Vienna Waits For You

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Summary

"It was the day before Nishinoya Yuu's twenty-second birthday, and he had never been more convinced that he'd reached the end of the better part of his life." A story about losing many things, finding some of them again, and realizing the rest wasn't really lost after all.

Notes

"Time is the longest distance between two places." - The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

He made it to town around nine o'clock, and it was already dark by the time he stepped off the train and breathed the eternally familiar air of his hometown. It'd been a long time since he'd visited – over three months, and even then it was just for a day, enough to pop in and see Suzu's recital. She and Taka had both been devastated that he wasn't staying longer, but he'd made all the necessary excuses – early practice in the morning, had a test he needed to prepare for, coach wasn't going to put up with him getting poor grades anymore, another failed test and he'd be benched. Six weeks later, on Taka's birthday, he'd called and apologized that he wasn't able to come home. Too many deadlines, too many responsibilities.

"I understand," Taka had said. Thirteen, and already the wisest and kindest of the three Nishinoya children.

He hadn't told Taka the real reason; he hadn't said that he couldn't bear to face the rest of the family, their mom asking him, "What will you do after graduation, Yuu? Will you even graduate, Yuu? Do you have any sort of plan at all, Yuu?" or the constant response of his dad, "Dear, he's fine. He knows what he's doing. He's young. There's still time."

The truth was, he didn't have any answers to his mother's questions. And while he appreciated his dad's attempts to defend him, those statements terrified him even more. So he'd called less and less often, first once a week, then only a few times a month. He'd continued to text Suzu and Taka – just enough that they wouldn't think something had happened to him. Each text was brief, some had no words at all, only pictures. But it was enough to keep his mom from calling him, demanding to know if he was eating properly. When he stepped off the train and set foot in his hometown for the first time since June, he'd not spoken to her directly in over two weeks.

He stayed on the platform a long time, sat on a bench and wondered what he was doing there, if he should just get back on a train before someone he knew saw him. It was the day before Nishinoya Yuu's twenty-second birthday, and he had never been more convinced that he'd reached the end of the better part of his life.

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In the end, he wasn't brave enough – or maybe he wasn't scared enough – to get back on the train. He hiked his bag up his shoulder and walked without direction. The bag wasn't very heavy; in his haste to leave his dorm he'd only grabbed a few things – a couple t-shirts, a can of deodorant, his toothbrush. He was wearing the same jeans he'd worn for four days and he'd probably wear them a week longer. What did it matter, after all?

He looked at the watch on his wrist, the only nice thing on his person. It had been a gift from his dad when he first went away to school. "You earned it," his dad had told him. "You worked so hard."

The team worked hard, Nishinoya had wanted to argue. He'd just been carried along in their wake. But he hadn't said anything, because his dad had been practically glowing. It was a look that he hadn't seen very often associated with volleyball, usually reserved for Taka's latest test scores or Suzu's dance class. In the end three different schools had vied for his commitment despite his grades, and Nishinoya's family hadn't paid a single yen toward his tuition. There was a small sense of comfort in that.

His watch told him that it was nearly ten. He needed a place to go before it got too much later; he'd
caught a little sleep on the train, but there lingered in his limbs a terrible bone-weariness that he couldn't seem to shake no matter how much he slept. It made his arms feel heavy and his legs move slow. He realized with some agitation that he had two options in front of him: either go to his parents' house, or spend the little money he had on him on a room for the night.

What was he even doing here in the first place? What was he thinking? Nishinoya had no answers and no plan. He'd never been terribly good at uncertainty, and so when he found an open sign on a local bar, he went right in the door without thinking.

Inside, it was smoky and dim. Nishinoya winced at the atmosphere, but he went deeper in all the same. The place was tiny, really – just a handful of tables, a couple booths, a few pool tables. Half a dozen stools at the bar, where Nishinoya headed. There, the bartender looked him up and down suspiciously. "You got ID, kid?" the man said.

Nishinoya glowered but reached for his wallet without complaint. Just a beer, he thought to himself. To calm his rattled nerves and help him decide a course of action. There was no harm in a single beer.

He was three in before he began to realize that he might just be well and truly fucked. He'd had a snack on the train but no proper dinner, and he could already feel his head swimming when he stumbled toward the bathroom to piss. This wasn't gonna do at all. He couldn't go to his parents' house drunk. Would he be able to find a room somewhere? Either way he needed to get out of this place before he sank any deeper in.

Nishinoya washed his hands and splashed cold water on his face, and that helped a little bit. In the mirror above the sink he took stock of his reflection. It was a pretty sorry sight. Dark circles hung under his eyes. He'd always been thin, but now there was a pinched look to his face, his cheekbones sharp and shadowed in the dim light from the single bulb above. Nishinoya noticed a small bruise just in front of his left temple. He gingerly prodded it with his finger and winced at the resulting ache. How had that happened? He hadn't been to practice since–

He ducked his head and haphazardly splashed more water on his face. Some of it soaked into the front of his t-shirt. Fuck, he was just a mess.

In the mirror, he saw the doorknob of the bathroom turn. Someone was trying to get in, though they were thankfully hampered by the bolt on the door. Irritation licked across Nishinoya's senses. Didn't anyone knock anymore?

"Alright, already!" he shouted. "I'm comin' out!" He dried his face with his sleeve and stalked over to the door. He undid the bolt with a hard snap and tugged the door open quickly. "Jeez, would you just–!" Nishinoya cut off abruptly when he noticed he was eye-level with the would-be occupant's sternum. Well. He'd just add getting beat up to his list of reasons it was a bad idea to come home.

"Oh, sorry!" the man said. "I didn't realize someone was in there."

Nishinoya let his eyes pan slowly upward. The man had a broad chest, t-shirt tight across his pectorals, wide shoulders and a thick neck, the shadow of scruff on his square jaw. His mouth curved into an apologetic smile. He had soft dark eyes that crinkled in the corners. His hair was long and loose.

It was as if a fist had clenched around Nishinoya's heart. His breath caught in his chest like a dammed river. He opened his mouth. The syllables tumbled out, the shape of them achingly familiar on his tongue, even though he hadn't said them in a long time. "Asahi...san?"
The guy – Asahi? – looked back at Nishinoya with an equal amount of astonishment. "Wait," he said. "Is that–" He grabbed Nishinoya's shoulders. Nishinoya jumped at the abrupt movement. "It is!" Asahi grinned at him, white teeth flashing in the dim light of the hallway. "Nishinoya! Oh my god, I didn't recognize you with your hair like that! You look–"

Terrible, Nishinoya supplied silently. In the past year, he'd taken to wearing his hair in a high fade, longer on the top so it hung over his forehead, but he hadn't had it tidied up in such a long time that the result was now an uneven, shaggy mess. Combined with his drawn face and wet shirt, he knew he didn't cut the most striking figure.

"Great," Asahi concluded. "You look so great. Wow, it's great to see you."

"That's a lot of 'great', Asahi-san."

"Well, it is." Asahi still had a hold of his shoulders. His hands were warm and heavy. "What are you doing here? How long are you in? Actually – hang on, I have to piss really bad – don't move, okay? Stay right here." He gently shifted Nishinoya out of the doorway and went into the bathroom.

The door closed behind him. In the wake of that moment, Nishinoya's legs felt so unsteady that he had to lean against the wall of the hallway. What had just happened? Was that man really Asahi? He'd looked like him, the voice had been the same as Nishinoya remembered. But the way he held himself, the sure set to his shoulders, the easy way the questions had tumbled out of his mouth, faster than Nishinoya could answer – that didn't seem familiar at all. Was his memory faulty? The vise-like pressure in Nishinoya's chest had not eased. He rubbed the heel of his hand hard against his chest as though it could relieve some of the ache.

Part of him wanted to run. To see Asahi here, in this place, in the state he was in – it seemed like some weird nightmare. He'd probably had this nightmare before. But to see Asahi at all, to run into him like this, by chance on a random visit, well... Nishinoya had had that dream as well. Many times.

He ran his fingers through his hair to try to get it into some semblance of order. God, he wished he had showered. Nishinoya looked down at himself – old ripped jeans, wet t-shirt under an open flannel. He looked like a homeless person. Great, Asahi had said. Nishinoya didn't see it.

The door opened again, and the Asahi-look-alike came back out. He was still smiling, and Nishinoya noticed this time that his cheeks were flushed. That seemed more like the Asahi he remembered, and the knot in his chest loosened slightly.

"Okay!" Asahi said. "Who're you here with? Will they mind if I buy you a drink?"

Nishinoya rubbed his neck. "No. I'm... here by myself."

Asahi's smile faltered a little bit. "Really?" He reached forward to clasp Nishinoya's shoulder once more. "Well, is it okay if I buy you one? So we can catch up?"

Nishinoya wanted to say no. He wanted to walk out of the bar, back down to the train station. The last train hadn't gone yet. He could still get out of town.

"Sure," he said. "Sounds good." He blinked at himself in alarm. How had those words come out of his mouth?

"Great," Asahi said again. He looped an arm around Nishinoya's shoulders, led him down the little
hallway back to the bar proper. The gesture threw up warning bells in Nishinoya's head again – this wasn't like Asahi; Asahi wasn't so easy with physical contact. It was a game Nishinoya had liked to play in high school, how uncomfortable could he make his favorite upperclassman, and he'd play it by jumping onto Asahi's back or blowing in his ear, and Asahi had always responded in the loveliest way, by flushing darkly or stuttering out loud, or sometimes both. Now it felt strangely like their roles had been reversed.

Asahi led him across the room to a table that held two other young men, neither of whom Nishinoya recognized. A terrible feeling started welling up in his throat. He realized belatedly that it was panic. "Asahi-san–" he started.

"Hey, guys," Asahi said to the men. "I'm gonna go have a drink with this old friend of mine, okay? I'll hit you up later."

One of the men, the one with glasses, looked Nishinoya up and down and then threw Asahi a smirk. "An old friend, Azumane?"

"Shut up, Keizan, it's not like that," Asahi laughed. "We played volleyball in high school. This is Nishinoya."

"Oooohh, Nishinoya," the other man said. He had a wide face and a gap between his front teeth. "The famous Nishinoya."

"Shut up," Asahi said again. "You guys are the worst."

The two men laughed. "You hear that, Keizan!" the wide-faced man said. "The seal of approval!"

"Indeed I did, Kenichi!" the other man returned. They clinked their glasses together.

"Oh my god," Asahi said. "I'll call you tomorrow." He pulled Nishinoya away from the laughing pair. "Sorry about that," he said, when they were out of earshot. "They're not bad guys."

"It's okay," Nishinoya said. He'd frozen up when they stood next to the table. He felt strange and unsettled, nervous for being thrown in with the other men. So Asahi had friends. What was the problem? Sure, he seemed easier with them than Nishinoya remembered him ever being with anyone. But that seemed par for the course with the new Asahi. Still... Nishinoya looked up at Asahi's face. "They knew my name?"

"Oh, I, uh..." Asahi scratched at his cheek, his eyes turned to the side. "Well, I've told them about how the team was at Karasuno, you know."

"Ah," Nishinoya said.

The room wasn't terribly crowded in general, just a few handfuls of people mostly clustered around the bar and the pool tables at one side of the establishment. Asahi led him toward the opposite end, where there were a couple empty booths. "Wait here, I'll get us drinks," he said, and he put one large hand down on the table. Nishinoya noticed then he wore a leather wristband, a silver thumbring, and he had a tiny tattoo of a star on the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger. Nishinoya looked again at Asahi's face, earnest and open, without a hint of shyness.

"Okay," he said.

There was a beat in which Asahi just looked back at him, then his forehead creased and he rubbed his neck. It was such a familiar gesture that it hit Nishinoya right in the gut, leaving him winded. "What're you drinking...?" Asahi prompted.
"Oh, uh... I don't care. Whatever you're having."

Asahi's smile turned awkward again, the same as it had in the hallway. "Okay, wait here," he said again, and he walked off toward the bar.

Nishinoya sat down and put his head in his hands. It really felt like some strange dream. Earlier that day he'd been sitting at the desk in his dorm room, the letter out in front of him, the pen in his hand. He'd considered calling his mother, hearing her advice – but in that instant he'd been afraid to hear what she might say – and in the next he shoved the letter in between pages of his chemistry book, and then buried the book deep into his desk, where he couldn't see it. But that hadn't been enough, he'd known the letter was still there, and so he'd thrown a handful of things into his knapsack and run out the door. He hadn't even left a note for his roommate. Now he found himself back in Karasuno, sitting at a sticky table in a smoky room, waiting for someone he'd thought about so many times since he'd left home, someone it seemed now he hardly recognized.

His head swum from the alcohol he'd already had – usually not enough to affect him as much as it seemed to be doing now – and suddenly he realized that it was probably a very, very bad idea to have a drink with Asahi. He should leave. He could leave, right then, it wouldn't even be hard, just grab his bag out of the seat next to him and make a run for the door. But he didn't seem to be able to move, despite every fiber in his body telling him that if there was one person who he didn't want seeing him in this state, it was the boy he'd dreamed about since he was fifteen years old.

What was it that his coach had said? *You're all instinct and no sense. Get your head on straight, Nishinoya.* God, he was so tired; all he wanted to do was sleep. He tangled his hands in his hair and stared at the tabletop.

"Nishinoya, are you okay?"

He snapped his head up at the question, let his hands fall down to the table. Asahi stood over him, a drink in each hand. He wasn't smiling anymore.

Nishinoya attempted to arrange his features into one of his old grins. "I'm fine, I'm fine!" he said. "Just tired, you know. Traveling. And stuff."

Asahi put the beers down on the table and slid into the booth across from him. A deep groove had appeared between his eyebrows. "Are you sure...? We could take a raincheck."

Fuck, Nishinoya thought. "No, it's cool, really. I'm only here for a couple days, so..."

Asahi's mouth pursed thoughtfully. Between the pensive slant of his brow and the unsure look on his face, Nishinoya was struck with a wave of nostalgia, strong and familiar. It knocked loose a piece of the wall inside his head, and the next smile that came to him was easier. "Asahi-san, you've got that look again."

"What look?"

"Like you're trying to figure out if something's gonna eat you."

"Oh!" Asahi's eyebrows jumped up his forehead in such a ridiculously cartoonish expression of distressed surprise that Nishinoya couldn't help the laugh that burst out of his mouth.

"There you are, Asahi-san," he said. "I wondered where you went." He grabbed his beer and sat back in his seat.

"I'm going to pretend that makes sense," Asahi returned cautiously, but some of the concern had
left his face at the sound of Nishinoya's genuine laughter. He leaned forward with his beer in hand. "Hey, though, it is great to see you."

"Yeah?" Nishinoya asked. He felt his cheeks heat a little, but pleasantly. The way Asahi grinned at him was contagious.

"Oh yeah," Asahi returned. He reached the beer toward Nishinoya and clinked their glasses together. He leaned back and took a long drink.

Nishinoya couldn't help but stare at the way his Adam's apple bobbed, the way his hair brushed his shoulders with the movement. Asahi had a long black cord around his neck; it disappeared into the v-necked collar of his shirt. Nishinoya caught sight of a smattering of chest hair dusting the top of his pectorals.

Oh, Nishinoya thought. He cast his eyes down to the table and took a swig of his own beer. That old nugget. He'd thought he'd buried it, that it was a fanciful teenage experiment he'd eventually stop entertaining. Now here he was years later, and it had come to the surface again with barely any prompting. Nishinoya wondered if he was ever going to get over Azumane Asahi.

"SO!" Asahi said loudly, and he put his glass down with a clink. Nishinoya noticed he'd drained half the glass already. "What're you doing home? Still going to school?"

"Y-yeah," Nishinoya returned, and he took another long drink while he thought about what to say.

"What are you studying?" Asahi asked in the beat that followed.

"Physical therapy," he said automatically.

Asahi leaned forward across the table. "Oh, you'd be great at that!"

"I don't know..." Nishinoya mumbled. He used his thumb to rub a line in the condensation on his glass.

"No, really," Asahi insisted. "Just think about how you used to corral the old team. I bet you could really help a lot of people."

Nishinoya felt his ears get hot. "That's... not the same. I didn't do that much."

"You're misremembering. You did a lot."

"Asahi-san, please," Nishinoya said. "It's not a big deal, okay?"

"Okay, sorry." Asahi was grinning at him, and Nishinoya drank again so he'd have an excuse to break their eye contact.

"Do you want another one?" Asahi asked, pointing at Nishinoya's glass as he put it down again. Nishinoya blinked at it. He realized it was nearly empty.

"Oh." How had that happened? "Sure."

"Great, I'll be right back." Asahi downed the rest of his beer quickly and started to slide out of the booth.

"No!" Nishinoya blurted, so sharply that Asahi paused and blinked at him. "Let me get this round."
Asahi's face resolved into a smile. "How about you get the next one?" he offered.

Nishinoya sat back. The inherent promise in the suggestion made his mouth feel dry. He nodded silently, and Asahi went off to get more drinks.

Nishinoya finally allowed himself to entertain the thought that maybe, just maybe, Asahi really did want to hang out with him. Well, he wasn't helping matters by being so stilted. By the time Asahi returned, he'd resolved to try to remember more of their old dynamic.

Asahi sat back in the booth. He tucked his hair behind his ears and grinned at Nishinoya bashfully. His face was pink from the alcohol and warm atmosphere of the bar. Nishinoya felt the knot inside him loosen a little more. He took another long drink to bolster his courage.

At length he murmured, "Asahi-san, I really missed you."

Asahi laughed. "What, right now?"

"No!" Nishinoya frowned in frustration. "I mean--"

"I know what you mean," Asahi said. He smiled shyly in return. "I missed you too."

Nishinoya felt his heart stutter. He looked away and drank again.

"Hey," Asahi said, "do you remember that time Ennoshita tried to convince us to make that cooking show?"

Nishinoya nearly choked on his beer. "Oh my god," he said. "The one for the school channel?"

Asahi laughed. "Yeah. What a disaster."

"I'd forgotten about that!" Nishinoya couldn't help but grin. "Didn't you get scared by the microwave?"

"It made a really loud noise," Asahi insisted, and Nishinoya felt delirious laughter bubble up at the memory. The rest of their conversation flowed easier as they recounted the disastrous attempt at not only a cooking segment, but also crafts with Hinata and his little sister.

"He never explained anything!" Asahi declared. "It was all sound effects!"

"Remember how Kageyama glued his hand to the desk?"

"Oh my god."

The laughter helped Nishinoya relax. He sat back in the booth, woozy and warm, and let the nostalgia wash over him. He'd nearly forgotten his original apprehension when Asahi leaned forward and asked again, "So what brought you home?"

Nishinoya realized he hadn't answered the question earlier. "I just came to visit."

"On a Wednesday? Don't you have classes or something?"

Shit. "Well, it's just for a few days. A... it's a family thing."

Asahi sat back. The concerned expression was starting to come back. "Ah. Everything okay?"
"It's fine," Nishinoya said, then diverted quickly. "So what about you, Asahi-san? What're you doing these days?"

"Well..." Asahi chuckled and rubbed his head. "I just work in a shop, you know. It's not much. Dad tried to get me to go to school, but. Well." He chuckled again. "It wasn't for me, I guess."

Nishinoya felt his face color again. He looked aside. "That's okay," he said quietly.

"Yeah, I'm fine with it." Asahi's voice was easy, and when Nishinoya looked up again he saw that his expression was untroubled. "It leaves time for other stuff, so it's fine."

"Other stuff?"

Asahi grinned sheepishly. "You'd laugh if you knew."

A tiny spark of curiosity blossomed in Nishinoya's chest. "Aw, c'mon Asahi-san, that's just mean."

"I'm afraid that information is classified," Asahi said, his dark eyes twinkling as he peeked over the rim of his glass.

"No, no, not fair!" Nishinoya insisted. "You can't say that and then not tell me, it's not reasonable!"

Asahi laughed at his adamancy. "I'm not nearly drunk enough to admit it," he said.

"Then drink! Drink more!" Nishinoya ordered. He reached across the table and grabbed Asahi's hand around his glass, pushed it up until the rim was nearly to Asahi's lips.

Asahi kept laughing. The throaty sound of it was unbearably wonderful to Nishinoya. He grinned back deliriously, all the while staring at Asahi's white teeth in his mouth. He was very conscious of how warm Asahi's hand was under his, and he tightened his fingers around Asahi's glass.

Asahi's other hand came up. Nishinoya thought for a moment that he'd use it to extract himself, but Asahi just closed his palm around Nishinoya's wrist. When Nishinoya turned his eyes back toward Asahi's face, he saw that Asahi was looking at him with a soft, half-lidded expression. His hand was firm but gentle against the flat inside of his wrist.

Nishinoya's stomach jumped. He let go of Asahi's hand and pulled his arm back. Asahi didn't resist the movement and released him. Nishinoya grabbed his own beer and took another drink to mask his nervousness. What had just happened?

"I'm really glad I ran into you," Asahi said. He'd pitched his voice low, but even in the general din of the bar, Nishinoya had no trouble hearing him. It was almost as if Asahi was speaking inside his head.

"Are you?" Nishinoya asked cautiously.

"Yeah," Asahi said. His eyes cast downward. His cheeks had darkened. "Here. Tonight. It feels like fate." When he turned his eyes back up, the look on his face made Nishinoya's blood run backward. "You know," he said, "I always--"

Nishinoya cleared his throat loudly and then drained his beer. "Next one's on me, right?" he asked quickly, pointing at Asahi's nearly empty glass.

Asahi's eyebrows knit together. "Sure, in a minute. I'm trying to tell you something."
Nishinoya slid out of the booth and unsteadily stood up. "I'll grab it now, I'll be right back."

"Wait," Asahi said. He grabbed Nishinoya's wrist again before he could move away. "Did I... misunderstand?"

"What?" Nishinoya squinted. Asahi's face was blurring a bit, but Nishinoya could see that the worried look was back. "No, it's fine," he assured. "It's fine."

Asahi didn't let go. "Nishinoya... are you alright? How many have you had?"

"I'm fine!" Nishinoya insisted. "Didn't I say I was fine?" He tugged against Asahi's grasp. "C'mon, just – I'll be right back, Asahi-san, leggo."

Asahi moved out of the booth and stood up. He let go of Nishinoya's wrist and instead clasped his shoulder gently. "Nishinoya, you're about to fall over." He bent to peer at Nishinoya's face more closely.

Panic fluttered to life in his throat again. "I said, let me go!" Nishinoya shouted, and he shoved against Asahi as hard as he could. Asahi barely teetered on the spot, but Nishinoya recoiled badly and stumbled against a table; it groaned as it shifted across the floor. He tumbled over a chair with a loud clatter and fell hard against the floor.

"Nishinoya!"

"Ow..." Nishinoya grabbed his smarting elbow that he'd knocked against the chair. He took stock of his complaining body – probably more bruises to add to the list, more aches to go along with all the inexplicable ones, but nothing more serious, it seemed.

A dark shadow loomed above him, and Nishinoya realized Asahi was crouching down over him. He felt those warm hands on him again.

"No, he's alright," Asahi was saying, "he's had too much to drink." Nishinoya heard other voices on top of each other, but Asahi's hands stayed on him, gentle and steady.

Nauseous and humiliated, he felt angry tears stinging in his eyes.

"I understand. I'll take him home. I'm sorry."

The grip on Nishinoya's arms tightened, and he felt himself lifted to his feet. The noise of the bar, somewhat muted now, passed over him as they went from light to dark, and then Nishinoya felt cool air on his face.

"Let's sit down," Asahi said.

"No," Nishinoya returned, "I'm gonna–"

Asahi steered him sharply, and Nishinoya's knees knocked into the trashcan. He grabbed the edge of it and vomited again and again until it felt that his kidneys might come loose. His legs were shaking, his limbs felt heavy and weak, but the strong arm around his waist didn't leave him, and Nishinoya stayed on his feet. He felt tears streaming down his face; his nose ran. When the wave of nausea had passed, he rested his forehead on the knuckles of his trembling hands and sobbed for breath.

He felt Asahi's hand against the back of his neck, his fingers tangling in the nape of Nishinoya's hair.
Oh god, Nishinoya thought miserably. He clenched his eyes tightly shut and fought to get himself back under control again. How could this have happened? It had been going so well. One minute they'd been laughing together over a beer, just like old friends should, and the next...

Nishinoya straightened back up slowly as his stomach stopped heaving. He used his sleeve to wipe at his face. His breathing was still shamefully unsteady; he could feel little hiccuping gasps escaping his throat. God, he couldn't remember being this humiliated in a long time. Maybe ever.

