciatively. In his sleeveless muscle shirt, he began to notice a slight chill in the air, due to the lengthening night, and he wonders vaguely if Kenma had been able to sense it.

He watches, as Kenma crouches beside him, poking at his phone to switch to the next song. Kuroo notices then that underneath the sweatshirt, Kenma is only wearing a pair of boxers, the pale skin of his thighs already starting to prickle with goosebumps.

“Hey,” he says gently, not sure why he feels the need to speak quietly. Perhaps because the night itself is quiet. No one is out at this time, as curfew is only fifteen minutes away, and most people are already settling down in their homes. “You should go back inside. It’s cold out.”

Kenma glances over at him, hair sliding in front of his face. Kuroo reaches out to tuck it back again, inadvertently brushing his fingers across Kenma’s warm cheek. Kenma’s passive expression doesn’t change, though his eyes flicker to Kuroo’s wrist.

“Curfew’s about to start,” Kuroo reminds him, but Kenma only moves closer, tucking himself against Kuroo’s side, as he settles down onto the pavement.

Realizing that Kenma isn’t going anywhere, Kuroo resigns himself to the company, though he doesn’t resent it. He likes the feel of Kenma’s weight against him, and even as the air begins to chill further, he feels warm. Picking up his rag, he returns it to the bike, drinking the cocoa slowly to savor it. Kenma always makes it perfectly, Kuroo muses. He always takes care of Kuroo, without Kuroo ever asking him to: doing his laundry, cooking his meals, making him cocoa, tea, coffee . . .

“Why don’t we go out sometime this week?” he asks, glancing down at the top of Kenma’s head, staring at the dark hair. His roots have grown out more, the black strands falling about halfway down his head, before shifting into blond. Kuroo flicks a piece of that hair absently.

“Where?” Kenma asks, and Kuroo notices that he’s drawn out his PSP from somewhere and is playing it muted.

Kuroo never has the heart to tease him that twenty-two-year-olds don’t play with PSPs anymore.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think that far ahead,” Kuroo admits, earning him a soft snort of unsurprise from Kenma. “Are there any new movies you’d like to see?”

“Not really . . .”

“I could take you to see the base.”

Kenma glances up to give him a withering look. Kuroo holds his rag up, waving it. “Just a suggestion! They’ve been talking about a ‘bring your pet to work’ day, so I just figured, since I don’t have a cat or a dog, I could just bring you.” He grins, as Kenma nudges him hard in the side with his
elbow, a gesture that would’ve hurt three years ago, but now just tickles.

“If you hate my suggestions, then you think of something,” he says in mock exasperation.

Kenma’s expression turns thoughtful, but he doesn’t reply. Kuroo turns back to Nekoma, but before he can run his rag once more over her glossy side, the curfew bell rings, loud and long, echoing down the street. Kuroo sighs, finishing his cocoa and moving to stand. He stuffs the rag into the pocket of his jeans, picking up his phone then. Kenma stays close to his side, as he turns toward the stairs and heads up to their apartment.

There’s a moment, just before they reach the door, that Kuroo thinks he feels Kenma’s hand brush against the back of his. But when he looks down at his best friend, the one person who’s kept him going, who’s given him a reason to fight harder than ever, Kenma’s playing his PSP like it’s the most interesting thing in the world, and Kuroo can do nothing but smile like an idiot.

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When Iwaizumi enters his apartment, clean from his shower at the base, the lights are off. At first this doesn’t seem unnatural, he simply assumes Oikawa remained at the base to finish his work. But as he kicks off his shoes, and ventures further into his home, he can distantly make out the sounds of the television in Oikawa’s room. Sighing deeply, he makes his way over, pushing open the door to find his roommate and best friend of twenty years asleep on the floor. Beneath him lie scattered piles of paper, each one cramped with Oikawa’s loopy handwriting.

The news anchor on the TV looks like she belongs in a swimsuit commercial, and she smiles at the camera with large, spectacularly white teeth. She turns to Kuroo, who looks startled to see her, dark pupils wide in the gold of his eyes.

“Kuroo-san, what an amazing display of courage and bravery! What do you have to say to your fans out there?”

Iwaizumi snorts, as he watches Kuroo attempt to recover.

“Stay in school, kids. And, uh, don’t do drugs.”

Iwaizumi steps over to Oikawa, studying his face. A tiny frown wrinkles his brow even in sleep.

“While that’s certainly a wise message for many, there’s no denying the hype surrounding the SS-415 serum that powers our super saviors,” the reporter continues blithely. “Bokuto-san, what are your feelings on the matter?”

Bokuto looks all too happy to be on camera, and he waves ecstatically. “Being a member of the SSP is awesome! We get to blow beep up and look cool while doing it!”

“So you endorse the military’s appeal to add more Super Soldiers to the program?”

“Well, the more the merrier, right? Besides, we can use all the help we can get to take these mother-beep-ers down!”

Iwaizumi contemplates whether or not to wake Oikawa. On the one hand, he knows for a fact that his friend hasn’t been getting enough sleep. On the other hand, he also knows that the floor is
probably mightily uncomfortable and it’d be better to transfer Oikawa to the bed, though that would involve waking him. And once Oikawa was awake, Iwaizumi knows it’ll be a pain to get him to fall asleep again.

Deciding finally to just let Oikawa sleep, he leans over to turn off the TV.

“Huh, what?” Oikawa awakes with a start, sitting up. A piece of paper sticks to his cheek, damp with drool. Iwaizumi curses inwardly.

“Go back to sleep, dumbass,” he chides, not as harshly as he means to. To make up for it, he kicks Oikawa in the side, knocking him back to the floor.

“Iwa-chaaaaan,” Oikawa brightens, sitting back up with a smile, as he blinks sleep from his eyes. “You’re home!”

“I thought you’d be in the lab still,” Iwaizumi admits, reaching over to pull the paper from Oikawa’s face. He can’t help but smirk at the faded ink that remains on Oikawa’s skin.

“I came here to watch the fight,” Oikawa says, glancing at the TV. He frowns when he sees that it’s off and reaches to turn it back on.

Iwaizumi steps in front of the TV, blocking his path. “How many times have you watched it?” he asks, crossing his arms.

“Only twice!” Oikawa protests, trying to get around Iwaizumi to the TV.

Iwaizumi quickly adjusts his position, knocking Oikawa’s hand away with his knee. “That should be enough for tonight. Didn’t you get something from it?” He eyes the scattered papers, the backwards equation marking Oikawa’s cheek.

Oikawa pauses, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “I learned that Iwa-chan needs to stop eating so much ice cream. I know the camera adds ten pounds but my word.”

Iwaizumi scowls and places his foot on Oikawa’s chest, pushing him over once more. “Are you calling me fat, Shittykawa?”

“I’m only concerned for your health, Iwa-chan.” Oikawa blinks up at him with wide eye that are anything but innocent. “I know it’s impossible for anyone to be as slim and beautiful as myself, but mmph—”

Iwaizumi had knelt and placed his hand over Oikawa’s mouth, and now frowns at him darker than before. “Need I remind you that this is my apartment, and I can throw you out whenever I fucking feel like it?”

“So mean,” Oikawa complains, muffled behind his hand. But his eyes flash playfully and the expression in them says, *But you won’t.*

Iwaizumi hates himself, because his own eyes concede, *No, I won’t.*

He pulls his hand away, sitting back on his heels, as he scans the papers surrounding them. He picks one up, but he can’t decipher the shorthand. It looks like something out of one of those shitty alien movies Oikawa loves.

“Your theory worked, by the way. About the eyes being the most vulnerable part. Our katanas went straight into its brain.”
Oikawa sits up, a delighted grin spreading over his features. Iwaizumi’s heart does a funny thing, but he ignores it. “I knew it! And it was so obvious before, like I can’t believe I only got the idea last week.”

“To be fair, General Ukai was pretty preoccupied in serum production.”

Oikawa’s expression darkens.

Iwaizumi feels his own brows furrow in response. “What’s with that face?”

“It’s so stupid,” Oikawa complains, gathering up his papers into a neat stack, tapping his palm on the top. “All they talk about is the SSP. They should be focusing on figuring out how to stop these things before they evolve into stronger, more violent beasts.”

Iwaizumi feels a lump of dread drop into his stomach, feeling queasy. The thought of the kaiju growing stronger is rather terrifying. Every time his beeper goes off, every time he has to strap on his katana, every single fucking time he has to leap across empty air to land on those ugly beasts, his heart pounds faster than it should, and his chest tightens so hard his lungs ache. It’s not as though the members of the SSP don’t know what they’re getting into with each fight. They do. Each one knows that one day they might not return from a fight. But so far their success rate has been so high (thanks largely to Oikawa and the other scientists at the lab, as well as Captain Sawamura and his training), that people seem to forget that they’re just men. Human. Not superheroes from a comic book.

Oikawa never forgets, however, which is why he runs himself ragged making sure the serum continues to work properly, and studies the kaiju for any signs of weakness, any indication that they might be stopped by easier, less risky means.

Even now Iwaizumi can see how pale Oikawa’s skin is, how dark the circles under his eyes have become. He frowns, reaching over to flick the side of Oikawa’s head.

“Hey, you look like shit. You should go back to sleep. We can go over all this during the debriefing tomorrow morning.”

“Let me watch the fight one more time,” Oikawa says, reaching for the TV once more.

Iwaizumi smacks his hand away quickly. “No.”


Iwaizumi points to Oikawa’s bed. “Bed. Sleep. Now.”

Oikawa whines, flopping down on the floor with all his limbs spread out in a long, gangly mess. “What are you, my mom? I’m a twenty-five year old grown-ass man.”

“Then fucking act like it.”

Oikawa doesn’t move off the floor, so Iwaizumi sighs and stands. He grabs Oikawa’s ankles and, with a soft grunt, lifts and throws him onto the bed. Oikawa lands with an indignant squawk, bouncing once, before landing in a red-faced heap of offense.

“Iwa-chan is so mean to me!” he wails, and Iwaizumi fights his oncoming headache.

“Shut the fuck up and go to sleep,” he snarls, looming over Oikawa with what he hopes is a threatening and intimidating expression. “You’re no good to anyone half-dead from exhaustion.”
Oikawa opens his mouth to protest, but then it falls closed again, wordlessly. Iwaizumi suppresses a smirk. He steps over to the bed, reaching down to lightly flick his friend’s forehead. “Sleep,” he says, gentler this time. He can’t help it. Oikawa’s face is flushed, and his hair is disheveled from sleeping on the floor. That faded equation still graces his cheek, and his clothes are wrinkled, his shirt riding up his stomach from the toss.

Iwaizumi wishes he had his phone on him to take a picture, because it’s rare to see Oikawa in any way but perfectly put-together.

Oikawa grumps, but turns onto his side, grabbing his pillow to stuff it beneath his head. “Will Iwa-chan make breakfast tomorrow morning?” he asks, his voice lowering into a sleepy murmur.


Oikawa mutters something indistinct, but he seems to be finally heeding Iwaizumi’s words. He allows his red-rimmed eyes to fall closed, and Iwaizumi spends the next half-hour straightening up the rest of the room, before leaving for his own. He hurls himself on his bed, every muscle in his body aching. He knows he’s due another injection soon, but he’s too tired to stand and go into the bathroom. So he closes his eyes and tries not to remember the feeling of swinging in mid-air, with only Kuroo’s sweaty, blood-covered hand keeping him from (probable) death.

They’re not superheroes. They’re still human.

***

Tsukishima Kei stands before a dilapidated apartment building, frowning. He doesn’t see how anyone could stand to live in such squalor, but then again he isn’t an orphan living off the welfare of the city and the pity of those nice enough to lend a financial hand. No, that person is heading towards him now, struggling with multiple bags of groceries.

“Hurry up,” he calls, shifting the bags in his own arms. “I can’t stand around all night holding your groceries. Curfew is about to start.”

“Sorry, Tsukishima-san!” Yamaguchi Tadashi exclaims, panting softly, as he finally reaches the front door. He fumbles briefly for his key, before setting it in the lock and turning it. He steps inside quickly, moving back to allow Tsukishima to enter as well. He does silently, wrinkling his nose at the putrid smell coming from the ceiling above.

“We’re having plumbing issues,” Yamaguchi explains apologetically. “Um, you can just set those in here . . .”

He leads the way into the tiny kitchen, and there’s barely enough for two people to stand side by side. Tsukishima sets his bags on the minuscule counter and thanks the gods that even on his modest policeman salary he can afford a better place than this.

“Thanks again for helping me,” Yamaguchi says, beginning to set the food in the painfully bare cupboards and fridge. “I’m sorry if I inconvenienced you.”

Tsukishima stuffs his hands inside his pockets, shifting slightly on his feet. It’s not that he’s exactly bothered by Yamaguchi’s words, but something about them doesn’t sit right with him.
“I’m only doing my duty to protect and serve the community,” he says, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Besides, you shouldn’t have been out so late anyway.”

“Sorry, Tsukishima-san,” Yamaguchi says again, flushing faintly. “I just didn’t have time before because of the attack so I—”

Tsukishima waves him off, turning toward the door. “I don’t care about your excuses,” he says. “Plan better next time.”

“Y-yes, Tsukishima-san.”

Okay, that is really starting to grate his nerves now. He clicks his tongue in annoyance. “We’re nearly the same age,” he says. “You don’t have to call me –san.” It makes him feel old, and he’s only twenty. It’s only been six months since he left the academy, and he immediately recognized Yamaguchi as an old classmate of his when he’d run into the young man outside the store. He still isn’t sure why he stopped and helped him, after watching him struggle with his multiple bags for a full minute. He told himself it was because curfew was approaching, and he didn’t think that bright-eyed, freckled face would fare well in lock up.

“So . . . Tsukishima-kun?” Yamaguchi tries hesitantly.

Tsukishima sighs. That doesn’t sit quite right with him either. He waves his hand again. “Just . . . call me what you did back in school.”

“Oh. Okay . . .”

There’s still some confusion in Yamaguchi’s expression, but Tsukishima doesn’t feel like sticking around to try and put him at ease. Instead, he bows, says a curt, “goodnight,” and leaves the apartment, just as the curfew bell begins to ring. Cursing beneath his breath, he sprints to where he left his bike in front of the store.

Yaku Morisuke and Haiba Lev are waiting for him at their usual corner. Also, as usual, Lev is talking excitedly about something, and Yaku looks relieved at the interruption, as Tsukishima skids to a stop in front of them.


“I had to deal with an idiot,” Tsukishima says, sitting back in his seat.

Lev is practically bouncing on his toes, and he looks like he wants to say something, and while Tsukishima couldn’t care less about what Lev has to say, he finds himself sighing and turning toward him. Listening to him babble could be a good distraction from earlier, abnormal thoughts.

“What is it, Haiba?”

“DID YOU SEE THAT FIGHT?! KUROO-SAN AND IWAIZUMI-SAN ARE SO FREAKING COOL!”

Yaku winces, cupping one hand over his ear. “Stop shouting, Lev. We’re standing right here.”

“I was with you during the fight, so yes, I saw it,” Tsukishima says, with more patience than he feels. He turns to look at Lev. “Has he been like this since this afternoon?”
Yaku gives him a withering glance. “What do you think?”

“I can’t believe you guys are so calm about this! It was the best fight I’ve ever seen!” Lev exclaims.

“You say that about every fight,” Yaku points out, pulling his bike out in front of him in order to straddle it.

It takes a moment for Lev to realize that they’re apparently about to move out now, and he quickly hops onto his own bike. “No, but I really mean it this time! Man, I wish I’d been able to get his autograph! Kuroo-san is so cool. Like, the way he always grins and takes out those kaiju like they’re nothing! And of course Iwaizumi-san is cool too, but he never does any interviews! Bokuto-san is my favorite though, I think. Though Akaashi-san is usually the one who thinks up all the strategies. Hey, did you know they’re making action figures of them?! There’s supposed to be a video game coming out too! I hope I have enough money to buy it.”

Lev continues to ramble, even as Tsukishima and Yaku pull ahead on their bikes, eyes scanning the streets for anyone out past curfew. The law was placed to protect civilians from being caught outside during a possible nightly attack, though so far that had only occurred once and not outside the perimeter of the downtown quadrant. Nobody knows why the kaiju have so far only remained in that section of the city, but it doesn’t seem to be a fear on anyone’s mind that they might start migrating through the prefecture.

Tsukishima knows that it’s only a matter of time before a kaiju emerges in a populated area. It’s one of the reasons why he takes his job so seriously, why his heart stutters in his chest whenever they find someone outside during curfew. Not much about the kaiju is public knowledge, but it’s well known to all that they hunt and kill and eat any living thing they come across. Tsukishima assumed this meant they had incredible sense of smell and perhaps amazing eyesight as well, which meant anyone outside while the super soldiers were not on duty could be in danger of becoming prey, or even drawing the kaiju out.

It’s not a thought Tsukishima likes to dwell on. The nights are already too frightening to allow his thoughts to linger on ‘what ifs.’ But he finds himself drifting toward them anyway, because he can still hear the screams, can still taste the blood in his mouth, can still see that shock of blond hair across a pale face . . .

“Tsukishima-san, look out!”

Lev’s warning comes too late. Tsukishima veers quickly to avoid the wide-eyed young man, but the turn is too quick, his braking too hasty, and he falls over onto the street, grimacing as pain flares in his right elbow. He turns his head to glare at the person responsible, and his stomach twists as his eyes light on a sprinkling of freckles across a small nose and wide cheekbones.

“What the hell are you doing out here? I just left your apartment,” Tsukishima seethes, standing and righting his bike.

He can feel the curious stares of Yaku and Lev at his back, but all he can focus on is Yamaguchi, and then the military-grade rifle he clutches in both hands against his chest, like a shield. He pauses, allowing his gaze to scan over the make and model. It’s a sniper rifle, an older American weapon. He racks his brain a moment to think of the name, before recognizing it as a M21. It’s obviously been used yet well taken care of, and Tsukishima can’t help but wonder if its Yamaguchi’s or if he simply found it somewhere.

It looks so out of place in Yamaguchi’s hands it would be comical, except for the fact that it’s a very real weapon in the hands of someone currently breaking the law.
“And what, exactly, is that?” Tsukishima asks, his voice now calm and collected as always.

This apparently frightens Yamaguchi more than his anger did, for he hops back a step, eyes impossibly large.

“I-It’s mine!” he exclaims defensively. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t be out, but I-I like to practice and I can’t during the day, so I-I . . .”

Yaku steps forward, two fingers resting on the top of the nightstick attached to his belt. “Tsukishima-san,” he says slowly. “Do we need to be worried right now?”

 Lev’s eyes are a contender against Yamaguchi’s, and his mouth has dropped open in shock. Tsukishima can tell he’s probably going to be useless if Yamaguchi puts up a fight, which only increases his annoyance at the entire situation.

“No,” he says to Yaku, shaking his head while keeping his eyes on Yamaguchi. “This is just the idiot I mentioned earlier.”

Yamaguchi’s face flushes, but he doesn’t attempt to defend himself again, and Tsukishima hopes that means he’s realized that he’s an idiot. Self-aware idiots weren’t as irritating as those who had no idea.

“Go home, Yamaguchi,” he says flatly then. “And I better not see you out after curfew again. If you want to practice so badly, come by the station. I can take you to a range.”

Yamaguchi’s eyes might pop out of his head if they get any larger. “Y-yes, Tsukishima-san. I mean, -kun, I mean . . . Tsukki. Sorry, Tsukki!” He turns and scampers off in the direction of his disgusting apartment, and it’s only then that Tsukishima realizes his entire body is tense, as though he’d prepared himself for a fight, which is ridiculous seeing as he doubted Yamaguchi even knew how to throw a punch.

A soft snicker beside him causes his muscles to clench again, however, and he turns to look at a smirking Yaku.

“Tsukki?” he says, an eyebrow lifting.

“Don’t call me that,” Tsukishima says, moving to get onto his bike once more. He can feel the tips of his ears burning, which only strengthens his aggravation.

“I think it’s cute!” Lev supplies helpfully, and Tsukishima wonders if it’s too late in the game to request new partners.

He pushes off the ground, pedaling faster than before in an attempt to possibly leave the two behind. The wind pushes through his hair, ruffling the back of his jacket. He finds himself wondering again why Yamaguchi would have a weapon like that. He realizes that he should have requested to see some registration, and mentally berates himself. He’ll have to go by the apartment the next day to check on that.

He tells himself that’s the only reason he has to go, not at all thinking about the way Yamaguchi’s freckles stood out in his pale face, bathed in yellow from the overhead street lamps. Nor did he think about the way his old nickname sounded coming from the lips of an old almost-friend. Because that’s what they’d been, right? Not quite friends, but not quite strangers either.

He tells himself once more not to dwell on the past.
It never is a fulfilling pastime.

Chapter End Notes

We're in for a wild ride, guys.

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
The chapter number went up because, well, this is turning out to be a more massive thing than I originally planned. Oops?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s no real surprise to anyone that someone who loves owls as much as Bokuto would take on some of their characteristics. In this particular case, it’s their nocturnal nature. Bokuto feels the most energy at night, and this often leads to Akaashi scolding him and telling him to go to sleep so he’ll be able to wake up the next day at a decent time.

Of course this never happens, and Akaashi always has to wake him.

He does it nicely, though, despite the fact he’s no doubt exasperated by Bokuto’s antics by now. Every morning, he starts by laying a strong hand on Bokuto’s shoulder, shaking it gently.

“Bokuto-san, it’s time to get up,” he says in his quiet voice, which is easy to ignore. So Bokuto does, shifting over to bury his face into his pillow.

Akaashi leaves then, and Bokuto is able to get a few more minutes of sleep in. He’s always vaguely aware of Akaashi returning, however, and when he pulls aside the curtains to allow the sun to filter in through the window and hit Bokuto’s face, he’s more awake than he likes to be.

“Akaashiiii,” he whines, hugging his pillow closer.

“It’s time to get up,” he repeats, his voice firmer than before.

He leaves a second time, and Bokuto ponders if he can close the curtains and sneak back into bed before Akaashi returns. Because he always does, and the third time is always what gets Bokuto up, because delicious smells begin to waft in from the kitchen, and Akaashi stands in the doorway wearing an apron and a faint smile and says, “Breakfast is ready.”

And then Bokuto is up and at the kitchen table, scarfing down whatever delectable dish Akaashi decided to make that day. He truly is blessed with an amazing best friend and partner. As Akaashi moves about to clean the pot and pan he used, Bokuto ends up watching him, grinning at the graceful movements of the other. Akaashi is so beautiful it’s almost unfair. Bokuto can’t count how many times girls have approached his stoic friend, begging for a photo or an autograph, while Bokuto bounces anxiously beside him. Akaashi is always gracious, of course, and indulges them, but he doesn’t seem to enjoy the attention (to Bokuto’s endless frustration).

When Bokuto first heard about the Super Soldier Program and saw the demonstrations made by Kuroo Tetsurou and Iwaizumi Hajime, he couldn’t wait to turn twenty so he could register. It seemed like fun. All the publicity and celebrity-status, not to mention the cool gadgets and motorcycles. Fighting the kaiju seemed like fun too. Kuroo and Iwaizumi made it look easy, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, confusing and disorienting the creature before delivering the killing blow. Bokuto grew up knowing about the kaiju. They first appeared when he was three years old. His childhood was full of horror stories about the kaiju, and eventually he simply got used to their presence. It was just a part
of life that these creatures appeared and everyone lived in fear that their town or village may be next.

Despite this, Bokuto knew the danger they posed, and so he seized the opportunity to fight them, to join that team that seemingly took down each monster effortlessly. He didn’t want his friends and family to be afraid anymore. The satisfaction of protecting others was better than all the perks of the job, though he did enjoy those immensely.

Akaashi didn’t want him to join. Bokuto still remembers that argument with more clarity than he would like. He was in a mood for weeks following it. He understood why Akaashi feared for him. But with Kuroo and Iwaizumi at his side, what had he to fear? Still, Akaashi refused to talk to him for months afterwards, and Bokuto began to wonder if maybe he shouldn’t join the SSP after all.

Then one day during training, Akaashi appeared with a registration form in hand. Bokuto was ecstatic.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, practically yelling.

Akaashi gave him a tiny smile. “Someone has to make sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

Bokuto was too excited to do anything but hug his friend, completely forgetting that logically Kuroo and Iwaizumi would have his back, so Akaashi being there was technically unnecessary.

Akaashi lied about his age in order to join, but thankfully that never backfired on him. The two trained vigorously, and when the time came to undergo the serum treatment, they both entered the lab together.

Bokuto still isn’t completely sure why Akaashi joined. It couldn’t have just been for him, could it? But Akaashi doesn’t seem interested in the glory or even the fights themselves. Of course he puts all his efforts into them. He strategizes their attacks with precision, and his intensity on the battlefield can’t be denied. Yet he never seems to be enjoying himself. You shouldn’t devote your life to something unless you enjoy it, right? That’s Bokuto’s belief, at least.

“Hey Akaashi,” he says now, after swallowing down a bite of omelette. “How come you didn’t stick around last night? There were a lot of reporters! You could’ve gotten an interview!”

Akaashi shrugs, slipping off the apron and hanging it on the hook by the fridge. He turns to the table then with his own plate of food, sitting across from Bokuto. “I didn’t have anything to say.”

“But they were taking pictures! We could’ve gotten one together,” Bokuto says, pouting now.

Akaashi glances across the room to the next, where a shelf sits on the wall full of dozens of photos Bokuto has of the two of them.

“I think we have enough.”

Bokuto waves his fork. “We can never have enough photos, Akaashi! They’re precious mementos of our time together!”

He thinks he sees Akaashi smile. He thinks. But then Akaashi returns to his food, his expression impassive as usual. It’s frustrating, but Bokuto knows his friend well enough to hazard accurate guesses toward what he’s feeling . . . most of the time, anyway. He’s not as observant as, say, Kozume Kenma. That kid knows how to read people like they’re holding signs above their heads stating exactly what they’re feeling. Bokuto can only read Akaashi because of their close friendship. He’d say he’s about 85% accurate when he does.
“Hey Akaashi, will you spot for me during training today?” he asks hopefully.

“Huh? Of course. Don’t I always?” Akaashi asks, glancing up at him with a puzzled frown.

It’s adorable, and Bokuto grins. “Oh, yeah. Guess so.”

***

Kuroo hates leaving Kenma at the beginning of the day. It’s particularly painful because Kenma never says anything, simply grips the back of his jacket, looking up at him with wide eyes silently begging him to stay. But Kuroo always has to gently pry those slender fingers off him, intensely apologetic, with anxiety twisting his stomach.

“I’ll be back,” he promised today, as usual. “Call Hinata.”

Then he dropped a small kiss on Kenma’s forehead. For a moment they both froze. That wasn’t a usual thing. Hugs? Yes. Holding hands? When the situation called for it. But kisses? That wasn’t a line they’d crossed. Until now. It was a chaste thing, nothing to be worried about, and yet Kuroo fled the apartment immediately, as though he had hellhounds after him.

On his ride to the base, he wonders why he freaked out so badly. Kenma is his best and closest friend. They have been through so much together, it seems stupid be anxious over a single, innocent kiss. So why does his heart still pound at the thought of it? Why can he still feel the soft warmth of Kenma’s skin beneath his lips?

Knowing he should at least apologize for his abrupt departure, he pulls his phone out the minute he pulls into the parking lot of the SSP military base. He finds there’s already a text from Kenma waiting for him. Its subject reads don’t be stupid, which just spikes his heart rate into new heights.

But let it never be said that Kuroo Tetsurou is a coward.

He opens it.

From: Kenma
Subject: don’t be stupid

it doesn’t change anything

Kuroo breathes a sigh of relief. He quickly sends back a simple reply (good :) ), wondering absently if that means he can do it again sometime. Then he mentally berates himself, because that’s the last thing he should be thinking as he walks into the base and heads toward the debriefing room.

“I’m just saying, Kuroo looks like he’s got a great dick,” Nishinoya Yuu is saying nonchalantly from his position at the head of the table, a seat he most definitely isn’t allowed to take.

The others around the table, Tanaka Ryuuunosuke, Bokuto, and Akaashi consider this statement with surprising thoughtfulness. Kuroo chuckles, completely confused, not that that’s ever stopped him from chiming in his opinion.

“What about my fantastic dick?” he asks, swaggering into the room and flopping down on a chair. He faces the others with a grin, enjoying the slight flush that colors Akaashi’s cheeks, while Tanaka and Bokuto grin back.
“Ryuu asked me Fuck, Marry, Kill for you, Bokuto, and Akaashi, and I said I’d fuck you, which apparently came as a surprise,” Noya says, shrugging.

“Oho ho?” Kuroo can’t help but feel flattered, though he is somewhat taken aback that they’re playing this type of game so early in the morning. He wonders if Captain Sawamura knows he’s got a tiny mischief-maker spinning in his chair. It doesn’t appear as though their superior officer has arrived yet.

“Who did you choose for Marry and Kill?” Kuroo asks, curious despite himself.

“Marry Akaashi, Kill Bokuto,” Noya says promptly.

Kuroo glances over at Bokuto, who visibly deflates.

“It’s not fair,” he complains, folding his arms and scowling at the table. “I’d make a great lover or husband!”

Kuroo wonders if he’s about to go into one of his moods, and is about to spout off a joke to make him laugh, when Akaashi touches Bokuto’s shoulder lightly.

“I’d marry you, Bokuto-san,” he says solemnly.

Bokuto rolls his eyes. “Pfft, we’re practically already married!” he exclaims, though Kuroo notices a faint blush rise on his cheeks.

“What about you, Kuroo?” Noya asks, still spinning in the chair.

“Would I marry Bokuto?” Kuroo asks, grinning faintly.

Noya stops spinning and grips the table, swaying back and forth a moment. “Fuck, Marry, Kill: Bokuto, Akaashi, Iwaizumi.”

Kuroo finds he doesn’t truly need to think about it. “Fuck Bokuto, Marry Akaashi, Kill Iwaizumi.” Inwardly he apologizes to Oikawa.

Bokuto’s eyes light up. “Oho ho ho? You’d really fuck me, Kuroo?” he asks, seeming much too delighted at this prospect.

Kuroo eyes him skeptically. “Is there something you want to tell me, Bokuto?” he asks, smirking faintly.

Bokuto just beams at him, until Akaashi coughs awkwardly.

“What about . . . Captain Sawamura, General Ukai, and, uh, Doctor Sugawara?” Noya asks next, tapping his chin.

“Marry Sugawara,” the rest say in unison.

“I’d fuck Sawamura-san, I think,” Tanaka muses, scratching his chin. “He can be really scary. Kind of a turn-on.”

The others look at him, aghast.

“What?” he asks.

“Do you want to *die*?” Bokuto asks, his volume level rising.
“Well?! The only other option is General Ukai and do any of you really want to fuck him?” Tanaka asks incredulously.

Disgruntled murmurs of dissent circle the room.

“Guess we gotta murder Ukai-san then,” Noya says cheerfully.

“You’re going to do what?” a new voice enters the room, deep and ominous.

Kuroo notices how both Noya and Tanaka visibly flinch, and even Bokuto looks startled, his head whipping around in search for the source of the interruption. Akaashi simply sighs, and Kuroo can’t help but laugh, as Captain Sawamura Daichi steps forward, frowning deeply.

“Ahhh, don’t mind,” Noya says sheepishly, grinning as he rubs the back of his neck. “We were just playing a game!”

“Get out of my chair, Nishinoya,” Sawamura says flatly, and Noya pops up, scurrying around to sit beside Tanaka, who gives him a sympathetic fist-bump.

“I apologize for my tardiness.” The captain of the military squad assigned to the SSP looks exhausted. Kuroo wonders if he was up all night reviewing the tapes of the attack, just as Oikawa does. “Let’s start the debriefing, shall we?”

“Excuse me, Sawamura-san,” Akaashi says softly, raising his hand as if in school. “But Iwaizumi-san isn’t here yet.”

Sawamura scowls again, looking around the table as though he’s just noticed that their team is missing a member. “Where is he?” he asks darkly.

“Probably dropping Oikawa off at work,” Kuroo supplies helpfully, drawing his phone out of his pocket. Technically they weren’t allowed in the briefing room, but he knows everyone carries theirs in anyway. Well, maybe not Akaashi. “I can call him if you want.”

Sawamura sighs, rubbing his forehead. “We don’t have time to wait,” he says. “I have a meeting with the general at ten-hundred hours. We’ll have to proceed without him. Someone take notes to give him later.”

Everyone stares blankly, because of course none of them thought to bring a pen or pad to write notes. In the end, Akaashi sighs deeply and draws out a small pad and a pen from his pocket. Bokuto looks on admiringly.

“Tanaka, Nishinoya, did you have any trouble with the crowd last night?” Sawamura asks, looking down the table at the two officers.

It’s hard to believe sometimes that the two imps across from him are actually lieutenants in the captain’s squadron, especially when Noya grins and flips Sawamura a peace sign.

“No trouble to report, sir!” he quips. “The men were shouting, the women were crying, and the children were screaming or laughing depending on the age . . . business as usual!”

“No one tried to get through the barricade,” Tanaka continues. “I saw to it personally that the police stationed around the crowd held off any fanatics trying to be heroes or to get a picture of the Flying Crows.”

Kuroo chuckles. “Is that what they’re calling us? I’d rather be a cat.”
“Can I be a horned owl?” Bokuto asks, perking up at the sound of nicknames.

Sawamura sighs. “Figure out your celebrity names later,” he says, waving off Noya’s reply. “Have the police been cooperative, then?” he asks, turning back to Tanaka.

Tanaka nods vigorously. “Yes, sir! I made sure to be extra intimidating when I gave them your orders.”

Noya nods with him. “I saw him myself. He was very intimidating.”

“Why, thank you, Yuu.”

“You’re quite welcome, Ryuu.”

Sawamura rubs his temples. “How about you, Kuroo?” he asks, interrupting Kuroo’s snickering.

“Sir?” Kuroo straightens his back, reminding himself that he’s a professional. He tries not to shrink beneath Sawamura’s withering glare.

“Did the attack go as planned?” he asks.

Before Kuroo can reply, the door to the conference room swings open, and a scowling Iwaizumi walks through.

“You’re late,” Sawamura comments idly.

“Something came up,” Iwaizumi says, unapologetic.

Kuroo raises an eyebrow. “Did you spit or swallow?” he can’t help but ask with a smirk, earning him a murderous glare. He holds his hands up in surrender. “Sorry, sorry.” He grins still, though, as Noya and Tanaka snicker behind their hands.

“Kuroo,” Sawamura says with a look that says behave. He turns to Iwaizumi then. “We were going over the attack. I just asked Kuroo if the attack went as planned.”

Iwaizumi nods. “Oikawa was right about the eyes. They appear to be the most vulnerable part of the kaiju’s bodies. It saves a lot of time from trying to cut through the skin, but the only downside is figuring out a way to get on top of them. We used a building, with Akaashi and Bokuto’s explosives, but we won’t be able to do that every time. We’ll run out of buildings.”

“Hm, what do you propose then?” Sawamura asks.

Bokuto jolts upright in his seat. “Akaashi has an idea for that! He mentioned it last night!”

Kuroo looks over with some interest, as does the rest of the group, and Akaashi’s cheeks redden.

“It’s just a basic sketch,” he murmurs, tearing a page out of his pad and sliding it across the table to the captain.

Bokuto bounces. “It’s a really good idea! I bet Asahi-san can make them super fast.”

Sawamura studies the paper, as Noya and Tanaka hop out of their seats and crowd around his in order to peer over his shoulder at the paper. Kuroo has to resist the urge to do the same. Iwaizumi only appears vaguely intrigued.

“It’s a harness that shoots cables that attach to the kaiju and then pull you toward it. Like a grappling
hook, only you don’t have to climb the rope. It retracts into the harness, so all you need to do is try not to get hit while in the air.” Akaashi explains this all while keeping his eyes on the table, while Bokuto beams.

“Whoa, this looks so cool!” Noya exclaims.

“Can I have one too?!” Tanaka asks.

“Hold on,” Sawamura says, laying the paper on the table. “This is an interesting idea, but I’ll need to run it by the general first. We need to make sure that we can afford to make them, then we need to hire the engineers, and I’m sure this will require new training for SSP as well.”

“I’m up for it,” Kuroo says, though he notices Iwaizumi’s silence has intensified, as he scowls down at his folded arms.

“Asahi-san can make them, can’t he?” Bokuto asks.

Akaashi shakes his head, glancing sidelong at Bokuto. “Asahi-san is a mechanic, not an engineer.”

“Huh? What’s the difference?”

Akaashi sighs. “I’ll explain later.”

Sawamura stands. “If that’s all, I should fax this to the general before our meeting,” he says, picking up the paper once more. He turns to Akaashi. “Will you accompany me? I want you to explain how this works to General Ukai in person.”

Akaashi’s eyes go wide, but he nods. Bokuto slaps him on the back with a grin. “Way to go, Akaashi! Getting a face-to-face with the General! Blow his socks off!”

Kuroo desperately tries to hold back an inappropriate response to the harmless statement. To his gratification, Noya seems to be struggling as well. Bokuto remains blissfully oblivious, and he simply beams, as Akaashi gathers his notes.

It’s only as Sawamura begins to leave that Kuroo remembers the question he wanted to ask. He stands, bowing respectfully, all traces of mirth gone from his expression, carefully wiped away. He wants his question to be taken seriously.

“Sir,” he says. “I have a concern.”

Sawamura pauses, considering Kuroo curiously. “Go on.”

“It’s about the publicity surrounding the SSP. I’ve heard that they’re going to make action figures of us, possibly even create a video game.”

“WHOA, REALLY?!” Bokuto practically leaps out of his seat in excitement. “That’s so cool! I want one!”

Kuroo fights a grimace. “As cool as that is,” he continues (and he has to admit that it does sound pretty cool), “shouldn’t we be worried that all this celebrity status is making us seem, well, less like soldiers and more like rock stars or something? I mean, we’re doing a job here. A serious job. But nobody seems to understand that.”

He can feel the atmosphere in the room dampen at his words. Iwaizumi grunts softly.

“I agree,” he says, standing as well. “The people aren’t as cautious as they should be. They know
we’ll save them, so they don’t bother preparing for the worst. Oikawa’s calculations have told him that these beasts are getting stronger. I can tell that they are myself. The one we took down yesterday was bigger and more vicious than the one we fought last month.”

Kuroo nods. “I’ve noticed that too.”

Sawamura looks pained, but he nods. “I’ll bring it up to the general, but I doubt he’ll agree. The celebrity status keeps people from panicking and causing trouble.”

Iwaizumi frowns. “I understand that, sir, but—”

Sawamura holds up a hand, cutting him off. “I said I’ll bring it up. You both have made good points, so I’ll make sure your side of the matter is heard clearly. Satisfied?”

Kuroo and Iwaizumi exchange a look. Kuroo can see the frustration behind Iwaizumi’s eyes, but the way his lips tighten tell him that he’s done talking. Suppressing a sigh, Kuroo turns back to their captain.

“No, but we’ll defer.”

Sawamura nods. “Get to training. I’ll send you all a memo with the general’s decision on the new equipment.”

Those in the room salute, as Sawamura exits. Kuroo pulls out his phone then, sending a quick text to Kenma.

To: Kenma  
Subject: the celebrity thing

I mentioned your concerns to the captain. He said he’ll speak to the general but don’t get your hopes up

Less than a minute later comes the reply,

From: Kenma  
Subject: re: the celebrity thing

thank you

Wondering at the strange fuzziness in his chest, Kuroo pockets his phone and turns to Bokuto.

“Last one to the weight room buys the other coffee for a week,” he challenges, taking off then to Bokuto’s indignant shout,

“But I don’t even drink coffee! Hey!”

***

Kenma sits with his legs crossed beneath him, staring blankly at the screen in front of him. Although he knows it shouldn’t be a big deal, he can’t stop thinking about the kiss Kuroo planted on his forehead before he left. He did it so naturally, as though they did that sort of thing all the time. What
was thinking as he did it? Or had he not been thinking at all?

Kenma’s fingers curl tighter around the controller in his hands, watching passively as his character dies dramatically. Shouyou leans over from his spot beside him, peering into his face.

“Hey, are you okay? That’s like, the third time you’ve died,” he says, eyebrows furrowing slightly over his nose. It’s cute, and Kenma can’t help but smile faintly.

“I’m fine,” he says, because it’s true. Kuroo is just at the base for training and a debriefing. There’s no kaiju attacking, so everyone is safe for the time being. He has no reason to be anxious or worried.

So does his stomach feel so queasy?

To add to his growing unease, Shouyou has started to fidget beside him, the way he does when he wants to say something but is still gathering the courage. Sighing, Kenma pauses the game, turning to look at his friend.

“What is it, Shouyou?” he asks patiently, peering through the strands of hair that have fallen in front of his face.

“Well, it’s something I know you’re not going to like,” Shouyou says, rubbing the back of his head, as he tilts his body to one side, looking at the screen instead of Kenma’s face. “But I’ve been giving this a lot of thought, so hear me out, okay?”

Kenma narrows his eyes, his chest starting to ache as the anxiety intensifies, pushing his heart into a faster rhythm.

“Okay,” Shouyou continues, looking back at Kenma. He grabs his knees, rocking forward. “I want to join the Super Soldier Program. As a soldier.”

Kenma’s heart stops. He can feel an icy hand creeping into him, grabbing the muscle and squeezing hard. He knows he’s staring blankly, but he can’t think of anything to say. A lump has formed in his throat, so he’s not sure he can talk even if he could come up with something.

Shouyou has started fidgeting again. “I think I’d do really great!” he hastens on. “I always got top marks in P.E. at school! Well, for running at least. I mean, I’m still fairly active. I know I’m small and not very strong, but I can jump! You saw how Kuroo and Iwaizumi jumped onto that monster yesterday! I could do that! It’d be easy! All I have to do is SWOOSH and then POW!” He sweeps his hand up in the air, and then brings it down as a fist into his other hand.

Kenma hears him, but finds it difficult to concentrate on his words. All he can focus on is the rushing in his head, on the mantra starting to print its way across his mind,

*I’m going to lose him too. I’m going to lose him too.*

“I see them on TV, and I just . . . I don’t want to sit here and be helpless, you know?” Shouyou’s hands go to the side, gesticulating wildly. “I want to be strong like them. I want to save the world too!”

“Shouyou.” Kenma’s voice is quiet, soft. It’s all he can force out at the moment, though he struggles to swallow back the rest of the lump in his throat.

Shouyou stops, hands frozen in the air. He lowers them after a pause, tilting his head as he studies Kenma’s expression. His own is open and curious with just a hint of apprehension.
Such an innocent face.

“Are you sure about this?” Kenma tries to keep the tremble out of his voice. He curls his fingers into the too-large cuffs of Kuroo’s sweatshirt. He’s not sure why he’s still wearing it, but it makes him feel safe. He wonders briefly if Shouyou would be safe if he gave the sweatshirt to him.

Shouyou nods vigorously. “I really want to do this,” he says.

Kenma sighs. “I can’t stop you . . . I guess.” He looks toward the screen, staring at the large letters spelling PAUSE until they start to blur.

“Are you mad?” Shouyou asks hesitantly after the silence lengthens uncomfortably.

Kenma shakes his head, picking up his controller once more. He isn’t mad. He’s not sure what he is. Disappointed? Not quite. It’s something closer to fear, but he doesn’t want to admit that. He unpauses the game, causing Shouyou to scramble for his own controller so he doesn’t get left behind. The two of them play on quietly, which is unusual for Shouyou. But he keeps glancing at Kenma out of the corner of his eye, and Kenma knows that he’s probably worried.

“I’m not mad,” Kenma says finally, when Shouyou glances at him for the fifth time.

“Really?” Shouyou asks, his voice rising hopefully.

Kenma nods, and Shouyou grins, returning to the game with his usual vigor.

It’s around six in the evening when Kenma gets up to start working on dinner. Shouyou switches to a first person shooter, and Kenma goes ahead and starts on enough food for three. His phone vibrates as he’s getting out the rice, and he flips it open, setting the bag on the counter.

From: Kuro
Subject: oh yeah

I’m bringing the team over for dinner. That okay?

Breathing an inaudible sigh, Kenma replies with the affirmative, adding water to the pot he’d brought out. It’s not that he doesn’t mind the team. He actually likes them. But he’d hoped to bring up Shouyou to Kuroo, try to convince him to talk his friend out of registering. He isn’t sure he’ll be able to do that with the others around.

He’s just putting the finishing touches on the sushi when he hears the door open. Padding on socked feet to the front of the apartment, he curls his fingers once more into the cuffs of his oversized sweatshirt, pulling his arms to his chest as Kuroo, Bokuto, and Akaashi file into the apartment.

Kuroo is laughing at something Bokuto apparently said, kicking his boots off. His eyes are almost hidden by his cheeks, he’s grinning so hard. The sight causes Kenma’s stomach to flutter peculiarly. He tries to ignore the sensation, and it’s easier when Bokuto notices him.

“Kenma!” he exclaims, in the voice of one who’s discovered buried treasure.

Kenma can’t stop the faint smile that curls the edges of his lips. “Hey Koutarou.”

Bokuto grins, holding out his hand hopefully. Kenma steps underneath it, allowing him to pet his head. It’s something only Bokuto can do. He earned the right a year previous after saving Kuroo’s life. Kenma was wary of the overenthusiastic man-child at first, unsure if his nature would be irritating or not. But he reminds Kenma of Shouyou, which made it easier to warm up to him.
Kenma immediately saw Akaashi as a kindred spirit, though, and he nods to him now with another small smile. Akaashi returns the gesture.

“It’s good to see you, Kenma-kun,” he says in his quiet, soothing voice. “Sorry for intruding.”

Kuroo is looking at him expectantly, and Kenma realizes that he hasn’t given him his usual welcome hug. Stepping forward, he wraps his arms around Kuroo briefly, not wanting to linger when there’s food waiting. Kuroo’s arms don’t immediately release him when he tries to step back, however, and Kenma glances up in confusion.

Kuroo looks as though he wants to say something, his lips part to do so, but then they shut and he smiles instead. “Smells good in here,” he says after allowing Kenma to step out of his embrace.

Kenma tries to calm his heartbeat, which had quickened momentarily. Telling himself not to worry about what that meant, he nods and leads the way into the kitchen. He’s already set the table for six, and looking at the spread he realizes that someone is missing.

“Where’s Hajime?” he asks, glancing over at Kuroo.

Kuroo shrugs. “Having dinner with his boyfriend, I’d assume.”

Kenma frowns slightly.

“He means Oikawa,” Akaashi supplies helpfully.

“WHOA, WAIT!” Bokuto exclaims. “Oikawa and Iwaizumi are dating?!”

“No, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi sighs. “They’re not dating.”

Bokuto looks horribly confused, but that is when Shouyou decides to enter, his face immediately lighting up in delight at the sight of Bokuto and Akaashi.

“Oh wow, oh wow!” he yells, bouncing on his toes, his hands curling into fists. “Bokuto-san! Akaashi-san! You’re the ones that do the- the BOOM! And the GWWWASH!”

Akaashi looks amused, and Bokuto’s eyes widen. He runs over to Shouyou, touching the tips of his fiery orange hair with a look of awe.

“This is Hinata Shouyou,” Kuroo says, taking a seat at the table. “He’s Kenma’s friend.”

“He’s so cute,” Bokuto says with a grin over at Akaashi, who simply shakes his head with a faint smile.

Shouyou has started bouncing again, and when Bokuto turns back to the table to sit, he practically flies over to take the seat next to him. “This is so cool,” he babbles excitedly. “I can’t believe I’m actually meeting you in person! Oh wow. Oh man. What kind of explosives do you use? Do you always work together? Who comes up with the strategies? Like how do you know exactly where to place the bombs? Do they always go off in time? What happens if—”

“Shouyou,” Kenma says, pained. He isn’t entirely sure he can handle both Bokuto and Shouyou under the same roof. Shouyou starts at the sound of his name, looking sheepish.

He grins and tugs on his hair. “Sorry! I guess I got carried away there.”
Kenma shakes his head, picking up the food and carrying it to the table as Bokuto attempts to answer all of Shouyou’s questions. Kuroo looks up at him gratefully as he sets the platter of sushi down, and Kenma fights the heat that rises to his cheeks, his mind going to that morning when Kuroo’s lips had rested against his skin, soft and warm.

He sits down quickly, not looking at Kuroo as he begins to serve himself. The others do the same before clapping their hands together and giving thanks for the food. As they dig in, Shouyou continues to pester Bokuto and Akaashi, and even Kuroo with questions about their attack strategies and the different types of kaiju they’ve fought. Kenma is able to tune them out for the most part, concentrating on the food and wondering briefly if it’s too salty.

“. . . And that’s why I want to register for the program myself!”

Kenma’s head whips up at this, and he stares across the table at Shouyou. But his friend is beaming up at Bokuto, not noticing the stare. Kenma glances over at Kuroo, hoping to see something akin to apprehension at the very least. But all he sees is amusement.

“You sure are a feisty thing,” Kuroo says with a grin. “We could use that enthusiasm in the field. Iwaizumi’s such a grump. You’d be fun to work with.”

“You really think so?” Shouyou gasps excitedly, wriggling in his seat.

Kenma frowns, stabbing his sushi with his chopsticks instead of picking it up. Kuroo doesn’t seem to notice his shift in mood, because he’s still grinning at Shouyou. Kenma’s frown deepens.

“I’ll bring your name up to the general,” Kuroo continues, leaning back in his seat. “It’s hard work though. You sure you’re up for it, shrimp?”

“I am, I am!” Shouyou shouts, stars in his eyes. He’s so swept away in the prospect of fighting alongside his heroes that he doesn’t even react to the nickname.

Kenma wants to excuse himself from the table, but that would call attention, and he doesn’t want that. So instead he shrinks further into Kuroo’s sweatshirt, picking apart his sushi. After a moment he feels eyes on him, and he looks up to see Akaashi watching him, a worried wrinkle creasing his forehead. Ah. Kenma almost forgot how observant Akaashi is.

There’s a question in his eyes, but Kenma doesn’t answer. He’s not sure what his answer would be. He looks back down at his plate, trying to sift through his feelings to find the most correct one. He’s angry, disappointed, anxious . . . fearful.

It’s fear.

That’s the most intense feeling swirling in his chest just then.

He hates it.

He hates being afraid. He hasn’t stopped, not since the first kaiju attack. It only grew worse after Kuroo joined the SSP. He remembers that anger wasn’t the most intense feeling then either. No, fear had permeated every cell in his body, wracking his chest with pain and filling his head with nightmares.

And now Kuroo was going to let it happen again, only this time with Shouyou. The only member of his small broken family that isn’t involved. Who shouldn’t be involved.

“Kenma?”
Kuroo’s voice startles him out of his darkening thoughts. Kenma blinks, looking over at his best friend. Now Kuroo has that worry wrinkle too, though it’s more deeply set in his skin. Kenma shakes his head, because he doesn’t want to have this discussion, this argument, here in front of the others. Instead, he stands and begins to clear away the empty dishes. Kuroo’s hand catches at his elbow, but Kenma shifts away, pulling out of Kuroo’s grasp to continue toward the sink.

Shouyou and Bokuto are now exclaiming over the upcoming action figures and potential video game. Akaashi’s voice chimes in every now and then, but Kuroo says nothing more. Kenma can feel the heat of his gaze on his back, but he doesn’t turn around.

*Yes, I’m angry with you,* he sends across at Kuroo, hunching his shoulders, as he rinses the plates.

Akaashi seems to sense the change in atmosphere. He stands, suggesting that he and Bokuto leave as it’s getting late. Bokuto and Shouyou continue their conversation as they walk toward the door. They pause briefly to shout a farewell, and then the apartment falls silent.

The ticking of the clock over the stove can be heard, loud and intrusive. Kenma can feel a tense shudder move up his spine, and he scrubs more viciously at the dish in his hand. There’s a grease spot that’s difficult to clean.

“Kenma.”

He scrubs harder, gripping it tightly.

“*Kenma.*”

Kenma jolts, as the dish breaks in half. He blinks, staring down at the two pieces of ceramic, one lying in the sink, the other still in his hand. He hears Kuroo curse, and then his friend is beside him, prying his fingers off the dish and grabbing both his forearms to inspect his hands.

“Are you okay? Did you get cut?”

Kenma shakes his head numbly. He looks up into Kuroo’s face, sees the worry on it, and his heart clenches.

“Don’t let him,” he forces out, his voice trembling despite his best efforts to keep it steady.

Kuroo frowns faintly, turning his gaze to Kenma’s face. “What are yo—”

Kenma turns his arms in Kuroo’s grasp, grabbing onto his wrists. “You can’t let him.” His whole body is trembling now, and he can tell that his nails are digging into Kuroo’s skin, but Kuroo doesn’t flinch.

He does, however, seem to realize what Kenma is asking of him.

“Kenma . . . Hinata is an adult. If his heart is set on joining the SSP, there’s no way either of us are going to be able to talk him out of it. You know how stubborn he is. The best I can do is make sure he has a good coach; someone who won’t let him go into the field until he’s ready.”

He sounds almost sad, but Kenma can’t accept it, not with Shouyou. He lets go of Kuroo’s arms, pulling away, as he takes a step back. The ticking is loud again, pounding against his head. Or maybe that’s his heart in his throat. He can’t tell. He sees Kuroo’s hand move toward his face, possibly to brush his hair behind his ear. It’s a normal gesture, but Kenma shies away. Kuroo freezes, and the hurt that settles over his expression tears into Kenma’s chest.
He turns away from the sight, holding his arms close to his chest, as he runs toward his bedroom. He can hear Kuroo calling after him, but he doesn’t stop or turn around. Shutting the door, he leans against it briefly. The bedroom looks almost foreign. It doesn’t feel real to be standing there. He wishes it wasn’t real, at least.

His limbs feel heavy as he walks toward the bed. Instead of getting into it, however, he drops to the floor, crawling underneath it. There, in the safe confines of the enclosed space, he curls into himself, hugging his knees. Closing his eyes, he lets the tears fall.

Kuroo knocks on the door, softly at first, and then more insistently. When Kenma doesn’t respond, he eventually opens the door and steps in uninvited. Kenma wants to yell at him to go away, but he doesn’t. Because he isn’t sure that’s what he truly wants. So instead he opens his eyes, watching Kuroo’s feet cross over to the bed. They’re followed by Kuroo’s knees, covered with the dark material of his jeans, and then Kuroo’s lying on the floor, looking in at Kenma.

“Kenma, I’m sorry,” he says, his voice thick with the tears that are shimmering in his gold eyes. “You know I would stop all this if I could. Please . . .” He reaches his hand forward, inching cautiously under the bed.

Kenma watches it approach unsure if should take it. He wants to. He wants to so badly his fingers begin to twitch. But that would indicate forgiveness, and he’s still angry.

But at Kuroo? Or at the situation?

Kenma closes his eyes, a headache brewing behind his eyes.

“Kenma, please.”

Kuroo’s broken voice is what moves Kenma’s hand forward. He grasps Kuroo’s fingers, and then takes the hand as a whole, giving it a firm squeeze. When he opens his eyes, there’s relief in Kuroo’s wet eyes.

“I won’t let anything bad happen to him,” Kuroo swears. “I promise, Kenma.”

A sigh shakes Kenma’s chest; he can almost hear his ribs rattling from the release. Slowly, he inches out from under the bed, tucking himself against Kuroo’s body instead. Kuroo wraps his arm around him instantly, pulling him close. Kenma can feel Kuroo’s own sigh tremble through him, as he presses his nose against the top of Kenma’s head.

“I’ll protect him,” Kuroo says, stronger this time, with a resolve that causes Kenma’s chest to ache once more.

But who’s going to protect you?

***

Technically, nobody is allowed in the lab after eight o’clock without express permission from the general. It’s a rule that most of the scientists adhere to, albeit grudgingly. Kageyama Tobio isn’t a simple scientist, however. He’s head of the lab and that title comes with special privileges. It comes in handy whenever he knows one of his subordinates has screwed something up and it needs to be fixed after hours. He swipes his ID card through the reader by the door, and it slides open, the sharp
### Document Content

At the far end of the lab a light is on. Frowning, Kageyama heads toward it. He knows who the rule-breaker is before he rounds the last table and finds Oikawa seated at a computer, typing away furiously.

“Oi,” he says flatly, causing Oikawa to jump in surprise. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Oikawa blinks over at him, huffing a soft laugh. “Oh, it’s just you, Tobio-chan. I thought it was someone important.” He turns back to his work then, unperturbed.

Kageyama bristles at the honorific and the insult. While he was once Oikawa’s assistant, he has long since surpassed him in both rank and skill. He should show more respect.

“You’re not—”

“Shh.” Oikawa waves a hand, cutting him off.

Scowling, Kageyama tries again. “The general explicitly said—”

“Shh. Tobio-chan, please. I know you like to assert your dominance, but now really isn’t the time.”

Kageyama clenches his fist at his side, shifting on his feet. He isn’t sure what to do. While it would be well within his rights to throw Oikawa out of the lab, he isn’t sure he could physically lift the man if he tried that way. And talking to him reasonably seems out of the question as well. So in the end he just stands there, feeling like an idiot but not sure what to do about it.

Eventually Oikawa sighs and turns back to him. “Your awkwardness is distracting,” he says. “If you’re going to scowl at me, at least do it from across the room.”

Kageyama opens his mouth to protest, perhaps even spout off an insult (if he can think of one good enough), but before he can, he notices something familiar on Oikawa’s computer. He leans forward to get a closer look, causing Oikawa to lean back reflexively.

“Is that . . . is that an analyses of the anomalies found in the kaiju samples we brought in yesterday?”

Oikawa eyes him skeptically. “Yes . . .”

“Why are you looking at these? Our assignment is to work on adjusting the serum formula for the super soldiers to make them impervious to pain.” Kageyama leans back, frowning down at his former mentor. “This is useless information. We’ve already established that the kaiju feel pain.”

Oikawa shakes his head. “This has nothing to do with the new serum for the soldiers.”

Kageyama frowns. “Then why—”

Oikawa spins his pen around in his fingers. “Tell me, Tobio-chan, have you noticed anything about the kaiju?”

Kageyama’s frown deepens. “We haven’t been assigned to examine the kaiju—”

“Don’t you think we should be? We’re sending these soldiers out to deal with creatures we know nothing about! Don’t you think it’s odd that neither the military nor the government seem to have any interest in the monsters our soldiers are fighting?” There’s a gleam in his eyes now, a feverish look that sends Kageyama’s stomach into a state of unease.
He takes a step back. “Oikawa-san, you need to return to the work you’ve been assigned. If our superiors wished us to know about the kaiju, they’d tell us to investigate. But they haven’t. So we should just focus on the task they’ve given us.”

Oikawa stares at him so intently, that Kageyama can feel heat rise up the back of his neck, burning his ears. He attempts to maintain eye contact, but he feels his gaze sliding toward the computer monitor instead.

“You seem to have a lot of faith in our military and government, Tobio-chan,” Oikawa states, his voice lilting in a way that sets prickles to Kageyama’s skin.

“Of course I do,” Kageyama mutters. He shifts his glare back onto the man before him. “If you want to continue working here, I suggest you put some faith in them too. They’re doing their best to protect us. Making the soldiers stronger will help us defeat the kaiju, so stop wasting time on your own projects.” He’s proud of how confident and self-assured his words sound, but then Oikawa laughs, and Kageyama suddenly feels like a sixteen-year-old boy again, about to be scolded by his mentor.

“You’re still so egotistical. It’s almost sad.” Oikawa shakes his head with a small grin. “You want to keep your job, your high position, so you’re willing to be a puppet.”

Kageyama clenches his fist. “I’m not a puppet!” he exclaims, his heart hammering in his chest. He can feel the blood rushing quickly to his face, only this time it’s not from embarrassment. How dare he suggest that he’s being controlled in any way! He knows why he’s here. To save the world! That’s the only reason why any of them are here. How could such a selfless motive be called egotistical?

Turning on his heel, Kageyama storms toward the door, deciding to let Oikawa get in trouble for being logged in after hours. If Takeda-san asks why Oikawa was at the computers at such a late hour, Kageyama will just tell him that Oikawa refused to listen to his commands. It won’t reflect badly on him, right? He did try, after all.

“Oh, Tobio-chan~”

That infuriating sing-song voice calls after him, and Kageyama halts though he knows he shouldn’t.

“I just want you to think on this: ever wonder why the kaiju have only appeared in downtown Sendai? If they are truly living in the sewers, why are they not popping up everywhere?”

Kageyama says nothing, because honestly the thought never occurred to him. But he doesn’t turn around to ask Oikawa to elaborate. If Takeda-san or General Ukai knew the reason, they would surely tell him, as well as the soldiers. Oikawa just wants to get him angry. To doubt himself so Oikawa can regain his position as head of the lab.

Well, Kageyama won’t let that happen.

Swiping his card through the sensor, he steps through the doors and heads for the elevators.

There’s no conspiracy. Oikawa’s just crazy from lack of sleep.

But as Kageyama pounds on the button for the first floor, he can’t help but recall that intensity in Oikawa’s gaze. Even if there’s nothing going on, Oikawa seems convinced that there is.

This could pose a problem.
Chapter End Notes

Up Next: Daichi runs into Doctor Sugawara, Yamaguchi has a lesson with Tsukishima, and Kenma meets Lev

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
Running Up that Hill

Chapter Notes

This freaking chapter is the longest I've ever written, which is why it took so long. I'm so sorry about that!

This chapter is also dedicated to Gin because she's amazing/art batman, and her livestreams last weekend gave me life (in beautiful, painful ways).

(Also, please remember the fiction part of that science fiction tag because, well, I'm no scientist)

(Gah, I completely forgot to mention that I started a tag for this fic on tumblr! So you can track "fic: iwfyitd" for updates and tears and such XD)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There's a little coffee shop called Sunshine Café that's fifteen minutes from the base. In order to get there by 07:35, however, Daichi has to leave his apartment twenty minutes earlier than he would have to otherwise. There are plenty of closer coffee places on his way to the base, of course, but none of them have a certain ash-blond regular.

Daichi knows it's pathetic, but seeing as Sugawara Koushi is the closest thing he has to a friend, it's nice to talk to him outside of work. They're usually too busy to exchange more than a couple of words while at the base, and despite having exchanged phone numbers early on in their working relationship (for convenience sake), Daichi has found no valid excuse to call him.

So for now he settles for the ten-minute conversations they have every morning at this café. He lingers just inside the doorway, staring at his watch. At 07:34, he steps into line, and after the minute passes, Sugawara enters. Today it's raining, and he's wearing a yellow rain-jacket with a hood. He pushes back the hood, eyes scanning the café until his gaze lands on Daichi. Immediately he grins, lifting his hand in a wave of greeting.

Daichi waves back, stricken (not for the first time) by how beautiful Sugawara is. The shine of his wide hazel eyes, the beauty mark above his cheek, the brightness of his smile, the cream of his skin...he's every bit as lovely as a woman. Daichi often thinks that if he weren't straight he'd already be in love with Sugawara. (Perhaps he thinks about that option a little too much, but he tries not to dwell on it.)

Stepping to the side, he makes way for Sugawara to join him in line.

“You're looking chipper this morning,” Daichi comments, always amazed at how Sugawara can manage to be so alive this early in the day.

Sugawara beams at him. “It's a beautiful day,” he replies. “Don’t you think?”

Daichi casts a dubious look toward the large glass windows where he can see the splash of raindrops against the pavement, falling fast and heavy. At least there's no lightning, he thinks.

“I love the rain,” Sugawara continues. “The soothing sound like a water lullaby, the fresh, earthy
Daichi can’t help but smile back at him. “Well, when you put it like *that*,” he says, stepping up as the line moves. “Seems a hassle to have to bike through, though.”

Sugawara steps with him. He shrugs. “I don’t mind getting wet,” he says. He pauses then, eyeing Daichi’s umbrella where it sits in the crook of his arm. “But I take it you prefer to stay dry.”

Daichi laughs. “Well, considering my position at the base, it’d be rather unprofessional for me to show up to work sopping wet.”

Sugawara tilts his head, studying him briefly before facing forward. “Pity. I think it’d be a good look on you.”

Suddenly Daichi is *very* glad that Sugawara isn’t looking at him, because he’s pretty sure his face is bright red. He coughs into his hand, willing the heat to dissipate. Sugawara is still looking ahead, his expression the same as before. Doing his best to calm his racing heart, Daichi approaches the counter to order his coffee. Before he can pay, Sugawara steps up beside him, holding out enough yen to cover both their drinks.

“Add a vanilla latte to that order, please,” he says, while Daichi gapes.

“Sugawara-san!” he exclaims. “I can’t let you do this.”

Sugawara smiles. “It’s already done,” he says, as he passes the money to the cashier and receives his change. “And how many times have I told you to call me Suga?”

Daichi can feel himself sputtering, which he knows probably looks horribly undignified. But Sugawara (No, *Suga*, he reminds himself) has already moved down to the end of the counter, taking their coffees from the barista with a smile and quiet thanks.

By the time Daichi recovers, Suga is before him again, holding out his order.

“Black with two sugars?” he says, an eyebrow quirking upward. “That’s new. Is there a reason?”

Daichi takes the coffee numbly, being very careful to not allow their fingers to touch. “I have to guide some potential recruits through the base today,” he admits.

Suga’s eyes light up. “That sounds fun!” he exclaims. “Do you think I could tag along?”

“Oh,” Daichi hesitates. Suga is looking at him with a hopeful expression, eager and interested. But considering how the morning has gone so far, Daichi isn’t sure he needs the distraction. (And *Suga* would be a distraction he has to admit to himself grudgingly.) A lot is riding on this tour. He knows General Ukai is looking for more men to add to the SSP, so it’s imperative that the tour goes well so they can receive more applicants.

Suga’s eyes begin to dim, and before Daichi can make a full reply, he’s turned away toward the door. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I don’t want to get in your way.”

Daichi’s chest aches, and he reaches out to touch Suga’s elbow before he can stop himself. “It’s not that I think you’ll get in my way,” he says, though he knows it’s not exactly the truth. “I just . . . protocol states that only approved personnel can accompany the tours and . . .” He trails off, because it sounds lame even to him.
Suga gives him a smile, but it’s small and doesn’t reach his eyes. Daichi wants to punch himself in the face.

“Of course,” Suga says agreeably. He sips at his latte, holding it with both hands, as he stares out the window.

Daichi’s stomach is twisting, and he shifts on his feet. He wants to do something to make up for it, but what can he do? He has to leave within the next couple of minutes if he’s going to make it to the base in time to prepare for the tour, but he doesn’t want to leave things like this with Suga.

“Let me drive you to the base,” he says before he can think better of it.

Suga starts, looking over at him with wide eyes. “You don’t have to do that!”

Daichi swallows, tugging at his collar. It feels too tight, but unbuttoning it is out of the question. His uniform is always in perfect condition. It’s something he prides himself on. “You bought my coffee,” he says, attempting to smile as easily as Suga does. “It’s the least I can do. Besides, this way you won’t get your coffee wet.”

Then Suga smiles, a real smile; sincere and beautiful, and Daichi’s chest clenches.

He walks them to the door, opening it for Suga, watching without trying to seem like he’s watching, as Suga pulls his hood up over his face and steps outside. He waits beneath the awning for Daichi to join him. He does, forcing a smile and telling himself that everything is fine. He opens his umbrella and holds it over Suga’s head.

“Where’s your bike?” he asks. “We can put it in my trunk.”

Suga nods to a bike chained to a rack outside the café. They walk over and Daichi stands by awkwardly, as Suga crouches before the rack, setting his coffee cup on the wet ground. Daichi thinks about offering to hold it, before he realizes that his hands are full with his own coffee and the umbrella. It doesn’t take Suga more than a couple seconds to unlock the bike, however, and then they head toward Daichi’s car. He places his coffee inside then helps Suga put his bike in the trunk. Before long they’re on the road heading for the base.

“Sorry for getting your seat wet,” Suga says, brushing back strands of his hair, as he once more pushes back the hood of his jacket.

Daichi is grateful that he’s driving, since he has an excuse not to look at Suga. “It’s fine,” he assures him.

Suga leans toward him, and Daichi shies away automatically, before realizing that he’s reaching for the thermostat. Suga glances at him, eyebrow quirked, and Daichi swallows hard. He doesn’t understand what’s happening or why he suddenly feels so warm despite the chill of the rain. Since when does Suga’s presence affect him like this? He wonders if it’s just a strange manifestation of his guilt for having to reject Suga’s interest in the tour.

With the heat turned up, Daichi starts to feel uncomfortably hot, but he keeps himself from complaining. Instead, he clutches the wheel and keeps his focus ahead.

“How’s, um, how’s work been in the infirmary?” he asks to fill the silence, wishing he’d thought to bring along some music, but in his haste to leave on time that morning he’d left his iPod.

Suga smiles. “As well as can be expected, I suppose. Thankfully I haven’t had to deal with anything serious. Just mainly Tanaka-kun and Noya-kun for scrapes and bruises.”
Daichi tightens his grip on the wheel. “If they’re giving you trouble . . .”

Suga waves his hand dismissively with a soft laugh. “Ah, don’t mind. It’s what’s to be expected from a rambunctious pair such as them. Really, I enjoy the opportunity to spend time with them. It’s been a while since college.”

“Oh, right. They’re your kouhai,” Daichi recalls, and when he glances over at Suga, he sees the man smiling fondly.

“Yes. We were on the same volleyball team,” Suga says with a nod.

Daichi can’t help but smile as well. “I remember you told me you played in high school and college. I did as well. It’s a shame we lived in different prefectures back then.”

Suga grins. “It truly is.”

Daichi feels warm again, but he decides to ignore it. It takes them a little over twenty minutes to reach the base, given the early morning traffic and bad weather, but Suga keeps the atmosphere pleasant, chattering about the time he spent playing volleyball with Nishinoya and Tanaka. Daichi’s content to simply listen to the rise and fall of Suga’s voice, the soft and comforting cadence of it. It relaxes him until he can’t remember why he was so nervous about riding in the car with Suga in the first place.

The military base sits just outside of the perimeter that surrounds downtown Sendai. Watchmen stand at their posts on top of various buildings, cycling through shifts so that there are eyes on the area at all times. They’re the ones that signal the base if there’s a kaiju sighting, and those who receive the signal send the message to Daichi, who in turn relays the message to his Super Soldiers.

The base itself used to be a high school, evacuated and closed after the first kaiju attack twenty years prior. It was successfully converted within a week and now the only remaining indication of it’s previous occupation is faded doodles, notes, and numbers on the inside of the bathroom stalls.

At the front gate Daichi and Suga hand over their ID cards to the guard standing by the entrance. It’s a formality, really, as they’ve gone through this gate enough times for the guards on every shift to recognize them. But Daichi is nothing if not diligent, and Suga doesn’t argue when Daichi holds his hand out for his ID.

Once they park, Daichi helps Suga chain his bike outside the building before they head inside together. The construction crew that worked on renovating the building created an open space directly inside the doors, large enough to hold a few armored trucks and various equipment, with high ceilings and a balcony that wraps around the perimeter, connecting to offices, stairwells, or hallways which lead to other parts of the base. The armory sits to the right of this area, a small room that Daichi thinks used to be a utility closet.

His office is on the second floor, but before he can say a farewell to Suga, a shout from above startles him, and he has just enough time to leap back before the small body of Noya comes flying through the air past him.

“What the hell?!” Daichi yelps, only able to see a brief glimpse of Noya’s face (he’s grinning delightedly), before he whips back toward the ceiling by two cables attached to a harness around his torso. Daichi follows his movement and sees two metal harpoons attached to the cables buried in the wall above the balcony.

Before he can ask what’s going on, Tanaka’s screaming form whips by him, heading directly for
Suga.

“SUGA-SAN, LOOK OUT!” Noya shouts from his perch on the balcony.

Instinctively, Daichi leaps forward, but Suga simply steps to the side. He reaches out his hand and grabs Tanaka’s flailing foot with barely a glance, faster than Daichi can comprehend. He’s still staring, dumbfounded, as Suga smacks Tanaka’s leg and sends him back toward the balcony where he hangs, twirling.

“Your trajectory is completely off,” Suga scolds, not unkindly. “Unless you were aiming at my head, in which case I have to wonder what I did to deserve such an assault.” He grins, even as Tanaka’s face turns red, either from embarrassment or the fact that he’s now hanging upside down.

“I’m sorry, Suga-san!” he yelps, still spinning, though his speed is starting to decrease, as his cables begin to unravel and straighten.

Daichi realizes he’s staring when Suga glances at him, still smiling brightly. Deciding now was not the time to ask Suga where he’d obtained the strength and quick reflexes to bring a flying man to a full stop with one hand, Daichi turns, instead, to glare at Tanaka.

“What the hell are you two doing?” he asks, eyeing the leather straps of the harness around Tanaka’s torso. The straps wrap down around his thighs and between his legs, which seem to be there to support him upright, though they’re failing at the moment. Two shiny compartments sit at Tanaka’s hips, from which the cables run to where his harpoons are imbedded in the wall beside Noya’s.

Noya, apparently not surprised that Suga lived, is attempting to pull his harpoons from the wall with little luck. He doesn’t stop to answer Daichi’s question, and Tanaka attempts to right himself with difficulty.

“Who sanctioned this?” Daichi asks then, wearily rubbing his forehead. It’s too early in the morning for Nishinoya and Tanaka’s nonsense. Suga is snickering behind his hand, which doesn’t help.

“Sawamura-san!” Azumane Asahi, mechanic and ex-soldier, steps into the room, dragging a large net behind him. He drops it when he sees Tanaka dangling under the balcony, with Daichi and Suga looking on, and rushes forward. “I am so sorry! They were supposed to wait until I had the safety net up before they began the test!”

Noya gives up on the harpoons, leaning over the balcony railing then to wave down at those gathered below. “These are the prototypes for Akaashi’s new fighting machines. They just arrived!”

“They said they had your permission to test them out,” Asahi says, apology written across his face. His hair is in a state of disarray, strands falling forward out of his bun into his eyes. He brushes them away, glancing uneasily toward where Noya is still rocking halfway across the railing above.

“And you believed them,” Daichi says flatly, really wishing that Suga would stop laughing.

Asahi winces, looking back toward him timidly. “I’m so sorry, Sawamura-san.”

Daichi ignores this second apology, turning instead to look skeptically at Tanaka, who is flipping over and over while trying to pull himself upright. “Get out of that thing before you kill yourself,” he says.

“Yes, sir, Captain Sawamura-san,” Tanaka says, attempting a salute, which only makes him fall forward to hang upside down once more.
Suga has managed to get control over himself and steps forward to lay his hand on the small of Tanaka’s back. “Here, I’ll help,” he says gently, assisting Tanaka in straightening.

Tanaka begins to unfasten the straps around his torso, as Daichi points to the stairs and frowns at Asahi. “Go help Nishinoya,” he says, leaving no room for argument.

Asahi nods meekly, scurrying to obey.

“Do you even know how they work? Or did you just immediately put them on as soon as they arrived?” Daichi asks, crossing his arms, as he watches the seemingly complicated process of getting out of the harness.

“It was Noya’s idea,” Tanaka says with an unabashed grin. “These things are fucking awesome. We should totally show them off for the kiddies today.”

Daichi curses under his breath, checking his watch. It’s already close to 08:30, and the tour is supposed to start right at 09:00. He claps his hands together to get everyone’s attention. “Right. The potential recruits will be here at zero-nine-hundred, and I expect you all to be on your best behavior, understand? Tanaka and Noya get those harpoons out of the wall and put those devices back into their box. They haven’t been cleared by the general for testing, so technically you could’ve both lost your jobs today, I hope you understand that.”

Tanaka grimaces, but Noya only glances at Asahi, as he drops his harness to the floor. The large man rubs the back of his neck, looking over the railing down at Daichi.

“Um, what should I do?” he asks, and Daichi resists the urge to tell him to jump off the balcony.

“Help them,” he says instead, rubbing his forehead and telling himself not to be mean.

Tanaka finally manages to free himself from the harness, and hits the button that retracts the cables, sending the device flying up toward the balcony. It smacks Noya in the chest, flinging him against the wall. Stunned, he sags to the floor. Asahi yelps in panic and starts to approach him, but Noya brushes away his grasping hand, hopping up unsteadily with a grin.

“BRO! THAT WAS AWESOME! DO IT AGAIN!”

“No! Do as I said!” Daichi shouts, and the two lieutenants and mechanic hasten to comply.

Already it seems like he should’ve asked for a stronger cup of coffee. His head is pounding, and he rubs it again, before noticing Suga at his elbow. Lowering his hand, he turns to the other man. His face feels hot, and he wonders if it’s from his frustration or if it’s embarrassment from yelling at his subordinates in front of Suga.

“Any orders for me, Captain?” Suga asks with an easy smile.

Daichi blinks, unsure if he should laugh or not. In the end he manages a rather undignified snort and shakes his head. “No; I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Suga waves a slender hand through the air. “Don’t mind,” he says, and his smile turns sympathetic. “They’re my kouhai, after all. I know they can be difficult to manage. If you’d like, I can stay here and monitor them while you prepare for your tour.”

Daichi hesitates. “Don’t they need you in the infirmary?” he asks, not wanting to cause any more trouble to Suga than he probably already has. Annoyance at Noya and Tanaka rises in him briefly, but he stifles it as best he can, knowing that they’d most likely not intended for him and Suga to
Suga shrugs, an elegant gesture that seems to fit him in a subtle, indescribable way. “Ennoshita can handle things for a couple hours,” he says. He turns to face Daichi more fully then, his hazel eyes focusing on Daichi’s own dark ones with an intensity that causes Daichi to take a small step backwards, unsure of the pricking sensation that erupts across his skin.

“Please,” Suga continues earnestly. “If there’s any way I can support you and somehow make your job easier . . . I’d like to help.”

Daichi can do nothing but nod wordlessly, and for a moment Suga hesitates, lips parting once more. Daichi finds himself inhaling, his gaze still transfixed by those eyes, waiting. But then Suga’s lips close in a smile, and he bows.

“I’ll see you later then, Sawamura-san,” he says.

“Daichi.” It’s out of his mouth before he can catch it, and Suga straightens slowly. For a moment neither of them move or speak, and Suga’s eyes are studying Daichi’s expression, and Daichi can’t for the life of him read Suga’s. But then those eyes brighten, delight shimmering in their depths, until Daichi wants to hide his face in his hands. Instead, he shoves them into the pockets of his pants, clearing his throat.

“You can call me Daichi,” he says, telling himself that it’s only fair, considering Suga insists on being called “Suga.” But then he realizes that Suga is only part of Sugawara. It’s not as though Suga had allowed him to call him Koushi.

Koushi. Daichi wonders what that name would sound like in his voice, what it would taste like.

*These are not friendly thoughts*, his mind scolds, even as Suga bends at the waist once more.

“I’ll see you later then . . . Daichi,” he says in a voice like velvet: smooth and soft and incredibly comfortable. As though he’d been saying that name his entire life.

Daichi is fairly certain that nobody has ever said his name like that before. To spare himself further embarrassment, he bows sharply in return, before turning and heading for the stairs that would lead him to his office. He has to pass Tanaka, Noya, and Asahi on the way, but his two lieutenants do little more than grin at him, and Asahi’s face is flushed.

Daichi tells himself that those expressions have nothing to do with the exchange just now.

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Kageyama does not enjoy being King of the Lab. It’s quite lonely for one thing. He tells himself that it doesn’t matter that he’s friendless; that science doesn’t call for acts of kindness or compassion. They are all there to do a job: strengthen the SS-415 to make it flawless, to research methods to make the Soldiers better, to facilitate and increase the Program. Kageyama intends to do all this to the best of his ability, which is admittedly far better than most if not all the other scientists in the lab.

He tells himself to soften his words, to not speak so sharply to his co-workers. But if they’re doing something wrong, isn’t he obligated to tell them?
Grimacing, Kageyama leans forward at his desk, pressing the palms of his hands into his eyes. It’s a little past nine in the morning, and already he’s shouted at two members of his team: one for misplacing a beaker, and the other for calculating a piece of the new experimental formula incorrectly. They both apologized and hastened to fix their mistakes, but everyone else in the lab exchanged looks of disgust at Kageyama’s outburst. He might’ve missed this, if it hadn’t been for Oikawa.

“Now, now, Tobio-chan, isn’t it too early for the verbal lashings? You’re making the others nervous,” he said lightly.

That caused Kageyama to pause, and when he looked about the room the only person who would meet his gaze was Oikawa, who smirked. This only made Kageyama more frustrated.

“If they did things correctly, I wouldn’t have to yell,” he insisted.

“They’ve barely had their coffee,” Oikawa said, looking as though he could use a few cups himself. “Even a genius like yourself should know not everyone is at their best in the early morning hours.”

Kageyama flushed, before retreating to his desk, where he proceeded to stare at his calendar with a faint frown for the next hour.

Leaning back in his chair, Kageyama twirls his pen absently, watching as it turns. He wonders if he had been too harsh with two earlier. He tries to remember his words, and realizes that he probably called them ‘dumbasses’ at one point. It’s a rather immature word, now that he thinks about it. Would ‘idiots’ be better? Or wait, no, he’s supposed to be thinking of ways not to insult his coworkers when they screw up projects they’ve worked so hard to obtain. It’s the most prestigious job in the country, so Kageyama really doesn’t understand why anyone would be lazy or inattentive enough to make such simple mistakes.

He’s starting to delve once more into thoughts of how incompetent his team is when he hears voices outside the lab, growing louder. Frowning, he stands and makes his way over to the door, sliding it open in time to see Captain Sawamura about to swipe his ID card through the panel by the door. He blinks in surprise, before smiling faintly.

“Ah, Kageyama-kun,” he says, looking pleased to see him. “Just the man I was looking for.”

Kageyama stares, taken aback by the sight of the captain smiling at him. He narrows his eyes slowly, not sure what to expect but bracing himself for any outcome. He’s still not ready for the titters that sound from behind Sawamura-san, and when he glances over the man’s shoulder, he’s surprised to see a small group of maybe ten or fifteen college students, around his own age, staring back at him.

“Whoa, who’s that guy?” one whispers to his neighbor.

“What’s up with his face? It’s so scary!” another murmurs, and his companion nods slowly with wide eyes.

Kageyama can feel his ears burning. He whips his gaze back toward Sawamura-san, who’s looking at him with an apologetic expression.

“I know you’re probably busy,” he starts, “but these are potential candidates for the Super Soldier Program, and the general asked me to give them a tour of the base. The lab is a large part of the SSP, and I figured it’d be good for these kids to know what they’re getting into as far as the experiments. Would you mind showing us around?”

Kageyama stares in incredulity. Him? Lead a tour? Is the captain fucking nuts? He starts to protest,
opens his mouth to do so, before he remembers that Sawamura-san said the general himself sent these kids on this tour. Would he be disobeying the general if he refused?

“No . . . course not,” he says, and then grimaces. “No problem” seemed too informal to say to a superior, so he meant to say “of course not.” Naturally it came out stilted and awkward, and Kageyama wonders if any of them would notice if he hurled himself into the nearby potted plant.

Sawamura-san’s encouraging smile doesn’t falter, despite the stifled laughs behind him.

Kageyama bows stiffly, before turning to lead the way into the lab. He can feel the stares of his coworkers, as he walks past their workstations. Clearing his throat, he stops a few feet into the room, turning to look at the curious faces staring back at him. His palms are sweaty, so he hides them behind his back, wishing he’d been given advanced notice, because he has no idea what to say.

“Uh, welcome to the SSP Lab where we administer the SS-415 serum to the Soldiers. It’s one of two labs; the other is located in Iwanuma and is the head facility. They, uh, create the serum there and then send it to us. We’re mostly a . . . research lab? We experiment and find new ways to make the serum better and stronger. Only the most brilliant scientists of our time were hired to work on the equations and formulas.”

“So what does that make you? The janitor?” A voice calls out from the group, though Kageyama can’t see the originator.

He frowns, even as the young men snicker and Sawamura-san turns to fix them all with a sharp glare. That quiets them quickly, and the captain shakes his head at them.

“You will be respectful to Kageyama-san while we’re here, do you understand?” he asks.

“Yes!” the group responds, though Kageyama can still hear a few muffled giggles.

His ears feel hot again, and he quickly turns away to lead them further into the lab. He gestures vaguely to the computers set up in rows, various scientists working on their projects seated in front of them. They barely glance up as the group passes, and Kageyama doesn’t stop to introduce them.

“These are the computers. Over there are the beakers and Bunsen burners. We only work with those when we need to test our new formulas. We don’t want to send them over to the Iwanuma lab until we’re positive they work.”

As Kageyama turns back to the group, he sees a hand sticking in the air. He pauses, staring at it a moment, looking down the arm to the owner, a small kid with bright orange hair. He looks like he belongs in high school, not college, and Kageyama wonders briefly if he’s a prodigy like himself.

“Uh, what?” he asks, realizing then that the kid wants to ask a question.

“Have you ever had anything explode?” the kid asks with a grin.

“Sometimes,” Kageyama admits. “I’ve never had anything explode on me, though.” He refrains from adding I’m too smart for that.

“Whoaaa.” The kid’s grin grows wider, almost blinding Kageyama with its intensity.

He blinks. The only person he’s seen before with a smile that bright is Sugawara-san. Or maybe this kid’s smile is brighter. He’ll have to visit Sugawara-san for reference. Turning away quickly, he leads them further down to his desk.
“Right now we’re working on a formula to add to the serum to stop the Soldiers from feeling pain. The general and those higher up believe it’ll make them more effective in battle.”

Again that hand flies into the air. Kageyama frowns but nods to the orange-haired kid to speak.

“Does the serum hurt?” he asks, and that question sparks interest among the group.

They all turn to look at him expectantly, and Kageyama swallows hard.

“Oh, I’m not . . . I mean, I’ve never really . . . serum administration isn’t really—”

“It hurts like hell,” a smooth voice interrupts, and Kageyama turns with a scowl to see Oikawa approach, a charming smile already tilting his lips.

“Hello children,” he says with a friendly wave. “Are you here to find out how wonderful and amazing the Super Soldier Program is? Because I can assure you that if you join, it’ll be the most painful experience your adorable little selves have ever gone through.”

Kageyama stares, recognizing that glint in Oikawa’s eyes, the one that says he’s angry, despite the smile still plastered on his face.


Oikawa simply shrugs. “There’s no use sugarcoating things, Sawamura-san,” he says. “If these tykes are going to join our program, they need to know what they’re getting into.” He sighs, placing his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “It’s a tough road you’ve chosen, kiddos. Are you absolutely sure this is something you want to do?”

His smile slides away, and he fixes them with a stare that has most of the visitors shifting uncomfortably and looking away. The only one who continues to meet his gaze is the orange-haired kid.

“It’s worth it if we’re saving lives, isn’t it?” he asks, and the rest turn to look at him. His gaze doesn’t waver from Oikawa, and Kageyama feels something akin to admiration stir within his chest. “I don’t care if the serum hurts. I can take it!”

Oikawa laughs, grinning. “What’s your name, kid?” he asks, that dark gleam still in his eyes. A few young men step back automatically, but the orange-haired kid remains where he is.

“I’m Hinata Shouyou,” he states loudly. “And I’m going to defeat all the kaiju!”

Oikawa advances on Hinata, staring down at him, still smiling. “Is that so? So you’re prepared for the sleepless nights, the painful growth of muscle, the nausea, the mood swings, the intense desire to take the serum even before the scheduled administration? Not to mention there’s the knowledge that no matter what you do the kaiju will always return.”

A brief look of uncertainty rattles Hinata’s expression, and Kageyama resists the urge to step in front of him, to shield him from whatever has suddenly possessed Oikawa. As it is, he has to clench his fists, frowning and wondering what the hell Oikawa is talking about. He knows that the scientist was one of the ones to administer the serum to the very first Soldier (if he remembers correctly, it was Iwaizumi Hajime), but the serum has been perfected since then. They shouldn’t have the same issues now as they had back when the program first started.

Sawamura-san steps forward quickly, laying his hand on Oikawa’s shoulder. “Oikawa-san,” he says again. “You are out of line. Return to your station.” He pauses, taking in Oikawa’s pale face, the
dark circles beneath his eyes. “Actually, why don’t you go home? Kageyama-san can cover your station.”

Oikawa instantly recoils. He steps back, shaking his head. “That won’t be necessary. I’m fine.” He bows briefly, before turning to head back toward his computer. He gives Kageyama a look that Kageyama doesn’t understand, it seems to be full of resentment, but Kageyama can’t think of why he’d feel that way. He does look exhausted.

“Anyway, I think we can move on with our tour,” Sawamura-san says, turning back to Kageyama. “Thank you for your time.”

When he gives his group a look, they snap to attention and call out, “Thank you!”

Kageyama bows in return, sparing a quick glance toward Hinata Shouyou, who looks frustrated, his brows pulled together over a rather cute nose. Telling himself not to get distracted by such thoughts (it’s unlikely they’ll cross paths again anyway), he turns away as the group leaves the lab, heading for his own station.

He’s not there more than a few minutes before he feels a presence by his shoulder. He stiffens, expecting Oikawa. Which is why he nearly falls out of his chair when an enthusiastic voice cries out in his ear:

“Whoa, that’s so cool! Is that the formula for the serum?”

Kageyama swivels quickly around to come face to face the orange-haired kid from earlier. Hinata Shouyou.

“How are you going to make us not feel any pain? Like will it just be so little things don’t hurt like a paper cut or a broken bone? Or could I get like, impaled and I wouldn’t feel a thing?”

Kageyama shifts away, scooting his chair back. The kid, Hinata, is leaning over him, peering into his face with a grin, and his breath smells like sour milk. The desk is behind him, though, and he can’t move out of the chair without pushing Hinata over, so for now he sits, hands gripping the arms of his seat tightly.

“I don’t know,” he answers with a frown. “We haven’t run those tests yet.”

“That tall guy kinda stepped on your moment, didn’t he? You want me to fight him for you? Oh hey, that looks a bit off. Is it supposed to read like that?” He points over Kageyama’s shoulder to the computer.

Kageyama shifts away, scooting his chair back. The kid, Hinata, is leaning over him, peering into his face with a grin, and his breath smells like sour milk. The desk is behind him, though, and he can’t move out of the chair without pushing Hinata over, so for now he sits, hands gripping the arms of his seat tightly.

“I don’t know,” he answers with a frown. “We haven’t run those tests yet.”

“That tall guy kinda stepped on your moment, didn’t he? You want me to fight him for you? Oh hey, that looks a bit off. Is it supposed to read like that?” He points over Kageyama’s shoulder to the computer.

Kageyama’s frown deepens, and he turns to look at his monitor. A blood sample from one of the Soldiers sits displayed where he’d been running simulations on it to see what changes in the sequence could result in pain suppression. But Hinata isn’t pointing to the new equations, but to the original sample at the top.

“That’s a lot of epinephrine,” Hinata states factually. “Isn’t it dangerous for people to have that much?”

Kageyama exits out of the screen quickly, standing abruptly. “Nothing is wrong with the serum,” he says. “What would a highschooler know about it anyway?”

“Eh?!” Hinata straightens indignantly, rising up on his toes. “I’m not a highschooler! I’m in college!”
Kageyama lifts an eyebrow. “You graduated early?”

“I’m twenty-one!”

Kageyama starts in shock, his eyes widening as he stares down at Hinata’s angry frown.

“But . . . you can’t be. I’m twenty-one.”

“People can be the same age as you, stupid!” Hinata shoots back.

“I know that!” Kageyama gripes, doing his best to regain his composure. “But you’re so small, I just assumed . . .”

Hinata is fairly trembling with outrage, his hands clenched into small fists at his sides. Kageyama is taken aback by his fury, thinking that surely this isn’t the first time someone has mistaken the boy for a highschooler before.

“You want to go?” Hinata asks, lifting his fists. “Your face might be scary, but I bet I can take you.”

“What’s your problem?” Kageyama asks, annoyed now.

“You’re my problem!”

“I haven’t done anything to you!” This is ridiculous, but Kageyama can’t help but retort. Something about this kid has him riled up, his heart pounding, face flushing.

“You called me small!”

“That’s because you are—”

“Is there a problem here?” Sawamura-san appears behind Hinata, a frown darkening his features.

Hinata yelps and jumps to the side, quickly lowering his fists. “No, sir, Captain Sawamura-san!”

Kageyama contemplates telling the captain that Hinata threatened him, but in the end he decides it’s not worth it. The kid would probably only get a scolding anyway.

“Hinata-kun, you’re not supposed to leave the group,” Sawamura-san says, ignoring Kageyama for now, much to his relief. “Don’t wander off again, understand?”

Hinata bows quickly several times. “Yes, Sawamura-san!”

Kageyama resists the urge to roll his eyes, and bows as well. “I’ll return to my work now,” he says, quickly sitting down and facing his computer.

He ignores the sounds of Hinata leaving, his ears still burning from the argument. Turning back to the formula, he pulls it up, staring at the levels of epinephrine that Hinata pointed out. They do seem to be unusually high, but it hasn’t been a problem in the Soldiers, so he probably shouldn’t worry about it, right?

Chewing on his lip, Kageyama pulls up his email. Yachi-kun would be able to tell him if there’s something wrong with the serum. He asks her in a brief message to check if the epinephrine or noradrenaline levels were raised in the newest production of the serum lately. He doesn’t remember sending them a sequence with higher concentrations of those formulas, but perhaps the Iwanuma facility had been experimenting themselves. Or he might just have a bad sample. Perhaps the Soldier had been anxious for some reason that day.
There’s probably nothing to be concerned about.

***

“Hey, Tsukishima, you’ve got a visitor.”

Tsukishima feels his stomach twist, as he looks up and meets the gaze of a large man with sad brown eyes and hair pulled back into a bun. Azumane Asahi. It’s not the first time he’s been to the station, though every time Tsukishima wishes it’d be the last. Just seeing him dredges up painful memories, memories he’s carefully tucked away into a metal cabinet in the far reaches of his mind.

Even looking at him now, hands stuffed into his pockets, shoulders pulled inward in a self-conscious slump, Tsukishima can see how he looked four years and two months ago, July 11th, the day after the one and only kaiju night attack.

The sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky. Tsukki had to shield his eyes with his hand to meet the gaze of the man in front of him. Lt. Azumane stood with his cap tucked under one arm, shoulder hunched. When his eyes met Tsukki’s, he turned them toward the ground, and his chin trembled.

“Is this the Tsukishima residence?” Lt. Azumane asked, and Tsukki had to lean forward in order to hear him.

“Yes . . .”

“I’m afraid I have bad news. Are your parents home?”

Tsukki frowned. Across the street, a dog barked from within the confines of its fenced yard. Next door, a nosy neighbor peered at them from behind some hedges. “They’re at work. What’s going on?”

“I’m . . . I’m so so sorry. It’s about your brother . . .”

Tsukishima blinks, shoving away the memory. He stands and bows to Azumane, as he approaches.

“What can I do for you, Azumane-san?”

“You know you don’t have to call me that. Asahi-san is fine,” Azumane says quietly. When Tsukishima straightens but doesn’t reply, he continues, “I just . . . I made extra for lunch, so I came to bring you this.”

He lifts a bento in front of him. When Tsukishima makes no move to take it, he steps forward to set it down on the desk beside Tsukishima’s phone. Tsukishima stares down at it, feeling the looks his coworkers are giving him and sensing their pity in the soft murmurs spreading throughout the room. His hands tremble, so he places them together in front of him and bows a second time.

“Thank you for the food,” he says, pausing before adding, “Azumane-san.”

He chances a glance at Azumane’s face, sees the way it falls, and cruelly thinks good. He can’t stop the man from showing up at his workplace, but that doesn’t mean he has to make things easy for him either. The first time Azumane came to visit him after delivering the news that tore his world apart, Tsukishima couldn’t believe his audacity. He didn’t want anything to do with the man, yet he
continued to visit his family, offering condolences, fixing their vehicles free of charge, and once in a while making lunch for Tsukishima during his days training at the police academy.

Tsukishima always accepted these gifts because it was polite, but as soon as Azumane left, he threw the bento away or gave it to someone else (usually Yaku or Lev). He doesn’t want this man’s pity or compassion. He doesn’t want to look into those sad eyes and see them water, as the mouth speaks of death and apologizes over and over again. The memory always plays the same, and he’s always able to catch it right before Azumane speaks the words that shattered his heart.

But some days it’s difficult.

“I’m . . . I’m so so sorry. It’s about your brother. He was in my squadron, last night during the kaiju attack. He couldn’t—”

“Tsukki! Hey, Tsukki! Are you ready to go?”

Tsukishima starts, straightening as he pulls himself out of the memory. Looking over Azumane’s shoulder, he sees Yamaguchi. His young, freckled face is bright and smiling. He’s wearing his gakuran, and he clutches a diploma case in his hand, while his other lifts in a wave. Tsukishima’s vision fuzzes, and when he blinks, he sees nineteen-year-old Yamaguchi, face drawn from lack of nutrition, dark bruises under his eyes from nights without restful sleep. His hand is lifted in a wave, but his other holds the handle of a gun case. His smile is the same though, cheerful and warm, and Tsukishima’s chest tightens.

“Wow, Tsukki, I had no idea you were so popular,” Detective Hanamaki calls drily from his desk a few feet away. Opposite him, his partner Matsukawa snickers.

Fighting a grimace, Tsukishima turns to glare at them. “Don’t call me that,” he says. He glances at the papers on Hanamaki’s desk and raises an eyebrow. “Still haven’t caught the leader of the Mad Dog gang, have you? How long has it been now? Three years? Four? Some would say such incompetence is unworthy of a badge.”

Hanamaki flips him the bird, his expression unchanging.

Azumane shuffles in front of him, clearing his throat. “I’m sorry,” he says, and Tsukishima thinks of how sick he is of hearing those words from his mouth. “I didn’t realize you had a date planned.”

Hanamaki and Matsukawa whistle suggestively, as the back of Tsukishima’s neck burns.

“It’s not a date,” he says as coolly as he can.

Leaving the bento on his desk, he grabs his jacket from the back of his chair, pulling it on, as he walks toward Yamaguchi, who’s still smiling.

“I brought some lunch for us too, it’s in my backpack. Do you still like strawberry shortcake? I brought some with me just in case, but we can—”

“Shut up, Yamaguchi.” Tsukishima passes Yamaguchi without looking at him. It’s only a second later that he feels Yamaguchi at his elbow, a surprisingly familiar presence despite his not having felt it since his first term in high school.

“Sorry, Tsukki,” Yamaguchi says brightly, easily falling into step beside him.

Tsukishima doesn’t reply, but for some reason his neck feels warm again.
It’s rather disconcerting, the deft way Yamaguchi pieces together the sniper rifle. But Tsukishima finds himself relaxing somewhat when Yamaguchi takes his first five shots and every single one misses the target, the last one barely grazing the upper arm of the black silhouette.

“You said you’ve been practicing?” he asks, pulling off the noise-blocking earmuffs and raising an eyebrow at his companion.

Yamaguchi pulls off his own with a flush, giving him a sheepish grin. “That’s actually the best I’ve ever shot.”

Tsukishima blinks, unsure if he should feel annoyed or relieved. He shakes his head, stepping forward to place his hand on Yamaguchi’s shoulder. “Relax,” he says. “You’re too tense, so your timing is off. Try inhaling, and then pulling the trigger on your exhale, keeping both eyes on the target.”

He gives Yamaguchi’s shoulder a squeeze, and Yamaguchi starts, firing wide and hitting the next target over. They’re lucky they’re alone at the range. Tsukishima flinches at the noise and frowns, pulling his hand away quickly.

“Don’t ask for my advice if you’re just going to disregard it,” he says, ignoring the way his heart is pounding.

Yamaguchi looks back at him with wide eyes. “S-Sorry, Tsukki! It was an accident.”

Tsukishima clicks his tongue, stepping back and setting the muffs back into place. “Try again.”

Yamaguchi nods, pulling back on the earmuffs and facing forward again, inhaling deeply. Closing his eyes, he exhales, soft and long, and Tsukishima watches as he rolls his shoulders back.

Yamaguchi opens his eyes then, leaning forward slightly as he gazes down the sight of the rifle, the tip of his tongue peeking out from between his lips.

Tsukishima notices this with a spark of nostalgia. It’s the same expression Yamaguchi always had right before he served a volleyball back in their high school club days. The look of careful concentration tinted with anxiety. His freckles stand out more now than they had back then, blending into the healthy glow of his skin. Now his pale skin spreads thin over sharp cheekbones, and Tsukishima wonders what exactly was in those bags of groceries he’d helped carry two weeks ago.

He opens his mouth to ask, but then Yamaguchi fires the shot, his entire expression brightening. He looks to Tsukishima with excitement shivering through him, as he pulls off the muffs.

“I think I hit it that time!”

Skeptical, Tsukishima flips the switch, bringing the target close to inspect it. Surprisingly, a hole stares back at him from the right shoulder of the silhouette. It’s not much, but considering Yamaguchi’s track record so far it’s definitely an improvement.

“That won’t kill anyone,” Tsukishima points out, adjusting his muffs around his neck.

“Maybe I don’t want to kill anyone,” Yamaguchi replies.

Tsukishima frowns. “Then why do you want to learn how to shoot? Is this not for self-defense?”

Yamaguchi stares down at the barrel of his rifle, running a finger along the edge of it. He purses his
lips but doesn’t answer right away, setting an uneasy feeling in Tsukishima’s stomach.

“I . . . I want to join the military,” he says finally, his voice soft. “Help protect people from the kaiju.”

Tsukishima’s blood turns to ice. He can do nothing but look at Yamaguchi in horror, too stunned to keep the expression from his face. His heart stutters out of rhythm, loud in his ears.

“You—”

“Tsukishima-san! Hey, Tsukishima-san! I didn’t know you were going to be here!”

Yamaguchi flinches at the interruption, and Tsukishima quickly rearranges his expression, replacing the mask he’d so carefully built over the years. He turns, as Lev and Yaku approach, Lev waving excitedly.

“Hey, isn’t this the guy you almost ran over a few weeks ago? Whoa, you sure have a lot of freckles. I didn’t notice before!” Lev exclaims, earning him a kick in the shin from Yaku.

“Shut up, Lev,” Yaku says, giving Yamaguchi an apologetic look.

Tsukishima feels something akin to irritation when he spots Yamaguchi’s self-conscious flush, the way his companion reaches up to touch his nose, even has he smiles at Yaku reassuringly.

“It’s okay,” he says, even though it’s clear that it isn’t.

Tsukishima tells himself this annoyance is at Yamaguchi’s obvious lie; that makes more sense than getting upset over someone inadvertently hurting Yamaguchi’s feelings. He starts to tell Yamaguchi to stop being so sensitive, but he stops himself before he does, closing his mouth in a firm line instead.

“Do you need us to get out of your way?” Yamaguchi asks, lifting his rifle from its stand and starting to take it apart.

“You don’t need to,” Yaku says, shaking his head. “We’re here for target practice, same as you.”

“Yaku-san says I can’t hit the broad side of a barn,” Lev exclaims. “Only that’s not true because I’ve hit the side of our family’s barn plenty of times!”

“You were aiming for the cans in front of the barn,” Yaku says in exasperation.

Tsukishima snickers, because he can’t help it, and he’s pleasantly surprised to find Yamaguchi snickering as well. The nervous look in his eyes has faded, his old sparkle returning, so Tsukishima hastens to add,

“Perhaps if he had someone who could actually reach around and help him aim,” he says lightly, and feels gratification when Yamaguchi glances between Yaku and Lev and laughs again.

Lev blinks, not understanding, until he looks down at his arms and then Yaku and laughs as well. “I get it! Because you’re so short, Yaku-san!”

A vein twitches in Yaku’s forehead, and he reaches out to punch Lev in the side, earning him a yelp of pain. Yaku then crosses his arms over his chest, turning back to Tsukishima.

“Why don’t you help him then, string bean?”

Lev, who had been rubbing his injured side, brightens at this prospect. “Ooh, yes! Teach me,
Tsukishima-sensei!” He grins, bowing even as Tsukishima curls his lip.

“I’m not going to do that,” he says, turning to Yamaguchi. “Let’s go eat.”

Yamaguchi nods, finishing putting away his rifle. Yaku, however, doesn’t budge.

“Does he even have a license for that thing?”

Yamaguchi stops cold, his eyes widening. His pale face seems whiter than before, his freckles standing out like ink marks on paper. Tsukishima clicks his tongue, frowning. They’ve only been to the range twice in the past couple of weeks, but somehow Tsukishima conveniently forgot each time to ask if Yamaguchi had a license or some form of registration.

Yamaguchi is clutching the gun case to his chest, as though it’s some precious thing he can’t bear to part with, and Tsukishima notices a name embossed on the side.

Yamaguchi Isamu

Yamaguchi’s father.

Tsukishima sighs, turning to Lev. “I’ll give you some pointers,” he says, fighting a grimace when Lev practically jumps into the air in excitement.

He steps up to stand beside Lev, giving him the same advice that he gave Yamaguchi earlier. As he stands and attempts to guide Lev’s arms into the correct position to shoot, he hears Yaku talking to Yamaguchi and can’t help but half-listen to their conversation.

“So how do you know Tsukishima?” Yaku asks.

“Um, we used to be best friends, back in middle and high school,” Yamaguchi explains, and that throws Tsukishima off right away.

Best friends?

Tsukishima tries to remember if they’d been close enough to be considered best friends by most standards. He remembers wanting that label, but Yamaguchi never came to his house after school, and Tsukishima rarely went over to Yamaguchi’s. They hung out at school and in volleyball club, and sometimes would get something to eat together afterwards, maybe go to the park, but their past interactions feel superficial to him now.

But perhaps they’d meant something more back then.

“Used to be?”

“Well, after . . . after Tsukki transferred to the academy we sort of . . . lost contact.”

Regret colors Yamaguchi’s tone, and as Yaku clucks sympathetically, Tsukishima feels his chest tighten. He knows he probably should’ve kept in contact with Yamaguchi after he left their high school, but he hadn’t known what to say. He hadn’t wanted Yamaguchi to see him in the state he suffered through for years, and even when things got easier it seemed as though too much time had passed to properly reconcile things.

He’s honestly relieved that things have felt normal since their reunion; that nothing’s been awkward or stilted, aside from that first meeting in front of the grocery store. It almost feels like how things were back at the beginning of his first year, pre-July 10th.
Lev interrupts his ruminations, firing off a shot without warning. Tsukishima flinches, rubbing his ear, as he takes a step back.

“You didn’t give me time to put on the earmuffs,” Tsukishima complains, noticing Lev had already put his own on. He wonders when that’d happened.

“Sorry, Tsukishima-san!” Lev says apologetically. “I was concentrating so hard I forgot!”

Tsukishima shakes his head, pulling on the muffs and effectively blocking out whatever else Yaku and Yamaguchi had to say behind them. He nods for Lev to continue, and the young man fires five times more until his chamber is empty. Tsukishima waits until he’s set down the pistol, before bringing the target forward.

“It’s . . . decent,” he has to admit, though begrudgingly, glancing over at Yamaguchi’s with its single hole through the shoulder.

Lev’s target has a hole torn through the side of its stomach, hip, and shoulder. Not perfect, but not terrible either.

“Yaku-san! Yaku-san! Look at how good I did!” Lev says excitedly, grabbing Yaku’s arm and dragging him over to the target.

“You’re too loud,” Yaku admonishes, though he studies the target with some surprise. “This isn’t bad.”

Lev beams. “I told you I could hit the broad side of a barn!”

Yamaguchi laughs, and Yaku just palms his forehead.

“We’re going to have lunch now,” Tsukishima says, looking pointedly at Yamaguchi, who nods at him, still smiling.

“You want to join us?” Yamaguchi asked then, turning that smile onto Yaku, who blinks back at him blankly for a moment.

Tsukishima again feels irritation, but he pushes it back because it doesn’t make sense.

“Lev should practice more,” Yaku says, glancing briefly at Tsukishima.

“Maybe some other time then,” Yamaguchi says, waving.

Tsukishima heads toward the door, trying to ignore the feeling that he’s being watched. Yamaguchi appears at his elbow a few seconds later, swinging the gun case lightly between them.

“I like Yaku,” Yamaguchi declares once they’re outside. “And Lev isn’t that bad either, once you get past his lack of tact. He’s kind of like a giant puppy or something.”

He’s still grinning after he falls silent, and Tsukishima’s heart is doing weird things in his chest.

“You look like an idiot.”

Yamaguchi’s smile doesn’t falter. “Sorry, Tsukki. I’m just . . . really happy that you have friends. After you transferred, I was worried you’d be alone.”

Tsukishima frowns faintly, wanting to feel annoyed by that, but not finding those emotions within him. Instead, he feels something like warmth and that unnerves him.
“They’re not my friends.”

Yamaguchi hums softly a moment, looking entirely unconvinced. “Okay.”

***

**Kuro**

[photo attachment] (08:23)

* dick cloud! (08:23)

* why would you think i want to see that? (08:25)

**Kuro**

* cuz its fukin hilarious (08:26)

* to a 12y old boy maybe or an idiot (08:26)

**Kuro**

* u wound me (08:26)

**Koutarou**

* kenma!!!!! help me!!!! akaashi is wearing his reading glasses and he looks so hot???? what do I dooooooo???? (09:34)

* tell him (09:35)

**Koutarou**

* i cant do that!!! he’ll think thats weird!! (09:35)

* then don’t tell him (09:35)

**Koutarou**

* but i have to say something! he noticed me staring! (09:36)

* i don’t know what to tell you (09:36)
im gonna diiiiiiie (09:36)

Kuro
we’re tryin 2 come up w superhero names Bo says he wants to be The Horned Owl what should i be? i was thinking of something hot like The Jaguar (11:38)

The Bedhead (11:38)

Kuro
rude thats not even hot (11:38)

The Hot Bedhead (11:38)

Kuro
forget it im asking akaashi (11:38)

shouyou thinks your dick cloud looks like volleyballs (12:45)

Kuro
of course he does (12:50)

Koutarou
i told akaashi i liked his glasses but he says i told him that before?? (12:55)

you probably did (12:55)

Koutarou
i dont even remember… (12:55)

did he say anything else? (13:05)

Koutarou
no but he blushed a little oh fuck kenma hes so cute im gonna die (13:05)
Not many people remained near downtown Sendai after the nightly attack of July 10th destroyed several neighborhoods close to the perimeter. A few small businesses stayed open, however, and there’s one cornerstore market where Kenma frequents whenever he or Shouyou have a craving. Shouyou offered to go with him to pick up the pork, but he’d already started on the rice when they discovered their lack, and Kenma didn’t feel like risking the apartment burning down.

It’s not a long walk, and the fall air is pleasant. Not too hot or too cold. Kenma still wears Kuroo’s old Nekoma jacket, however, on top of his shirt and the knee-length skirt Shouyou’s sister Natsu gave him a few months ago. It’s black, and she apparently hates wearing black (“It’s depressing!”), but seeing as she no longer has female friends in the area, she offered it to Kenma. He accepted graciously, and it’s comfortable.

Kuroo doesn’t know he has it, and Kenma tries not to wonder what his best friend would think if he saw him in it.

As he walks, he checks his phone for new messages. Bokuto is still gushing over Akaashi, and Kenma wonders if he’ll ever actually admit his feelings to Akaashi. He doesn’t understand why Bokuto goes to him for advice either, seeing as Kenma isn’t exactly experienced in romance or relationships. Very briefly he recalls the forehead kiss Kuroo gave him a couple weeks ago. He quickly dismisses it from his mind, because it isn’t good to dwell on ‘what if’s.’ It’s a rabbit hole he can’t allow himself to explore, because he knows what lies on the other end.

Kuroo’s main concern is saving the world. Kenma can’t get in the way of that.

He can’t be selfish.
As he stands in front of the pork, trying to decide which would be best to take, he reminds himself that there’s nothing to suggest that Kuroo sees him in that way in the first place. His brain follows that path and brings up the look on Kuroo’s face after the kiss. The expression had been one of shock and horror, but that probably was simply because they’d never crossed that line before and he was afraid of Kenma reacting badly. That’s how Kenma had taken it at the time, at least.

He realizes that he’s poking at the edge of that rabbit hole again and quickly abandons it, focusing on the pork. He grabs one that looks decent and inexpensive and makes his way to the snack aisle, grabbing some that he knows Shouyou will like.

Kenma checks out while sending a note of encouragement to a flailing Bokuto, not making eye contact with the clerk as he murmurs a thank you and grabs the bag. His eyes are still on his phone as he exits, and it’s only when ten minutes pass, and he doesn’t pass the familiar brick wall to his right that tells him he’s reached the apartment complex, that he looks up.

Frowning, he gazes about a completely unfamiliar area. Had he turned right or left when he exited the store? He can’t remember now, and a glance over his shoulder reveals a path he doesn’t recognize. Deciding there’s nothing else he can do, he sits on the curb, texting Shouyou to let him know that he’s lost. Shouyou responds with concern, but Kenma tells him to stay in the apartment, knowing Shouyou’s sense of direction isn’t the best either. No point in them both being lost.

He’s contemplating whether or not to text Kuroo (unsure if he wants to admit that Kuroo should’ve picked up the pork after all), when he senses a presence behind him. Hunching forward, Kenma stares down at his phone, silently hoping that whoever it is will pass by quickly.

“Hey.”

Kenma ducks further into his shoulders, gripping his phone and bag of food tightly.

“Hey, little girl. Are you lost?”

A pair of feet land in front of him, as whoever was behind him jumps off the sidewalk and into the street. Kenma leans back, glancing up briefly. He’s able to see a kind smile in a pleasant face beneath fluffy brown hair, before he shifts his gaze to the side.

“I can help you find your parents,” the man offers.

Kenma shakes his head, ignoring the flare of pain in his chest that suggestion brings. “I’m waiting for someone,” he says, looking up once more in time to see the man’s eyebrows rise.

“Not a girl then,” he says. “My apologies.”

Kenma doesn’t reply, because it doesn’t really matter to him, and turns his attention back to his phone, hoping the conversation is over and the man will move on. He doesn’t. Instead, he steps closer. Kenma stands then, shifting away and guessing he can struggle with whether or not he should text Kuroo somewhere else. The man doesn’t let him move away, however, but instead takes a step to block his path.

“Excuse me,” Kenma says, his heart pounding faster against his ribcage.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m going to need that bag.” The voice is still kind, but when Kenma looks up, he sees the steel behind the man’s eyes.

Turning swiftly, Kenma starts to run the opposite way, but three men step into his path. He quickly stops before he collides with the one in the middle, a short, surly looking man with bleached hair
buzzed close to his head. Two unbleached black stripes sit above his ears and wrap around his head, and his arms cross over his chest, his deep-set eyes glowering at Kenma with enough intensity to cause Kenma to stumble back a few steps.

The men on either side of the angry one look completely different. The one on the right looks bored and doesn’t look at Kenma, but instead stares off to the side, like he’d rather be anywhere else. The one on the left looks nervous, sweat beading his temples, as his features struggle to maintain a glare. His hair is spiked up in a way that makes his head resemble a shallot, but Kenma can’t find the humor in this when he feels the pleasant-looking man from before take his elbow.

“There’s no need for things to get violent,” he says, his voice still calm as before. “We’d just like your bag; you see we are very hungry individuals and would rather not resort to breaking and entering. In exchange, we’ll be more than wiling to ensure your safety while you wait for your friend. So really it’s a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

Kenma stares down at the hand clutching his arm in a vice-like grip. He’s breathing hard, spots appearing before his eyes. He can hear his heart pounding in his ears, his chest tightening further. He should’ve texted Kuroo. He should’ve—

“Uh, Yahaba-san? He doesn’t look too good . . .” The shallot-head man shifts on his feet, his voice sounding genuinely concerned.

“What have I told you about using my name when we’re on a job?” the pleasant man asks, annoyed. Kenma feels his knees weaken, and then he’s on the ground, bag spilled, phone skidding away. He can’t breathe. He grabs at his chest, tugging on his shirt. It’s too tight. He can’t breathe.

“Shit!” The pleasant man, Yahaba, kneels beside him, letting go of his arm in favor of resting his hand on Kenma’s back. “You’re having an panic attack, but it’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you, I promise. Just take a deep breath.”

Kenma doesn’t want to listen to him. He wants Kuroo. Or Shouyou. He wants to be anywhere but here. Where’s his phone? Where’s—

“Hey! HEY! Leave that girl alone!”

“W-We weren’t doing anything, officer!”

“Just listen to my voice. You’re okay. Everything’s okay.”

The hand is rubbing his back in small, soothing circles, and Kenma stares down at the concrete beneath him, arms tucked against his chest, struggling to inhale as Yahaba instructs. But then he’s pulled away abruptly, and Kenma squeezes his eyes shut.

“I told you to leave her alone!” the new voice exclaims.

“Kyoutani!” Yahaba calls quickly, before his voice grows calm once more. “With all due respect, Officer Haiba, this young man is in the middle of a panic attack. If you’re not going to help, then please stand aside.”

Kenma feels a new presence at his side, and a hand larger than the one before rests on his back. It doesn’t rub like Yahaba’s hand, but instead pats in a somewhat awkward fashion. It’s comforting, in a strange way, and the presence doesn’t feel malicious. It feels strong. Warm. Kenma is surprised to feel the tight ball in his chest start to unwind, his breaths coming to him a little easier.
“I know you!” Officer Haiba says. “You’re the Mad Dog gang! Hanamaki-san has been looking for you guys for ages! I should bring you in . . .”

“You’ll bring in the four of us by yourself? Where’s your partner?” Yahaba asks, sounding amused now.

“Oh. Uh . . .”

Kenma feels calm enough to sit up, so he does. Immediately, he meets the gaze of the scary-looking man from before. He’s still frowning, but he seems less intimidating now. Kyoutani. Kenma wonders briefly what his given name is, before Kyoutani pulls his hand away from Kenma’s back quickly.

“You okay?” he grunts, holding Kenma’s phone out to him.

Kenma takes it slowly with a slight nod. He holds it close to his chest, looking around at the scene in front of him. The two other members of the gang are still a few steps away, the shallot-head looking more nervous than before. The bored one seems slightly more interested in the situation and is watching everything through half-lidded eyes. Yahaba is standing next to Kenma and Kyoutani, his arm in the grasp of a very tall, very young, police officer. His name badge says “Haiba” and when he notices Kenma, he starts in surprise.

“Oh, hey. You’re not a girl,” he exclaims. He stares at Kenma with wide green eyes, before they narrow again in recognition. “Hey, aren’t you the one who lives with Kuroo-san? I see you on TV sometimes with him.”

Kenma stands slowly, his legs still shaky. He notices his bag of food is gone, but isn’t too concerned about that at this point. Kyoutani is studying him more closely now, his brow furrowed lower. Yahaba looks intrigued, and Kenma draws Kuroo’s Nekoma jacket closer around himself. He isn’t sure how to get himself out of this situation. Everyone is looking at him expectantly, and he doesn’t know what to say or what to do. All he knows is that he wants them to stop looking at him. Right now.

Bowing quickly to Kyoutani, he murmurs a thank you, before turning and hurrying off down the sidewalk.

“Hey, wait up!” Officer Haiba calls after him, and Kenma runs faster.

Unfortunately, due to the officer’s long legs, he catches up pretty quickly. Kenma slows to a walk, breathing hard again, though this time it’s from exertion. He’s gotten rather out of shape since his volleyball days back in high school. Perhaps he should take up Kuroo’s offers to work out with him at the base.

Or maybe he could just stop leaving the house altogether to avoid situations that require running.

He likes that idea better.

“Are you really Kozume Kenma?” Haiba asks, eyes impossibly wide. “I’m Haiba Lev! I’m a huge fan of Kuroo-san’s. Like, a huge fan! I’m going to register for the SSP as soon as I can. I just have to work on my aim. But once I get that down I’m going to become the best Soldier Japan has ever seen!”

Kenma doesn’t know where he’s going. He stops, studying the street crossing in front of him. It looks familiar, but he can’t place where he’s seen it before.

“There’s the physical exam too, but I think I can pass it. Do you know anything about that, Kozume-
san?"

“No.”

**Kuro**

*Hinata says ur lost???? where are you???
(14:48)*

*if i knew that i wouldn’t be lost* (14:48)

“But Kuroo-san will know, right? Do you think he’d let me ask him some questions?”

“Maybe.”

**Kuro**

*kenma i swear to god* (14:49)

*i’m with a police officer. Don’t worry about me i’m heading home now* (14:49)

Kenma shuts the phone and looks up at Lev, who seems to be contemplating what questions he could ask Kuroo. He looks fairly harmless, and he did come to his rescue with the gang, so perhaps Kenma can trust him.

“Do you know what block this is?” he asks.

Lev blinks, glancing around them. “Block 12, I think.”

“You think?”

Lev yelps indignantly. “I wasn’t really paying attention when I was rushing to save your life!”

“My life wasn’t in danger.”

“The Mad Dog gang is very infamous around here. I can’t believe you’ve never heard of them! They’re dangerous and tricky.” Lev says with a nod.

Kenma tilts his head, thinking back to the look on Kyoutani’s face as he handed Kenma his phone. The gentle way Yahaba had rubbed his back.

“I don’t think they’re dangerous,” he muses aloud.

“Yaku-san says I’m supposed to stay away from that investigation,” Lev says. “But when I saw you on the ground I had to help! Though I thought you were a girl . . . why are you wearing a skirt anyway?”

Kenma glances down at the article of clothing in question. “I like it,” he says simply, starting to walk again. Now that he has an idea of where he is, he thinks he can find his way home. He pulls up a map on his phone, studying it as he walks.

Lev keeps up with him, and Kenma isn’t sure if he’s annoyed or not. On the one hand there’s the security of having the police with him, but on the other hand Lev doesn’t seem like a very competent policeman. He’s more like an overgrown puppy, though that in itself doesn’t irritate Kenma as much as it probably would have before he met Shouyou.

“I’m going to walk you home to make sure you’re safe,” Lev declares, as if that wasn’t already
obvious.

Kenma doesn’t reply, but keeps his eyes on his phone, only glancing up to check his surroundings before returning. It takes about thirty minutes before Kenma sees the familiar brick wall and then the parking lot in front of the apartment complex. He stops, turning to look up at Lev.

“This is it.”

It’s an indication for Lev to leave, but the young police officer doesn’t pick up on the cue.

“Is Kuroo-san home now?” he asks instead excitedly, green eyes bright.

“No.”

Kenma walks toward the building, breathing a sigh when he hears footsteps following. He realizes that Lev isn’t going to leave until he’ve asked Kuroo his questions, so he decides to just ignore him as best he can. He enters the apartment and takes off his shoes, before nearly falling over as Shouyou throws himself on him.

“You’re okay!” Shouyou exclaims, squeezing Kenma tightly.

Kenma wiggles out of the embrace. “Of course I’m okay. And you didn’t need to text Kuroo.”

Shouyou looks only slightly apologetic. “I was worried,” he says, jumping back then when he notices Lev behind Kenma. Automatically his hands come up as fists in front of his face. “Who are you?” he asks loudly.

“I’m Lev!” Lev replies, just as loudly. “Who are you?”

“Hinata Shouyou. I’m Kenma’s best friend.”

“I thought Kozume-san’s best friend was Kuroo-san.”

“Well . . . I’m his second best friend!”

“Are you second because you’re short?”

“Geh?! That doesn’t make any sense!”

Leaving the two in the hallway, Kenma retreats to the bedroom to change into a pair of sweatpants before heading for the couch, glad at least that Shouyou is distracted from asking about the pork. He can smell the curry and rice in the kitchen and wonders if it’ll still be good without the meat. Pulling out his phone again, he texts Kuroo.

i’m home now. when will you be back? the officer followed me home and i don’t think he’ll leave until you get here. apparently he’s a huge fan (15:20)

Kuro
i can come home now all we’re doing is working out got all the meetings and training shit out of the way early (15:22)

Kuro
u ok? (15:22)
Kenma sets his phone aside and pulls his legs to his chest, resting his forehead on them. He pulls his arms into the sleeves of Kuroo’s jacket, using his hands to grip the edges closed over his chest. He can still hear Lev and Shouyou talking, though now they’ve moved on to discussing the Super Soldier Program. Shouyou going on about the tour of the base he had yesterday. Kenma heard it all already, about the cool-looking harnesses, about the weight room and lab, about the frowny-faced scientist with the intense blue eyes. Lev is giving him more interested attention than Kenma had, so Shouyou goes into bigger detail.

These two are so excited about the prospect of saving lives that they’re not even considering their own. Do they not understand the risks involved? Do they not realize that the Soldiers are still human? They’re not invincible or immortal. In fact, on Kuroo’s weaker days Kenma doubts he’d be able to hold his own in a fight against that shallot-head from earlier.

That’s what the drug does to you. It makes you incredibly strong with amazing stamina and speed, but leaves your body ragged and weak after the serum is spent. That’s why the Soldiers are dependent on the injections. They’re addicted to it. They have to be. If they stop taking the drug they’d be weaker than a newborn kitten . . . and possibly die like one as well.

It’s not a glamorous life, no matter how the media tries to spin it.

But Kenma doesn’t know how to explain this to Shouyou, who can only see the benefits of the program, how it saves people and protects them, so he can do nothing but sit and listen while his chest aches and his eyes burn.

Kuroo arrives much sooner than the speed limits should’ve allowed. By this time Shouyou and Lev have migrated into the kitchen, where Shouyou sets the table for his pork-less curry and rice. Kenma remains where he sat, until he hears the key in the lock and the front door opening.

He flies off the couch and into the hallway, launching himself at Kuroo before the man has a chance to set down his helmet. He curses softly, dropping it to the floor, before his arms come up around Kenma to hold him close.

“Did something happen?” he asks worriedly, his hand running lightly up and down Kenma’s spine.

Kenma shudders, not wanting to mention what happened with the gang, knowing that Kuroo would probably hunt them down if he knew, so instead he skips that part of his stressful day and focuses on the issue he has right now.

“Shouyou keeps talking about his tour of the base,” he mumbles into Kuroo’s shoulder. “And now Lev is encouraging him more.”

“Lev? Who’s Lev?” Kuroo asks dubiously, his hand continuing to rub Kenma’s back soothingly.

“The police officer.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound Japanese at all,” Kuroo muses, as he kicks off his shoes and carries Kenma back toward the couch.

“I don’t think he’s full-Japanese,” Kenma admits, glad for the new direction in the conversation.

Kuroo lowers him onto the couch, and Kenma tugs him down to sit next to him before crawling into his lap to lean against his chest. Kuroo doesn’t protest, but wraps his arms lightly around Kenma in response, settling easily into the cushions.
“You said he had some questions for me?”

Kenma nods.

“And he won’t leave unless I answer them?”

Another nod.

“Is it okay if I do?”

Kuroo’s watching Kenma’s face closely for signs of discomfort. Kenma looks back at him for a moment, before sliding his gaze away.

“Yes.” Kenma knows he probably won’t enjoy the subject matter, but if it gets Lev out of his apartment, he thinks he can suffer through it. He doesn’t move from Kuroo’s lap, however, which forces Kuroo to call into the kitchen.

“Yo, Hinata! Bring that Lev guy in here.”

“Is that Kuroo-san?” Lev’s voice asks, rising high in excitement.

“Yeah, yeah, but don’t worry. He’s cool,” Shouyou assures him, and they both walk into the living room, looking quite a sight with their height differences.

“Fucking hell,” Kuroo says when he sees Lev. “What other half are you? Giraffe?”

Lev looks dazed. “I’m half-Russian,” he says, kneeling on the floor in front of the couch. He’s staring at Kuroo in awe, eyes gleaming.

Shouyou sprawls next to him, grinning between the two.

“Are Russians half-giraffe?” Kuroo asks, sounding completely serious, and Kenma wonders if Shouyou honestly thinks Kuroo is “cool.”

“You can ask your questions now,” Kenma says to Lev, and the officer starts, glancing between Kenma’s face and Kuroo’s. His gaze drifts to how Kenma is nestled in Kuroo’s lap, and his lips part. Kenma recognizes the question in his eyes so quickly adds, “about the Super Soldier Program.”

Lev straightens then. “Right! Kuroo-san, I was wondering about the Super Soldier Program! I want to register and was hoping I could get some pointers from you. I think you’re amazing, by the way! I’m a huge fan!”

“So I’ve heard,” Kuroo said, chuckling. “You’re a policeman, right? Do you have experience with fighting?”

Lev’s grin fades. “Oh, um, not really. Yaku-san doesn’t let me get into fights. If there’s a dangerous criminal we have to bring in he tells me to wait by the bikes, and he handles it.” He jolts then, eyes widening. “Oh no! I forgot my bike back in Block 12! Yaku-san’s going to kill me!”

Kuroo and Shouyou look to Kenma for an explanation, and he shrugs. “I think Yaku-san is his partner.”

Lev looks woefully toward the door. “I need to go get it before it gets stolen. It’s police property!”

He turns back to Kenma. “Can I come back later to ask my questions?”

Kenma blinks, unsure why Lev is asking him and not Kuroo.
Now they’re all looking at him expectantly, and Kenma’s shoulders curl inward. He stares at Kuroo’s arm around him, running a fingernail along the black leather covering it. “. . . I guess.”

Lev jumps to his feet, his easy smile back on his face. “Thank you very much!” he cries as he bows, before bounding toward the door and exiting.

Kuroo laughs softly. “Well, that was interesting.”

Kenma would rather not think about it. He slides off Kuroo’s lap to stand. “Can we eat now?” he asks, hoping Kuroo won’t need to leave for the base now that his reason for returning home has gone.

“Oh yeah!” Shouyou exclaims, leaping up from the floor. “Everything’s done now, though it doesn’t have pork.”

Kuroo glances toward Kenma. “I thought you’d gone to get pork.”

Kenma turns away. “I forgot it.”

“Kenma . . .”

But Kenma escapes to the kitchen before Kuroo can accuse him of lying.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Harness training for the Soldiers, Iwaoi date, and more information on July 10th

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
When I said that this was going to be a massive AU, I really did not intend for that to mean word count-wise.

Yet here I am with an over 28k word chapter.

Hope you all enjoy the result of my suffering! XD

(There’s smut at the end of this chapter, btw. If that makes you uncomfortable, stop reading at "He moves down Kuroo’s back" and skip to "Kuroo’s arm snakes around him".)

When Kuroo awakes the sun has yet to rise, the horizon a deep purple merging with the dark blue above, still speckled with stars. He yawns, feeling his jaw crack. Stretching his legs out, he bumps against a warm knee and pauses. A quick glance to the side reveals Kenma curled beside him, arms tucked close to his chest, hair spread out over the pillow. His mouth is open just slightly, a line of drool trailing down to the sheets.

Kuroo grabs the edge of his blanket to gently wipe away the saliva, trying to remember when Kenma came into his room. He thinks it was midnight, and he recalls waking toKenma standing at the end of his bed, dwarfed by the oversized t-shirt he wore to sleep in, boxers barely peeking out beneath it.

“What’s wrong?” Kuroo asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Bad dream,” Kenma replied softly, before crawling under the sheet and blanket without another word.

Kuroo was used to this, so he didn’t protest, simply lay back down and watched Kenma’s face in the light from the street lamps that shone through the window.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

But Kenma shook his head, only reached out with a single finger to run it along Kuroo’s nose. He traversed over Kuroo’s features, a light brush of skin that sent warmth across Kuroo’s cheeks. This wasn’t new either. Kenma seemed to rely on touch memorization, at least when it came to Kuroo. The first time it happened was when they lay together after the funeral, and Kenma had made Kuroo promise that he would never leave him.

Kuroo fell asleep to Kenma’s ministrations, and as he looks at those hands now, fingers curled lightly in front of Kenma’s face, he notices indents in the skin that weren’t there before. Picking up Kenma’s hand carefully, Kuroo frowns at the marks sunk deep into Kenma’s knuckles.

He was biting himself again.

The thought makes Kuroo’s chest clench, and he brushes his thumb across the marks, resisting the urge to kiss the delicate fingers in his grasp. Instead, he rests them back against the mattress, sliding
out of bed carefully. Kenma shifts, but doesn’t wake, and Kuroo pads toward the door, slipping out into the main apartment as quietly as he can.

For a moment he stands in the hallway, stretching his arms across his chest and over his head. His muscles feel weak, and when he punches the wall beside him experimentally it barely vibrates. Sighing, Kuroo makes his way over to the bathroom, opening the cabinet and reaching for the top shelf that Kenma can’t access. There’s a pouch there, and inside are five syringes attached to the pouch with Velcro on one side, and five vials strapped to the other. He pulls one of those vials out, along with a syringe, and then places the pouch back on the shelf.

Not wanting to be seen by Kenma if he decides to go to the bathroom when he wakes, Kuroo moves to the kitchen, stepping out of the sliding doors and onto the balcony. As he empties the vial into the syringe, he faces downtown, and it’s strange to see the city dark and silent. It’s a gray blob of mismatched shapes, most of the buildings dilapidated or gone completely following Bokuto and Akaashi’s explosives and the kaiju’s own deadly swings.

The sky is starting to lighten, the deep purple turning to pink, and Kuroo fixes his gaze on the changing colors, as he tugs down his sweatpants and drives the needle into his thigh. Grimacing, he holds, slowly pushing the serum into his bloodstream.

Almost immediately he feels a rush of heat, as his heart starts pumping faster, his muscles aching in a painful yet pleasant way as they react to the serum. He’s breathing hard, but he can’t help but grin at the sensation of strength flowing through him. It’s addictive, this feeling, and he knows that should worry him, but if this is what makes him able to fight the kaiju and protect the citizens of Japan, protect Kenma, he can handle a little drug addiction.

“You don’t have to look so happy about it.”

Kuroo grimaces, turning to see Kenma standing in the entry to the kitchen, looking small in the space between the wall and door. The light from the emerging sun shifts across his impassive features, casting shadows that hide his eyes from Kuroo. It makes Kuroo feel uneasy, and he carefully extracts the needle from his leg and fixes his pants.

“Did I wake you?” he asks apologetically, deciding not to go into whatever Kenma is implying with that comment.

Kenma shakes his head. “Hungry,” he says, by way of explanation.

Kuroo steps into the kitchen, carefully wrapping the needle and syringe in paper towels before throwing them both away. “I’ll make breakfast,” he says, and Kenma nods, making his way into the living room.

Kuroo starts on some *tamagoyaki* and steamed rice, humming to himself as he goes, tapping his fingers on the countertop absently. He always gets this urge to move about after his injections, his body tense and anxious like he’s waiting for something. Oikawa explained it as his body’s “fight or flight” response, and said that it was normal after injecting the serum. Usually he goes on runs or to the base to work out with Bokuto, but after last night he can’t bring himself to leave Kenma. He can still see those chew marks on Kenma’s knuckles, and he wonders if he can get Kenma to talk about his nightmare.

Once the food is prepared, he brings it out to the couch, grinning faintly when he sees Kenma tapping away on his PSP.

“You’re going to need to put that down to eat,” he says, setting the food on the low table in front of
the couch.

Kenma doesn’t look up and only acknowledges him with a soft, “hmm.”

Shaking his head, Kuroo places himself beside Kenma, picking up the remote for the TV and turning it on. It’s already set for a news station, and the anchorwoman is pretty, so Kuroo leaves it as he nudges Kenma and holds out his chopsticks full of rice.

Kenma opens his mouth dutifully, eyes still fixed on his game, and Kuroo rolls his eyes before feeding him the rice.

“Sometimes I wonder if you really are my pet,” he muses, earning him a kick to his knee. He laughs, rubbing the spot. “I knew you weren’t completely engrossed in that game. Eat your breakfast.”

Sighing, Kenma pauses and sets aside the PSP, reaching for the food on the table. He brings it close, and Kuroo turns his attention to the TV, where the news anchor sits in her studio. Beside her head is a photo of Bokuto and Akaashi exiting one of the buildings they just destroyed, and Kuroo has to admit that they look really cool walking forward in all black with the explosion behind them.

“They’re calling the group the Flying Crows, though not all of them fly, as seen here. Bokuto Koutarou and Akaashi Keiji are the demolition experts, tasked with the job of distracting the kaiju or creating bridges for Iwaizumi Hajime and Kuroo Tetsurou, the real Flying Crows. One has to question whether or not the serum is really necessary for all Soldiers, if some are never going to fight the kaiju directly.”

Kuroo frowns, pointing his chopsticks at the TV. “Are you insulting my bro Bo, anchor lady?”

Kenma sighs again.

“Well, Iki-san, I do believe that in order to put themselves on the line the way these men do they’re going to need that extra boost.” A male anchor shows up beside the woman, his tone conversational. “I don’t believe the serum is a negative thing here. If it’s enhancing their strength and protecting their lives, I say we should make more of it. Mass produce it so everyone will have the ability to fight if there’s cause for it.”

Kenma reaches over Kuroo for the remote, quickly changing the channel. Kuroo glances down at him, notes the tenseness around his lips, and doesn’t protest. The channel Kenma flips to is an old anime, and they finish their breakfast while watching Goku fight a dragon.

By this time Kuroo can’t stop bouncing his leg. Kenma glances over at him, and Kuroo shakes his head, forcing himself to stop.

“Sorry, I just . . . I’m getting antsy. I need to go for a run or something,” he says, moving to stand. “Will you be okay here by yourself?” He thinks back to the nightmare, remembering he’d wanted to talk to Kenma about that.

“Can we go for a walk?” Kenma asks, blinking up at him.

Kuroo frowns, not thinking a walk would exert enough energy. Already he’s practically bouncing on his feet. “I gotta run, Kenma.”

Shockingly, Kenma gets to his feet. “I’ll run too,” he says.

“Since when do you ever run?” Kuroo asks, glancing toward the door, as his hands curl into fists.
Kenma’s knuckle travels toward his mouth. Kuroo reaches over to grab his wrist before he can bite, pulling it away. “Look, just stay here. I promise I’ll be back. Call Hinata if you need to.”

“He’s never up this early.” Kenma’s gaze is focused on Kuroo’s hand on his wrist.

“So fucking wake him up, shit Kenma, I have to go.” Something akin to irritation bubbles up inside him. It’s strange and foreign, because he never gets irritated with Kenma. But the emotion is there, simmering. As he drops his hand and turns to get his shoes, he feels Kenma’s grip on his shirt, holding fast.

“But—”

“Kenma, stop!” Anger flares through him, and he swats Kenma’s arm away with enough force to cause Kenma to stumble back a step. His eyes are wide, pupils large in gold irises, and Kuroo’s chest clenches.

They both freeze, and the anger vanishes as quickly as it appeared. It’s replaced by shock, and guilt slams hard into Kuroo’s stomach, as he reaches for Kenma, his hand trembling.

“Kenma, I-I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

Kenma stares at him, eyes growing blank, lips pursing. “Just go,” he says, turning away to retreat back into his corner of the couch, picking up the PSP once more.

Kuroo feels something icy grip his heart, but Kenma doesn’t turn back around, and his blood is boiling, muscles aching, and he needs to run. So he pulls on his shoes, and heads for the door. He pauses with his hand on the knob, though, and looks back once more toward Kenma.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” he says, to no response. Anxiety twists his gut painfully, and he feels like he’s going to throw up. But knowing he can’t do anything and afraid he might punch the wall if he doesn’t get moving, he exits the apartment and immediately takes off down the stairs and into the street.

He’s not sure where he’s going, but he heads in the general direction of the base, wondering if Suga or Oikawa can explain what happened just now. All he can see in his mind’s eye is the look in Kenma’s eyes, as Kuroo slapped his arm away. Never in his entire life has he laid a hand on Kenma in that way. And the hurt in Kenma’s eyes was enough to haunt his dreams for eternity.

Kuroo slows to a stop, even though he’s not quite out of breath. He’s reached the perimeter, but he heads in the general direction of the base, wondering if Suga or Oikawa can explain what happened just now. All he can see in his mind’s eye is the look in Kenma’s eyes, as Kuroo slapped his arm away. Never in his entire life has he laid a hand on Kenma in that way. And the hurt in Kenma’s eyes was enough to haunt his dreams for eternity.

Kuroo can remember that night like it happened only yesterday. July 10th. The nighttime kaiju attack. It was before he’d joined the program, only eighteen years old, fresh out of high school and into his first year of college. Kenma was just starting his third year then. He remembers getting the call in the early morning hours, the police asking him to pick Kenma up at the station. Apparently as soon as he’d heard about the accident, Kenma had run out of the house toward the scene and had to be dragged away by the police.
Kuroo can’t remember why Kenma’s parents had been on the road that night. He thinks it was because of a banquet or a fundraiser or something. But the kaiju had appeared completely unexpectedly. They’d had a reputation for only showing up during daylight hours, and always in the most central part of downtown. Their predictability made them easier to handle, and the military could usually handle it with enough men, though there were often many causalities. That’s why the serum was proposed, to lower the death toll.

But four years and three months ago the serum was still being tested, and nobody was prepared for the kaiju that appeared in the night, so close to the edge of the old perimeter that it wandered outside of it, searching for food. Buildings were destroyed; hundreds of civilians lost their lives. In a suicide mission, the only squadron on watch took it upon themselves to stop the kaiju. Most of them were killed.

Azumane Asahi was the squadron leader. He made it away unscathed with a victory under his belt, but he quit the military later that week. Kuroo still doesn’t know the whole story behind that, but he knows that mission haunts the man to this day.

Kenma’s parents’ car was forced off the road and into a tree by the kaiju. The squadron managed to lure the beast back into the evacuated downtown area, but the damage had been done. By the time the police and emergency response teams showed up to take away those injured, it was too late to save them.

Kuroo stands before that tree now, pressing his hand into the mark that still sits there, a section of cream surrounded by dark brown. He remembers the way Kenma flung his arms around him once he entered the police station. The police told him that they asked Kenma for a relative’s number, and he’d given them Kuroo’s. All Kuroo could do was stand there and hold Kenma. That feeling of helplessness stuck with him the next day and the next, and at the funeral he’d taken Kenma aside.

“We’re going to your place to get your things, and then you’re coming to live with me,” he said, completely ignoring the fact that his parents might not be on board with such an arrangement. But he didn’t care.

Kenma’s eyes had brightened only slightly, but it was enough to give Kuroo hope that maybe Kenma would be okay.

“I’m going to protect you. No matter what. I promise,” Kuroo said, holding out his pinkie. It was their seal, developed years prior in elementary school.

Kenma pressed the pad of his pinkie against Kuroo’s, setting the promise in stone. “I trust you,” he said softly, speaking the words one must always say in the final act of the seal.