They were outside, he realized, standing on the sidewalk just a few paces down from the bar. The air was cool and clean. Nishinoya felt his head clearing a bit. He rubbed his running nose on the shoulder of his flannel shirt.

"Better?" Asahi asked softly.

Nishinoya sighed in mild distress. He closed his eyes. He nodded slightly. He didn't trust himself to speak.

Asahi's arm was still around his waist. Nishinoya wanted to die.

"There's a bench a little ways down," Asahi told him. "Do you want to sit down for a bit?"

"No," Nishinoya croaked. His throat was rough from bile and tears. He tried clearing it. "No," he said again. "I should go. I think I should go."

"Nishinoya," Asahi's voice was sharp. He turned Nishinoya on the spot and grabbed his upper arms so he could look him in the eye. His face was stern. It looked so familiar to Nishinoya, so much like Asahi had looked during their high school matches, that he almost started crying again.

"Nishinoya," Asahi said again, "where are you going to go? Where are you staying?" He asked the questions in such a way that Nishinoya got the impression that he knew there were no answers to them.

"I'm fine, Asahi-san," he said quietly. "I don't need you to babysit me."

"Your family?" Asahi continued. "Are you staying with them?"

"Asahi-san, please," Nishinoya breathed in a pained whisper. "Just let me go."

"They don't even know you're here, do they?" Asahi asked.

Nishinoya looked straight up in an attempt to fight the tears that threatened to come back up. Even in the ambient light of the streetlamps, he could still see stars between the rooftops overhead. He never saw stars like that back in the city. He shook his head quickly.

Asahi was quiet a moment as he digested this information. "Is there anyone else you can stay with? What about Tanaka? He still lives here in town with his family, right?"

"I don't know," Nishinoya admitted in a wavering voice. "I haven't talked to him in six months."

That seemed to give Asahi pause. He sighed heavily. "Well," he said finally, "I guess you'll just have to come home with me, then."

Nishinoya's eyes shot back down. "Asahi-san, I couldn't--"

"I won't take an argument, Nishinoya," Asahi said firmly.
"But–"

Asahi insisted. "Just for tonight. Just come sleep on the couch. You can go in the morning. I just–" He made a pained face. "I would never forgive myself if I let you go off alone like this."

"I'm fine," Nishinoya said again, though the statement was undercut by the wobble that remained in his tone.

"You're not," Asahi told him. "And you don't have to talk to me about it if you don't want, but... right now, just for tonight, let me take you home."

Nishinoya felt the earth rock under his feet slightly. He thought again of his dorm room, of the unfinished letter in his desk, the lonely train ride back to all those things that had made a pit in his stomach large enough to swallow his entire life. He looked at Asahi's face, open and familiar, sharp with genuine concern.

"Okay," he whispered. "Let's go."

Asahi sighed in obvious relief. "Okay. It's not far from here. We can walk."

Nishinoya nodded. A walk was probably good; it would help him sober up a little more. He still wasn't sure how those drinks had hit him so quickly and so hard. Another weak moment to be ashamed of, at any rate.

"Are you okay to walk? Should I carry you?" Asahi asked him, and Nishinoya realized he'd been wrong earlier. This was the most humiliated he'd felt in recent memory.

"I can walk by myself," he mumbled. Nishinoya noticed then his bag was slung over Asahi's shoulder. He reached out his hand.

Asahi handed the bag over with a little apologetic smile that somehow made Nishinoya feel worse. "It's this way," Asahi said as he gestured down the road.

They didn't say much else during the trip, for which Nishinoya was grateful. The evening had already turned worse than he'd ever imagined it could – he already looked like shit when he'd run into Asahi, and it had just gone downhill from there. Nishinoya was ready to close his eyes for awhile and try to forget it all. He still wasn't sure what he'd do in the morning. He supposed he'd figure it out then.

They stopped outside a building not even a mile from the bar. There was a dry cleaners on the ground floor, its windows dark, a metal gate pulled over the store front and locked with a heavy padlock. "I'm up above this one," Asahi said, and he led Nishinoya around the side of the building, into a little alleyway. Nishinoya followed Asahi up a creaking set of metal stairs, to a dingy door that bore the number 83A.

"Eighty-three?" Nishinoya said.

"Who knows," Asahi returned. "I've never figured out where one through eighty-two are."

Inside the apartment, Nishinoya took stock of what he could see in the darkness. There was a small kitchen to the left, open to the main living space on the right. Nishinoya could see the dark maw of a hallway directly ahead, the outlines of doors on either side of it.

Asahi flipped a switch next to the door, and a light came on above the kitchen. "You can take the bed if you want," he offered. "I don't mind the couch."
"Please, Asahi-san," Nishinoya said. "Don't make me any more of a burden than I already am."

Asahi touched his shoulder. "You're not a burden, Nishinoya," he returned softly.

Nishinoya shrugged off his hand and went for the couch on his right. He laid down immediately with his face in the cushions, his back toward Asahi and the rest of the apartment.

Asahi didn't respond to that, though Nishinoya heard him moving around. Nishinoya heard water running, and then after a few beats there was a thunk on the end table next to his head. "You should drink some water," Asahi suggested. "And I'll set some aspirin out for you if you want it."

Nishinoya said nothing in return. For a time, he only heard Asahi moving quietly around the apartment, and he'd begun to drift a little when the blanket settled over him. "The bath's the first door on the left, toilet is the second," Asahi murmured. "There's a new toothbrush in the medicine cabinet. If you need anything else, just make yourself at home." Nishinoya heard his soft footfalls moving away, and then the sound of his bedroom door closing. When he was sure Asahi was gone, Nishinoya sat up on the couch and put his head in his hands.

The clock on the stove said 12:37am. It was his birthday. Nishinoya Yuu was twenty-two years old.
Chapter 2

Nishinoya woke up to the soft clink of a spoon against a bowl and the smell of eggs cooking. When he opened his eyes and looked up, he saw Asahi across the room in the kitchen. He was standing in front of the stove and had his back to Nishinoya.

Asahi wore a racerback tanktop and sweatpants that hung low on his hips. His hair was tied back in a messy knot. As Nishinoya watched silently, Asahi reached up with one hand to scratch at his back. He lifted the tail of his shirt to do so, and Nishinoya got a perfect glimpse of the small of his back and, below that, the dimples that sat just above the waistband of his pants.

Asahi hummed softly to himself as he cooked. Nishinoya saw his bicep flex as he stirred. His feet were bare against the tiles of the kitchen floor.

Nishinoya tore his eyes away from the scene long enough to take stock of himself. Not too bad, really, considering the night he'd had. After Asahi went to bed, he drank the entire glass of water set aside for him, then brushed his teeth and washed his face in the bathroom before retiring to the couch again. The aspirin had helped too. His head was sore, but not crippling so.

His hip and knees ached from where he had fallen on them the night before. His weight rested on the complaining joint, and when he tried to shift off it he winced aloud, which caught Asahi's attention in the kitchen.

"Oh, you're awake!" Asahi smiled at him over his shoulder. "How do you feel? Would you like some coffee?"

"Nngh," Nishinoya said in response. He sat up on the couch. A new glass of water sat beside him on the end table, and he reached over and drank from it gratefully.

When he put the glass down with a relieved sigh, Asahi gave him a sympathetic look. "Better?"

"Yeah," Nishinoya said. "Thanks."

"Coffee?" Asahi suggested again, and Nishinoya nodded.

"What time is it?"

"Not quite ten-thirty. Do you want to sleep some more? You can go lie down in the bedroom."

Nishinoya shook his head, then winced again and put his hand to his forehead. "No, I'm fine." He wasn't quite sure he'd be able to handle curling up in Asahi's sheets. They probably still smelled like him from the night before.

Nishinoya knocked his knuckles against his forehead. He was going to have work hard to bury those sorts of thoughts again.

You never realize what a good memory you have until you try to forget something. - Franklin P. Jones
Asahi brought him a large stoneware mug, and he took it gracefully. When he tasted the coffee, he looked back at Asahi in surprise. "It's sweet!"

"Yeah, don't you like it with sugar?"

"...how did you know?"

"I remember you had it like that once," Asahi said. He walked back toward the kitchen.

"You... remembered?" Nishinoya said quietly.

Asahi shrugged and turned to the stove again. "It's not a complicated order."

Nishinoya looked at the mug in his hands, the dark reflective surface of the liquid. He lifted it to his lips and drank again.

Sweet. Hot. It filled up his stomach, warmed his esophagus all the way down.

"Would you like breakfast?" Asahi asked over his shoulder. "If you feel up to it, I mean."

Nishinoya's stomach panged as if on cue. He didn't feel nauseous, which seemed a small miracle. "Food would be good, yeah."

"I made omelette and toast, and there's jam as well," Asahi said. "I could make something lighter if you like. I only have instant soup, but it's not too bad. Or I could–"

"Asahi-san, it's fine," Nishinoya said. He leaned his head onto the back of couch and stared at the ceiling. The stretch of muscle in his stiff neck felt both good and painful at the same time. He closed his eyes and listened to Asahi move around in the kitchen.

"Don't drop the mug," Asahi said, and Nishinoya started. He realized he'd been drifting off again, the mug listing dangerously between his hands. He sat up quickly, then winced at his complaining head and neck. He rubbed at the muscles ineffectually with one hand and drank more coffee with the other.

"Sore?" Asahi appeared in front of the couch with a plate in either hand, and Nishinoya looked up at him. His shoulders were broad and dusky. He had no visible tan line that Nishinoya could see. He had the same little smile he'd worn when he handed Nishinoya the coffee.

The night before, in the low light of the bar, Nishinoya had thought that Asahi looked pretty good. Now that he saw him in the soft mid-morning gleam of sunlight, spilling pale yellow from the front window, with clothes wrinkled and hair tangled from sleep, his face in desperate need of a shave, Nishinoya realized that Asahi was absolutely gorgeous.

Asahi handed him a plate, and Nishinoya took it wordlessly. He set the coffee on the end table so he could pick up the chopsticks. Asahi sat down beside him almost close enough to touch. Nishinoya froze, hardly daring to breathe, but Asahi didn't seem to think much about it. He grabbed the TV remote off the table at the other end of the couch.

"D'you mind?" Asahi asked. "Local news is on."

The absurdity of the sentence derailed his attractiveness. It took Nishinoya a second to recover in the aftermath. "The news?" he echoed. "You watch the news. The local news. Are you forty?"

"Ha ha, you're hilarious." Asahi clicked on the TV and set the channel.
As Nishinoya ate his breakfast, he had to admit the ambient sound of the anchorwoman's voice was comforting. There was some sort of art show on at a neighborhood rec center, someone's cat had learned how to sort their mail, a city councilman had said something stupid again. The food was surprisingly decent – his eggs were a little overcooked, but not badly, the coffee was good and sweet, the jam was homemade. As Nishinoya ate, he realized it was the best tasting thing he'd eaten in awhile, maybe weeks. It had been such a long time since he'd eaten something that hadn't come out of a bag or a box or a wrapper. He lowered his chopsticks and stared at his plate.

"Asahi-san," he said quietly.

"Hm?" Asahi returned around a mouthful of food. His attention was still on the television, currently on a segment about a local business that had belonged to the same family for over a century.

"Aren't you..." Nishinoya poked at his food. "Aren't you going to ask about last night?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Nishinoya saw Asahi's jaw stop working. Then it started again, and Asahi swallowed. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Nishinoya frowned. "You know what I mean."

Asahi lowered his plate onto his lap. He turned toward Nishinoya and gave him a sympathetic look that made Nishinoya's gut churn. He couldn't bear being pitied. "Nishinoya, all that happened was you drank too much, so I brought you home to sleep it off," Asahi explained. "The rest, well." He shrugged. "I figure if you want me to know about it, you'll tell me, right?"

Nishinoya looked back at his plate, stared hard at the crust of bread sitting next to the rest of his omelette. "What if I don't want to tell you?" he mumbled.

"Then you don't have to," Asahi said. "But." He put his hand on Nishinoya's knee. Nishinoya stared at the little star tattoo he'd noticed the night before. How long had Asahi had that? "Nishinoya, all that happened was you drank too much, so I brought you home to sleep it off," Asahi explained. "The rest, well." He shrugged. "I figure if you want me to know about it, you'll tell me, right?"

Nishinoya swallowed hard. The food in his stomach felt as though it had coalesced into a sharp brick. He set his plate aside. "Asahi-san," he said quietly, "why're you being so nice to me?"

That question seemed to surprise Asahi. He took his hand away and sat back. "Why wouldn't I be?" he asked. "Aren't we friends?"

Nishinoya felt his mouth tighten, his face crease. "Are we? We haven't talked in years and we just – I just ran into you at random and now – here I am on your couch eating your food and watching your stupid news and – I barely recognize you, I know you don't recognize me!" He felt dizzy. His breath was coming out in funny little gasps; it felt like each one only went halfway into his lungs, got stuck somewhere behind the lump in his throat.

"Nishinoya."

Nishinoya felt a warm hand on the back of his neck. The weight of it coaxed him down until he was folded over his knees. He put his hands on either side of his head and dug his fingers into his hair until it hurt.

When the moment had passed, he stayed in the position a little bit longer, gazing at Asahi's thin carpet between his socked toes. He hadn't even been awake half an hour, and he'd already embarrassed himself. Asahi's hand was still against his neck. Calm voices emanated from the television. Nishinoya really had to pee.
He sat up with a long sigh. He felt Asahi shift next to him as he retracted his hand, but Nishinoya couldn't bring himself to look at him. "Sorry," he mumbled at length.

"It's okay," Asahi said. His voice was soft. "How long has it been like this?"

Nishinoya hugged his arms. "I thought you weren't going to ask."

"Nishinoya," Asahi said again, his tone edged with frustration.

"I don't know, okay?" Nishinoya admitted in a small voice. "I feel like I just woke up one day, and someone else was inside my body."

Asahi didn't say anything to that. The hair on Nishinoya's neck prickled in the lengthy silence that followed, until he couldn't stand it anymore, and he forced himself to look at Asahi.

He sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his plate set aside and his eyes unfocused in the direction of the television. His face was tight, the corner of his mouth drawn down. Nishinoya felt hot shame lodge like a fist in between his lungs. He looked at the floor again.

"That's nuts, right?" Nishinoya mumbled. "Saying it out loud, I can hear how stupid it sounds." He made a huffing sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "I just need to get over it, it's so stupid."

"It's not stupid," Asahi murmured. Out of the corner of his eye, Nishinoya saw him shift, and he looked up again. Asahi gave him a sad smile. He continued. "Nishinoya, you're so incredible, to try and bear this all on your own, I just can't imagine it."

"What? That's just – that–" Nishinoya felt as though he'd been literally knocked back by the ridiculousness of that sentiment. "There's nothing incredible about it, Asahi-san. I'm just... weak. And a mess. And..." He scrubbed at his face. "I mean, there's nothing even wrong with me! So I don't know why I just keep... freaking out..." His voice petered out pathetically. Nishinoya grimaced and leaned forward so he could brace his arms against his legs and rest his forehead on the heels of his hands.

"You know what would help?" Asahi asked.

"What's that?" Nishinoya mumbled into his hands.

Asahi ticked the list off his fingers. "Finishing your breakfast, taking a bath, calling your mom."

Nishinoya flopped back on the couch. "Trying to get rid of me?"

"No – I–" Asahi backtracked quickly. "No, you can stay as long as you like." After a beat, he added, "Stay the whole day, if you want."

"You don't have to say that, Asahi-san."

"I mean it," Asahi insisted, frowning. "I wouldn't offer if I didn't mean it."

Nishinoya slunk deeper into the couch. He wondered if he slouched enough he could merge with the patched cushions. He felt strangely similar to the threadbare fabric that adorned them.

Asahi regarded him solemnly. "Stay 'til lunch, at least," he suggested.

"I can't call my mom," Nishinoya countered. "Please don't make me."
"I won't make you do anything, Nishinoya," Asahi said.

Nishinoya closed his eyes in relief. "Okay. I'll stay 'til lunch." As an afterthought, he added, "I guess a bath would be good."

"It's a start, at least."

Nishinoya felt Asahi stand up. He opened his eyes, cast them upward. Asahi was silhouetted in the light of the window on the far wall. Nishinoya could see the hair on his arms, the flyaways in his hair, the dust motes floating gently around him.

His chest panged. He didn't deserve to be there, to see Asahi like that, to experience the moment's still intimacy. Already he was wondering why he'd even agreed to come at all, why he hadn't run away the instant he'd run into Asahi the night before.

Asahi picked up the plates. "More coffee?" he asked as he gestured toward Nishinoya's mug. "Or bath first?"

Nishinoya was suddenly aware of the film of day-old sweat on his face, the matted hair at the base of his scalp, the way his old t-shirt stuck to his back. "Bath, I think."

Asahi nodded and carried the plates off toward the kitchen. "The towel on the rack is clean. The building's not really new, but they updated the bath just a few years ago."

Nishinoya peeled himself off the couch, felt his body ache in a host of places, both the sharp pains of new bruises and the old dull weariness that plagued his bones. His bag was next to the couch, where he'd dropped it the night before. He could put on a fresh shirt, at least.

He wanted to be able to tell Asahi that he was sorry he'd been so strange, that he wished they'd met again earlier, or even later, when he'd gotten over whatever worm had slithered into his brain, when everything could be fixed again. He was angry that their reunion had been marred by his erratic behavior, his inability to carry on a coherent conversation.

He wanted to say thank you, for letting him crash, for making breakfast, remembering how he liked his coffee, for... well. For being a familiar face in a dark place, for catching him before he fell headlong into a precarious situation, drunk and alone and with nowhere to go.

Instead Nishinoya just said, "I'll be quick," and he went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

~

Nishinoya washed his hair with Asahi's shampoo. He took one long look at the conditioner but didn't pick it up. There were honestly a lot more bottles than he'd expected to see – different types of things for hair, for skin, an inexplicable little gray rock resting in the tray next to a bottle of bodywash.

He scrubbed his skin until it glowed pink, feeling as though the stink of the bar had settled into his pores, as though he could scrub away some of the embarrassment he'd had from crying and barfing together out on the street. When Nishinoya slipped into the bath, he hissed aloud at the shock against the newly sensitive flesh. The water was almost painfully hot, but it felt good in a way he'd not felt in awhile. He usually just showered at the dorm, and hadn't had a good bath in a long time. The water swallowed him up, patient and yielding. He sat back and tilted his head so he could stare at the ceiling.
Nishinoya realized why he'd agreed to come, why he'd followed Asahi home in the first place. What had led him there was selfishness, pure and simple, his desire to keep Asahi in sight as long as possible. He wanted to draw Asahi in close, even though it meant burdening him with all this ridiculous shit. Nishinoya had thought he'd gotten over that old teenage crush he'd had on his upperclassman, that after he went away to play volleyball in college he'd finally put the whole mess behind him.

All it had taken was one look at Asahi’s broad shoulders and dopey grin, and suddenly Nishinoya felt sixteen again. Like he was looking up a mountain, one he could never summit. One he could never even try to.

He closed his eyes and sank deeper into the water. It had already managed to loosen some of the tight pain in his neck and back. Now that the sun was up and he was sober and fed, Nishinoya didn't feel quite so close to the edge of the cliff he'd been on the night before.

The resignation letter was still in his desk back in his dorm room. The best course of action was probably to head back, dig out the letter, and finish it before he lost his nerve again. He didn't need to talk to anyone about it, really. Wasn't it better to just get it done and out of the way, and then move on with his life?

He put his fingers in his ears and bent his knees double so he could slip his head below the water completely. With his eyes closed and his ears plugged, in that darkness where the only thing that spoke to him was the muted interior roar of his own body, he could almost imagine rewinding his life over the last four years. If he could get back to the person that existed then – if he could even remember how to be that person again…

If he couldn't be that person anymore, what did that leave him? Where would he go from there?

His lungs were beginning to scream at him. He sat up at once, broke through the surface of the water with a little gasp. He'd never been very good at contemplation, and Asahi's bath didn't seem like the most ideal place to start. Nishinoya clambered up to his feet and brushed the excess water off his arms and chest before stepping out of the bath and reaching for the towel. His side where he'd fallen the night before was mottled and bruised, but the muscles felt looser, the weight of his limbs somewhat lighter.

He'd left his clothes and bag in a pile near the door. His jeans still smelled of the bar, but there was nothing much to do about that. A clean t-shirt still helped. He towel-dried his hair and ran his fingers through it until it stood up in soft spikes. He really needed a trim – maybe when he got back to the city. A new haircut, fresh clothes, maybe eat dinner in the cafeteria instead of take-out in his dorm room. Make himself feel new, so he could look on the letter with fresh eyes. He had promised Asahi he'd stay until lunch. He could leave right after. It was a good plan.

For the moment, Nishinoya decided to ignore how bad he was, in general, at sticking to plans.

~

Asahi left the television on when he traded Nishinoya out for the bath, and it droned on quietly in the background as Nishinoya picked around the front room of the apartment. It wasn't a big living space, but Asahi didn't have much in the way of furniture to clutter it up – just a couch, the end tables, the flat screen on the far wall, and a tall, narrow bookcase near the window that held one shelf of books, one shelf of movies, and a surprising amount of little odds and ends. Trinkets from vacations, possibly? Small charms from the shrine – one for family and one for health. A little glass jar of sand and tiny shells, stoppered with a cork and dusty. Three ceramic frogs sat next to a folded piece of paper. When Nishinoya opened it up, he saw it was a child's drawing of three
indeterminate people, two little ones and a larger person between them. Feeling suddenly nosy and ashamed, he carefully refolded the paper and replaced it on the shelf.

There were a few framed photos on the shelves as well, including one that looked professionally posed of an older couple in traditional clothing, a tall thin man with grayed temples and glasses standing behind a seated woman with mousy brown hair and dark, soft eyes. Her resemblance to Asahi was striking, and Nishinoya knew suddenly that the pair must be his parents.

Next to the couple was a photo of a young family, a man who looked like a younger version of Asahi’s father, a tall thin woman and two round-cheeked infants in a double stroller. A third photo was a candid of another young man taken from behind; all Nishinoya could see was the back of his head, long hair tied in a messy ponytail under a dirty canvas hat. Nishinoya thought for a moment it might be a photo of Asahi, but the proportions seemed off – the shoulders too broad, the shape too square, a heavy beard peeking from his jawline. Beyond his silhouette was a backdrop of blue sky and mottled green hills.

On the next shelf, above Nishinoya’s eyeline, was a folding double frame. The left portion held a picture of Daichi and Suga from across a table. They looked different than Nishinoya remembered, Suga’s hair trimmed short and Daichi’s grown a little longer. Daichi appeared to be in the middle of a vehement discussion, the side of his flattened hand pressed hard into the palm of his other one. Suga, in response, sat back with his arms crossed. Nishinoya could almost see his eyes rolling back into his head.

Nishinoya smiled a little to himself at the photo, but the smile dropped immediately when he noticed the photograph in the right side of the frame.

It was a picture of Asahi and the two men from the bar the night before. Asahi stood between them, looking awkward and pleased as he smiled at the camera, and the men both had an arm around his shoulders, laughing at each other instead of facing forward. They were out on the street somewhere, dressed casually.

It felt weird, the hard knot that suddenly tightened in Nishinoya’s chest.

He heard the bathroom door open and replaced the photos as quickly as he could. He fumbled a little with his hand above his head and the frame fell over with a plunk. He didn’t have time to fix it before Asahi came back into the front room, looking bright and pink-cheeked. He had dressed in a striped t-shirt and a pair of dark, fitted jeans. He was pulling his damp hair back and twisting it into a clawed clip.

He must have noticed Nishinoya’s discomfort, as the smile on his face dropped slightly.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Nishinoya said. “I was – I just.” He took a step back from the case. “I was snooping. Sorry.”

Asahi’s grin returned. “I don’t have anything to hide,” he said. He crossed the room toward the bookcase, and reached into the shelf to right the frame that Nishinoya had knocked over.

“Sorry,” Nishinoya repeated, but Asahi just shook his head.

“It’s alright,” he insisted. He adjusted the frame once more, then turned back to Nishinoya. “Are you hungry enough for lunch? I know a good place not far from the station. I’ll treat you.”

“Asahi-san, no, I–”
“I insist,” Asahi said firmly.

Nishinoya was too off-center to argue with the determined look on Asahi’s face. “...okay,” he said finally.

The unsettled feeling persisted along their walk to the diner. Who are those guys?Nishinoya wanted to ask. Why do they deserve to sit next to Daichi and Suga? The more he looked at it, the less he knew about the life that Asahi had made for himself, the less Nishinoya felt like he belonged there, the more it seemed like he was a splotch of muddy water on a fine silk painting.

Asahi didn't speak much as they sat opposite from each other in a booth and placed their orders. He started a few halting sentences that Nishinoya couldn't really continue before the food came. As they ate, he stared out the window with a pensive look on his face.

Nishinoya looked at the table between them as he picked through his own lunch. Could it be they had so little left in common that they couldn't even speak to each other?

Asahi’s voice broke the quiet. "I think I owe you an apology."

Nishinoya blinked in surprise and lifted his gaze from the tabletop. "For...?"

Asahi coughed into his hand and turned his eyes aside. "For last night. For how I was acting. I misread the situation and made you uncomfortable."

"The situation," Nishinoya repeated slowly. He wracked his brain, tried to remember what Asahi had done the night before. It really seemed to Nishinoya that he had been the one acting weird, not Asahi.

Then he remembered how he'd reached across the table, the soft look to Asahi's eyes, the way panic had flared in his throat when Asahi started to speak. In that moment he'd been terrified that, as drunk and stressed as he was, he'd let something slip and tell Asahi everything. It didn't occur to him that Asahi may have been acting any particular way on purpose.

"What do you mean?" Nishinoya asked cautiously. "How'd you misread it?"

Asahi laughed awkwardly. "Ah, you're not gonna make me say it out loud, are you? It's so embarrassing." He was blushing darkly, not only in his cheeks but also the center his forehead. "I was sort of. Hitting on you."

Nishinoya's brain slowly ground to a halt. He thought again at the way Asahi had looked at him, heavy-lidded, lips curling into a grin. Nishinoya's mouth felt dry. "You were hitting on me?"

Asahi put his elbow on the table so he could put his face into his hand. "God," he said. "I feel like an idiot. I'd had a couple drinks already and – I'd thought about you a lot, in the past, and then seeing you there..." He lifted his head, glanced at Nishinoya briefly before looking away again. "I don't know, I thought, maybe... like, it felt like a scene from a movie, you know? A chance reunion, unplanned meeting. I got carried away. I'm sorry."

Nishinoya stared at the center of the table. He felt his own cheeks burning. "N-no. It's okay," he said haltingly.

"I mean, you've got so much other stuff going on," Asahi continued. "I should have noticed you weren't doing so hot last night. I shouldn't have." He laughed nervously again. "I shouldn't have pushed so hard."
"Asahi-san," Nishinoya mumbled slowly, "why'd you think that I was – that I would've been–" He had difficulty saying it out loud. Had his attraction really been that obvious? Had it shown on his face? Was it the way he held himself, the square of his shoulders?

Confusion touched Asahi's face. "Because you were at that bar." Nishinoya's total incomprehension must have been apparent, because Asahi then asked, "don't you... don't you know about that bar?"

Nishinoya shook his head.

"Um..." Asahi suddenly looked supremely uncomfortable. "It's kind of known as a... tolerant bar."

Realization hit Nishinoya like a dump truck. "Oh my god," he groaned, and he threw his head back and buried his hands in this hair. He'd gone to a gay bar on his first night home. He didn't even know Karasuno had a gay bar. Maybe it had been fate after all. "I am such a dumbass."

"You didn't know?"

"Of course I didn't know!" he blurted. "I was panicking and just ran into the first open place I found!" He looked at Asahi again. "But you were there, with friends! Why were you there?"

"Ah...isn't that..." Asahi shrugged. His shoulders were high around his neck "...obvious?"

"Oh my god!" Nishinoya repeated in dismay. "I'm such a dumbass!"

Asahi's visible discomfort grew, sliding into true apprehension. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Nishinoya started, realized how his reaction was coming off. "No!" he said quickly. He held up a hand to emphasize his point. "No, it's not a problem, I'm just." He tugged on his shirt and looked down. "I'm really embarrassed, that's all." He lifted his eyes back to Asahi again. "It's okay. Really it is."

"Good," Asahi said, "that's good."

Silence settled between them like dust. At length Nishinoya said, "But your friends, though."

Asahi laughed in surprise. "Who, Keizan and Kenichi? They're on the neighborhood team. They're." He grimaced, then smiled. "They're kind of idiots, really. But they're really good guys. They've helped me a lot with figuring stuff out."

Nishinoya felt a hot prick somewhere near his diaphragm. He realized it was a stab of jealousy. "That's nice," he said. "I'm glad you had someone to help you."

"Yeah," Asahi agreed softly. He looked down with a smile. "How about you, Nishinoya?"

"Me?" His voice cracked on the word and he winced inwardly. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, not like that," Asahi said abruptly. "Just, you know. Being away from home. School, volleyball. Anyone you have to talk to?"

Nishinoya frowned and poked at his food. "I don't know. I guess? Some of my teammates are pretty cool. Coach is a good guy. I have a roommate. Don't see him a lot, but. He's around."

"But do you have friends?"

"Jeez, Asahi-san, what is this?" Nishinoya said, a little too quickly. "What does it even matter?" He
took a drink of his soda to cover his discomfort.

"I guess it doesn't, sorry." Asahi leaned his head on his hand and looked out the window. "So why haven't you talked to Tanaka lately?"

Nishinoya choked on his drink. He came up coughing. "W-what do you mean?"

Asahi shrugged. "You said you haven't talked to him in six months. That seems like a long time for your best friend."

"He – we–" Nishinoya felt himself color again. "I mean, he was my best friend in high school, you know? When was the last time you talked to Suga-san or Daichi-san?"

"Couple weeks ago," Asahi said without missing a beat. "They're doing good. Suga graduated last year, Daichi's taking more time. He's got a semester left."

"Asahi-san, I wish you would just say what you're getting at."

Asahi grinned apologetically. "Sorry, I forgot who I was dealing with." He reached forward and covered Nishinoya's hand on the table with his own. "It sounds like you've closed people out. Maybe you're trying to punish yourself for something. Maybe you think it would be better to be alone. But." He looked down at their hands on the table. His lashes were dark against his high cheekbones. "Everyone needs someone to talk to, Nishinoya." His eyes flicked up. "Even you."

Nishinoya felt pinned underneath Asahi's gaze and the warm weight of the hand against his own, and he used that as an excuse for what spilled next out of his mouth. "I just got so sick of lying," he murmured. "When they asked how I was doing, and I said 'fine'."

"Why lie in the first place?" Asahi asked. "You never used to do that. You were always the one keeping me honest."

"I don't know how to be that person anymore," Nishinoya admitted quietly.

Asahi gave him a sympathetic smile. "You're still exactly that person," he assured. "You just don't see it right now."

Nishinoya pulled his hand back and rubbed it with his other one to dispel the tingling in his fingers. "Am I? If you want me to be honest, I don't think I am."

Asahi sighed. "These sorts of things don't happen overnight, Nishinoya. Getting to this point, or getting back from it."

Nishinoya groaned. He shoved his plate aside so he could put his head on the table and cover it with his forearms. "Shouldn't I just be able to freeze myself until things are okay again?"

Asahi let out a chuckling huff. "How are you going to work on anything while frozen?"

"A small flaw in the plan, I admit."

Nishinoya felt a heavy pressure against his head and realized Asahi was ruffling his hair. He closed his eyes and accepted the affection, soaked up its warmth like a sponge. Asahi took his hand away and then grabbed Nishinoya's wrist, the one he wore his watch on.

"We should go," Asahi said. "You need to get to the train station."

Nishinoya opened his eyes. The laminated surface of the table stared back at him. The small flame
growing inside of him stuttered and winked out. "Alright," he said.

~

The station wasn't too far from the diner. The two of them loped along the sidewalk at a fair pace, and Nishinoya knew they'd get there quickly. He wished they were walking slower, wished the station was further away, wished the train was coming later – anything that would keep him next to Asahi just a little bit longer, would keep him from having to go back to his tiny dormroom and his scrambled life.

Outside a shop Asahi's feet stalled.

"What?" Nishinoya asked.

Asahi thumbed over his shoulder at the door to the shop. "Can you wait here a second? I need to pick up a couple things."

Irritation licked at Nishinoya's edges. "Right now?"

"Yeah, sorry. It will just take a minute."


Asahi nodded and stepped toward the door. It dinged as he opened it and disappeared inside the shop. Nishinoya found a lamppost to lean against and took his phone out of his pocket on instinct.

As he was holding the phone in his hand, he realized he'd not had a single message all day. Not from his roommate asking where he was, not from his siblings wishing him a happy birthday. Not a call from his mom, nor a lengthy voicemail guilting him into calling her back, oh don't worry about it Yuu, I'm only your mother and I just love you, that's all. Still, it was early, he supposed. The kids were in school, his mom was at the firm, his dad was in the salon. His roommate would be in class all day. Maybe it wasn't so odd. Nishinoya flipped open the phone and realized it was off. He felt his eyebrows lift. Had he turned it off the night before? When he tried at the power button, nothing happened.

Oh, he thought. It wasn't really so surprising. It was an older phone, and it hadn't been charged in over a day. He'd used it quite a bit on the train ride the day before. The battery must have been depleted. He knew he hadn't remembered to pack his charger the day before; it was still plugged into the outlet next to his bed back in his dorm. So he wasn't going to be able to charge the phone up again until he got back.

Nishinoya felt strangely relieved as he put his phone back into his pocket. It was the perfect excuse, wasn't it? Sorry I missed your call. My phone was dead. It wasn't even a lie. Asahi was right that lies didn't come naturally to him. But now he absolutely, honestly, could not be expected to respond to any messages until he got back to campus. It was an oddly freeing notion.

The door dinged behind him, and he turned to see Asahi come back out from the shop. He carried a small bag in one hand.

"Got everything you needed?" Nishinoya asked.
"Yeah," Asahi returned. His cheeks were a little pink.

Nishinoya peered at him suspiciously. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Asahi said. "I had this idea, and it seemed really great in the moment, but now it just sounds dumb."

"Asahi-san, what is it?"

Asahi made an awkward sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "Okay. Don't say I didn't warn you." He dug in the bag. "Hold out your hand and close your eyes."

Nishinoya glared at him briefly then acquiesced. He heard the rustle of Asahi's bag, a brief silence, and then something very cold was placed into his hand. Nishinoya's fingers flexed involuntarily, and he heard the wrapper crinkle in response. Somehow, he knew it exactly what it was before he opened his eyes.

He looked at the object in his hand. He turned it over, saw the familiar logo and character design. Bewildered and off-balance, Nishinoya cast his eyes upward to look at Asahi. "What's this?"

"Uh..." Asahi chuckled. "It's your birthday, isn't it? I just thought. I don't know. I said it was dumb."

Nishinoya looked back down at the ice pop. His insides felt hollow despite the meal they'd just shared. "You remembered my birthday?"

"Of course I did," Asahi said. "Your birthday is easy – it's the opposite of mine, right?" He shifted his weight. "I'm sorry, if you don't like them anymore, I understand. You don't have to eat it."

"No!" Nishinoya blurted, too quickly. He closed his fingers and held the ice pop against his shirt. It was so cold the skin of his hand was starting to numb. "No," he said, more quietly. "I want it. Thank you, Asahi-san."

Asahi smiled then, and his relief and pleasure were so apparent that Nishinoya's legs felt weak. "We'd better go," he said to cover his reaction. Asahi nodded. He crumpled up the empty bag and shoved his hands in his pockets.

_The opposite of mine_, Nishinoya's mind echoed. He'd never thought of it like that. It was weird, wasn't it? Weird how Asahi's brain worked – weird how he made connections, how he remembered all these details of someone he'd not spoken to in years. How had he remembered so much – _why_ had he remembered?

As they walked, Nishinoya ate the soda ice as quickly as he could manage. He remembered how he used to eat them in three bites or less. The scene struck him as painfully nostalgic. Walking beside Asahi in Karasuno, eating his favorite snack. It could've happened six years earlier. It probably did happen six years earlier.

His legs were rubbery beneath him, his stomach knotted unhappily. It felt as though all the blood in his body was draining toward his feet. His tongue was numb from the ice, the roof of his mouth the same. When Nishinoya licked the stick clean, he held it up. Not a winner. It fell flat on his shoulders like heavy yoke.

Asahi stopped walking suddenly, and Nishinoya looked up in surprise. He realized they were already at the station.
Nishinoya felt his heart pounding in his chest. The train was due in less than ten minutes. Asahi turned toward him, gave him a small smile. "Well," Asahi started slowly. "I guess this is where I leave you."

"Yeah," Nishinoya said.

"It was really great to see you," Asahi said. He was blushing again. "Even with –"

"Even with me acting like an idiot?" Nishinoya cut in.

"I was gonna say me acting like an idiot," Asahi corrected. He rubbed his neck. "D'you think I could. Get your number?"

Nishinoya blinked. "Do you really want it?"

Asahi nodded. "I'd like to stay in touch from now on. If it's okay with you, I mean."

"Why wouldn't it be okay?"

Asahi made the weird laugh-sigh sound again. "I thought maybe I made you uncomfortable, what with everything–"

Nishinoya interrupted before he could continue. "Asahi-san, you don't make me uncomfortable." It wasn't exactly a lie. Frustrated, maybe. Disappointed, that too. Uncomfortable wasn't really the truth. "You can have my number. I'd like you to have it." He reached out his hand before Asahi could hedge the issue again.

Asahi chuckled nervously before handing over his phone. "That's so like you, Nishinoya," he said.

"What's like me?" Nishinoya asked as he input his number into Asahi's contacts.

"You never let me argue you out of anything," Asahi explained. "You're always so generous."

Nishinoya froze with his thumbs over the buttons of the phone. He stared at the screen, felt a bead of sweat form on his temple. He'd input 'Yuu' without thinking. He erased the name, and put his full one in the contact instead. "I'm not," he mumbled.

"What's that?"

"I'm not generous." Nishinoya felt the moment between them thinning like a piece of taffy being pulled from either end. Soon it would snap, and all he'd be left with was a torn edge, something he'd have to work and mend and file down again. "I'm selfish," he whispered. "All I do is take." The train would be there soon. Desperation welled up inside him.

"Nishinoya," Asahi said softly. Nishinoya looked up. There was a crease between Asahi's eyebrows, and it deepened when their eyes met. "Nishinoya, you're not selfish."

Nishinoya clutched Asahi's phone to his chest as though it could delay time a little more, as though the connection between them would remain as long he never gave it back; the train would never come, and they could exist together like that, on the street in their hometown, where everything felt simpler. "I am," Nishinoya said, and he felt his eyes prick again. He shoved the compulsion down, gritted his teeth against it. "All I can seem to think about is myself."

Asahi reached for him, hand going for his shoulder, but Nishinoya threw himself forward and wrapped his arms around Asahi's torso. He buried his face against the hard plane of Asahi's chest.
Nishinoya felt Asahi stiffen in surprise, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Don't make me go," Nishinoya whimpered. "Can't I stay? Please don't make me go back." His throat felt tight and his eyes burned, but he kept the tears back. "Just one more night, then I promise I'll go. Just one more day, please."

Asahi's hands came down on his shoulders. Nishinoya was certain that Asahi would push him away, but instead those hands moved on their own – one slid around his back, the other against his head, and Asahi hugged him back. His grip was firm around Nishinoya's body, but the pressure against his head was gentle as Asahi turned his face to look at him.

Though the furrow in Asahi's brow was heavy, his eyes were soft, and when he spoke his voice was genuine. "Stay," he murmured. "Stay as long as you like. I want you to stay."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," Asahi said. "Please stay, Nishinoya."

Relief pooled in his body like cold water – it swelled up from his feet, flooded his torso, and made his hands tremble where they clutched the back of Asahi's shirt. It pressed up his throat and seized at his larynx; his voice failed him, and it was all he could do to nod weakly and press his forehead back against Asahi's chest.

Asahi let him stay there a little longer without complaint, but he eventually put his hands on Nishinoya's shoulders again and gently pushed him away. "Why don't we go back to my apartment for now?" he asked.

Nishinoya rubbed his face on his forearm and sniffed hard. He nodded again, and when Asahi turned down the sidewalk, he followed.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: To everyone who has sent me comments and messages about relating to Nishinoya's feelings and situation - I see you, I hear you, I'm happy it's resonating with you even as I'm sad you're experiencing/have experienced it. I hope this story makes you feel like your emotions are more universal, that you are not alone, and that things will be alright for you in the end. No one's life is determined at 22. Not Noya's. Not yours either.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They didn't speak again until they got back to Asahi's apartment, though it was at least a twenty minute walk. The silence hung between them like pane of glass. Nishinoya couldn't decide if he wanted to shatter it – or if he was relieved it was there. They went up the creaky stairs again. Asahi unlocked the door, and they went inside.

When he crossed over the threshold and stood inside Asahi's door, Nishinoya felt the relief hit him again. The little kitchen, the couch, the cramped living room. He closed his eyes and inhaled. It all smelled like Asahi.

It was Asahi who spoke first. "Would you like something? A glass of water?"

Nishinoya shook his head. He took another gulping breath. Along the walk a little thought had tickled the back of his mind. Something he used to do with his brother when Taka was upset. It had always calmed the younger boy. "Asahi-san," he mumbled.

"Hm?"

Nishinoya could feel the heat of Asahi standing next to him. Need devoured him like a cancer. He swallowed his nervousness before it choked out his words. "This is... gonna sound weird."

"It won't," Asahi assured.

Nishinoya stared straight ahead, down the little hallway toward Asahi's bedroom. "I used to – when my little brother was upset. He's shy, you know? He'd get nervous a lot. He'd come home from school and he'd - I'd always know, he'd have the look on his face." Nishinoya shook his head. The words were getting jumbled in his attempts to get them out as quickly as possible. "We'd go lay down in my bed together. He'd read, or we'd play a game, or sometimes we just laid there. And he'd fall asleep, or I would...." Nishinoya trailed off. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears.

"Nishinoya," Asahi said softly. "Are you asking to go lay down?"

Nishinoya nodded. He still stared forward, not looking at Asahi next to him. "Would you. Lay down with me? Just for a little while. So I'm not..." He winced at how pathetic it sounded coming out of his mouth. "So I won't be alone."

Asahi didn't respond right away, so Nishinoya added quickly, "I won't do anything weird, I promise."
"I'm not worried about that," Asahi said. "I don't mind at all. Do you want to right now?"

Nishinoya nodded again. He felt oddly detached from the moment, as though he were watching himself make the request. He watched himself follow Asahi down the hallway toward the bedroom door, then when Asahi opened it and gestured for him to go in, he watched himself step inside.

"It's messy," Asahi said. "I can keep the front room clean but the bedroom is--" He chuckled. "Well, its harder to motivate when you don't think anyone's gonna see it."

Nishinoya shook his head. "I don't care," he mumbled. The bed was against the outside wall of the apartment, the headboard underneath a pair of windows. Bright afternoon light filtered in. "Can you close the blinds?"

Asahi crossed the room and leaned over the bed on one hand to reach for the window. The bed was rumpled. He'd clearly not made it after waking up that morning. "Blankets on the bed?" he asked. "Or should I push them down?"

Nishinoya hugged his arms to his sides. "Asahi-san, could you stop asking questions?"

Asahi turned toward him. He gave Nishinoya the softest, sweetest smile he'd ever seen on another human being. "Come here," Asahi said, and he opened his arms. "Just come here."

Nishinoya felt his heart drop into his stomach, but he still took the few steps across Asahi's room and into his arms. Asahi's chest was warm. Nishinoya could hear his heart beating under the hard press of his sternum. The cadence was a little fast, but it was steady and deep. Nishinoya fisted his hands at his sides. He closed his eyes and let the sound swallow him up.

"Which side do you want?" Asahi murmured, but Nishinoya shook his head. "Okay," he said gently. He turned Nishinoya on the spot, hands on his shoulders. Nishinoya didn't resist the movement. "Lay down here, then."

Nishinoya clambered into the bed. He was relieved it was big enough for two people to fit on comfortably. He curled into a ball with his eyes closed, facing away from the center of the bed. He heard the shuffle of Asahi's feet crossing to the other side, then the mattress shifted beneath him. Then there was silence.

Asahi had a clock on the wall, and the soft ticking that emanated from it seemed to fill up the space between them until Nishinoya felt like he was drowning. "Asahi-san."

"Yeah?"

"Why are you all the way over there."

"Oh! I uh..." Nishinoya could practically hear the look of nervous apprehension that was probably painted on his face. "I didn't think... you wanted me to..."

"I mean we don't have to spoon or anything," Nishinoya clarified. "But you can get closer."

He felt the bed shifting underneath him, and then something warm and flat pressed against the length of his back.

"How's this?" Asahi asked.

Nishinoya felt behind himself and encountered Asahi's back through his t-shirt. "Yeah," he said, "that's good." He settled again, this time with eyes open toward the wall. The clock kept ticking on
the wall. If Nishinoya concentrated, he imagined he could almost feel Asahi's heartbeat through his back.

"D'you wanna talk about it?" Asahi asked quietly.

Nishinoya turned his face into the sheet. "Not yet," he mumbled. "Why don't you try talking for awhile."

"About what?"

"Anything, Asahi-san."

"Um..." Asahi shifted a bit. "Well, I told you about the neighborhood team?"

"Your friends are on it."

"Oh, I am too. That's how I know them."

Nishinoya looked at his hands curled in front of himself. "So you're still playing, then."

"Yeah." Asahi laughed a little. "I thought I'd be able to give it up, you know? But it was like part of me was missing after that."

"I don't remember them," Nishinoya mumbled. "From before."

"There are a few guys on it," Asahi explained. "They didn't all come to practice or our games. Kenichi and Keizan are kind of new anyway. Only a couple years older than us."

Us, Nishinoya thought. Asahi hadn't said 'me'. They were both twenty-two now, weren't they? After all, they'd been born during the same year. The spare nine months between them artificially created a distance that had seemed so vast those years before, in the dynamics of high school.

"You'd like them," Asahi continued. "They remind me of –"

"I don't really want to talk about volleyball," Nishinoya cut in.

"Oh," Asahi said.

"I'm sorry," Nishinoya mumbled. He felt dark and sick inside, bathed in shame.

"No, it's alright," Asahi assured.

Nishinoya swallowed hard. The guilt inside him swam up like nausea and the words came out like vomit before he was able to stop them. "I'm on probation."

"Probation?"

"From my team," Nishinoya explained. "Indefinite."

Asahi didn't say anything for a moment, then he quietly sighed. "Ah."

"Yeah, I'm just a universal fuck-up," Nishinoya said darkly. "That's pretty much the story really."

"I'm sure you're not," Asahi returned.

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you thought," Nishinoya mumbled.
"I know you, Nishinoya." Nishinoya felt the bed shift again, and then Asahi grabbed his shoulder and pulled him onto his back. Asahi leaned over him, propped up on one arm. "I know whatever is going on, you'll get it all sorted out."

Nishinoya felt himself blush, and to cover his nervousness he looked away from Asahi to glance around the room. The bedroom was just a little bit larger than the living room. Apart from the bed and clock, it housed a dresser, a small bookcase, and a desk. "This ain't a bad place, Asahi-san," he said. "How long've you been living here?"

Asahi leaned his head onto his hand. "I guess not quite a year. I moved out of my parent's house back in December."

"Why?"

Asahi shrugged. "My brothers are both living on their own. Dad's already over sixty-five, and I wanted him to feel like he didn't need to support me anymore. He works in Tokyo, and I know he misses Mom. I wanted him to know he could retire, if he felt like it was time."

Nishinoya blinked at the ceiling. "Your parents are kinda old, aren't they?"

Asahi chuckled softly. "Yeah. I don't know. They didn't seem that old when I was younger. Or maybe I had no reference for how old 'old' was supposed to be. But lately..." He shrugged again. "He seemed tired, the last few times he's been home." Asahi reached forward with the hand he wasn't leaning on, and absently plucked a long brown hair off the front of Nishinoya's shirt. "I worried about leaving Mom on her own, but she hasn't really minded, I don't think. Every time I go over there she's off with friends." He smiled. "It's kinda nice, actually. I used to worry about her a lot."

Nishinoya reached up and caught Asahi's hand before it could move away. He brought it back down, pulled the palm flat against his chest and held it there with both of his own. Asahi's eyebrows raised at the action, but he didn't pull his hand out from Nishinoya's grasp.