That night, Kenma didn’t want to sleep alone. For the first time, Kuroo allowed Kenma to crawl into his bed, telling himself that it wasn’t weird, despite their ages. Kenma had stared at him in the dark, pupils wide and black.

“Promise me that you’ll never leave me,” he said, his voice void of emotion, his face and eyes dry of any tears. Kuroo can’t remember if he ever saw Kenma cry during that time.

“Of course I’ll never leave you,” Kuroo said softly, and he pressed his pinkie against Kenma’s. It was an easy promise to make, because he and Kenma were forever. They both knew that, so he wasn’t entirely sure why Kenma insisted on making him say it.

“I trust you,” Kenma whispered, and Kuroo remained awake long after Kenma had fallen asleep.
Kuroo pulls out his phone, texting Kenma because he can’t leave things like this.

To: Kenma  
Subject: I’m sorry

I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Kenma doesn’t reply.

***

Akaashi likes to think he’s an observant person, but it doesn’t take any skill to notice Kuroo’s despondency as he enters the base’s locker room, dressed in sweatpants and a sleeveless shirt that stretches across his chest in a way that makes Akaashi wonder if he’s wearing a size too small on purpose. On his feet are sneakers and he looks sweaty and disheveled, not at all like the suave motorcycle gang member he usually resembles.

“Yo, Kuroo! Did you run the whole way here?” Bokuto asks from his locker, shoving his jacket and helmet into it with little grace.

“Had to blow off some steam,” Kuroo says, with none of his usual jauntiness. There’s no sign of his signature sneer, and if anything Akaashi would say he looks . . . upset.

“Did something happen?” he asks quietly, hoping he’s not overstepping his bounds by asking.

Kuroo shoots him a glance, considering.

“What the hell is with that get up?” Iwaizumi asks with a frown, stepping into the locker room. He’s wearing a tracksuit beneath his leather jacket, and his helmet is tucked beneath his arm.

“You didn’t hear? The unkempt ‘just rolled out of bed’ look is in this year,” Kuroo says, his features shifting to normal.

Akaashi wonders if Kuroo doesn’t feel comfortable revealing vulnerabilities in front of his partner. He’s positive that something is wrong, however, and makes a note to ask Kuroo about it later, preferably alone. He doubts Kuroo will speak seriously to him with Bokuto within hearing distances. They all know to be careful around Bokuto, not quite sure what exactly can send him into one of his moods.

“It’s unprofessional,” Iwaizumi grunts, placing his helmet and jacket into his own locker, along with his keys and phone. Technically they’re all supposed to store their phones (allowed to check it on their breaks), but Bokuto and Kuroo never do.

“We’re just training. We don’t need to look professional,” Kuroo says, rolling his eyes.

“This is our job,” Iwaizumi says, frowning. “They gave us these tracksuit uniforms for a reason.”

Bokuto bounces on his toes lightly, glancing between them, his features pulled tight with anxiety. Kuroo shrugs, stepping up to his locker. He pulls out a jacket that probably hasn’t been washed in weeks, considering it’s curled into a wrinkled ball. He slips it on before displaying himself to Iwaizumi, arms out to the sides.
“Happy?”

Iwaizumi grunts. “I’m never happy,” he says, which, Akaashi wonders, is his version of a joke.

Kuroo grins. “Ah, youth is wasted on the young.”

“I’m older than you.”

“Okay! Let’s go train!” Bokuto exclaims before Kuroo can make a jab at that remark, leaping onto Kuroo’s back. “Mush!” he cries then, pointing toward the door.

Kuroo stumbles under his weight a moment before readjusting. He howls in reply, before taking off out of the room. Sighing, Akaashi stands, hesitating, before slipping his phone into his locker. He glances over at Iwaizumi, seeing him open his locker once more to check his phone.

“Oikawa-san will be okay by himself for a few hours,” he offers, and feels somewhat guilty when Iwaizumi starts, his phone almost slipping from loose fingers.

He catches it with a fumble, setting it back into his locker. “I just want to make sure the idiot remembers to break for lunch,” he says gruffly.

Akaashi nods, because he understands Iwaizumi’s concern. Iwaizumi leaves without another word, and Akaashi follows.

Their training room used to be the school’s gymnasium, and now houses punching bags, a small boxing ring, and a large tumbling mat. Beside the mat on the wall are racks of wooden practice swords and katanas. The weight room is the old equipment room, and several water jugs are set up next to the entrance. At Kuroo and Bokuto’s insistence, a stereo system with large speakers sits on one of the benches against the wall, and they often blare loud playlists of what they call “inspiring training-montage songs.” Iwaizumi cringed when they first brought up the suggestion, but Akaashi notices now when he goes over to play a specific song, the way he puts in just a little more effort once the pounding bass shakes the floorboards.

Today the room is set up with large red balls set up on tall poles around the room. Sawamura, Tanaka, and Nishinoya are standing in the center, and both Tanaka and Noya are grinning deviously. Akaashi doesn’t have to ask why; the reason is in a pile at their feet. The harnesses he designed have arrived, and Akaashi supposes that it’s time to try them out.

“It’s obvious Akaashi’s designs,” Sawamura explains, gesturing to the harnesses on the floor. “He believes they’ll be more efficient in taking down the kaiju, and will probably lower the time it takes to kill them as well. We’ll be testing them out today, and I’ll go over the drills I have planned in a moment. For now, Tanaka?”

He steps to the side and Tanaka steps forward, clearing his throat. “Okay!” he says then, loudly, with a clap of his hands. “Listen up, Soldiers!” (Akaashi refrains from mentioning that they’re already listening.) “These harnesses are rather tricky! They require a lot of skill and agility to maneuver in,
which is what we’ll be working on today! They’re rather complicated to secure, so watch closely as Noya and I demonstrate!”

Noya steps up then, picking up a harness from the floor. He begins to assist Tanaka in fastening it on, the straps going over his shoulders and waist and under his buttocks and through his legs over his thighs. The end result looks a little ridiculous, but Akaashi had known it would.

“That looks really uncomfortable,” Kuroo comments, wrinkling his nose in an expression Akaashi has often seen on Kenma.

“It is,” Tanaka admits. “But wait until you see what you can do with it!”

He gestures for Noya to take a step back, and when he does, Tanaka presses a button on the cases attached to his hips. Two black cables shoot from them, burying themselves in the second story wall across the room.

“Okay! So with this you have three options: slow, medium, and fast. I’m pretty sure that speaks for itself. Now at full speed, this is what’ll happen.”

With a shout, Tanaka presses a second button and flies through the air as the cables retract, pulling him toward the balcony. He catches hold of the railing before he can slam into it, slapping the button to stop the mechanism from dragging him over it. Balancing precariously with one foot on the balcony between the spindles and one hand on the railing, he waves down to the others.

“Isn’t it awesome?” he cries.

“I WANT TO TRY!” Bokuto exclaims excitedly, hopping up and down. “That looks like fun!”

Kuroo’s eyes are gleaming, but Iwaizumi looks ill, his lips pursed tightly, as his arms cross over his chest.

“What exactly are the purpose of these things?” he asks.

Nishinoya makes an affronted sound. “To make killing the kaiju easier! Duh! Now you can just shoot the cables into its head, fly up, and shove your swords into its eyes! Easy-peasy lemon-squeezy!”

Akaashi hides a laugh in a cough, wondering where Noya had learned that expression. Iwaizumi still looks irritable, but he doesn’t argue.

“Can we try it now?” Bokuto asks hopefully, as Tanaka climbs over the railing and goes about pulling the cables from the wall.

Sawamura shakes his head. “First things first,” he says. “You must practice balancing upright. You’ll attach the harnesses, but you won’t use the cables to fly just yet. You’ll hang from the balcony and when you can stay upright for an hour, you can practice the retraction.”

Bokuto groans in disappointment, but Akaashi can see the wisdom in this. Still, it strikes him as odd that the four of them are present for this training, when he and Bokuto don’t fight the kaiju directly. Their job requires them to remain on the ground, but there are three more harnesses at Sawamura’s feet.

He raises his hand and waits for Sawamura to call on him.

“Excuse me, Sawamura-san,” he says quietly, yet the others still turn to look at him. “But why are
Bokuto-san and I here? The harnesses were designed for Kuroo-san and Iwaizumi-san.”

Sawamura nods. “I know that fighting the kaiju isn’t your job, but we’d like to prepare for whatever happens. If, for some reason, Kuroo and Iwaizumi are unable to continue fighting, we will need to rely on you and Bokuto to take down the kaiju.”

Bokuto’s eyes fill with wonder. “Whoa,” he says, and then gives Akaashi a grin. “We’ll get to be Flying Crows too, Akaashi!”

Akaashi doesn’t share his excitement. He joined this program to keep Bokuto safe and having him flinging himself at kaiju would be counterproductive to that goal. He sighs, shaking his head.

“What about the new recruits?” he asks, keeping his eyes on his captain.

Sawamura scratches his jaw absently. “We do have a few that are interested after coming for the tour, but they still need to pass both the physical and the psychological exams. And then the treatment takes time to go into affect, which you all know. It could be upwards to a month or two before we can start them on training, and we have no idea when the next kaiju will attack. So I apologize if it makes you uncomfortable, but I need the both of you to be ready to fight if need be.”

Akaashi bows, though his stomach twists, bile rising in his throat. He swallows it down quickly. “I understand. Thank you for the answer.”

Bokuto’s arm lands heavily across his shoulders, as Akaashi straightens. “Come on, Akaashi. Where’s your sense of adventure? This will be fun! And we probably won’t even need to fight. Nothing’s going to happen to Kuroo or Iwaizumi.”

Akaashi manages to give Bokuto a faint smile, but out of the corner of his eye he notices the way Kuroo’s back stiffens, how his shoulders and neck grow tense, and again he wonders what happened that morning.

“All right then!” Tanaka exclaims, as he hops the last couple of steps from the stairs and approaches the group. He slips out of the harness with more ease than he’d gotten into it, and holds it out in front of him. “Who’s first?”

Bokuto rushes forward to snatch the harness from Tanaka, who laughs. Kuroo steps forward next, picking up a second harness from in front of Sawamura. As Akaashi does the same, he notices Iwaizumi standing back, arms still crossed tightly.

“I’m not putting on that thing,” he grunts.

Sawamura’s expression darkens. “Excuse me?” he asks, voice calm yet simmering with something like a warning.

Iwaizumi doesn’t back down. He shakes his head, tilting his chin upwards in a slight show of defiance. Akaashi glances between the captain and Iwaizumi, unsure at first what’s going on. But then he notices the tension in Iwaizumi’s face, the beads of sweat at his temples, the way his throat bobs.

Iwaizumi is afraid.

“Sawamura-san,” Akaashi says, before the man can start shouting about insubordination. He steps between them. “Please allow me to speak with him.”

Sawamura blinks, but then he sighs, rubbing his forehead. “All right,” he agrees. He turns then to
Nishinoya. “If I leave to go to a meeting, will I return to utter chaos?”

Noya grins. “You know I can’t promise that, Captain,” he says, shaking his head.

Sawamura frowns, and Tanaka is quick to jump in with, “but we’ll make sure training goes well! You can count on us!”

Sawamura nods, resigned, and heads for the door. None of the tension leaves Iwaizumi’s form, however, and he watches Akaashi warily as he approaches. Akaashi knows better than to touch the man.

He won’t respond well to physical assurances. I should use logic and reason with him.

“I understand that this might be out of your comfort zone,” he starts, keeping his voice level and maintaining eye contact. His hands are clasped behind his back, a non-aggressive stance. “But it truly is a more effective way to kill the kaiju. You said yourself that we will run out of buildings to demolish. This foregoes the need for our bridges. It’s efficient and fast. You’ll be able to cut your fighting time in half, probably.”

Iwaizumi frowns, but he doesn’t reply. Akaashi remains silent, knowing patience works best with Iwaizumi as well. Finally, Iwaizumi sighs, and his arms fall to his sides.

“I didn’t sign up for this shit,” he mutters, though he steps over to Noya to retrieve his harness.

Akaashi feels some of his own tension ease and absentely rubs at his chest where it aches. That was close. If Iwaizumi had decided to quit the program over this . . . But no, he couldn’t quit. That was their curse. Once the serum treatments started, they couldn’t stop. Their bodies would deteriorate, muscles growing weak, until their hearts ceased beating altogether. There isn’t an alternate treatment to reverse the effects safely, and Akaashi doubts the government is looking for one. They need more Soldiers, so why would they spend time and money finding out a way to allow their Soldiers to quit the program?

Iwaizumi can’t leave the SSP; none of them can. But they signed up for this fate with that knowledge. This is their life now. Relying on drugs and fighting monsters. It doesn’t feel as glamorous as Bokuto seems to think it is. Akaashi doesn’t feel like a superhero. Mainly, he just feels tired.

But for Bokuto he can handle tired.

“Akaashi! Akaashi! Check this out!” Bokuto exclaims.

Akaashi looks up from where he’s attaching the final piece of his harness to see Bokuto standing beneath the balcony. His cables are attached to it, and when Tanaka nods, he presses the button for slow until he lifts off the floor a couple feet. He stops the cables, but immediately topples forward, smacking his face against the floor.

Kuroo laughs abruptly, and Akaashi grimaces, as he rushes forward to help pull Bokuto upright. Nishinoya is rolling on the floor with his laughter, and even Tanaka fights back an onslaught of chuckles, as he steadies Bokuto with both hands on his waist.

“Ow,” Bokuto whines, and blood drips from his nose.

“Catch yourself with your hands next time,” Akaashi scolds gently, shaking his head even as he pulls down the edge of his tracksuit jacket sleeve to wipe at Bokuto’s face.
Bokuto pouts. “I just wasn’t ready. I’ll balance good next time,” he says, and nods for Tanaka to let him go. When the lieutenant steps back, Bokuto kicks his legs in the air like his attempting to swim. It works for a couple seconds, but then he’s falling backwards. Akaashi hastens to catch him before the back of his head can hit the ground.

“I’m going to beat this!” Bokuto yells, frowning in frustration.

Akaashi shakes his head, watching Bokuto worriedly and glad, at least, that he hasn’t descended into one of his moods. Though he supposes there’s still time for that.

Nishinoya has already helped Kuroo and Iwaizumi set up, and now they’re both dangling from the balcony as well. Iwaizumi struggles for a few seconds, before he’s able to balance himself, only wobbling some. He only remains upright for a couple minutes, however, before he too is falling over. He catches himself and hauls himself back upright, eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

Kuroo is doing best of the three, balancing almost perfectly with minimal effort. He crosses his arms over his chest, looking bored.

“We need music,” he declares, and Noya grins, hastening over to the stereo to start the “Inspiring Training-Montage” playlist (volume one).

As the music starts to shake the rafters, Tanaka glances around Bokuto to look at Akaashi.

“You should go start practicing!” he shouts to be heard. “I can watch Bokuto.”

Akaashi is reluctant to leave Bokuto’s side, but he does, stepping over to an empty space where he can keep an eye on his friend even as Noya helps him string up the cables. As he starts to balance, he watches as Bokuto manages to keep himself upright for maybe two minutes, before flopping forward or backward again. Iwaizumi has improved, and his longest time now is five minutes.

Akaashi figures out a way to hold his body in order to balance correctly. The trick is to keep leg movements to a minimum, as to not upset the weight distribution. But Bokuto is still flailing, unable to keep still, and Akaashi winces, as Bokuto’s face once more makes contact with the floor.

“Fuck!” he cries, slamming his fist against the wood beneath him. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Akaashi bites his lip, and Bokuto struggles to detach the harness from around him. Tanaka hastens to help, but Bokuto pushes him away.

“I can do it myself!” he snaps. “I’m not a baby!”

Tanaka holds up his hands, backing away. Bokuto manages to free himself, and lands on his hands and knees, breathing hard. Kuroo watches with a faint frown, concern tracing his features. Iwaizumi looks on impassively, but there’s a slight twitch of his eyebrows over his nose. Akaashi feels his own heart stuttering anxiously, and he bites the inside of his cheek, as Bokuto approaches him, scowling.

“I don’t want to do this anymore!” he shouts, his face red. Tears shimmer in his eyes, and Akaashi swallows hard.

“Fine,” he says evenly, keeping himself composed despite the worry crawling through him. “Go to the locker room and calm down.”

Bokuto blinks, and Akaashi wonders if he was expecting him to try and talk him into it like he did with Iwaizumi. But Akaashi knows logic and reason won’t work on Bokuto when he’s in this state. Bokuto shuts his mouth after a moment of silence, turning and stomping off toward the gym exit,
slamming the door behind him. Akaashi sighs, and almost flips over before righting himself.

“Well, shit,” Kuroo mutters, as the last song ends and leaves them in an oppressive quiet.

Now they all look at Akaashi, and he fights the urge to sigh again.

“I know,” he says, lowering himself back onto the floor. He removes the harness carefully. “I’ll go talk to him.”

Akaashi is used to Bokuto’s mood swings, though lately it seems as though his bad moments are getting worse. For one thing, Bokuto can get rather depressed and self-deprecating, but genuine anger rarely makes an appearance. Akaashi has never seen a display like this before, and concern makes his chest feel tight, as he quickens his pace across the base toward the locker room.

The truth is Bokuto shouldn’t have been allowed into the program in the first place. After they’d passed the physical examinations, Akaashi quickly went on and passed the psychological one as well. However, Doctor Takeda wanted Bokuto to retake his, so while Akaashi continued to the next phase, the serum injections, Bokuto returned to the psychologists.

“What’s going on?” Akaashi asked Oikawa, as he gently administered the serum. Akaashi remembers the shock of it running through his system, the way his heart pounded so quickly he was afraid it would burst. He sat there, sweating and out of breath, as Oikawa glanced toward the doors.

“Something came up in your friend’s psychological examination,” he said, brown eyes flickering toward Akaashi’s green ones. “I’m sure it’s nothing to be worried about.” He flashed him a reassuring smile then, but Akaashi could see the lie behind it.

Akaashi went to see Bokuto after the lab cleared him, and he babbled about how the doctors were saying that his mental and emotional condition was too unsteady to be put into the field. They mentioned he displayed some symptoms of bipolar disorder, which Bokuto thought was ridiculous.

“I’m fine, Akaashi,” he insisted, eyes wide. “I’m perfectly healthy! There’s no reason for any of this. I’m fine!”

“I know, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi murmured, though he wondered if that was true. He touched his arm lightly, stroking down to give his fingers a gentle squeeze. “I know.”

But the doctors refused to give their permission to start Bokuto on the serum. They claimed the results would be too unpredictable. They expressed concern that Bokuto’s mental state combined with the serum could trigger a violent episode. Apparently something similar had happened before, though they didn’t go into detail.

“But Bokuto-san would never hurt anyone,” Akaashi insisted to Oikawa, as he was administered his next quarter-dose of serum. They were slowly allowing his body to grow accustomed to the chemicals. A total of five injections were needed for his body to adjust, before they could give him the full dosage. “He’s not violent.”

Oikawa hummed softly. “I’m sure you’re right,” he said. “But don’t you think it’d be best for him to simply go home and forget about this whole business?”

Akaashi thought about that. He looked down at the needle inserted into his arm, watched the push of Oikawa’s thumb, felt the rush of heat surge through his veins. It felt good: the strength, the quickening of his heart. He looked up at Oikawa.

“If they send him home, can I go with him?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.
“No.” Oikawa smiled, but this time he didn’t try to hide the despondency. “I’m afraid not.”

“You should go home, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi told his friend that night. “There’s no reason for you to risk your health for this.”

Bokuto blinked up at him from behind his comic book. “What? You want me to leave?”

“No, of course not,” Akaashi said, shaking his head.

Bokuto frowned slightly in confusion. “Then why—”

“We both should leave,” he said. He felt the way his heart beat faster in fear, a tendril of death brushing against it. Knowing that was just his sense of self-preservation, he ignored it.

Bokuto stared at him like he didn’t recognize him. “How can you say that, Akaashi? You’d be leaving countless to die. No, we’d both be leaving them to die. They need us. They need Soldiers! We have to do this!”

“But if they won’t give you the serum—”

“I’ll make them give it to me!” Bokuto exclaimed. “I’ll sneak into the lab and inject myself if I have to!”

Akaashi’s chest squeezed, and when he inhaled his lungs ached. He wanted to yell at him. He wanted to scream and call him an idiot. Didn’t he realize that he was throwing his life away? Didn’t he know that at the first sign of violence, the first slip-up, it was likely that the military would want to put him down?

It wasn’t that Akaashi wanted people to die. That wasn’t it at all. He just didn’t want to lose Bokuto.

In the end it wouldn’t matter what he wanted, though. Bokuto’s sense of right and wrong was impenetrable, and to him this was the right thing to do. He wouldn’t back down no matter what Akaashi said.

So in the end he simply sighed. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said softly. “We’ll go to Oikawa-san.”

So they did. Oikawa was reluctant at first, but once he saw how determined Bokuto was, he agreed. The first injection was administered, and Akaashi watched Bokuto’s eyes glow as he experienced that first rush of strength and power. Instead of feeling proud, however, all Akaashi felt was disappointment.

Now no matter what happened, Bokuto was stuck in the program, same as him.

And things would never be normal again.

When Akaashi steps into the locker room, the first thing he sees is Bokuto standing still in the middle of the room. His back is facing the door, and his shoulders are hunched forward and tense, his hands in fists at his sides. The fact that he’s standing so still frightens Akaashi, and when he slides his gaze over what’s left of the locker room, that fear jumps to new heights, his heart pounding loudly in his ears.

The lockers to the right have been completely destroyed. Broken pieces of metal lay scattered about the floor, twisted and mangled. The benches in front of the lockers are splintered in half, and it looks
as though a bat was taken to the lockers on the left, as they still stand but are dented with brown scratches scattered over it. What Akaashi assumes is a bench leg lies on the floor in front of Bokuto where he presumably dropped it.

Behind Akaashi, he can hear nervous whispers, and when he glances over his shoulder, he catches the eyes of a few cadets huddled across the hall.

“He just started raging out,” one of them says softly. “I’ve never seen anything like it. He was yelling and breaking everything . . .”

“It’s fine now,” Akaashi tells them, with a calm he doesn’t feel. “Nothing to worry about. Go on now.” He gestures for them to leave and after a moment’s hesitation, they scurry away.

Akaashi closes the doors then, sliding them shut and waiting for the click before turning to face Bokuto. He’s still standing like a statue, not having moved a single inch.

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi says softly, swallowing down the nervous lump in his throat. He steps forward, carefully picking his way around the fallen locker doors. He feels out of his element. He’s calmed Bokuto down from episodes before, but they’ve never been anything like this. He isn’t sure his words will work, and that causes anxiety to twist around his lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

“Bokuto-san,” he says again, sharper this time.

Bokuto’s head comes up, ears twitching. He turns, and the expression on his face is unlike anything Akaashi has ever seen before. It’s full of rage and despair, and his eyes are blank circles of fiery gold. Akaashi inhales sharply, bracing himself. But then Bokuto blinks, and the anger disappears, replaced by a bright smile and an affectionate gaze.

“Akaashi! You came to get me!”

He bounces over happily, but Akaashi takes an automatic step back. Inwardly, he grimaces, as Bokuto’s countenance clouds over with confusion.

“Akaashi?”

The uncertainty in Bokuto’s voice tears into Akaashi’s heart. He reaches out to take Bokuto’s hand, gripping it firmly.

“Come on, let’s get back to training,” he says, grateful that his voice isn’t betraying his unease. “I’ll show you a trick to staying upright.”

He wonders if it’s too much to hope for that Bokuto won’t look behind him and see the mess he created, but before he can pull Bokuto through the door, his friend looks behind him to see what’s left of the locker room. His eyes grow wide, and his head whips back around to look at Akaashi.

“What happened?” he asks incredulously. Then his voice dips down soft, hesitant. “Did . . . did I do that?”

“Let’s get back to training,” Akaashi repeats, a scream of something akin to anguish lodged in his throat, making his voice strained.

Bokuto looks down at their joined hands, slowly pulling his away. Akaashi reaches for it, but his fingers grasp air. Bokuto looks at him, his gaze steady, but something behind them flickers in pain.

“Akaashi.”
“It’s fine,” Akaashi says quickly. “It’s fine. You’re fine. It was just an episode. We’ll talk to Suga-san and Oikawa-san about it. Everything is fine.”

“But—” Bokuto’s brows furrow, but Akaashi quickly grabs his hand again, pulling him out of the locker room.

It won’t do any good to dwell on it. It happened, but it’s over now. Bokuto didn’t hurt anyone, so perhaps things aren’t as bad as they seem. Neither Suga nor Oikawa will tell anyone, so nobody will come after Bokuto. They won’t put Bokuto down, and Oikawa can modify the serum to fix things. There’s no reason to freak out.

Yet Akaashi can’t stop his heart from pounding faster, can’t calm the blood that’s rushing in his ears, can’t cease the tremble of his fingers. He tightens his grip on Bokuto’s hand and walks faster.

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When Bokuto and Akaashi return, they both look unsettled. Kuroo can’t help but remember what happened that morning, that rush of anger that caused him to act unnaturally. He wonders if something similar had happened to Bokuto, and the worry that gives him makes him want to run to Suga’s office right then and there to beg him to take a look at their blood, to make sure everything’s okay.

But training isn’t over yet, so he just gives Akaashi a questioning look, silently asking if Bokuto is okay. The look he gets in return is full of distress, but Akaashi simply purses his lips and nods. That doesn’t really tell Kuroo anything reassuring, but he’s willing to accept it for now. Bokuto and Akaashi return to Bokuto’s harness, and under Akaashi’s patient guidance, Bokuto manages to hold himself upright for the required amount of time.

Kuroo’s limbs are aching somewhat once Sawamura reenters the gym and tells them they can move on to the next stage. He hops on the balls of his feet, shaking out his legs and swinging his arms. Moving over to Akaashi, he bends his head toward his comrade’s ear.

“We should go see Suga after this,” he murmurs, to which he receives a quick nod.

Moving over to Bokuto, he gives his friend a slap on the shoulder. “Good job!” he grins. “You finally got the hang of it.”

Bokuto grins. “Yeah, once I got into the swing of things, it was pretty easy!”

Kuroo laughs. “It’s a good thing Akaashi didn’t leave you dangling.”

“Shut up, you two,” Sawamura interrupts, rolling his eyes. He moves to stand in the middle of the gym, gesturing to the red balls on the poles that stood around the room at various heights. “For this part of the training, you will use your harnesses to fly up and stab those red balls, which represent kaiju eyes. Remember you must use all your force to drive your katanas into them so that they reach the brain, before getting away quickly. The goal is to be able to swing, stab, and retreat within five seconds. Less, if possible.”

Akaashi raises his hand, but Sawamura answers him before he can ask his question. “Yes, I know. You and Bokuto have never used katanas before. That is why you’ll first learn some basic stances and attacks with Asahi.”
Nishinoya looks up from where he’s retrieving the harnesses from the balcony. “Asahi-san is joining us?” he asks.

Sawamura nods. “I asked him to come in and show Bokuto and Akaashi how to handle katanas, since he had the best form in the unit back in his military days.”

Kuroo watches the way Nishinoya glances toward the door, eyes bright. He can’t tell if the jittering of Noya’s fingers is from excitement or apprehension. Sidling up to Iwaizumi, he nudges the shorter man gently.

“Psst, hey, what’s up with that?”

Iwaizumi grunts and steps away from him. “They used to be in the same squadron,” he says under his breath, and Kuroo is somewhat surprised that he actually answered. “They had a falling out when Azumane-san left, but that’s all I know.”

“A falling out about what?” Kuroo asks, his interest piqued. Base gossip isn’t generally intriguing. It mostly consists of who is sleeping with whom, who’s been promoted recently, and who’s on leave and for what reason. Base gossip is generally what keeps Kuroo from being bored out of his mind when he’s not messing around with Bokuto, but generally it disappoints.

This, however, could be something.

Unfortunately, Iwaizumi gives him a look that says ‘you should mind your own business’ and steps away to retrieve his harness from Noya.

Kuroo sticks his lip out in a pout and resolves to ask Suga about it when they go to see him later. He’s sure he will know, considering he’s been with the base for years. With that, Kuroo takes his own harness back from Noya and straps it on. He struggles briefly but manages to do it himself.

As he’s latching the last belt, the door to the gym slides open and the broad-shouldered form of Azumane Asahi enters. He’s wearing a tracksuit similar to those Iwaizumi and Akaashi are wearing; only his are black and orange, instead of black and white. Curious to see Noya’s reaction, Kuroo slides his gaze over to the small man beside him.

Remarkably, Noya is pointedly not looking toward the doors, but instead is focusing on detangling Bokuto’s harness to lay it flat on the floor. His lips are pursed, though, and there’s a faint frown creasing his forehead, so Kuroo knows he’s aware of Asahi’s presence.

Interesting.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Sawamura says, stepping over to Asahi to shake his hand. “Thanks again for doing this. How’s the Tsukishima kid doing?”

“Still won’t talk to me,” Asahi admits, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. “But he looks healthy.”

Sawamura nods, apparently satisfied with this answer, and Kuroo is completely confused, but his attention is diverted when Tanaka appears in front of him.

“Yo!” he says sharply. “Are you just going to stand there or are we going to get this training started?”

Kuroo gives him a lazy grin. “Just waiting for your instruction, Tanaka-sensei,” he says, bowing slightly.
Tanaka’s face flushes faintly, as a pleased grin settles over his features. “Tanaka-sensei, I like that,” he muses, stroking his chin.

Kuroo chuckles, before moving to stand beside Iwaizumi, facing the group of poles. He tilts his head toward his partner, giving him a smirk.

“You ready for this?” he asks, noting the sweat on Iwaizumi’s forehead.

Iwaizumi looks grim, but nods. “Let’s kick some ass,” he says, and actually slaps Kuroo on the shoulder before rushing toward the first pole. He sends his cables flying, and they bury into the wall far ahead. He whips through the air a little too fast, only able to clip the red ball with the edge of his katana, sliding the top of it off. He thuds against the wall, a concentrated scowl on his face. Wasting no time, he detaches one cable, shooting it across the room next, before allowing himself to swing down toward the same red ball at a slower pace than before. This time he manages to get his katana in, but only a few inches. His second cable detaches, coiling back into its machine, and Iwaizumi lands against the wall, hanging sideways.

“I guess it’s my turn,” Kuroo quips, shrugging back his shoulders.

He starts at a run, same as Iwaizumi, only he leans back and aims the cables toward the ceiling. As he retracts and flies past the red ball, he doesn’t take a swing at it, but instead continues past it, until he comes to a stop and hangs upside down from the ceiling.

“Kuroo!” Sawamura shouts from the ground. “Aim for the balls!”

Kuroo cackles, and his body shakes the cables, and for a moment he’s worried he might detach accidentally. But they hold, and he waves a cocky salute toward his captain. “I’ll destroy your balls, Captain! Don’t worry!”

Bokuto’s laugh echoes from the mat where he and Akaashi have started practicing different stances with Asahi. Sawamura’s face is red.

“Stop messing around!” he snaps.

Kuroo again salutes, before hitting the button that will drop him toward the floor. He aims for the red ball, katana pointed outward like an extension of his arm. The point hits the ball first, and his body weight drives it in deep until only the hilt is visible. He twists to land on his feet, using his grip on the katana to keep himself from falling off. Quickly, he shoots his cables toward the wall beside Iwaizumi and launches himself off the ball, leaving his katana behind.

His feet hit the wall with a thud, and he grins over at Iwaizumi, who actually looks impressed.

“Nice work,” he says with a nod. “But a free-fall toward the kaiju’s eye won’t work every time. What if he happens to look up, and you land in his mouth instead?”

Kuroo hadn’t thought of that. He shrugs though, unfazed. “Then I’ll drive my katana into its brain from the inside.”

“You’re an idiot,” Iwaizumi grumbles.

“Hey, at least my plan worked,” Kuroo points out, offended. “You barely grazed it.”

“I’m not suicidal,” Iwaizumi says, but his eyes flicker toward the red ball with its shaved top, and he frowns.
Before Kuroo can protest against these words, Iwaizumi pushes himself off the wall, this time burying one of his cables into the red ball itself. Kuroo raises an eyebrow as he watches his partner brace one foot on the pole, while he drives his katana into the middle of the ball, before quickly lowering to the floor. Kuroo whistles appreciatively, dropping toward the ground himself. He lands in a roll, before hopping onto his feet.

“That’s what we should do!” he exclaims excitedly. “Iwaizumi, you’re a genius.”

Iwaizumi scowls at him. “What?”

“Aim for the kaiju eyes themselves. Bury the cables into them, instead of their heads or their faces. Then we can’t possibly miss our target with our katanas.”

Iwaizumi shakes his head before Kuroo can finish his idea. “The kaiju will be moving about, not standing still,” he says. “I just used the ball because it was the fastest and easiest way to insert my katana directly into it. But that won’t work in battle.”

“It will if we aim correctly,” Kuroo points out. “It’s not impossible.”

“No, but it’ll be extremely difficult.”

“Are you backing down from a challenge, Iwaizumi?” Kuroo asks, raising both eyebrows at him.

His jibe has the desired effect. Iwaizumi’s eyes narrow, and a flush colors his tan cheekbones. “Like hell I am,” he growls, and Kuroo pumps his fist in victory.

So they practice aiming their cables directly at the red balls, and eventually convince Tanaka and Noya to attach them to swinging ropes so they can practice shooting for moving targets. This is much more difficult, and they miss more often than they land, barely having time to shoot their cables into the wall before they fall to the floor. They don’t give up though and start again each time. Meanwhile, Akaashi and Bokuto continue their lesson with Asahi. From what Kuroo can see from his vantage point high above them, Bokuto’s form is quick and aggressive, never hesitating. He doesn’t seem to be aware of possible defeat. It’s sloppy but effective. It’s a style that’s so much like Bokuto that Kuroo has to grin.

Akaashi’s method is more calculated. He waits for an opening to appear before he strikes, and he doesn’t take an opportunity to attack unless he’s sure he can land a hit. He’s more graceful than Bokuto, but because of his hesitation, he often ends up on the defensive. However, he’s just as deadly as Bokuto, because once he gauges the right moment, he strikes faster than Asahi can block, and he wins matches almost as often as Bokuto.

By the time lunchtime arrives, Iwaizumi and Kuroo have managed to lock in a routine. It’s almost like a dance in the air, both of them aware of each other and their targets. They leap as one, and attack as one, and Kuroo can tell they’re getting faster. It’s easier to land on their targets, even as Noya and Tanaka move the ropes at greater speeds.

“Okay!” Sawamura calls. “That’s enough for now. Take an hour break and meet back here. Akaashi and Bokuto will train with the harnesses. Iwaizumi and Kuroo, I’d like the two of you to practice your forms with Asahi. You haven’t ever trained with him before, and I’d like you to listen to his advice for improvement.”

Kuroo is breathing hard, exertion aching his muscles, but it’s not painful. He feels alive, like he can take on a thousand kaiju right now, but he knows that’s mainly the serum rushing through his veins. He bows with the rest of them, and they head for the locker rooms.
Akaashi and Bokuto stop before the doors, and Bokuto glances nervously at them. Kuroo catches onto their uneasiness and narrows his eyes.

“What’s up with you two?” he asks.

“Um, earlier I—”

“Nothing,” Akaashi says quickly, cutting Bokuto off in a rare display of discourtesy.

Bokuto blinks and stares at Akaashi, dumbfounded, but Akaashi ignores this look, stepping forward to push open the doors. The locker room looks the same as always, and Akaashi breathes a soft sigh of relief.

Bokuto looks around with confusion etched on his features. “Hey, what happened to—”

“They must’ve cleaned it,” Akaashi says lightly, stepping into the room and heading for his locker.

“You guys are acting weird,” Kuroo comments, tilting his head.

“Bokuto-san made a little mess earlier,” Akaashi says, pulling his phone out of his locker to check it. “But apparently the janitor’s been by.”

“Um, yeah,” Bokuto agrees, bobbing his head up and down quickly in a way that’s rather suspicious.

Akaashi turns to Iwaizumi. “We’re going to see Suga-san,” he says then. “Both Kuroo-san and Bokuto-san have felt off lately. You should come too.”

Iwaizumi frowns. “But I feel fine,” he says.

Akaashi shakes his head. “This is something that could affect all of us. Bokuto-san lost his temper in a way he never has before, I know you all realized it.” Here he slides his gaze over to Kuroo. “And something happened this morning to Kuroo-san.” He continues looking at Kuroo, leaving him an opening to explain.

Kuroo sighs, pulling his phone out of his pocket to check it again. Still no word from Kenma. His heart sinks further in his chest, something like despair circling it, squeezing tightly. He snaps his phone shut and slides it back into his pocket.

Have I ruined everything?

“I snapped at Kenma earlier,” he tells the rest of them, his voice sounding scratchy and unnatural. He clears his throat, swallowing hard. “I’ve never done that. Ever. It was like this anger I couldn’t control filled me up and came out before I could stop it.”

Bokuto’s eyes are wide. “Dude,” he breathes.

Even Iwaizumi looks concerned. “I haven’t experienced anything like that,” he says.

Kuroo glances over at him, unable to keep the small smirk from emerging on his lips. “Perhaps, but you’re always angry, so how could you tell?”

Iwaizumi glares. “I’m not always angry,” he says angrily.

Kuroo shrugs, looking back toward Akaashi. “So let’s go see Suga. Maybe there’s just something off with our blood sugar levels or something. Maybe we just need to eat some cake and we’ll be fine.”
Akaashi doesn’t look convinced, but Bokuto nods eagerly. “Yes! Cake! That’d be awesome. I fucking love cake.”

Kuroo grins, but he doesn’t miss the concern in Akaashi’s gaze, as he watches Bokuto.

“It might simply be stress related,” Suga says, carefully placing four marked vials of blood into a tray. “But I’ll run these up to Oikawa in the lab just to be sure.”

“Thank you, Suga-san,” Akaashi says, bowing, and the others follow suit.

Suga gives them an easy smile, and Kuroo thinks that it’s probably the brightest thing he’s seen all day. It makes him breathe a little easier, lifts some of the weight from his shoulders, and he notices how the others relax as well. It causes him to marvel at how a single person can ease the tension in a room so quickly. Then again, it’s possible that Suga is actually an angel from heaven and not a normal person at all. It certainly wouldn’t surprise Kuroo if it were true.

“So!” Suga exclaims, clapping his hands together. “If we’re going off the assumption that it is stress-related, I can offer up some solutions if you’d like.”

Akaashi nods. “Yes, please.”

“Obviously you all have things you enjoy doing. I’m going to suggest to Daichi that he give you a few days off, let you do those things. You’re no good to the program if you’re tense and exhausted from stress.”

Daichi?

Kuroo glances over at Bokuto with raised eyebrows, to see if he noticed the way Sawamura’s given name fell so familiarly off Suga’s lips, but Bokuto is still watching Suga, nodding and grinning at the prospect of getting a vacation, and Kuroo reminds himself that Bokuto wouldn’t catch onto something so subtle. Kenma would, but he’s not here.

Kuroo touches his phone in his pocket, wondering if he should send another text or give Kenma his space. He doesn’t want to be annoying. He slides his hand into his other pocket instead, drawing out a piece of gum and unwrapping it slowly.

“Thank you, Suga-san,” Iwaizumi says, looking almost relieved.

Suga nods and then twists his fingers together in front of him. Kuroo puts the gum in his mouth, crumpling up the wrapper.

“Ah, this next question is a bit personal,” Suga continues. “But when was the last time any of you had sex?”

Kuroo choking on his gum. Bokuto makes a strange, startled sound. Iwaizumi’s face goes red. Akaashi’s, pale.

Kuroo manages not to die, but laments yet another piece of gum lost to the cavern of his stomach to lie dormant for seven years. Iwaizumi looks as though he’s struggling whether to be angry or embarrassed.

“Sorry, sorry.” Suga says, waving a hand, as he fights a laugh at their reactions. “I only mean that . . . sexual frustration can lead to stress and aggression and intercourse can help your bodies relax.”
“It’s not really any of your business,” Iwaizumi grumbles.

“I haven’t since college,” Kuroo croaks, still coughing.

Akaashi steps over to the water fountain that sits in the wall of the infirmary. Grabbing a small cup for pills off the front counter, he fills it and then steps over to hand it to Kuroo, who takes it with a nod of thanks, tossing it back quickly.

“I don’t think I have since college either,” Bokuto says, laughing nervously.

Akaashi says nothing.

Suga grins. “Well, it’s just something to think about,” he says. “I’ll go talk to Daichi now about those vacation days.” He waves cheerily and heads toward the door.

Kuroo watches him go and takes back his earlier thought about Suga being an angel. More like a mischievous sprite or something akin to that. He can’t believe the doctor actually suggested sex as an option to quell the weird irritation and anger he’s been feeling. It’s not like Kuroo has any options for that either, short of going to some gross bar and hitting it with a random stranger, which doesn’t sound appealing at all.

Very briefly, his mind conjures an image of Kenma, curled beside him on his bed, bitten knuckles lying close to his small, pink mouth . . .

Kuroo mentally slaps himself, and quickly turns to Bokuto.

“Yo,” he says, allowing his face to slide into an expression of suggestive intent, his mouth lilting into a leer. “You doing anything this weekend?”

Bokuto stares back at him uncomprehendingly before his eyes brighten in realization, and he laughs.

“Ohoho? Kuroo, are you propositioning me?” he asks with a flutter of his eyelashes.

“Ugh,” Iwaizumi says, turning and leaving the room without another sound.

Kuroo ignores him, as he shrugs. “We’re friends. If I have to do it with someone, I’d rather it be someone I know and like, you know?”

Bokuto grins. “Aww, I like you too, Tetsu-chan.”

Kuroo laughs. “Shut up.” He shoves Bokuto’s arm, almost knocking his friend over. “Do you want to or not?”

Bokuto’s grin falters, and he glances over at Akaashi, who’s watching them impassively. Nothing on his face betrays any emotion, and it’s a little frightening, if Kuroo is honest with himself. He realizes what he’s done wrong too late, though Bokuto doesn’t seem to notice the shift in atmosphere.

“Do you mind, Akaashi?” he asks. “It’s worth a try, right?”

Akaashi’s gaze shifts to Kuroo, and Kuroo can almost feel the steel of it sliding between his eyes like a knife. He winces.

"Why are you asking me?" Akaashi asks coolly, snapping his gaze back toward Bokuto. “You can do whatever you want, Bokuto-san. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to find something to eat.” He bows and leaves the room, taking with him the chill that had settled in the room.
Bokuto’s brows furrow faintly. “Is he mad?” he asks hesitantly, glancing over at Kuroo.

Kuroo slips his hands into his pockets. “On second thought, it’s probably best if we don’t,” he says lightly. “It’d be weird, right? We’re friends, and I don’t want to ruin that or anything.”

Bokuto is looking at him suspiciously, and Kuroo resists the urge to chew on his lip. “Okay . . .”

“We’re bros,” Kuroo says, nodding quickly. “I’m not going to mess with that.”

He doesn’t admit that his original suggestion had been a diversion from what his brain apparently thought his body wanted. Because he knows he doesn’t want to have sex with Kenma. That’d be even creepier than sleeping with Bokuto, right? Kenma’s a part of his soul, and there’s nothing sexual about that. He doesn’t think about Kenma in that way, so it’s ridiculous for his brain to supply him with images of Kenma flushed pink from a recent bath; of him standing beside Nekoma in just Kuroo’s old high school sweatshirt, his slender legs disappearing beneath the hem; of him ruffled and sleepy-eyed in the mornings, his small mouth yawning, as he rubs at his eyes.

Kuroo’s heart twitches in his chest.

Oh.

“Shit.” He mutters the word before he can stop himself, and he notices Bokuto watching him strangely.

“Uh, hey, man, are you okay?”

Kuroo forces what he hopes is a carefree grin. “Yeah, yeah, I just remembered that I didn’t bring anything for lunch. Gotta go run and get something. Want me to pick you up something?”

Bokuto shakes his head. “Akaashi always packs us lunch,” he says.

“Right, right, have fun with that then,” Kuroo says, and leaves quickly before Bokuto can realize that that doesn’t make any sense.

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Kenma tells himself that he shouldn’t worry. He tells himself that Kuroo was simply stressed. It’s been months since the Soldiers last had any vacation days, so it’s natural that the exhaustion would catch up to Kuroo at some point. Still, it makes him uneasy that Kuroo so effortlessly batted him away like an annoying fly on his shoulder. The anger in his gaze had been unmistakable, and Kenma’s stomach flips anxiously at the memory of it.

As soon as Kuroo left the apartment, Kenma took his PSP and walked the short distance to Shouyou’s house. He forgot to take his shoes with him, or even get dressed, and as he shuffles down the street in his apartment slippers, he shivers in the cool morning air, his bare legs and arms prickling with goosebumps.

Natsu opens the door, because Shouyou is never up this early, and stares at him with wide eyes. She’s fourteen, and apparently didn’t inherit the same short gene as Shouyou, because she stands as tall as Kenma, though Kenma often wonders if she’ll grow any taller.
“Onii-chan?” she says, her voice wavering with uncertainty. “Is everything okay?”

Kenma looks over her shoulder toward where he knows Shouyou’s room is. “Is Shouyou awake?” he asks, though he already knows the answer.

Natsu shakes her head. “Okaasan and Otoosan are still sleeping too,” she says. “I have to get ready for school.”

Kenma nods absently, clutching his PSP in both hands because he doesn’t know what else to do. Natsu studies him a moment, before opening the door wider. “You can go wake him up if you want,” she says. “But he’s grumpy if someone wakes him up before he wants.” She pauses then, tilting her head. “But maybe he’s only grumpy when I do it.”

Kenma slides past her, hurrying toward Shouyou’s room. He likes Natsu, but once she gets talking it’s difficult to make her stop, and he doesn’t want to get trapped in the doorway waiting for her to realize that he needs to see Shouyou as soon as possible.

Softly, he slides open the door to Shouyou’s room, stepping inside before shutting it carefully behind him. Shouyou is splayed across his bed on his back, arms and legs spread out across the mattress. His mouth is open, and soft snores issue from it, along with a line of drool that’s drying on his chin. His orange hair is a mess of tangles on his pillow, and the entire display is completely undignified. Still, the knot in Kenma’s stomach unravels somewhat, and he can’t help but smile.

Cute.

Still clutching his PSP, he kicks off his slippers and crawls onto the bed beside Shouyou. He has to push one of his arms and legs away to make room, but Shouyou doesn’t wake, only shifts onto his side and continues snoring. Kenma curls up against his back, turning on his PSP (muting it). As he plays, Kenma listens to the soft sounds Shouyou makes in his sleep, feels the warmth of his back against his forehead and knees, and takes comfort in them.

The peace only lasts for about ten minutes, before Shouyou jerks in his sleep and elbows Kenma in the face. With a hiss of pain, Kenma lurches back, falling off the edge of the bed with a loud enough thump to wake Shouyou. He sits up quickly, eyes wide and fists automatically up in front of his face.

“Who’s that? I’ll fight you!” he shouts, words slurred with sleep.

Kenma forgets to be irritated and laughs instead, because Shouyou looks ridiculous and harmless. Then his chest aches, because he knows Shouyou won’t stay harmless for long.

His friend blinks, turning his gaze onto Kenma, and he gasps. “Kenma! Did I knock you off the bed? I’m so sorry!”

“It’s fine,” Kenma assures him, allowing a tiny smile, even as he grabs Shouyou’s offered hand and pulls himself back up onto the bed.

Shouyou grins. “What are you doing here?” he asks, bringing his face in close.

Kenma turns his own away, fighting another smile. “Shouyou, your breath stinks.”

“Oh! Sorry.” Shouyou pulls back, one hand covering his mouth. He narrows his eyes then slightly, as he takes in Kenma’s oversized shirt, the boxers that just barely peek out from under the hem, his bare legs prickled once more with goosebumps. “Why aren’t you dressed? Did something happen?”

Kenma keeps his gaze fixed on the shelf beside the bed. It’s covered in volleyball trophies, and
pictures of Shouyou’s old team back at Karasuno High School. He looks so young and happy in the photos, and Kenma’s chest clenches for a second time.

“I just . . . needed to see you.”

He turns his gaze back onto Shouyou, who’s lowered his hand and is studying Kenma, head tilted to the side like a bird’s. Kenma shrinks under the scrutiny, drawing his shoulders high, as he glances down at the PSP in his hand. He fiddles with it absently, drawing his fingers over the creases of the plastic.

“Kuroo hit me . . . sort of.”

The squawk of disbelief and anger that emanates from Shouyou’s lips is loud enough to probably be heard by the neighbors.

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! I’LL PULL HIS STUPID HAIR RIGHT OFF HIS STUPID HEAD!” Shouyou bellows, leaping off the bed. He’s already grabbing a pair of jeans from the floor, hopping into them without even taking off his pajama pants.

Kenma scrambles to stand as well, dropping his PSP on the bed in his haste. He grabs Shouyou’s wrists to stop his frantic dressing, shaking his head quickly.

“It wasn’t on purpose!” he says quickly, his heart pounding hard against his ribcage, incited by Shouyou’s panic. “I don’t know what’s wrong, but something is and I just . . . I needed to see you. I n-needed—”

He cuts off, as his chest tightens and the stumbling, racing beat of his heart crawls up into his throat. He can tell he’s breathing too fast, but he can’t seem to slow down his gasps for air. His hands tighten their grip on Shouyou, and his friend’s eyes widen, as Kenma begins to double over.

“He’s sobbing, I’m sorry, Kenma. I’m sorry. Just . . . here, calm down. Breathe. You’re okay. It’s okay,” he says, gently pulling away from Kenma’s hold and moving instead to wrap his arm around Kenma’s back.

Carefully, he guides Kenma to the floor, letting him kneel hunched over his knees, and then pressing his torso over Kenma’s in a half-hug. The steady beat of Shouyou’s heart thuds against Kenma’s back, and his voice continues to murmur soft words of encouragement and apology.


Dimly, Kenma realizes that it’s probably a bad thing that Shouyou knows instinctively by now how to calm him. He didn’t used to get these attacks so viciously while they were in high school. It was only after July 10th that they began to wrack his body more and more often.

Kenma grits his teeth, hating how helpless he feels, relying on the weight of his younger friend to reassure him. He remembers the attack from a week ago, how he’d collapsed in front of strangers. At least this wasn’t as embarrassing.

“Kenma?”

Kenma realizes that his breathing has slowed, and his heartbeat is somewhat back to normal. He shrugs Shouyou off him, straightening slowly. He inhales shakily, not looking at his friend, but keeping his gaze trained toward the floor. His hair swings forward to hide his face. It’s long, brushing his shoulders. He needs a haircut. He feels the light touch of fingertips against his shoulder.
“Kenma? Are you okay? I’m really sorry.”

“I’m fine,” Kenma murmurs, before glancing over at Shouyou’s pale face. A pang of guilt thuds against his chest at the worry he sees in those bright golden-brown eyes. He offers him a small smile, a trick he learned from Kuroo. Smile through the pain and perhaps it’ll go away. “I promise.”

Shouyou watches him skeptically. “Maybe you should talk to someone. Has Kuroo acted like this before?”

Kenma shakes his head. He doesn’t have to try and think back over the past few years. Kuroo has never so much as looked at him with anger or irritation before. That was why the look that morning unnerved him so much. For the first time in all the years Kenma has known him, Kuroo appeared . . . frightening.

Shouyou tugs on his fiery hair absently. “I don’t know what you want me to do,” he says then, deflating.

Kenma shifts his gaze to the PSP abandoned on the bed. Then he reaches up to touch the hair hanging before his eyes, picking up a strand to inspect. “Cut my hair.”

Shouyou starts. “What?”

“Just a little. It’s too long.”

“Uh,” Shouyou squirms nervously. “Maybe my mom should?”

Kenma tilts his head, guessing that does sound like a better plan than allowing Shouyou to hold scissors near his head. “Okay.”

Shouyou jumps up and seems to realize his awkward state of dress. He flushes. “Um, I should get dressed.”

Kenma blinks at him, before realizing. He nods, before standing and making his way back toward the bed. He grabs his PSP and then leaves the room, walking to the couch to settle down on it, knees pulled to his chest. He turns his game back on and plays quietly in the corner of the couch, barely glancing up once Shouyou’s parents leave their room and head for the kitchen.

“Kenma-kun, it’s nice to see you,” Shouyou’s mother says with a fond smile. “Good morning.”

He glances up briefly. “Good morning,” he says to be polite, before returning to his game. Thankfully, Shouyou’s family knows him enough by now not to be offended by his abrupt speech and odd habits.

Natsu makes her way out of her room in her uniform, hopping towards the kitchen, presumably to grab breakfast before she leaves for school. Her hair is done up in two small ponytails on either side of her head, dozens of sparkly clips holding back the rest of her wild curls from her face. When she spots Kenma on the couch she stops and changes course, moving to throw herself down on the couch next to him.

“Onii-chan, do you want to hear about my project at school?” she asks, continuing before Kenma can reply. “We have to write an essay about the SS-415 and whether or not it’s a good idea to mass produce it.” She pauses, waiting to see if her words have the desired effect.
Kenma glances up at her, which is apparently what she was waiting for, as she surges on.

“I mean, I think what Kuroo-san and the others do is really cool, you know? Saving lives and being heroes, but I don’t think mass-producing the serum is a good idea. I mean, we don’t need that many Soldiers, when Kuroo-san’s group is doing a great job, you know? Besides, there’s supposed to be bad side effects, right? Like cramps and in-in-something . . . when you can’t sleep?”

She looks at Kenma expectantly, and he looks back down at his game.

“Insomnia.”

Natsu nods vigorously. “Yes, that’s it! Insomnia.”

She goes on to tell him what her friends think about the essay, but Kenma tunes her out. Something she said before nags at him, and he goes over her words slowly before he fixates on the ones that stood out to him.

Side effects.

Was that strange anger Kuroo displayed earlier a side effect of the serum? Will it only get worse? Did Oikawa know about it and neglect to tell them? Is it possible that it’s a new thing that the scientists at the lab didn’t anticipate? Were Bokuto, Akaashi, and Iwaizumi displaying similar symptoms? Or is it just Kuroo? Is something really wrong with Kuroo?

“Onii-chan . . . Onii-chan!”

Natsu shakes his knee, startling Kenma out of his thoughts. He pulls his gaze toward her face to find it pouting back at him.

“You’re not listening,” she complains.

“Sorry,” he says automatically, no inflection in his voice.

“Natsu! Stop bothering Kenma!” Shouyou says, rolling his eyes as he appears in the doorway.

“I’m not bothering him,” Natsu retorts, but she gets up and leaves for the kitchen.

Kenma relaxes somewhat once she goes, but his thoughts still haven’t calmed. Shouyou bounces lightly, glancing between him and the kitchen.

“Have you eaten?” he asks then, tilting his head.

Kenma thinks about the half-finished plate of tamagoyaki and rice that he left on the coffee table. They’re both probably cold and rubbery by now. Not that his stomach feels up to food of any kind at that moment. But perhaps some tea might help calm him.

“Tea,” he says, looking up at Shouyou.

Shouyou nods. “Be right back,” he says, before darting into the kitchen.

Kenma glances at the clock above the TV across the room from him. It’s almost eight. Has Kuroo tried to call him? He reaches for his side, before remembering that he doesn’t have pockets and he left his phone in the apartment. Pursing his lips, he debates the pros and cons of going back to retrieve it. His mind is decided for him when Shouyou’s mom steps into the living room, holding a cup of tea, which she hands to him with another smile.
“Shouyou tells me that you want to cut your hair?” she asks, eyeing the long strands curiously.

Kenma nods. “Just a trim,” he says, taking the cup from her and sipping at it carefully. It’s warm and sweet and slides down his throat to settle in his stomach, further unraveling the knot there. It’s comforting and delicious, and he allows a tiny smile. “Thank you for the tea.”

After Natsu leaves for school, Shouyou’s mom has Kenma seated in a chair in front of the TV, and both he and Shouyou are engrossed in Pokémon battles while the soft snip snip of scissors whisper past Kenma’s ears. He reminds her only once that he doesn’t want it short, before turning his attention to the video game, trusting her not to ruin anything.

And she doesn’t. The end result looks similar to how he had his hair back in high school, though the black covers most of his head now that the ends brush against jaw and just beneath his ears. Only a couple inches of the tips are blond, and as he stares at his reflection in the bathroom mirror he wonders if he should bleach it again. His skin looks almost startlingly pale against the dark hair that shifts in front of it, and his gold eyes stand out more.

He flinches instinctively, as Shouyou shoves into his personal space in order to fit his reflection into the mirror beside Kenma’s. “Gwaaaah, you look so cool!” he exclaims, his eyes bright, his grin wide.

Kenma’s cheeks feel warm, and he lifts a strand of hair to look down at it. “I do?”

Shouyou nudges him lightly. “Yeah, kinda badass,” he says. “You were like, a soft kitten before, but now you look more dangerous. Like a panther.”

Kenma isn’t sure he likes that. He doesn’t want to look dangerous. Won’t that call more attention to him? He wonders briefly what Kuroo will think. Will he hate it? He turns to ask Shouyou, before realizing his friend couldn’t possibly know the answer to that question. So instead, he purses his lips, resolving to simply wait and see Kuroo’s reaction. If it’s negative he’ll go to the store to get more bleach. If it’s not . . .

Well, he’ll cross that bridge when he gets to it.

“Kuroo left without making a lunch,” he says instead. “We should make one for him.”

Shouyou’s eyes widen. “Are we going to go give it to him? At the base?!?” he asks excitedly, rising on his toes.

Kenma blinks, wondering if Shouyou has to get that excited about it. “Yes,” he says around a sigh, because although he doesn’t want to help spur on Shouyou’s enthusiasm towards becoming a Soldier, he also doesn’t want to go to the base alone. Just the thought of entering that fortress sends unpleasant shivers down his spine, and he knows he’ll freeze up and run away if he has to talk to the gate guards. With Shouyou along, getting inside and finding Kuroo won’t be a problem.

He just hopes Shouyou doesn’t try to convince anyone to accept him into the program right then and there.

***

Kenma makes too much food for lunch. Hinata doesn’t realize it at first, too caught up in the novelty
of making Kuroo a meal. They manage not to burn anything, and it’s only when Kenma is tying up the fifth bento box that Hinata starts, narrowing his eyes.

“Wait a minute,” he says, surveying the spread before them. “I know Soldiers eat a lot, but there’s no way all this is for Kuroo.”

“It’s not,” Kenma replies, and leaves it at that with no further explanation.

Frustratingly curious, Hinata tries not to bother Kenma about it; because he knows the fastest way to shut him up is to continuously ask him the same questions over and over again. Still, Hinata is practically wriggling with his unspoken question by the time they leave the apartment, Kenma now dressed in some of Natsu’s clothes. They fit him better than Hinata’s would have, as he’s still a few centimeters shorter, and more muscular than Kenma. (Natsu insists that Hinata isn’t “muscular” but simply “toned well,” but Hinata doesn’t get the difference.)

Hinata has to admit that Natsu’s pink sweater with the cat on the front looks cute on Kenma, and the jeans fit almost perfectly over his slender legs and hips. After a moment of studying him, however, Hinata frowns, because Kenma is almost worryingly thin. He tries to remember to get Kenma to eat, but he can’t watch his friend all the time, and he knows that Kenma can forget about meal times when he’s alone.

“We should’ve made one more for you,” Hinata says, as they approach Hinata’s bike chained to the fence by the apartment. He unlocks it, before setting the bentos in the front basket.

“I’ll share with Kuroo,” Kenma says.

“You better,” Hinata says, narrowing his eyes.

Kenma just blinks back at him, expressionless as the cat on his chest.

Hinata shakes his head, straddling his bike and waiting for Kenma to stand on the bars they’d attached to the back wheels of the bike ages ago. Hinata suggested once that they get a tandem bike, but Kenma had protested. Hinata thinks he likes the feeling of standing precariously, as the wind rushes through his hair, and he grips Hinata’s shoulders.

“So . . . to the base then?” Hinata asks, glancing over his shoulder and up at Kenma. He feels slim fingers dig into his jacket, curling into fists.

“No, not yet,” Kenma says, looking off down the street.

From this angle, with the sharpness of his features, the high rise of his cheekbones, the line of his jaw, the flashing gold of his eyes, and the inky blackness of his hair curtaining his face, Kenma looks almost regal. Hinata feels a slight shiver, thinking Kenma has never before intimidated him. But this might be the first time Hinata’s come close to that sensation.

He really is like a panther. Beautiful yet deadly. When did that happen?

“Um?” Hinata shifts in his seat, wondering if Kenma is just going to stare into the distance, or if he’s actually going to tell them where he wants to go.

Kenma blinks and looks down at Hinata, a slight flush darkening his cheeks. It breaks the spell from before, and Hinata breathes easier, as Kenma’s gaze slips to the side.

“Oh. Block 12.”
Hinata nods, not sure where that is but quickly checking his phone. Once he thinks he has a good grasp on which direction to take, he starts pedaling. It’s always a little difficult to get started with the extra weight of Kenma, but it seems easier this time. He’s not sure if that’s because Kenma has gotten lighter or because he’s gotten stronger. He hopes it’s because of the second one, though it wouldn’t surprise him if it were the former.

“So what’s in Block 12?” he calls over to Kenma.

It’s a moment before Kenma answers.

“Mm, the Mad Dog gang.”

Hinata brakes abruptly, and Kenma falls forward onto his back with a soft grunt. Hinata swivels, eyes wide, wondering if his best friend has gone insane.

“Are you serious? They’re like, super dangerous! Everyone knows that!”

Kenma rights himself, only looking a little annoyed. “They’re not dangerous. And they don’t seem to be very high on the police’s priority list.”

“But the main guy, they say he’s super scary! That he’s like a bulldog and will rip your throat out with his teeth if you look at him funny!”

Kenma actually laughs at that, which only confuses Hinata further. Knowing it’d be useless to argue anyway, Hinata turns back around, grumbling under his breath. Kenma’s hands give his shoulders a reassuring squeeze, but it doesn’t loosen the tightness in his stomach.

“If we get murdered in some smelly back alleyway I’m blaming you,” Hinata says, even as he starts pedaling once more.

Kenma guides him toward the corner store where they usually pick up groceries, before taking them further into the Block. The buildings get more dilapidated as they go, looking dingy with peeling paint and boarded up windows. The fences are mostly rusty, and a chained dog barks ferociously at them from an overgrown yard. Hinata practically stands in his haste to move faster, his heart pounding in his chest.

The hairs on the back of his neck and arms are prickling, and that familiar icy grip of fear scrapes at his chest. His lungs burn from exertion, but he doesn’t slow down. Not until Kenma suddenly tightens his grasp, short nails digging deep into his jacket and shirt until Hinata can almost feel them against his skin.

“This is it. This is where I met them,” he says, and he hops off the bike before Hinata can slow to a complete stop.

“Uh, Kenma?” The uneasiness in Hinata’s stomach grows, and he feels the sudden urge to use the restroom. He holds it in as best he can, pretty sure if he left to find one in this part of the city he’d never make it back.

Kenma reaches for the bentos, taking all but one. He steps up onto the curb of the sidewalk, standing still, looking expectant, like he knows something (or someone) will come to him. Hinata carefully sets his bike down, hopping up onto the curb beside Kenma.

Before he can ask what he’s waiting for, a tall, slender man steps out of the shadows from the alley beside them. His smile is pleasant, but his eyes are sharp, taking in Kenma holding the bentos, and the trembling Hinata beside him.
“Kozume Kenma,” the man says, flicking a strand of light brown hair out of his eyes. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, though I must admit I’m surprised.”

Kenma clutches the bentos, looking down at them. Hinata frowns, moving to stand in front of him slightly.

“How do you know his name?” he demands, fists clenched at his sides.

“I do my research,” the man says, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t know who you are, however.”

“I’m Hinata Shouyou, and I’ll kick your ass if you lay a finger on him!” Hianta’s glad his voice doesn’t wobble as he speaks. The man doesn’t look like much of a threat, but Hinata still doesn’t trust him. He looks like he’s got an angle or something. An ace up his sleeve.

That ace appears behind him then, a glowering form of muscle and ragged clothes. His deep-set eyes stare back at Hinata, two stripes of black hair circling his otherwise bleached head. Hinata recognizes him immediately, though not from any photo or sketch on the news. It’s just instinctual.

He yelps, setting himself further in front of Kenma, shielding him from the boring gaze. “It’s the Mad Dog!” he cries, bringing his fists up finally. “Y-you wanna go? Huh? Huh?!”

The first man laughs, an amused sound without any hint of malice. The Mad Dog himself seems confused, not stepping forward to take on Hinata’s challenge, but instead turning toward the first man.

“What the hell is this? They’re sending kids to try and lure us out?” he asks in a gruff voice.

“Hey! I’m not a kid!” Hinata protests.

“Shouyou, you’re too loud,” Kenma says, speaking up for the first time since the man rounded the corner.

Hinata feels himself being nudged aside, and he watches as Kenma steps forward, offering the bentos to the first man. Surprisingly, he meets his gaze, not looking away even as the man slowly raises both eyebrows.

“Not quite the shy, delicate flower I met before then,” he says, as though this interests him. He eyes the bentos then. “What’s this?”

“Food,” Kenma says.

“I can see that.” The man takes the bentos slowly, counting them. “One for each of us?” Again he sounds surprised.

Kenma clutches the ends of Natsu’s sweater sleeves in his palms, bringing his arms close to his chest, as his eyes skitter away to stare into the gutter. “You’re not bad people. You helped me. So... this is a thank you... I guess.” His shoulders rise to meet his ears.

Hinata moves closer to Kenma instinctively. He isn’t feeling any ill-intent coming toward them from these men, but it doesn’t stop the urge to protect Kenma from welling up inside him. But as he moves to wrap his arm around Kenma’s shoulders, his friend gives him a sharp look out of the corner of his eye that freezes Hinata in place. The gold eyes glint behind the dark strands of hair that have fallen in front of his face, and the image is unsettling. Hinata takes a step back, realizing that, in this situation at least, Kenma can take care of himself.
The man bows low before Kenma, and the Mad Dog behind him follows suit after a moment.

“You have my gratitude as well,” he says, straightening. “My name is Yahaba Shigeru. If you ever need assistance from the Mad Dog gang, well, it appears you know how to find us.”

Kenma nods solemnly. Hinata has no idea what’s going on, but the tension is gone, so he finds himself starting to relax. Yahaba turns to go, but the Mad Dog remains still for a moment. He regards Kenma in what could be called a thoughtful way, though it’s hard for Hinata to imagine the guy having much brain power (based on first impressions at least).

“You know Iwaizumi Hajime and Oikawa Tooru?” he asks, brows still furrowed over his snub nose.

Kenma looks at him, and his back stiffens. Wordlessly, he nods. Yahaba pauses at the edge of the alleyway, looking back at them but not urging his partner to hurry along.

“Are they . . . is Iwaizumi okay?” Mad Dog asks, his scowl growing deeper, though now Hinata is pretty sure that it isn’t out of anger or irritation, if it ever was in the first place. It might even be . . . concern?

Kenma tilts his head ever so slightly, studying Mad Dog with a guarded gaze that has the bigger man shuffling his feet and avoiding eye contact. Hinata blinks in surprise at this development, though he bites his lip to keep from asking what the hell is happening.

“I think so,” Kenma says after a moment.

The answer doesn’t completely ease Mad Dog’s facial features, but he nods abruptly and turns to leave, hurrying around the corner, passing Yahaba on his way. As for Yahaba himself, he lifts his hand in a slight wave, before disappearing as well.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Hinata asks, once he’s sure it’s safe to talk.

Kenma doesn’t reply, but he sags against him, and Hinata hastens to catch him before he can fall.

“Are you okay?” Hinata asks, panic rising as he searches Kenma’s face for signs of an attack. But his friend just closes his eyes and nods.

“Tired,” he murmurs.

Hinata realizes that this is just the release of stress making Kenma’s limbs weak, so he turns and hoists Kenma up onto his back. It’s like carrying Natsu, only Kenma might be lighter. That’s worrisome, but before he can dwell too much on it, he turns back to where he left his bike, the last bento box still sitting in the basket. He carefully sets the bike upright and moves to straddle it.

“Hold on,” he tells Kenma, though he doesn’t really need to, seeing as his friend has his arms and legs wrapped around him like a spider monkey.

By the time they reach the base, the sun is high in the sky and the cool morning air has turned warm in a way that makes him almost uncomfortably hot beneath his jacket and Kenma’s body heat. He grits his teeth and doesn’t complain, however, simply wipes the sweat from his forehead and sticks his ID out for the guard at the gate to inspect.

“We’re here to see Kuroo Tetsurou,” he declares, and Kenma shifts slightly on his back.

Hinata thinks he might’ve dozed off. The guard looks at the lump of Kenma skeptically.
“What about him?” he asks, jerking his thumb at Kenma, as he hands the ID back to Hinata.

“Uh, yeah, hold on.” Hinata tries to maneuver his hand to get it into Kenma’s pocket, before realizing that he’s wearing Natsu’s clothes and therefore doesn’t have his ID on him. “Uh-oh.”

The guard’s eyes narrow.

“L-look,” Hinata says, holding up his hands. “I swear we’re not here to cause trouble or anything. We’re just bringing Kuroo-san his lunch.” He gestures to the bento box. “See?”

“I’m still going to need to see some ID.”

Hinata frowns, wondering if he can bike around the barrier fast enough that the guard won’t be able to catch him. The man seems to guess at this thought process though, because one hand shifts to the gun at his side, while the other moves toward the radio on his shoulder.

Hinata feels his insides coil, tight and small, ready to spring. He bends his knees, ready to pedal forward as fast as he can, but then a familiar figure jogs up to the gate, slowing to a stop when he catches sight of him.

“Yo, Hinata!” Kuroo calls, waving his hand. “What are you doing here?”

“Bringing you lunch!” Hinata calls back, before shooting the guard a look. “See?” he says, resisting the urge to stick out his tongue. He fails, and pokes it out quickly.

The guard bristles, turning to look at Kuroo, as the Soldier approaches the guard station. “That one doesn’t have his ID on him. I can’t let him pass.” He points to Kenma, and Kuroo’s eyes widen.

“He doesn’t need an ID; he’s with me,” Kuroo says, moving to carefully detach Kenma from Hinata’s back.

Hinata notes the cautious way Kuroo handles Kenma, the way he cradles him to his chest like something precious. Peering up into his face, Hinata can see the guilt flashing over those half-lidded eyes, partially hidden behind his mess of a bedhead. Kenma turns into Kuroo slightly, resting his forehead against Kuroo’s chest, and for a moment Kuroo stands completely frozen, staring down at Kenma like someone just shot him through the heart.

“He’s not angry with you, you know,” Hinata informs him, getting off the bike to stand alongside it. “I wanted to fight you, but he didn’t want me to.”

Kuroo looks up at him, stricken. “I didn’t . . . he didn’t answer my text, so I thought . . .”

Hinata rolls his eyes. “He left his phone at your apartment. Same with his clothes.” He gestures to Kenma’s outfit, which is obviously not something Kenma would usually wear. Kuroo’s eyes go wide, his mouth dropping into a small ‘O.’ He tilts his head then, a faint grin curling his lips.

“He cut his hair?”

“Okaasan did,” Hinata says, hopping from one foot to the next. “Sorry, but can we go inside? I gotta pee, and you need to eat, and so does he.” He gives the bento box in the basket a pointed look.

Kuroo seems to shake himself out of whatever daze he’d fallen into the minute he began holding Kenma. “Right, right,” he says with a nod. He hesitates, before moving to lower Kenma onto his feet.
“No.” Kenma’s voice is soft, but stern, and Kuroo quickly straightens, holding Kenma closer.

Hinata fights a laugh. A city renowned superhero obeying the whims of a tiny cat person. That isn’t something you see every day. Kuroo turns and leads the way into the base, Hinata following along behind, pushing his bike beside him. He’s already been there before on the tour, but he can’t help but marvel at the structure anyway. To think that this used to be a simple high school and now it’s one of the most important buildings in all of Sendai. Possibly the entire Miyagi prefecture.

And one day, preferably soon, he’s going to work here too.

He gives the bento to Kuroo when they part ways in front of the cafeteria, Kuroo telling him where he can find the bathroom. Hinata hurries quickly and does his business, and he’s just wondering what he should order for his own lunch as he exits when he bumps face-to-chest against a tall figure passing the restroom doors. He stumbles back, an apology on his lips, when the figure turns and snaps at him.

“Watch where you’re going, dumbass!”

Hinata blinks, because he recognizes that voice, and when he tilts his chin up to look into the face of this rude stranger, he realizes that it’s not a stranger at all, but Kageyama Tobio, the scientist that led the tour of the lab the other week. Kageyama seems to recognize him as well, because his eyes widen, and then narrow quickly.

“You! What are you doing here?”

“I’m just going to the bathroom!” Hinata yelps, not appreciating being yelled at for no reason.

“No! I mean—” Kageyama cuts himself off, lowering his voice, as he runs his fingers through his hair agitatedly. “What are you doing here at the base? Did you pass the examinations already?”

“Examinations?” Hinata blinks, trying to remember if he’d taken any exams that week at the college. He knows he couldn’t have forgotten if he had, because he always stress out over them.

“The physical and psychological examinations for the Super Soldier Program,” Kageyama reiterates, speaking slowly as though he might be speaking to an actual idiot.

Hinata frowns at this. “I knew that,” he lies, before shaking his head. “And no, I haven’t even been called in for an interview yet.” It’s something he’s a little bitter about, and he wonders if maybe Kenma called in a favor, asking Kuroo to not let the military take him. But then he realizes Kenma would never do something so underhanded. At least, he’d tell him outright if he had.

“You probably won’t be,” Kageyama muses thoughtfully, frowning at an empty spot on the wall over Hinata’s shoulder. “I highly doubt you’d pass the physical examination.”

Hinata shoves Kageyama instinctively, causing the taller man to stumble back in surprise. “Like hell I won’t! I’m strong and fast! And I might not be very tall, but I can jump! And that’s what you need in Soldiers, right?”

Kageyama tugs on his lab coat to straighten it. “You also need agility and the ability to think quickly on your feet. You need to be fearless and have determination and the will to live.”

Hinata huffs. “I have all those things!” he insists. “I’ll pass your stupid exams, you’ll see! I’ll be the best Soldier there ever was!”
“You don’t even know if your body can handle the serum, dumbass!” Kageyama snaps, and
something flashes in his eyes, something that looks like concern.

Before Hinata can point it out, however, the sound of voices drifts down the hall, along with
approaching footsteps. He freezes, because he knows technically he’s not supposed to be there
without a visitor’s pass and a guide, and he forgot to get a pass at the gate and Kuroo would be his
guide if he wasn’t currently in the cafeteria with Kenma.

“Shit!” he mutters, glancing around quickly for a place to hide. He considers the bathroom, but what
if the people coming this way need to use the toilets? He realizes that he’s screwed either way, and
considers making a break for it, when Kageyama suddenly grabs the hood of his jacket and drags
him down the hall, pushing open a door to his right and shoving him inside.

“Hey! What are y—”

He cuts off abruptly, as Kageyama’s hand moves to cover his mouth. The taller man has stepped into
the closet with him (for Hinata realizes it is a closet, complete with shelves of cleaning supplies,
brooms, mops, and a bucket of what looks like dirty dish water), and he presses Hinata up against the
shelves, closing the door until only a sliver of light seeps in between it and the jam.

Hinata struggles briefly against him, grabbing at the hand over his mouth, but Kageyama is
surprisingly strong and keeps him pinned against the shelves until they dig painfully into his back,
and he winces. Kageyama blinks at this and quickly releases him, taking a step back but gesturing for
Hinata to be quiet.

Hinata flips his middle finger up in response, but stays silent despite the yell building in his chest. He
swallows it down, his ears perking as he hears the familiar rumble of Captain Sawamura Daichi’s
voice from outside the door.

“I understand you think it’s for the best, but the kaiju can attack at any moment. We have to be
ready.”

An easy, trilling laugh sounds in response, and Hinata scoots forward in interest, not recognizing it.
Kageyama presses his hand against Hinata’s chest, however, holding him back, as he leans against
the wall and peers through the open crack of the door out into the hall.

“Do you have so little faith in your training that you still don’t think these boys are ready for
anything? You’re a good captain, Daichi. A few days off won’t turn them into sloth-like apes.
They’re strong, capable men, but they’re tired. They need a rest.” There’s a quiet pause before a
softer, “and so do you.”

Hinata tries to move forward again, straining to see through the crack to know who’s talking.
Kageyama again pushes him back, glancing down at him with a frown.

“Let me see!” Hinata hisses.

“No, stay quiet.”

“I can’t afford a rest,” Captain Sawamura is saying now. “It’s my duty to make sure a kaiju never
again breaches the perimeter.”

“That wasn’t your fault . . .”

“Then who’s fault was it, Suga? Because they never ventured that far out before! I should’ve been
there. I should’ve—”
“What? Gone after the kaiju yourself? Don’t be ridiculous, Daichi. The SSP wasn’t even formed back then. All you had were men, and they did their best, and they succeeded.”

“And most of them died,” Captain Sawamura grumbles.

“Not Asahi, Tanaka, or Noya,” the man called Suga replies gently, almost tenderly it seems. “Not you.”

Hinata looks up at Kageyama with wide eyes. “What are they talking about?” he whispers, bringing his face as close to Kageyama’s ear as he can so he can keep his voice low.

Kageyama looks annoyed by this and cranes his face away. “The attack of July 10th. Were you born yesterday?”

Hinata bites his lip, lowering himself back down. He remembers July 10th. That was the night Kenma’s parents died. He’d been lucky. His parents had been home that night tending to a sick Natsu. Hinata had watched the battle on the news until his father came in and made him turn it off. He watches the tightness of Kageyama’s jaw and wonders where he’d been that night.

“In any case, a few days rest will be good for your Soldiers,” Suga continues. “They’ve mentioned a growing agitation within all of them. I suggested it may simply be stress, but I sent vials of their blood to Oikawa to look at just in case.”

Beside him, Hinata can feel Kageyama’s body stiffen. Hinata tries to remember why that name sounds so familiar, and he wracks his brain until it conjures up an image of a scientist with wavy brown hair and deep brown eyes, a wide smile that doesn’t match the almost manic expression in his eyes as he rants about the side effects of the serum.

“Kageyama-kun,” Hinata murmurs (recalling that the “esteemed” scientist before him is somehow the same age as him), “Is there something wrong with the serum?”

“No, of course not,” Kageyama snaps quickly, but in the light from the hallway, his eyes look troubled.

“But Oikawa-san said—”

“Oikawa isn’t the head of the lab anymore!” Kageyama says, his voice rising to an almost hysterical level.

Hinata opens his mouth to reply, though he isn’t sure what to say, when the door suddenly flies open. He freezes, realizing how he’s standing pressed against Kageyama, and flushes, quickly hopping back, before looking up to meet the stern gaze of Captain Sawamura. Beside him stands a man with ash-blond hair and wide hazel eyes that sparkle at them with a mischievous glint.

“Kageyama-kun, I didn’t know you had a boyfriend,” he teases gently with a grin. He doesn’t seem at all fazed by their compromising position.

Hinata hastens to protest, indignant by the accusation. As if someone as stuffy and obnoxious as
Kageyama could be his boyfriend! “I’m not—”

“You thought you could duck into a closet for some alone time on your lunch break? Naughty,” Suga continues lightly, and Hinata shuts his mouth quickly, realizing suddenly that Suga is giving them an explanation for why they were in the closet other than simply being there to eavesdrop on a private conversation.

Captain Sawamura looks less angry now, so he quickly grabs Kageyama’s hand, ignoring the startled yelp the other gives.

“I’m so sorry, Captain Sawamura-san, sir!” he says, bowing quickly. “It won’t happen again!”

The captain is still frowning, though it’s bordering now on contemplative. “Do I know you?” he asks slowly.

“I came here for the tour, sir,” Hinata supplies helpfully. “I want to become a Soldier!”

Captain Sawamura turns his gaze onto Kageyama, who’s staring at Hinata with a deep scowl. “Why didn’t you tell me that you knew someone who was interested in the program?” he asks.

Kageyama blinks, his mouth hanging open rather stupidly, until Hinata kicks his shin. He starts, shooting Hinata another glare, before he turns back to the captain with an apologetic bow. “I-I didn’t know, sir. When I saw him at the tour I . . . wanted to remain professional?”

Hinata inwardly cringes at how it comes out as a question, and hopes Captain Sawamura misses the way Kageyama looks questioningly over at Suga. Briefly, the captain’s eyes narrow, but when he turns his own gaze toward Suga, he’s only met with a serene smile.

“Come on, Daichi, let’s leave the kids to their fun,” he says, tugging gently on Captain Sawamura’s uniform sleeve.

“You shouldn’t be fooling around in janitor closets,” the captain grumbles, looking back at Kageyama and Hinata. “The door could’ve closed on you and locked you in. Plus there are chemicals in there.”

“Yes, sir. It won’t happen again, sir,” Kageyama says stiffly, and his hand is sweaty in Hinata’s palm. He wants to shake it off, but he continues to hold on tightly until both the captain and Suga are out of sight around the corner.

He rips his hand away then, leaping back from Kageyama before the other can retaliate, which he attempts to do with a lunge for Hinata’s hair.

“Dumbass, Hinata! Now they think you’re my boyfriend!” Kageyama rages, striding out of the closet and kicking the door shut behind him.

“IT’s better than us getting in trouble for being somewhere we’re not supposed to be and listening to their conversation!” Hinata shoots back, before something hits him. He blinks, tilting his head, as he looks up at Kageyama. “Wait. You . . . remember my name?” It’s been a week since the tour. Had he really made that much of an impression on the scientist? All they’d done was argue!

Kageyama stares at him a moment, before a light dusting of pink colors his cheeks. Hinata stares at it, fascinated by this strange turn of events.

He kinda . . . sorta . . . looks cute like that . . . maybe.
But then Kageyama scowls and ruins the effect. “You remember my name,” he points out. “You said it in the closet.”

Hinata blinks twice rapidly. “I did?”

Kageyama just nods, the hand that had held Hinata’s flexing at his side. Hinata swallows, realizing his heart is pounding really fast. When had it started doing that? He starts to inch away, eager to escape, not wanting his face to betray the fact that he’d been thinking about Kageyama quite a bit since the tour.

But only to complain about him to Kenma and then Lev, he reminds himself. It’s only because he annoyed me so much.

Kageyama is still frowning at him, dark blue eyes concentrated on Hinata’s face, like he was trying to work out a puzzle. Hinata feels his phone buzz in his pocket, and quickly pulls it out to flip it open, grateful for the distraction.

From: Kuroo-san
Subject: yo shrimpy

did u fall in? lol

Flushing, Hinata replies quickly with something he hopes is a coherent ‘I’m on my way back now’. He shuts the phone and looks up at Kageyama, whose frown has eased somewhat, his attention also diverted by the phone. His gaze is still on it, and Hinata waves it absentley.

“I came here with Kenma,” he explains. At Kageyama’s blank stare, he elaborates. “Kuroo-san’s best friend?” Kageyama’s gaze doesn’t flicker in recognition. “Geez, don’t know the names of your own Soldiers?”

Kageyama flushes at that, turning his face away. “I’m not in charge of serum administration,” he mutters.

“So what, they’re just lab rats to you?” Hinata narrows his eyes; not thinking even someone like Kageyama could be so callous.

The taller man doesn’t respond, nor does he look back at Hinata, so in the end Hinata pockets his phone and takes another hop-skip backwards.

“So, uh, I guess I’ll see you around,” he says, not sure why he’s offering any type of farewell. Perhaps he feels he owes it to him for forcing the guy to pretend to be his boyfriend. (Not that that’s something he should apologize for. Hinata would be an awesome boyfriend.)

It seems to catch Kageyama off-guard as well. He twitches, his hand lifted in a half-wave, and his eyes are wide.

“Oh, yeah. See you.”

Before Hinata can dwell too much on the weird awkwardness that has settled between them, he nods, turns, and races down the hallway.

***
Three days off. That’s what Sawamura gives them. It’s not much, but Iwaizumi is grateful for it anyway. Kuroo immediately takes off for home, and Bokuto and Akaashi leave without saying much (which isn’t that strange for Akaashi, but is for Bokuto. Iwaizumi wonders briefly if something’s wrong, before reminding himself it’s none of his business). Despite being bone-tired and eager for food and sleep, Iwaizumi makes his way toward the base lab.

It’s the end of the day, so most everyone is packing up to leave, shutting down their computers, and jotting their last few notes on notepads. Kageyama isn’t anywhere to be seen, which is strange, since he’s usually one of the last ones to leave, making sure everyone’s work is logged correctly.

He knows the way to Oikawa’s computer by heart; could walk through the maze of tables and file cabinets blindfolded. He stops just behind Oikawa’s chair, eyes resting on the back of his friend’s head. It’s bent forward, as Oikawa peers at the computer screen in a close way that can’t be healthy for his eyes. Honestly, Iwaizumi isn’t sure how Oikawa has managed to avoid glasses so far.

“Oi,” he says, kicking lightly at Oikawa’s chair. “Get up. We’re going out to eat.”

Oikawa starts in surprise at first, before swiveling in his seat to grin up at Iwaizumi. “Iwa-chan, are you taking me out on a date? But I’m not even wearing a tie!”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. “Get your ass out of that seat and come with me now. You barely took a lunch break, and I know that mug is full of coffee.” He glares at said mug beside Oikawa’s computer mouse like it personally offends him (and it has, somewhat; it’s going to keep Oikawa awake all night if the idiot drinks it).

Oikawa twirls his pen between his fingers, humming softly. “You know, I would really love to go out with you, Iwa-chan, but there’s something that I simply must—”

Iwaizumi doesn’t wait for him to finish. With a grunt, he kicks the chair out from under Oikawa, sending the man to the floor with a yelp and flailing arms and legs. “Don’t make me drag you out of here,” he warns.

“Mean, Iwa-chan!” Oikawa pouts, moving to stand in a single, fluid movement. He brushes off his lab coat and, after Iwaizumi frowns at it pointedly, shrugs it off, folding it neatly and placing it on the chair once he’s set it upright again. “And where is Iwa-chan taking me tonight?” he asks, his voice lilting.

Iwaizumi shoves his hands into his tracksuit pants, looking over Oikawa’s Italian leather loafers, his light brown slacks, his pale blue button down shirt tucked neatly into his waistband. The collar is open, revealing the smooth hollow of his throat. Iwaizumi feels like a gross, sweaty werewolf next to a menswear model and it doesn’t help his mood.

“It’s not going to be fancy, so don’t get any ideas of matsutake mushrooms or wagyu beef or anything like that.”

Oikawa snorts, slinging his arm across Iwaizumi’s shoulders, as he, miraculously, walks toward the exit. “What about that pizza place we used to go to as kids? I’m pretty sure it’s still around. That old baker wasn’t that old.”

Iwaizumi nods, trying not to feel self-conscious at how clean Oikawa looks and smells. Shrugging his arm off his shoulder, he pushes open the door before continuing down the hallway. “We’re going to stop by the apartment first so I can get changed,” he grunts.
Oikawa blinks. “Oh! Well, let me just grab—” He starts to turn back to the lab, but Iwaizumi grabs his arm before he can, gripping tightly.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he growls.

Oikawa bits his lip, glancing from the hand on his arm to Iwaizumi’s stern expression. “But Iwa-chan,” he implores, and this time it’s a request, not a whine. “Suga-san gave me everyone’s blood today to look at. He told me what was going on. Bokuto-kun tearing up the locker room, Kuroo hitting sweet, innocent Kenma.” His eyes are wide, as he leans in close to Iwaizumi’s face. “I need to look at the samples. If there’s something wrong with you—”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Iwaizumi said abruptly, frowning back at Oikawa. “But if there is—”

Iwaizumi takes a step back, holding his hands out to the side. “Look at me. Does it look like there’s something wrong with me?”

Oikawa frowns slightly. “No . . .”

“And I feel fine,” Iwaizumi insists, stepping close again. He gently whacks the back of Oikawa’s head. “I’m not angry or feeling particularly more violent than usual, so just drop it for one night and have some fucking pizza with me.”

Oikawa rubs the back of his head with a faint pout, but then he grins, and it’s his genuine one, the one that lights up his eyes and causes them to crinkle in the edges. Iwaizumi’s heart thuds faster at the sight, and he reminds himself that now is probably an extremely inappropriate moment to think about what Sugawara suggested earlier as way to relieve stress.

As Oikawa goes on about something “Tobio-chan” said earlier that day that was apparently “uncalled for” and “totally rude,” Iwaizumi starts to tune him out. He steps onto the elevator with Oikawa, staring at the numbers as he hits the button for the bottom floor. As it lights up, he thinks back to what else Sugawara had mentioned, about doing things he enjoyed. Glancing over at Oikawa, he wonders if it’s a good idea to mention volleyball.

They’d played together their childhood and into middle school, but once Oikawa reached high school, he began to overwork himself. Finally, near the end of his first year, he blew out his knee. Because he refused to acknowledge it at first and played on the injury, it grew worse until finally the doctors had to put a ban on the sport altogether. Oikawa’s athletic career ended as soon as it’d begun.

But that was over six years ago. And while Oikawa had switched tactics and gone into science instead, surely there was a part of him that still loved the game. But would bringing it up after all this time help Oikawa or hurt him?

Then he wonders why he’s worrying about Oikawa when he’s supposed to be worrying about himself. He can go play volleyball with anyone. It doesn’t have to be with Oikawa.

But as he steps off the elevator, telling Oikawa that he’s going to need to wear the motorcycle helmet this time and listening to him whine about “helmet hair,” Iwaizumi realizes that yes, yes it does.

He manages to wrestle the helmet onto Oikawa’s head, and together they ride out toward the outskirts of Sendai. Bokuto and Akaashi were the only ones to take the military’s offer of expensive living, Bokuto apparently not able to pass up the opportunity to have extra room to do . . . who knows what. Iwaizumi preferred to stay with Oikawa in the apartment they rented out during their second year of college. It was spacious enough, and far enough from the base that when Iwaizumi
goes home he actually feels like he’s leaving work. It helps him relax.

The commute takes about twenty minutes while driving the speed limit, and Iwaizumi tries to ignore the way Oikawa presses against his back, arms wrapped tightly around his waist. Of course the dumbass forgot to bring a jacket, so he’s shivering in the cool evening air, and Iwaizumi resists the urge to pull over and hand him his jacket.

But about halfway there the way Oikawa shakes starts to really grate his nerves, and he pulls over to the side of the road.

“Iwa-chan?” Oikawa blinks at him in confusion.

Iwaizumi removes his leather jacket and tosses it over his shoulder into Oikawa’s face. Oikawa squawks indignantly, but Iwaizumi ignores this.

“Put it on,” he instructs.

“But then Iwa-chan will be cold,” Oikawa protests.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Iwaizumi glares at Oikawa until his friend meekly pulls on the jacket.

“Aw, Iwa-chan, you do have a heart,” he coos, pulling the jacket around himself.

Iwaizumi flicks the side of Oikawa’s helmet, before turning back around to pull back out onto the road. He isn’t cold. Oikawa’s body heat against his back is more than enough to keep him warm, and even if it wasn’t, the way his heart is racing, pumping blood through him at a pace too quick to be healthy, would definitely compensate.

When they enter the apartment, Iwaizumi wants to go directly to his bedroom and flop onto his bed and not move for the next three days. But he forces himself to head for the bathroom instead, showering quickly, as he doesn’t have time for a bath. He exits in just a towel, and regrets it the instant Oikawa calls to him from the couch.

“My my, Iwa-chan, have you been working out?”

“Shut up,” he growls, as his ears grow hot. He wishes he has something to throw at Oikawa’s head, but all he has is the towel, and there’s no chance in hell he’s giving that up.

Instead he scurries into the bedroom and quickly dresses in the nicest jeans he has, fishing a clean shirt out of the pile of laundry that he still hasn’t folded due to time constraints and general fatigue. He pulls it on, wondering briefly if it’s shrunk slightly, before shrugging that thought away. When he walks back out, Oikawa is still on the couch. Iwaizumi flicks his ear hard, as he passes.

Oikawa yelps and rubs at it, looking offended. “What was that for?”

“Pick something,” Iwaizumi said, shaking his head, as he slipped on his shoes. He grabs his spare leather jacket off the hook by the door then, as Oikawa is still wearing his other one. He tells himself that it looks ridiculous on the slender man, but really it suits him. Anything Oikawa wears suits him. It’s a little disturbing.

The pizza place is actually within walking distance, and as they walk, Iwaizumi half-listens to Oikawa explain the different vitamins that the Soldiers might be deprived of and what he might be able to do to remedy that. He nods along where he’s supposed to, but really his mind is still fixated on Sugawara’s words from earlier.
When was the last time he had sex? He honestly can’t remember, though it might’ve been in college, same as Bokuto and Kuroo. If he had it hadn’t been memorable, which is somewhat of a shame. He knows he prefers guys, has known that for a while actually, but that is no excuse for the way his body is reacting to Oikawa tonight.

Iwaizumi shouldn’t be noticing the rise and fall of Oikawa’s Adam’s apple as he talks. The dip of his bottom lip, the way a passing wind ruffles the ends of his hair, the way his slender fingers move back and forth, as he punctuates his words with gestures. This is best friend. His brother in every sense except by blood. From the start Iwaizumi has always known that Oikawa is off-limits. And even though he knows for a fact that Oikawa is bisexual, with the extreme focus he has on his job, on keeping Iwaizumi and the other Soldiers healthy, on monitoring the kaiju to keep them all safe, Iwaizumi isn’t sure Oikawa can handle a relationship with anyone.

“Iwa-chan is so solemn tonight,” Oikawa says, and Iwaizumi realizes that he’s been silent for the past few minutes.

“Sorry,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “Just . . . it’s been a long day.”

Oikawa hums softly. “If you let me work on that I could probably know what the problem is by tomorrow evening,” he says lightly.

“Sawamura-san has given us a three day vacation,” Iwaizumi says pointedly. “I’m going to make sure that goes for you too.”

Oikawa’s eyes widen. “Three days?! Iwa-chan, that’s ridiculous! Do you know how much work I get done in three days?”

“Kageyama can handle it,” Iwaizumi says. He stops then, reaching out to grab Oikawa’s arm, narrowing his eyes at him. “Is this some sort of pride thing? Are you running yourself into the ground just so you can try to beat Kageyama?”

Oikawa looks offended, and this time Iwaizumi can tell it’s genuine. His lips purse, and his eyebrows come together above his nose. “Of course not,” he says. “There’s something up with the kaiju, Iwa-chan. They always appear in the same place and never breach the perimeter. If they’re wild beasts, wouldn’t they try to find a way out? Wouldn’t they go hunting for food?”

Iwaizumi frowns. “Are you forgetting July 10th?”

“No, and that’s what bothers me. The kaiju showed up randomly, not in the center of town, and it did go on a rampage. It acted just like we would expect a wild animal to behave. Unpredictably.”

Iwaizumi forces a laugh, ignoring the cold sensation seeping into his skin, despite his thick jeans and leather jacket. “What, you think the kaiju are being controlled somehow? And that July 10th was one that broke away from that control?”

It feels ridiculous even to say it, but Oikawa just looks at him with wide eyes in a pale, drawn face.

“Yes, exactly.”

Iwaizumi suppresses a shiver and crosses his arms over his chest. “Okay, so just who do you think is controlling these gigantic monsters covered in scales and spikes with large meaty claws?”

“I don’t know,” Oikawa admits, frowning faintly once more. “Aliens, maybe.”

This time genuine laughter bursts from Iwaizumi’s chest, loosening the tight grip that had started to
settle there. Oikawa gasps and shoves Iwaizumi’s shoulder.

“Don’t make fun of me!” he exclaims, affronted. “It could be aliens!”

“You and your aliens,” Iwaizumi gasps, shaking his head, as he wipes away the tears of mirth that sting his eyes.

Oikawa pouts, and Iwaizumi is glad at least that the weird intensity has left his eyes, and he looks normal again. His pout is almost endearing, and as he starts walking again, Iwaizumi has to resist the urge to grab his arm and pull him back to kiss him hard. It’s a thought that both startles and unnerves him, and he shoves his hands into his pockets to make sure they behave, before hurrying after Oikawa.

The pizza is okay. Not as good as he remembers it being, but the man behind the counter is too young to be the original owner and baker. It’s probably his son, and Iwaizumi wonders if he always wanted to go into pizza or if he only took over the shop because it was expected of him. Oikawa eats his pieces with seemingly great enjoyment, but then again he’s never had great taste.

“Iwa-chan, let’s go see if there’s a matsuri nearby,” Oikawa says once they leave the restaurant. He links his arm through Iwaizumi’s, and Iwaizumi lets him, too full to put up a fight.

“Do people still do those?” Iwaizumi muses, allowing himself to be dragged but wondering if the people in Sendai still felt like celebrating things. Then again, it wasn’t as though the public realized that their lives were in danger. Even with the attack on July 10th, the media put a positive spin on things. There were action figures and video games made. Once, a news anchor speculated that an anime might be made centered around the four heroes.

Bokuto and Kuroo seemed excited at this prospect, but it just annoyed Iwaizumi. He was there to do a job, not to be fawned over or idolized like some movie star. He risked his life up there in the sky, leaping on top of kaiju, narrowly missing sharp teeth, fangs, and claws. And people wanted to make light of it, to pretend it wasn’t dangerous, to act like Iwaizumi and the others were simply playing a game.

“They might have a float dedicated to the Soldiers,” Oikawa teases, tugging him toward twinkling lights in the distance. It does appear to be a small festival, perhaps in celebration of the end of another month with no kaiju casualties. “Ooh, maybe there’ll be Iwa-chan masks!”

“Fucking hell, I hope not,” Iwaizumi mutters.

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Oikawa giggled. “It would be better if they had Tooru masks, as I am much prettier than Iwa-chan.”

“Fuck you,” Iwaizumi says, shoving him, but he can’t truly argue that.

The festival only seems to span a couple streets, but it’s full of people despite the size. Oikawa runs to each booth like a little kid, exclaiming over the different prizes and games. Iwaizumi can feel a headache forming, a sharp pounding against the inside of his skull, but this is the first time Oikawa hasn’t appeared exhausted and stressed in months, so he decides to let them stay . . . for a little while at least.

He buys them some takoyaki, but refuses to wear a pig mask that Oikawa insists looks just like him. He retaliates against this remark by shoving Oikawa’s takoyaki into his face while the other is attempting to take a bite, and laughs at the smear of sauce that covers Oikawa’s nose, mouth and chin. Oikawa cries out in distress and then makes Iwaizumi fetch him something to clean the mess.
Iwaizumi is still chuckling, as he goes to find some napkins or paper towels. He rounds the corner of a food stall and nearly knocks over a man filling a bowl with mochi. He almost drops it in his surprise, and Iwaizumi hastens to lay a hand on his elbow to steady him.

“My apologies,” he says with a short bow. “Are you all right?”

The man doesn’t seem to hear him, but instead stares at Iwaizumi in awe. “You! You’re that—that guy! The one from the news! The Soldier!”

Iwaizumi feels the back of his neck prickle with unease. He tenses, watching the man warily. “Yes,” he says slowly, unsure of this man’s intent.

“I think you’re amazing!” he crows, with all the enthusiasm of an avid fanboy. This time he does drop the bowl of mocha and grabs Iwaizumi’s arms, which causes him to grunt and take a step back. But the man follows, too eager to notice Iwaizumi’s discomfort. “You were one of the first, weren’t you? What’s it like? Is the serum good? Do you think they’d take in someone like me? What are the kaiju like up close?”

The questions are rambled too fast for Iwaizumi to keep track of them. His head swims, and he blinks, annoyance rising in him swiftly. The man’s face is close to his, and as he talks, spit flies from his mouth and lands on Iwaizumi’s face. The edges of his vision are tinted red, and his heart pounds relentlessly against his chest. He’s just about to shake off the man and excuse himself, when the man asks,

“Do you think I could have your autograph?”

Something inside Iwaizumi snaps. It’s an almost audible break, and with it comes a surge of anger, mixed with disbelief and the overwhelming urge to punch something. It’s hot, too hot, and he squeezes his hand around something soft. Vaguely he understands that it’s the man’s neck, and that he’s holding him up against a wall, but it feels as though his body is acting alone. He’s disconnected; his mind fractured. He squeezes, barely feeling the scratch of nails against his arm, as the man struggles to pull his grip away.

“You want my autograph?” he growls, focusing his gaze on the man’s reddening face. “What do I look like to you? A fucking movie star? I’m a Soldier. You’ll treat my position with respect, as it’s due! Do you fucking realize how much I’ve sacrificed in order to keep your puny ass safe? No, of course you don’t. You just think this is all a game, don’t you?” A manic, almost hysterical laugh threatens to force its way out, but he pushes it down, using that mania to fuel his anger.

It’s exhilarating, this feeling. It’s both hot and cold, and his blood is rushing through him with a fire that feels . . . good. He’s pretty sure he could take on a kaiju single-handedly like this. He might even have enough power and strength to knock down the building in front of him. He clenches his free hand into a fist, deciding to try it. He rears back, and the man he’s holding flinches. Slamming his fist into the wall, he feels the vibrations running through both him and the brick. It rattles his bones, but he stands fast. His fist sinks past the resistance a few inches, but it doesn’t bring the building down.

Too solid. I need a softer target to destroy.

The man he’s holding whimpers, which was a mistake. Iwaizumi’s gaze shifts to him, and although everything is bathed in hues of red and pink, he can see the terror on the man’s face.

Good. Be terrified. I could kill you with a single hit to the chest.

The man is squirming, gasping, and Iwaizumi dimly realizes that he’s still squeezing his throat,
cutting off his air. He narrows his eyes, pulls his fist back once more, before a sharp voice cuts through the haze like a blade, ramming into Iwaizumi’s ears with enough force to cause him to tilt his head to the side.

“Hajime!”

Iwaizumi shakes his head, brushing off the voice. He . . . has to kill this man in front of him. For some reason. He’s strong enough to crush him with one blow, so why is he hesitating? Grunting, Iwaizumi adjusts his stance, tenses for the hit again, but then a pale face with wide brown eyes appears before him, in front of his intended target. Its lips are saying something, a name, over and over again.

“Hajime, stop! Hajime!”

Cool, slender hands cup his face, stinging against the fire burning beneath his skin. Iwaizumi flinches, and the red surrounding him shivers, splinters, breaks. He blinks, and his mind slides back into place, aligns with his body. His hand releases the man automatically, and he stumbles back, away from Oikawa. His body feels weak, and his knees buckle. Before he can hit the ground, Oikawa is at his side, arm around him, holding him steady.

Shit. What did I just—

Iwaizumi shakes his head, trying to clear it. Indistinctly he remembers what happened, but it feels foggy, like a dream. The man he’d run into earlier is on the ground in front of a wall, gasping and coughing, hands at his throat, which is already starting to bruise. Iwaizumi stares, his breathing shallow, catching in his own throat.

He’s aware of Oikawa at his side, trying to coax him to his feet. Roughly, he pushes him away, standing on his own. He wobbles but remains upright. He doesn’t look over at Oikawa, knowing that he’ll only see concern there, perhaps tears, and Oikawa is an ugly crier.

“I’m fine,” he lies.

“We’re going back to the lab,” Oikawa says, his voice hoarse, like he’d been yelling for some time. “I need to test those samples immediately.”

Intellectually, Iwaizumi knows that he’s right. If Kuroo and Bokuto experienced the same uncontrollable rage he just had it could mean something bad for the Soldiers and the SSP. Oikawa should definitely go figure out what’s wrong and try to fix things before someone gets seriously hurt.

But on the other hand . . .

Iwaizumi turns to Oikawa, stepping close and dropping his forehead against the side of his friend’s shoulder. “I’m tired,” he mumbles. “The samples will still be there tomorrow. Let’s go home.”

Oikawa stiffens beneath his head, and he knows that Oikawa isn’t used to him initiating physical contact separate from violence, but his body aches like it does after a battle, and he wants nothing more than to just sleep.

The man has finally worked his way to his feet, and he points at Iwaizumi accusingly. “He-he tried to kill me!” he wheezes, his voice barely above a whisper. “I’m going to the police!”

Oikawa tilts his head toward the man. “You can do that, of course,” he says, his voice lilting in a way that doesn’t quite disguise the malice behind his words. “But do you honestly think they’re going to believe that the world famous superhero Iwaizumi Hajime stooped so low as to try to kill an
insignificant civilian?”

“Shut up, Oikawa,” Iwaizumi grumbles, straightening. He glances at the man, guilt twisting in his stomach. He knows he should do or say something to apologize and possibly rectify the damage he’d done, but nothing comes to mind that he feels would compensate.

Sighing, he reaches into his jeans to pull out his wallet. He takes out all the money he has, pressing it into Oikawa’s hands. “Give that to him,” he says.

Oikawa’s eyes brighten, and he holds the money out to the man. “For your silence,” he says ominously.

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. “For the hospital bill,” he corrects. “I truly apologize.” He bows low to the man, who takes the money with a huff and scurries away.

“Iwa-chan, that could’ve been such a cool moment!”

“I’m not some mafia member paying off a witness to a hit,” Iwaizumi says, rubbing his forehead. It’s an instinctive gesture. The pounding headache from before is gone. He tries not to wonder if it’s because of what just happened.

“You’re ugly enough to be a hit man,” Oikawa muses, and then yelps in pain as Iwaizumi kicks his leg.

“Fuck you,” he says, but it sounds half-hearted even to him.

Oikawa is unnervingly quiet on their way back to the apartment. The late night breeze feels cool against Iwaizumi’s skin, still flushed from earlier. He keeps his hands inside his jacket pockets, clenched into fists to stifle their trembling. Oikawa keeps his strides shorter than usual, so Iwaizumi doesn’t have to quicken his steps to keep up with him.

Finally, Oikawa breaks the silence. “If Kuroo does that to Kenma . . .”

“He won’t,” Iwaizumi says flatly, not even wanting to entertain that idea.

Oikawa chews on his lip. “He came to see me this afternoon. Kenma, I mean. He told me what happened, described the look Kuroo got in his eyes . . . I saw that same look in your eyes, Iwa-chan. It was scary.”

Iwaizumi swallows. “I won’t hurt you either, dumbass,” he says gruffly, trying to ignore the tightness of his chest.

“I know, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says, his voice lighter now. He glances over at him with an easy smile. Iwaizumi expects it to be a fake one, a teasing one, and is about to berate him for it, but he realizes with a start that it’s genuine. He remembers how Oikawa stepped in front of him earlier. He’d been about to kill the man he held, and Oikawa placed himself in harm’s way. Iwaizumi slows to a stop, his eyes widening with realization.

“Shit. I could’ve killed you.”

Oikawa takes a couple more steps before he stops, turning back around to face Iwaizumi. He waves his hand through the air dismissively. “But you didn’t, Iwa-chan, don’t worry.”

“But I could have. You’re such an idiot. If that ever happens again, don’t you dare put yourself in
front of my fist again.” Iwaizumi shakes his head.

“Okay, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says, and this time his smile is anything but sincere.

Iwaizumi narrows his eyes. “Oikawa . . .”

“Ooh, look! A shooting star!” Oikawa grabs his arm, pointing toward the sky.

Iwaizumi sighs, but looks up dutifully, staring at the streak as it flashes across the sky. He glances over at Oikawa then, studying the look on his face. It’s serene, calm, not a hint of worry or fear. His eyes are bright, shining with wonder as they always do when stargazing, his lips tilted in a tiny smile. Iwaizumi doubts he’ll see much of that expression going forward, and that knowledge clenches in his stomach, weighting it down until his entire body feels heavy.

“Come on.” He shifts his arm, taking Oikawa’s hand in his.

With a start, Oikawa lowers his gaze, tilting his head as he studies Iwaizumi, but Iwaizumi keeps his face forward.

“Iwa-chan?”

“We’re going to miss curfew,” he says, breaking into a run and dragging a stumbling, indignant Oikawa behind him.

***

“Kenma . . .”

“Stop.”

“But I just—”

“You don’t have to.”

Kenma doesn’t look up from his PSP. He knows if he does he’ll only see Kuroo sprawled on the floor between the couch and the coffee table, looking up at him with a sad expression. He’s been trying to apologize ever since Kenma arrived at the base, but Kenma doesn’t think it’s necessary. They both know that Kuroo is sorry, and Kenma just wants to move on.

This time Kuroo seems to listen though, as he sighs and moves to stand. They’ve finished dinner, and Shouyou left after Kenma changed and handed back Natsu’s clothes. He’s now dressed in another one of Kuroo’s shirts (a black one with a guitar on the front) over his boxers, though it’ll soon be too cold to keep his legs bare during the night.

“You know, when I bought that shirt I was planning on actually wearing it at some point,” Kuroo says, reaching over to tug on the sleeve, causing the wide collar to slip down across Kenma’s shoulder.

Kenma lifts his shoulder to let it slide back into place, keeping his eyes on his game. He makes a noncommittal noise in response, knowing that Kuroo isn’t actually bothered by Kenma wearing his shirts. Kuroo’s still in his gross sweatpants and sleeveless shirt from earlier, but hasn’t left yet to take a shower or bathe. Kenma hopes he does soon, because he’s starting to stink.
“Suga had some suggestions for what to do doing our vacation,” Kuroo says, draping himself over the back of the couch. “He says that we should do things we enjoy, so how about some volleyball?” He reaches out to flick a strand of Kenma’s hair.

“No.”

Kenma got enough of volleyball in high school. He doesn’t really enjoy the sport and only really got excited while watching Shouyou play. But he doesn’t play these days either. Sports aren’t really a thing anymore, not when most young men are eager to join the military instead.

Kuroo groans. “The bookstore won’t be open until tomorrow.”

“Read something you have here.”

“But I’ve read all of them like, a dozen times. I haven’t had time to get anything new.”

Kenma doesn’t have anything to offer in reply to that, so he focuses once more on the game, while Kuroo makes noises of discontent from behind him.

“I’d go over to Bo’s but I think Akaashi is mad at me,” he says, and that catches Kenma’s interest.

“Why would Akaashi be mad at you?” he asks, lowering his game to look over his shoulder at Kuroo. It takes a lot to get Akaashi mad. Kenma honestly doesn’t know where the man gets all his patience.

Kuroo grimaces and rests his head on his arm, staring at Kenma’s shoulder instead of his face. “I sorta asked Bo if he’d have sex with me.”

Kenma blinks, unsure what to do with that information. He hadn’t known Kuroo thought of Bokuto in that way. His chest does a strange twisty thing that he ignores, as he turns back to his game.

“Did you ask him that in front of Akaashi?”

“Yes, and don’t tell me I’m an idiot, because I know that I am. I wasn’t thinking. I sort of . . . panicked.”

“Kuro, you’re not making sense.”

“Sorry, just, ugh.” Kuroo inhales deeply, before exhaling slowly. His warm breath tickles the back of Kenma’s neck, as it moves the blond tips across it gently.

Kenma suppresses a shiver.

“Suga also suggested that sex might help with all the aggression we’ve been feeling. I know it reduces stress, but I don’t want to just go sleep with some stranger, you know? So I thought of Bo.”

There’s a split second hesitation between Kuroo’s question and final sentence. Someone who only knew Kuroo casually might not have have caught it, but Kenma does. Because he knows Kuroo better than anyone. He turns and fixes Kuroo with a stare.

“You thought of Bo.”

Kuroo’s eyes don’t waver from Kenma’s face, but they widen almost imperceptibly.

“Yes.”
He’s not quite lying, but he’s not exactly telling the truth either. Kenma can’t quite figure out why, at least not from simply staring at him. He narrows his eyes, the ache in his chest starting to become increasingly painful.

Kuroo’s gaze lowers to Kenma’s lips. It lingers there only briefly, before skittering away quickly, but not so quick that Kenma doesn’t catch it. His heart is already thudding wildly against his ribs before Kuroo even opens his mouth to speak.

“I might’ve thought of you first.”

Kenma blinks rapidly, unsure how to process that information. He brings his knuckle to his mouth, biting down hard; just to make sure he isn’t dreaming. Kuroo’s eyes widen though, and he lifts his head off his arm.

“Just because you’re my best friend, that’s all! I wasn’t going to—”

“Oh.”

Kuroo stops abruptly. “Okay?” he repeats, his voice strained.

“I’ll have sex with you.”

Kuroo falls off the back of the couch. Kenma leans forward to look down at him, wondering if he should find it as amusing as he does, that wide-eyed look of shock and terror on Kuroo’s face. He sets his chin on the couch cushion so just his eyes are visible over the edge, as he watches Kuroo sit up slowly.

“Kenma, I wasn’t going to ask you to do that,” he says, shaking his head. “You don’t have to.”

“But you want to, right? With me?”

Kuroo stares, a flush darkening his cheeks. It’s cute, and Kenma’s stomach flips over. He doesn’t think about sex much, honestly. But the thought of doing it with Kuroo doesn’t disgust him. It makes him feel oddly warm inside, a sensation that isn’t at all unpleasant.

“Kenma, I—”

“Take a bath first though,” Kenma says, turning back around and retrieving his game from where he dropped it. As he restarts the game, he listens to the sounds of Kuroo getting off the floor and walking to the bathroom. After the door shuts behind him, Kenma releases the breath he’d been holding. It slides out shaky and uneven.

He’s not sure what this means. Why does Kuroo want to have sex with him? Is it just to relieve stress, as Suga suggested? He knows that despite his reputation around the college campus, Kuroo was never as much of a playboy as he seemed. Kenma can count on his hands the number of times Kuroo told him not to wait up because he was hooking up with someone (providing a little too much information for Kenma’s comfort). And that stopped completely once he joined the SSP.

Kenma wiggles his toes together, staring down at them. His chest is achy again, but he wants to do this. He’s tired of being useless. Of just sitting around the apartment doing nothing but laundry and waiting. He braved dark alleyways to give much needed food to the Mad Dog gang. He spoke to Oikawa about his concerns over Kuroo’s strange behavior earlier, giving him information that might be helpful to his research into the issue. He can do this for Kuroo too, to calm his stress, to make him feel better. Feel good, hopefully.
And if Kuroo does only mean for it to relieve stress and there’s nothing else to it, that’s probably best anyway.

Once Kenma hears the bathroom door open again, he stands, setting aside the PSP on the coffee table. His heart is stuttering, jerky and much too fast. He tells himself that it’s natural to be nervous for one’s first time, and walks purposefully toward Kuroo’s bedroom.

When he pushes open the door, he pauses. Kuroo is standing naked in front of his window, staring out at the shadowy buildings of downtown Sendai that sit past the perimeter. The room is dark, and the only light comes from the street lamps outside, so all Kenma can see is Kuroo’s silhouette, black against the soft orange.

Kenma lets his gaze fall across the curve of Kuroo’s shoulders, down the length of his arm at his side, his hand holding his towel in a limp grasp. Despite the powerful figure he cuts, Kenma senses exhaustion and fear. Kuroo’s shoulders are hunched, and his other hand is pressing against the windowsill, gripping it.

Quietly, Kenma enters the room, pulling off Kuroo’s shirt and letting it fall to the floor. He steps up behind Kuroo, reaching up to lightly run his fingers over the skin of Kuroo’s back, tracing lines to connect the moles scattered about. Kuroo’s skin quivers beneath his touch, and Kenma can feel as well as hear the sigh that shakes his ribs.

“Sorry.” Kuroo’s voice is low, hovering beneath the quiet but not quite breaking it. “I just saw the shadow of downtown and thought . . . this isn’t going to end, is it? They keep coming and we don’t know why or for what reason and all we can do is fight until we can’t fight anymore. We can’t even retire, not with how the serum works. So we have to die to end it. Either die in battle or die from withdrawal.”

Kenma bites his lip. He wishes he knew what to say to comfort him, but nothing comes to mind because he can’t help but agree. The entire situation is hopeless. Kenma could see that it was from the beginning. It was why he hadn’t wanted Kuroo to sign up for the program.

Leaning forward, he rests his forehead against Kuroo’s back, still trailing his fingers across his warm skin. “Why did you have to join?” he murmurs softly. “Why do you always have to try and be superman?”

Kuroo chuckles softly, but there’s no humor in his voice. He turns and sinks to his knees in front of Kenma. He rests his head against Kenma’s stomach, and Kenma gently runs his fingers through the still damp hair.

“They needed me to join. You needed me to join,” Kuroo says, sighing. His breath warms Kenma’s skin, and it’s almost comforting, but it doesn’t untangle the knot that’s formed there.

“I never asked you—”

“No, Kenma. Listen.” Kuroo lifts his head, grabbing Kenma’s hands out of his hair to hold them firmly, as he looks up into his face. “I would do anything to protect you, understand? Literally, anything. Those monsters took your parents, and I wasn’t about to let them take you too. You or anyone else.”

Kenma stares down at Kuroo, the knot in his stomach growing larger, and it rises into his chest and throat. It’s a mix of affection and misery, the feeling welling up stronger than anything he’s ever felt before.
I love him.

I’m in love with him.

It’s not a surprise, really. He’s always known that he loves Kuroo, and this second revelation is an anticipated next step in his feelings toward his best friend. But really, it couldn’t have come at a worse time.

Kenma knows that the smart thing to do is to pull away; to tell Kuroo he can’t have sex with him after all, but after an admission like that it seems cruel. So instead he bends and presses his lips against Kuroo’s forehead, then his nose, and finally his lips. It’s a chaste kiss; just a light press against Kuroo’s mouth, and Kuroo doesn’t hasten to deepen it, but instead lifts his arms to wrap them around Kenma’s legs. It ends after a short moment, and Kuroo presses his forehead against Kenma’s.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he says then, and Kenma understands in the way his arms are holding him loosely. He’s afraid of his strength; that he’s going to somehow crush Kenma. Normally, Kenma would be annoyed at such a ridiculous notion, but after the events of that morning he’s willing to let it be.

“I’ll top then,” Kenma says, leaning back.

Kuroo laughs. “Have you ever done that before?” he asks.

“No,” Kenma admits. He hasn’t done any of this before. But now’s not really the time to dwell on that. He steps back, pointing toward the bed. “Go,” he says, to which Kuroo raises his eyebrows.

“I like it when you get bossy,” he says, which earns him a withering glance from Kenma. Still, he stands and walks over to the bed, falling face first against the pillows. He groans softly, a subtle indication of how tired he must be after all the training he’s done that day.

Kenma walks to the bed, stopping by the bedside table to open it and draw out the lube he knew would be there. He drops it on the bed beside Kuroo, and then climbs up to straddle his back, resting his hands on Kuroo’s shoulders to start massaging them, doing his best to ease out the tension he feels coiled beneath the warm skin.

Kuroo groans again, though this time in pleasure, and Kenma’s cheeks burn. He’s glad for the fact that Kuroo has his face smashed into his pillow. The nagging question of why Kuroo wanted to have sex with him in the first place circles Kenma’s mind, but he doesn’t latch onto it. He can’t stop and let himself wonder if Kuroo is in love with him too. Kenma knows it’d be best if he’s not. That’s what he tells himself.

If they were to fall in love, it’d be that much more difficult to send Kuroo off to fight the kaiju. The fear would cut deeper; the stress would grow more palpable. If they were to fall in love, he’d beg Kuroo to leave the SSP. He can already hear himself say it: “leave them for me. Stay with me.” He can’t put that extra weight on Kuroo, because Kuroo would despair. He’d waver between doing what he feels is right and what Kenma wants. It’s difficult enough now, Kenma knows, for Kuroo to tear himself away, to fling himself into battle. But if they were to fall in love . . .

How badly would Kuroo’s heart break?

Which is why Kenma should stop. He should leave, before things get out of hand.

But he doesn’t.

He moves down Kuroo’s back, leaning forward to kiss at each mole as he does. His fingers slide
along Kuroo’s sides and hips, stroking gently. He can feel Kuroo shudder, feel the release of his breath. He resists the urge to just lie down on top of Kuroo and sleep, moving instead to sit back on his heels. Grabbing hold of Kuroo’s hips, he lifts them in order to reach around and take hold of his member. It’s already half-hard in his hand, which surprises him, but he doesn’t dwell on it. Instead he begins to slide his grip up and down, eliciting a moan from Kuroo.

“Kenma,” he gasps, lifting his head from the pillow in order to look back at him. He starts to turn to sit up, but Kenma quickly pushes him back onto the mattress.

“No.”

“But I want to touch you.”

“This is for your stress, not mine.”

Kuroo frowns faintly, but before he can protest further, Kenma gives his length a slight twist, and he falls back into the pillow, muffling another moan against it. Kenma keeps up with the smooth strokes, running his thumb over the tip, rolling the head between his fingers, not stopping until drops of white start to bead at the slit, leaking down over his fingertips.

He pulls away then, kissing the side of Kuroo’s hipbone, as he reaches for the lube. Kuroo lifts himself up on his elbows, looking back at Kenma once more. “Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks, brows furrowed on his flushed face.

Kenma just looks at him, popping open the bottle and smearing the cool gel over his fingertips. Kuroo follows the movement with his eyes, swallowing. Kenma has always assumed that Kuroo only tops, but the way he shifts his ass closer to Kenma makes him wonder if he truly does enjoy being the bottom as well.

Or maybe it’s just because it’s him.

Kenma tries not to dwell on that hope.

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.

He rubs his fingers together to warm them, before sliding his hand down between Kuroo’s legs. He gently prods his finger between his cheeks, finding his entrance before slowly rubbing his finger against it. Kuroo’s breath hitches, and he stares down at Kenma over his shoulder with a half-lidded gaze full of lust. Kenma feels his face warm, and he has to look away.

Carefully, he slides his finger in past the resistance. He glances at Kuroo’s face for any signs of discomfort, but Kuroo just grins faintly, resting his head back against the pillow.

“Don’t be gentle for my sake,” he says.

Kenma frowns, going ahead and pushing in a second finger, since Kuroo apparently doesn’t appreciate his attempts at tenderness. He’s rewarded with a gasp and slight wince from Kuroo.

“I’ll gag you,” Kenma warns, thinking it’s difficult enough to keep from dying of embarrassment without Kuroo making things worse by running his mouth.

“Is that a threat or a promise?” Kuroo asks, and Kenma sits back, pulling his fingers away.

“Do you want this or not?” he asks, frowning.
Kuroo bites his lip, sitting up on his elbow again. “I do, I’m sorry. I’m just . . . a little nervous, if you can believe that.” He laughs softly and stares down at his hands, picking absently at the sheet beneath him.

Kenma watches him, trying not to wonder why Kuroo might be nervous about sex of all things. He usually boasts about how great he is in bed. The only reason why he might be nervous . . .

“Don’t worry about it,” he says then, leaning forward and dipping his head in order to kiss Kuroo.

It’s deeper than their first, Kenma parts his lips almost immediately, nudging his tongue against Kuroo’s mouth until it opens for him, and he can slip inside. Kuroo’s breath tastes of mint, which is understandable, considering the gum he always chews. Kuroo’s arm comes around Kenma, pulling him close to his chest. He murmurs softly, as his hand then moves toward Kenma’s boxers, rubbing against the outside of it.

Kenma twitches at the sensation, the material coarse against his sensitive skin. He brings one leg up, wrapping it around Kuroo’s thigh, tugging himself closer, as he nips and sucks on Kuroo’s bottom lip. Kuroo moans again, kissing him harder, pressing him down against the mattress, as he rolls over him. Kuroo’s heavy, but he lifts his weight on one arm, never breaking the kiss.

Kenma presses his hand against Kuroo’s chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart that matches the quickening one of his own. A pricking heat has started to spread over Kenma’s body, the rushing of blood through his veins into places it rarely ventures. He finds himself arching into Kuroo’s touch, and then Kuroo’s lips are gone, traversing instead over his jaw, down the side of his neck, to the hollow of his throat.

Kuroo sucks there gently, and Kenma’s hand finds its way into Kuroo’s hair, tangling into the soft, damp strands. This isn’t what he was expecting. He isn’t sure if he should stop Kuroo or not. His mind is telling him to, is practically screaming at him. But his body trembles beneath Kuroo’s relentless hand and wet kisses, as they continue down his collarbone and chest.

Pausing at his nipple, Kuroo runs his tongue along it, and Kenma shivers, the heat extending further and faster, until his entire body is throbbing. Kuroo starts sucking, and Kenma’s chest lifts toward him instinctively, his grip tightening in Kuroo’s hair.

“K-Kuro,” he gasps, but it’s not the protest he intended. He’s too far gone to protest, he realizes. He’ll need to worry about the consequences of this later.

Kuroo’s hand moves to the waistband of his boxers, sliding them away and off, tossing them off into the dark of the room. Kenma trembles, as Kuroo’s lips continue to move down. He sucks a spot beside Kenma’s navel, calloused hands running up and down Kenma’s thighs. They’re rough against his skin, but warm, almost too warm. Kenma knows it’s just another side effect of the serum, that Kuroo’s body heat runs higher than normal, but it still worries him for a moment, and his hand shifts to Kuroo’s forehead, brushing his hair back gently.

Kuroo chuckles against his abdomen. “There’s no fever, doctor,” he says, and Kenma resists the urge to roll his eyes.

Before Kenma can reply, however, Kuroo ducks further down, wrapping his mouth around Kenma’s half-hard member, sucking it deep into his mouth. Kenma gasps, and bites down on his knuckles to stifle the strangled noise that threatens to escape. He moves his other hand to the sheets beneath him, not wanting to pull out Kuroo’s hair. Kuroo’s tongue moves over him with finesse, licking the sides in long, smooth strokes, before flicking over the tip, once, twice, until Kenma’s arching off the bed, eager for more.
He presses his head against the pillow beneath him, gasping, his fingers trembling, as Kuroo slides his mouth over him once more and gives a few hard sucks. Kenma’s aware that he’s making a noise similar to a whimper, but he can’t stop it. His hips buck up toward Kuroo’s face, and Kuroo leans back, crawling up Kenma to kiss him again gently.

“You’re ready now,” he murmurs with a faint grin.

Kenma shoves him off him, and Kuroo’s grin widens. He settles back on his stomach on the bed, resting his head on his crossed arms and peering up at Kenma. It’d be cute, but there’s a glint in his gold eyes that turns Kenma’s insides to liquid. He nods, reaching for the lube once more. He rubs a handful over his erection, biting his lip and flinching slightly at the coolness.

Kuroo is still watching him, so Kenma ducks his head and quickly moves down to straddle Kuroo’s legs, which spread slightly for him. Kenma leans forward, running his hand down over Kuroo’s back, touching the mole that sits just to the side of the V of his lower back with his fingers. He runs them down Kuroo’s ass slowly, still sick from the lube, and presses two fingers into Kuroo once again.

Kuroo groans, ducking his head into his arms. “Kenma.”

Kenma stares at the mole, his face burning, as he begins to thrust his fingers in deeply, remembering Kuroo’s earlier comment about being gentle. Kuroo responds favorably, his hips lifting from the mattress to push back against his hand. His breaths are coming in heavy pants, his shoulders and back tense. Kenma leans down to kiss at the moles on his back once more, feeling the skin quiver, as Kuroo clenches around his fingers.

Kenma moves his fingers around experimentally, searching for the spot he knows will unravel Kuroo. He’s reached it a couple times while fingering himself, but he’s not sure if it’ll be around the same spot. He presses gently in a couple places, until a low, almost animalistic groan sounds from Kuroo.

“Fuck!” Kuroo’s back arches, as his body trembles.

Kenma feels his lips twitch in an almost-smile, pleased by this response. He pulls his hand back, glancing at the side table.

“Do you want me to wear a condom?” he asks, more for Kuroo’s sake than his own. He’d seen Kuroo’s file while talking with Oikawa. He knows he’s clean.

“You haven’t been sleeping around behind my back have you?” Kuroo asks with a breathless laugh. Kenma frowns and flicks his ass cheek none-too-gently, causing Kuroo to twitch. He takes this to mean that Kuroo doesn’t care, and aligns his hips to position himself at Kuroo’s entrance.

Even as he starts to push inside, he wonders what it would be like to have Kuroo above him, stretching him the way he’s stretching Kuroo, holding him close. He wants that (has wanted that for a while now probably), but with Kuroo so afraid of hurting him . . .

He pauses when he’s about halfway inside, noting the tension in Kuroo’s back. Kuroo is clutching at his pillow now, teeth digging into the case. Kenma adjusts slightly, his own body shaking at the incredible heat and pleasure he feels. Kuroo is hot and tight, and Kenma slowly pushes forward, burying himself deeper into that resistance with a soft groan of his own.

Kenma’s heart pounds fast and hard in his ears, and as he starts to move, in shallow thrusts to spare Kuroo more pain, he finds himself getting louder, his whimpers turning to moans. His hands clutch
Kuroo’s hips, and he can feel him quivering beneath him.

“Kuro,” he pants, dropping his head forward. He’s throbbing with pleasure, the heat pooling in his abdomen already, pressing urgently, encouraging him to go faster. But he keeps his thrusts gentle, and Kuroo’s moans grow louder as well.

“Fuck, Kenma,” he grunts after a moment. “More.”

Kenma digs his fingers into Kuroo’s hips, pressing his own against them as he starts to move faster. It’s getting difficult to breathe, and his skin is tingling. He gasps, pushing to find that spot he located before. He adjusts and thrusts harder, and then Kuroo yells, his voice rough.

“Fuck, Kenma!”

His voice breaks on the name, and Kenma’s chest tightens at the sound. He bites his lip against a whimper and lets his head fall back, allowing the pleasure to take over his body. He moves instinctually, thrusting against that spot over and over, and feeling Kuroo’s hips twitch and roll beneath him, searching for more.

“Ah, ah, Kuro!” he gasps, feeling his own hips starting to jerk out of rhythm, as the heat becomes too much and starts to push him over the edge. His skin is tingling like it’s been struck with electricity, and that sensation heightens until it’s burning him and he cries out as the orgasm hits him, bright and sharp, and he pitches forward, his body shaking, his sweaty grasp slipping over Kuroo’s equally slick skin. He manages to thrust through his climax, but it’s disjointed and sloppy.

He drops his forehead onto Kuroo’s back, panting for breath. His chest aches, but not in an entirely unpleasant way. He can tell Kuroo hasn’t come yet, so before Kuroo can push him away, he reaches down underneath them, running his hand over Kuroo’s member. It’s wet with pre-cum, and slides easily against his palm. Kuroo buries his face into the pillow once more, and it only takes a couple pulls before he’s spilling over onto the sheets, groaning loudly.

Kenma pulls his hand away, wiping it on the sheets since they’ll need to be cleaned anyway. Carefully, he detaches from Kuroo, flopping over onto his back beside him. He stares up at the ceiling as he attempts to catch his breath, his mind blissfully blank. He closes his eyes and reminds himself that they can deal with the consequences later.

Kuroo’s arm snakes around him, pulling him close. He’s still on his stomach, but he turns his head to the side to look over at Kenma. His eyes are glazed, and there’s something akin to adoration in them. Kenma has to look away, and stares once more at the ceiling.

“Do you feel less stressed?” Kenma asks, once he can speak impassively.

Kuroo laughs softly. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Kenma nods, moving to sit up. His PSP is still in the living room, and he shouldn’t stay there anyway. Post-sex cuddling is for couples, not for best friends. (His mind tells him that sex isn’t for best friends in the first place, but it’s a little late for that reminder.)

“Hey, where are you going?” Kuroo asks, sitting up on his elbow. He blinks at Kenma, brow furrowed in sleepy confusion.

“My room,” Kenma says, glancing at him briefly before looking away.

Kuroo’s hand reaches out and he lightly presses the pad of his pinky against the back of Kenma’s. “Please stay?”
Kenma knows it’s a bad idea. They can’t fall in love. It’ll only lead to more stress, more pain. He can’t be selfish.

“Change the sheets.”

Kuroo grins. “Okay, okay, give me a second.” He rolls off the bed with barely a wince, grabbing a pair of boxers from the floor to put them on. As he pulls the soiled sheets off the bed, Kenma curls into a ball against the pillows and closes his eyes.

Maybe he can be selfish for one night.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: another unexpected and unpredictable kaiju attack

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/

(EDIT: Oh! So as you all know (or should know anyway) this whole thing was inspired by Eicinic's Superman!Kuroo AU, and so that concept belongs to her. Also, the way Hinata helped calm Kenma's anxiety attack is also a concept of hers, from her Adulthood AU. Ya'll should definitely check those out because her art is incredible and emotional and I love them so much my heart could burst. Anyway, yeah. XD)
Bokuto is sure Akaashi is angry with him. When he asked after they got home, Akaashi assured him that he wasn’t, but Bokuto is 87% sure that he is. He seemed stiffer than usual as they arrived home, and he went straight to his room without stopping to make dinner. That meant Bokuto had to fend for himself in the kitchen, which resulted in several burned attempts at making okonomiyaki, until he finally just settled on simple cereal.

Afterwards, he went to Akaashi’s door to tentatively knock, but received no reply the first couple of times.

“Akaashi? Akaashi, are you okay?” he asked, before pressing his ear against the door to listen for any suspicious sounds.

“I’m fine, Bokuto-san,” came the reply a moment later. “Just tired.”

“Do you want to watch volleyball with me?” Bokuto asked hopefully, picking at a loose piece of wood on the doorframe absently.

“No, thank you. I just want to sleep.”

Sighing dejectedly, Bokuto made his way back to his room, where he frowned up at the ceiling. He knows it probably has something to do with the incident in the locker room, but he isn’t entirely sure how to explain that it wasn’t his fault. Not entirely, at least. He hadn’t realized what he was doing. Honestly, thinking about it now, it’s still a giant blur. If he concentrates, he can vaguely remember seeing everything turn red in his vision, and can recall how angry he’d felt, how much he wanted to punch something. But if he tries to remember a reason for it, he can’t come up with anything.

A couple hours pass like this, and he’s starting to think about calling Kuroo to ask him his opinion on what he should do, when his phone rings. Quickly, he snatches it up, grinning when he sees that it’s Kuroo. He answers it swiftly, turning onto his side and tucking his free hand under his pillow.

“Yo, Kuroo! How’s it hanging?”
“Pretty great considering I just had sex.”

Bokuto sits up hurriedly. “No way! Seriously! You’re so lucky! How did you get some that fast though?” he asks in disbelief, counting out the hours since he last saw Kuroo on his hand. It’d only been two.

“Oh, well, it was with Kenma.”

Bokuto’s eyes widen. “Holy shit.”

“I know.”

“Holy shit! When was Kenma even an option, dude? Like, he actually let you fuck him?” Now that he thinks about it though, Bokuto has to admit that Kuroo and Kenma make sense.

“He fucked me, actually.”

That boggles Bokuto’s mind, as it isn’t something he thought possible until just now. “Dude.”

“We’re best friends,” Kuroo continues, confirming the thoughts running through Bokuto’s mind just then. “I can’t believe I never considered this before, but I’m actually really nervous right now. Like, dude, I think I’m in love with him. Like honest to God in love with my best friend.”

“Whoa.” Bokuto drums his fingers against his knee, glancing toward the door. Akaashi is his best friend, and Bokuto knows that he loves him. But he’s never considered the possibility that maybe they could be more. (Okay, that's a lie. He’s considered it often, but never before has he had the opportunity to test that boundary.)

“I don’t think he’s in love with me though,” Kuroo continues with a sigh. “I mean, I’m pretty sure he only agreed to have sex because I said Suga thought it might help with the stress.”

“Did it help?” Bokuto asks curiously.

“I think so? I feel really great right now, anyway. Kenma’s sleeping, and I should probably hang up before I wake him, but I just needed to tell someone that this is actually happening. I’m going to ask him out tomorrow, if I don’t chicken out at least.”

“You can do it, man. I believe in you,” Bokuto says genuinely. He’s happy for Kuroo; that despite everything he’s able to find someone.

They hang up and Bokuto returns to staring at the ceiling, frowning faintly. Now that he thinks about it, it makes perfect sense for him and Akaashi to have sex. They’ve been best friends since high school, and Bokuto trusts him implicitly. Surely it’s the same for Akaashi. And if Suga’s suggestion worked for Kuroo, wouldn’t it also work for him and Akaashi? And it’d be fun too! And maybe Akaashi will go out with him afterwards as well!

Bokuto finds himself grinning in the dark of his room, his heart pounding faster at the thought of going on an actual date with Akaashi. He’d get to hold his hand, but like for real. He could kiss his nose and run his fingers through his fluffy hair and stare into those deep green eyes until that cute flush colored Akaashi’s cheeks. It seems too good to be true that something like that could really happen to him. He’s so excited by the prospect, he finds himself leaping out of bed and hurrying out and across the hall to Akaashi’s bedroom.

He enters without knocking, going immediately to jump on the bed where Akaashi lies, completely forgetting about his avoidance earlier in his enthusiasm. Bokuto shakes Akaashi’s arm rapidly.
“Akaashi! Akaashi, wake up!”

Groggily, Akaashi brushes him away, sitting up slowly. He rubs at his eyes, and his hair is a mess from the pillow, sticking up every which way. It’s absolutely adorable, and Bokuto’s heart swells in his chest. Before he can think better of it, he leans forward and kisses Akaashi.

Akaashi rears back immediately, knocking his head against the wall. “Bokuto-san!” he gasps, his eyes wide. He puts his hands in front of him, as if to ward him off. “What are you doing?!”

Bokuto forces himself to calm down, grinning sheepishly now, as he rubs the back of his head. “Ah, well, Kuroo called me, and he had sex with Kenma and says he feels better now, so I thought we should give it a try to make us feel better too.”

Akaashi’s face is blank, completely unreadable, but Bokuto is used to that. He sits back on his heels, fingers digging into his knees, as he watches Akaashi expectantly. He can’t keep himself from squirming as the seconds pass, and Akaashi continues to say nothing. Finally, he purses his lips, looking away.

“I don’t think that’ll help in our case,” he says, and Bokuto can feel his racing heart starting to slow, to sink down to the bottom of his chest.

“Oh,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck then. “But . . . why not?”

It might just be Bokuto’s imagination, but he thinks he notices a slight flush spread pink across Akaashi’s cheekbones. His friend looks down at his hands, now folded in his lap. He picks at a cuticle absently, not meeting Bokuto’s inquiring gaze.

“Bokuto-san, you wear your heart on your sleeve. I don’t think you’d be able to do it without getting your feelings involved, and I don’t want you to get hurt.” His eyes shift to the side, staring at nothing.

Bokuto stares at the top of Akaashi’s head, unsure of the emotions swirling through him just then. He wants to reach out and run his fingers through that soft hair in front of him, but he knows that’d probably be unwelcome in this moment. Akaashi wouldn’t hurt him. He knows that. But he hesitates, because he thought for sure Akaashi would agree with the idea. Didn’t he love Bokuto as well?

“Ah, it doesn’t have to be like that,” Bokuto tries to reassure him with a pat to the shoulder. “If we’re doing it just to test out Suga-san’s theory, that’s okay! It doesn’t have to mean anything if you don’t want it to.” He shakes his head, smiling as wide as he can.

He knows Akaashi is probably right. The way he feels for Akaashi is difficult enough to contain, and if they were to take that next step in their relationship, it would mean everything to him. And if Akaashi doesn’t feel the same . . . well, he only implied it just now, but Bokuto can feel the sting of it anyway. It will hurt, he knows, but if it’s what’s best for him and Akaashi as Soldiers, if it will keep that terrifying anger and lack of control at bay, if it’ll keep Akaashi safe from whatever is wrong with Bokuto, shouldn’t they at least try it?

Akaashi looks up and gives him a small smile. “I’m sure there are other methods we can try to work on de-stressing. You just need to be patient, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto groans, flopping over on the bed beside Akaashi. “But I want us to feel better now.”

“I feel fine,” Akaashi says, and he moves his fingers into Bokuto’s hair, stroking the strands gently.
Bokuto freezes, not having expected that. He tilts his head back to look up into Akaashi’s face, but his expression is still a mask of impassivity that Bokuto can’t read.

“Do you really?” he asks hopefully, searching Akaashi’s eyes for anything that would show him if Akaashi is lying to him. He can never tell, though, so the search is futile.

Akaashi nods. “We can do something tomorrow though, if you’d like.”

Bokuto sits up quickly, that thought cheering him instantly. Perhaps he can get his date with Akaashi after all. “Can we go to the bird sanctuary?” he asks, grinning.

Akaashi rolls his eyes. “The last time we went there, you tried to smuggle an owl out under your jacket and almost had us arrested.”

“But it was so cute. And it totally wanted to come home with us,” Bokuto insists, remembering the soft fluffy owl with affection. It’d been small and sleepy-eyed and had reminded him of Akaashi. He doesn’t regret attempting the theft at all.

“We can go if you promise not to try and steal any birds,” Akaashi says, and he might be fighting a smile.

Bokuto beams back at him, holding up his right hand. “I promise I won’t steal any birds,” he says, though he crosses the fingers of his other hand behind his back, because he wants to keep his options open just in case he falls in love with another one.

“Can I go back to sleep now?” Akaashi asks, and Bokuto remembers that it’s the middle of the night.

“Right! Sorry!”

Bokuto hops off the bed, unable to stop grinning, however. “Goodnight, Akaashi! Dream of adorable tiny owls and how awesome it’d be if we had some as pets!”

Akaashi shakes his head at him, but he really is smiling now. “Goodnight, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto backs out of the room with a wave, closing the door behind him. He has to admit that he’s a little disappointed with how the night didn’t go the way Kuroo’s had, but he’s pleased with his results in any case. In fact, he’s so excited at the thought of spending the day with Akaashi at the bird sanctuary that it takes him another two hours to fall asleep.

And when he does, he dreams of him and Akaashi raising a flock of owl babies together, and it’s one of the best dreams he’s ever had.

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The apartment building is as decrepit as Tsukishima remembers. He’s not sure why he’s once more at Yamaguchi’s place, but he has one of Asahi’s bento’s in his hands, and he knocks before he can talk himself out of it. Yaku and Lev decided to go to lunch at an actual restaurant for their break, but when they asked Tsukishima to join them, he felt the sudden urge to take Asahi’s bento to Yamaguchi instead. He wasn’t going to eat it himself, and it seemed a waste to just throw away perfectly good food.
And he can’t stop picturing Yamaguchi’s sharp cheekbones, freckles stark against pale, malnourished skin.

The carpet in the hallway is dingy, and it smells as though someone urinated in the corner by the stairwell. There’s a suspicious stain on the peeling wallpaper next to Yamaguchi’s apartment door, and from somewhere above him the screams of an infant assaults his eardrums.