"You can keep talking about them," Nishinoya said softly. "Your family."

Asahi smiled again, softer this time. He curled his fingers over one of Nishinoya's thumbs. "I've got two nieces now, did you know that?"

"No."

"Yeah, my eldest brother, his wife had twin girls." He laughed. "I think it's revenge for Mom getting three boys." He ducked his head into the crook of his arm. "They're both three now and I don't think Jun will ever recover."

"Oh wow," Nishinoya murmured. He felt a smile tickling at the corners of his mouth. "Is your brother good with them?"

"God, you wouldn't even believe it, if you knew him before." Asahi peeked from the inside of his elbow and gave Nishinoya a grin. "He was such a shithead. He's still a shithead. But I'd never seen him so scared of anything as he was when they were born." His gaze turned wistful. "I never felt more like he was my brother than right then."

Nishinoya couldn't help the laugh that startled its way out of his mouth. "Because he was scared?"

Asahi grinned again and tucked his face back against his arm. "Because he loved something enough to be worried about it."
Nishinoya felt his sharp corners soften. Asahi's hand was warm against his chest; his thumb brushed absentmindedly against Nishinoya's sternum. The clock was still ticking on the wall, the sound somehow muted now in the wake of their conversation. Asahi's bed was soft underneath his back. Nishinoya noticed a waterstain on the ceiling near the corner of the room. It was shaped a little like a turtle.

"My coach isn't a bad guy," Nishinoya said quietly. He saw Asahi lift his head out of the corner of his eye, but Nishinoya didn't look. He continued staring at the turtle-shaped stain. "He didn't yell at me or anything. He just." Nishinoya felt his face crease. "I didn't get in trouble, you know? It wasn't like. Before." He felt like if he stared hard enough at the stain, it might start moving, might turn into an actual turtle. "Coach told me I was being too reckless. Maybe he was right, I don't know. I had a couple bad falls. Hurt my ankle over the summer. My grades got bad, even for me. Anyway, he told me to take some time off, work on my classes, meet with my tutors and get back on top of things. Come back in a few weeks."

"What happened?" Asahi prompted.

"I don't know," Nishinoya mumbled. "It was fine. I was fine. Maybe... maybe I was feeling a little off. Maybe out of place?" He shook his head. "But I felt..." The words were all jumbled together in his head. He'd shoved them down for so long it took a few tries to untangle the mess. "I was looking at all the guys on my team. Great guys. They work real hard, they're so talented. And next to them I felt. Small. I mean, I am small, but..." Asahi's hand kept him grounded against the bed, and he kept going. "I felt like maybe I was the weak link in the chain, you know?"

"I know what that feels like," Asahi murmured. "I'm sure no one else feels like that about you, though."

Nishinoya shook his head. "I don't know," he said again. "It just all got to be a little too much in my head, I think." Nishinoya closed his eyes and saw the waterstain in negative against his eyelids. It wasn't everything yet, not quite the whole story, but it was more than he'd managed to tell anyone else. He felt weak in the aftermath, with a sick trembling in his extremities that was not unlike the sensation he'd get after pushing himself too hard at practice or during a workout—a feeling that had become all too familiar in recent weeks, before his coach told him to take a break.

"Sounds like your coach is just worried about you," Asahi said. "They'll be glad to have you back, I'm sure."

Nishinoya exhaled hard through his nostrils and felt a bitter smile curl on his lips. "I haven't decided if I'm going back yet."

"Nishinoya..." Asahi said cautiously. "You're considering quitting?"

"Maybe," Nishinoya said. "I'm not sure what I'm even doing there."

The bed shifted as Asahi moved. Nishinoya cracked open his eyes. He saw Asahi prop himself back up on his elbow, his face drawn tight. He squeezed Nishinoya's hand. "Why don't you just... stay here a few days. Think about it." Asahi frowned. "Or don't think about it, whichever is most helpful to you. Then when you do go back, you can look again at everything a little differently."

Nishinoya laughed, or tried to at least. It got caught in his throat and came out suspiciously like a sob. "That's so... not the way my brain works."

"Well..." Asahi said. He turned his hand against Nishinoya's chest until he could lace their fingers together. He stroked his thumb along the back of Nishinoya's hand. "You do need a break, I think."
Nishinoya let his gaze fall to their entangled hands. Asahi was leaning his weight on the arm that wore the wristband, the hand that held the tattoo; the one he pressed into Nishinoya's sternum was unmarked and unadorned. Asahi's nails were clean and well-trimmed at the ends of his long fingers. He had knobby knuckles and a fine dusting of hair on the lower half of his forefinger. His skin was a little dry – Nishinoya could see the creases at his joints were slightly whitened. But his hand was warm and large, and it swallowed up Nishinoya's smaller one like a heavy blanket.

"You don't mind?" he asked quietly. "If I stay?"

Asahi's face smoothed into a soft look that crinkled the corners of his dark eyes. "I want you to stay," he said.

"Okay," Nishinoya murmured. "I'll stay then."

"Good." Asahi's thumb stroked at his hand again. Nishinoya could feel heat rising up his neck; his ears were going to start burning. He tried to keep his face neutral but knew it was a losing battle. Instead he looked again at Asahi's hand clasped around his own. Nishinoya swallowed hard. He saw the action happening as though someone else was behind it – as though it was a scene in a play or tv show, one of those dramas that Suzu loved; slowly he lifted Asahi's hand to his mouth.

Nishinoya kissed at the skin of Asahi's first knuckle, then slightly beside it, in the corner between his first and second fingers. He felt the tickle of the fine hair on Asahi's hand, the scratch of dry skin against his chapped lips. He kissed Asahi's ring finger, the pointed middle knuckle of his bent pinky. Then Nishinoya breathed against Asahi's hand in a long, shaky sigh, as though the action could dispel the fluttering in his chest. Nishinoya lifted Asahi's hand to his forehead and held his knuckles there, aware of the damp spots his mouth had left on Asahi's skin.

Finally, he managed to whisper, "Thanks. I owe you one." He felt Asahi shift. Nishinoya let go of his hand.

Asahi didn't pull his hand away from Nishinoya's face. Instead he carded his fingers up into Nishinoya's hair and brushed the shaggy mess of it away from his forehead. Nishinoya let his eyes fall closed. He was desperately aware of the feel of Asahi's body so close to his own, the smell of him, the heat that made the hair on his forearms stand up straight.

"You don't owe me anything," Asahi said at length. The stiff tone of his voice made Nishinoya's eyes spring open. The crease was back between Asahi's eyebrows, as sharp as it had been in front of the train station. His mouth was turned in a strange frown. "I don't... expect anything from you."

Mortification flooded Nishinoya's stomach briefly, then faded. He looked at the ceiling again as disappointment crept along in its wake. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"No," Asahi murmured. In his peripheral vision, Nishinoya saw him shake his head.

A heavy silence settled between them. Nishinoya couldn't bear the weight of it. "Well!" he said abruptly, forcing lightness into his tone. "I've sure been an asshole today!"

Asahi gave him a startled snort in return, halfway between a chuckle and a hard breath. "Well, it's your birthday, so I guess I'll forgive you." He pinched Nishinoya's nose. "Just this once, of course."

"How magnanimous, Asahi-san." Nishinoya's voice was tinny and nasal inside his head as Asahi held his nostrils together.

"That's a big word for an athlete."
"I am in college," Nishinoya reminded him.

"So you are," Asahi agreed. He let go of Nishinoya's nose and pulled away. Nishinoya fought the urge to grab him and hold him back.

Asahi rolled off the bed and stood up. He straightened his t-shirt. "Would you feel like going back out in a bit?" he asked. "I need some groceries so I have something to feed you besides toast and instant soup."

"I can pay," Nishinoya offered quickly.

Asahi made the weird laugh-snort sound again and brushed his hair back from where it had fallen in his face. "We can share it," he said. "How's that?"

"Alright," Nishinoya reluctantly agreed. It would have to do.

~

It was odd, Nishinoya thought, how much lighter he felt. Like some of the gravel in his joints had shaken loose. Just admitting to his probation, and how frightened he'd been – and having Asahi there, looking down on him just as he used to – well... Nishinoya wasn't particularly good at emotional nuance, but even he could see the connection.

So Asahi was probably right, then. A few days. Think it through. Then he could go back and make a proper decision. In the moment he'd been disappointed when Asahi had pulled away – but now, as they poked around the shop down the street from Asahi's apartment, he was relieved. Hitting on someone late at night after a few beers was a different beast than what passed between people in the sober light of afternoon. Nishinoya was certain now that Asahi's behavior the night before had been what he initially suspected – just a fluke, a spur of the moment action. Wasn't he relieved? He told himself he was relieved. They were friends, weren't they? It wouldn't do very well to complicate the situation. Nishinoya's life seemed to be fucked up enough, anyway.

He told himself this, imagining for all of thirty seconds that he was the sort of person who could make rational, reasoned arguments against a particular course of action. Then, as he watched Asahi picking through produce for an apple with just the perfect amount of radial symmetry, the conviction splintered somewhere between the sharp pang in Nishinoya's chest and the freshly scabbed spot on Asahi's jaw where he had nicked himself shaving that morning.

"Do you like mushrooms?" Asahi asked. "I think I have cabbage that's still good. We could do a quick stir-fry or something."

Nishinoya picked up a carrot and turned it end to end in his hand before replacing it. "You cook for yourself a lot?" he asked.

Asahi shrugged. "Probably not as much as I should," he admitted. "But it's hard, on your own, you know?" He put some more things in the basket he carried. "I eat at my mom's pretty frequently," he laughed.

Nishinoya paused next to the squash. Taka's favorite. "It's hard when you're used to eating with other people," he agreed. When he looked back at Asahi, Nishinoya found him bearing a sympathetic little smile. "Ohhh!" he groaned in frustration, "stop looking at me like that!"

"Sorry," Asahi said, and he turned his attention back to the groceries.

It took most of the meager amount of cash in Nishinoya's wallet to pay for his half of the groceries,
but the action gave him an immeasurable boost to his sense of morale. As they walked back to Asahi's apartment with the bags in tow he felt much better than he had earlier in the day on the same stretch of sidewalk.

"Do you have anything specific you'd like to do today?" Asahi asked. He added, "For your birthday, I mean."

Nishinoya shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know. All I did for the last one was get drunk at a bar with some guys from my team, and I already sort of repeated that last night."

"Yeah," Asahi agreed, "maybe something a little more toned down is in order. You know, since you're so elderly now and all."

"Hey." Nishinoya elbowed Asahi hard in the ribs. "Who's the old man here, Azumane. I'm not the one with the five o'clock shadow."

Asahi rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand, his fingers still twisted in the handle of a shopping bag. "I swear I shaved this morning," he insisted. "I don't know where it keeps coming from."

Nishinoya noticed for the first time that the leather wristband Asahi wore bore a large brown clay bead.

"Hey, Asahi-san," he said carefully. "What's with the..." He pointed at Asahi's hand, the wristband, the tattoo.

"Hm?" Asahi returned. He lifted his hand, bicep curling as he raised the grocery bag, and inspected the indicated hand. "Oh, well..." He made a face. "It's a really boring story actually. I wish I could say there was deep meaning here." He rubbed over the little star with the thumb of his opposite hand. "My mom wanted to kill me. I think she might have, if my brother hadn't gotten his own tattoo a few years before." He laughed. "Kinda softened the blow, I think."

"The brother with the twins?"

"No, the other one. Takeshi. He's a park ranger in Toyama." Low-hanging clouds had gathered in the sky while they shopped. The wind was picking up, and loose leaves scattered around them as they walked, clattering in the street. The air smelled like rain.

Nishinoya thought about the photo from Asahi's shelf of the young man with green hills behind him. "A park ranger?"

"I mean, sort of," Asahi laughed. "I don't, uh... I don't know exactly what he does. He works for parks services and spends like fifty weeks out of the year on Mount Tate." Asahi lifted his hand and tapped behind his left ear. "It says 'mountain', right here." He shook his head. "I thought Mom was going to blow a vessel."


"Yeah, well, our mom didn't see it that way."

The photo of Asahi's parents in traditional clothing swam to the forefront of Nishinoya's memory. "Is she..." He worried over how to phrase the question. Tattoos were one thing but – Asahi was gay. "Is she old-fashioned?"

Asahi stopped walking. Nishinoya froze, suddenly afraid he'd said something stupid again – why didn't he think more, why did he just blurt everything that came to his head like it was nothing? He opened his mouth to backtrack, but Asahi started laughing.
Really laughing. Not nervous chuckling or a soft exhalation of mild amusement – no, Asahi was almost guffawing. He choked slightly and coughed hard into the crook of his elbow, and then laughed again, somewhat softer.

Nishinoya was genuinely confused. "Asahi-san...?"

"Sorry!" Asahi managed finally. He wheezed a little, his hand on his chest. "Just the thought of my mom being – you know how my parents met?"

Strangely, Nishinoya felt annoyed at the question, like Asahi's laughter was directed at him. "No."

"Of course you don't," Asahi agreed. "I mean, Mom didn't tell me until just a few years ago. And Dad, well, my dad is not very..." He winced. "He's... anyway." Asahi shrugged. "I still don't really know the whole story, but I'll probably never actually get it. My mom was kind of – a hippie in college?"

"A hippie?" Nishinoya echoed. He let the word sit for a moment, tried to reconcile the image it conjured with the middle-aged woman in a kimono from the photograph. "What do you mean?"

"It was in the seventies – she wrote for a counter-culture magazine. She took part in student protests and everything."

Snippets of history floated back to Nishinoya, long-forgotten discussion topics from essays years past. "Was she a communist??" he blurted suddenly.

"No, no," Asahi reassured. "She was too young for that." Wind blew again, so strong that Nishinoya felt himself shift from the force of it. Hair flew into Asahi's face, into his eyes and lips. He brushed it aside ineffectually with the back of his hand and started walking again. Nishinoya followed. "My dad's family is pretty old-fashioned, though," Asahi continued. "And he was studying to be a doctor when he met this crazy girl at school." His voice turned thoughtful. "They were so different from each other then. They still are now."

"He didn't become a doctor, then."

"No, he didn't. And I think his family sort of... half-disowned him. I didn't really know this as a kid, though I knew I had cousins I'd never met before. I guess I never really connected it to the fact that they were all on his side of the family." They crossed the street and stepped onto the block that housed Asahi's building. The dry cleaners was open, and the smell of laundry mingled with the heavy ozone scent of the air. "My dad and I have never been very good at talking to each other," Asahi admitted as they clambered up the stairs toward his front door.

"Why not?"

Asahi put the key in the door. "I was scared of him for a long time. I thought he was just this cold distant guy. I always got on better with Mom when I was little."

Nishinoya thought of the photograph again, of the tall man with graying hair and a stern countenance.

"We got a little better over time," Asahi continued. He opened the door and gestured for Nishinoya to go in. Just in time as well, since the rain was finally starting to patter on the overhang ahead. "Especially once I realized that he was actually a very shy person."

Nishinoya blinked up at Asahi, realization hitting him like a tossed rock. "Like you!" he blurted loudly, then immediately winced.
But Asahi was smiling. "Yeah," he agreed. "Like me." He gestured again for Nishinoya to enter the apartment, and Nishinoya obeyed. The rain was falling now in earnest, and the air on the landing felt chill and damp. The apartment in comparison felt close and warm.

"I'm sorry," Asahi said as he closed the door. "I'm talking a lot about me, aren't I?"

"It's okay," Nishinoya returned, "I like it." He felt his cheeks heat a little at the admission and turned away from Asahi to carry the groceries into the kitchen. He vaguely remembered his question that had motivated the story. "So your hippie mom doesn't approve of tattoos. How about your dad?"

Nishinoya heard Asahi approach, the crinkle of the bags in his hands. "Well, I'm pretty certain he wasn't exactly pleased. But he never really tried to tell me or my brothers to live a particular way, so..."

Nishinoya glanced at Asahi out of the corner of his eye. Curiosity burned inside him. Again, he thought to himself – tattoos were one thing, but... He couldn't help the question that slipped out next. "Do they know that you're gay?"

Asahi lifted his bags onto the counter. Nishinoya mirrored the motion. He looked at Asahi directly, no more half-glances aside.

Asahi's face was even. Guarded. "They do," he said finally. "They've known for awhile."

Apprehension swam up Nishinoya's throat. "Were they mad?"

"Not... mad. Not exactly." Asahi started unpacking the groceries. He set them out methodically, organizing as he went between the nonperishables and those items that would go in the fridge. "It took awhile for them to get used to the idea," he clarified. "But Mom's okay with it these days."

Nishinoya noted the omission. He probably should've followed Asahi's example and unpacked his own bags, but he was rooted to the spot. He felt instinctively defensive and crossed his arms in response. "What about your dad?" he asked sharply.

Asahi finally stopped moving. He set down the box in his hand. "Dad is..." He looked at Nishinoya, who quickly realized Asahi had been avoiding his gaze for the entire conversation. "You have to understand what it was like for him in his family. They were very traditional. He--"

"So what?" Nishinoya demanded. "So he gets a free pass to act like an asshole to his gay son?"

"He's not an asshole," Asahi insisted, "he just has a hard time talking about it."

"So what!" Nishinoya repeated, his tone raising in volume. "Just because--"

Asahi interrupted him. "Nishinoya, it's really okay," he said quickly. "He's getting used to it. He worries about me, that's all. He worries about how our family is perceived."

Nishinoya's anger simmered back to a low burn. "Who cares what other people think?" he asked tightly.

"I guess we can't all be as bold as you, Nishinoya," Asahi said mildly.

Nishinoya settled back on his heels. He let the description sit for a moment. "My mom would probably use the word 'reckless'," he admitted.
"I can't say I disagree with her," Asahi laughed. He seemed lighter again, and Nishinoya's discomfort started to ease. Asahi added, "My dad's family put a lot of expectations on him when he was younger. He never wanted things to be like that for me and my brothers." He resumed putting the groceries away. "So even though he doesn't really understand me, even though we can't really talk about it, he doesn't try to stop me or change me."

"But that’s—" Nishinoya thought about his own relationship with his father. His dad had been the one to placate his mother when he dyed his hair in high school, who smoothed things over when he got in trouble. Nishinoya couldn't imagine not being able to talk to him – apart from the hiccup in recent months, Nishinoya had always turned to his dad for advice and comfort. "That still sounds... not great, Asahi-san," he finished lamely.

"He needs time," Asahi insisted. "He just needs some time." He held out his hand, and Nishinoya stared at the appendage dumbly for a moment before it clicked that he should hand over the groceries from his bags.

Asahi continued as he took the items. "Honestly, even I couldn't talk about it for a long time. So, it's not so surprising, really."

Questions still caught in Nishinoya's throat, but he managed to tamp them down somehow. He turned aside, looking away so that the words wouldn't bubble up in Asahi's face. The action brought his line of sight across the clock on the stove. It was already almost five. Asahi had asked what he wanted to do for his birthday. Nishinoya still didn't really know. Rain hammered the side of the building, a soft counterpoint to the sound of Asahi opening and closing cabinets.

Nishinoya had a disorienting moment, similar to what he'd experienced earlier in the day. He felt like he was outside his body, watching the scene as though it were a movie – seeing himself standing in Asahi's kitchen on the rainy afternoon of his birthday. How had he gotten there? Already it seemed like a year had passed since he'd stepped off the train the night before – his dorm room felt like a distant memory, maybe a dream he'd conjured. The more he tried to reattach himself to the moment, the more disembodied it seemed to become, the less it felt real and tangible. Suddenly the closeness of the apartment was suffocating, the quietness overwhelming.

"Asahi-san," he said tightly, feeling the name in his head like his ears were clogged shut.

Asahi turned slightly from where he stood in front of the fridge and looked back over his shoulder. "Hm?"

Desperate for the conversation to continue, Nishinoya blurted the first thing that came to his head. "So what's for dinner?" Stupid, he thought immediately, stupid! Could he have chosen a less natural transition?

"Well..." Asahi shrugged, the line of his back going taut beneath his t-shirt. "We could go to my parents' house."
Nishinoya hadn't expected that suggestion. "Your... parents?"

"Mom's the only one there right now – Dad's working," Asahi hastily explained. "I'd originally planned to eat with her tonight, before..."


"Not like that," Asahi insisted. "Anyway, I called her earlier to tell her I wasn't coming, and she said to just bring you along."

Nishinoya didn't say anything for a moment, and Asahi continued, "I mean, she's a much better cook than I am, and it's not too far away – if the rain lets up, we don't have to make the trip in the rain if you don't want—"

"Asahi-san," Nishinoya cut in. Asahi stopped talking. Real dinner, a mother's cooking. Not his mom, but... his mom had never been the best cook anyway. But, real dinner. Real company. With Asahi's family. Warmth spilled inside Nishinoya at the thought, settling thickly between his diaphragm and his lungs.

He wondered why he didn't feel more nervous. "That sounds nice," Nishinoya said. "I think that sounds really nice."

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The rain passed in a little more than an hour, during which time Asahi made tea and gave Nishinoya the same oversized stoneware mug he'd used that morning. He regaled Nishinoya with stories of Suga and Daichi's college lives, which allowed Nishinoya to keep mercifully quiet about his own.

Along the ride to his mother's side of town, Asahi related the tale of an unfortunate weekend with Suga. "Not five minutes after I arrived, he tripped on a curb and broke his foot."

"No!"

Asahi laughed. Nishinoya couldn't help but watch the way his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. His hair was still loosely fixed in the same clip from earlier, though he'd added a light cotton jacket and a scarf to his outfit. Nishinoya felt positively grungy in comparison with his old clothes and unkempt hair.

"So there I was, I'd taken work off, I traveled half a day to visit him, and I had to take Suga to the emergency room for most of the night. Then he was in bed the rest of the visit!"

"No!"

"And he kept nagging at me the whole time! – 'Asahi, bring me a glass of water. Asahi, I need aspirin! Asahi, it's too cold it's too hot turn the fan on turn the fan off where is my magazine what about my school books...' Asahi shuddered at the memory and grimaced. "I thought I was going to have a nice trip. I couldn't tell if I was his friend or his maid."

The train was relatively busy that time of day, and they had to stand close together. "I guess you could've left?" Nishinoya suggested.

"Are you kidding? And face Suga's wrath? I think I'd rather be his maid."

The image made Nishinoya laugh so hard that he earned quite a few offended glares, but he didn't
really care. "He can be pretty terrifying," he said.

"Right?" Asahi agreed. "Horrifying! He sent me a text later saying what a nice few days it had been, and I was too scared to ask him if it was sarcasm."

"Asahi-san!"

"I know, I know." Asahi grinned, his dark eyes glittering. "I didn't visit him again for a long time afterward, and he was definitely not embarrassed to say how offensive he found that."

"What did Daichi-san do?"

"He was a wiser man than me. He left the country for four months."

"He did not!"

"He said it was a semester abroad, but I knew better. And I'm pretty sure Suga gave him a worse time than me afterward."

Nishinoya tried to imagine Suga with his foot in a cast, his usual graceful step encumbered by crutches or a walking boot. "I would've liked to have seen it."

"It worked out for him that semester," Asahi continued, "I think he had gotten about ten different girls to fall in love with him by the time he healed."

"Lucky jerk!" Somehow, Nishinoya didn't think he'd have the same effect on women in that situation.

"It's his special power, he can make everyone fall in love with him," Asahi explained. "Just a little bit. Just enough. He's insidious."

Something about the tone of Asahi's voice put Nishinoya off. "What about you?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't think so," Asahi laughed, "I could never have that quality like he does."

"No, I mean--" Nishinoya felt heat in his face and he looked away, down the length of the car. "No, about Suga-san." He glanced back at Asahi. "You said everyone."

"Oh," Asahi said. He made a wincing smile. "Well, not really. I mean, maybe a little? Before I knew him, of course. He does seem quite pretty, when you don't know him very well. But then, horrifying, remember?"

"That's true," Nishinoya admitted. Pretty was a good word for it. He thought of the angles of Suga's face, the delicate structure of his wrists, his fair eyelashes. Shit, he thought. Maybe Asahi was right. Just a little bit. Just enough.

Pretty, Nishinoya thought again. Was that what Asahi was into? That kinda guy? "In high school... was there anyone else?" He didn't really know why he couldn't just leave it alone. Maybe he was a glutton for punishment.

"Well..." Asahi's eyes turned aside. He picked at a loose thread on his jacket. "I wasn't really comfortable enough with it back then to entertain the idea of being interested in anyone." He shrugged. "Sorry, I know that's not as entertaining as old gossip."

Nishinoya shook his head. "It's okay." He felt embarrassment creeping around the corners of his brain. "Sorry for being nosy."
"I don't mind," Asahi returned. His head popped up, and he looked above Nishinoya's head to the far side of the train, where the display was. "We're almost there."

They got off the train at a platform on the edge of town, where the lots were large and the open space between houses spilled wider and wider. The road curled snugly over and around a handful of hills, either side of it thick with trees flecked with color. Shiny wet leaves gathered against the curbs. The sun had sunk low enough to touch the ridge of mountains to their west, and the world around them was bathed in a soft golden light, shadows lengthening as they walked. Nishinoya thought about how often Asahi must've made the trip in high school, on evenings like this one, or in the misty cold of morning, the early dark of winter.

Despite its semi-remote location, Asahi's parents' house looked fairly modern from the outside, moreso than Nishinoya's family home. The evening now came on in earnest, and the lamp by the door was a shining point before them in the closing dark.

All at once, an anxiety stuttered into Nishinoya's stomach, a sense of foreboding – what was he thinking, was he going to stick out at Asahi's old home, what made him think he'd be welcome there with hardly any warning – but the door opened before they even made it all the way up the front steps, and he didn't have time for the sensation to plummet out of control.

Along the walk, the words had bandied around in his head – hippie, communist, counter-culture – each combining awkwardly with the picture of the woman in the kimono at Asahi's apartment – but none of it really prepared Nishinoya for how mild and plain Asahi's mother actually looked as she stood in the arch of the doorway in house slippers. She was a tall woman, even apart from the illusion of her looming above them, a dark silhouette with the lit interior of the house behind her.

"There you are!" she declared with her hands on her hips. "I wondered!"

"Mom..." Asahi said as they came up the stairs toward her.

"Don't you 'mom' me, I expected you forty minutes ago," she returned.

"Mom, I texted you that it was raining at the apartment."

"You think I'm glued to my phone like you kids? I'm an old lady, Asahi. I can't figure out that fancy new one Jun picked out for me."

"You play games on it all the time!"

While the two of them bickered, Nishinoya stood a step below Asahi and stared at his mother from around his elbow. She had the same long face as Asahi, the same nose, the same wide-set brown eyes. Her hair was neatly trimmed in a chin-length bob with long bangs curling over her forehead. She was clearly older than Nishinoya's own mother, but there was a spry lightness to her that made her seem younger than he had expected.

Her eyes turned to him, and Nishinoya snapped upright as though an electric current passed through his body.

"Asahi," she said, "stop being so rude and introduce me to your friend."

"I was trying to! This is--"

"My name is Nishinoya Yuu!" Nishinoya blurted over Asahi's softer voice. "It's nice to meet you!" He inwardly winced at the volume of his tone; he hadn't meant to yell – it just sort of happened.
She looked momentarily startled by his outburst, but then her face eased into a smile. Her eyes crinkled the same way Asahi's did. "Well, of course you are," she said mildly. She stepped out of the doorway, backwards into the house. "Why don't you boys come in? Dinner is ready."

The house was open and bright inside. It smelled sharply of curry but had the undercurrent of a home well-lived in. Mrs. Azumane took Asahi's jacket as Nishinoya removed his shoes and then turned toward Nishinoya with an expectant look that quickly dissolved into disapproval. Nishinoya felt apprehension spike – had she already found something to dislike about him?

"Where is your coat, Nishinoya-kun?" she asked.

"Huh?" He looked down at himself in surprise. He still had his old flannel at least. "It's – I'm–"

"Asahi!" Mrs. Azumane rounded on her son. "You let him walk all the way here without a jacket?"

"I didn't–"

"Don't you know it's supposed to get cold tonight?" she demanded.

Nishinoya put his hands up. "It's okay! Really!" he insisted. "I'm fine – I won't be cold – I don't have a jacket with me so–"

"This just won't do," Mrs. Azumane said. "Come into the kitchen, dear, let me fix you something hot to drink." She took Nishinoya's shoulders in both hands and steered him down the hallway.

Nishinoya looked back at Asahi in surprise, but Asahi just shook his head and made a waving gesture with his hand that said let her do what she wants.

Dinner was set in the dining room, at a table much too large for just the three of them. They clustered together at one end of it, Asahi and Nishinoya across from each other with Mrs. Azumane at the end.

After he got over his initial nervousness, Nishinoya found that he quite liked Asahi's mother. She was somehow soft and sharp at the same time, prone to laughter and sarcasm, with a mischievous glint to her eye.

"So what do you do, Nishinoya-kun?" she asked as she piled a second helping onto his plate.

"Uh..." Nishinoya fiddled with the rim of the plate when she settled it in front of him. "I go to school."

"In Sendai?" She held her hand out for Asahi's plate, then took it purposefully from him when he shook his head.

"No, in Chiba," Nishinoya said quietly.

Mrs. Azumane paused with the serving spoon in one hand and Asahi's plate in the other. "Chiba!" she repeated finally, "but that's so far!"

"It's not so bad," Nishinoya insisted. "It's only like half a day."

"You poor thing! Who takes care of you!"

"I take care of myself," he said.

"No, that's–" She brandished the spoon aggressively. Asahi reached to take his plate back from her,
but she moved it unconsciously out of his grasp as she gestured with both hands full. "That's not acceptable, you're still a boy! Who feeds you!"

"There's a cafeteria on campus..."

"Mom," Asahi cut in, "both Jun and Takeshi went away to school, and you never had a problem with them."

"You were just too young to remember a mother's worry," she insisted, pointing the spoon now at Asahi. "And Takeshi didn't go so far away. Jun lived with your father."

Asahi practically lunged across the table to get his plate out of her hand when she came dangerously close to dumping its contents all over Nishinoya. He sat back with a sigh. "And I'm sure he took better care of Dad then Dad did of him."

Mrs. Azumane dropped the spoon back into the bowl in the middle of the table with a splat. "Oh, dear," she said gently, "I know you worry about your father. But that man is like a tree. And Shio and Jun take good care of him in Tokyo."

Nishinoya noted the way Asahi stared at the food in front of him, his mouth twisted in an unhappy knot. It sounded like an older discussion, one that had been revisited and reworked many times.

"Well, Nishinoya-kun," Mrs. Azumane said as she turned back toward him, "I'll just have to send you care packages, I think. I already put them together for my prodigal middle son, so it won't be too much more to make them for you."

"What? N-no..." Nishinoya sat back awkwardly with his hands clenched in fists on his thighs. "You don't need to--"

"Your mother won't be offended, will she? I don't mean to imply she isn't doing her part."

"It's not that--"

"She won't take no for an answer," Asahi explained. "It's best just to let her do what she's gonna do."

"Oh!" Mrs. Azumane smacked him on the hand. "I'm only insistent because I'm right! And you know it."

"Yes, ma'am," Asahi said.

"It's not my fault the world is full of foolish young men who don't know how to listen to their mothers."

"Mom--"

"Young men who move across town for no reason and go out all hours of the night--"

"Mom!" Asahi moaned. He slumped in his chair, his face painted in mortification.

It was such a familiar look, something Nishinoya had seen so many times when they were younger – he felt immediately the same sensation he'd had back then – the desire to jump to Asahi's aid. "Mrs. Azumane," Nishinoya cut in, "Asahi-san said you wrote for a magazine in college?"

She blinked, her speech halting midsentence, and looked at him with her mouth in a perfect 'o' of surprise. At length she said, "Well, I did! It was a very different time then, you see, not as it is now
When Nishinoya chanced a glance at Asahi as she continued her story, he mouthed 'thank you' in return.

They had coffee after dinner, which Asahi tried to decline until his mother insisted it was decaf. Asahi made sure there was sugar for Nishinoya's cup.

"It's hard now for you young people," Mrs. Azumane bemoaned as they nursed the drink. "Back when I was your age, expectations were so much clearer. Everything was well defined."

"You didn't follow those expectations, though," Nishinoya said.

"I rebelled a little," she admitted. "But even so, I did my part. I got married, and I gave the world three strapping Azumane boys to carry on the family name. Not that your father's family cared one way or the other."

"Mom..."

"And what has happened now? The one having babies can only have girls! The other two are either gay or married to a mountain."

"You can't get married to a mountain, Mom."

"Your brother is damn well trying, isn't he!"

"Mom!" Asahi moaned in embarrassment. He put his head on the table and covered it with his hands.

Nishinoya burst out laughing. "How would you even—" he gasped.

"No," Asahi groaned against the table, "don't encourage her."

"I'm convinced he's going to commission the parks service for the largest bridal veil ever created, and drape the damn thing over the peak of Mount Tate!"

Nishinoya laughed so hard he felt tears leaking out of his eyes. He covered his face in his hand and snorted uncontrollably.

Mrs. Azumane continued. "He'll come home and he'll say 'Mom' – he'll say 'Mom, Tate-sama is expecting' and I'll have to say to him, 'Takeshi, we don't approve of these sorts of mixed unions in this house!'"

"Mom, how would that even happen?"

"Your brother is the most stubborn creature ever born on this earth, I swear he tried to come out of me sideways – he would find a way to impregnate that mountain!"

"God," Asahi said desperately. "How would – augh – I don't even want to –"

"At least he has passion. At least he knows what he loves," she continued. "He's lucky in that way. So many have no direction, and you all end up lonely and overworked. It's tragic, really!"

Asahi lifted his head from the table. "Lonely and overworked, that's not really something new," he said. "Think about Dad."
Mrs. Azumane smiled at him, the same kind of sad, sweet smile that Asahi had trained on Nishinoya during the past day. She reached across the table and patted his hand gently. "Asahi, my love, it's foolish to try and convince that man to do anything he hasn't already decided to do. Believe me, after forty years of marriage I've learned a few things."

"Forty!" Nishinoya blurted in shock. "That's impossible! You can't be that old! And Asahi-san is only twenty-two!"

Asahi's mom blinked at him for a moment, then reached out and patted his hand next. "My dear, you may come for dinner any time," she laughed. Her smile turned wistful. "Asahi's brothers are somewhat older than he is, I'm afraid."

"Yeah," Asahi agreed, "I was the accident baby."

"Accident!" Nishinoya hit his fist on the table. "You shouldn't put it that way, Asahi-san!" he declared loudly. "An accident is something bad you wanna prevent. And there's nothing bad about you!" He turned back toward Asahi's mother, his hand clenched in the air. "Right, Mrs. Azumane? Asahi-san was a surprise, not an accident?"

Mrs. Azumane stared at him without speaking. Nishinoya felt his conviction deflate slightly. Asahi was also looking at him wide-eyed. Had he overstepped...?

Suddenly, Mrs. Azumane started laughing against the back of her hand. Nishinoya lowered his fist. Was what he'd said that stupid? Mrs. Azumane stood up and leaned across the table. She took his face in both hands and kissed him once on either cheek. "You little devil," she said. "You really are something, aren't you?"

Asahi's face split into a wobbly grin. "You have no idea," he said.

Nishinoya felt the blood rush into his face. "I'm. It wasn't. I didn't mean." But Asahi's mother was still laughing. She patted his cheeks gently.

"I'll get the cake," she said. She ruffled his hair before moving away. She collected their empty cups and returned to the kitchen.

Nishinoya blinked and looked at the table a moment in concussed awe. He glanced back up at Asahi. "Cake?"

"Yeah," Asahi said. "I told her it was your birthday."

"Asahi-san, you shouldn't have," Nishinoya said nervously.

"It's your birthday, Nishinoya," Asahi asserted. "Everyone deserves a good birthday. Especially you."

His cheeks were still burning. "But..."

"Nothing bad about me, huh?" Asahi asked softly. Nishinoya clapped his mouth shut, but Asahi just smiled back at him, cautious and hopeful.

The lights clicked off and Nishinoya jumped in place, though he managed not to yelp like Asahi did. As his eyes adjusted he saw the candles in the doorway, and Asahi's mother's face glowing orange above them.

"Happy Birthday, Nishinoya-kun!" she said brightly. She paused and pursed her lips. "What was
"Mom," Asahi sighed. "You'll make him uncomfortable."

"It's Yuu," Nishinoya said. "My name is Yuu."

"That's perfect," Mrs. Azumane said. "What a darling thing you are." She came across the room and set the cake down in front of him. It was store-bought, small and neatly decorated, with at least ten candles in the top. "Happy Birthday, Yuu-chan," she said. She bent and kissed him on the cheek again.

Nishinoya looked across the table at Asahi, whose eyes made soft reflections of the candlelight. He looked at the table briefly, then back up to Nishinoya again. His eyes were hooded in the flickering glow beneath his tousled hair. He was absolutely stunning, all dark lashes and high cheekbones. "Happy Birthday, Yuu," he said quietly.

Nishinoya's heart thumped in his chest and he swallowed hard. He closed his eyes and wished with all his might. Then he inhaled deeply through his nose and blew the candles out in one go. In the resulting darkness, Mrs. Azumane laughed and clapped. Nishinoya felt her leave his side as she went back toward the light switch.

A warm weight settled onto his hand, and Nishinoya realized it was Asahi reaching across the table. He turned his hand to squeeze Asahi's hard before it moved away. The light came on just as Nishinoya pulled his hand back.

Asahi's mother came back to the table brandishing a knife with a somewhat worrisome gleam in her eyes. "Who wants some?" she asked. "I'm kidding. Everyone gets a piece. Then I have a new movie for us to watch. It's very romantic, Asahi will probably cry."

"Mom, please," Asahi begged, as he slid down in his chair dejectedly.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who helped me get this together. And thank YOU for reading!
Chapter 4

Dear Readers: The story definitely earns its "mature" rating in this chapter. You have been forewarned!

As always, thank you for all the comments and messages. It's amazing to me how this story is resonating with so many readers. Everything will be okay for Noya, and everything will be okay for you too.

It was late by the time they started back toward Asahi's apartment. "Sorry," Asahi mumbled. "I didn't realize we'd be there so long."

Nishinoya shook his head, then realized Asahi probably couldn't see him very well in the darkness as they walked together along the road. "I liked it. It was nice."

"I hope that whole thing with the cake wasn't too much."

Nishinoya tucked his face into the collar of Asahi's old jacket that Mrs. Azumane had lent him. "No, it was great. I really like your mom."

Asahi huffed. "She's ridiculous. But when Dad was gone and Jun and Takeshi both went off to school, it was just me and her for a long time."

"She loves you a lot."

"We do pretty good most the time," Asahi agreed. "She's really easy to talk to."

"I can tell," Nishinoya said. As they passed over a small rise, he looked down into the spare scattered lights of the valley below them. The stars above flickered coolly. Nishinoya shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"No," Nishinoya said. "I'm happy." He reached out with one hand and grabbed Asahi's. He laced their fingers together.

There was a momentary silence, then Asahi's fingers curled slightly around his. "I'm glad," Asahi said.

Nishinoya stopped walking. Asahi continued a step more without realizing, then paused when their arms tugged tight between them. "Nishinoya...?"

"D'you know what I wished for?" Nishinoya let the words tumble out of him into the chill evening air.

"You're not supposed to say or it won't come true, right?"

"I don't give a shit!" Nishinoya declared. He stepped forward, grabbed Asahi's shoulder with his free hand, and sprang up on his toes. He missed Asahi's mouth in the darkness and kissed instead a
spot between his lower lip and chin. Nishinoya felt the scruff of Asahi's jaw against his lips, and something inside him began to burn. He fisted his hand in the collar of Asahi's jacket and tried to tug him downward so he could kiss him more properly.

Asahi wasn't cooperating. "Nishinoya!" he blurted. He pulled his hand out of Nishinoya's, then grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed down until Nishinoya was standing flat-footed on the ground again. "What're you doing?!!"

"I feel like I'm being pretty clear," Nishinoya returned, frowning heavily. He settled back on his heels and crossed his arms. He squinted in the dark and tried to get a better read on Asahi's face. Nishinoya regretted that he hadn't done this closer to a streetlamp. There was nothing for it now, though.

Asahi's hands were still on his shoulders, holding him at a safe distance. "I told you I didn't expect anything," Asahi said, his voice stiff. "You don't have to –"

"I'm not doing anything because I think I owe you something," Nishinoya said sharply. "I just wanted to kiss you. Just like I wanted to kiss you earlier."

"Earlier?"

Nishinoya nodded. "Like I wanted to kiss you when I was sixteen." Asahi didn't say anything to that, and Nishinoya pressed forward with his hands fisted up front of him. "What I wished over the candles was that – just for tonight, you'd let me kiss you. I don't care if it was just a drunken whim that made you hit on me last night, Asahi-san, I don't care if you never wanna talk to me again, or if you regret seeing me at all – just. For tonight. Can't I kiss you? On my birthday? Can't you let me?"

"Nishinoya," Asahi said softly. "Do you really want to kiss me?"

Nishinoya practically tore his hair out. "Do I want to kiss you. Are you deaf? Didn't I just say—"

The words cut off when Asahi practically folded down over him, one hand against his chin and the other around the back of his head. Asahi held Nishinoya in place while he slotted their mouths together and swallowed up the rest of his sentence.

Nishinoya heard himself make a little surprised grunt. He buried his shaking fingers in the front of Asahi's jacket and breathed through his nose. Asahi's lips were gentle and insistent. Nishinoya felt the tickle of Asahi's loose hair against his face. He closed his eyes and tried to keep his legs from trembling.

When Asahi finally pulled back and straightened up to his full height, Nishinoya sighed heavily.

"What?" Asahi said. His voice was still stiff. Nishinoya wished he had a better look at Asahi's face. All he could see was the vague outline of Asahi's brow and nose, the dark open space between his lips, the barest glint of distant light reflecting in his eyes. His hands were heavy as they settled back on Nishinoya's shoulders.

Nishinoya swallowed hard. "You know how, when you really want something, you tell yourself. I'll have a little taste, just a little bit, to tide me over. And then, that little bit just makes it worse." Nishinoya scrubbed at his face with one hand. "That's you all over, Asahi-san."

"I don't know what you want from me, Nishinoya," Asahi murmured. From his tone, Nishinoya could imagine his expression, that heavy crease between his eyebrows, the one he'd seen so many times already over the last day.
"I want to have known you were gay six years ago," Nishinoya said. "I want to have met you again when I wasn't so fucked up. I want--" Nishinoya fisted his hands in Asahi's jacket. He leaned his forehead against Asahi's chest. "I want to kiss you. Again. A lot." He sighed and closed his eyes. "I want to fuck you. I want you to fuck me."

Asahi let out a startled noise at the admission, then a deeper sound that made Nishinoya's stomach clench. "We shouldn't..." Asahi's voice was thick. "We shouldn't talk about this out here." His hands were still against Nishinoya's shoulders. He smoothed them over the curving muscle down to Nishinoya's upper arms. "Let's go back to my place and we can talk about it there, okay?"

Nishinoya nodded once more before remembering yet again that Asahi probably couldn't see the action very well. "Okay," he murmured. Heat circled in the floor of his abdomen like a restless cat. The autumn air was cold against his hot cheeks. "We'll talk," he agreed.

~

By the time they got back to the apartment, after an awkwardly silent train ride and walk, Nishinoya had resolutely decided that talking was at the very bottom of his list. Near the top, right after 'Climb Asahi Like a Shy Tree', was to kiss him again. So when Asahi stuck his key in the latch and turned it, Nishinoya pushed him hard into the apartment and let the door shut behind them. He kept pushing Asahi until they reached a wall, and then he scrambled his way up Asahi's long form, up on the balls of his feet with his arms thrown around Asahi's neck.

"Nishi-! Nishinoya!" Asahi fumbled between Nishinoya's attempts to kiss him. "Wait a second!"

"Why're you making this so difficult?" Nishinoya grumbled irritably.

"Nishinoya!" Asahi hissed sharply, and real anger flooded into his voice for the first time since Nishinoya had run into him in the bar the night before. "I told you I wanted to talk about this!" He pushed hard against Nishinoya's shoulders and shoved him away.

Nishinoya staggered under the force of it and stumbled backward off-balance. He felt his hip bite into the end table beside the couch; he managed to grab it and stay on his feet.

Asahi was still up against wall. The only light on in the apartment was above the stove, but Nishinoya could see that Asahi was breathing hard, hands splayed behind him on the off-white paint. His hair was tumbling out of his clip, disheveled from Nishinoya's attempts to maul him. His eyes were wide.

Nishinoya felt the shame of it hit him like a sledgehammer. He folded in place, crumpling at the waist until he was crouching on the floor with his forehead pressed into his knees, hands on either side of his head squeezing his temples hard enough to make them meet in the center of his skull. "Oh god," he moaned. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Asahi-san." He wasn't quite sure what had come over him, what sort of desperation had clouded him so badly.

He felt more than heard Asahi's footsteps as he crossed the room. Nishinoya tensed, certain that Asahi was going to push him out the door. But there was just a heavy thump in front of him, and Nishinoya looked up just in time to see Asahi kneeling there, before he swallowed Nishinoya up in a tight hug.

Nishinoya froze in surprise. The tears that had been threatening behind his eyes stalled. Asahi wrapped one arm around Nishinoya's shoulders and pulled him in tight, the other he used to turn Nishinoya's face into the space where his shoulder met his neck.
"It's alright," Asahi murmured. "You're alright. I'm not mad."

Nishinoya blinked next to Asahi's warm skin. He smelled like deodorant and curry and birthday cake. He smelled like home. Nishinoya desperately dug his fingers into Asahi's jacket and fought back the swell of agony that threatened to strangle him.

Finally he managed a long breath, a trembling exhale, and he pushed himself away from Asahi to sit back on the floor. Asahi stayed kneeling in front of him, sitting on his feet with his hands on his knees. Nishinoya let his eyes flick up briefly to Asahi's, then down to the floor again.

"What was that about?" Asahi asked in a low voice.

Nishinoya shook his head. "I just feel like I've missed my chance at everything." He looked back up at Asahi. "Including you." He curled his hands around his legs and put his face against his knees again. "I thought maybe if I could just have you, just for tonight, maybe it might make me feel like I had something, at least."

Asahi exhaled slowly. "Nishinoya," he said softly. Nishinoya felt his hand touch his jaw, turn his face upward. Asahi smiled at him gently. "I'm still here. I've been here the whole time. You haven't missed anything at all."

Then he frowned. "I want to be clear," Asahi continued. "Last night wasn't a drunken whim."

"It wasn't?"

Asahi shook his head. "No. I'd actually... well, to be honest, when I saw you in that bar last night, it... it was something I had thought about." He smoothed Nishinoya's hair behind his ear. "It's not that I've been..." Asahi chewed on his lip. His cheeks darkened. "I've not really been... waiting. But I think a little piece of me had been hoping you might walk in that door one day."

Nishinoya felt his own face heating. He hugged his knees tighter. "Then..."

Asahi laughed breathlessly. He cast his eyes to the side, cheeks still flushed. "I'm saying. I want to. Fuck you, I mean."

Nishinoya sucked in a breath. He unfurled from his huddle and sprang onto his knees in a fluid motion. He grabbed Asahi's arms. "Really?"

"Yeah. But..." He touched Nishinoya's chin again, tipped his face up with his fingers. "If you're asking for... just a one-time thing, one night. Or if you just want to because you wanna forget everything on your plate for awhile. I mean, I can understand it, but--" Asahi frowned again. "I'm not sure that I can do that, honestly. I'm not really... built for it." He met Nishinoya's eyes. "But if that's what you want, what you need. I can try."

Nishinoya looked up into Asahi's face, awed and devastated by the emotion pouring out of it. He moved his hands up Asahi's arms to his shoulders, then up to his neck and into his hair. "That's not what I want, Asahi-san," he murmured. "I just want you. I want you. I always wanted you."

Asahi let out a soft sigh and slid his arms around Nishinoya's body. His hands splayed over his back. "Nishinoya," he whispered. Nishinoya felt the puff of air glide over his mouth as Asahi leaned in, and he felt a sharp jolt in his stomach in response.

"I'm sorry I'm such an idiot," Nishinoya mumbled. "I didn't mean to --"

"Stop talking," Asahi breathed, right against his lips, and Nishinoya did.
Nishinoya didn't have a huge amount of experience with kissing. There had been a few fumbling encounters over his college career, a couple parties where he'd had too much to drink and ended up on a couch in a back room with a girl whose name he didn't know. There had be one aborted attempt to hook up with a guy in his calligraphy class during his second year – the guy had chickened out at the last minute, and left Nishinoya sitting at a tea shop, looking like an idiot and feeling more than a little relieved. So he felt that his opinion was probably somewhat limited on the matter, and yet...