He knocks again when he gets no answer, and he’s just debating whether or not he should simply leave, when Yamaguchi flings open the door, panting softly. His hair is damp and sticking to his forehead. He’s wearing sweatpants that are a couple inches too short for him, and a t-shirt that hangs loosely on his thin frame. His eyes widen when he catches sight of Tsukishima’s uniform, but when his gaze travels up to Tsukishima’s face, he grins broadly, eyes squinting with obvious joy.

“Tsukki! Hi!”

Tsukishima’s heart stops, before he swallows hard and nods, forcing it to start again. He turns his gaze away, frowning at the stain beside the door, as he holds out the bento in front of him.

“I didn’t want it, so I figured you could have it,” he says around clenched teeth.

Yamaguchi takes it from him, and Tsukishima ventures a peek toward his face, notes the still bright grin, and quickly looks away again.

“Thank you so much!” Yamaguchi says, before stepping back and holding the door wider. “Do you want to come in and share it with me?”

Tsukishima looks back at him and continues to frown. “Does it still smell?” he asks, thinking more about how Yamaguchi shouldn’t be sharing food.

Yamaguchi shakes his head. “No, a guy came and fixed the plumbing, and I got some flowers from the shop down the road to help freshen things up. Come on, you’re still on your lunch break, right?”

“Yeah . . .”

Yamaguchi smiles at him expectantly, and Tsukishima sighs, stepping past the threshold into the apartment. “Okay, but only for a few minutes.”

Yamaguchi closes the door behind him. As Tsukishima kicks off his shoes, he glances around the apartment, noticing the sunflowers sitting in a jar on the low table in the living room. There isn’t a couch, but instead a couple pillows set up beside the table. Yamaguchi moves to sit on one, and he pats the spot next to him. Tsukishima clicks his tongue against his teeth, before stepping to take the edge of the proffered pillow, moving it away from Yamaguchi a safe distance, before lowering onto it.

“Thanks for the food!” Yamaguchi says, opening up the bento then and starting to dig in with his chopsticks.

As he does, Tsukishima takes the time to look around the apartment. He only had the barest of glimpses the last time he’d been in the place, and now he can see more of how Yamaguchi lives. There’s books stacked on and around a stand that is meant for a TV, but no TV sits there. Aside from that, the pillows, and the table, there’s no other furniture in this room. The ceiling has a large water stain in one corner, and there’s a long crack in the plaster of the wall behind them. In a small hallway past the tiny kitchen, Tsukishima can see three doors: two on the right and one straight ahead. The first two are probably the bathroom and toilet, the other the bedroom.
He resists the urge to ask Yamaguchi if he even has a bed, turning to look at the boy seated next to him, as he feels a nudge against his arm.

“You should eat,” Yamaguchi says, holding his chopsticks full of rice up toward Tsukishima’s face.

Tsukishima can feel the back of his neck burning, but he leans forward to wrap his lips around the chopsticks, pulling back once he has a grasp on the rice. He chews and swallows with his gaze firmly pointed toward the table.

“Why didn’t you want this? It’s really good,” Yamaguchi asks curiously.

“Azumane-san gave it to me,” Tsukishima says, figuring there wasn’t any point in lying about it.

“Azumane-san? Is that the man who was talking to you at the station the other week?”

Tsukishima grits his teeth, but nods. “Yes.”

“You don’t like him very much, do you? Is there a reason?”

“He—” Tsukishima stops, unsure if he wants to talk about this. It’s still a sore subject, even after all this time, but Yamaguchi already knows part of the story, and the way he’s watching him with wide, trusting eyes, makes Tsukishima think that maybe it’s all right to open up. Just a little.

He sighs, leaning back on his hands to fix his gaze on the stain on the ceiling. It looks somewhat like a rabbit, but Tsukishima doesn’t point that out. “He was the leader of my brother’s squadron,” he says, frowning faintly as that memory once more starts to make its way to the forefront of his mind. Azumane Asahi standing in front of his door, cap tucked under his arm, sad brown eyes looking at Tsukishima like he knew exactly what he was doing to the fifteen-year-old’s heart.

“Akiteru-san?” Yamaguchi says softly.

Tsukishima looks over at him, raising an eyebrow. “You remember him?”

Yamaguchi nods. “Of course I do. I remember everything from back then. You never came back to school after July 10th. And you transferred to the police academy the day after the funeral. I never heard from you again after that.” His brows furrow slightly over his freckled nose, and Tsukishima feels a sharp pang of guilt snap hard against his chest.

“I wasn’t exactly in the best place back then,” Tsukishima admits, sitting up and folding his hands in his lap. “You were okay though, right? I mean, you didn’t let any bullies mess with you, I hope.” He attempts something like a smile, though he’s sure it’s closer to a grimace.

But Yamaguchi smiles back at him, shaking his head. “Nope! Nobody messed with me.” He laughs then, but it sounds somewhat forced. “I mean, it’d be pretty shitty of someone to bully an orphan.”

Tsukishima once more feels his heart stutter; only this time the gap fills with dread. He stares at Yamaguchi, at that bright smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Tsukishima glances once more toward the bookstand, noting the small shrine he barely glanced over before. He figured that the reason Yamaguchi lived alone was because his parents were gone in some way, but as he looks at the photograph sitting there, with both of Yamaguchi’s parents smiling toward him, looking young and vibrant and just as he remembered them, he feels something sharp twist in his gut.

“Yamaguchi,” he says abruptly, and the smile fades from Yamaguchi’s face. “Did you parents die during July 10th?”
Yamaguchi blinks at him. “I . . . thought you knew?”

“Of course I didn’t know!” Tsukishima snaps, scowling now. “You never told me!”

“S-Sorry, Tsukki!” Yamaguchi’s eyes are large as he stares back at Tsukishima. “I just . . . you were so upset about your brother . . . I didn’t want to bother you with my problems. And then you went away, and I figured . . . it was for the best.”

He gives a vague shrug that makes Tsukishima want to grab his shoulders and shake him. The guilt has climbed up into his throat, cutting off any attempts to speak further. He clears his throat, shaking his head. After Akiteru’s death, Tsukishima practically locked himself in his room. He remembers that Yamaguchi texted him almost every day that week, but his texts were full of expressions of concern. Nothing hinted at the fact that Yamaguchi might have been suffering as well.

It irritates Tsukishima, thinking of his friend (his best friend) deceiving him in this way, forcing him to act selfishly without knowing. But there doesn’t seem to be anything he can do about it now. Unless . . .

A sudden idea comes to him, and he stands abruptly.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” he says, turning toward the door to grab his shoes.

Yamaguchi scrambles to his feet to follow him quickly. “Tsukki, wait! Are you mad? I’m sorry I didn’t tell you! Please don’t go.”

Tsukishima feels a hand at his elbow, but he pulls away, shaking his head. “I’m not mad,” he says, keeping his face composed. “I just remembered that there’s something I need to do.” He hesitates, looking back at Yamaguchi, his chest clenching at the wetness of his friend’s eyes.

“Don’t cry,” he adds, exasperated. “There’s nothing to cry about, okay? We can go to the range before my night shift.” He reaches into his pocket and draws out a handkerchief, shoving it into Yamaguchi’s hands. “Meet me in front of the station at three o’clock.”

Yamaguchi takes the handkerchief slowly, nodding. “Okay, Tsukki,” he says in a small voice, not attempting to stop him again as Tsukishima exits the apartment.

Tsukishima unchains his bike from the rack in the parking lot, quickly pedaling toward the station. He doesn’t know why he didn’t think of this solution before. It seems so obvious now. He can’t let Yamaguchi remain in that disgusting building in that pathetic apartment. He can’t let him waste away, barely eating, doing who knew what to earn income.

He thinks of how Yamaguchi was as a child, how warm and bright he was. He’s still both those things, but it seems to be a paler version than Tsukishima remembers. He recalls soft hands, lightly freckled, grabbing onto his sleeve, the back of his shirt. The high call of “Sorry, Tsukki!” made with a wide grin, as Yamaguchi never seemed very apologetic for bothering Tsukishima. Not that Tsukishima was truly bothered in the first place. He just could never think of anything to say when he got flustered, aside from “Shut up, Yamaguchi,” or other such phrases.

That was why when they started their first year of high school, Tsukishima wrote down all the words he wanted to say to Yamaguchi but couldn’t. He was trying to think of a way to discreetly slip the note into Yamaguchi’s bag when Azumane knocked on the door and ruined his life. Now the note remains folded and unread under his mattress, never to be seen.

Things have changed since then, Tsukishima tells himself. He’s no longer the idealistic child he used to be. He’s different now, even if Yamaguchi appears to have remained the same. It bothers him
more than it probably should, but this is his best friend, and Tsukishima has already failed him once.

He’s not going to do it again.

The station isn’t busy when he arrives. Hanamaki and Matsukawa are arguing over something at their desks, and Tsukishima does his best to ignore them as he passes and heads for the chief’s office.

Chief Nekomata Yasufumi probably should have retired years ago, but because of his stellar reputation and success with handling his station he was asked to extend his position. Nobody else seemed to want the job anyway, not with the increased responsibilities the attack of July 10th brought with it. The curfews, the relocation of evacuated citizens, the duty to disband violent gangs and prevent new ones from popping up were a part of the police force’s job now, and it was as tiring as it was stressful.

The man’s now seated in his office, fingers clasped together in front of him. He’s staring down at a newspaper headline, of which Tsukishima barely catches a glimpse, before Chief Nekomata folds it up and sets it aside.

“Tsukishima,” he says, looking surprised. “I think this is the first time you’ve come to see me without being requested. What can I do for you?”

Tsukishima bows, clenching his fists at his sides. “I’m sorry for intruding,” he says, straightening. “But I have a request.”

“Come have a seat.” Nekomata gestures to the chair in front of his desk.

Tsukishima sits, but remains stiff, his back straight. He grips the armrests, maintaining eye contact and reminding himself why he’s sticking his neck out.

“Um, there’s this . . . young man that I know, an orphan, who’s living in a rather disgusting apartment in a rundown part of the city. I’m worried for his safety and health, and I was wondering if he might be relocated to a safer and better establishment.”

Nekomata sits back in his chair, running his hand over his head. “I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he says apologetically.

Tsukishima frowns. “This precinct is in charge of relocating citizens, is it not? This young man’s parents were killed in the attack on July 10th. He’s been given no support, and he might be involved in illegal activities. I’m not sure what his employment situation is. This can’t be acceptable.”

“It’s not,” Nekomata agrees. “But I’m afraid we don’t currently have the resources to do something like that. It would require us requesting housing and rations from the government, and they’re no longer allowing citizens to request such things. I’m afraid all the money they’re receiving from taxes is going straight into the Super Soldier Program. There’s nothing left for relocation.”

Tsukishima feels his chest clench, as hopelessness sinks into him. There’s nothing I can do, he thinks, automatically, before shaking his head.

No, I refuse to lose.

“Sir, is it against regulations for a member of the police force to house a possible criminal?”

Nekomata looks amused. “Do you know for a fact that he’s a criminal?”
Tsukishima shakes his head. “No, sir.”

“Then I don’t see anything wrong with it, so long as nothing illegal goes down on your watch. If something does happen, you’ll be required to report it, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Tsukishima says, though he wasn’t thinking of asking Yamaguchi to stay with him. He’s not sure why, but the prospect makes him nervous in a way he hasn’t felt since . . . he can’t exactly remember.

Instead, as soon as he leaves Nekomata’s office, he goes to stand beside Yaku’s desk, waiting for him and Lev to return from their break. Hanamaki spots him and snickers, but Tsukishima ignores him, instead pulling Yaku’s notepad closer to him to jot down a list of things Yamaguchi would need for a move.

When Yaku and Lev return, Tsukishima has around four pages, and he tears them away to neatly fold and slide into his pocket.

“Yaku-san, Lev,” he says, bowing slightly.

Yaku immediately seems suspicious. “What’s going on?” he asks, even as Lev calls a greeting and waves.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” Tsukishima says, keeping his hands inside his pockets. “My . . . friend Yamaguchi . . . he needs a new place to live. His current living situation is . . . pathetic. I know you room with Lev, and I figured that meant you had enough space for one more. He wouldn’t be any trouble. He’s fairly self-sufficient and mostly obedient.”

Yaku laughs. “Are you talking about Yamaguchi-kun or a pet dog?” he asks, and Tsukishima’s neck burns. “Why don’t you take him in yourself? It’s just you living in your apartment, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes,” Tsukishima admits, keeping his voice neutral. “But I prefer to be alone.”

Yaku gives him a little smile that makes it clear that he thinks Tsukishima is lying, but he doesn’t say anything to that affect. Instead he turns to look at his partner, who’s spinning in his chair.

“Lev!” he says sharply, and Lev abruptly stops spinning.

“Yes, Yaku-san?” he asks with a grin, wavering back and forth in his seat.

“Would you be opposed to getting another roommate?”

Lev’s face brightens, as he looks from Yaku to Tsukishima and back again. “Is Tsukishima-san coming to live with us?!?” he asks excitedly.

Tsukishima frowns, wondering why he would be happy about that prospect.

Yaku also frowns, and he kicks Lev’s chair over. “Don’t you ever listen?” he demands, as Lev sprawls on the floor with a yelp. “We’re talking about Yamaguchi-kun, not Tsukishima!”

“Is Yamaguchi-kun the one with all the freckles?” Lev asks from the floor.

Tsukishima bristles slightly, but nods. “Yes.”

“Ooh, I like him! He’s cute!” Lev exclaims, earning them a few glances.

“Shut up, Lev. You’re too loud,” Yaku snaps. He turns back to Tsukishima then. “I guess if he
wants to come live with us, he can. I’m not entirely convinced it’s the best option for him, though. Having three mouths to feed is more difficult than having only two.” He gives Tsukishima a pointed look, which Tsukishima ignores.

“So you’ll do it?” Tsukishima asks, clenching his fist around the notes in his pocket.

Yaku nods. “We’ll do it.”

A wave of relief rushes over Tsukishima, and he sighs softly, before giving a small nod and blowing once more. “Thank you.”

He turns and leaves for his desk. He glances at the clock. He still has a few more minutes of break time left, so he gets out his phone and calls the landlord of Yamaguchi’s building, since his friend doesn’t have a phone. He requests to speak to Yamaguchi in apartment 514.

“Hello?” Yamaguchi’s voice sounds wary.

“It’s me,” Tsukishima says, before realizing Yamaguchi won’t know who ‘me’ is.

“Tsukki?”

Or maybe he will.

“Yeah. I know I said we’d meet at three, and that’s fine, but I need you to bring all your personal belongings with you when you come.”

There’s a pause, before Yamaguchi speaks again, and his tone has shifted back into suspicion.

“Why?”

“You’re going to move into a new place. I’ve already arranged everything.”

There’s another pause, and Tsukishima frowns, not having realized that such an offer would require serious thought. Before Yamaguchi can say anything else, however, he hastens to explain.

“You’ll be staying with friends of mine. Yaku-san and Lev. You met them at the range.”

“I remember.”

“And they said it’s fine for you to stay with them, and it really is best if you move in right away, so I expect for you to have your things ready by three. I made a list of things we can pick up on our way to their place that you’ll probably need.”

“Tsukki, that’s very kind of you, but—”

Tsukishima’s frown deepens, and he tightens his grip on his phone. “Shut up, Yamaguchi,” he says, perhaps sharper than he meant to. “You’re not staying in that pathetic excuse for an apartment anymore. So just . . . bring your things with you when you come to the station, okay?”

Yamaguchi sighs. “Okay, Tsukki,” he says, but he doesn’t sound happy.

As they hang up, it strikes Tsukishima as odd that Yamaguchi didn’t seem more grateful. Did he not realize how Tsukishima was attempting to help him? And Tsukishima rarely makes it a habit to go out of his way for people. If it’s required of him, he will. But otherwise? He frowns down at his phone, until Hanamaki calls over to ask if his boyfriend broke up with him. Annoyed, Tsukishima returns to his paperwork, trying not to think of Yamaguchi, and his freckles spread over sharp cheekbones.
He manages to distract himself with his work, but by the time three o’ clock rolls around, he finds himself growing irritated again, especially when he catches sight of Yamaguchi heading toward him, carrying his gun case and nothing else.

“Where are the rest of your things?” Tsukishima asks, forgoing a greeting.

Yamaguchi smiles sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry, Tsukki,” he says genuinely. “It was really nice of you to offer me a new place to stay, but, um, I like where I’m living now.”

Tsukishima stares at him. “You’re joking,” he says, though he knows Yamaguchi well enough to know that he isn’t.

Yamaguchi shrugs. “I know it’s not ideal, but I help the landlord lady out with things, odd jobs around the building, in exchange for free rent. And then I run deliveries for the corner store sometimes, and just . . . I help out in the community, you know? I don’t want to leave them. A lot of those that live there are old people or single parents struggling to get by and . . . I’m doing good there. I can’t abandon them.”

Tsukishima stares, not sure if he should feel proud of his friend being a Good Samaritan or irritated that Yamaguchi is so selfless he neglects his own well-being to help others. He settles for someplace in between.

“You’re an idiot,” he says, shaking his head. “How are you supposed to help everyone if you’re dead from malnutrition? Have you looked in a mirror lately? You look like shit.”

Yamaguchi blinks. “Oh. Well, that doesn’t really matter, does it? If I’m helping—”

“Shut up,” Tsukishima interrupts, rubbing his forehead and trying to think. He should’ve known that it wouldn’t be as easy as just telling Yamaguchi to live with Yaku and Lev. He remembers now how stubborn Yamaguchi is. He should’ve taken that into account.

Yamaguchi falls silent, watching him closely. “Tsukki, I’m okay,” he says softly then. “Really.”

Tsukishima shakes his head. “You’re not though,” he says, his voice gruff as he struggles to keep his emotions in check. Before he realizes what he’s doing, his hand moves on its own, reaching out to brush his knuckles across Yamaguchi’s painfully apparent cheekbones.

Yamaguchi stiffens, his eyes widening, as he stares at Tsukishima. A light flush colors his pale skin, and Tsukishima quickly pulls his hand away. He shoves his hand into his pocket, clenching it into a fist around the papers still lying crumpled in there.

“You need to eat better,” Tsukishima says flatly. “You look like a walking corpse. Whatever it is you’re buying at that corner store isn’t good enough.”

Yamaguchi bites his lip, his gaze shifting to the side. “I . . . don’t get a lot of ration cards because of where I’m living. None of us do, really. I try to share with the others on my floor when I can.”

Tsukishima’s irritation burns brighter. “You need to stop doing that,” he says, shaking his head. “Or at least let me bring you food more often. Azumane-san is always making me bentos. You can have them. And . . . I’ll make more for you on my days off that you can store in the fridge. But if you share them with anyone, I’ll stop.”

Yamaguchi stares at him a moment, before a smile begins to brighten his face. He grins, nodding. “Okay, Tsukki!”
Grumbling, Tsukishima turns away from that beaming expression, ignoring the tightening in his chest. “Good. Now let’s go to the range and get you some dinner before my evening shift starts.”

***

Suga hums softly to himself as he finishes restocking the last med kit. There are several dozen scattered throughout the base, and while he knows Ennoshita or Saeko could do the task instead, he likes spending the time alone, enjoying the peace and quiet that doesn’t usually fall over the base. Daichi ended up giving Tanaka and Noya and Asahi the three days off as well, so there’s no loud shouts or reckless racing through the hall. His kouhai truly are a handful, but Suga doesn’t mind. It brightens his day to see them laughing and enjoying life. After July 10th, he was afraid he’d never see them smile again.

He’s just passing the offices on the second floor when he spots a light on in Daichi’s office. Frowning faintly, he walks over to investigate. Peering into the room, he sees the captain himself, hunched over papers on his desk, head in his hand, as his elbow rests against the top of his desk. His dark hair sticks up wildly, like he’s run his fingers through it several times already. His eyes are closed, which suggests he might be sleeping, but Suga is too indignant to leave him in peace.

“And what, exactly, do you think you’re doing?” he asks sharply, striding into the room and slamming the mostly empty box of medical supplies on top of the desk.

Daichi jerks upright, his expression alarmed. He blinks up at Suga in complete shock, before a blush begins to color his cheeks, and he rubs the back of his neck. It’s endearing, but Suga keeps his gaze hard, pursing his lips, as he stares down at his superior.

“Ah, Suga, I was just going over the possible candidates for the SSP. I have to schedule interviews—”

“And that couldn’t wait three days?” Suga interrupts, setting his hands on his hips, as he raises an eyebrow at Daichi. He’s exasperated and annoyed that even after everything they spoke about, Daichi still refused to rest. He works himself harder than anyone Suga knows, and Suga’s honestly afraid of him working himself to death one of these days. The stress isn’t good on any of them, but the weight of everything lands almost solely on Daichi’s shoulders. Suga knows he’s a capable man, and he admires his diligence, but even capable men need to take a break sometimes.

“Suga, I appreciate the concern,” Daichi says warily, not quite meeting his gaze. “But this is important.”

“Yes, but—”

Suga holds up a hand, cutting him off once more. “I’m not going to hear any excuses. As the SSP’s head medical officer, I forbid you to do any more work today. Come on. You and I are going to get coffee, and then we’re going to the park.”

He holds out his hand, and Daichi blinks at it before looking back toward Suga’s face. “The park? Why the park?”

“Because there are dogs at the park, and I happen to like dogs,” Suga says, matter-a-factly.
Daichi stares at him a moment longer before laughing. Shaking his head, he takes Suga’s extended hand and pulls himself to his feet. Suga notices how he quickly slides his hand away once he’s standing, shifting his hand into his pocket. He tries not to let it bother him, knowing that Daichi has enough to worry about, and instead gives him a bright smile.

“There we go!” he says, reaching out to punch Daichi’s side in encouragement.

Daichi huffs, doubling over slightly, as his hand moves to clutch the spot. “How the hell are you so strong?” he asks, his smile strained now.

“Judo,” Suga replies with a grin, before taking Daichi’s sleeve and tugging him toward the door.

Daichi allows himself to be dragged, and Suga releases him once they’re far enough away from the office that Daichi can’t turn and escape. They stop by the infirmary so Suga can grab his jacket, before they head outside. Suga glances over at him, as they exit the base and head into the parking lot.

“Is it okay if we take your car?” Suga asks. “I don’t think the two of us can fit on my bike, unless you want to ride my handlebars.” He laughs, and a light flush colors Daichi’s cheeks. It’s cute, and Suga smiles brighter.

“Uh, yeah, of course we can take my car,” he says, clearing his throat. He leads the way, and once they’re settled, he glances over at Suga. “Sunshine Café?”

Suga nods, leaning back in his seat. “But of course,” he says, grinning.

Daichi smiles back at him, before pulling out of his parking spot and heading out of the base. Suga looks out the window, but finds his gaze drawn back toward the man seated next to him so often his movements probably lack subtlety. He can’t seem to help it, though. Daichi is extremely handsome, even if he doesn’t seem to realize it. His hair is still ruffled, and Suga has to resist the urge to reach over and smooth it down. His dark eyes are usually set in an intense frown, but now he’s starting to relax, and the tension eases from his forehead, jaw, and neck, the further they get from the base.

“What made you join the military?” Suga asks curiously.

“Ah,” Daichi glances over at him, then back to the road. “My parents were a part of the military, as were Asahi’s. We grew up in the military, learning about fighting kaiju, and it stuck with us. We wanted to help make a difference, just as they did, so we enlisted as soon as we could.”

Suga wonders where Daichi’s parents are now, but he’s afraid to ask. So many men and women died in the kaiju attacks before the Super Soldier Program took off, Suga’s own parents included. He doesn’t want to broach a potentially painful subject, so he remains quiet, nodding instead.

“What made you decide to go into medicine?” Daichi asks then. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

He seems a little nervous, perhaps for the same reason Suga decided not to ask about Daichi’s parents. Suga smiles reassuringly though, resting his head against the seat, as he looks over at Daichi.

“I was seven when the first kaiju attacked,” he says, speaking easily. He’s told the story before, to Noya and Tanaka, and then to Ennoshita and Saeko when they joined his team. “I remember how terrified my parents were. How terrified everyone was. There were so many injured, so many dying, and I couldn’t do anything. I decided I wanted to be able to do something. I wanted to help in any way I could. Being a doctor just . . . it seemed the best fit for me. Didn’t think I could fight the kaiju, I’m not that brave, but saving the lives of the men and women who risked theirs to protect me? That’s something I could try to do.”
“I think that’s brave,” Daichi says softly, keeping his gaze fixed ahead. “To go into a situation like that and remain level-headed and steady enough to operate and save people’s lives . . . that takes a lot of courage, I think.”

Suga feels his chest swell at the words. He clenches his hands together in his lap, staring down at them as he wills his cheeks to cool. “I suppose,” he says lightly, shrugging one shoulder.

Daichi pulls in front of the café and parks, turning in his seat to look at Suga then. His expression is serious, his eyes intense as they stare into Suga’s. Suga’s heart flutters weakly as he looks back at him, clenching his hands tighter to try and calm the rushing of blood to his face. Daichi’s lips turn downward, his brow furrowing faintly over the strong line of his nose.

“I mean it, Suga,” he says then, his voice low. “You’re so strong. I-I saw how hard you worked after July 10th. You saved Nishinoya’s life. You never faltered. You didn’t let the deaths break you down. You persevered and you were able to fix my men.”

Suga swallows hard, remembering how he’d broken down in the emergency medical tent after Noya was sent to the infirmary to recover. Not all the injuries had been dire, and he’d set broken arms and legs with ease. But Noya had been thrown against a building and a rebar had gone through his stomach. Suga was able to patch his wounds successfully, but while he had, Tsukishima Akiteru died on the next bed. Only Ennoshita knows what transpired in that tent. How Suga had made a choice, between Tsukishima and Nishinoya. Tsukishima had already been close to death, while Noya still had hope. So he’d chosen Noya, and held Tsukishima’s hand as he died.

He’ll never forget what Tsukishima said to him, though. With his dying breath he smiled at Suga and thanked him for saving Noya. There was no resentment in his eyes, as he squeezed Suga’s hand as hard as his broken body could allow. And Suga had wept.

“I-I try my best,” he says now with a weak smile.

“We’re really lucky to have you,” Daichi says, with complete sincerity.

Suga prides himself on being able to remain composed and optimistic, but something akin to panic creeps up inside him. His palms are growing sweaty, and as he stares back at Daichi, he’s afraid of doing something stupid, like leaning across the gear shift and kissing this incredible man. He’s fairly certain that such actions would lead to regret and embarrassment, however, so he quickly reaches for the handle of the car door and gives Daichi his brightest smile.

“Enough flattery. Shall we go?” he asks, glad that none of his unease shows in his tone.

Daichi blinks, glances up at the café they’re parked in front of, and smiles sheepishly.

“Right.”

Suga is all too aware of Daichi’s strong left arm lightly brushing against his, as they walk to the entrance of the café. He smiles in thanks, as Daichi steps ahead to open and hold the door for him, and together they approach the front counter. There’s less people today, it being the afternoon on a weekday, and the warm, cozy feeling of the place sets Suga’s mind at ease. He finds his heart beating less erratically, and he’s able to smile easily at the barista, as they place their orders.

“I’ve got it this time,” Daichi says, as Suga begins to pull out his wallet.

Suga starts, looking over at Daichi. “Oh. Thank you.” Damn, there goes his heart again.

He manages to keep his blush under control, taking his drink from the barista with another thanks.
They step back outside, drinks in hand, and Daichi glances at Suga with a curious half-smile.

“So . . . the park?” he asks, starting to turn that way.

“Yes,” Suga replies with a nod.

The crisp fall air ruffles their hair as they walk, and a few leaves scattered against the sidewalk crunch beneath their feet. Suga absently zips up his jacket, glancing sidelong at Daichi, who is in his uniform, buttons fastened to the collar, complete with his tie. Suga stifles a grin, thinking it was just like Daichi to wear his uniform so neatly on a day when no one was at the base that would scold him for wearing something different. He can’t stop himself from reaching over to tug lightly on the sleeve.

“Do you always look so sharp?” he asks, tilting his head and imagining how Daichi would look in casual wear, perhaps close-fitting jeans and an un-tucked button-down.

Daichi glances down at his uniform. “Ah, I just . . . prefer to stick to my routine, I suppose. And looking professional just . . . makes me feel better about myself, I guess. I feel more like a captain and less like some guy who has no idea what he’s doing.”

Suga hums softly, shaking his head, as he takes a sip of his latte. “You’re a great captain,” he offers. “Whether you’re in uniform or not, that won’t change.”

Daichi gives him a grateful smile. “I’m trying my best, at least.”

Suga nods. “That’s all any one of us can do, really.”

He wants to reach out and touch Daichi’s arm reassuringly, perhaps even take his hand and give it a squeeze. But there’s a distance between them, not physical but just as effective, and he doesn’t have the courage to bridge that gap. He’s met a couple of Daichi’s ex-girlfriends, and there’s nothing to assume that the man is anything other than straight, but Suga finds himself hoping some days, some nights, and that hope is dangerous, because hope can influence actions, and he doesn’t want to lose his best friend at the base.

But Daichi smiles at him again, and Suga decides that if he can keep that expression on Daichi’s face, if he can ease the man’s burden, or help him carry it somehow, then that’s enough.

They reach the park, and the tension coiled in Suga’s chest eases at the sight of the blissful pet owners walking or playing with their dogs. He settles on a bench, and Daichi sits beside him, glancing sidelong at him with an inquisitive look.

“So we’re here to just . . . watch dogs?” he asks.

Suga grins. “That’s right.” His eyes follow a bounding Pomeranian, leaping into the air after a stick his owner threw to him.

“Is there a specific reason?” Daichi asks, and Suga can feel his eyes on him.

He laughs. “Do you need a reason to look at dogs?”

Daichi laughs quietly. “I suppose not. I take it you don’t have one?”

Suga shakes his head, shifting his gaze to an adorable Hokkaido puppy. He smiles, taking another sip of his coffee. “No. I wish I did, but with my job the way it is . . . I wouldn’t have the time to care for one. If I could have one, though, I think I’d like a Golden Retriever. They’re so sweet and
friendly."

“That fits you,” Daichi says with a nod.

“Does it?” Suga looks over at Daichi, feeling a happy glow swell in his chest.

Daichi smiles back at him, his cheeks pink, though Suga figures that’s probably from the chill in the air. “What type of dog do you think fits me?” he asks.

Suga looks back across the park, looking from one dog to the next, as he contemplates this question. There’s a small girl playing with an Akita puppy, her hair in pigtails tied off with pink bows that match the bows on her puppy’s collar. He jumps into her face with small yips, licking her nose and mouth as she squeals and laughs, trying to push him away. Suga smiles at the sight, before turning his gaze toward a young man walking beside a large German Shepherd. He’s an attractive one, with solid black fur and dark brown eyes. He wags his tail, tongue lolling, as he sticks so close to his master he almost trips the boy a few times. But the boy laughs each time, running his hand over the dog’s head, while the dog stares up at him adoringly.

“German Shepherd,” Suga says then with finality.

Daichi blinks, following Suga’s gaze. They both watch, as the boy turns to call toward friends, nearly falling over in his haste to reach them. The dog is at his side immediately, supporting him so he doesn’t hit the ground. Suga bites his lip, not sure if he hopes Daichi will read into that or not. If he’ll understand why Suga looked at that dog and immediately thought of Daichi.

“Why that type?” Daichi asks finally, turning to look at Suga, his gaze inquisitive but nothing more.

“Because they’re intelligent, protective, and loyal. Good with children,” Suga says slowly. He looks over at Daichi, focusing on the brown of his eyes and not the slow curve of his smile. “And rather handsome as well,” he adds after a moment, deciding to forget about propriety just for the chance to see Daichi’s reaction.

He’s not disappointed. Daichi’s eyes widen, and he coughs awkwardly, covering his mouth with his fist, before he looks away, his ears reddening. It’s adorable, and Suga grins.

Before Daichi can make a reply, however, a loud beeping disturbs the comfortable peace of the park. Several pet-owners glance over at the disruption, and Daichi pales, as he pulls out his phone and flips it open to read the alert. A twisting of anxiety curls through Suga’s stomach, and his grip on his coffee tightens instinctively.

“We have to return to the base,” Daichi says, standing quickly. “There’s been a kaiju spotted.”

Suga’s blood turns cold. “Already?” he replies weakly, as he stands as well. “But it’s barely been a month since the last one.”

“I know,” Daichi says grimly, pocketing his phone and tossing his coffee into the nearest garbage can.

Suga does the same, his fingers trembling as he releases the cup. It splatters its contents among the rest of the trash, slowly soaking into paper and sliding against plastic. Daichi turns and hurries back toward the café, and Suga follows, his heart pounding in his ears.

*Why is this happening now? Now of all times?*

Daichi is already texting the members of the SSP, as he slides into the driver’s side of his car. Suga’s
hand shakes, as he pulls the door shut behind him and fastens his seatbelt.

Briefly, Daichi glances over at Suga. “You okay?” he asks, and Suga wonders if now is really the best time for Daichi to be asking him something like this.

He feels lightheaded.

“Let’s go,” he replies, pursing his lips in a firm line.

Daichi hesitates for just a second, before he’s nodding and starting the car. They drive quickly toward the base, and in the distance Suga hears a roar that weakens his knees. He grabs the handle of the door to steady himself, inhaling deeply. He looks over at Daichi, sees the paleness of his face, the tightness of his features. His hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly, his knuckles begin to turn white.

Suga knows what he’s thinking, because his mind is repeating the same phrase over and over:

*Please, don’t let this be another July 10th.*

***

“Iwa-chaaaaan.”

Iwaizumi grimaces. It’s only been two hours since they woke up on their first day off in months, and already Oikawa is complaining about being bored. Iwaizumi doesn’t reply, simply settles deeper into the cushions of the couch, adjusting his book on his lap and frowning down at the pages. He tries to concentrate on the words, but Oikawa flops down beside him, spreading himself out over the couch, and places his head on Iwaizumi’s book, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Get off,” Iwaizumi grunts, pulling the book out from behind Oikawa’s head.

“Iwa-chan should play with me. I’m so bored.”

“You’ve said that about ten times already.” Iwaizumi places the book atop Oikawa’s face, smirking faintly at the indignant noise his friend makes.

“You won’t let me go to the lab, but you won’t do anything with me here either.”

He can hear the pout in Oikawa’s voice, and he doesn’t fight Oikawa’s hand, as it pushes the book away from his face. Iwaizumi sighs, looking down at his friend and resisting the urge to run his fingers through the silky hair on his lap.

“Fine. What do you want to do?” he asks, hoping it’s not another game of Monopoly. He’s not sure why, but Oikawa always manages to win. Iwaizumi’s pretty sure he cheats somehow, but he hasn’t been able to catch him in the act.

Oikawa taps his chin lightly. “I want to go see Mad Dog-chan,” he says finally.

Iwaizumi stiffens. He has a flash of a memory, of Oikawa, face streaked with frustrated tears, kicking at a fallen table, surrounded by a mess of smashed monitors and shattered beakers.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen! My calculations were right! They were right!” Oikawa clutched
at his hair, looking at Iwaizumi with a manic expression. Blood dripped from a deep scratch in his forearm, but he didn’t seem to notice. “They must’ve done something to it! Changed it somehow! This wasn’t supposed to happen!”

Iwaizumi shakes off the echo of that crazed Oikawa’s yells, focusing on the calm one in his lap now, staring up at him with placid expression that only somewhat hides the ideas sparking in his brain. “I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Oikawa sits up. “I’ll go without you then,” he says, moving to stand.

Sighing, Iwaizumi stands as well. “No, you won’t,” he says, frowning faintly. “And you don’t even know if he’ll talk to you.”

“Iwa-chan, I think you’re forgetting my immense charm and excellent persuasion skills.”

“You don’t have either of those.”

Iwaizumi fights a smile at the affronted look Oikawa gives him.

“Mean, Iwa-chan!”

Still, he’s walking toward the door and pulling on his shoes, so Iwaizumi stifles another sigh and follows. He knows there’s no point in trying to talk Oikawa out of this, and he has to admit that there might be something Kyoutani Kentarou knows that could help with his and the other Soldiers’ situation.

He only somewhat remembers the young man from when he used to visit Oikawa at the lab. That was five years ago, when they were still testing out the serum. Oikawa told him that Kyoutani had volunteered to be a part of the project, allowing them to experiment different formulas on him. Iwaizumi felt unsettled by this, but Oikawa assured him that they weren’t injecting him with anything they deemed could be lethal. And Kyoutani seemed to be holding up fairly well, from what Iwaizumi saw of him.

He asked him one day, while Oikawa discussed results in another room with the other members of his team, why he was subjecting himself to the experimentation.

Kyoutani had shifted in his seat, glancing across the room toward the large observation window that sat in the wall. Through it they both could see Oikawa talking animatedly to a shorter, fluffy-haired assistant that Iwaizumi couldn’t remember the name of. When he looked back at Kyoutani, the young man was staring at him with deep-set eyes, dark and intense.

“Wouldn’t you do anything to help the ones you love?” he asked gruffly.

That stuck with Iwaizumi, and after the experiments failed and Kyoutani returned home, he’d approached Oikawa with the suggestion of taking the young man’s place in the lab.

Oikawa had immediately refused, lips pursed. “I’m not going to experiment on you, Iwa-chan,” he said flatly. “You saw what it did to Kyoutani-kun.”

Iwaizumi frowned. “But you don’t have anyone else, right? It has to be a volunteer, and none of your scientists can offer themselves. Besides, I know you, Oikawa. You learn from your mistakes. You work harder than anyone. I know you can create the right formula. And when you do, I want you to test it on me.”

Oikawa stared at him, mouth open but no sound coming out. Iwaizumi rolled his eyes and lightly
pushed on his chin to close it.

“You look like an idiot with your mouth hanging like that,” he said gently.

Oikawa sputtered, shaking his head. “Iwa-chan, I can’t—”

“You can, and you will,” Iwaizumi said firmly. He tilted his head then, forcing a crooked smile. “I’ll be your Soldier. Just put a little faith in me, all right?”

And Oikawa had nodded, eyes still wide.

It only took a few months for Oikawa to figure out the right sequence for the formula. It was created and injected and Iwaizumi experienced weeks of pain, but he refused to let Oikawa apologize for it. His body grew stronger, faster, more resilient. He went through nights of tremors, of insomnia, of cramps so strong he could barely walk. He was in bed when the attack of July 10th occurred, unable to do anything but listen to the roars and the screams of the kaiju’s victims and shake. Oikawa tweaked the formula, drew blood and helped it sync with his body, until finally everything clicked, and he woke up without pain.

It was later that they would discover the withdrawal symptoms, but as much as Oikawa wanted to work on creating a cure, the higher ups refused to allow such distractions, wanting to focus instead on bringing in more Soldiors. They kept Oikawa and his team busy with screening new recruits, until eventually Oikawa snapped and refused his assignments, insisting that they work instead on learning about the kaiju and how to stop them without the need for Soldiors. That was when they removed him from head of the lab and placed his prodigy assistant over him.

Oikawa was resentful at first, but he spends his time now focusing on the kaiju. He studies their corpses, watches the media footage to learn how they move and act, giving the Soldiors pointers on how to predict their appearances and attacks and find their weaknesses. It’s useful information, but Iwaizumi knows that Oikawa isn’t satisfied with simply helping the fight. He wants to end it completely.

And Iwaizumi is pretty sure he’s still working on finding a cure as well, if the formulas and calculations spread out across Oikawa’s room are any indication.

He’s going to run himself into the ground trying to fix everything.

Oikawa walks beside him, scarf flung casually around his neck, dark denim jacket matching the rest of his ensemble perfectly. His eyes are bright, the circles beneath them barely visible thanks to the concealer Iwaizumi knows he uses. Iwaizumi doesn’t want to darken that light in his eyes, but the fear of Oikawa overworking himself, as he always does, lingers deep in his heart.

They arrive at Iwaizumi’s motorcycle (which Oikawa calls Hog-chan for some reason only the gods know), and the predictable argument over Oikawa wearing his helmet commences, but soon they’re on the road heading for the city. Iwaizumi has no idea how Oikawa knows where to go, but he shouts directions into his ear until they arrive at an alley between a run-down florist shop and an equally depressing family bakery.

“What are we doing here, Oikawa?” Iwaizumi asks, glancing around. They’re beside two dumpsters, and there’s a matted cat cleaning itself a few feet away, paying them no mind. The entire place reeks, and the secluded nature of it sends prickles across Iwaizumi’s skin beneath his jacket.

“I texted Yahaba-kun, and he said he’d talk with us here,” Oikawa says lightly, quickly pulling off the helmet, as he gets off Hog-chan and runs his fingers through his hair, arranging it back as best he
can to it’s natural flawless state. Iwaizumi resists the urge to reach over and ruffle it, knowing Oikawa would yell at him, and he doesn’t want to draw attention in this place.

“Why here?” Iwaizumi grumbles.

Before Oikawa can reply, two figures step into view at the other end of the alley. They approach slowly, and Iwaizumi recognizes the taller one as Oikawa’s former lab assistant, Yahaba Shigeru. The shorter one he knows immediately, never having been able to forget those intense eyes and perpetual scowl.

“Kyou-tani-san,” he says, getting off his bike to stand and bow slightly. He pulls off his helmet, tucking it under his arm.

Kyou-tani looks surprised to see him there, his gaze flickering from Iwaizumi to Oikawa and back again. “Yahaba only mentioned Oikawa,” he explains after a moment.

“Iwa-chan doesn’t like me playing without his supervision,” Oikawa says with a teasing laugh.

Kyou-tani ignores Oikawa, keeping his gaze fixed on Iwaizumi. “I’ve seen you on the news,” he says. “You took the serum.”

“I did.”

“That’s what we’re here about, actually,” Oikawa cuts in, looking over to Yahaba, who’s been standing silently, hands in his pockets. “The serum has presented certain, hmm, side-effects.”

Kyou-tani’s eyes narrow, and Yahaba speaks for the first time.


Iwaizumi grunts. “Rage states,” he says, remembering the red haze, the murderous intent that had filled him for a thing as small as a requested autograph. “Everything went red, and I almost killed a man.”

“That’s close to what happened to you, isn’t it, Mad Dog-chan?” Oikawa asks, and Yahaba’s gaze darkens.

“Don’t call me that,” Kyou-tani mutters, glaring at the wall beside them.

“If you’re about to ask if you can take Kentarou in for further experimentation, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” Yahaba says, his tone just as casual as Oikawa’s, though his eyes are hard, unyielding, and Iwaizumi notices how he steps ahead of Kyou-tani just enough to make it known that he’s shielding him.

Oikawa sighs. “I know it’s not something either of you want, but if there’s something wrong with our Soldiers and Kyou-tani-kun’s blood has the key to how to fix it, then it’s worth looking into, isn’t it?”

Yahaba frowns. “He received a different strain than Iwaizumi-san. Even if I wanted to help you, which I don’t, I highly doubt he’d be of use to you.”

Oikawa frowns faintly. “At least come to the lab and look at the serum with us. You were one of the best on my team, Shi-chan. I could use your sharp eyes again.”
Yahaba’s gaze hardens. “It’s Yahaba-san,” he says coolly. “And have you forgotten how your team and the people you work for treated Kentarou after he destroyed your lab? You kicked him out of the program and left him with zero support. He was crazy on the drugs you gave him, and you left him to suffer. And after July 10th, when his home was destroyed, you didn’t lift a finger to assist him, the man who volunteered for your cruel experiments.”

Oikawa’s eyes are wide, and he holds up his hands in a placating gesture. “I wasn’t a part of that decision!” he protests.

Iwaizumi stares at Yahaba, a sick feeling twisting in his stomach. He feels nauseous, looking between Yahaba and Kyoutani, realizing that he never even bothered to ask what’d happened to Kyoutani after he was sent away. His insides squirm with guilt, but Kyoutani won’t meet his gaze, and he isn’t sure an apology would do much good now.

Yahaba takes a step back, resting his hand on Kyoutani’s arm. “I’m sorry that your Soldiers are suffering,” he says, and that part seems genuine. “But you can’t have Kentarou, and I refuse to work for those people again. You’re a smart guy, Oikawa-san. I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“But—”

It’s not often that Iwaizumi sees Oikawa look completely defeated, but he does now. His shoulders slump, hands falling to his sides, as Yahaba and Kyoutani turn and walk away without a glance back.

Iwaizumi adjusts his helmet to his other arm, reaching out to take Oikawa’s elbow to turn him toward him. “Hey,” he says, his voice gruff because he isn’t sure how to speak otherwise in that moment. If he could smile and be refreshing like Sugawara he would, but his personality isn’t like that. All he knows is tough love, but Oikawa needs a kick in the ass more than he needs a pet on the head, usually. “Fuck them, all right? It was a good idea, and if they don’t want to help . . . fuck ‘em.”

Oikawa bites his lip, glancing toward the other end of the alleyway. “I had nothing to do with the SSP kicking Kyoutani-kun out of the program,” he says, his voice distant.

Iwaizumi pinches his arm, hard, causing Oikawa to yelp and rub at the spot. He glares at Iwaizumi, but Iwaizumi simply takes a step back, crossing his arms over his chest, helmet swinging from his fingertips. “I know that, idiot,” he says. “You did the best you could. But it’s the past now. There’s no use dwelling on it. Keep looking forward, yeah? Figure out the problem that’s in front of you. Don’t worry about what happened before.”

Oikawa smiles faintly. “Iwa-chan is smart sometimes,” he says, stepping over to Hog-chan.

“Only sometimes?” Iwaizumi grumbles, following him.

“You should rest when we get home. I know thinking up all those words must’ve hurt your tiny brain,” Oikawa quips with a laugh, straddling the motorcycle.

Iwaizumi tosses Oikawa’s helmet at his head, smirking when it hits the side of it with a soft thwack. Oikawa squeaks, and fumbles for the helmet so it doesn’t fall. Iwaizumi fights a laugh, feeling his phone vibrating then in his pocket. He draws it out, the smile dying on his lips as he looks at the message.

From: Sawamura-san
Subject: kaiju sighting
get to the base immediately

“Shit.” Iwaizumi shoves the phone into his pocket, pulling the helmet on and jumping quickly onto his motorcycle.

“Iwa-chan?” Oikawa’s voice is soft, concerned.

“A kaiju’s been spotted,” Iwaizumi grunts, revving the engine and starting for the base.

Through the wind whistling past his ears, and the sound of his heart pounding loudly through his head, he almost misses Oikawa’s reply.

“But it’s too early.”

***

Akaashi should’ve known that taking Bokuto to the bird sanctuary was probably a bad idea. Not thirty minutes into their visit, they’re being escorted out by security because Bokuto tried to catch several owls with his hands and bowled over a couple in his mad chase. Akaashi apologized profusely for the disturbance, but the guards didn’t look amused, and Akaashi is fairly certain they won’t be allowed back again.

Bokuto’s expression is dark as they leave the sanctuary, and Akaashi tries to think of something to cheer him. They walk in silence for a few minutes, Bokuto’s hands shoved deep into his pockets, as he walks hunched over, glaring at the ground.

“The snowy one was really adorable,” Akaashi offers after a moment.

Bokuto’s lips twitch in what might be a smile. “Yeah, if I had one I’d name it Hedwig.”

It takes a moment for Akaashi to understand, but then he smiles. “From Harry Potter?”

Bokuto lifts his head. “Yeah! I really liked her.” His face clouds over again, and Akaashi remembers with an inner wince what happened to the bird in the books.

Strike one.

Akaashi folds his arms behind his back, gripping his elbows, as he looks ahead. Bokuto remains solemn beside him, and Akaashi’s chest feels tight. They’re approaching a corner store, however, and an idea strikes him.

“Hey, I’ll buy you some ice scream,” he says, reaching over to tug gently on Bokuto’s sleeve.

That catches his interest immediately. Bokuto’s head comes up, eyes shining. “Really? Wow, and I haven’t even had lunch! Thanks Akaashi, you’re the best!” He jumps closer to wrap his arms around Akaashi in a hug, almost knocking them both off the sidewalk in his enthusiasm.

Akaashi rights himself, shaking his head with a faint smile. He reaches up to pat Bokuto’s arm, as he continues to cling to him.

“Bokuto-san, I can’t actually get you the ice cream if I can’t make it to the store,” he points out.
“Right, right.” Bokuto lets go of him, but reaches to take his hand instead, dragging Akaashi over to the store at a brisk pace.

Akaashi’s heart pounds in his chest, as he lets himself be pulled along, trying not to think too much about Bokuto’s hand in his. He remembers all too clearly the incident from the night before, how Bokuto had accosted him while he was half-asleep and then suggested that they have sex. He has no idea if sex would actually help Bokuto or not, but he doesn’t think he can take the risk with Bokuto’s feelings on the line.

Despite knowing very well his own feelings toward his friend, Akaashi also knows that now is not the right time for a relationship. Especially not with someone like Bokuto. The probability of him getting hurt is too great. Perhaps it’s selfish, but Akaashi doesn’t want to be responsible for breaking his friend’s heart.

They enter the store, and Bokuto immediately heads for the frozen aisle. Akaashi follows, able to gently wiggle his hand out of Bokuto’s grasp at this point. He stands back, allowing Bokuto to choose whatever he wants, though it seems like they’ll be here a while, as Bokuto exclaims over each option and goes through the pros and cons of getting them (Akaashi didn’t know there were cons to ice cream, but that was Bokuto for you).

Glancing down the aisle, Akaashi catches the sight of a mess of black hair moving back and forth along the alcohol racks. Leaving Bokuto to wonder which flavor of Gari Gari Kun was best (soda or cream puff), he walks over to the source of the weaving bedhead, not surprised to see that it belongs to Kuroo.

“Kuroo-san,” he says in greeting, and Kuroo jumps in surprise, spinning around quickly to look at Akaashi with wide eyes.

His expression quickly relaxes to his usual sleepy-eyed smirk, and he tilts his chin in response. “Yo, Akaashi. I didn’t expect to see you here. Where’s Bo?”

Akaashi gestures over his shoulder. “Contemplating the delights and horrors of ice cream.”

Kuroo laughs. “Sounds about right.” He grins and reaches for a bottle of champagne, pulling it off the rack to show Akaashi. “What do you think of this one? I’m finding it hard to decide.”

Akaashi blinks, leaning forward then to indulge him, reading the label on the bottle. “Blueberry . . . what’s this for? You and Bokuto-san?”

He glances up at Kuroo in time to see a dusting of pink color his cheekbones, before he clears his throat. His eyes are glued to the bottle as he replies. “Uh, for me and Kenma, actually. I’m going to ask him out. Like, on a real date.”

There’s a hesitance to his tone that Akaashi isn’t accustomed to. He studies Kuroo’s expression, remembers what Bokuto said the night before about their friends sleeping together, and the realization hits him. Kuroo is in love with Kenma. It should’ve been obvious before, Akaashi thinks, as he leans back and purses his lips. He just never took the time to stop and think about Kuroo and Kenma’s relationship. It didn’t seem to be any of his business, really, but now he finds himself squirming inwardly with the need to tell Kuroo that he’s making a giant mistake.

“Kuroo-san, with all due respect, I don’t think you should do that.”

Kuroo blinks at him, confusion darkening his features. “What? Why the hell not?”
“Well . . . you’re in love with him, aren’t you?” Akaashi asks, clasping his hands behind his back. Kuroo stares. “Uh, yeah. How did you—”

“So you shouldn’t take him on a date or pursue a relationship.”

“What the fuck?” Kuroo looks at him in complete astonishment, and Akaashi notices a flash of anger spark behind his eyes.

He stands his ground, firm in his beliefs, and shakes his head. His nails dig into the backs of his hands, as he tightens his grip on them. “I apologize if I’m overstepping here—”

“Fuck yeah you—”

“But you really should think about this.” Akaashi’s voice is rising, and he can feel panic curling against his ribs, tightening them, squeezing his heart in an icy grasp. “If you date Kenma-kun, if you enter that type of relationship, what’s going to happen to him if you die? Any of us can die in battle, Kuroo-san. I know we’ve managed to avoid that fate up until now, but it’s always a possibility. If you . . . if you create that type of connection between you and Kenma-kun, and you die, what’s going to happen to him? How will he feel? Once you cross that line, you can’t turn back. If you make him rely on you in that way . . . and you don’t have time for it anyway. None of us do. We have to focus on our jobs. It won’t be fair to Kenma-kun. Right now it doesn’t matter, because you’re only friends, but if you change that . . . you’ll have an obligation to him. An obligation you won’t be able to keep.”

He’s breathing fast now, and he’s pretty sure he’s spoken more words than he ever has to Kuroo. He can see the shock in Kuroo’s eyes, but his feet are stuck to the tile beneath him, and he can do nothing but stare back at Kuroo, his cheeks warm, his chest stinging.

“I get your point,” Kuroo says finally. “But me and Kenma . . . we’re not just friends. We never really have been. Wouldn’t it be better to spend whatever time I have with him in a way that’ll make us both happy? I don’t want to live with regrets.”

Akaashi swallows hard, shaking his head. “It’s not that simple.”

A look of understanding crosses Kuroo’s face, and he shifts his gaze past Akaashi’s shoulder, down the aisle to where Bokuto stands. Akaashi inhales sharply.

“You’re not talking about me and Kenma, are you?”

Akaashi opens his mouth to protest, but no words come to him. Kuroo’s expression softens slightly, but before he can say anything else, Bokuto bounds up with a grin, his hands clutching both flavors of Gari Gari Kun. He tackles Kuroo in a hug, almost knocking his friend over, but Kuroo quickly recovers, patting Bokuto on the back, though his eyes remain fixed on Akaashi, a troubled look in them.

Akaashi blinks as his vision blurs, and he looks away finally, staring at the floor, as Bokuto pulls away with a breathless laugh.

“Dude! What are you doing here? Is that for your date with Kenma?” he asks, catching sight of the champagne bottle Kuroo miraculously managed not to drop.

“Uh, yeah,” Kuroo says, laughing. “I thought I’d go all out.”

“That’s awesome,” Bokuto says. “Good luck, man!” He claps Kuroo on the back, before turning to
Akaashi with a bright grin. It falters when he sees him though, and he tilts his head to the side.

“Akaashi? Are you crying?”

Akaashi swipes at his eyes quickly. They come away wet, and he stares at them a moment, before wiping his hand on his pants. He looks up at Bokuto and smiles reassuringly.

“I’m fine,” he says, keeping his voice under control with little difficulty. It was a skill that he’s honed over the years. “Just got something in my eye. We should start heading back.”

Bokuto peers at him for a moment, and Akaashi can see the gears in his head working to figure out if he’s lying or not. He reaches out to take Bokuto’s wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m fine,” he says again.

“Okay,” Bokuto says finally. He shakes his head as though clearing it, before he turns back to Kuroo, grinning faintly. “Text me about the date later, okay?”

“I will,” Kuroo says with a nod.

Akaashi pulls Bokuto toward the front register before either of them can continue the conversation, purchasing the Gari Gari Kuns. He quickly steps outside, breathing easier once they’re on the sidewalk. Bokuto immediately opens the cream puff popsicle, holding the soda flavored one out towards Akaashi.

“I got this one for you,” he says, with a rare shy smile.

Akaashi takes it with a smile of his own, though his heart twitches pathetically. “Thank you, Bokuto-san,” he says quietly.

It wouldn’t be fair.

They walk in relative silence, the only sounds being their footsteps, the occasional car, and the crunch of their popsicles. Akaashi tries his best not to dwell on Kuroo’s words, but he can’t help but run them over in his mind. For a moment he lets himself entertain the idea of deepening his relationship with Bokuto. Of waking up to his smile every morning, of running his fingers over the muscles of his chest, his arms, his thighs. He imagines kissing those wet lips, wonders what his breath would taste like. Before he can stop himself, he discreetly casts a glance toward Bokuto, taking in his profile, and his stomach flips over. To distract himself, he bites hard into the Giar Gari Kun, wincing as the cold bites his gums, making his teeth sting. The ice slides down his throat and into the warmth of his stomach, causing him to shiver.

“Are you cold, Akaashi?” Bokuto asks, catching the faint movement.

Akaashi blinks, as Bokuto’s arm descends around his shoulders, and Bokuto pulls him close to his side. Immediately Akaashi feels his neck and face burn, which he suppose helps with the chill, but it doesn’t help his rapidly beating heart. He wonders briefly if the universe hates him. Still, he finds himself starting to lean into Bokuto’s side. Is this allowed? Just this?

“Whoa, hey! Look, Akaashi! It’s us!”

Bokuto jumps away, letting go of Akaashi to press his face against the window of a shop. Inside is a display of action figures, and upon closer inspection, Akaashi recognizes the figures as himself and Bokuto, as well as Iwaizumi and Kuroo. They’re dressed in their SSP uniforms, black with the insignia of two katanas crossed behind the silhouette of a soaring black crow, and the expressions are
surprisingly accurate. Kuroo’s wearing his signature smirk, Bokuto his confident grin, Iwaizumi his permanent scowl. Akaashi’s figure is expressionless, looking bored with half-lidded eyes.

The real Akaashi blinks, wondering if he always looks like that. He glances up at Bokuto, wanting to ask, but his friend still has his face pressed against the glass, grinning ecstatically.

“Look at us! We look so cool!” He turns to face Akaashi, practically vibrating with excitement. “Can we get them, Akaashi? Please?”

Akaashi glances toward the figures once more, wondering how unnerving it’d be to have Bokuto play with a figure of himself. Still, looking back at Bokuto’s expression, he can’t help but sigh and nod. “Sure,” he says.

“Fuck yeah!” Bokuto exclaims, disappearing into the store before Akaashi can say anything else.

He decides to wait outside, hoping Bokuto remembered to bring his wallet with him, at least. He doesn’t have to wait long, before Bokuto is bounding back out of the store, holding the boxes with the figures of Bokuto and Akaashi.

“I couldn’t get all of them, so I got the most important ones,” Bokuto declares, showing Akaashi before bringing them close to his chest to look down at them admiringly. “I’m going to make them get married.”

Akaashi nearly chokes on his last bite of Gari Gari Kun. He coughs for a moment, eyes stinging, chest burning, while Bokuto looks at him with a perplexed half-smile.

“What?” Akaashi asks once he can properly talk.

“Didn’t you say you’d marry me?” Bokuto asks, tilting his head.

Akaashi stares, trying to remember when he’d said that. Had he been drunk? He searches his brain, scrambling, until he remembers that day in the conference room before the debriefing. Nishinoya had brought up Fuck, Marry, Kill, and Akaashi had told Bokuto he would marry him, after Noya declared he’d kill Bokuto over marrying him.

“That was just a game,” he says weakly. He meant to cheer Bokuto up with that statement. He didn’t think Bokuto would take it to heart.

“Don’t worry,” Bokuto says dismissively, waving the Bokuto box in the air. “I’ll let you pick the music.”

He grins, obviously teasing, but Akaashi’s head is spinning. Bokuto turns back to gaze at the figures, starting to tear at the tape holding the cardboard closed. He struggles with it, but Akaashi can do nothing but watch, his heart pounding in his ears.

Did Bokuto even realize what he’d said? Or was it simply a flippant statement meant to tease? Did Bokuto think about that sort of thing? Were his feelings for Akaashi more than simple friendship? Even close friendship? Akaashi remembers Kuroo’s words again. They press against his brain, causing it to throb painfully.

“I don’t want to live with regrets.”

Was it better to live without regrets? Akaashi was trying to spare Bokuto the pain of heartbreak in the event that something went wrong in the future, but if those feelings were already present in Bokuto, then he’d be hurt either way. But how was he to know for sure? Did he simply ask Bokuto outright
if he was in love with him? Was that rude? Was this even the right place for a question such as that?

Akaashi’s reeling, and he steps to the side, reaching out to steady himself with his palm against a lamppost.

Bokuto finally seems to notice Akaashi’s crisis, and steps over in open alarm.

“Akaashi?!”

“Bokuto-san.” Akaashi stares up at him, blinking rapidly. His heart is pounding so fast that he’s positive Bokuto will be able to hear it. The question is there, burning the tip of his tongue, but it’s not the right time. It’s not the right place.

Do you love me?

“Akaashi, what’s wrong? You look like you’re going to throw up,” Bokuto says worriedly. His hands still hold the action figure boxes, limp at his sides. Since his hands are full, he leans his body forward instead, peering into Akaashi’s face. His breath is warm and smells of cream puffs.

“What . . . what if it wasn’t just a game?” Akaashi finds himself asking. It’s not the right question, and he grimaces inwardly. Or maybe it is the right question. It gets the point across, doesn’t it?

Bokuto reels back, mouth dropping open in shock. Akaashi closes his eyes; bracing himself for whatever loud exclamation Bokuto is about to shout, be it positive or negative.

But no shout comes. Instead, their phones begin to beep loudly, alerting them of an important message. Akaashi digs his phone out of his pocket quickly, seeing as Bokuto’s hands are still full, and he flips it open to read the message.

Immediately his heart ceases its erratic beat, instead turning cold and heavy, dropping into his stomach. He inhales, the headache pressing more insistently behind his eyes.

“Akaashi?” Bokuto asks hesitantly.

Akaashi pockets his phone, closing his eyes briefly to gather his thoughts. He feels surprisingly calm now, despite the urgent matter calling them to work. This, at least, is something he knows how to handle.

“Come on. We have to get to the base,” he says, turning to walk briskly down the sidewalk back toward where they’d parked their motorcycles in front of the bird sanctuary.

Bokuto hurriedly catches up with him, golden eyes wide. “Is it a kaiju?” he asks.

Akaashi can only nod grimly. His questions will have to wait.

***

When Kuroo woke this morning, he was somewhat apprehensive about what sex with Kenma might mean for their friendship. However things stay completely the same. Kenma didn’t stir when Kuroo got out of bed, and he paused to drop a small kiss on the side of Kenma’s head, before sauntering into the kitchen with a whistle on his lips. He prepared breakfast like he always did, and at the smell of food, Kenma came wandering into the kitchen, as he always did.
They bantered lightly back and forth, watched TV as they ate, before Kenma began to play on his PSP, switching between that and his phone, while Kuroo read with his head in Kenma’s lap. Everything felt natural and normal, and Kuroo wondered if he’d worried for nothing. They didn’t talk about what transpired, but that was okay. Kuroo was fully planning on broaching the subject during their date, in the hopes that the romantic nature of it all would help Kenma see how awesome it would be to actually date.

He still has no idea if Kenma likes him back in that way, but he figures that’s another subject they can discuss on the date. However, once he returns to the apartment after his run-in with Bokuto and Akaashi, Kuroo feels doubt sprouting in his mind. And when he opens the door and catches sight of Kenma seated on the couch as before, he feels his chest tighten.

Chewing on his lip, Kuroo kicks off his shoes and steps over to the couch, setting the bottle of champagne on the coffee table in front of Kenma. Kenma’s eyes barely flicker from his game.

“What’s that?”

“It’s for us,” Kuroo says, grinning as he throws himself down on the couch. He nuzzles his head against Kenma’s arm, causing Kenma to move it away to keep his fingers from slipping over the wrong buttons.

“Why?”

“Because we should enjoy the small things in life? Also, I’m taking you out on a date tonight.”

That catches Kenma’s attention. He pauses his game, looking down at Kuroo. His nose wrinkles slightly, and Kuroo momentarily fears that Kenma will protest. Thinking about what he’s said, Kuroo quickly amends his sentence.

“Ah, that is, if you want to. I wasn’t thinking any place super fancy or crowded or anything. Just a small place where we can talk.” He chews on his lip, watching Kenma’s expression. It’s still completely impassive, but Kenma breaks eye contact first, glancing toward his game. Kuroo isn’t sure if he should feel victory or defeat at that gesture.

“Talk about what?” he asks, which is a ridiculous question, because Kuroo knows that Kenma knows exactly what they need to talk about.

Kuroo huffs. “Us, duh.”

“Hm.”

Kuroo’s stomach is doing a strange sort of tap-dance, and he sits up slowly, wishing he had a piece of gum right about now. “I mean, we need to talk about this, right?”

Kenma picks up his game. Kuroo frowns. He reaches out with his foot to nudge Kenma’s leg.

“Hey, don’t ignore me. We fucked, remember?”

“I remember.”

Kuroo narrows his eyes, wondering if that’s a faint flush coloring Kenma’s cheeks, or if he’s just seeing what he wants to see. He leans forward, trying to catch Kenma’s gaze, but Kenma keeps his head down, his face hidden behind his hair. Kuroo reaches out to gently tuck a strand of it behind Kenma’s ear, letting his fingers linger on the blonde tips. It’s a different look on Kenma, this sort of daring, panther appearance. Although it reminds Kuroo of when Kenma was young and barely able
to set a volleyball, there’s now a mature aspect in the striking contrast between Kenma’s pale skin, gold eyes, and dark hair.

It looks . . . sexy.

Which is a word Kuroo never would’ve thought to call Kenma before last night.

He twists the soft strands of hair gently between his fingers, staring at them. Kenma keeps his eyes fixed on his game, but he’s grown still, his fingers not moving over the buttons. Kuroo remembers last night vividly, the sensations and sounds carved into his memory. He never wants to forget it, even if Kenma doesn’t return his feelings after all.

But he couldn’t have mistaken the look in Kenma’s eyes for anything other than love. That memory wasn’t one he’d created after the fact, to twist the fantasy to his liking. It’d been real. It had to have been real. He’d felt it.

“You know I love you more than anything else in this world, right?” Kuroo decides to say, pulling his fingers away from Kenma’s hair. His heart pounds a loud disjointed rhythm in his ears, as he watches Kenma’s expression for any signs of disapproval or resignation.

Kenma doesn’t turn toward him, but his cheeks do redden, and Kuroo knows he’s not just imagining it now.

Before Kenma can make any sort of reply, however, Kuroo’s phone beeps with the familiar alert of Sawamura’s summons. Frowning, Kuroo pulls his phone out his pocket, reading the message.

A kaiju? Already?

It’s only been a couple weeks since the last one. Usually the sightings are farther apart. Kuroo clenches his jaw, sliding his phone back into his pocket, as he stands. Kenma doesn’t look up at him, but his fingers clasp his PSP in a tight grip.

“I have to go,” Kuroo says unnecessarily, staring down at the top of Kenma’s head.

When Kenma makes no reply, Kuroo turns toward the front hallway to pull his shoes back on. As he straightens, he stares at the door, allowing himself to briefly entertain the notion of not going out to fight. Of staying here with Kenma and focusing on where their relationship is going. But as soon as he thinks this, he’s immediately smacking his cheek with his hand.

Pull yourself together, man. You’re a Soldier, not some lovesick teenager. Your love life’s got to wait.

Iwaizumi, Bokuto, and Akaashi are counting on him. Sawamura, Nishinoya, and Tanaka are counting on him. Fuck, the entire city of Sendai is counting on him. Shit’s a lot of pressure, but he knew that going into this, didn’t he? People depend on him now. Kenma depends on him.

Small fingers curl into the back of his jacket, and he feels a soft thump against his back. Kenma’s resting his forehead against him, and Kuroo feels a burning hatred toward the kaiju build inside him. His skin feels hot, tingling beneath his clothes. It frightens him, as he remembers what happened the last time he felt such anger, but then Kenma’s hand is slipping into his, and he’s turning Kuroo around to face him.

“I have to go, Kenma,” Kuroo says, his voice sounding weak and strained even to him.

“I know,” Kenma says, before leaning up on his toes, his free hand moving behind Kuroo’s head to
bury in his hair.

Kuroo finds himself being pulled forward, and he closes his eyes before he feels the soft, warm touch of Kenma’s lips against his. He doesn’t hesitate, but immediately wraps his arms around Kenma, pulling him close, as he tilts his head to deepen the kiss.

_Akaashi is wrong_, he thinks hazily, as he murmurs something indistinct against Kenma’s lips. They part for him, and he feels the scrape of Kenma’s teeth against his bottom lip, sending prickle of heat across his jaw and neck. _We can still have this. Even if I do die out there, at least we were able to have this._

It’s a morbid thought, but it comforts him, somehow.

_No regrets._

Too soon, Kenma is pulling away. Kuroo keeps him close, though, and rests his forehead against his best friend’s (should he still think of him in that way?). Sighing deeply, Kuroo’s breath mingles with Kenma’s, and the moment holds an intimacy that he doesn’t want to break.

“Call Hinata,” he says finally, not making a move to pull away just yet. “Everything will be okay.”

Kenma reaches up between them, lightly pressing the pad of his pinky finger against the spot he’d bitten on Kuroo’s lip. It stings faintly, but Kuroo barely registers it. Instead, all he feels is the warmth of Kenma’s skin, the dampness of his breath.

“I trust you,” Kenma whispers, and Kuroo finds it that much more difficult to lean back.

He does though, because he has to, and slowly he releases Kenma’s hand. Turning away quickly, Kuroo exits the apartment without looking back, knowing his resolve will crumble away completely if he does.

“Fuck these kaiju,” he mutters, as he swings a leg over Nekoma and pulls his helmet on over his head.

His phone buzzes, and he pulls it out to glance at the message, even as he turns his key in the ignition.

_from:_ Brokuto  
**Subject:** fml

> u got Sawamura’s text????

_to:_ Brokuto  
**Subject:** re: fml

> let’s send these motherfuckers straight to hell

***

The kaiju stands around thirty stories high, a monstrous being with giant claws and sharp teeth. Its face is shaped similar to that of a crocodile, with a long snout and beady eyes. It has a tail that whips
back and forth; crashing into buildings, as it makes its way from the center of downtown toward the perimeter. The thing is covered in scales, and it tilts its head back and roars low in its throat, the sound reverberating across the streets.

A crowd has already gathered at the police barricade, and Tsukishima marvels at the stupidity of mankind, as they press in close, cameras and phones waving in the air, as they all struggle to catch a glimpse of the kaiju, or of the Super Soldiers tasked to bring the monster down. There’s been no sign of the Soldiers yet, but Tsukishima’s only just arrived himself, with Yaku and Lev close behind.

“Whoa, that thing is huge!” Lev exclaims, staring toward what little they can see of the kaiju, weaving in and out of what buildings are left downtown. The sound of crashing and groaning of concrete and metal can be heard, as the kaiju presumably wades through the destruction left by other fights. Dust swirls from beneath its feet, snaking out toward the waiting spectators.

Lev turns to grin down at Yaku. “Yaku-san, I bet you’d look like, a tiny ant next to that thing!”

A vein on Yaku’s forehead twitches, and Tsukishima knows that the only reason why Lev is still standing is because Chief Nekomata is directly across from them, speaking to Captain Sawamura Daichi with the SSP Military Division.

A news reporter pushes his way to the front of the crowd. He’s young, perhaps the same age as Tsukishima, or a little older. His brow hair stands up in spikes, and his amber-brown eyes flicker between the three officers in front of him. He leans across the barrier, shoving some sort of recording device toward Tsukishima and Yaku.

“Hi! Hello! I’m Inuoka Sou! I’m with the Miyagi Daily paper! What do you think is in store for us today with this fight?”

Tsukishima stares at the eager, young reporter. He raises an eyebrow. “Isn’t your job to report on what actually happens? Are you planning on leaving before the fight starts?”

Inuoka blinks, before laughing sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Well, no, I mean, I was going to cover the entire fight, but—”

“So shut up, stay back, and watch the fight,” Tsukishima says, cutting him off.

Inuoka opens his mouth, a protest evident in his indignant expression, but Tsukishima doesn’t stick around to find out what that protest is. He catches sight of a familiar brown ahoge bobbing through the mass of people pressed up against the barricades. As another roar from the kaiju shakes the buildings surrounding him, Tsukishima abandons his post to hurry toward the freckled idiot that’s ducked under the barricade and is now tentatively approaching Chief Nekomata and Captain Sawamura. He’s clutching his gun case to his chest, and Tsukishima feels like he’s just swallowed lead.

“Yamaguchi!” he says sharply, stepping over quickly to grab his friend’s elbow. “What do you think you’re doing?” He raises an eyebrow, trying to look detached and superior and not at all like his heart is threatening to pound its way out of his ribcage.

Yamaguchi startles at his touch, whirling to look at him with wide eyes. “Oh! Tsukki! I just . . . I-I thought I could help.”

He glances toward the case in his arms, before turning to look at the dark shadow of the kaiju. It’s gotten closer within the past few minutes, but Tsukishima keeps his gaze fixed on Yamaguchi, frowning faintly.
“First of all, you’re a civilian with no military training,” he says, waving off Yamaguchi’s objections. “Secondly, your aim is terrible. What happens if you hit one of the Soldiers instead of the kaiju’s eye?”

At this Yamaguchi frowns. “I’ve gotten better, you said so yourself.”

“Not enough for pinpoint accuracy,” Tsukishima says, his frown deepening. “Once you can hit the range target’s heart or head . . . then I’ll be willing to discuss you approaching the chief about your assistance. But not before then. Especially not now.”

“But now is when they need help!” Yamaguchi exclaims, his voice firm despite how his body is trembling. His knuckles are white, as he grips the case, and his freckles stand out more than ever, but he meets Tsukishima’s gaze without flinching. “I don’t need pinpoint accuracy. That thing is huge! All I need is to distract it long enough for Kuroo-san and Iwaizumi-san to make their move.”

“That’s what the other two are for,” Tsukishima points out, even as his chest clenches in response to Yamaguchi’s words.

A distraction . . .

He’s once more brought back to that day, that day Azumane stood in front of his door, shuffling his feet and on the verge of tears.

“Your brother . . . he was incredibly brave. He and four others served as a distraction so Nishinoya and Tanaka could attack its head. The plan succeeded, but I’m afraid . . . I’m afraid your brother d — . . . I’m afraid he didn’t make it.”

“Tsukki?”

Tsukishima drags himself out of the memory, his pulse racing. He stares at Yamaguchi, and he can see in his mind’s eye his friend getting swiped across the chest with one of those large claws, flying against the wall of a building, and sinking to the ground in a broken mess of blood and bones.

“Go home, Yamaguchi,” he says flatly.

“But—”

Tsukishima turns away, waving at Yaku and Lev. The two hurry over, and Yaku seems surprised to see Yamaguchi on this side of the barricades.

“He’s not supposed to be here,” Yaku says.

“I know. I need you to take him home,” Tsukishima says. “One of us needs to anyway.” He gives Yaku a pointed look, shifting his gaze over to Lev, who’s greeting Yamaguchi with his usual enthusiasm.

Yaku’s lips purse, and he nods in understanding. “Lev,” he says, his voice sharp.

Lev instantly turns from Yamaguchi, looking down at his partner with a faint grin. “Yes, Yaku-san?”

“Take Yamaguchi-kun home.”

Lev’s lip juts out petulantly. “But Yaku-san! I want to stay here with you and protect everyone! How am I supposed to be a Soldier if I don’t get any field experience?!”

“That’s an order, Lev,” Yaku says, leaving no room for argument.
Lev sighs, his shoulders slumping. “Okay, Yaku-san,” he says, and he starts to lean down, arms outstretched.

Yaku leaps back, his foot colliding with Lev’s leg, sending the rookie stumbling to one knee.

“What the hell are you doing?” Yaku asks, eyes wide.

“Giving you a goodbye hug? It’s dangerous out here! What if you don’t come back?” Lev asks, biting his lip. His green eyes shimmer with what might be tears, as they stare back at Yaku, and Tsukishima feels his skin crawl with secondhand embarrassment.

Yaku’s face is red, as he grabs Lev’s ear and jerks him to his feet, though the younger man is bent over at the waist to accommodate Yaku’s short stature. “What have I told you about talking like that? I’ll be fine. Now get Yamaguchi-kun back to his apartment.”

“Yes, Yaku-san,” Lev says with a grimace, rubbing his ear once Yaku relinquishes it. “Come on, Yamaguchi-kun,” he says then, his voice lilting as he gestures for Yamaguchi to follow him back into the crowd.

“But I—” Yamaguchi falters, glancing to where Chief Nekomata and Captain Sawamura are now heading toward the temporary tent the military has set up for a headquarters.

“Tadashi.”

That catches everyone’s attention, but Tsukishima keeps his gaze fixed on his friend. He can feel a headache forming, and he wonders why he has to be stuck with such an earnest idiot for a friend. Yamaguchi looks back at him with wide eyes, before he ducks his head, a soft pink flush spreading across his otherwise pale face. Tsukishima doesn’t think about what that’s doing to his heart, but instead turns away to return to his post, gesturing for a few over-eager fans to step away from the barricade before they break it.

He doesn’t hear or see Yamaguchi leave, but he’s relieved when he glances over and sees only Yaku approaching him, the younger two nowhere in sight.

“So. A goodbye hug,” Tsukishima says, smirking faintly.

Yaku glowers up at him. “Don’t think I won’t kick you too.”

Tsukishima resists the urge to roll his eyes, wondering if Yaku really thought he was intimidating. He reminds Tsukishima more of a small cat than a large lion, but then again, cats can have sharp claws and teeth, so he takes a step to the side just as precaution.

“Tsukishima! Yaku!” Chief Nekomata waves them over. He’s finished talking to Captain Sawamura, and the latter ducks into the large tent beside them. “I want you to take point on watching the civilians. There are a lot of news crews here and we don’t want any reckless reporters trying to get to the action. Captain Sawamura is allowing us to have his lieutenants Nishinoya and Tanaka for assistance. Tell the rest of the men that they’re to defer to them if anything comes up. I’ll be in the tent with Sawamura watching everything on the monitors. Keep your walkies on at all times.”

Tsukishima and Yaku nod, saluting before heading back to the barricades where the rest of the police force has arrived. As Yaku goes over the chief’s words with them, Tsukishima glances toward the kaiju that is still pacing back and forth between the buildings. It appears to be growing frustrated, like it can’t find a way past these obstacles of rubble and concrete and metal. It doesn’t make much sense, seeing as the beast looks large enough and powerful enough to knock down anything in its path with a single blow.
Before Tsukishima can ponder this further, the Flying Crows arrive on their motorcycles, parking next to the barricades. Immediately, the crowd begins to shout and wave, some women actually screaming. It’s chaos and Tsukishima’s headache worsens. He rubs at his eyebrow, sighing. One of the Crows, a young man with wild black and white hair, jumps up and down to the cheers of their fans, soaking up the attention and waving both hands in the air in greeting, grinning widely. Kuroo-san, the only one other than Iwaizumi-san whose name Tsukishima has bothered to remember, also lifts a hand in acknowledgement, but the wave and the smile on his face seem sardonic. Iwaizumi-san and the bored-looking one don’t respond to the crowd at all, simply walk toward the tent headquarters.

“Lev would freak out if he knew we ended up standing this close to the Flying Crows,” Yaku says absently.

Tsukishima glances down at him, but before he can reply, one of the women in the crowd starts to climb over the barricade, waving her camera.

“Kuroo-san! Kuroo-san! Can I get a picture?” she cries.

Tsukishima grimaces inwardly, wondering if he’s going to have to manhandle this woman back behind the barricade. It’s the last thing he wants to do at this moment, but luckily he’s spared from acting by the arrival of Lieutenants Nishinoya Yuu and Tanaka Ryunosuke.

“How there!” Nishinoya exclaims. He leaps in front of the woman and holds his arms out to the side to create a wall with his body, which doesn’t look like it’ll be very effective, considering his small stature.

He’s even shorter than Yaku, Tsukishima thinks, and has to suppress a snort at the thought.

Nishinoya stares up at the woman like he thinks she might be an idiot. “Kuroo-san isn’t taking photos right now. He’s got a fucking kaiju to defeat! Don’t you have eyes?! What the hell do you think we’re here for?!”

Tanaka steps forward then, resting his hand on the woman’s shoulder, who’s looking down at Nishinoya like she isn’t sure if she should be offended or not. Tanaka smiles sympathetically.

“I know it’s probably always been a dream of yours to get a picture with the famous Flying Crows, but really, for your safety, you need to stay behind the barricade.”

The woman looks at him, hesitates, and then turns to head back behind the barriers. Tsukishima is about to be impressed by how well the man handled the situation, but then he turns to the rest of the crowd, giving them a ridiculous look, his chin tilted up, his eyes wide, mouth pulled into what Tsukishima figures is supposed to be a terrifying grimace.

“And that goes for all of you too!” he shouts, pointing at the crowd. The ones in front fall silent, staring at the lieutenant. He puffs out his chest before continuing, “If I see any one of you set one foot past these barricades I’ll shoot you myself. Don’t be idiots!”

There are several cringes throughout the front line of spectators, and Nishinoya and Tanaka high-five once it’s clear nobody else will be trying to leap over the barricades. Tsukishima sighs, wondering if he has to stay here with these embarrassing dumbasses or if he can be reassigned to a different task. Like maybe directing traffic away from the perimeter. He could stand and wave his arms.

Even Yaku looks traumatized. “I think . . . they might be worse than Lev,” he says in a horrified
whisper.

Tsukishima gets the feeling this is going to be a long afternoon.

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As Daichi looks at the four men in front of him, he can tell that they’re distracted. Akaashi is pointedly not looking at Bokuto, and Bokuto keeps sending Akaashi worried glances. Iwaizumi is scowling harder than usual, and Kuroo has yet to make a wisecrack. He knows it’s not his place to ask what’s going on, however, only to make sure they do their jobs.

“I know this is unexpected,” he says, as they begin to pull on their harnesses. “And I know that I gave you all time off. But we need to focus here. There’s a kaiju out there, and it’s only a matter of time before it wanders past the perimeter. We can’t let that happen.”

“Yes, sir!” the four of them chorus.

“I understand that you’ve only had one day of training with these harnesses, but despite that fact I want you to go out and do the best you can.” He pauses, frowning then as he shakes his head. “No, not the best you can. You will take down this kaiju. Failure is not an option, understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

Daichi turns then to Bokuto and Akaashi. “We don’t need another building to collapse, but we do need a distraction same as always. Set up your explosives somewhere the kaiju can easily spot, as far from the perimeter as you can get. We want him moving away from the crowd. You have everything you need?”

Bokuto pats the duffle bag slung across his chest. “Yes, sir! All my toys are here,” he says, grinning.

Daichi nods, turning then to look at Kuroo and Iwaizumi. “I want you two to be cautious. Your success rate right now with shooting your cables directly into the kaiju’s eyes is 65%. That’s too low for an actual battle. Don’t try that technique unless you know you can make the shot. In the meantime, simply aim for its head and slide down to stab its eyes. Understood?”

Iwaizumi nods. Kuroo, however, looks thoughtful. Daichi suppresses a groan, turning to him.

“What is it, Kuroo?” he asks, listening to the roar of the kaiju. It sends shivers down his spine. It’s too close. We have to get moving.

“I just thought, what if we attach one of Bo’s explosives to our katanas? That way we won’t have to stab that far into the eyes, just enough to leave the bombs. That’ll give us time to get away before the kaiju crashes to the ground as well.”

Bokuto grins. “That sounds fucking awesome! Let’s do it!”

Daichi stares, wondering if Kuroo is an actual idiot. It’s not that it’s a bad idea, but it’s probably the worst moment to be coming up with reckless schemes such as that. He shakes his head. “We don’t have any way for you to detach the bombs with enough time to get away before they explode. You’ll risk losing your katanas, and if it doesn’t work you’ll be left without weapons.”
Akaashi raises his hand. When Daichi nods to him, he lowers it, glancing between the four in front of him. “I could design something like that for later.”

“You’re a gem, Akaashi,” Kuroo says gratefully, grinning.

“For now, let’s keep that idea as a last resort,” Daichi suggests. He turns to the table behind him, picking up the earpieces that lay on top of it beside the laptops that will display recordings from tiny cameras in the top button of the Soldier’s uniforms. He and Chief Nekomata will remain in the tent to monitor the fight and give instruction to the Soldiers if need-be. Usually, Iwaizumi and Kuroo handle the fights well enough on their own, but after July 10th, Daichi doesn’t want to risk not knowing what’s happening.

He hands them the earpieces, and slips one into his own ear as well. Kuroo taps his, turning to look at Iwaizumi.

“Testing, one two three. You get some last night, Iwaizumi?” he asks, smirking.

Iwaizumi scowls, tapping his own earpiece. “Shut the fuck up, Kuroo.”

“I wanted to!” Bokuto exclaims, much too loud. The others wince, clutching their ears. “But Akaashi wouldn’t let us.”

Akaashi’s face reddens, and he shakes his head quickly. “Bokuto-san! This is highly inappropriate . . .”

“I agree,” Daichi says sharply. The four turn to look at him guiltily. “I know your nerves are probably running high right now. Never before has a kaiju appeared so soon after the last one. But you have to focus. Get out there and do your jobs.”

“Yes, sir!” The four of them salute, before filing out of the tent.

Daichi watches them leave, before stepping around the table, pulling one of the laptops closer. It’s the one showing footage from Kuroo’s camera, the other three displayed on the laptops spread out over the rest of the table.

“Here, you should sit.”

A voice behind him startles Daichi, and he whirls around to see Suga standing with his hands on the back of a chair, smiling serenely. Daichi tries to calm his racing heart, as he reaches forward with his left hand to grasp the chair between Suga’s hands. Suga doesn’t step back or relinquish his hold, simply continues to smile at him, and Daichi’s mouth suddenly feels very dry.

“What are you doing here?” he asks blankly.

Suga’s smile turns inquisitive. “Here in this tent or here beyond the perimeter?” he asks, tilting his head. “I am the head of the SSP medical team, you know.”

Daichi can feel his cheeks growing hot. He adjusts his grip on the chair-back, tightening his knuckles around it. “I know that. I meant . . . here in this tent.”

Suga’s smile brightens. Daichi feels a little faint.

“I knew you were probably stressing out about this attack, so I came to see how you were doing,” Suga explains. “Give you some encouragement if I could.”
Daichi nods, telling himself that he’s only nervous because of their earlier conversation where Suga indirectly called him handsome (and because there’s a kaiju wandering around not 1,000 meters away).

“Thank you. It’s appreciated,” he says, offering Suga a weak smile in return. “The team was acting strange, well, stranger than usual, so I must admit I’m feeling a little anxious about their performances today.” He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand.

“They’ll be fine,” Suga says reassuringly. He moves one of his hands to rest it on top of Daichi’s on the chair-back, and Daichi’s brain fizzes. He stares down at it, blinking stupidly, before turning his gaze back to Suga, whose encouraging smile has turned to something tender. “They have an amazing captain, after all.”

Suga’s hand is warm, his skin soft. He doesn’t have the same rough callouses that Daichi does, but Daichi knows from experience how tough those hands truly are. He clears his throat, feeling heat crawl up the back of his neck. He stares into Suga’s bright, hazel eyes, and his tongue feels numb. He knows he should say something, or do something, but he can’t think of what.

He starts to take a step forward, leaning toward Suga over the back of the chair, but then his foot hits the chair’s leg, and he stops abruptly before he can trip. The heat spreads to his face, and he quickly jerks the chair out of Suga’s grasp, taking a hurried step back.

“Er, yes, thank you,” he says finally, glad the words came out with minimal stumbling.

Suga gives him a look that resembles disappointment, but Daichi’s head is still swimming, and he can’t focus on what that might mean. Besides, it’s gone within the flicker of an instant, and then Suga is smiling again, reaching out to slam his fist into Daichi’s chest, winding him.

“No problem! Good luck today!” he says cheerfully, as Daichi doubles over with a cough.

“Uh, yeah, y-you too,” Daichi wheezes, clutching the spot Suga hit. Before he can think to say anything else, Suga leaves the tent, and Daichi hears a shout from Kuroo over the earpiece. The team is in position to attack.

As he turns to the laptops, sitting in the seat, Chief Nekomata enters the tent, looking grim.

“Damn news crews,” he mutters. “They’re giving my men a hard time. I should stay out there to help. Will you be all right watching from in here?”

Daichi nods. “I’ll send for you if I need to.”

The chief nods in return before leaving once more. Daichi hunches over the laptop before him, frowning faintly. He rubs his chest absently, wondering if the ache he feels there is because of Suga’s punch still or if there’s something else going on. Deciding now is not the time to worry about it, he focuses on the scene before him, his skin crawling at the sight of the giant monster looming in front of his Soldiers. He reaches up to press against his earpiece.

“All right, men, you know the drill,” he says, glad to find his voice back to normal. “Bokuto and Akaashi, are you in position?”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” Bokuto says.

“Kuroo, Iwaizumi?”

“We’re ready, sir.” Iwaizumi’s voice sounds steady and sure, and it alleviates some of Daichi’s
worry. His men have trained hard for this. They know what they’re doing, and Daichi believes in them. Not only because he has to, but also because he knows these men. He’s watched them grow stronger and more capable over the years. He knows that they’re trustworthy and uncompromising.

Really, he has nothing to be concerned about.

“Crows, fight!”

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The kaiju stands before Kuroo and Iwaizumi. It doesn’t appear to have noticed them yet, as it turns slowly back and forth, pacing agitatedly. It seems frustrated, and the roar in its throat shakes the buildings around them. Behind them, the crowd screams and shouts, some of the words encouraging, others strange fan-related things asking for marriage and other ridiculous notions.

Kuroo adjusts the katana on his back, feeling the dig of the harness in his thighs and shoulders. He glances over at Iwaizumi, studying the man’s profile. He’s staring straight ahead, almost as if he doesn’t see the massive crocodile-like creature in front of them. Kuroo wonders if he’s all right. Although he’s normally quiet, he seems more tense than usual.

“You okay, man?” Kuroo asks, deciding to take advantage of the short time they have before Bokuto’s explosion distracts the kaiju and they can attack.

Iwaizumi’s jaw tightens, and Kuroo braces himself to be cursed at. To his surprise, Iwaizumi sighs instead, running a hand through his short hair.

“I think we’ve bitten off more than we can chew here,” he says.

Kuroo blinks, glancing toward the kaiju and then back at Iwaizumi. “You mean, right now with this kaiju or . . . ?”

“With this entire program,” Iwaizumi says, looking back at Kuroo. There’s a sharpness to his gaze, an expression Kuroo can’t quite recognize.

He stares back at Iwaizumi, until the other turns his face away once more. Kuroo finds that he was holding his breath, and lets the air out slowly. His fingers twitch at his sides, and he thinks of Kenma alone in the apartment (though hopefully not alone, hopefully with Hinata). He remembers the kiss, still feels the sting of Kenma’s teeth against his already raw-bitten lip.

“Now’s probably not the best time to be having second thoughts,” Kuroo points out, forcing a laugh. “Wouldn’t matter if it was, would it?”

Iwaizumi’s voice is flat, and Kuroo stares at him, until Bokuto’s voice comes crackling over the earpiece. “Hey, hey, hey! We’re just about set up here. You two ready?”

Kuroo side-eyes the building next to him. It looks like it used to be a bank, and it’s about ten feet away. It won’t take that long to reach it. He nudges Iwaizumi gently and nods to it. Iwaizumi purses his lips, and he nods in return. Kuroo presses against his earpiece.

“We’re ready.”
The explosion rocks the ground beneath his feet, but he was waiting for it and doesn’t stumble. The kaiju does, however, and it turns with a roar of annoyance, its beady eyes fixed on the cloud of smoke emanating from a few blocks down. As it turns away, Kuroo and Iwaizumi take off at a run for the bank. They shoot their cables at the wall, leaping in the same moment. They don’t stop to dangle there, however, but push off the concrete and leap for the next building over, following the kaiju as it hunts down the source of the smoke.

Its back looks hard, the scales glimmering a pale blue-green in the afternoon sun. Kuroo wonders if their cables will even be able to penetrate the outer shell. He glances toward Iwaizumi, as they leap onto the roof of the next building, now at shoulder-level to the kaiju.

“I’m going to test the harpoons on its scales!” he says, ignoring Iwaizumi’s disapproving frown.

Running toward the edge of the roof, he jumps off it, shooting his cables at the back of the kaiju’s head. To his utter relief, they sink into the monster’s scales. Unfortunately, the kaiju feels it and whips its head around, swatting in the air with its claw. Kuroo doesn’t have time to reach for the cable box, and slams into an office building, crashing through the window and tumbling over abandoned desks and cubicle partitions. Before he can hit the wall, he presses the button on the box at his hips, retracting the cables from the kaiju’s head with a jerk that almost sends him flying again, before he catches himself. He stands slowly. His forehead is stinging, and he reaches up to touch what appears to be a gash above his right eyebrow. He winces, but wipes the blood off on his pants, going for the earpiece next.

“I’m okay,” he tells Iwaizumi. “The harpoons work, but the scales are sensitive. He felt them strike him.”

“I know, I saw,” Iwaizumi says grimly. “We’re going to have to time this carefully.”

“I still say we should go directly for the eyes.” Kuroo steps over the splintered desk in front of him, walking over to the broken window and peering out of it. Across the street, he can see Iwaizumi standing on the roof he’d just left. He waves. Iwaizumi doesn’t wave back.

“It’ll take a lot of precision. This thing has sharp reflexes. He’s faster than the last one.”

“We’ve got this,” Kuroo says, with more confidence than he feels. “Hey Bo, how are you holding up?”

“It’s senses are better than the last one too,” Bokuto says, his voice strained. “It already found us.”

“Shit,” Kuroo mutters, turning and running for the stairs of the office building. He pushes past the emergency exit doors, his steps echoing loudly throughout the stairwell, as he jogs quickly down to the first level. “Where are you?”

“We ran across the street and are holed up in one of the places we destroyed last time. I think it used to be a grocery store. I don’t think it’s noticed us yet, but I can hear him trying to sniff us out.”

“Don’t move, we’re coming.”

Kuroo’s chest burns, as he pushes his legs to go faster. He leaps over the railing at the third floor, landing on the first floor in a crouch. He stands, before sprinting out the door and into the street. The sun momentarily blinds him, having adjusted to the darkness of the stairwell. Shielding his eyes, Kuroo peers across the street, seeing Iwaizumi already swinging to the next building over.

Breaking into a run, Kuroo follows the path left by the kaiju; it’s large feet creating mini-craters in the ground.
They’re fine. They’ll be fine. The kaiju isn’t going to eat them.

“I’m setting up another bomb, just in case it sticks its nose in here,” Bokuto says over the earpiece. “Should give us enough time to get away if I aim it right.”

“Fuck, Bo, be careful,” Kuroo says. His voice comes out strained, and this surprises him. He shouldn’t be out of breath yet. He normally has better stamina. His last injection was only a couple days ago, but he wonders if he should’ve taken one before he left.

Shit.

The cut above his eye is still bleeding, and he has to flick the red liquid out of his eye to keep it from obscuring his vision. He spots the massive tail of the kaiju directly before him, and leans further into his sprint. He can see the small figure that is Iwaizumi flying through the air above him, and it seems like he’ll reach the kaiju before Kuroo does.

“Iwaizumi! Aim for its eyes!” Kuroo calls, pressing his fingers against his earpiece.

“I know, don’t distract me,” Iwaizumi snaps.

“Fuck! Kuroo! I think it found us!”

Kuroo skids to a stop, glancing down the alleyway beside him. He takes off down it. If he remembers correctly, this should be a short cut toward that grocery store. His feet pound against the cracked pavement, and he jumps over pieces of fallen debris and piles of rubble. He stumbles once, and has to slam his hand against the ground to keep from falling, and a sharp pain tingles in his wrist. Kuroo shakes it off, though, and continues to run. He can see the store in front of him now, and the kaiju is bent over, peering it’s dark eyes into the front windows, which are already shattered, broken glass covering the ground in front of it. The beast is on all fours, and Kuroo hopes that means it’ll be more difficult for the thing to maneuver.

“HEY, FUCKFACE! YOU’RE NOT EATING AKAASHI!”

Kuroo can hear Bokuto’s yell from inside his ear and the store, and he grimaces, knowing exactly what Bokuto is about to do. He can see Iwaizumi starting to swing down toward the kaiju’s head from above, katana already out, gleaming in the sun.

“Bo, wait!” Kuroo shouts, but it’s too late.

The explosion knocks the kaiju back, and it jerks its face away from the store. Its snout is on fire, and it rears back, standing once more to bat at the flames on its face. Iwaizumi hits its back, and bounces off; flying back into the building he sprang from. Kuroo winces.

“Iwaizumi!”

“I’m okay,” comes the gruff response, though his partner sounds pained.

“Bokuto-san!”

Akaashi’s frantic voice distracts Kuroo from Iwaizumi’s predicament, and he turns in time to see Bokuto leaping out of the front window of the store. His face is twisted into an expression of rage, and with his hair spiked up and soot covering his body he seems deranged. The look in his eyes is bright and frenzied, and it’s one Kuroo’s never seen in them before. His gut clenches, as he watches Bokuto fling himself at the kaiju’s leg, starting to clamber up the scales. The kaiju continues to stumble about, narrowly missing Iwaizumi on the building; its tail flickers back and forth wildly.
Akaashi appears in the doorway of the store, his face pale. He looks from Kuroo to where Bokuto is attempting to climb the kaiju with his bare hands. Kuroo forces himself forward, rushing toward Akaashi.

“What the fuck happened to Bo?” Kuroo asks. He’s breathless, his lungs burning, muscles cramping. He grimaces, and Akaashi glances at him worriedly.

“He—”

“Don’t just standing there gawking!” Iwaizumi’s voice snaps over their earpieces, loud and harsh. They both wince, turning to where Iwaizumi is still dangling off the side of the building. “Get him off that thing before he gets himself killed!”

The kaiju has managed to snuff out the flames on its snout, though it still sizzles and smokes. Lowering its arms, it finally notices Bokuto, who’s about halfway up the creature’s side. The kaiju reaches around to grab at Bokuto, and that’s when Kuroo makes his move. With a shout, he runs forward, shooting his cables directly toward the kaiju’s face. The harpoons bury themselves in the kaiju’s forehead, and it jerks back with a roar. Kuroo allows himself to be pulled forward with the movement, retracting his cables so he flies through the air to land on the kaiju’s head. The kaiju stumbles back, and Bokuto falls from the sudden movement. He lands on the pavement, rolling a few feet before coming to an abrupt stop against the front of the store. Akaashi hurries to him, but Kuroo’s distracted as large claws descend toward him.

He scrambles out of the way, sliding on his hands and knees across the broad forehead. The kaiju shakes its head, trying to fling Kuroo off. When it’s unsuccessful, it roars again and lowers onto all fours. It starts to run then, with surprising speed and agility, leaving behind the three others.

“Shit! Iwaizumi!” Kuroo grunts, trying to keep hold of the slick scales beneath him.

“I’m right behind you!”

“Akaashi?”

“Bokuto-san’s fine, just dazed.”

“You’re going to need to leave him for right now,” Iwaizumi cuts in. “This thing is headed for the perimeter. You need to get the explosives and cut it off before it reaches it. Make an explosion big enough to keep it back.”

“Yes, sir.” Akaashi sounds reluctant, but Kuroo knows he’ll follow through.

Akaashi’s dependable. I just need to find a way to slow this thing down. Give him time to get ahead of it.

Drawing his katana out, Kuroo stabs downward, wiggling it into a space between the two scales in front of him. He knows it won’t be enough to crack the skull, but he uses it as leverage to haul himself to his feet. The kaiju roars again, tossing its head, but Kuroo clutches the hilt of his katana and holds on firmly. He can hear the whomp whomp whomp of the news helicopter above them, recording everything. He wonders briefly if Kenma is watching the footage.

He hopes not.

“Kuroo! Iwaizumi! What’s happening? Why is Bokuto out of commission?” Sawamura’s voice comes crackling over the earpiece.
Kuroo grimaces. “Something happened to Bo. He’s fine, but we’re heading for the perimeter. Try to get everyone back! We’re gonna try to cut it off before it gets there, but we don’t know how close we’ll get.”

Sawamura curses, and if this were any other situation Kuroo might’ve been surprised. “Understood. Take it down, Kuroo. We can’t let it breach the perimeter.”

“I know, sir.”

Kuroo starts to inch forward, keeping a tight grip on his katana, as he leans out over the ridge of the kaiju’s brow. He stares down into the inky black of the monster’s eye, no iris or white to be seen. He can see his own reflection in the opaque surface, blood caking the side of his face, his hair in disarray, his whole head covered in dust and dirt.

For a moment he’s transfixed. It doesn’t make sense, because the kaiju has no expression, but Kuroo feels aware of its pain and confusion. And intelligence. And anger. There’s so much anger. Rage emanates from that eye, dousing Kuroo in a tingling heat. His can feel his vision tinting red, can feel his mind start to splinter from his body. Even his reflection seems to shift. A manic look enters his eyes, and with his ragged appearance, he nearly resembles some kind of wild animal himself. But as much as he’s disturbed by this fact, he’s entranced. His hand starts to loosen its grasp on the katana.

“Kuroo!” Iwaizumi lands beside him, grabbing the back of his uniform jacket and jerking him away from the eye.

Kuroo feels himself return, and he shakes his head to clear it. Glancing over at Iwaizumi, he stares at his fellow Soldier for a moment.

“I—”

“Worry about it later,” Iwaizumi says sharply, and Kuroo notices that he’s balancing with one hand on top of Kuroo’s katana, his own katana held loosely in his other hand. Kuroo wonders briefly if Iwaizumi would’ve run him through if whatever gripped him just now had just taken over.

The kaiju has slowed, coming into view of the perimeter. The crowd behind the barricade is waving and shouting. The police force and the rest of Sawamura’s squadron stand in ranks before the barriers. They turn as the kaiju stops and plants its feet, roaring loud enough to knock over the front line of the crowd. The soldiers stand firm, however, raising their guns toward the kaiju. Behind them, the police attempt to push the crowd back. They’re somewhat successful, as fear begins to take over some of the fascination. The mob starts to disperse, until only the news crews remain, arguing with the police.

“Where’s Akaashi? We need to get this thing away from the crowd,” Kuroo says.

Iwaizumi grunts the affirmative. The kaiju remains still, eyeing the rows of men and women before it, swinging its tail back and forth slowly.

Kuroo knows now would be the perfect opportunity to stab the kaiju in the eyes, but he’s afraid that the death throes will result in the injuries of the civilians still watching or worse. Beside him, Iwaizumi hesitates as well.

Then several things happen at once.

Sawamura leaves his tent, stepping in front of his soldiers to presumably issue commands.

Akaashi finally appears, running at a dead sprint toward the kaiju, Bokuto’s bag of explosives
bouncing against his back.

One of the reporters ducks under the barricade, avoids the reaching hands of the police, and heads straight for the kaiju, phone lifted in his hand.

This last movement is what catches the eye of the kaiju, and it turns toward the young man with the brown spiked hair. Slowly, it stalks forward.

“Sawamura-san!” Kuroo shouts, at the same time Iwaizumi yells,

“Akaashi!”

Sawamura turns swiftly, catching sight of the boy, who’s fallen to the ground and is scrambling back as best he can. Sawamura doesn’t pause, he takes off toward the kid, grabbing him and jerking him away as the kaiju reaches one claw out to grab him. They narrowly miss the curved points, and Sawamura shields the boy with his body, as he presses his fingers against his earpiece.

“GET THAT THING THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!”

Akaashi drops the bag, reaching in and grabbing a flare. He lights it before running to stand in front of the kaiju. He waves his arms back and forth, until the kaiju notices the flare. It turns toward the light, and Akaashi turns to run back toward downtown. Kuroo breathes somewhat easier, as the kaiju makes to follow.

His relief is short-lived, however, as the kaiju whips its tail, knocking into an office building just past the perimeter. The long, heavy tail breaks through the walls with a terrible crash. Kuroo turns around just in time to see the top half of the building slide forward, chunks of debris already falling.

Directly toward where Sawamura and the kid still hunch over on the ground.

The debris lands before anyone can make a move. In the dust that billows, Kuroo can’t tell if Sawamura and the kid got hit or not. He’s just about to let go of his katana, slide down the back of the kaiju, and go check on them, when Iwaizumi grabs his elbow, holding him fast.

“We have our orders,” he says solemnly, his eyes dark and resolute.

Kuroo’s heart is in his throat, pounding mercilessly. “We can’t just . . . leave him.”

“Akaashi!” Iwaizumi turns to look down at the man running in front of the kaiju, still guiding the beast into downtown. “Throw the flare and get back to Sawamura.”

Akaashi tosses the flare in a high arc. It spins slowly, and the kaiju leaps for it, almost knocking Kuroo and Iwaizumi off its head. The cables still imbedded in the monster’s skull prevent that from happening, but they struggle to keep their balance, as the kaiju knocks the flare to the ground and lands heavily, stomping on it.

Kuroo glances behind him, sees the Akaashi sprinting back toward the pile of debris, watches as the rest of the building continues to fall, and prays that Akaashi reaches Sawamura in time. The distance between the kaiju and the soldiers has grown, and so he turns to Iwaizumi.

“Now?”

Iwaizumi nods grimly.

As one, they turn and bury their katanas deep into the kaiju’s eyes on either side of its head. The roar
of pain that tears through the kaiju’s throat shakes Kuroo’s body down to his bones. He grits his teeth, dropping to one knee, as the kaiju writhes, dark, thick blood gushing from its eyes. With difficulty, Kuroo pulls his katana out. He knows if they try to detach their cables from the kaiju’s scales they’ll probably go flying as a result of the intense thrashing, so he simply lays his body flat against the scales, gripping them tightly, as the kaiju’s head jerks back and forth.

Iwaizumi lies beside him, his features taut. Kuroo manages a wobbly smile.

“Kinda like a roller coaster, huh?”

“I fucking hate roller coasters,” Iwaizumi mutters.

Kuroo barks a laugh, because he can’t think of anything else to do. His nerves are shot, his arms trembling, fingers aching as they dig into the scales. He can feel them starting to bleed, the warm liquid mixing with the kaiju’s already on his hands, and his grip starts to slip. He readjusts, pressing harder despite the pain. Iwaizumi’s hands don’t seem to be faring much better.

Finally, the kaiju shudders and sinks to the ground, stirring up more dust as it settles, its muscles relaxing as it succumbs to death. For a long moment, neither Kuroo nor Iwaizumi move. Kuroo rests his cheek against the still warm scales of the kaiju, exhaustion already starting to take hold.

Iwaizumi’s eyes are closed, and Kuroo chews on his lip as he watches him, suddenly incredibly grateful that he has a man such as Iwaizumi as a partner. He kept them together throughout this whole mess. He remained steadfast and strong, never wavering.

He should be called the leader of this team, not me.

Iwaizumi opens his eyes. They stare back at Kuroo for a moment, as deep and dark as the kaiju’s. Then he blinks and lifts his head, slowly removing his bloody grip from the kaiju’s scales.

“Let’s go.”

And Kuroo obeys without a word.

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Daichi figures it’s a consolation that he at least managed to push the idiot kid out of the way of the falling debris. He’s having a hard time focusing on that, though, as the numbing pain in his left arm continues to throb through him. The slab of concrete that fell on it is too heavy to lift with one arm, and Daichi knows it’s probably crushed. He can hear the crunching of metal above him, and a sickening feeling enters his stomach, twisting it cruelly.

Tilting his head back, he can see more chunks of concrete and metal falling toward him, though they mercifully land around him. He’s half buried in dry wall and plaster, but his face is mostly uncovered. He can see the sky above him through the haze of dust and white cement powder, and he can hear the roar of the beast. Daichi hopes that Kuroo and Iwaizumi manage to kill it.

It feels strange, but he’s unusually calm about his current predicament. Daichi figures he always knew he would die at some point, and at least he was able to do something useful before he went. If anything, he saved that kid’s life.
It didn’t exactly make up for July 10th, but it was something at least.

There’s a rebar digging into his thigh. It probably pierced the skin, but he’s having a hard time focusing on that. The pain is dull, moving sluggishly through his body, but not enough to make him cry out. He wonders if this is just his body in shock. He’s pretty sure he isn’t that tough.

The shriek of metal causes him to look up once more, and Daichi watches as another large slab of concrete detaches from the damaged building. This one spins in the air slowly, and Daichi can tell that it’s headed directly for him. He feels a kind of acceptance, watching it fall, and he closes his eyes.

I’m sorry, Suga. I guess I wasn’t as strong as you seemed to think.

There’s a niggling feeling in his chest, an ache that deepens as that thought lingers. He didn’t expect his last thoughts to be of Sugawara Koushi, but as he lies there and awaits death, his mind conjures up an image of the man. His ash-blond hair moving softly against his forehead, the beauty mark below his right eye, the bright hazel of those eyes, the gentle tilt of his lip as he smiles.

I should’ve kissed him in the tent, he realizes.

This startles him. This want, this need to kiss Suga that’s suddenly built up inside him, pressing against his chest, making it more difficult to breathe. For years Daichi could’ve sworn he had no interest in men, but ever since he met Suga, he realizes that he’s never been able to stop being interested in him. He wants to know more about this man. He wants the opportunity to kiss him and hold him close.

He doesn’t want to die.

And then Daichi notices that he hasn’t died, though he probably should have been crushed by that falling piece of concrete already. Slowly, he opens his eyes, blinking back the dust that cakes his face. The concrete block hovers above him, a mere foot from his face. When Daichi glances down, he sees a dark head of wavy hair, now sprinkled with white powder.

Akaashi is kneeling over him, crouched with both knees braced on either side of Daichi’s legs. His arms are spread out to the side like wings, and on his back is the slab of concrete.

“Akaashi?” Daichi’s voice croaks, his throat dry with dust, and he coughs, trying to ignore the white-hot pain that travels up his left shoulder at the movement.

Akaashi lifts his head slightly, just enough to meet Daichi’s gaze. His face is pale, lips drawn tight. There’s a cut across his cheek that’s bleeding, and there’s a strange gleam in his dark green eyes. Daichi’s head swims with pain, and his vision grows fuzzy for a moment, but he manages to frown faintly.

“How are you—”

“Don’t worry, Sawamura-san,” Akaashi says, though his features contort with the strain he’s undeniably feeling under the weight of the concrete. “I won’t let you die.”

Daichi glances to his left, staring at the blood that continues to seep out from under the block that’s crushing his arm. His vision darkens once more, as his heart is starting to pound faster, his fight instinct kicking in finally. He moves his right hand across his body, pressing it against the concrete and pushing as hard as he can. It doesn’t budge, and the pain the movement causes turns his vision completely black.
He sags back against the ground and quickly passes out. The last thing he hears is a wail of, “AKAASHI!” piercing through the rumble of the settling debris.

When Daichi opens his eyes next, he’s lying on white linen in a strange bed. The air smells sharp of antiseptic, and he can hear murmuring close by. He can tell he’s in the infirmary, the chill in the air and the beeping of monitors make that quite clear. For a moment he lies still and marvels at the fact that he’s alive. Then he moves to sit up, bracing his hands against the bed.

Only—

He falls to the left, hitting a bandaged stump that juts approximately six inches from his left shoulder. He hisses at the sharp pain that flares in the stump, and he readjusts quickly, using his right hand only to sit up and figure out what happened. He stares down at the bandage, at where his left arm should be, which is now just empty air. He stares, trying to comprehend why exactly it’s not there.

“Your arm was crushed completely, I’m afraid,” a gentle voice says, and Daichi starts, turning to look at the man who’s approached.

It’s Ennoshita Chikara, a medic and coworker of Suga’s. His face is kind as he looks down at Daichi, and he holds a clipboard in his arm against his chest. He shakes his head slightly. “We had no choice but to remove it. I’m sorry.”

Daichi blinks, his head feeling fuzzy. He glances at the IV bag beside his bed, wondering what exact medications they’re giving him. It all feels like a dream, honestly, and he expects to wake up still buried beneath that rubble with Akaashi kneeling over him like some sort of guardian angel.

“You also sustained a puncture wound to your left thigh,” Ennoshita continues, looking own at his clipboard. “Thankfully it missed your major artery. Both surgeries were done by Sugawara-san himself, so you were in good hands.”

Daichi glances down at his thigh, but he barely registers what Ennoshita is saying. He looks back toward the stump of his left arm, reaching over with his right hand only to touch it lightly. Ennoshita goes on, saying something about recovery time, but Daichi gets distracted by soft voices at the bed next to him. He lifts his head, looking over to see Akaashi seated on the bed, Bokuto kneeling across from him. He’s leaning over to peer into Akaashi’s face, staring intently at the cut on his cheek, which has already scabbed over and looks to be smaller than before.

He’s already healing?

“Akaashi, I’m so so so sorry,” Bokuto says, lifting his hand to ghost his thumb across the cut. “I don’t know what happened. I was normal, and then I was seeing red and I got so angry, and I couldn’t stop myself and you got hurt and it’s all my fault I should’ve been protecting you.”

Akaashi smiles faintly, shaking his head. “I’m fine, Bokuto-san. Besides, it’s not your job to protect me.” He reaches up to take Bokuto’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Still,” Bokuto sighs, looking positively miserable. He flops down, resting his head in Akaashi’s lap. Akaashi looks down at him, running his fingers through Bokuto’s hair gently, as that small smile continues to play about his lips.

Something in Daichi’s mouth turns bitter. Ennoshita’s stopped talking and is watching him closely. When Daichi turns back, he frowns up at the doctor.
“The serum accelerates healing, doesn’t it?” he asks. “Could I have kept my arm if you used it on me?”

Ennoshita’s eyes widen. “I-I . . . I suppose it could have,” he admits after a moment. “But Sugawara-san made the call. You’ll have to speak with him about it.” He checks his clipboard. “I should go check on Kuroo-san and Iwaizumi-san now.”

Daichi’s chest tightens. “What happened to them?”

“Minor injuries. Some cuts and bruises. They’ll be back on their feet by morning.”

Again that resentment crawls into Daichi’s stomach, and he nods curtly. “Please send Sugawara-san to me immediately,” he says, resting back against the pillows of the bed.

“Right away, sir,” Ennoshita says quietly, moving to adjust Daichi’s pillows to make him more comfortable, propping him up, before leaving.

Akaashi glances over at Daichi, his fingers still playing absently with Bokuto’s hair. Bokuto’s arms have wrapped around Akaashi’s middle, and Daichi stares at them, feeling sick to his stomach.

“Are you all right, Sawamura-san?” Akaashi asks.

Daichi pulls his gaze away from Bokuto’s arms, trying to focus on Akaashi’s face. “I’m alive, thanks to you,” he says with a nod, knowing he should acknowledge that Akaashi saved his life. He’s grateful for that, it’s true, but at the same time he can’t help but wonder if it would’ve been better for him to have died.

What good will he be to his men, to the SSP, held up in recovery without an arm and a busted leg? He’ll be seen as weak, surely. Another failure by Sawamura Daichi. He can’t even die with honor or come back as an avenging Soldier. He’s stuck as a cripple. Who would want to follow a cripple? Suga should’ve given him the serum.

He’s still brooding over this fact when Suga himself steps into the infirmary and makes his way over. Although he smiles, there’s a tightness to his features, a strain there that Daichi isn’t used to seeing. He doesn’t take the time to ponder over the sudden twist in his stomach. He sits up against the pillows, frowning faintly.

Suga stops within arm’s reach of the bed, and checks the monitors. “Your vital signs are strong,” he says, his voice quiet. He nods, seeming relieved, but he doesn’t look over at Daichi. “That’s good.”

“Suga,” Daichi winces inwardly at how harsh his voice sounds, but it catches Suga’s attention. He turns back around, meeting Daichi’s glare with an even gaze.

“Yes, Daichi?”

“Why didn’t you use the serum? Ennoshita says you might’ve been able to save my arm if you had.” Daichi pulls the sheets into his right fist, clenching the material tightly.

Suga’s gaze doesn’t shift away. “I made an executive decision,” he says calmly. “The serum has possibly been affecting the Soldiers in negative ways. I wasn’t about to risk the captain of the SSP suffering the same fate as them.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make,” Daichi says, his frown darkening. He can feel anger bubbling beneath the surface of his skin, heating it. The monitors beside him start to beep more rapidly,
matching the quickening pace of his heart. “What good am I to the SSP like this? If you’d given me
the serum, I’d already be out of here doing my job! What am I supposed to do now? Just sit here and
recover in comfort while my team falls apart?”

“You were rather unconscious when they brought you in,” Suga says, and his voice sounds stiff.
Some color rises high on his cheeks, and his eyes flash with something akin to irritation. It’s a look
Daichi has never seen before, and for a moment he feels very small sitting in the infirmary bed,
looking up at him. “I’m sorry if you feel I made the wrong choice, but I thought this would be best in
the long run. Your men need you lucid and . . . and yourself.”

Suga’s voice remains steady, but his fingers twist into the edges of his white coat, tugging on it
absently. “You’d be addicted to it, and we don’t know what these new side effects are. It’s bad
enough that the military and government want to go ahead with the new recruits, but I couldn’t let . .
. I wasn’t going to let that happen to you too.”

The expression on his face is sincere and the hazel of his eyes shimmer with the unshed tears that
linger there, but Daichi has a hard time feeling bad about that in this moment. He’s still too angry,
and the white of the bandages are stark against his tan skin. He ignores the pleading look Suga is
giving him, begging him to understand, and turns instead to look down at what’s left of his left arm.
He lays his hand over the bandages, his chest feeling tight.

“How am I supposed to lead when I’m like this? How long will it take me to recover? When can I
get back to work?”

Suga’s gaze finally lowers, and he stares down at the floor as he replies. “At least fourteen days in
the infirmary, and then you’ll need to relearn some things—”

“Fourteen fucking days in this bed.” Daichi shakes his head. “That’s unacceptable.”

Suga’s chin lifts, and the expression on his face now is resolute. His jaw is tight, hazel eyes flat, as he
stares back at Daichi. “I apologize if you feel I overstepped,” he says quietly. “But as head medical
officer here at the SSP, I did what I thought was best for you and for the program. If you disagree
with me, I’m truly sorry. But I will not apologize for the decision I made.” He bows then, stiffly.
“You may not believe this right now,” he says softly, voice barely above a whisper, as he remains
half-bent. “But I care about you very much. I hope you can forgive me someday.”

He straightens, and his eyes soften, and Daichi feels the back of his neck warm.

Daichi turns his face away once more. “If you see Kuroo and Iwaizumi outside, please send them in.
I need to speak to them.”

“Yes, Da—Sawamura-san.”

Daichi feels his heart twist painfully, but he can’t bring himself to let his pride down enough to reach
out to Suga as he turns away, to tell him that it’s all right if he continues to call him “Daichi.” To tell
him that, despite being frustrated and angry at his situation, it hasn’t changed his feelings for Suga . .
. feelings, he realizes as Suga exits the infirmary, that he never expressed in the first place.

It’s only after Suga leaves that Daichi remembers that Akaashi and Bokuto are still in the bed next to
him. They’re both watching him with sharp eyes, and Daichi feels a little like a mouse caught in the
predatory gaze of two owls.

“Dude,” Bokuto says, sitting up from Akaashi’s lap.

Daichi frowns, about to scold them both (though for what he’s not entirely sure), when Kuroo and
Iwaizumi step into the infirmary and make their way over. Iwaizumi looks rough, covered in dirt and sweat, but other than the cuts on his fingers, he seems mainly unharmed. Kuroo, on the other hand, is sporting a rather impressive cut above his right eye, mostly obscured by his hair. His hands are also scratched up in much the same way Iwaizumi’s are, and his right wrist is wrapped in an ace bandage. There’s another gash on his left forearm that’s been stitched up, but he doesn’t appear to be in much pain.

He whistles low when he sees Daichi, shaking his head. “That’s rough, man,” he says, nodding to Daichi’s arm. “Do you think you’ll get a cool prosthetic though?”

Daichi blinks, not having considered that. He pushes the thought away for now, and shakes his head. “I need to talk to the four of you,” he says as firmly as he can. “I’m going to be out of commission for a while. I’m not sure how long. In the meantime, I need one of you to take my place as captain of this team and the squadron. You’ll have Nishinoya and Tanaka to help you.”

The four of them exchange glances.

Daichi sighs. “I know it’s a big responsibility, but I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. We have new recruits coming in for interviews next week, and those that pass that stage will need to take the exams. I can help some with the selection process, but you will know better than me what it takes to be a Soldier.”

Iwaizumi clears his throat. “Who were you thinking to replace you, sir?”

“I was hoping you would,” Daichi admits, nodding toward Iwaizumi. Out of all of them, he’s the most dependable. Plus, he’s been in the program for the longest. Not only is he the oldest Soldier, he’s also the most experienced. That’s why Daichi’s extremely disappointed when Iwaizumi shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he says gravely. “But I can’t accept. There’s something wrong with me. My rage state is . . . violent. Unpredictable. I wouldn’t make a good captain.”

Bokuto hops off the bed. “I’d make an excellent captain!” he declares. “I’m dependable and loyal and strong and the people love me!”

Daichi eyes him skeptically. “After your little display today, I’m not sure we can expect you to keep calm during stressful situations,” he says, feeling pain starting to spread across his forehead. He rubs it wearily.

Bokuto deflates for a moment, before perking up once more. “Then Akaashi should be captain!” he exclaims. “He’s almost as amazing as me, and he hasn’t gone into any rage states at all. He’s perfect.”

Akaashi’s cheeks redden. “Bokuto-san,” he says, shaking his head. “Just because I haven’t experienced the same side effects as you three, that doesn’t mean I won’t in the future. Besides, I think Kuroo should be the new captain.” He turns his dark eyes onto the lanky Soldier standing beside the bed. “He has more experience than me, and he’s older. He’s also proven his merit on the battlefield and knows more about fighting than I do.”

Kuroo blinks, staring back at the five regarding him thoughtfully. He chuckles under his breath, pulling a piece of gum from his pocket and unwrapping it. As he places it on his tongue, he shrugs. “I can give it a shot, I guess. If you really need me to.”

“I do,” Daichi says with a nod, feeling relief sinking into his body, making his limbs feel heavy.
While Kuroo isn’t his first choice, he trusts him more than he does Akaashi. It isn’t that he thinks Akaashi is a bad person, but Daichi knows his reasons for joining the SSP are more selfish than any of the others’. He needs a captain he knows is completely dedicated to the program and to the team and squadron as a whole.

Now that that’s decided, Daichi tells Kuroo to check in with Michimiya Yui, his secretary. He doesn’t keep her on the base, knowing that she has a husband and two kids at home, but rather sends her what information he needs organized or scheduled. She’s prompt, reliable, and encouraging, and he really hopes that Kuroo doesn’t give her a hard time.

Once the four of them leave, Daichi settles back into his pillows, staring up at the ceiling. His wounds are starting to ache, as the pain medication wears off, so he presses the button for a doctor. Some part of him hopes that it’s Suga, so he can apologize. Now that he’s had time to calm down, he’s starting to realize that perhaps the serum wasn’t the best idea. He saw first hand the way Bokuto lost it during the battle, snapping suddenly and flinging himself into danger. It’s not that Bokuto isn’t usually overenthusiastic in that way, but Daichi could tell that something was off. He isn’t sure what to make of it, and that fact unsettles him.

He makes a mental note to check in with Kageyama later, to find out if there really is something wrong with the serum.

Ennoshita arrives a couple minutes later, with a fresh dose of painkillers. As he’s administering it, Daichi reaches out to tug on his sleeve lightly.

“Where’s Suga?” he asks, already feeling his body growing heavier, as the drugs start to work their way through his bloodstream. His eyelids droop, but he struggles to keep them open.

“He left for home,” Ennoshita says, pursing his lips. “He was exhausted from the stress of the day and the surgeries, so I told him to go rest.”


Struggling to stay awake, Daichi grips Ennoshita’s sleeve tighter. “Will you . . . will you tell him goodnight for me? Tell him that—that Daichi hopes he has a good night.”

Ennoshita’s eyebrows lift, and his mouth quirks in what could be an amused expression. Daichi isn’t sure, because he’s already drifting, a white cloud descending, engulfing him in a white blanket.

“I’ll tell him.”

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Kuroo’s dead tired as he shuts off the engine to Nekoma in the parking lot of the apartment complex. For a moment he simply sits, his muscles aching, his entire body feeling too weak to move. But then he sighs and drags his leg up over the bike, setting it upright on its stand, before trudging up the stairs. His feet clunk against the steps, and he almost trips over the top one when his right foot doesn’t quite clear it. He scowls at the offending step, before moving to unlock the front door, stepping inside.
He removes his helmet, drops it to the floor, and is about to step out of his boots, when a figure comes flying down the hall, and a small body flings itself onto him. Kuroo stumbles under the unexpected weight, hitting his back against the door behind him. It doesn’t take more than split second to realize who’s clinging to him though, and he wraps his arms around Kenma’s trembling form to hold him tightly.

“It’s okay. I’m okay. I’m here,” he murmurs past the lump that’s steadily growing in his throat. He realizes that Kenma must’ve seen the fight on the news. He remembers how closely he’d come to death more than once, and it makes sense now why Kenma’s gripping him tight enough to make it difficult to breathe.

“Kenma.”

Kuroo moves one hand up Kenma’s back to tangle in his hair, gripping the strands gently, as he turns to press a kiss against the side of Kenma’s face.

“Where’s Hinata?” he asks, not seeing the orange head bouncing around anywhere.

“I told him to go home after the fight,” Kenma says softly. He pulls away to frown accusingly at Kuroo. “You were supposed to text me.”

Kuroo grimaces. “Shit. Yeah, I know, I’m sorry. I just . . . a lot happened and Captain Sawamura got hurt and he wanted to talk to us about who’s going to be the captain while he’s incapacitated and everyone decided it should be me.”

Kenma’s frown deepens. “You?”

Kuroo forces a small laugh. He kicks off his boots before pushing off the door to carry Kenma over to the living room, despite his burning limbs. He carefully deposits Kenma onto the couch, settling down next to him and nuzzling his face against Kenma’s thin shoulder. He’s wearing his own clothes today, which is a little disappointing. Kuroo reaches up to gently pull aside Kenma’s collar, lightly kissing at the now exposed crook of his neck.

Kenma shies away from the touch, reaching up to lay his hand on Kuroo’s chest, pushing him back. Kuroo sighs, just wanting to snuggle up to Kenma’s warmth and sleep, but he forces himself to straighten and look Kenma in the eye.

“You can’t be captain,” Kenma says, shaking his head.

Kuroo frowns, that not being what he expected to hear. “I know it’s a lot of added responsibility,” he says. “But everyone agreed that out of the four of us, I’d make the best captain. I can’t let them down, Kenma.” He chews hard on the gum in his mouth, though it makes his jaw ache. “Don’t you think I’d make a good captain?” he tries for a grin, but Kenma just stares back at him, expressionless.

Sighing, Kuroo leans his head back against the couch cushions, staring up at the ceiling. He’s honestly surprised that his team would agree almost unanimously to make him the interim captain. The only leadership experience he has is his time as his club’s volleyball captain for a year back in high school. And volleyball is nothing like an entire military program. And even though he knows he’s technically the leader of the Flying Crows, he doesn’t know the first thing about running a base.

Perhaps he isn’t suited for this job after all.

Kuroo lowers his head, looking over at Kenma, who’s still watching him. “Do you think I’ll make a good captain?” he asks again, and this time his voice isn’t light, and he doesn’t smile. He can feel exhaustion creeping through him, but he keeps his head up, his gaze fixed on Kenma’s face.
Kenma sighs then, and his expression softens. He reaches up, running his fingers over the curve of Kuroo’s nose, up to his eyebrows, brushing his bedhead hair back from his forehead. Very lightly, he runs his fingertips over the cut above Kuroo’s eye, his lips twitching downward.

Kuroo finds himself holding his breath, as he watches Kenma. His heart starts to pound a little faster, as his chest tightens. “Kenma,” he says, his voice strained. “Am I going to fail at this? Am I going to fuck everything up?”

Kenma shakes his head then, lips pursed. “No.”

He leans forward, and Kuroo closes his eyes instinctively. He feels the soft brush of lips against his forehead, then the ghost of warmth against his cheekbones on either side of his nose, until finally Kenma arrives at his lips, and he kisses him, slow and deep. Kuroo reaches up to cradle the side of Kenma’s face, pulling him closer. He runs his thumb against Kenma’s cheek. The feel of the soft skin beneath his calloused fingers loosens the knot that had started to form inside him.

Kenma believes in him. He always has. He trusts him. Kuroo can’t let him down.

He pulls back from the kiss, sighing, as he rests his forehead against Kenma’s. He glances to the side, sees the bottle of champagne still sitting on top of the coffee table, and a low groan drags up from his core.

“Fuck. Our date.”

Straightening, Kuroo moves to stand, grabbing the bottle and heading for the kitchen. He can’t believe he was so stupid as to think that he could have a normal dating life with Kenma. Akaashi was right, he realizes, as he spits out his gum in the wastebasket and goes to find a corkscrew. To enter into that type of a relationship was to make an obligation. And with everything that’s going on now, especially with Kuroo now the interim captain of the base, he knows that he won’t have time to take Kenma out on dates. He doubts he’ll have much time with him at all, aside from nights when he’ll most likely be too exhausted to do much more than sleep.

It’s not fair to Kenma, to ask him to put up with all that in a relationship that’s supposed to be something deeper and more intimate. Kuroo knows he’ll be a shit boyfriend with these current circumstances, and the bitter anger that wells up in him at this realization burns in his chest. He foregoes locating the corkscrew, using the frustration building inside him to grasp the neck of the bottle and snap it off with a grunt.

The sharp glass cuts into his palm, but he barely feels it. He drops the top of the bottle’s neck into the trash, and tilts the rest of it toward his mouth, letting the sharp, sweet taste wet his lips and tongue, swallowing it down and welcoming the sting of it. The jagged pieces of glass scrape against his lips, and when he starts to taste blood, he lowers the bottle, dumping the rest out into the sink.

He felt small arms encircle him from behind, hugging him tightly around the waist. He feels Kenma’s head rest against his back, feels the sagging of his body as he sighs.

“We don’t have to date. Just... stay with me. Please.”

Kenma’s voice is small, and Kuroo feels like someone’s impaled him. He sets the bottle down in the sink and turns quickly, grabbing Kenma’s shoulders and pushing him away enough to look down into his face. Kenma tilts his chin down, avoiding eye contact, until Kuroo takes his chin in his hand, lifting it. He gently brushes the dark hair away from Kenma’s eyes, shaking his head.

“I’m never going to leave you,” he says firmly, though his voice breaks unintentionally. He clears his
throat, bending to press a kiss to Kenma’s forehead, not remembering until he feels the throb of pain against his lips that he’s bleeding. Grimacing, he pulls away, looking at the stain of blood on Kenma’s forehead. “Sorry.”

Gently, he presses his thumb against the spot, rubbing away the blood as best he can. Kenma continues to watch him, eyes fixed on Kuroo’s face, expression blank. There’s a flicker of something behind his eyes, though, a look Kuroo doesn’t quite catch. He tries not to worry about it, as he takes a step back.

“I gotta clean up,” he says, laying his hands on Kenma’s shoulders again. “Will you be okay?”

Kenma huffs. “You’re just going to the bath,” he reminds Kuroo.

Kuroo grins, because that’s the Kenma he’s used to seeing. The spark of his best friend is still there, and it lightens Kuroo’s heart. He ruffles Kenma’s hair, earning him a glare, which just makes him grin brighter.

The bath feels so amazing that Kuroo is tempted to simply lie in the tub all night. The warm water soaks into his skin, relieving some of the ache in his body. The wounds on his hands bleed into the water, and when he finally forces himself to get up, he struggles with wrapping them so the blood doesn’t get anywhere else as he heals. As he does this, he glances toward the medicine cabinet, thinking about the vials of serum. He wants to take one, to alleviate the weakness he feels. To make him feel strong again.

But he knows what he needs right now is sleep, not another adrenaline rush. Sighing, he tightens the gauze around his hands, turning his sore wrist experimentally. That pain, at least, has faded. It must not have been a bad sprain. Slinging a towel around his waist, he exists the bathroom and heads for his bedroom. He stops short in the doorway when he sees Kenma lying curled on his bed, PSP in hand.

Kenma’s stripped down to just his boxers, and his toes wiggle together absently as he plays, his eyes fixed on the game though he’s sure to know Kuroo is there. Kuroo can feel his skin heating up despite his exhaustion. Swallowing hard, he steps further into the room, telling his heart to calm down.

“Hey,” he says, sitting down gently on the edge of the bed. “Are you not going to sleep in your room tonight?”

Kenma simply shakes his head, keeping his focus on the game.

Kuroo’s brain is scrambling, trying to figure out what all this is supposed to mean. “I-I . . . I thought we weren’t going to date,” he says finally, his voice sounding weak even to him.

Kenma glances at him briefly, before returning to the PSP. “We can still have this.”

Kuroo is fairly certain that both his heart and his brain come to a shrieking halt. He’s completely frozen, staring down at the adorable person that Kuroo doesn’t even deserve to have as a best friend curled on his bed, practically naked, playing his game like it’s something he does every night. Kuroo realizes he needs to breathe after a moment and does with a hoarse cough.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’d . . . I’d like that,” he admits, his entire body tingling.

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, he stands, hesitating, before pulling away his towel and grabbing a clean pair of boxers from the laundry pile he has yet to fold. He tugs them on, before climbing onto the bed behind Kenma. He pulls the blankets up over them both, before wrapping his
arm around Kenma’s waist, pulling him back close against his chest.

“Is this okay?” he asks quietly, kissing the side of Kenma’s neck.

Kenma’s shoulder lifts instinctively, but he nods. Heaving a sigh of relief, Kuroo burrows his nose against the crook of Kenma’s neck, breathing in his scent and feeling his warmth, the press of his skin, the beat of his heart. Kuroo’s own heart begins to slow, as every muscle in him relaxes. He curls more fully around Kenma, and wonders if it’s really okay for him to have this. He wonders if he’s being selfish, if maybe Kenma would be better off with someone who could take care of him better, who could be there for him all the time, instead of just during the evenings and nights.

But he’s too tired to worry much about it now, and so he closes his eyes and tries to sleep. He’s vaguely aware when, an hour or so later, Kenma turns off his game and turns into him. Kuroo can feel the damp warmth of his breath against the hollow of his throat, as Kenma tucks his head under his chin.

“You’ll make a good captain,” Kenma whispers, his lips moving gently against Kuroo’s skin.

Kuroo can’t help but smile faintly, and he reaches for Kenma’s hand, curling his pinky finger around Kenma’s and holding it tightly.

“I trust you.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: a slight breather as everyone recovers from the attack, Kuroo adjusts to being interim captain, and Hinata takes the Soldier exams

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
The kaiju hovers over him, large and black. Its eyes are red, gleaming. It grins down at Daichi, with teeth stained with blood. He can feel its claws digging into his thigh, pinning him down. He scrambles for anything to grab to fling at the monster, to bash against the foot pressing against him, to get free. His fingers brush against concrete and metal, but no matter how far he reaches, he can’t seem to take hold of anything.

The kaiju leers at him, gouging its claws in deeper. Pain erupts like fire across Daichi’s leg, and he grits his teeth to keep from crying out. “Get off me!” he shouts, somehow knowing that the creature can understand him.

“I’ve defeated your soldiers, eaten every piece of them. And now it’s your turn,” the kaiju says, its voice rumbling through Daichi, rattling his bones.

Before he can say or do anything else, that large mouth opens, revealing rows of sharp teeth. The kaiju descends on him swiftly, biting into his arm and tearing it from his body. Daichi screams, as pain rips through him. His heart is pounding too quickly, and his blood is boiling. He writhes, grasping at his left arm, his fingers touching only air.

Where’s my arm? Where is it?!

Blood coats his fingers, warm and sticky, and the kaiju laughs, a deep, terrifying sound that shakes the ground beneath Daichi. It splinters and breaks, and Daichi falls through into blackness, his left arm throbbing, pulsating with white hot flashes that force another scream from his dry, cracked lips. He reaches for it again, but it’s not there. He doesn’t understand, and he continues to spiral through the dark, until he awakes with a gasp, the loud, rapid beeping of the monitor next to him ringing in his ears.

He pants heavily, his body coated with sweat. It’s still night; he can tell because the lights are out aside from one in the hall, that he can see through the crack of his door. It opens a couple seconds later, a silhouetted figure standing in the doorway. Daichi shields his eyes, squinting.

“S-Suga?” He’s not sure why that name comes to him, but as soon as it falls from his lips, he knows that’s who he wants it to be.

Silently, the figure crosses into the room and is swallowed by the shadows. Daichi struggles to focus on it, trying to make out features. But the figure turns away from him, grabbing his IV and injecting
something that makes the fiery sensation begin to fade from his arm.

His arm.

Daichi places his hand over it, over where it should be, his fingers falling through air to land on damp sheets. “M-my arm,” he says hoarsely, his voice coming out in a croak that he doesn’t recognize.

Long, cool fingers move across his forehead, brushing back his hair. The touch is gentle, almost tender, and the fingers move through his hair, causing the sweat-damp strands to spike. Daichi’s mind feels fuzzy, and he can’t seem to concentrate on the feeling, though he wants to. His eyes begin to close, but the fingers continue to run over his head, blunt nails scraping lightly over his scalp.

“Suga?” he murmurs, struggling to stay awake. He knows he needs to say something to Suga, something important. An apology and something else. But his tongue feels heavy, and when he searches for the words, they slip away from him like he’s grasping at fog.

It takes a moment for the figure to respond, and when it does it’s in a soft voice, barely above a whisper. “Sleep, Daichi. You’ll be okay.”

Miraculously, despite the anxiety creeping through him, Daichi does.

When he next opens his eyes, the fire in his arm has dulled to an ache. Light streams in from the windows, and he sits up slowly. His head feels groggy, and he presses two fingers between his eyebrows, trying to remember what happened the previous night. He can still feel his scalp tingling, and his chest feels full and warm somehow. He wonders briefly if he had a good dream, but he can’t remember dreaming anything past the nightmare.

The nightmare. Grimacing at the thought of it, Daichi recalls how he awoke in a panic, how the mysterious figure had entered his room to administer more painkillers, had run its fingers through his hair to comfort him. His chest feels pinched, and he rubs at it absently.

The door opens and Ennoshita walks in, carrying a tray of food. He smiles at Daichi, as he sets it down on the bed’s moveable shelf, swinging it toward Daichi. It comes to a stop over his thighs. “How did you sleep, sir?” he asks.

“I’m not sure,” Daichi admits. “Who was working the night shift?”

Ennoshita blinks, not having expected the question. “Ah, I think Tanaka-san,” he says, glancing at Daichi’s IV. He checks the levels, while Daichi contemplates this.

He’s fairly certain that whoever came into his room wasn’t Tanaka Saeko. It had definitely been a man’s voice that spoke to him. But if Suga hadn’t been working, was there any other explanation?

“I see. Thank you,” Daichi says with a nod, turning to the tray before him. The food doesn’t look entirely appetizing, but he bows his head in thanks, before picking up the chopsticks to eat, glad he can at least do this still.

Ennoshita lingers for a moment, and Daichi glances over at him. “Is there something else?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Ah, I’m just wondering if placing Kuroo as interim captain was the best idea,” Ennoshita admits. “I know it’s only been a few days but . . . he appears to be struggling, from what I’ve seen.”

Daichi’s forehead throbs, and he sighs, pressing his fingers against it again. “I didn’t have many
options,” he admits, feeling the guilt starting to set heavily in his gut. He looks down at his food, suddenly finding it difficult to gather an appetite. Looking back up at Ennoshita, he gives the man a nod.

“Help him as best you can. All of you. He’s going to need all the support he can get.”

Ennoshita smiles, bowing slightly. “Of course, Sawamura-san,” he says, before turning to leave.

Daichi returns to his food, managing to eat a few bites more before leaning back against the pillows. He stares at the TV mounted on the wall across from him, wondering if he wants to know what the media is saying about his injury, and Kuroo’s new promotion. The remote is beside the bed, easily within reach, and Daichi finds himself grabbing it despite his reservations.

With a grimace, he turns the TV on and switches to a popular news channel. Several photos of the kaiju attack are shown, and the news anchors talk about the Soldiers’ skill and praise them for it.

“As some of you may already know, Captain Sawamura Daichi, leader of the SSP squadron, was gravely injured during the attack. We hear he’s recovering well, but he’s placed Kuroo Tetsurou in charge of the SSP in the interim. After the speech he gave yesterday, however, many are wondering if Captain Sawamura has made the right decision.”

The station cuts to a recording of Kuroo standing in front of the base, hands in his pockets, dressed in his Flying Crow training uniform.

“Yeah, we’re doing all right,” he says with a slight shrug. “Beeping sucks about Sawamura-san, but beep happens, right? We gotta pick ourselves up and keep fighting. The kaiju aren’t going to stop coming around just because our leader’s fallen. Ah, temporarily, that is.” He shoots the camera an apologetic look. “If you’re watching sir, don’t worry.” He lifts his arms to the side. “We’re like the blood in our veins. We’ll flow without stopping. We’ll keep the oxygen moving and the mind working. A hundred motherbeeping kaiju won’t bring us down.” He throws up a peace sign then, before turning and walking off into the base, ignoring the questions the news crews continue to shout at him.

Daichi winces. “Shit,” he mutters, shaking his head.

“He knows how to make an interesting speech, that’s for sure.”

A soft chuckle by the door makes Daichi start, and he mutes the TV, as he turns to see Suga step into the room, a small smile playing about his lips. Daichi’s monitor starts to beep faster at the sight of it, and he curses the machine, giving it a dirty look. Suga laughs, seemingly unconcerned, as he steps up to the side of the bed.

“Kuroo-san is right, though. You don’t need to worry. He might lack finesse, but he’s a good man and a fine Soldier. You’ve trained him well.” Suga reaches out to lightly press his knuckles against Daichi’s shoulder.

Daichi is distracted from his concerns by the touch, however, and his neck feels warm, as he remembers the previous night. He moves to take Suga’s hand, lowering it from his shoulder to hold it. Suga blinks, his eyes widening slightly, as Daichi swallows hard and runs his thumb along the back of Suga’s fingers.

“Did you come see me last night?” he asks, willing himself to look Suga in the eye, despite the feeling of a hundred butterflies tap dancing in his stomach and chest.

Surprisingly, a faint flush colors Suga’s cheeks, spreading across his nose. “I . . . might have checked
in to see how you were doing,” he admits, looking down at the hand Daichi still holds. “You seemed
distraught.”

“I’m doing some better now,” Daichi says with a nod. “And I wanted to apologize for my behavior
the other day. I know you were simply trying to do what you thought was best for me, and I
appreciate that. I was only frustrated with my situation. I’m still frustrated by it. But none of this is
your fault. You did your job, and you did it well, and for that you have my gratitude.”

Suga pulls his hand away quickly, using it to rub the back of his neck. “Y—you really don’t need to
thank me,” he says with a small laugh, though it flows less easily from him than his usual ones do.
“Or apologize. I understand.”

Daichi frowns faintly, wondering if he’s done something wrong. He reaches out again, this time
catching Suga’s other arm at the wrist. “I do need to apologize, though,” he says insistently. “I was
cruel to you, and you didn’t deserve that. It wasn’t fair to you, and I hope you can forgive me.
Please.”

Suga looks down at him, his hand lowering to his side. “Daichi . . .” There’s something strange in his
voice, a catch, and Daichi wonders at it, before Suga suddenly pulls his wrist away in order to smack
his cheeks, before bowing. “Of course I forgive you!” he says, coming back up with a bright smile.
“So don’t worry about it any more, okay?” He reaches out his fist, as if to punch Daichi’s chest, but
seems to think better of it, because he freezes, and instead lays a somewhat self-conscious pat on
Daichi’s shoulder.

Daichi’s skin is crawling at the awkwardness. Things were never like this before with Suga, so
what’s going on now?

"Suga . . .”

“I should go check in with Ennoshita and Saeko,” Suga says, his gaze somewhere off to the side. He
glances at the tray of food, still half-full. “You should eat more.”

“Suga, is there something wrong? You’re acting strange,” Daichi says, wondering at this tightness in
his chest. Despite what he said, Suga doesn’t seem as comfortable around him as he used to be.
Daichi doesn’t want to lose what they have; their friendship is one of the most important things in his
life outside of his work. And to think he might have ruined that . . .

He’s suddenly struck with a horrible thought. His hand moves to his stump, covering with his hand.
“Is it . . . is it my arm?” he asks softly. “Does it make you uncomfortable? Are you . . . disgusted by
me?” It’s completely improbable, but in the moment it seems like a fairly easy assumption to make.

Suga’s eyes widen, and he stares back at Daichi in horror. “No, no, no! Of course not!” he exclaims,
quickly shaking his head, hands waving back and forth before him.

Daichi’s chest starts to ache. He grips the stump tighter, despite the sharp jab of pain the constriction
causes. Looking down at the sheets covering his legs, Daichi knows he should probably leave it at
that, but he finds himself speaking again, his mind going back to that moment beneath the concrete
when he thought he was about to die.

“I’m glad,” he says quietly. “It would break my heart if you were. You . . . you are incredibly
important to me, Sugawara Koushi. As I lay there, crushed and about to die, all I could see in my
head was your face. I realized that I didn’t want to die, because I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving
your side. I wanted to see that smile, your smile, at least one more time.”
Suga looks at him, and Daichi can see panic behind his eyes. His hands are fluttering, tugging on the hem of his scrubs, and he shakes his head quickly. “Daichi, I-I . . .”

Daichi grimaces inwardly, wondering if he’d made Suga uneasy. That hadn’t been his intention. He reaches out once more, taking Suga’s hand and pulling it away from where it’s clenching fabric. He brings the hand to his lips, ghosting a kiss over the back of the knuckles, and Suga’s face flushes.

“Daichi . . .” His voice sounds less panicked now, but there’s pain behind the whispered name, and Daichi wonders if he’d miscalculated.

“If-if you don’t feel the same, I understand,” he says, allowing Suga’s hand to slip from his grasp. He watches as it rises in the air, moving toward his face. He feels the cool skin against his warm cheek and tilts his head into the touch. Suga’s fingertips move down the line of his jaw, coming to a stop at his chin.

“You’re ridiculous,” Suga says quietly, before leaning down and kissing him.

Daichi had been about to protest, but the words die on his lips, as he feels Suga’s warm mouth on his. It’s gone before he can fully process the sensation, and he blinks at Suga, as he pulls away. The flustered expression from before is gone now and is replaced with a tender smile. Suga brushes his fingers once more across Daichi’s face, and Daichi tries to remember to breathe.

“Was that okay?” Suga asks, tilting his head.

“Do it again,” Daichi says immediately.

Suga laughs and leans in once more. This time, Daichi reaches to grab a handful of his shirt, tugging him down until Suga is seated on the bed beside him. Daichi wraps his arm around Suga’s waist, pulling him closer, as their lips move and slide together carefully, almost as though they’re afraid the moment will shatter if they move too quickly. Daichi moves his hand to caress the side of Suga’s face; unable to really believe this was happening. He strokes his thumb across Suga’s smooth cheek, and fights back a smile at the soft murmur Suga makes.

He pulls back first but keeps his forehead pressed against Suga’s. He runs his thumb over the lips he’d just kissed, tugging gently on Suga’s bottom lip in order to pull it away from the other. Suga complies easily, and Daichi can feel him trembling against him.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly.

“I’m perfect,” Suga assures him.

Daichi grins. “Yeah, you are,” he admits, not even feeling embarrassed by the cheesy statement, even as Suga laughs softly. He kisses him again, deeper than before, as Suga’s mouth fits around his, sucking gently. Daichi grunts, tilting his head to slide his tongue past Suga’s lips in order to taste him further. Suga offers no resistance but presses in closer, practically melting against Daichi’s chest, and Daichi can’t help but wonder why they waited so long to do this. He supposes it was his own fault, being convinced he was straight. Nothing like a near death experience to show you what you really want.

This time when they part, they’re both a little breathless. Suga smiles, running his fingers through Daichi’s hair. “Well, I think you’re doing better.”

Daichi chuckles. “Is that your medical opinion, doctor?”

Suga nods, his expression bright and open. He’s beautiful and shines like starlight, and Daichi finds
himself transfixed by that smile. He stares at it, feeling his cheeks start to ache with the strain of his own smile. But he can’t look at Suga right now and not smile. It’s practically impossible when Suga is beaming happiness toward him.

A flash on the TV screen pulls him back to reality, however, and Daichi glances up to see more footage of the kaiju battle. He’s reminded of his initial concerns, and he sighs, wishing this revelation of his had arrived sooner.

“I should call Michimiya and have her contact Futakuchi.” Daichi stretches to reach the infirmary phone by his bed, and Suga leans forward to help him, pulling it closer.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Kuroo’s going to hate Futakuchi,” Suga points out.

“I don’t have much of a choice,” Daichi says grimly, punching in the number. “I can’t have him cussing and making vague speeches in front of news cameras. The general isn’t going to be happy if the SSP’s reputation goes down because of Kuroo’s smart mouth.”

Suga grins. “He’s unique.”

Daichi grunts, holding the phone to his ear as it rings. “You’ll check in on them, won’t you? With the whole . . . serum anomalies?”

Suga nods, suddenly serious. “Of course. You don’t have to worry.” He lightly presses his fist against Daichi’s chest with a small, reassuring smile, and Daichi can feel his confidence returning.

Perhaps a hundred motherbeeping kaiju really wouldn’t bring them down.

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“Who’s coming to evaluate me?” Kuroo asks with a frown, chewing his gum and looking woefully at the nearly empty pack that sits before him on Sawamura’s desk (well, really it’s his desk now, but Kuroo is having a difficult time adjusting to that).

“His name is Futakuchi Kenji. He’s a representative from the department of public relations,” Michimiya Yui says, her voice as patient as ever. “After your speech the other day, Captain Sawamura and General Ukai think it best that someone show you the ropes on how to be . . . more charismatic.”

“I’m charismatic,” Kuroo grumbles. “I’ve got charisma coming out of my fucking ears.”

“According to some polls, your popularity has gone down since you’ve refused to answer questions, and most people were confused by your blood analogy.”

Kuroo sits back, offended. “Excuse you, that is an amazing analogy. I used to say it all the time to my volleyball team in order to get them motivated before a game.”

He can’t help but smile faintly at the memory, of Kenma’s long-suffering sighs and complaints about how embarrassing Kuroo was. Just the other day Kenma gave him that same annoyed look when he saw the broadcast of the interview.

“This isn’t a game, Kuroo-san,” Michimiya says, not unkindly.
Kuroo snaps back to the present with another frown. “I know,” he says, sighing and rubbing his hand over his hair. “Fine, I’ll meet with this Futakuchi guy, but under protest.”

He can hear the amusement in Michimiya’s voice as she replies, “Very well, sir.”

After they hang up, Kuroo runs his hands over his face. He absently wonders how Sawamura deals with the stress of this job without growing any gray hairs. Then he wonders if he does have gray hairs only covers them up with dye. He’s attempting to conjure up an image of Captain Sawamura with gray hair when there’s a knock on the door and Suga peeks his head in.

“Hello! Hard at work I see,” he says, his voice teasing.

Kuroo’s lips twitch to the side. “I’m not sure what I’m doing, honestly,” he says, waving Suga inside. He gestures to the papers spread out before him. “I’m supposed to come up with the physical exam. Apparently it’s supposed to be different every single time so nobody new knows what to expect. But the captain’s notes are incredibly unhelpful.”

He picks up a paper to show Suga. “This just reads: ‘duck fighting.’ What the hell does that even mean?”

Suga laughs. It’s light and refreshing, and Kuroo can feel his shoulders relax just by the sound of it. He shakes his head, stepping up to the desk to take the paper from Kuroo. “I’d ask him, but at this point I’m not sure he would even know.” He sets the paper down, giving Kuroo another bright smile. “I’m sure you’ll come up with something! If I were you though, I’d talk to Tanaka. He helped Daichi come up with Bokuto and Akaashi’s exam.”

Kuroo blinks, not having known that. “Did he help plan mine too?”

Suga taps his chin absently. “Hm, I believe so. It might’ve been Noya that time. But I’d definitely talk to Tanaka. He’s pretty good at coming up with ideas for physical competitions.”

Already Kuroo can feel the weight on his chest start to alleviate. He doesn’t have to do this alone. That realization makes him feel more confident, and he stands, giving Suga a short bow.

“Thanks for your help, Suga-san! I appreciate it.”

He straightens, only to bend over again with a *woof* as Suga’s fist collides with his sternum.

“Do your best!” he says with a wide, encouraging smile, as Kuroo rubs the sore spot on his chest.

“Uh, yeah,” he coughs, wondering if Sawamura had to go through these types of punches while in office. What a brave man.

He finds Tanaka wrestling with Noya in the training gym. They hop to attention when they see him, which feels weird, so Kuroo quickly puts them at ease.

“Uh, I really just need to talk to Tanaka about something, so if you need to continue training,” he says to Noya, who blinks, before grinning.

“What’s this about?” he asks.

“The Soldier exam, specifically the physical part. I have no idea what Captain Sawamura had planned for this, so I was hoping Tanaka could help. I heard he assisted the captain in Bo’s exam, and he said it was pretty awesome.” Kuroo admits, eying the way Tanaka’s puffs up with pride.
“Of course I can help out!” Tanaka exclaims, jabbing his chest with his thumb. “I’m great at coming up with physical examinations!”

Noya bounces on his toes, practically vibrating with energy. “You should have them do a wrestling match! Or dodgeball! Nothing brings a team closer together than a game of dodgeball!”

Tanaka looks at his friend with a grin. “Excellent idea, Yuu! I like the way your mind works!”

As he grabs Noya in a headlock and ruffles his hair, Kuroo thinks over this option. He does like the idea of a game, wondering if volleyball could be an option. Then again, he needs something that could translate well onto the battlefield, and fighting kaiju was nothing like receiving, setting, and spiking a ball.

“I remember we did a lot of races,” Kuroo says. “My group, I mean. There was a wall we had to scale and an obstacle course. I feel like that’s a good way to test endurance and speed.”

Tanaka pauses in tormenting Noya, contemplating this. Noya escapes, carefully patting his hair to make sure it’s still upright.

“That’s not a bad idea either,” he admits. He glances around the gym thoughtfully. “Yuu and I could build a massive obstacle course in here for them to run. Split them into groups and time them.”

Kuroo nods. “Exactly what I was thinking. But we gotta have something else too. Something that’ll show how they work together and solve problems under pressure . . .”

The three of them stand in silence for a moment, expressions twisted in varying stages of concentration. They’re still standing like that when the door to the gym opens and Asahi walks in carrying two water coolers. He pauses when he sees the three of them there, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt anything!”

Kuroo’s about to dismiss his apology, when Noya interrupts him.

“Asahi-san!” he exclaims, leaping forward. “Come over here and use that big brain of yours to do something useful!” He grabs Asahi’s arm, attempting to tug him forward.

“Ah, Nishinoya, I’m sure I can’t do anything to help,” Asahi says, standing still despite Noya clinging to his bicep.

Noya’s expression suddenly darkens. “What do you mean? You used to be captain with Sawamura-san. You were great with coming up with strategies.”

Asahi’s eyes grow sad, and he looks away. “No, I wasn’t. I’m sorry, Nishinoya, but I’m really only here to restock the water coolers. Narita’s mother is sick and asked me if I could do some of his chores.”

Noya looks angry again, and while Kuroo is interested to see where this argument will go, he realizes that as interim captain he should probably put a stop to things before they grow more heated. He steps forward to lay his hand on Noya’s shoulder, glancing between them. Noya barely registers his presence, glowering up at Asahi. Kuroo can feel Noya’s small body trembling with his rage, and it surprises him, since he always thought the two were good friends.

“Hey, hey, I’m not sure what’s going on here,” he says in his best placating voice, trying to channel Suga’s refreshing nature. “But Sawamura will murder me if I let you two kill each other on my
Asahi’s gaze turns toward the floor. “I’m sorry, Kuroo-san,” he says genuinely. “I’ll just go . . .” He trails off, shooting one more sad glance at Noya, before walking toward the water coolers on the other side of the gym.

“He’s such a fucking coward,” Noya snaps, not bothering to keep his voice down. Kuroo can see the way Asahi’s shoulders rise toward his ears, a familiar gesture Kuroo’s seen often on Kenma. It makes his chest ache, but he’s not sure what to do about it. He glances at Tanaka, wondering if he could calm his friend.

Tanaka hastens forward, slinging his arm across Noya’s shoulder. “Come on now, Yuu, you just gotta give him some time. He’ll come back eventually.”

“It’s been four years,” Noya grumbles. “He should’ve been captain after Sawamura-san got hurt.” He pauses then, glancing sidelong at Kuroo. “No offense.”

Kuroo holds up his hands. “None taken.” He’s pretty sure Asahi would do a better job than him anyway.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, as Tanaka pulls Noya to the side. Looking over at Asahi, he thinks back to what Noya had said about him being captain with Sawamura-san. It would be nice to get some advice from someone who used to be in his position. Straightening his shoulders, Kuroo sidles over to where Asahi is switching out the empty water coolers for the full ones. He can’t help but admire the way the muscles in his arms bulge at the weight of the coolers.

He leans against the wall, crossing his ankles casually. “You’re pretty strong,” he observes. “Is that from fixing the machines around here or do you work out?”

Asahi blinks at him, glancing around as if he’s not sure if Kuroo is talking to him or not. “Um, are you . . . are you hitting on me?” he asks hesitantly.

Kuroo laughs, a hard laugh that stings his side. Asahi gives him a perplexed smile, waiting patiently for Kuroo to recover. He does after a moment, wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes.

“No, no, don’t worry,” he says, shaking his head. “Just making an observation. I mean, not that you’re not an attractive guy, it’s just . . . you don’t just fix the cars and stuff here, do you? I saw your form when you were teaching Bo and Akaashi how to fight with the katanas. Despite not having been on the squad for four years your abilities haven’t decreased. Have you been practicing?”

Asahi flushes, and Kuroo knows he hit the right spot. Asahi reaches up to rub the back of his neck. “Just for physical fitness,” he says. “It’s good to stay in shape, right?”

“Sure, sure,” Kuroo nods absently. “But have you considered rejoining the squad? I could use your expertise. It’d be nice to have someone by my side that was an actual captain. I’m sort of flailing here.”

Asahi glances toward where Tanaka and Noya have reverted back to wrestling. His lips twist downward, before he looks back at Kuroo with sad eyes.

“You don’t want me on your team,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s my fault we lost our men during July 10th. It was my idea to attack without waiting for backup. It was my idea to use Tsukishima and the rest as a distraction so we could take down the kaiju. Nishinoya almost died . . . Tsukishima did die . . . and it was my fault.” His gaze turns to the coolers beside them, and he reaches out to run his
finger along the curve of the handle closest to them lightly.

Kuroo feels his chest spasm in sympathy, but he reaches out to clasp Asahi on the shoulder, feeling his muscles twitch beneath his hand in surprise. "It was a rough time, I understand," he says, thinking back to his own experience on that day. He can still remember the tight grip of Kenma's arms around his waist, the shock he felt when the police explained what had happened to his parents.

"But shit happens, you know? You did the best you could under the circumstances. You think Noya regrets helping take down that thing before it could kill more people? Do you think Tsukishima died cursing your name or something? I highly doubt it." Kuroo shakes his head, hoping that what he's saying is coming across as encouraging. Asahi is watching him blankly, so he can't really tell if he's helping or not.

He takes a step back, letting his hand fall from Asahi's shoulder. "Just think about it, okay? You have us now too. You don't have to worry about your men getting killed, because we're here to stop the kaiju. That's our job as Soldiers. All I need from you is a little guidance with how to lead, that's all."

He pauses, thinking about what Michimiya told him. He grimaces, rubbing the back of his neck. "And, uh, I could use some help coming up with speeches too. Apparently I cuss too much and make weird analogies when left to my own devices."

Asahi blinks, and his shoulders relax. A small smile tilts his lips, as he nods. "I think I could help with that, at least," he says.

"Great!" Kuroo exclaims, clapping him on the shoulder once more. "I'll see you in my office later then!"

Asahi coughs and nods, looking a bit flustered. "Um, yes. Okay."

Feeling like he's accomplished something good for once, Kuroo turns away, rejoining Tanaka and Noya and flicking them both on the head. "I'd tell you to behave, but that's not really my style, so I'll just say don't burn the gym down, and I'll see you both in my office later to go over this plan for the exam."

"Yes, sir!" Tanaka and Noya exclaim with salutes, before returning to their tussle.

Kuroo can feel Asahi's eyes on him as he leaves, so he keeps his shoulders straight and puts his hands in his pockets once more, whistling absently.

It takes them two days to figure out a plan and another two days to get everything ready for the examination. That's two days past the schedule Sawamura gave him, but Kuroo feels confident that the wait will be worth it in the end. That doesn't stop the media from hounding him with questions about it, though.

"Why has it taken so long to hold the exams?" one reporter asks, as Kuroo pulls up to the gate of the base on Nekoma.

It's the morning of the exam, and already there's several news crews setting up in front of the base. He hands the guard his ID, trying not to be irritated with the earnest reporter.

"I had to make sure the test was conducive to the specific duties we'll be asking the new Soldiers to perform," he explains, stifling a yawn. It's too early for this shit . . .

"Do you find yourself struggling in your position as interim captain?" the reporter asks next, her eyes
wide and dark blue. She’s pretty, but that’s not enough to keep Kuroo from finding her whole existence just then grating.

“I’m doing fine,” he says, taking his ID back from the guard. He waits for the barrier to lifted, before revving Nekoma’s engine and driving forward into the base’s parking lot.

Once he steps into the base, he can feel his heart beating faster in anticipation. He has to admit that he’s excited for the examination. He’s looking forward to seeing how these young boys complete the tasks he has planned for them. It’s going to be entertaining. He wonders if Tanaka or Noya thought to bring popcorn.

He’s almost in a good mood when he reaches his office, but that mood plummets when he sees a familiar and unwelcome figure sitting at Sawamura’s desk. In his chair. Like he fucking owns the place.

“Strange, I could’ve sworn I had the exterminator set traps for rats,” Kuroo asks, keeping his voice light, as he drops his helmet by the door.

Futakuchi Kenji gives him a wholesome smile, seemingly unaffected by the jab. “And good morning to you, Kuroo-san! I hope you slept well?”

“What are you doing here, Futakuchi?” Kuroo asks, stepping up to the desk with a frown. “You were just here three days ago.”

“I came to observe the examination, of course!” Futakuchi says, moving to stand. “I have to make sure everything remains within the safety parameters. We don’t want these young men getting hurt and causing a mess for my department.”

Kuroo bites back a rude retort, clenching his teeth in a smile instead. “You do realize that this exam is for potential Soldiers, right? Our job isn’t exactly ‘safe.’ They need to understand that if they’re going to join the program.”

“Of course, of course,” Futakuchi says, waving his hand dismissively. “But you have been known to be rather reckless, and we wouldn’t want things to go too far and have a stain on the SSP reputation, now would we?”

Kuroo knows he has a point, but that doesn’t stop his irritation from growing at the thought of having the man following him around everywhere. Knowing he can’t do anything about it, though, he simply steps forward, picks up the papers he needs from his desk, and turns to leave.

“Try not to get lost,” he says over his shoulder, as Futakuchi hastens to follow.

Maybe I can shuffle him off to Kageyama somehow before the exam starts.

He can’t help but snort softly at the mental picture that brings, and despite the unlikelihood of that happening, he’s in a much better mood as he goes to find Tanaka, Noya, and Asahi.

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When Hinata opens his eyes the morning of the Soldier exam, he doesn’t expect to see Kenma lying in bed beside him, staring back at him with a solemn expression. Instinctively, Hinata reels back,
nearly falling off the bed. He pinwheels his arm to catch himself, rocking back to safety with a yelp.

“Kenma! What are you doing here?” he shouts, his heart still trying to strangle him.

Kenma, at least, has the decency to look somewhat sheepish, his gaze flickering to the side. “There’s a new Kingdom Hearts game that released today. If we go to the store I’ll buy it for you.”

Hinata grins. He’d been waiting for that game! “Oh wow, really? That’d be awesome! Let me just —” he moves to hop out of bed before the realization hits him. With a groan, he flops back on the bed, spread-eagle, nearly whacking Kenma in the face. He dodges at the last minute.

“Aw man, I can’t today! It’s the Soldier exam!”

Kenma’s gaze focuses somewhere along the wall across from them. “Skip it.”

Hinata sits up again, brows crinkling together. “I can’t skip it. Kuroo and the others need more Soldiers. You watched the footage of the last fight with me. Captain Sawamura might not’ve gotten hurt if there were more Soldiers there to help. I have to do this Kenma.”

His friend doesn’t reply, simply purses his lips, and Hinata sighs. Leaning over, he gently knocks his forehead against the side of Kenma’s.

“Hey. Come to the base with me. We can hang out during my breaks.”

Kenma’s lips tighten further, but he nods. Grinning, Hinata launches himself off the bed then, going to his closet to find something suitable to wear. Kenma scoots over to the edge of the bed, his legs dangling off the side of it. They’re encased in thick black stockings that disappear beneath a black pleated skirt that Hinata recognizes as one of Natsu’s. His sweater looks soft and warm with a scooped neck and is a dark blue color. Hinata stares for a moment, as Kenma fidgets, his fingers twisting together in his lap, as he focuses his gaze on the door. His hair is brushed neatly, and Hinata is suddenly struck with a thought.

“Did you get dressed up because you thought I’d say yes to going out?” he asks, his hands pausing over his old high school tracksuit jacket. He pulls it off the hanger, before turning to look at Kenma more fully, noting the blush that’s coloring his cheeks. “Kenma. You should’ve known better!”

Kenma’s shoulders hunch toward his ears, and his hands move to clutch the edge of the mattress. He leans over to stare down at his feet, wiggling his toes in the stockings. “It’s Kingdom Hearts,” he says softly.

“Saving the world is more important than a Kingdom Hearts game,” Hinata scolds, hopping out of his pajama pants in order to pull on his tracksuit pants (also from his high school).

Kenma flinches, and Hinata feels a little guilty at the soft way Kenma says, “I know.”

Once he’s changed, Hinata hops over to Kenma, wrapping his arms around his shoulders in a gentle hug. “We can go to the store after the exam, okay?”

Kenma smiles, but it doesn’t seem to reach his eyes. “Okay.”

Hinata grins, before standing and grabbing Kenma’s wrist, pulling him out of the room and through the hall into the kitchen. His mother’s already there fixing breakfast, and she greets Kenma warmly, before setting two plates on the table. While he eats, Hinata prattles on about the exam and what he’s heard about it, though the whole thing is shrouded in mystery. And Kuroo hasn’t exactly been providing reliable information either. Whenever anyone from the news asks about it, he answers
“What do you think it’ll be like, Kenma?” he asks around a mouthful of rice, staring across the table at his friend, who’s moving his food around his plate with his chopsticks absently.

Kenma starts at the question, glancing up at Hinata before his gaze returns to his plate. “I don’t know. Kuro doesn’t talk about it.”

“He didn’t even mention what it was like when he took the exam?” Hinata asks, settling back in his chair with disappointment.

“I didn’t ask him.”

There’s a slight edge to Kenma’s voice, but Hinata doesn’t catch it, musing instead on the possibilities of the day. His stomach feels queasy, and in the end he can’t finish his breakfast. His entire body feels like it’s vibrating from the inside out, and he hasn’t even gotten to the base yet. After he grabs his ready-made backpack, he hurries outside with Kenma in tow, and they stop by Kenma’s apartment so he can grab his things. Then together they head for the base, Kenma perched behind Hinata on the back of his bike as per usual.

When they arrive, there’s already a large group of news crews camped outside the guard station. A couple reporters glance up when Hinata stops at the barriers to hand over his ID, Kenma passing his over as well. One of them extracts himself from the crowd and hurries over.

“Are you one of the prospective Soldiers?” he asks excitedly.

Hinata grins, smiling broadly. “Yep!”

“Do you have any guesses as to what’s in store for you?” the man asks, holding what looks like a recording device out towards Hinata’s face.

A shiver of excitement runs through him. He’s actually being interviewed! This would be amazing, if only he could think of something to say. But he has no idea what’s in store for him, so he wracks his brain for something suitable.

“No, but whatever happens I’m going to win!” he decides on, keeping his grin. “I’m going to beat everything they throw at me!”

Kenma remains silent behind him, but Hinata feels his grip tighten on his shoulders.

“What about these rumors that the serum is starting to have a negative effect on the Soldiers? Are you at all worried about that?” the reporter asks next, and Hinata barely catches the tiny noise of distress Kenma makes before they’re interrupted by the arrival of another potential Soldier.

“Whoa! Look, Yaku-san! There’s so many people here already! Do you think we’ll be on the news?”

Recognizing the voice, Hinata turns to see Lev, the friendly police rookie who he met at Kenma’s apartment, striding toward the front gates. Beside him walks a much smaller policeman. Hinata doesn’t recognize him, but he does recognize the tired look on his face. It’s one he’s seen on his mom’s face whenever she tells him and Natsu that they’re “trying her patience.”

“I don’t know, Lev,” the shorter man says with a shake of his head. “But try not to say anything stupid if you are.”
“I won’t!” Lev chirps, his bright green eyes scanning the crowd before falling on Hinata. He grins and waves. “Hinata-san! Hinata-san!”

Hinata waves back. “Hello, Lev-kun!”

Lev turns to the man beside him. “Yaku-san, I’m going to go see Hinata-san now, okay?” He pauses, half-bent toward Yaku like he’s expecting something.

Hinata watches with amusement, as Yaku awkwardly pats Lev’s head, looking flustered.

“Don’t forget to eat your lunch. I put it in your bag,” he says, stuffing his hands into his pockets quickly, as he looks away.

“Thank you, Yaku-san!” Lev exclaims, and he rushes over to where Hinata and Kenma are, his eyes lighting up further when they land on the latter of the two. “Kenma-san! You’re here too! And you’re wearing a skirt again! Why do you keep wearing those? Do you wish you were a girl?”

Kenma sighs. “I just like them,” he says quietly, giving Hinata a look that says “please save me.”

Hinata gives him a salute before turning to Lev, who’s showing the guard his ID. “I didn’t think you were taking the exam this time. I didn’t see you at the tour.”

“I was working that day, but I got today off,” Lev explains, putting his ID back into his bag.

The reporter is still standing by Hinata’s bike, watching the entire exchange with a faint grin. He gives Kenma a second look, before holding his recorder out toward him.

“You said your name was Kenma? Would you happen to be Kozume Kenma, close personal friend to Kuroo Tetsurou?” he asks, his eyes bright and interested.

Kenma shrinks away from the recorder, wrinkling his nose as though the man was holding out a rotten fish. Hinata frowns, turning back to the reporter and straightening in his seat, attempting to block Kenma as best he can with his body by tilting to the side slightly.

“Hey! Who said you could ask him such personal questions, huh?” he asks, putting on his best “Do you want to fight?” stare.

The reporter blinks before taking a step back. “I apologize,” he says. “I just thought he might be able to give us an insider opinion on the new captain.” He glances over at Kenma once more. “Is he capable of leadership? His speeches are rather vague and he tends to ramble off topic when asked simple questions. None of us are experiencing much confidence in his abilities to conduct this exam.” He gestures over his shoulder to the rest of the reporters gathered there, most of whom have noticed the impromptu interview and are now starting to sidle over, their own recording devices held aloft.

“Kuroo-san is amazing,” Lev cuts in, stepping in front of Kenma and Hinata. “If he didn’t tell you something you wanted to hear, you probably didn’t need to know it in the first place.” He crosses his arms over his chest, towering above the man in front of him.

“Y-yes, of course,” the man stammers, which strikes Hinata as odd, since he doesn’t find Lev that intimidating. But then he tilts his head and studies Lev as though he were seeing him for the first time and realizes that with Lev’s height and the bright flash of annoyance in his green eyes, he does look rather daunting.

Scary. Lev-kun can be scary!
The reporter looks thoroughly chastened, and the guard lifts the barrier for Hinata, Kenma, and Lev to go through to the base, so they do, but not before shooting dirty looks toward the reporters still pressing toward the gates, raising their voices and shouting more questions now that the chance for an interview is slipping away from them. The three ignore them, though, and Hinata parks and locks his bike on one of the rails in the parking lot.

“Okay!” he says, turning to Kenma. “I’m going to head to the gym, because they told us to gather there. Where are you going to go?”

“Probably Kuroo’s office,” Kenma admits.

“Do you have your game?” Hinata asks hopefully, not wanting Kenma to get bored while waiting.

But Kenma nods, tucking his hands into the back waistband of his skirt. “In my backpack.”

Hinata grins in relief, stepping forward to give Kenma a small hug. “I’ll come find you when we’re done, okay?”

He’s surprised when Kenma wraps his arms around him and clutches him tightly, pulling him closer. He’s even further surprised when Kenma nuzzles his face into his neck in a strangely intimate gesture. Hinata feels his heart jitting out of nervousness, and he quickly pulls away, smacking Kenma’s shoulders repeatedly in a quasi-comforting gesture.

“I’ll be fine!” he squeaks, not meeting Kenma’s stare, as he turns and hurries toward the large gym across the parking lot.

Lev walks beside him at a more leisurely pace, not having to speed up when his legs were about the size of Hinata himself.

“Do you think any others are here yet?” he asks.

Hinata pulls his brain out of his confusion over Kenma’s behavior, reminding himself that he needs to focus on the exam. He grins, as that shiver of excitement begins to thrum through his veins once more.

“Only one way to find out!” he exclaims, before sliding open the doors of the gym with a flourish and hopping inside. He flings his arms to the side, tilting his head back with a grin so wide his eyes squeeze shut. “Hinata Shouyou reporting for duty!”

He pauses then, as silence greets him. Lowering his head, he opens his eyes to look about a dark and empty room. Tugging on his hair absently, Hinata looks about the gym, completely bewildered.

“Hello? Is anyone here?”

Lev steps inside to stand beside him, also looking about in perplexity. “Did we get the meeting place wrong?” he asks dubiously.

“No, the email said to come directly to the gym when we arrived,” Hinata says, remembering that clearly. He’d read the email several dozen times.

Lev nods. “My email said that too.”

Hinata squints into the dark of the gym, trying to recall what else had been in the email. He slings off his backpack and sets it on the ground, crouching beside it to unzip and rifle through it. Lev crouches beside him, watching him with interest.
“What are you doing?” he asks.

“The email also said to bring some things. A flashlight for one. Ah! Here it is!” Hinata pulls out the torch, flipping it on and accidentally shining it directly into Lev’s face. The other flinches automatically, and Hinata drops the beam to the floor. “Sorry,” he says with a sheepish grin. He stands then, pulling his backpack over his shoulder once more.

“My email said to bring a blanket and bottles of water,” Lev says, straightening as well. He pats the messenger bag at his side. “Yaku-san made sure I brought it.”

Hinata snickers, remembering the small man from earlier and how he treated Lev. “Is he like, your mom or something?” he teases, walking further into the gym and shining his flashlight about experimentally, trying not to let his nervousness betray in his voice. His stomach is flip-flopping, and he’s reminded how much he dislikes being in dark, abandoned places.

“Yaku-san is amazing,” Lev says wondrously, keeping close beside Hinata. “He always takes really good care of me.”

He says it with such genuine happiness that Hinata finds he has no retort. So instead he falls silent and concentrates on finding his way across the gym toward the stairs he can see against the opposite wall. He nudges Lev’s side then, gesturing with the flashlight beam to the large red arrow pointing up the stairs.

“Hey look! A clue!”

“We do you think the test’s already started?” Lev asks, as they hurry towards the stairs.

“It must have,” Hinata says, nodding quickly. “Nothing else makes sense!”

They make their way up the stairs and there they find another arrow pointed toward the back of the gym. Following it, they come across a long table on which sits two harnesses. They look complicated to attach, and the two struggle for a few minutes before Hinata realizes that there are instructions attached. Once they’re both fitted into the strange gear (which chafes uncomfortably along the inside of Hinata’s thighs), he turns his attention back to the instructions. On the flip side of the paper is a note.

Welcome to the SSP Soldier Examination!

By now you should have everything you need to complete the test. Follow the instructions you receive to the letter and you’ll pass! Right now there is a box with vital information in it needed for the next stage of the exam. The box is located in downtown Sendai. You must retrieve it and bring it back to the base, during which time you’ll receive your progress results. There will be groups of you working in pairs and there is one box for each of you, so there’s no need to fight over who gets a box.

The gear you have on is to help you navigate the city. A car will be waiting out front to take you to the starting point. Once you arrive, a map of the city and instructions on how to use your gear will be provided. The map will show you where the boxes are located, but there will be various obstacles standing in your way. You must work together to overcome these obstacles if you are to succeed.

My staff and I will be observing you at all times, but we will not interfere.

You are on your own.

Good luck.
The note is signed in Kuroo’s familiar scrawl. Hinata swallows hard, getting that squeamish urge to visit the restroom. He knows he doesn’t have time for that, though, so he clutches his stomach and forces himself to calm down. Lev is staring down at the note with wide eyes.

“So it’s like a game!” he exclaims after a moment, a grin spreading across his face. “I can do this! I’m good at games!”

Hinata can’t help but wonder if Kuroo got the idea for this test from a game of Kenma’s. He folds up the paper and carefully stores it in his pocket, not wanting to lose it just in case it became important later on. Smacking his cheeks to rev himself up, he turns to look up at Lev, matching his grin.

“So am I,” he says. “Let’s win this thing!”

“Yeah!” Lev says, holding his hands up for a high five. He pauses then, realizing that his hands are far too high in the air for Hinata to reach. He’s just about to bend down when Hinata leaps into the air to smack his palms against Lev’s.

Lev staggers back, surprised. “You—”

Hinata lands, a flush heating his cheeks. All nerves have calmed now, and he feels nothing but a sense of exhilaration speeding through his body. He picks up his flashlight once more, gesturing the beam toward the stairs. “Let’s go!”

The man who picks them up and drops them off doesn’t say a word to either of them, which Hinata finds somewhat unnerving, especially when they’re handed the map and instructions for the gear they’re wearing without any advice or clue as to what their next step should be. The gear appears to shoot out cables that will help them fly from building to building, which seems super cool to Hinata, though he has no idea how that’s supposed to work in reality.

“Should we figure out how to use these things before we continue?” Lev asks, studying the instructions in his hands.

Hinata shakes his head, focused on the map instead. Several points of the ruined downtown area have been circled, but Hinata has never been to this part of the city, so he isn’t sure where these points are. Remembering something else the email had mentioned, however, he digs into his backpack until he finds a compass.

“We should get started on finding our box right away,” he says, juggling both the map and the compass now. “If we stop to test out the gear, we’ll probably fall behind the other teams. We gotta be first.”

Lev hesitates before nodding, folding up the instructions and putting them carefully into his bag. He turns to Hinata then with a faint grin.

“So where are we headed?” he asks, leaning forward to look down at the map spread out between Hinata’s hands.

“I think . . . I think we’re here,” Hinata says, tapping a spot with his finger. “Which means the closest box is over here.” Another jab. “But . . . do we want to go for the closest one or for the most difficult one? I mean, on the one hand we could look efficient, but on the other hand it could look like we backed away from a challenge . . .”

Lev bites his lip, chewing on it thoughtfully. “We should go for the challenging one,” he says. “Or
we won’t be worthy to be called winners.”

Hinata grins. “I knew I liked you,” he says, turning back to the map. “Okay, this one is right in the heart of the city.” He points to it. “That’s usually where the kaiju appear. I don’t think we’ll come across one because we just had a sighting a few days ago and they’re never that frequent.”

Lev tilts his head. “Yaku-san says they’re getting more unpredictable though. He tells me never to go to the perimeter unless I’m with him.” He glances toward the barricades they’re standing behind warily.

Hinata studies the path they’ll need to take once more before folding up the map and storing it in his backpack. “Well, this is a test, and Yaku-san can’t be here. So just stick close to me. I’ll take care of you.”


Hinata gives Lev his best scowl and straightens to his full height. “Hey! I’m not that short! You’re just freakishly tall! And anyway, I’m probably a lot faster than you.”

“But your legs are so—”

Hinata takes off in the direction they need to go, sprinting as fast as he can. He can hear Lev’s indignant yelp behind him and laughs, before focusing on heading toward the middle of the city. It doesn’t take long for Lev to catch up to him, which surprises him, and he slows to a stop once they come across their first obstacle: a large pile of debris and rubble caught between two buildings, blocking their path.

“We should use our gear,” Lev says, even as Hinata starts to clamber up the pile.

He narrowly misses gouging his hand against a rusted piece of rebar and quickly hops down with a sheepish grin. “Right,” he says, looking down at the boxes situated on either hip. He tries to remember which buttons did what, and he angles his pelvis toward the wall of the building beside them, hitting the first button on both boxes simultaneously. Cables shoot out from them, slamming into the concrete high above with a shudder. Grinning, Hinata tries the next two buttons, and finds himself hurtling through the air to land face-first against the wall.

Grimacing, Hinata plants his feet against the brick, leaning back into the harness, glad the cables don’t seem to give and allow him to perch there. He’s fairly high off the ground, about halfway up the building, and he rubs his hand across his aching jaw. His nose stings, and he can feel blood dripping down his lips. He swipes at it with the back of his hand, before turning to look down at Lev below.

“Don’t press the second buttons!” he calls.

“What?” Lev calls back, cupping his hand around his ear.

Hinata cups both hands around his mouth, leaning further down. “THE SECOND BUTTONS! DON’T PRESS—ACK!” He leans too far down, upsetting his balance and flipping upside down. He dangles, the world spinning momentarily, until he feels the shiver of the concrete against his back as Lev’s cables find purchase. The next thing he sees is Lev’s body flying through the air toward him at far too great a speed.

Hinata yelps and hoists his torso forward, grabbing onto his cables to pull himself back into a seated position, narrowly missing getting smacked in the face by one of Lev’s flailing legs, as he slams into
the wall next to him. He groans, his own nose starting to bleed, as he leans back.

“I told you not to press the second buttons,” Hinata scolds, and his voice sounds strange and nasally due to his injured nose. He pokes at it experimentally, hoping it’s not broken.

“I thought you said to press them,” Lev admitted, grimacing as he pokes at his own nose. “Yaku-san is going to be mad,” he whines.

Hinata shakes his head to clear it. “Just don’t press any more buttons. Do you still have the instructions with you?”

Lev struggles with his bag for a moment, being careful not to drop anything onto the ground below. He pulls out the folded instructions, opening the paper and holding it out to Hinata. He takes it and skims down to where it explains the buttons’ functions.

“Okay, the first buttons release the cables, we know that already. And the second buttons are the fast speed, which also, duh. Okay, so the third buttons are the slow ascent, the fourth buttons are the descent, and the fifth buttons release the cables from whatever they’re attached to.” He looks up at Lev pointedly. “We do not want to press the fifth buttons,” he says firmly.

Lev nods, eyes wide.

Hinata glances down across the pile of debris to the empty street beyond. “Now we have to figure out a way to get over there somehow.” He sighs, realizing what they have to do. “Ugh, we’re going to need to use the fifth buttons though. I think we have to fall and then, while we’re falling somehow angle our bodies toward that building on the other side of the debris and shoot the cables into the far wall.”

Lev’s eyes widen further. “Is that even possible?” he asks, dumbfounded.

“Only one way to find out,” Hinata says, folding up the instructions to put them into his pocket alongside the map. He inhales deeply, hopes Kenma won’t be too upset at the sight of his broken and mangled body if he screws this up, and pushes the fifth buttons. At the same time, he shoves off the wall with his feet, launching himself into the air.

For a single, incredible moment, he’s flying. Actually flying. The wind rushes by him, whipping his hair across his face, stinging his cheeks. His stomach flips, but not in a bad way, in the way it does whenever he rides rollercoasters. It’s exhilarating, and he can’t help but shout at the top of his lungs, the wind whisking his voice away. Even so, he laughs, filled with renewed confidence.

Then, as he starts to fall, he quickly twists his body around so that he’s facing the wall he wants to connect to. Time seems to slow, and he pushes the first buttons without worrying that he might miss, and the cables rush out to meet his target, thudding into concrete in the exact spot Hinata saw in his mind’s eye as he released them. They pull taut with a snap, and Hinata swings toward the wall, the wind whistling faster across his ears. He presses the third buttons next, and the cables jerk him upward at a slower speed, until he lands against the wall in a crouch, the force sending tingles across the bottom of his feet through his sneakers.

For a moment he hangs there, frozen, unable to believe he actually did it. Then he lifts his fist in the air and shouts.

“GWUAH! THAT WAS AMAZING!”

Twisting around he looks over to where Lev is watching him from the other building. He beckons to him, and Lev looks skeptical but detaches from the wall and jumps the same way Hinata did. He
manages to get one cable buried into the wall beside Hinata, but the other goes wide, and Lev lands on his stomach beneath Hinata with an undignified grunt. Hinata can’t help but snicker at the way Lev looks like he’s been smashed against the side of the building, arms and legs spread out in all directions.

“You’re really uncoordinated,” Hinata says with a smirk, lowering himself to the ground.

Lev follows suit with a pout. “I’ll get better the more I do it. I managed to make it across at least.”

Hinata has to concede that and consults with his map once more. “Okay, I think we need to go this way.” He gestures down the street, in really the only direction they can go. The alleyways are mostly full of more debris, leaving open only the street directly in front of them. They begin to walk, but it’s not long before Hinata spots someone in the distance, running in the same direction they are.

“Hey! I think that one’s after our box!” Hinata cries, starting to sprint.

Lev, who’d been in the middle of taking a drink of water, sputters and quickly caps the bottle, stuffing it into his bag and hurrying after Hinata.

“Hey!” Hinata cries, pointing to the figure. “Hey you! That box is ours!”

The figure doesn’t appear to have heard, or perhaps he’s ignoring them on purpose, but he doesn’t slow. Hinata puts on a burst of speed, ignoring his burning lungs and muscles. He jumps, ramming himself in the back of the young man, knocking them both to the ground.

“Get off me!” the boy cries, pushing at Hinata until he scrambled to his feet.

“We’re getting the box from the center of the city,” Hinata says, jabbing his chest with his thumb. “You go find a different box!”

The boy on the ground frowns up at him. “I can get whatever box I want,” he protests.

Lev finally catches up and slows to a stop, placing his hands on his knees, as he bends over, attempting to catch his breath. “Where’s your partner?” he asks, straightening.

“He was slowing me down,” the young man says with a sneer, turning his gaze away. He gets to his feet, brushing off his clothing.

Hinata notices he has two bags, one over each shoulder. He frowns and points to them. “So you took his supplies and left him alone?” he asks. “What the hell? You can’t do that!”

“Nothing in the instructions says I can’t,” the boy says, shaking his head.

“It says you have to work together in order to get past the obstacles,” Hinata says, pulling out the instructions to show him. “See? Right here!”

The boy pushes the paper away without looking at it. “Look, you can do it your way if you want, but I’m going to do things my way, and I’m going for the center box. So see ya.” With a wave, he takes off again.

Hinata grinds his teeth together in frustration, his hands in fists at his sides. Lev watches him worriedly, but after a moment Hinata forces himself to calm, running his fingers through his hair. “Okay, okay. We don’t want to fight people over the boxes. There’s supposed to be one for each team, right? So let’s just . . . find another box.” He knows he sounds disgruntled, and Lev looks disappointed as well.
As they’re turning to head in a different direction, however, something hard and metallic suddenly knocks into Hinata’s forehead. He jumps back with a yelp, grasping at the throbbing spot, as Lev reaches out quickly to catch what looks like a metal cylinder before it can hit the ground. He fumbles it, though, and smiles sheepishly as he picks it up off the ground.

Lev opens it then, pulling out a rolled out piece of paper. As Hinata rubs his forehead, Lev reads the note, his lips moving silently until Hinata gives his leg a small kick.

“Hey! Out loud,” he says pointedly.

“Oh! Sorry,” Lev says, looking down at Hinata as though he’s surprised he’s still there. “It’s saying that there’s a short cut to the center of the city if we take these side streets.” He lifted the paper so Hinata could see the numbers written down. “It’s saying to use them so we can reach the box first.”

“Didn’t Kuroo say that he wouldn’t be helping us?” Hinata asks, finding the whole thing highly suspicious.

“Maybe he changed his mind,” Lev says, watching Hinata’s face.

Hinata taps his chin thoughtfully. Would Kuroo play favorites like this? Or is the clue just another test? On the one hand, if they obey the instructions and it leads to a trap that could slow them down. But if it is a trap and they’re able to beat it, wouldn’t that show what good Soldiers they’d make? Or they can take the easy way out and simply find another box.

Hinata doesn’t like the thought of taking the easy route.

“I think we should follow the instructions. Kuroo-san said in his first letter that we’re supposed to follow them exactly,” Lev points out.

“That’s true,” Hinata admits. He grins then and adjusts his backpack straps on his shoulders. “Then let’s find this short cut!”

***

Kenma sits in Kuroo’s office, slouched in a chair with his knees pulled to his chest. He isn’t sure how long he’s been sitting there, but his PSP is running low on battery, and he forgot to bring the charger. Kuroo usually has an extra one in case this happens, but Kuroo still hasn’t made an appearance. Kenma’s also getting hungry, his stomach growling repeatedly, though he’s already eaten the snacks stored in his backpack.

Sighing, he pulls out his phone and ignores the unread messages he has from Bokuto in order to text Kuroo.

>>where are you? (10:32)

There’s not an immediate answer, so Kenma returns to the previous page to click on the messages from Bokuto.

Koutarou

hey so u and kuroo are together now right? how did that happen exactly? (06:55)
cuz like i think i want to try that w/akaashi (06:55)
i never thought he liked me like that but he said something the other day (06:56)
i just have no idea what to do ??? (06:56)
shit its really early ur probably still asleep (06:57)
sorry (06:57)

Intrigued, Kenma stares down at the messages, wondering what it was Akaashi had said and also wondering why Bokuto thought he could somehow help with something like this. It’s not as though he and Kuroo’s relationship is that spectacular or even normal. He honestly has no idea if they can call themselves boyfriends or not. They’ve had sex once and it hasn’t happened again since, and they can’t even go on dates due to Kuroo’s hectic schedule, which has grown even more hectic now that he’s interim captain. So mostly they just spend their time eating dinner together and then going to bed together. Like an old married couple.

Kenma wrinkles his nose at that comparison and then looks down at his phone as it vibrates.

**Kuro**

?? i’m at work? (10:40)

Kenma rolls his eyes before replying.

>>i know i’m at the base where are you? (10:40)

This time the reply is immediate.

**Kuro**

wait fuck ur here?? what’re u doing here? (10:40)

>>asking you where you are (10:41)

**Kuro**

kenma i stg… (10:41)

>>i’m in your office i’ve been here for the past hour and a half (10:42)

**Kuro**

wait what? why are you just texting me now then? (10:42)

>>my PSP ran out of battery (10:42)

**Kuro**

fucking hell (10:42)

stay there ok? i’ll be right up don’t go anywhere we’re having the exam today and there’s a fucking rat on my back (10:43)

Kenma has no idea what that means, but he sits dutifully and waits for Kuroo to appear. He does about ten minutes later, looking irritated. He’s wearing his uniform, the fancy one he’s supposed to wear at events and benefits, and he looks sharp in all black, with his boots polished, buttons gleaming. Kenma rises to greet him, and Kuroo stops short just inside the doorway, his eyes widening. Kenma realizes then that he’s still in the outfit he chose to go out with Shouyou, and Kuroo has never seen him in a skirt before. He clenches his fists into the hem, gripping the material tightly, as he wills his cheeks to stay cool. Kuroo’s still staring, his jaw slack, his own face flushing in a way that’s making it hard for Kenma to keep himself from following suit.
“What’s the hold up?” an unfamiliar voice asks, and a man Kenma doesn’t recognize squeezes past Kuroo and the doorframe to enter the room. He has fluffy brown hair and an easygoing smile, though it tightens somewhat as he glances between the two in front of him.

“Kuroo-san, did you call your boyfriend here in order to have a quickie during work hours?” he asks admonishingly, though there’s a lilt of playfulness in his voice. He pulls out a pad and a pen, jotting something down.

Kuroo whips his head around to glare at the man. “What? No! Stop writing that down; that’s not what this is.”

He turns back to Kenma then, face apologetic. Crossing over to his desk, he opens one of the drawers and pulls out a PSP charger, handing it over to Kenma. Kenma notices how he doesn’t make eye contact and suppresses a sigh.

“Kuroo-san, are you not going to introduce me to your boyfriend?” the man asks with a faint grin, twirling his pen between his fingers.

“He’s not my—” Kuroo stops, glancing sidelong at Kenma.

Kenma stares back at him, offering no help. If Kuroo doesn’t want to call him his boyfriend, that’s up to him, but the hurt jabs tiny pricks of pain across his chest. Kuroo looks away, gesturing to the man.

“Kenma, this is Futakuchi, the SSP’s PR rep. Futakuchi, this is Kozume Kenma.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Futakuchi says, bowing.

Kenma turns away, walking over to plug the charger into the outlet on the wall, attaching it to his PSP and setting it on the desk.

“You’re supposed to be monitoring the candidates,” Futakuchi says to Kuroo in the silence that follows.

“I was and I will! Just give us a sec, okay?” Kuroo asks, frowning at the man with more malice than Kenma has ever seen on his face directed toward a person. It’s surprising, but apparently Futakuchi is used to it, for he simply shrugs and gives them a small wave.

“I’ll return to the control room then,” he says cheerily. “But if you’re not back within the next ten minutes, I’ll be forced to write that down.”

“Fine, whatever,” Kuroo says, waving him off.

With a small bow, Futakuchi leaves, and Kenma hops up onto Kuroo’s desk, swinging his legs absently while he waits for his PSP to charge enough for him to start it back up. Grinning faintly, Kuroo moves to stand in front of him, one hand reaching out to trail fingertips up Kenma’s stocking-covered thigh, disappearing beneath his skirt. He smells good, like fresh mint and apple shampoo. Kenma suppresses a shiver, picking up his phone to look at instead of Kuroo’s face.

“Did you get dressed up for me?” Kuroo asks, his voice low, his grin shifting into a smirk.

“No.”

“Oh.” Kuroo pauses, biting his lip. He pulls his hand away and takes a step back. Kenma watches out of the corner of his eye, as Kuroo reaches into his pants’ pocket and pulls out a stick of gum,
unwrapping it slowly. “The exam is going well. We’re seeing a lot of interesting developments.”

“Hm.” Kenma turns his attention back to his phone, pulling up his Candy Crush app.

Kuroo places the gum in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “Shrimpy’s not doing too bad.”

Kenma stills, pointer finger hovering frozen over his screen. He can feel the weight of Kuroo’s stare on his face, but he slides his gaze to the floor.

“Is he winning?”

Kuroo steps over to lean against the desk, half-sitting on it, as he crosses his legs at the ankles, hands pressed against the desk behind him. “It’s not really about winning. It’s about learning their reactions to certain obstacles. Finding out how they’d respond in a real life or death situation.” He purses his lips then, knowing immediately he said something wrong.

Kenma’s head comes up sharply. “You’re putting them in life or death situations?” he asks flatly, his heart pounding faster. He quickly stands, shoving his phone into his backpack and swinging it over his shoulder. “Where is he?”

Kuroo grimaces, pushing off the desk to straighten. “Kenma, it’s fine, I promise. We’re monitoring everything from the control room, and I—”

“Where’s the control room?”

Kuroo looks as though he’s about to protest further, but then he shuts his mouth and nods, a resigned expression settling over his features. “Don’t go running off. I’ll take you.” He takes Kenma’s hand then, holding it firmly, as he pulls him out the door.

Kenma walks quickly beside Kuroo, his hand clammy, but Kuroo doesn’t seem to mind. He doesn’t let go, even when they enter a room filled with monitors and a group of people with pencils and notepads, every one of them taking notes between looking at the screens.

Kuroo doesn’t stop to introduce Kenma to anyone but instead tugs him over to a monitor displaying a very familiar bright orange head. Kenma releases Kuroo’s hand to place both of his on the table, leaning up on his toes as far as he can to get a better look at the screen above his head.

Shouyou is standing amidst rubble, and there’s dried blood smeared across his cheek from his nose. His clothes look dirty and rumpled, and his hair is a wild mess. Beside him stands another familiar figure, but Kenma doesn’t recognize him as Lev until he lifts his head, and Kenma catches a glimpse of those cat-like green eyes.

“He’s with Lev? You put him with Lev?” Kenma hisses, frowning over his shoulder at Kuroo.

Kuroo throws up his hands defensively. “Hey, I thought he might be more confident with a friendly face. Besides, he’s really taken the initiative. Lev’s been following him the whole time.”

*That’s because he’s an idiot. You placed him with an idiot that’s going to get him killed.*

Then again, Kenma supposes that Shouyou wouldn’t have much trouble getting himself killed, being as reckless as he is. He turns his attention back to the screen, watching as Shouyou consults his map and says something to Lev.

“Why can’t I hear him?” Kenma asks, keeping his focus on Shouyou’s face, staring at that trail of red across his cheek.
“We had no way of installing audio, so we’re only receiving video feed,” Kuroo explains, stepping forward to rest his hands on Kenma’s shoulders. “Tanaka, where are we at with these two?” He turns to his lieutenant, gesturing to the screen.

Tanaka turns in his chair, consulting his notepad. “Looks like they just finished their second side mission. They have the crowbar and the key. They almost missed the key, but Lev remembered the instructions said to go up the broken stairs so they figured out a way.”

“Side mission?” Kenma tilts his head back to look up at Kuroo.

He looks back down at him with a sheepish smile. “I might’ve constructed this exam around one of your video games. They need to find this box and open it but to get the tools to do that they have to go on side missions to collect them. We placed obstacles in their way that they need to figure out how to work around as a unit. We told them to follow the instructions exactly.”

Nishinoya rolls his chair over from where he’d been sitting consulting another monitor. He grins deviously. “That’s going to pose a problem in the end though,” he says, before giving Kenma a small wave. “Hey, Kenma-kun.”

Kenma lifts his hand briefly, before turning back to Kuroo. “What does he mean ‘a problem’?”

Kuroo doesn’t meet his gaze. “Have you eaten?”

“Kuro . . .”

Kuroo glances toward Futakuchi, who’s standing near the back of the room, watching everything avidly, jotting down things on his notepad every once in a while. “You should eat. The cafeteria is downstairs. Well, you know where it is.”

Gently, he steers Kenma away from the monitors, guiding him toward the door and out into the hall. Kenma doesn’t resist, but he frowns, not liking the way Kuroo is avoiding his question. Once they’re away from everyone, Kuroo turns Kenma around and cups his face in his hands, tilting it up so their eyes meet. Kuroo’s hands are rough but warm, but Kenma doesn’t focus on that. Instead, he studies Kuroo’s expression, the lines in it, the way his lips twitch downward every so slightly, before lifting in his usual, carefree smile.

It’s fake, and Kenma feels it like a nail driven into his heart.

“Nothing’s going to happen to Hinata. I promise,” Kuroo says, and Kenma can hear the sincerity in his voice. But it’s an empty promise, and they both know it. Shouyou may be fine during the exam, but what about afterwards? The way he made it sound, it seems like Shouyou’s a promising candidate, which means he’s likely to be chosen for a Soldier.

And Kuroo can’t promise that nothing will happen to him then.

“Go eat, and then wait for me in Sawamura’s office, okay?” Kuroo says, lightly running his thumb under Kenma’s eye.

“You mean your office,” Kenma corrects softly, not missing the way Kuroo’s face flinches at the amendment.

“Go eat,” Kuroo says again, bending to place a small kiss on Kenma’s forehead before moving his hands back to Kenma’s shoulders, turning him, and giving him a gentle push down the hall.

Kenma frowns, but he is hungry, so he starts off down the hall toward the elevator. He tells himself
he’ll make Kuroo let him watch the rest of the exam after he finishes eating. There are a couple people in the elevator when it arrives, so Kenma ducks his head and hurries inside, pressing himself back against a corner, relieved that someone has already pushed the button for his floor. Nobody talks to him, which is fine with him, and he slides his hands into the waistband of his skirt, slouching forward and staring at the floor until the elevator dings. He glances up then, sees his floor number above the door, and hurries off the elevator.

Once he’s in the hall, he breathes easier, straightening somewhat as he begins to walk toward the cafeteria. As soon as he arrives, he grabs a tray and heads for the dessert section, bypassing the vegetables and meat Kuroo would most likely tell him to choose. Instead, he reaches for a slice of apple pie, his stomach growling louder, as the sweet smell of cinnamon wafts up toward his nose. He turns toward the seating area of the cafeteria then, biting his lip.

There aren’t a lot of people, and Kenma easily spots familiar faces a few tables down. He hurries over, careful not to spill his tray. As he gets closer, he’s able to hear snippets of Oikawa and Iwaizumi’s conversation, and one word in particular stands out to him.

“. . . which is why we need Kyoutani,” Oikawa is saying, pointing his chopsticks across the table at Iwaizumi.

“Kentarou?” Kenma asks, blinking at the two of them.

Oikawa starts, turning in his seat. His expression brightens when he sees Kenma, and he gestures for him to sit beside him. “Kenma! How lovely to see you! You know our little Mad Dog-chan?”

Kenma nods, taking a seat beside him. “Why do you need him?” he asks, spearing his fork through the pie to take a bite.

Iwaizumi and Oikawa exchange a glance. Kenma notices the barely perceptible shake of the head that Iwaizumi gives Oikawa, but Oikawa turns back to Kenma to reply.

“He used to work for us,” Oikawa explains. “He was a volunteer for the Super Soldier Program before Iwa-chan. But . . . something went wrong and he . . .” Oikawa stops, shaking his head and waving his hand as if brushing off a bad memory. “But! I think he could be useful to us again! His blood could hold the key to fixing Iwa-chan and Kuroo and the rest!”

Kenma wrinkles his nose. “But if something went wrong with him, why do you think he can help now?”

“I’m not sure if he will or not. That’s why I need to study him. He doesn’t need injections of the serum to keep him alive, so that’s one thing we can look into as well. It could help us find a complete cure,” Oikawa says, his eyes bright.

Iwaizumi sighs from across the table. “Yahaba-san isn’t going to let us have him,” he says pointedly. “You should try a different angle, Oikawa.”

Oikawa shoots him a glare. “I’m trying to cover all my angles, Iwa-chan,” he says, and Kenma gets the feeling they’ve been arguing about this for a while.

Oikawa turns back to Kenma with what could be called a hopeful look, but there’s a spark in his gaze that causes Kenma to lean away slightly. “Will you talk to him, Kenma?” he asks, reaching forward to grab Kenma’s free hand to clasp in both of his. “Maybe he’d listen to you. This could help us with Kuroo as well.”

He gives Kenma such a pointed look that Kenma feels prickles of heat dance across the back of his
He pulls his hand away, turning back to his pie, shoulders rising to his ears. He feels like he’s being manipulated, but he isn’t sure if he minds if it means helping Kuroo. But then again, he doesn’t want to subject Kyoutani to any further experiments. He’s seen the look in the man’s eyes, the look that reminds him of a wild animal trapped in a cage. He doesn’t think further experimentation is going to help him, even if it does end up helping Kuroo and the rest.

Not for the first time, Kenma wishes Kuroo had never gotten mixed up in this program.

And now Shouyou . . .

“Um, Oikawa-san?”

They all freeze and turn to look at the newcomer. Kenma recognizes him as Kageyama Tobio, one of the scientists that helped Oikawa recruit Kuroo in the first place. While he’s grown to know Oikawa well enough that he doesn’t resent him anymore, the same can’t be said for Kageyama, especially since the younger man took Oikawa’s position from him. (Which, Kenma knows that isn’t exactly what happened, but he’s still bitter about it for Oikawa’s sake.)

“Not now, Tobio-chan, I’m eating,” Oikawa says, gesturing to his already empty tray.

Kageyama glances at it and then looks back at Oikawa. “I need to talk to you about the serum—”

“I said I’m eating. As in, this is my lunch break. As in, go away.”

Iwaizumi frowns. “Oikawa, don’t bully him,” he admonishes softly.

“He’s bothering me!” Oikawa turns back to Kageyama with a frown. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait until later.”

Kenma blinks, taking in Kageyama’s flushed cheeks, Oikawa’s glare, and Iwaizumi’s weary expression. The atmosphere is tense, and Kenma wonders if he can take his pie and sneak away without anyone noticing. Kageyama shifts on his feet, glancing at the folder he’s clutching in his hands.

“It’s actually—”

But Oikawa has turned back around and is staunchly ignoring him now.

Kageyama looks pained. “Oikawa-san . . .”

Oikawa stares across the table at Iwaizumi. “What should we do tonight, Iwa-chan? Go out or stay in?”

Iwaizumi gives him a withering look but replies in a monotone. “Stay in. I’m tired.”

“Oikawa-san.”

“Hm, yes, we could order in. Or I could make you something!”

“You’re a terrible cook.”

Kageyama is starting to look frustrated, and his hands that hold the folder tremble. Kenma feels something akin to pity well up inside him, though he isn’t sure what to do about it. Kageyama finally seems to notice him though and turns to look at him. He holds out the folder. Kenma stares at it, guessing he can’t escape now.
“Could you please give this to him?” he says, glaring at the folder instead of Kenma’s face. “It’s really important.”

Kenma takes the folder slowly.

Oikawa glances over and scrunches his nose. “Don’t take that from him, Kenma-chan. You’re going to get Tobio-chan sickness. You won’t be cute anymore.”

Kenma blinks. Kageyama grits his teeth.

“It’s information about the serum that Yachi-kun gathered from the samples I sent her,” he says directly to Kenma, ignoring Oikawa. He bows then stiffly. “Thank you.” He says it like the words have been dragged from his mouth kicking and screaming. Turning on his heel then, he stalks off.

Kenma opens the folder to peer inside. His brain immediately starts swirling in confusion at the mess of numbers and words he doesn’t understand. He places it on the table between him and Oikawa, returning to his pie.

“You should probably take a look at that anyway,” Iwaizumi says pointedly.

Oikawa looks at the folder as though it’s a spider set on biting him. “It’s probably his formula for removing fear, which is a stupid plan that I want nothing to do with.”

Iwaizumi sighs, reaching across the table to pick up the folder. “He knows that, though, so it could be something else. I’m taking it.”

Oikawa throws up his hands. “Fine! But I’m not looking at it when we get home. I still need to work on my strategy for getting Mad Dog-chan to join our team.” Here he glances sidelong at Kenma.

Kenma looks back at him wordlessly, fitting the last piece of pie into his mouth. He stands then, picking up his tray. “Look at the folder, Tooru,” he says. There’d been something in Kageyama’s eyes, a desperation that seemed unlike him. He didn’t appear to be the type of person to ask for help, yet he came to Oikawa despite knowing the man didn’t like him.

Oikawa pouts. “Everyone is conspiring against me,” he laments.

Ignoring him, Kenma walks to place his tray above the trash bin, before heading out of the cafeteria. He wonders if he can manage to sneak back into the control room to watch the exam, but he knows Kuroo will probably force him out the door again. Sighing, he heads back to Kuroo’s office to resume his game, trying to keep the worry over Shouyou from burning a hole through his stomach.

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Hinata is exhausted. He knows he has plenty of stamina, but it’s been hours since the exam started, and he’s scaled buildings and piles of debris, fought his way through an actual fire (where that blanket in Lev’s bag really came in handy), and knocked down rotting walls to collect various items that have made his backpack heavier and heavier. He has no idea why he needs a crowbar, a key, a pair of scissors, and a screwdriver, but the instructions told them to retrieve these items and they were supposed to be following Kuroo’s words to the letter.

Around noon, however, they have to stop. Hinata’s stomach is growling and he can hear Lev’s
complaining as well. The sun is high in the sky, and Hinata’s taken off his jacket and his shirt is sticking to him with sweat and dirt. He feels grimy and gross, but he feels like they’re making progress, and that allows him to take the time to rest and get his snacks out. He flops down beside a building, and Lev folds his long legs to sit beside him. He pulls a delicious smelling bento out of his bag, though it seems a little squished.

“Can I have some?” Hinata asks, grabbing his stomach. “I only packed some umaibo. I didn’t think the exam would take this long. I thought I’d be home already.”

“Oh, sure,” Lev says with a grin. “Actually, I have two bentos!” He reaches into his bag once more to pull out the second one. This he hands over to Hinata. “Yaku-san always packs more than I need, just in case.”

Hinata unwraps the bento carefully. The top of the box is bending inward slightly, due to the things Lev piled on top of it, but when he opens it the food is still arranged well. “Thanks for the food,” he calls, placing his palms together. Lev follows suit and then the two begin eating.

“Oh wow! This is great! Yaku-san is a good cook!” Hinata exclaims, as his mouth explodes with flavor. He hums happily, rocking back and forth in his seat as he eats.

“He’s an amazing cook!” Lev says proudly. “I keep telling him he should be a chef instead of a policeman, since it’s probably safer too, but he says I’d get myself killed if he left me alone in the force.”

Hinata tilts his head, not thinking Lev sounds disgruntled by that. “Is Yaku-san your boyfriend?” he asks curiously, noting the way Lev’s cheek seem to turn pink whenever he talks about his roommate and mentor.

Lev’s face reddens further. “Of course not. That’s silly,” he says, shaking his head. He looks down at his bento then, eyelashes fluttering against his fine cheekbones. “He doesn’t see me like that.”

“Oh,” Hinata says, and then because Lev seems sad now, he adds, “I’m sorry.” It seems strange to him, though, that Yaku would go to so much trouble for Lev if he didn’t like him at least.

But before he can say as much, a young man a little older than them comes stumbling around the side of the building. He has shortly cropped hair and his face is bloodied, as are his hands, and he’s limping. His clothes are torn and rumpled, dust and dirt clinging to him. Hinata swallows down the last of his bento and stands quickly.

“Are you okay?” he asks, rushing over.

“I-I’m fine,” the man says, grabbing Hinata’s arm. His fingers leave smears of blood against his skin. “But my partner! He-he fell. I can’t carry him, and I just . . . we need help!”

Lev approaches slowly, setting his half-eaten bento back into his bag. He pulls out the latest note of instructions, frowning down at them. “But . . . Kuroo-san says that we need to go straight for the building in the center of the city. We have everything we need to open the box, and we shouldn’t let anything distract us.” He holds the letter out for both of them to see. “Right there, see?”

Hinata frowns at the words scrawled across the page.

You have the final piece of the puzzle, congratulations! Now, go directly to where your box sits on the roof of the bank in the center of the city. If you meet anyone on your way, do not let yourself get distracted. The exam is nearing to a close, and the clock is ticking. If you do not open the box before thirteen hundred hours, you will forfeit the exam. Good luck.
Hinata bristles, glancing at his phone for the time. It’s already twelve-thirty, and he knows it’ll take them at least ten more minutes to reach that building. But the man before him is looking at him with such desperation; can he really leave him and his partner to suffer? He has to help them, doesn’t he?

“What the hell, Kuroo,” he mutters, frowning at the note. “So we have to choose between helping someone in need and passing the exam?”

Lev nods seriously. “I . . . I’m going to the bank,” he says. “Kuroo-san probably already knows that this man is hurt and will send someone to help himself, right? So we should concentrate on finishing the exam.” He bites his lip, glancing at the man apologetically. “It’s what Yaku-san would do. He’s always telling me to look at the bigger picture. We have to beat the exam, right?” He looks down at Hinata, his eyes wide and pleading.

Hinata glances between him and the man still clutching his arm with bloodstained fingers.

“Please,” the man says. “I-I know you want to win, but my partner is really hurt.”

Hinata runs his hand over his face. “Ugh, okay, Lev here.” He tosses him his bag, which Lev catches clumsily. “Everything you need to open the box is in there. Good luck.” He turns to the man then. “Take me to your partner.”

“Hinata-kun . . .” Lev says hesitantly. “If you do this you’ll fail.”

Hinata throws his hands in the air. “I’ll fight Kuroo for another chance then!” he says. “Just go, Lev. Win for both of us.” He sticks out his hand, which Lev shakes hesitantly.

He turns with the man then, and as he leads Hinata through the debris back from where he’d approached, Hinata wonders if he’s really made the right choice. His stomach is twisting, and he can see his uniform with the symbol of the flying crow fading further into the distance. He clenches his fists at his sides, wondering why this had to happen. Why did this man have to appear right now? Right when he was so close to getting what he wanted?

He wanted to fight. He wanted to be able to protect his family and Kenma and everyone else in Japan. He wanted to stand alongside his heroes, the ones who inspired him and motivated him to do better, to be better than he was. The world isn’t the same; he isn’t the same. And so he can’t live the same life he did before and waste his potential. And yes, there is a part of him that wants to fight for the glory of being a hero, but that selfish desire aside, what the Flying Crows do is a good thing. They’re saving lives and that’s amazing to Hinata. It’s such an important job, and he wants it with everything he has.

He imagines himself standing beside Kuroo, his feet planted on a kaiju’s neck after defeating it. There’s cheering from the crowd in front of him, and Kuroo is rubbing his hair, telling him he’s done well.

“I want to stand on a kaiju’s neck,” he mutters wistfully.

“What was that?” the man beside him asks, walking beside him with long, quick strides.

Hinata blinks and then sighs. “Nothing,” he says.

They turn a corner, and Hinata can see the body of another man slouched against a wall. He’s covered in blood, but something doesn’t seem right to Hinata. He doesn’t seem to be in pain. In fact, he’s flipping through his phone absently. When he looks up and sees the two approaching him, however, he quickly drops the phone and clutches his side with a grimace.
“Oh good, you’re here,” he says, his voice strained.

“I brought help,” the first man says, kneeling beside is partner.

Hinata watches the two, tilting his head. “What’s going on here?” he asks slowly. “I thought you said your partner was really hurt.”

The two men exchange looks. “Um, he is really hurt,” the first says.

“Yeah, look at all this blood,” the second says, gesturing to the stain on his shirt over his side.

Hinata crosses his arms. “Who are you?” he asks, narrowing his eyes.

The first man sighs, running a hand over his closely shaved head. “My name is Narita,” he says. “Narita Kazuhito. This is Kinoshita Hisashi.”

Kinoshita lifts a blood-covered hand. “Yo.”

Narita sighs. “This was supposed to be part of the exam,” he explains. “But Kinoshita’s a horrible actor.” He frowns at his partner.

Hinata stares at the two in confusion. “Wait! So others are going through this same test too? So they’ll be distracted from the box as well! That means I still have time to win!”

He turns to sprint off, but Narita grabs his arm, shaking his head.

“Hinata-kun, the exam is over,” he admits.

Hinata stares. “It’s over?”

Kinoshita nods. “Kuroo-san wanted to see what each team would choose. He said this would be the final determining factor on who would go on to become a Soldier and who wouldn’t.”

Hinata continues staring. He has no idea if this is a good thing for him or not. It seems like choosing to help someone over winning was the right choice to make, but what if Kuroo failed him because he didn’t follow the instructions? Soldiers were supposed to obey their commanding officers no matter what, right?

He can feel his hands trembling, his entire body vibrating. His stomach is turning flips, and he can feel the blood draining from his face. Narita and Kinoshita look on with concern.

“Are you all right?” Narita asks.

“Did I win or lose?” Hinata blurts out. “Was I supposed to help you or was I supposed to go with Lev?!”

Kinoshita pushes himself up to stand. “That’s not for us to say, but we can take you to Kuroo-san now.”

He beckons for Hinata to follow him, which he does in a slight daze. It doesn’t seem right, for the exam to be simply over just like that. It feels too easy. Why was he told to go on all those side missions to get the extra supplies if he wasn’t even going to use them? He knows he probably did something wrong, but trying to save a fallen soldier couldn’t be wrong, could it?

He wishes he knew how Kuroo’s mind works.
Narita and Kinoshita lead him to a parked car about a half-mile away. As he climbs into the backseat, he can’t help but wonder if Lev made it to the box or not. He sits silently and frowns down at his hands throughout the entire ride, twiddling his thumbs and fighting the urge to throw up.

They park outside the base and lead Hinata inside. He feels rather disgusting in the new, clean environment, and he feels better when they enter the base and he sees dozens of young men standing about looking just as filthy and exhausted as he. Hinata easily spots Lev among them and hurries over, tugging on his shirt.

“Lev!”

“Hinata-kun!” Lev looks down at him, eyes widening. “I’m so sorry! I tried to get to the box, but these men in military uniforms came and grabbed me before I could! Then they brought me here.” His shoulders slump. “I think we failed.”

Hinata feels his stomach drop. He gives Lev’s arm a squeeze anyway, wondering how he was supposed to cheer Lev up when he feels the weight of disappointment settling over him. Before he can think of anything to say, Kuroo appears on the balcony above, hands spread out on the railing in front of him.

“Greetings young hopefuls,” he says with a shit-eating grin that makes Hinata want to punch him. “Congratulations on making it through the SSP’s physical exam. I won’t give you your scores here, but I’d like to see each of you in my office. Well done, though! You should be proud of what you accomplished today, even if, well, most of you failed.”

Mumbles of outrage and disbelief ripple through the crowd. Hinata clenches his hands into fists, frowning up at Kuroo and watching the man smirk as he surveys the group. When his eyes land on Hinata, he points directly at him.

“Yo, Shrimpy. You first.”

Lev gives him a sympathetic look. “Good luck,” he says, resting his hand on Hinata’s shoulder to give it a squeeze.

Hinata nods, straightening and pushing through the group of grumbling potentials to walk toward the stairs. He climbs them quickly, skipping over steps, and then bursts into Kuroo’s office just as the man is sitting down at his desk.

“What the hell was that ending?” he demands loudly.

Kuroo blinks at him. “Please shut the door,” he says, gesturing to the seat in front of him.

Hinata slams the door shut behind him with a scowl, stalking up to the desk then and planting both hands on it, leaning forward to frown in Kuroo’s face. Kuroo smirks, looking for all the world like a yakuza leader, conniving and evil. Hinata refuses to let that intimidate him though and darkens his scowl.

“I was so close to getting the box! I would have too if you hadn’t cut the exam short! Where you trying to make us fail?”

“Shouyou, you’re too loud.”

Hinata starts, whirling around to look at Kenma, who’s seated in the chair beside the empty one Kuroo had gestured toward. His knees are drawn up, and he’s slouched down, hands on his PSP. He blinks over his knees at Hinata, eyes roving over him from the top of his head to his shoes and then
back up again. Hinata feels his face flushing, knowing he probably looks terrible.

“Are you okay?” Kenma asks, sitting up straighter. He gestures to his nose.

Hinata pokes a nostril gingerly. It doesn’t hurt as much as it did before, though it still stings, and he can tell that it’s swollen. “I think I fractured it. But I’m okay.”

Kenma sends a glare over to Kuroo, who puts his hands up defensively.

“I didn’t tell him to go swinging into the side of a building.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Hinata says, turning back to Kuroo with a frown. “What was that twist at the end supposed to prove? That no matter how hard you work you can still fail at the end?”

Kuroo tilts his head. “Is that what you got out of it?” He leans back in his seat, twirling a pen between his long fingers. “I mean, that’s a pretty good lesson in of itself, but no, that’s not what it proved. And you didn’t fail, by the way.”

Hinata feels his heart leap in his chest. “I didn’t?”

Kuroo shakes his head. “The main goal of the physical exam is, of course, to make sure you all are physically capable of handling yourselves in an unstable environment, but I wanted to see more than just if you guys could climb piles of rubble quickly and sprint through rough terrain.

“I wanted to see what you guys would choose: glory or humanity. You stopped to help someone who’d been hurt, despite my instructions to stay on the box. I mean, yes you should usually obey your orders, but things happen on the battlefield. Unpredictable things. And sometimes people get hurt. The fact that you helped Kinoshita told me that you’d make a good Soldier. You have the heart for it. Taking down kaiju is important, but it’s not all about following orders. Sometimes you gotta disobey in order to do the right thing, though it’s not necessarily the smart thing.” He stops, tapping his chin with the pen and looking thoughtful.

Hinata’s head is swimming. He’s still stuck on the fact that he didn’t fail the exam. “So I won? I beat the exam?” he asks slowly. “I can be a Soldier?”

Kuroo sets down his pen. “You still have to pass the psychological exam,” he says. “But I think you’ve proven yourself worthy of the Soldier title, yes.” He grins, a real one this time. “Congrats, Shrimpy. You’re Soldier material.”

Hinata pumps his fist in the air. “YAHOO! I DID IT! I WON!”

Kenma sets his feet down, moving to stand. “Shouyou,” he says, his voice flat. “Let’s go home. You need to clean yourself up before we go out.”

Hinata turns to Kenma in confusion. “Huh?”

Kenma sighs, bending to pick up his backpack from the floor. “The Kingdom Hearts game, remember?”

A lightbulb flashes in Hinata’s head, and he smacks his forehead. “Oh right! Sorry! Let’s go!” He’s still feeling giddy about his exam results, and so he doesn’t notice the way Kenma frowns at Kuroo before they leave the office.
Kenma’s quiet on the way home. He’s usually quiet, Hinata supposes, but there seems to be something different about this quiet. He’s like an angry quiet, though Hinata’s not sure why he would be angry when he made it out of the exam alive and well. To try and distract Kenma from whatever bad thing he’s feeling, Hinata tells him about how he and Lev managed to make it through all the tests. He’s in the middle of describing how he figured out that the scissors were under the floorboards of an apartment building when Kenma interrupts him.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he says.

Hinata glances up at him over his shoulder, stopping at a crosswalk. As he waits for the pedestrian light to turn green, he studies his best friend’s face. Kenma doesn’t meet his gaze but stares off down the street instead.

Hinata bites his lip. “Are you mad at me?” he asks. “I’m really sorry I blew you off this morning, but I couldn’t miss this exam.”

Kenma purses his lips. “I’m not mad,” he says, though it seems like a lie to Hinata.

Hinata reaches for Kenma’s hand, but he moves it away under the guise of brushing his hair behind his ear.

“The light’s green,” he prompts.

Frowning, Hinata turns back around and peddles forward. The excitement from earlier is starting to taste sour in his mouth, and he wishes he knew what to say to make Kenma feel better. But nothing comes to mind besides saying that he won’t become a Soldier, and that’s not something he can promise. So instead he falls silent, and since Kenma doesn’t offer any new topics for conversation, the ride home is tense and quiet.

Hinata’s mother seems to realize that things aren’t good, because she immediately goes to make hot cocoa for the both of them. Kenma sits in the corner of the couch with his PSP, while Hinata escapes to the shower. He’d like to take a bath and soak and think about what to do to make Kenma smile again, but he isn’t sure he has the time, so he rinses himself off as quickly as he can. Remembering how Kenma dressed up for him, he chooses his best pair of jeans and a soft black sweater that his mom says looks good on him.

After drying his hair, Hinata hops back into the living room. If he can make himself be positive and happy, maybe it will rub off on Kenma. He grins and reaches out to grab Kenma’s knee, giving it a small shake.

“I’m ready to go!” he says brightly.

Kenma glances up at him, taking in his outfit. A tiny smile curls his lips, and Hinata feels something like triumph warm his chest. Kenma pauses his game, setting it back inside his backpack, before moving to stand.

“Okay,” he says, taking Hinata’s hand and pulling him toward the door.

“Wait! Where are you two going?” Hinata’s mom asks, stepping out from the kitchen. “Shouldn’t you be resting, Shouyou?”

“I’ll rest later, Okaasan!” Hinata chirps. “Right now I have a date with Kenma to go get the new Kingdom Hearts game!” He grins, glancing at Kenma quickly in time to see a faint blush color his cheeks, before he lets his hair swing forward to hide his face.
His mom blinks, but then a gentle smile brightens her face. “Oh, well okay then. Will you be home for supper?”

Hinata shook his head. “I’ll eat at Kenma’s,” he says, looking to his friend for confirmation.

Kenma says nothing, but he nods his head. Hinata waves goodbye to his mom and Natsu, before stepping forward to pull Kenma out of the apartment. This time as they ride toward the only shopping mall left open in the area, he chatters on about the new features this game is supposed to have, Kenma chiming in every once in a while. It’s a completely different atmosphere than before, and Hinata finds himself starting to relax again.

They enter the mall and head directly toward the gaming store. Hinata can see the way Kenma’s entire being lights up with excitement the minute they walk through the doors. His face is bright, eyes wide. He doesn’t hunch forward self-consciously, and he practically runs toward the display for the new game. He picks one up in his hands reverently, smoothing his hand over the front of it.

Hinata grins, skipping over to join him. “Do you really have the money to buy this, Kenma?” he asks, picking up a case himself to look over the description on the back.

Kenma nods. “I took Kuroo’s credit card out of his wallet this morning,” he says.

Hinata blinks and then laughs. “Won’t he be mad when he sees the charge?”

“I don’t care.” Kenma says, holding the game to his chest, looking around the store then. “Do you want the new PS5? I know you still have the PS3.”

Without waiting for Hinata’s stuttering reply, Kenma turns and walks over to the consoles, bending to inspect the tags. Hinata rushes over, waving his hands.

“Wait, wait, that’s too expensive! Kuroo is going to kill us!”

“He won’t.” Kenma chooses a box, hoisting it up under his arm. His hands now full, he turns to look at Hinata, his gaze steady. “Is there anything else you want?”

Hinata isn’t sure what to say. He’s at a complete loss once again. He’s used to Kenma buying him little things, a keychain here, a phone charm there. He does the same for Kenma. But this is too much. It’s like Christmas; only it’s only the beginning of November, so he feels completely unprepared for this generosity. Besides, he gets the feeling Kuroo isn’t going to appreciate a 78,000 JPY charge on his credit card bill.

“N-no, this is fine,” Hinata says, feeling a little faint.

Kenma purses his lips but nods and makes his way toward the cashier. Hinata hurries after him.

“Why are you doing this? You don’t have to buy all this for me!” Hinata exclaims, shaking his head.

“I want to,” Kenma says plainly, looking at the card he’s handing over to the girl behind the cash register and not her face.

“But it’s too much! How am I supposed to repay you?” Hinata asks, gripping his hair.

Kenma says nothing, and his silence makes Hinata feel suddenly uneasy. Is Kenma expecting something from him? Is that why he’s buying these things? Is this a manipulation tactic? But Kenma wouldn’t do that to him, right? Or at least, he’d admit that’s what he was doing if it was . . .
Kenma lifts the bag that contains the new console and game, turning to Hinata. “Let’s get some mochi,” he says, turning and leaving the store.

Hinata follows him quickly. He grabs Kenma’s arm before he can walk toward the mochi stand, looking up at his friend with a faint frown.

“Kenma, what’s going on?”

Kenma looks off to the side. “I just want to play more games with you. It’ll be easier now that you have the new console so you don’t always have to come over to mine for us to play together.”

Hinata lets go of him, rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s . . . pretty cool, I guess,” he says, not sure why his stomach feels so squeamish. Kenma still won’t look at him. “But I’m not going to be able to play much once I become a Soldier.”

Kenma starts walking again without replying. Hinata still can’t shake his uneasiness, but he finds himself hurrying after Kenma. He doesn’t want to ruin their day out, so he forces his stomach to settle, ordering some mochi and allowing Kenma to pay. They find a seat and discuss the new Kingdom Hearts worlds, describing which ones they think will be cool and which ones they’re pretty sure will be lame. Hinata finds himself relaxing once more, laughing when Kenma makes a joke, his heart swelling each time Kenma laughs as well. It feels right. It feels comfortable. Almost like the way things used to be before July 10th.

It really is great to see Kenma laughing.

Hinata feels warm and happy on their way home. Kenma’s hands grip his shoulders, and he can hear the rustling of the bag hanging on the crook of his arm. The console’s box bounces against his back every now and then, jabbing him with the corners, but Hinata doesn’t mind. He thinks ahead to when he can play the game, wondering how many new worlds he can explore before he has to go home.

Kenma says they should go to his apartment first, so as to not bother his mother, and Hinata agrees. He can get pretty loud when he plays games, so he understands the need for consideration. He can feel his excitement thrumming through his veins, causing the hairs on his arms to prickle. He’s not sure why he’s getting like this, but maybe it’s just left over adrenaline from the exam and the knowledge that he actually passed. He’s going to be a Soldier. He’s going to be famous like Kuroo and save lives.

He can’t wait.

Kenma seems much more subdued once they enter the apartment, though. He sets the console down by the door as they take off their shoes, and Hinata sings out a “sorry for intruding,” despite no one else being home.

Kenma then pads over to the TV, crouching in front of it to set up his own console. Hinata makes himself comfortable on the couch, folding his legs underneath him and then taking the controller that Kenma hands to him. Once the game starts, they’re both fully engrossed in the story, each taking turns going through the different worlds, and Hinata doesn’t notice that Kenma is getting closer to him until he leans to the side and almost knocks heads with him.

“Sorry!” he exclaims, leaning away.

Kenma turns to look at him, blinking slowly, and Hinata feels that uneasiness from before leap into his stomach. He bites his lip, glancing toward the screen before looking back at Kenma. Is it just him
or did Kenma get even closer than before? He starts leaning further back, getting dangerously close to the edge of the couch.

“Um, Kenma? What are you—”

Kenma cuts him off with a kiss, soft and quick against his lips. Hinata is so shocked that he stiffens immediately before falling off the couch with a squawk, the controller flying out of his grasp. He lands on his back, blinking up at Kenma in complete astonishment, his legs still hanging over the seat of the couch.

“Wh-what?”

Hinata reaches up to touch his lips, which are still burning from the warmth of Kenma’s. Kenma stares down at him, his face void of expression as usual, though his cheeks seem a little pinker than before. He moves off the couch, kneeling beside Hinata. Hinata sits up quickly, his heart pounding. His stomach feels like it’s doing summersaults. He’s never been kissed before, and he’s not entirely sure how he feels about Kenma being his first.

“What did you do that for?” he asks, pulling his legs off the couch and crossing them.

“Don’t join the SSP,” Kenma says softly.

“Hah?!” Hinata stares. What does a kiss have to do with that?

Kenma’s gaze falters. He looks down at the floor briefly before sneaking another glance up toward Hinata’s face. “If it’s about the money, I can buy you things. Whatever you want. Kuroo won’t mind.” He shakes his head quickly. “You can have anything, Shouyou. Anything. Even . . .” He stops, and Hinata can see the way his throat bobs, as he swallows hard.

Slowly, Kenma’s hand reaches forward, and two fingers curl into the waistband of Hinata’s jeans. Hinata stares at them incredulously, like they’re alien fingers. That would be the only logical explanation here. He’s been abducted and this is a strange, alien-drug induced dream. His heart thuds rapidly in his chest, starting to worm its way into his throat.

Kenma leans forward again, pressing a light kiss against the corner of Hinata’s lips, as his hand moves across Hinata’s abdomen, trailing prickles of heat. Hinata’s skin feels tight and tingly, but he isn’t sure if he likes it. It feels strange. This is Kenma, his best friend. He’s never looked at him in that way, so why . . .?

“You could have this too,” Kenma murmurs, and his voice breaks on the words. “I’d give you this if you just . . . don’t become a Soldier.”

Suddenly everything makes perfect sense. With a grimace, Hinata takes Kenma’s wrist, pulling his hand away, as he leans back once more. Kenma isn’t looking at him, but instead staring off to the side, his face a bright crimson now.

“Kenma,” Hinata says, shaking his head. “I don’t want that from you. I don’t want anything from you. I want to be a Soldier.”

Kenma snatches his hand away, sitting back on his heels with a faint frown. His gaze moves back to Hinata’s face, and Hinata flinches at the cold anger he sees in them.

“Why are you being so selfish?” Kenma asks in a clipped voice.

Hinata’s eyes widen, as his jaw drops. “I’m being selfish?” He can’t believe this. “You’re the one
trying to manipulate me into not saving the world by buying me things and-and trying to seduce me!”

Kenma’s features flinch, and he moves to stand. “Maybe I just don’t want my other best friend to go through the pain I’ve had to watch Kuroo go through,” he says, his voice still quiet but sharpened around the edges like a thin blade. “It’s not worth it, Shouyou. The kaiju just keep coming and even if you can defeat all of them, you’ll still be addicted to the serum.”

Hinata leaps to his feet. “I don’t care about that!” he exclaims. “Kenma, this is about protecting my family! Protecting you! I don’t care if I’m in pain. I want to be a hero and save people! Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Not when you’ll be throwing away your life for a cause that won’t give you any gratification!” Kenma snaps, his own voice rising now.

“I’ll be saving lives! That’s plenty gratification!” Hinata says, waving his arms for emphasis. “And it’s not like I’ll be going anywhere! I’m still going to live next door. I’m still going to be your best friend!”

“No. You won’t,” Kenma says flatly.

Hinata freezes. “What-what are you talking about?” he asks, his heart stopping in his throat, causing him to choke on the words.

Kenma turns away, looking down at the floor. “I’m not going to watch someone else I care about lose himself to the serum. I can’t go through that again. I won’t.”

Hinata feels tears burning the corners of his eyes. “So you’re saying if I become a Soldier you’re not going to be my friend anymore?”

Kenma hesitates, then nods.

Hinata curls his hands into fists. He wants to scream. He wants to punch something. But there’s only Kenma, and he can’t punch Kenma, despite the overwhelming urge he feels to strangle him just then. He’s never felt this way toward Kenma before. It feels wrong. It makes his skin itch, and an unpleasant shiver to run down his spine. But Kenma’s being completely unreasonable.

“And you called me selfish. I can’t believe you,” he says, shaking his head, swallowing back the lump in his throat.

Kenma’s shoulders rise toward his ears. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly, and his voice holds so much regret that Hinata believes that, at least.

Hinata wants to curse at him, to grab Kenma’s shoulders and shake him until he sees reason. He isn’t doing this to hurt him. He’s doing this because, aside from the pride and the desire for fame, it’s the right thing to do. More people should be stepping up to try and save their homes, regardless of the consequences. He’s not stupid. He knows that the serum has unpleasant side effects, but that shouldn’t matter to anyone when the serum would help them fight literal monsters. Kenma’s parents died because of the kaiju. Hinata doesn’t understand why Kenma doesn’t want to fight them himself.

“I’ll just go then,” Hinata says finally, lowering his voice.

Kenma recoils, turning away from Hinata completely now. “Fine.”

Shaking his head, Hinata turns toward the door. He walks over to grab his shoes, scrubbing at his face with his sleeve once he feels the tears starting to slip down his cheeks. He pauses when he gets
to the door. He lays his hand on the knob, turning to look back at Kenma.

“I’m really going now,” he says pointedly.

Kenma doesn’t reply but remains standing where he is, staring at the ground. Hinata feels his chest ache like when Natsu sits on it sometimes during their play wrestling. He doesn’t want to leave, but he isn’t sure what else to do.

So he opens the door and steps through, shutting it quietly behind him.

***

Kuroo isn’t sure what to do about Kenma. When he got home after going through all the potential Soldier candidates, he found a new game paused on the TV and Kenma curled up under his bed in his room. It took Kuroo two hours to coax him out, and even then Kenma only crawled under his covers, pulled them over his head, and lay there without moving or saying a word.

Kuroo knows that it’s probably his own fault. He did approve Hinata for the program, after all, even though he knew Kenma wouldn’t like it. That wasn’t entirely his call, though. Everyone in the control room thought Hinata had the best stats out of everyone who participated. And he was also one of the very few to leave the box in favor of saving the injured rival. Only five had done that, and so Kuroo was left with only five young men to move on to the psychological exam. It was a lot less than he’d hoped for, and he could tell the others were disappointed with the low number as well.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t choose others as well,” Futakuchi admitted once he saw the results. “They all showed promise. Especially that tall one. What was his name? It sounded foreign.”

“Haiba Lev,” Kuroo said, not looking up from the official rejection letters he was signing. “And yeah, they were all strong and fast and got a handle on the new equipment fairly quickly, but that’s not what I’m looking for in a Soldier. Being strong and fast isn’t enough.”

Futakuchi raised an eyebrow. “I would think that that’s all the job requires. You’re fighting kaiju, not staging a coup.”

Kuroo snorted. “You don’t fight the kaiju. You don’t know what it’s like out there. None of you top brass do. You sit in your offices and shuffle money around and brag about how strong your military is, but none of you know what it takes to be truly strong out there. And I don’t want any Soldiers beside me who aren’t willing to have my back no matter what. We rely on each other out there. I need to know who’s willing to make a sacrifice to do the right thing.”

Futakuchi looked thoughtful, but he didn’t continue arguing.

Kuroo still feels as though he was disappointed in him, though. And he knows for a fact that Sawamura’s disappointed, if his voicemail demanding to know why only five candidates were chosen is any indication. It sits heavy on his shoulders, but he stands by his decision.

It helps that the other Soldiers agree with him.

“I think you’re doing great as captain,” Bokuto tells him, waving his remote in the air.

Kuroo is over at his and Akaashi’s apartment, leaving Kenma alone for the day since he’s still
moping. It’s been three days, and Kuroo’s starting to seriously worry about him. He’s not sure what to do, though, so he decided to see if Akaashi or Bokuto had any ideas.

“That exam was rough, but it taught them all some good lessons, I think!”

“Thanks, Bo,” Kuroo says with a weak smile, looking at him from across the couch.

Akaashi sits curled up between them, nursing a cup of cocoa in one hand, while his other holds a book open on his knee. “None of the candidates know about how the serum seems to be malfunctioning, though,” he points out. “Do we know if they’ll still complete the exam process when they find out?”

Kuroo winces, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m . . . not sure if I’m going to tell them.”

Akaashi fixes him with a hard stare. Bokuto gapes. Kuroo sinks further into the couch. “I don’t want to scare them off when it could be nothing! I haven’t felt any rage lately, and Akaashi isn’t experiencing the states at all.” He gestures to the young man beside him. “And yeah, Bo’s meltdown during the fight was inconvenient, but he hasn’t gotten like that since, right?”

Bokuto looks skeptical, but he shakes his head slowly.

“Kuroo-san, it hasn’t been that long. You should tell them. They need to know all the risks,” Akaashi says pointedly.

Kuroo runs his hands down over his face and groans. “It’s just . . . none of them are going to want to join if they know, and we can’t afford that right now. We need more Soldiers.” He bites his lip, worrying on it. He isn’t sure if the military will even sanction the Soldiers for serum administration if they find out about the rage states. So far they’d been able to keep the full extent of the side effect between them, Sugawara, and Oikawa. He knows there are rumors going around after Bokuto’s televised crazed attack on the kaiju, but nothing has been confirmed. Kuroo’s been careful to avoid answering any questions concerning the serum and Bokuto’s condition, stating only that Bokuto is as healthy as he can be.

Come to think of it, Kuroo is beginning to see why his popularity has decreased since he took Sawamura’s position. Even he’s getting frustrated with his lack of knowledge. He resolves to talk to Oikawa about it soon so at least if he’s going to lie to the press he can lie a little more creatively.

Neither Bokuto nor Akaashi offer any solution to his problem, so he decides to change the subject to a more pressing matter.

“I don’t know what to do about Kenma either,” he says helplessly. “He won’t get out of bed. He’s not eating either. And I’m pretty sure he hates me.” He sighs.

Akaashi shakes his head. “Kenma-kun doesn’t hate you,” he offers.

Kuroo squints at him.

Bokuto taps his chin with the remote. “We didn’t really do anything for his birthday, did we?”

Kuroo looks over at Bokuto. “No, he said he didn’t want to do anything. I mean, I got him some
“Well, your birthday is coming up, so we should celebrate both birthdays together!” Bokuto suggests, straightening his shoulders with a grin. “We could go out to eat someplace fancy! Invite Iwaizumi and Oikawa too! Make it a party!”

Kuroo hesitates. On the one hand, it does sound like fun, but on the other hand he isn’t sure how well Kenma will handle going out or if he’d want to at all. Still, it’s a good suggestion, so he nods. Standing, he stretches his arms over his head.

“Okay, you make the reservations and text me the place you picked. Kenma and I will meet you there.”

“Awesome!” Bokuto hoots, pulling out his phone.

Akaashi closes his book, looking up at Kuroo with a steady gaze. “Be gentle with him,” he says, as though Kuroo needs reminding of that.

“I’m always gentle,” he quips, waving at the two of them as he steps toward the door.

Once he’s on Nekoma heading home, however, he can’t help but wonder what he’ll do if Kenma refuses to come out. He doesn’t want to anger him further, but Kuroo knows that Kenma can’t keep wallowing in bed. It’s not healthy for one, and for another it’s not going to help repair his relationship with Hinata. The orange-haired boy has already been over twice to see Kenma, but each time Kenma refused to see him, burrowing further under his blankets instead. Kuroo knows that getting Kenma out of the apartment is probably the best thing for him, but he hopes Kenma doesn’t fight him on it, because he’s not sure he has the willpower right now to force him.

He parks Nekoma outside the building and takes in a few deep breaths. Chewing on his lip, he sets his helmet on the seat and makes his way up to their front door.

The apartment is dark and quiet, just like he knew it would be. Sighing softly, he kicks his shoes off at the door and makes his way over to Kenma’s bedroom. As he suspected, the lights are off and the covers are drawn up over a lump on the bed. There isn’t even a pale blue glow to tell him that Kenma’s on his phone or playing a game. Everything is simply dark, and not a single sound issues from the lump.

“Oh, this is getting ridiculous now,” Kuroo says, though he makes sure his tone remains gentle. He walks over to the bed, climbing up on it and curling himself around Kenma. He lowers the blankets from around Kenma’s face, looking down at his profile. Kenma’s eyes are open, but he’s staring across the room blankly.

“Hey,” Kuroo says, brushing some of his hair off his cheek, tucking it tenderly behind Kenma’s ear. “Come on. You gotta get up. Akaashi and Bokuto are making reservations. Let’s get you cleaned up so we can go.”

Kenma pulls his knees closer to his chest. “No.”

Kuroo sighs, resting his forehead against the side of Kenma’s. “Kenma, please. I know you’re upset, and I know you probably hate me, but you can’t go on like this. It’s been three days.”

“I don’t hate you,” Kenma murmurs. He shifts, turning onto his back, and Kuroo leans away to accommodate him. His eyes are red as though he’s been crying, though no tears stain his cheeks.

“You should hate me.” His eyes don’t meet Kuroo’s gaze, but look off to the side.
Kuroo frowns, running his thumb across one of Kenma’s eyebrows, lifting more hair away. “Why should I hate you?” he asks.

“Because I’m selfish,” Kenma says, looking at him finally. His brows furrow, lips torn from hours of biting turning downward. He doesn’t look angry, more . . . disappointed. But Kuroo can tell that that disappointment is directed inward.

“Everyone’s selfish, Kenma,” Kuroo tells him, smoothing his thumb over the crinkle of his forehead now, before moving it down to ghost over that small mouth. Kenma watches him, his expression turning skeptical.

“You’re not,” he says, lifting his own hand to rest three fingers against Kuroo’s own cracked lips. Kuroo feels his stomach drop at the touch, though he tells himself not to focus on that right now. Instead, he puckers his lips to kiss at the fingers, catching Kenma’s wrist in a light grip. He moves Kenma’s hand to his face to lean his cheek against it.

“I am though,” Kuroo insists quietly. “Why do you think I’m fighting so hard to keep you when I know you’d be better off with someone who can devote all their time and attention to you? Because I selfishly want you to stay by my side, even when I have so little to offer.”

Kenma shakes his head. “I want to stay with you,” he says. “You’re all I have left.”

Kuroo turns his head to kiss Kenma’s palm before leaning back further. “That’s not true, though. You have Hinata and Akaashi and Bokuto. Hell, even Iwaizumi and Oikawa are here for you. We all care about you, Kenma, and we want you to be happy. So come out and eat with us, please?”

Kenma sits up slowly. “Will Shouyou be there?” he asks, wrapping his arms around himself tightly.

Kuroo hesitates, tilting his head as he studies Kenma and his posture. “Do you want him to be?”

Kenma shakes his head. “I want to stay with you,” he says. “You’re all I have left.”

Kuroo hesitates, tilting his head as he studies Kenma and his posture. “Do you want him to be?”

Kenma shakes his head, gaze lowering.

“It’ll just be us four then. Plus Iwaizumi and Oikawa if Bokuto can get them to join. So let’s go! Do you want the bath first or . . . ?”

But Kenma’s already reaching for his phone. “You can go first,” he says, opening an app.

Kuroo shakes his head at him, though he supposes it’s good to see Kenma returning to his old self. He bathes quickly, deciding not to linger given the time, and when he steps out of the bathroom drying his hair, he hears his phone ping with a message. It’s Bokuto giving him the name of the restaurant and the time they’re meeting. Kuroo sends him a reply and gets dressed, pulling on a pair of jeans and a button down shirt that doesn’t smell. He throws his leather jacket over it, thinking he looks decent enough, and returns to Kenma’s room.

“All right, your turn,” he says, tugging on Kenma’s foot that’s sticking out from under the covers.

Kenma draws his foot back. “I’m almost done with this level,” he says.

“Fucking hell.” Kuroo shakes his head, stepping forward to grab Kenma around the waist and fling him over his shoulder.

“Kuro, what—”

“If I let you keep at it, you’ll be there all night,” Kuroo reasons. He starts carrying Kenma toward the bathroom, able to hear the soft pat pat of his thumbs tapping on the screen of his phone still. “You’re
incorrigible.”

He sets him down on the toilet seat, turning to start the water to fill up the tub. He stands then and takes the phone out of Kenma’s hand despite his mewl of protest.

“Take your bath and then you can have this back,” Kuroo says, shaking his head before exiting the room.

It takes Kenma even less time than Kuroo to bathe, and Kuroo has to fight the urge to grab Kenma and snuggle him when he sees him exit the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy towel. He sticks his hand out for his phone as soon as he sees Kuroo, but Kuroo shakes his head, pointing to the bedroom.

“Get dressed first,” he says.

Kenma frowns, but he turns to shuffle into his bedroom. As he shuts the door, Kuroo remembers to quickly add, “dress nicely! This is a fancy establishment we’re going to!”

He moves to the couch then, sitting down to wait.

To: Brokuto  
Subject: dude

*kenma just came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and he scowled at me and i have the weirdest boner right now*

From: Brokuto  
Subject: re: dude

*dude u should see akaashi when he leaves the showers at the base*

To: Brokuto  
Subject: re: re: dude

*dude we use the same showers. i have seen him*

From: Brokuto  
Subject: re: re: re: dude

*well???

To: Brokuto  
Subject: re: re: re: re: dude

*hes alright*

From: Brokuto  
Subject: dude wtf

*!!!!*

Kuroo’s attempting to stifle his laughter when Kenma exits the room and walks over to stand in front of him. He’s wearing dark jeans and a black sweater, with Kuroo’s old high school sports jacket over it. He holds out his phone pointedly, and Kuroo raises an eyebrow.

“No skirt tonight?” he asks.
“My phone.”

Kuroo laughs, handing it over. “Fine, fine. Here. But I’m very disappointed in your fashion choice this evening.”

Kenma takes his phone back without a word, and Kuroo stands. He was looking forward to seeing Kenma in a skirt again, but he knows better than to push his luck. At this rate he might never see it again, and he doesn’t want to risk that. Kenma in a skirt has haunted his dreams for days.

He’s been trying not to think about it, but the fact of the matter is he wants to have sex again. He tells himself that it’s probably best for it to remain a one-time thing, considering the fact that he can’t commit to a real relationship right now with all the responsibilities keeping him from home. But looking down at Kenma, even dressed plainly as he is now, Kuroo wants. He wants so badly that it makes his stomach and chest hurt.

As they walk toward the door to grab their shoes, he has to fight the urge to grab Kenma and pull him back, to forgo the restaurant and simply stay indoors making love all night. But of course he can’t do that, because Kenma hasn’t given him any indication that he wants to have sex again, and despite him saying that they could still have the intimacy of a lovers’ relationship, it seems wrong to expect such things when Kuroo has so little to give in return.

All he can give is love, and he wonders if that’s even enough.

They walk outside, and before they reach Nekoma, Kenma grabs Kuroo’s sleeve, pulling him to a stop. Kuroo does, turning to look down at him quizzically.

“What?”

Kenma looks up at him, the lights from the apartments above reflecting off his golden eyes, making them sparkle and shine like stars. Kuroo feels his gut clench but resists the urge to lean down to kiss him.

“What you said before,” Kenma says, tucking his hands into the pockets of Kuroo’s jacket he’s wearing. “About having little to offer me.” He shakes his head. “That’s not true, you know. You give me a lot.”

He looks embarrassed now, and he turns his face away. “You . . . take care of me. You’ve given me a home. You . . .” He stops, his shoulders rising.

But Kuroo understands, and he feels that aching hole in his chest start to fill. It doesn’t completely take away his worry and anxiety over the situation, but it’s enough to let him breathe easier. He reaches out to touch Kenma’s cheek, bending to kiss it then lightly.

“I’ll always take care of you. For as long as you want me to.” Kuroo reaches down, hooking his pinky through Kenma’s and holding it up between them for Kenma to see.

Kenma looks from their fingers to his face, bright eyes searching for something. Kuroo hopes he finds it, whatever it is.

“I trust you,” Kenma says finally.

Kuroo smiles and starts to turn away, but Kenma grabs the front of his jacket, pulling him close. Their lips meet, and Kuroo feels his stomach drop once more. He feels unsteady on his feet, so he drops the extra helmet he grabbed indoors and plants both hands on Kenma’s shoulders to steady himself. He moves them up to Kenma’s face then, cradling it between his hands, as he tilts his head.
and deepens the kiss. Kenma’s lips are rough but warm, and they open beneath him willingly. Kuroo inhales, tasting mint from Kenma’s toothpaste as he captures Kenma’s breath and makes it his own.

Kenma clutches his jacket tightly, stepping closer until their bodies are as flush as they can be with their height difference. Kuroo’s back starts to ache, but he doesn’t stop sliding his lips over Kenma, sucking gently here and there, while Kenma trembles. Their tongues meet, and Kuroo has to resist the urge to grab Kenma around the waist and pin him up against the apartment building beside them. Instead, he forces himself to pull away, his heart pounding, lips tingling.

Kenma seems rather dazed himself, and his lips glisten, slightly swollen. Kuroo blinks, shaking away the haze that’s covering his thoughts.

“I . . . thanks?” he says stupidly, because he has no idea what else to say.

Kenma blinks back at him, before snorting softly in what could be a laugh. He bends to pick up the helmet from the ground, putting it on before walking around Kuroo to straddle the back of Nekoma, strapping the helmet under his chin. Kuroo shakes himself again, following.

“You’re terrible for my health, I hope you know,” Kuroo says, flicking Kenma’s nose gently.

Kenma scrunches his nose.

Kuroo grins, starts up Nekoma and takes them into the city.

“Kenma!” Bokuto exclaims when he sees them. He bypasses Kuroo completely in order to come to a stop in front of Kenma, arms outstretched. Kenma doesn’t hesitate but steps into his waiting embrace. Bokuto lifts him off the ground as he hugs him tightly. “Are you okay?” he asks, as he gently sets Kenma back on his feet.

“Better now,” Kenma says with a small smile.

Akaashi steps up to greet them, giving Kuroo a nod before turning to Kenma himself. “It’s good to see you, Kenma-kun,” he says, brushing his fingers across Kenma’s shoulder.

Kenma gives him a small smile. “You too.”

Even Iwaizumi, standing with his arms crossed off to the side gives Kenma a nod, his stern features softening at the sight of him.

Kuroo throws his hands in the air. “Is no one happy to see me?” he asks.

Bokuto gives him a look. “We literally just saw you like, an hour ago.”

“Wow. I see how it is.”

Kenma turns to Iwaizumi. “Is Tooru not coming?” he asks.

Iwaizumi shakes his head. “He wanted to, but for once I made him stay home and work. He’s been avoiding Kageyama’s report for days.”

Kenma nods, and Kuroo claps his hands together.

“Okay! I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving. Let’s eat!”
The others follow him into the restaurant where they are shown to a private room that Bokuto reserved. The waitress is very pretty, and Kuroo can’t help but wonder if she’s trying to flirt with Bokuto as she shows them the menu, with the way she’s fluttering her eyelashes and leaning in close. He seems completely oblivious, however and keeps turning to Akaashi to show him each item she describes to him. Akaashi indulges him with a faint smile, and Kuroo remembers how Akaashi confronted him in the corner store, wondering if he’s content to keep things the way they are with Bokuto.

He knows it’s none of his business, but he can’t help but wonder if Akaashi is going to break Bokuto’s heart. They’ll have a problem if that occurs.

Trying to push that thought from his mind, Kuroo turns to Kenma beside him, but to his surprise, he’s leaning toward Iwaizumi, showing him a new game on his phone. And Iwaizumi actually seems interested. Kuroo feels somewhat betrayed and wishes Oikawa were here so they could at least talk about how pretty they are to each other or something.

Before long the waitress leaves with their orders, and Bokuto and Akaashi finally turn toward Kuroo.

“So! Are you going to want to do anything on your actual birthday?” Bokuto asks curiously.

“I’ll probably be too busy to do anything,” Kuroo admits.

“Aw, no man. That’s no fun. We’ll kidnap you,” Bokuto offers with a grin. “You can come over to mine and Akaashi’s. We’ll set up the karaoke!”

Kuroo looks skeptically over at Akaashi. “You sing karaoke?”

Akaashi flushes faintly. “Sometimes,” he admits.

“His voice is amazing,” Bokuto says with a grin, looking at Akaashi adoringly.

Akaashi’s flush deepens. “Bokuto-san,” he says admonishingly, shaking his head.

“Oikawa would love that,” Iwaizumi says with a huff, which might’ve been his version of a laugh.

Kuroo turns to him with a smirk. “I bet you’re a regular Elton John, Iwaizumi,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

Iwaizumi frowns. “Who?”

“He’s a British singer,” Kenma offers helpfully, his eyes never leaving his phone.

“I’m not singing any British songs,” Iwaizumi says, shaking his head.

“I don’t think our karaoke disc has any British songs,” Bokuto muses thoughtfully.

The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of food, and soon they’re all munching happily. Kuroo has to admit that Bokuto picked a fine restaurant. The food is delicious, and even Kenma is eating, though he sometimes misses his mouth, as his eyes never leave his phone. Kuroo grins and picks up a napkin to wipe at Kenma’s face, cleaning up the smear of sauce on it.

“Put your phone down when you eat, Messy,” he says with a laugh.

Bokuto laughs as well. “You’re such a mom, Kuroo,” he teases.
“Bokuto-san, you have something on your face too,” Akaashi says quietly, gesturing.

Bokuto’s eyes widen, and he picks up a napkin to wipe at his face, only noticing after Kuroo starts laughing that the napkin is coming away clean. He frowns at Akaashi, who only smiles back at him. Kuroo is wheezing, and even Kenma’s lips are twitching, and Iwaizumi can’t help but chuckle.

“I can’t believe this!” Bokuto exclaims, throwing his hands in the air. “Akaashi, how could you?”

“I’m sorry, Bokuto-san,” Akaashi says, but there’s nothing apologetic about his expression.

Kuroo is still fighting laughter when the waitress comes back to refill their drinks. Bokuto throws the napkin onto the table with a pout, but as he swings his arm, it knocks into the waitress’s arm, causing her to miss Iwaizumi’s glass. The liquid spills over onto his shirt and lap, and her eyes widen in horror.

“I am so sorry, sir!” she exclaims, grabbing the rest of the napkins on the table to swipe at Iwaizumi’s chest.

He grabs her wrists, stopping her. She freezes, and Kuroo feels his laughter dying in his throat, as a very familiar anger flashes through Iwaizumi’s eyes. Kuroo rises to his knees, reaching across Kenma to rest his hand on Iwaizumi’s shoulder.

“Iwaizumi-san, let it go. It was a mistake,” he says, keeping his voice calm despite the apprehension shivering through him.

“This is my favorite shirt,” Iwaizumi says in a low voice. He doesn’t sound like himself. There’s rage hovering beneath his words, far more than the situation merits.

“I-I’m so sorry,” the waitress says again, her eyes filling with tears. “Please, let me get my manager. Y-you can complain to him if you wish.”

Iwaizumi stands, pulling her up with him. He takes two long strides until she’s pinned against the wall. Kuroo immediately jumps to his feet, Bokuto at his side.

“Iwaizumi, stop!”

But Iwaizumi doesn’t listen, or else he can’t hear him. He moves one hand to the waitress’s throat, clamping around it tightly. Her eyes bulge, and she scrambles to try and pull it away, her nails digging into his skin. Iwaizumi doesn’t seem to feel it. He keeps squeezing, his dark eyes hard as flints.

Kuroo leaps around the table to grab his arm. “Bokuto!” he cries, gesturing for his friend to grab Iwaizumi’s other arm.

Bokuto starts but then leaps into action. Together they manage to drag Iwaizumi away from the woman, leaving her gasping for breath on the floor. He starts to struggle then, grunting as he pulls his arm away from Kuroo and takes a swing at him. Kuroo leaps back.

“Iwaizumi! Iwaizumi, calm down!”

An inhuman growl issues from Iwaizumi’s mouth, like nothing Kuroo has ever heard before. His expression is twisted, teeth bared, and he’s practically snarling. Akaashi rushes over to the waitress, kneeling beside her.

“Are you all right?” he asks her softly.
“I called Tooru,” Kenma says, appearing at Kuroo’s elbow.

Fear suddenly grips Kuroo’s stomach in a hard vice. Iwaizumi is obviously out of control, and his fist is still swinging. Bokuto has grabbed him under the arms and is attempting to drag him away, but he’s pushing forward toward Kuroo and Kenma. If Kenma gets hurt . . .

“Kenma, stay back,” Kuroo says, pressing his hand against Kenma’s chest and pushing him away as gently as he can.

“Let me go!” Iwaizumi shouts, turning onto Bokuto now. His fist connects with Bokuto’s jaw, and he stumbles back, his hold loosening. Iwaizumi takes the advantage, breaking free and grabbing Bokuto around the neck with both hands, shoving him up against the wall now with a cry of rage.

“Bokuto-san!” Akaashi stands quickly.

He starts to cross over, but Bokuto holds out his hand.

“Stay back, Akaashi! I can handle it!” Bokuto says, though he’s rasping, his face turning red as Iwaizumi starts to squeeze tighter. Bokuto presses his hand against Iwaizumi’s face then, pushing his head back. His other hand slams down against Iwaizumi’s arm once, twice, until there’s a snap, and Iwaizumi howls in pain, stumbling back and cradling his arm to his chest.

Bokuto drops to the floor, coughing hoarsely. Akaashi rushes to his side, kneeling beside him and laying his hand on his back.

“Bokuto-san, are you okay?” he asks, worry coloring every word.

Bokuto nods as he massages his throat, leaning into him. Kuroo watches Iwaizumi warily. He isn’t sure what’s happening, but he does recognize signs of a wild animal in Iwaizumi’s stance and behavior, and wild animals tend to grow angrier after being wounded.

Iwaizumi has fallen to his knees, and his chest is moving rapidly with his heavy breaths. His jaw is clenched, and his head is bowed. Kuroo can’t tell if that look is still in his eyes. Still holding his hand out to keep Kenma at bay, he walks forward slowly, tilting his head to try and get a good look at Iwaizumi’s face.

“Kuro . . .” Kenma’s soft voice follows him, but Kuroo waves his hand.

“Just stay there,” he says, before kneeling in front of Iwaizumi. “Iwaizumi-san?”

Iwaizumi doesn’t reply but remains hunched over his injured arm, panting.

Kuroo swallows down the anxiety that’s threatening to choke him, reaching out to lightly rest his hand on Iwaizumi’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” he murmurs. “You’re okay. You’re safe. We’re not going to hurt you again, just . . . calm down, all right?”

Iwaizumi’s head comes up at the touch, eyes blazing. Kuroo only has a second to think oh shit before his back hits the floor, and Iwaizumi is on top of him, pinning him down, his good hand around Kuroo’s neck. Kuroo’s throat burns, and tears of pain gather in his eyes, obscuring his vision. He grabs Iwaizumi’s hair in his fist and brings his head up to slam it against Iwaizumi’s face. Instantly stars dance before his eyes as pain explodes behind them, but the headbutt has the desired effect and Iwaizumi reels back.

Kuroo quickly moves into a crouch, ready for another rush this time. In his peripheral, he can see Kenma standing still as a statue, fingers clutching the cuffs of Kuroo’s jacket, arms close to his chest.
He’s chewing on his knuckle, and his eyes are wide with fear. Bokuto and Akaashi are still behind him, though the waitress has long since fled. It’s just the five of them in the room, and Kuroo tries to think quickly. If he has to fight Iwaizumi, he doesn’t want it to happen here where the others can get hurt. He has to lure Iwaizumi outside somehow.

His gaze flickers to the window beside them. It’s across the room, but if he can draw Iwaizumi over to it, perhaps he can grab him and fling them both through the glass. It’d be a hard landing, but neither of them would die from the fall.

He’s just starting to shift his weight to begin this plan, when the door bursts open and a red-faced Oikawa stumbles into the room.

“Hajime!” he yelps, the panic in his voice echoing throughout the room.

Iwaizumi instantly freezes. Kuroo knows he should take the opportunity to fling himself on the man and restrain him somehow, but he finds himself hesitating, wondering how Oikawa’s presence will affect the situation.

Oikawa hurries into the room, bypassing them all without a glance, his gaze fixed on Iwaizumi. He drops to his knees in front of him, taking his face in his hands. “Hajime, snap out of it,” he says, his voice high-pitched and trembling. “I’m here to take you home, okay? I’m here. You can stop now.”

Iwaizumi blinks slowly, and his hand comes up in a claw. Kuroo tenses, expecting Iwaizumi to grab Oikawa the same way he did Bokuto and the waitress, but instead his fingers curl into the front of Oikawa’s shirt, gripping tightly. His forehead comes forward to rest against Oikawa’s shoulder, and his own slump, as the rage leaves him.

Oikawa’s arms come up around him, rubbing his back slowly, soothingly.

Feeling like he’s intruding somehow, Kuroo turns away from the scene to look at Bokuto and Akaashi. They’re standing now, faces pale, but neither of them look permanently damaged.

“Are you both okay?” he asks anyway, just to make sure. His voice sounds gruff and unlike his usual cadence, and he clears his aching throat.

“We’re fine, Kuroo-san,” Akaashi says softly, his arm still wrapped around Bokuto.

Bokuto nods, and he looks tired, the lines around his eyes and mouth pronounced. Kuroo feels a small hand worm its way into his, clutching it tightly. When he looks down, Kenma blinks up at him.

“We should give them some privacy,” Kenma says softly.

The three of them silently agree, quietly slipping out of the room. Kuroo stops by the front to pay and apologize. He gives the waitress a handful of yen to pay for whatever medical costs she might need to cover, before they make a hasty retreat.

The sky outside is dark, and the atmosphere is heavy and solemn, as the four walk down the sidewalk. Kuroo wants to say something to lighten the mood, but he can’t think of anything. All he can conjure up in his mind is the image of Iwaizumi’s eyes as they stared at him, wild and dark, tinged with the red haze of fury. Would that happen to him at some point? Is that rage just stewing inside him, waiting for the right trigger to help it escape?

The thought honestly frightens him, and looking down at Kenma beside him, warm hand still clutching his, Kuroo feels his stomach twist with fear at the thought of crushing him against a wall the way Iwaizumi had with that waitress. Kenma and her were about the same size. It would be so
easy to break him.

Swallowing hard despite the sting in his throat, Kuroo pulls his hand away from Kenma’s. Kenma looks up at him with a questioning gaze, but Kuroo ignores it, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets instead.

The four of them continue walking with no real destination in mind. The crisp fall air brings with it the smell of dry leaves and burning wood, the lights from the apartments and houses they pass illuminating the sidewalk ahead of them. The street lamps provide light as well, but as they move away from the busier side of the city into the neighborhoods, they start to disappear.

“Hey! You four!”

They pause, turning as one, as a short policeman on a bike pulls to a stop. He holds up his wrist, indicating the watch on it. “It’s almost curfew, you shouldn’t be wandering around.”

Kuroo glances at his own watch. “We still have a couple hours,” he says.

Beside him, Kenma narrows his eyes. “Yaku-san?” he says slowly, and then stiffens as though in realization. “But if you’re here . . .”

“KENMA-SAN!”

A second policeman joins the first, and Kuroo recognizes him as that foreign kid who took the exam. He grimaces inwardly as he remembers that he failed him, but the kid doesn’t seem as broken up about it now as he had when Kuroo had to deliver the news. In fact, he looks downright cheerful, as he parks his bike and hops off it to approach Kenma with a wave. He bends down to grin into Kenma’s face, and Kenma takes a step back, frowning faintly.

“What are you doing way out here?” Lev asks. “Don’t you live in Block 6?”

“We went out to eat,” Kenma says, hugging his arms to his chest. He looks up at Kuroo with a look he knows well, the one that says _save me._

“Yo,” Kuroo says, taking a small step in front of Kenma. Lev straightens, and Kuroo grumbles inwardly at how tall he is. He still has to tilt his head back to look him in the eye.

“Kuroo-san!” Lev says excitedly, and then his expression falls. “I’m really sorry about failing the exam. I thought I was doing the right thing by following your instructions. I should’ve gone with Hinata-kun to help that person.”

Kuroo feels awkward with the apology. “Er, you didn’t do anything wrong, really. I just . . . was looking for a specific thing.”

Yaku gets off his bike, walking over to jab Lev in the side. “I already told you to stop moping about that,” he tells him sharply, as Lev grimaces and rubs his side.

“But I really wanted to be a Soldier,” Lev says sadly.

Kuroo glances between Yaku and Lev, turning to look at Bokuto and Akaashi and Kenma beside him then. Akaashi and Kenma’s expressions are blank, but Bokuto is giving him big eyes and Kuroo gets the feeling he’s about to be talked into something.

“What?” he asks with a sigh.
Bokuto scratches at his ear. “Well, I was just thinking about how we could use some cheering up, and I was going to suggest getting ice cream. I think we should invite Lev to go with us.” He grins.

Kenma sighs, but with the way Lev’s face lights up at the prospect, Kuroo can’t find it in him to say no.

“I mean, if it’s okay with his handler,” Kuroo says, gesturing to Yaku.

Yaku frowns, his lips pursed. “I’m his partner, not his handler,” he corrects, and Kuroo fights a laugh at the way Lev looks down at him in surprise.

“But Yaku-san, you do handle me really well,” he offers.

Kuroo barks a laugh, not having expected such a golden reply. Bokuto snickers as well, and Yaku responds by kicking Lev hard in the leg, causing the young man to stumble forward.

“Don’t say it like that!” Yaku exclaims, his face red.

Lev looks completely clueless, which just makes it that much better. Kuroo decides that having these two around might actually help the group’s mood immensely, so he flings his arm around Lev’s shoulders and turns him back toward the Block they’d just left.

“Sure, let’s get you ice cream,” he says with a grin.

Lev grins happily in response, grabbing his bike to push alongside them. “Is this okay, Yaku-san?” he calls over his shoulder.

Yaku throws his hands in the air. “I guess! Just . . . we have to be back in Block 12 by curfew. You know Yamaguchi-kun always needs to be reminded to stay indoors.”

“But Yaku-san, I think Tsukishima-san would rather do that himself,” Lev says, putting a finger to his nose with a wink.

“Yamaguchi-kun? Tsukishima-san?” Kuroo repeats, interested in drama that had nothing to do with his own issues.

Lev grins. “Tsukishima-san has a big crush on Yamaguchi-kun,” he says with a nod. “He doesn’t think we know, but we know.”

Yaku sighs. “Lev, it really isn’t any of our business,” he says pointedly.

“Ooh, are we talking about our crushes?” Bokuto asks, hopping forward to walk beside them.

Kuroo glances behind him at Akaashi, who seems pale in the passing street lamps. Kenma has already pulled out his phone again, and at Kuroo’s look, Akaashi curls his fingers into Kenma’s jacket sleeve to steer him around any obstacles. Nodding appreciatively, Kuroo returns to the conversation going on beside him.

“My ideal crush would have dark hair and dark eyes,” Bokuto muses aloud, tapping his chin.

Kuroo wonders if he could be any more obvious.

“I prefer people with light hair and brown eyes!” Lev exclaims. “And who are shorter than me.”

Kuroo snorts. “That’s pretty much everyone, isn’t it?”
Lev tilts his head thoughtfully. “Well, I suppose so. But I only like specific short people.”

Kuroo smirks, glancing around the boy to look at his partner. Yaku-san is staring pointedly ahead, though his ears are red.

“What about you, Yaku-san?” he asks, allowing his voice to lilt on the honorific, the way Lev’s does. “What does your ideal crush look like?”

Yaku shoots him a frown. “Anyone I don’t have to stand on a chair to reach,” he says flatly.

Lev’s lips turn downward suddenly. “But Yaku-san, how are you going to find anyone who’s shorter than you when you’re already so sm—”

He cuts off at the glare Yaku sends him. “I didn’t say they had to be shorter than me,” he says stiffly, looking away.

Kuroo is highly amused by this whole scene, and he’s almost disappointed when they reach an ice cream stand. The owner is starting to close up for the night, but he sells them the last of his sweets at a discount because they’re a half a day old by now. They all take a seat on the curb to eat, Kenma absently licking at his cone while keeping his gaze on his phone. Akaashi is seated beside him with a pile of napkins, however, just in case. Kuroo is grateful, though he takes a seat on the other side of Kenma as well. Yaku sits beside him, with Lev and Bokuto chattering away on the other side.

They’ve moved on to the new video game that’s being made centering on the Soldiers.

Kuroo tunes them out, turning to the small policeman beside him. He’s not sure he’s ever seen anyone eat ice cream so seriously, and he has to stifle another laugh.

“So,” he says slowly, leaning back on one hand, turning his body toward Yaku so they’re somewhat shielded. “When are you going to tell the kid you’re in love with him?”

Yaku pauses, lowering his ice cream and narrowing his eyes at Kuroo. “What makes you think I’m in love with him?” he asks warily.

Kuroo shrugs. “Instinct. You were pretty quick to say you wouldn’t crush on someone so tall you had to use a chair to reach them. I’m guessing you’d have to use a chair to reach that giant of a half-Russian.” He grins. “Besides, you sure seem to spend a lot of time not looking at him. But when you do, your eyes get all soft.” He pauses, glancing over shoulder at Kenma, before looking back at Yaku. “It’s how I imagine I look when I look at Kenma,” he admits.

“You should mind your own business too,” Yaku says, looking very focused on his ice cream now.

“Maybe,” Kuroo says with a shrug. “Though I find that’s usually pretty boring.” He grins, straightening to pat Yaku on the back. “You’re in a stressful job, so I can understand your hesitance. But really, you shouldn’t leave him hanging like this when it’s obvious he adores you.”

Yaku’s ears are pink again, but he doesn’t reply. Instead, he finishes his cone and stands. Nudging Lev’s foot with his, he waits until his partner looks up at him before speaking.

“We should get back to our shift,” he says, sticking his hands in his pockets. “I don’t want you staying up too late.” He immediately purses his lips then, shooting Kuroo a look that challenges him to say anything. Kuroo holds up his hands.

Lev grins and hops to his feet, causing Yaku to step back. “Thanks for the ice cream, Kuroo-san!” he says happily, waving.
Kuroo waves back, feeling some better about the whole night. It seems like he’s done some good at least, and he wonders if that’ll make up for what happened earlier.

As the four of them walk back to their motorcycles in front of the restaurant, Kenma moves to take Kuroo’s hand again. This time he lets him, feeling less on edge than before and welcoming the warmth in the chilly air of the growing night. Bokuto and Akaashi are talking in low voices, and Kuroo strains to hear them.

“Were you meddling again?” Kenma asks softly, not looking up from his phone.

Kuroo turns his focus onto Kenma and gasps, clutching his free hand over his heart. “I never meddle!” he says. “Everything I do and say is helpful and wise.”

Kenma smirks faintly. “I think you were meddling.”

“Well, if it helps them out then I don’t see the problem,” Kuroo says, shrugging. He glances over at Bokuto and Akaashi, noting the tiny, fond smile that curls Akaashi’s lips as he listens to Bokuto ramble.

Kenma notices the look and tugs on his hand. “Hey. You leave them alone, okay? They have to figure things out themselves.”

“But—” Kuroo gives him a pained look.

Kenma shakes his head. “They’re not like us. They haven’t been together as long. They’re not ready.”

Kuroo grimaces, pretty sure that being ready wasn’t going to help in this situation. But he keeps his mouth shut as they arrive at their bikes and say goodnight. Both Akaashi and Bokuto give Kenma a gentle hug, telling him that they hope he feels better soon. Once Kenma and Kuroo are on Nekoma, Kuroo turns to help Kenma with his helmet.

“Sorry the night didn’t exactly go as planned,” he says apologetically.

“It’s fine,” Kenma says softly. “I just hope that Hajime is okay.”

*Me too*, Kuroo thinks glumly.

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Iwaizumi doesn’t speak on the way back to their apartment. It turns out that Oikawa had “borrowed” a neighbor’s car to come get him as soon as he heard the news from Kenma, and it’s too small to fit Iwaizumi’s motorcycle in it, so they leave it in front of the restaurant. Oikawa keeps glancing over at him as he drives, with concern written in every facet of his features. Iwaizumi doesn’t meet his gaze but instead rests his head against the window, watching as the lights from the city begin to fade away.

He can tell Oikawa wants to say something, but he doesn’t, so the tension in the car grows until finally Iwaizumi can’t take it anymore. It’s like a balloon is extending in his chest, squishing his heart and lungs against his ribs, and so he pops it with a deep sigh, looking over at Oikawa finally.
“I’m sorry.”

Oikawa starts, his eyes wide. “Don’t apologize!” he says quickly. “You didn’t permanently hurt anyone, and you already explained to me how you don’t have any control when you’re in that state.”

“It shouldn’t have happened, though,” Iwaizumi mutters, looking down at his damp clothing. He can vaguely remember the waitress spilling his drink on him, and then everything that occurred afterwards is clouded in a red haze. He can see himself throwing the poor woman against the wall and doing the same to Bokuto. But it doesn’t come to him like a memory, but more like a film he’s watching. He can remember the rage he felt, the uncontrollable anger though, and the burning desire to kill.

His arm aches, itching as the bone mends itself, accelerated by the serum coursing through his veins. Flexing his fingers slowly, he looks down at his hand, still able to feel the fragile bones of the woman’s neck beneath it. One quick squeeze. That’s all it would’ve taken to snap her neck. Bokuto and Kuroo would’ve been more difficult, but Iwaizumi doesn’t doubt his own strength. In that state he could’ve killed them both.

“Iwa-chan.” Oikawa’s voice comes softly across his thoughts, breaking through them.

Iwaizumi grunts in response but turns to look out the window once more. For now it seems as though Oikawa is safe from his rage state. Each time it’s happened, Oikawa has been able to pull him out of it with no injury to himself. But how long would that last? Would there come a day when Iwaizumi would snap completely and kill his best friend? Glancing at him now out of the corner of his eye, he studies that long, slender neck, the gentle curves of it. How easy would it be to break it? Iwaizumi has never seen Oikawa as fragile, but in that moment it’s like he’s made of porcelain, and Iwaizumi is a metal bat swinging closer and closer.

“Did you learn anything about the serum from Kageyama’s report?” Iwaizumi asks, cutting Oikawa off before he can continue his thought.

Oikawa bites his lip. “It . . . it looks like the Iwanuma base has been adding something to my formula without telling us.”

Iwaizumi frowns. “Is that legal?”

Oikawa tilts his head. “I’m not sure. I mean, technically we’re contracted under them, so everything needs to be approved by them, and if they feel our formulas need adjusting they can do it themselves.”

“But without informing you? That sounds sketchy as hell.”

Oikawa makes a face. “I know. I’ll have to call Ushiwaka and ask him what the hell is going on over there.” He sighs. “He’s going to tell me I should work for them again. I wonder if I can make Tobio-chan call him instead.”

“I don’t know if you want that kid on a phone,” Iwaizumi says pointedly, straightening in his seat as they reach the apartment. Oikawa turns off the engine, sitting there quietly a moment, hands in his lap.

Unnerved by the silence, Iwaizumi turns to look at him. “What?”

Oikawa’s features flinch, and he looks out the windshield, not meeting Iwaizumi’s gaze. “I just . . . I should’ve realized they’d changed the formula. I was so caught up on monitoring the kaiju . . . I
haven’t been studying the serum at all.”

“You were taken off the serum project,” Iwaizumi reminds him. “Nobody expected you to be studying it.”

Oikawa runs his fingers through his hair, gripping the strands tightly. “I know that, but I—”

“If you know that, then shut up and don’t blame yourself for not seeing something you weren’t even supposed to be looking at,” Iwaizumi snaps, the fatigue starting to settle in him.

He moves to unlock the door himself, getting out of the car. He slowly straightens his fractured arm, finding he can move it easier now with minimal pain. He’s surprised by how quickly he’s healing, considering his exhaustion. Oikawa says nothing more, but gets out of the car and leads the way to the apartment, unlocking it and stepping inside. Iwaizumi follows, kicking off his shoes before going to the couch to throw himself down on it with a groan.

Oikawa lingers off to the side, looking uncertain.

“Should I . . . make tea or something?” he asks hesitantly.

Iwaizumi shakes his head, beckoning him closer instead. “I need to talk to you,” he says, his heart sinking heavily in his chest. The thought came to him in the car and while he knows it’s the right thing to do, he dreads Oikawa’s reaction.

Oikawa perches lightly beside him, legs curled up underneath him. His eyes are wide and if Iwaizumi looks closely, he can see tiny flecks of gold in the brown of his irises. But that would require leaning too far forward, so he looks away, staring instead at the coffee table in front of the couch as he grips his healing arm against his stomach.

“Iwa-chan? What’s going on?” Oikawa asks, and his voice holds a slight tremor that makes Iwaizumi’s gut clench painfully.

“I think . . . I’m gonna stop taking the serum,” Iwaizumi says, his voice tight. He swallows down the lump gathering in his throat, but still doesn’t have the courage to look over at Oikawa, who’s grown suddenly very still beside him. “I know my own strength. I could have killed that woman. I could’ve killed Bokuto and Kuroo. Kenma too.”

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says, reaching out to touch the back of his hand lightly. His skin burns against Iwaizumi’s, but all Iwaizumi can do is stare blankly at it. “Don’t talk like that, okay? It’s fine. You’re fine. I got there and made everything okay. I’m going to make everything okay, Iwa-chan.”

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says, reaching out to touch the back of his hand lightly. His skin burns against Iwaizumi’s, but all Iwaizumi can do is stare blankly at it. “Don’t talk like that, okay? It’s fine. You’re fine. I got there and made everything okay. I’m going to make everything okay, Iwa-chan.”

Iwaizumi sighs, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the couch. “But what if you’re not there next time? What if I go too far and actually kill someone? I won’t be able to forgive myself. It’s just . . . it’s better for me to end this now before I become a danger to everyone around me. To you.”

He opens his eyes, looking over at Oikawa finally.

He expected tears, but the furious look that greets him catches him off-guard.

“No,” Oikawa says flatly, and his anger simmers beneath the word, sharp and scalding. “I’m not going to let you do that, Iwa-chan. I’m not going to let you leave me.”

Iwaizumi frowns. “Oikawa,” he says firmly, straightening in his seat. “I’m doing this for you. To protect you.”

“And I’m saying no,” Oikawa snaps, jumping off the couch to stand. “I don’t need your protection. I
can take care of this. I can make you better. You just have to give me the time. You’ll be dead within a week if you go off the serum, and that’s unacceptable.”

Iwaizumi stares up at him, not having accounted for this response. He’d braced himself for tears, but he figured Oikawa would see the wisdom of his decision. The team was getting new recruits, so he would be redundant soon anyway. And with his condition worsening, this really was for the best. It was the best way to protect everyone, to keep what happened at the restaurant from happening again.

“You’re being unreasonable, Oikawa,” Iwaizumi says, standing finally as well. “It’s my life. I can do what I want with it. You should focus on making sure the new recruits don’t get the same serum we did. Don’t waste time finding a cure for us. We’re a lost cause anyway.”

“Like hell you are!” Oikawa snaps. He steps closer, grabbing Iwaizumi by the front of his shirt with both hands. It’s a complete role reversal, and Iwaizumi feels a strange sense of déjà vu, but he’s on the wrong side. He’s the one who knocks sense into Oikawa, not the other way around. “I’m not going to let you die; are you fucking kidding me? No! No, I’m not going to let that happen! I’m going to fix this! I’m going to fix everyone! Just give me the time!”

“I don’t have the time!” Iwaizumi shouts, slapping Oikawa’s arms away. “Don’t you see that? I’m getting worse. And soon you might not be able to make me snap out of it. It’s possible that I’ll kill you! And that’s unacceptable to me!”

Oikawa’s face is bright red, and there are tears lingering in the corners of his eyes, but he doesn’t back down. Instead, he shakes his head quickly, hands curling into fists at his sides. “You can’t leave me, Hajime. You can’t,” he says, his voice trembling now, breaking on the words.

Iwaizumi scruffs the back of his head with his hand, sighing heavily. “Trust me, I don’t want to,” he says, feeling the fight leave him as quickly as it appeared. His body feels heavy, and he just wants to rest. He’s done with this. He’s done with living in fear and addiction, teetering on the edge of a cliff. A cliff he’ll drag so many people down with him if he falls. It’s better this way. Oikawa will be all right. He has others he can rely on. He has a whole team behind him. He won’t fail if he loses one knight.

“I love you.”

Iwaizumi’s head comes up so quickly he can hear the snap. He stares, wide-eyed, wondering if he just heard what he thought he did. “What?”

Oikawa’s lips tighten, and he meets his gaze steadily. “I love you,” he says again, and his voice doesn’t waver. There’s no tremor anywhere on his form. He’s still as a statue, staring into Iwaizumi’s eyes with such intensity, Iwaizumi finds himself shivering in response.

“What the hell?” he says, his voice cracking as he gestures helplessly. “What do you—”

Oikawa steps forward again, hands reaching, but this time he doesn’t grab Iwaizumi’s shirt, but instead his face, clamping it between his palms. Iwaizumi’s protest dies in his throat, and he finds himself rooted in place by Oikawa’s gaze.

“I love you, Hajime. So you see, you can’t leave me. Because if you do, I will fall apart completely. You’re my pillar. I can’t stand without you. I don’t even want to try.”

That’s stupid, Iwaizumi wants to say. He wants to tell Oikawa that he’s only a single player. That in the grand scheme of things he’s not that important. In the big picture, he can fall away and the team can keep going. Oikawa can keep going. But the words don’t come to him. He finds himself instead
taking a step closer, leaning forward, reaching to grab the back of that perfect head, grip that perfect hair, and bring Oikawa’s face down to his to kiss him roughly.

Iwaizumi has dreamed lately of kissing Oikawa, much to his irritation, but this isn’t like those fantasies late at night, with a phantom brushing against his lips and skin. This is real, and Oikawa is warm and solid beneath his hand. His lips are soft and pliable, and they open immediately to him with a breathy sigh. Iwaizumi feels heat coil in his stomach, dropping further down, as he steps closer, his healing arm moving to wrap around Oikawa’s waist despite the twinge of pain he feels at the movement.

Oikawa’s lips slide along his eagerly, nipping and sucking at Iwaizumi’s lower lip. With each brush of teeth and tongue, Iwaizumi can feel his willpower crumbling. He pushes forward, causing Oikawa to stumble back toward the hall. He seems to sense Iwaizumi’s urgency, because he begins pulling at his shirt, fingers fumbling over the buttons to unfasten them quickly. Iwaizumi grunts, tugging at Oikawa’s shirt, pulling it out of his waistband, his own fingers deftly threading buttons through their holes to reveal Oikawa’s lean, firm chest underneath.

They pause in the hallway, breaking away for breath, and Iwaizumi takes the moment to run his hands over Oikawa’s torso, feeling the warm skin quiver beneath his touch.

“You’ve been going to the gym,” Iwaizumi observes, stroking his fingers over the muscles of Oikawa’s abdomen, watching how they twitch.

“Of course I have,” Oikawa says, offended. “I’m not going to get fat sitting at a desk all day.”

Iwaizumi chuckles, and then moves forward once more, pressing Oikawa up against the wall, as he places his lips on Oikawa’s neck, trailing wet, hungry kisses down the slope of it. He reaches his collarbone and pauses, pulling the skin into his mouth with his teeth. He sucks hard at it, listening to the soft moan it drags from Oikawa’s lips.

“Iwa-chan,” Oikawa whimpers, fingers moving into his hair to grip the short strands.

Iwaizumi only grunts in response, pressing his hand against the front of Oikawa’s pants. He feels the hardening bulge there and smiles around the skin his mouth, as Oikawa’s hips jerk in response to his touch, arching off the wall to push against him. Oikawa seems desperate, and Iwaizumi wonders if he hasn’t been having sex at all this whole time. It seems unlikely, but . . .

Iwaizumi pulls away from the collarbone, moving his lips further down Oikawa’s chest. He continues to palm the erection beneath his hand, fighting a smirk at the soft gasps Oikawa gives in response to the stimulation. He’s never seen Oikawa like this, so . . . needy. It causes the blood within him to run hot, pooling in his abdomen and melting lower to gather between his legs. He can feel his own pants starting to grow tight, but he keeps his focus on the quivering skin beneath his lips and teeth.