Nishinoya was absolutely, totally, one hundred percent convinced that Asahi was probably the best kisser in Japan. Maybe on the planet. If there was an Olympic event for kissing, Asahi would take the gold medal. It wouldn't even be a competition. Nishinoya's head lolled back on his shoulders as Asahi kissed him so sweetly and perfectly that it felt like all the muscles in his neck had liquified. Asahi cradled the back of his head in one huge hand and held him in place while he opened his mouth and pressed his tongue against Nishinoya's.

Nishinoya felt himself moan, heard the noise in his head like it had come from somewhere else. He tightened his arms around Asahi's neck and pressed himself up flush against the broad width of Asahi's body. God, they were still wearing their jackets. Still! But Nishinoya couldn't disengage himself long enough to undo the zipper on his own. Asahi's hand found the hem of it and slipped underneath – suddenly there was a warm palm coasting over his ribs with an almost ticklingly delicate touch. Nishinoya shuddered and gasped shakily into Asahi's mouth. He couldn't seem to do much else besides cling to Asahi and let himself be touched and kissed senseless.

His knees complained against the floor. He shifted forward to try and readjust the weight, and Asahi seemed to take it as some sort of cue – he grabbed Nishinoya by the hip and pulled him forward, settling back at the same moment, until Nishinoya was straddling his thigh. Asahi closed his hand over the swell of Nishinoya's ass and pressed him in close. His other hand he coasted over Nishinoya's thigh between his legs. Asahi reached around and pulled Nishinoya's leg tightly against his groin; Nishinoya could feel Asahi's dick in his jeans, already half-hard through the stiff fabric.

Nishinoya gasped and broke their kiss. He looked down at their bodies pressed snug together. "A-Asahi-san..."

Asahi pressed his lips against his temple, his forehead. "Is this too much?" he asked softly.

Nishinoya shook his head. "Just give me... a minute."

Asahi nodded. He trailed his fingers down the back of Nishinoya's thigh to the inside of his knee, and back up again. Nishinoya closed his eyes and rested his head against Asahi's shoulder. He stuck his hand half into the collar of Asahi's shirt and pressed his palm flat against the seam of Asahi's neck and collarbone. He felt the pulse of Asahi's heart beneath his fingers and let the rapid beating steady him. Nishinoya shifted experimentally on Asahi's thigh, which drew a groan from each of them.

"Do you want to go to the bedroom?" Asahi murmured.

"Yeah," Nishinoya said. "I really do."

Asahi chuckled low in his throat. He let go of Nishinoya's ass and instead grabbed his hips, pushed him slowly up and off his thigh. Nishinoya let his legs unfold at the knee until he was standing upright above Asahi, who still knelt on the floor with his hands around Nishinoya's hips. He gazed up at Nishinoya, lips full and slightly parted, eyes darkened, looking positively obscene. Nishinoya sucked in a hard breath and put his hand on top of Asahi's head. Asahi leaned forward, up onto
knees slightly, until he could press his face into Nishinoya's stomach. His fingers curled into the waistband of Nishinoya's jeans, teasing at his hipbones. Nishinoya dug his fingers into Asahi's hair and leaned against him for support.

Asahi tightened his hands at Nishinoya's hips and tugged slightly as he stood up. He held Nishinoya closely as he straightened – the effect being that his chest stroked up the length of Nishinoya's body, which made Nishinoya sigh aloud and clutch at his shoulders. At his full height Asahi lifted his hands to Nishinoya's jaw and kissed him again, his touch tender, lips gentle.

"You're shaking," Asahi murmured.

"I am not," Nishinoya returned sharply.

Asahi wrapped an arm around him and used his other hand to brush Nishinoya's hair away from his face. "I'd never do anything to hurt you," Asahi said softly. "If you don't want this, just say so."

"I want to!" Nishinoya insisted. "I'm just..." Anxiety had stuttered to infuriating life in his stomach. "I've just never... done much. With anybody."

Asahi smiled at him and brushed his hair back again. "That's alright. We can go slow."

Nishinoya shook his head. Desperation was curling inside him like dark silk, cold and sleek. A strange fear had taken hold of him – that if they didn't move faster the whole scene would shatter, scattering like leaves, and he'd wake up in his dorm room even more miserable and lonely than before.

"Asahi-san," he whispered, his throat tight. "I just want you so bad. I feel like I'm falling apart."

Asahi cupped his head gently. "I've got you, Nishinoya," he said. His voice was like velvet. "I'm not gonna let go."

Nishinoya looped his arms up around Asahi's neck and pulled him down again. On a whim he pulled the clip out of Asahi's hair entirely and tossed it behind him onto the couch. Asahi's hair fell in a long silken sheet over his hand. "Please," Nishinoya breathed.

Asahi kissed him again; his mouth was hot inside, and he tasted like the coffee they'd had after dinner. Nishinoya finally managed to get his hands around the snaps on Asahi's jacket; he shucked it off Asahi's shoulders, and Asahi dropped his arms long enough to let it fall to the floor before he wrapped them back around Nishinoya's waist and nearly took him off his feet. The zipper on Nishinoya's jacket came next; it joined its brother on the floor and was forgotten.

Nishinoya let himself be led to the hallway, let himself be pressed against the wall with Asahi's knee between his thighs while Asahi fumbled with the doorknob to the bedroom. Asahi laved at his throat with a hot tongue while Nishinoya groaned and sighed and clutched at his shoulders to stay on his feet. Nishinoya could feel the taut length of Asahi's muscle under the thin cotton of his t-shirt; the cored strength of Asahi's arms and hands, the hard line of his thigh against Nishinoya's groin. Asahi somehow seemed bigger than he'd been in high school, than he'd been even earlier that day – he was everywhere around Nishinoya, overwhelming each sense in turn. Asahi sighed up the length of Nishinoya's neck to his ear and nipped gently at the lobe, all humid breath and the barest hint of teeth.

His hands were on Nishinoya's ass again, and Nishinoya groaned and canted his hips upward along Asahi's leg. Asahi pulled and lifted, and Nishinoya felt his feet come off the ground; he was unceremoniously carried into the bedroom and dumped almost immediately onto the bed.
Nishinoya let out a little exhalation of surprised when Asahi dropped him. He propped himself up on his elbows. "H-hey..."

"Hang on," Asahi said. Nishinoya could see him silhouetted in the faint light from the hallway as he stepped back toward the open door.

"Where are you going?" Nishinoya blurted, a little more desperately than he intended.

"Nowhere," Asahi assured him, the smile evident in his voice. Light flooded the room, and Nishinoya squinted in the sudden brightness as Asahi lowered his hand from the switch. "I just don't wanna miss anything." He was flushed and gorgeous, looking somehow both shy and predatory, though Nishinoya couldn't explain exactly how. Disheveled hair fell into his face; a few strands were sticking to his lower lip. Asahi's shirt had ridden up on his stomach and showed a broad swath of tanned flat skin, the peek of a one hipbone above the low waist of his jeans. He was noticeably hard, the bulge of his erection apparent under the straining fabric. Nishinoya swallowed hard at the sight of it, heat pooling in his belly. When he cast his eyes wordlessly back up at Asahi's face, Asahi glanced down at himself, then up again. He grinned sheepishly.

Nishinoya tried to smile back, but his mouth wobbled and he couldn't seem to make it cooperate. Instead he shrank a little, shoulders turning inward, self-conscious in the onslaught of illumination. It seemed unreal – or perhaps too real – Asahi looming in the doorway like an enormous marble sculpture, perfect and beautiful. Nishinoya felt pinched and tiny in comparison, scrawny and underwhelming.

Asahi crossed the room in a few strides. He put one knee on the bed and leaned forward on both hands to kiss Nishinoya once more. When Nishinoya tried to put one arm around Asahi's shoulders, Asahi took a hold of his wrist and put it back down again. "Let me," he murmured against Nishinoya's open mouth. "I want to." He pushed Nishinoya back on the bed and knelt down between his legs. His hands went to the buckle on Nishinoya's belt. He'd just gotten it undone when Nishinoya came back into himself long enough to grab Asahi's wrist.

"Asahi-san," he said quickly, "you don't... you don't have to."

Asahi stilled. His eyes cast up the length of Nishinoya's body and settled on his face. Asahi looked pure and open, his face soft and gentle. His lips pursed. "Do you not want me to?" he asked.

Nishinoya tightened his grip on Asahi's arm. His skin was warm; Nishinoya felt his wristband under his hand, the little clay bead against his palm. "It's not that I don't want it," he said. "It's not like I haven't thought about this happening before! But I..." Nishinoya felt his face crease. "I don't want you to do this because you feel sorry for me or..."

"I wouldn't do this for something like that," Asahi said. His face turned anxious, eyebrows knitting together. "Nishinoya," he said quietly, "do you still not realize how badly I want you?"

Nishinoya let his head fall back against the bed. He stared at the ceiling.

When he didn't say anything, Asahi spoke again, more hesitantly. "Is that okay?"

"Okay?" Nishinoya echoed. His voice cracked on the word and he winced. "I just can't believe someone like you would be into a guy like me."

"A guy like – Nishinoya, how can you–" Asahi frowned. "Don't you understand?"

"Understand what?"
Asahi shook his head. He ran his hands down Nishinoya's thighs to his knees, then stood up between Nishinoya's legs dangling off the bed. Asahi leaned down over his body, one hand against the bedspread. With the other, he touched Nishinoya's face. "Nishinoya, I've been in awe of you since I was sixteen years old. You're absolutely astounding. How can you not realize that?"

Nishinoya gripped the bedspread in both hands to keep from trembling. "But, Asahi-san," he murmured. "I'm..." He closed his stinging eyes. "I'm..." Nothing special, he wanted to say. Probably a mistake, he wanted to say.

"Nishinoya," Asahi whispered. His mouth was close to Nishinoya's ear, his breath coasted against the side of Nishinoya's face. "Let me show you."

He reared up against Asahi's chest and tangled his hands into Asahi's loose hair. Asahi's arms closed around his back. Nishinoya felt his hand cup the back of his head. He turned his face into the warm, musky skin of Asahi's neck. "Please," Nishinoya begged. "I need..."

Asahi's hand turned his head gently. He pulled back – Nishinoya couldn't help the whimper that escaped him – but Asahi leaned forward again, kissed his brow, then his cheek, then the corner of his mouth. "I'm here," he said. "I'm not going anywhere." He rested his forehead against Nishinoya's. "You took care of me so many times. Let me take care of you."

The ardent honesty of Asahi's gaze was unbearable, so Nishinoya closed his eyes. He nodded once firmly. He turned his head to catch Asahi's mouth with his own, and kissed him with urgency.

Asahi put his hand on Nishinoya's shoulder and pushed him away gently. He kissed Nishinoya's jaw, his throat; Asahi's fingers touched lightly behind his ear, coaxing his head this way and that. He pushed downward and Nishinoya yielded until he was laying on the bed again. Then Asahi kissed him again, sweetly this time, and he slid his hands down Nishinoya's body to the tail of his shirt.

"Nishinoya," he murmured, breath warm across Nishinoya's lips. "Can I?"

Nishinoya swallowed hard and nodded again. Asahi kissed him once more, briefly, then slid his hands under Nishinoya's shirt and pushed it up to expose his stomach and chest. Asahi knelt again between Nishinoya's legs. He took ahold of Nishinoya's hips and pulled him forward on the bed until his ass nearly hung off it. Then Asahi leaned down over Nishinoya's body, and he opened his mouth against the flat of his stomach.

A little gasp worked its way out of Nishinoya's mouth at the hot contact of Asahi's tongue on his abdomen. He put his hands back in Asahi's hair again to keep them from shaking. He could feel his legs quivering on either side of Asahi's torso, his toes straining to touch the floor. Asahi's chest rubbed against his groin as Asahi shifted over him. Nishinoya looked at the ceiling again and bit his lip to keep from groaning.

"Relax," Asahi breathed. The puff of air tickled the hair below Nishinoya's bellybutton.

"I'm trying," Nishinoya said in a strangled voice, and Asahi chuckled against his skin. His hands went back to Nishinoya's jeans. As he undid the button, he kissed the sharp point of Nishinoya's hipbone, mouthed his way down the groove that lead to Nishinoya's nearly-erect cock. Asahi pulled the zipper down agonizingly slow, and Nishinoya couldn't help but angle his hips upward.

Nishinoya wasn't wearing underwear, and he felt air against the base of his penis when Asahi tugged on his jeans. He moaned softly at the friction from the stiff material. Asahi reached into his jeans and cupped Nishinoya's cock protectively as he worked the pants downward. Nishinoya
flexed his hips until they came off the bed, and Asahi grabbed the waistband of his jeans and pulled them down past his knees.

Asahi sighed as Nishinoya's cock sprang free. It was such a wondrous sort of sound that Nishinoya felt his eyes prick again. He put one hand over his face, the other he fistied in the cover of the bed.

He jumped as Asahi's breath cascaded over his erection. Asahi's hand touched his balls gently from underneath; the other pressed flat against the inside of Nishinoya's thigh and coaxed his legs as far apart as they would go with his calves still tangled in his jeans. Nishinoya acquiesced with knees bent and his feet braced against the side of the bed. His legs were already trembling from the stress of anticipation.

"Asahi," he choked, "please." He reached down blindly.

Asahi's fingers laced into his. "I'm here," he said softly. "I'm here." With his other hand, Asahi curled his fingers around the base of Nishinoya's cock. He closed his mouth over the head.

Nishinoya bit hard on the heel of his palm. He felt like a rubber band pulled tight, terribly close to snapping in two. Asahi's mouth was all velvet heat. It threatened to shatter Nishinoya's already thinning resolve. Asahi sucked downward slowly; he drew Nishinoya's cock in a few centimeters and then pulled back off again. Asahi tightened his grip around the base, and Nishinoya choked into his hand.

Asahi curled his tongue into the notch at the base of the glans, his lips grazing the tip of Nishinoya's erection. Nishinoya managed to prop himself up on his elbow so he could finally look – Asahi's face was flushed, his eyes hooded, and at the movement his gaze locked with Nishinoya's. His hair stuck to the side of his face. The edge of his mouth turned upward.

"Aw fuck," Nishinoya breathed.

Asahi let go of Nishinoya long enough to spit into his hand, and then he coated Nishinoya's cock from root to tip in hot saliva.

"Aw fuuuccckk," Nishinoya repeated as Asahi stroked him. His head lolled back on his shoulders, eyes rolling shut. He pulled his hand out of Asahi's other one, so he could support himself on the bed with both arms.

Asahi seemed to take this as permission, and in the next moment he devoured Nishinoya's cock, sucked in the full length of him all the way to the base, until his nose touched Nishinoya's pubic hair.

Nishinoya cried out; he buried one hand in Asahi's hair and tugged hard, bucked his hips once uncontrollably. Then he put his hand on Asahi's forehead and pushed him up, shame spilling hot in his gut as it tangled with his arousal. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "I couldn't help it."

Asahi let him go again. His lips were swollen and glistening. He chuckled, a deep throaty sound that made Nishinoya's cock jerk next to his chin. "No, it's okay," he assured softly. "I've got you. Don't worry." Then Asahi closed down on him again.

Nishinoya tugged on his hair once more, and Asahi moaned around the cock in his throat. He held the base secure in one hand while he swallowed down the length, his cheeks hollowing as he sucked upward to lave the head before plunging down again.

Nishinoya groaned. It took all he had to not grab Asahi's hair in both hands and outright fuck his mouth. Asahi took his hand away from Nishinoya's cock and cupped his balls instead, rolling them
gently over his fingers, brushing his knuckles along the slight furrow between them. Asahi moaned again, and the sound of it reverberated up Nishinoya's spine.

"Oh god," Nishinoya gasped. The sound of Asahi sucking his cock was absolutely wretched, wet and loud and agonizingly hot. Asahi kept humming appreciatively, and Nishinoya thought he might explode from that alone. He realized he had clenched his knees around Asahi's body, that his hips were shifting of their own accord, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. He felt his balls tightening, the pressure building upward.

"Asahi," he moaned, "Asahi – I'm gonna –"

Asahi nodded and hummed an affirmative. He grabbed Nishinoya's unbruised hip tightly enough to make it match the other one and plunged his lips all the way to the base of Nishinoya's cock, his nose pressed hard into Nishinoya's skin.

Nishinoya gasped in shock as he started to come. He grabbed the back of Asahi's head and bucked once, twice; he felt his cock hit the back of Asahi's throat, and then the hot burst of semen spilled out of him. He shuddered and curled upward on himself like a burning leaf.

The wave broke and pulled back from him, and he flattened again. He let go of Asahi's head. Asahi pulled away slowly, let Nishinoya's still-hard cock slip from his mouth. He exhaled hard and wiped his chin with the heel of his hand.

Nishinoya managed to speak again after a moment. "Sorry," he whispered, "I couldn't..."

"No," Asahi said. His voice was hoarse. "That was amazing, Nishinoya. Thank you."

Hysterical laughter threatened to bubble out of Nishinoya's throat. He felt disturbingly close to tears. "Why're you thanking me?" he asked. "That's ridiculous."

Asahi chuckled again. "It was beautiful. I'm really happy."

"That's ridiculous," Nishinoya repeated weakly, his voice thick in his throat. The word beautiful knocked around inside his head. "You did all the work, Asahi-san."

"It wasn't work," Asahi insisted. He kissed down the inside of Nishinoya's thigh toward his knee. "I loved it."

"Asahi-san," Nishinoya said again, desperation leaking around the edges of the syllables. He flung his arm over his hot face. Then, as realization hit, he sat up abruptly. "Asahi-san! Do you want me to–"

"Ah, no," Asahi cut him off. He scratched at his cheek bashfully. "I already... well." He coughed, then grinned sheepishly. "I already took care of it."

Nishinoya's brow creased in confusion, then his eyes widened as he understood. "Then you were... while you were..." He gestured obscenely.

Asahi laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. Nishinoya noticed now that he was only using one hand, the other hidden down below Nishinoya's line of sight.

"I, uh, got a little too excited," Asahi said. "I couldn't help myself." He looked down, cheeks heavily flushed. "You're so hot, Nishinoya."
"Hot," Nishinoya echoed in disbelief. Of all the words he'd use to describe himself, 'hot' was not on the list. "You're joking."

Asahi laughed again. "Don't you think the circumstances say otherwise?" he asked, and he gestured at Nishinoya's bare lap, still close to his face.

"Oh," Nishinoya said. He thought again of how Asahi had moaned around him in light of the new information. His flagging cock gave a half-hearted twitch in protest. "Well, then," he mumbled, ears burning.

Asahi reached up behind himself and grabbed his shirt at the back of his collar, then pulled it off over his head. He wiped his hands and then himself, and stood up. Nishinoya caught a short glimpse of his penis and the dark brown patch of hair at its base before Asahi tucked himself back into his pants. He left them unfastened as he straightened his boxers around his hips.

Nishinoya cast his eyes down at himself, feeling more than a little self-conscious. He pulled down his shirt over his stomach. He set his feet on the floor and lifted his hips to pull his jeans back on.

"Oh, um," Asahi cut in. "D'you want some pajamas instead?"

Nishinoya froze with his jeans around his thighs. "What?"

Asahi rubbed his neck again. Nishinoya tried not to stare at the play of muscles in his chest as his arm lifted and settled. "I just thought, to sleep in, you know? Instead of your jeans." He shrugged. "Might be more comfortable."

"Oh..." Nishinoya looked down at himself again. He pulled his pants the rest of the way up his hips, but didn't zip them. "That does sound pretty good." A strange unsettled feeling was tumbling around inside him, twisting his stomach into knots. His legs were shaking a little in the wake of his orgasm, and he used that as an excuse to sit back down on the bed and brace himself with his hands behind him.

"What's wrong?" Asahi asked.

Nishinoya shook his head. He didn't know how to explain the empty yawning ache in his diaphragm.

Asahi bent down in front of him. He touched Nishinoya's head, tangling his fingers in his hair. "Is that not what you wanted?" Asahi asked, his voice cautious.

Nishinoya grabbed a handful of Asahi's hair in either hand and tugged his face down. He kissed him hard, tongue delving, while Asahi grunted in mild surprise. Nishinoya could smell the musk of himself on Asahi's skin, the bitter aftertaste of his own come in Asahi's mouth. Asahi kissed back, tilting Nishinoya's head in his hand to slot their lips together more comfortably.

"You don't have to go yet," Nishinoya mumbled. "Can't you just stay with me for a minute?"

"Ah," Asahi sighed, his mouth easing into a smile against Nishinoya's. "I already told you." He slipped his arms under Nishinoya's and around his back. "I'm not going anywhere."

Nishinoya let the relief hit him, let it fill him up until he thought he might burst. He closed his arms together around Asahi's shoulders and pulled backward abruptly. As he hit the mattress, Asahi tumbled off-balance on top him and forced the air out of his lungs.

"Hey!" Asahi huffed. He propped himself up with an elbow on either side of Nishinoya's head.
"Hey," he said again, tone softening. He touched Nishinoya's hair again. "You okay?"

"You ask that like you didn't just suck my brain out through my dick."

"Oh!" Asahi colored beautifully and choked on a startled laugh. "Well, I...I just..."

"Not that I'm complaining," Nishinoya added. Now that he had the solid weight of Asahi on top of him, he felt a little less splintered, and the ache inside him receded to a quiet din. He tilted his chin upward, and Asahi kissed him gently in response.

"How about pajamas?" Asahi suggested when they came apart again. "And maybe some tea?"

"D'you have hot chocolate?" Nishinoya asked. He rubbed his thumb over Asahi's rough chin.

Asahi ducked his head and pressed his lips to the pad of Nishinoya's thumb. "I might even have marshmallows," he said.

"Oh god," Nishinoya moaned deliriously. "A blowjob and marshmallows. You know how to treat a guy."

"Yes, I am very good," Asahi murmured as he nuzzled his face into Nishinoya's palm. "Wait until you see my movie collection."

"Lotsa action movies?"

"Uh..." Asahi laughed awkwardly. "If by 'action movies' you mean 'thorough documentaries' then yes."

"Asahi-san," Nishinoya said seriously, "you're lucky I'm here to straighten you out."

"Hm. I suppose you're right." Asahi pressed a quick kiss to the heel of his hand, then peeled himself off Nishinoya and back onto his feet. This time, he took ahold of Nishinoya's hands and pulled him up too. One warm hand closed over the back of Nishinoya's neck, close to the base of his skull. "Pajamas?" Asahi asked. "Hot chocolate?"

"Yeah," Nishinoya said. "Fuck yes."

Asahi laughed again, low in his throat. Nishinoya thought he might never get over the sound of it. Later, as they sat curled together on Asahi's couch, the stoneware mug held tightly in Nishinoya's hands, flannel pants rolled three times at the hems so he wouldn't trip over them, one shoulder cool as it peeked out of the collar of one of Asahi's old t-shirts, Nishinoya began to suspect that perhaps he never wanted to.

Asahi's had thrown an arm around him, and the rough pad of his thumb coasted pleasantly down the exposed skin of Nishinoya's shoulder. The television played some late-night drama Nishinoya wasn't familiar with. The volume was turned low, and he was much more aware of the soft sound of Asahi breathing beside him, the weight of Asahi's hand on his shoulder, the heat pooling where their bodies tucked together.

When the hot chocolate was finished, Asahi plucked the mug from his hands and took their dishes to the sink to rinse them. Nishinoya followed him into the kitchen. The tiled floor was smooth and cold against his bare feet. A request bandied its way around in his throat, but before he was able to voice it, Asahi turned back to him.

"Let's go to bed," he said.
Nishinoya felt a smile touch his mouth, curling around his lips in a way that felt odd and unfamiliar and genuine. He grabbed Asahi's hand quickly. "Asahi-san, you read my mind."

They brushed their teeth together in the bathroom, both standing over the sink. Nishinoya caught Asahi's eye in the mirror and grinned at him, and Asahi grinned back with a mouth full of foam. In the dark of the bedroom, Asahi used the light on his phone to locate the reading lamp beside his bed. It reminded Nishinoya that his phone was still dead; he'd have to try to track down a charger if he planned to stay for very long. But that could wait. For now, there was nothing he wanted more than to curl up in Asahi's blankets and sleep for a year.