He lowers to his knees, licking at the curve of Oikawa’s hip above his waistband, before slowly unfastening his pants. He makes sure the zipper drags against the damp bulge in Oikawa’s boxer-briefs, enjoying the choked sound Oikawa makes at the tantalizing touch.

“Fuck, Iwa-chan. Stop teasing me,” Oikawa whines, pressing his fist against the wall beside them.

“Don’t act like you’re not enjoying this,” Iwaizumi says pointedly, rolling his eyes but pushing Oikawa’s pants down until they fall around his ankles. His underwear follows next, and Iwaizumi finds himself confronted by Oikawa’s member, wet and swollen, drops of pre-cum still gathering at the tip.
Gently, he wraps his hand around the base. Oikawa whimpers again, curling inward now, his chin dropping to his chest. Both hands go into Iwaizumi’s hair, gripping firmly, but Iwaizumi finds he doesn’t mind the slight burn of it. Instead, he lowers his lips toward the glistening head in front of him, running his tongue along the slit. Oikawa’s breath stutters, and Iwaizumi takes that as encouragement. He opens his mouth further, taking in the tip and as much of the shaft as he can manage comfortably. He gives an experimental suck, and he feels Oikawa’s hips buck forward. He pulls back, setting both hands against Oikawa’s hips to hold him still, before descending once more.

“Fuck, fuck, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa moans, his eyes fluttering closed. He moans again, legs trembling. Iwaizumi continues. Oikawa is salty and warm against his tongue, a sharp tang that’s not exactly pleasant, but he can ignore that for the way Oikawa is reacting. Enjoy it even. He tries not to smirk, concentrating on dragging his tongue and lips against Oikawa with as much friction as he can. Oikawa’s hips jerk again, straining against Iwaizumi’s hold.

“Iwa-chan, st-stop,” Oikawa gasps suddenly. “I-I won’t, I’m not—”

Iwaizumi pulls away, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He stands, taking a step back to observe Oikawa leaning against the wall, panting heavily. He’s still wearing his shirt, though it’s open and loose about his torso. With his pants and underwear pooled at his feet, his member leaking more pre-cum, and the flush that’s spread over his cheeks, he looks thoroughly debauched, and Iwaizumi feels his own length start to throb at the sight.

“Ikea-chan, st-stop,” Oikawa moans again, his voice lowered to a husky register that sends more blood rushing to Iwaizumi’s member. “Mm, we should save that for later, since your arm is broken and all.”

Oikawa simply nods, shedding his shirt and leaving it and the rest of his clothes in the hall to walk quickly toward Iwaizumi’s room. Iwaizumi follows, his heart pounding in his chest. He can’t believe what he’s done and what he’s about to do. It seems unreal, and he keeps waiting for the guilt and shame to hit him, reminding him that this is his best friend, who is probably manipulating him to keep him alive and a danger to everyone around them.

But those feelings never come, and Iwaizumi doesn’t care about the consequences at all.

He steps into the bedroom, not bothering to close the door. Oikawa immediately turns to him, stepping close and kissing him hungrily, tongue slipping into his mouth without hesitating. Iwaizumi responds in kind, wrapping his arms around Oikawa and pulling his lithe body close, drinking in his taste and smell, surrounding himself in the feel of his naked body beneath his calloused fingers. Oikawa’s hands begin to wander themselves, tugging off Iwaizumi’s shirt and tossing it aside, before moving to his pants to unbuckle his belt. He tugs it out of the loops with a snap that sends shivers down Iwaizumi’s spine.

“You like that, Iwa-chan?” Oikawa asks against his lips, his voice lowered to a husky register that sends more blood rushing to Iwaizumi’s member. “Mm, we should save that for later, since your arm is broken and all.”

Iwaizumi resists the urge to roll his eyes and opens his mouth to protest ever doing that sort of thing with Oikawa, when he’s suddenly being grabbed by a warm, slender hand, and all thought instantly leaves him. He inhales sharply, tingles of pleasure shooting up and down his body as Oikawa’s hand begins to move, tugging quickly at him, as his lips press against Iwaizumi’s flushed neck, moving up to his ear. Oikawa takes the lobe between his teeth, biting down gently before giving it a suck.

Iwaizumi feels a low groan vibrate through him, and he barely recognizes it as his own voice. It sounds hungry, feral almost. He grips Oikawa’s arms, pushing him away.
“I don’t want to hurt you,” he says seriously, thinking again how easy it would be to break him.

Oikawa simply gives him a lazy smile. “Don’t worry, Iwa-chan,” he says glibly. “I’m going to be riding you.”

Before Iwaizumi has time to process that image, he’s being pushed down against the bed, and Oikawa is crawling over him. Iwaizumi stares, as Oikawa presses his lips against his chest, moving them downward slowly in a trail of warm, wet kisses. The muscles ripple on his back and shoulders, and Iwaizumi finds himself watching with halting breaths. Oikawa’s body stretches like a cat’s over him, lean and seductive, and Iwaizumi feels his throat drying at the sight. He presses his head back against the pillows, attempting to calm his racing heart before he passes out.

He feels Oikawa’s hands once more at his pants, unfastening them and tugging them off and away, taking his underwear with them. He shivers at the sudden exposure, but quickly Oikawa is there again, pressing his body down against his, spreading warmth through him. Iwaizumi plants his hands on Oikawa’s back, running them down the expanse of it, down the curve of his spine, to where his ass rises. He grips it instinctively, feeling the firmness of it, before moving his hands back up. Oikawa kisses him, long and slow, his tongue moving languidly through Iwaizumi’s mouth. Iwaizumi feels himself trembling, meeting his tongue with his own. He wants him. He’s aching for him. Damn him.

“Stop fucking around,” Iwaizumi growls finally as the kiss lasts a little too long for his comfort.

Oikawa laughs softly, moving off him to reach for the bedside table. “Iwa-chan is so impatient tonight,” he sings, pulling some lube out of the drawer. He pauses then, tilting his head. “You don’t have any condoms?”

Iwaizumi flushes. “I haven’t had sex since college,” he admits.

Oikawa’s eyebrows rise halfway up his forehead. “Don’t tell me you’ve been saving yourself for me this whole time,” he says, though there’s only a slight teasing edge to his words.

“Fuck off, of course not,” Iwaizumi snaps, covering his face with his arm. “I just . . . got busy. And it didn’t seem that important.”

Oikawa hums softly under his breath, moving off the bed completely then. He steps out of the room to where his pants lay on the floor, reaching into the back pocket to pull out his wallet and a condom. He comes back with a grin, holding it aloft.

“You keep a condom in your wallet?” Iwaizumi asks with a frown, peeking out from beneath his arm.

“Iwa-chan, I am a hot-blooded Japanese man in his twenties. Of course I keep a condom in my wallet,” Oikawa says, shaking his head as he moves to kneel on the bed.

He plants his knees on either side of Iwaizumi’s legs, reaching for the lube to spread over his fingers. Iwaizumi swallows hard, watching him rub those slender fingers together to warm the gel. Realizing what Oikawa is about to do, he sits up, reaching for Oikawa’s hand.

“Wait, let me—”

Oikawa slaps his hand away lightly, shaking his head. “Not so fast, Iwa-chan. I want to show you what you’ll be missing if you leave me.” His voice is lighthearted, but his gaze has grown sharp again, staring Iwaizumi down until Iwaizumi falls back against the mattress, curling his hand into a fist.
Nodding in satisfaction, Oikawa then reaches behind him. His back arches slightly, and his head falls back, as he pushes a finger into himself. Iwaizumi can only watch, his entire body on fire, as Oikawa prepares himself. His teeth catch onto his lower lip, eyes closed, as he begins to thrust his fingers at a slow but steady pace.

“Fuck,” Iwaizumi chokes on the word, watching the way Oikawa’s thighs quiver, the way his hips tilt, as his body tenses. His skin is glistening with a fine sheen of sweat, and Iwaizumi begins to feel lightheaded. He can feel his pulse pounding against his neck, and it’s all he can do not to grab his member to start jerking off to the beautiful sight of Oikawa’s body, bare and trembling before him.

“Fuck, Oikawa, I-I need—” he gasps, and Oikawa lowers his head, smirking faintly at him.

“I know, Iwa-chan,” he says softly. “I know.”

He pulls his fingers free, grabbing the condom then and opening it. He slides it over Iwaizumi’s length, and Iwaizumi inhales sharply at the brief touch of Oikawa’s fingers against his flushed, throbbing member. Then Oikawa is spreading a generous amount of lube over him, and Iwaizumi finds himself thrusting into his hand. Oikawa laughs softly, but Iwaizumi is too desperate now to feel embarrassed by his body’s actions.

Thankfully, Oikawa decides to stop teasing him. He shifts forward, settling his knees on either side of Iwaizumi’s hips, before lowering himself down onto him. He takes it slow, inching carefully downward, until Iwaizumi is completely encased in Oikawa’s tight heat. He groans, throwing his arm over his flushed face once more, but a moment later Oikawa is tugging it away, shaking his head.

“I-I want . . . I want to see your face,” he says breathlessly.

Iwaizumi feels his cheeks burning, but then so is most of his body. He moves his hands to Oikawa’s hips instead, though he grips harder with one than the other, his broken arm still aching as it heals. Oikawa begins to rock his hips, tilting forward and then back, lifting off Iwaizumi before settling back on him in slow movements. He’s biting his lip, his face red, his hair sticking to the sides of it. Iwaizumi stares up at him, feeling the rush of pleasure from Oikawa’s friction pulsating through him. He doesn’t know how Oikawa manages it, but even ruffled and sweaty he looks stunning.

Iwaizumi feels plain and ugly in comparison, but he doesn’t waste time worrying about that. He arches into Oikawa instead, lifting his hips to match Oikawa’s rhythm. He tries to urge him to go faster, grunting softly, as his fingers press harder into soft, pale skin. Oikawa moans, taking the encouragement without protest, quickening his movements. He places his hands on Iwaizumi’s chest, pushing down against him to acquire more leverage.

Iwaizumi finds himself moaning as well, not able to stifle them any longer. He presses his head back against his pillows, gritting his teeth, as Oikawa begins to rock faster and harder, slamming down on Iwaizumi’s hips forcefully.

“Hajime, Hajime!” Oikawa cries softly, his head falling back, eyes tightly closed in ecstasy. One of his hands moves off Iwaizumi’s chest to wrap around his member, which is still dripping wet. He tugs quickly, matching the rhythm of his hips, and Iwaizumi grimaces.

“Fuck, Tooru,” he gasps, the name falling from his lips easier than he expected.

Oikawa trembles at the sound of his name. He drops his head, opening his eyes to look into Iwaizumi’s face, meeting his gaze. His eyes are wide and glassy, and his lips part, his tongue moving over them briefly.
“Say my name again,” he says, and it’s almost like a plea.

Iwaizumi swallows hard past the dryness in his throat. “Tooru,” he says, his voice steadier this time.

A smile tilts Oikawa’s lips, and Iwaizumi knows it’s not one of his fake ones. He’s happy, truly happy, and that alone causes Iwaizumi’s heart to swell in his chest. He removes one of his hands from Oikawa’s hip, tangling his fingers in Oikawa’s hair, as he sits up and crushes his lips against that smiling mouth. Oikawa kisses him back immediately, beginning to rock again, though his movements are somewhat limited given their new position.

Iwaizumi doesn’t care though. He wants to remain attached to Oikawa, and he kisses that smile over and over again, murmuring “Tooru” between each one. Oikawa laughs, though it sounds somewhat like a sob, and Iwaizumi can feel pressure building in his abdomen. He plants one hand behind him, making sure it’s his good arm, and pushes down against the bed to rock his hips up against Oikawa, helping to increase the friction. Oikawa adjusts his knees, grabbing onto Iwaizumi’s shoulders and starting to roll his hips up and down, head falling back once more.

Iwaizumi leans forward, attacking the exposed neck with tiny bites and kisses, before pressing his teeth against Oikawa’s rapidly throbbing pulse, squeezing his eyes shut as a groan pushes through him, the heat within him building faster and stronger than before.

“Fuck, Tooru. Tooru,” he mutters, groaning louder, though it’s still muffled against Oikawa’s skin.

Oikawa’s nails dig into Iwaizumi’s shoulders. He’s moaning “Hajime” over and over, rocking harder, pushing and pulling with more speed, until his breath is stuttering and his body stiffens. With a sharp cry, he comes, and as he does, his body clenches around Iwaizumi, and that’s all it takes for him to finish as well. He moans, long and low, as the sharp pleasure bursts through him, rushing over his body and pounding white-hot light behind his eyes. He pants heavily against Oikawa’s neck, the exhaustion from before starting to sink into his limbs.

Slowly, he pulls away, flopping down against the mattress. Oikawa takes a moment, before he lifts off Iwaizumi carefully, removing the condom and tying it off. He disappears from Iwaizumi’s line of vision momentarily, before returning with a washcloth. He settles on the bed beside Iwaizumi, gently wiping at his chest, cleaning off the cum that’d landed there.

“Does this mean you love me too, Iwa-chan?” he asks after a moment, smirking faintly, as he glances toward Iwaizumi’s face.

Iwaizumi huffs, too tired to retaliate physically. He flings his arm over his face once more, instead.

“Nah. I fuck all my childhood friends without feelings involved,” he says, and flinches as the washcloth slaps against his stomach.

“Mean, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa complains, but he doesn’t sound as putout as usual.

The bed moves and Iwaizumi assumes Oikawa is moving to leave, so he quickly reaches out to grab his wrist. Oikawa freezes, looking down at him with a startled expression.

“Don’t go,” Iwaizumi says gruffly, feeling his cheeks still burning but keeping his gaze on Oikawa’s face.

Oikawa tilts his head, grinning faintly. “I was just going to put this in the laundry,” he says, lifting the washcloth.

Iwaizumi feels foolish then and quickly lets him go. Oikawa stands and crosses the room. As he
does, Iwaizumi tries not to think too much about what just happened. He’d just fucked Oikawa. Or had Oikawa fucked him? Either way he feels royally screwed. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to let his feelings for Oikawa get in the way of doing the right thing.

But as Oikawa returns, still naked, and climbs under the covers of Iwaizumi’s bed, Iwaizumi has a difficult time feeling bad about what they’ve just done. Heaving a sigh, he moves underneath the blankets as well. Oikawa immediately snuggles up to him, and for a moment Iwaizumi stills, unsure of what to do. Thankfully, he’s spared any guessing games, as Oikawa grabs his good arm and wraps it around his shoulders.

“Now that we’ve fucked, you have to promise not to leave me,” Oikawa says seriously. “You have to make an honest man out of me.”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes. “Go to sleep, dumbass,” he says, settling back against the pillows.

He figures he can save the worrying about tomorrow for tomorrow.

***

Kageyama sits glaring at his computer screen. Although it’s past eight in the morning and Oikawa is usually at work by now, he’s alone in the lab. The rest of the team usually doesn’t arrive until half-past nine, but Kageyama and Oikawa always arrive early to get a head start on things.

He contemplates calling him, wanting to know his thoughts on the information he received from Yachi-kun. But he knows Oikawa probably won’t pick up if he knows it’s him, and Oikawa probably has his number blocked anyway.

So he sits tapping his pen against his desk absently, frowning at the numbers and equations on the screen before him and trying to ignore the uneasiness he feels. He recognizes the addition the Iwanuma lab snuck into the serum, but he doesn’t know what it means. He was hoping Oikawa would have some idea, but it’s been four days, with no word from his former mentor.

“Kageyama-kun!”

A bright voice behind him causes him to jump in his seat, his pen clattering against his desk and rolling away. It falls off the edge, landing with a clink on the floor, before continuing to roll out of sight.

Apprehensively, Kageyama turns to face the intruder, and wonders if he should be surprised when he sees Hinata Shouyou standing in front of him, waving and grinning like some sort of maniac. It doesn’t escape Kageyama’s notice, however, that Hinata is sporting rather impressive bags under his eyes, and his smile doesn’t seem as bright as normal.

He wonders if something happened, but it’s not like he can ask when they barely know each other. Besides, it’s none of his business, and he doesn’t care anyway.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” he says instead, because it’s true.

Hinata holds out a manila envelope. “I got the results from my exams! I took the psychological one yesterday and I passed.”
Kageyama feels something twist in his stomach, something that feels a lot like fear, but that doesn’t make any sense. Slowly, he takes the envelope, opening it and sliding out the papers enclosed. He looks over the notes from the psychiatrist briefly, before pushing the papers back into the envelope and holding it back out to Hinata.

“Why are you showing me this?” he asks, feeling his face falling into another frown.

“Because you said I wouldn’t pass, and I did,” Hinata says, sticking out his tongue.

“Congratulations, I guess.”

Hinata skips a step closer, taking the envelope and holding it behind his back. “So this means I get to take the serum now, right?”

Kageyama glances at the screen behind him. “Um, I’m not sure that’s . . . I mean, we’ve run into some abnormalities with the serum, and I’ve told Kuroo-san not to let anyone administer the serum until we find the source—”

“But that will take some time, right?” Hinata interrupts, bouncing on his feet. “And you need more Soldiers now.” He shakes his head. “I don’t care about the risks. I want to be a Soldier, so you can administer the serum now.”

Kageyama blinks at him, wondering if this guy is actually an idiot. “Dumbass! I’m not going to inject you with an unstable serum! Who knows what it’ll do to you!”

Hinata comes to a halt, tilting his head. A different look enters his eyes, it’s sharp and intense, like a hawk, and Kageyama feels pinned by the stare. He can’t tear his gaze away, and his heart starts pounding faster without his consent.

“Kuroo-san and the others sacrificed everything they had to save the world. What kind of Soldier will I be if I’m not willing to make that same sacrifice?” Hinata’s voice has deepened, grown serious.

Kageyama feels a chill move through him. “But you might not have to,” he says after a moment, shaking his head slowly. “Oikawa-san can probably come up with a better serum formula. One that won’t hurt you or any of the others.”

“But how long will that take?” Hinata asks, his gaze unwavering.

Kageyama shrugs. “A month maybe? We’ll have to test it.”

Hinata scrunches his nose. “That’s too long,” he says, shaking his head. “You should give me the serum now. And then when you figure out the better formula, we can switch to that one.”

Kageyama squints at him, wondering why he’s being so stubborn. Any sane person would know that it’s better to wait until the serum was ready and safe, and here this guy wants to jump head first into the unknown. Isn’t he scared at all?

Hinata shuffles on his feet as the silence lingers on, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “Um, so—”

“Why do you want this so badly?” Kageyama interrupts, speaking his thoughts aloud in the hopes that Hinata could clarify things for him.

Hinata blinks. “Well . . . doesn’t everyone want to be a hero?”
Kageyama frowns. *That doesn’t clarify anything at all.*

“But . . . why?” he asks.

“Why do I want to be a hero?” Hinata asks. At Kageyama’s nod, he taps his chin thoughtfully, turning his gaze toward the ceiling. “Well, after July 10th it was really scary, you know? My best friend lost his parents. A lot of people lost loved ones. And it seemed really unfair. Bad things shouldn’t happen to good people like that. So I decided I wanted to stop that from happening again. I want to protect my family and friends, defend the citizens of Sendai! I want to defeat all the kaiju, and be the very best Soldier there ever was!” He clenches his fists, his voice starting to rise. He stops then, looking back down at Kageyama. “Besides, you shouldn’t need a reason to want to fight evil, right?”

Kageyama stares. *Is this guy for real?*

But it seems like he is. He seems very real, almost blindingly so. Kageyama supposes he understands somewhat where Hinata is coming from. That desire to be the best is something he feels too. After all, a lot of people are depending on him. It’s why this anomaly in the serum worries him. The thought that he might’ve messed up and let this altered formula be administered to the Soldiers makes him feel sick to his stomach.

Which is why he needs Oikawa to contact him with a solution to help him fix things.

“Fine,” Kageyama says, shaking his head. “I’ll inform Kuroo-san that you’re ready and willing to take the serum now, and he’ll assign you an administrator.” He starts to turn back to his computer, when a soft sound from Hinata gives him pause.

He turns back around, frowning as Hinata scuffs his foot against the floor, looking sheepish.

“What?”

“*I was kind of hoping you’d be the one to administer it,*” Hinata admits.

Kageyama blinks. “*What? Right now?*”

Hinata nods. “I don’t like Oikawa-san, and I don’t know any of the other scientists. I’d rather it be you. I think I trust you . . . maybe. More than a complete stranger at least.”

Kageyama tries not to think of how his heart pounds faster at those words. It’s stupid and unprofessional, but he can’t help but feel nervous. He’s never administered serum before, even though he knows it’s a straightforward process. He and Oikawa came up with the process. So really, he knows exactly how to administer it. He just never *wanted* to. It didn’t help that nobody seemed to want his assistance in the first place.

“Okay,” he says finally, moving to stand. He beckons for Hinata to follow him, making his way over to the serum samples encased behind glass in the freezer at the back of the lab. They’re marked with the date they were filled, and Kageyama chooses the most recent batch they received from the Iwanuma lab. He picks a vial and then hesitates, turning back around to face Hinata.

“It’s kaiju DNA,” he says.

Hinata starts, confusion written over his features. “What?”

Kageyama swallows, knowing he probably shouldn’t be telling him this, but he’s about to stick a needle into him and pump his blood full of *kaiju DNA,* and it seems wrong to say nothing. “The
extra adrenaline you saw in the formula. It came from kaiju DNA. The serum’s being modified at our main lab before it’s being sent to us for administration. We didn’t know.”

Hinata stares. “That seems like a pretty big thing to not know,” he says pointedly.

Kageyama scowls, feeling the guilt rising up in him once more. “We had no reason to suspect that they were tampering with it,” he snaps irritably. “It just . . . I just wanted you to know. In case you want to change your mind.”

Hinata tilts his head and looks past Kageyama’s shoulder a moment before shaking his head. “No. I want to do this. I can handle a little kaiju DNA. It’ll be pretty badass, right? I’ll be like a member of the X-Men!”

He grins, and Kageyama again wonders if he’s an idiot. Deciding it’s not his place to judge, he walks over to the table with the vial to grab a jet injector. He attaches the vial carefully, gesturing to the chair that sits beside the table. The whole area has been arranged for precisely this purpose, with various medical supplies in labeled drawers against one wall. Hinata sits in the chair, rolling up his sleeve automatically.

Kageyama steps forward with the injector, his stomach feeling queasy. He hesitates, looking into Hinata’s face. “This is only a quarter of the regular dosage,” he explains. “You’re body is going to need to adjust to the serum, so it’ll take four injections over the course of four weeks before you can start taking the full dosage.”

Hinata grimaces. “But I can start training with Kuroo-san and the rest right away, right?”

Kageyama purses his lips. “That . . . depends on how much pain you’re in.”

“Oh.” Hinata seems paler now, and Kageyama hesitates further, giving him a chance to back out still. But Hinata straightens his shoulders, leaning back in his seat and nodding. “It’s okay. I can take it.”

Kageyama isn’t sure what to expect, but he steps forward and gently takes Hinata’s arm in his hand. He doesn’t miss the way Hinata flinches at his touch, but he decides not to comment. His hands are probably cold or something. Shaking his head to clear it, Kageyama sets the tip of the injector against Hinata’s bicep.

“Ready?” he asks.

Hinata nods, gritting his teeth.

Kageyama inhales sharply and then pulls the trigger, injecting the serum directly into Hinata’s bloodstream.

Hinata screams.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: Oikawa makes a rash decision, Bokuto asks Akaashi out, and Tsukkiyama go on a picnic!

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
“What the fuck were you thinking?!"

Kuroo can’t think of a time he when was more angry with anyone than he is right now. Kageyama Tobio stands before him, head bowed, hands in fists at his sides. He’s bent at the waist in a half-bow and has been for the past five minutes, while explaining to Kuroo why exactly Hinata is currently in an infirmary bed behind them.

“You told me yourself that the serum is currently too unstable to use on anyone!” Kuroo feels the need to remind the kid, thinking back to his disappointment when he heard the news himself.

Kageyama’s features flinch. “I know I screwed up—”

“Oh good, because for a second there I thought you’d suddenly forgotten how to use your brain at all!” Kuroo knows he’s raising his voice too much and takes a step back, reaching up to rub his forehead, grimacing as his fingers press against a tender spot that sparks pain through his skull. “Just be glad he’s okay. I don’t even want to think about what sort of PR disaster this could have been.”

“Sugawara-san says he’ll be fine to leave by tomorrow,” Kageyama says, still staring at the floor. Kuroo waves at him, pushing his irritation down, forcing the spots of red he’s seeing to dissipate. He takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. The last thing he needs is to fall into a rage state and attack Kageyama. Futakuchi would have a field day with that.

“Kuroo-san,” Kageyama says then, slowly straightening. “He asked me to do it. He said he didn’t . . . he didn’t trust anyone else to.”

There’s color rising high on Kageyama’s cheekbones, though his features retain their signature scowl. Kuroo stares at him, wondering if the kid has a crush on Hinata, before dismissing the thought from his mind. He can’t get distracted from his intention for coming to the infirmary in the first place.

“You’re going to monitor him,” he says, pointing at Kageyama. “You’re going to make sure nothing goes wrong, and if anything does you’re going to fix it, do you understand?”

Kageyama starts, his frown darkening. “I don’t have time for that,” he protests. “Oikawa-san—”

“Oikawa can handle things just fine,” Kuroo says. “You got yourself into this mess, and you’re going to see it through. No ifs, ands, or buts.”
Kageyama scowls, but his lips tighten in a straight line, and he doesn’t argue again. Sighing, Kuroo turns to head down to Sawamura’s room, knowing the captain wanted to see him. Everyone knew about Hinata and Kageyama’s dumbass decision to use the serum without proper authorization. Kageyama had burst into the infirmary with a limp Hinata draped over his arms and the base had gone into panic mode. Things have calmed now, and Sugawara says Hinata will be fine, but Kuroo knows that his head is going to be on the block for this. He can already feel the back of his neck itching.

He rubs at it, as he steps into Sawamura’s room. His heart is still pounding from the scare with Hinata, and he really hopes Kageyama knows what he’s doing. Kuroo doesn’t want to think of what will happen if anything goes wrong with Hinata. Kenma’s already going to hate him for allowing this to happen in the first place. If Hinata’s body starts rejecting the serum . . .

Sawamura sits in his bed facing the television mounted on the wall. He’s flipping through channels absently, but he turns off the monitor and sets down the remote when Kuroo enters. Automatically, Kuroo’s eyes shift to where Sawamura’s left arm used to be, now just a stump at his shoulder. He scolds himself for looking, turning his gaze back to Sawamura’s face.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” he asks, bowing and then straightening with a salute.

“I heard what happened with the kid; Hinata Shouyou was it?” Sawamura doesn’t sound angry, but Kuroo knows he’s probably holding back in order to remain professional (something Kuroo still doesn’t know how to do, apparently).

“Yes, sir. It . . . it was an oversight on my part. I didn’t realize the kid, er, Hinata-kun was in the lab. I know he shouldn’t have been there unsupervised, and I apologize, sir. It won’t happen again.”

Sawamura nods, but he seems distracted. “What are you going to do about the other four candidates? If the serum isn’t ready to be administered safely what do you plan on doing with them while they wait? And how long is this adjustment of the serum going to take?”

“I don’t know,” Kuroo says honestly in response to all three questions.

Sawamura sighs. “General Ukai is expecting a progress report. The top brass is expecting results, Kuroo. They could come in and take over everything if we don’t satisfy them.”

“I know, I know,” Kuroo says, running his hand through his hair. His palms feel clammy, and the headache has spread to the rest of his skull. He wants to lie down, place a cool cloth over his head, and forget about the SSP and all his responsibilities. But he can’t, and he knows he can’t, so he just sighs and nods.

“I’ll talk to Oikawa. We’ll figure something out,” he says.

Sawamura purses his lips. “Don’t make me regret placing you as interim captain, Kuroo.”

Kuroo winces inwardly, feeling the words strike him hard across the chest, and he feels about as small as a mouse under his captain’s gaze. Despite this, he gives Sawamura his most confident smile and throws up finger guns.

“I won’t let you down, boss,” he says, giving a wink for good measure.

Sawamura doesn’t look amused, but the tension in his shoulders seems to ease somewhat. “I’m counting on you,” he says, as if that would alleviate the pressure on Kuroo’s own shoulders.

Still, Kuroo knows all this already, so he simply salutes and turns to leave. He knows how bad things
could get if the government decides to come in and take over their operation completely. It was possible they’d start mass-producing the serum regardless of the risks; recruiting everyone they could get their hands on. Kuroo knows that the top brass want the military in general to grow stronger, and General Ukai has a reputation for wielding an iron fist. Kuroo really doesn’t want to work directly under a man like that. Sawamura can be stern and sometimes likes to ruin their fun, but Kuroo knows he’s a good man. He’s worked beside him for over three years now. He knows nothing about General Ukai.

Slinking into Sawamura’s office, Kuroo shuts the door before going to slump in the chair behind Sawamura’s desk. He pulls open a drawer to get out some painkillers, downing it with the cold coffee he’d abandoned earlier. It’s nasty, but he doesn’t feel like getting up and finding a fresh cup. Dropping his head onto his desk afterwards, Kuroo sighs deeply. He pulls out his phone, placing it on the desk beneath his face so he can look down at it. He contemplates texting Bokuto, but in the end it’s Kenma’s contact he pulls up instead.

To: Kenma  
Subject: fml

i feel like absolute shit rn and i know u prob dont feel much better but u got anything that might cheer me up?

As expected, there’s a reply shortly afterward.

From: Kenma  
Subject: re: fml

The Panther

Confused, Kuroo sits back in his seat, propping one foot up on his desk.

To: Kenma  
Subject: re: re: fml

what?

From: Kenma  
Subject: re: re: re: fml

your superhero name

Kuroo grins, allowing himself a moment to close his eyes and imagine himself as a panther, sleek and beautiful but also deadly. He bites his lip then, looking back down at the text and feeling something squirm in his stomach.

Deadly. Is that how Kenma sees me?

To: Kenma  
Subject: oh?

u think im sexy like a panther huh?

From: Kenma  
Subject: re: oh?
Kuroo laughs, and the ugly feeling in his stomach dissipates, as he relaxes further. He props his other foot up on the desk, leaning dangerously back in his chair. He’s contemplating the pros and cons of attempting to sext Kenma when the door suddenly flies open, and Futakuchi strolls into the office. Startled, Kuroo jolts and the wheels of his chair slide forward, causing him and his chair to flip over backward.

“Oops! Did I catch you at a bad time?” Futakuchi asks cheerily.

Kuroo curses under his breath and scrambles to his feet. He tucks his phone into his pocket, frowning at the man in front of him.

“What do you want Futakuchi? I thought you went back to Iwanuma.”

“They want me to stay on a little longer,” Futakuchi says, moving to take a seat in front of the desk. He crosses his legs, leaning back and making himself comfortable.

Kuroo sighs, righting his own chair and flopping down in it. “What do they want now?”

“They had me schedule an interview for you, so you can explain to the public why you turned away so many recruits.”

Kuroo runs his hand through his hair. “I already explained that. They didn’t have what I wanted.”

“But they had what General Ukai and his superiors wanted,” Futakuchi reminds him. “They want an official statement.”

“So they can hang me for it,” Kuroo surmises.

Futakuchi hums softly but doesn’t comment. Instead, he turns to the pad in his hand, flipping through his notes. “The public also wants to know why there’s been a delay in the administration of the serum. You have your chosen recruits, and many people want to know why they haven’t been integrated into the SSP yet.”

Kuroo chews on his lip. That’s a more difficult question to answer. He’s still not sure what exactly is wrong with the serum. Oikawa hasn’t given him any satisfactory answers on that front, and he’s pretty sure the guy is avoiding him on purpose. It makes him feel uneasy, thinking it has to be pretty bad for Oikawa to remain silent on the issue.

“When’s the interview?” Kuroo asks, wishing the painkillers would kick in already.

“Saturday morning,” Futakuchi says, ripping a page from his pad and setting it on the desk. He slides it over to Kuroo with a smile. “Here’s the address to the station and the time. Please wear something presentable and do something about your hair. This is going to be a formal interview.”

Kuroo picks up the paper to look at it, briefly glancing over the address before setting it aside. “If I could fix my hair I would’ve done it already,” he says, shaking his head. “Is there anything else?”

“Try not to cuss,” Futakuchi says, standing.

“Right, yeah,” Kuroo says, thinking at least he’ll have time to prepare this time. He wonders if Asahi will be able to give him pointers on how to properly conduct himself. He’d rather take suggestions from him than from Futakuchi.
Futakuchi turns toward the door. He pauses as he opens it, turning to look back at Kuroo. “You have a lot on your plate,” he says factually. “I admire your fortitude.”

“What?” Kuroo stares at him blankly, wondering if he’d just heard a compliment from Futakuchi.

Futakuchi smiles, waving over his shoulder as he leaves without further comment.

Kuroo blinks, glancing over at the paper with the interview information on it. He grabs it and folds it carefully, sliding it into his pocket so he won’t forget later. He has four days to come up with suitable answers to the asinine questions he’ll undoubtedly be asked. Standing, he crosses to the door but hops a step back as it opens once more and Oikawa steps into the office. He starts, staring at Kuroo for a moment before grinning.

“Sorry! Were you heading out?”

Kuroo shakes his head. “I was just about to go find you, actually.”

“Oh wow, I’m flattered, Kuroo, really, but I’m afraid I don’t have time for a quickie I’ve got an important document for you to sign.” Oikawa waves a paper back and forth in front of Kuroo’s face.

Kuroo smirks at Oikawa’s joke, but when he takes a second look at the scientist, he finds his smirk sliding into a faint frown. His face is pale, and there are dark circles under his eyes. Even his smile seems more forced than usual, and Kuroo wonders if Iwaizumi managed to get him to sleep at all last night.

“You look like shit,” he comments.

Oikawa’s eyes widen. “I expect such comments from Iwa-chan, but from you Kuroo? I’m hurt, I really am.”

“I’m serious. When was the last time you slept?” Kuroo asks, and his frown deepens as Oikawa breezes by him with a fluttery laugh.

“I don’t need another mom, Kuroo. Iwa-chan does that job well enough on his own.” Oikawa flops into Kuroo’s desk chair, spinning around briefly before coming to a stop and setting the paper in his hand on the desk in front of him. “Something came up in the tests of the serum.”

Kuroo feels his chest tighten with sudden apprehension. “What?” he asks warily, moving to stand beside the desk.

Oikawa picks up a pen and begins twirling it between his fingers, as he hums softly. “Something that could be bad. I’m not sure yet. I need to run more tests, and to do that I need a thing.”

“A thing.” Kuroo stares down at Oikawa and wonders why he feels a tremor of unease prickle up his spine.

“Yes, a thing. It’s just a small thing. But I need your authorization to retrieve it. I promise that it’s vital to learning more about the serum.” Oikawa holds the pen out for Kuroo to take, smiling again. “Once I know what we’re dealing with and how to fix it, I’ll tell you everything, I promise.”

“Why can’t you tell me everything now?” Kuroo asks, taking the pen from Oikawa. He picks up the paper to read over it, but when Oikawa clears his throat, he pulls his gaze from the paper to look up at him.

“I don’t want you to freak out about it,” Oikawa admits, holding his gaze but twitching his fingers
“Against the wood of the desk. ‘Iwa-chan . . . he’s not doing well. He . . .’ Stopping, Oikawa breaks eye contact, looking away. ‘He wants to stop taking the serum.’”

Kuroo lowers the paper, staring at Oikawa in disbelief. His chest squeezes once more, hard, and he resists the urge to rub at it. “What the hell? Why would he do that?”

Oikawa sighs, tilting his head back to look up at the ceiling. “He wants to pull the selfless hero act. Killing himself to save others he might hurt later.” He lowers his head, looking at Kuroo once more. There’s a gleam in his eyes, sharp and fierce, and Kuroo raises an eyebrow at the sight. “That’s why I’m going to figure this out, and I’m going to fix it. I just need your permission.” He gestures to the paper once more.

Kuroo sighs. “Right.” He signs the paper, handing it back to Oikawa then. “I’m counting on you,” he says, right before remembering how he felt when Sawamura said the same to him. He’s just about to apologize, when Oikawa jumps up with a more genuine smile.

“I’ve got this all under control,” he says with complete confidence. He waves the paper in a salute before strolling out the door.

Kuroo watches him go, wishing he knew how to keep up appearances so well.

Suga stands in front of Nishinoya, arms crossed, wondering how in the world the young man has been in his office three times in as many days. Shaking his head, he steps forward to inspect the gash above Noya’s left eye, brushing his fringe away with gentle fingers.

“And how did this one happen?” he asks.

Noya tilts in his seat, curling his fingers around the edge of the flat doctor’s chair. He kicks his feet in the air absently, before scratching his nose and shrugging. “We were just testing the harnesses to make sure the cables were sturdy enough to carry the weight of two people in case someone ever gets injured and needs to be carried.”

“And let me guess: Tanaka dropped you.”

Noya laughs. “It wasn’t his fault, really. I wanted him to do a flip so Asahi-san could see how cool the harnesses are!”

At Asahi’s name, Suga pauses, studying Noya’s face a moment before turning to get a cotton ball and some antiseptic. Dabbing the cotton with the liquid, he turns to gently press it against Noya’s wound, allowing it to soak up the blood and clean the area. Noya winces slightly.

“Noya-kun,” Suga says carefully. “You need to leave Asahi alone. I know how badly you want him to rejoin the team, but you can’t force him. You have to let him make that decision on his own.”

Noya’s grin slides off his face as quickly as it appeared. “I’m not . . . forcing him,” he says, brows wrinkling before he winces at the pain the movement causes and smooths out his forehead once more. “I just want him to know what he’s missing out on.”

“He already knows, I’m sure,” Suga says, throwing away the blood-soaked cotton ball and peeling
off his gloves to join it. He grabs a gauze pad; not thinking the cut needs stitches. He places it carefully over the small wound, taping it off at the edges.

“He was the best captain we’ve ever had,” Noya says. “He was really good at it. Everyone looked up to him and respected him. And then he just . . . ran away. It’s not right! He’s a coward.”

“He almost lost you, Noya. He did lose Tsukishima.” Suga stops, remembering that night with a clench in his gut. He inhales slowly, releasing the air once he feels it’ll flow smoothly. “You know how fragile his heart is. He’s still blaming himself for that.”

“But he shouldn’t! That’s the point! We made the choice to follow him into battle! His strategy was good! It worked!” Noya flings his arms up in the air, waving them agitatedly. “He should be proud of what we accomplished that day! We saved hundreds of lives! Thousands even!”

“But he almost lost you,” Suga says pointedly, then wonders if he shouldn’t have been so direct, as Noya’s body grows rigid.

“What do you mean?” he asks slowly, eyes narrowing.

“Nothing, nothing,” Suga says quickly, shaking his head as he throws away the gauze wrapper. “You’re fine now, so you can return to work. Don’t go flying into any more railings.”

“Suga-san,” Noya says, hopping off the bed and grabbing Suga’s wrist. “What do you mean?”

Suga carefully extracts his arm, giving Noya a small smile. “You should talk to him. Really talk to him, instead of simply growing angry and scolding him.” He sets his hands on Noya’s shoulders then, guiding him to the door and giving him a small push out into the hall.

Noya walks off, strangely silent and looking contemplative.

Suga sighs and shuts the door, changing the plastic sheet on the chair and disinfecting the area before sliding another sheet over it. He feels that now familiar itch beneath his skin to go see Daichi; thinking that seeing his smile would brighten up his day immensely. But he still has a few more hours before his beak, and anything could go wrong at any moment.

So he sits on his stool instead, checking the time for what feels like the thirtieth time in an hour. He still feels warm thinking about their kiss, though they haven’t had a chance to share another one since that first time. Suga tells himself that it’s okay to wait, that he should give Daichi the time to rest and recuperate so he can return to work. But honestly, he knows that once Daichi is on his feet again, his life will grow busy like before, and he probably won’t have time to spend on kissing. Suga only has a week left of Daichi’s nearly undivided attention, and he wants to take advantage of that.

Standing, he resolves to ask Ennoshita to cover his shift, just for a few minutes, while he goes to check on Daichi. But before he can leave the room, the door opens and Iwaizumi steps inside.

“Sorry, do you have a minute?” he asks.

Suga tilts his head, studying the man. He has no obvious signs of injury, though he looks fatigued and there are dark bruises beneath his eyes from lack of sleep. Suga is starting to see similar signs in all of the Soldiers these days. And even Oikawa has started to look worse for wear. It worries him, but he knows there’s not much he can do other than tell them to try to get more sleep and prescribe painkillers.

“Of course,” he says with an easy smile. “Do you need more painkillers?”
Iwaizumi shakes his head. “I just had a question,” he says, rubbing one hand along the outside of his thigh. “With our bodies the way they are right now is it possible to inject ourselves with a higher dosage of serum safely?”

Suga’s eyebrows fly upward. “You want to heighten your dosage of the serum?”

Iwaizumi rubs the back of his head. “I’m just wondering because I’ve noticed that my and Kuroo’s strength has started to deteriorate faster during our fights. And we’re more exhausted afterwards than we were before. But considering these rage states and the toll the serum takes on our bodies, I’m wondering if it’s safe to up the dosage or not.”

Suga blinks, concern tickling the back of his mind. He resists the urge to immediately protest against such an option, however, knowing Iwaizumi is just asking in order to better himself as a Soldier. Still, he hopes the question is hypothetical.

“I’m not sure if it’ll be safe with the two of you in your current conditions,” Suga admits. “The more you take, the harder it’ll be on your bodies and with the state the serum is in now . . . I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“But if we had to at one point, would we survive it?” Iwaizumi asks, his dark eyes trained on Suga’s face.

Suga bites his lip, hesitating, before nodding slowly. “If it’s only a small amount more and you compensate by immediately fighting or exerting the extra adrenaline, you’d probably be fine. But again, this serum has been acting unpredictably, so until Oikawa and Kageyama figure out a way to adjust it, I don’t think you should be messing with your dosage.”

Iwaizumi nods, frowning thoughtfully, before bending at the waist in a bow. “Thank you, Sugawara-san. I’ll take this into consideration.”

Suga steps forward, resting his hand lightly on Iwaizumi’s shoulder. “You have a lot riding on you, I know that. But please remember to take care of yourself. Don’t push yourself too hard. You’re not doing this alone.”

Iwaizumi gives him a grateful look. “I know. But just what sort of Soldier am I if I can’t help lead my team? Kuroo has enough to deal with and worry about right now. And Oikawa . . .” he stops, running a hand through his hair. “I just need to get stronger. I get the feeling Kuroo’s going to ask me to train the new recruits, and with how weak I am right now—”

“You’re not weak,” Suga says firmly, shaking his head. “You’re one of the strongest people I know, Iwaizumi. Please don’t doubt yourself.” He punches Iwaizumi lightly in the arm. “You can do this. Just remember it’s okay to ask for help if you need to. Even with Oikawa.”

Iwaizumi nods. “Thank you, Sugawara-san.”

Suga smiles. “And I told you: call me Suga.” He crosses over to the cabinets on the wall, unlocking one and opening it to reveal rows of prescription bottles. He chooses one and then re-locks the door, stepping back to hand the bottle to Iwaizumi. “Here are some sleeping pills for Oikawa. They’re mild, but it’ll be enough to calm him down so his exhaustion can do the rest. If you want to take them as well, though, I’ll have to give you a stronger dosage.”

Iwaizumi’s hand closes around the bottle, and he shakes his head. “This is enough. Thanks again, Sugaw—Suga-san.”

Suga smiles, supposing that’s progress. He gives Iwaizumi’s arm a pat before opening the door for
him. “Good luck! Remember to get rest, okay?”

Iwaizumi nods, heading out then. Suga sighs softly, the heavy stone in his chest not disappearing even as Iwaizumi turns away out of sight.

They’re too young for this life.

It’s ironic that the thought comes to him just then, because Akaashi makes an appearance in the hall next, walking over to where Suga is closing up the room. He pauses, making a deep bow. Suga looks down at him, biting his lip and wondering what else was in store for him today.

“Sugawara-san,” Akaashi says as he straightens. “I apologize if this is a bad time, but I was wondering if I could get some more sleeping pills for Bokuto-san. His nightmares have returned.”

Suga feels his chest twinge with sympathy, and he nods quickly, reopening the door to step through. “Yes, of course,” he says, moving to the cabinet once more. As he rifles through the bottles for the correct one, he can feel the silence grow heavier, weighted with tension. Slowly, he turns back around to face Akaashi, who is watching him with an unreadable expression, but he seems agitated, his fingers twisting together in front of him.

“What is it, Akaashi-kun?” Suga asks, trying not to sigh. He hopes this is something he can actually help with, though he’s starting to wonder if he should find a therapist of some kind to whom the Soldiers could pay weekly visits.

“I wanted to ask your advice on something, if that’s okay,” Akaashi says apologetically. Suga gestures toward the patient chair. “Go ahead.”

Akaashi sits primly, back straight, hands folded in his lap. “Hypothetically speaking, if I were to be in love with one of my associates, and I knew they possibly had feelings for me as well, do you think it would be wise to pursue a relationship? Or would it be ill-advised considering if either of us died it would make things worse for the other if we had a deeper connection?”

Suga wonders if he should be surprised or not. “Is this about Bokuto?” he asks, holding out the bottle of sleeping pills. Akaashi takes it slowly, and Suga sits down on the stool once more, wheeling closer to the chair.

Akaashi looks down at the bottle in his hand, turning it over slowly. “You already knew.”

“I suspected,” Suga admits. “It’s not difficult to tell how much he admires and likes you. You’re not as easy to read, but I’ve seen you slip up enough times to draw my own conclusions.”

Akaashi’s cheeks flush, and Suga notes how pale he’s grown as well. The circles beneath his eyes aren’t as pronounced as Iwaizumi’s, but they’re present and sit darkly in his wan features. He’s still as pretty as ever, but there’s a fragility to the delicate lines of his face and form. He’s never grown as bulky as the others (though Suga would call Kuroo more lean than particularly muscular), and Suga is still surprised whenever he thinks of the way Akaashi held up that slab of concrete over Daichi, keeping it from crushing the man until help arrived.

“I don’t believe pursuing a romantic relationship is a wise decision for any of us,” Akaashi admits. “There’s too much at stake. The risk of death is always high, and I’m afraid . . . I’m afraid he won’t be able to cope with losing me if that ever happens. He’s always been dependent . . .”

Suga tilts his head. “But that’s a choice for him to make, isn’t it? What if he wants to spend whatever time he does have with you? Shouldn’t you allow him that choice?”
Akaashi looks up, dark green eyes shimmering and Suga realizes with horror that they're filled with tears. He launches off the stool to grab the box of tissues on the counter, holding it out to Akaashi, but he waves it away with a shake of his head.

“I’m fine. I just . . . I don’t think I can do that. You don’t know Bokuto-san the way I do. If anything happens to me it’ll crush him completely.”

Suga purses his lips, sitting back with the box in his lap. “Are you sure you’re not giving him enough credit? Or maybe . . . you’re the one that’s afraid? Afraid you won’t be able to cope with losing him if you deepen your relationship?”

Akaashi stares at him, face paling further, and Suga feels he hit some sort of mark with that. Softening his features, Suga wheels himself closer, reaching out to touch Akaashi’s knee lightly.

“It’s okay to protect yourself,” he says, as gently as he can. “But don’t speak for Bokuto’s feelings if you’re talking about your own. That’s not fair to him.”

Akaashi moves to stand, and Suga pushes his stool back, standing as well. Akaashi clutches the bottle of pills in his hand, bending forward in a bow. “Thank you for the pills and the advice, Sugawara-san,” he says politely, but there’s an edge to his voice, a resentment that Suga catches, and it makes him sad.

“Akaashi-kun, please don’t get in the way of your own happiness,” Suga says, his mind going to Daichi almost automatically. “You deserve to be happy. For all the hell you kids have gone through and continue to go through, you deserve as much happiness as you can get.”

Akaashi blinks at him, his face devoid of emotion. “Thank you, Sugawara-san,” he says, bowing again before turning to leave.

Suga sighs, watching him go and feeling as though all his words had slid off Akaashi without soaking in at all. He waits until he’s sure nobody else will turn up for advice they won’t listen to, and then he goes to find Ennoshita, definitely feeling he deserves a break. The thought of seeing Daichi’s smile lifts his spirits, however, and he hopes that the time spent with him will be enough to rejuvenate him.

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The aluminum can flies into the air, arcing high across the Friday afternoon sky. A moment later it explodes, shot through by a single bullet. It splinters in two, both sides dropping to the ground. Immediately there’s a shout of excitement, and Yamaguchi leaps from his spot on the ground, pumping his fist into the air.

“I got it! Tsukki, I got it!”

Tsukishima can’t help but smile faintly, picking up another can. “Don’t get cocky. That’s the first one you’ve hit all week. If you can hit this one too then we’ll celebrate.”

“With the picnic I brought us?” Yamaguchi asks, grinning brightly.

Tsukishima eyes the basket sitting beside the empty gun case. The smells wafting from it have been tempting him the entire time they’ve been there, but he insisted they keep practicing until Yamaguchi
could hit a can. It was good incentive, he thought, though it’s caused him to suffer more than he assumed he would. Even now his stomach growls, and so he nods.

“Sure.” He gestures then for Yamaguchi to get down, which he does, lying on his stomach on the grass. Tsukishima flings the can in his hand out over the descent of the hill on which they’re camped. He looks down then and watches the way Yamaguchi’s shoulder’s tense, the way his eyes narrow, peering along the sight of his rifle. His tongue pokes out between his lips, and then he fires with a jolt. Tsukishima turns quickly to watch as the can splinters once again. A direct hit.

“You’ve gotten better,” he has to admit; though it makes sense considering all the time Yamaguchi’s spent practicing.

Yamaguchi beams as he sits up. He turns away from his rifle, grabbing the basket and drawing it closer to him. He pulls a blanket from it, spreading it out on the grass before moving to sit on it. He pats the spot next to him before drawing out the food.

“Do you think I’m ready to sign up for the military yet?” he asks hopefully.

Tsukishima lowers himself onto the blanket slowly, trying to ignore the irritation welling in him at the question. He selects a bento, unwrapping it to inspect the contents. He knows this isn’t the food he prepared for Yamaguchi himself, and he wonders who did make it. However, he’s satisfied with what he sees, so he picks up a pair of chopsticks, splitting them.

“Thanks for the food,” he says in a monotone, before beginning to eat.

Yamaguchi frowns faintly. “Tsukki,” he says, reaching over to poke his shoulder with his chopstick. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“No, I don’t think you’re ready,” Tsukishima says flatly. “You’re too soft, Yamaguchi. You’re not strong enough mentally or emotionally for that kind of life, even if you’ve gotten better at your aim.”

Yamaguchi purses his lips, looking down at his food then. Tsukishima wonders briefly if his tone was too harsh, but he supposes either way it works in his favor if Yamaguchi listens to him.

But instead Yamaguchi looks up again, his eyes flashing with an intensity that causes Tsukishima to raise an eyebrow in surprise.

“I don’t think anyone is ready for this type of life,” Yamaguchi says, shaking his head. “But that shouldn’t stop us from doing the right thing. I want to fight alongside the soldiers that work to protect us. I don’t want to be useless.” He picks up a vegetable with his chopsticks, popping it into his mouth with an air of finality.

Tsukishima watches him a moment before replying, turning to his own food once more as he does. “Didn’t you say you helped out around your community? Working to help those struggling live easier lives? I wouldn’t call that being useless.” He shakes his head.

Yamaguchi sighs. “I know, but . . . that’s not doing anything to help fix the big issue. The government won’t issue grants to help us rebuild our homes, so I figure the only way to make that happen is to get rid of the thing that’s draining all their funds, you know? Or help the Soldiers rid us of them at least.”

“It’s not something you can just hop in and out of though,” Tsukishima says with a frown, glancing sidelong at his friend. “Once you join the military, you’re stuck there until they tell you you can leave. And if you prove to be a good soldier, they won’t just let you go. They’ll want you to fight in other wars. And if you’re a sniper, you’ll be killing people, not monsters.”
Yamaguchi chews quietly on his next bite, staring down at the bento in his lap. Tsukishima can tell he never thought that far ahead into the future, and that fact causes him to grow angry. How could Yamaguchi be so careless with his life and wellbeing? He can’t even feed himself properly, and here he wants to join wars just to maybe save people. People who will probably die anyway. And of course there’s always the fact that Yamaguchi could die as well.

Tsukishima grits his teeth, his mind once more going to Akiteru. He swallows his next bite forcefully before turning back to Yamaguchi, ready to tell him once and for all that he won’t be helping him with his aim anymore. It’s a decision he’s been dancing around for a while now, but he can’t just sit by and let Yamaguchi do this knowing he only did the bare minimum to get him to stop.

“Yamagu—”

“Hey, Tsukki?”

Tsukishima cuts off abruptly, frowning faintly. But Yamaguchi’s head is up, and his expression is soft and open. Tsukishima finds himself staring, eyes roaming over each freckle as it stands out against his friend’s pale face. Only it’s not so pale anymore. It’s started to regain a healthy glow, something that Tsukishima prides himself on.

“What?” he asks, when he realizes Yamaguchi is waiting for acknowledgement.

“You don’t have to take care of me because you feel guilty about my parents,” Yamaguchi says quietly. He tilts his head, giving Tsukishima a tiny smile. “I know you’re really busy at your job, and it’s nice to spend time with you again after all these years, but I don’t want you to feel obligated out of guilt.”

Tsukishima stares at him, wondering where this idea of obligation suddenly came from. Though he does feel guilty for what happened between them, that’s not why he’s doing all this. That’s not why he feels the inescapable need to protect Yamaguchi.

He thinks of that note, scrawled with a child’s handwriting, tucked beneath the mattress of his bed. He thinks of nights spent huddled beneath a blanket, watching horrifying films that made Yamaguchi laugh and Tsukishima clutch his friend’s hand tightly, insisting all the while that he wasn’t scared. He thinks of days spent exploring the woods near the park, hopping from rock to rock in the streams and catching Yamaguchi whenever he started to slip. He thinks of that fire burning low in his stomach whenever he saw Yamaguchi’s smile that last year of middle school.

It’s too late now. There’s no point in bringing it up.

But he hadn’t missed the way Yamaguchi had frozen when he placed his fingers on his cheek. He saw the way his eyes widened, how his breath seemed to catch in his throat. It could’ve been shock, or it could’ve been something else.

Really, there’s only one way to find out.

So, with his heart thumping in a wild, disjointed rhythm, Tsukishima sets down his chopsticks and places his food to the side. Shifting to look at Yamaguchi more fully, he frowns and shakes his head, reaching out to touch Yamaguchi’s cheek once more, sliding his fingertips across the array of freckles. Yamaguchi’s skin is warm, and Tsukishima can feel it grow warmer beneath his touch. His own neck burns, and he can feel the heat spreading to his ears.

“Ts-Tsukki?”

“Shut up, Yamaguchi,” Tsukishima says softly, as he leans in and places a soft kiss against
Yamaguchi’s lips.

He’s never kissed anyone before, and he can tell how stiff he is, how rigid the lines of his lips are as he presses against Yamaguchi’s. He tells himself to relax, but it’s difficult considering Yamaguchi hasn’t reciprocated yet. He’s sitting stiffly himself, and Tsukishima pulls away to inspect Yamaguchi’s expression. It’s full of blank shock, eyes wide, lips parted.

Tsukishima resists the urge to kiss him again, and instead he settles back. He watches Yamaguchi, waiting for him to respond.

“Um!” Yamaguchi squeaks, hands clenching tightly around his chopsticks and bento.

“Tsukishima-san! Yamaguchi-kun!”

An irritatingly familiar voice shatters the tense moment, and Tsukishima grimaces, turning with a frown to watch as Lev and Yaku approach them across the field. Yaku’s sharp eyes take in Yamaguchi’s flushed features, the close way they’re seated, and Tsukishima inches away, but not before he catches the tiny smirk that lifts the corner of Yaku’s lips.

“Oooh, a picnic! That’s so cool! How come we never go on picnics, Yaku-san?” Lev turns to Yaku with a wide, inquisitive grin.

Yaku sighs. “Who has time for things like this?”

Lev gestures to Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. “Tsukishima-san has time.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Yaku says, shaking his head and turning to look at Tsukishima. “We have to go. There was a disturbance call in Block 12. I’ve been trying to reach you.”

Tsukishima checks the phone in his pocket, realizing he’d placed it on silent during the target practice. He sees there are several missed calls from Yaku and sighs, slipping it back into his pocket.

“I’m on break. Can’t you just go with Lev?” Tsukishima asks, guessing now would be the time when he was needed elsewhere. He’s starting to wonder if the universe just doesn’t want him to be with Yamaguchi, considering this is the second time he’s attempted to confess only to be interrupted.

“No offense, but you’re more intimidating,” Yaku says. “All we know is that there’s a lot of loud noise and something that sounded like an explosion. It was near an abandoned corner store, so it’s probably some kids messing around. You’ll need to scare them off.”

“Right, right, because Lev is Lev, and you’re too small to intimidate anyone,” Tsukishima drawls, moving to his feet.

Yaku scowls. “Watch it.”

Tsukishima holds up his hands, thinking Yaku could be plenty intimidating if he wanted to be. Turning to look at Yamaguchi, he gives him an apologetic shrug.

“Sorry, looks like I have to go back to work.” He keeps his voice light, not about to make a big deal about the kiss with Yaku and Lev standing there.

Yamaguchi nods quickly, starting to put away the food. “It’s okay! Um, you can . . . you can stop by my apartment after you’re done, if you want . . .” He doesn’t look up as he says this but instead stares down into his picnic basket intently.
Tsukishima can feel Lev and Yaku’s eyes on him, and the back of his neck burns. He adjusts his glasses and turns away.

“Maybe,” he replies cagily, stepping over to his bicycle. He lifts the stand, wheeling it over to where Yaku and Lev are standing.

“I’m sorry we’re interrupting your date, Tsukishima-san,” Lev says, arms swinging as he walks along the other two down the hill.

“It wasn’t a date,” Tsukishima says, and resists the urge to look over his shoulder.

***

Shouyou

kenma! guess what? i think the serum is already working!!! i picked up natsu last night and i didn’t even struggle!!! im getting stronger!!! 😌 (Thurs 20:05)

oh! oh! and i tink im fastr too!!! i ran the track at the base and got a 5 min mile!!! 😈 (Thurs 20:25)

hey kenma i know u said we cant b friends anymore but i think thats stupid. im fine ok? im gonna b fine (Thurs 24:30)

pls rite me back i miss u (00:00)

hey guess what? kageyama is my monitor!!! crazy huh? look how scary his face is when he yells at me – 1 attached photo (09:05)

scary!!!! 😌 (09:05)

Kenma frowns down at his phone as it buzzes for the tenth time since that morning. It’s yet another picture, this time a selfie of Hinata holding up a peace sign, with Kageyama’s now very familiar face scowling in the background. They seem to be a gym or weight room of some kind, with barbells and dumbbells scattered about the floor. Hinata looks sweaty, but he’s grinning, and the caption he sends beneath the photo reads: bakayama says i cant lift my weight in barbells yet but ill show him!!!! 😌 (Thurs 09:05)

Kenma groans softly, pressing the screen of his phone against his forehead. This avoiding Shouyou thing would be a lot easier if Shouyou didn’t insist on texting him and sending pictures of himself looking adorable and sunshiney. But Kenma can’t find it in him to block Shouyou’s number, so he simply tries to ignore the constant interruptions to his day.

The truth is he misses Shouyou too.

The apartment is quiet and lonely without his comforting presence. At first Kenma thought he’d like the new silence. With Kuroo gone and Shouyou also at the base, Kenma can play his games in peace. But it only took a day for him to realize that as much as he preferred quiet there is such a thing as too quiet. And when he’s left alone with just his thoughts, it can grow dark and constricting, until he feels as though the walls are starting to close in on him. Already Kuroo has come home twice to find him curled beneath his bed, and Kenma can see how the worry is taxing Kuroo further.

He doesn’t want to be a burden.

His phone buzzes again, and Kenma sighs. He pulls it away from his face to open the new message from Shouyou.
Kenma finds himself starting to smile but quickly rearranges his features to his normal, neutral expression. Realizing he needs to do something to distract himself from this ache that’s building in his chest, he stands and makes his way to the kitchen. He prepares five bentos, placing them carefully in his backpack then. Slipping on his shoes, he almost forgets to grab his jacket and scarf, but remembers at the last minute. He pulls them on over his pale blue sweater with the tiny owls covering it (a gift from Bokuto) but forgoes a hat. He figures he’ll be warm enough with this. He’s wearing jeans today, so his legs probably won’t get cold.

It’s difficult, but Kenma makes himself set his phone inside his backpack. Further precaution against Shouyou’s persistence. Squaring his shoulders, he steps out into the crisp, autumn day, closing and locking the door behind him. He takes a deep breath to steady himself before starting down the steps to the parking lot below.

He sets out for the 12th Block then, already knowing the route by heart. It takes longer to get there than it usually does while riding on the back of Shouyou’s bike, but he manages to make it there in a little over an hour. His gait is brisk, but he has to stop to catch his breath, each time cursing inwardly at how badly he’s allowed himself to get out of shape (not that he was in amazing shape before, but at least when he played volleyball he had better stamina than this).

Arriving at the familiar abandoned storefront, he knocks on the boarded up door. It used to be glass, but now it’s just planks of wood nailed together, with the sign that reads: “the doctor is in.” There’s a soft creak, and a single board lifts from the rest, a pair of dark eyes peering at him from the crack in the wood.

“What’s the password?”

Kenma sighs. “Yuutarou, it’s me.”

The eyebrows flinch downward slightly. “Sorry, Kenma, but you have to say the password.”

“No, he doesn’t, Kindaichi; just open the door.”

A soft, slightly annoyed voice comes from behind the pair of eyes, and Kindaichi turns away from Kenma to glance behind him, giving Kenma a view of the back of his head.

“It’s for safety, Kunimi-kun!”

“Nobody uses your stupid passwords, Kindaichi. Stop asking for them.”

“Well, we should use them!”

Kenma clears his throat, and the eyes are back, looking out at him apologetically. “Can you just say it, please?”

Kenma grimaces, wishing Shouyou was here so he could say the password instead. But he’s not, so he scratches his nose and stares off to the side as he mumbles this week’s password, trying to keep his ears from burning.

“Akira, Akira, Bo-Bira, Banana-Fana, Fo-Fira, Me-My-Mo-Mira. Akira.”

The door opens immediately, and Kenma ducks inside, his entire face feeling like it’s on fire. Kunimi and Kindaichi are standing on the other side of the door, and Kunimi is staring at Kindaichi incredulously.
“Why the hell did you use *my* name?” he asks, his voice not sounding quite as indifferent as usual.

Kindaichi shuffles his feet, clasping his hands behind his back and looking away. “It’s cuter with your name,” he says.

“Change it. Immediately.”

“It’s not supposed to change until Sunday!”

“Kindaichi, I swear to God . . .”

Kenma skirts around the two as Kunimi advances on a shrinking Kindaichi, moving instead toward the back of the store. There’s only a few shelves left standing, and those are filled with various supplies: rolls of blankets, bags of canned food, assorted clothing, etc. Off to the side, on the counter where the cash register used to sit, is an array of miscellaneous medical supplies and bottles of medication. In the back there’s a small room that used to be a manager’s office. It’s been converted to a bedroom, and there are four futons cramped together in what little space there is. On one of these futons sits Yahaba. Beside him, with his head resting in Yahaba’s lap is Kyoutani, curled into a ball, eyes closed. One of Yahaba’s hands is on his head, while the other runs soothingly up and down Kyoutani’s side.

Kenma stops abruptly, biting his lip.

Yahaba looks up. He smiles, but it’s tired, and Kenma recognizes it immediately. He’s seen that same exhaustion on Kuroo’s face enough times to know how stressed Yahaba must be.

“Kenma-kun. It’s good to see you.”

“Sorry for intruding,” Kenma says, sliding the backpack off his shoulders. He crouches, setting it on the floor to rifle through it. He pauses briefly over his phone, but then continues on without drawing it out. Instead, he takes the bentos and sets them on the floor in front of Yahaba.

“Thank you,” Yahaba says gratefully. His hand stills on Kyoutani’s waist, and the latter opens his eyes.

Sitting up slowly, Kyoutani looks at the bentos for a moment, yawning softly, before looking up at Kenma with the tiniest trace of a smile ghosting over his lips.

“How are you?” he asks, and the way he’s looking at Kenma with those deep-set eyes full of his usual intensity makes Kenma tell the truth.

“Not great,” he admits, shaking his head.

Yahaba clucks sympathetically. “I’ve been keeping track of the news. I heard about the Soldier exam. And I see your friend isn’t with you today. Did he get in?”

Kenma nods, feeling that ugly heaviness sink into his stomach, twisting it mercilessly.

Before Yahaba can respond, Kunimi and Kindaichi appear. Kindaichi is rubbing at a spot on his arm, but he stills when he sees the bentos.

“Food?” he asks hopefully.

Kenma nods again, and Kindaichi and Kunimi descend on the bentos immediately, each of them snatching up a box and sitting down to devour them quickly, barely able to get out “thank you for the
food” before their mouths are full.

Yahaba laughs softly. “Slow down before you choke,” he admonishes softly, picking up two of the last three. He hands one to Kyoukani, before turning back to Kenma. “Thank you for the food.”

Kenma pulls his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. He looks down at the last bento. He brought it for himself, but his appetite has left him as the weight in his stomach continues to churn back and forth anxiously.

“Are you angry that Hinata-kun chose the SSP over you?” Yahaba asks gently after a moment of silent eating.

Kenma shrinks further into himself, resting his cheek on his knee, as he stares off at the wall across from him. He lifts his head when he feels the soft touch of a hand at his foot, and he finds himself looking into Kyoukani’s dark gaze, now softened with empathy.

“You shouldn’t be angry. He isn’t choosing it over you. He’s choosing to fight rather than do nothing. You need to let him.” Kyoukani says seriously.

“I know how you feel.” Yahaba cuts in with a nod. “I was angry and disappointed and, well, many things when I found out Kyoukani volunteered himself for experimentation. But it was something he felt he had to do, so I reevaluated my emotions and realized that while I was scared, I had to support him. That’s what friends do.” He turns and gives Kyoukani a small smile. “It was difficult, and it still is, trust me. But I wouldn’t give up what we have for anything.” He shakes his head, looking back at Kenma. “You shouldn’t give up what you have with Hinata-kun either.”

But I’m afraid . . .

Before Kenma can finish his thought or attempt to voice it, a loud knock sounds at the door, rapid and insistent. Everyone freezes, turning to look toward the door.

“Kyoukani Kentarou! This is the military police. Come out with your hands above your head immediately!”

Kinhaichi squeaks, quickly covering his mouth with his hand.

Yahaba frowns. “How did they—”

“Kyoukani Kentarou! You have thirty seconds to open this door, or we will come in after you!”

Kunimi stands, crossing over to a tattered duffle bag on the floor near the office door. He draws out a large knife, but Yahaba immediately shakes his head, gesturing for Kunimi to put it back. He stands, face still and pale, and holds his hand out in a silent command to stay back.

Kenma’s heart is pounding its way into his throat. He watches as Yahaba approaches the front of the store. Standing quickly, he rushes forward, wondering if he could talk to whoever was on the other side of that door. If he explains who he is, who his (boyfriend? lover? partner?) best friend is, perhaps they will listen to him. Kyoukani is on his feet as well, rushing ahead of Kenma to grab Yahaba’s shoulders.

“Don’t—”

A sudden blast of heat and drywall knocks them off their feet. Kenma finds himself flying forward onto the ground, smacking his chin against the linoleum floor beneath him. He grimaces, as sudden pain sparks up his jaw. There’s something solid and heavy on his back, and for a moment he’s afraid
he’s trapped beneath a slab of debris or a shelf from one of the aisles. But then he feels a rapid heartbeat against his back, and the warmth of quick, shallow breaths against the back of his head.

“Shigeru!” Kyoutani’s voice breaks, desperate.

Kenma lifts his head enough to see that he’s hidden behind a shelf. As the dust settles, he can make out a group of men stomping through the pieces of wood and drywall, through the hole they created in the storefront. Kenma starts to get up, pushing his hands against the floor, but the weight on top of him shifts, pressing more firmly against him.

“Stay down,” a quiet voice speaks into his ear, the barest of tremors showing Kunimi’s fear (for Kenma can tell it’s Kunimi now). He glances over his shoulder, down the length of the young man on top of him, to the back room where he can see Kindaichi peeking out from behind the doorway, eyes wide.

Kunimi follows Kenma’s line of vision and gestures for Kindaichi to get back behind the wall. He does, disappearing quickly. Kunimi looks down at Kenma then, and Kenma can feel his heartbeat quicken further.

“If I get up, will you stay here and not move?” he asks softly, eyebrows pulling together over his nose.

Kenma nods wordlessly.

Kunimi purses his lips and then nods in return, before sliding off him and quickly crawling back to the office room. Kenma scoots forward once Kunimi is out of sight, peering around the shelf in front of him. The military men are wearing dark clothing and helmets with opaque visors, so it’s impossible to see their faces. Kenma doesn’t recognize any of them by their posture, but he can clearly see the insignias on their shoulders.

A crow flying before two crossed katanas.

Captain Sawamura Daichi’s men.

Kuroo’s men.

“Kentarou!” Yahaba cries out, as the men surround Kyoutani. He struggles to stand, pushing aside chunks of drywall and wood.

Kyoutani drops into a crouch, and from his hiding spot Kenma can see the dark flash in his eyes, the rage that settles into his features. His blood runs cold at the familiar snarl that curls Kyoutani’s lips, and when Kyoutani leaps onto the first soldier, Kenma flinches, scooting back as Kyoutani begins to pound the guy’s helmet with his fist, splintering it, breaking it to reach the face behind the visor.

The man goes down under Kyoutani’s weight, screaming in pain. The others rush forward, grabbing Kyoutani’s arms to pull him away, but he flings them in both directions with ease, a low, guttural yell issuing from his mouth. He sounds like a wild animal, trapped, in pain, and Yahaba stands off to the side, hands extended before him, face twisted in grief.

“No, stop! Please, stop!” he shouts, but he isn’t speaking to Kyoutani. His gaze is fixed on the men as they stand and pull out their guns, training them onto Kyoutani, who’s returned to the man beneath him, pummeling him with his fist until it begins to come away bloody.

“Don’t shoot him!” Yahaba screams, rushing to stand in front of the guns. “I can stop him, just please, please don’t shoot.”
He whirls around, dropping to his knees beside Kyoutani. “Ken! Kentarou,” he says insistently, laying his hands on Kyoutani’s back and shoulder. “Kentarou, stop. Listen to me. Listen! You’re okay. You’re going to be fine. You can stop now.” His voice is quiet but insistent, a soft mantra repeating the same words over and over again.

Kyoutani pauses, fist still raised. The man beneath him lies limp, no longer struggling. Kyoutani shakes his head, once, twice, quickly as though shaking off a shroud. He lifts his gaze then, meeting Yahaba’s. Slowly, his grip releases on the man, and he sits back, the fury clearing from his face. In its place is exhaustion and regret.

Kenma watches, as he gets off the man and slumps against Yahaba, resting his forehead against his shoulder, as Yahaba’s arms come up around him. He rubs Kyoutani’s back in slow circles.

“I’m here. You’re okay. You’re okay. Shhh, just breathe. Breathe, my love.” His words are soft, but Kenma can hear the way it breaks on the words, can see the tears glistening in his eyes. His face is dirty from the explosion, save for a few streaks that the tears have washed clean.

Slowly, the military men approach, guns still trained on Kyoutani.

“Please, don’t,” Yahaba says to them, shaking his head, as he holds Kyoutani closer.

“We’re under orders,” one of them says gruffly, though there might be a twinge of sympathy under his tone.

While one checks on their fallen companion, the others take Kyoutani’s arms, pulling him away from Yahaba’s grasp. Kyoutani doesn’t resist this time, but allows them to drag him to his feet, every part of him sagging.

Yahaba stands quickly. “Take me!” he blurts out, hands fisted at his sides. “You’re from the SSP, right? Take me instead. Trust me, I’m more valuable to them than he is.”

Kyoutani’s head comes up quickly. “Shigeru.”

Yahaba turns eyes wild with desperation onto Kyoutani.

He shakes his head slightly. “Don’t.”

Yahaba swallows hard, turning back to the men. “Take me,” he says again. “Please. I was one of the lead scientists on the Super Soldier project. It’s me Oikawa Tooru wants.”

The men exchange a look. The one helping the injured man pauses on his way out the hole in the wall, glancing back at the group.

“He might be the safer option,” he says to them, before stepping out of the store.

The men nod, releasing Kyoutani and taking Yahaba’s arms instead. Kyoutani makes a soft noise similar to a whine of pain. He steps forward, hands reaching, but Yahaba shakes his head and Kyoutani retreats, crushing his arms against his chest instead.

“Take care of the kids,” Yahaba tells him with a small smile. “I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

Kenma watches, pulse throbbing in his throat, as the men lead Yahaba out of the store. Kyoutani stands completely still, before dropping to his knees, pressing his head into his hands. Slowly, Kenma stands, listening to the sound of trucks starting up and driving away. A shuffling noise from the office causes Kenma to glance over, and he sees Kunimi and Kindaichi framed in the doorway.
They’re both pale, and Kindaichi is clutching Kunimi’s arm, practically hiding behind him. Kunimi looks grim, his gaze flickering from Kyoutani’s bowed form to Kenma and then back again to Kyoutani. He bites his lip.

Kenma’s hands shake. He slowly curls them into fists, wishing he knew what to do. Wishing he knew what to say. That helpless feeling crawls back into his stomach, as he’s once more reminded how worthless he is.

*Kuroo wouldn’t do something like this. It has to be a mistake.*

Kenma thinks of the insignia. Those men were from the SSP; there could be no denying that. Not unless they’d stolen uniforms, but that doesn’t seem likely. A nauseating feeling churns in Kenma’s stomach, and he bites hard on his knuckle to fight back the bile rising in his mouth.

“What the hell happened here?”

A new voice cuts through the silence, and Kenma lifts his head to see Yaku, Lev, and a tall young man with glasses that he doesn’t recognize step through the hole in the wall. They look around at the mess created with wide eyes, and when Yaku’s eyes land on Kenma, they widen.

“Kenma-san!” Lev exclaims, hurrying over. He bends down, peering into Kenma’s face. “Are you okay?! You’re bleeding!” His hand comes up toward Kenma’s face.

Kenma shies away instinctively, moving his hand to his chin. His fingers come away bloody, and he stares down at the shining red liquid, stark against his pale skin.

“Oh.”

“Kyoutani-san?” Yaku approaches the man huddled on the floor, his voice soft, careful. “What happened here? Where is Yahaba-san?”

Kyoutani makes a sound like a whimper and curls further into himself. Kunimi steps forward, Kindaichi still clinging to his arm.

“Some military men came and took him away,” he explains, expression and voice stiff. There’s heat in his gaze, however, an anger that Kenma can feel as though it’s his own, brewing hot in his stomach. “Fuck of a lot of good you guys are. What happened to ‘Protect and Serve’? Or does that not apply to homeless orphans?”

Yaku’s eyes widen. “Of course it applies,” he says sharply then, his eyebrows lowering quickly. “We only heard that there was a disturbance in this area. We thought it was abandoned. We didn’t realize this was your hideaway.”

Lev glances around the store as he straightens. “This is the Mad Dog gang hideout? I thought it’d be bigger. More impressive. This place is a dump!”

Kunimi frowns. Yaku shakes his head. “Shut up, Lev.”

The glasses guy still hasn’t said a word, but he steps up now, hands in his pockets. “Hanamaki-san has been looking for this place for years. But it’s not on any of our grid maps.”

Yaku nods. “It’s shown as demolished and hazardous, so I guess he didn’t bother to check.”

The glasses guy snorts. “Fine detective work, that.”
Lev bounces lightly on his toes. “Are we going to arrest them? Since all that’s stolen?” He points to the scattered medical supplies and medications near the cash register.

Yaku follows his finger, shaking his head. “We don’t know that that’s stolen,” he says, glancing sidelong at Kunimi then. “I do think we should take you in for questioning, however. Kidnapping is a serious offense.”

“It wasn’t kidnapping,” Kyoutani murmurs.

They all turn to look at him in surprise.

Kyoutani scowls up at Yaku. “He went willingly.”

Yaku looks back at him a moment, before glancing at Lev and Glasses. “We should still bring them in. They’ll be safer at the station, and we can figure out relocation options as well.”

Kunimi raises an eyebrow. “You’re not going to arrest us?”

Yaku matches his expression. “Do we need to arrest you?”

Kindaichi quickly shakes his head. “We’re not bad guys, I swear!”

“What about Kenma-san?” Lev asks, gesturing to the young man beside him.

Kenma shrinks away from his hand.

Yaku sighs. “Take him home. I don’t know what he’s doing here, and I don’t want to know.”

Lev grins, turning to look down at Kenma excitedly. “Let’s go, Kenma-saaaaan,” he sings, reaching to take Kenma’s hand.

Kenma steps it out of reach quickly. “What’s going to happen to them?” he asks, directing his question to Yaku.

Yaku glances toward the other three, Kindaichi and Kunimi now crouched beside Kyoutani, speaking to him in soft tones. Yaku rubs his forehead. “I know Hanamaki has been looking for ways to charge them with all the thefts going on in this area, but I see no evidence of theft here, so we’ll simply hold them until we can place them in shelter.”

“Don’t split them up, okay?” Kenma requests softly.

Yaku nods. “I’ll try my best,” he promises.

Kenma looks once more toward the three huddled on the floor before turning away with a sigh. He walks past Lev, forcing the other to turn quickly to follow him. Once they reach the outside, Lev gestures to his bicycle.

“You can ride on my handlebars, Kenma-san!” he says.

Kenma wrinkles his nose in distaste, but there’s no place for him to stand in the back, so he simply nods. As Lev straddles the bike, he approaches warily, resisting the urge to kick Lev, as the taller young man picks him up and places him on the handlebars in front of him. Lev is still tall enough to see over Kenma’s shoulders, so at least Kenma doesn’t have to worry about Lev crashing them into a building or a tree.

“Can you take me to the base instead?” Kenma asks softly, glancing over his shoulder at Lev. He
tries not to start at how close those wide green eyes are.

Lev grins. “Of course, Kenma-san!” he says happily. “I'll take you wherever you want to go!”

Kenma nods, turning to face forward once more. His hands grip the handlebars beneath him, as Lev starts to pedal forward. It’s a precarious perch, but Kenma manages to hold steady (though he almost falls the first couple times Lev turns without warning).

He isn’t sure what he’s going to say to Kuroo when he sees him. All he knows is that this type of thing is unacceptable. The SSP is supposed to protect the citizens of Sendai, not blow up their homes and take away their families. And despite his aversion to confrontation, Kenma knows he can’t just sit back and do nothing. He has to take a stand at some point, and if this program is changing Kuroo into someone he’s not, Kenma needs to get him out somehow.

Lev pulls to a stop in front of the base, setting his feet on the ground to steady the bike as Kenma hops off the handlebars.

“Thanks,” he says, already turning away.

“Kenma-san,” Lev says, and the seriousness of his tone causes Kenma to pause and glance back. “I don’t think Kuroo-san would do something like this. He probably didn’t know.”

Kenma presses his lips in a firm line, nodding but not sure it’s possible that Kuroo didn’t know. Such operations had to be signed off on by the captain, didn’t they? Sticking his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, Kenma approaches the guard stand beside the barrier. When asked for his ID, Kenma frowns, remembering suddenly that he left his backpack (with his phone and wallet) back at the store. He turns around to ask Lev if he can take him back to retrieve it, but the rookie cop is already gone.

Sighing, Kenma turns back to the guard. “I don’t have my ID. But I’ve been here before. It’s fine.”

The guard looks skeptical. “Let me call my manager,” he says, reaching for a phone attached to the wall of the stand.

Kenma doesn’t wait for him to dial the number. Instead, he ducks beneath the barrier and takes off at a run across the front parking lot. The guard shouts behind him, but Kenma doesn’t look back. Already his legs and chest are screaming at him to stop, but he ignores the pain, pushing forward until he bursts through the front door. Immediately, he heads for the stairs, though now he slows, panting heavily as he grasps the rail and hauls himself up.

Kuroo is on the phone when Kenma reaches his office. He looks up as Kenma enters, and his face immediately breaks into a grin. He gestures for Kenma to enter and have a seat, before pointing to his phone and sticking out his tongue in a picture of disgust. Kenma fights a smile. He doesn’t want to smile at Kuroo right now. He wants to understand what’s going on. So he steps forward, face carefully arranged in an impassive mask. Kuroo narrows his eyes slightly, studying Kenma’s expression before turning his mouth closer to the receiver of his phone.

"I'm going to need to call you back," he says, before hanging up quickly.

As he stands, two security guards burst into the room behind Kenma, causing him to flinch. Kuroo frowns, as they take either side of Kenma’s arms.

“What are you doing?” he asks. “Let him go.”

“But this young man is trespass—"
“I said, let him go.” Kuroo’s tone is sharp, allowing no argument. The two security guards retreat, letting Kenma go with a skeptical look before leaving the office. Kuroo sighs, shaking his head as he runs his hand through his hair. He pauses then, tilting his head as he studies Kenma closely. His frown deepens, and he reaches forward to cup Kenma’s face in his hands, tilting his head back to inspect the scrape on his chin. "You're bleeding." He takes a step back, surveying the rest of Kenma. "And you're filthy. What happened?"

Kenma brushes his hands away. "I could ask you the same," he says flatly.

Kuroo's eyes widen at the hostility he catches in Kenma's voice. "What did I do?" he asks.

Kenma narrows his eyes, wondering if Kuroo actually doesn't know. It doesn't seem probable, but that isn't Kuroo's lying face. He looks genuinely confused, and so Kenma huffs, stepping back and crossing his arms tightly over his chest, his fingers clutching the cuffs of his jacket.

"Some of your men came and took Shigeru."

Kuroo blinks blankly down at him. "Who?"

Kenma scowls, and he fiddles with a strand of thread hanging from one cuff. "He used to work for Tooru. Apparently he needs him for something. So they blew up the store he and his family were living in and took Shigeru away." He lifts his chin to look Kuroo in the eye. "Doesn't something like that need your authorization?"

Kuroo still looks blank, but then his features settle, drawing tightly together, and he reaches forward to take Kenma's shoulders in his hands. "And you were in the explosion?"

Kenma nods, though that doesn't answer his question. "You knew this was going to happen?" he asks, just wanting a straight answer.

But Kuroo doesn't listen. Instead, he leans back, letting go of Kenma to step around him. "Stay here," he says absently, as he exits the office.

Kenma follows him anyway. Kuroo's strides are long and angry, his shoes clipping against the hard floor with quick, harsh sounds. Kenma has to jog to keep up, and he grabs at the stitch forming in his side. Kuroo doesn't slow down, however, but instead makes his way to the next level up where the labs are. He doesn't greet anyone there but heads directly for Oikawa's desk.

"Oikawa, you bastard!" he shouts, drawing eyes from all around.

Kenma stops short, shrinking back, as Kuroo grabs the front of Oikawa's shirt, yanking him to his feet. The muscles of his back and shoulders are tense beneath his shirt, and Kenma can see the way his free hand trembles, as he curls it into a fist. Oikawa's eyes are wide, and Kuroo shakes him once, hard.

"You kidnapped someone?! You blew up a building and kidnapped someone!"

Oikawa yelps, holding up his hands defensively. "It wasn't a kidnapping! Yahaba volunteered!"

"After you blew up his home!"

"It wasn't supposed to go down that way! I didn't send them there to attack anyone!"

"But they did, didn't they? Did you ever consider there might've been more than one person there? Kenma was there, you idiot! What if your men had killed him in the explosion?"
"They told me it was a necessary display of force!" Oikawa says, licking his lips. His eyes skitter over to where Kenma stands, pressed up against the desk behind him, trying to look as small as possible. The apple of Oikawa's throat bobs, and he looks back at Kuroo pleadingly. "I had to do it. I'm sorry. I need Yahaba's help. I knew he wasn't going to join us if I didn't do something to convince him . . ."

"We don't do that sort of shit, Oikawa! We're supposed to be the good guys!"

"I'm doing this to help you!" Oikawa shouts, finally shoving Kuroo away from him. A manic glow enters his eyes, and he appears feverish, his arms waving. "You're dying, don't you get that? You're all dying, and I need to fix it! Sometimes we have to make sacrifices, make hard choices to get the results we need!"

"I thought when you said you needed a thing it was, I don't know, a science thing. I didn't know you meant a person," Kuroo seethes, shaking his head. "I can't believe you. I thought you were better than this."

Oikawa runs a shaking hand through his hair. "Are you going to make me send him back?" he asks softly.

Kenma's entire body feels tense. Every lab assistant in the room has their eyes trained on the two men standing stiffly before each other. The silence rings in Kenma's ear, and the tension is palpable, growing thicker and heavier before Kuroo snaps it half with a shake of his head. His shoulders slump forward.

"No. If he's truly what you need to fix the serum, then I'll let him stay. But I'll be watching you more closely from now on, Oikawa. Don't think for a second that I'm letting you off the hook for this. Putting innocent civilians in danger is not acceptable."

"I understand," Oikawa says, turning his gaze away finally.

Kenma feels as though he's choking. His breath is coming in quick, hurried gasps, as his chest constricts around his lungs. He shuts his eyes quickly, placing his hands over his ears to block out any other words. This isn't right. This isn't who Kuroo is. He doesn't hurt people. He saves them. Why is he hurting Yahaba and Kyoutani? It's not right. It's not right.

A soft hand at his elbow causes his eyes to fly open. Kuroo looks down at him, lips pulled downward in a tired frown.

"Kenma, I'm sorry. But . . . we need this serum."

Kenma jerks away, taking a step back. "It's not right," he says, his voice sounding small in his own ears.

"It's not," Kuroo agrees, nodding wearily. "But . . . in war we don't always get to do the right thing."

Kenma understands, deep down, what Kuroo is saying. But when he thinks of Kyoutani, bowed over his knees, and the pale, frightened faces of Kunimi and Kindaichi, he doesn't think he can accept it. He takes another step back, drawing further away from Kuroo. He sees the hurt in Kuroo's expression, the way he flinches under Kenma's accusatory gaze, but in that moment he can't bring himself to care.

"I don't think we're the good guys anymore," Kenma says softly, before turning and running out of the lab.
Iwaizumi heard about what happened in the lab. Everyone heard about it, honestly. Gossip spread like wildfire at the base, and Iwaizumi overheard the story from a couple food servers in the cafeteria. Immediately, he went to find Oikawa, and now he's standing just inside the bathroom door, staring at the man seated across the room against the wall, face buried in his knees, hands folded behind his head.

"Oi," Iwaizumi says, drawing closer. "Get off the bathroom floor, that's disgusting."

"It's where I belong," Oikawa bemoans. "I'm a piece of shit, Iwa-chan."

"I'm not going to argue with that," Iwaizumi says mildly, moving to sit beside him.

Oikawa lifts his head just enough to give Iwaizumi a glare. His nose is red, as are his eyes, and Iwaizumi can see tear stains on his cheeks. "Mean, Iwa-chan. You can at least try to comfort me."

"From what I hear, you got yourself into this mess," Iwaizumi says pointedly. "What the hell were you thinking? Blowing up Yahaba's place and taking him by force? Did you really think that was going to fly with Kuroo?"

Oikawa whines softly, placing his head back on his knees. "I don't know! It was the best idea I could come up with. I need his help."

"You have Kageyama," Iwaizumi feels the need to remind him. "You could've gone to him for help."

Oikawa shakes his head, lifting it once more and placing is chin on his hand, leaning back against the wall, as his elbow props up on his knee. "No, I couldn't. He was reassigned to watch the new Chibi-chan."

"Hinata Shouyou," Iwaizumi corrects.

Oikawa waves dismissively. "Whatever. The point is, Kuroo placed Kageyama on monitoring him, so I couldn't ask for his help."

"Are you sure you didn't just kidnap Yahaba because you're still jealous over Kageyama being placed as head of the lab?"

Oikawa frowns. "I'm not that petty," he snaps. "And I didn't kidnap Shi-chan. At least . . . it wasn't supposed to go down that way." He sighs, folding his arms across his knees and dropping his head onto them.

Iwaizumi hesitates, before reaching over to lay his hand against Oikawa's back. Instinctively, Oikawa stiffens, but Iwaizumi simply rubs gentle circles between Oikawa's shoulder blades until Oikawa starts to relax once more.

"What's done is done," Iwaizumi says, knowing Oikawa's heart is in the right place at least. "You can't go back and change it now so just . . . make up for it by fixing this serum."

Oikawa turns his head, looking over at Iwaizumi with skepticism. "You're not angry with me," he
says slowly. "I thought you were going to hit me."

"You're hitting yourself plenty," Iwaizumi sighs. "You're too hard on yourself, you know that? I'm glad you're getting help, but you should really work on how you go about asking for it."

"I know. I'm a terrible person," Oikawa laments.

Iwaizumi lifts his hand off Oikawa's back to flick him between the eyebrows gently. "You made a mistake. That doesn't make you a terrible person. If you want, I can talk to Yahaba, see if I can smooth things over."

Oikawa lifts his head, grinning faintly. "Iwa-chan is going to be the diplomat? But you have no charisma or charm!"

Iwaizumi raises his eyebrows and lifts his hand. Oikawa leans away immediately with a soft laugh, and Iwaizumi fights a smile, glad that Oikawa seems to be feeling better now, at least. Lowering his hand, he beckons to him with a finger. "Come here," he says, pitching his voice low.

Oikawa straightens, watching Iwaizumi warily but moving closer. Their thighs touch, and Iwaizumi feels a spark of heat immediately, spreading fire up and down his leg. Ignoring that for the moment, he instead wraps his hand around Oikawa's tie, pulling his face close enough to kiss. Oikawa immediately relaxes. Iwaizumi can feel the tension leave him as he sighs into the kiss. Iwaizumi presses firmer, slotting his lips just right against Oikawa's, encasing his bottom lip between his own and giving it a tiny suck. Oikawa murmurs in response. Slowly, Iwaizumi pulls away, unable to keep his mouth from quirking into a smile at the expression of complete calm that's settled over Oikawa's features.

"Just let me help, okay?" Iwaizumi says then, gently. He releases Oikawa's tie, reaching up to brush the back of his knuckles across Oikawa's cheekbone.

"Okay," Oikawa breathes, opening his eyes. He gives Iwaizumi a tiny smile. "Thanks, Hajime."

Iwaizumi fights the blush that threatens to overtake his face, moving quickly to stand. "And get the fuck off the floor. It's still gross." He holds out his hand, and once Oikawa grabs it, he hoists him to his feet.

"You're blushing," Oikawa sings lightly.

"No I'm not," Iwaizumi protests, despite the heat that's definitely warming his cheeks now. "Shut up, Shittykawa. Get back to work." He shoves Oikawa's arm lightly, turning to leave. As he does, he hears Oikawa's soft laugh following him, and his heart swells in his chest.

At least I'm still good for that.

He finds Yahaba in the observation room. It’s familiar blank walls stare back at him morosely, and the single bed sits against the far one, just as Iwaizumi remembers it. There’s a table and a chair in the center of the room, and a toilet off to the side. It’s close to a prison cell, only there’s a large window with thick glass set in one wall, with an intercom off to the side. Iwaizumi remembers his time spent in this room, shortly after receiving the new serum formula. Oikawa visited him nearly every day.

And as Iwaizumi looks in at Yahaba, seated on the edge of the bed staring down at his hands, he wonders if they will allow Yahaba any visitors.
“This seems a little excessive,” Iwaizumi admits, as he presses the intercom button.

Yahaba’s head comes up. His eyes meet Iwaizumi’s, and a sardonic smile curls his lips. He stands, crossing over to the intercom on his side to press it.

“Don’t you know? I’ve been secretly taking the serum this whole time and I’m just as strong and dangerous as one of you.”

Iwaizumi snorts softly. “I wish that were true, honestly. We could use someone like you on our team.”

Yahaba’s smirk disappears. “I told you both to leave us alone,” he says flatly. “I didn’t want to be dragged back into this.”

“I know,” Iwaizumi says apologetically. “But Oikawa is desperate. This anomaly in the serum . . . it’s not good. He won’t tell me what it is, exactly, but . . . it’s enough to keep him up all night every night this past week.” He rubs the back of his neck.

Yahaba watches him impassively. “I’m sorry that you’re all having a hard time with it,” he says after a moment, and he sounds sincere at least. “But this isn’t my problem. You all made it not my problem when you sent Kyoutani away. I swore I would never work here again after that.”

“I don’t want to force you,” Iwaizumi admits. “But I . . . I’m begging you to reconsider. If you need me to do anything for you, I will. This is tearing Oikawa apart, and I’m afraid if he doesn’t find what he needs soon he’s going to destroy himself looking for it. So please . . . please help him.” He curls his fingers at his side, clenching his hand into a tight fist.

Yahaba’s shoulders relax, his posture growing less defensive. He looks away. “I need to know that Kyoutani, Kindaichi, and Kunimi are safe,” he says, looking back at Iwaizumi then with a firm gaze. “If you can guarantee their safety and well-being, then I will help.” He glances around the observation room. “And I don’t want to be kept in here like an animal in a cage. Tell Oikawa I’ll help him if he gets me an actual place, with room enough for my family.”

Iwaizumi isn’t sure how that’ll fly with General Ukai, but considering Yahaba may be their only hope to fixing the serum he’s willing to bet Kuroo at least won’t have any arguments. He nods. “I’ll tell Kuroo your conditions,” he promises.

“I won’t lift a finger until they’re met,” Yahaba says seriously.

“I understand,” Iwaizumi says, feeling relief coursing through him, weakening his knees. He wonders if Oikawa never considered offering Yahaba what he truly wanted in exchange for his help. Then again, he wouldn’t exactly call Oikawa stable these days. Sighing, he bows toward Yahaba through the glass. “Thank you.”

Turning, he heads out, just hoping he can convince Kuroo to get the general to let them use part of the budget in this way. It seems like a lot to ask, but if this is truly their only hope for fixing the serum, to keep these rage states from escalating further, than surely the general will listen and agree.

***

From: Kenmaaaa
Bokuto stares down at the text that’s been sitting in his phone for the past week and a half. He’s been agonizing over it for just as long, wondering if it could really just be that simple. He glances over at Akaashi, seated on the couch with his legs tucked up underneath him. It’s Friday evening, and they’ve already eaten dinner and showered. Akaashi has his book on his lap, and a mug of tea in the other hand. His hair looks soft and fluffy, and it’s all Bokuto can do to sit still and not crawl across the couch to run his fingers through it. It’s still damp around the edges, curling up delicately against the pale skin of his neck.

Bokuto looks back down at the text, swallowing a distressed whine before it can escape.

It’s not that simple.

Ever since the kaiju attack, Akaashi has been avoiding the conversation they had outside the game store. Thinking about it makes Bokuto frustrated, but he can’t think of how to broach the subject without scaring Akaashi off with his enthusiasm. What had he even meant asking “what if it wasn’t just a game?” Was that a roundabout way of asking Bokuto to marry him?

Did Bokuto want to marry him?

Bokuto sneaks another glance at Akaashi, watching the way his lips part around the edge of his mug, the way his throat bobs as he swallows, the way his eyelashes flutter against his fine cheekbones each time he blinks.

He shouldn’t be this pretty. It’s unfair.

Marriage seems too big of a next step, especially considering they haven’t even properly kissed yet.

Bokuto imagines kissing those lips, tasting the tea on his breath. He groans, tapping his phone against his forehead, trying to rid himself of such thoughts. It’s a bad idea to simply hop over and kiss him. It’s a very bad idea.

Bad idea. Bad idea.

“Bokuto-san, are you okay?”

Bokuto stops hitting himself with his phone, lowering it to look over at Akaashi. He’s looking at him with some concern, and Bokuto tries for a smile.

“I think we should date!”

Shit.

That wasn’t what was supposed to come out.

Akaashi seems frozen, staring at him with wide, unblinking eyes. Bokuto fidgets in his seat, tossing his phone onto the coffee table, before tucking his legs up underneath him to face Akaashi more fully. Akaashi slowly closes his book, setting it and the mug on the coffee table as well, before mirroring Bokuto’s movement.

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi starts, but anxiety overtakes Bokuto and he interrupts quickly.

“I just mean, uh, we’ve been really good friends for a really long time,” Bokuto says, and he knows
his voice is too loud, but he can’t seem to soften it. “And we’ve been through a lot together, and I trust you with my life, and I think you’re really pretty and smart and amazing and-and-and I really like you, Akaashi!” His heart is pounding much too fast. He’s pretty sure it’s going to burst out of his chest at any moment. He places his hand over it, curling his fingers into his shirt, as if that will keep it inside.

Akaashi doesn’t answer at first, and Bokuto can feel himself starting to grow hysterical.

“I thought you might like me too!” he shouts, and Akaashi starts at the sudden noise, flinching back. “Please accept my feelings!”

“Bokuto-san,” Akaashi says again, a reprimand.

Bokuto cringes, slapping his hand over his mouth and giving Akaashi an apologetic look over his fingers. He watches, deflating slowly, as Akaashi sighs, looks away, scratches his ear, and then looks back at Bokuto with a tiny smile.

Bokuto’s heart immediately sinks to his stomach. He’s seen that smile before. He knows that smile. He’s 96% sure he’s about to be rejected. Quickly, he covers his ears with his hands, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have said anything!”

He feels gentle hands on his wrists, pulling his hands away. He opens his eyes, swallowing hard at the sight of Akaashi’s face hovering so close to his. He finds himself leaning forward, lips reaching, but Akaashi sits back, moving his hands to grasp Bokuto’s, giving them a squeeze.

“Don’t apologize, Bokuto-san. I’m the one who’s sorry. I consider you a very dear friend, but that is all. I’m afraid my feelings don’t extend further than that.”

Bokuto feels his eyes burning, and his vision swims, distorting Akaashi’s features. He blinks rapidly, trying to force back the tears. He’s moderately successful, though he can feel one caught at the edge of his eyelashes, clinging desperately. His grip on Akaashi’s hands tightens.

“But . . . in front of the store . . . you said—”

Akaashi leans forward suddenly, and Bokuto cuts off, stiffening, as he feels warm lips brush against the edge of his eye, lifting away the tear and brushing over his temple.

“I only meant that I would like to stay with you,” Akaashi says, settling back down on his heels, calm as anything. As if he didn’t just nearly give Bokuto a heart attack. “As I said, you are very dear to me. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t.” Bokuto gasps, knowing he’s staring, but unable to tear his gaze away from Akaashi’s face, the soft curves of it, the delicate planes.

Akaashi purses his lips, and then nods, smiling. “Thank you.”

He pulls away then, releasing Bokuto’s hands and returning to his spot in the corner of the couch. He picks up his book and mug once more, but Bokuto can’t seem to find the strength to move. He sort of feels like crying, but at the same time the weight in his chest seems too great to relieve with only tears. He doesn’t understand. If he’s so dear to Akaashi, why doesn’t he want to at least experiment with the next level? It’s worth a shot, isn’t it? To see if their feelings grow to something more? They’re already compatible. Living together and having been friends this long proves that.
And another thing, Bokuto thinks, mind whirling, I’m awesome, aren’t I? Anyone would be lucky to date me, right? Doesn’t Akaashi think the same? Or is there something wrong with me . . .

He stops, his thoughts screeching to an immediate halt.

He remembers the locker room: metal and wood bent and splintered, destroyed by his own hands. He remembers coming to in the battlefield, alone and covered with dust from the debris he’d fallen into. The red haze had returned then, blinding him, cutting off his senses until all he felt was rage.

There was something wrong with him.

Akaashi was probably afraid of him. He probably had nightmares about Bokuto turning on him, destroying him, crushing his beautiful face beneath his fists.

Bokuto doesn’t realize he’s hyperventilating until spots appear in front of his eyes. Akaashi lurches forward, grabbing his forearms quickly.

“Bokuto-san! Bokuto-san, breathe!”

Bokuto struggles to focus, looking into Akaashi’s eyes; they’re dark green, almost black. Bokuto stares into their depths, losing himself in them, finding comfort in the way they’re trained on him closely.

Akaashi cares . . . He’s not afraid. He’s not afraid.

“You’re not afraid,” he gasps, his heart stuttering, trying to keep up with his breathing.

Akaashi’s forehead crinkles, his lips tilting downward. Would he ever get to taste those lips?

“I’m not afraid?”

“No, Bokuto-san, of course not.” Bokuto whispers.

He feels Akaashi’s chin brush against his hair, as he shakes his head. “No, Bokuto-san, of course not.”

That eases Bokuto’s fear somewhat, though he wonders if Akaashi would tell the truth about it in the first place.

No, of course Akaashi would tell the truth. He’d never lie to me.
Akaashi starts to pull away, his hands moving from Bokuto’s hair and back to his shoulders, presumably to push them back. But Bokuto continues to cling to him, not allowing him to escape.

“Bokuto-san.”

“Just . . . can you stay with me tonight? I promise I won’t do anything weird, I just . . .” Bokuto lifts his head, catching the barest glimpse of what looks like alarm cross Akaashi’s features, before it slides away to his usual, impenetrable mask. “I don’t want to be alone right now.”

Akaashi hesitates, his hands moving to grasp Bokuto’s biceps. Bokuto suppresses a shiver.

“Please, Keiji . . .” Bokuto bites his lip, wondering if the use of Akaashi’s given name would help persuade him. He figures he has a fifty-fifty chance of Akaashi softening or getting angry, and he’s relieved when Akaashi sighs and nods.

“Okay, Bokuto-san. But only for tonight.”

Bokuto doesn’t wait for Akaashi to change his mind, but immediately stands, his arms still around Akaashi, holding tight, as he starts to carry him to his room. Akaashi lets out a soft laugh, which startles Bokuto into a halt.

“Bokuto-san, please put me down. I need to get ready for bed first,” he says with a faint smile.

“Right, sorry,” Bokuto says, carefully setting Akaashi down. He watches, as Akaashi retreats to his bedroom before turning and heading to his own with a sigh.

He pulls off his shirt, chucking into the pile of laundry that he keeps promising Akaashi he’ll attend to but hasn’t yet. He reminds himself again to take care of it in the morning, heading into the bathroom then to brush his teeth. Once that’s done, he flops down onto his bed, turning over to look at the ceiling. He thinks about calling Kuroo, but his phone is still out on the coffee table, and Bokuto doesn’t feel much like moving.

He feels his stomach twist, wondering if it should take this long for Akaashi to get ready for bed. It seems like an awfully long time has passed. He sits up, chewing on his lip, as he stares out the doorway of his bedroom to the expansive hallway that separates his room from Akaashi’s. He taps his fingers on his knee before finally just hopping to his feet.

He walks down the hall, bare feet silent against the hardwood floor. He lifts his hand to knock on Akaashi’s door, just as Akaashi opens it. He blinks at Bokuto, taking in his bare chest and drawstring pants with a single, cursory glance. Bokuto grins, wondering if Akaashi appreciates the display of fantastic muscle, and he scruffs the back of his neck with the hand he’d raised to knock.

“Um, I thought you might’ve changed your mind,” he admits sheepishly.

“Bokuto-san, it’s been five minutes.”

Bokuto decides not to comment on that, instead letting himself check out Akaashi’s own sleepwear. He’s wearing a pale red t-shirt and blue pajama pants that look soft and comfy, hanging loosely around his legs. The design has dozens of tiny owls covering it, and Bokuto’s grin widens as he recognizes them immediately.

“Those are the pajamas I got you for Christmas!” he exclaims, pointing.

Akaashi’s cheeks turn rosy, and he coughs lightly. “Yes, well, I told you I liked them.”
Bokuto beams, feeling happiness finally squirm its way back into his heart. He hops past Akaashi into his room, always marveling at how neat and organized everything is. There are labels on his drawers, and nothing lays abandoned one the floor, not even a single sock. His laptop sits perfectly center on his desk, and his bed is made with what Bokuto’s mom always called “hospital corners.”

It’s a pretty extreme contrast to his own mess of a room.

Bokuto jumps onto the bed, wiggling beneath the covers. He figures he might as well crash here, since he walked all the way down the hall and everything.

“You’re not wearing a shirt. Aren’t you going to get cold?” Akaashi asks, shutting the door and making his way over to the bed. He seems to hesitate, but only briefly, before sliding into the bed beside Bokuto, allowing him to pull the covers up over the two of them.

“You’ll keep me warm,” Bokuto says with full confidence, wrapping his arm around Akaashi and pulling him close.

Akaashi makes a small noise of protest. “I said I’d stay with you, Bokuto-san,” he says, pressing his palm against Bokuto’s chest and leaning back. “I didn’t say anything about cuddling.”

Bokuto drops his bottom lip in a pout. “But it’s much nicer to cuddle,” he insists. In a bold move, he lifts his hand to curl one of Akaashi’s dark locks around his finger. “I promised I wouldn’t do anything, and I meant it. Just . . .” He trails off, pulling his hand away apologetically.

“Did you take your sleeping medication?” Akaashi asks.

The abrupt change of subject catches Bokuto off-guard.

“No?”

Akaashi sighs. “You need to take it, Bokuto-san. You’ll have another nightmare if you don’t.” He pushes back the covers to get out of bed.

Bokuto reaches out quickly to grab Akaashi’s wrist, holding it firmly but not enough to fully detain him if Akaashi truly wished to get away. But Akaashi stills, looking back at Bokuto over his shoulder.

“I won’t have a nightmare,” Bokuto says seriously, shaking his head. “Not if I’m holding you.”

Akaashi sighs, but he moves back into bed, pulling the covers up over his shoulder. “I really shouldn’t let you push me around like this,” he says, pursing his lips.

Bokuto grins. “You can’t resist someone as adorable and handsome as me,” he says, though the rejection from earlier still stings his chest. He pushes the feeling away quickly. He’ll be fine with just this. He will.

Akaashi laughs softly, which causes that sting to disappear completely. “I suppose not,” he admits, and before Bokuto can reply, he presses in close to Bokuto’s chest, curling up against him.

“Goodnight, Bokuto-san.”

Bokuto grows still, holding his breath on the off chance that Akaashi didn’t mean to get so close and will shift away if Bokuto so much as breathes. But he can’t hold it forever, and when he exhales with a low sigh Akaashi doesn’t move away. If anything, he presses in closer, and his warm breath tickles Bokuto’s skin, causing him to shiver.
Tentatively, he moves to set his hand against Akaashi’s side. When he doesn’t push his arm away, he
grows bolder and shifts it to the small of Akaashi’s back. He can feel Akaashi’s body heat through
his shirt, and his own face burns. Ducking his head, he nuzzles his nose into Akaashi’s hair. It’s just
as soft as Bokuto thought it’d be, and it smells amazing. Bokuto takes a deep inhale, savoring the
fragrance. It smells like some kind of citrus, and Bokuto commits the scent to memory, so that
whenever he smells it again, no matter where he is, he’ll think of this moment.

“Goodnight, Keiji,” he whispers, heart lodging in his throat.

But Akaashi doesn’t stir, doesn’t correct him, and so Bokuto settles deeper into the mattress and
allows sleep to come.

***

Kuroo didn’t go home Friday night. He didn’t think he’d be wanted. He sent Kenma a text letting
him know his plans to stay at the base and work on his interview preparation, and all he received in
reply was a simple: k. It hurt, but on some level he knew he deserved it.

Asahi finds him in the morning, drooling over his notes for the interview. He shakes his shoulder
gently, and Kuroo awakes with a jolt, wiping at his mouth.

“I wasn’t asleep!” he exclaims, before realizing that it’s only Asahi and not Futakuchi, who’d been
disturbingly present for most of his dream. “Oh. Asahi-san. It’s just you.”

Asahi blinks. “Uh, should I be offended or . . .”

“No, sorry. I just . . . I thought you were Futakuchi for a second,” Kuroo admits, stifling a yawn.
“What time is it?”

Asahi glances at the clock on the wall. “Almost seven. I came in early because you said you wanted
my help with last minute interview prep . . .?”

Kuroo blinks blankly at him, not remembering that conversation in the slightest. “Uh, of course I
did,” he says quickly with a nod. “Thanks for coming in.” He runs his hand through his hair quickly.
“Uh, what would you suggest I start with first? The interview’s at nine . . . shit. That only gives me a
couple hours.” He rubs his palms into his eyes.

“Um, perhaps a shower?” Asahi fidgets, looking down at him apologetically.

Kuroo barks a laugh. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” He stands, stretching his arms over his head
and back until he feels a crack in his spine. He shakes his arms out then, crossing one over his chest
to pull it and then doing the same to the other. “Is my uniform back from the dry cleaners?”

“Um, perhaps a shower?” Asahi fidgets, looking down at him apologetically.

Kuroo barks a laugh. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” He stands, stretching his arms over his head
and back until he feels a crack in his spine. He shakes his arms out then, crossing one over his chest
to pull it and then doing the same to the other. “Is my uniform back from the dry cleaners?”

“Uh,” Asahi says, shifting his gaze nervously to the side.

“Shit, right, sorry. You wouldn’t know that, would you?” Kuroo shakes his head, tapping his finger
to his temple. “Got a lot of stuff going on up here. Can’t keep everything straight. Oh, but here are
my thoughts on what my answers should be for the guy’s questions.” He picks up a few papers from
his desk, holding them out to Asahi. “Read them over for me? Let me know if I’m coming across too
blasé. I think there’s a couple cuss words too, so cross those out if you find them.”
Asahi takes the papers with a nod, moving to sit in order to read through them. Kuroo walks out of the office, heading down to the gym to use the showers there. He maintains a jaunty gait, saluting the people he sees in passing, returning their smiles and “good mornings.”

When he reaches the locker room inside the gym, though, he feels his steps lagging. He’s alone in the room, and he takes his time stripping down and folding his clothes to set in his locker. He grabs a towel and a bar of soap before moving into the showers.

As he stands beneath the warm water, he presses his forehead against the smooth tile of the wall, closing his eyes. The water pounds against his shoulders, trickling down his back, but he barely registers the sensation. He curls his hands into fists, wanting to pound them into the wall, to scream at the top of his lungs. He’s never felt this helpless before, this frustrated.

“I don’t think we’re the good guys anymore.”

Kuroo relaxes his hands, his fingers hanging limply at his sides.

Was Kenma right? Had they crossed a line with Yahaba? In their quest for stabilization had they become corrupt? Had he become . . .

Kuroo shakes his head, pushing his hair out of his eyes. He grabs the soap, unwrapping it and scrubbing it between his hands vigorously until lather forms. He runs this through his hair then, jerking violently through the tangles despite the sharp pain that burns the corners of his eyes. He uses the same roughness on the rest of his body, scrubbing hard into his skin until it begins to grow pink. HeWelcome the burn, though, the friction. It keeps his mind focused, and he can forget about Kenma’s flat gaze, the way his voice had broken just the slightest bit on his words.

“I don’t think we’re the good guys anymore.”

He knows what he did. He ruined the lives of an innocent family with a single stroke of a pen. He wishes he hadn’t been so stupid. He should’ve read over Oikawa’s documents. He’d known Oikawa was up to something, yet he allowed himself to get distracted, to sign away the life of a man he didn’t even know without a glance.

Shit.

He rinses himself quickly, shutting off the water and grabbing the towel to dry off before wrapping it around his waist. He steps out into the locker room then, taking a seat on the bench with a sigh. He flexes his hands slowly, staring down at them and wondering if he’ll just wind up proving how much of a fuck up he is in this interview.

The door to the locker room opens, and he glances up to see Tanaka strolling in, whistling with one hand holding his phone, grinning down at it. He pauses when he senses someone in the room, looking up to meet Kuroo’s gaze.

“Hey, boss. What’s up?”

“Heh contemplating whether or not it would benefit anyone to throw myself off a cliff. How are you?” Kuroo asks, keeping his tone light in the hopes Tanaka won’t find him completely pathetic.

Tanaka raises his eyebrows. “That’s some deep shit, man. Where did all that smooth Kuroo-confidence go?”

Kuroo snorts softly. “Not sure I ever had it,” he admits, moving to stand. He opens his locker, pulling out a pair of clean boxers and his uniform trackpants, figuring he can wear those until he gets
his actual uniform from the cleaners. He remembers now he asked Michimiya to pick it up.

“If you’re having doubts about your skills as a captain, you shouldn’t,” Tanaka says, pulling off his shirt. “You’re doing pretty good, all things considered. Nobody expects you to be perfect, you know.”

“Right,” Kuroo says absently, closing his locker and draping his towel around his neck to catch the drips of water from his hair.

He knows Tanaka has a point, but he can’t help but wish Captain Sawamura would recover faster. He’s not sure how much more of this added responsibility he can take before he fucks up everything too far to be repaired. He’s grateful for Iwaizumi’s suggestion to help Yahaba though, and he makes a mental note to bring it up with Sawamura as soon as he can.

“Thanks, Tanaka,” Kuroo says, turning to the other man. “I never thought it possible, but you actually sounded pretty smart just then.”

“Tha—hey!”

Snickering softly, Kuroo leaves the indignant Tanaka and makes his way back toward his office. Asahi glances up as he enters but looks away quickly when he sees Kuroo is shirtless. Kuroo resists the urge to laugh at him, gesturing to the papers in his hands instead.

“Well?”

“I think you’re going to do fine,” Asahi says, moving to stand. He places the papers on the desk, turning to meet Kuroo’s gaze. “Your answers are clear and concise, and you only swore a couple times. I crossed them out like you said.”

“Thanks.” Kuroo crosses over to the desk to pick up the papers. “Hey Asahi-san?”

Asahi had turned toward the door, but now he pauses, turning back to look at Kuroo.

“Do you think I’m a good captain?”

Asahi’s eyes widen. “You’re doing your best,” he says after a moment, and he scratches the side of his face absently, not meeting Kuroo’s gaze.

“That’s not what I asked,” Kuroo says, sighing. He shakes his head, moving to sit.

Asahi hesitates, shifting on his feet. “I think you’re a good man trying to shoulder a lot of weight without much support,” he says after a moment. “You shouldn’t push yourself too hard or look down on your efforts. You’ve held this place together in Daichi’s absence, which is more than most people could claim.

“Right,” Kuroo says with a faint grin, feeling somewhat encouraged. “Thanks, Asahi-san. And you know, the same applies to you too. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

Asahi coughs into his hand lightly. “Thank you, Kuroo-san.” He bows, before turning to leave.

Kuroo lets him, sitting back in his chair and glancing at the clock. He still has an hour before he has to leave for the news station. He picks up his phone.

To: Kenma  
Subject: (no subject)
im sorry. i honestly never meant for what happened to happen. im so fucking sorry shit. i cant stand that ur mad at me. i know i fucked up. i honestly dont know what im doing here kenma i really really dont. im not captain material. not at this scale. this isnt a volleyball game u kno? its real life with real people dying and getting hurt if i dont do my job right.

im not sure im cut out to be superman

He sends the text before he can think better of it. Slumping in his seat, he rests his arm over his face, really hoping that neither Tanaka nor Asahi let anyone in on his moments of weakness. Captains are supposed to keep a bold face through everything, right? His soldiers can’t see him breaking down now.

His phone buzzes, and Kuroo lowers his arm to look at it.

From: Kenma
Subject: (no subject)

I love you.

Kuroo stares down at the screen, wondering if he’s reading those characters right. His heart feels like its working its way out of his mouth, and he purses his lips tightly, fighting back the burning sensation in his eyes. He’s not sure if he should send a text back or not, but Kenma’s reply has the desired effect.

Kenma believes in me. He’s counting on me. He loves me.

I can’t let him down.

Kuroo hates the interviewer immediately and promptly forgets his name not long after they’re introduced. He’s a simpering man with a nose like a ferret’s, and Kuroo finds himself staring at it more often than he listens to the questions.

“Kuroo-san?”

“Sorry,” Kuroo says, forcing himself to concentrate. “Could you repeat the question?”

“The public is wondering why you haven’t administered the serum to the five new recruits.”

“We’re working on enhancing the drug to minimalize the side-effects,” he says, having rehearsed this answer again and again. He glances toward the studio audience and catches sight of Futakuchi in the front row. The man gives him a grin and two thumbs up. Kuroo resists the urge to roll his eyes, instead turning back to Ferret Nose with a faint grin. “We have started administration with one recruit, though. Hinata Shouyou has proven himself quite resilient and volunteered to take the older formula in order to begin his training immediately. It’s not something we recommend, however, as the safety of our team is of the utmost importance.”

Ferret Nose nods, returning to his pad in front of him. “Another question we received is why you only chose five candidates out of the literal dozen of potential recruits that completed the exam.”

Kuroo curls his fingers into the soft plush of the couch on which he sits, forcing himself to keep his smile. “I’ve already answered that question,” he says lightly. “I didn’t feel as though they had the right personalities to be Soldiers.”
Ferret Nose raises his eyebrows, and his nose twitches distractingly. Kuroo focuses on his eyes. “Their personalities? Is such a thing necessary for taking down kaiju?”

“I don’t want men whose only goal is to take down monsters,” Kuroo says, shaking his head. “I want their first instinct to be protection and sacrifice. I want them to know going into this that their job is to protect the citizens of Sendai no matter what, not to achieve celebrity status through glory and triumph.” He glances toward the studio cameras, wondering absently if Kenma is watching. “I also wanted people who I knew I could count on to have my back in the field. Those who only looked out for themselves . . . I can’t have that sort of selfishness on my team. We’re all one body when we’re fighting. We have to flow like the blood in our veins.”

“Ah yes, the blood analogy,” Ferret Nose interrupts. “Many people are confused about that as well.” Kuroo blinks. “It means what it means,” he says helplessly, not entirely sure how to explain it without sounding like an idiot. He can just see Kenma rolling his eyes at him, and he fights back a smirk.

Ferret Nose doesn’t appear impressed, but he moves on. “One last question before we go to break: what do you plan to do if another kaiju attacks before Captain Sawamura is cleared for active duty?” Kuroo can feel his blood cooling in his veins, sending an icy shiver down his spine. He doesn’t want to think about that possibility and has very pointedly not thought about it ever since Sawamura was placed on medical leave.

“I . . . I’ll lead my team as I always do,” he says, not sure what else to say. He hadn’t been prepared for this type of question. He curls his fingers tighter into the fabric of the couch.

“But will you be able to fight the kaiju and monitor the situation on the ground at the same time?” Ferret Nose asks, and Kuroo feels the intense urge to punch him in the face for sounding so condescending.

“I’ll figure it out,” Kuroo says as confidently as he can.

And for a moment, he believes it.

The rest of the interview goes predictably, with the questions growing less serious as time went on. He was asked if he had thoughts about changing the Flying Crows uniform, what his thoughts were on the new video game coming out, and if he had a special lady in his life.

The thought of changing the uniforms has never crossed his mind, and he said so (what he didn’t mention was that it was a moronic question that shouldn’t have even been on the list). As for the video game, he doesn’t have an opinion one way or the other, but he hopes the kids have fun with it at least. (He does tell them to remember that a game isn’t like real life and that kaiju are not to be taken lightly, but he’s not sure how well that will translate to the small ones. He hopes their parents are more discerning though.)

At the lady question, Kuroo found himself faltering. He knows how much Kenma hates the limelight, but the thought of lying and saying he has no one special didn’t sit right with him. So in the end, he simply shrugged and said as nonchalantly as he could, “I do have someone special, but they’d like to remain anonymous.”

Futakuchi told him afterwards that he could practically hear the hearts of the women around him breaking at that comment.
Kuroo just imagined what Kenma’s face might’ve looked like as he looked into the camera and said those words. He hoped it’d brought a smile at least.

Kuroo doesn’t look forward to returning to work, but he does. Everyone who greets him on his return congratulates him on the “great interview” and Noya admits sheepishly that they turned it on in the break room for everyone to watch. Kuroo laughs, because he appreciates the support, but he can’t help but wonder if he made an idiot of himself.

He manages to get through the day without much issue. He visits Sawamura to discuss Yahaba’s conditions, and while his captain doesn’t seem pleased with the way they conducted themselves, he agrees to talk to General Ukai about using the budget for housing for Yahaba and his family. Kuroo thinks it’s a good idea, and as he goes home that evening, he’s excited to tell Kenma, pretty sure all will be forgiven once he does.

What he’s not expecting when he steps into the apartment is the multiple pairs of tattered, unfamiliar shoes piled beside the door, and the sound of unfamiliar voices arguing in the kitchen.

“Er, Kenma?” he calls, wondering if trespassers have invaded their house. He kicks off his shoes, but keeps a firm hold of his helmet, adjusting his grip to use it as a weapon if need-be.

“On the couch,” Kenma calls.

He doesn’t sound distressed, but Kuroo moves cautiously anyway. He comes to the end of the hall and sees the back of Kenma’s head over the couch. The TV is on, playing an old movie softly, and the noise from the kitchen grows louder as whoever is in there begins to exit. He leaps out of the hallway with a shout, swinging the helmet in a quick, downward stroke at the intruders.

A tall, lanky boy with black hair gelled up into the form of a shallot leaps back with a cry of alarm, dropping his tray of food and knocking into the shorter boy behind him. The shorter boy stumbles, his own tray wobbling.

“Kindaichi!” he says in annoyance, stepping out from behind the shallot-head. “Watch where you’re —” He stops abruptly when he sees Kuroo standing there. His eyes narrow slightly. “Who are you?”

“I could ask the same question of you,” Kuroo points out, as he straightens. These kids don’t look dangerous, but the way the shorter one moves in front of Kindaichi tells him enough to know that the kid is ready for a fight if need-be.

“Kenma-san invited us over,” the kid says, as Kindaichi nods vigorously behind him. There’s no inflection in his voice, but his eyes move over Kuroo keenly, making Kuroo a little uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

“Uh, Kenma?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Don’t shout,” Kenma says from his spot on the couch. “I think I finally got him to sleep.”

Kuroo turns around to see whom he’s talking about, stepping over to the couch and blinking blankly down at the man who looks to be in his mid to late twenties curled up on the cushions, his head in Kenma’s lap. Kenma’s hand is resting lightly in his bleached hair, and the man looks angry even in sleep, brows pulled together over his nose.

Kuroo points. “Who’s that?”

Kenma’s eyes remain on the TV. “I left my backpack at the store. They brought it to me last night, and I told them they could stay. I didn’t think you’d mind.”
“But what’s his name?” Kuroo asks, wondering if Kenma had even bothered to ask.

“This is Kentarou. The two in the kitchen are Yuutarou and Akira.” Kenma pauses, tilting his head. “Yuutarou is the shallot-head.”

“Hey!” Kindaichi exclaims indignantly from the floor, where he’s retrieving his fallen food.

Kenma smiles faintly.

“Why do those names sound familiar?” Kuroo asks, sitting on the arm of the couch since the length of it is currently occupied. He notices now that Kenma is wearing a skirt, the same black pleated one from last time. He tries not to focus on this, turning his gaze quickly to the TV and he watches as a samurai runs another through with his katana.

“Kentarou used to live with Shigeru.” At Kuroo’s blank look, Kenma sighs. “Yahaba.”

“Oh! That’s . . . oh.” Kuroo grimaces, rubbing the back of his neck. “Right. About that . . . Iwaizumi came up with a solution. We’re gonna try to get them housing close to the base so Yahaba can work with Oikawa and can still go home at night. It’ll be big enough for all four of them.” He recognizes the names now from the written agreement Iwaizumi had Yahaba create for General Ukai to sign if he decides to agree to the terms. Kindaichi Yuutarou, Kunimi Akira, and Kyoutani Kentarou. Yahaba’s family.

He glances over at the kids outside the kitchen, Kunimi stooped now beside Kindaichi to help him soak up the curry sauce that’d landed on the floor with a paper towel. They look young, younger than Kenma, and Kuroo wonders how old they are. Turning back to Kenma, he looks down at Kyoutani. There’s something familiar about him. Not in the way that tells Kuroo that he’s seen his face before, but there’s something about the lines in his features that tugs at a strange feeling deep in his gut.

Kenma looks up at him, his eyes shining in a way Kuroo sees so rarely it causes his heart to stutter in his chest. “You can do that?” he asks hopefully.

Kuroo grins crookedly, reaching out to take a strand of Kenma’s hair, twirling it between his fingers. “The budget for it has to be approved by General Ukai, but I’m going to try my best.” He nods absently, allowing his hand to fall away. “I’ll make things right again, Kenma. I promise.”

Kenma moves to take his hand, giving it a faint squeeze. He glances down at Kyoutani in his lap then, before carefully extracting himself from beneath the man’s head. He adjusts a throw pillow beneath Kyoutani’s head, pausing to bend and place the tiniest of kisses against his temple before looking up at Kuroo.

“There’s food,” he says, gesturing to the kitchen.

Kuroo takes his moving hand, pressing the back of it to his lips briefly. “I was kind of hoping I could talk to you,” he admits, before glancing over his shoulder at the two who were now finishing their cleaning and moving to stand. “Would you mind if we went somewhere?”


Kenma glances at the other three in the room. Kunimi and Kindaichi have settled down in front of the TV, legs crossed beneath the coffee table as they set their food on top. Leaning with their backs against the couch, they begin to eat while watching the movie. Kenma looks back at Kuroo and nods.
“Let me change—”

“Please don’t,” Kuroo finds himself saying, before he feels his cheeks start to burn.

Kenma’s face appears flushed as well, and he ducks his head, hair swinging forward to hide his expression. “I won’t change the skirt,” he promises, barely above a murmur, before squirming his hand out of Kuroo’s grasp and running into his bedroom. He shuts the door behind him, and Kuroo wonders if the growing heat in the room is coming from the extra bodies or from himself.

Kenma emerges a few minutes later, now changed into a thicker sweater, dark red and covered with tiny black cats, with black socks that go up past the hem of the skirt, which falls to Kenma’s knees. The whole ensemble makes his pale skin stand out more, the delicate lines of his form more pronounced. Kuroo swallows hard, gesturing to the door then mutely.

“Help yourself to whatever’s in the kitchen,” Kenma tells Kunimi and Kindaichi as he passes them on his way to the door.

Kunimi waves without turning his eyes from the movie, but Kindaichi lifts his head to give Kenma a smile. “Have fun!” he says.

They pull on their shoes and jackets, Kuroo grabbing the extra helmet, and head outside into the chilly night air. Kuroo zips up his jacket, before turning to make sure Kenma’s done the same.

“How long have you known these guys?” he asks, thinking both Kunimi and Kindaichi (and definitely Kyoutani) seem rather friendly with Kenma.

“Um, about a month or so,” Kenma admits, keeping his eyes trained on the steps of the stairs as they descend toward the parking lot.

“A month? You’ve had friends outside of Hinata for a month and you didn’t tell me?” Kuroo’s incredulous.

“You didn’t ask,” Kenma says absently, stepping toward Nekoma once they reach the bottom of the stairs. He pulls on his helmet and straddles the motorcycle, glancing over at Kuroo expectantly.

Kuroo shakes his head, moving to get on in front of Kenma. “Anything else I should know about?”

Kenma doesn’t reply for a moment, until Kuroo starts the engine, and he thinks he catches the sound of Kenma’s voice, though it’s swallowed up by the loud noise of the rumbling machine beneath them.

“What was that?” Kuroo asks over his shoulder.

“Nothing,” Kenma replies, wrapping his arms around Kuroo’s waist.

Kuroo contemplates arguing the matter, but instead he decides to let it be and drives out of the parking lot.

He heads toward the outskirts of the city and into the countryside. He knows these roads well enough from visiting Oikawa and Iwaizumi every once in a while, so even as the street lights begin to fade behind them and only the headlight from Nekoma lights their way, he feels confident in the direction they’re going. Kenma remains quiet behind him, but Kuroo doesn’t think he’d be able to hear him if he spoke, with his helmet over his head and the whistling of the wind moving past them. It’s cold, and he shivers despite his jacket. He hopes he’s able to block some of this wind from Kenma.
Once he finds what he’s looking for, Kuroo veers off the road, driving Nekoma into the grass and up a knoll until they reach the peak of it. He shuts off the engine then, and kicks down the stands of the motorcycle, pulling off his helmet. Kenma extracts his arms to do the same, and Kuroo can feel the hard plastic against his back.

“Why are we here?” Kenma asks. Although his voice is soft, it sounds loud out here in the middle of nowhere, with only the crickets disturbing the peace.

Kuroo drops his helmet to the ground, twisting in his seat to take Kenma’s and follow suit. He gestures for Kenma to come around him then, and while Kenma gives him a skeptical look, he complies, getting off Nekoma to walk around to climb up in front of Kuroo. Kuroo scoots back, giving Kenma more space as he settles, leaning his back against Kuroo’s chest. He shivers, and Kuroo opens his jacket, tucking it around Kenma’s shoulders so that it covers both of them.

“Look up,” he murmurs softly into Kenma’s hair then.

Kenma tilts his head back, and Kuroo does the same, taking in the wide expanse of the sky. Away from the lights of the city, it’s easy to see the array of stars above, some bright, some faded, but all there; covering the inky darkness with a billion pinpricks of light. Kuroo thinks he can see Mars, shining a pale red among the white of the rest.

“Compared to this, kaiju don’t seem like that big of a deal, huh?” Kuroo says, resting his chin on the top of Kenma’s head. “They’re just tiny things compared to the vastness of space. Seems silly to be afraid of them. To be afraid of anything, really.” He pauses, wondering if he’s making sense. But Kenma doesn’t reply, and when he glances down, he sees the stars reflected in the glass of his eyes, as they move back and forth to try and take in everything.

“I wanted to thank you for your words this morning,” Kuroo says then, brushing his lips against Kenma’s forehead gently. “They really helped a lot.”

Kenma’s head lowers, and his shoulders rise to meet his ears for a moment, before he slowly relaxes once more.

“I realize I’ve put you through a lot of shit,” Kuroo admits. “I joined the SSP to protect you, to make a better life for you. I didn’t know how else I was going to support us. I was a college kid living off my parents’ savings and that . . . that wasn’t going to fly long term. And with you graduating . . . you know you could’ve gone to college with the money they’ve been giving me. You still can, if you want.”

Kenma shakes his head. “Doesn’t seem that important anymore,” he says quietly.

Kuroo stares down at the back of Kenma’s head, lifting his hand to gently run his fingers through the dark strands. “I’m sorry I fucked everything up,” he says with a sigh. “I shouldn’t have let Shorty join the SSP. I shouldn’t have taken this captain position. And I shouldn’t have let Oikawa do what he did. I’m a shit captain, and I’m really sorry for letting you down.”

Kenma shifts, lifting his leg up and over Nekoma to turn around toward him, straddling the motorcycle once more but now facing Kuroo. He reaches out to curl his fingers into Kuroo’s jacket, looking up at him seriously. His face seems expressionless as usual, but there’s a tiny wrinkle between his eyebrows, and his small lips are tilted downward.

“You haven’t let me down,” he says, shaking his head again. “You’re amazing.”

Kuroo barks a laugh, not sure why that seems hilarious to him just then. Kenma’s frown deepens.
“Sorry,” Kuroo says quickly, breaking off his laughter abruptly. He sighs, placing his hands lightly on Kenma’s hips. “I just don’t feel very amazing right now.”

Kenma scoots forward, lifting his legs to lay them across Kuroo’s thighs, until he’s pressed close against him. Kuroo’s breath hitches at the movement, and then Kenma tugs him down by his jacket, meeting his lips in a deep kiss. Kuroo’s hands tremble at Kenma’s hips, and he curls his fingers tighter around them. Kenma’s lips are chapped, but Kuroo finds he doesn’t care. His aren’t much better anyway. He lightly runs his tongue along the roughness of them, and Kenma opens his mouth willingly, his warm breath tasting of curry.

Kuroo bends further down, pressing his tongue into Kenma’s mouth with a soft moan, as he moves one hand around to the small of Kenma’s back, pushing him closer. His pants are already tightening around his crotch, and when he feels the bulge of Kenma under the skirt beneath his underwear pressing against him, he can’t help but moan.

He sneaks his fingers up beneath Kenma’s sweater, not breaking the kiss as his other hand moves to Kenma’s knee, sliding up underneath the skirt to feel the warm skin of his thigh. He rubs his thumb along the inside, up to the edge of silky underwear, and feels Kenma’s skin quiver in response. Kuroo can’t help but smile in the kiss, wondering if Kenma changed into panties because he planned to do this from the start. Kenma rocks his hips forward then, rubbing himself against the front of Kuroo’s pants, and Kuroo’s breath catches in his throat.

He pulls away from the kiss with a soft gasp. “Kenma,” he pants, his mind feeling a little hazy as he looks down at Kenma’s flushed face.

Kenma’s eyes are still closed, but he rocks his hips again, just an inch, sending Kuroo’s blood rushing to his abdomen, pooling lower with a tingling sensation that sends pleasant shivers up his spine. Kuroo grips Kenma’s thigh tighter, lowering his mouth to Kenma’s cheek, sliding his lips across to his ear. He takes a nip at it, before pulling the lobe between his teeth and sucking gently. His skin is soft and warm, and Kuroo can feel Kenma’s moan vibrating in his throat. He kisses the spot on his neck just beneath his ear, pushing more firmly against the small of Kenma’s back, urging him to move faster.

He complies, curling his fingers tighter in Kuroo’s jacket and using it as leverage, grinding up against Kuroo with soft pants of exertion. Kuroo moves his lips down Kenma’s neck, finding a soft spot to sink his teeth into. Kenma mewls softly in response, and Kuroo bathes the spot with his tongue, sucking on it gently.

“K-Kuro,” Kenma murmurs, his breath stuttering over the name.

Kuroo leans back, capturing Kenma’s mouth once more with his, sliding his lips harder against his. Kenma moves one hand from Kuroo’s jacket to push his small, slender fingers into his hair, gripping tightly. Kuroo doesn’t mind, but instead moans in encouragement, using his hands to guide Kenma’s hips harder against him.

He’s straining against his pants, and the pressure is growing painful, but he doesn’t want to stop. He can feel the himself dampening the inside of his underwear, and when he moves his thumb to press against Kenma’s own trapped erection, he can feel the slickness of his pre-cum soaking through the fabric. Kenma gasps at the touch, and Kuroo finds himself moving to quickly unfasten his pants, relieving some of the pressure. He wants to feel Kenma against him, his blood is running hot with need, so he pulls the edge of Kenma’s panties aside, allowing his erection to spring free. He strokes his fingers along the length of it, and Kenma trembles, his moan swallowed up in Kuroo’s kiss.

Kuroo pulls himself out then, before grasping their two lengths together and starting to rub quickly.
He slides his palm over their tips, gathering their pre-cum before slicking the liquid down over their shafts to make his strokes smoother. Kenma’s gasping, squirming against him, and Kuroo has to break the kiss to breathe. His chest feels tight and full, but he rests his forehead against Kenma’s, closing his eyes as he works his hand against them.

“F-fuck, Kenma,” he chokes, feeling his body’s heat growing. He’s sweating beneath his jacket despite the cool evening air, but he’s not about to stop to take it off. Kenma’s skin feels damp beneath his forehead, and he can feel Kenma’s breath slide against his cheek in soft puffs of air. The fingers in Kuroo’s hair tremble, gripping tighter instinctively.

“T-Tetsurou.”

Through his pleasure-driven haze, Kuroo isn’t sure he heard correctly, so he pauses, stilling his hand. Kenma mews in protest, rocking his hips once more. Kuroo leans back though, licking his lips, as he stares down at Kenma.

“Did you just—”

Kenma opens his eyes slowly. His gaze is glassy, eyes half-lidded, his cheeks flushed. He purses his lips, frowning faintly as he grinds up against Kuroo again, causing Kuroo’s heart to stutter in response, his thighs twitching.

“Tetsurou,” Kenma says again in a low voice. It’s husky in a way Kuroo’s never heard it before, and his blood surges to his member, causing it to throb, almost taking him over the edge right then and there. Kenma’s eyes narrow. “Don’t stop,” he commands.

Kuroo hastens to obey, jerking his hand over them once more, quick and firm, and he watches as Kenma’s head falls back, exposing the length of his lily-white throat. His eyes close, lips parted, wet and swollen now from the kisses. Kuroo stares, wide-eyed, his body shaking. Kenma moves his hips, thrusting into Kuroo’s hand and rubbing himself more against Kuroo’s own length.

“Fuck, Kenma,” Kuroo moans, not sure he’ll be able to last much longer. He buries his face in Kenma’s neck. He places his lips against the flushed skin, but he doesn’t have enough presence of mind to kiss him or move at all. So he simply breathes hotly against his throat, the muscles of his face flinching as he moves his hand faster. The fire in his abdomen grows, burning hotter, spreading through every vein, and he groans, shuddering, as he finally feels the release. Bright sparks of pleasure shoot through him like bolts of electricity before settling to a low, dull tingle, and he slows his hand, sticky now, and wet.

Kenma whimpers, thrusting upward once more. “Testu, I-I’m still . . .”

Kuroo glances down, his mind still swimming in the aftershocks of his climax. He gathers his thoughts enough to begin moving his hand again, though this time he simply wraps it around Kenma’s length, running his thumb over the tip that’s dribbling pre-cum over the both of them. His movements are lazy, as his limbs feel disconnected, and he watches his hand move as though it were someone else’s. Then he feels small hands clamp hard against the side of his face, forcing his head up. He blinks, staring into Kenma’s face, into the intensity of his gaze.

“I need to come, Tetsu,” he says, his voice low, barely shaking.

Kuroo swallows hard, nodding, and quickly adjusts his grip, rubbing Kenma faster, twisting gently, and then Kenma curls inward, shoulders hunching as his entire body tremors, and he climaxes with a soft cry. Kuroo hurries to catch as much as he can, not wanting Kenma to stain his skirt more than he might already have. Slowly, he pulls his hand away, as Kenma pants quietly. He flicks his hand to
the side, ridding it as best he can of the sticky liquid, before shrugging out of his jacket and shirt. He uses the shirt to wipe his hand and clean up the mess they’d made.

Kenma scoots back, fixing his underwear and skirt, keeping his head bowed so his hair hides his face. Kuroo bunches up the now dirty shirt, wondering if he should just chuck it into the grass or take it home to wash. He pulls his jacket back on, guessing he should probably do the responsible thing and wash it. So he holds it awkwardly between his legs, as he looks over at Kenma. His heart is still attempting to return to its normal rhythm, and so he takes a moment to simply look at Kenma.

He studies the delicate curve of his nose, the alluring pout of his small lips, the light sheen of sweat sticking his hair to the side of his face and causing his skin to glisten in the moonlight. Kuroo finds himself grinning faintly, remembering the way his name had sounded in Kenma’s voice.

“You called me Tetsurou,” he says happily.

Kenma’s shoulder rise to his ears, and he plays with the zipper of his jacket absently. “That’s your name,” he says, looking to the side.

“Yeah, but you said it,” Kuroo says, leaning down to knock his forehead gently against Kenma’s. “It sounded so good in your mouth.”

Kenma wrinkles his nose. “Gross.”

Kuroo laughs, leaning back. “Hey, you came on to me, remember?”

Kenma huffs, pushing the shirt onto the ground beside the helmets, before turning around so his back is once more facing Kuroo’s chest. “Only because you were being stupid,” he says, leaning back against him.

Kuroo wraps his arms around Kenma, welcoming his warmth despite the fact that his body still feels too hot, flames flickering dully beneath his skin like a low burning fire. He drops a tiny kiss on top of Kenma’s head.

“Thanks,” he says softly, glad Kenma’s apparently decided to forgive him.

It makes him feel like maybe he can be the good guy after all.

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday, Kuroo~

Up next: Hinata undergoes training and another kaiju attacks!

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
I'm sorry for how long this took to post, I'm sorry for the shorter length of this chapter, and I'm sorry for its contents.

I'm really, very sorry.

The apartment building still smells like piss. Tsukishima winces instinctively as he reaches the top of the cracked stairs and gets hit with the full stench of the stained hallway. He covers his nose with one hand, and glances down at his other, which clutches a folded note with worn edges. On one side sits the uneven scrawl of an excited fourteen-year-old.

Tadashi

He put a star to dot the eye. It was stupid. The whole note is stupid. The ramblings of a lovestruck child with a crush he didn’t completely understand. But at the same time, Tsukishima knows it’ll mean something to Yamaguchi. His friend is sentimental like that.

It’s been a week since the kiss.

Tsukishima knows that he should’ve called first, but he hadn’t been able to go over to Yamaguchi’s place after the incident with the Mad Dog gang, and he assumed that Yamaguchi’s offer was good at any time. At least, he hopes it was. He’s realizing now that a week is probably too long to wait after kissing someone, but he hadn’t known what to say. He still doesn’t know, which is why he’s carrying his stupid note from junior high.

Squaring his shoulders, Tsukishima lowers his hand from his face and makes his way toward Yamaguchi’s apartment door. Before he gets there, however, it opens, and Tsukishima pauses, as Kyoutani Kentarou exits the apartment. He recognizes him instantly as a member of the Mad Dog gang that he and Yaku took in the other week. Yaku insisted on letting them go, despite Hanamaki’s protests and insistence that they at least search the corner store for stolen goods.

Frowning, Tsukishima watches as Yamaguchi steps out into the hallway. His friend touches Kyoutani’s shoulder, and Kyoutani turns to him. They speak softly, and although Tsukishima tells himself that it’s none of his business, he strains to hear them, taking a small step forward.

“. . . in no time. You’ll see,” Yamaguchi says, right before he wraps his arms around Kyoutani’s neck in a gentle hug.

Kyoutani steps in close, returning the hug with what appears to be a vice-like grip, with how his hands curl into the material of Yamaguchi’s sweater. He presses his face into Yamaguchi’s shoulder, and Yamaguchi rests his cheek against his hair. It’s a moment of intimacy; even Tsukishima can sense that. For some reason a sharp sting hits his chest, and he stuffs the note in his pocket. Despite not having gathered enough evidence to convict him, it’s still well known that Kyoutani is a criminal. And Yamaguchi acting so friendly toward him doesn’t sit well with Tsukishima.
Irritation flares in him, and he stalks forward, not saying anything, but simply standing off to the side, waiting for one of them to notice him. Yamaguchi’s eyes are closed, but Kyoutani stiffens almost immediately. He pulls away and turns to fix Tsukishima with a dark glare.