He was still as tired as he had been when he stepped off the train, but the exhaustion had transformed inside him, softening around the edges until it felt like something more manageable. He took the same side as he had earlier in the day, but curled this time toward the inside of the bed, while Asahi climbed in beside him. Asahi clicked off the lamp, and then his hands found Nishinoya in the dark.

"Will you stay tomorrow too?" Asahi murmured.

"Yeah," Nishinoya breathed.

Asahi moved closer. One of his hands fumbled against Nishinoya's jaw and caught ahold of his chin. "Good." He kissed Nishinoya softly, just once. "Goodnight, Nishinoya." He wrapped his arm around Nishinoya's waist and pulled him in close.

Nishinoya went without resistance, and let himself be pressed in against the flat of Asahi's warm chest. He closed his eyes and listened to Asahi's heart. He tried to make his own match the steady thrum of the one beating next to his ear.

He gradually rediscovered the sound of the clock ticking on the wall. The road outside the building hadn't been busy even during the day; it was a long time before Nishinoya saw headlights pan across the ceiling as the distant sound of wheels against pavement echoed below. He didn't remember seeing a second set before he slipped down into a deep, dreamless sleep.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

There is nothing too explicit in this chapter, but there are a few references to a sexual situation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Nishinoya opened his eyes, he was perched on the edge of Asahi's bed, staring at the wall of the bedroom. A pale morning light peeked in around the still-closed blinds on the window above Asahi's headboard.

Nishinoya turned over in the bed and found himself facing Asahi's back. Asahi hadn't stirred; he was snoring softly in time with the slight raise of his shoulder on each intake of breath. His shirt had rucked up his back, and Nishinoya got the perfect view of the furrow of his lower spine, stretched as it was with his body curled in sleep. Nishinoya couldn't help but slide his eyes lower until his gaze met the top of Asahi's pajama pants. They were low enough on his hips that Nishinoya could almost see the cleft of his ass peeking above the waistband.

Nishinoya bit his lip. He slipped out from the covers as quietly as he could, taking care to not disturb the bed, and Asahi slept on. Nishinoya padded gingerly to the door and opened it carefully before stepping into the hallway. Once the door was closed behind him, he exhaled a long sigh of relief and went off to the toilet.

In the kitchen, the clock above the stove read 9:18. Nishinoya figured he'd let Asahi sleep just a little longer. He wasn't used to sleeping so late into the morning, but he remembered that Asahi had never been much of a morning person. For now, Nishinoya shoved the overly-long sleeves of Asahi's shirt up his forearms and assigned himself the task of breakfast. It seemed like a small thing he could do, something to show Asahi he was grateful for being welcome to stay and for...

for whatever had happened the night before.

The image of Asahi kneeling in front of him on the floor, eyes blown and lips parted, came unbidden to Nishinoya's mind, and he felt his stomach clench in response. He curled his bare toes against the chill kitchen tile and shook his head to clear it. There was no point in trying to read too much into it right now. After all, he realized with frustration, he hadn't even gotten the chance to reciprocate. It felt like the whole thing had been over so quickly – almost before Nishinoya had a chance to process that it was happening at all. And Asahi had – Asahi had...

He wondered briefly what Asahi had looked like in that moment. How had he touched himself, what did he do? And when had he come? – which moan around Nishinoya's cock had been the indicator? Which had been the noise that Asahi made when his semen spilled over his own fingers?

“Aw fuck,” Nishinoya whispered over the stove. He reached down and readjusted the burgeoning erection in the front of his pants. Breakfast, breakfast, breakfast. He forced himself to remember again the look on Asahi's face when Nishinoya first tried to attack him in the apartment. The residual shame and embarrassment crept in around his gut like a cold tendril and effectively squashed down his blossoming arousal.
Breakfast, he told himself, breakfast. He already had rice in the cooker; he could make a quick soup. There were eggs to be cooked, and pickles in the fridge. It was kind of a mishmash, but it would be edible, and there would be plenty of it. He could do that at least.

It was not quite a half hour later that Asahi came out of the bedroom, yawning blearily. “You cooking?” he mumbled, then yawned again. “Smells good.”

“You were supposed to stay in bed, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya groused without turning from the stove where he stirred the soup. “I was gonna bring it in to you.”

Asahi paused as he came around the counter. “Like, breakfast in bed?”

“Well, it's too late for it now if you're asking.”

“No, it's not that.”

Nishinoya froze when Asahi's voice came from right behind him. He felt hands come down on his shoulders, and then the hard ridge of Asahi's chin rested on the top of his head as Asahi peered over him at the stove. “It's just...” Asahi's voice reverberated inside his head like the low pulse of drum. “It's really thoughtful, Nishinoya. You're the guest here, after all.”

Nishinoya felt heat rise into his cheeks. A momentary guilt rose in his stomach at how quickly the image of Asahi on his knees came to his mind again. He did his best to push it away. “It's not a big deal, Asahi-san,” he said, a little sharply.

Asahi's hands slid off his shoulders, and the warm weight of his body peeled away from Nishinoya's back. Nishinoya fought the urge to shiver in the wake of it. “Coffee?” Asahi asked.

“Ah,” Nishinoya remembered. “I, uh, don't usually drink it, so...” He gestured vaguely at the pot. “It might be kinda strong.”

Asahi reached for the carafe gratefully. He opened a cabinet above the coffee maker and pulled out a pair of matched mugs, similar to the stoneware one Nishinoya had used the day before, but smaller. “It's great, I'm sure,” Asahi returned. “I'm not used to breakfast. Two days in a row, this is amazing.”

“Not used to breakfast?”

Asahi shrugged. “I'm usually in a rush in the morning.” The corner of his mouth turned up sheepishly. “Most days I'm running out the door, and I just grab a snack on the way,” he explained. “Takes about half an hour to get to work anyway.”


“I know,” Asahi said, his tone mixed with an apology.

Nishinoya turned back to the stove with a huff. “Well, I used to make my brother and sister breakfast and lunch all the time,” he declared. “I can make it for you while I'm here, I guess.”

In the small kitchen they were almost close enough to touch each other, and Nishinoya felt the air tighten as Asahi stilled. “You don't have to, Nishinoya,” he said softly.

The lingering heat in Nishinoya's cheeks flared up again. “It's really nothing,” he insisted. “You let me stay, after all. And you've been so.” He frowned again and wished abruptly that he was better with quiet words. Words that meant something soft and sweet. “Good,” he finished lamely. “To
me.” He could feel the blush spreading to the back of his neck. He'd spent the morning so far trying to think of a nice way to thank Asahi for the day before without success. Somehow ‘thanks for sucking my dick last night’ didn't seem to have quite the emotional resonance he was looking for.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi started haltingly, “don't feel like you need to–”

“Just let me make you breakfast, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya cut in. “Just let me do that? Just while I'm here.” He could palpably feel Asahi's growing discomfort, and so he changed the subject. “Do you have to work today?”

“Ah, no,” Asahi said. He reached back into the cabinet for the sugar tin. “I moved a few shifts with someone, so I don't go back 'til Sunday.”

“Sunday?” Nishinoya put down the spoon and turned toward Asahi fully. “That's a lot of days off, isn't it?” Asahi hadn't worked the day before, and it was only Friday.

“It's fine,” Asahi assured him. “I'll make the days up later. Right now, I'd rather be here with you instead.”

Nishinoya let the statement sit for a moment. It stalked around in his gut, curling uncomfortably beneath his ribs, unsettling his stomach. He reached over to switch off the stove. “Is that so?” he finally mumbled.

Asahi turned back toward him, a teaspoon still in hand for the sugar. “Does that surprise you?”

Nishinoya didn't answer. Instead, he opened the cabinets within arms reach until he found bowls and plates, and pulled down two of each. “So then what's the plan for today, if you're not working?”

Asahi shrugged. “I hadn't really made any plans yet.” He went back to preparing the coffee. Nishinoya noted the way Asahi sidestepped the awkward moment and wasn't sure if he was relieved or frustrated. He added it to the list of things he owed Asahi, a list that seemed to keep growing.

Asahi continued. “Do you have anything in mind?”

Nishinoya snorted. “I think I'm done making plans for the time being,” he said. “I keep breaking them almost immediately.” He dug around in the drawers fruitlessly for a few seconds until Asahi handed him a ladle. “Thanks.” He started spooning out the soup, one ladleful at time. It was hot and smelled good, and he was pleased that he'd been able to make it. “I guess maybe... there is one thing.”

“What's that?” Asahi prompted.

“I need clothes,” Nishinoya admitted. “And a phone charger. Mine's been dead since yesterday.”

Asahi made a thoughtful 'ah' sound. “I did wonder why no one was messaging you. I thought maybe you had turned it off.”

“Yeah, well.” Nishinoya shrugged. He set the bowls down and began loading up their plates. “Anyway, I probably should check it, make sure nothing crazy happened.”

Asahi blew on his coffee and took a small sip. “We could go to a shop,” he suggested. “If you need money I can–”
“No,” Nishinoya cut in, “I thought that maybe we could. Go to my house?”

Asahi paused. He regarded Nishinoya solemnly for a moment over the rim of his mug. “Are you ready to see them?” he asked carefully.

Nishinoya shook his head quickly. The words came out of him in a rush. “I thought we'd go during the day, when the kids were at school and Mom and Dad are working. I didn't bring my key but there's a window in the back that Dad has promised my mom he'd fix for like, ten years, so–”

“Are you asking me to help you break into your own house so you can steal stuff from yourself?” Asahi grinned at him, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

The ridiculousness of it hit Nishinoya, and he felt his apprehension begin to melt. He smiled then, and the tension he hadn't realized was knitting his shoulders together suddenly loosened. Laughter bubbled up in his chest, warm and bright, and he set down the plates so he could let it out without dropping them. “I guess I am!”

Asahi started laughing too. “Well, an offer like that, how can I refuse?”

“Right?” Nishinoya leaned an elbow onto the counter so he could rest his forehead against his hand. “I should start a new crime trend – stealing from yourself so you can avoid your problems.”

“Isn't that sort of what gambling is?”

“I think that would add more problems than it avoids, Asahi-san.”

“Might be fun to try, though.”

Nishinoya rolled his eyes. “You're probably the least likely person I know to gamble.” He picked up a plate and handed it to Asahi. “I bet you have a savings account.”

Asahi mouth tightened, his eyebrows knit in confusion. “What's wrong with a savings account?”

“Asahi-san! You're not even twenty-five yet!” Nishinoya gestured dramatically with the spoon in his hand. “The fact that you have to ask that just demonstrates how hopeless you are!”

They ate breakfast together at a low square table that Asahi unfolded from where it leaned against the wall of the kitchen. It was barely large enough for one person, let alone two, and Nishinoya was conscious of the way their elbows occasionally knocked together. Through some unfamiliar sense of meekness, Nishinoya managed not to mention again the events of the night before or Asahi's work schedule, and the stiff moment they had in front of the stove did not return.

Asahi's demeanor appeared no different than it had during the previous day, and Nishinoya began to wonder if – perhaps – maybe it really had been nothing after all. Or not nothing, for how could it have been absolutely nothing? But perhaps not anything more than just what it had been. Asahi had said that he wasn't built for one-night stands, but...
rapped his knuckles on the open door before entering.

“Are ‘ou ‘un w’ uh ishish alreh’ee?” Nishinoya asked with his mouth full of foam, which garnered an outrageously handsome grin from Asahi – one that brought out the dimples in his cheeks, that crinkled at the corners his eyes.

“No, I just rinsed them,” Asahi explained. “I’ll wash them later.” He opened a drawer and pulled out of a tangle of hair elastics.

Nishinoya spit in the sink. “That’s bad practice, Asahi-san.”

Asahi slowly extracted a tie from the knotted mass. “I have a precise system,” he said. “I put off washing the dishes until I have absolutely no clean ones left. And then I buy a package of disposable plates.”

“Asahi-san!”

Asahi laughed as he pulled his hair back. “It's a very good system!” he insisted.

Nishinoya rinsed his mouth and slid his toothbrush into the cup next to Asahi's. The night before, the intimacy of the shared space had seemed warm and comforting – but now it felt a bit strange. “I guess I'm not one to talk,” Nishinoya said, as he caught sight of his disheveled reflection in the mirror. He frowned and ruffled a hand into the scruff on either side of his head; the resulting effect being that his fine dark hair stood out from his scalp in a halo of static.

Asahi reached over him for his own toothbrush. “You could get a haircut while you're here if you like,” he suggested as he applied toothpaste to the bristles.

“Eh,” Nishinoya said. He combed his fingers through the shaggy bangs on his forehead. “My dad usually trims it for me,” he said. “It would feel weird if someone else did it.”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah, he's a stylist.”

Asahi had been lifting his toothbrush, but he stopped at this statement and paused there with his mouth still open and the toothbrush in hand. “A stylist,” he said finally.

“Yeah?” Nishinoya returned. “I know, it's weird, but–”

“Your dad is a stylist,” Asahi reiterated, “and he still let you go to high school with that hair.”

The silence which enveloped the bathroom was both instantaneous and oppressive.

“Excuse me?!” Nishinoya demanded. Asahi ducked his head away and shoved his toothbrush into his mouth. “Oh, no, no, no, you don't get off that easy,” he continued, grabbing at Asahi's elbow and pulling hard. “What do you mean that hair?”

“Well,” Asahi started, and flecks of foam landed on Nishinoya's cheek. “Oh, I'm sorry!” he blurted.

“Forget that!” Nishinoya ordered as Asahi tried to wipe at his face. He knocked Asahi's hand away. “Mister piddly-ass-seventeen-year-old-chin-pubes!! What d'you mean that hair?”

Asahi's light laughter filled the small bathroom. “Well,” he offered finally, “no one is their best in high school, right?”
He had toothpaste on his chin. Nishinoya remembered how he had looked at seventeen, tall and nervous and awkward, hands and feet too big for his still-unfilled frame. He was beautiful then. He was beautiful now.

Nishinoya flicked the foam off his cheek. “My hair was badass,” he insisted. “I bleached it myself.”

“It suited you,” Asahi agreed. He wiped with his thumb at the center of Nishinoya’s forehead.

“Yeah, yeah,” Nishinoya said. He used Asahi’s elbow to leverage his toothbrush back into this mouth. “You’ve shown your true colors now, Azumane.”

Asahi smiled apologetically around the plastic handle. He turned back toward the mirror and finished brushing his teeth.

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“Are you sure about this?” Asahi asked for the third time, as Nishinoya clambered over the short fence at the Nishinoya homestead. He was looking back and forth along the street anxiously, and Nishinoya couldn’t help but grin a little at the expression on his face.


“I suppose...” Asahi agreed hesitantly.

“You know, Asahi-san, if you're so worried about getting in trouble you might try to look a little less like a delinquent.”

“Now, that's not fair,” Asahi insisted. When Nishinoya dropped off the fence, he hoisted himself over it gracefully. Nishinoya tried not stare at the flex of his biceps underneath the long sleeves of his t-shirt. “You're the one who looks like a vagabond.”


“My look is ‘artistic’ at best,” Asahi explained as he dropped his legs. “Don't you know how many hours I spent trying to look like I spent no time at all on it.”

“You just put in a hair-tie this morning. I watched you do it. You didn't even shave.”

Asahi’s shirt caught in the fence and he spent a moment untangling himself. “I pretended to be asleep this morning. I actually woke up three hours before you and styled my hair to look like this.”

“Like you slept on it for three hours.”

“Exactly.” When Asahi turned back toward Nishinoya, his eyes were glinting with a smile. “Now you know my terrible secret.”

“One of them, at least,” Nishinoya returned.

It seemed odd, standing in his family’s front yard with Asahi, his first time home in months. Everything looked the same as always: the pile of empty pots next to his dad's garden, the brick path leading to the front door, their old shed off to the side, with peeling paint and a door that was held shut with a piece of wire. Nishinoya remembered the details intimately, unaltered in his
memory from the time he was young. Nothing there had changed – nothing except himself. He tried to shake off the feeling. “Come on,” he said, “the broken window's around the back.”

He tried to remember the last time he had used the window to sneak in. Right before graduation he and Tanaka had snuck the underclassmen out after hours, and Saeko unwittingly provided the alcohol. Later that night, as he stumbled home through the quiet dark of the sleeping town with Tanaka's warm arm slung over his shoulders, alternately giggling hysterically and shushing each other in turn, he'd felt like the whole world was laid out in front of him, like he'd somehow managed to make something of himself after all, and success was just a step away.

Now, as he jiggled the frame of the window until the latch came loose, Nishinoya wondered how it was possible that he could've been so wrong.

He opened the window and poked his head inside. The window led into the back den, where his mom had set up a home office. The room was dark, her computer shut down, the files on her desk untouched. The house was silent and empty.

“Looks good,” Nishinoya told Asahi over his shoulder, before he braced his hands against the windowsill and hauled himself through the opening.

The scent of it hit him first – the old smell of a home, of his family, of old furniture in every room and thousands of dinners in the kitchen, the scent that he never seemed to notice until he returned after a time away.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi whispered behind him, and he realized he was still standing in the way of the window.

“Sorry,” Nishinoya said, stepping aside. He put out his hand and Asahi clasped it through the window, then he clambered though. His hand was warm, the skin of his palm rough against Nishinoya's, and he didn't let go immediately.

“You okay?” Asahi asked softly. He turned his hand in Nishinoya's and twined their fingers together.

Nishinoya scoffed. “Why wouldn't I be okay? It's my own house, Asahi-san.”

“I know, but...” Asahi lifted his other hand to Nishinoya's shoulder. “Well, if you're sure.”

Nishinoya made himself smile, and he squeezed Asahi's fingers before dropping his hand. “Let's get my stuff.”

They stepped into the hallway. Nishinoya could navigate the house with his eyes closed, knew all the doorways, which cabinets stuck, and what floorboards creaked. He knew about the finicky sink in the upstairs bathroom, the way the heater rattled before clicking on.

He'd lived there since he was five years old. Standing in the quiet hallway, Nishinoya felt like a stranger in that house.

“Which bedroom is yours?” Asahi whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” Nishinoya whispered back.

“Oh! I... oh. I don't know.”

Nishinoya cracked up at Asahi’s expression and lost the thread of his existential angst. “Asahi-san,
your face!” He grabbed Asahi’s cheeks with his hands and stretched them apart, which pulled the skin of Asahi’s nose and mouth comically tight.

“H-hey!” Asahi laughed. He seized Nishinoya’s wrists and pulled his hands away. “Stop that!”

“Come on, you dork,” Nishinoya said. With Asahi’s hands still on his wrists, he could just barely reach enough to flick him in the forehead. “My room's upstairs.”

As they passed through the house, Nishinoya took stock of little things – his dad's old sweater hanging on the banister, the groan of the fifth stair under their feet, the flower stickers on Suzu's door, the ones she'd tried to peel off the year before in a fit of adolescent anguish when she didn't get into her first choice of high school. The door to Taka's room was open; as they passed by, Nishinoya caught a glimpse of Taka's neatly organized bookshelves, his meticulously made bed. They'd be alright, he mused. They were good kids. They'd do the family justice, and Nishinoya himself could slug off into obscurity.

The door of Nishinoya's bedroom was closed. His hand paused only briefly against handle before he opened it.

His room was tucked in the corner of the house, and the ceiling was low and slanted under the sloping roof. He had the smallest of the four upstairs rooms. Nishinoya was fairly certain that it had once been connected with Taka's room into a larger one, since the adjacent wall between them was thin and roughly joined to the exterior wall, and both rooms seemed oddly undersized. But he didn't mind it so much – it had always been his own space.

The air in the room tasted stale, as though the door and windows had not been opened in a long while. Nishinoya couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed – relieved that no one had snooped through his things, disappointed that the household had seemingly gone on seamlessly without him.

He'd left his laptop in his dorm room, so the surface of his desk was covered in comics and a fine layer of dust. He swiped a finger through it, and the dark laminate surface of the desktop shone through the clean streak he left behind, reflecting the dim light from the windows.

“How long since you've been home?” Asahi asked behind him as he stepped further into the room.

“Not sure,” Nishinoya admitted. “Since last term, at least.” The room was achingly familiar, but still felt odd somehow, like the pieces of it had been taken apart and put back together again, but nothing fit quite the same. He wondered if the distance from the door to the bed frame had always felt so short – if the window above his headboard had always been so small.

Nishinoya took the few steps forward and flopped face first onto his bed, diagonally across the futon. “Uggghh,” he moaned, “how long's it been since these sheets've been washed?”

Asahi snorted behind him. “Not getting much use with you gone, I would hope,” he said.

Nishinoya rolled over on his back and pinned him with a glare where he still stood in the doorway. “What kinda operation do you think my family's runnin' here, Azumane?”

“No, I didn't mean like–” Asahi laughed awkwardly and rubbed his neck. “I just meant. No one's been sleeping here, it looks like.”

“Probably not,” Nishinoya agreed.

Nishinoya watched as Asahi stepped a little more into the room. He moved slowly, almost
cautiously, as though he wasn't sure what was allowed. He paused next to Nishinoya's disorganized bookcase, which was half full of objects decidedly unbooklike, wedged in among his few texts and novels. Asahi reached into the bookcase and pulled out a wooden rectangle – Nishinoya realized a moment later that it was a picture frame. What picture? he wondered absently, and he threw an arm over his eyes.

“This is us,” Asahi said quietly.

Nishinoya's eyes popped open and he sat up. “Us?” he said. His voice squeaked slightly on the word.

“Yeah, look.” Asahi stepped over and sat down beside him on the bed. Nishinoya felt the mattress shift as he settled. Asahi held the frame out so they could both look at it.

“Oh,” Nishinoya mumbled. He could feel embarrassment tangling around inside him.

“Is this my graduation?” Asahi asked.

Heat curled at the back of Nishinoya's neck. “Yeah,” he said. In the picture they were both wearing their school uniforms, and Asahi's was actually neat and properly fastened for once, his hair tied back and his face clean shaven. He had his hand on Nishinoya's shoulder, fingers curling into the black fabric of his jacket. Nishinoya was smiling so wide that his mouth was open and his teeth showed. In contrast, Asahi looked extremely stern.

“I didn't remember getting one of just the two of us,” Asahi said.

Nishinoya reached out and took the frame out of Asahi's hand. “Well,” he said, “it was a busy day.”

“I would've liked to have had a copy of it, if I'd known.”

Nishinoya turned the frame over in his hands. He fiddled with the fastenings. “What's the deal, Asahi-san?”

Asahi looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“You say you wanted a picture of us. You took off work while I was here. And you...” He felt the blood rush into his face. “I mean. Last night. You know.”

Asahi settled back and leaned away from Nishinoya to look at him more carefully.

“I mean, you can be honest with me,” Nishinoya said. “I might be kinda fucked up right now, but I can still handle it, alright?” He turned the frame over and over in his hands and didn't look at Asahi directly.

Asahi was silent for a few moments, and Nishinoya felt himself panic briefly in the vacuum. “Maybe pretend I didn't say anything,” he added quickly.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said, and his voice was so soft and sweet that Nishinoya let his eyes pan upward to meet his face. “What do you think is going on here?”

Nishinoya shrugged. “I don't really know,” he admitted.

Asahi smiled at him. He leaned forward again and lifted one hand as he did so; this hand he touched gently against Nishinoya's cheek. He moved close, and Nishinoya's eyes closed instinctively. Asahi smelled like soap and faint cologne, and like his apartment. He kissed
Nishinoya's temple close to the corner of his eye. His lips were soft and dry.

“Why don't we go ahead and get your stuff?” Asahi suggested as he pulled back. “There's something I'd like to show you.”

~

It was nearly lunchtime when they got off the train at the stop Asahi indicated. Nishinoya blamed that for the way his stomach audibly growled, loud enough that Asahi blinked in surprise and then grinned at him.

They bought rice balls at a shop not far from the station. Nishinoya had never been there before, but Asahi bent obediently at the knees when the old lady behind the counter reached to pinch his cheek. She sent them off with a free meat bun and the instruction to eat more.

In front of the shop, Asahi split the bun in two pieces, and didn't notice Nishinoya's curious look until he'd already shoved most of his half into his mouth. He colored a little, high in his cheeks, and covered his mouth with his hand so he wouldn't spit out the food. “I help her move boxes sometimes,” Asahi hastily explained, his words muffled.


Asahi swallowed hard. “H-hey,” he stuttered, “we didn't exactly break in...”