“Officer Tsukishima,” he says slowly. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Tsukishima points out. He frowns, noticing how Kyoutani is standing with his back to Yamaguchi, as though to shield him from Tsukishima. It’d be funny if Tsukishima weren’t so irritated. To think that Yamaguchi needs protection from him . . .

“Tsukki, this is my friend, Kyoutani Kentarou,” Yamaguchi says, catching onto the tension. He glances between the two, biting his lip gently.

“I know who he is,” Tsukishima says flatly, looking up at Yamaguchi then. “He’s a wanted criminal, you know.”

“Never convicted,” Kyoutani growls.

“I know who he is too, Tsukki,” Yamaguchi says softly. He touches Kyoutani’s shoulder then, a brush of his fingertips that Kyoutani immediately responds to. He relaxes his shoulders and takes a step to the side, though his frown never wavers.

“You know this cop, Yamaguchi?” Kyoutani asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

Yamaguchi seems confused. His head tilts to the side, and he blinks. “Yes? This is my best friend Tsukki. I’ve told you about him before, remember?”

“You never told me he was a cop.”

Tsukishima sighs, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Weren’t you leaving?” he asks Kyoutani.

Yamaguchi looks distressed, but Kyoutani narrows his eyes before shoving past Tsukishima, knocking his shoulder into him to push him off balance. Tsukishima stumbles back a step, not having anticipated Kyoutani’s strength. He glances over at Yamaguchi then, trying to smooth out his frown.

“You shouldn’t be friends with people like him,” he says, attempting to sound gentle and wise, but Yamaguchi shoots him a glare that makes him feel about two inches tall. It’s not a look he often gets from Yamaguchi, so he’s rather taken aback.

“You didn’t have to be so rude. His world just got turned upside down. I was just offering him some comfort.”

“And what does that ‘comfort’ entail, exactly?” Tsukishima asks snidely before he can stop himself.

Yamaguchi’s face grows red, but Tsukishima can’t tell if it’s out of embarrassment or anger. His hands curl into fists, however, so Tsukishima guesses anger. He can feel the note in his pocket, and he runs his thumb along the edge of it, wondering how this could’ve gone so wrong so quickly.

“Why are you here, Tsukki?” Yamaguchi asks tightly.

Tsukishima closes his fist around the note. “I came to tell you that I’m not going to help you with your sharpshooting anymore.”

The expression on Yamaguchi’s face melts away to surprise, and Tsukishima doesn’t miss the flash of hurt in those wide brown eyes. He looks away.
“Wh-what? But . . . why not?”

Tsukishima sighs, adjusting his glasses with one hand. “You’re going to get yourself either killed or stuck in a life not meant for you, and I’m not going to help facilitate that. From now on, if you want to make ridiculous life choices you do so on your own.”

Yamaguchi frowns faintly. “I’m not going to stop doing what I feel is right just because you think I’m not suited for it. Honestly, Tsukki, I don’t know why you’re being like this. Friends are supposed to support each other.”

Tsukishima can feel the sharp edges of paper digging into his palm. He sighs, running his free hand across the back of his neck. “I can’t support you in this.” He glances sidelong at Yamaguchi, who’s watching him with such an innocently confused expression it stings Tsukishima’s chest. “Sorry,” he adds in a mutter, turning his face away again.

Yamaguchi studies him; Tsukishima can feel his gaze boring into him even as he stares at the gross stains on the wallpaper in the hall. His heart is pounding in his ears, and he can feel the sickening twist of self-loathing writhe in his stomach like acid.

This isn’t how this was supposed to go. I meant to make you happy. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Abruptly, Tsukishima turns away and makes his way toward the steps. Yamaguchi calls after him, but Tsukishima ignores him. He wishes he had his earphones. Never before has he wanted to drown out the sound of Yamaguchi’s voice, but now, hearing his name torn painfully from his friend’s throat, Tsukishima wants to block it out, ease the guilt that’s joined the rest of the awful feelings waltzing together in inside him.

He walks quickly, his long legs taking him outside the apartment complex within the span of minutes. He doesn’t hear Yamaguchi behind him anymore, and he tells himself that’s a good thing. Getting onto his bike, he pedals quickly out of the 12th Block and toward the more affluent side of Sendai.

It’s become rare for people to afford to live in the 5th Block, especially with all the job losses the kaiju attacks have influenced. With all the businesses downtown destroyed, most people left Sendai completely to find jobs in other cities and prefecture. But some had enough in their savings to continue to lead comfortable lives, and the Haibas had always been smart with their money.

The first time Tsukishima visited Lev and Yaku at Lev’s parents house, he was surprised at how expensive and modern everything was. Lev explained that when his parents died their will dictated that he and his older sister were to have the house. His older sister apparently worked and lived in Tokyo, and while Lev had moved in with her after the attack of July 10th, when he graduated from the police academy he requested to be placed in Sendai “to help protect the families and friends he left behind.”

Yaku moved in with him when he found out that the young rookie was living on his own. Tsukishima has no idea where the man finds the patience to deal with the excitable young man. Lev is a bundle of energy that Tsukishima can barely tolerate on good days. (And if the year spent with Lev has led to him begrudgingly liking the kid, well, Tsukishima figures it’s just him getting used to the proximity.)

He steps up to the front door of the large house, knocking and somewhat hoping that nobody is home. His luck appears to be against him in earnest today, however, because the door immediately opens to Lev’s excited grin, which only widens further when he sees Tsukishima standing there.
“Tsukishima-san! You came to see us on your day off!”

“I’m here to see Yaku-san,” Tsukishima says, lingering on the doorstep and wondering if this was a bad idea.

“Oh! Yaku-san!” Lev calls into the house over his shoulder. “Tsukishima-san is here to see you!”

Yaku comes around the corner of the hallway, looking somehow even smaller in socked feet, red sweatpants, and a white shirt with sleeves that come down to his fingertips. He’s holding a mug of something warm, steam rising from it. He shakes his head at Lev when he sees the two of them.

“Let him in and shut the door, Lev,” he says, not unkindly. “You’re letting the cold in.”

“Come in, Tsukishima-san~” Lev sings, opening the door wider, as he takes a step back.

Tsukishima enters, wondering if Lev isn’t cold himself, seeing as he’s only wearing jeans and a baggy, leopard print t-shirt. He’s wearing house slippers, but no socks. But he doesn’t appear chilled at all, standing there in the open doorway, still grinning widely.

“Sorry for intruding,” Tsukishima says, sliding out of his shoes. He waits for Lev to shut the door behind him before he pulls off his coat and scarf, hanging them up on the rack beside the door.

“Is there something wrong, Tsukishima?” Yaku asks, still standing by the end of the hall.

Tsukishima wonders if he’s avoiding standing close to him because he’ll feel small.

“I just . . . I wanted to ask for a favor, if that’s all right,” he says, pushing his hand into his pocket and fingering the wrinkled edge of the note.

Yaku nods. “Of course. Would you like some tea?”

“I won’t be staying—”

“Tsukishima-san! You should stay for lunch! I was just about to make some!” Lev exclaims, right next to Tsukishima’s ear.

Tsukishima swerves to the side with a faint frown. “I don’t—”

“You should stay,” Yaku agrees with a small smile.

Tsukishima glances at him, wondering why his chest feels tight suddenly. He brushes away the feeling, telling himself it’s not a big deal to have lunch with his co-workers. He shrugs then, taking a step away from Lev and further into the apartment.

“Just for a few minutes.”

A few minutes quickly turns into a couple hours, and Tsukishima has to admit that at least it’s an entertaining couple of hours. He sits at the table in the kitchen, watching amusedly as Lev attempts to make lunch with Yaku hovering around him, telling him what he’s doing wrong and what he needs to correct. Something like that would irritate Tsukishima, but Lev takes it in stride, beaming every single time Yaku moves in closer to show him the right way to prepare the meal. Eventually, Tsukishima begins to suspect that Lev is doing things wrong on purpose. He notices the way Lev’s hands hesitate right before messing up, and as Yaku swoops in to fix things, Lev looks down at Yaku with a look in his eyes that makes Tsukishima wonder if he should leave.
Yaku never sees this look, however, his gaze focused on the task at hand. Tsukishima wonders if he’s actually oblivious, or if he simply chooses to ignore his partner’s admiration. The fact that the two aren’t actually together baffles Tsukishima, and he wonders if they’d be less annoying if they finally made that step. (Considering the way the morning went, however, Tsukishima figures they’d probably be more annoying.)

“Okay! It’s ready!” Lev says happily, carrying the food over to the table.

“Sorry for the wait,” Yaku says apologetically, placing some napkins in front of Tsukishima.

“It’s fine,” Tsukishima says, shifting in his seat.

The two take the seats across from him, and together the three place their hands together to say thanks. Once they begin eating, Yaku looks over at Tsukishima with a curious glance.

“So what favor did you need?” he asks.

“Oh.” Tsukishima had nearly forgotten about that in his attempts to ignore the irritating dance of seemingly unrequited pining that played out before him. He reaches into his pocket and draws out the crumpled paper, sliding it across the table to Yaku. “Would you mind getting rid of this for me?”

Yaku’s eyebrows jump up his forehead. He takes the paper slowly, and Lev leans over to try and see what it is. Yaku waves him away and doesn’t open the paper, but instead fixes Tsukishima with questioning look.

“What is this?” he asks slowly.

“Nothing important,” Tsukishima says automatically, spearing a piece of meat with his chopsticks before eating it. He can feel both Lev and Yaku’s eyes on him, and when he looks up he sees them watching him with identical looks of skepticism. He frowns. “I just don’t think I can do it myself.”

“Can we read it?” Lev chirps.

Tsukishima stares at him. “No.”

“Can I at least ask what it’s about?” Yaku asks, setting the note beside his plate.

Tsukishima follows the movement with his eyes, his stomach twisting once more. “It’s private.”

“Does it have anything to do with Yamaguchi-kun?” Yaku asks, watching Tsukishima closely.

Tsukishima purses his lip. He turns back to his food and decides to simply not answer. He knows Yaku will take his silence as admission, but he’d rather not say it out loud. Yaku simply nods, tactful as always, and continues to eat.

Lev, however, is not so tactful.

“Is it a love confession?” he asks, open and innocent.

Tsukishima choke’s on his food. He glares at Lev, and Yaku turns to him in exasperation.

“Lev, he just said it was private.”

“But if it is a love confession, then you shouldn’t throw it away!” Lev exclaims, shaking his head as he looks between them. “You should tell the people you love that you love them. Otherwise it’s a waste!”

Lev rubs his side, frowning faintly. “You don’t think that it’d be a waste, Yaku-san? Think about how happy they could be together! If he doesn’t say anything that might not ever happen! And he deserves to be happy.” He turns to look at Tsukishima. “You deserve to be happy, Tsukishima-san.”

“I don’t really think you should be the one telling me something like this,” Tsukishima deadpans, thinking of the irony in the situation.

Lev stares back at him blankly. “I tell Yaku-san all the time that I love him.”

Amused, Tsukishima glances toward the red-faced Yaku. “And what does he say to that?”

“What am I supposed to say to that?” Yaku snaps, throwing his hands into the air. “Lev, this isn’t one of your stories, okay? Not everybody gets a chance at a happy ending, and I’m sure Tsukishima-kun has valid reasons for not wanting to tell Yamaguchi-kun his feelings. And, really, it’s none of our business so leave him alone.”

Both Lev and Tsukishima are surprised by this outburst. Lev bites his lip and finally returns to his food, though he pokes at it more than he eats it. Tsukishima feels the awkwardness descend like a heavy blanket over them, and it’s stifling. His skin crawls with the sensation. Clearing his throat, he moves to stand. Bowing shortly, he adjusts his glasses and tries not to feel bad. It’s not like he’s responsible for Yaku’s own suppressed feelings. And if he triggered them, well, maybe that’s a discussion they need to have, and he did them a favor.

“Thank you for your hospitality, but I should go,” he says, turning away without making eye contact with either of them.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” Yaku says, standing abruptly.

“There’s no need,” Tsukishima says with a dismissive way of his hand. “I’m sure I can find my way out.”

Turning away, he leaves the kitchen. As he walks toward the hall that leads to the door, he can hear Lev speak to Yaku, much more subdued than before.

“I can stop telling you I love you if you don’t like it, Yaku-san.”

There’s a pause before Yaku responds. Tsukishima lingers while he slips on his shoes, straining to hear Yaku’s quieter voice.

“Eat your food, Lev.”

Tsukishima isn’t sure why he feels a twinge of disappointment. Standing, he quickly exits the house.

***

Daichi’s house looks the same as it always has. Nothing has changed, outside or in. There’s the spot of chipped paint on his fence where a kid ran into on his bike. There’s the uneven crack in the pathway leading to his front door that he’s tripped over more than a few times.

When Tanaka Saeko wheels his chair in through the front door, he sees everything the way he left it.
The TV remote on the coffee table by the sports magazine he’d read the morning of the attack before going into work. His jade plant still sits on the low table by the door, and he feels a twinge of guilt as he realizes it hasn’t had anyone to tend to it this entire time.

It feels strange, to encounter a piece of his life before the attack, before his injury, untouched and unchanged. He looks down at himself, at the pinned sleeve of his uniform, at the stiff thigh that still causes him to limp (he’ll need to go to physical therapy to strengthen it). He feels different. He’s not the same man that left his home to go to what he thought would be a normal work day. He feels older. Not in the sense that time has passed, though it has, but in the new heaviness that weighs upon his shoulders, the ache in his muscles.

Saeko pats his shoulder absently. “You going to be all right here by yourself, Captain?” she asks, popping the gum in her mouth.

“Yes, thank you.” Daichi moves to stand, gripping the arm of the wheelchair. His leg protests, but he stretches it out and back a few times before lowering it and taking a step toward the couch. It’s difficult, awkward, but he manages it and flops down with a sigh of relief.

“Do you have anyone we can call to check up on you or something?” Saeko asks, obvious worry in her voice.

Daichi thinks of his parents, long dead, of Suga in his office at the base, with work too important to pull him from. He sighs, dropping his head back against the couch. “I’ll be fine, Saeko-san,” he tells her gently. “Thank you for escorting me home.”

“Yeah, well, I gotta do my part, right? Anyway, I’m going to bring your bags in, okay?”

He listens to her exit the house, and for a moment he feels guilty for making her carry his things in, despite knowing that he can’t exactly carry anything himself at the moment. He’s glad, at least, that there isn’t much.

Standing shakily, he makes his way to the kitchen, getting out his kettle and tea set. He’s just setting the water on to boil when Saeko steps into the room, hands on her hips.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demands, eyebrows raised.

Daichi stares blankly at her, not sure what to respond for a moment. “I’m making tea,” he says, gesturing to the kettle. “I was going to invite you to have some with me.”

“You need to be resting,” Saeko says, shaking her head. “If you want tea, I can make it.”

Daichi sighs. “I’ve been resting for over two weeks. And you have other duties to attend to back at the base. I’m sure Nishinoya or Tanaka need more stitches for some crazy stunt they’ve done. I’m fine. Really.”

“You need to be taking it easy,” Saeko says firmly. “Your leg has healed but your muscles are still weak. Don’t be doing anything strenuous, especially if you’re by yourself.”

Daichi laughs. “Making tea is hardly strenuous,” he says, shaking his head with a faint smile. He’s grateful for her concern, but it strikes him as a little ridiculous the way she’s attempting to coddle him, especially when Saeko isn’t the coddling type.

“Hmph.” Saeko shakes her head at him. “Fine. I’ll leave you to it. But don’t hesitate to call me or Ennoshita if you feel any pain you shouldn’t.” She steps over and sets a bottle of prescription painkillers on the counter beside him. “Take two of these twice a day with meals,” she tells him. “No
more, no less. Got it?"

Daichi looks at the pills, feeling a tightening in his throat as he realizes that he’ll be dependent on them for a while. The reminder of how pathetic he’s become hits him like a slap to the face, but he nods obediently.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you again.”

Saeko studies him for a moment with pursed lips before nodding. “I put your bags in your room. Don’t push yourself. If I hear about any funny business, I’ll get General Ukai to put a caregiver in the budget.”

Daichi grimaces inwardly at the thought of having someone babysit him. It’s bad enough he’s still unable to return to active duty. He doesn’t want to be a burden on anyone else. He nods, taking a step forward then.

“Let me walk you to the door,” he says.

But Saeko shakes her head. “Get your tea and go lay down or watch TV or something. I’ll be calling later to check up on you, and don’t you dare think of lying.” She points her finger into his face with an intimidating expression that works far better than her brother’s.

Daichi has to fight a smile at that, and he nods. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he assures her.

Once she leaves, however, Daichi leans heavily against the counter, rubbing at his thigh. It aches, the muscle feeling tight and sore. He reaches for the pain medication, but struggles to open it with one hand. He frowns, biting down on his lip as he twists his thumb and forefinger around the cap, clutching the bottle in his palm. He finally gets it off with a sudden pop that sends pills flying in all directions. Cursing under his breath, Daichi drops to his knees, scrambling to pick up as many as he can before they can roll away. His thigh burns, and tears of frustration prick at the corners of his eyes.

As if adding insult to injury, his doorbell rings at that exact moment. Daichi considers yelling at whomever it is to go away, but knowing it’s probably a neighbor stopping by to welcome him home, that seems discourteous. So he grabs a chair at the table to hoist himself up. His leg buckles as soon as he puts weight on it, sending both him and the chair to the floor with a crash and a curse.

The front door opens, and he hears a familiar voice call “Daichi?”

Suga.

Daichi closes his eyes, willing Suga to go away. He can’t see me like this. He can’t—

Suga steps into the kitchen, holding a small bouquet of flowers. He’s dressed in his scrubs from the base, but his feet are bare. “Are you all right? I heard a crash . . .” He trails off, looking down at Daichi on the floor. His eyes widen, and he quickly sets aside the bouquet to kneel beside Daichi on the ground, holding onto his shoulders to help him into a seated position.

“I’m fine,” Daichi says gruffly, though his chest stings with wounded pride. “My leg just gave out.” He extends it slowly, wincing at the pain.

Suga surveys the kitchen, taking in the pills scattered about the floor. The teakettle whistles shrilly, and Suga stands to lift it off the stove, as Daichi grabs the fallen chair to push himself to his feet. He rights it then, before collapsing into it with a sigh.
“What are you doing here?” he asks then, watching as Suga proceeds to make the tea himself. He brushes away the faint annoyance that tells him he’s being a poor host for making Suga prepare the tea, as he’s not sure if his leg would be able to support him long enough to properly serve it himself.

“I’m here to welcome you home, of course,” Suga says breezily. He moves about the kitchen gracefully, his steps steady and sure. Daichi finds himself mesmerized by the turning of his pale wrists, as he pours the water into the teapot. “What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t?” He picks up the teapot to pour the water into two cups, before dumping the excess water.

Daichi stares at him, his chest feeling strangely tight. “Boyfriend?”

While it’s true that Suga came by to see him often while off duty during his time in the infirmary, and they had kissed several times during those visits, Daichi never really stopped to consider what their relationship was now. They never talked about it either. He supposes it makes sense to call the two of them “boyfriends,” but the word itself has him rubbing his sweaty palm against his thigh, irrationally nervous.

Suga gives him a long glance, as he places tealeaves in the teapot and pours the water from the cups back into it. “I hope you don’t think I make-out with all my patients,” he says drily.


Suga watches him from across the table, and Daichi shifts uneasily in his chair. Pursing his lips, Suga moves to pour the tea, slowly, alternating between the two in order to ensure they both taste the same. He sets down the pot then and carefully hands Daichi one of the teacups.

“Does the word boyfriend make you uncomfortable?”

Suga’s voice is soft, non-judgmental, but Daichi still feels the weight on his chest grow heavier, as he takes the cup from him. Their fingers brush, and Daichi can’t deny the tingle that spreads up his arm at the brief contact.

“It’s not uncomfortable,” he admits. “But it is . . . different.” He sighs. “I’m sorry. I’ve never been in any sort of relationship with another man before.”

Suga pulls a chair over beside him, sitting sideways to face Daichi. He sets down his teacup and reaches over to take Daichi’s hand, moving his cup to the table as well. He clasps Daichi’s hand in both of his, and Daichi feels his heart rate pick up speed, as Suga looks directly into his eyes.

“If we were to walk down the street holding hands, would you be ashamed and want to pull away?” he asks seriously.

Daichi thinks on that, imagining a scenario of walking hand-in-hand with Suga. He feels his cheeks warm, but the pleasant squirm in his stomach tells him everything he needs to know.

“Absolutely not,” he says with finality, and it’s completely worth it to see the smile that brightens Suga’s face.

“Then don’t worry about different. Different isn’t bad, right? Different can be good.” Suga releases his hand and picks up his tea, holding it up in a toast. “To different.”

Daichi laughs, picking up his own tea. He lifts it briefly before taking a sip. It’s perfect. He wonders if there’s anything Suga can’t do well. It’s a stray thought that he fixates on, the tea turning cold in his stomach and bitter in his mouth. Here’s Suga, happy, healthy, full of life and love to give, but is
Daichi deserving of any of that? What kind of boyfriend would he be if he has to have Suga prepare everything for him? Do everything for him?

That’s not the type of partnership he wants.

“Suga . . . if we do this,” he says quietly, staring down into his cup. “I don’t want you to treat me like a patient. I refuse to let you carry the weight of my disability on your own.” He looks up then, into Suga’s surprised expression. “Be my boyfriend, not my caregiver. Do you think you can do that?”

Suga smiles, and it’s like the sun appearing before him, pushing back the darkness that lingers over Daichi’s head.

“I think I can,” he says confidently, and he punches Daichi’s shoulder lightly. “I won’t baby you, I promise. But I’d like to help you get back on your feet, if you’ll let me.”

Daichi feels his mouth twitching into a small grin, and the weight on his chest finally lessens. “I’d like that.”

Suga leans forward, cupping the back of Daichi’s head with one hand, as he kisses him gently. Daichi relaxes almost immediately into the kiss, moving his lips against Suga’s warm ones, tasting a drop of tea on them. The warmth spreads through him, pushing away the cold apprehension from before completely. He can’t help but smile, and when Suga pulls back, he’s smiling as well.

“Welcome home, Daichi,” he says softly, before kissing him again.

***

Iwaizumi wakes slowly. In what’s become an instinctive gesture, he reaches for Oikawa beside him, only to be met with empty air. He opens his eyes in a squint, pretty positive that Oikawa fell asleep beside him the previous night. He was worn out from the stress of the day and from the sex they’d had, but he forced himself to remain awake until he heard Oikawa’s soft breaths deepen into sleep.

So where the hell is he now?

It’s a little past five in the morning, and Iwaizumi isn’t a morning person. But he forces himself to sit up, grabbing a pair of clean boxers to pull on, along with a sweatshirt and sweatpants. It’s too cold to wander around half-naked, and he hopes Oikawa took that into consideration when he left the warmth of their bed.

Shuffling into the living room, Iwaizumi wonders if he should be surprised to see Oikawa sitting on the floor in front of the couch, knees pulled up to his chest, headphones on, as he stares at the screen of his laptop. It’s a posture so familiar to Iwaizumi it causes his chest to ache. Oikawa’s even wearing his glow-in-the-dark alien pajamas, and the thick-rimmed glasses he hasn’t worn since he was fourteen sit perched on his nose.

“You look like a nerd,” Iwaizumi says affectionately, as he crosses the room to sit down beside him.

Oikawa barely glances at him, and Iwaizumi wonders if he heard him. He looks at the screen, but all he sees are number and letters in combinations that make no sense to him. Sighing, he reaches out and pulls off Oikawa’s headphones. Nothing’s playing in them, but Oikawa still has that glazed look on his face, lost in a world deep inside his mind that Iwaizumi fears might one day consume him.
entirely. Swallowing hard, he reaches out and flicks Oikawa’s ear, hard.

“Oi! Dumbass!”

Oikawa reacts this time, jolting away from Iwaizumi’s hand and nearly falling over onto his side.

“What was that for?” he whines, rubbing his ear.

“What do you think it was for? It’s past five in the morning. When did you get up to start working on this?”

Oikawa glances at the wall clock, grimacing then. “Erm, around midnight?”

Iwaizumi stares. “We went to bed at eleven.”

Oikawa rubs his eyes behind his glasses. “I thought I might’ve figured something out. But it’s no use. I need to get access to the original formula to compare them and find what’s mutated or been tampered with.”

“If there’s nothing you can do, you should be resting,” Iwaizumi says, shaking his head.

Oikawa wrinkles his nose. “Shi-chan and I are also working on something to counteract your rage states.” He gestures to the laptop screen. “This is a possible formula he sent me a couple hours ago. I’m reviewing it.”

Iwaizumi glances at the screen once more. “So you’re keeping Yahaba up as well?”

Oikawa frowns. “This is in his benefit too, Iwa-chan. If we can successfully create something that can suppress the rage states, it could help Mad Dog-chan as well.”

“But Kyoutani doesn’t have the same serum we do,” Iwaizumi points out.

Oikawa throws his hands in the air. “If you’re going to be negative about all my ideas you can go back to bed.”

Iwaizumi stifles a laugh. “I’m sorry,” he says genuinely. He moves close to Oikawa, leaning up against his side. “I’m just worried about you. You’re working yourself too hard. You started wearing your glasses again.”

“It’s just a little eyestrain. I’ll be fine,” Oikawa says dismissively. He reaches down to type something on his laptop, and Iwaizumi can see the tension in his neck and shoulders.

“We have to start getting ready for work in an hour,” Iwaizumi says softly. He lifts his hand, placing it on the back of Oikawa’s neck, massaging it gently. “Come back to bed.”

Oikawa tilts back into his touch, his eyes closing briefly. “I suppose . . . an hour won’t hurt.”

“Come on.” Iwaizumi moves to shut Oikawa’s laptop and take off the man’s glasses for him, carefully folding them and setting them atop the computer. He stands then and holds his hand out to Oikawa to help him up. Almost immediately, Oikawa flops against him, dropping almost all his weight against Iwaizumi, causing him to curse and stumble back in an effort to keep Oikawa from falling to the floor.

“Shittykawa, what the hell?”

“I’m so tired, Iwa-chan. Carry meeeeee,” Oikawa whines, wrapping his arms around Iwaizumi’s
There’s a mischievous glint in his eyes that belies the pout of his lower lip, and Iwaizumi grits his teeth.

“Don’t be such a baby, your legs are fine,” he says sharply, attempting to shake Oikawa off. Though the whole scene is so reminiscent of Oikawa’s antics back when they were teenagers, he has to fight a fond smile. It’s not cute, he scolds himself. It’s annoying.

“But you’re so strong, Iwa-chan. I bet you could lift me over your head,” Oikawa says, still attached to him.

“I’ll throw you into the ceiling,” Iwaizumi says, even as he places his arm beneath Oikawa’s legs and around his back to lift him up bridal-style. Oikawa nuzzles his face against his neck in a way that tickles yet feels warm and nice at the same time. He can feel the blood rushing to his face, as Oikawa places a tiny kiss below his ear.

“You take good care of me, Iwa-chan.”

“Yeah, because you’re too stupid to take care of yourself.”

“Mm, mean.”

Iwaizumi carries him into his bedroom, tossing him unceremoniously onto the bed. Oikawa squawks as he bounces but quickly recovers, shaking his head at him.

“You’re a brute.”

Iwaizumi shrugs, moving to get into bed on the other side. “I am what you made me.”

Immediately he regrets these flippant words, as a dark cloud covers Oikawa’s face. He shifts closer to him on the bed, peering into Iwaizumi’s face with round eyes.

“I’m going to fix you, Hajime.”

The seriousness of his words, and the intense look in his eyes, makes a shiver run down Iwaizumi’s spine.

“Go to sleep.” He places his hand on Oikawa’s face, pushing him back onto the bed.

Oikawa lies down, but he also grabs Iwaizumi’s hand, holding it in both of his, as he traces the scars on it lightly. “I mean it. You’re not going to be like this forever. I’ll work all day and night for months if I have to.”

“You’re doing enough,” Iwaizumi says softly, looking down into Oikawa’s earnest expression and feeling his chest clench. He leans down to place a gentle kiss against Oikawa’s lips. “Now sleep.”

Eventually Oikawa does, and Iwaizumi watches him to make sure he stays asleep. His hand is still trapped between Oikawa’s, but he carefully extracts it, replacing it with his other, so he can reach across the bed to pick up his phone from the bedside table.

“Hey, Kuroo? Yeah, it’s me. Oikawa and I are going to be a little late coming in today . . .”

Iwaizumi is not captain material. He doesn’t have the patience for it, or the brains to come up with decent plans. It’s not that he’s stupid or inept, he just doesn’t think in calculations and strategies the way Oikawa, Kuroo, and Sawamura do. And he’s fine with that. He’s fine being a Soldier, doing
what he’s told to do, going where he’s told to go. So long as he has a clear direction, he can execute his mission well.

But he has no idea what to do about the bouncing ball of orange hair in front of him.

“Oh wow, oh wow, this is so awesome! So cool! I can’t believe it! I’m actually going to get to train with Iwaizumi Hajime!”

He’s still jumping up and down, grinning so broadly that Iwaizumi feels flustered. He’s not used to this type of praise. Bokuto and Kuroo have the most fangirls. They even get fan letters. Iwaizumi’s never gotten anything like that, and to his knowledge neither has Akaashi. So all this excitement coming from the shrimp in front of him is . . . overwhelming.

“Oh, right. So . . . Hinata Shouyou, is it?” Iwaizumi thinks he’s seen the kid hanging around Kenma, but he doesn’t think he’s ever spoken to him face to face before.

Iwaizumi fights a headache. “I reviewed the tapes of your exam. You got the hang of the harnesses pretty quickly, so I don’t see the need to coach you on those except to say keep practicing. You’ve been weight-lifting and doing cardio with your monitor, correct?”

Hinata nods. “Every day! I think I’m getting stronger, though Kageyama says I still have a long way to go before I’m strong enough to fight. But I’ve already had two doses of the serum, so I think I’ll be able to fight soon!”

“Well, that’s what we’re here for,” Iwaizumi says, beckoning for Hinata to follow him over to the mats near the back of the training room. He selects a wooden katana from the rack on the wall. It’s shorter than the others, and lighter. He hands it to Hinata, watching his grip as he takes it. “You’ll need to learn how to properly fight with a katana before we let you take a swing at a kaiju. You’ll need to be able to cut and thrust while moving at high speeds and flying through the air. We’ll start on the ground first, though.”

Hinata nods, gripping the katana tightly in his small hand. Iwaizumi chooses a longer one with a comfortable grip, before getting into a crouching stance in front of Hinata. Hinata mimics this stance, his tongue poking out between his lips. Iwaizumi nods. “Go ahead,” he says.

Hinata swings. It’s wide and slow, and Iwaizumi easily blocks it. He shakes his head. “Again,” he says. “Move faster.”

Hinata swings again, this time taking a step to add more force. But again, he takes too long to bring the katana around and Iwaizumi knocks it aside. He gives Hinata more pointers (don’t bring your arms up so high, shift your weight as you swing not before, etc.), but Hinata’s just simply too easy to read. He doesn’t seem to have any concept of subtlety, and Iwaizumi wonders if he wouldn’t be better as a distraction than a front-line attacker.

But each time he gets knocked down, Hinata pops back up again with a shout of “Again!” or “One more!” and Iwaizumi can’t help but be impressed. They continue until Iwaizumi finds himself panting hard, and Hinata’s legs and arms are trembling. Finally, Iwaizumi makes a mistake. Hinata shifts his weight to the right, the way he has been this entire time. Iwaizumi lunges forward but, faster than he can blink, Hinata darts to the left and swings his katana down across Iwaizumi’s back, stopping it a fraction of an inch over his shirt.
A feint. Perfectly executed.

Iwaizumi straightens, turning around to regard Hinata. The kid is breathing hard, sweat dripping down the sides of his face. He looks stunned by his own success, but then he grins widely, looking up to meet Iwaizumi’s gaze.

“That was it, right? I got it. I got you.”

Iwaizumi raises an eyebrow, but nods. “You did. Well done.”

Hinata begins bouncing once more, thrusting his katana into the air. “Yatta! I did it! I beat Iwaizumi Hajime!”

Iwaizumi rolls his eyes, moving his foot swiftly to knock against Hinata’s legs as he lands, sending him sprawling to the mat. “Never let your guard down in front of your opponent,” he says, setting the tip of his katana against Hinata’s neck.

Hinata beams up at him. “I was faster than you. I’m going to become the best Super Soldier ever!”

Iwaizumi shakes his head, reaching down to help Hinata to his feet. “I don’t know if that’s the kind of goal you want,” he admits. “It’s a difficult life, and fighting kaiju isn’t the same as sparring with someone like me.” He turns to set his katana up on the rack. “Go see your monitor. If he says you can continue, grab a harness and practice stabbing a target while in mid-air. Remember a kaiju will be able to see you coming if you’re not careful. Use that speed of yours to get in, stab your target, and get out before it can grab you.”

“Just wait until Kageyama hears I pulled one over on Iwaizumi Hajime!” Hinata hollers, as he takes off toward the exit.

Iwaizumi can’t help the faint grin that tugs at his lips. The kid’s enthusiasm is infectious, and he can’t help but feel somewhat gratified at the admiration. He doesn’t think he deserves to be fawned over in such a fashion, but it’s a nice feeling nonetheless.

He makes his way toward the lab to check on Oikawa, hoping that he’s taken breaks but doubting it. He also hopes that he hasn’t antagonized Yahaba too much. The guy already hates them because of what happened to his family, and although General Ukai hadn’t agreed to allow the budget to include an apartment for the four of them, Kuroo himself had taken part of his paycheck to rent a small place near the base. It wasn’t much, but Yahaba expressed his gratitude and agreed to work with Oikawa.

Iwaizumi still finds it difficult to believe that Oikawa willingly placed people in danger to achieve his goals, but at the same time it doesn’t surprise him. Oikawa’s growing desperate, and that’s leading to decisions and mistakes he might not make otherwise. Iwaizumi can’t blame him for his desperation, but it worries him that Oikawa might be growing unstable.

Just how far will you go to beat this thing?

He steps into the lab, and he can immediately hear Oikawa and Yahaba bickering over something by Oikawa’s desk. Sighing, he walks over to place himself between them. Yahaba shuts his mouth as soon as he sees Iwaizumi, taking a step back and pursing his lips.

Oikawa just continues to look offended.

“What’s going on?” Iwaizumi asks, crossing his arms over his chest and glancing between them.
“The Iwanuma lab has the original SS-415 formula in their possession,” Yahaba explains. “However, Ushijima Wakatoshi is head of that lab, and he’s avoiding our calls. I suggested to Oikawa-san that we go visit him in person, but he’s refusing that option.”

“The last thing I want is for Ushiwaka to realize how desperate we are. He’ll twist it somehow to his advantage. We’ll be indebted to him, and he’ll make use of that,” Oikawa says, hands on his hips. “He’ll try to get me to join his team.”

“Not everything is about you, Oikawa-san,” Yahaba says flatly.

Oikawa waves his hand dismissively. “When it comes to Ushiwaka, it is,” he says haughtily.

Iwaizumi sighs. “Unfortunately, he’s right,” he admits. “Ushijima-san is pretty intent on getting Oikawa to join his team.”

Oikawa nods. “He’s obsessed with me.”

Iwaizumi frowns. “But that doesn’t mean Yahaba’s idea is a poor one. If you need that formula and the only way you can get it is by going there yourself, then you should. See what he has to say at least.”

Oikawa wrinkles his nose, but Yahaba nods.

“Maybe you can wear your glasses so he won’t recognize you,” he offers to Oikawa with an innocent smile.

Iwaizumi snorts in a vain attempt to hold back a laugh, as Oikawa narrows his eyes at Yahaba. Before he can make a retort, however, a voice calls from the doorway.

“Uncle Tooru!”

The three of them turn to see a young man, around fifteen or sixteen years old, waving at them. He approaches quickly, his visitor’s badge bouncing on his chest where it’s clipped to the pocket of a plaid shirt. It takes a moment, but the Iwaizumi recognizes him as Oikawa Takeru.

“Uncle Hajime! You’re here too!” Takeru grins, holding his hand up for a high-five.

“Shit, I haven’t seen you since you were in middle school,” Iwaizumi says with a faint smile. He slaps his hand lightly against Takeru’s. “You’ve gotten big.”

Oikawa is staring at his nephew with a faint frown, and Iwaizumi nudges him gently. “Oi, Shittykawa. Say hello to your nephew.”

“What are you doing here?” Oikawa asks instead. “Is Kazou okay?”

Takeru raises his eyebrows. “Otousan’s fine,” he says. “I asked Okaasan if I could come visit you for the day since I have off from school.” He glances between the three standing before him. “Did I come at a bad time?”

“No, it’s fine,” Iwaizumi says quickly. He grabs Oikawa’s elbow and drags him around to place him in front of his nephew. “Go, take a break.”

“But—”

“Yahaba will be fine on his own. It’s not like he doesn’t have plenty of interns to use if he needs help.”
Takeru is looking at his uncle with a hopeful gaze, and Oikawa wavers, glancing between his desk and Iwaizumi.

“Your nephew came all the way out here to see you,” Iwaizumi says, lowering his voice to a gentler tone. “You deserve the day off. Go. Have fun.”

“Come on, Uncle Tooru,” Takeru says with a grin. “I’ve been doing good on my school’s volleyball team. I want to show you my sets.”

That catches Oikawa’s attention, and he turns to look at Takeru with a faint smirk. “You think you can set better than me?” he asks.

“You haven’t played in years! I bet I can slaughter you,” Takeru says with a grin.

The two of them start off, and Iwaizumi watches them go. He hopes that the day spent out of the lab, being with family, will be enough to loosen some of Oikawa’s tension. Yahaba steps up beside him, hands in his lab coat pockets.

“Oikawa-san isn’t well,” he says quietly. “He’s been growing more irritable lately, prone to outbursts. Is he sleeping at all?”

“Only when I force him to,” Iwaizumi says with a sigh.

“I’d advise you convince him to take some sleeping medication. Or at least something to relax him. If he becomes unstable he’ll be no use to this program.”

“I know,” Iwaizumi sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Believe me, I know. I’ll talk to him.”

Yahaba purses his lips, but nods. “As much as I dislike him for what he’s done to me and my family, I know he’s the best chance any of us have at fixing this serum.”

“He knows that too. That’s what worries me.”

That evening, Iwaizumi makes dinner for three. Although his muscles ache from swinging on the harnesses that day, showing Hinata the correct way to move in the gear, he refrains from injecting himself with a dose of serum. He still has two days before his body will begin to weaken to the point where he cannot get out of bed. While he knows limiting himself in this way is probably unhealthy, he can’t think of a better way to attempt to lower the risk of his rage state appearing.

The front door opens, and he can hear Takeru’s voice from the hallway. Hanging up his apron, Iwaizumi goes to greet the two, fighting a smile when he sees the grin on Oikawa’s face. He still looks pale and the circles beneath his eyes haven’t faded, but he looks more relaxed than Iwaizumi has seen him in months, so that alone has Iwaizumi silently thanking Takeru for his presence.

“Did you two have fun?” Iwaizumi asks, glancing between the two as they remove their shoes.

“Uncle Tooru took me to the planetarium! And then we saw a movie, and it was awesome. And he bought me an action figure of you!” Takeru lifts the small Iwaizumi in his hand.

Iwaizumi glances at it, before looking over at Oikawa. “ Seriously?”

Oikawa grins back at him. “It’s horrendously ugly, isn’t it? I saw it and said, ‘doesn’t this look just like Iwa-chan?’ and of course Takeru agreed with his favorite uncle—”
“You’re his only uncle.”

“—and so I just had to buy it for him.” Oikawa takes the figure from Takeru, shoving it into Iwaizumi’s face. “Look at how grumpy it is! It’s perfect.”

Iwaizumi takes the figure with a frown. The likeness is pretty good, though he doesn’t think it looks that grumpy. Perhaps slightly irritated . . . Ugly seems like a bit of a stretch.

He looks up at Oikawa with a smirk. “You’re just jealous they didn’t make any action figures of you,” he says, handing the figure back to Takeru.

Oikawa looks affronted. “Mean, Iwa-chan!”

Knowing he’s right, Iwaizumi simply turns toward the kitchen, beckoning them to follow.

“Come on, the food’s going to get cold.”

Oikawa flounces into the kitchen, but a gentle tug on his arm has Iwaizumi pausing to turn back and look at Takeru. His brows are pulled low over his eyes, and Iwaizumi feels a twist in his gut before the kid even speaks.

“Uncle Hajime? Is there something wrong with Uncle Tooru?”

“What do you mean?” Iwaizumi asks carefully, ignoring the way his pulse pounds loudly in his ears.

“He just . . . didn’t seem like himself. He spaced out a lot with this weird look on his face, and he got us lost a couple times, even though he said he’s been to the planetarium dozens of times.”

“He has,” Iwaizumi admits, not liking where this conversation was heading.

“So yeah, I don’t know. It was kind of weird. He seemed really disoriented. He said he was just tired when I asked him about it, but there’s more than that, isn’t there?” Takeru bites his lip, looking at Iwaizumi, as worry pulls lines across his young face.

Iwaizumi sighs and pats Takeru’s shoulder absently, staring at it to avoid eye contact. He’s not sure what to say that won’t concern the kid, but he doesn’t want to lie to him either. He pulls his gaze up then, tightening his jaw.

“I won’t let it get worse. I promise,” he says. “I’ll take care of your uncle, Takeru. Don’t worry.”

Takeru nods, and the complete faith in his expression has Iwaizumi’s chest clenching. He watches him walk into the kitchen, realizing that that’s one more person that’s counting on him. Yet another person he cares about that he can’t let down.

Running his hands over his face, Iwaizumi once more considers the vials of serum under the sink in the bathroom.

*I’m stronger with the serum, but I’m also more unpredictable. Which is better for Oikawa? Strength or security?*

“Iwa-chan! The food’s getting cold! Did you get lost?”

Iwaizumi straightens, pulling his shoulders back and shaking the worries from his mind. Tonight he should just focus on having a good time with family. He can think on those questions later.

He just hopes he has the time to find the answers.
Kageyama always frowns when he works. Actually, it seems like he frowns all the time. He’s a perpetual scowler. He even frowns while eating lunch, like his food has somehow personally offended him. Hinata finds it almost amusing, especially since he seems so scary, and Hinata knows by now that Kageyama is the furthest thing from scary.

"Have you ever tried not frowning?" Hinata asks one day while Kageyama's prepping him for his third injection.

Kageyama gives him a blank look.

"You should try smiling!" Hinata prompts, grinning himself to demonstrate.

"Why?" Kageyama asks, frowning. "It doesn't make sense to go around smiling all the time."

Hinata huffs. "I'm not talking about walking around with a giant grin. That'd be creepy. But, you know, it's okay to lighten up sometimes and smile. Even laugh! If you think something is funny or . . . ."

Kageyama is still staring at him like Hinata is speaking a different language. "Funny? Like what?"

"I don't know! Like . . . what do you get when you cross an elephant and a skunk?"

Kageyama frowns deeply, like he's trying to figure out a puzzle. "An elephunk?"

Hinata laughs, not having expected such a serious reply. "No, a big stinker!"

It takes Kageyama a minute, but then he snorts and rolls his eyes. "That was terrible."

"You come up with a better one then!" Hinata pouts, having thought it was pretty clever.

"This is stupid," Kageyama says, though he pauses with the jet injector pointed into the air.

"You're only saying that 'cause you can't think of a good joke," Hinata taunts.

It has the desired effect. Kageyama frowns again, lowering the injector. He taps his chin, thinking. Hinata waits, wiggling slightly in his seat. He wishes they'd make a doctor chair that was more comfortable.

"Okay, what is a ninja’s favorite type of shoes?" Kageyama asks, before quickly continuing before Hinata can guess. "Sneakers!" He grins, and it's wide and unsettling.

Hinata leans back, feeling an unpleasant shiver crawl over his skin. He wrinkles his nose at Kageyama. "That's creepy."

Kageyama quickly loses his grin. "You're the one who wanted me to smile," he snaps, advancing with the jet injector once more.

"Yeah, but I didn't expect it to be just as scary," Hinata says, yelping then as Kageyama grabs his arm roughly and quickly injects the serum. "Ow!"
"I was born with this face, okay? I can't help it," Kageyama grumbles, stepping back. His dark blue eyes observe Hinata warily, as if expecting him to scream and go into convulsions again, though that hasn't happened since the first time.

Hinata feels the rush of heat and adrenaline, vibrating slightly in his seat. He hops off the chair, jumping up and down a few times, punching at the air after he lands. Both Kageyama and Iwaizumi told him that after his injection he would have to do some form of physical activity to use the excess adrenaline. Everyone seems surprised that he's able to stay on his feet after the injections. Hinata doesn't tell them that most nights he has to bite his pillow to muffle screams of pain as his muscles and bones seem to burn and creak. He knows that it's just the serum doing its job to make him stronger and denser, so he doesn't want to complain.

Besides, he doesn't have a right to complain, not when he's the one who made Kageyama give him the unstable serum. He sometimes has nightmares of losing his mind the way Bokuto did on-air that one time, attacking his family and friends. He wakes in a sweat, trembling all over. But once he checks on Natsu and his parents and sees them sleeping peacefully, he feels some better. He always feels a twinge of pain in his chest though, when he texts Kenma only to receive no reply.

"Shouldn't you report to Iwaizumi-san now?" Kageyama asks, after observing him for several minutes.

"Trying to get rid of me so soon? But I thought we were having fun!" Hinata teases, pleased when a faint flush colors Kageyama's cheeks, before the guy turns away quickly.

"We're not here to have fun. We're here to work."

"You're so boring, Bakayama," Hinata sighs wistfully.

"I'm not paid to have fun, dumbass! And neither are you," Kageyama says, turning back around with a scowl.

Hinata starts. "I'm getting paid?"

Kageyama reaches over to smack his clipboard against the top of Hinata's head. "Of course you are, dumbass! You're a Soldier now. You get paid by the government for your service."

Rubbing the sore spot on his head, Hinata squints up at Kageyama. "How come nobody's given me any money?"

"They put it into your account. Kuroo-san explained all this to you already! Weren't you listening?"

"Was that when I was in the infirmary?" Hinata asks, scrunching his nose as he tries to remember.

"Dumbass!" Kageyama takes another swipe at him, but Hinata hops away quickly, dodging the swinging clipboard.

"I was on painkillers! How was I supposed to remember anything! Where do I get this money?" Hinata asks, grinning at the prospect of being rich. He could get a new bike! And get Natsu that iPod she wanted! And help his mother with the groceries! And buy Kenma games! This is great!
"You were supposed to pick up your debit card in Kuroo's office."

Before Kageyama even finishes his sentence, Hinata dashes out of the lab and runs down the hallways and stairwells until he reaches Kuroo's office. The captain is sitting at his desk on the phone. He looks up when Hinata bursts through the door and holds up a finger. Hinata recognizes the gesture well and lingers in the doorway, bouncing on his toes. Kuroo appears to be talking to someone important, because his voice is serious, and there's a tiny crinkle in his forehead.

"I understand that, sir, and I assure you that we're d—yes, we're aware. But Ushijima isn't . . . yes, I know they're extremely busy at the Iwanuma branch, but if Ushijima could spare just a few minutes to go over the serums with my scientists, that'd be . . . we're trying to figure this out quickly so we can get results, sir. And that's impossible of Iwanuma refuses to work with us . . . Yes, thank you. That's all I wanted. You have a good day, sir."

Kuroo hangs up and runs a hand through his hair, which is already starting to look wilder than usual. Hinata bounces into the room, feeling a little bad about interrupting him, but not bad enough to stop from slapping his hand down on the top of the desk.

"I'm here for my money!"

Kuroo looks at him blankly for a moment before laughing. "You never came to get that?" he asks, moving to open a drawer in his desk. He draws out a plastic card with Hinata's name on it, and Hinata's eyes widen as he takes the card reverently.

"Oh wow. This is so cool! My first debit card!"

Kuroo grins at his reaction. "You should go to the mall this afternoon. Test it out."

There's something in the way he said this that makes Hinata pause. It's suggestive somehow, and he tilts his head, frowning faintly as he feels his fight instinct start to rise.

"Why?" he asks suspiciously.

Kuroo shrugs, leaning back in his seat. "I may or may not be taking Kenma there to pick up some more skirts."

Hinata inhales sharply, feeling his heart starting to pound. "Kenma's going to be there?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny the possibility that Kenma may or may not be in the nearby vicinity of a certain department store this afternoon."

Hinata huffs in frustration, wondering why Kuroo can never just say what he means."So he won't be there?"

"I didn't say that."

"So he will be there."

"I didn't say that either."

Hinata waves his arms. "I'm gonna fight you."

Kuroo laughs. "He's forbidden me to try and fix you guys, so I can't tell you anything directly. Just be there in front of that fountain by three. You know the one."

"The fountain at three," Hinata repeats, his pulse throbbing in his ears.
He hastens to his lesson with Iwaizumi, though he has a difficult time concentrating and does worse than ever before. Iwaizumi seems perplexed, but once Hinata explains that he’s going to see Kenma today, he says he understands and actually lets him leave training early! So Hinata rushes home, taking a shower and scarfing down his lunch.

“Onii-chan! You said you were going to take me to the movies today!” Natsu complains, as she watches him shove his feet back into his shoes.

“I’m sorry, Natsu, but I have to go meet Kenma!”

“Ooh, you’re talking again?” Natsu asks hopefully.

“Nope! But hopefully we will soon,” Hinata says with a grin, leaping up. He waves goodbye and leaves the apartment, hopping onto his bike and pedaling quickly down the street to the mall, his wet hair still dripping down the back of his neck.

Because of his haste of course he’s a good hour early for the meeting, and so Hinata spends his time and excess energy doing jumping jacks and running in circles around the fountain until he gets dizzy and has to sit. He’s just contemplating if he can reach a cool looking coin sitting at the bottom of the fountain, when he hears a familiar voice shout out.

Looking up, he sees Kuroo and Kenma walking toward him. Kenma’s face is half-hidden behind the hood of his jacket, and he has his PSP out, eyes fixed on the screen. Hinata has to resist the urge to run up and throw his arms around him. He can feel his eyes burning with tears, but he holds them back, knowing Kenma never knows what to do when people start crying on him.

Kuroo is holding onto Kenma’s sleeve to guide him, and he meets Hinata’s gaze with a faint grin before turning to look down at Kenma.

“I’m going to duck into this sports store really quick. Will you be okay out here? There’s a bench by the fountain.”

“Mm.”

Kenma nods absently, so Kuroo maneuvers him over to the bench. He sits him down, giving Hinata a pointed look and a jerk of his head toward Kenma before turning and walking away into the nearby sports store. Hinata’s nerves are tingling. He can feel his heart beating rapidly, and his palms are sweaty. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt so anxious in his life.

Is this how Kenma feels right before he has one of his attacks?

Hinata shuffles forward, rocking up on his toes and back down on his heels in front of Kenma. He doesn’t want to startle him by plopping down next to him, so he lingers, waiting for Kenma to notice him. It takes a moment, but then Kenma pauses his game and slowly lifts his head until their eyes meet.

“Hey, Kenma!” Hinata exclaims, giving his best and brightest smile.

Kenma’s eyes widen, and he glances about quickly as though looking for an escape. That hurts, but Hinata reminds himself that he knew that would probably be Kenma’s first reaction. He’s not going to give up so easily this time.

“Iwaizumi-san let me out early so I could meet you here! Isn’t that cool of him? He’s really cool.”

Kenma sits stiffly, still looking like a deer in the headlights. “H-how did you know I was going to be
“Here?” he asks, wetting his lips with his tongue, quick and nervous. “Did Kuroo tell you?”

Hinata’s a horrible liar, and he knows it, so he doesn’t answer this question, simply moves to sit next to Kenma, reaching to take his hand in both of his.

“I’ve missed you so much! I’ve been so bored! When I’m not at the base I’m just at home and there’s no one to talk to but Natsu, and you know, I love her because she’s my sister, but she’s not you. She doesn’t listen that well. She’s always interrupting me and talking over me and it’s just not the same, you know? Have you been getting my texts? Do you know about Kageyama? I told you about him, right? The grumpy scientist guy who’s my monitor now? I got him to tell a joke today and it was awful, you should’ve heard it! And he smiled all creepy like. It was terrible. But kinda funny too! And . . .”

Hinata trails off, noticing finally how Kenma is leaning away from him, and the hand he’s holding trembles. He bites his lip, looking down at it before giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I know you’re scared of losing me, Kenma, but you don’t have to be, okay? I’m right here. I’ve always been right here, and I always will be. This serum isn’t going to beat me.” He shakes his head, looking desperately into his friend’s face, trying to read his expression.

Kenma has his face tilted away, but when Hinata ducks his head, peering around the edge of his hood, he thinks he can see tears glistening in his bright gold eyes.

“Please, Kenma, can we be friends again? I really want to be friends again. Please.” He gives Kenma’s hand a light tug, and then another when the first gets no response.

Kenma finally turns back to him, meeting his gaze for a moment, before sliding his eyes to the side. “I miss you too,” he murmurs softly.

Hinata’s eyes widen. That’s a “yes.” It has to be. Releasing Kenma’s hand, Hinata throws his arms around Kenma’s neck in a firm hug. He feels slender hands come up to rest against his back, before gripping the material of his jacket, clinging tightly. Burying his face in Kenma’s hood, he struggles against the urge to jump up and down. He’s vibrating with excitement and happiness, and he can’t sit still for much longer. So he releases Kenma and stands, grabbing Kenma’s hand to pull him up as well.

“We should get mochi to celebrate! And then I can help you pick out your new skirts!”

Kenma smiles. It’s faint, but it’s there, and Hinata feels his heart swell ten times bigger at the sight of it.

“Okay,” he agrees with a faint nod, slipping his PSP into his pocket.

Together they go find Kuroo, and together they spend the rest of their time at the mall. Hinata is pretty sure this is one of the best days of his life. Kenma doesn’t let go of his hand for most of the excursion, and when picking out skirts he only chooses the ones Hinata says looks good on him.

(“My opinion doesn’t matter?” Kuroo asks after Kenma defers to Hinata for the fifth time.

“You’ll just say I look good in all of them,” Kenma points out.

“That’s because it’s true.”)

Once he’s chosen a good five or six skirts, they head to the cash register. On the way, Hinata catches sight of a blue scarf hanging on a rack. He releases Kenma to wander over to it, picking up the end
and rubbing his thumb against the material. It’s soft and heavy. The perfect type to keep one’s neck warm during the winter. Christmas is coming up, and while Hinata’s already bought presents for Kenma and his family (he even threw in a gift for Kuroo and Iwaizumi), he hasn’t gotten anything for Kageyama.

“Do you want that?” Kenma asks softly at his elbow.

Hinata starts, looking guiltily over at Kenma. “I was just looking!” he says, pulling his hand away quickly.

“You should get it. It’d look nice with your hair,” Kenma says with a nod.

Hinata scratches behind his ear absently, looking skeptically at the scarf. “I . . . wasn’t really thinking about me. Um, I think Kageyama’s favorite color is blue. He’s always eating blueberry things during lunch.”

Kenma’s watching him quietly, and Hinata can feel the weight of his gaze. That was one thing he didn’t mind about not being around Kenma: the way his friend always seems to be able to read his mind. It’s unsettling, and Hinata feels a nervous twist in his stomach.

“I don’t like him like that.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“It’s just, he’s my monitor. So I should get him a Christmas present.”

“Okay.”

“But it’s not because I like him.”

“Okay.”

Hinata snatches the scarf off the rack, turning to make his way toward the register. Kenma follows him silently, but Hinata knows what he’s thinking. And he’s wrong. This has nothing to do with liking anybody and everything to do with him wanting to give a Christmas present to his monitor. Like a good person. Because he’s a good person.

And if he thinks about how the blue of the scarf will bring out the blue in Kageyama’s eyes while the cashier rings him up, well that’s something he can deal with later. Or not at all.

“What is this?”

Kageyama stares down at the gift bag Hinata just handed to him, being too excited to wait another week for Christmas. Besides, he’s not going to be on the base for Christmas, so he’d probably not see Kageyama again until after.

“Merry Christmas, Kageyama-kun!”

Hinata bites his lip, bouncing anxiously on his toes as he waits for Kageyama to open his gift. He does so slowly, drawing out the scarf and looking at it for a moment.

“It’s your favorite color!” Hinata explains loudly, when the silence becomes too much for him.

Kageyama frowns, lifting his gaze to stare at Hinata. “No, it’s not.”
“Eh?!” Hinata leaps back, horrified. “But you’re always eating blueberry things!”

“Just because I like blueberry things doesn’t mean blue is my favorite color, dumbass!” Kageyama says, rolling his eyes.

“Well, what’s your favorite color then?!” Hinata asks, clutching at his hair and unable to believe he screwed up so badly.

Kageyama glances at the top of his head and then away, his hands clutching the scarf and gift bag tighter, as a faint blush colors his cheeks.

“Orange,” he grumbles.

Hinata reaches out and snatches the scarf from Kageyama’s hands.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Kageyama asks, reaching to grab it back.

He holds it close to his chest, but Hinata leans up on his tiptoes to reach for it again. Kageyama leans away, and nearly falls over before he backs up a step to catch himself.

“Give it back!”

“You can’t take back a gift, dumbass! It’s mine now!”

“But you don’t like it!”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it!”

“But orange is your favorite color, so I have to get an orange one!”

“This is fine! I like it!”

Hinata pauses, one hand holding onto Kageyama’s arm, while the other reaches for the scarf Kageyama’s now holding above his head. He’d just been about to attempt climbing the taller man, but now he freezes, looking up into Kageyama’s flushed face.

“You do?”

“Get off me.” Kageyama places his free hand on Hinata’s face, pushing him back until he’s a couple steps away. He lowers the scarf then, holding it in both his hands. Impossibly, a tiny smile curls his lips. And it’s not creepy at all.

Hinata feels a weird tingle in his chest.

“You do?” Kageyama lifts his gaze, the smile gone now. It’s not replaced by a frown, though, and Hinata beams back at him.

“Okay!”

Kageyama puts the scarf back in the bag and sets it on the desk. “Come on. Let’s do your physical.”

***
For the first time in a long time Kuroo believes that maybe everything will be okay.

It’s a week before Christmas, and everyone seems happy. Kenma and Hinata are talking again, back in each other’s lives as if nothing had happened (Kuroo pats himself on the back for that one). And with Kenma happy, he’s happy. Even the fact that those weird kids Kindaichi and Kunimi are always visiting with their strange guardian Kyoutani doesn’t faze him. Kuroo reminds them every time that they have their own apartment now, but they ignore him, and he doesn’t truly mind. They’re good people, and they’re able to make Kenma smile, so that makes them worthy of his tolerance.

That half-giraffe rookie policeman starts to come over more often too. Kenma doesn’t seem too pleased at first, but Hinata always gets excited to see Lev so after a while he stops giving Kuroo the “help me” eyes and seems to enjoy the presence of the two of them. It’s not uncommon for Kuroo to come home now to an apartment full of people just hanging out in his living room, talking or watching movies or playing games with Kenma. And Kenma seems to thrive, which makes Kuroo hopeful for the future.

Their sex life has gotten better too. Kuroo’s often too tired to be very creative at the end of the day, but Kenma makes up for it. Kuroo has no idea where he gets his information, but he’s able to make them both feel amazing. Kuroo feels incredibly lucky and blessed and with Sawamura recovering well, he begins to make plans for a time when he’ll be able to lavish Kenma with all the love and affection and time he deserves.

One night, as he lounges on the couch and watches Kenma, Lev, and Hinata play a video game on the TV, he reaches out to flick the ends of Kenma’s hair, as he sits on the floor in front of him.

“Let’s go see the lights together Christmas Eve,” he says softly, beneath the excited shouts of Hinata and Lev.

Kenma turns to look over his shoulder at Kuroo, a smile playing about his lips.

“Okay.”

Lev pauses the game and swivels around to look at them, his green eyes shining bright. “You’re going to see the Christmas lights?” he asks excitedly. “That’s so romantic!”

Kenma ducks his head, and Kuroo chuckles at the faint blush that colors the back of his neck. He leans down to kiss it lightly. Kenma’s shoulders rise, and he turns to give Kuroo a small frown. He smiles back innocently.

“Do you think Yaku-san will go with me if I ask him?” Lev asks, tilting his head.

“You’ll never know unless you try!” Hinata reasons.

Lev looks thoughtful, and Kuroo lies back against the pillows. He listens to Hinata and Lev weigh the pros and cons of Lev asking Yaku out on such a significant day as Christmas Eve, as he studies Kenma’s profile. Kenma’s decidedly not looking at him. Kuroo has to resist the urge to nudge him and silently ask if he wants to go have a quickie in the bathroom. He knows now from experience that Kenma will say no if there’s anyone else in the apartment.

Still, he’s content to simply lie there and watch the three of them. There’s a warm, happy feeling in his stomach, and his chest feels full in a good way. He realizes that he feels at peace. It’s a feeling he hasn’t experienced in what feels like decades. He can’t remember the last time. Eventually, Kenma gets up and joins him on the couch, lying down in front of Kuroo with his back against Kuroo’s
chest, as he turns to accommodate him. Kuroo wraps his arm around Kenma’s waist, buries his nose in his hair, and dozes off.

The sun is just rising on the horizon when a loud alarm wakes Kuroo with a start. He recognizes it immediately. It’s his beeper alerting him to a kaiju sighting. He sits up quickly, knocking Kenma off his chest. Grimacing, he reaches over to slap his beeper, turning off the alarm. But Kenma’s already awake, rubbing at his eyes as he sits up on his elbow. The sheet slips off his bare chest, and he shivers, goosebumps appearing along his arms.

“Kuroo?”

Kuroo stares back at him, his heart pounding in his chest. He can’t do this. How is he supposed to be captain and lead the military into formation, ready to assist, while also fighting the kaiju? He can’t abandon Iwaizumi to fight it on his own, and he has no idea if Bokuto and Akaashi are ready to use katanas and harnesses to fight. He knows Hinata isn’t.

Kenma must see the pure terror in his eyes, because he reaches out to grab his hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Don’t panic. You can do this.”

Kuroo swallows hard, knowing that Kenma must be panicking as well. He has to be. He never takes Kuroo leaving well.

“I’ll be back,” he says, with as much confidence as he can muster.

Kenma nods. “Yes.”

“I’ll come back to you.”

Kenma hooks his pinky around Kuroo’s. “I trust you.”

Kuroo nods, leaning forward to press an urgent kiss to Kenma’s lips, before rolling out of bed and grabbing a pair of clean boxers to pull on. He dresses quickly, swiping his beeper from the bedside table, before hurrying to the bathroom to grab a vial of serum. There’s one left. He’ll have to ask Oikawa for another package. He chooses a needle and attaches it to the syringe, filling it with the serum before injecting it into his thigh. He inhales sharply, feeling the rush of heat, as adrenaline fills him.

For a moment his vision goes completely red, as a rush of rage washes over him. He shakes his head quickly, fighting the urge to scream and run at the wall. He turns away, instead, hurrying toward the door. As he gets on his shoes, he’s already calling Sawamura.

“Kuroo? It’s five-thirty in the morning.”

“I’m aware of that, sir. There’s been a kaiju spotted. I’m heading to the base now.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line, and Kuroo hesitates with his hand on the door.

“Sir?”

“Kuroo, you know I can’t be there to help you.” There’s pain in Sawamura’s voice, a strain of regret. Kuroo’s grip tightens around the door handle. It squeaks in protest.
“Sir, your men need you. I need you. I can’t do this without you. I can’t... I can’t command the troops and fight the kaiju at the same time, and Hinata is still too inexperienced to take my place.”

“I understand you’re in a difficult position,” Sawamura says, and Kuroo grits his teeth to bite back his immediate response to that. “But I’m not yet at my full strength. I can barely walk. I can’t command anything.”

“Frankly, sir, that’s bullshit.”

There’s another pause, and each second that ticks by has Kuroo’s anxiety growing. The kaiju is out there, getting closer to the perimeter with every step. He has to go, but he’s stalled, waiting for help from the only man he knows to call.

“The men need a strong leader...”

“No offense, sir, but fuck that. The men need you. You’re their leader. Not me, not Azumane. You. And fuck that ‘I’m not strong enough’ bullshit. You don’t have to stand to tell your men what to do.” His heart is pounding, his muscles burning, screaming at him to go go go. But he continues to stand there, waiting in tense silence for Sawamura’s reply.

There’s a soft sigh. “Go deal with the kaiju. I’ll try my best to get there.”

Kuroo feels a wave of relief; an immeasurable amount of weight lifts from his shoulders. He thanks Sawamura before hanging up and finally leaving the apartment. He hops onto Nekoma, settling his helmet over his head, before revving the engine and peeling out of the parking lot at a high speed.

The base is already in chaos with men and women rushing to and fro to ready themselves. Kuroo heads to the locker room, stripping out of his clothes to pull on his uniform. Iwaizumi, Bokuto, and Akaashi are already there, faces grim.

“I called Sawamura,” Kuroo tells them, hoping this information will help. “But just in case he doesn’t show, Bo, I want you and Akaashi to wear your harnesses and strap on katanas. We might need your help.”

Akaashi pales, but Bokuto nods, his eyes blazing with determination.

“You can count on us, Kuroo!”

They gather their things and head for the trucks to drive to the perimeter. In the scramble of people and shouts and moving equipment, Kuroo almost doesn’t see Hinata until he catches a glimpse of bright orange hair bobbing toward them. He groans inwardly, hopping off the back of the truck to meet the kid.

“Hinata.”

“I’m here to help, Captain! I’m ready!” Hinata says, still in the process of pulling on his harness.

Kuroo shakes his head. “No, you’re not. You’ve barely been trained a month. Go home. Go to Kenma. He needs you more than we do.”

“I joined the SSP to fight!” Hinata protests.

“I know, and you will, just not today,” Kuroo says, trying to keep a pleading tone out of his voice. “Hinata, this is an order from your Captain. Go home.”
Hinata frowns, a pout already forming, but Kuroo turns away. He hurries over to the truck and is about to climb back up, when he hears the loud voice of Nishinoya from across the bustle of the crowd.

“Stop running away from this! We need your help!”

Groaning inwardly, Kuroo glances up at the three already in the truck. “Go on without me. I’ll catch up.”

Iwaizumi nods, his lips a tight line. “Hurry.”

Kuroo salutes, before running over to where Nishinoya has Asahi caught by the arm. He’s shaking the arm, looking livid. Asahi’s shoulders are slumped, and he’s staring at the ground, shaking his head.

“What’s going on here? We don’t have time for this!” he says, exasperated.

“Daichi-san isn’t here yet,” Nishinoya says, turning his head to look up at Kuroo. “You need someone to lead the men while you fight the kaiju, right? You have someone right here who can do that! But he’s a fucking coward!” He turns back to glare up at Asahi, who flinches.

“I-I can’t. I’m sorry,” Asahi says, his voice breaking on the words. “My leadership is terrible. It cost soldiers their lives. It almost cost you your life.” He looks down at Noya, his gaze pleading. “Don’t ask me to be the one to risk your life again. Please.”

“Nishinoya,” Kuroo snaps, his patience wearing thin. “Sawamura-san said he’d be here, so he’ll be here. Stop pestering—”

“I’m not pestering!”

“Stop pestering Asahi-san and get to your unit!”

Nishinoya clenches his hands into small fists. He glares up at Asahi, tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. “I would follow you anywhere, Asahi-san,” he says, a faint tremor in his voice. “I don’t see how you can’t understand that. We volunteer our lives in protection of this country, this city, and yes it comes with risks, of course it does! Soldiers would’ve died that night with or without your leadership, but because of you we were able to take down the kaiju before it killed more of us. More civilians. You have to see that. You have to see that we willingly risk our lives and with you we’re stronger, not weaker!”

Kuroo sighs, rubbing his head. His blood is still pumping through him quickly, his heart pounding with an urgency to get to fighting. He knows Noya’s right, but now really isn’t the time to have a meaningful heart-to-heart.

“Thank you, Nishinoya. Now please return to your unit.”

This time Noya salutes and turns to run off. Kuroo turns back to look at Asahi, who’s pale and appears stricken.

“He’s right, you know,” Kuroo says. “The only thing standing in your way is the fact that you don’t trust yourself. You have good instincts, a level head, we could use that.”

“I-I . . .” Asahi blinks, swallowing hard.

“Think about it,” Kuroo says, realizing that the last of the trucks are rolling out. He waves and turns
to hop onto the nearest one heading out, hoping that the scene didn’t waste valuable time.

The snow outside is falling heavily. It’s only a few days until Christmas Eve, and there are lights wrapped around trees still sparkling from being on overnight. Kuroo wonders how many people’s holidays have been ruined by this kaiju’s appearance, and he hopes that the paperwork he’ll be required to do after this battle, and the interviews, won’t make him miss his date with Kenma. He has so much planned, and he’s already made reservations at one of the nicest restaurants still open.

And there’s the ring he ordered. It should be ready to be picked up soon.

Kuroo knows that despite how badly he’d like to actually propose to Kenma it’s actually the worst possible time for a question like that. So instead he got him a promise ring. A symbol of his devotion, in the hopes that one day they’ll no longer have to worry about kaiju or rage states or serum injections and then he can ask Kenma to be his one and only officially, forever.

Shaking those thoughts from his mind, Kuroo focuses on the task ahead of him with a grim reminder to himself that the kaiju have been getting stronger, faster, smarter. And if this evolution continued the way they expected it to, then this will be the hardest battle yet. He has to keep his head in the game.

His truck is one of the last to arrive at the perimeter. Already the media and a crowd of people have gathered, chattering excitedly and pressing forward to try and see the kaiju. Kuroo himself can’t see it, and he wonders if this one’s smaller somehow, hidden behind the buildings that still stand at the center of downtown. He can hear the roar, though, and the earth beneath his feet trembles, as he hops off the back of the truck and hurries to meet his fellow Soldiers in the captain’s tent.

“Have you guys seen it yet?” he asks breathlessly, fitting his earpiece over his ear.

Iwaizumi shakes his head. “It’s difficult to see anything in this damn snow,” he says.

Bokuto and Akaashi are wearing harnesses, katanas strapped to their belts. Bokuto’s bag of dynamite and explosives hangs at his waist, and he’s fiddling with his lighter, his face set in a determined mask.

“If you need help just let us know. We’ll back you up. I’ve gotten pretty good at this katana fighting stuff,” Bokuto says with a grin.

“Right now just detonate your explosives as far from the crowd as possible, just like usual,” Kuroo says, testing the earpiece. “Everyone hear me okay?”

They all nod. Kuroo glances outside. He can see Nishinoya and Tanaka taking charge of the local police and their fellow soldiers, positioning them in a defensive formation in front of the crowd. He’s glad that he doesn’t have to worry about telling them what to do, at least.

Chief Nekomata steps up to the tent. “Captain Kuroo,” he says with a nod. “If you need me to watch the monitors I can. I trust my men to listen to your lieutenants.”

Kuroo nods. “Sounds good, chief. I appreciate it.”

While Nekomata takes his place at the table on which the monitors sit, and Kuroo turns back to his team.

“Let’s go.”
Akaashi and Bokuto disappear almost immediately into the white of the blizzard. Kuroo stands beside Iwaizumi, waiting for the explosion that will draw the kaiju away from the crowd. He frowns, squinting into the distance. He thinks he sees a shape moving between the buildings, but it’s well camouflaged.

“This one’s different,” Iwaizumi mutters, his body trembling as the cold wind whips across them, hitting them with tiny pellets of ice. “I can’t feel its steps.”

Kuroo nods, his stomach quivering with nerves. If it wasn’t for that vague outline of a beast, he isn’t sure he’d know anything was there at all.

“I won’t let this be our last kaiju,” Kuroo assures Iwaizumi. He glances over at him. “We both have people to get back to. So we go at this thing with everything we got.”

Iwaizumi nods, pursing his chapped lips. “Right.”

There’s a crackling in their ears, and Kuroo lifts his hand to cover it, straining to hear Bokuto’s voice over the tiny speaker.

“I see it! It’s like a giant white tiger or something. But it’s got scales and spines on its back. Big green-yellow eyes. Shit, I think it sensed us. It’s coming closer. I’m gonna attack it.”

“Wait, Bo! What’s your position? We’ll come to you,” Kuroo says quickly. When he gets no response, he feels his chest tightening. Quickly, he slaps his hand against his earpiece, pressing it hard. “Bo? Bokuto! Akaashi!”

Iwaizumi shakes his head, indicating that he’s receiving nothing either. Then an explosion rocks the ground. Kuroo and Iwaizumi stumble, grabbing onto each other’s shoulders to steady themselves. Kuroo quickly turns toward the billowing smoke that cuts through the white. It’s a few blocks away, but Kuroo doesn’t hesitate. He immediately begins running, Iwaizumi at his heels.

When they reach the scar of black soot against the white ground, Bokuto and Akaashi are nowhere to be seen, and neither is the kaiju. Kuroo frantically presses his fingers against his earpiece.

“Bokuto! Akaashi!”

Iwaizumi steps around the mark on the ground, coming to a stop beside an abandoned bag. He lifts it, showing it to Kuroo. “It’s Bokuto’s explosives. Looks like they went off to fight the thing themselves.”

“Fucking idiots,” Kuroo seethes, kicking at the snow. He turns then, surveying the ground. He points. “Footprints. Heading toward the perimeter.”

Iwaizumi jogs over, the bag of explosives hanging from his shoulder. He looks down the path the kaiju left, his features tightening. “Let’s get ahead of them and cut them off.”

Kuroo nods. “My thoughts exactly.” He lifts the goggles they’d brought for such an occasion, fitting them over his eyes. He presses the button for his harness, aiming toward the nearest building. He lifts off the ground, flying into the falling snow. It stings his cheeks, sharp and cold, but thanks to the goggles he can still see. Well, sort of. It’s difficult to see anything in this downfall of swirling white. But he keeps his eyes trained on the footprints below, grateful for the serum running through him making his eyesight sharper.

“Kuroo.” Iwaizumi’s voice sounds small in his ear.
Kuroo lands on the side of a bank, stopping and leaning back on his harness to stay in place, feet planted against the concrete. “What?” he asks, teeth chattering faintly.

“I see blood.”

Kuroo’s chest seizes. “Human or kaiju?”

“I can’t tell. But it doesn’t seem like a lot. So . . . possibly human.”

Kuroo closes his eyes briefly, inhaling slowly in an attempt to keep from losing composure. “If it’s not a lot they’re probably okay,” he says, more to himself than to Iwaizumi.

“Probably,” Iwaizumi agrees.

“Let’s keep going.”

Kuroo detaches himself from the wall and continues swinging forward, increasing his momentum in an attempt to reach the perimeter before the kaiju can.

***

Tsukishima can’t think of a worse day for this. It’s three days before Christmas Eve, and he’d been preparing for a trip to visit his parents for the holiday, having gotten the okay by Chief Nekomata for the vacation. Now he’s not sure if he’ll be able to go, considering crime rates always spike after a kaiju attack. He sighs, glancing sidelong at the two standing beside him.

Yaku is shivering from the cold, despite being bundled up with a hat and scarf and gloves. Lev looks fine, though he’s wearing a hat and scarf and gloves himself. The scarf is wrapped loosely around his neck, and he keeps glancing worriedly down at Yaku. But Tsukishima has noticed some distance growing between the two ever since he visited them, so he doubts Lev will say anything.

He feels somewhat guilty, because he knows he provoked Yaku into saying what he did, and he’s realizing that it must’ve hurt Lev worse than he initially thought. There’s nothing he can really do about it though, so he tries to ignore the way Yaku has been avoiding Lev at work, opting to do menial task that don’t require him to partner up with the rookie.

This leaves Tsukishima stuck with Lev more often than not, which would be irritating if Lev wasn’t so strangely quiet these days.

“Here Yaku-san,” Lev says finally, pulling the scarf off his neck to wrap it around Yaku’s, setting it on top of the one Yaku’s already wearing.

Yaku looks like he wants to protest, and he parts his lips, but in the end he simply sighs and ties the scarf neater around him.

“Thank you, Lev,” he says softly.

Tsukishima turns away, not sure why he feels sick to his stomach. He glances along those in the crowd near the police barricades, who are all peering into the snow, trying to catch a glimpse of the Soldiers in action.

“Why is there so much snow? I can’t see anything!” one complains.
Tsukishima blinks, wondering how people can be so stupid. “It’s snowing,” he says flatly.

“Hmph, you don’t have to be so rude,” the woman complains. “What’s your badge number?”

Tsukishima is about to simply turn away, when he sees Yamaguchi pushing his way forward in the crowd. He arrives at the barriers with flushed cheeks, out of breath. His hands are empty, which Tsukishima is relieved to see, but he still tenses.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, attempting to speak normally past the lump growing in his throat.

“I didn’t want you to be out here alone,” Yamaguchi says breathlessly, smiling faintly. His smile disappears then, as his gaze lowers to the ground. “And I wanted to apologize for the other week. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

“Yamaguchi, now really isn’t the best time—”

“Look! There they are!” someone from the crowd shouts, pointing toward the buildings in the center of downtown.

Tsukishima turns to see a giant four-legged creature come bounding out of the white space between two buildings. The snow is beginning to slow its descent, so Tsukishima can see clearer than before. It looks like a tiger, with large white paws and a head like a cat’s with black stripes along its white fur. Its body is armored, however, with what appears to be dark gray scales coming from the top of its head and extending down the length of its back, sides, and stomach to its rump. From there extends a long, flickering tail. On its back are giant spikes as well; long spines that curve inward like hackles.

Yamaguchi inhales sharply, as it begins to lope toward the perimeter. It stops suddenly then, jerking back as if it’s been lassoed. Tsukishima can see the thin shimmer of a cord imbedded in its neck. It turns with a roar, shaking its head, approaching the building where two small men stand perched on the outside wall. The kaiju takes a swing at it, long claws penetrating through cement and metal to send the whole thing crashing down. Tsukishima winces, as he watches Kuroo and Iwaizumi get buried beneath the debris.

A horrified gasp moves through the crowd, and the kaiju pauses, tail flicking back and forth above him, as it surveys the damage it caused, as if searching for a survivor.

Then a flare bursts through the white, burning red in the hands of another small figure. From his vantage point, Tsukishima can’t tell if it’s Bokuto or Akaashi, but the light catches the gaze of the kaiju and it turns away to follow the other Soldier further into downtown. The crowd remains deadly silent, all eyes trained toward the mountain of debris where Kuroo and Iwaizumi still haven’t made an appearance.

“They might be trapped,” Yamaguchi says softly, his eyes wide.

“Someone needs to help!” Lev exclaims, looking toward the soldiers stationed in front of the crowd. “Why isn’t anyone helping?”

“They’re under orders, Lev,” Yaku says, his voice muffled behind the scarves he’s pulling closer around his face. “They’ve probably been told not to engage no matter what happens. The Soldiers are supposed to be able to take care of themselves.”

“But Captain Sawamura leaped in and helped that reporter kid,” Lev says, frowning.
“And he lost an arm,” Tsukishima reminds them.

“And he’s a captain. So he can do what he wants,” Yaku points out.

Lev’s frown deepens. He looks out at the mass pile of cement, mortar, and metal, chewing on his lip. Tsukishima watches him, feeling a twist in his gut. He steps forward, laying his hand on Lev’s arm.

“Don’t,” he tells him, keeping his voice low so neither Yamaguchi nor Yaku can hear him and figure out the same thing he had.

Lev turns to look at him, his eyes wide and desperate. “Someone has to do something. I failed the Soldier exam because I wasn’t willing to help my teammate. I cared more about following instructions and winning. I’m not going to do that again. I’m going to be a good Soldier.”

Tsukishima can’t come up with a good argument to that, so he lets his hand fall to the side. Lev glances over Tsukishima’s shoulder toward Yaku, before looking back into Tsukishima’s face.

“Don’t let him follow me,” he says. “Promise?”

Tsukishima clenches his jaw, but nods. Lev slips away then, running at a sprint toward the fallen building. Yaku immediately jumps to Tsukishima’s side.

“What the hell is he doing?”

“Helping,” Tsukishima says, his heart pounding rapidly.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” Yaku turns angry eyes up at Tsukishima, before taking a step forward.

Tsukishima places a hand on his shoulder, tugging him back. “He told me not to let you follow him.”

“That dumbass!” Yaku practically screeches. He turns on his heel and storms toward the captain’s tent. Tsukishima glances briefly at Yamaguchi’s pale face, before hurrying after Yaku.

Nishinoya jumps in front of them as they reach the tent. “I can’t let you go in there,” he says, but he barely gets the words out before Yaku is barreling past him, nearly knocking over the man in the process.

“Hey!”

Tsukishima shakes his head at Nishinoya. “Don’t even bother,” he tells him, before stepping into the tent, past the grumbling lieutenant.

“I need to see the monitors!” Yaku is shouting at Nekomata. “Lev just ran out there!”

“Haiba?” the chief frowns, looking from Yaku to Tsukishima. “He’s not supposed to leave his post.”

“Well, he did,” Tsukishima says, stepping up behind Yaku to look over his head at the monitors arranged on the table. They’re from different angles at different spots in the city. He can see Bokuto and Akaashi fighting the kaiju in one monitor, each of them flying somewhat unsteadily through the air, dodging swipes from the kaiju’s claws. In another monitor, he can see the rubble that buried Kuroo and Iwaizumi.

As he and the other two watch, Lev runs into the frame. Yaku’s hands fly out to grab the edge of the table, his eyes fixed on the screen. They can’t hear sound on these monitors, but Tsukishima can tell Lev is calling Kuroo and Iwaizumi’s names. He climbs atop the pile, head moving back and forth. Suddenly he rushes forward, crouching beside something. The camera zooms in and Tsukishima can
see the dark head of Iwaizumi, the rest of him pinned beneath the debris.

Lev talks to him a moment, before standing and grabbing a piece of rebar. He sets it beneath one of the slabs, grimacing as he pushes all his weight down onto it, using the leverage to lift the slab just enough for Iwaizumi to pull his arm free. Together they begin to push away the rest of the rubble, until Iwaizumi can wiggle out.

Tsukishima’s heart pounds in his chest, and he finds himself holding his breath, as they turn to start digging together to find Kuroo. Glancing down, he sees Yaku still transfixed by the scene. His teeth are worrying at his lip, and his entire small body is tense. Briefly, Tsukishima glances toward the other monitor. He frowns as he sees the two Soldiers and the kaiju have disappeared. He glances toward another, but there isn’t a sign of any of them.

“Where did it go?” he asks aloud.

“Fuck! No! Lev!” Yaku suddenly exclaims, lurching forward, his stomach pressing against the end of the table.

It jostles, the monitors wobbling, but Tsukishima can see Lev and Iwaizumi pulling Kuroo out of the rubble, and as the camera pans out, he can also see the form of the kaiju materializing in the white, its outline growing more clear as it draws nearer to the three standing on the rubble.

“Lev! Get out of there!” Yaku shouts, his knuckles turning white.

_He can’t hear you . . ._

A giant paw comes flying forward, claws extended. It bats the three to the side, and they sail through the air before coming to an abrupt stop against the brick wall of a second building. They fall like broken dolls with limp limbs, landing in small heaps on the sidewalk.

“No! Lev! Lev!” Yaku whirs toward the tent entrance, but Tsukishima grabs his arm in a tight grasp.

“If you run out there you’ll die,” he says flatly, trying to ignore the way his throat is threatening to close up on him.

“Let me go!” Yaku yells, trying to twist his arm out of Tsukishima’s grip. “I have to go—he’s hurt! He’s not a Soldier. He’s not—”

He’s panicking, his breaths catching on his words as he gasps harder and faster. Chief Nekomata stands, looking grim. “We’ll send out a medical team as soon as the Soldiers take down the kaiju. Until then, I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do.”

“Fuck you! _Fuck you_!” Yaku shouts, still yanking his arm. He reaches for his sidearm, pulling it from its holster and aiming it at Tsukishima’s face. “I swear I’ll pull the trigger if you don’t let me go.” His voice is firm now, tight, as every inch of him trembles.

Tsukishima stares down the gun at Yaku, his chest aching. He shakes his head slowly.

“No, you won’t,” he says, as calmly as he can.

Yaku bites his lip, and Tsukishima watches as he crumbles. His arm lowers and his body sags. When Tsukishima releases him, he sinks to the ground, staring at it as his shoulders shake. His free hand curls into a fist, nails scraping across the frozen dirt. His shoulders heave with his silent sobs, and Tsukishima quickly backs away. He exchanges a look with Nekomata.
“Go,” he says softly. “I’ll watch him.”

Tsukishima nods and leaves the tent at a brisk walk. He returns to his post, his chest feeling shivery.

“Tsukki?”

He keeps his back to Yamaguchi, staring off into the white snow now drifting calmly toward the ground in gentle flakes.

His eyes sting at the corners, but he blames that on the cold.

***

Iwaizumi thinks for a moment he might be dead. His entire body aches, though, and he doesn’t believe he’d feel pain like this after death. Then again, maybe he’s being punished for all his sins. Slowly, he opens his eyes, blinking away the snowflakes that cling to his eyelashes. He sits up, his head spinning. There’s something metallic in his mouth, and when he spits it out, blood appears in spots on the snow.

Not dead then.

He remembers standing beside Kuroo and the kid with silver hair one moment, and the next he was flying through the air and landing against something that sparked pain across his entire body. Carefully, he stretches out his arms, making sure they still work, before staggering to his feet. Everything seems to be in place, though his chest still hurts like hell.

Turning to his left, he sees Kuroo lying still on the ground. For a second he panics, wondering if he might be dead. But then Kuroo groans and shifts, opening his eyes. There’s a cut across his cheek, and when he coughs, blood spills out of his mouth as well. He sits up with a wince, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, smearing blood across his cheek.

“Where’s Lev?” he asks immediately, his voice tight.

Iwaizumi blinks. Right. The kid’s name was Lev.

Turning around, his chest seizes as he looks at the sprawled figure of the boy lying beside him. Already the snow has begun to cover his body, and his eyes are still wide with surprise, jaw slack. A spot of blood stains the snow beneath his mouth, and with the way his neck is twisted, Iwaizumi can see immediately that it’s broken.

“No, no, no, no,” Kuroo mutters, hurrying past Iwaizumi to kneel beside Lev.

His hands hover above the boy’s form, before he lays his hand against Lev’s cheek, moving it down beneath his chin for a pulse, though Iwaizumi knows it’s hopeless. The kid probably died instantly. A small mercy.

“No, no, please no,” Kuroo is still muttering, his hands trembling. His goggles are crooked on his face, and he pushes them off his head. “We-we have to get him out of here.” He turns to look at Iwaizumi, eyes wild. “He can’t stay here.”

Iwaizumi purses his lips, swallowing hard. “Kuroo. The kaiju is still out there. Bokuto and Akaashi
can’t take it down on their own. We have to go.” He moves to stand, but Kuroo remains kneeling, staring down at Lev.

“Kuroo.” Iwaizumi reaches out to grab Kuroo’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. Kuroo starts, and Iwaizumi feels bad, but he can’t let that distract him. “We’ll come back for him.”

This gets Kuroo on his feet. He nods slowly, picking up his goggles from the ground before standing shakily. Iwaizumi gives his shoulder another squeeze. He pulls away then to try the comms.

“Bokuto. Akaashi. Can you read me?”

As before, there’s only silence. Sighing, he takes off at a run to where the disturbed snow leads. His muscles ache, and he notices instantly that he’s favoring his right foot, but he keeps going. There’s anger burning in his chest now. That kid didn’t deserve this. He just wanted to help. And he had helped. Iwaizumi was pinned down, unable to move, and the kid, Lev, helped him escape the wreckage.

Red tints the edges of his vision. This time, however, he doesn’t fight it. He allows the red to seep in, curl around his heart, making it pound harder. He grits his teeth, urging his feet to move faster. Up ahead he can see the kaiju, whipping back and forth as it attempts to take a bite out of the Soldiers jumping over its head. Each time Bokuto or Akaashi make a pass, they swing at the head with their katanas, and blood drips from dozens of cuts, falling to speckle the white ground.

Iwaizumi can sense Kuroo beside him, a pulsating presence of rage that matches his own. He falls into it willingly, allowing the monster inside him to take control. A roar issues from his mouth, mad and terrifying. Without truly thinking of it, he aims his cable directly for the kaiju’s eye. It lands near its ear, but he doesn’t hesitate to jump. As he’s pulled through the air, he reaches into Bokuto’s pouch still at his side, drawing out a stick of dynamite. As he lands on the kaiju’s face, he rams the stick as hard as he can into the eye. He’s nearly thrown off, as the kaiju tosses its head, a roar of pain echoing off the buildings.

But he clenches his jaw and holds fast, pulling the lighter out of the pouch and flicking it on. He lights the fuse, before detaching himself. He aims for a building as he falls, swinging up onto its roof. The kaiju bats at its eye with a paw, but before it can dislodge the stick, it explodes.

Iwaizumi throws himself down on the roof, covering his head with his hands, as bits of kaiju fur and brain fly through the air. Something clanks beside him, and he lifts his head, staring blankly at a blood and gore covered metal cylinder. Without thinking, he grabs it, shoving it into the pouch, as he stands.

The red haze has cleared some, and he feels fatigue starting to set in. Peering over the edge of the rooftop, he looks down at the kaiju still twitching on its side, half its head gone. Frowning, he lowers himself from the building, approaching the head of the beast. The snow crunches beneath his feet, soaked crimson with blood. The kaiju’s chest heaves quickly, and its paws stretch against the ground weakly.

Iwaizumi comes to a stop before its remaining eye, and he can see the life still glimmering in it. As he watches the large, green and yellow eye stare back at him, he feels a tremble in his chest.

*It’s scared. It doesn’t want to die. But it’s in pain...*

Carefully, he reaches out his hand to press against the kaiju’s fur, stroking it slowly. It’s soft, almost like a housecat’s. Bits of snow cling to it, melting beneath his hand. He pulls away after a moment, unsheathing his katana and gently pressing it into the eye, deeper and deeper, until the beast shudders.
Iwaizumi carefully extracts the katana, wiping it clean on the snow. He hears the others approach, quick footsteps behind him. He turns around to face them. Bokuto is leaning against Akaashi, a large gash across his right outer thigh. Akaashi’s smeared in blood but appears unhurt.

Kuroo lingers behind, his katana hanging limp in his grasp.

“Dude, Iwaizumi, that was fucking awesome,” Bokuto says with a lopsided grin. “You took the thing down all by yourself!”

“It was already weakened from the two of you,” Iwaizumi says, sheathing his katana. “What happened to your comms?”

Bokuto grimaces, looking guilty. “I, um, I took mine out when I rushed it. I didn’t realize I was doing it, I just didn’t want Kuroo telling me to stop.”


Iwaizumi waves him off, his gaze back on Kuroo. He seems restless, continuing to glance over his shoulder, his face pale. The cut on his cheek has stopped bleeding, but it looks like it needs stitches all the same.

“Kuroo,” Iwaizumi says, stepping up to his partner.

Kuroo starts, looking back at him.

“Let’s go get Lev.”

Kuroo insists on carrying Lev the entire way back to the perimeter. His steps lag, but even when Iwaizumi points out his limp, Kuroo brushes away his concern.

“It’s my responsibility,” he says firmly.

The crowd erupts into cheers as soon as the five are in sight. None of them smile and wave this time. Not even Bokuto. The people seem to pick up on the grim atmosphere, and once they realize what Kuroo is carrying, a heavy silence falls over everything.

Kuroo carries Lev to the med tent, where Sugawara gestures for him to lay the boy down on a stretcher. He insists they all stay so he can inspect their wounds, so they do, sitting in a solemn line while Sugawara surveys their injuries.

“Did Sawamura ever show?” Kuroo asks hoarsely after a moment.

Sugawara purses his lips. “Near the end,” he says, nodding. “He’s being briefed by Chief Nekomata now.”

“Where is he?”

The five turn their heads to the front of the tent, where a small policeman stands trembling despite the two scarves wrapped around his neck, his eyes bloodshot, and his nose red.

“Yaku-san.” Kuroo moves to stand, but Sugawara pushes him back down.
“He’s there,” Sugawara says gently, nodding to Lev.

Iwaizumi watches Yaku’s composure dissolve. He’s barely able to stifle a sob, as he rushes over to collapse beside the boy. He takes Lev’s face in his hands, stroking his thumbs across Lev’s cold cheeks before bending to press his forehead against Lev’s.

“No, no, please, Lev. Lev, please.”

Iwaizumi can hear the anguish in the man’s voice, and it tears at his heart. He looks away, down at his hands. He picks at the dried blood beneath his fingernails, trying to keep his breathing steady as his chest squeezes around his lungs.

“Yaku-san. Yaku-san, I’m so sorry,” Kuroo says desperately, his voice breaking.

But Yaku doesn’t seem to hear him. He makes no reply, and the tent falls silent, save for the soft, anguished sound of Yaku’s tears.

***

It’s Christmas Eve and the base is as quiet as a graveyard. Kageyama knows people are working because he’s walked by several interns and soldiers going about their tasks throughout the day. But everyone knows what happened during the attack. He’s heard rumors that Kuroo has stepped down from his captain position, giving it up for either Sawamura or someone else. He’s not sure. All he knows is that he wasn’t told to stop working on Hinata’s progress, so he continues to work, checking Hinata’s blood work for any signs of the extra adrenaline. So far everything appears normal, and he wonders if the serum mutates over time inside the body.

He’s not sure what to say when he next sees Hinata. He knows that the kid who died was a good friend of his, and he feels like he should probably offer some condolences. But he’s never been good at the whole comforting thing.

“Hi.”

Kageyama jerks in his seat, spinning around to look up at Hinata. He’s standing there with his hands fidgeting in front of him. Kageyama can tell immediately that he’s upset. Even his hair is drooping. But as always, his tongue fails him, and he can only stare blankly for a moment.

“It’s not time for your check up,” he says finally, stupidly.

Hinata shrugs listlessly, looking off to the side. “I know. I just... I don’t want to be at home, and Kenma’s is even worse. I don’t know what to with all the... the sad. I mean, I feel sad too, but I try to distract myself, you know? Everyone else just seems to want to wallow in it.”

“They’re grieving,” Kageyama says, wondering if Hinata is really that insensitive.

“I know that,” Hinata says with a quick frown. “But I don’t grieve like that. Do you want to go for a run? I feel like running.” He bounces on his toes.

Kageyama glances at his computer. He knows he needs to keep working, but a run sounds nice. He moves to stand, turning off his monitor. When he turns back to Hinata, however, he finds the boy looking at him curiously.
“What?” he asks, frowning as a wave of self-consciousness crashes over him.

“How do you grieve, Kageyama-kun?”

“What the hell? You can’t just ask someone a personal question like that,” Kageyama says immediately, his heart starting to pound faster in his chest.

Hinata is merciless, however. He steps closer, biting his lip in a way that makes Kageyama’s heart stutter out of rhythm. Kageyama takes a step back, clinging to the edge of his desk with one hand.

“Have you ever lost anyone you were close to? On July 10th? I just want to know how you dealt with it.”

I haven’t dealt with it.

Kageyama swallows hard, pushing his features into a darker frown. “I don’t want to tell you.”

“Why not? I thought we were friends,” Hinata says, tilting his head.

Kageyama’s heart stops for a moment, as he stares down at Hinata. Is this guy for real?

“Friends?”

“Yeah, I mean, we spend a lot of time together, and you kept my Christmas present, and you take care of me—”

“It’s my job to take care of you, dumbass,” Kageyama mutters, wondering why his heart feels like it’s trying to escape his ribcage.

Hinata deflates further. “Oh. So you’re not my friend?”

Kageyama has no idea how to answer that. He feels like answering “no” would hurt Hinata’s feeling somehow, but saying “yes” doesn’t seem right either. He’s never had a friend before, but he’s pretty sure real friends don’t fight all the time the way they do. And they certainly don’t think about each other the way Kageyama sometimes finds himself thinking about Hinata.

Kageyama must linger too long, because Hinata’s expression clouds over, and he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Are we or not?” he demands.

“I-I don’t know!” Kageyama exclaims, flinging his hands in the air. “We don’t act like friends, do we?”

“What do friends have to act like?”

“They have to like each other for one.”

“So you don’t like me.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“That’s exactly what you said!”

“Shut up, dumbass!”
Kageyama’s hands clench into fists as his sides, and Hinata’s mirroring his stance. They glare at each other, and Kageyama feels his heart attempting to crawl into his throat. It’s pulsating hot in his pulse, and Kageyama feels the sudden urge to grab Hinata and fling him against the wall of his cubicle to kiss him feverishly.

But he doesn’t. He does reach forward, but only to curl his fist into Hinata’s shirt and yank him closer, glaring at him even as Hinata scowls back.

“Are you gonna hit me? I can knock you out if I wanted to,” Hinata says, bringing his fists up.

Kageyama has no doubt that he can, knowing how strong he’s gotten with the serum injections. He’s just about to . . . do something, or say something (he’s not sure what, but it’ll be nice and scathing), when the door to the lab opens once more, and Oikawa rushes in, waving something in his hand.

“I was right! I was right! I’m not crazy!” he shouts.

Kageyama quickly lets go of Hinata, shoving him away so the boy stumbles back. He turns to frown at Oikawa, wondering what the hell he’s going on about.

“Oikawa-san?”

Oikawa flashes him a manic grin, slamming the object in his hand onto Kageyama’s desk. It’s a cylinder made of some sort of metal. It’s singed and melted a little at the ends. Oikawa presses against the back and a panel slides away, revealing a mess of wires and circuits inside. Hinata crowds up against Kageyama’s side, straining to see.

“What is this?” Kageyama asks, glancing up at Oikawa’s face.

“Iwa-chan brought it to me. It came from inside the kaiju’s brain. It’s some sort of tracker or monitoring device. The point is that it’s manmade and look at this.” He holds up the panel to show Kageyama the inside of it.

Hinata lifts onto his toes to see. Kageyama stares at a series of numbers engraved into the metal. The numbers mean nothing to him, so he looks up at Oikawa with a confused frown.

“It’s a serial number, from a production line,” Oikawa says in a hushed voice. “It took some hacking, but I was able to track it to the Iwanuma base.” His eyes grow wider still; fixated on Kageyama’s face so intently that Kageyama leans back slightly.

“I wasn’t crazy,” Oikawa continues, eyes gleaming. “The kaiju are being controlled. And they’re being controlled by the SSP.”

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: a funeral, a confession, and a breakdown

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
Chapter Notes

it's been 84 years . . .

no but seriously, I'm deeply sorry about how long it's taken to update this. This chapter is much shorter than the previous ones, but I'm actually very happy with how it turned out.

Before you read this chapter, I encourage you to read THIS DRABBLE by skittidyne! as I've dubbed it officially canon and it's set between the last chapter and this one. Also, there's accompanying ART!

((there's smut in this chapter! to skip it, stop at "He strokes his thumb along his skin" and resume at "His body aches"))

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

New Voicemail, Monday, 09:00

“Hey, um, Tsukki? I know you like to deal with this sort of stuff alone but, um, just know that you can come over whenever you want, okay? I-I want to be here for you. So, um, yeah. You can call me or-or whatever you want . . . I’m really sorry about what happened. Um, okay. Bye.”

New Voicemail, Tuesday, 10:54

“Hey Tsukki. Did you get my message? I just want to make sure you’re okay. Please call me back? I know you probably don’t want to talk but . . . I just want to know if you’re okay. I mean, I know you’re probably not okay but, um, you know what I mean. Okay, bye.”

New Voicemail, Wednesday, 12:23

“Tsukki, come on. Please talk to me. I know you’re probably just lying on your bed staring at the wall right now, so why don’t you do that over here? You shouldn’t be alone right now. Don’t cut yourself off from people who care about you. Please.”

New Voicemail, Thursday, 15:07

“Tsukki, I’m coming over.”

Tsukishima frowns at the screen of his phone after the last message. His clock ticks softly beside his bed, a grim reminder of how late in the day it is already, and he still hasn’t left his room or even gotten dressed. There’s no point, really. Chief Nekomata gave him and Yaku some personal leave after the attack. He doesn’t have work, and it’s not like he’s picked up any hobbies. Usually on his
days off he spends time with Yamaguchi or Yaku and Lev.

But he can’t go see Yaku and Lev. Because Lev isn’t there anymore.

He turns over onto his side with a grunt, pushing the callback button.

“Tsukki?!” Yamaguchi’s voice is wrought with worry, and Tsukishima grimaces, a twinge of guilt twisting in his stomach.

“Don’t come over.” His own voice is hoarse from lack of use, and he clears it as subtly as he can.

There’s silence on the other end of the phone, until he hears Yamaguchi sigh softly.

“Are you going to the funeral service on Saturday at least?” he asks.

Tsukishima frowns, rolling back over to stare up at the ceiling. “I don’t see the point. It’s not like my being there is going to make him any less . . .” He trails off, getting stuck on the word, feeling it swell up and lodge in his throat. He swallows hard against it, ignoring the sting in the corner of his eye.

“I think he’d still want you to be there,” Yamaguchi says gently. “For Yaku-san.”

Tsukishima scrubs at his face with his free hand. He hasn’t spoken to Yaku since the day of the attack. He’d sat beside him at the station during the debriefing, and the flat, dead look in his red-rimmed eyes still haunts his sleep. He tells himself over and over that there was nothing he could’ve done. Nothing any of them could’ve done. Lev was the only one stupid and brave enough to run headlong into danger like that. If any of them had followed, they would’ve ended up with broken necks as well.

That’s what he keeps telling himself, but it doesn’t alleviate the ache in his chest.

“I didn’t even like the kid,” he grumbles.

“That’s a lie,” Yamaguchi states quietly.

Tsukishima clicks his tongue against his teeth.

“I-I’ll go with you, if you want,” Yamaguchi offers after a moment. “For moral support.”

“I don’t need you to hold my hand. I’m not going to be crying on anyone’s shoulders or anything.”

Yamaguchi is quiet and Tsukishima grimaces, instantly regretting his words and harsh tone. He feels on edge; a shivery feeling weighs on his chest. He can’t shake the idea that if he goes, if he attends the service, it’ll literally be the final nail in the coffin. It’ll solidify the fact that Lev is gone, erased from the world. It’s an all too familiar feeling.

He’d felt the same way about Akiteru’s funeral.

It somehow makes it all more real. A glaring sign that reads, “He’s Not Coming Back.”

“Sorry. I just . . . I’d rather go alone.” He doesn’t want Yamaguchi of all people to see how weak he truly is.

“Okay, Tsukki.” Yamaguchi’s voice is small, sounding very far away.

Tsukishima sets the phone against his forehead, closing his eyes and not speaking again. After a
while, he hears a click and the call ends. He supposes he should be grateful for his friend knowing when to give him space, but in the lengthening silence Tsukishima can’t help but wish Yamaguchi were there, at least lying beside him in the quiet.

Maybe then it wouldn’t feel like it was crushing him.

It stops snowing for the day of Lev’s funeral. The sky is clear; the sun shining brightly down through the open windows of the temple at which Lev’s shrine will stand. It's the same temple his parents’ shrine were placed. Tsukishima stands near the edge of the group, hands deep in his coat pockets, face half-hidden in his scarf. He recognizes people from work, and Lev’s sister, dressed in black, her silvery hair done up in a bun. Tsukishima’s never met Lev’s sister, but she has his same wide green eyes and fine features. She’s tall as well, and in her hand she holds a single sunflower. Beside her, Yaku stands in a black suit, stone-faced.

Around his neck is a scarf, red. Normally such a color is frowned upon at funerals, but it's unlikely anyone will dare question it or ask Yaku to remove it. It takes a moment, but then Tsukishima recognizes it.

*Lev's scarf . . .*

A lump rises to his throat, but he turns his eyes forward, toward the priest that's chanting in a low voice. In front of him is the casket, open. Lev's sister hasn't dared glance into it yet, but now he allows his gaze to lower. Lev's hair has been brushed until it shines like silver in the sunlight. His face looks unnatural, and it takes a moment for Tsukishima to realize that it's because he's not smiling. He's so used to seeing that wide, excited smile on Lev's face, that seeing him like this, with features so serious and severe, makes him uneasy.

He slides his gaze away.

The priest finishes his chant. The funeral goers begin to move forward, placing their flowers in the casket. Lev's sister goes last, but Yaku remains where he is, eyes red but dry. One hand moves into his coat pocket, while the other touches the scarf around his neck. Tsukishima also doesn't move from his position near the wall of the temple, and as the only two not joining the line toward the casket, their eyes meet across the room.

Slowly, Tsukishima inclines his head, a slight acknowledgement. Yaku's expression tightens, lips pursing, but he nods back briefly before turning away.

Tsukishima wonders if he's still angry with him for not allowing him to run after Lev.

He wonders what might've been different if he had allowed it.

He turns to leave, figuring he's shown his support well enough and not wanting to linger. Stepping outside, he frowns at the two men approaching the temple. He recognizes them instantly.

"Interesting that a pair of wanted criminals would show up at a cop's funeral," he says, placing his hands in his pockets.

Yahaba smiles tightly. "I've always respected and admired Yaku-san. We're here to offer whatever comfort we can and apologize for his loss." He places his hand on Kyoutani's shoulder beside him. "We know how much Haiba-kun meant to him."
Tsukishima raises an eyebrow. "Do you?"

Yahaba lifts his chin. "What's really interesting is that you've been Yaku-san's partner for this long yet you have no idea how much he's done for us and how grateful we are to him. Are you sure you're his partner?"

Tsukishima feels irritation bristling through him. Rather than waste his time arguing, though, he steps to the side to walk around the two in front of him.

"Tsukishima!"

Yaku's voice slows his steps, and he halts, turning around to see Yaku striding toward him, a frown on his face. Tsukishima opens his mouth, ready to apologize for his loss, but Yaku grabs his hand and shoves something into his palm, eyes flashing angrily.

"You're a coward," he snaps. "Throw this away yourself or confront him, but whatever you do, don't waste the time you have with him."

Tsukishima blinks, glancing down at the folded piece of paper in his hand. Its worn edges are familiar, and so is the star dotting the "i" in Yamaguchi's name.

Tadashi

Tsukishima's neck burns, and he returns his gaze to Yaku's face. Yaku's expression softens slightly, as he sighs, a soft cloud of white misting the air.

"Yamaguchi-kun adores you. I hope you realize that. Don't make the same mistakes I did."

He turns away then, stepping over to where Yahaba and Kyoutani still stand, watching everything. They speak to him in low tones, Yahaba's hand resting against Yaku's back in a gentle, familiar gesture. They enter the temple as a group, and Tsukishima turns his eyes back to the note in his palm.

Well. Tsukishima has always hated wasting time.

Yamaguchi's dressed in sweats and a worn t-shirt with the word 'Tacos' written across the front. It's a stupid shirt, but Tsukishima decides he likes it, if only because Yamaguchi is wearing it.

Yamaguchi's eyes are wide, as he stares at him from the doorway of his apartment. "Tsukki? I didn't expect to see you here..." His hand tugs at the edge of his shirt, and there's an embarrassed flush coloring his freckled cheeks.

"There's something I need to tell you," Tsukishima says, wishing his heart would stop beating so quickly. It's annoying. "It's important. Can I come in?"

Yamaguchi blinks, but he nods, stepping back and allowing Tsukishima to step past him. Despite the grimy and disgusting atmosphere of the entire apartment complex, Yamaguchi smells nice, fresh, like strawberries. Tsukishima briefly wonders if he's recently taken a shower (he wonders if that place even has a working shower).

He slips out of his shoes, as Yamaguchi turns toward the kitchen.

"I'll make us some tea," he says, but stops, as Tsukishima reaches out to grab his wrist. He turns
back, eyes wide, and Tsukishima carefully turns his hand so that his palm is facing up, before setting
the note into it.

"I've had this since before Akiteru . . ." he admits, lifting his gaze to observe Yamaguchi's
expression. It's startled, eyes flickering from the note to Tsukishima's face and back again. "It's
stupid," Tsukishima continues, releasing him and stepping back to put his hands in his pockets. "But
I've put it off long enough."

Slowly, Yamaguchi unfolds the note. Tsukishima cringes inwardly, remembering the childish
handwriting, the idiotic exclamation points, the way he described Yamaguchi's freckles as stars and
how he rambled on about all the things he liked about Yamaguchi, from his hair to his smile to the
freckles on his hands. How he liked Yamaguchi's laugh, the way he was always able to cheer
Tsukishima up, how Tsukishima wanted to tell everyone that Yamaguchi was his best friend,
because he was so proud of that fact. He declared that he wanted to kiss Yamaguchi's freckles, to call
him his boyfriend even if they couldn't tell anyone. But he worried that Yamaguchi didn't like him
back as much.

At the very end was a question: "do you like me too? circle the yes dinosaur or the no dinosaur" and
beneath it were two carefully drawn t-rexes, each holding a sign. One yes, one no.

Tsukishima's neck burns, but he keeps his gaze on Yamaguchi's face, watches the way his
expression moves from shock to delight, watches the slow grin spread across his face, quickly
covered by one hand. He shifts awkwardly, waiting for Yamaguchi's final reaction.

Finally, Yamaguchi lifts his gaze from the note, and his eyes are shining. "Tsukki . . . do you really
mean everything you wrote in here?"

Tsukishima clears his throat. "Yeah," he admits, kind of hating himself.

"You want to kiss my freckles?"

Tsukishima frowns. "Shut up, Yamaguchi."

Yamaguchi laughs, and before Tsukishima can brace himself, he's flung his arms around his neck,
squeezing tightly. Tsukishima stumbles back, unsure what to do with his hands. The hug doesn't last
long, though, before Yamaguchi pulls away and grins at him.

"Do you know how long I've waited . . ." He stops, shaking his head. "After I saw you again, I
wasn't sure if you still cared about me. I thought you might've been trying to make up for leaving, but
other than that . . ."

Tsukishima snorts, rolling his eyes. "I'm not that good of a person," he says. "If I didn't care, I
wouldn't have bothered even carrying your groceries that day."

"It was so weird seeing you like that. I sort of wondered if fate . . . but that seemed stupid. I was
really happy to be your friend again, though." Yamaguchi smiles again, and it's like sunlight shining
in that drafty apartment.

Tsukishima swallows hard. Stepping closer, he reaches for Yamaguchi's wrist, sliding his hand down
to hold his then tightly. Yamaguchi's fingers curl around his and squeeze. His heart stutters
pathetically.

"I tried to tell you before. During the picnic . . ."

Yamaguchi blinks. "I was really confused about that. Especially because you never mentioned it
again. I started doubting what it might've meant . . ."

Tsukishima rolls his eyes again. "What else could it have meant? You think I'd kiss anyone
platonically?"

"Well, no, that doesn't seem like you," Yamaguchi admits. "I don't know. I'm sorry, Tsukki. I
probably should've brought it up myself. Confronted you about it. But I was scared . . ."

Tsukishima sighs, bending slightly to rest his forehead against Yamaguchi's. He closes his eyes. "I
don't want to end up like Yaku-san. You can't join the SSP."

"Tsukki . . ."

Tsukishima tightens his grip on Yamaguchi's hand. "I don't care if it's selfish. I'm not losing you."

There's a moment of silence before Yamaguchi raises his hand and places it gently against the side of
Tsukishima's neck. He strokes his thumb along the side of Tsukishima's jaw, sighing against his lips.

"I don't think I've ever heard you say something with that much conviction before," Yamaguchi
answers quietly. "I've been thinking a lot about it." He leans back to look into Tsukishima's eyes,
giving him a faint smile. "I'd have to go through a lot of training before I'd be able to go into the
field, and we might not even have kaiju by the time they allow me to join their ranks. But I still want
to do something to help. So I was thinking of joining the police academy instead."

Tsukishima raises an eyebrow. "You want to be a cop?"

Yamaguchi grins. "Well, they serve and protect too, don't they? Plus . . . I can request your unit and
work with you . . . maybe. If that's okay."

Tsukishima purses his lips to fight a smile. "I guess that's better than the SSP."

Yamaguchi takes a step back, gesturing into the apartment. "Have tea with me?"

Tsukishima's first instinct is to refuse. Looking around the dismal apartment, he thinks that this is the
type of environment in which he'd least like to be. But then he looks back at Yamaguchi's face, at his
hopeful expression, and he takes a step further inside.

"Sure."

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"DID YOU KNOW?!"

Daichi startles at his desk, looking up at the livid man in front of him. The door swings back from the
wall it crashed against, leaving a dent where the handle hit the plaster. Daichi draws his gaze from
the wall to Kuroo, sighing softly.
"Did I know what?" he asks patiently.

Kuroo approaches the desk in two long strides, slamming a folder down in front of him. His bed-head hair looks worse than usual, and the redness of his eyes suggests tears or lack of sleep or both. Daichi pulls the folder closer, opening it slowly. He already knows what it contains, however. He has an identical folder in his desk drawer.

"I got that from Oikawa," Kuroo seethes. He reaches forward to poke at the photos contained in the folder, the photos that show the serial number engraved on the device Iwaizumi brought in from the battlefield. Kuroo jabs his finger at the number. "It traces back to the Iwanuma base, Sawamura. Our own fucking base."

Daichi gathers the photos back together, closing the folder. "I know. Oikawa informed me yesterday."

"Then why aren't you doing anything about it? You're captain again, right? Are you just going to sit on your ass while our own government terrorizes its people?" Kuroo flings his arm out to the side, eyes flashing angrily.

Daichi understands. When Oikawa first told him about the trace back to the SSP, he'd been upset too. Finding out that the hope you believed in is a lie is a difficult pill to swallow. He'd ranted and raved to Suga at his home, while his partner watched him worriedly from the bed.

"We can fix it," he said, hazel eyes wide, face pale. "We can expose them to the media. Get the whole thing shut down. If they're manufacturing the kaiju—"

"We can't."

Kuroo glares at him. "What do you mean, 'we can't'? You're the fucking captain. Get General Ukai on the phone and tell him everything. Get him to stop it!"

"And what happens to you?" Daichi asks, his voice strained. He can feel a lump forming in his throat, and he swallows it back. "What happens to your team? To Hinata? The Iwanuma base manufactures the serum, Kuroo. Without that serum, you and the rest of the Soldiers will die. This isn't as simple as you seem to think!"

Kuroo slams his hands down on the desk, leaning forward into Daichi's face. His eyes are wild, tinged red, more animal than human. His jaw is clenched, and when he speaks it's through his teeth, as if each word is being dragged from the core of him.

"I am more than willing to die," he says, voice low. "When we signed up for this program, we knew we were signing away our lives. But those people out there," he points toward the wall "they didn't ask for this. Haiba Lev . . . he didn't ask for this."

Daichi sighs, his shoulders slumping. "I heard about the kid. It's a tragedy. It shouldn't have happened, I agree. But we can't turn and bite the hand that feeds us. At least . . . not without a plan." He reaches to hold the stump of his left arm, the wound aching. "If you can come back to me with more concrete evidence and an actionable plan, then we can discuss this further. In the meantime . . . go home, Kuroo. Get some rest."

Kuroo straightens slowly, his fingers twitching at his sides. "I can't go home. Kenma . . ."

"Then go somewhere you can get sleep. Take a couple days off. You held everything together well, Kuroo. You deserve a break."
Kuroo snorts softly, obviously not believing him. But after a moment he turns and leaves the office, leaving the door open behind him. Daichi sighs again, rubbing his forehead as the beginnings of a headache begin to creep around his temples. He lowers his hand, as a knock sounds, and he looks over at Suga standing in the doorway, hand still raised from knocking on the doorframe.

"I heard all the noise . . . are you okay?"

Daichi waves his hand through the air wordlessly. Suga steps into the room, shutting the door quietly before walking over behind the desk to lean against it, facing Daichi.

"Nobody expects you to fix everything right away," he says softly. "A lot of things are broken, but you had to take time to heal. Don't feel guilty about not being here."

"I was feeling sorry for myself," Daichi admits, staring down at the folder in front of him. "I should have returned as soon as I was cleared for active duty."

"You shouldn't dwell on it." Straightening, Suga moves around the back of Daichi's chair, reaching out to rub his temples gently. Bending, he places a small kiss against Daichi's cheek. "You're here now. Things will be okay."

Daichi tries to relax into the massage, but all he can think of is that look in Kuroo's eyes. "The Soldiers aren't doing well . . . are they?"

Suga pauses before he answers. "No, they're not."

"What can we do?"

"The serum is keeping them alive, but the more they take the more it mutates, the harder it is for them to stay in control. The only thing that'll work at this point is a cure."

Daichi nods slowly. "Oikawa mentioned that. He thinks he can create one if he can retrieve the original formula from the Iwanuma base. I gave him permission to visit and speak to the lead scientist there. Hopefully that'll yield results."

"Do you think Oikawa is trying to cure the rage states or every effect of the serum?" Suga's voice holds a note of worry, and his fingers pause on Daichi's temples.

"I'm not sure," Daichi admits, frowning faintly.

"Daichi, they're not going to let him take the formula if they think he's trying to reverse the serum completely."

"Oikawa's smart. He'll figure out a way to get that formula."

Suga hums softly. "He hasn't been doing well lately either. He's working himself too hard, starting to space out in the lab. If it wasn't for Yahaba-san, we might not still have a lab. Iwaizumi's come to me about sleeping pills, but he hasn't been back for a refill so I'm not sure if Oikawa is taking them."

Daichi groans softly, rubbing his hand over his face. Are all his men falling apart? "We're just going to have to trust he knows what he's doing. We don't have any other choice."
Although it's a mere forty minute drive from Sendai, entering Iwanuma is like entering a new world altogether. Everything is untouched by the kaiju's savage attacks, and people still thrive, even in the poorer blocks. The closer to the base they get, the louder Oikawa grinds his teeth, until Kageyama is sure they're going to fall out.

"Now listen, Tobio-chan," he says through a tight smile, his fingers gripping the steering wheel of the car Sawamura-san allowed them to take. "The people here are very elitist. Just because they get to live without fear of death and destruction they think they're better than us. Ushiwaka especially. Don't let him look down on you, got it?"

Kageyama looks over at him blankly. “But Oikawa-san, if they're the ones manufacturing the kaiju, wouldn't that make them the bad guys? Wouldn't we be better than them?”

Oikawa blinks at him a moment before laughing and turning back to the road. “That simple mind of yours is actually rather refreshing!”

Kageyama frowns, unsure if he's being insulted or not. When he first found out he'd have to bring Kageyama along with him for this errand, Oikawa had protested. Sawamura-san insisted, saying the fact that Kageyama has been in contact with one of the lab assistants gave them an in, and perhaps an advantage in convincing Ushijima to listen and hand over the formula. Oikawa loudly proclaimed that Iwaizumi’s muscles would be more impressive, but once Sawamura-san’s face got scary, he was quick to agree.

If he was completely honest, Kageyama would prefer Iwaizumi-san to be here instead of him. Hinata's training has become more extensive, and the thought of leaving him unmonitored for an extended period of time makes him feel anxious. He's not sure what to expect on this trip with Oikawa, his former mentor and current rival. He wonders if he should be more apprehensive, especially considering Oikawa's been treating him closer to how he used to before Kageyama was given the lab.

He tries not to dwell on that, but instead rehearses what he should say when he sees Yachi in person for the first time. When he emailed her saying he and Oikawa would be visiting the Iwanuma base, she wrote back with a lot of exclamation points. Kageyama feels his face warm just thinking about it. Is it safe to assume she's excited to meet him officially? He's not sure.

He wouldn't be excited to meet himself.

Oikawa pulls up at a large, modern building, shimmering in the sunlight from its many windows. It's a far cry from the school building the Sendai base refurbished. Kageyama steps out of the car and has to tilt his head back to see the top of the building. It's remarkable, but Kageyama understands Oikawa’s annoyance. Seeing this place in person, he can't help but wonder why the bad guys get better things then they do. It seems unfair.

“Kageyama-kun!”

Kageyama lowers his gaze to see a small, blonde girl run toward them, waving with a wide smile. Oikawa grins and gives Kageyama a gentle nudge. “You didn't tell me your friend was so cute, Tobio-chan.”
Kageyama scowls, cheeks flushing. “Don’t you dare flirt with her, Oikawa-san.”

Oikawa looks at him with wide, innocent eyes. “I’m surprised you think so low of me!”

“Are you?” Kageyama mutters, just as his friend stops in front of them.

Her cheeks are flushed, and she bends over to gasp for breath. She’s wearing a pleated skirt under her lab coat, with a button down blouse and long socks with yellow suns dotting them. Her short hair is drawn back with sparkly clips, and she brushes flyaways out of her sweaty face, as she straightens.

“Welcome to the Iwanuma base!” she says with a wide grin.

Kageyama feels his cheeks burn hotter. His carefully planned words leave him in an instant, and he stumbles over a greeting. Oikawa steps forward with a deep bow.

“It’s out pleasure to be here. Do they always send such adorable welcome parties? How hospitable.”

“Oh!” Yachi squeaks, bowing back quickly. “Um, you must be Oikawa Tooru? I’ve heard a lot about you! I’m Yachi Hitoka!”

Oikawa glances sidelong at Kageyama, but he turns his gaze away. “So, my protégé has been talking about me, hmm? I wonder what he’s been saying.”

“N-nothing bad! Or, um, just things . . . ah, I should bring you inside to see Ushijima-san!”

Yachi nearly trips over her own feet in her haste to turn around and lead them inside. Oikawa and Kageyama follow, the silence growing awkward. The inside of the building is just as clean and shiny as the outside. Kageyama thinks he can see his reflection in the floor, and their shoes click against the linoleum, as they walk across it. Yachi begins to explain what the different rooms they pass contain, but Kageyama isn’t really listening.

This is the place. The place that tracking device came from. Is there a room for kaiju? Will they turn a corner and come face to face with a monster? Or are they tied up on leashes in a secret underground hanger, waiting to be released into Sendai? How do they get the kaiju to the capital anyway? Do they use boats? teleportation devices? The kaiju are huge, so how do they remain inconspicuous while transporting them?

Kageyama is just about to open his mouth and ask when they turn a corner and come face to face with a tall man wearing a stern expression. Oikawa immediately stiffens beside him and Yachi’s voice squeaks before going silent.

"Oikawa Tooru," the man says, his voice deep and just as intimidating as his countenance.

Oikawa sniffs, unfazed. "Ushiwaka-chan."

Ushijima frowns faintly. "I believe I’ve asked you to not call me that."

"You’ve asked me to do many things," Oikawa says, waving his hand dismissively. When he notices Ushijima’s gaze turn to Kageyama, he gestures to him. "This is my protégé, Kageyama Tobio. Don’t let his stupid expression fool you. He’s actually quite the genius. A brilliant mind cultivated by yours truly, of course."

Kageyama frowns, feeling like Oikawa must be making fun of him somehow, yet unable to help but feel gratified by the compliments. Ushijima bows respectfully.
"It's an honor to meet the one who runs the lab over at our Sendai base."

Oikawa's smile tightens. "Oh. You heard about that, I see."

Ushijima turns back to Oikawa. "If you had taken my offer to be my colleague, perhaps you wouldn't have lost your position."

Kageyama glances between the two, and fully expects Oikawa to get angry, but instead his smile simply widens.

"Perhaps I should have taken your offer," he says lightly. "Maybe then you and your team wouldn't have fucked up so terribly!"

Ushijima frowns again. "What do you mean? There's nothing wrong with our serum."

"Yachi gave me your current formula," Kageyama says, speaking up finally. "It's not the same as the one Oikawa-san helped create."

Yachi squeaks and shakes her head quickly, eyes impossibly wide. Kageyama stares back at her in confusion, having assumed she'd accessed that information legally. Considering how Ushijima turns on her, he's starting to suspect he was wrong about that.

"Who are you?" he asks the trembling girl. "How did you obtain access to our formulas?"

"Um! I-I'm Shimizu-san's assistant," Yachi says, bowing rapidly. "I'm sorry! But when Kageyama-kun told me about the side-effects the Soldiers have been getting, I had to help somehow!"

Ushijima turns back to Oikawa, his brow furrowed deeper over his nose. "There's nothing wrong with our serum," he says again. "Perhaps you're not administering it correctly."

Oikawa flings his hands in the air. "It's a simple injection! Directly into the bloodstream, the way your lab told us to administer it!"

"It's pretty irresponsible for your lab to give us a faulty serum," Kageyama points out. "Do you not have test subjects?"

Ushijima nods. "We do. None of them are showing adverse side effects, other than perhaps some enhanced aggression."

Oikawa snaps his fingers. "That's it right there. Our Soldiers are experience rage states and its affecting their personalities. They're becoming more animal than human."

"Isn't that the point?" Ushijima asks, and he sounds honestly baffled. "Do we not need to create monsters to defeat monsters? The increased strength and power these 'rage states', as you so call them, serve to improve the Soldiers' abilities. Have you not noticed that they take down the kaiju quicker and with more precision due to their new aggression?"

Oikawa's eyes widen. "So you're saying you tampered with my formula on purpose?"

"Like I said, there's nothing wrong with our serum." Ushijima bows slightly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to attend." He turns to Yachi, who startles. "Please escort our guests out."

Kageyama wonders if that's really it, if Ushijima is going to refuse to help them. But Oikawa leaps forward as Ushijima begins to walk away, grabbing his arm to hold him in place.

"Give me the original formula," he says, his expression shifting to that dark intensity Kageyama has
seen unnerve their coworkers in the lab. He's never been particularly fazed by it, and neither, it seems, is Ushijima. "Our Soldiers do not deserve this life. Give me the formula so I can create a cure for them."

Ushijima simply looks at Oikawa. "And when they grow weak? What will you do then? The kaiju will still appear and your program will fall apart. Your city will be completely destroyed, and our government will turn to the lab which generated the results they originally requested. You and your Soldiers will become nothing, irrelevant. Forced to live in squalor."

Oikawa's jaw clenches. "At least they'd live."

Ushijima pulls his arm away from Oikawa's grasp and takes a step back. "Your love for Iwaizumi is blinding you from seeing the right path. It always has. You would put him above the rest of the world. Above your mission."

"You're damn right, I would," Oikawa snaps. "Though I wouldn't act so high and mighty if I were you."

Ushijima raises an eyebrow but doesn't ask Oikawa to explain. Instead, he inclines his head and turns to leave once more, Kageyama glances between Ushijima's retreating back and Oikawa standing seething beside him.

"I thought we were going to ask him about the tracking device," he says.

Oikawa straightens, running his hand through his hair. "He wouldn't tell us anything if we asked, and it would only alert him to our suspicions." He glances around the hallway before his eyes land on Yachi, still pale and trembling. His expression softens. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I'll make sure you don't get in trouble for what you gave us. Before we go, though, do you have a place around here that's accessible only to Ushiwaka and those directly beneath him? A secret place where he might hide the original formula?"

Yachi bites her lip. "Um, w-well, there's Ushijima-san's office. And . . . oh!" She brightens, holding up one finger. "There's this vault in the basement! Nobody is allowed near it and you need a secret security code to get in. They say it's full of toxic chemical waste, but Ushijima-san goes down there all the time and never in a hazmat suit! Oh, unless they keep them down there, which would make sense . . . sorry, that's probably not helpful at all!"

But Oikawa is smiling, and for some reason Kageyama now feels unnerved.

"No, no. That's very helpful. Thank you."

They're walking back to the car when Oikawa speaks again. "Tobio-chan, don't tell Sawamura-san what Yachi-san told us, mmkay?"

Kageyama frowns. "We're supposed to report all our findings."

"Yes, yes," Oikawa says, waving his hand dismissively. "But just don't tell him about the vault."

Kageyama narrows his eyes slightly. "What are you planning on doing, Oikawa-san?"

"Something that will help your little Chibi-chan, so don't worry about it." Oikawa pats Kageyama on the head as he moves around the car to get in.

Kageyama scowls at the pat, but at the mention of Hinata, he feels somewhat like Oikawa dumped cold water on his head. That's right . . . Hinata will start showing symptoms of the rage state if we
don't get that original formula and create a cure.

"Are you going to figure out a cure?" he asks hopefully.

Oikawa grins. "I'm going to figure out a cure and keep them from releasing any more kaiju. Just wait, Tobio-chan. We'll put a stop to this whole nasty business."

***

Bokuto sits perched on the kitchen island counter, watching as Kuroo paces back and forth. Akaashi's reading on the couch, and Bokuto has no idea how he can be so calm when their friend is freaking out in their living room.

"This is bullshit. It's bullshit!" Kuroo growls, his hands curled into fists.

"Yeah, okay, but, um, what exactly?" Bokuto asks, not entirely sure how to help.

Kuroo frowns at him. "You mean besides the fact that nobody is being held accountable for what happened to Lev, despite this whole mess being orchestrated by the government itself?"

Bokuto bites his lip. "But... we don't know that for sure."

"That tracking device has a serial number that traces back to the fucking Iwanuma base, Bo! Weren't you listening to what Oikawa told us?"

Bokuto scratches the back of his head. "Uh, yeah, I was. I just... I don't get why the government would make kaiju to destroy Sendai. I mean, the government takes care of the people, right? That's why they created us. To protect everyone! We're the good guys!"

Kuroo stops pacing to narrow his eyes at him. "Sometimes I honestly don't know if you're actually stupid or not."

Bokuto frowns. "Hey."

Akaashi closes his book with a sigh. "Kuroo-san," he says calmly. "Don't speak to Bokuto-san like that. He put a lot of faith in this program, we all did. You can't fault him for wanting to cling to that faith."

Bokuto crosses his arms over his chest, feeling small all of a sudden. "We're helping people."

Kuroo runs his hand through his hair, a gesture he's repeated so often his bed-head has grown worse than usual. "Yeah, okay, we're 'helping' people. But only because they made a situation where people needed help. Don't you get it, Bo? They created the monsters in order to create us."

Bokuto's frown deepens. "But... why would they do that?" He looks to Akaashi for an answer. He always has an answer.
Akaashi gives him an apologetic look. "I don't know, Bokuto-san. Perhaps we're an experiment. Maybe they're looking to build more Soldiers for an army, but they needed to test its effectiveness somehow, so they created monsters as an excuse to run the experiment. Or maybe we're supposed to be a show of force so other countries feel threatened. Or maybe it's just a scheme to garner more support and get more money. It could be any one of those or none of them."

Bokuto feels sick to his stomach. He hops off the counter. "That's terrible. How could they use us like that?"

"They don't care about us as people, that's how," Kuroo mutters. "We're just puppets to them. Tools for their agenda."

Bokuto shakes his head. That can't be true. "Sawamura-san cares about us! Dr. Takeda does too! And Suga-san!"

"I don't think they're in on it, if that makes you feel better," Kuroo admits. "It's higher up."

Bokuto gasps. "General Ukai?!"

Kuroo grimaces. "Maybe even higher."

Bokuto's eyes widen. "The governor?" He gasps again. "The prime minister?!"

"I don't know, Bokuto," Kuroo says sharply. He runs his hand over his face with a groan.

Akaashi's watching him closely. "Kuroo-san, you should go home," he says gently.

Kuroo shakes his head. "No. Kenma's going to try to take care of me, and I can't... I can't be near him when I'm like this." He looks down at his hands, and Bokuto notices that they're trembling. He curls them into fists again. "Just let me crash here for a bit? Please?"

Akaashi purses his lips. "As long as you let Kenma know where you are, and why you're here."

Kuroo nods quickly.

"Dude, isn't Kenma like, all beaten up about that kid dying? Should you be leaving him alone?" Bokuto asks, unable to help but feel worried for their friend.

Kuroo hesitates. "He... has Hinata. I'll give him a text too. Have him check up on him."

He pulls out his phone, collapsing onto the couch as he begins to text. Akaashi steps over to Bokuto and tugs on his sleeve, drawing him into the hallway.

"He can't stay here indefinitely," Akaashi tells him firmly. "After three days, we have to tell him to leave, understand?"

Bokuto nods, knowing Akaashi is probably right but unable to imagine kicking his best friend out of the apartment.

Three days turn into a week. There's no sign of any kaiju, so Sawamura continues to let Kuroo off the hook, as he neglects to show up for training. However, even Bokuto can sense the growing concern of those around him, and the frequent texts from Kenma asking after Kuroo just validate the
"Dude, what's up with you? This can't just be about the government conspiracy thing." Bokuto perches on the back of the couch, looking down at Kuroo as his friend does push-ups on the floor. He's already gotten to two hundred without breaking a sweat. Bokuto's noticed that he's been doing a lot of exercises around the apartment to keep in shape and blow off steam, even though it'd probably just be simpler for him to use the equipment at the base.

When Kuroo doesn't answer, Bokuto turns to Akaashi for help. Akaashi's standing in the kitchen making breakfast, and he sighs. "Kuroo-san, is this about Haiba Lev?"

Kuroo remains silent, but he starts moving faster, grunting softly.

"Dude, you can't blame yourself for that," Bokuto says after a moment of silence. "There was nothing you could've done."

"I could've gotten him out of there the second I climbed out from that debris," Kuroo mutters. "I should've been more aware of where the kaiju was."

"Dude, it happened so fast. How the hell were you supposed to predict something like that?" Bokuto hops off the couch, lying down on the floor on his back in order to look up into Kuroo's face, now starting to grow red with exertion.

"You were a good captain."

"The fuck I was."

"You were."

Bokuto tilts his head back, looking over at Akaashi, but he simply shakes his head. Bokuto sighs, looking back at Kuroo. He reaches over and grabs a handful of his hair, stopping him in place. Kuroo looks over at him, and Bokuto can see the wetness of his eyes. A pang of sympathy hits him, and he scoots closer, pulling Kuroo down on top of him in order to wrap his arms around him in a tight hug.

Kuroo stiffens at first, but then he sags against Bokuto, his body shuddering. Akaashi looks down at them with pursed lips, before turning back to making breakfast. Bokuto strokes Kuroo's hair, not saying anything about the tears he feels dripping down his neck.

After they eat, Bokuto manages to talk Kuroo into going to the base with them. Everyone there gives them a respectful distance, though the soldiers they pass salute Kuroo, as if he were still captain. Bokuto thinks that's nice of them, but Kuroo barely lifts his head in acknowledgment. It's frustrating, watching his best friend be the dejected one. Bokuto's not used to comforting people, and he's not sure what the right thing to say is. He knows when he feels dejected he likes people to compliment him and stroke his ego, but he's not sure if that'll work on Kuroo. He doesn't seem inclined to believe any compliments.

He's way too hard on himself.

"Hey." Iwaizumi catches Bokuto's attention in the locker room. He beckons to him, and, curious, Bokuto steps over, head tilted to the side.

"What's up?" he asks.

Iwaizumi glances over his shoulder to where Akaashi and Kuroo are changing into their uniform
track suits, before looking back at Bokuto. "Have you been . . . feeling any rage lately? Like, to the point where you're afraid you might actually hurt someone because of it?"

Bokuto's eyes widen. "Not . . . not since the kaiju attack. Why? Have *you* been feeling like that?"

Iwaizumi looks away, rubbing the back of his neck. He sighs, lowering his hand to look down at it, slowly clenching his fingers into a fist. "I've been trying to hold it back, but it's getting worse. I need to blow off steam somehow and working out here . . . it's not doing it for me. I think I need to actually hit something. Like a person." He looks up at Bokuto. "I need a sparring partner, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to rage out with me."

Bokuto blinks. The rage states aren't exactly his favorite thing to experience, and the thought of going into one willingly honestly frightens him. What if he's not able to get back out again? But he gets where Iwaizumi's coming from too. The guy needs help.

And he came to Bokuto.

The warm feeling of being needed fills him, and he nods rigorously. "Yeah, sure! I can help!"

Iwaizumi grimaces. "Keep your voice down," he mutters. "I don't want Kuroo and Akaashi to know about this."

Bokuto covers his mouth with his hand quickly, nodding. "I understand," he whispers. Akaashi wouldn't approve at all. He'd say it's too dangerous. But he doesn't know what the rage states are like. He doesn't understand that desire to attack, to maim, to kill. It's not a nice feeling, and Bokuto knows Iwaizumi's just looking for a way to get those feelings out without hurting someone he loves. Bokuto's strong enough to take it, and it'd probably be beneficial for him too.

He doesn't even want to think about what would happen if he slipped up and attacked Akaashi in their home.

"Great. I'll text you tonight about a place to meet up. It'll be away from the city. When was your last injection?"

"Uh," Bokuto scratches his head, trying to remember. "A couple days ago?" With all the excitement lately, Bokuto hasn't really been keeping track of his injection schedule. He's just been taking the serum whenever he feels too weak. It's probably not the healthiest method, but he doesn't want to always have to rely on Akaashi to remind him.

Iwaizumi shakes his head. "Take another one tonight. You'll need all your strength."

Bokuto nods. "Roger!"

He wonders if he should really be as excited about this prospect as he is.

Kuroo doesn't return with them to the apartment. He says he needs to take a run, and he seems jittery so Bokuto and Akaashi let him go without much argument. Bokuto can't help but worry, though. He's pretty sure he's never worried about anyone as much as he has Kuroo lately.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" he asks Akaashi at the dinner table.
"Kuroo-san . . . he's been through a lot, and I don't think he's truly dealt with everything that's happened to him," Akaashi says softly, shifting the food on his plate around with his chopsticks. "I think everything is hitting him at once, and he took Haiba Lev's death very hard. But he'll pull through. He's strong."

Bokuto nods slowly. He knows Kuroo is strong, but he doesn't like the way he tends to push people away when he's upset, like he has to shoulder everything himself. That seems backwards to Bokuto. Whenever Bokuto's upset, he likes having a support system, people to come around him and help build him back up. He hopes that Kuroo realizes he has that kind of system with him and the other Soldiers, Kenma too.

After dinner, Bokuto gets the text from Iwaizumi with directions to a place he insists is isolated and deserted. Bokuto grabs his jacket and coat and is pulling on his shoes when Akaashi appears in front of him with a faint frown.

"Where are you going?"

"Uh, out?" Bokuto realizes he probably should have come up with a lie before this moment, knowing he's not great at thinking up things on the spot.

"Where? You realize there's a curfew." Akaashi raises his eyebrow, and Bokuto averts his gaze.

"Yeah, yeah, but Iwaizumi needs my help with something. It'll be quick, I promise." He flashes Akaashi a grin, as he moves to stand. "Don't worry, okay? I can take care of myself."

Akaashi stares at him and Bokuto can't read his expression. But he doesn't say anything else, and so Bokuto steps past him to the door.

"Don't wait up! I mean, if you want to that's cool, but you don't have to, so . . ."

Akaashi turns away and walks into the hall toward his room. Bokuto watches him go, chewing on his lip and feeling bad for not telling him the whole truth, but he knows Akaashi would try to talk him out of going if he knew, and Iwaizumi doesn't have anyone else to turn to. Bokuto's his only hope.

He gets on his motorcycle and heads out toward the place Iwaizumi described. Nobody's on the streets, so it doesn't take him long to reach the clearing deep within a forest of trees off the side of the road. Bokuto has to heave his motorcycle over a fence, not wanting to leave it out on the street where anyone could come by and steal it. He pushes it through the snow, navigating through the trees until he comes to an open space. Iwaizumi's already there, standing in the center of the clearing.

He turns when he hears Bokuto approach, and Bokuto waves with one hand, as he leans the bike up against a tree.

"Cool place you picked out," Bokuto observes, glancing up at the expanse of stars he can see above the circle of trees. He looks back at Iwaizumi, who's absently tapping his fist against his thigh.

"Did you take the serum?" he asks.

Bokuto blinks. Oh. Right. He was supposed to do that. Oh well, it's only been a couple days since he last took it. He should be fine. He's strong enough to take Iwaizumi.

"Uh, duh, of course," he says with a confident laugh. "Not that I need it to defeat you." He flexes his arms for good measure.
Iwaizumi’s lips twitch. "I've figured out how to activate the beast, but I can't control it once it takes over me. This could get messy. You okay with that?"

Bokuto nods. "Uh, how do you activate the . . . beast? It just happens to me. I've never really thought about making it happen on purpose."

Iwaizumi shrugs out of his jacket, tossing it over the bare branch of a tree. "I think of something that upsets me, makes me angry. Then I usually go ape-shit on these trees until the beast gets tired and goes away." He gestures to the scarring on the trees around them, and Bokuto suddenly notices the damage throughout the clearing. Pieces of bark lie on the ground, sticking up out of the snow in various places around them.

"Dude," Bokuto says solemnly. "You come here and do this a lot?"

Iwaizumi turns his face away. "I feel like it's safer to be around Oikawa if I do."

Bokuto nods. He gets that. He still has nightmares about attacking Akaashi. It wakes him in a frantic, cold sweat in the middle of the night, rushing to Akaashi's room to make sure he's okay. Akaashi always takes his face in his hands, assuring him that he's fine, that no, Bokuto didn't attack him in his sleep. He reminds Bokuto to take his medication and then sends him back to bed. It's become an almost nightly routine.

Maybe this fight club can help him too.

"Right, so let's do this thing," Bokuto says, clapping his hands together.

Iwaizumi lowers himself into a crouch, his hands coming up, straight and stiff. Bokuto watches as his expression darkens, that now familiar red glow entering his eyes. Bokuto gets himself ready, moving into a similar stance.

*Think of something that makes me angry . . .*

Immediately his brain supplies him with the image of a kaiju, tall and menacing, crashing through apartments full of screaming people. He sees Akaashi, face streaked with blood, determined to take down the monster. He watches, as in his mind's eye the kaiju squashes Akaashi beneath its foot, like he's nothing but a meaningless insect.

"NO!"

He attacks first. He swings his arm down toward Iwaizumi’s head, vision blurred red with his incensed rage. Iwaizumi blocks him easily and ducks away. This only makes Bokuto angrier. He roars again, and the red consumes him.

***

Akaashi knew something was up the minute Bokuto said he was going out. He waits for Bokuto to
leave, then activates the GPS on his phone, watching with a faint frown as the small dot that's Bokuto makes its way out of town to a spot in the middle of nowhere and then stops. Akaashi stands still for what feels like hours, trying to figure out from just this what Bokuto is up to. The only scenarios he can come up with don’t lead to good things, and so he leaves the apartment quickly, taking his motorcycle and following the path Bokuto took.

It leads him into the middle of nowhere, which doesn’t alleviate Akaashi’s worries. He slows to a stop, not seeing Bokuto’s bike anywhere on the road, but soon he notices the tire track leading into the forest. Frowning, Akaashi hoists his motorcycle over the fence, following the track deeper into the trees.

He hears the sounds of the fight before he sees it. Pausing, he tilts his head, attempting to pick out Bokuto’s voice. It’s not difficult. He’d know his voice anywhere. But it sounds different, more animal than human, a loud roar followed by grunts and yelps of pain.

Akaashi abandons his motorcycle and runs toward the noise, smacking aside low-hanging branches heavy with snow. He bursts into a clearing and stops, eyes wide, taking in the spectacle before him.

The snow has been trampled, black with dirt and spotted red with blood. The two men grappling in the center of the clearing are snarling, biting, punching at any opening. Their clothes are torn and stained with blood and sweat. It takes a moment for Akaashi to recognize Iwaizumi. The man’s right eye is swollen shut, and there’s a piece of his ear missing. Bokuto’s mouth and chin is dripping crimson, and the wild look in his eyes is unlike anything Akaashi’s ever seen, even on the battlefield.

"Stop!" he shouts, hurrying toward the two.

They pay him no mind; perhaps they hadn’t heard him. Iwaizumi wrestles Bokuto to the ground. As Akaashi draws nearer, he can hear his labored breathing. His movements seem weaker than Iwaizumi’s, and Akaashi scrambles to remember when he last saw Bokuto take his dose of the serum. Had it been a day? Two days?

Iwaizumi’s hands close around Bokuto’s throat. He squeezes, growling low in his throat. Bokuto thrashes beneath him, fingers like claws grappling for a hold. He swipes his nails across Iwaizumi’s cheek, leaving bloody stripes, but Iwaizumi’s hold doesn’t loosen.

Akaashi sees red.

A cold feeling washes over him, settling deep into his veins and solidifying into ice. He moves forward before he realizes what he’s doing, grabbing what’s left of the back of Iwaizumi’s shirt and flinging him off Bokuto. It’s as easy as batting away a fly. Iwaizumi weighs nothing, and he goes flying across the clearing. Bokuto hacks and coughs, gasping for air.

Akaashi turns from him, facing Iwaizumi, as the man lands in a crouch. Akaashi expects to feel anger, but he doesn’t. He feels nothing but the chill of the air around him, seeping into him, as he steps closer to Iwaizumi, who growls menacingly. This doesn’t deter Akaashi, who simply sends him flying backwards again with a swift uppercut to his jaw.

"A-Akaashi?"

He hears Bokuto’s hesitant call as though from far away. He doesn’t turn around, intent on his goal. Iwaizumi hurt Bokuto, nearly killed him. He can’t be allowed to go free. Akaashi continues forward. He grabs Iwaizumi’s throat, lifting him and smashing him back against the trunk of the nearest tree. Iwaizumi grunts, as the air is knocked from him. Narrowing his eyes, Akaashi begins to squeeze his hand around Iwaizumi’s neck.
I want to see you turn blue . . . to see those pretty eyes of yours pop out of your head.

Iwaizumi grabs his arm, scratching at it. When that does nothing, he reaches for Akaashi’s face. Akaashi leans his head to the side, avoiding the scrabbling hand. He brings his other arm up, curling his hand into a fist. How much strength does it take to kill a monster? Akaashi’s mind calculates quickly, as he gathers his energy for the blow.

"Akaashi! Akaashi, stop! Let him go!"

Something hard slams against his back and thick arms surround his waist. They squeeze, though not enough to hurt him. Akaashi feels warm breath against the back of his head, as Bokuto burrows his face into his hair.

"Please, Akaashi! That's enough! You can stop!"

"He was going to kill you," Akaashi says, his voice sounding flat and hollow in his own ears.

"No, he wasn't! I promise he wasn't. I'll explain everything. Just . . . please let him go."

Bokuto’s body shudders against Akaashi’s. Akaashi blinks, the red in his vision fading away. He sees his hand around Iwaizumi's throat, the way the man is twitching, his face growing purple. Eyes widening, Akaashi quickly releases him, watching in horror as Iwaizumi drops to his knees in the snow, coughing and holding his throat.

"Iwaizumi-san . . ."

Iwaizumi shakes his head, and when he lifts it the rage has faded, and he simply looks tired.

"You lied about the injection," he croaks, turning his gaze onto Bokuto. "It shouldn't have escalated that far."

Bokuto's arms loosen around Akaashi, and he turns to frown at him. "Bokuto-san?"

Bokuto scuffs his shoe against the ground, kicking away a lump of snow from a patch of dead grass. "I didn't think it would matter. I figured I could still take him in my rage state." He bites his lip, looking at Akaashi with imploring eyes. "Don't be mad! I was just trying to help."

"How is getting yourself killed helping anyone?" Akaashi asks, a different type of irritation filling him. If he hadn't decided to follow Bokuto out here . . .

Bokuto shrugs, his entire countenance drooping. Even his hair is limp, dripping with melted snow. Akaashi surveys his injuries. He has scratches across his chest, and his cheekbone is swollen and bruised. His neck is red, evidence of Iwaizumi's grip still lingering. His wrist has also swelled, and Akaashi figures that it was broken at some point during the fight and is still healing.

Akaashi reaches out and grabs his other wrist, tugging him toward the place where he left his bike. "We're going home," he says firmly.

"Akaashi-san."

Iwaizumi's hoarse voice causes him to pause briefly, and he glances over his shoulder to look back at Iwaizumi, as he stands slowly. His expression is penitent, and he bows deeply.

"I'm sorry."

Akaashi understands why they did it, but it doesn't make him any less annoyed at the both of them.
He nods in response, before pulling Bokuto out of the clearing.

"Wait, my bike!"

Bokuto twists his wrist, but Akaashi holds on firmly. "You can get it tomorrow," he says, as sharply as he can. Bokuto's struggling ceases immediately.

"You're mad."

"Of course I'm mad!" Akaashi snaps. He halts abruptly, turning to frown up at Bokuto, who still looks like a kicked puppy. "Do you realize how badly this could have gone? Do you realize I could've lost you here tonight, not because of any kaiju but simply because of your own stupidity?"

Bokuto flinches. "He needed a sparring partner. His beast is getting stronger. He needs some way to control it . . ."

"So you offer yourself up as what? A sacrifice to sate his beast's appetite?"

Bokuto tilts his head. "I'd sacrifice myself for any of you guys," he says sincerely. "That's what being a superhero is all about, isn't it?"

"We're not superheroes, Bokuto-san! We're just Soldiers! We're just men! Your delusions of grandeur are going to get you killed and then where will I be?!"

Bokuto's eyes are wide in his face. "Akaashi . . ."

Akaashi grabs the front of Bokuto's shirt, clenching the torn material in his hands, as he shoves Bokuto up against the tree beside his motorcycle. It feels like all the emotion that left him earlier, all the anger and fear that he felt when he saw Bokuto beneath Iwaizumi, has come flooding back, overwhelming him. They spill out of every pore, staining the air, the ground, the cloudless sky above. He feels like screaming, or crying, and his eyes burn with unshed tears.

"Stop being so selfish!" he shouts, close enough to Bokuto's face to feel the startled hitch in his breath. "I joined this program for you! I've gone through all of this-this pain and ridiculous politics and media attention just to stay by your side! To keep you safe. And then you run off to do completely asinine shit like this without even taking precautions to protect yourself? Without even telling me?"

Akaashi doesn't realize that he's trembling until he feels Bokuto's warm, steady hands lay against his waist. The tears are sliding down his face now; he can feel the sting of them freezing on his face. Bokuto's expression has taken on a form of realization, as he stares at Akaashi with a slack jaw. But does he know? Does he truly know?

Bokuto's throat constricts, and he licks his lips. "Keiji . . ."

Akaashi's not sure what he's expecting. An apology maybe. A promise to never do it again. He doesn't expect to feel warm lips descend onto his, still slick with blood. Bokuto's hands move to his back, pushing him closer. Akaashi moves willingly, one hand detaching from Bokuto's shirt to grip his hair. The tears fall faster, as he presses himself against Bokuto as hard as he can.

It's taken too long for them to get to this point. The ache inside of him yearns for more. He gasps against Bokuto's mouth, opening for the prodding tongue. He tastes the sharpness of blood, but the wet heat overpowers it. Bokuto's tongue sweeps through his mouth, and Akaashi moans, clutching him tighter.
After a moment longer, Bokuto pulls away, brows drawn together over his nose. He lifts his hand, wiping at Akaashi's lower lip with his thumb. "I got blood on you," he murmurs apologetically.

Akaashi struggles for breath, not sure how to answer.

Bokuto grins faintly then. "Akaashi . . . you kissed me back this time."

"I-I . . ." He can't come up with an excuse, because it's true. He did kiss him back. And he wants to kiss him again. And again . . .

*It's taken too long.*

Akaashi turns away, moving toward his motorcycle. He straddles it, looking over at Bokuto until he steps up to join him, sitting behind him and wrapping his arms around his waist. Akaashi breathes a quiet sigh, before revving the engine and pushing through the snow back toward the road.

The ride home is silent, and surprisingly the apartment is too, as they step into the front hallway and remove their shoes, jackets, and coats.

"Kuroo?" Bokuto calls, hanging up the tattered remains of his jacket. When there's no answer, he pulls his phone out of his pocket to check for messages.

Akaashi stares past him, not focusing on anything. Things feel different. His skin itches, and he's still too warm despite having removed most of his layers. He's hyper aware of Bokuto's presence, of his breathing, the dripping strands of his hair lying against the back of his neck.

"He didn't leave any messages . . . Akaashi?"

Akaashi pulls himself together, shaking his head to clear it. "I'll start a bath for you."

He doesn't wait for Bokuto's answer, instead heading for the bathroom. He sits on the edge of the tub as it fills with water, not sure what he's supposed to do now. He practically confessed to Bokuto with that kiss. He can't go back to pretending he doesn't love him that way, even someone like Bokuto would be able to see through that.

Akaashi touches his face, feeling the tear tracks still lingering on his cheeks. He feels calmer now than before, but the deep ache that settled in his chest hasn't eased. He lowers his hand, staring down at his fingers, remembering how Bokuto's hair had felt clenched between them.

He needs to banish these thoughts before they become unbearable. He needs to—

The bathroom door opens, and Bokuto steps through, already shirtless. The scratches on his chest look less red than before, but there's bruising on his stomach and abdomen, and he's rubbing his swollen wrist lightly. "I left Kuroo a message, Iwaizumi too. I hope he's okay . . ." He trails off, catching Akaashi's gaze.

"Um, it probably looks worse than it is. I took some painkillers, so I won't even feel them soon, don't worry." He grins reassuringly, but it doesn't loosen the knot in Akaashi's chest. If anything, it tightens it.

Bokuto's grin falters. "Akaashi?"

Akaashi turns off the water to the bath, moving to stand. He steps over to the shower, pulling his shirt off over his head and setting it where it'll hopefully not get wet. Bokuto's grin is completely gone now, and he stares, gaping, as Akaashi begins to unfasten his pants. He slips them down and
off, along with his underwear, folding them and placing them on top of his shirt.

Bokuto swallows hard. "A-Akaashi?"

Akaashi reaches over to turn on the shower, testing the water before moving to stand beneath it. He tilts his head back, closing his eyes and letting the water wash away the tear stains. When he lowers his head and turns to face Bokuto, he still standing frozen, watching Akaashi in stunned silence.

Akaashi holds out his hand to him. "Bokuto-san, you need to rinse off before you get into the bath. You're filthy."

Bokuto shakes himself free from his stupor, though a blush has risen high on his cheekbones. Akaashi can't help the quickening of his heartbeat, as Bokuto sheds the rest of his clothes, kicking them aside. Akaashi can see now that one knee is red and swollen as well, and there are several bruises along his shins. He purses his lips, trying not to grow upset again.

Bokuto approaches him hesitantly, almost shyly it seems. When he's close enough, Akaashi reaches out and takes his good wrist, pulling him gently beneath the water, stepping out of the spray so Bokuto can fit. He picks up a bar of soap then, lathering it between his hands before running it carefully over Bokuto's neck and shoulders. The dried blood begins to loosen, running rivulets of red down his body.

Akaashi can hear Bokuto's labored breathing, but he keeps himself in check as best he can. The atmosphere has grown heavy, tense with anticipation. He's not sure how to best interpret it. He tries to ignore it instead, running the soap across Bokuto's chest and back, cautiously cleaning away the sweat and blood, aware of the bruises. His face burns as he moves his hand lower, and Bokuto's hand reaches out quickly to grab his wrist.

"I-I, um, I can do that bit," he says, flushed pink in a way that suggests it's not just from the water.

Akaashi nods, releasing the soap into Bokuto's hand. While he cleans himself, Akaashi moves his fingers to Bokuto's face, wiping away the blood from his face. When Bokuto straightens, he sets the soap down on the counter and lets the shower rinse off the suds. Akaashi can't help but allow his gaze to wander, moving over the expanse of Bokuto's muscular form. Even bruised and battered like this, he's beautiful.

"Akaashi," Bokuto's voice is softer than he's ever heard it before, and Akaashi can feel his cheeks warming at the sound. He feels the touch of a hand on his hip, and then Bokuto's other hand is against his chin, lifting it and following the gesture with a kiss.

Akaashi wraps his fingers around Bokuto's biceps, clinging tightly as his body trembles. Bokuto steps closer, and Akaashi doesn't retreat. He feels the warm, wet skin of his chest bump against his, and he fights a moan at that simple contact alone. Bokuto doesn't linger this time but instead pulls back to slide his lips along Akaashi's cheekbone to his temple. He sighs shakily then, wrapping both arms around Akaashi and tugging him close into a tight hug.

Startled, Akaashi can do nothing but hug him back, slipping his arms around Bokuto's neck and holding him close. He runs his fingers through his hair slowly, as he feels Bokuto's shoulders begin to quiver.

"I-I'm sorry, Akaashi. I didn't mean to scare you. I promise I didn't. I thought I was doing the right thing. I knew you'd worry if I told you, that you wouldn't want me to do it, but I needed to. I know you don't understand, but I needed to."
Akaashi sighs, leaning his head against Bokuto's. "I forgive you," he says softly. *I should be the one apologizing. For all the stress I've put you through concerning your feelings toward me...*

Bokuto pulls away, lifting a hand to push Akaashi's hair back from his face. "This is real, right? You're not going to start pushing me away and saying you didn't mean it, are you?"

Akaashi shakes his head. They've already gone too far to turn back now. "No, Bokuto-san. I'm not going to push you away again. I promise."

Bokuto grins, and the expression lights up his face in a way Akaashi hasn't seen it brighten in a long time. He yelps softly in surprise, as Bokuto suddenly bends to pick him up, stepping over to the bathtub.

"Bokuto-san," Akaashi protests weakly, as Bokuto begins to step into the tub. "I don't think we can both fit."

"We can like this," Bokuto says confidently, as he moves to lay Akaashi down lengthwise in the tub, moving over him so he's hovering directly above him. Their feet brush against each other, and Bokuto slowly lowers his knees then to straddle Akaashi's hips, bracing himself against the sides of the tub with his hands. Akaashi's eyes widen, as Bokuto lowers himself further, knocking his forehead gently against his, before kissing him deeply. Akaashi can't help but melt back into the water. He lifts his arms to once more wrap them around Bokuto's neck, lips sliding eagerly against his.

The longing inside him has deepened to a hunger, and being surrounded on all sides by Bokuto like this, Akaashi can't help but want more. He arches into Bokuto, one hand sliding up into the dripping strands of his hair like before, while his other trails his fingers along Bokuto's spine.

Bokuto shivers above him, and then he sinks further against him, one hand leaving the side of the tub in order to slip into the water and take hold of Akaashi's hips once more. He strokes his thumb along his skin there slowly, and Akaashi lifts into the touch with a soft moan. Bokuto's hand moves then, carefully wrapping around his length to give it a couple strokes.

Akaashi gasps, pulling away from the kiss. Bokuto freezes immediately, biting his lip, as he looks down at him.

"Is this okay?" he asks hesitantly.

Akaashi pants quietly, considering the ramifications. His mind feels splintered, though, and his thoughts slip through the cracks like smoke, not one solidifying into coherency. He decides that he can worry about the consequences later, and he shifts beneath Bokuto, pressing his foot against the wall of the tub in order to roll his hips up into Bokuto's touch.

"Yes," he breathes shakily.

Bokuto ducks his head, kissing the edge of Akaashi's mouth and then his cheek, peppering the length of his jaw until he comes to his ear. Akaashi shivers at the feel of his warm breath ghosting across the shell of it, and Bokuto's hand begins to move again, sluggish under the water, but with enough friction to cause the shaft to harden within seconds. Or maybe that's simply because of that aching need burning low in Akaashi's stomach.

The tub isn't exactly comfortable, however, and after taking a moment to fully commit to this idea, Akaashi pushes Bokuto back gently.

"We should go to the bedroom," he says, trying to keep his voice even. "It'll be more comfortable."
Bokuto's eyes widen, but then he swallows and nods quickly, pulling back. He steps out of the tub, offering Akaashi a hand up. Before he can climb out, however, Bokuto moves to pick him up again. Akaashi blinks.

"Bokuto-san, I can walk myself," he admonishes gently. "And your wrist—"

"I like holding you like this," Bokuto says without embarrassment. He grins and presses his nose against the side of Akaashi's face for a moment before turning toward the door. Akaashi reaches out and grabs a couple towels, his heart pounding faster, as Bokuto steps down the hall into his room, dripping water everywhere. He sets Akaashi down then, and takes one of the proffered towels. He runs it over his hair quickly and down the rest of his body before tossing it away and grabbing Akaashi around the waist to fling them both onto the bed with a grin.

"Bokuto-san!" Akaashi yelps as his back hits the mattress. He wasn't able to completely dry off, and he can feel the water lingering on his skin dampening the comforter beneath him.

"It's fine," Bokuto assures him with a soft laugh. He nuzzles his face into the side of Akaashi's neck, and Akaashi can feel his grin. "Mmm, I love you, Akaashi. I really do."

Akaashi swallows hard, moving to rest his hand on Bokuto's back lightly. "I—"

Abruptly, Bokuto rolls off him, jumping to his feet and stepping over to his bedside table. Akaashi shivers in the sudden lack of warmth, sitting up slightly to frown over at Bokuto, wondering what he's doing. When he turns back around holding a tube of lubrication and a condom, Akaashi flushes down the length of his body.

"This is still okay, right?" Bokuto asks hopefully, as he climbs back onto the bed. "I've been wanting this for a long time . . ."

Akaashi swallows hard and nods. "Yes," he says weakly.

His heart feels like it's about to burst from his chest, as Bokuto moves over him once more. He bends down, pressing his lips just slightly against Akaashi's, chaste and sweet. Akaashi grabs the back of his neck, pulling him closer as he deepens the kiss with all the urgency he feels thrumming through him. Bokuto grins into the kiss, and his hand moves between them again, wrapping around Akaashi and tugging quickly.

Akaashi moans, and Bokuto takes advantage of his parted lips to slip his tongue between them again. He rocks his hips, and Akaashi can feel the smear of pre-cum against his stomach from Bokuto's member, as he rubs against him. Akaashi shudders in anticipation, that fire of want burning hotter, coursing through his veins. He arches his hips, urging Bokuto onward.

"B-Bokuto-san," he pants softly against Bokuto's lips.

Bokuto leans back, his eyes a deep molten gold as they look down at him with so much adoration, Akaashi feels almost embarrassed. He closes his eyes, feeling so completely unworthy of that adulation.

*I've only brought him pain, I've only—*

He has to make up for that. He has to make up for everything.

He turns his head and opens his eyes, reaching for the lube that Bokuto left on the mattress beside them. He flips open the top and after a bit of a struggle, manages to squeeze some out onto his fingers. He rubs them together, before reaching down between them, past Bokuto's hand, in order to
press his fingertips against his own entrance.

He inhales deeply, before sinking his index finger past the resistance. Bokuto realizes what he's doing and stops. He draws back slowly, sitting on his heels and watching, his eyes blown wide, as Akaashi pushes his finger in deeper.

"Akaashi," he breathes, his voice breaking on the name. "You're so . . ."

Akaashi leans back his head, arching his hips for better access, as he adds a second finger. He stifles a groan, and he feels Bokuto's hands take his thighs, helping to hold him up. Akaashi feels warm, wet lips press against his inner thigh, feels the tickle of Bokuto's hair against his skin, and he can't hold back his next moan. Bokuto drags his teeth along a throbbing vein, and as he nibbles gently, Akaashi slides a third finger in along the others. He can't go as deep like this, so he concentrates on stretching his walls, scissoring his fingers slowly.

It hurts, but he knew it would. And it's not even close to the pain of the serum administration. He concentrates on the sensation of Bokuto's lips and tongue moving along the line of his inner thigh, his skin quivering. Finally, he draws his fingers out, sagging against the mattress.

"Bokuto-san," he murmurs, and Bokuto lifts his head, looking down at Akaashi expectantly. Akaashi can't help but smile faintly at that expression. "I want you inside of me."

Bokuto's face flushes a deeper red than it has been before, but he nods quickly, reaching for the condom and lube. "Don't worry, Akaashi. I won't leave you unsatisfied." He accompanies this with a confident grin, though it wobbles as he applies the lube over his hard and rubbered length.

This isn't about me . . .

Bokuto leans over him, grabbing his legs to lift them up over his shoulders, before bending lower to kiss him deeply. He aligns himself, and Akaashi inhales through his nose, releasing the air slowly, as Bokuto inserts himself carefully. The pain is sharp at first, and Akaashi muffs a small cry against Bokuto's lips. But he forces himself to relax, and Bokuto goes gently, waiting for the tension in his body to release before he pushes in further.

Akaashi moans, grabbing at Bokuto's hair once more, his other hand moving down his back. He digs his nails in to anchor himself, and Bokuto grunts softly but doesn't tell him to stop. Once he's fully set inside of Akaashi, he pauses, pulling from the kiss.

"A-Akaashi," he pants quietly, his face twisting into a grimace. "Fuck, you're so tight. You-you feel so good."

"Bokuto-san," Akaashi murmurs, pleased to hear that. He aches all over, that fire still burning, and he tugs gently on Bokuto's hair. "Move."

Bokuto complies immediately, rocking his hips back to pull out some before pushing back against him. The pressure is intense, but Akaashi doesn't mind it. He's surrounded by Bokuto on all sides; he's full of him, slotted together like two pieces of a puzzle. The thrusts are gentle but deep, and Akaashi feels something akin to electricity tingling deep underneath his skin.

"Akaashi," Bokuto groans, reaching between them to once more wrap his hand around Akaashi's member. It's leaking profusely now, and Bokuto's palm slides over it in smooth strokes.

The pleasure at the touch assaults all of Akaashi's senses, and he cries out softly, head tilting back against the comforter. His heart pounds rapidly against his chest, and he pants for breath, the heat within him rising higher with each thrust and pull. Bokuto's breathing is quick and erratic, and his
other hand grips the comforter beside Akaashi's shoulder.

"Akaashi, Keiji," he gasps out in rhythm to his thrusts. "I love you. Shit, I love you. I love you."

Akaashi's chest aches. He feels tears burning the corners of his eyes once more, and this throat feels tight. He wants the say the words back to him, he wants to so badly he feels as though he'll burst. But the deep-seated fear that's kept him silent for so long grips his lungs, cutting off his speech. He tightens his grip on Bokuto, on his hair, on his back, digging his nails in deeper.

"Fuck, fuck," Bokuto mutters, grimacing as he begins to push harder and faster, his hand on Akaashi's length trembling as he continues to tug on him. He adjusts slightly, and the head of his member begins to press against Akaashi's prostate with each new thrust.

"Ah!" Akaashi can feel the heat starting to consume him, to eat him from the inside out. He wants to be devoured, though. He wants and wants and wants . . .

He reaches the edge of his climax and falls. He squeezes his eyes shut, as the intense pleasure drags another cry from his lips.

"Koutarou!"

His body trembles with the onslaught of sensations, his toes curl, and he clenches his knees around Bokuto's shoulders. Bokuto stiffens, a cry of his own breaking forth, as his hips stutter out of rhythm, become disjointed. Eventually he slows and then pulls out, allowing Akaashi's legs to fall to the mattress. His thighs quiver, aftershocks from his orgasm still twitching through him.

Bokuto removes the condom, tying it off before tossing it into the trash can. He collapses beside Akaashi then, groaning deeply into the pillows. Akaashi hesitates before slowly turning to the side to look at him. His body aches, but he can ignore that for now. Hesitantly, he reaches out to touch the still damp strands of hair at the back of Bokuto's head.

"Bokuto-san," he murmurs softly.

He's not sure if Bokuto will hear him, but Bokuto's head comes up immediately, and he turns his head to face Akaashi. He smiles then, a tired but happy smile.

"Mmm, that was good, wasn't it? That was so good . . ."

Akaashi swallows hard, his chest still tight. He nods though, because it was good. Bokuto scoots closer, moving his arm to wrap it around Akaashi's waist. He turns, wiggling down the comforter until he can set his face against Akaashi's chest. Akaashi bites his lip, as he slowly wraps his arms around Bokuto's head, stroking his fingers through his hair gently.

"Hey, Akaashi?"

"Mm."

"Do you love me?"

Akaashi closes his eyes, his fingers not faltering in Bokuto's hair. "What do you think, Bokuto-san?" he asks quietly, a sincere question.

"I think you do. But . . . you're really hard to read. When you were crying in the woods . . . I think that's the first time I've ever seen you really cry, Akaashi. To show, well, any kind of emotion, actually."
"I'm sorry." Akaashi isn't sure what else to say. He's never been good at expressing himself. He can't
wear his heart on his sleeve the way Bokuto does. It's an easy way to get hurt.

He squeezes his eyes shut tightly.

Please don't take him from me. Please don't take him from me. Please don't—

"Akaashi? You didn't really answer my question."

Akaashi ducks his head, burying his nose in Bokuto's hair. He inhales deeply, the scent of his musk,
the water, the soap. He sighs then. It's such a simple word, love. Akaashi doesn't feel like it's big
enough to truly describe how he feels toward Bokuto. It's a desperate, ugly thing, really. A selfish,
all-consuming monster deep within him that he loathes as much as he craves its presence.

"You're everything to me," he answers finally.

It's as close to the truth as he can get.

***

Kenma hasn't seen Kuroo in a week. He knows why he's been keeping his distance, but it doesn't
make the reality of his absence sting any less. He has Shouyou, and Kentarou comes over with the
boys every night to check up on him. But it's not the same.

He wants Kuroo.

He wants to make sure he's okay, he wants to take comfort in his arms, to comfort him back . . .
however way he can. He knows Kuroo blames himself for Lev's death. He knows Kuroo is probably
afraid of Kenma blaming him too. And considering his anger after discovering the secret of the SSP .
. . Kuroo's probably afraid of raging out and hurting Kenma on top of everything else.

Which is ridiculous, because Kenma fully believes that even in a rage state Kuroo wouldn't hurt him.
He's not the monster he's convinced himself he is.

Of course there's no way of changing Kuroo's mind about that if he refuses to answer Kenma's texts.
It's frustrating, but Kenma refuses to give up. He knows from Bokuto that Kuroo's been staying at
his and Akaashi's apartment, so he's instantly concerned when he receives a late text from Bokuto.

Koutarou

hey kenma is kuroo with u? he went for a run after work but he hasn't been back yet (02:31)

Kenma feels his stomach clench. Without thinking of the curfew (or getting changed out of his
pajama pants and too-large long sleeved shirt (another one of Kuroo's)), he throws on a coat, pulls on
some shoes, and rushes out into the cold, still night.

He's not sure how he knows where to go, but he sets off toward his old neighborhood, where he
used to live with his parents when they were alive. His footsteps seem loud against the sidewalk, all other sound muted beneath the blanket of snow that lies several feet deep. More snow begins to fall as he reaches the street on which he grew up. He's out of breath, and the cold stings against his cheeks, nose, and mouth, but he pulls the hood of his coat more forward, and the collar higher up around his face, and continues forward.

He slows when he sees the line of police barricades that cut off the street from the debris that still lie in jumbled piles from the attack of July 10th. Further down is the tree with the white scar. Kneeling in the snow beside it is a figure, hunched over and trembling.

Kenma knows it's Kuroo as sure as he knows his heart is beating, and his lungs are expanding. He breaks into a run, his hood falling back around his shoulders.

"Kuro!"

As he draws nearer, he can see the red staining the snow beneath the man. His hands are outstretched in front of him, crimson from fingers to wrist. The blood is splattered across his clothes; he's practically covered in it. And when he turns toward Kenma, his pupils are dilated, and the look in his eyes is closer to anger and terror than relief or happiness.

"Get back! Go away!" he shouts, whirling into a crouch. His lips are raised in a snarl, and he braces himself with one hand in front of him, a defensive stance.

Kenma slows to a stop abruptly. "Kuro." His chest feels tight, as he looks over the state Kuroo is in. His hair is a mess and his clothes are torn, like he got into a fight with someone. A fight that apparently didn't end well for the other person.

Slowly, Kenma reaches out his hand, palm facing upward like he would to a stray cat. He takes a step forward, and Kuroo growls low in his throat, shrinking back against the tree. Kenma's eyes burn, but he holds back the tears, taking another step toward his best friend, his lover, his entire world.

"Kuro, it's me," he says softly, keeping his voice steady. "It's okay. You're okay now."

Kuroo narrows his eyes, the wild look remaining. For a moment Kenma fears that he doesn't recognize him. Is he still in his rage state?

His heart thuds rapidly in his chest, but he doesn't back away or turn to run. This is Kuroo, and no matter what state he's in Kenma is going to take care of him. He's a part of this fight too, no matter how much Kuroo's tried to keep him away from it. And there are different ways to fight than to stand before a kaiju.

He can fight against the serum that's threatening to take away everyone Kenma cares about and loves.

Lowering to his knees, Kenma continues to hold out his hand, inching closer. "It's okay," he murmurs, as soothingly as he can. "It's okay. You're okay now. It's me. I'm Kenma. You know me. You won't hurt me. I'm Kenma." His voice breaks finally, and something in Kuroo's gaze changes.

He tilts his head, studying Kenma closely. The crazed look in his eyes fades, and he blinks rapidly a moment before recognition floods his features. Relief causes Kenma's shoulders to sag, but instead of rushing forward and taking him in his arms, Kuroo shrinks further back against the tree.

"Kenma," he gasps, a visible shudder running over him. "What are you doing here?"
Kenma frowns faintly. "I could ask you the same thing," he says, lowering his hand. "Why won't you come home?"

Kuroo looks down at himself, grimacing as he takes in the blood. His hands begin to tremble. "Look at me, Kenma. Look at what I am. I can't... I can't be around you while I'm like this." He holds up one hand and the look he gives Kenma is full of anguish. "This could've been your blood."

Kenma closes the gap between them. With his back against the tree, Kuroo can go nowhere, but he stiffens, as Kenma takes his face in his hands. He shakes his head firmly. "It wouldn't have been," he says with full confidence. "You'd never hurt me, Kuro. You're not a monster."

"But I did hurt someone," Kuroo says, as his body continues to shake. "Kenma, I-I hurt someone. I just went for a run and this guy confronted me. I think he was from a news station. He kept asking me questions about-about Lev. I couldn't take it. I saw red and then I... I was standing over him, and he was just... lying there. Bleeding. I carried him to a hospital but I don't know if he's dead or-in a coma or how many bones I broke or how much blood he lost or—"

Kuroo's starting to ramble, his eyes wide and glazing over. Kenma frowns and moves one hand over Kuroo's mouth, cutting him off.

"You carried him to a hospital. A monster wouldn't do that. A monster wouldn't feel remorse. I don't think monsters know that they're monsters."

Kuroo closes his eyes, taking deep breaths through his nose, his shoulders slowly releasing their tension. He falls forward, resting his forehead against Kenma's shoulder. Kenma slowly wraps his arms around him, holding him close.

"I'm sorry, Kenma. I'm so sorry. For Lev, for avoiding you, for dragging you into this whole mess, for just... everything."

Kenma feels hot tears slipping down his neck. He sighs, leaning his head against Kuroo's. He rubs his back slowly, wishing Kuroo would've let him do this a week earlier. The tightness in his chest loosens somewhat, and he turns his head to kiss Kuroo's lightly.

"Can we go home now?" he asks quietly.

Kuroo nods after a moment, and Kenma stands, pulling Kuroo up by the shoulders. He moves his hands then to cup his face once more, leaning up on his toes in order to press a soft kiss against his lips. Kuroo touches his side lightly, but maintains his distance other than that. Kenma sighs, but doesn't press the matter. He knows why Kuroo's being cautious. He doesn't like the reason, but he understands.

He moves his hand down to take Kuroo's and tugs on it, turning to head back toward the sidewalk. Kuroo follows willingly.

He remains silent throughout the walk back. Normally Kenma doesn't mind silence, but this is a weighted one, full of frustration and sadness. He laces his fingers through Kuroo's and gives his hand a firm squeeze. After a moment, Kuroo squeezes back.

It's nearly dawn by the time they make it back to the apartment. Kenma's footsteps have started to drag, and he stumbles while climbing the stairs. Kuroo's quick to catch him, and he lifts him into his arms, carrying him easily the rest of the way.

"Mmmnot a kid," Kenma mumbles, stifling a yawn.
Kuroo chuckles softly, and the sound is a welcome one. Kenma can't help but smile faintly. Kuroo manages to get the door open, and he kicks it shut before carrying Kenma over to his bedroom. He lays him gently on the bed, kissing his cheek lightly before straightening.

Kenma reaches out to grab his sleeve.

"I need to shower," Kuroo tells him softly, removing his hand.

Kenma opens his eyes to frown up at him.

"I'm not going anywhere, I promise." Kuroo holds out his pinky.

Kenma studies him a moment before lifting his hand to press his pinky against Kuroo's. "Trust you," he murmurs.

Kuroo bends to kiss his forehead briefly. Kenma closes his eyes again, listening to the sound of the shower as it turns on. He shifts onto his side then, curling his knees to his chest. He fights to stay awake, wanting to make sure Kuroo really does come back.

When he next opens his eyes, he has to squint against the bright light streaming in from his window. He sits up slowly, looking over at the clock beside the bed. He watches as it flips over to 13:42 and rubs his eyes. Turning, he reaches for Kuroo beside him, frowning when he encounters only his sheets.

Sudden fear grips his chest, and he scrambles off the bed. He quickly pulls open his door and steps into the hall, nearly colliding with Kuroo, as he stands holding a tray full of breakfast food. He steps back quickly, holding the tray aloft as to not spill it.

"Whoa, whoa, hey! Careful!"

Kenma sighs with relief, throwing his arms around Kuroo's waist and squeezing him tightly. "You're still here," he mutters, burying his face into the warmth of Kuroo's chest, rubbing his cheek against the soft material of his long-sleeved shirt. He's also wearing his flannel pajama pants, and he smells clean.

"I promised I wasn't going anywhere," Kuroo reminds him, laying one hand against the back of his head.

Kenma doesn't reply. His heart is still pounding much too fast from his scare.

"Hey," Kuroo says gently, pushing Kenma back so he can see his face. "I meant that, okay? I won't leave you again. I'm sorry I did."

Kenma knows he believes that, but considering their situation, Kenma also knows that it's an impossible thing to promise. There are so many things that can take Kuroo from him . . .

He curls his fingers into Kuroo's sleep shirt, gripping it tightly. He leans forward to press his forehead against his chest again, exhaling shakily.

"Come on, the food's going to get cold," Kuroo says, nudging Kenma's leg with his knee.

Kenma releases him, stepping back and reaching to take the tray from him. He frowns faintly, realizing that he should've been the one to get up and make breakfast for them. But when he glances at Kuroo's face, he wonders if the domesticity of the gesture helped calm him. He seems more peaceful somehow.
He catches Kenma's gaze and smiles faintly, reaching up to tuck his hair behind his ear, allowing his fingers to linger on Kenma's cheek a moment.

"I love you."

Kenma blinks back at him slowly, leaning into his touch just slightly. "I love you too," he says quietly, cheeks burning faintly.

Kuroo's smile widens. "How about we just stay in bed for the rest of the day? We'll order in for dinner."

Kenma nods quickly, thinking that sounds perfect.

And it is, surprisingly. They lazy around playing games together throughout the afternoon, Kenma letting Kuroo play on his DS while he gets an older one out of the closet. They talk about nothing serious: old cartoons they used to watch, antics their volleyball teammates used to get into back in high school, the time Kenma got stuck in a tree and Kuroo had to rescue him.

Kuroo laughs a little too hard at that story, prompting Kenma to kick at him to get him to stop. This leads into a tickle fight, which Kenma inevitably wins. As he perches on top of Kuroo, staring down at him in the dimming light from the setting sun, his chest feels full yet weightless at the same time. Kuroo's arm lies across his face, and his laugh still lingers on the corner of his lips. Reaching forward, Kenma pushes away his arm to see his entire face.

Kuroo's eyes are warm and happy, as they look back at him. Kenma bends to kiss him, long and slow. Kuroo's hands are on his thighs, but they shift up to his hips, holding them firmly, as he presses back into the kiss with the same amount of care. Kenma parts his lips, breathing softly against Kuroo's mouth until it opens for him. He tilts his head, licking past his lips with leisurely strokes.

He tries to put all his love into the kiss, all his trust and faith and everything he feels toward Kuroo. He wants him to know that he believes in him. He wants Kuroo to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Kenma knows he can get through this, that he can defeat the monsters, in whatever form they take.

He wants Kuroo to know that he'll be by his side no matter what, and that he'll always be there to bring him home.

Kuroo moves his hand to the small of Kenma's back. He's just starting to slide it up underneath his sleep shirt, when a loud and persistent knock on the door shatters the atmosphere like a volleyball crashing through a window (Kuroo's fault).

Kenma pulls back with a frown, and Kuroo sighs as the knocking continues. Despite Kenma's mewl of protest, he lifts him up and off him, setting him down on the bed beside him.

"I'll just see who it is; I'll be quick."

Kenma pouts, and Kuroo smiles apologetically, as he exits the bedroom and walks across the apartment to open the door.

"Oikawa? What the fuck are you doing here?"

Kenma straightens at the name. He slides off the bed, padding out to the front area to eavesdrop easier.

"You wouldn't answer your phone! I've been trying to call you all day!"
Kenma hears Kuroo grunt softly in annoyance. "Whatever it is, can it wait until tomorrow?"

"Absolutely not! I'm calling for an emergency meeting at the base. Tobio-chan and I have managed to get our hands on irrefutable proof that the kaiju are being controlled by the SSP. We need to form a plan of action immediately! Sawamura already has the rest of the team gathered, so come on!"

Kenma steps over to the hallway, looking past Kuroo to Oikawa's manic expression. Kuroo's standing stiffly despite the grip Oikawa has on his arm.

"Kuro," Kenma says softly, stepping over to the coat rack. "Let's go."

Kuroo starts, turning to look down at him in surprise. "But what about—"

Kenma shakes his head. He can wait. Kuroo and the rest of the Soldiers can't. If Oikawa somehow hacked into the Iwanuma base's security system to retrieve the files he and Kageyama uncovered, he knows the sooner they act on the information the better. If Oikawa's right about the Iwanuma base, they're not going to be happy about him stealing such sensitive material.

Kenma pulls on his coat and shoes, before tossing Kuroo's coat to him.

"Come on, Superman. Let's save the world."

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: an insane plan that could never work, a heist they go through with anyway, and a kaiju attack of the worst kind

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
can you believe this fic is nine months old already? wow
((there is smut in this chapter. to skip it, stop at "Moving one hand between them," and resume at "He's not sure how long he lies there."))

Oikawa leads them into the conference room. Nobody seems to mind that they're still in their pajamas underneath their coats. Sawamura's already seated at the head of the table, with Bokuto and Akaashi on his right. On his left sits Yahaba, and Kenma starts slightly in surprise before going over to stand next to him. Yahaba smiles, dark circles prominent under his eyes. Oikawa doesn't look much better.

"How are you, Kenma-kun?" Yahaba asks quietly, as Kuroo moves to grab the chair on the other side of Kenma.

"I'm okay," Kenma says, his eyes searching Yahaba's face. "How are you?"

"I'm managing."

Kenma nods in understanding. Oikawa claps his hands together, remaining on the other end of the table, several manila folders spread out on the surface in front of him. That's when Kuroo notices a man he doesn't recognize seated beside Oikawa. He's staring at the screen of a laptop, fingers flying over the keys so quickly they seem to blur.

"Who's that?" he asks, interrupting Oikawa before he can speak.

Oikawa gives him a glare. "If you'd let me start the meeting, I'll introduce you," he says.

"We're not starting the meeting until everyone is here," Sawamura states solemnly.

"We are all here," Oikawa says firmly.

Bokuto raises his hand. "Um, no we're not! We're missing Iwaizumi!"

Oikawa frowns. "Yes, well, I figured it was prudent to leave him out of things. He needs to rest. Especially after that little stunt you two pulled last night." He fixes Bokuto with a hard enough stare that the man wilts and sinks down into his seat.

Kuroo glances between them, confused. "What happened last night?" It's then that he notices the rather impressive bruise that's still healing on Bokuto's cheekbone. "Dude, what the fuck happened to your face?"

Sawamura frowns. "I too would like to know what happened," he says.

"Bokuto-san and Iwaizumi-san got into a fight," Akaashi states calmly. "But they are both alive and healing. There's nothing to worry about."
Sawamura's frown doesn't ease, and Kuroo notices the tension in Oikawa's jaw. He knows there's something else going on here, but he isn't sure if it's wise to bring it up in front of everyone. Beside him, Kenma reaches out to lay his hand on his arm. Kuroo glances over at him, and Kenma shakes his head just slightly. Kuroo takes that as a further indication that he should wait until after the meeting at least.

"If the news you have for us affects the team as a whole, I'd prefer it if Iwaizumi was kept in the loop," Sawamura says.

"Iwa-chan doesn't need anything else on his plate right now," Oikawa says flatly. "I know what I'm doing, Sawamura."

Of course as soon as he says this, the door to the conference room bursts open, and Iwaizumi strides in, looking livid.

"What the hell, Shittykawa? You left before I woke up, and you called a meeting without me?"

Kuroo's eyes widen as he takes in Iwaizumi's face. His left eye is badly bruised, and the tip of his right ear is missing. Quickly, Kuroo glances over at Bokuto, but he's slumped further in his chair, as though trying to disappear. Akaashi's lips are in a thin line. Curiosity burns in his mind, wondering if everyone had raged out last night. Had something triggered it for all of them or was it just a coincidence?

"Iwa-chan, please. I didn't want you to get involved," Oikawa is saying, lowering his voice.

"I'm already fucking involved," Iwaizumi growls. "You can't leave me out of shit like this when it has to do with my team."

Oikawa looks like he wants to protest, but before he can, Sawamura interrupts.

"Thank you for joining us, Iwaizumi. Please, have a seat." He gestures toward the open chairs.

Iwaizumi selects the seat beside Kuroo. Kuroo turns to him, the question burning on his tongue. But a quick tug to his sleeve from Kenma keeps him from speaking. For now.

Oikawa gives the room a tight smile. "Well, I guess now we can begin." He waits, as though expecting another interruption. The sound of the laptop guy's fingers tapping against the keys fills the silence, until Oikawa claps his hands together again.

"Okay! So, as you are all aware, we discovered that the Iwanuma base has been tampering with my original formula for the serum."

"You mean, Kageyama discovered," Iwaizumi says pointedly.

Oikawa closes his eyes briefly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Anyway, it appears as though Ushiwaka intentionally changed the formula in order to create something a little closer to the formula we used on Kyoutani-kun. They've placed more adrenaline and more kaiju DNA into the serum, resulting in these rage states you all have been experiencing." He glances sidelong at Yahaba. "Kyoutani-kun experienced similar side-effects while we were testing the serum on him."

Kuroo looks over at Yahaba, whose face appears calm. His hands, however, clench beneath the table, relaxing only when Kenma reaches over to touch the back of his right one gently.

Kenma's good at that, Kuroo muses. Helping others relax . . . He remembers the ring, realizing he never went to pick that up. As far as he knows, it's still at the store. He reminds himself to grab that
"So Ushijima isn't planning on letting you fix the serum, is that what you're saying?" Sawamura asks.

Oikawa shakes his head. "He wouldn't even let me look at it. That's where Konoha comes in." He gestures to the man on the laptop beside him. "Everyone, this is Konoha Akinori. He's a private contractor willing to assist us in hacking into Ushiwaka's computer."

Konoha lifts his hand in a wave.

"Okay, I'm going to stop you right there," Sawamura says, shaking his head. "We're not . . . hacking into a government sanctioned laboratory. For one thing, it's illegal."

Kuroo exchanges a glance with everyone around the table. "I don't think any of us have a problem with that, boss," he offers mildly.

"And anyway we won't be hacking, per se," Oikawa says, gesturing to Konoha. "I'll let him explain."

Konoha reaches down beside him, pulling out a round device that he presumably pulled from a bag at his feet. It looks like a paperweight, black and smooth, small enough to hide in the palm of one's hand. He sets it on the table in front of him.

"All someone needs to do is place this beside Ushiwaka-san's computer for twenty minutes. It'll copy everything on his hard drive. Then all you have to do get this device back to me, and I can use my laptop to access his files. Then I'll have to do some hacking to get around any encryptions. But he won't notice anything because it'll be a copy, not the actual drive."

"That's where Shi-chan comes in," Oikawa says brightly.

"How so?" Yahaba asks, raising an eyebrow.

"That kid you have living with you. Kunimi Akira?"

Already Yahaba is shaking his head. "No, absolutely not."

"My sources say he's an excellent thief. He knows how to get in and out of places discreetly, and Ushiwaka doesn't know his face. No, no, listen. It'll be perfectly safe. We have Yachi-chan set up a tour of the base for local university students. He goes in as one of those and, just briefly, he slips away to the bathroom. He sets up the device, chats up the receptionist or something, and then slips it back into his pocket. See? Simple and easy and quick. No danger."

"I'm not involving Kunimi in any of this," Yahaba says flatly. "He's just a kid, Oikawa-san."

"So is Chibi-chan," Oikawa says, lips tightening. "So is Tobio-chan. So was Haiba."

Kuroo flinches, and he can feel the collective wince that moves throughout the room. Kenma's hand works its way into his, giving it a firm squeeze. Kuroo inhales shakily, squeezing it back.

"I said no," Yahaba states. "That's final."

Oikawa sighs. "Then what do you propose?"

The tension in the room grows almost palpable. Bokuto studies his nails. Akaashi sits perfectly still, making subtle glances at Bokuto. Sawamura's brow is furrowed in deep thought. The silence is
broken by a pop and a hiss, and all eyes turn to Konoha, where he sits holding a canned drink. He blinks.

"Sorry, all this angsty silence was making me thirsty," he says drily, taking a long swig.

Yahaba groans. "Fine, I'll do it," he says. "I'll tell Ushijima-san we've discovered a way to suppress fear in the Soldiers, and that I'd like to go over the formula with him in his office."

"Hmm, risky," Oikawa says, tapping his chin. "We'd have to actually come up with a formula, and I don't like the thought of Ushijima actually getting his hands on one like that."

"Kageyama's already come up with a formula," Yahaba says.

Sawamura starts in surprise. "He has? Why haven't I heard of this?"

"With all due respect, sir," Yahaba turns to Sawamura with a slight bow of his head. "Neither he nor I thought it wise to hand over such a formula. We knew you'd be required to release it to the Iwanuma base."

Sawamura sighs. "I suppose that's fair. Go on."

Oikawa's jaw is tight, and he gives the room a thin smile. "Of course Tobio-chan has already created such a formula. He . . . is my protégé and I . . . am very proud of him."

"Don't hurt yourself," Iwaizumi says absently.

Oikawa gives Iwaizumi a glare. "Okay, so we use the formula Tobio-chan created. How do we ensure that Ushiwaka won't begin production on a new serum with it? This whole plan is to stop him, not facilitate the creation of a new serum to create new Soldiers."

"I can make a subtle enough change that he might not catch at first glance, but if they try to use it, it'll fail."

"He might be dense enough to not catch it, but his scientists aren't," Oikawa says irritably.

"Well, I suppose it's a good thing then that we'll have enough evidence to take down the lab by the time they fix it," Yahaba says coolly.

"Yes, okay, fine. We'll go with your idea," Oikawa says, sounding disgruntled.

Konoha slides the device across the table to Yahaba, who deftly sweeps it off and into his pocket in a single smooth gesture. Kuroo nods to him with respect. Yahaba nods back, a hint of a smile on his face.

"Okay, so if you just need Yahaba for that, why are we here?" Bokuto asks.

"I'd like the three of you, well, I guess now the four of you," here he glares at Iwaizumi, who glares back, "to come with us. If the Iwanuma base has been changing the formula this whole time, they have to have test subjects."

Yahaba pales. "You mean . . ."

Oikawa nods, his expression grim. "Yes, just like Kyoutani. I'm afraid they might be keeping these subjects in an underground vault. If that's true, we need to get them out as quickly as possible. We don't know when the next kaiju will strike, so we need to get them out now before we run out of time. They'll likely kill them if we release the evidence we find."
"So it's a rescue mission!" Bokuto exclaims, perking up instantly.

Sawamura frowns. "I don't like the thought of all my Soldiers leaving the base at once," he says.

"If I have all of them with me, we'll be done that much faster," Oikawa points out.

Kuroo notices the skepticism on Iwaizumi's face, the way Oikawa is avoiding making eye contact with him. Something's not right, but Kuroo can't put his finger on what it might be. Beside him, Kenma shifts in his seat.

"How can I help?" he asks, speaking for the first time since the meeting started.

Oikawa glances over at him, eyebrows lifting like he'd forgotten he was there. "Ah, Kenma-kun! Don't worry about helping, just wait for Kuroo back at home like a good boyfriend. Make him some dinner, light some candles, put on something pretty." He waves his hand dismissively.

Kenma frowns, and Kuroo finds himself growing irritated for his sake. "Kenma's not some TV housewife," he says. "Don't treat him like one."

Oikawa tilts his head. "Sorry," he says, and it seems genuine. "I assumed that's what he already did."

Kenma releases Kuroo's hand, grabbing the edge of the table in both hands, gripping tightly. "I'm not a child, and I'm not helpless," he says, frowning at all those around the table. "You all treat me like I'm this fragile thing, but I'm not. I want to help."

Kuroo cringes, and he notices those around the table are avoiding Kenma's gaze.

"Kozume-kun," Sawamura says then, gently. "I'm grateful you wish to help, but you are not military trained and placing you in danger is something none of us want."

"Then give me something to do that isn't dangerous," Kenma says, and Kuroo can hear the exasperation beneath his normally impassive tone.

He places his hand on Kenma's shoulder. "Kenma, we can talk about this later," he says quietly.

Kenma shoots him a glare so intense that Kuroo flinches and pulls his hand away. Kenma stands, turning and leaving the room without another word. Kuroo gives everyone around the table an apologetic look, before standing and hurrying after him.

He catches him in the hallway, grabbing his elbow and turning him around. He feels somewhat silly, standing in the hallway of a military base in his pajamas. Kenma doesn't look uncomfortable, though. He looks pissed.

"You're just as bad as the rest of them, so don't think you're off the hook just because I like you best," Kenma says flatly, eyes narrowing.

"I know," Kuroo says, releasing Kenma's arm. "Kenma, it's not that I don't think you're strong. I do. You're one of the strongest people I know, if not the strongest. And it's not that I don't want you by my side. I always want you there."

Kenma's expression softens. "Then let me—"

Kuroo shakes his head. "But as much as you don't want to hear it, Sawamura's right. You're not military trained. You're a civilian, and bringing you on a covert operation is irresponsible. I can't do my job if I also have to look out for you."
Kenma frowns. "I can take care of myself."

Kuroo bites his lip, wishing it could be that simple. "When was the last time you had a panic attack?"

Kenma's features tighten, a muscle in his jaw twitching.

"Kenma," Kuroo steps forward, resting his hands on Kenma's shoulders, running them down his arms slowly over the soft material of his coat. He stops at Kenma's elbows, rubbing his thumbs along the inside of them. "You've been through so much. I know you're hurting. I know you're tired of being left behind, and you want to do something. But you have to stay here for this. Promise me you'll stay home and let me do my job. I'll come back to you. I always do."

Kenma doesn't relax. He steps away, out of reach, shaking his head. "You can't make promises like that," he says bitterly. "You don't know what it's like, watching you leave not knowing if you'll ever make it back. At least if I'm with you I have a chance to help protect you!"

Kuroo's mind jumps to Lev, his earnest face looking down at him from above the rubble.

He's lying pinned beneath a slab of concrete, struggling to push it off him with one hand, the other stuck beneath more debris. But then the slab lifts away, and a familiar face beams down at him. "Lev? What are you doing here? Go back to the perimeter!"

"I'm helping you, Kuroo-san!" Lev's grin is bright, despite the strain on his features, as he lifts the concrete off Kuroo with Iwaizumi's assistance. "Someone had to, so I thought 'why not me'?"

Kuroo closes his eyes slowly, rubbing his forehead where the scar above his eye aches, echoing the pain in his chest. "You can't help me," he says, opening his eyes to frown down at Kenma. "This isn't up for debate, Kenma. You're not coming with us."

Scowling, Kenma turns away, walking off toward the stairs. Kuroo's not sure where he's going, considering they came here together on Nekoma. But he realizes he probably needs space, so he lets him go and reenters the conference room. As he sits, he tries not to feel guilty. He did the right thing.

Please understand . . . it's only because I can't stand the thought of losing you.

The meeting doesn't last much longer. They plan to leave the next morning, not wanting to waste any time when the possibility of another kaiju attack is high. Sawamura agrees to allow the Soldiers to go with Oikawa and Yahaba to the base, though he has a few conditions.

"I want this to be a clean operation," he states solemnly. "In and out as quickly as possible. If you have to fight I don't want any casualties. Keep your cool." Here he looks pointedly at Iwaizumi and Bokuto, but Kuroo feels his stomach twist uneasily.

As the rest of them file out of the room, Kuroo approaches his captain.

"Sawamura-san," he says, bowing deeply. "I feel like I should inform you . . . last night I went into a rage state and I . . . I hospitalized a reporter. I figured I should let you know in case he says anything to the press. I'm deeply sorry. It won't happen again."
Sawamura sighs, reaching up to hold his left shoulder. Kuroo tries not to let his gaze wander to where the sleeve of his uniform is pinned over the stump of his arm. More guilt squirms inside him, and he bites his lip, hard.

"I'll let Futakuchi know to be on watch for anything. I'm sure he'll come up with a strategy to fix things. Try not to let it worry you." Sawamura reaches over then to clasp Kuroo's shoulder. "Thank you for the apology. You're a good man, Kuroo. Don't let this rage state define you."

"Right. Thank you, sir." Kuroo bows deeply once more before heading out of the room. He pulls out his phone, texting Kenma that he's ready to go. Bokuto and Akaashi are leaning against the railing by the stairs, looking down into the garage where the trucks are parked. Kuroo steps up to join them, keeping his phone in his hand so he'll feel it vibrate when Kenma replies.

"So what really happened last night?" he asks, glancing between Bokuto and Akaashi.

Bokuto shifts on his feet awkwardly. "Um. We had sex?"

Kuroo feels his eyebrows escaping into his hairline. "I was talking about the fight but . . . wow, okay." He glances over at Akaashi, whose face is turning red. "Uh, congrats?"

"It's not—" Akaashi cuts himself off, frowning slightly. "I'm going home." As he passes them, he glances over his shoulder at Bokuto. "You can tell him. But no one else."

Kuroo watches him go before turning back to Bokuto. "You'd think he'd loosen up after getting some."

Bokuto grins sheepishly. "He's still mad at me. I kind of did something really stupid."

"So what else is new?" Kuroo asks with a faint grin, looking down at his phone as it vibrates in his hand. He quickly flips it open to read the text.

**From:** The Bae  
**Subject:** (no subject)

*shouyou's here. i'm riding home with him.*

Kuroo bites his lip, wondering just how long Kenma's going to be mad at him for this. He sighs, replying with a simple "ok. be safe." before turning to look at Bokuto.

"I have to go pick something up in town. You want to come with? You can tell me about whatever happened on the way."

Bokuto perks up immediately. "A trip into town with my best bro? Definitely!"

Kuroo grins, thinking he'll be glad for Bokuto's company. There's just something about the guy that incites enthusiasm in others. He spreads good vibes, and Kuroo could use some of those. He knocks his fist lightly against Bokuto's shoulder.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

They walk down the steps together and out the doors into the parking lot, and Bokuto tells him about what happened while he was gone the previous night. When he mentions Akaashi's rage state, Kuroo whistles softly under his breath.

"So, he gets them too," he says, thinking that doesn't bode well for any of them.
Bokuto nods. "It was really scary. He didn't seem angry at all! His face was just like . . ." He stops walking to show Kuroo the expression, his features growing blank, eyes vacant. Kuroo has to admit it looks rather unnerving, but then again he's not used to that expression on Bokuto. It seems rather close to Akaashi's regular expression, however. "Except all cold and cruel, you know? Like there were icicles coming out of his eyes, ready to impale you!"

Kuroo nods slowly. "I mean, considering how different his personality is to the rest of ours, it makes sense that his rage state would manifest differently."

"I . . . I think he was really going to kill Iwaizumi," Bokuto says, his voice dropping. "If I hadn't been able to stop him . . ." His shoulders slump. "I shouldn't have gone out there. Not without taking the serum at least. It was stupid. I was stupid."

Kuroo turns to him, reaching out to grab his friend's shoulder, giving it a small shake. "Hey. We all do stupid shit sometimes. And with our bodies going out of whack on us . . . don't blame yourself too much, okay? Your kaiju was itching for a fight, so it went looking for one."

Bokuto's lips twitch. "My kaiju?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, the serum's got kaiju DNA in it, right?"

"Iwaizumi calls it his 'beast.'"

Kuroo shrugs. "Same thing. There's something dark inside of us. Something manufactured. But it's not us okay? We're not the monsters." He shakes his head firmly, trying to convince himself of this even as he says the words.

He remembers Kenma's earnest attempt to get that notion through his head the previous night by the tree where his parents' died. He still can't believe he found him way out there. How had he known where to look?

Bokuto's nodding at his words, his shoulders relaxing slightly. "Yeah," he says with a shaky grin. "Yeah, we're not the monsters."

They approach their motorcycles, and Kuroo notes the mud still clinging to the tires of Bokuto's. He says nothing, however, simply gets onto Nekoma and waits for Bokuto to start his engine before revving his and carefully exiting the lot.

Bokuto follows him, as he rides out toward the shopping district. The lights from Christmas and New Years have been taken down, leaving the trees bare. With the overcast sky and snow still clinging to branches and curbs, a dreary atmosphere weighs heavily on the various patrons, walking to and fro carrying their bags and talking softly.

Kuroo tries to shake the feeling that something's wrong, knowing there are dozens of things wrong, and shuts off Nekoma in front of a jewelry store. Bokuto's eyes widen, as he removes his helmet and sets it on the handlebars of his bike.

"Dude."

"It's not what you think," Kuroo assures him quickly.

But Bokuto's already grinning. "Dude, can I be your best man? I'm going to be your best man, right?"

Kuroo fights a smile. "It's not an engagement ring," he says, getting off Nekoma and stepping toward
the doors. "But . . . yes, if Kenma ever wants to get married you'll be my best man."

Bokuto practically vibrates with happiness, and as they enter the store Kuroo has to resist the urge to
tell him not to touch anything, afraid he'll break something in his excitement. The old man who runs
the store gives Kuroo a bright smile as soon as he sees him.

"Ah, Kuroo-san! You finally return." He bows deeply.

Kuroo rubs the back of his neck. "There's no need for that, Kimura-san," he says, waving his other
hand. He feels decidedly awkward now, standing in the middle of the expensive store in just his
pajamas beneath his coat.

"But you are my most famous customer!" Kimura says, as he straightens. "And you spent so much
money too!"

Kuroo grimaces inwardly, as he can feel Bokuto's look of awe directed toward him. "I'm just here to
pick it up," he says a little desperately.

"Yes, yes, of course." Kimura bows again before shuffling back behind the counter. He bends,
selecting a small box from a shelf, before straightening and setting the box on the counter. He
gestures for Kuroo to pick it up, which he does slowly.

Nestled in the padded interior of the box sits a white-gold ring. It's plain, just a simple band, but
when Kuroo pulls it out to inspect it more closely, he sees the kanji engraved on the inside: 信

It means "trust." It means faith, confidence, devotion . . . it means everything Kuroo feels toward
Kenma and hopes that Kenma feels toward him. It's an apology, and a vow. It's the look in Kuroo's
eyes when he hooks his finger around Kenma's and says "I promise." It's the pleasant ache he feels
in his chest when Kenma looks back at him and says "I trust you."

He only hopes that it's enough.

Kuroo carefully sets the ring back into the box. He thanks Kimura with a deep bow of his own,
before turning toward Bokuto. He finds his friend staring down at the rings on display beneath the
glass of the counter. He's fidgeting, fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"Bo?"

"Do you think Akaashi would be mad if I got one for him?" he asks, his eyes still on the rings.

"I don't know. I don't actually know Akaashi that well," Kuroo admits.

"He's been kind of weird since last night," Bokuto says. He crosses his arms over his chest. "Kinda
quiet and stuff. I mean, he's usually quiet but he's like . . . super quiet. And I keep trying to cuddle
with him, and he doesn't let me. I don't know what I did wrong. I thought he wanted me to make
love to him."

Kuroo hesitates, remembering Akaashi, pale-faced and trembling, ranting at him about obligations
and expectations in the corner store. Slipping the box into his pocket, he reaches out with his other
hand to give Bokuto's shoulder a squeeze.

"He's probably just scared, Bo. He lost both his parents because of the kaiju, didn't he?"

Bokuto nods, his lips tilted into a frown.
"You should talk to him, but don't be pushy. I know you're not the best at listening, but try for his sake, okay? Try to understand where he's coming from."

Bokuto tilts his head. "I can be a good listener," he insists.

Kuroo smirks faintly. "Yeah, sure."

Bokuto frowns, but Kuroo slaps him on the back encouragingly, before turning toward the door. "Go talk to your man. I gotta go make sure mine doesn't hate me."

Bokuto shakes his head, as he follows Kuroo out of the store. "Kenma could never hate you," he says.

"Hopefully," Kuroo says absently, remembering how angry Kenma looked earlier.

He's not sure what he's expecting when he gets home, but it's not an empty apartment. Sighing deeply, Kuroo fixes himself some leftovers before retreating to the bedroom. He takes off his coat, flinging himself down onto the bed. He remembers that morning, how peaceful it'd been. He never thought he'd end up enjoying a lazy day in bed, with all the extra adrenaline in him he usually finds it hard to even sit still, but it'd been nice.

And then Oikawa had to show up and ruin everything.

*That's not fair. He had a good reason to interrupt us.* Kuroo sighs, rolling onto his back and flinging his arm over his eyes. He remembers the weight of Kenma on top of him, the way he pushed back his arm to look into his face, the shimmer of happiness in his large eyes.

Kuroo so rarely sees that these days.

*It's my own fault. I've been pushing him away. He's given so much to me, and what have I given in return?* Guilt settles heavily in his stomach. *The ring will make things better. It'll make up for everything.* He tries to convince himself of that, as he peeks over at the box he set on the bedside table.

He ends up dozing, his body fatigued. He knows he'll have to take some more serum before the heist tomorrow, but for now he lets himself rest.

The front door opens as twilight begins, the setting sun casting long shadows across the room. Kuroo props himself up on his elbows, waiting. A few minutes pass before Kenma appears in the doorway. His coat gone, he stands in the pajamas he'd worn earlier. The too-large long sleeved shirt (that has to be one of Kuroo's) hangs off his thin frame in a way that's somewhat worrying. His collarbones are sharp, one side peeking out from the collar of the shirt.

"Are you okay?" Kuroo asks hesitantly, when Kenma doesn't immediately speak.

Instead of replying, he enters the room and makes his way toward the bed. He crawls up into it, turning onto his side to face away from Kuroo. He curls his knees up to his chest. Kuroo's own chest tightens, and he moves to lie back down. Wrapping his arm around Kenma, he pulls himself closer, nuzzling his nose in Kenma's hair.

"I'm sorry," Kuroo says quietly, glad Kenma isn't trying to get away at least.

Kenma doesn't reply, and Kuroo lifts his head to see if he's fallen asleep already. But no, he's simply staring blankly at the wall, his face expressionless. Kuroo chews on his lip, wondering if his time with Hinata hadn't helped him feel better.
"I have something for you," Kuroo says after a brief pause. He reaches over Kenma to grab the box off the table beside the bed. He opens it, dropping the box on the floor, as he pulls out the ring. Sighing, he sets his head gently against Kenma's, looking at the ring in his fingers. He can feel Kenma's stiffened, his back growing rigid against his chest.

"It's not a proposal," Kuroo explains. "It's a promise." He shifts the ring to show Kenma the kanji engraved inside it. "Ever since we were kids... whenever I make a promise you tell me you trust me. So I'm promising you now that I'm never going to stop fighting to get back to you. No matter where I go or what I do... I'll never give up. Not on us, not on you... not on myself. I know I can't promise that I'll always be here. I'm not naïve enough to think there's a one-hundred percent chance I'll get out of this mess alive or unscathed. But... no matter what I'll keep fighting."

Kenma inhales sharply, and Kuroo places a small kiss atop his head.

"I promise." Carefully, he slides the band onto Kenma's right ring-finger, intertwining their fingers afterward.

Kenma shifts, turning onto his back. Kuroo leans back to give him room, not entirely sure what to expect. Kenma stares up at him, his features impassive. Kuroo moves his other hand to stroke the back of his knuckle across Kenma's cheek. Kenma bites his lip.

"I trust you," he says then, softly, before shifting his gaze away. But Kuroo doesn't miss the tears that shimmer in his eyes.

Gently, Kuroo bends to place a tiny kiss against the corner of Kenma's eye. "Even if my legs get torn off, I'll crawl my way back to you," he says with a faint grin.

Kenma snorts, turning his gaze back to give Kuroo a look. "It was romantic up until that one."

"It's the truth though," Kuroo insists, his grin widening. "Nothing's going to stop me from returning to you. I'll fight a million kaiju. I'll punch the god of death in the face. Even if I reincarnate into a flower or something I'll uproot myself and drag my tiny flower body to your doorstep."

Kenma's cheeks are flushed, and he purses his lips, struggling not to laugh. Instead, he lifts both hands to cover Kuroo's mouth. "Stop," he says. "You're so embarrassing."

"I love you, Kenma," Kuroo says earnestly, his voice muffled against Kenma's hands. "I love you so much."

Kenma turns around, burying his face in the pillow beneath him. Kuroo laughs softly, nudging the back of Kenma's head with his nose.

"Kenma."

"Go away," Kenma mumbles.

"Kenma."

Kenma lifts his head, frowning at Kuroo over his shoulder. Kuroo lifts a hand to brush back his hair gently, tucking it behind his ear.

"No matter what happens tomorrow, I want you to know that."

Kenma's gaze falls onto Kuroo's arm, his frown softening. "I'm still mad at you."
Kuroo sighs. "I know."

"I want to help you."

"Kenma." Kuroo sits up, running his hand through his hair. He looks off at the wall, at the darkening shadows. Each minute that passes is a minute closer to the time when he'll have to leave again, when the final fight to stop this whole mess begins. He doesn't want to waste it. "You do help me." He looks down at Kenma, who's watching him silently, wide eyes bright and focused.

"Your support, your encouragement, your love . . . it all helps. You give me a reason to keep fighting. To stay alive even when I feel like giving up. You help me keep the kaiju inside me at bay. It's so difficult, but when I think about your face, how much I don't want to hurt you . . . it helps me keep it under control. You pulled me away from it last night. I don't know if anyone else could have done that."

He rubs the back of his neck, looking away again. "And when I was Captain . . . your belief in me helped me do the best I could to be a good one. I don't think I succeeded but . . . I tried." Sighing, he drops his hand to his lap, looking down at his calloused fingers. "I know you're angry with me for a lot of things; I know you blame me for Hinata. You have a right to feel that way. But the fact that you're still here . . . that you're here," he turns to face Kenma, placing his hand lightly on Kenma's hip, "it means the world to me. You mean the world to me."

Kenma's still watching him, his expression revealing nothing. Kuroo swallows hard, shifting his body so he's hovering over Kenma once more. He bends, pressing his forehead against Kenma's, closing his eyes and breathing a soft sigh.

"Thank you," he says.

"You don't have to thank me," Kenma mutters.

Kuroo leans back, looking down at him, but Kenma's eyes are lowered, focused on Kuroo's chest instead of his eyes. His cheeks are still flushed pink. Kuroo thinks back to all those times Kenma comforted him. How he touched him with warm, gentle hands, kneading stress from his shoulders or simply rubbing soothing circles against his back. He remembers the times they made love, how Kenma worked so diligently to bring him pleasure with no regard for himself.

Kuroo's out of words. He can't think of anything else he can say to fully explain how much he loves and appreciates Kenma, and his existence in his life. He could've given up on Kuroo years ago. He could have left, lived a normal life in another city far from the turmoil and hardship of Sendai and the kaiju and the SSP. But he didn't. He stayed. For him.

"I don't think you understand . . . how much you mean to me," Kenma continues, drawing Kuroo out of his reverie. He sighs, eyelashes fluttering on his cheeks, fingers curling gently into Kuroo's sleep shirt. "You . . . you've taken care of me. I'm not . . . I feel safe with you. You gave me a home. You are my home." He bits his lip, frowning slightly, and Kuroo can tell he's embarrassed by his own words.

But he doesn't have to say anything else. Kuroo's heart swells in his chest, with love and adoration and gratefulness. He lowers his head and kisses him deeply. Kenma seems relieved, breathing a quiet sigh through his nose. Kuroo knows Kenma's not always comfortable revealing his emotions through words, but the way he relaxes, the way he wraps his arms around Kuroo's neck and kisses him back, tells Kuroo everything he needs to hear.

It feels so good to kiss Kenma again. Earlier that day had been the first time since before Christmas
that they had a chance to be intimate. Kuroo regrets running away after Lev's death. He should've been here. It could've been like this: the two of them holding each other, taking comfort in one another.

He pushes that thought aside, focusing on the feel of Kenma beneath him now, the way his lips are moving softly against his. They part after a moment, and Kuroo feels his tongue licking gently against the rough skin of his lower lip. A shiver runs down his spine, and he opens for Kenma, welcoming the soft, wet warmth of his tongue. He moans, tilting his head to deepen the kiss further, stroking his tongue along Kenma's.

Moving one hand between them, he slips it beneath Kenma's shirt, stroking the quivering skin of his stomach with his fingertips. He knows Kenma usually needs a little encouragement to get his body responding the way it needs to for their activities, so he slides his hand down past his waistband and into his boxers, taking hold of his limp member and moving his hand in slow, firm strokes.

Kenma gasps into his mouth, his body arching slightly. Kuroo suppresses a smile, feeling the shaft swell in his grasp, growing hard. Despite his exhaustion, he can tell his own body is beginning to warm up to the idea, his skin feeling flushed, pools of heat gathering in the pit of his stomach and surging south. He quickens the pace of his ministrations, Kenma's skin growing hot under his touch. He squirms beneath Kuroo, as beads of pre-cum begin to leak from his tip. Once Kuroo feels that, he pulls his hand away.

Kenma whimpers softly in protest, but Kuroo simply leans back from the kiss, sitting back on his heels to take Kenma's hips in his hands. He hooks his fingers into his waistband of his pants and boxers, pulling them both down his thighs. Kenma lifts his legs to help get the clothing off, tugging his shirt off as well and tossing it to the floor. Kuroo drops the pants and boxers on top of it, as Kenma sits up and grabs the hem of his shirt.

He pulls it up over Kuroo's head, before kissing him hungrily, his teeth scraping along Kuroo's lower lip. Kuroo moans, wrapping his arms around Kenma's slender form, holding him close. The kiss is sloppy, noses bumping, tongues catching on the corners of their mouths, but Kuroo doesn't mind. He clutches Kenma almost desperately, clinging to his flushed skin, feeling the heat against his bare chest merging with his own.

Kenma's straddling his lap now, naked and trembling, his hands moving through Kuroo's hair to grip the strands tightly. He forces Kuroo's head back, his teeth nibbling at the side of his jaw near his ear. Kuroo groans, hearing Kenma's shallow gasps for air, breath hot against his sensitive skin. He's straining in his own pajama pants; his erection throbs, aching for attention. But for now Kuroo disregards it, wanting to focus on Kenma for once.

He moves one hand further down Kenma's back, cupping his ass for a moment, before dragging his finger along the crack between his cheeks. Kenma shivers then pauses, pulling away. There's a question in his eyes, and Kuroo tilts forward to kiss the tip of his nose.

"I want to . . . if it's okay with you," he says softly, watching Kenma's expression.

He nods, once, and Kuroo moves him off his lap. He shifts down the bed toward the bedside table, opening the drawer to pull out the bottle of lube. He tries to keep his hands from shaking, as he turns back to Kenma. He's always avoided this, preferring Kenma to top because of his fear that his super human strength will wind up hurting Kenma somehow. But this time he wants to do the work. He wants to lavish Kenma in his love.

Kenma reaches forward, laying his hand on top of Kuroo's before he can open the lube.
"We can just do it the way we normally do," he offers quietly.

Kuroo shakes his head, inhaling deeply. "Just give me a minute," he says, his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

Kenma sits back, fingers curling into fists on his knees. Kuroo takes the opportunity to shimmy out of his own pajama pants and boxers, kicking them to the floor. He looks over at Kenma then, eyes roaming over his thin frame. His chest tightens.

"I'm not fragile," Kenma says flatly, and Kuroo lifts his gaze to his face. His jaw is set, and he moves forward, straddling Kuroo's lap once more, placing his hands on Kuroo's shoulders. "You're not going to break me."

Kuroo exhales shakily. "I know," he admits, giving Kenma a crooked grin. "I'm just . . . nervous."

Kenma shakes his head, leaning forward to place a tiny, chaste kiss against his mouth. "Don't be."

He takes the lube from Kuroo, before taking his hand and turning it over. He squeezes some of the liquid out onto Kuroo's fingers, and Kuroo rubs them together to warm it before allowing Kenma to guide his hand behind him. Lifting up onto his knees slightly, Kenma sets Kuroo's index finger against his entrance, eyes never wavering from Kuroo's face.

Kuroo swallows hard, his body feeling like it's about to overheat. Kenma's cheeks are flushed, but his gaze remains steady, and Kuroo feels grounded. He can do this.

Slowly, he presses his finger against Kenma, gently pushing past the resistance to insert his finger in to the first knuckle. Kenma inhales sharply, and he releases Kuroo's hand to grip his bicep instead. His other hand curls tighter into Kuroo's shoulder, but he gives Kuroo a nod, and Kuroo sinks in to the second knuckle.

It's tight, so tight, and he can feel Kenma's heartbeat pulsating rapidly against his finger. Or maybe that's his own heartbeat. He can't tell. Kenma bites his lip, breaking eye contact finally to duck his head, eyelids fluttering closed. Kuroo struggles to breathe, as he rests his cheek against the top of Kenma's head and carefully begins to thrust his finger in and out.

Kenma makes a soft sound, something akin to a whimper. Once Kuroo's finger starts to slide more easily, he gingerly adds a second finger. Kenma's grip tightens on his arm, nails digging in. Kuroo pauses, but Kenma shakes his head.

"No," he gasps. "Keep going."

Kuroo obliges, his body feeling hot, his pulse pounding in his skull, as he scissors his fingers, stretching Kenma's walls further. Kenma's hips begin to move, just slightly, undulating in rhythm to Kuroo's thrusts. As he does, his member slides against Kuroo's, trailing pre-cum along it. Kuroo grimaces, as a spark of pleasure shoots through him, igniting more heat in his veins. He hadn't realized how neglected his body felt until that moment.

"K-Kenma," he pants.

Kenma doesn't need to be told what to do. His hand moves off Kuroo's arm, wrapping around his length instead, giving it a few firm tugs. Kuroo groans loudly, burying his face further into Kenma's hair. His free hand shifts to Kenma's hip, holding it tightly, as pleasure prickles beneath his skin, hot and sharp. Pre-cum dribbles from his slit, and Kenma uses it to coat his shaft, his hand gliding easily.

Kuroo's fingers move faster inside Kenma, unable to help it. He presses in deeper, searching for
Kenma's prostate. He strokes his walls, twisting his wrist to get the right angle, until finally—

"Kuro!" Kenma stiffens, his hand stilling, as his shoulders cave in, and he trembles.

Kuroo grins, but it feels shaky. His entire body feels shaky. He withdraws his hand, and Kenma relaxes, dropping his forehead onto Kuroo's shoulder for a moment. Kuroo allows him the breather, thinking he needs one himself or he's going to come all too soon.

Kenma lifts his head, face flushed, hair clinging to his temples with sweat. He reaches for the bottle again and coats his hand with lube, wrapping it around Kuroo's member again to smear the cool gel over it. Kuroo flinches at first, but then he moans, reaching up with his clean hand to brush Kenma's hair back from his face.

He kisses his temple, his breath shivering. Kenma moves forward, lining himself up.

"I love you," Kuroo murmurs against his damp, heated skin.

Kenma sinks down slowly, his voice breaking on a soft cry at the penetration. Kuroo takes his hips, holding him steady, as he pauses, breathing quickly.

"Are you okay?" Kuroo asks, leaning back slightly to look into Kenma's face. His entire body feels like its throbbing, aching in the tight heat of Kenma's ass, but he resists the urge to force Kenma further down, waiting instead for Kenma's affirmation.

It comes a moment later in the form of a nod. Kenma inhales sharply and pushes the rest of the way down. Kuroo's groan matches Kenma's, and for a moment they sit there, joined together, both trembling, fingers digging into sweat-slick skin.

Then Kenma gradually starts to rock his hips. His movements are careful, measured, but Kuroo can barely handle the friction.

"Fuck," he pants. "Fuck, fuck, Kenma." He grimaces, trying his best to hold back, to keep himself from encouraging Kenma to move faster.

"I just . . . need a minute," Kenma gasps, eyes squeezed shut, as he continues to shift his hips, adjusting, getting used to the pain of the stretch.

Kuroo remembers his first time bottoming and lets Kenma take his time, though his body screams at each little movement. He groans, pulse pounding rapidly in his ears, as he tries to think of something other than the pleasure assaulting all his senses. He starts to recite the periodic table in alphabetical order (silently, in his mind), and he reaches Carbon when he hears Kenma speak.

"Okay."

Kuroo doesn't hesitate. He grabs Kenma's hips and flips them over, pressing Kenma into the mattress, as he lets his baser instincts take over. Kenma grips his hair with his hands, his heels pressing into Kuroo's back. Kuroo has the presence of mind to grab a pillow to set beneath Kenma's hips to make him more comfortable, before he starts to rock his hips, thrusting deep and hard.

Kenma cries out, tugging on Kuroo's hair as his grip tightens. Kuroo braces one hand on the bed beside Kenma, using the other to wrap around Kenma's length. He tugs on it, erratically, messily, but he's rewarded with loud moans and whimpers so he doesn't worry too much about being precise.

The pleasure builds, sparking white-hot beneath his skin. He's breathing heavily, quickly, his heart thudding its way out of his chest.
"Kenma, Kenma, fuck. **Fuck.**"

His body trembles. He's not sure he can hold off much longer. Kenma's hips rise to meet his, his body arching, flushed. Pre-cum gushes over Kuroo's fingers, dripping onto Kenma's stomach. He rubs his thumb through the mess at the tip, matching the rhythm of his thrusts. Kenma stiffens, another sharp cry escaping his open mouth. Kuroo can feel himself hurtling toward the peak of his climax. His fingers dig into the mattress beside Kenma, his body tensing.

They come nearly at the same time. Kenma arrives first, his head falling back, nails digging into Kuroo's scalp, as his body quivers and sticky white strands splatter across his chest. Kuroo's hips stutter, and the pleasure spikes, crashing over him in a wave that sends a tremor through his whole body. He shudders, as he comes inside Kenma, and his senses overload. For a moment he can't see or hear anything, just the bright, sharp sensations of his orgasm.

When the high fades, and he returns to himself, he pulls out carefully, before flopping over onto the mattress beside Kenma, gasping. His legs quiver in aftershocks, his chest heaves, and he basks in the complete emptiness of his thoughts. His mind is blank, worry-free, and as his body starts to relax, he feels the exhaustion set deep into his bones. He breathes a lusty sigh, eyes closing.

He can hear Kenma's quick pants for breath beside him, but he can't move. He tries to ask him if he's okay, but he's still too winded to talk.

He's not sure how long he lies there. He thinks he might've passed out for a few minutes, because the next thing he knows, a cool, damp cloth dabs against his forehead. Forcing his eyes open, Kuroo sees Kenma sitting beside him, dressed in one of Kuroo's shirts (and only his shirt). His hair looks damp, like he's already taken a shower. Kuroo feels a stab of guilt.

He should be the one to give Kenma aftercare.

Reaching up, he takes Kenma's wrist, stilling the cloth.

"Are you okay?" he asks hoarsely.

Kenma's lips twitch. "It hurts some," he says truthfully. "But I'm okay." He blushes then, looking away. "I liked it."

Kuroo feels relieved, and he allows himself to relax back against the mattress. He pulls Kenma's wrist toward him and lightly kisses the inside of it. He notices then that Kenma's still wearing the ring. He smiles.

"Do you like this?" he asks, holding up Kenma's hand to indicate the ring.

Kenma glances at his hand before nodding.

"Do you think . . ." Kuroo swallows hard, his stomach fluttering. "Do you think you might want to get married some day?"

Kenma tilts his head. "Is that necessary?"

Kuroo smiles sheepishly. "It'd be nice. I'd like to call you my husband. Make all this official . . ."

Kenma's expression doesn't change, but he seems amused. "You're a sap."

Kuroo tugs on Kenma's wrist, and he moves willingly to lie down beside Kuroo, snuggling up to his side, as Kuroo wraps his arm around his waist, ducking his head to breathe in the scent of Kenma's shampoo. Apples. He grins faintly.
He wants this. He wants all of this. Forever.

"That's not a no," he says.

"That's not a no," Kenma echoes in agreement.

Kuroo hopes with all his heart that they'll get to revisit this conversation in the future. And that, when the time comes, Kenma's "not no" will be a definite and enthusiastic "yes."

***

Bokuto sits on his motorcycle in front of the house he shares with Akaashi. He knows his friend (partner? boyfriend?) is home because his own motorcycle is sitting in the driveway. The black paint is scuffed near the tires. He doesn't take meticulous care of it the way Kuroo does. He has different methods of coping.

Bokuto can hear one of those methods now. Drifting through an open window is the sound of piano music, most likely coming from Akaashi's iPod. Bokuto always forgets until he hears the music that Akaashi used to play.

He used to do a lot of things he doesn't do anymore since joining the SSP.

A sick feeling of guilt twists in Bokuto's stomach, as he remembers Akaashi's words from the previous night.

"I joined this program for you! I've gone through all of this-this pain and ridiculous politics and media attention just to stay by your side! To keep you safe. And then you run off to do completely asinine shit like this without even taking precautions to protect yourself? Without even telling me?"

Bokuto inhales deeply, and when he exhales his chest feels shivery. He gets off the bike, unfastening his helmet and setting it on the handlebars. As he walks up the front steps to enter the house, his brain supplies him with helpful thoughts of self-loathing.

You're the reason why he stopped playing piano.

You're the reason he's so unhappy.

Bokuto's fingers tremble, as he gets out his keys to unlock the door. He nearly drops them, but he manages to get the right one into the lock to turn.

I'm so selfish. I was so caught up in the glory of being a hero, I didn't even realize I was hurting him.

Groaning inwardly, Bokuto kicks off his shoes and makes his way into the living room, dragging his feet. Akaashi is sitting on the couch holding a cup of tea in both hands, staring out the open window. The room is cold, but Bokuto doesn't move to close it. Instead, he slumps over the back of the couch with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry, Akaashi," he says miserably.
Akaashi turns his head to look at him, his face expressionless as always. "For what, Bokuto-san?" he asks evenly.

"Gah, for being stupid. For being a massive idiot. For not realizing how much you sacrificed to enter the program with me. You've always been such a good friend to me, and I just . . . took it all for granted. I had no idea that you were hurting."

Bokuto can't think of a time when he felt more like the scum of the earth. He recalls waking up that morning to an empty bed, the way Akaashi had shied away from his "good morning" hug, the way he didn't let him hold his hand at the meeting.

Fuck. He's such an idiot.

"It's okay if you hate me," Bokuto mutters, when Akaashi doesn't reply right away. "I kinda hate me right now."

"Bokuto-san, I don't hate you," Akaashi says quietly.

"But you should!" Bokuto wails. He slides off the back of the couch, prostrating himself on the floor. He groans, covering his face with his hands. "Last night was just a fluke, wasn't it? You were just . . . being a good friend and giving me what I wanted, huh? That's why you won't let me touch you again." He falls silent, dropping his hands to the floor beside him. He opens his eyes to look up at the ceiling despondently.

"I thought we were going to be boyfriends," he admits in a small voice, his heart sinking pathetically into the pit of his stomach.

Akaashi's head disappears for a moment, before he reappears, folding his arms over the back of the couch and looking down at Bokuto. He seems sad, the corners of his lips pulled downward. Bokuto braces himself for more rejection.

"I can't be your boyfriend, Bokuto-san," Akaashi says softly.

Bokuto blinks rapidly, telling himself not to cry. He's already being a giant wimp about this whole thing.

"It's not," Akaashi continues, his eyes on the floor, "that I don't want to be."

Bokuto swears his heart actually stops for a moment. He gapes at Akaashi, wondering if it's just his imagination or if there's a light flush coloring his normally pale cheeks.

"Being together in that way . . . it comes with expectations. Obligations. I can't be your boyfriend, because I won't be able to meet your expectations of what a boyfriend should be like. I can't . . . I can't go on dates with you or meet your family for dinner or promise that I'll always be with you." He lifts his gaze to meet Bokuto's. "Either of us could die, whether from a kaiju attack or simply this serum malfunctioning. I don't . . . want us to get closer, for you to fall in love with me, only to possibly lose me. The pain of that separation . . . it'd be greater if we were something other than just friends."

Bokuto sits up, frowning up at Akaashi. "But we're already more than friends, aren't we? We have been since college. I thought so at least . . ." He shakes his head, moving to his feet. "And that whole thing about dying . . . that's stupid. Anybody can die at any time, Akaashi. I could get hit by a truck or a tsunami could wash away the house or there could be a gas explosion!" He waves his arms for emphasis.
Akaashi features flinch, but he simply purses his lips, not replying.

Bokuto grabs the back of the couch on either side of him, looking desperately down into his face. "I'm already in love with you, Keiji," he says. "You being my boyfriend or not isn't going to change that!"

Akaashi turns his face away, looking toward the cup of tea on the coffee table. "I'd rather not encourage it."

"Akaashi," Bokuto complains, bumping his forehead lightly against the top of Akaashi's head. "What was last night then? If you don't want to encourage it?"

Akaashi bows his head, his fingers twisting on his lap. "It was weakness," he says quietly.

Bokuto shakes his head. "I don't believe you."

He hops over the back of the couch to sit down beside Akaashi, grabbing his hands in both of his. "Last night was real. You said so. You said you weren't going to take it back," he reminds him, his chest squeezing tightly, threatening to cut off his speech. He swallows hard against the lump in his throat. "You have to remember that. It was just last night!"

Akaashi bites his lip. "I-I don't . . ."

"I'll try harder to control my beast. I won't rage out when we fight kaiju anymore. I'll protect you, so you don't have to worry about me losing you, okay? It'll be fine!"

"No. No, that's not—"

"I'm not going to let you die, Akaashi! So let me love you!"

"Just-just shut up! Shut up for once in your fucking life!" Akaashi yells.

Bokuto freezes, pain twisting his heart, as Akaashi yanks his hands away and stands quickly. "It's me, okay? It's me who can't lose you!" Akaashi's trembling, tears filling his eyes.

Bokuto stares, stunned, as Akaashi turns away and covers his face with his arm, wiping at his eyes.

"My father died in the original attack twenty years ago. On July 10th the kaiju destroyed the hotel my mother was staying in. She was visiting me . . . I don't have any other family, Bokuto-san. You . . . you're all I have left." He inhales shakily, turning to look at Bokuto through red-rimmed eyes. "I didn't want you to join the Super Soldier Program because I was afraid I'd lose you to the kaiju as well. I followed you to keep you safe, as best I could. I didn't mean for you to fall in love with me. I just . . . couldn't—"

He cuts himself off, shaking his head.

Bokuto stands slowly, not sure what to say. He knew about Akaashi's parents, but he had no idea that he didn't have anyone else to turn to; that he had nowhere else to go. Stepping forward, he wraps his arms around Akaashi, pulling him into a close, tight hug. Akaashi clings to him, burying his face in Bokuto's shoulder.

Biting his lip, Bokuto stands there, stroking Akaashi's head. Words have completely failed him at this point. Akaashi's never really seemed to need words, though, so he simply holds him, running his fingers through the soft strands of Akaashi's hair, until the young man pulls away, composure
gathered.

Bokuto lets his hands fall to the side, hating the helpless feeling that's tightening his chest.

"Akaashi?"

"I'm sorry, Bokuto-san," Akaashi says calmly. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You didn't." Bokuto shakes his head. "I just . . . what can I do to make this better? To make you feel better? I don't know what to do."

Akaashi lifts his hand, placing it against the side of Bokuto's face and smiling sadly. He leans up, placing a small kiss against the corner of Bokuto's mouth.

"Don't die," he says plainly.

Bokuto nods immediately. "Right. No dying. I won't. I promise! I'll stay alive forever!" He hazards a grin. "You have to promise too though."

Akaashi's lips twitch. "I promise I won't die."

"And?" Bokuto prompts.

"That I'll stay alive forever."

Bokuto grins, pressing his fist against Akaashi's chest lightly. "See? That wasn't so hard. Now you can relax because neither of us is going to die."

It's an impossible thing to promise. Bokuto knows. He's not naïve enough to think they'll live forever. But it's worth it to see the softening of Akaashi's expression. The tension in his body seems to fade, as he moves to sit back down on the couch. Bokuto joins him, wrapping his arm around Akaashi's shoulders and pulling him close to his side. Akaashi moves willingly, resting his head against Bokuto's shoulder.

Bokuto leans his cheek against the top of Akaashi's head, rubbing it gently against the soft hair. "And you know, if Oikawa's plan works and we're able to stop the kaiju and get a cure . . . we won't even need to worry about dying in any more fights."

Akaashi hums softly.

"When that happens, when things are normal again, we're going to revisit this topic of not being boyfriends," Bokuto says firmly.

"Okay, Bokuto-san," Akaashi says quietly.

"And Akaashi?"

"Hm?"

"Call me Koutarou."

Akaashi moves his hand to lace his fingers through Bokuto's, as his hand hangs over his shoulder. His hand seems small, compared to Bokuto's large, broad one. Bokuto gives it a squeeze anyway, though, a firm reassurance of his presence. Glancing down, he thinks he sees Akaashi smile.

"Okay . . . Koutarou."
After the meeting, Oikawa remained at the base to discuss hacking procedures with Konoha. He seemed fascinated with the process, and Konoha didn't seem to mind answering all his questions.

They've been talking for at least an hour. Iwaizumi hasn't moved from his seat the entire time, though he did eventually fold his arms on the table, resting his head against them and closing his eyes to doze. He can't help but smile faintly at the sound of Oikawa's voice, high-pitched in his excitement over learning something new. Iwaizumi wonders if he'll have to worry about Oikawa hacking into government software just for the fun of it.

He's still annoyed at the fact that Oikawa attempted to leave him out of his plan to take down the Iwanuma base, and as time goes on he starts to suspect that Oikawa knows this and is stalling. Iwaizumi lifts his head, frowning faintly. Oikawa is sitting on the table facing Konoha, legs kicking absently, and the look on Konoha's face is one of amusement, perhaps interest.

Iwaizumi stands abruptly. "Come on, Shittykawa," he says, walking around the table to place his hand on Oikawa's shoulder. "Time to go."

Oikawa glances at him, and Iwaizumi expects a fight. So he's surprised when Oikawa simply nods and slides off the table to stand. "Well, thank you for everything, Kono-chan! I look forward to working with you tomorrow!"

He gathers up his papers and folders before following Iwaizumi out of the conference room with a little wave. Iwaizumi turns toward the stairs, but Oikawa touches his elbow.

"I can't go home yet. I have to go to the lab and make sure everything's ready for tomorrow. When we get that formula we're going to need to start working on a cure right away. Once they discover what's happened, I'm sure they'll send troops over here to shut us down. We need to have the cure ready before then."

Iwaizumi sighs. "What you need is rest," he says. "How many hours of sleep did you get last night?"

"I'll rest when this is over," Oikawa says, but as he turns swiftly toward the elevators, he stumbles, wavering on his feet.

Immediately, Iwaizumi's at his side, wrapping his arm around his waist to support him. "You told Kageyama what's going on, right?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then he knows what to do. I know you two don't get along, but you need to trust him. He was given his position for a reason."

Oikawa bites his lip. "So much went wrong before . . ."

"They'll go right this time," Iwaizumi says, with more confidence than he feels, given the
circumstances. Still, he turns and guides Oikawa toward the stairs. "By the way, you're paying me back for the taxi I had to take to get here. Don't ever steal my bike again."

Oikawa grins sheepishly. "I thought it might help deter you from following me."

Iwaizumi reaches up to ruffle Oikawa's hair none too gently. "Dumbass."

Oikawa remains silent, and it's a little unnerving. Iwaizumi tries not to think too much about it, knowing the man is exhausted. And Iwaizumi isn't sure he's recovered from his anger last night, either.

When he came home, covered in blood (his own and Bokuto's), Oikawa was livid.

"Who did that to you? Iwa-chan? What happened?!"

"I'm fine," Iwaizumi grunted, heading for the bathroom to wash off.

Oikawa followed doggedly. "No, I want an answer. Did somebody attack you?" He stopped in the hallway, face paling. "Did you . . . did you attack someone?"

Iwaizumi froze, turning around to look at Oikawa. "It was Bokuto," he admitted, voice gruff. "I asked him to spar with me while raging out. Things got out of hand."

"You raged out on purpose? Iwa-chan! Why the hell would you do that?" Oikawa's expression was frantic, eyes wide with worry.

"I needed to," Iwaizumi said, turning his gaze away. "I have to learn to control it. Otherwise I'm nothing but an animal. A monster."

"Iwa-chan," Oikawa stepped forward, placing his hands on Iwaizumi's shoulders. "I'm going to fix you. I'm going to get you a cure, so you don't have to do stuff like this!"

"And what if you can't, Oikawa? What if I'm stuck like this? I have to learn how to keep the beast under control otherwise I could wind up hurting people. You didn't want me to stop taking the serum, remember? This is the only alternative I could think of."

"You have to trust me, Iwa-chan. Don't you trust me?" Oikawa's eyes were wide, bloodshot from lack of sleep, dark circles beneath them and above sharp, pale cheekbones.

Iwaizumi reached up to touch his face, leaving a trail of blood against his skin. Oikawa didn't flinch. Despite his exhaustion, his gaze was clear, steady, and Iwaizumi found himself nodding.

"Yeah. I do. Always."

They pull up in front of their place, and Iwaizumi shuts off the engine to Hog-chan. He takes off his helmet carefully, his torn ear still tender. The wound closed fairly quickly, to his surprise, but the pain still lingers. When he turns to look at Oikawa, he finds him staring at it.

"Does it still hurt?" he asks, reaching up as if to touch it. He doesn't, but instead keeps his fingers hovering just above it.

Iwaizumi doesn't shy away, but studies Oikawa's face instead. "Kind of," he says truthfully. "But it's not that bad."

Oikawa drops his hand, lips pursing. "This plan is going to work," he says. "I'm going to make that
"I know," Iwaizumi says.

He gets off the bike, setting his helmet on the handlebars. Oikawa follows suit, and Iwaizumi grabs his hand, as they head into the house. Once inside, Iwaizumi tugs Oikawa over to the bedroom immediately, shutting the door and pulling the curtains so the light dims to a comfortable level.

Oikawa unbuttons his shirt slowly, eyes on the floor. Iwaizumi tugs his own shirt over his head, tossing to the side, as he starts to unfasten his jeans.

"What's up?" he asks.

Oikawa lifts his head, blinking over at Iwaizumi. "I just . . . I hope I covered all my bases. This plan is going to be risky. If Ushiwaka catches on to what we're doing at any time, he could call in reinforcements. I don't want any of you to have to fight." He shakes his head. "Shi-chan's going to need to be extremely convincing. I wish I could do it myself."

"Yahaba's been conning people for years," Iwaizumi reminds him. "He's had to, living the way he does. He'll play Ushiwaka enough to get the information you need. He just has to set down that hacking thing next to the computer, right? Not much you can do to mess that up."

Oikawa nods absently, pulling his shirt off and stepping over to the closet to hang it up. Iwaizumi simply kicks his clothes to the side, falling onto the bed in just his boxers. When Oikawa reemerges, he's wearing flannel pajamas with stars and moons covering them. Iwaizumi can't help but snort softly, fighting a smile.

"Isn't that the exact same pajama set you wore in high school?" he asks, rolling onto his side and propping himself up on one elbow.

Oikawa gives him a look. "Of course not. These are much nicer than the ones I had in high school." He sits down on the bed and offers Iwaizumi his arm. "Feel how soft these are. Much higher quality."

Iwaizumi obediently runs his hand over the sleeve. He raises his eyebrows. "Damn. It's like touching a cloud or something. Or, I guess, what you figure a cloud would feel like."

"Mmm," Oikawa hums contentedly, lying down and folding his hands on his stomach, stroking the material of the pajamas there gently, as he stares up at the ceiling. "Kono-chan is going to hack into the security feed, make sure nobody sees you as you break into the vault."

"Do you have any idea what might be in there?" Iwaizumi asks, watching Oikawa's face.

Oikawa shakes his head, stifling a yawn. "It could be experiments, it could be a control center for the kaiju; it could be kaiju themselves." He turns to give Iwaizumi a look. "If they have actual kaiju there, I don't want you to fight them. Get everybody out, and we'll get Bokuto and Akaashi to bomb the place."

Iwaizumi nods. "Okay, but I really don't think they'd be able to hide kaiju inside a vault. I mean, it'd have to be a massive vault."

"I just want you to be prepared for anything." Oikawa reaches up, taking the side of Iwaizumi's face in his hand and turning it to look at the damaged ear with a faint frown. "It's a shame," he says with a wistful sigh.
"What?" Iwaizumi asks warily.

"You're even uglier than before. I'm sorry, Iwa-chan. There's no hope for you now. You're doomed to be a troll forever."

"Fuck you," Iwaizumi says, grabbing the pillow beside him to whack Oikawa hard in the face.

Oikawa yelps, grabbing his own pillow then to hit Iwaizumi in retaliation.

It's stupid and immature but Iwaizumi's chest feels lighter, as an all-out pillow fight ensues. He resists using his full strength, but he doesn't go easy either, and by the time Oikawa surrenders (pinned and flailing beneath the two pillows), they're both panting and sweaty.

"We haven't done shit like this in years," Iwaizumi manages between gasps for air, as he collapses back on the mattress.

"We're old and boring now," Oikawa laments.

"Or just tired."

"When everything goes back to normal, I demand a rematch." Oikawa says, huffing a lock of hair out of his face. "You have an unfair advantage."

"Hey, I gave you a fair chance."

"I don't believe you," Oikawa says, sticking his tongue out, as he pouts.

"Trust me, if I was using my full strength, you would've—" Iwaizumi stops abruptly, realizing he doesn't want to think about what he could do to Oikawa at his full strength.

Oikawa sits up, gently taking the pillows away from Iwaizumi to set them back in place at the head of the bed. He leans down then to kiss Iwaizumi slow and deep on the mouth. Iwaizumi returns it, cradling the back of Oikawa's head carefully in his hand.

Oikawa pulls back after a moment, setting his forehead against Iwaizumi's.

"When Dr. Takeda first approached me with the idea of creating Super Soldiers to combat the kaiju, I was so excited. I thought I could actually do some good. I could fight against the monsters in my own way. I could make everything better, save lives. But I just ended up destroying lives instead. Kyouken-chan, Shi-chan . . . Iwa-chan."

"Hey," Iwaizumi says gently, hearing the tremor in Oikawa's voice. "You haven't destroyed my life. I don't blame you for any of this. You thought you were doing the right thing. It's the government's fault. Whoever thought up the idea of the kaiju and Super Soldiers in the first place. They suckered you into it. They saw how brilliant you were. They knew you could create the right serum. They're the ones that messed it up, okay. You said yourself your formula was good."

"It was good," Oikawa muttered. "None of you experienced rage states until they took me off serum administration."

"Yeah, because you're too smart. You would've caught the change in the formula immediately. None of this is your fault, Oikawa."

Oikawa leans back, sitting up and pulling his knees to his chest. He looks toward the window, silent. Iwaizumi's chest aches, and he sits up slightly, kissing Oikawa's shoulder lightly. "Come on. Sleep
with me. We can worry about tomorrow tomorrow."

Oikawa glances down at him, eyes shifting toward his mangled ear. "This plan is going to work . . .
right?"

"The plan is going to work," Iwaizumi says, as firmly as he can. He puts his hand on Oikawa's chest
then, pushing him down onto the futon beside him. Setting his forehead against the side of Oikawa's,
he closes his eyes. "Now sleep."

"Okay, but . . . only for a little while," Oikawa replies, his voice sounding small and distant.

When Iwaizumi opens his eyes a few minutes later, Oikawa's fast asleep, snoring softly through his
open mouth. Iwaizumi's chest squeezes, and he gently turns Oikawa onto his side, so he can cuddle
up to his back, holding him firmly against his chest. He has no idea what's going to happen
tomorrow, but he's determined to get done what needs to get done.

He's not going to let Oikawa down again.

***

The sky is clear the next morning. As Kuroo gets dressed, he tries to think of that as a good omen.
Kenma's still asleep in bed, curled on his side and clutching the edge of the sheets up under his chin.
He looks peaceful, and as much as Kuroo doesn't want to leave without saying goodbye, he also
doesn't want to wake him and see that look disappear into a frown of worry.

So he makes his way into the bathroom, withdrawing the pouch of vials from behind the cabinet. He
picks up a vial, studying the liquid inside. It's mostly clear, with a pinkish tint. Has it always been
that color? Kuroo can't remember. With a sigh, he picks up a syringe and fills it, jabbing it into his
thigh to press the serum into his bloodstream.

The rush of adrenaline kicks in almost immediately, and his heart begins beating faster. He throws
away the syringe and vial and sets the pouch back in the cabinet, bouncing on his toes to release
some of the energy that's now coursing through him.

When he steps back into the hallway, Kenma's standing in the doorway to the bedroom, Kuroo's
shirt hanging off his thin shoulders, falling to mid-thigh. Kuroo pauses, studying him. He eyes
Kenma's legs and finds himself wishing he'd taken the time to mark them up last night. His skin
looks so soft, so . . . bitable. He finds himself salivating.

I still have a few minutes before I have to leave. He takes a step toward Kenma, hand reaching.

Kenma takes a step back, frowning slightly. "Aren't you leaving?" he asks flatly. The accusatory
gaze in his eyes adds, "Without saying goodbye."

Kuroo stops abruptly, his senses returning to him, as his brain overrides the hunger, switching gears
with a snap. "Uh, right," he says, moving his hand to the back of his neck. "Sorry. I just . . . I didn't
want to wake you."
Kenma eyes him warily. "You took the serum."

"I had to. I have to be at my full strength today," Kuroo says, lowering his hand. "I'll be back before dinner, hopefully. Call Hinata, okay?" He steps forward again, but this time he manages to hold himself in check, taking Kenma's arm and simply placing a small kiss on his hairline.

When he moves to step back, Kenma grabs his wrist, holding him in place. Kuroo pauses, skin tingling, looking down at Kenma. He really hopes he isn't about to ask him to stay. With how his heart is racing, Kuroo knows he'll probably give in.

But instead of saying anything, Kenma reaches up with his other hand, wrapping it around the back of Kuroo's neck and pulling him down to give him a firm kiss. Kuroo closes his eyes, moaning softly in longing. He wants to push Kenma back into the bedroom; he wants to lock the door and forget about anything else. He wants to lose himself in Kenma's skin, his scent, his taste. But all too soon, Kenma's pulling away and giving him a small push against his chest.

"Text me when it's over. Promise."

"I promise," Kuroo says breathlessly, his chest aching.

Kenma smiles faintly, despite the anxiety clouding his expression. "I trust you."

It feels like Kuroo's physically tearing himself in two, leaving a piece of him behind, as he turns and heads toward the front door. He pulls on his boots and grabs his helmet. He tells himself not to look back, as he opens the door and steps out into the sunlight.

"Just stay alive, he tells himself. Stay alive and return to him. That'll be enough."

Oikawa told them all to meet at a café across the street from the Iwanuma base, sending the address to all their phones. Kuroo checks his maps, as he straddles Nekoma. It'll take him forty-five minutes to get there, with traffic. Inhaling deeply, he starts the engine and peels out of the parking lot, trying his hardest not to think of Kenma standing alone in the doorway of the bedroom, holding himself and staring at the floor.

"I'll come back to you. I promise."

The café is somewhat crowded, being as early as it is in the morning. Kuroo finds the rest of the group at a table near the back. Konoha has his laptop out, and a pair of headphones on, nodding his head rhythmically as though listening to music. Akaashi and Bokuto are dressed in street clothes, as is Iwaizumi, and they're all nursing cups of coffee that Kuroo wonders if they're even drinking, considering the tired looks on all their faces. Oikawa and Yahaba are discussing something in low voices, both of them with half-eaten scones in front of them and half-empty frappuccino cups. Kuroo has to pull up a chair from a different table in order to fit, scooting in between Bokuto and Iwaizumi.

"Morning," he greets with a crooked grin.

Bokuto gives him a faint smile in return. Iwaizumi simply grunts and takes a sip of his coffee.

"So how's this going to work exactly?" he asks, turning to Oikawa, who turns away from Yahaba
once he realizes Kuroo's arrived.

"I was going to go over everything once everyone got here. You're late," Oikawa says pointedly.

Kuroo glances at the clock hanging above the front counter of the café. "You said 0800."

Oikawa glances at his phone and holds it up. It reads 08:03.

Kuroo holds up his hands defensively. "Okay, so I'm a little late. My bad. What's the plan?"

"You all will be wearing a wire," Konoha says, his eyes still on his laptop. "Yahaba will be wearing a camera in this pen, which will record the meeting." Konoha picks up an ordinary looking pen from beside his laptop, not looking at it before he sets it back down. "We can watch everything on the laptop. I've also hacked into their security feed so all I have to do is issue a command and their video will start looping. Depending on how smart the security team is, I'd give you guys about twenty minutes before they notice something's up."

Oikawa turns to the rest of them, his eyes shining. For once he looks like he might've actually slept, which Kuroo supposes is a good thing. He's not sure he likes the manic look on his face, though.

"While Yahaba gets into Ushiwaka's office and plants the device, the rest of you will head down to the vault. There's a security code to get in, but between the four of you, I bet you can just open the vault door without having to worry about it."

Iwaizumi snorts. "Yeah, and most likely set off every alarm in the place."

"You'll set off the alarm anyway if you put in the wrong passcode," Oikawa counters. "At least this way the vault will be open and you can get inside even if an alarm goes off."

"You want us to just . . . open a vault door. With what? Our bare hands?" Kuroo asks incredulously.

"You all have super-strength, don't you?" Oikawa asks, blinking over at him.

"I can use a small blast to weaken the hinges," Akaashi says, raising his hand. "It's not impossible."

"What if someone hears that?" Kuroo asks, turning to him. "And comes to investigate?"

Akaashi gives him a steady, impassive look. "Then we neutralize them before they can call for backup."

Kuroo doesn't like the thought of that, but Oikawa's already moved on.

"In the meantime, I'll run point here with Kono-chan," he says, gesturing to Konoha beside him. "You'll each be wearing these, so we can keep in contact with you."

He hands out small, flesh-colored nubs which Kuroo assumes are supposed to go in their ears. His assumption is proved correct when Iwaizumi places his in his ear and taps it gently.

"So you'll hear us through the wire, and we'll hear you through these?"

Oikawa nods. "It should be a quick and easy heist. In and out. Nobody gets hurt."

"Unless something goes horribly, terribly wrong. In which case, a lot of people could get hurt," Kuroo says.

Oikawa looks frustrated. "Are you always this depressing in the morning? I feel sorry for Kenma-
kun."

Kuroo rolls his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. "I just want to make sure we're prepared for whatever happens."

"If anything goes wrong, I'll handle it," Oikawa says, his voice calm but hard as steel. "You just worry about following your orders. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? Soldier?"

"Wow, okay," Kuroo says, surprised by Oikawa's hostility.

"Oikawa," Iwaizumi says firmly.

Oikawa blinks, shaking his head then as he sits back, waving his hand dismissively in the air. "Ah, sorry. Sorry. I'm just a little tense."

"We're all tense," Iwaizumi says, keeping his gaze on Oikawa. "We know the stakes. But the plan is solid. We won't let it go wrong." He gives the rest of his team a look, and they all nod solemnly, Kuroo included.

"We brought lab coats for you all," Yahaba says, picking up a backpack from the floor and setting it in his lap, patting it. "So you'll blend in. And Konoha brought some fake IDs. They won't work on any doors; just keep them tagged to your coats so you'll look official."

"I could've gotten you real ones if I'd had more time," Konoha says. "Just so you know. I don't do sub-par work."

"Thank you for all the work you have done," Kuroo says. "We appreciate it."

Konoha turns back to his laptop. "Yeah, well, I'm not doing this out of the goodness of my heart. Oikawa's paying me."

"So!" Oikawa says, clapping his hands together. "Are we ready to go?"

"Don't I get a coffee first?" Kuroo asks. When Oikawa shoots him a dirty look, he holds up his hands again. "I'm kidding."

Yahaba stands, pulling the backpack over his shoulder. He freezes then, eyes widening, as he catches a glimpse of something near the front of the café. Kuroo turns around to see what happened, and his own eyes widen as he watches Kyoujouiki Kentarou, Kunimi Akira, and Kondaichi Yuutarou make their way over to the table.

"Kyouken-chan!" Oikawa exclaims, while at the same time Yahaba gasps,

"Kentarou! What are you doing here? What are they doing here?" He looks distraught, glancing between the two kids flanking Kyoujouiki.

"You left," Kyoujouiki says, frowning slightly. "And you didn't answer my texts."

"Kenma told us where you were," Kunimi says, holding up his phone.

Kondaichi looks just as upset as Yahaba. "Why didn't you bring us with you? We can help! Maybe . . ."

"I didn't want to involve you," Yahaba says, running his hands over his face. "Kyoujouiki, take them home immediately."
Kyoutani’s frown deepens.

In an apparent effort to soothe the situation, Oikawa steps around the table. "You two must be Kunimi and Kindaichi," he says. "I've heard so much about you! It's nice to put faces to the names. I'm Oikawa Tooru." He holds out his hand, smiling graciously.

Kunimi pockets his phone. "You're Oikawa Tooru?" he asks.

Kuroo recognizes the tone and stands. Iwaizumi does as well, but neither of them is fast enough to stop Kunimi from bringing his arm up and punching Oikawa square across the jaw.

"That's for screwing with my family," he says without inflection, as Oikawa reels back and catches himself on the back of a chair to keep himself from falling.

"Akira!" Three voices ring out in admonishment, drawing the attention of several café patrons.

Kuroo grimaces. Their cover is going to be blown if they keep making scenes like this. "Can we take this outside?" he hisses, giving the area around them a pointed look.

Oikawa rubs his jaw, rotating it experimentally. "Yes, that's probably wise," he says. He glances at Yahaba, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Shi-chan?"

Yahaba sighs, beckoning for the three newcomers to follow him outside. Iwaizumi steps over to Oikawa, who waves him off.

"I'm fine," he says. "He has a good arm though. He would've made a good wing-spiker." He grins faintly.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of," Kuroo mutters. "Already something's gone wrong."

"Nothing's gone wrong," Oikawa says, shaking his head. "This is just a little bump. We'll work around it."

He starts for the front doors, Iwaizumi on his heels. Kuroo sighs, glancing over at Bokuto and Akaashi. Bokuto appears to be holding back a laugh.

"I've never seen anyone deck Oikawa like that before," he says, chuckling.

Kuroo finds he has to grin himself. "Come on, Yahaba has the stuff we need so we might as well head out." He glances over at Konoha. "Do we need anything else?"

Konoha reaches into his bag, pulling out a pouch. He tosses it to Kuroo, who catches it neatly. "The wires are in there. Just make sure they're hidden beneath your clothes in an inconspicuous place."

"Right. Thanks again," Kuroo says, bowing slightly, before heading outside with Bokuto and Akaashi beside him.

He steps into the middle of several arguments.

"You can't make decisions like this on your own. Not when it affects all of us!" Kyoutani is growling, looking as though he's two seconds away from grabbing Yahaba and throwing him up against the wall of the café.

"It doesn't affect all of you," Yahaba snaps.

"If it involves you putting yourself in danger, it does," Kyoutani says, hands clenching into fists. "I—"
"We can't lose you again."

"If it makes you feel any better, Shi-chan isn't necessarily putting himself in any—"

"Shut up, Oikawa," both Kyoujuti and Yahaba say, without looking at the other man.

Kuroo glances over at the kids, where Kindaichi is scolding an indifferent Kunimi.

"You shouldn't have punched him. He could have you arrested for assault or something?"

"It'd be worth it," Kunimi says drily, slowly flexing the hand he'd used to punch Oikawa.

"Can we all just calm the fuck down?" Iwaizumi says flatly, raising his voice to be heard over everyone. Surprisingly, they listen, turning to look at him. This seems to catch him off-guard as well, and he flounders for a moment before crossing his arms over his chest and frowning. "Look, Oikawa's plan isn't putting Yahaba in any real danger. The worst that could happen to him is he gets caught trying to steal files off Ushiwaka's computer by Ushiwaka himself. If that happens, I'm sure his tongue is quick enough to get him out of dodge."

"He could get sent to prison for that," Kyoujuti grumbles.

"It's a good thing we have a few connections in the police department then," Iwaizumi says, glancing at Kuroo.

Kuroo thinks of Yaku, and his stomach drops. He hasn't seen him since the day before the funeral, when he stopped by the station to give his condolences. Yaku hadn't seemed . . . angry with him.

But the dull look in his eyes hadn't exactly been welcoming either.

He has no idea if Yaku would help them or not if they needed him to, but he nods anyway to reassure Kyoujuti. He figures they can cross that bridge if they get to it.

"Who's going with him?" Kyoujuti asks, crossing his arms to match Iwaizumi's stance.

"I'm going in alone, Ken," Yahaba says softly. "That's the only way for it to work."

Kyoujuti shakes his head. "No. I won't accept that. Someone has to go with you. If nobody volunteers, then we're leaving and taking Shigeru with us."

"I think Oikawa should go," Kunimi says lightly, glancing at the man.

Oikawa seems unnerved and even takes a small step back. "I can't," he says. "Ushiwaka doesn't trust me. He's not very bright, but I don't think I could convince him that after my last visit I've decided to join his team after all. Besides, I need to run point with Konoha."

"I can go," Iwaizumi says.

Oikawa's eyes widen. "Iwa-chan?"

"I'm a familiar face, and I've never given him any reason not to trust me," Iwaizumi says, shrugging. "It might actually put him at ease. I could tell him I want to take the fear-reducing serum. I could ask him questions about it; keep his focus on me while Yahaba plants the device."

"So we'll have to open the vault with just the three of us?" Kuroo asks. "That's going to be difficult, considering one of us is going to have to play look out. That leaves only two to actually open the thing."
Kyoutani frowns at the ground. Yahaba's eyes widen, and he shakes his head. "Kentarou, no."

But Kyoutani already is stepping forward. "I'll help you," he says, looking Kuroo in the eye. "You've been good to me and the kids. You and Kenma." His ears seem to redden slightly. "It's the least I can do."

Kuroo's surprised, but he nods. "Yeah, okay. Sure. It'd be an honor to work with you." He holds out his hand, and after a moment Kyoutani takes it to shake firmly.

"What about us then?" Kunimi asks.

"You both stay here," Yahaba says firmly. "And behave."

Kunimi rolls his eyes. Kindaichi wrings his hands. "Are you sure it's safe? Maybe we could come with and be back-up?"

Iwaizumi shakes his head. "Neither of you have military training. If something goes wrong, you'll only get in the way."

"So you're expecting something to go wrong," Kunimi says, coolly.

Iwaizumi frowns. Yahaba steps forward and puts his hand on Kunimi's shoulder, giving him a tiny push toward the café. "Go. Get yourselves some hot chocolate. Play games on your phone or listen to music. Be kids for once."

"But Yahaba-san, we're not really kids anymore," Kindaichi says, even as he follows Kunimi back into the café.

Yahaba sighs, watching them go. "I know."

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Iwaizumi doesn't put on the lab coat, not needing a disguise for his new task. He stands with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, riding the elevator up to third floor where the offices are with Yahaba beside him. The man is quiet, tense, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"Kyoutani will be fine," Iwaizumi says after a moment. "He's in good hands."

"I know, I just . . . He almost went back, you know. To the SSP."

Iwaizumi turns to him, surprised. "Why the hell would he want to do that? After what they did to him?"

Yahaba's lips quirk in a faint half-smile. "Because he's a good person. He gets frustrated that he wasn't able to make good on his promise to help me save the world. I guess I'm just . . . worried that doing this might give him unrealistic expectations that he can still join."

"You don't think he can?" Iwaizumi asks, as the elevator dings and the door opens.
Yahaba steps through into the hallway, shaking his head. "His body won't be conducive to any new treatments. The serum you have now . . . it'll only make things worse for him. And he's unstable enough as it is. It's just . . . a bad idea for everyone."

"Maybe this'll do the opposite. Maybe this'll give him the taste of heroism he's always wanted and then he'll stop craving it," Iwaizumi says.

"Maybe," Yahaba says, making his way down to Ushijima's office. He opens the door, and they're greeted by a receptionist who smiles at them cheerily.

"Hello! Do you have an appointment with Ushijima-san?"

"No, but he's expecting me," Yahaba says smoothly. "I'm from the Sendai base of the SSP." He holds out his base ID.

The receptionist glances at the Flying Crows symbol beside Yahaba's photo and nods, pursing her lips. "Of course, Yahaba-san. Ushijima-san is in his office. You may go on in." She waves to the door behind her.

"Thank you," Yahaba says, pocketing his ID.

Iwaizumi isn't sure how Yahaba can seem so calm, especially after being so tense earlier. He realizes that he barely knows the man, but it's still impressive to him that Yahaba seems to be just as good at wearing mask as Oikawa.

Telling himself not to be nervous, that the deception is for a good reason, he follows Yahaba into the office, where Ushijima sits behind his desk. He stands when they enter, bowing slightly.

"Yahaba Shigeru. Iwaizumi Hajime," he says in his deep monotone, and Iwaizumi can't tell if he's greeting them or simply stating their names.

"Hey," he says in return, lifting his hand.

Yahaba steps forward to shake Ushijima's hand. "Thank you for allowing us to meet with you," he says cordially.

"I wasn't expecting Iwaizumi-san," Ushijima states, once they're all seated.

"When Yahaba-san said that he decided to, uh, give you the fear reducing formula for the serum, I decided to tag along and find out what exactly you're going to do with it," Iwaizumi says, thinking that last part is true at least.

"We will reduce the fear of the Soldiers, taking away the flight instinct so there's only fight. It will make you all more efficient." Ushijima turns to Yahaba. "Do you have the formula with you?"

"Yes," Yahaba says, drawing a USB out of his pocket. He sets it on the desk in front of Ushijima. "It's all there. The formula sequence Kageyama created, ready for testing. I have to ask, though, how exactly do you plan on testing it?"

Iwaizumi glances sidelong at Yahaba. That question wasn't in the script Oikawa gave them before they entered. Yahaba doesn't meet his gaze, simply keeps his eyes on Ushijima, who picks up the USB and turns it over in his fingers slowly.

"We use volunteers, same as you," he replies.
"So you do experiment on people."

Ushijima gives him a puzzled look. "As did you, if I recall correctly. You need not worry about them. They understand the risks and are being generously compensated for their service."

"And if something goes wrong and they no longer prove useful, do you plan on simply throwing them out into the streets?" Yahaba's voice is tight, and Iwaizumi can tell he's losing his composure.

Reaching over, Iwaizumi lays his hand on Yahaba's shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. "Hey," he says quietly. "That's not why we're here."

Yahaba glances at him, before nodding briefly, turning back to Ushijima with an apologetic smile. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to question your procedure. I know you're doing what you can to protect our country."

"About the fear thing, though," Iwaizumi says, taking Ushijima's attention off of Yahaba. He doesn't see the device Konoha gave him, and he wonders where Yahaba plans on placing it. The desk is open, the computer whirring softly to the side, out of the way of their feet. There's no inconspicuous place for Yahaba to set the device near the machine, not without Ushijima being able to look beneath the desk to see it.

"When will it be ready for us to take, do you think?"

Ushijima raises an eyebrow. "I wouldn't think you'd be interested in it," he admits. "Isn't Oikawa Tooru against this addition to the serum?"

"He is," Iwaizumi agrees. "But he's also not the one out there fighting those things. If I can become stronger, if I can become a better asset to my team... I'm interested."

Ushijima studies him for a long moment. Iwaizumi can feel his heartbeat in his throat. He meets the man's gaze squarely, and something in his expression must convince the man, because he nods then, slowly.

"Very well. I can go over a few of my team's ideas on how to further improve the Super Soldiers, if you wish."

Iwaizumi opens his mouth to accept, but before he can say anything, a shrill beep cuts through the conversation. He stiffens, and glances down at his belt where his beeper sits. It's flashing a red light, the alarm loud in the small office. A sick feeling enters his stomach, as he realizes what this means.

"Iwaizumi-san?" Yahaba's voice is quiet, but Iwaizumi can hear the anxiety hovering beneath his tone.

He quickly turns off the alarm, before lifting his head to meet his gaze. "A kaiju's been spotted," he says, swallowing hard.

Yahaba's eyes widen, and his face pales. He glances at Ushijima before turning back.

"Go," he says. "I can get the information you want and deliver it to you tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," Iwaizumi says, standing abruptly. He bows briefly before hurrying out of the room.

"Iwa-chan! what are you doing?" Oikawa hisses in his ear.

"Didn't you hear? My beeper went off."
Oikawa's silent for a moment, and Iwaizumi heads for the elevator. "Where are the others?" he asks. "We need to get back to Sendai immediately."

"They're in the basement, but Iwa-chan . . . you can't go back to Sendai. Not now. We won't have another opportunity like this."

"So what, we just leave Sendai to be destroyed?" Iwaizumi growls, searching for a button to the basement in the elevator. He can't find one, and he realizes it must be accessible only to personnel, which means he has to find a service elevator. He pushes through the doors before they can close, eyes scanning the immediate area. He sees a sign for the stairs and hurries toward them, figuring that can also work.

"If you can get into that vault, you can find out how they're controlling the kaiju and you can keep it from breaching the perimeter," Oikawa says, voice calm.

Iwaizumi shoves open the door for the stairs, taking the steps two at a time as he descends further into the building. "And what are they supposed to do in the meantime?" he asks.

"You have another Soldier back at the Sendai base, don't you?" Oikawa reminds him softly.

Iwaizumi freezes on the stairwell, his hand gripping the railing so tightly it begins to squeak, crumpling under his fist. "You can't be serious."

"He joined the SSP for this reason. Let him do what he signed up to do."

"He's just a fucking kid, Oikawa! And he'll be there alone!"

"Not alone," Oikawa says firmly. "I'm calling Asahi-san now."

"What good is that going to do?"

"He's fought against kaiju before, with his squadron. Nishinoya Yuu and Tanaka Ryuunosuke also know how to fight them. Don't worry, Iwa-chan. I'm sure they'll be able to hold it off until you're able to join them."

Iwaizumi shakes his head, staring down the steps again, moving as fast as his legs will take him. He doesn't like the unease twisting through his stomach, the tightening of his chest that isn't from exertion.

As he gets closer to the basement, he prays to whatever deity might be listening for them to make it back to Sendai in time to keep everyone safe.

Don't let this be another July 10th. Don't let our mistakes be the cause of more destruction.

Let Hinata Shouyou live.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: a discovery, a battle, and a loss

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
Anthem of the Angels

Chapter Notes

1. I apologize for the long wait. My opinions and emotions regarding this fic have been somewhat of a roller-coaster, making it difficult to gain and maintain motivation. The contents of this chapter made it difficult as well.

2. I therefore apologize for the contents of this chapter.

3. A small reminder that may help: although there are a few deaths, only one POV character dies.

Okay, let's do this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The tension feels tight on the elevator ride down to the lower level, like a thread has been pulled taut between each of the men standing there, watching the neon green numbers tick down.

Beside Kuroo, Kyoutani shifts slightly, the first movement since the doors closed. Kuroo glances over at him, wondering if he should say something.

"Yahaba will be fine," he offers after a moment. "He's got Iwaizumi with him. He won't let anything happen to him."

Kyoutani grows still, but he nods briefly. Whether that gesture is in agreement or in thanks, Kuroo isn't sure, but he feels better for saying something. Behind him, Akaashi clears his throat.

"If there are guards stationed at the vault, we need to take them down as quickly and quietly as possible without activating any alarms."

Bokuto chews on his lip. "But we're not going to kill them, right?" He glances between the other three.

Both Akaashi and Kyoutani look to Kuroo, who blinks back at them. "Of course not," he says quickly, when he realizes that apparently wasn't obvious.

"We run the risk of one of them escaping and raising an alarm anyway," Akaashi says pointedly.

"Then make sure none of them escape," Kuroo says flatly. His stomach twists uneasily at the icy look in Akaashi's eyes. He remembers what Bokuto told him about his rage state, of the coldblooded way he nearly murdered Iwaizumi. He faces the doors once more, silently hoping that none of their rage states are triggered by this coup.

The elevator doors open, but the four remain inside until they hear Oikawa's voice in their ears.

"The coast is clear. Go."

"No guards?" Kuroo murmurs in confusion, as he hurries forward with the others.
"We have the video feed on a loop, so you shouldn't encounter any problems," Oikawa chirps.

The elevator opens into a T, one hallway going horizontal with a door at either end, and the hallway directly in front of them that leads to a giant vault. This is where they head, Kuroo gesturing for Akaashi to stay back and keep an eye on the elevator and other doors. Bokuto slings his sack of explosives off his shoulder and quickly begins setting up charges around the vault in the seams of the door. Kuroo stands back, hands flexing at his sides. He feels like he should be holding a weapon, just in case whatever's in that vault comes charging out at them. Beside him, Kyoutani fidgets as well.

"Okay, once these explode they're probably going to set off an alarm of some kind," Bokuto says, stepping away from his handiwork.

Kuroo nods. "We'll have to be quick."

"Akaashi! Toss me the—" Bokuto stops abruptly, half-turned toward the elevator.

Kuroo turns quickly to see Akaashi standing with his arm around the chest of a small, thin young man, a knife pressed against his throat. He's wearing a security guard uniform, his eyes wide, as he trembles in Akaashi's grasp. Kuroo grimaces.

"Oikawa!" he hisses. "There's a security guard here. Why didn't you warn us?"

"I didn't see him on the cameras!"

"Where did you come from?" Kuroo asks, approaching the young man. He glances at his name tag: Sakunami Kousuke.

The boy (for he couldn't be older than nineteen or twenty) stares up at Kuroo with large brown eyes. "Y-you're Kuroo Tetsurou! One of the Flying Crows!"

"Akaashi, what are you doing? Let him go, he's just a kid!" Bokuto cries, hurrying over.

Akaashi stares back at them impassively. "He came from the door on the right. He'll bring back up if I let him go."

Kuroo studies Sakunami. "Do you know what's going on in this place?" he asks, keeping his voice gentle, noting how Akaashi hasn't dropped the knife.

"N-no, sir! I just started! I just keep an eye on the backdoor, and y-you're not supposed to be in here!"

Kuroo reaches out to take Sakunami's radio, crushing it in his hand before tossing it aside. "Akaashi, let him go."

"He could still run off and tell the others," Akaashi warns.

"He won't. He knows we're the good guys, don't you, kid?" Kuroo says, tapping his fist against Sakunami's chest. The boy nods vigorously.

Akaashi sighs but releases his hold. Immediately, Sakunami races down the hall toward the door he came through. Akaashi whirls, throwing his knife. Bokuto shouts, "NO!" but the handle of the knife hits Sakunami in the back of his head, and he falls to the floor with a thud.

"You could've killed him!"
"I should have killed him," Akaashi hisses, pulling the detonator out of his pocket. "You both are too trusting. He would've had the entire security team down here."

"The alarm is going to sound once we blow the vault. Either way, we're going to get ambushed by security!"

"Will you two shut up?" Kuroo asks, a vein throbbing in his forehead. "We don't have time for this. Kyoutani!"

Kyoutani, who'd been standing back by the vault this entire time, starts at the sound of his name. Kuroo beckons to him.

"Get over here and get down."

Kyoutani hurries to the end of the hallway where the others are. When he glances over and sees the guard on the floor, his eyes widen. "Is he—"

"No," Kuroo assures him quickly. "Just . . . get down."

Kyoutani nods, hunching down behind the wall. The others follow suit, and Akaashi poises his thumb over the detonator.

"One. Two. Th—"

A shrill beeping causes all four to wince. Kyoutani grunts. "An alarm already?"

Kuroo glances down at his side, where his beeper vibrates against his hip. He can feel the blood draining from his face, as he shakes his head. He quickly silences it, but just then Akaashi’s and Bokuto’s go off as well. Kyoutani looks between them as they turn off the noise, his expression darkening.

"Oikawa?" Kuroo swallows hard, really hoping this doesn't mean what he thinks it does. For a moment there's no response. "Oikawa!"

"I'm here, I'm here. Shit, sorry. There's been a kaiju sighting," Oikawa confirms, his voice thin. "Iwa-chan's on his way to you now."

"He left Yahaba?" Kyoutani moves to stand.

Kuroo grabs his arm and yanks him back down. "Oikawa, what's going on? Do you have any details at all?"

"No, no I haven't contacted the base yet. I'm doing that now!"

Kuroo looks over at Bokuto and Akaashi, who are watching him, faces grim.

"Are we still doing this?" Akaashi asks, holding up the detonator.

Oikawa sounds strained. "We won't have another opportunity like this, especially not after you took down that guard. If you leave now, they'll be expecting us next time."

"But we can't leave Sendai to a kaiju!" Bokuto says, his voice a hoarse whisper-shout.


Kuroo closes his eyes, trying to think. It's true that they won't have another chance to break into the
vault after this. They'll most likely move their base of operations too, which will make it more difficult in the future to find out what exactly Iwanuma is doing. They can't drop everything and return to Sendai, but the thought of leaving Hinata alone, completely without guidance . . .

Wait. He doesn't need to be without guidance.

"We'll stay here," Kuroo says, opening his eyes. "We'll finish this, and get back to Sendai as quickly as we can. It could be there's something behind that vault will be able to stop what's happening in Sendai."

"But what about the kid?" Bokuto asks, eyes wide. "He's never fought against an actual kaiju before."

"Nishinoya, Tanaka, and the others have," Akaashi points out. "They'll know what to do."

"I know someone else who can help too," Kuroo says, straightening in order to pull his cell phone out of his pocket.

The door down the hall to their right bursts open, and Iwaizumi runs through.

"The kaiju—"

"We know," Akaashi says. "We're finishing this first."

Iwaizumi's expression clouds over, as he frowns darkly. "We can't leave Hinata by himself."

"He won't be," Kuroo says, pressing the speed-dial button on his phone. He stands, walking a few steps away from curious eyes.

Kenma answers on the second ring.

"Kuro."

"Where's Hinata? Is he with you?"

"He's on the phone with Sawamura. I think he's leaving for the base soon."

It's difficult to tell what Kenma's feeling when Kuroo can't see his face nor hear any inflection in his tone, but still, Kuroo attempts to keep his voice gentle as he replies, despite the urgency.

"Kenma, you have to go with him. You've watched all my fights; you know how the Flying Crows work. You can guide him and make sure he knows what to do."

Kenma's silent for a moment. "You're not coming back," he says flatly.

Kuroo grimaces. "Not right away. We have to finish things over here first, though. I promise We'll be there as soon as we can, but in the meantime . . . you can be Hinata's eyes for him. Tell him where to go and what to do, and he'll be okay."

"You don't know that," Kenma says, his voice growing small and soft.

"Kenma," Kuroo rests his forearm against the wall, setting his forehead against it and lowering his voice. "I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't have full confidence in you."

Kuroo can hear Kenma's breathing quickening, growing shallow. Closing his eyes, he grips the phone tighter in his hands. "Don't panic. Breathe, okay? You can do this."
"He'll die if I mess up," Kenma whispers.

"He won't," Kuroo says firmly. "He has Nishinoya and Tanaka, and they've fought kaiju before. It won't be just the two of you, I promise. And I'll be there soon."

"Two hours."

"What?" Kuroo opens his eyes.

"You have two hours to get back to Sendai, or I'm going to be mad at you."

Kuroo can't help but chuckle softly. "Yes, sir."

Kenma hangs up then, and Kuroo turns back to the men waiting for him.

"We have two hours," he says, pocketing his phone. "Let's get this done and head back to Sendai."

Akaashi nods, holding up the detonator once more. They crouch behind the wall, and this time Akaashi presses the button with no interruptions. The wall vibrates, as a loud BOOM shakes the room. Concrete dust falls from the ceiling, coating them in white powder. Covering his mouth and nose with the front of his shirt, Kuroo signals for them to rush the vault. Together they stand and run down the hall, just as an alarm beings blaring above them.

The vault is still intact, standing as it was before, though now covered in black soot from the blast points. The wall around it, though, is crumbling, and all it takes is a few hard kicks from Kuroo and Iwaizumi to break through.

They crash into what appears to be a control center of some kind. Monitors of varying sizes are set up along the far wall, in front of a large panel of buttons and gears set. In front of this panel sit five people, who seem to have either not noticed the explosion and muffled alarm or they're simply ignoring it. Kuroo has no idea why they would, until he gets closer and sees what's on the monitors.

The largest one in the center is displaying an aerial view of downtown Sendai. Kuroo recognizes the feed instantly, because it's the same angle he always sees in the playback videos of the Flying Crows fight during debriefing. It's the feed from the news helicopter that follows him and his team.

On the screen he sees the kaiju, stomping its way through the ruins of the city. It's massive, the largest one he's seen yet, towering over the buildings. It looks like a Godzilla, right down to the spines along its back and the massive tail, only its head is shaped closer to that of a crocodile's. It's hideous, and Kuroo has to forcibly tear his gaze away to look at the other monitors.

These seem to show vital signs, fluctuating numbers and graphs with symbols shifting and changing. In the lower right hand corner of the wall is a screen showing a dark room illuminated with red light. The room holds cages, dozens of them, and in the cages closest to the screen lay sleeping kaiju, smaller than the one currently in Sendai, but varying in size.

"Oikawa was right," Kuroo breathes, stunned. The others stand silently beside him, no doubt coming to the same conclusion as him. "They're being controlled."

"HEY HEY HEY!" Bokuto bellows, storming over to the row people observing the screens and making adjustments on the panel in front of them.

"I wouldn't interrupt them, if I were you," a soft, slithery voice speaks from the shadows. A man appears, stepping in front of Bokuto and placing hand on his chest, like a man standing in front of a bullet train believing he can stop it. Bokuto does stop, though, confusion written over his features.
"Who the hell are you? What the hell is going on?" he demands.

"Bo," Kuroo cautions. Beside him, he can hear Iwaizumi muttering into his mic, describing the scene to Oikawa.

"This is the base of operations for the kaiju project, of course," the man says. "My name is Daishou Suguru, base leader. I work directly under commands of General Ukai."

"Ukai Keishin sanctioned this?" Kuroo asks darkly, as Bokuto chokes in indignation.

"Did I say Keishin? I meant his grandfather. Ikkei."

"Ukai Ikkei has been dead for twenty years," Akaashi says, tilting his head slightly. "He was killed in the initial kaiju attack."

"Yes, it's a shame he never saw his genius come to fruition," Daishou says, seeming genuine. "It was his idea to create these kaiju; splicing together the DNA of animals with the DNA of an underwater creature we discovered off the shore of Tokyo seven years prior. We never discovered the origin of this creature, but from the information we gathered from the corpse we knew it had to have been extremely powerful."

"Why the hell would he want to create monsters like this?" Kuroo asks, anger simmering as he gestures toward the screens.

"So we could create you, of course!" Daishou exclaims. "I mean, look at you! The first Super Soldiers in the history of Earth! The Japanese military will be the strongest in the world! We still haven't perfected the serum, of course, which is why you're still fighting these kaiju we send up to you." He nods to the screens. "But once we figure out how to make you perfect, we'll be mass producing the serum to all members of the Japanese Self-Defense Force."

"You've placed thousands, millions of lives in danger for an . . . experiment?" Iwaizumi growls, striding forward to stand beside Bokuto in front of Daishou. "People have died!"

Uneasiness flips Kuroo's stomach, as the lines of Iwaizumi's shoulders tense. He feels sick at this revelation, but watching Bokuto and Iwaizumi's stances shift, hands clenching into fists, he knows he has to defuse this situation before it escalates.

"Look," he says, stepping forward. "I know you think your mission is noble or whatever, but there's a twenty-year-old kid out there with no fighting experience about to battle that kaiju, along with hundreds of other men and women who aren't Super Soldiers. So, for their sakes, could you just . . . get your kaiju back in its cage?"

"Mm, sorry, I can't do that," Daishou says, looking anything but sorry. "Hinata Shouyou has taken the latest dose of the serum, which means we have to observe how he does against the kaiju."

"And if he dies?" Kuroo asks, through gritted teeth.

Daishou shrugs. "Then we try again with another candidate."

"Who else knows about this?" Akaashi asks, and he seems much too calm to Kuroo.

"Obviously it would cause problems if the public knew about our operations," Daishou says. "We're all under a strict confidentiality agreement. But Prime Minister knows, of course, as well as General Washijou and Ushijima, though Ushijima has been kept in the dark about a few things that were need-to-know."
Kuroo snorts under his breath. "Figures Washijou would be behind this," he mutters. Although he's never met the man personally, from what he's heard about him he knows he doesn't like him.

"What about us?" Akaashi asks. "Now that we know what you're up to, are you going to kill us?"

"Of course not," Daishou says with a grating laugh. "I know you won't go public with this. If you did, we would destroy everything you care about." He smiles, an unsettling expression, and Kyoutani growls beside Kuroo.

"I'm not going to let you get away with this!" Bokuto exclaims, the tension in his body finally snapping.

Before Kuroo can stop him, he rushes at the panel with a loud yell.

"KOUTAROU!" Akaashi shouts, but it's too late.

Bokuto slams his fist into the panel, the loud sound of protesting metal filling the room. The people sitting finally react, leaping out of the way, as Bokuto pulls his fist out of the mess of metal, plastic, and wires. They spark intermittently, and the monitors on the wall go blank.


Bokuto blinks, his expression clearing into one of confusion. "Huh?"

"Kuguri," Daishou snaps at one of the men that had been sitting at the panel. "Call the nursery."

The man, Kuguri, flips open his cell phone and quickly dials a number.

"But . . . I stopped them, didn't I?" Bokuto asks, as Iwaizumi buries his face in his hands. "Now they can't control them anymore!"

"Koutarou, the kaiju are living creatures, even if they're being controlled by this base," Akaashi attempts to explain. "Now the kaiju in Sendai won't have anything holding it back from breaching the perimeter."

Bokuto's face pales. "Oh."

"It's okay," Kuroo says quickly. "We'll get back and stop it before it has a chance to do that."

We have to. Kenma . . .

Kuguri lowers his phone, shaking his head at Daishou. "They're loose."

"All of them?" Daishou asks, and for the first time since Kuroo and his team burst into the room, he looks nervous.

Kuguri nods. Daishou hisses, seething, and whirls on Bokuto.

"Now you've done it!" he spits. "They're loose, all of them! Even the ones that haven't been implanted. Even if we get everything up and running again, there will be no way to control them."

Bokuto pales further. "Oh," he says again in a small voice.

"How many kaiju are we talking here?" Kuroo asks, dread filling his stomach, tying into a thick knot that sits heavily inside him.
"Twelve," Daishou says. "None of them fully grown but deadly enough." He gives them all a baleful look. "I suggest you get back to your city before it's completely destroyed."

Kuroo grabs Kyoutani's arm, pulling him toward the hole in the wall. The others follow suit, practically sprinting. As soon as they enter the hallway, however, Kuroo feels a shove against his back. He falls face-first onto the floor with a yelp, just as a shot rings out. Kyoutani grunts and suddenly he's beside him on the floor, holding his side. Blood seeps through his fingers, and Kuroo lifts his head to see a group of security officers at the end of the hall. The front row is kneeling, guns lifted, while another row stands behind them, weapons also at the ready.

"Get down!" one of them shouts. "All of you, get down! You're under arrest!"

"Fuck," Kuroo mutters, punching the floor. "We don't have time for this!" He glances sidelong at Kyoutani. His eyes are closed, and he's breathing shallowly, hand pressed against his side, as blood seeps between his fingers.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly, as Iwaizumi, Bokuto, and Akaashi all get down on their knees.

Kyoutani nods quickly.

"Everyone, stand down."

The security team lowers their weapons, parting down the middle to allow Ushijima, of all people, to step through. Right behind him is Yahaba, and when he sees Kyoutani bleeding on the floor, he rushes forward.

"You idiot," he scolds, kneeling beside him and turning him to look at the wound. "You did something heroic, didn't you?"

"He might've saved my life," Kuroo says, sitting up on his knees. He frowns up at Ushijima then. "Are you here to take us to jail? You know you can't hold us there, right?"

Ushijima blinks down at him. "I am not here to take you to jail," he states.

"Oh. Well, good."

"Why are you here then?" Akaashi asks, sitting up as well.

Bokuto and Iwaizumi are twitching, hands flexing at their sides. Kuroo knows if they don't get out of here soon, they're going to explode, which isn't going to be pretty for anyone.

"I heard the alarm. But more importantly, there is a kaiju in Sendai," Ushijima says. "We can discuss the breaking and entering at a later date. For now, I believe you all have a job to do."

"Seriously? You're letting us go?" Kuroo asks, honestly surprised.

Ushijima blinks at him. "I am not the bad guy," he tells him.

Bokuto and Iwaizumi are already on their feet. Kuroo hesitates, looking toward Yahaba and Kyoutani beside him.

"We'll be okay," Yahaba tells him pointedly, his arm around Kyoutani. "Go."

Kuroo nods, squashing down his guilt as best he can, as he gets to his feet and hurries toward the elevator with the others.
Hinata's already thrown up twice. The first time is after he gets the call from Sawamura telling him he has to be at the base immediately because there's a kaiju and not a single one of the other Flying Crows are in the city. The second time is after he arrives at the base and sees everyone geared up for the fight. Even Nishinoya and Tanaka are wearing harnesses, and Hinata's stomach turns over on itself, and he barely escapes to the bathroom, where he sits on the floor after puking for a good five minutes, breathing deeply to calm himself.

Eventually Kenma comes to find him.

"I don't think there's any kaiju in here," he says, crouching outside the stall.

Hinata bangs the back of his head against the wall of the stall, making it vibrate. "I just need my stomach to settle. I'll be fine." He attempts a wobbly smile.

"You're not going to be alone out there," Kenma says quietly.

"I know! Nishinoya-san and Tanaka-san are really cool! They're the best! They've got my back, so everything will be okay." He nods rapidly, willing himself to believe that.

Kenma gives him a faint smile. "I meant . . . I'm going to be with you."

"You're going out to fight the kaiju too?" He looks at Kenma skeptically then, eying his thin limbs that are swamped in a sweater and jeans that are too big for him. "You're not really strong enough, though, are you? Do you even know how to use the harnesses? Or a katana?"

Kenma rolls his eyes. "I didn't mean I'll be going out there with you. I meant . . ." He huffs, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out two earpieces. He holds one out to Hinata, and puts the other one in his own ear. "I'm going to be in the captain's tent with Sawamura. I'll be watching the monitors, and I can give you instructions through these." He taps his ear.

Hinata looks at him in awe, as he quickly sits up and puts the earpiece in. It feels weird, but when he presses on it and says, "HI, KENMA!" he sees Kenma wince and knows he heard him through the tiny device.

"This is so cool! So you'll be like, telling me what to do out there and stuff? How to fight?"

Kenma nods. "I've watched a lot of Kuro's fights . . . I know what he does to win."

"Then . . . we'll be unstoppable!" Hinata exclaims, reaching out and grabbing Kenma's hands. "With you, me, Nishinoya-san, and Tanaka-san, there'll be no way we can lose!"

Kenma ducks his head, his cheeks growing red, but Hinata just beams at him. Confidence returns to him, knowing now that he's going to have his best friend at his side. Hopping to his feet, he takes a deep breath.

"OKAY! LET'S DO THIS!"
Despite his newfound confidence, however, he still feels his stomach twisting uneasily, as he meets with Kageyama to receive his dose of the serum.

Kageyama looks stormier than usual, which doesn't help.

"What's wrong, Kageyama-kun?" Hinata asks, trying to keep his voice light.

"Nothing," Kageyama says, obviously lying. He scowls harder at the jet injector in his hand, as he attaches the vial to it.

"Are you worried about me?" Hinata can't help but tease, even as his heart pounds faster at the thought. Which is stupid. Because he doesn't like Kageyama. Not like that, at least.

"No," Kageyama snaps quickly (too quickly?). "I just think you're an idiot."

"Why?!" Hinata cries indignantly.

"You're going out there by yourself when you've never fought a kaiju before. You're going to get yourself killed."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Meanieyama-kun!" Hinata exclaims, and he can feel himself falling into a pout. "I'm not going out there alone, you know. Nishinoya-san and Tanaka-san will be with me—"

"Normal humans . . ."

"And Kenma will be helping too!" Hinata continues, raising his voice to talk over Kageyama. "So I won't be alone!"

"Still." Kageyama frowns down at the armrest of the chair Hinata's sitting in. "It's likely that you're going to die."

"Are you saying you don't want me to die?" Hinata asks, his heart stuttering strangely as he looks into Kageyama's scary expression. For a brief moment it there's a look Hinata's never before seen on Kageyama's face. It's gone after a second, but Hinata's heart keeps fluttering.

Kageyama says nothing, only takes Hinata's arm and carefully injects him with the serum. Immediately Hinata feels the heat of adrenaline coursing through his veins. He curls his toes, his traitorous heart feeling normal again, though pounding faster in his chest, as strength fills him. He hops out of his seat and does a quick two laps around the lab to warm up. Kageyama turns away from him in order to put the jet injector away.

"You should wish me good luck," Hinata declares, coming to a stop in the center of the room with his hands on his hips.

"Why?" Kageyama asks, frowning over at him. "Whether I say it or not isn't going to change the outcome."

"Because," Hinata says. "That's what friends tell each other!"

Kageyama blinks, his eyes widening slightly. Growing bold, Hinata stomps over to him. He thrusts his chin up in order to look into Kageyama's face.

"You're my friend, aren't you?" he asks as though it's a challenge.

"I'm . . . your monitor," Kageyama says, almost like it's painful.
Hinata shakes his head. Holding out his fist, he presses it against Kageyama's chest. "It's okay, Kageyama-kun, you can say it. We're friends."

Kageyama looks down at his fist. He reaches up and takes Hinata's wrist, and for a second Hinata is afraid he's going to shove him away. But he just holds it, lifting his gaze.

"Good luck, then," he says, and his voice sounds weird, kind of like how Natsu sounds when she's trying not to cry.

Hinata grins, hoping to put his mind at ease. "Thanks!" he chirps, and when Kageyama lets him go, he dashes from the room.

The loading area is full of people. Soldiers rush back and forth, getting their weapons ready, starting up the jeeps and trucks to head for downtown. Hinata watches the hustle and bustle in awe for a moment, before he hears his name being called. Looking to the right, he sees Nishinoya on the back of a jeep, waving his arm above his head.

"Come on! We gotta go!"

Hinata salutes, rushing to grab his harness and katana off the equipment rack. He pulls the harness on awkwardly as he runs back to the jeep and hops up into the back. Nishinoya has to grab the front of his shirt to keep him from falling backwards, as the jeep starts forward abruptly.

"You look nervous!" Nishinoya shouts over the sound of the engine and the cold wind whipping past them.

"I feel like I'm going to throw up!" Hinata calls back gleefully.

Nishinoya laughs loudly, slapping him on the back. "Save it for later! We've got a city to save!"

A crowd has already gathered at the perimeter. They cheer when they see the trucks and jeeps nearing, but when Hinata's the only Soldier to appear, whispers begin to travel. One of the reporters nearest the jeep sticks his hand out toward Hinata, holding a recording device under his nose.

"Are you the only Soldier here? Where are the Flying Crows?"

"I'm the only Flying Crow you'll need today!" Hinata chirps confidently. "I'm going to take down the kaiju in no time, so please cheer me on!"

The people closest to the reporter exchange looks. "You haven't actually fought a kaiju before, though, have you?"

Hinata grins sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, no. But I know what to do! Don't worry! I've got great fighters at my back! Like Nishinoya-san!"

"We gotta go, Hinata!" Nishinoya says, hands at his back to push him toward the command tent. "He'll be available for interviews later!" he says to the reporters. "In the meantime, please stand back and let us do our jobs!"

Hinata waves and allows himself to be guided through the crowd.
The command tent is busy. Sawamura stands in front of the table of monitors, with Kenma sitting behind it, eyes intent on the screens. Hinata wants to go over to see what he's looking at, but he stays where he is between Nishinoya and Tanaka, as Sawamura hands them their earpieces. There are two other men in the tent with them who Hinata doesn't recognize. Sawamura hands them earpieces too.

"Hinata, this is Yamamoto Taketora and his partner Shibayama Yuuki. They'll be running point on the ground while you, Nishinoya and Tanaka are in the sky," Sawamura explains.

"We're gonna take that motherfucker down!" Yamamoto shouts.

"YEAH!" Tanaka yells back.

"YEAH!" Nishinoya echoes.

The three of them scream at each other, getting pumped up, and Hinata starts bouncing on his toes, caught up in the excitement and adrenaline. Shibayama gives him a shaky smile, looking pale but determined. He doesn't join in the yelling.

"OKAY, SETTLE DOWN!" Sawamura shouts over all the screaming. He waits until they're back in line to continue. "Now, hopefully the Flying Crows will be back before too long. When they get here, I want all of you to fall back to this tent and let them take care of things, understood?"

The three look disappointed, but they nod. Nishinoya raises his hand then, as though he's in school. Sawamura sighs.

"Yes, Nishinoya?"

"No offense, sir, but you're not exactly in a shape to lead us out there. Who's going to captain this squad?"

Hinata gasps. "AM I THE CAPTAIN?!!"

Kenma snorts behind the monitors, and Hinata shoots him an affronted look. His indignation grows when Tanaka and Nishinoya fall over themselves laughing.

"I'm the only Super Soldier here!" he points out, resisting the urge to stomp his foot. He does anyway though, just a little.

"You have no experience fighting kaiju, nor do you have the military training," Sawamura says, shaking his head. "No, I've chosen someone who has fought successfully against kaiju in the past without the use of Super Soldiers."

Nishinoya stiffens, his eyes widening. "You don't mean . . ."

The tent flap opens and Azumane Asahi steps through, smiling sheepishly.

"ASAHI-SAAAAAAAN!!!" Nishinoya leaps at him, latching his arms and legs around him in a koala hold, before slapping his hands up and down on the man's shoulders rapidly. "YOU'RE HERE!!"

Asahi has to grab Nishinoya's thighs to keep from falling over, and he seems nervous. "When Daichi told me what was going on . . . I couldn't leave you to fight on your own. Before you . . . you said you'd follow me even after what happened. Is that still true?"
Nishinoya clamps his hands on either side of Asahi's face, squishing his cheeks together. "I would follow you anywhere, Asahi-san," he says seriously.

Asahi blushes furiously, and Sawamura has to walk over to pry Nishinoya off him.

"Glad that's settled," Sawamura says, shaking his head. "Asahi, the men all have orders to obey your commands. We have over hundred men and women here ready to go on your mark. Just let us know what you need."

Asahi nods. "Yes, sir."

He turns to his newly appointed team, determination carved into the lines of his face. Hinata's never seen him look like this before, and a shiver runs down his spine.

Scary . . .

"Okay, listen up," Asahi says, and the team snaps to attention. "We're going to go at this the way we used to. There will be a decoy team and an attack team. The decoy team's objective is to draw the attention of the kaiju away from the perimeter. You must keep its focus on you, in order for the attack team to do their job. Once the attack team has an opening, they will aim for its eyes, just like the Super Soldiers do. Understood?"

The team nods. Hinata's hand shoots into the air. Asahi looks startled, his calm façade cracking slightly, but it quickly smooths over, as he nods at Hinata.

"Yes?"

"I'm on the attack team, right?"

To his dismay, Asahi shakes his head. "You, Yamamoto, and Shibayama are the decoy team. Myself, Nishinoya, and Tanaka are the attack team." He glances at Sawamura. "I'll be drawing five others from your soldiers, as well."

Sawamura nods. "Take whoever you need."

"Wait a minute!" Hinata cries. "Why am I on the decoy team? I've been training to fight!"

"You haven't trained enough," Sawamura says flatly. "Iwaizumi himself told me you weren't ready."

Hinata frowns. "I'm as ready as they were when they first started!"

"Shouyou."

Hinata turns. Kenma's standing behind the monitors, looking over them at him with eyes intense behind his dark hair. Hinata's heart sinks.

"You don't think I can do it either?" he asks. The thought of Kenma not believing in him hurts more than the others pushing his abilities aside as non-consequential.

Kenma sighs. "It's not about whether or not you can fight. It's about your skill set."

Hinata blinks, tilting his head. "My skill set?"

"Hinata," Sawamura says, stepping closer. "I've looked over your statistics. You can run and jump faster and better than any of my soldiers. We need someone with your talents out there to maneuver quickly enough to keep the kaiju occupied while the attack team moves into place. Really, you're the
only one who can do it. The decoy team needs you."

Hinata's eyes widen. "Oh," he says. His resolve returns, and he clenches his hands into fists. He can feel the adrenaline pumping through him, bolstered by the serum running through his veins. "You can count on me!" he says brightly. "I'll be the best decoy ever!"

Sawamura nods, a faint smile playing about his lip. "Dismissed. And... good luck."

"YEAH! LET'S DO THIS!"

With a cry, Nishinoya, Tanaka, and Yamamoto all rush out of the tent. Shibayama and Asahi follow quickly, not wanting to be left behind. Hinata turns to join them, when he feels a small tug on his hand. He pauses to look at Kenma standing next to him. Kenma's fingers linger on his hand for a moment, before falling away.

"Make sure you do everything I tell you to do," he says in a low voice.

Hinata grins. "I will," he promises. He flings his arms around Kenma in a tight hug. "I'll see you later, okay?"

He doesn't give Kenma a chance to respond before dashing out of the tent. The air is chilly, and as he runs to catch up with the others, the wind stings his cheeks. He remembers at the last minute to pull on his goggles, knowing once he starts using the harness, the wind is going to be a lot worse.

"Here!"

Nishinoya thrusts a flare into his hand. Hinata clutches it tightly, noticing both Yamamoto and Shibayama have one too. He tilts suddenly sideways, as the ground shakes beneath his feet. Lifting his gaze, Hinata stares, dumbfounded, at the monster stomping through the ruins of the city. His stomach clenches, as his knees knock together. Yamamoto slams a hand against his back, nearly toppling him over.

"Look sharp, kid! We've got a city to save!"

Hinata straightens immediately. "Yes, sir!"

As Yamamoto and Shibayama start running ahead, Hinata reaches for his earpiece.

"Kenma?"

"I'm here."

Hinata inhales shakily. The sound of Kenma's voice helps to steady the wild pounding of his heart. *We can do this.*

It quickly becomes apparent, however, that they can *not* do this. Hinata's not exactly one to be pessimistic, but after thirty minutes of running and leaping from building to building with a kaiju on his tail, he begins to appreciate the amount of work the Super Soldiers put in fighting these things.

"They make it look so easy on TV," Hinata gasps, hanging from his harness behind a building to
catch a breath.

"Careful, it's about ten meters behind you."

Hinata presses against his earpiece. "Where are Nishinoya and Tanaka?"

"Nishinoya's still on its back. He hasn't been able to make it up to the head yet. Tanaka and Asahi are trying to wound it enough to slow it down some, but it's not working."

"Dammit!" Hinata frowns, looking along the street below, cluttered with debris. He's been in this part of the city before, during the Soldier exam, but he can't think of what he can use to further distract the kaiju.

"We're not doing any good as decoys," Shibayama's voice crackles over the earpiece. "We should help them attack."

"No!" Yamamoto growls. "We have our orders."

"Tora, it knows we're not a threat. It hasn't been chasing us for the past ten minutes. We can catch it off-guard if we attack. It won't be expecting it!"

Hinata chews on his lip, considering this. "He's right," he realizes. "It keeps heading our way, but not to attack. It's more like it's just stumbling in our direction now."

"Shouyou." Kenma's voice sounds sharp in his ear, but Hinata ignores him, keeping an eye out for his team.

"It's preoccupied with Tanaka-san and Azumane-san right now," Shibayama says. "I'm going to go for its eyes. Cover me!"

"Yuuki!" Yamamoto shouts, but the next moment Hinata sees a small figure leap through the air by the cables at its sides.

Hinata quickly pushes off the building to follow. As he clears the roof, he sees the kaiju, batting the air with its claws. Tanaka and Asahi are whizzing past its chest and head, leaving long stripes of red in their wake from their katanas. On its back, Nishinoya is attempting to climb the ridges along its spine, but each time the kaiju moves, he has to readjust his hold.

"Why isn't Nishinoya using his harness to cling to the kaiju's skin?"

"So far it doesn't seem to realize that he's there. We want to keep it that way!"

Hinata hits the roof and tucks into a roll as he lands. He races across the building, the cables coiling into the harness before he shoots them back out again as he leaps into the air. They bury into the kaiju's shoulder, and it reacts with a roar. Turning, it swipes at Hinata as he passes. Hinata twists in the air, managing to avoid getting hit. Shibayama isn't so lucky, and he tumbles through the air toward the ground.

"YUUUKI!"

Yamamoto's scream pierces through Hinata's earpiece, and he winces, clinging to the kaiju's scales, as he watches Yamamoto dive after his partner.

He almost makes it.

Yamamoto's cable goes taut, and he stops just short of Shibayama's flailing hand. He swings wide,
almost crashing into another building. He manages to catch himself, quickly retracting one of the
cables in order to shoot it off near the base of the next one. Hinata watches, biting his lip, as he drops
to the ground and sprints toward Shibayama's prone form where it landed several meters behind the
kaiju's current position.

"Shouyou."

Hinata swallows hard. "Is he . . . ?"

"Shouyou."

Hinata nearly slides off the kaiju's shoulder, as it twists and turns, trying to reach him. Asahi and
Tanaka make another pass, directing its attention towards them once more. Shaking himself, Hinata
tries to pull his focus back to the task at hand. He looks down to where Noya is struggling to climb
the spines. He's made progress, but he still has a long way to go. Hinata presses his earpiece.

"Nishinoya-san! Shoot one of your cables toward the sky. I'll catch it and pull you up!"

Noya tilts his head back to look up at him. His eyes widen, even as his lips twitch into a smirk.

"You'll have to be fast!"

"I can do it!"

Noya nods. Bracing himself, he leans back just enough to shoot one cable out from his harness.
Hinata watches as it flies toward him. Leaning out, he snatches it out of the air, giving it a hard yank.
Noya flies through the air toward him, and when he gets close enough, Hinata grabs his arm to pull
him onto the kaiju's shoulder.

"Wow! That serum is really something! How strong do you think you are now, anyway?"

"Find out later," Asahi cuts in, his voice strained. "There's just the four of us now, we have to get
this done quickly."

"Wait, just us? What happened to the other five soldiers?" Hinata asks, looking toward the ground as
though they'd magically appear.

"Dead," Noya says grimly.

Hinata's stomach flips. "Oh."

"Come on; boost me up toward its eyes. We've got one shot." Noya unsheaths his katana, swaying
slightly to stay upright, as the kaiju continues to try and knock Asahi and Tanaka out of the air.

Hinata nods, knowing they have a job to do. He bends down, letting Noya climb up onto his
shoulders. With a soft huff, he straightens as he shoves the man toward the kaiju's face. Noya shouts
a war cry, as he flings himself forward, burying the katana into the kaiju's eye.

The kaiju shrieks in pain, stumbling as it reaches for its eyes. Noya hangs from the katana for a
moment before dropping toward Hinata. He catches him, holding him around the waist as he quickly
shoots a cable toward the nearest building, launching off the kaiju's shoulder, as it starts to fall.

They land hard on the rooftop of the building, and Hinata shields Noya's body from the impact as
best he can. They skid a couple meters from the edge, and Hinata grimaces, as the concrete tears
through his jacket. When they stop, he releases Noya and the two of them scramble to their feet,
rushing toward the edge to look down at the kaiju lying still on its face.

Tanaka and Asahi land beside them, their cables retracting into their harnesses, their katanas dripping with kaiju blood.

"Are you okay?" Asahi asks Noya immediately.

"Dude, that was awesome," Noya says with a grin. "We did it! We won!"

"Not so fast."

The grim voice of Sawamura interrupts Noya's celebratory shout.

"What do you mean? What's happening?"

"We just got word from Kuroo. You're going to have company."

Hinata jumps, as several loud shrieks and roars echo from the center of the city. Asahi pales, as the noise gets louder, until the air is full of the sound of kaiju.

"How many are there?" Tanaka asks, adjusting his grip on his katana.

"Kuroo says twelve."

"TWELVE?!" Hinata yelps.

"Sawamura, what do we do?" Asahi asks, his voice low.

"I'm sending more soldiers to your position. Kuroo's team is on their way, so you only have to engage until they get here. Fall back when they arrive, and I'll send fresh recruits to assist them. Do not pull any more stunts like before without consulting either myself or Kozume. Do you understand?"

Hinata's chest tightens, as he remembers Shibayama. "Um. Sawamura-san? Is Shibayama okay?"

"No, Hinata. He's not."

"He's dead," Kenma says softly.

Hinata feels sick. He stumbles over to the edge of the rooftop, vomiting into the air. He grips the concrete, his vision swimming, as he stares down at the body of the kaiju, Noya's katana still sticking out from its eye. Surprisingly, this sight doesn't trigger his gag reflex once more. Instead, he feels a wave of determination and strength fill him, and he jumps to his feet.

"We can do this!" he says, turning to look at the others. "If we can take down that thing, we can deal with the rest! We just gotta keep fighting! We can't let Kuroo and the others down!"

"Yeah!" Noya shouts, catching onto Hinata's enthusiasm. "That's right! We brought down one son of a bitch. We'll just keep going and hold them off until Kuroo and his team get here."

Tanaka still looks pale, but he nods, clapping Noya on the back. "These things aren't invincible. My man Noya here proved that. And we know how to steer them away from the perimeter. We got this."

Asahi looks between the three. "Stay together," he says. "We'll wait for the reinforcements, and then we'll cordon off in a grid formation. Try to isolate the kaiju and take them down one by one. It'll be easier than tackling them in a group."
Hinata nods vigorously, his hair bouncing on his forehead.

"Are you okay?" Kenma's voice is soft in his ear.

Hinata turns from the others, reaching for his earpiece. "I'm a little shaky," he admits. "But I'll be fine."

"Don't ever ignore me again," he says flatly.

Hinata grimaces. "I'm sorry. I thought it was a good idea at the time. I mean, it did work. But Shibayama . . ."

"You can't dwell on that now," Kenma says quickly. "Focus on what's in front of you."

Hinata lifts his head, swallowing hard. In the distance, he can see buildings toppling over, crumbling to dust, as the kaiju make their way toward them. What's in front of him. Right. Looking over his shoulder, he can barely see the perimeter in the distance, but he knows what's there. Hundreds of people coming out to see the fight. Men, women and children who are relying on them for safety. His parents are beyond that perimeter. Natsu and her friends. Kenma. Kageyama.

He has to do whatever he can to protect them. That's why he's here, isn't it? That's why he took the serum to become a Super Soldier. It wasn't just about becoming a hero. He wants to protect his family and friends. He wants to make sure they never have to worry or live in fear again.

And if that means taking down twelve kaiju today, then he'll do it.

Overhead the news helicopter hovers. He can hear the stunned voice of the newscaster who most likely has just seen the amount of kaiju the soldiers are facing. Squaring his shoulders, Hinata turns back to the others. Noya and Tanaka are bolstering each other's enthusiasm, jumping up and down and shouting an old fight song. They must be exhausted, their limbs tired and aching, but they're still ready for anything. Asahi stands behind them, clutching his katana in a white-knuckled grip. When he catches Hinata's gaze, he gives him a weak smile.

Yeah, we're still fighting, Hinata thinks proudly, turning his eyes to the kaiju in the distance. Give us your best shot.

***

The ride back to Sendai is wrought with tension. Akaashi can tell Bokuto is blaming himself for the unfortunate turn of events. His shoulders are tight, as he sits hunched forward on his motorcycle, pushing it to go as fast as it can, as the four of them blaze down the highway. They weave in and out of traffic, no doubt a menace to those on the road, but the one thought on everyone's mind is to get to Sendai as quickly as possible.

The crowd at the perimeter looks larger than usual. As the Soldiers ride up, those on the fringes turn
to watch them approach. Nudges and whispers spread out through the crowd, and people begin to fall back, clearing a path for them to ride right up to the barricade. Kuroo gives them a nod of thanks, and the group abandons their motorcycles in favor of hopping the barricades and hurrying toward the command center.

"What's the status?" Kuroo demands as soon as he enters. Kenma sits up straight at his position behind the monitors, and Sawamura circles around the table to greet them.

"They've taken down the initial kaiju, but they're having a harder time with these new ones," Sawamura says, his expression grim. "We've lost a dozen soldiers so far."

"Hinata?" Kuroo asks, glancing toward Kenma.

"He's alive," Kenma says, glancing toward the monitors. He hunches forward once more, pressing his ear piece in order to give a quick command.

"I'm going to be honest, Kuroo, I'm concerned," Sawamura says gravely.

Kuroo glances behind him at Akaashi, Bokuto, and Iwaizumi. "We talked it over before we rode over here. We think there's a way for us to win this, but we're going to need serum. A lot of it."

Sawamura frowns. "What are you planning?"

"We're going to overdose," Iwaizumi says.

The tent is silent for a moment. Kenma looks up, frowning, as Sawamura stares at them in stunned horror.

"Absolutely not," he declares. "You have no idea what that could do to your bodies!"

"We won't be strong enough otherwise," Akaashi says, pushing down any feeling of apprehension that may be present. They don't have time to dwell on what-ifs.

"We have to save the city," Bokuto says. "We'll do whatever it takes."

"This is insane."

Kuroo turns to the tent flap, lifting it in order to snag the nearest soldier. "Hey, you! Go get Sugawara at the medical tent. Tell him to bring eight doses of serum."

"Kuroo, I won't let you do this." Sawamura steps forward, grabbing Kuroo's arm. "Your bodies won't be able to handle it. You'll go into your rage states, and then you'll crash harder than ever before. It could kill you."

"Not to mention your rage states will be worse than usual," Kenma says, standing now. He's staring at Kuroo, and Akaashi notices Kuroo doesn't return his gaze, but keeps his eyes on Sawamura.

"We have a fail-safe for that," he says calmly, though his hand is clenched in a white fist at his side.

"What fail-safe?" Kenma demands.

"Do you have any snipers?" Kuroo asks Sawamura.

Sawamura pales, as Kenma steps out from behind the monitors.

"Kuro, no."
"If our rage states become out of control, if we're a threat to anyone's safety, you have our permission to take us out."

Sawamura's eyes widen. "All of you agreed to this?"

Akaashi nods, along with Bokuto and Iwaizumi.

"We're not monsters," Bokuto says, quieter than Akaashi's ever heard him speak before. "And we don't want to become monsters either."

Kenma is scowling at Kuroo, his small body radiating anger. Akaashi watches, as he storms closer to Kuroo and grabs his jacket sleeve, yanking on it.

"You promised you'd do whatever you could to stay alive," he hisses, apparently not minding the audience.

Kuroo's eyes are sad, as he looks down at Kenma. "I'm sorry."

He reaches for Kenma's face, but Kenma smacks his hand away, turning and retreating back behind the monitors, fuming. Akaashi hopes he doesn't come to regret that reaction.

"What's this about extra doses of serum?" Sugawara asks, stepping through the tent entrance.

As Kuroo explains the plan a second time, Akaashi takes Bokuto's sleeve and pulls him to the side.

"I know that once your rage state hits you're going to be reckless and stupid—"

"Hey . . ."

"So I'm letting you know that you don't have to hold yourself back. I'm going to be with you, every step of the way. I'll protect you."

Bokuto tilts his head to the side. "But Keiji, shouldn't you be protecting the soldiers? They don't have special abilities like us. We gotta look out for them."

Akaashi shakes his head. Lifting his hand, he presses his fist against Bokuto's chest. "You look out for them. You're the hero, Koutarou. Be the hero. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

Bokuto stares at him before taking his face in both his hands, drawing him in for a deep kiss.

"You're a hero too, Keiji," he says, as he pulls away.

Akaashi's lips tingle, and he resists the urge to touch them. He manages a small smile, even as he disagrees with Bokuto's assessment of him. He takes one of Bokuto's hands and gives it a firm squeeze, before turning back to the others. Kenma is staunchly refusing to look at Kuroo, and Akaashi can see the pain this causes Kuroo, but he still rolls up his sleeve past the elbow and offers his arm to Sugawara.

"I just want to the record to show that I do not recommend this," he says, brandishing a syringe.

"Noted," Kuroo says, giving Sugawara a grim smile.

Sugawara sighs, before taking Kuroo's arm and injecting it with the serum. He selects another vial, changes the needle in the syringe, fills it, and injects him again. Kuroo flexes his hand slowly, his shoulders tense. He steps out of the way, as Iwaizumi approaches Sugawara for his turn. Bokuto and Akaashi fall in behind him, just as the tent flap opens once more and a freckled young man clutching
a rifle case stumbles into the tent.

"Um! I-I was told you needed a sniper?" he stammers, eyes wide as he stares at Kuroo.

"Are you willing and able to shoot one of us if we become a threat to anyone due to our rage states?" Kuroo asks, cutting straight to the chase.

The young man's eyes widen further. "I-I . . ."

"This is important, kid," Kuroo says, taking him by the shoulders. "If this plan goes sideways, you could be the one thing standing between us and a massacre."

The young man's face is pale. Sawamura steps forward. "What's your name?" he asks, his expression less intense than Kuroo's. At the sight of him, the young man relaxes slightly.

"Yamaguchi Tadashi, sir," he says, bowing.

"Are you okay with this, Yamaguchi-kun? We can find someone else if we need to," Sawamura says, and Kuroo gives him a look.

"We don't have time—"

"I'll do it!" Yamaguchi exclaims, straightening his shoulders and lifting his chin. "I can do it."

Kuroo nods, giving Yamaguchi a hard slap on the back that sends the young man stumbling forward a couple steps. "Hopefully we won't need your expertise, but it makes me feel better to know we have a backup in case things get messy."

As Akaashi steps up to Sugawara and rolls up his sleeve for his injection, the tent flap flies open once more and Oikawa rushes through. Iwaizumi stiffens, rolling his sleeve down quickly to cover the marks.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"I had to see you before you went out there," Oikawa says breathlessly, throwing his arms around Iwaizumi and hugging him tightly.

"Awww." Kuroo smirks at them, and Iwaizumi lifts his middle finger to him behind Oikawa's back.

"Sugawara takes Akaashi's arm, tapping the inside of his elbow. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asks softly, looking into Akaashi's eyes.

"Yes," Akaashi says, knowing just as well as the rest of them that there's no other way. They can't just be their best out there. They have to be better than their best. They have to be the strongest they can possibly be.

He's used to the sting, so he doesn't flinch as Sugawara inserts the needle. Closing his eyes, he feels the familiar rush of adrenaline that accompanies the serum administration. Just as he's getting used to it, however, he feels another prick. His heart pounds against his ribs, and his fingertips start to tremble. As Sugawara steps back, Akaashi rolls down his sleeve and flexes his hand, curling his fingers into a fist. He moves to the side to allow Bokuto his turn.

Iwaizumi and Oikawa part, and Oikawa grips Iwaizumi's shoulders tightly. "Don't do anything stupid. Come back to me."

Iwaizumi grins slightly. "You mean, stupider than what we just did?"
Oikawa huffs, and he looks like he wants to kiss Iwaizumi, so Akaashi turns away to find Kuroo staring forlornly at Kenma, who is staunchly refusing to look at him. It's none of his business, and it's not as though Kuroo's ever listened to his advice as far as Kenma is concerned, but Akaashi steps forward anyway, touching Kuroo's arm lightly.

"Don't go out there while he's still angry with you."

Kuroo turns his gaze onto Akaashi and gives him a sad smile. "There's nothing I can say right now to make this better." He turns toward the harnesses piled by the tent entrance, stepping forward to take one. "I broke my promise to him. He's allowed to be angry."

Akaashi frowns, as Kuroo pulls on the harness. But if you die out there and that's the last conversation the two of you had, he's going to regret that forever. He doesn't say this, however, as it seems Kuroo has made up his mind.

Iwaizumi pulls away from Oikawa and steps up to grab a harness of his own. Akaashi joins them, and after a moment Bokuto does as well.

"Can anyone else see like . . . super good right now?" Bokuto asks, his eyes wide, pupils dilated.

Kuroo grins. "Better than ever." He turns to his team then, the smile slipping into a grim expression. "I know we already talked about the consequences of this, and there's really no going back now, so I'm just going to say now that I'm proud to be standing here with you three. Thank you for always fighting hard and doing your best to take care of the people of this city. I'm glad to have fought beside you."

"That was beautiful, dude," Bokuto says, actually tearing up.

"We have to go," Iwaizumi says gruffly, stepping past them all to exit the tent.

"He loves us, don't worry," Kuroo says confidently. He shoots one last glance toward Kenma before following Iwaizumi outside, with Bokuto and Akaashi right behind.

The snow in the center of downtown Sendai has been reduced to brown and red slush. Despite Akaashi's strong stomach, he can't help but feel queasy at the sight of the carnage before them. Dozens of bodies lay strewn upon the snow, with only two kaiju joining them. The soldiers appear to be having a difficult time separating the monsters, and the smallest, while not as large as the first one, seems to stand at least fifteen meters tall.

"KUROO-SAN!"

Akaashi glances up to see Hinata perched on the edge of one of the few buildings left standing. He waves enthusiastically, and Kuroo gives him a slight wave in return, before turning to the others standing with him.

"We need to take over, now."

Iwaizumi nods. Bokuto's staring at a body near his feet, his face pale. Reaching over, Akaashi grabs his arm, giving it a deliberate yank. Bokuto starts, looking over at him.
"Don't focus on them," Akaashi says firmly. He looks to the kaiju stomping their way through the streets, attempting to catch the soldiers flying about their heads. "Focus on the fight."

Bokuto's expression clears. He nods, brows furrowing. He reaches into his sack and pulls out a stick of dynamite. "These bastards are going to pay for this," he mutters.

"I won't hold you back."

Bokuto grins, slow and feral. His pupils dilate and with his enhanced vision, Akaashi thinks he can see the flash of red hidden deep within the gold. He turns toward the kaiju, and rolls his shoulders back. With a quick flick of his wrist, he ignites the wick of the dynamite and takes a small hop-skip forward, flinging the stick as hard as he can at the closest kaiju. It hits the monster right between the eyes, exploding in a shower of sparks. Roaring, it stumbles back, swatting at its face.

"YEAAH COME AND GET IT YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Bokuto shouts, as the kaiju turns toward them.

Kuroo and Iwaizumi draw their katanas, fingers hovering over the buttons of their harnesses. Akaashi reaches into his own pouch, pulling out a grenade. He squeezes it in his fist tightly, looking toward Bokuto then. As the kaiju approaches, he waits for the signal.

Once it's given, he pulls the pin and tosses the grenade directly beneath the kaiju's feet. At the same time, the other three rush forward with a yell. The kaiju stumbles backwards, as the ground explodes beneath it, and as it's unstable, Iwaizumi and Kuroo hit it directly in the face with as much force and speed as they can muster. The kaiju roars as it falls, and Iwaizumi and Kuroo plunge their katanas into its eye simultaneously.

Bokuto's already sprinting toward the next one. The loud noise has attracted the others, and the group turns toward the Soldiers. Akaashi hurries after Bokuto, staying close behind him as he delves into the midst of the stampede.

Time passes strangely. It seems to slow, as he calculates each step, each throw, each leap. He does his best to keep Bokuto in his line of sight, following the man as he hacks and jumps and demolishes his way through the kaiju. Kuroo sends most of the soldiers back to the perimeter, including Hinata (who protests but leaves without further argument when Kenma yells his name). The only ones left with them are Azumane, Nishinoya, and Tanaka, along with a few other members of their squad. Akaashi doesn't remember their names.

Kuroo keeps the squad on the fringes, giving them the order to simply keep the kaiju from wandering off. "Keep them contained with their attention on us," he told them. So far it seems to be working.

It's more difficult to maneuver when surrounded on all sides by the creatures, but Akaashi understands Kuroo's strategy. If even one escapes while they're taking down the others, it's likely they won't notice until it's too late. The rage states narrow their focus, pinpointing their desires into one single craving: to kill.

Akaashi can feel that urge within him now. It runs like ice through his veins, pushing him forward, coloring his peripheral vision in crimson hues. He's doing his best to suppress it, reminding himself over and over that he can't forget Bokuto. Bokuto needs to be protected. Bokuto needs to be kept safe. Bokuto needs—

"AKAASHI, LOOK OUT!"

It's Tanaka's voice, yelling from somewhere above him. Akaashi bats the echo of his voice out of his
mind. He doesn't need another distraction. Where is Bokuto? He was to his right a second ago, or
was it a minute ago? Two minutes? The grenade feels warm in his hand. He pulls the pin and
throws, just as he's knocked into the air, flung in the opposite direction. He lands hard on the ground,
skidding briefly across the icy asphalt. He stares at the place where he'd just been standing, the thick
foot and ankle of a kaiju directly in front of him.

His heart races, but he's unsure if the cause is the close call or the serum racing through him. He hops
to his feet, as Iwaizumi and Kuroo force the kaiju back. It leaves behind a small crater in the street,
and from that crater comes a low groan. Approaching cautiously, Akaashi can feel some of the ice
leaving his veins, trickling out slowly as he tries to convince himself that it's not who he thinks it is,
who he fears it is.

Lying on his back, wheezing through crushed ribs, Bokuto looks up at him from the center of the
 crater. Akaashi stumbles toward him, dropping to his knees. A quick glance down the length of
Bokuto's body tells him enough about his injuries to know that this isn't something that the serum can
fix. Not soon enough, anyway.

"K-Keiji." Bokuto's fingers twitch, and Akaashi picks up his hand slowly. He feels as though he's
moving underwater. His limbs feel heavy, and his mind is swimming sluggishly, trying to
comprehend what's happening through the haze of his shock.

"Did-did I do it? Did I . . . save you?" Bokuto's eyes widen, and the spark is still there, though
dimming rapidly.

Akaashi nods his head. "You're my hero, Koutarou," he says, his voice calmer than he feels it should
be.

Bokuto relaxes, a weak smile tilting his lips. "I know, right? I'm amazing."

"I'll get you back to Sugawara, so just hang on." Even as he says it, Akaashi knows there's no hope.
Bokuto's body is too broken. It's doubtful he'd even survive the trip.

Bokuto's fingers shift in Akaashi's grip. "I'm sorry . . . I broke our promise . . ."

"Shh, don't think about that right now." Akaashi's hand is trembling. There's snow seeping into his
pant legs, but the ice forming around his heart feels colder.

"You're right. I'll think about something else. I'll . . . I'll think about how you looked when we made
love. You're so beautiful, Keiji . . ."

Bokuto's eyes are closing, and each breath rattles around shards of bone. There's a gurgling noise,
and blood bubbles from Bokuto's lips. He coughs, choking, and Akaashi tightens his hold.

*Say it. You have to say it.*

"I-I . . ." The words catch in his throat, but he pushes past the lump growing there. This is important.
It's probably the most important thing he's ever said in his life.

He shouldn't have waited this long.

"I love you."

At first he isn't sure Bokuto heard him. He grows still, his fingers lying limp across Akaashi's palm.
But then he smiles, briefly, and with all the strength he has left, Bokuto opens his eyes and speaks
one last time.
"Hey, hey, hey . . . that was my line."

The fire that's always burned in those golden eyes extinguishes, and Akaashi can feel the last of the warmth inside him die with it.

"Bokuto . . .?"

Akaashi lifts his head slowly. Kuroo stands at the edge of the crater, staring down at Bokuto in horror. Akaashi can only blink at him, as he watches the horror shift to rage. An inhuman roar, unlike anything Akaashi has ever heard before, tears through Kuroo's throat. He turns, disappearing over the edge of the crater.

Akaashi doesn't move.

With his reason for fighting lying motionless in front of him, he sees no reason to join the others. So he continues to kneel in silence, as snow begins to fall.

***

Kenma's starting to grow frustrated with the newscasters covering the fight in their helicopter. With so many kaiju, they're wary about getting too close and so haven't been able to give Kenma a very good aerial view of what's happening. The cameras on the Soldiers' jackets aren't providing much detail either. Akaashi and Bokuto's are down, and Kuroo's keeps flickering. Iwaizumi's is still steady, but he's moving too quickly for Kenma to register anything.

Shouyou stands beside him, practically vibrating with his need to return to the fight. Considering how it's going, however, Kenma's glad he's no longer in the midst of the battle. With his inexperience, he'd only slow the other Soldiers' down. He explained this to Shouyou, but his friend still pouted for the good part of five minutes. He seems to be over it now, but his energy is back and difficult to handle.

He's just about to ask if he needs to be given an errand to do or something, when a soldier Kenma doesn't recognize comes running into the tent.

"Captain Sawamura!" he calls, bowing deeply. "The Soldiers were unable to keep all the kaiju contained. There are two heading toward the perimeter!"

Kenma glances toward the monitors. Sure enough, two kaiju have broken off from the group and are ambling in their direction. Leaning in close, he can count maybe three or four kaiju left in the center of downtown where the Soldiers are. He reaches for his ear piece.

"Nishinoya, Tanaka, Azumane, do you see the two kaiju heading toward the perimeter?"

"We know! We know! But we're a little tied up right now! Kuroo's gone berserk!"

Kenma freezes. "What?"
Sawamura frowns. "Noya, what do you mean by 'gone berserk'?"

"I mean, he's going crazy! He's not coordinating with Iwaizumi anymore; he's just attacking all of them himself. I have no idea where Akaashi and Bokuto are, and the kaiju must sense something 'cause they're acting scared. We're barely keeping these last four contained—HEY RYU! THAT ONE'S GETTING AWAY!"

There's no reply and then Noya's back with a loud "HOLY SHIT!"

Kenma strains to see what's happening on the monitors. All the Soldiers' cams are dark now, but the helicopter has gotten closer to Asahi's squad's position, and Kenma sees a cloud of snow and concrete dust billowing in the air.

"What just happened?" Hinata screeches.

"Kuroo just like . . . he came out of nowhere and like . . . tackled that kaiju to the ground? Like he landed on its face with no hesitation whatsoever and drove his sword into its eye. It's down! There's only three left!"

The snow and dust settles, but even though Kenma squints and leans close to the screen, he can't see where Kuroo has gone. He nearly jumps out of his skin when Sawamura speaks from directly behind him.

"Where did he go? Our monitors are down."

"I have no idea! Oh, wait! It looks like he noticed the two that got away. He's heading your way!"

"What about the other three?" Sawamura asks.

"Iwaizumi's doing his best, but to be honest, Captain I think he needs help," Asahi says.

"You three stay with Iwaizumi," Sawamura says.

Kenma turns in his seat and glares at him, but Sawamura doesn't acknowledge him. His eyes are intent on the monitor in front of them.

"Once you've taken down the last of the ones there, join Kuroo. I have a feeling it's going to take more than one person to talk him down from this rage state."

"Roger."

Sawamura looks down at Kenma finally. "Kuroo will be fine on his own for now, but I'll have some of my men on standby in case he needs assistance."

"I could go!" Shouyou chirps.

Sawamura shakes his head. "If Kuroo's gone into a worse rage state than ever before, I want to minimize the risk of collateral damage. You'll stay here."

Shouyou sighs. Sawamura turns to the soldier that reported to him. "Go find Yamaguchi Tadashi and tell him to find a good vantage point and wait for my signal."

Kenma stiffens. After the soldier leaves, he moves to stand. "You're not going to need Yamaguchi," he says. "I can talk him down."

Sawamura frowns slightly. "That might have worked in the past, but I don't like the sound of these
It sounds like his rage has gone too far."

Kenma curls his hands into fists. "I can do it."

Sawamura turns back to the monitor. "We'll see what his condition is like once these kaiju are down."

The newscasters apparently decided following Kuroo seemed safer than staying near downtown, so the video shifts. Kenma watches, heart in his throat, as Kuroo uses his harness to fly into the closest kaiju's head. It tosses its neck back, trying to shake him off, but Kuroo's strength and speed seem to have tripled. He scampers up over the crest of the head and slides down toward the eye, stabbing it deeply with his katana. Wrenching away, he leaps toward the next one, as the first falls.

This one is closer to the perimeter, and outside the tent Kenma can hear screams from the crowd. The ground shakes beneath his feet. Disregarding Sawamura's shout, he runs from the tent, going to stand beside a tall, lanky policeman with blonde hair and glasses. His name badge says Tsukishima, and he doesn't look at Kenma as he joins him. Instead, his eyes are on a nearby building.

Kenma follows his gaze, catching a glimpse of a sniper's rifle, peeking out from a high window.

His heartbeat quickens. "He won't need to," he says.

"I can talk Kuro down. He won't need to kill anyone."

Tsukishima smirks faintly. "If you think you can stop a monster without a weapon, be my guest."

Kenma frowns. "He's not a monster," he says, turning back just in time to see the second kaiju fall to earth, the ground trembling beneath it as it settles. Kuroo hops off its head, swinging his katana around and roaring, as if challenging anything else to try and attack him. Kenma bites his lip, digging his nails into the palm of his hand. He's still Kuro.

"Kenma!" Shouyou's at his elbow, touching his arm gently. "We know why he's acting like this. The report just came in."

Kenma glances at him out of the corner of his eye, trying to keep Kuroo in focus, as he continues to roar, beating his chest with his free hand.

Shouyou's lower lip trembles. "Bokuto's dead."

Kenma parts his lips, but he can't think of anything to say. That doesn't seem real. Bokuto is one of the physically strongest Soldiers. How could he be dead? But, looking at Kuroo, everything suddenly makes sense.

"His heart is broken."

"I need to go to him." Kenma shakes off Shouyou's hand, stepping forward.

"WHAT?! Are you crazy?!" Shouyou jumps him from behind, wrapping his arms around Kenma's chest to hold him back.

Kenma struggles against his grip, eyes fixed on Kuroo as he turns from the crowd, something having caught his attention. He sniffs the air, and Iwaizumi steps around the body of the kaiju. He seems tired, his steps dragging, the rage gone from his expression. His katana is at his side in a loose grip.
He says something to Kuroo that Kenma can't make out, but Kuroo shakes his head. Iwaizumi speaks again, and Kuroo lowers into a crouch.

Kenma shoves against Shouyou's arms. "Let me go to him!"

"No! I don't want you to get hurt!"

Kuroo leaps at Iwaizumi. Tsukishima glances toward the building, but no shot rings out. Kenma reaches up around Shouyou's arm, pressing his earpiece.

"Sawamura, tell Yamaguchi to stand down. I can talk to Kuro! I can bring him back!"

"Negative. Yamaguchi, remain in your position. If Kuroo tries to harm a civilian, you have my permission to take the shot."

"R-roger."

Kenma shakes his head, gritting his teeth and suppressing a growl.

"I-It's going to be okay, Kenma," Shouyou says into his ear. "Iwaizumi-san will know what to do."

It doesn't appear so. The two are tumbling through the snow, snarling, fists flying, teeth snapping. Asahi, Nishinoya, and Tanaka run around the kaiju, eyes wide, but a quick command from Sawamura has them avoiding the brawl, carefully skirting around it to make their way to the perimeter barricade. Kenma half-expects Akaashi to appear next, but he doesn't.

Iwaizumi yelps sharply, and Kenma's attention reverts back to Kuroo. His mouth is bloody, having just taken a chunk out of Iwaizumi's arm. Shouyou's grip slackens in shock, and Kenma makes his move. Jabbing Shouyou in the stomach with his elbow, he sprints forward, hair whipping around his face, as Shouyou calls to him, telling him to come back.

"Kozume, what are you doing?" Sawamura barks into his ear. "I gave you an order."

"I can help him!" Kenma insists, stumbling only briefly before coming to a skidding stop in front of the two Soldiers on the ground.

Kuroo has Iwaizumi pinned, rage still etched into the lines of his features. Blood drips from his chin, and he's straddling Iwaizumi, one hand wrapped around Iwaizumi's neck, the other holding down Iwaizumi's right arm. The left one is bleeding, pressed up against Kuroo's neck, as he tries to keep his snapping teeth away from his face.

Kenma shudders. Fear curls through his stomach, though as terrifying as Kuroo looks, it's not his appearance that frightens him.

"If I don't calm him down, they'll kill him."

His heart thuds violently in his ears.

"Kuro," he calls softly, catching Kuroo's attention. He turns his head, still snarling. His eyes are thin golden rings around large black pupils. There's pain in them. So much pain. Kenma's chest tightens at the sight of it.

"Kuro," he says again, stepping closer slowly. "It's me. It's Kenma." He lifts his hand, palm up, the way he did before in that spot beneath the tree where his parents died. "Let him go. Let Iwaizumi go. It's over. It's all over. You killed the monsters. We can go home now."
His hand trembles, as he inches closer. Kuroo's eyes don't waver from his face, but he also doesn't move from his position. Iwaizumi's face is growing blue from lack of air. Kenma tries to think quickly. What can he do? What can he say? He can't bring Bokuto back, and he knows nothing is okay right now, but Kuroo has to know that he still has him.

He still has Kenma.

"Kuro, please," he says quietly, keeping his voice as steady as he can. "Take me home. I want to go home."

Kuroo relaxes his grip on Iwaizumi. His eyes are still too large, too wild, but his mouth closes, as he studies Kenma. They're close now. Close enough that Kenma could reach out a couple more inches and touch Kuroo's cheek if he wanted. But he remains where he is; he knows he can't rush this.

"Kenma," Iwaizumi croaks weakly from beneath Kuroo. "Get out of here."

Kenma shakes his head slowly, eyes fixed on Kuroo. "I'm not going anywhere. You hear me? I'm with you. I'm here. I'm here."

A low whine issues from Kuroo's throat. Recognition flickers in his eyes. Relief brings tears to Kenma's own eyes, but he forces them back, as he lifts his arms to the side.

Kuroo lunges at him.

A shot rings out.

Kenma falls backwards into the snow, Kuroo landing heavily on top of him. The sound of the gunshot rings in Kenma's ears, as he stares up at the sky, blinking away the snowflakes that fall gently onto his face.

What just happened?

"Kuro?"

Kuroo doesn't move. Iwaizumi staggers to his feet. His eyes widen, as he looks down at Kuroo and Kenma.

Kuroo still isn't moving.

"Kuro?" Kenma pats his back, squirming under him. "Kuro, get up. You're heavy."

"Kenma." Iwaizumi's voice is still hoarse, but Kenma can hear the tone. It's not the right tone. He should be relieved, but he sounds grim, almost sad. He reaches down, pulling on Kuroo's shoulder to roll him off of Kenma.

Kenma sits up, and that's when he notices the blood.

It's seeping through the front of Kuroo's shirt and jacket, and when Kenma looks down, he sees blood covering the front of his coat.

No.

There's shouting from somewhere behind him. The sound of running footsteps. Iwaizumi kneels beside Kuroo, checking for a pulse. He says something, but Kenma can't hear him over the static in his head, the rushing in his ears. He feels like he's tumbling in the ocean, getting knocked over by the waves, as they press him down into the sand, trying to drown him.
"Get him to my tent immediately." Sugawara's there, suddenly, his expression similar to Iwaizumi's. There are men surrounding Kuroo, blocking him from sight, lifting him onto a stretcher. Sawamura's there too, standing beside Iwaizumi, speaking to him quietly.

The waves finally release him, and Kenma comes up for air with a sharp inhale that sends pain through every cavity of his chest.

"What did you do?!" he screams in a voice that sounds nothing like his own. He flings himself at Sawamura but is caught by two of the medics. They're asking him if he's okay, if he was hit, but Kenma's attention is on the man responsible.

"He was calm! He was himself! HE WAS KURO!"

Sawamura's face is pale, apologetic, but nothing about his visage indicates that he thinks he made the wrong decision. "I gave Yamaguchi a direct order. He was a danger—"

"He wasn't a danger to anyone! He was himself again! He knew me!"

"Sedate him," Sugawara says as he passes, walking briskly beside the stretcher.

Sedating a person Kenma loved—believing he was harmful—there was no way this could be right. His face stings with the cold, tears freezing on his cheeks.

They killed him. They killed the one person Kenma had left. The one person he needed and loved more than anything else in this world.

Pain pricks the side of his neck, and his vision blurs. He feels himself falling, and he doesn't try to catch himself. He doesn't even try to fight the darkness that's curling around him.

Are they sending me to him?

He hears a whimper, like an animal in pain. It's only when he's on the edge of consciousness that he realizes he's the one whimpering.

Silence falls, and everything turns black.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: the fallout, Kuroo's fate, and a new promise

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/
The atmosphere in the debriefing room is grim. Hinata can feel the weight of it resting heavily on his chest. He bounces his foot impatiently, wanting the talking to stop. He has to go see Kenma. He has to make sure he’s okay.

That’s a stupid thought. He knows Kenma’s not okay. But still . . . Hinata wants to be there for him.

Looking across the table, Hinata can see the sniper that shot Kuroo. Yamaguchi Tadashi. He’s so pale, his freckles stand out on his cheeks like someone took a marker and drew them on. His gaze hasn’t left the table since he sat down. Hinata wants to be mad at him. As soon as he saw him, he wanted to scream and demand to know why he did it. But the truth is that Hinata knows why. From everyone’s perspective it looked as though Kuroo was about to attack Kenma. Even Hinata thought so. Despite Kenma’s insistence that Kuroo had returned to himself, Hinata truly feared for Kenma’s life in that moment Kuroo lunged at him.

So he can’t be mad at Yamaguchi. If their roles had been reversed, he honestly can’t say whether or not he’d do anything different. He’d do anything to protect Kenma. And that realization just makes him feel worse.

“Thank you for your bravery,” Sawamura says to Yamaguchi, after the boy finishes his statement. “I know that couldn’t have been easy to do.”

Yamaguchi stares down at the table. He lifts his gaze after Sawamura speaks, meeting Hinata’s. Hinata blinks at him, gripping the edge of his seat, and Yamaguchi flinches, turning to Sawamura.

“Is . . . is Kuroo-san going to be okay?” he asks, his voice small and subdued.
Hinata’s heart leaps into his throat, and he looks over at Sawamura as well.

Sawamura sighs heavily, glancing at the other two Soldiers in the room. Akaashi stares into space, and Iwaizumi cradles his bandaged arm to his chest, tense and silent. The other soldiers at the table exchange glances, all looking harried and solemn. It’s unnerving to see Nishinoya and Tanaka so quiet, but the air feels heavy, as they wait for Sawamura’s response.

“He’s still in surgery,” Sawamura says finally. “But he’s in good hands.”

Nishinoya perks up. “Is Suga-san doing the surgery?”

Sawamura nods. “He is.”

“It’s totally cool then, guys,” Nishinoya tells everyone present. “He fixed me up super good, and I had a rebar go straight through me!”

Tanaka’s lips quirk in a tentative smile. “Yeah,” he says with a slow nod. “Yeah, that’s true. Suga-san is the best! Kuroo-san’s going to be okay.”

He holds up his hand for a high-five. Nishinoya slaps his palm against his, and Hinata feels his spirits lift. If Nishinoya and Tanaka are confident that Kuroo will be okay, then he’s confident too.

Sawamura ends the briefing with an order for everyone to go home and get some rest. He tells Hinata to hang back, however, and Hinata hesitates by the door, wondering if he’s going to get a scolding for something.

“I’m sorry, Sawamura-san!” he says before the man can speak. “I wasn’t a good enough Soldier. I couldn’t hold Kenma back, either . . .”

Sawamura waves his hand. “This isn’t about that. You did everything you could. I’m proud of you.”

Hinata breathes a sigh of relief, a warm tingle entering his chest at Sawamura’s last words. He fidgets then, realizing now he doesn’t know why he’s been asked to stay.

“I wanted to know if you’re feeling okay,” Sawamura admits. “Are you experiencing any side-effects?”

Hinata blinks. He tilts his head, rubbing the back of it as he tries to think of what he’s felt after taking the serum. “Um, I haven’t felt really angry or anything . . . like that, you mean?”

Sawamura nods. “No rage states?”

Hinata shakes his head. “I’m okay, Captain! Maybe the serum works differently with me!”

“Either way, Oikawa’s working on a cure. I want you to take it when it’s done.”

Hinata bites his lip. He looks down at his hands. If he takes the cure, he won’t be strong and fast anymore. He won’t be able to be a Soldier anymore. His whole life he’s wanted to be a member of the Flying Crows. Never has he imagined he’ll have to come up with something else to be. If he’s not a Soldier, what is he?

“Do I have to?” he asks, glancing up at Sawamura. “I can still be useful! I can, um, help rebuild stuff! Yeah! With my super strength and speed I could get buildings done in no time!”

Sawamura looks amused. “Do you know anything about construction or architecture?”
“No,” Hinata admits sullenly, deflating once more.

Sawamura stands, walking over to place his hands on Hinata’s shoulders. “We never should have had to put you in this position in the first place. You deserve a life free from the threat of kaiju, Hinata. You deserve the life of a normal young man. Go to college. Play sports. Volunteer at a shelter. There are other ways to help people that don’t involve risking your life.”

Hinata ducks his head. He thinks of Kenma’s parents, of Lev, of Shibayama, of Bokuto and Kuroo. So many lives lost or destroyed because of those damn kaiju. He wishes he could’ve done more.

“Do you think that’s enough?” he asks, looking back at Sawamura’s face. “I don’t want to just help people, Sawamura-san. I want to make a difference!”

“You will,” Sawamura says firmly, releasing his shoulders. “For now, though, report to Kageyama for your physical.”

Hinata’s eyes widen. Kageyama!

With everything that happened, he completely forgot about Kageyama. Without another word, he sprints out of room.

He bursts into the lab, startling the scientists closest to the door.

“KAGEYAMA!”

All heads lift, and Hinata scans those present until he spots Kageyama standing beside Oikawa’s desk with Yahaba. He’s scowling, but when their eyes meet, Kageyama’s expression shifts. He quickly abandons whatever he’s doing, ignores the stunned reaction of his coworkers, and hastens forward.

Hinata runs toward him and, not caring about the others watching, throws his arms around Kageyama’s waist to squeeze him tightly.

Kageyama stiffens in his grasp for a moment, before his arms come up around Hinata as well. “Idiot,” he mutters. “You can’t come barging in here like this.”

“You don’t care,” Hinata says, nuzzling his face against Kageyama’s chest. He feels warm. Solid. After the day Hinata just had, Kageyama feels comfortable, familiar. It’s nice.

Kageyama pushes him away, holding him at arms length. Hinata pouts. He wasn’t done with the hug yet. Kageyama’s blushing, and he looks around with a frown. “Not here,” he says, grabbing Hinata’s hand then and pulling him toward the door.

“We’ll just wait here then!” Oikawa calls after them.

Hinata lengthens his stride to keep up with Kageyama’s long legs. “Where are you taking me?” he asks, his heart hammering rapidly.

Kageyama doesn’t respond until they’re in the room where he always administers the serum. He shuts the door behind them, turning to look at Hinata, then, with a doleful expression.

“I thought you were going to die,” he admits, his voice low and miserable.

“Ha! You should’ve believed in me, because I’m not dead at all,” Hinata says triumphantly, hands on his hips.
Kageyama scowls. “But you could have died.”

Hinata drops his hands, grinning faintly, a warm, happy feeling filling him from head to toe. “So you were worried about me!”

“Of course I was worried, dumbass! You’re my only friend!” Kageyama snaps, hands balled into fists at his sides.

Hinata blinks, not having expected that outburst. “Your only friend?” he asks, tilting his head.

Kageyama curses under his breath, looking away. Hinata steps closer to him, bending slightly to look up into Kageyama’s face.

“Hey, Yamayama-kun~”

Kageyama’s jaw tightens, and he purses his lips, like he’s trying not to smile. “What?”

“I don’t have to be your only friend. You should go out with me sometime! I can introduce you to my friends!”

Kageyama stares at him. “Go . . . out?”

Hinata’s face burns, as he realizes what he just said. “Um, yeah! Go out.” He nods, not about to backtrack now. “It’ll be fun!”

Kageyama looks back at him, his features slowly softening. He reaches toward Hinata’s head, and Hinata ducks instinctively. But Kageyama just keeps his arm extended, waiting. Slowly, Hinata straightens, until he feels Kageyama’s palm rest against the top of his head. His fingers tremble slightly, as they thread through Hinata’s orange locks. Hinata grins faintly, as a shiver runs through him.

“Is that a yes?” he asks hopefully.

Kageyama’s hand drops to his side. He nods, once. But that’s enough for Hinata.

The physical reveals nothing out of the ordinary, though Hinata can feel the fatigue starting to settle in his limbs. He shakes it off as best he can, not ready to leave. He still has to check in on Kenma. Leaving Kageyama with a promise that he’ll contact him later about going out, Hinata hurries for the infirmary.

As he rounds a corner, he sees Yamaguchi and a tall, lanky young man with glasses, wearing a policeman’s uniform. He stops short, taking in the scene. Yamaguchi has his face pressed into the glasses guy’s shoulder, his body trembling. The glasses guy has his gaze fixed on the wall, one hand on Yamaguchi’s back. He expression looks almost disinterested in Yamaguchi’s distress, which contradicts how he’s holding him, and Hinata can’t help but think he should be making more of an effort.

“Yamaguchi, don’t mind!” Hinata chirps, startling them both.

Yamaguchi pulls away from the glasses guy, looking down at Hinata in surprise.

“You did the right thing,” Hinata says with a firm nod.

Yamaguchi bites his lip, red-rimmed eyes turning toward the floor. “But . . . Kozume-san—”

“Do we know you?” the glasses guy sneers, stepping up to stand a little in front of Yamaguchi,
staring down at Hinata with a look of disdain.

Hinata leaps back a step, not liking the hostility he feels in this guy’s aura. He puts his fists up instinctively. “I’m Hinata Shouyou. I’m one of the Super Soldiers!”

“One of the Super Soldiers, huh? Must not be very ‘Super’ if you can’t even stop one of your own from going crazy.”

Blood rushes to Hinata’s face, and he lowers his fists to his sides, clenching them tighter. “Iwaizumi-san tried to stop him! But he—”

“But what did you do to try and stop him?” The glasses guy looms over him, his jaw tight, lips downturned.

“I—!” Hinata cuts himself off, realizing that he didn’t do anything. He tried to hold Kenma back, but he did nothing to try and help Iwaizumi subdue Kuroo. Could I have prevented what happened? His hands relax, as he blinks blankly at the man in front of him.

“Tsukki,” Yamaguchi says quietly. “Stop. Let’s just go home.”

Tsukki glances over his shoulder at Yamaguchi. His expression doesn’t change, but he does take Yamaguchi’s arm and pull him forward, shoving past Hinata on their way. Hinata remains where he’s standing. He looks down at his hands, slowly uncurling his fingers in front of him.

He remembers how Kenma felt in his arms, how rapidly his heart raced in his chest. Hinata could feel it pounding through his back, as Kenma struggled to break free of his grip. Should he have tried harder to keep Kenma away from Kuroo? Should he have handed him off to a soldier and run forward to try and subdue Kuroo himself? Is all this his fault?

Hinata sprints forward, heading for the infirmary. He hasn’t seen Kenma since they sedated him and brought him back to the base. Does Kenma blame him too?

He bursts through the doors, startling the receptionist. There’s no one in the immediate waiting area, and he hurries over to the front desk.

“Is Kuroo-san still in surgery?!” he asks, panting heavily. The run shouldn’t have taken this much energy from him. The serum’s effects are waning. He knows he needs to sleep, but he also knows he won’t be able to relax until he’s seen Kenma.

The receptionist (Hinata scrambles to think of her name. Hana?) gives him a sympathetic look. “I’m afraid so.”

Hinata grips the edge of the desk, leaning on it slightly. “What about Kenma? Where is he?”

“Kozume-kun?” Hana turns to her monitor, clicking through some files. Hinata leans over the top of the desk to try and see the screen himself.

“They put him in room three to rest. I don’t know if he’s awake, but you—”

Hinata takes off before she can finish. He finds room three and opens the door cautiously, not entirely sure what to expect. Kenma’s on the bed lying on his side, facing away from the door. He doesn’t turn or move at all, as Hinata enters, shutting the door behind him.

“Kenma?” he tries hesitantly, feeling at a total loss. “Um, Kuroo isn’t out of surgery yet but . . . is it okay if I sit with you?”
Kenma doesn’t reply. Hinata bites his lip but walks forward. His limbs feel heavier with each step, but he makes it to the bed and climbs on top of it. Lying down behind Kenma, he wraps his arm around Kenma’s waist, burying his face in his soft, dark hair.

“I’m sorry, Kenma,” he says, the words catching on the lump in his throat. “Please don’t hate me.”

Kenma inhales sharply, his body shuddering as he exhales.

“I don’t hate you,” he says, then, in a small, dull voice.

“I should’ve helped Kuroo-san. I should’ve—”

Kenma rolls over onto his back, frowning up at him. “It’s not your fault.”

Hinata stares down at him forlornly. “I really wanted to be a hero. But people are dead and Kuroo is hurt and you’re sad and I can’t do anything to help.”

Kenma grabs the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair. He tugs down until their foreheads touch, his fingers trembling. Hinata holds his breath, making a conscious effort to not say anything that might ruin the moment. Kenma’s eyes close.

“You are helping,” he murmurs.

Relieved Kenma doesn’t seem angry with him, Hinata settles down beside him. Keeping his arm wrapped around Kenma’s waist, he nuzzles his face against the side of Kenma’s, allowing the fatigue to seep into his limbs. He closes his eyes.

The next thing he knows, a hand shakes his shoulder. Sitting up quickly, he stares wide-eyed at the man in light blue scrubs standing next to the bed.

“Sugawara-san?”

Sugawara gives him a tired smile. “Kuroo is out of surgery,” he says, gaze shifting to the bed beside him. Hinata turns to see Kenma sitting up slowly. He doesn’t look like he got any sleep, but when he registers Sugawara’s words, he scrambles off the bed.

“I want to see him,” Kenma says.

Sugawara holds up his hand. “He’s breathing on his own, but he’s not awake yet,” he cautions. “He needs rest.”

“I want to see him,” Kenma says again, his voice like ice.

Hinata glances between the two. After a moment, Sugawara nods.

“Very well,” he says. “Come with me.”

Kenma starts forward, but hesitates before he reaches the door. He looks back at Hinata, circles dark beneath his eyes. “You should go home,” he says quietly.

Hinata slides off the bed and stands. “Will you be okay?” he asks hopefully.

Kenma glances at Sugawara. “He’s alive,” he says, turning back to Hinata. “I’ll be fine.”

Hinata nods, watching him go. Scuffing his hand through his hair, he makes his way out of the room and out of the infirmary. Outside, the sky has darkened; clear, now, without a cloud in sight. Hinata
finds his bike where he left it earlier in the parking lot, unlocking it. The base seems eerily quiet. There are no alarms blaring, no soldiers shouting and running back and forth. The guard at the gate doesn’t even lift his head, as Hinata pedals past.

He’s not sure why he goes to the downtown perimeter. He stops just outside the barricade, looking over them to the demolished buildings beyond. There are workers there, clearing out the remains of the kaiju. He knows they’ve already removed the bodies of the soldiers.

Shibayama . . . Bokuto-san . . .

How many others were there? Hinata can’t remember. He didn’t even know their names, he realizes.

Getting off his bike, he climbs over the barricade. Standing at attention, he brings his hand up and salutes the city. Salutes all the fallen soldiers of the past and the present. He salutes Haiba Lev and Shibayama Yuuki and Bokuto Koutarou.

Normally, it’s difficult for him to remain still for long periods of time, but he lingers in this position for several minutes, the cold air nipping his nose and cheeks, stinging his eyes.

Oh. Wait. Those are tears.

Sniffling softly, he wipes at them, turning back to hop over the barricade and pick up his bike. He rides home as quickly as his tired limbs will allow, dropping it in the driveway of his house.

Natsu opens the door before he can get to it. She looks up at him with wide brown eyes, her hair pinned back in a million sparkly clips.

“Onii-san,” she says softly, before lifting her arms to the side.

Hinata falls into them gratefully, squeezing her tightly, as he buries his face in her warm neck. Natsu holds him back just as firmly, her small fingers gripping his shirt.

“Your face is cold,” she complains, but she doesn’t let him go, and when he starts to cry, she only kicks the door shut and doesn’t say a word.

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Kuroo’s face is pale. He’s lying much too still on the infirmary bed, and a pinkish liquid is being dispensed through an IV. Kenma recognizes it instantly and gives Sugawara an accusing frown.

The doctor lifts his hands in a placating gesture. “I know,” he says. “But his body is addicted to it. Oikawa’s working on a cure, but in the meantime, this serum is what’s keeping him alive.” He looks down at Kuroo, his eyes growing sad. “We had to replace his heart. The damage from the bullet was too great. There . . . was only one heart available that could withstand the effects of the serum.”

Kenma inhales sharply, his chest constricting around his own heart. He stares at Kuroo, reaching for his hand. His skin is warm, but his fingers don’t twitch, even as he strokes the back of them gently.
“I wasn’t sure how you wanted to tell him,” Sugawara admits. “I thought . . . it might be easier coming from you.”

Kenma bites his lip, picking up Kuroo’s hand and holding it gently between his. He presses his fingers against his wrist, feeling the beat of his pulse.

_He’s alive. It doesn’t matter how._

He’s not entirely sure Kuroo will feel the same.

“There’s more,” Sugawara continues. “But I’ll wait until he’s awake to tell you both together.” He takes a step toward the door. “I’ll leave you alone for now. Press the call button when he wakes.”

Kenma nods absently, stroking his thumb against the soft skin of Kuroo’s wrist. He continues to stare at his face, the sharp lines of it, the stillness of it. It’s unnerving. Even in sleep, Kuroo’s never looked this . . . inanimate.

Kenma’s eyes burn from lack of sleep and dried tears. When Hinata slept beside him, he tried to close them, but as soon as he did he saw Kuroo lying in the snow, a pool of blood growing beneath him. Even now, he can’t shake that vision, and the cold stone of dread that entered his stomach continues to sit in apprehension.

Will Kuroo be the same when he wakes? Will he be different? What’s the second thing Sugawara needs to tell them? How is he going to tell Kuroo about the heart?

Everything feels like a weight on his chest, growing heavier each passing moment. With a deep sigh, he grabs the nearest chair, dragging it closer and collapsing into it. He picks up Kuroo’s hand once more, pressing his fingers against his lips, as he keeps his gaze fixed on Kuroo’s face. His eyelids droop, but he struggles to stay awake. He has to stay awake.

He wakes with a jerk, lifting his head from where it’d fallen on the edge of the bed. He feels something around his shoulders, and as he straightens a blanket falls from them. Releasing Kuroo’s hand, he grabs it before it fully slips off, pulling it closer around him. Looking up, he sees Iwaizumi by the door, hesitating.

“They said he was out of surgery.” Iwaizumi says, his hand drifting to the bandage around his left arm. Kenma’s gaze drops to it, and he swallows hard, remembering Kuroo’s mouth covered in blood. Iwaizumi’s blood. Iwaizumi glances down at the gauze before giving Kenma a grim smile. “I’m fine. They gave me painkillers and antibiotics. I’ll probably be healed by the end of the week.”

Kenma wants to apologize, but the words stick to the inside of his throat. Iwaizumi steps further into the room, his eyes resting on Kuroo’s form.

“He’ll be okay,” he says firmly. “It’ll take time, but he’ll pull through. We’ll be here to help him, too.”

Kenma nods, grateful. Iwaizumi turns to him then, and his eyes soften. “We’re here for you, too, Kenma-kun.”

Kenma bites his lip. He appreciates that, but all he wants is for Kuroo to be okay. If Kuroo’s okay, then he will be, too.

Akaashi visits next. He doesn’t step into the room, simply lingers in the doorway, staring in at Kuroo and Kenma. He looks terrible. His eyes rimmed red, his face pale, lips dried and cracked. Kenma wonders how long he’s been there and why he hasn’t gone home.
“Will he live?” he asks, tersely.

Kenma nods, and the barest flicker of contempt passes over Akaashi’s face, before it’s replaced with resignation. Kenma knows to not take it personally, considering, but he can’t help the sting of indignation that flares within him.

“It’s not his fault,” he says, his voice hoarse from disuse. He levels his glare on Akaashi, however. He understands what Akaashi is going through; he knows he barely escaped such an existence, himself. But he will not stand by silently and allow Akaashi to blame or hate Kuroo for what happened.

Akaashi’s eyes widen, almost imperceptibly. He looks down at the floor, his eyes closing briefly. “I know,” he says softly, before lifting his gaze once more. “But even so, I wish it’d been him. I wish it’d been any one of us, instead.”

Kenma swallows hard. The sting burns hotter, but he remains seated. He lifts his knuckles to his mouth, biting down gently, as he stares into Kuroo’s pale face. He’s sorry for Akaashi’s loss, but he refuses to feel guilty for being relieved at Kuroo’s prognosis.

He can’t think of anything to say to try and ease Akaashi’s pain, so he remains silent, and listens to the sound of Akaashi’s footsteps walking away.

Time passes strangely, after that. He may have been sitting here for hours, or maybe it’s just been a few minutes, when Kyoutani enters the room carrying a bento box. He sets it on the edge of the bed, the white kitty faces on the pink cloth catching Kenma’s eyes first. He blinks at the box before lifting his gaze to look up at Kyoutani.

The man shoves his hands into his pockets, his gaze fixed on Kuroo. “Shigeru said you probably haven’t eaten since yesterday. It’s from him.”

Kenma knows it’s probably Kyoutani who actually made the bento, considering Yahaba’s probably busy in the lab with Oikawa, but he nods.

Kyoutani sighs, rubbing the back of his head. “Sucks,” he mutters, glancing down at Kenma. “This shit’s fucked up.”

Kenma nods again. “Fucked up,” he agrees quietly.

“Kuroo’s a tough dude, though. He’ll pull through.”

Kenma picks up the bento, cradling it in his lap. He doesn’t have any appetite, so he simply holds it, wondering if he can save it for Kuroo. He feels a broad hand drop onto his head, stroking his hair once before pulling away.

“Eat,” Kyoutani mutters, before he’s gone as well.

Kenma strokes the bow on the bento lightly, knowing he should but not sure he can stomach the food right now. The thought of eating makes him feel nauseous.

A soft murmur causes him to jerk upright, and the bento nearly tumbles to the floor before Kenma catches it on instinct. Standing quickly, he sets the bento down on his chair, stepping forward to lean over Kuroo, staring down into his face.

Kuroo’s eyelashes flutter, before he opens his eyes, blinking. Kenma holds his breath, as Kuroo’s
gaze wanders across the ceiling, before landing on Kenma’s face. He blinks again, and Kenma can’t help the tears that start to blur his vision.

“Kenma?” Kuroo whispers, and there’s no red tinge in his eyes, no snarl in his tone.

He’s back, and he’s Kuroo.

Kenma grabs his face in his hands, bending down to kiss him deeply. Kuroo doesn’t respond immediately, but Kenma pulls back before he can, stroking his thumbs across Kuroo’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Kuroo chokes out, tears filling his own eyes. “I broke our promise.”

Kenma shakes his head quickly. Yes, he was angry in the tent when Kuroo told Sawamura his stupid plan. But he’s too relieved to hold onto that anger, right now.

“I’ll scold you for that later,” he says, biting his lip to fight back a smile. “Just focus on getting better, okay?”

Kuroo reaches for his chest, feeling the bandage there with a faint frown. Kenma pulls away, his relief growing heavy, shifting into dismay.

“I thought . . . that kid. He shot me in the heart.”

“They gave you a new heart,” Kenma says softly, his hands falling away from Kuroo’s face. He tugs at the bed sheets, keeping his eyes on his fingers, as they fidget. “They had to find one that could withstand the amount of serum you needed . . .”

Kuroo inhales sharply. “You mean . . .”

Kenma nods, lifting his gaze. The shock and horror on Kuroo’s face is too much to bear, however, and he has to look away again.

“You have Koutarou’s heart.”

Kuroo remains silent, and when Kenma chances a glance at his face, he sees Kuroo’s pressed his fists into his eyes, his lips twisted in a grimace of pain. Kenma turns to hit the call button, his chest so tight he can only take short, shallow breaths. He doesn’t know what to say. He can’t take away Kuroo’s pain, right now. No matter how badly he wants to. Within two minutes, Sugawara steps into the room. He takes in the scene with a solemn expression before stepping over to lay his hand on Kuroo’s head.

“He would’ve wanted you to have it,” he says in a firm, quiet voice. “When the kaiju . . . when Bokuto died, his ribs pierced through his lungs and heart, but we were able to patch his heart enough to transplant it. Unfortunately . . . the patch we used had to be injected with serum before we could stitch it onto the heart, so it wouldn’t tear while you take the serum you still need to stay alive. What this means is . . . you can’t stop taking the serum. Oikawa is working on a cure, but . . . you may not be able to take it. Many complications can occur if the patch grows weak or becomes incompatible with the heart.”

Kuroo laughs abruptly, startling both Sugawara and Kenma. The laugh is tinged with hysteria, and he chokes on a sob until he’s crying and laughing simultaneously, pain twisting across his features. The sound cuts through Kenma like a knife, and he grabs Kuroo’s arms, shaking him.

“Kuro, stop. Kuro!”
Kuro stops laughing as suddenly as he started. His hands fall from his eyes, and he stares dully at the ceiling, swallowing hard.

“So what you’re saying is I’m going to be stuck as a monster for the rest of my life.”

Sugawara purses his lips. “Nobody is giving up on you, Kuroo. Once Oikawa finishes his cure, we can have him start on a new serum for you as well.”

Kuroo’s jaw clenches. “Oikawa’s been through enough. He’ll run himself ragged again. I’m not putting that responsibility on him.”

“There’s also Kageyama and Yahaba,” Sugawara points out. “There’s an entire lab here. We’ll take care of you.”

“Like you took care of Kyoutani?” Kuroo asks, bitterness lacing his tone.

Kenma bites his lip, not liking the unfamiliar look on Kuroo’s face just now. “Kuro,” he says in soft admonishment.

Kuroo closes his eyes with a sigh. “That wasn’t fair. I’m sorry.”

Sugawara’s hand falls away from Kuroo’s head. “I know you’re going through a lot, right now. And I know the SSP has made mistakes in taking care of you all. But I personally will see to it that you’re taken care of. You’re a hero, Kuroo. We all owe you a great debt.”

Kuroo snorts in derision, but he doesn’t argue. Sugawara looks to Kenma, and he appears haggard. “He’ll need to stay here for another week while he recovers. The serum should speed up the process, but we don’t want to take any chances. I’ll give you some paperwork that explains everything about his follow-up care and how to monitor him. I’ll want to see him at least twice a month for the next three months to check that everything is working properly. But Bokuto’s heart is strong. As long as you keep taking the serum, you should recover fully in less than half that time, due to your accelerated healing.”

Kuroo doesn’t respond, so Kenma nods in his stead. “Thank you,” he says. “For everything.”

Sugawara bows slightly and takes one last look at Kuroo before leaving.

“Kuro.”

Kuroo eyes remain closed. “I don’t know if I can do this, Kenma. Bokuto . . . this stupid fucking serum . . . I can’t . . . I’m not . . .” He chokes back a sob. Covering his face with his arm, he grits his teeth, as the tears continue rolling down his cheeks.

Kenma sits on the edge of the bed, lying down, then, barely fitting. He wraps his arm around Kuroo’s waist and presses his face into his shoulder.

“Just live. That’s all you need to do,” he says, squeezing his eyes shut, as he tries to keep the desperation out of his voice. “I’m here. I’m here.”

He continues to hold him, as Kuroo cries himself into an exhausted sleep.
“They’re shutting us down.”

Daichi blinks across the table at General Ukai and Dr. Takeda. He isn’t sure of the emotion he’s feeling, at this news. It’s something between relief and . . . apprehension.

“Who’s shutting us down?” Oikawa asks, looking even more exhausted than ever. On either side of him sit Yahaba and Kageyama, neither of them looking much better.

“The prime minister,” General Ukai says. “Ushijima and Daishou have been arrested, and the Iwanuma base is under investigation for tampering with the serum, thanks to the evidence Oikawa brought us. But if I’m honest with you, I don’t think that’s going to lead anywhere. I’m fairly certain the prime minister knew exactly what was going on.”

“So the Super Soldier Program is over . . . just like that?” Daichi asks.

“What about the cure? I haven’t finished my tests!” Oikawa exclaims.

“After the incident with Kuroo, the prime minister feels it’s best to suspend the program indefinitely. He’s issuing a statement tomorrow. Most likely he’ll explain that we’ve experienced some ‘slight hiccups’ with our serum manufacturing.”

Oikawa flops back in his seat. “So there goes my funding,” he says, shaking his head. “How am I supposed to work on a cure now?”

“The government doesn’t care about the Soldiers, they just want to save face in the public eye,” Yahaba growls.

“But won’t people still be afraid of kaiju attacking?” Kageyama asks, brow furrowed. “They don’t know they were all destroyed.”

Dr. Takeda clears his throat. “According to my sources, in his statement, the prime minister will say we stumbled upon the nest and took them all out.”

Kageyama’s frown deepens. “But that’s not what happened.”

“He’s a politician, Tobio-chan,” Oikawa says, tiredly. “Lying is what they do.”

Daichi rubs his hand over his face. “Okay, so no more SSP. We still need to find a way to keep the lab running long enough for Oikawa to finish the cure.”

Dr. Takeda straightens in his seat. “I’m a frugal spender, and I have quite a decent nest egg in my savings. I will donate to the lab to keep it running.”

Everyone turns to look at him in surprise. Ukai reaches for him, before stopping with his hand outstretched.

“Ittetsu, are you sure?”

Dr. Takeda pushes his glasses up his nose with a finger, nodding in determination. “Yes. I can think of no better use for it. After everything our Soldiers have sacrificed for us, it’s the least I can do.”

Oikawa lifts his chin, his eyes wet. “I’ll work as hard as I can to get things done swiftly. We won’t
take too much of your money, I promise.”

Yahaba reaches over and lightly thumps Oikawa on the back of his head. “You mean we will work hard.”

Oikawa rubs his head with a frown. “Living with Mad Dog-chan has made you insolent.”

Yahaba gives him a tired stare. “I’ve always been insolent.”

Oikawa pouts. “Yes, but you’re usually more polite about it.”

Kageyama lifts his hand as though in school. Daichi nods to him. “Yes, Kageyama-san?”

“What will happen to us once the cure is finished? Are we fired?”

“Everyone will be reassigned,” Ukai says, looking around the table. He looks pointedly at Oikawa. “Though I’ll order that some of you take a furlough, first.”

Oikawa looks away.

Daichi glances at the clock. It’s after midnight, and he can feel exhaustion seeping through his body, as the stress from the day catches up to him. He knows he still has a stack of paperwork to complete, but all he wants to do is see Suga, to go home with him and fall asleep in his arms. They both could benefit from a good night’s sleep.

They all could, actually.

“General,” he says, turning to Ukai. “May I suggest we turn in for the night? It’s been a long day.”

Ukai turns to him with a nod. “Good idea, Captain. We’ll reconvene once I have your new assignments. For now, rest.”

“I’ll be in the lab,” Oikawa says, standing.

Daichi gives him a look. “No, you’re going home, too. You can get back into the lab tomorrow.”

Oikawa frowns, about to protest, but Daichi holds up his hand. “You’ve been running yourself ragged all day. Iwaizumi’s not fairing much better. You both need time to rest and recuperate.”

“But—”

Yahaba stands. “It’s better to work when we’re alert and rested,” he says. “We don’t want to risk making any mistakes.”

Oikawa purses his lips then nods shortly. “Okay.”

Yahaba bows to those present, before grabbing Oikawa’s sleeve and pulling him toward the door.

Kageyama remains seated for a moment, frowning down at the table.

“Is there something wrong, Kageyama-san?” Dr. Takeda prompts gently.

Kageyama starts, lifting his head with a blink. “What’s going to happen to Hinata Shouyou?” he asks.

“He’ll be taking the cure, same as the others,” Daichi says, remembering his earlier conversation with the boy. “He’s expressed interest in volunteering to help those whose homes were lost in the
attacks.”

Kageyama nods slowly. “Would I be able to volunteer, too?”

Dr. Takeda raises his eyebrows. “You don’t wish to continue working as a scientist?”

“I do,” Kageyama says quickly. “But . . . it would be good for someone to keep an eye on him after he takes the cure, right? Just to be sure everything works out?”

Ukai exchanges an amused glance with Dr. Takeda. “Are you asking if you may continue monitoring Hinata-san after he takes the cure?”

Kageyama nods. “Just to make sure.”

The general shrugs. “I don’t see why not. Permission granted.”

Kageyama stands and bows. “Thank you,” he says, before turning to leave. Daichi watches him go, before turning to Ukai and Dr. Takeda.

“You’ll keep me informed about the Iwanuma investigation?” he asks hopefully.

Ukai nods, his expression grim. “Unfortunately, there’s no way to know if what happened here won’t happen again. In ten years, twenty, thirty . . . it won’t surprise me if they try again with a new serum and a new team.”

Daichi sighs. “I’m afraid of that. Oikawa has the original formula, but unless the rest of the Iwanuma samples are destroyed . . .”

Ukai moves to stand, Dr. Takeda joining him. “We’ll keep an eye on it. I’ll try to convince the prime minister that it’s in all our best interest to lock up the serum and throw away the key. But you know how these politicians are with power. They’re never going to stop craving it.”

Daichi stands, as well. “I hope you’re able to make him see sense, then.”

“I haven’t been able to so far,” Ukai admits with a crooked grin. “But I’ll do my best.”

After they say their goodbyes, Daichi makes his way down to the infirmary. He gives the receptionist a nod, as he passes by her desk, and makes his way to Suga’s office. He hesitates in the doorway, looking in at the man sitting on the edge of his desk, studying a clipboard in his hand with his brows furrowed. Even exhausted, with his face pale and dark circles beneath his eyes, he looks beautiful, if fragile.

Daichi knows he’s not, though.

Knocking lightly on the doorframe, he waits until Suga raises his head to step into the room. Suga gives him a faint smile.

“You’re barely limping,” he says.

Daichi nods. “My doctor’s taken good care of me.”

Suga’s smile widens before it slips away on a sigh. His eyes return to the clipboard, and he runs his teeth along his bottom lip. “I didn’t know if the heart would take. His body might still reject it if we take him off the serum . . . I’ve condemned him to the life of an addict . . .”

“You did what you had to in order to save him,” Daichi says firmly, reaching up to brush the backs
of his fingers across Suga’s cheekbones. “Like you did for me.”

Suga snorts softly. “You weren’t very happy with my decision back then, either.”

Daichi smiles sheepishly. “I got over it. I had you to help me. Kuroo has Kenma. He’ll be okay.”

Suga glances toward the door. “Akaashi won’t talk to me. I suggested a therapist, but I don’t know if he’ll go.”

Daichi takes the side of Suga’s neck in his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “We can figure things out in the morning. Let’s go home.”

Suga sighs, his shoulders drooping. Turning, he sets the clipboard down on his desk. Daichi steps up behind him, wrapping his arm around Suga’s waist and placing a soft kiss on the nape of his neck.

“You’ve done everything you can,” Daichi reminds him, softly. “It’s up to them, now.”

The car ride back to Daichi’s house is a somber one. Suga keeps his gaze out of the window, and Daichi scours his brain, trying to think of something encouraging to say.

“Dr. Takeda has offered his own savings to help Oikawa finish the cure,” he comments, after a long moment of silence.

Suga glances over at him. “What do they plan to do once they’re cured?” he asks. “Turn them out onto the streets?”

Daichi frowns. “I won’t let that happen. They should be compensated for their service. General Ukai will make sure of it. We’ll take care of them, Suga. I promise.”

Suga purses his lips, but he nods. “Okay.” His expression softens, and he reaches over to lay his hand on top of Daichi’s thigh. “What about you? Do you know yet where they’re reassigning you?”

Daichi shakes his head. “No,” he admits. “But they’ll probably ask me to captain a unit in a different field.”

“Do you think they’ll transfer you to another region?”

Daichi sighs. “I don’t know.” It’s not a possibility he wants to dwell on. Moving would mean leaving Suga behind, in all likelihood. He’s a magnificent doctor and surgeon. Daichi doesn’t suspect they’ll want to let him go.

“I’ll go with you, if they do.”

Daichi pulls to a stop in front of the house, turning then to look at Suga with wide eyes. “Are you sure?” he asks, his heart beating faster as hope fills him.

Suga gives him a soft smile. Reaching up, he wraps his hand around the back of Daichi’s neck, pulling him forward into a kiss. Daichi kisses him back readily, moving his hand from the steering wheel to touch the side of Suga’s face with his fingertips. Suga pulls back slowly, setting his forehead against Daichi’s, then.

“Wherever you go, that’s where I want to be, too,” he admits quietly. “So, yes. I’m sure.”

Despite the stress and horrors of the day, Daichi can’t help but smile, as he tilts his head to kiss Suga, again.
With the Super Soldier Program shutting down and no more kaiju to anticipate, Iwaizumi isn’t entirely sure what to do with himself. Two weeks after the final attack, he’s finally done healing, and with nothing left to fix, the serum begins causing some agitation. While Oikawa works steadfastly in the lab with Yahaba, Kageyama, and a couple other scientists who stayed on to assist them, Iwaizumi prowls the now mostly empty headquarters on his own. He stops by the gym to work out for several hours, but that can only take so much of his concentration. When he starts to grow fidgety again, he makes his way toward the Sendai perimeter.

Despite it still being winter, restoration efforts have already begun, and the city is littered with construction crews. According to Oikawa, Sawamura got Kyoutani a job on one of these crews. Apparently, he also managed to get both Kindaichi and Kunimi private tutors, so they can continue their interrupted education. Iwaizumi is glad for them, but he can’t help but wonder how he fits into all this. Nobody has given him any new assignments, and with a cure on the way, Iwaizumi realizes he’s going to need to find some sort of normal job to do.

Oikawa will most likely go into teaching at a university, but what can Iwaizumi do? What skills does he have other than fighting?

“Maybe you can become a dojo master,” Oikawa says one night, as they’re getting ready for bed. It’s one of the few nights Iwaizumi’s been able to convince Oikawa to come home.

Iwaizumi snorts, as he pulls his sleep shirt over his head. He catches a glimpse of the scar on his forearm, pale against his tanned skin. He hasn’t seen Kuroo since he woke. He knows he should probably stop by their place soon. He just hasn’t known what to say.

“Hey,” Oikawa says, leaning over his pillow on the bed to look up into Iwaizumi’s face. “Iwa-chan is smart and strong. You’ll find a place.”

Iwaizumi sighs, moving to get under the covers beside Oikawa. “I just . . . want to be useful. Help people, somehow.”

Oikawa wraps his arm around Iwaizumi’s chest and pulls him close. Pressing his lips against Iwaizumi’s shoulder, he slips his hand down to take his, lacing their fingers together. “You’re already helping people. You’re helping me, aren’t you?”

Iwaizumi closes his eyes, squeezing Oikawa’s fingers gently. “How, exactly?”

“Well, making me sleep, for one. Keeping me company. Supporting me.” Oikawa lifts his head, and when Iwaizumi opens his eyes, he finds Oikawa leaning over him with the softest look he’s ever seen on his face.

“I love you, Hajime.”

Iwaizumi’s face grows warm, but he releases Oikawa’s hand in order to thread his fingers through the man’s hair. He leans up, then, brushing his lips against Oikawa’s in a gentle kiss. Oikawa
murmurs softly, pressing more firmly, as his fingers curl into Iwaizumi’s shirt. Slowly, Iwaizumi begins to relax. Oikawa’s lips travel over his jaw and down his neck. Iwaizumi tugs gently on Oikawa’s hair, forcing his head back up.

“You need sleep,” he reminds him quietly.

Oikawa pouts. “Fine, but we’re revisiting this once the cure is complete.”

Iwaizumi pecks his lips in another quick kiss. “Absolutely.”

A week later, he’s standing in front of Kuroo and Kenma’s apartment. A low fog hovers in the air, but with the serum still coursing through his veins, Iwaizumi wears only a light jacket on top of his sweater. Bracing himself, he knocks on the door.

Almost immediately it opens to reveal Kenma, clad in fuzzy pajama pants and a long t-shirt that must belong to Kuroo. He blinks owlishly at Iwaizumi, his hair mussed. For a second, Iwaizumi’s afraid he’s woken him up, but then he notices the dark circles under Kenma’s eyes.

“Hey,” Iwaizumi says, lifting a hand in greeting. “Is . . . is it okay that I’m here?”

Kenma nods, stepping back and opening the door wider. Iwaizumi steps inside cautiously, toeing off his shoes and calling a quiet, “sorry for intruding.”

Kuroo’s lying on the couch; Iwaizumi can see the black tuft of his hair sticking out over the armrest. “Did he sleep there all night?” he asks Kenma softly.

Kenma yawns, shaking his head. “He didn’t sleep,” he says, but it’s obvious he means neither of them did.

Iwaizumi frowns. “Is he okay?”

Kenma levels Iwaizumi with a look. “He has Koutarou’s heart.”

Iwaizumi winces. He’d heard something about that, but honestly it’s difficult to wrap his head around. He can’t imagine what Kuroo must be feeling. He clasps Kenma’s shoulder briefly, before stepping over to the couch, walking around it to crouch beside it. Kuroo’s staring at the ceiling, dressed only in a pair of pajama pants. Down the center of his chest is an already fading scar, a vertical line of pale skin. Iwaizumi finds himself staring at it a moment, before he drags his gaze up to Kuroo’s face.

His eyes are swollen from crying, dark circles similar to Kenma’s coloring the skin beneath them. His lips are dried and cracked. It’s the worst Iwaizumi’s ever seen him look, and his chest tightens with sympathy.

“Hey,” he says gently, reaching out to place his hand lightly on Kuroo’s bicep.

Kuroo closes his eyes briefly, swallowing hard. He turns his head then and attempts a wry smile. “Hey. Sorry for not getting up. Doc says I still have to be careful moving around.”

“It’s fine,” Iwaizumi says, giving Kuroo’s arm a gentle squeeze. “I just . . . came to see how you
Kuroo laughs, then winces at the pain it causes. “Pretty pathetic, huh?”

“You’ve been through a lot,” Iwaizumi says. “It’s going to take a while to heal.”

Kenma appears beside the couch. He taps Kuroo’s forehead. With a slight grimace, he sits up on his elbows, allowing Kenma to take a seat where his head used to be. Kenma guides his head back down into his lap, and starts carding his fingers through Kuroo’s hair. It’s an intimate gesture, and Iwaizumi watches as Kuroo relaxes into it, some of the tension leaving the lines in his face.

“You heard about them shutting everything down?” Kuroo asks, his eyes closing once more.

Iwaizumi nods. “Yeah, I heard.”

“You know yet what you’re going to do?”

Iwaizumi shakes his head. “Oikawa suggested I become a dojo master.”

Kenma snorts, even as Kuroo smirks. “I could see that. You’ve got the training for it.”

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly something that helps people.”

“It teaches self-defense,” Kenma points out.

Iwaizumi tilts his head. “Yeah, I guess. But . . . I don’t know.”

“After literally saving lives, it feels pretty pedestrian,” Kuroo surmises.

Iwaizumi smile ruefully, settling down to sit cross-legged on the floor. “I guess it’s a pretty narcissistic concern.”

“I get it, though,” Kuroo admits, his voice growing softer. “We were heroes. We knew what we were doing kept people safe. It’s not so easy going back to a normal life, after that.”

“You could become a fire-fighter,” Kenma suggests. “Or join the police academy.”

Iwaizumi has to admit he didn’t consider that. “I guess I have more options than I thought,” he realizes.

“Happy to help,” Kuroo says, lifting his fist.

Iwaizumi taps his against it but keeps his eyes on Kuroo’s tired face. “What about you?”

Kuroo smirks. “Me? I’m fucked.”

Kenma frowns, his fingers stilling in Kuroo’s hair. “Kuro.”

“It’s true. I’m stuck on this serum until who knows when . . . I can’t try to get a normal job when I’m like this. The stupidest thing could set me off, and I’ll rage out. I’m not going to put people’s lives at risk, like that.”

“You don’t have to do anything, right now,” Kenma says, shaking his head. “I’ll get a job. I’ll take care of you.”

“And that’s fair to you? Forcing you to do everything? To be my damn caretaker?”
Kenma’s jaw tightens. “I don’t mind.”

“I mind!”

Iwaizumi can tell this is an argument they’ve had before. Tension floods the room, and he shifts uncomfortably. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to start anything, with that.”

Kuroo waves him off wearily. “It’s fine. I’m sorry. I’m just . . . tired.”

Iwaizumi moves to stand. “I should probably head out, anyway.” He hesitates. “Uh, Bokuto’s parents are taking his body back to Tokyo. They’re going to have the funeral there. You guys going?”

Kenma looks down into Kuroo’s face, which has tightened once more.

“I doubt his parents are going to want to see me,” Kuroo says quietly. “The guy who let their son die and then took his heart?” He chuckles darkly. “I’m sure they hate me.”

Kenma sighs, moving his fingers through Kuroo’s hair once more. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Kuroo doesn’t respond, but it’s clear from his pursed lips and the wrinkle in his forehead that he doesn’t agree. Iwaizumi’s chest feels tight.

“Well . . . I guess I’ll see you guys around,” he says. Reaching down, he takes Kuroo’s shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. “Listen to Kenma, man. He knows what he’s talking about.”

He heads for the door, then, pulling his shoes back on. He feels a tug on his sleeve and turns to see Kenma looking up at him.

“When are you leaving for the funeral?” he asks.

Iwaizumi blinks. “Next Friday.”

Kenma nods. “We’ll be there.”

Iwaizumi studies Kenma, standing there with his clothes hanging off his thin frame. Despite his outward frailty, his chin is lifted, and his eyes are bright with resolve. *There’s more strength in this one than we all know,* Iwaizumi realizes.

Taking a step back, he bows to him. Kenma starts in surprise, his eyes widening. His fingers curl into his sleep shirt, and when Iwaizumi straightens, Kenma’s frowning in confusion.

“What was that for?” he mutters, fidgeting in embarrassment.

“I admire you,” Iwaizumi admits. “You’ve held it together better than any of us. You’re probably one of the strongest people I know.”

A flush darkens Kenma’s face, and he looks away. “I’m not that strong.”

“You are,” Iwaizumi says seriously. He looks over Kenma’s shoulder to where he can see Kuroo’s hair once more sticking over the top of the armrest. “And you’re going to get him through this.” He reaches out to pat Kenma’s shoulder. “You’re both going to be okay.”

Kenma blinks, determination once more filling his expression. He nods, once, and closes the door behind Iwaizumi, as he steps back out into the cold.
Thursday, Oikawa wakes Iwaizumi with a crow of triumph.

“I GOT IT! I GOT IT! IT’S ALL HERE!”

Iwaizumi rubs the sleep from his eyes, sitting up on one elbow. He squints at Oikawa, as he bounces on his knees on the mattress beside him.

“What?” he asks groggily.

“The cure formula! I figured it out! Yahaba and Kageyama just ran the numbers and they came back correct! We can move onto production, now!” Oikawa beams down at him, grabbing his face between his hands to squish his cheeks together. “I told you I’d fix everything, Hajime,” he says, his eyes wild with glee. “This is it!”

Iwaizumi’s heart pounds loudly in his ears. The cure . . . He’s figured out the cure. He sits up quickly, grabbing Oikawa’s wrists to pull his hands away from his face.

“Are you serious?” he asks, dumbfounded. “Are you really serious?”

Oikawa laughs, tears filling his already swollen eyes. “Yes! Yes!”

“Fuck!” Iwaizumi cries, unable to think of anything else to say. His heart is racing, and he feels like he needs to run around the block yelling or something, but instead he grabs Oikawa in a hug, struggling to hold back tears of his own. “Fuck!”

Oikawa’s still laughing and crying, as he digs his fingers into Iwaizumi’s back. But not two seconds later, he’s pulling back. “I have to get to the lab. We have to run tests!”

He scrambles off the bed, picking up clothes from the floor to smell them. Iwaizumi stands as well, remembering the decision he’d made.

“Test it on me,” he says, causing Oikawa to freeze.

He shakes his head, as he finishes buttoning up his shirt. “No, no, Iwa-chan. That’s not necessary. We—”

“It is necessary,” Iwaizumi says firmly. “The only way you’re going to see if it works is to test it on someone who’s already addicted to the other serum.”

Oikawa bites his lip, hesitation flickering over his features. “But if I’m wrong . . .”

“You just said the numbers came back correct. That you and Yahaba and Kageyama ran them.” Iwaizumi steps over to him, grabbing his shoulders and looking Oikawa in the eyes. “I believe in you, Tooru. You’re not wrong.”

Oikawa nods. “Okay,” he says. He inhales deeply. “Let’s do this.”

They break several speed limits getting to the base, but the police must still respect the Flying Crows, because nobody pulls them over. Oikawa parks Hog-chan in the practically empty lot, and the two of them hurry toward the building.
“I already told Shi-chan and Tobio-chan to meet us here,” Oikawa says. His eyes are gleaming, and the confident air about him reminds Iwaizumi of how he used to be as a teenager and in his first years at university when he knew what he wanted in life and how he was going to achieve it. He’s glowing, despite the exhaustion still lingering on his features, and Iwaizumi can’t help but marvel at how beautiful his boyfriend is.

Desire surges within Iwaizumi, but he clenches his fists and struggles to keep his body calm. As much as he would like to shove Oikawa against the wall of the elevator and make out with him, they have something more important to do.

When they step into the lab, Yahaba and Kageyama are already there. Yahaba is holding a vial, which contains a pale blue liquid. Oikawa steps forward to study it, practically vibrating.

“Is this it?” he asks in a hushed, reverent tone.

Yahaba nods. “We were actually already here when Kageyama got your text,” he says. “We started mixing right away.”

Kageyama turns his gaze onto Iwaizumi. “Is Iwaizumi-san taking the cure first?” he asks.

Iwaizumi steps forward. “I am,” he says.

“We’ve already separated the formula into two other vials,” Yahaba tells Oikawa, as he hands over the vial in his hand. “If all goes well, they’ll go to Hinata and Akaashi.”

“We’re also keeping a sample to make something for Kuroo-san,” Kageyama says. “Since he can’t take this one.”

Iwaizumi lifts his arm. “Go on,” he says, firmly. “Let’s get on with it.”

Oikawa turns to him, hesitating once more. “You have to tell me immediately what you feel,” he says. “If anything feels off at all, we’ll need to get more of the SS-415 serum in you immediately. Tobio-chan.”

Kageyama nods, picking up a vial with the familiar pink-tinged liquid. “Yes.”

Iwaizumi gives Oikawa a look. “I’ll be fine,” he says, with complete confidence.

Oikawa’s expression clears, and he takes the syringe Yahaba hands him. His hands are cold, as he takes Iwaizumi’s arm. Setting the tip of the needle against Iwaizumi’s vein, he inhales shakily. Iwaizumi leans forward, brushing his lips against Oikawa’s cheekbone.

“I believe in you,” he murmurs against his skin.

Oikawa releases his breath and inserts the needle. He pushes the cure into Iwaizumi’s bloodstream. Then he withdraws, stepping back and observing Iwaizumi with a keen gaze. Iwaizumi stands still as a statue, waiting. Nothing happens immediately. He feels the same as he did before.

But then a wave of dizziness hits him. He stumbles, nearly falls, but immediately Oikawa is there to catch him.

“Hajime? Hajime!”

Iwaizumi grips him, but he can feel his body weakening. The strength and power that he’s grown so used to over the years is slipping away. The room spins, and he saggs in Oikawa’s arms, shaking his
head in an attempt to clear it. For a moment, he blacks out.

When his vision clears, he’s lying on the floor, held up against Oikawa’s chest by his arms around his torso. Oikawa’s eyes scan his features, and the worry creasing his forehead fades into relief.

“You’re awake!” he exclaims.

Iwaizumi blinks. He feels normal, again. Sitting up, he looks around the room. “How long was I out?”

“Just a couple minutes,” Yahaba says, poised over him with a new syringe. “How do you feel?”

Iwaizumi pushes himself to his feet. Oikawa scrambles up, as well, grabbing him around the waist to steady him. “Uh, fine, I guess?” he says. “Nothing hurts or anything.”

“Can you lift that desk with one hand?” Kageyama asks, pointing.

Oikawa shoots him a glare. “Let him recover a bit before asking him to do stuff!”

“No, no it’s okay,” Iwaizumi says. He steps over to the desk, piled high with paperwork, a computer monitor, and personal knick-knacks of the owner. Placing his hand around the edge of it, he pulls upward, using all his strength. The desk shifts, lifting off its first two legs slightly. It’s heavy.

Iwaizumi’s not used to things being heavy, anymore. On the serum, he’d be able to lift this desk above his head, or at least to shoulder-height, if he was fatigued.

Oikawa claps in delight. “You’re completely normal!” he exclaims, as Iwaizumi sets the desk down with a grunt.

“Gee, thanks,” Iwaizumi mutters, but he can’t help but feel relieved.

It worked. It really worked. He looks down at his hand, curling it into a fist.

“Should I do more tests?”


They make their way into the weight room where the usual exercise equipment the Soldiers use are set up as well. Iwaizumi steps onto the treadmill, feeling a little self-conscious with the three scientists staring at him. He hits the button to start it and begins jogging. Yahaba steps forward, after a moment, to increase the speed. Iwaizumi quickens his pace. Faster and faster he runs, until he’s sprinting, sweat slipping down his back, his muscles aching. He looks at the miles per kilometer, thinking he must be going at least somewhat close to his old speed.

He’s not.

Oikawa grins, as Yahaba turns off the machine, and Iwaizumi collapses against the console, panting heavily.

“It worked!” he says happily.

“What about the rage states?” Kageyama asks, raising his hand. “How do we test if those are gone, too?”

“I guess we’ll have to make him angry,” Yahaba muses.

“You’re face is uglier than a boar’s, Iwa-chan!” Oikawa says gleefully.
Iwaizumi flips him off, too exhausted and breathless to attempt a comeback.

“Think we’re good,” Oikawa says, writing something down on the clipboard he brought. “Everything worked perfectly! Let’s call Chibi-chan and Akaashi-san!”

“Can I get some water first?” Iwaizumi wheezes, guessing he’ll have to start working out again to get back into the shape he was before the serum. It’s a thought that both disappoints him and pleases him.

He’s normal, now. He’s no longer a danger to himself or to Oikawa or to anyone. They can move on, now, make plans for their future together.

He looks forward to it.

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Akaashi never wants to step foot inside the SSP Headquarters again, after that night. He clears out his locker and leaves without looking back. But living in the apartment he used to share with Bokuto isn’t much better.

Everywhere Akaashi turns he sees reminders of the life that shone so brightly beside him. It’s too painful, at first. He takes down all the photos of him and Bokuto and stuffs them in a box. All of Bokuto’s clothes get thrown into a large plastic garbage bag, and his favorite mug, his knick-knacks and toys, are placed into another box. Akaashi pushes everything under Bokuto’s bed, then, and shuts the door behind him when he leaves.

He hasn’t been inside the room since.

It doesn’t disappear, however. It remains a constant in the back of Akaashi’s mind. He has to consciously keep his head turned away, whenever he passes through the hallway.

But the worst part, he comes to realize, is the silence.

It’s so quiet, now. Bokuto’s loud voice used to be a source of annoyance, for Akaashi. But now all he wants is to hear that voice again. The absence is a gaping hole, in the apartment, and in his chest. There are no more shouts of “Good morning, Akaashi!” when he wakes up. There are more no questions about random facts Bokuto heard from Kuroo or others. There are no more calls of “Hey, hey, hey!” used in whatever random form Bokuto saw fit to use them.

Akaashi tells himself to not call Bokuto’s phone to hear his voicemail. Not only is it pathetic, it will only cause him more pain.

Instead, he desperately tries to drown out the silence by playing his music. At first it’s just classical tracks on his iPod dock, but that doesn’t soothe his agitation. So he buys a piano keyboard.

He’s rusty, not having played in years. But when he plays, he pours his pain into the music with each sorrowful melody.
The days turn into weeks, and Akaashi continues this half-life, this faded existence. He takes long walks most days, to avoid being at home. He spends more money than is probably wise on restaurants and alcohol just to postpone the time when he’ll need to return to the empty apartment. It doesn’t feel like home anymore, anyway.

He tries to erase Bokuto from every corner of his mind. But when he goes to sleep at night, his dreams are full of him. Of his laugh, his touch, his smile, his eyes. Sometimes, his treacherous brain replays that day. He has to watch as Bokuto shoves him out of the way of that descending foot. He has to stare once more into that face, as the life leaves his bright, golden eyes.

He has to listen, over and over again, to Bokuto’s voice gasping his name and that phrase Akaashi should have been able to say first.

_I love you._

He tries to avoid sleeping, these days, but exhaustion eventually overtakes him, and he wakes to a tear-stained pillowcase.

It’s four weeks and a day when Akaashi gets a text from Oikawa. He’s been avoiding all calls from his former teammates and colleagues, not wanting their pity. He knows their hearts are in the right place, but he can’t stand the thought of them stumbling through apologies and awkward sympathy.

The only one who might have any inkling of what he’s feeling is Kuroo. But he hasn’t reached out at all. Akaashi appreciates it. Knowing what he does about Kuroo’s operation, he’s not sure he wants to hear Kuroo’s voice or see him at all.

The knowledge that Bokuto’s heart is still beating inside someone else’s body makes Akaashi furious. He wishes no true ill will towards Kuroo, but he can’t help but think, “how dare he.”

_How dare he live with Bokuto’s heart when Bokuto can’t._

**Oikawa**

*WE HAVE THE CURE! GET YOUR ASS TO THE LAB* (09:14)

Akaashi stares down at the text for a long moment. He’s been taking the serum methodically, out of habit. It would be nice to not have to worry about it anymore.

But is it worth setting foot inside that building?

**Oikawa**

*I know you might not want to see us right now* (09:16)

*but with the lab shutting down eventually we’re going to run out of serum* (09:16)

*you might not feel like your life is worth much but* (09:16)

*I can think of a few people who don’t want to see you go just yet* (09:16)

Akaashi tightens his grip on the phone, wondering if he should believe him. While he has the utmost respect for Iwaizumi, Kuroo, and Kenma, he has no illusions about whether or not they’re friends. He’s not close to them, has never let them get close. He held himself apart, only a part of the group for Bokuto’s sake.
Would they truly care if he let himself die?
Would it be so bad to let himself simply . . . fade away?

He taps his phone screen to go back to his contacts. He finds Bokuto’s name, hovers his thumb over it. Closing his eyes, he remembers the conversation they had here in this room.

“Right. No dying. I won’t. I promise! I’ll stay alive forever!” Bokuto gives what Akaashi assumes is his best attempt at a sly smile. “You have to promise too, though.”

He remembers his own lips twitching, unable to resist that grin. “I promise I won’t die.”

”And?”

”That I’ll stay alive forever.”

Bokuto grins, pressing his fist against Akaashi’s chest lightly. “See? That wasn’t so hard. Now you can relax because neither of us is going to die.”

Akaashi lifts his hand to rub it against his chest. It was a stupid thing to promise. But he’d wanted to make Bokuto happy. He’d caused him so much pain already . . .

But a promise was a promise. If he promised Bokuto to not die, then he’s not going to die.

I’m on my way. (09:20)

Hinata Shouyou’s already there when he arrives, vibrating nervously. Kageyama grabs his hair roughly, but instead of swatting him away, the boy visibly relaxes. Akaashi’s chest twists painfully, and he turns to Oikawa instead.

“Is this going to take long?” he asks.

“Not at all,” Oikawa assures him.

He’s acting professional, all business, and Akaashi appreciates it. He appreciates less the glances Hinata keeps shooting his way. He looks like he wants to say something, and Akaashi sincerely hopes he doesn’t.

“Chibi-chan, why don’t you go first?”

“Um! Are we really sure I need this, though? I mean, I haven’t experienced any rage states at all! Maybe it’s different for me!”

Oikawa gives him a thin smile. “You’d rather remain addicted and then grow crazy and die when we run out of the serum?” he asks pleasantly.

Hinata deflates. “Oh. I guess not.”

“Dumbass,” Kageyama mutters.
Oikawa claps his hands together. “Okay, let’s get started, shall we?”

Yahaba hands him a syringe and a vial filled with a pale blue liquid. Oikawa draws the liquid out into the syringe, before turning to take Hinata’s arm. He tenses, but it’s over in a few seconds. Hinata blinks, staring down at his arm. He staggers backwards, almost falling except that Kageyama is there to catch him. Hinata shakes his head, pupils blown wide. After a couple minutes, however, he straightens slowly.

“Huh. Weird,” he says, looking down at his hands. “I don’t feel any different!”

“You won’t,” Oikawa assures him. “But don’t try running through any walls or anything.”

He turns to Akaashi, then, who steps forward, arm outstretched. Yahaba hands Oikawa a new vial and syringe, and he repeats the process. Akaashi feels the superhuman strength seep from his limbs, and when he sways to the side Oikawa takes his shoulder to steady him.

“You okay?” he asks, and his eyes seem to hold a deeper question.

Akaashi brushes his hand off his shoulder. “I’m fine.”

It’s a lie, and they both know it, but Oikawa simply purses his lips and nods. He takes a step back, plastering on a smile and lifting his arms to the side. “Congratulations! You’re both cured. You can now live normal lives.”

Akaashi resists the urge to roll his eyes.

Kageyama turns to the other two, holding up his phone. “Kuroo is on his way to give us those blood samples,” he says.

Akaashi’s stomach bottoms out. He needs to leave before Kuroo arrives. He’s not ready to see him. Not yet.

He bows stiffly. “Thank you,” he says, because it’s the polite thing to do. He leaves the lab, then, walking briskly.

He’s so focused on getting out of the building as soon as possible, that he doesn’t see Tanaka until he nearly runs into the man. He takes a step back, bowing instinctively in apology.

“Oh! Ah, Akaashi-san,” Tanaka bows awkwardly over the box he has in his hands. “I was actually, uh . . . well, Captain said I shouldn’t bother you with this . . . but we cleared out Bokuto-san’s locker so Iwaizumi-san can take his things to the funeral tomorrow . . . but I thought, I don’t know. Maybe you’d like to keep something for yourself?”

He lifts the box, and Akaashi blinks down at it, nausea curling around his stomach, as his chest tightens. He doesn’t want to take it. He knows he doesn’t want to take it. But his hands move forward anyway, taking the box from Tanaka and holding it close to his chest.

“Oh! Ah, Akaashi-san,” Tanaka bows awkwardly over the box he has in his hands. “I was actually, uh . . . well, Captain said I shouldn’t bother you with this . . . but we cleared out Bokuto-san’s locker so Iwaizumi-san can take his things to the funeral tomorrow . . . but I thought, I don’t know. Maybe you’d like to keep something for yourself?”

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“I’m sorry about your loss, man,” Tanaka says, shaking his head. He lifts his hand, running it over his close shaven scalp. “It’s pretty fucked up.” He seems sincere, but that only makes it worse. Akaashi swallows back the lump that’s gathering in his throat, as he nods.

“Thank you,” he says, because he can’t think of anything else to say.

Tanaka pats his shoulder, as he passes him. Akaashi remains where he is, staring down at the box in his arms. He knows he shouldn’t open it. It’s a bad idea to dredge up memories he’s better off trying
to forget.

Even knowing all this, Akaashi makes his way to the locker room. Sitting down on one of the benches, he sets the box on the floor between his feet. Inhaling, he opens it.

Sitting directly on top are some folded clothes. A tank top and some basketball shorts that Bokuto used to train in. There are also some street clothes, most likely ones Bokuto planned on changing into after training. Akaashi draws them out slowly, pressing his face into the soft material and inhaling. They smell like Bokuto’s deodorant, and the lump in his throat grows. The corners of his eyes sting, and he blinks back the tears that are gathering, as he carefully sets the clothes back into the box.

His hands brush against something hard and oddly shaped. Moving the clothes to the side, he pulls out two action figures.

They’re the action figures Bokuto begged Akaashi to let him buy the day of the unpredictable kaiju attack when Sawamura lost his arm. Bokuto’s likeness is intricately detailed; his bright grin looks almost identical to his real one.

He can see Bokuto now, holding up the two boxes so happily. He remembers the fond way Bokuto stared down at them. The way he smiled with such affection when he said, “I’m going to make them get married.”

Akaashi chokes on a sob, bringing the figures close to his chest, as he curls over them. He remembers what happened the night before, and the way Bokuto kissed him. Their first kiss. Akaashi rejected him, that night. Stupid! He wasted so much time. They could have had so much more. But Bokuto suffered with assumed unrequited feelings, because of Akaashi’s stupidity.

And then he died.

Because of Akaashi.

Pain tears through him, and his lips part, as an anguished cry rips itself from his throat. He’s suppressed it for so long, he can’t stop it. He releases all the misery, all the guilt, all the agony. He weeps giant, messy tears, his breath catching each time he inhales. His body trembles with the force of his sobs, but he can’t stop. It feels as though his soul is being torn from his body.

He clutches the action figures, as he slides off the bench, dropping to his knees. He hunches over the box, struggling for each breath, as his cries get more desperate.

“Akaashi? Akaashi!”

A body falls to the floor beside him, and Akaashi finds himself enveloped in a pair of strong arms. He turns into a firm chest, wondering for one delirious moment, if Bokuto’s heard his cries and has come back to him.

“It’s okay. It’s okay; I’m here. I’m here, Akaashi.”

Akaashi recognizes the voice. He reacts violently, shoving Kuroo away so forcefully, he knocks himself over, falling against the box and squishing the side of it. Kuroo remains where he knelt, arms still outstretched. His face is etched with pain, but Akaashi feels no sympathy for him.

He sits up, trembling, as he tries to gather his wits enough to speak. “You, you—!”

“I know,” Kuroo says, his shoulders drooping, as his arms fall to his sides.
“You didn’t stop him. Nobody stopped him!”

“I know,” Kuroo says, his lips tightening into a thin line. “But . . . he saved your life, Akaashi.”

“What life?!” Akaashi throws the words back at him, torn between anger and sorrow. “Without him, I have no life! Without him, I have nothing!”

Kuroo’s expression softens. “That’s not true. You have us . . . me, Kenma, Iwaizumi, Oikawa . . . we care about you.”

“You’re all the reason he’s dead!” Akaashi spits back. “If he hadn’t seen the Soldiers on TV, he never would’ve wanted to join! He would have stayed safe if it wasn’t for you!”

Kuroo watches him, and the tenderness in his eyes makes Akaashi want to throw something at him. But he only holds the figures tighter, their small edges digging into his palms.

“Akaashi, you know . . . you knew Bokuto better than anyone. Do you really think he would’ve done nothing to help the people of Sendai? Even if there wasn’t a Super Soldier Program, you know he would’ve wanted to do something. That’s just . . . how he was.” He sighs, looking down at his empty hands. “I wish, more than anything, that I could turn back time and change what happened. I’m . . . I’m so sorry, Keiji.”

Akaashi struggles to take control of his emotions. He sniffs, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. His chest aches. He knows Kuroo is right. Bokuto wasn’t someone who could sit idly by and watch while people suffered. He and Kuroo were alike, in that regard.

Akaashi supposes that’s why Kuroo’s here now.

Kuroo reaches for the box beside them, gently tugging it closer. He looks inside, and his calm façade breaks once more. Tears slip down his cheeks, as he reaches inside and pulls out Bokuto’s shirt. He holds it in both hands, staring down at it miserably.

He’s in pain too, Akaashi reminds himself. My pain might be deeper, but I’m not the only one who lost him.

“Tanaka put it together,” he says softly, his voice sounding flat. He feels hollow inside, like he’s rid himself of everything that was weighing on him. Only he doesn’t feel lighter, just . . . empty. “To give to his family tomorrow.”

Kuroo lifts his eyes, shifting his gaze to the figures in Akaashi’s hands. “Are you going to keep those?”

Akaashi looks down at them, slowly uncurling his fingers. “No,” he decides. “I’m not.”

Reaching forward, he drops both figures back into the box. Kuroo bites his lip.

“It’s okay to keep them, you know,” he says quietly.

Akaashi shakes his head. “It doesn’t look like him. The eyes . . . the eyes aren’t quite right.” The photos are better. He’s not sure if he’s ready to bring them out, again. But the knowledge that he has them soothes some of the sting in his chest.

Kuroo nods, as though he understands. He picks up the box and sets it on the bench, before standing and reaching his hand out toward Akaashi. Akaashi hesitates, before taking it and allowing Kuroo to help him to his feet.
His fingertips linger on Kuroo’s wrist, feeling the pulse that beats beneath his skin.

*Bokuto’s heartbeat.*

He closes his eyes briefly, and Kuroo remains completely still, until Akaashi allows his hand to fall away.

“I’m sorry about my display,” he says, his voice tired and spent. He feels as though he just fought a kaiju on day three of the serum.

“No, don’t apologize,” Kuroo says, shaking his head. “It was good for you to let it out.” He sighs, glancing toward the box. “I just . . . wish I could help.”


Kuroo turns his gaze back to him. “Are you going tomorrow?”

Akaashi inhales shakily, breathing out slowly. He doesn’t know if he’s ready to face Bokuto’s family. But considering what their son meant to him, it would be disrespectful not to.

So he nods. “Yes.”

The ceremony is beautiful, but it feels too . . . sad. Bokuto was full of life and energy. It feels wrong to send him off without any sort of fanfare. But Akaashi assumes telling his parents this would be inappropriate.

He’s anxious about speaking to them. He stands off to the side, twisting his fingers together, as others pay their respects. They’ve met before, back when Bokuto and Akaashi were in university together, but he isn’t sure how much Bokuto kept in touch with them, throughout the years. He doesn’t know if they’re even aware of the nature of his relationship with their son.

But he can’t stand in the corner all day. Kuroo and Kenma have already given their condolences (Kuroo and Mrs. Bokuto hug for such a long time, Akaashi begins to feel embarrassed and has to look away), and he can feel their eyes on him, watching. Waiting.

He fidgets with the cuffs of his sleeves before squaring his shoulders and stepping forward.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bokuto,” he says with a slight bow. “I’m—”

“Akaashi Keiji,” Mrs. Bokuto gasps, her hand covering her mouth.

Akaashi blinks in surprise. “You . . . know my name.”

“Of course we do,” Mr. Bokuto says with a smile that doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “Koutarou spoke of you often.”

Mrs. Bokuto reaches forward, grabbing Akaashi’s hands in both of hers. “Thank you, so much, for everything you did for him. He loved you so much. You made him so happy.”

Akaashi stares, wondering if he’s entered some strange alternate universe. “I . . . he said he was
happy? With . . . me?” he asks, hating how his voice catches on the words.

“It was always, ‘Akaashi this, Akaashi that,’” Mr. Bokuto says, chuckling softly. “Honestly, it was harder getting him to talk about himself. That’s how we knew you were special.”

“Please, come back to the house with us,” Mrs. Bokuto says, giving Akaashi’s hands a squeeze. “I’m sure you have so many stories about him. If . . . if you wouldn’t mind sharing?”

The woman looks at him so hopefully, that Akaashi can’t help but nod. He starts in surprise, then, as she smiles tearfully and pulls him into a tight hug. She’s soft and warm and smells like cookies, even though he doubts she would’ve made some before coming to the temple. Or maybe she’s one of those mothers that bake when they’re stressed. Akaashi realizes he doesn’t know much about them.

Yet here she is, a practical stranger, giving him such a warm hug that he can’t help but lean into it. He places his hand on her back and ducks his head into her shoulder, fighting back the tears that prickle the corners of his eyes. Mrs. Bokuto leans back to take his face in her hands; her own eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

“Koutarou told us your parents died in the kaiju attacks?” she asks him.

Akaashi’s taken aback by the question, and he answers before thinking. “Yes.”

She gives him a soft smile. “Consider us your new parents, then.”

Akaashi blinks, wondering what just happened. “I’m . . . sorry?”

“From the way Koutarou spoke of you, we figured you were practically our son-in-law,” Mr. Bokuto admits. “We think . . . it’s what he would have wanted.”

“If that’s okay with you,” Mrs. Bokuto prompts, sniffling though she’s still smiling.

Akaashi doesn’t know what to say. Everything’s happening so quickly; he’s completely overwhelmed. But with both of Bokuto’s parents looking at him with such hopeful expectancy . . . how can he refuse?

Besides . . . it’d be nice to have parents, again.

“Yes, please,” he finds himself saying, blinking back more tears.

Mrs. Bokuto brightens, and she pulls him back into another firm hug. “You’ll be safe with us,” she says. “I promise.”

Akaashi clings to her, wanting desperately to believe her.

But somehow, deep inside of his shattered heart, he feels seeds of hope starting to bloom.

Maybe . . . he will be okay, after all. He knows he has a long journey of healing ahead of him, but with the Bokutos on that path with him, maybe they can make it through this valley.

He thinks Bokuto would want it that way.

***
Two months later, winter gives way to spring, and construction on rebuilding Sendai begins in earnest. In the Prime Minister’s statement, he condemns the actions of the Iwanuma base, but Kuroo is fairly certain the man already has another scheme up his sleeve to make Japan more powerful.

He reminds himself that isn’t any of his business, however, and he has more important things to dwell on.

Like the fact that he’s still stuck on the serum and every day is a constant struggle to keep his heightened adrenaline under control.

He knows Oikawa’s working on something he can take that will eliminate the adrenaline spikes and the rage states, but Kuroo also knows he’ll probably always be dependent on some kind of medication.

And how much of the serum is there left, even? How does Oikawa know he won’t run out before he manages to come up with something new? Without funding from the government, work is slow. Yahaba’s helping out of the goodness of his heart, but it’s just the two of them, and Kuroo refuses to let either of them run themselves ragged on no sleep just for him. (Kageyama was apparently too valuable to give up and the General reassigned him to a facility in Tokyo where they’re working on a cancer cure.)

The worst part, though, is what this is doing to Kenma.

He doesn’t deserve any of this shit. Kuroo’s wracked with guilt every time he loses his temper for the stupidest things. He knows it’s just the damn serum messing with his biochemistry, but every time he yells, every time he puts his fist through a wall to keep himself from hurting Kenma . . . Kuroo hates himself.

“It’s okay,” Kenma tells him one night, as he wraps Kuroo’s bleeding knuckles in gauze for what feels like the fifth time that week.

“No, Kenma, it’s not okay,” he says through gritted teeth, his earlier anger still lingering, though this time it’s directed toward himself. “What if next time I’m not able to control myself and hit the wall? What if it’s you?”

“You’re not going to hurt me,” Kenma says, with that quiet confidence of his. His eyes remain on the gauze, and he holds Kuroo’s hand so tenderly, Kuroo wants to yell again.

“I don’t deserve this! I’m a monster!”

“How can you say that?” he asks, for what must be the millionth time. “You saw what happened on that field. You saw what I did to Iwaizumi!”

Kenma lifts his gaze with a flat stare. “But you didn’t hurt me.”

“I might have! If Yamaguchi hadn’t shot me down, who knows what I could’ve done to you!” The very thought of Kenma bleeding beneath him, bleeding because of him, makes Kuroo’s stomach heave, as his ribcage threatens to cut off his breath entirely.

Kenma sets down the gauze and picks up the tape, securing the bandage around Kuroo’s hand. “You’re not going to hurt me,” he says again.
Kuroo pulls his hand away, using it and his free one to cup Kenma’s face in his palms. “Kenma, look at me.” He waits until Kenma’s met his gaze before continuing. “I’m terrified, okay? I’m terrified of what I’m capable of on this serum. Please, please leave. Go live with Hinata or Iwaizumi and Oikawa. Don’t risk your safety for me.”

But Kenma does what he always does when Kuroo begs him to leave. He reaches up and flicks Kuroo’s forehead gently, before grabbing the back of his head and pulling him down for a firm kiss. And Kuroo, the idiot that he is, melts against him. Because he loves Kenma, so much, and he doesn’t want him to leave. His presence is soothing, his words calming. If Kenma left, Kuroo isn’t sure what he’d do. Go crazy, probably.

But that just makes him all the more anxious about their situation.

*I’m too dependent on him,* he thinks, as he watches Kenma sleep in bed next to him. He bites his lip, eyes roving over the soft planes of Kenma’s face, the silky strands of his hair. *This is unhealthy. For both of us. He deserves better.*

Eventually, he thinks of a solution.

But it takes him another month to act on it.

The SSP Headquarters is completely cleared out. General Ukai tells them that they’re planning on converting it back into a high school. The night before they officially have to hand over their keys, Nishinoya calls for a meeting and suggests that they hold a memorial in the gym.

“Like a goodbye party,” he says. “Only, you know, not wild and crazy. A respectful party. To remember people.”

“That’s . . . actually not a bad idea,” Sawamura says, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tanaka says with a nod, looking thoughtful. “We could, like, make little shrines for everyone. Or maybe just make one big one and put all their names on it.”

“Won’t that cost a lot?” Iwaizumi asks, glancing around the table. “I mean, I’m all for that idea, but . . . do we have the resources for it?”

“We can all chip in!” Noya chirps.

Sawamura smiles. “Finally using your heads for once,” he says, looking proud.

“Okay,” Tanaka says, clapping his hands together. “We’ll take care of everything. Just be here tomorrow night. And dress nice!”

“Yeah! Formal and stuff! We gotta be respectable,” Noya says, giving Tanaka a high-five.

“I didn’t know you knew how to be respectable,” Sugawara teases gently.

Kuroo realizes suddenly that this could be the opportunity he’s been waiting for to implement his plan. Of course Hinata will go, and he can ask the kid to keep Kenma distracted. It’ll be perfect.

So long as Kuroo doesn’t get cold feet.
The following night, Kuroo stands in front of the mirror attached to the closet door, adjusting and readjusting his tie. He’s wearing a simple black suit with a dark red shirt, his hair as slicked back as he could manage it. Kenma steps quietly into view, and Kuroo’s breath catches in his throat. He’s wearing a white button down shirt with a bowtie, a black tailored jacket, and a knee-length black skirt. On his feet are buckled boots that go halfway up his calves.

“You look amazing,” Kuroo says softly, swallowing hard, his heartbeat picking up speed.

Kenma tilts his head to the side, leaning in to look into the mirror himself. “You’re not bad yourself,” he says, reaching up to flick the tuft of hair Kuroo wasn’t able to slick back like the rest.

Normally, Kuroo would be affronted by such a gesture, but all he can think of are his plans tonight and how he really really doesn’t want to go through with them.

“Did Keiji answer your text?” Kenma asks, stepping over to where Kuroo left his phone on the dresser.

Kuroo shakes his head. “He’s been living with the Bokutos for a while now, but I don’t think he’s ready yet.”

Kenma glances sidelong at him. “Are you?”

Kuroo isn’t entirely sure, but he lifts his chin. “They gave their lives fighting alongside us,” he says with resolve. “I owe them the respect of attending.”

Kenma nods. He walks back over to him, sliding the phone into Kuroo’s pocket, before leaning up on his toes to press a soft kiss against Kuroo’s cheek.

“What was that for?” Kuroo asks with a faint, crooked grin.

“I love you,” Kenma says plainly, and Kuroo’s chest seizes painfully.

Reaching up, he tucks a strand of dark hair behind Kenma’s ear. He has it up in this fancy half-braid thing Mrs. Hinata did for him, but tendrils have escaped, and Kuroo’s fingers linger against them for a moment.

“I love you too,” he says.

*Please forgive me.*

The gym has been completely transformed. Kuroo has no idea how Tanaka and Noya managed to get everything together so quickly, but there are twinkling lights hanging from the upper balcony, light covered plants in every corner, a table full of champagne, a buffet with catered food, soft music playing from an iPod dock, and in the center of the room stands the memorial.

It’s carved into the shape of the Flying Crows symbol: two katana pointing toward the ground, with a crow flying between them. Etched into the dark stone, covering the entire statue, are hundreds of names. As Kuroo walks around it, reading each name to himself, he nearly runs into Yamamoto Takatora, who stands clutching a glass of champagne, as tears run unchecked down his face.

“He was a good kid, you know?” he sniffles, staring at the characters that read *Shibayama Yuuki.* “He didn’t deserve to go like that.”
Kuroo grabs his shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. “Clean your face, soldier. He wouldn’t want you sobbing like this at a party.”

Yamamoto nods, sniffing loudly. “I’m sorry for your loss, sir,” he says, nodding to the head of the crow.

Its wings are outstretched, like it’s flying directly toward you, and at the very top of its head is the name, Bokuto Koutarou.

Kuroo bites his lip, fighting back tears of his own, now. “Thanks,” he says with a nod. He pats Yamamoto on the shoulder, before turning to escape. In doing so, he almost bowls over a short, familiar man.

“Watch it,” Yaku says, without malice.

Kuroo freezes, wiping at his eyes quickly. “Yaku-san, you came.”

“Of course, I came,” Yaku says, stepping around Kuroo to approach the memorial. Yamamoto’s turned away to gulp down the rest of his champagne, and Yaku ignores him, eyes scanning the memorial.

Kuroo hesitates before stepping forward, setting his finger against the name he’s looking for. “Here,” he says softly.

Yaku reaches up, stroking the name Haiba Lev with the tips of his fingers. His eyes remain dry, but there’s a sadness that hovers around him.

“Yaku, I’m . . . I’m so sorry,” Kuroo starts, guilt sinking like a stone in his stomach.

Yaku shakes his head. “It’s not your fault the kid was an idiot,” he says. “Though, I guess I’m more of an idiot. I should have told him how much he meant to me.”

“I . . . I know it’s none of my business, but . . . I think he knew,” Kuroo says quietly. “Whenever he came over, you were his favorite topic of conversation. He told us everything you did for him, how you took care of him.”

Yaku sighs, allowing his hand to fall away. “I hope you’re right,” he says.

“Yaku-san?”

Yaku and Kuroo both turn to see Tsukishima and Yamaguchi approach. When Yamaguchi sees Kuroo, his eyes widen, his face paling.

“K-Kuroo-san!”

“It’s okay, Yamaguchi,” Kuroo assures him, holding up his hand. “You did exactly what I told you to do. There’s no hard feelings, I promise.”

Yamaguchi hesitates before nodding, bowing slightly, before turning to Yaku. “It’s good to see you,” he tells the shorter man, moving to hug him gently. “How are you holding up?”

“Some days are better than others,” Yaku says with a wry smile that Kuroo finds painfully relatable.

He turns to Tsukishima, who’s staring stoically at the memorial. More specifically, the name etched on the hilt of one of the katana. Tsukishima Akiteru.
“I never met him,” Kuroo admits, stepping up beside Tsukishima. “But I heard he was a good man.”

Tsukishima nods, slightly. Kuroo wonders if he should say more, but before he can think of anything, Tsukishima’s turning away and walking over to the champagne table. Kuroo watches him go, guessing it doesn’t get much easier over time.

He looks back toward Bokuto’s name, pulling his phone out of his pocket and taking a picture. Before stopping to think too much about whether or not it’s a good idea, he sends the photo to Akaashi.

_They put his name at the very top. He would’ve liked that._ (20:13)

A second later, his phone buzzes.

**Akaashi**

*Yes, he would have._ (20:13)

Kuroo slips his phone back into his pocket, glad that Akaashi has a support system in Bokuto’s family. It’s probably just what he needs in order to heal. Kuroo bites his lip, looking over to the table where he left Kenma. Hinata is there now, talking animatedly to him, though his features aren’t as bright as usual. Iwaizumi and Oikawa have joined him, as well, both looking amused at Hinata’s tale. Kuroo’s gaze lingers on Kenma, though, and his chest aches.

*He has a good support system, too. He’ll be fine.*

That’s what he tells himself, at least, as he makes his way over.

“And we Skype all the time, but it isn’t the same,” Hinata’s saying as Kuroo approaches.

“Who are you Skyping?” he asks, unable to help his curiosity.

“His boyfriend,” Kenma says.

Hinata squawks. “Kageyama?! My boyfriend?! That’s! That’s! No, he isn’t!”

Kenma rolls his eyes. “He practically is,” he informs Kuroo.

“How knew Shorty had game?” Kuroo asks with a faint smirk, though inwardly he grimaces. *Damn. There goes my plan for Kenma’s romantic future.*

“Well, we all know it’s not *Tobio-chan* who has game,” Oikawa snickers into his champagne glass, until Iwaizumi nudges him to stop.

“But he’s not—”

Hinata cuts himself off, as the music stops, and Daichi moves to stand by the memorial in the center of the room. He clears his throat, looking nervous despite the striking figure he cuts in his official uniform.

“I want to thank you all for coming,” he says, his fingers twitching slightly at his side. He looks around the room at everyone gathered, nodding respectfully. “I know the men and women we honor here tonight are grateful for your attendance. Thanks to the efforts of two of our own, we have this beautiful memorial with us tonight, and General Ukai has just informed me that there will be a park built in the restored city. This memorial will be placed in that park, for everyone to see and pay their respects.”
He pauses, as everyone in the room applauds. Kuroo glances over at Kenma, as Sawamura goes on to thank others who might not be recognized, like the mechanics and engineers and medics. Kenma’s watching attentively, the lights around them twinkling in the glass of his eyes. Kuroo bites his lip. He fights the urge to say one last thing, steal one last kiss.

Kenma’s too smart. He’ll know immediately what’s going on.

It’s better to just slip away now.

Carefully, he backs up into the crowd, turning for the door. His pulse thuds against his throat, and his hands tremble, as he pushes against the door to exit. The cool night air stings his flushed cheeks, and he makes his way over to Nekoma, as quickly as he can. Earlier, he packed a bag and hid it beneath his bed. While Kenma’s preoccupied at the party, he plans to sneak back into the apartment, grab it and leave.

It’s the only thing he can think of to do. If Kenma refuses to leave him, then he has to leave Kenma. As much as it breaks his heart, it’s what’s best for both of them. Kenma will be free from this burden. He’ll be safe. He’ll—

“Kuro?”

Kuroo freezes halfway to putting his helmet on. Closing his eyes, he tells himself to not turn around. Maybe he just imagined it. Maybe—

“Kuro.”

Fuck.

Setting the helmet down, Kuroo turns, an explanation already on his tongue.

A small fist collides with his jaw, and Kuroo is so stunned, he nearly falls off his bike.

“Kenma?!”

Kenma stands next to him, closer than Kuroo was expecting. He’s glaring, his face red, as he cradles his right hand to his chest. Kuroo’s chest tightens, and he reaches for him instinctively.

“Shit, Kenma, are you okay?”

Kenma shies away from his touch. “You’re leaving?”

Kuroo freezes, his concern shifting to panic. His mouth feels dry, as he stares into Kenma’s face. In the light of the overhead lights of the parking lot, he can see the fury in his expression. In the hurt.

“Kenma, I . . . it’s for the best,” Kuroo says helplessly, and it sounds lame even to him.

“The best for who?” Kenma spits back viciously. “For me? You’re not doing this for me. You’re doing this for you. You’re doing this because you’re scared and for some stupid reason you think you have to protect me from yourself!”

“I do need to protect you!”

“No, you don’t!” Kenma’s voice rings out sharply in the still air. “How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not some frightened little kid anymore?! I can take care of myself. I can take care of
“But you shouldn’t have to,” Kuroo says desperately. He swings his leg back over Nekoma, standing quickly. “Kenma, I have no idea when my new medication is going to be ready, or if it’s even going to work! I can’t force you to—”

“You’re not forcing me to do anything!” Kenma snaps, his voice lowering once more. “Do you think I’m with you out of some sort of . . . of obligation? I’m with you because I love you, idiot! Because despite the serum and the rage states and everything else they did to you, you’re still you. And I want to be with you.”

Kuroo’s vision blurs. Kenma scowls up at him, sparks practically flying from his eyes. But despite his obvious anger, all Kuroo feels is a swell of such intense love that all he can do is step forward, wrap his arm around Kenma’s waist, and kiss him fiercely.

Kenma kisses him back, but the tension doesn’t leave his body. He pulls away after a moment, still frowning. “You promised you’d never leave me, remember?”

Kuroo nods, kissing Kenma’s forehead and temple. “I won’t. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not a monster, and you’re not going to hurt me, so stop thinking you are and that you will.”

Kuroo winces, and he tightens his grip. “I’ll try,” he says, leaning back then to look down at Kenma. “I just . . . sometimes it’s really hard to fight for control.”

“But you always win, don’t you?” Kenma asks, staring him down.

Kuroo can’t help but smile sheepishly. “Well, yeah.”

Kenma reaches up to flick his forehead. “So stop doubting yourself.”

Kuroo bends to bury his face against Kenma’s soft neck. “You’re right. You’re always right.”

“You always say you trust me,” Kenma mutters. “So trust me already.”

“I do.” Kuroo plants a kiss against Kenma’s neck before pulling back to look down at him. The anger’s gone from his expression, replaced with exasperation. Kuroo can deal with exasperation. He kisses Kenma between the eyes gently. “I trust you.”

Kenma huffs. “Good. Now get me some ice for my hand. Your jaw is like a brick wall.”

Kuroo grimaces. “You didn’t need to do that,” he says, stepping back to gently take Kenma’s wrist, inspecting the hand. “You already had my attention.”

“Yes, I did,” Kenma says flatly. “You were being an asshole.”

“Okay, I deserved it, but next time don’t throw your fist. Throw something else. Like a rock or something.”

Kenma’s eyes brighten with a gleam that worries Kuroo instantly.

“On second thought, maybe don’t throw anything at me at all. I’ll behave, I promise.”

“Too late,” Kenma says, pulling away and turning toward the street. “I thought I saw a decent sized rock over here . . .”
“Wait, wait, wait,” Kuroo says, grabbing Kenma’s uninjured hand and tugging him to a stop. “First thing’s first, we’re going to get some ice on that hand. Then we have a party to get back to.”

Kenma tilts his head, considering, before shrugging and turning back around. “Okay,” he says, before tangling his fingers with Kuroo’s.

“Okay,” Kuroo repeats with a tentative grin.

As he leads Kenma back into the gym, he tries to not let any apprehension seize him. He knows their situation hasn’t changed. The life they’re living isn’t ideal, and he knows there will probably be many rough patches ahead.

But they’ll face them together, and with that knowledge Kuroo gains more confidence for their future.

*We’ll be okay.*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone, who stuck with me through this two year journey. I honestly couldn’t have made it through without you. Your kind comments, your encouragements, your insistence that this fic *isn’t* a load of crap... I’m so incredibly grateful for all of it. Ya'll are the real MVPs, okay?

And to those of you who are reading it for the first time or only came upon this recently, I’m grateful to you as well for sticking through this massive thing despite all the tragedy within. Thank you so much.

(If you want to hear the official playlist for this fic, you can find it [HERE](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/ah8U5y4QqjgZ969W5y9z7j) on Spotify)

You can also see the amazing art made for this fic [HERE](https://shions-garden.tumblr.com/)

Until next time~

http://shions-heart.tumblr.com/

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