They ate together as they walked. The day was trending toward the kind of beautiful that could only occur in autumn – temperate and clear, blue sky above and the leaves just starting to turn. Nishinoya's spirits had bolstered after they left the smothering quiet of his family's empty house and stepped into the sunshine. He wore fresh clothes, a clean t-shirt and fitted jeans under a hoodie jacket, and it improved his mood considerably.

“So where we going?” he asked as he licked grains of rice off his fingers.

“It's not too much farther,” Asahi returned.

He walked at a steady lope, and Nishinoya took one and a half strides for each of his. They passed another row of shops, and then at the curb Asahi paused to look both ways on the street with his hand on Nishinoya's arm. There was no great deal of cars passing, and Nishinoya had made no move to cross the street without looking, so the gesture seemed oddly possessive.

Across the street was a small building, old and squat, with a hand-written sign in the window. Hiroki's Art and Ceramics, it said. Asahi went right up to the door and opened it.

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There was a little bell in the doorway as they came in, Nishinoya shifted his backpack higher up on his shoulder and stepped in behind Asahi. The space inside was open but cluttered around the periphery with counters and sinks covered in various objects of unknown purpose; untidy cubbies adorned a far wall. A handful of tables dotted the room, as well as a cluster of pottery wheels near the right-hand wall. On the left was a large metal contraption including an enormous basin large enough to fit a full-grown person, and next to it piles of burlap sacks and marked plastic barrels. Nearly every surface in that corner was covered in a fine layer of delicate dust.

No one else was in the studio, but the petite figure of an elderly woman peeked out from the doorway of a back room. Asahi waved at her and she waved back, then put her glasses back on her nose and disappeared from view again.
“How many old ladies do you know?” Nishinoya asked quietly.

“Probably more than I should,” Asahi admitted. He put his hands in his pockets. “Well. What do you think?”

“What do I think about what?”

Asahi shrugged and looked at the floor, smiling nervously. “The studio, what do you think?”

Nishinoya gave it another look around to see if he had missed anything. Each table had a selection of tools in the middle. The cubbies were marked with peeling tape. Metal racks against a wall held a number of unfinished pieces, each disassembled component labeled carefully. “I dunno, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said carefully. “What am I supposed to be thinking right now?”

“Ah...” Asahi rubbed his neck. He looked at the far wall. “Well, come here.” He gestured at the cubbies and started in their direction.

Up close, Nishinoya could see the cubbies were labeled with individual names. Each held partially finished items, half-constructed pottery, piecemeal projects. He read along the row. Hashimoto, Ueda, Yatagawa, and then, on the piece of tape that Asahi smoothed flat under a broad index finger, Azumane. Nishinoya blinked at the pair of characters. His gaze snapped back to Asahi’s reddened face. “Asahi-san!” Nishinoya blurted. “You work here?!”

Asahi laughed awkwardly. “No, no...” He cleared his throat. “It’s not a place to really ‘work’. Except for Mrs. Ishida, her family owns it.” He smoothed down the tape again. “I just. Come here. To make things.”

Nishinoya peered in around his arm at the contents of his cubby. There was a plate, a bowl, what looked like the body of a teapot without a spout or handle. “Asahi-san, you make pottery?”

Asahi chuckled again and nodded quickly. “I’m... I’m not very good. I’m still learning.” He pulled the bowl out of the cubby and flipped it over in his hand. The bottom of the it was marked with the first character of Asahi’s surname, east. “I’m no good at the hand-building stuff, but I can make simple things on the wheel.”

Nishinoya was silent for a moment. He put his bag on the floor. He held out his hand, and Asahi obediently handed the bowl over. It was dry but unbaked, the clay gritty and soft beneath his fingertips. Nishinoya turned it over to look at the mark again. He rubbed his finger over it thoughtfully. When he looked back at Asahi, his face was marred by nervous apprehension.

Nishinoya handed him the bowl back, and Asahi returned it to the cubby. When it was safely in place, Nishinoya grabbed Asahi’s hand and squeezed his fingers tight. “Can you show me?” he asked.

Asahi leaned back in surprise, raising his hand that Nishinoya clasped between them. “Sh-show you?”

“Yeah!” He added his other hand to Asahi’s, so that he was holding it with both of his own. “C’mon, that’s so cool! You can use the wheel? Let me see it!” He leaned and tugged, and started pulling Asahi in the direction of the handful of pottery wheels.

“You – you don’t think it’s embarrassing?” Asahi asked as he let himself be dragged.

“Well, it's not really a... masculine hobby, is it?”

“Who cares!” Nishinoya insisted. He stepped around behind Asahi and pushed him forward, then reached up to put his hands on Asahi's shoulders. “It's your hobby, isn't it? I wanna see what you can do!” He pulled hard, attempting to force Asahi down into one of the seats.

Asahi barely wavered on the spot despite the way Nishinoya hung on him with nearly his entire weight. He turned abruptly in place and Nishinoya almost came off his feet, but Asahi looped an arm around behind and caught him about the waist before he fell. Nishinoya ended up pressed against the warm angles of Asahi's back, and he felt the vibration of Asahi's voice through his torso as he spoke. “Okay, okay,” he conceded. “You're lucky I'm wearing old clothes already.”

Nishinoya planted his feet and pulled his cheek away from the sharp ridge of Asahi's shoulder blade. “Really?!”

“Yeah,” Asahi said. “But... I gotta get the stuff ready for it, okay?” He turned, more slowly this time, and disengaged himself from Nishinoya. “Hang on a sec.”

Nishinoya planted himself next to one of the wheels. He saluted dramatically. “Aye-aye, cap'n! Hanging on!”

“...right,” Asahi returned cautiously. He held his hands up in a placating gesture. “Just... just don't get your hopes up too much.”

Nishinoya watched him as he stepped back and forth in the space, gathering items – a flat round plate, a basin of water, a long wire connecting two handles, a few other tools. He glanced back and caught Nishinoya's eye, then ducked his head until Nishinoya could only see the flushed tips of his ears poking out of his loose hair while he gathered the rest of the materials.

When he stepped back over, his face had cooled a bit as far as Nishinoya could see. He sat at the wheel directly across from Nishinoya and gave him a careful smile. “I use this one a lot,” he offered as explanation. Asahi's t-shirt pulled tightly across his chest as he lifted his arms to readjust his hair into tighter knot. The shirt had a wide neck, and Nishinoya could see the little divot at the base of his throat, the shift of his collarbones as his arms moved and lowered. He pushed his sleeves up to his elbows.

The thought of Asahi on his knees between Nishinoya's legs came to him unbidden once more, and he had to swallow hard and tighten his fingers into the denim stretched across his thighs.

Asahi didn't seem to notice. He wet the wheel and put the plate down on it. There was a soft clink as it slid into place on the surface. From a plastic container he removed a fat cylinder of gray clay, about the size of two fists together. He threw it hard into the center of the plate, and one end of it flattened immediately. Nishinoya heard a click and a whir, and Asahi gave the wheel a twist to set it off.

He splashed a good deal of water onto the clay, then placed his hands over the mound of it as though he were warming his palms over a flame. He leaned over the wheel and pushed down; between the gaps of his fingers Nishinoya could see a rounded dome taking shape under his hands. Asahi's fingers moved over each other, fingertips sliding and apart as he curled his hands and pulled the clay upward into a cone. He leaned back to wet the clay again, and Nishinoya caught a glimpse of his face – sharp and focused, the anxiety forgotten, his eyes turned forward and his gaze clear.

Nishinoya had seen that look on Asahi's face before.
Asahi turned his hands so his forearms were perpendicular to each other, and pressed in with the heel of his right palm over his left. The cone gradually curled over itself and flattened into a fat disk. Asahi slid his fingers into the indentation in the middle and deepened it.

His hands seemed impossibly large, his fingers long and graceful as they curved against the dark clay. Rolls of the material collected against Asahi's skin as he smoothed the surface of the project; he periodically cleaned it off his fingers and dipped them in the water again.

Asahi curled his hands into the dip he'd made in the middle of the form, one on top of the other in a triangular shape, and the sides of it began to slope gently upward and outward. The wheel slowed near imperceptibly as Asahi's fingers tightened, and the exterior wall of the shape began to thin out.

Very suddenly, Nishinoya realized that it was a bowl. Just a simple bowl, nothing extraordinary about it, but he was sure that Asahi had seen the shape of it in the clay when it was only a formless gray lump.

Asahi smoothed down the rim and made a lip on it, then placed one hand inside the bowl and the other outside as he shaped the wall, pulling out near the base so it was more curved and less conical. He pulled out a long metal tool with a pointed end and trimmed the base. He used a sponge to mop out water that had pooled inside it. Then he sat back, and the wheel began to slow, and Nishinoya realized the demonstration was over. It had been barely five minutes from start to finish.

“Well, it's kind of heavy,” Asahi admitted with a sigh. He pushed hair back from his face with the back of his hand. It left a smear of gray on his cheekbone where his thumb had touched. “I started with too much clay and that made it too big and then...” He drifted off when he looked up and noticed that Nishinoya had rounded the collection of pottery wheels to stand next to him.

With Asahi sitting and Nishinoya on his feet, he had the rare experience of looking down on Asahi from above. Nishinoya could see the fine baby hairs near his hairline, the speckle of stubble along his jaw, the hint of a wrinkle in the middle of his forehead. Nishinoya lifted his hand and brushed the pad of his thumb lightly against the smudge of clay on Asahi’s cheek.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi murmured, but that was all he managed before Nishinoya bent down and kissed him.

Asahi made a soft sound in his throat. Nishinoya opened his eyes and saw Asahi's were closed, so he pressed forward, grabbing a handful of Asahi’s t-shirt at his shoulder and tugging him close. He opened his mouth and Asahi's lips parted in response. Nishinoya grabbed his chin to tilt his head so he could slot their lips together snugly, and he pushed his tongue into Asahi's mouth.

Asahi made another sound, deeper this time. He wrapped an arm around Nishinoya's neck. Nishinoya slid his hand against Asahi's chin up into his hair. Asahi turned toward him on the stool, and Nishinoya stepped forward into the space between his legs. Asahi's other arm looped around his waist and drew them together. Nishinoya could tell Asahi was being careful to not touch him with his hands; he wanted to tell Asahi not to bother, not to worry, just to touch him and mark him and ruin him as much as he pleased instead – but that would mean taking his mouth away from Asahi's, and Nishinoya found he wasn't quite able manage it.

Nishinoya felt emboldened by Asahi's earnest response to his advance, which had surprised even him. He had told himself that morning that he'd let Asahi draw the boundaries of what he wanted, that he wouldn't try to push anymore after the disastrous attempt to maul Asahi in his own living room. But the way Asahi's hands had moved over the clay, the sharp focus in his eyes – they caught on something inside Nishinoya's stomach, and he found himself powerless to stop it. Now, as he bit down on Asahi's bottom lip and got a sharp gasp in response, he couldn't seem to
remember what he'd been so apprehensive about.

Asahi's palm pressed against his cheek, and Nishinoya felt the half-dried clay crumble and stick to his skin. “Ah,” Asahi breathed, hot air flowing over Nishinoya's sensitive lips, “sorry.”

Nishinoya shook his head. “I don't care,” he mumbled back. He pressed forward again, but Asahi leaned back, maintaining the separation.

“Wait.”

That was it. One simple word, and suddenly Nishinoya remembered again, the mortification flooding back, the unease spilling inside him as he remembered Asahi's face in the dim light from the kitchen bulb. Had he done it again? Had he made the same mistake? Could it be that Asahi didn't really want him after all?

But Asahi’s face didn't look as it did at that time – there was no shock, no anger. Instead, he looked as he had in the bedroom, his eyes hooded, his mouth soft and pliant. Nishinoya's sharp dread relaxed somewhat.

“Hang on,” Asahi said, his voice hoarse. He unwound his arms from Nishinoya's body and pushed him away, then stood up somewhat unsteadily. He wiped his hands on his jeans before walking toward the back room where the old lady had disappeared. Nishinoya abruptly realized he'd forgotten she was there.

“Mrs. Ishida!” Asahi called loudly into the doorway, “I'm going to show my friend the kiln out back!”

Nishinoya heard the distant reply, almost unintelligible.

Asahi stepped away from the door and motioned for Nishinoya to follow him.

“It's your stuff?” Nishinoya asked.

Asahi shook his head. “Leave it.”

Nishinoya obeyed. He followed Asahi to a door near the back of the studio, one that was labeled 'NOT AN EXIT!' on a handwritten sign.

The door led to an open-air courtyard behind the building. A high fence enclosed the yard on three sides. There was no gate or door apart from the one they'd just come through. A few meters from the door in the center of the yard was a large rectangular brick structure.

Nishinoya heard the click of the door behind him, and then Asahi grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and pressed him against the exterior wall of the building. The force of hitting the wall made Nishinoya exhale sharply, but the action was swallowed up as Asahi closed in on him and kissed him again, open-mouthed and forceful.

Nishinoya grunted at the contact, then immediately tangled his hands into the back of Asahi's shirt and pulled him closer. Asahi's huge hand framed his jawline and pushed his head into the wall. Nishinoya heard a sharp noise of displeasure escape his own throat – but then Asahi's leg slipped in between his thighs, and he lost track of his protest.

Nishinoya had no reference for how long they stayed against the wall, only that his back started to go numb from the chill of it behind him, and his chin stung from the scratch of Asahi's stubble. He tried biting Asahi's lip again and was rewarded with an even better sound than before. Nishinoya
grinned deliriously. He slid his hands down to grab Asahi’s ass.

Asahi groaned against Nishinoya’s mouth. He braced his forearms against the wall on either side of Nishinoya’s head and pushed himself back a little. “You better be careful,” he suggested in a thready tone.

“Well?” Nishinoya returned. “I should be careful?” He curled a leg around Asahi’s thigh, drawing their bodies together. Asahi closed his eyes and exhaled hard through his nose. “Are you sure?” Nishinoya asked.

“Ohm,” Asahi leaned forward until their noses touched. “Maybe we should both be careful.”

Nishinoya pulled one hand up between their bodies and used it to pinch Asahi’s chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I dunno, Asahi-san,” he said. “I kinda like it when you’re not.”

“Oh, really.” Asahi’s eyes glinted at him. He wedged an arm in between Nishinoya and the wall and closed it around his waist. “What else do you like?” he asked, voice low and soft as velvet.

Nishinoya wasn’t able to respond before the doorknob jiggled near them. Asahi shoved away immediately, backing up so quickly he would have toppled over if he hadn’t caught himself on the kiln.

Mrs. Ishida poked her bespeckled head out into the courtyard. “Azumane-kun, I’m going to get some lunch down the street.”

“Yes, of course,” Asahi returned. “I’m sorry, ma’am.” Nishinoya was impressed how quickly his disposition had gone from debauchery to politeness.

Mrs. Ishida either didn’t notice their disheveled state or chose not to comment on it. She disappeared back inside, and the door closed behind her.

There was a beat of silence. Nishinoya caught Asahi’s eye from across the courtyard, and then Asahi covered his mouth with his hand. Nishinoya burst out laughing at the expression on his face.

“Oh my god,” Asahi mumbled between his fingers. “I think I almost got kicked out of my membership.”


“Wow, I do not want to think about that,” Asahi insisted, and Nishinoya laughed even harder. Asahi lowered his hand and bit his lip, but he was smiling. “We should... we should go clean up the mess,” he suggested as he readjusted his clothes.

“Okay,” Nishinoya agreed. He felt strangely buoyant – between the cool wall at his back and the warm sunshine above, and Asahi’s blushing face in front of him – he finally started feeling like some of the loose stones in his brain were shaking out. He’d almost entirely forgotten the sensation he’d had earlier at his house, like he was a puzzle piece that didn’t quite fit.

They went back inside, and Asahi seemed to be extra cautious of the distance between them, which alternately frustrated and delighted Nishinoya. He bumped his elbow into Asahi’s as he gathered the tools together, and Asahi cleared his throat and leaned away pointedly, which made Nishinoya grin as he looked over the bowl.

“What’re you gonna do with it?”
“The bowl?” Asahi lifted up the basin of water, shrugging as he did so. “It's not so great, so I probably won't keep it,” he said. “I'll dump it in the bin in a minute.”

“No!” Nishinoya blurted, too loud in the small space, and his voice rang off the walls. Asahi froze and blinked at him in surprise, and he winced in return. “I mean, it's not that bad, Asahi-san.”

“Oh, well…” Asahi carried the basin toward the sink. “I can't save everything I make, you know? It's not worth it to fire everything.”

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said softly. He tentatively touched the rim of the bowl with a fingertip. It was still soft, but not so soft that he made an indentation. “Could... I have it?”

“What?” Asahi dumped the water in the sink.

“The bowl, could I have it?”

Asahi turned and looked back over his shoulder. “You want it? It's not very good, I mean, I didn't even try to smooth it out…”

“I do,” Nishinoya said. He wiped his hand on his pants. “I like it.”

“Well.” Asahi put the basin in the sink. He was blushing again. “Well, I did make it for you.” He scratched his cheek with one finger. “They usually do firings on Mondays and Thursdays, so it could be done by Tuesday... if you decide to stay that long, I mean.” He put a hand up quickly. “Not that you have to, of course! I can ship it to you!”

Nishinoya looked at the bowl again. He could see the ringed paths left by Asahi's fingertips. “Do you want me to stay that long?” he asked.

Asahi turned back around. He started the water in the sink and began washing his hands. “You can stay as long as you like, Nishinoya,” he said.

“Not what I asked,” Nishinoya thought bitterly, but he pushed it away. He tried to keep hold of the delirious feeling he'd had out in the courtyard. If he had any doubts as to whether Asahi actually wanted to kiss him or not, they were much fewer now than before. His chin still felt overly sensitive from the sandpaper of Asahi's against it. Nishinoya rubbed at it absently with his fingers.

Asahi came back to the wheels. He sat at the stool in front of the bowl and carefully lifted the plate off the wheel with the bowl still attached. “It'll need to dry overnight,” he said as he turned the bowl this way and that above his eyeline. “I can come back tomorrow and fix it a little more.”

Nishinoya glanced around. Mrs. Ishida was nowhere in sight. He stepped behind Asahi and put his chin on his shoulder. “How did you get into this?” he asked.

Asahi chuckled awkwardly. “Well…” He set the plate down again. “I took a class at the rec center. It was... I don't know, I signed up on a whim.” He fidgeted, dusting flakes of dried clay off his pants, scratching at layers of it caked on the guard of the wheel. “Mom suggested I try getting into art.”

Nishinoya closed his arms around Asahi's shoulders. He pressed the side of his head into Asahi's jaw. “Why?”

“I think to help express myself? You know I... haven't always been the best at that.”

Nishinoya snorted but didn't say anything. He felt Asahi's jaw shift next to his head and heard the
smile in his voice as he continued.

“I still don't know if I'm really 'expressing' myself,” Asahi explained. “I'm just making the same round thing over and over.” He shrugged. “I get kind of nervous about the idea of trying to make anything more elaborate, honestly. Maybe when I'm a little better at it.”

“Why do you keep doing it, then?”

Asahi paused a bit. He twisted the plate on the surface of the wheel. “It makes me feel... calm,” he explained quietly. “When I've got the wheel going, my brain sort of turns off.” He rubbed his thumb over a fingerprint in the rim of the bowl. “So if I'm worried about something or stressed out, a lot of times I come here and put in earphones and just... make things.”

Nishinoya leaned his head away from Asahi, turning slightly so he could see the side of Asahi's face.

“Is that stupid?” Asahi murmured. The corner of his eye was soft, the edge of his mouth turned wistfully.

Nishinoya shook his head. “No,” he said. “That's how I feel when–” He cut off. He looked away quickly, turned his gaze back to the pottery wheels in front of them. His heart thumped painfully. “That's how I feel when I play volleyball,” Nishinoya admitted quietly. After a beat, he added, “that's how I used to feel.”

Asahi curled a hand around Nishinoya's wrist across his breastbone. He rubbed his thumb against the back of Nishinoya's hand.

Nishinoya cleared his throat. “Maybe I should try pottery instead,” he said.

“I'm not sure you'd like it,” Asahi told him. “It's very repetitive. And you have to sit still for a long time.”

“Hey!”

Asahi chuckled again, low and easy. He lifted Nishinoya's hand to his lips and kissed his palm. “Mrs. Ishida will be back soon,” he said. “We should clear out.”

His breath was warm against Nishinoya's fingers; his chin scratched against his palm. Nishinoya inhaled slowly and caught the smell of the skin of Asahi's neck, the tickle of hair against his face. A question loomed in his gut, curling upward like smoke from embers. He felt the heat of it swelling inside him, glowing hot enough to burn.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said softly. His fingertips trailed down the back of his hand. Nishinoya's skin tingled in the wake of the action.

“Hm?”

“Would you...” Asahi paused. He slipped his hand to Nishinoya's wrist. His fingers were easily large enough to enclose the slender joint completely. “Do you want to... go back to my place?” His voice was barely above a whisper as he clarified, “right now?” before Nishinoya had a chance to answer.

Nishinoya couldn't help the breathy laugh that escaped him. “Uh, yeah. Okay. Yes,” he said, and he fisted his free hand in the front of Asahi's t-shirt. “I am so up for that.” In a fit of daring, he nudged his face into Asahi's neck and pressed his lips against the pulse point under his jaw. Asahi's
breath stuttered in response, and Nishinoya couldn't help but grin against his skin. Asahi turned his head and caught Nishinoya's mouth awkwardly, snaking an arm up to close his hand around the back of Nishinoya's head. Nishinoya cupped his chin and held him there.

“Mrs. Ishida will be back soon,” Asahi repeated quietly.

“Then let's go,” Nishinoya returned.

It didn't take very long for them to take care of the rest of the mess and set Asahi's bowl aside to dry. Mrs. Ishida came back as they were headed for the door; she stopped Asahi to ask him about his parents and his brother's little girls while Nishinoya stood anxiously to the side with his bag gripped in both hands, nearly vibrating in place.

Asahi finally extracted himself from the conversation, and Mrs. Ishida's gaze fell on Nishinoya for a moment. She had thick old glasses with clouded lenses, but behind them was a pair of eyes so clear and shrewd that Nishinoya felt suddenly like she could see all the way into his soul. But the moment passed, and she turned back to Asahi with a grandmotherly air, patted his hand gently between both of hers, and tottered off toward the back office.

Asahi opened the door and held it there, and Nishinoya went through. He felt a question forming on his tongue about the old woman, but he caught sight of Asahi's profile and sharpened gaze, and the words died on him, the question forgotten.

They didn't speak the entire walk back to the station. At the crosswalk, Asahi's hand came down on Nishinoya's shoulder as it had earlier on his arm, and it felt like a hot brand against his skin, even through his clothes.

The train wasn't remotely crowded, but Asahi stood too near to him all the same, close enough that to any outside observers it might appear they were having a discreet conversation – but Asahi said nothing to him, only let their hands rest together on the bar. Around a curve their bodies leaned in tandem, Nishinoya forward and Asahi back, and Nishinoya caught a whiff of his deodorant and the smell of his clothes. Asahi's gaze flicked down from where it had been fixed out the window above Nishinoya's head, and his pupils were wide, his eyes darkened. Nishinoya felt his heart rate pick up. His hands were sweating. He wiped the free one on his jeans, but he couldn't bring himself to separate the other from where it touched Asahi's.

Briefly he entertained the thought – if they were alone in the car, he could let himself fall right into Asahi's chest on the next curve, let his hands slip under the hem of his t-shirt and splay over Asahi's flat stomach, the one he'd seen the night before when Asahi slipped his shirt off. Nishinoya realized once more that he never really got to see anything else; Asahi had never even taken his jeans off. It seemed criminal, somehow. Unreasonable. Before he could stop himself, Nishinoya reached forward and slipped his index finger into one of Asahi's belt loops. He gave it a sharp tug.

Asahi ducked his head, surreptitiously glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was looking. When he was appeased, he turned his attention back to Nishinoya and gave him a slow sort of smile. He enclosed Nishinoya's wrist and extracted his hand from the loop. Asahi ran his thumb over the sensitive inner portion of Nishinoya's wrist before he let him go again.

Nishinoya swallowed hard. His skin tingled where Asahi's thumb had touched. His mouth opened and words came out before he could overthink them. “This time...” Nishinoya murmured quietly. Asahi looked at him, all sharp focus and heat, and his mouth went dry. “This time,” Nishinoya repeated, low enough that no one else would hear, “I wanna touch you, Asahi-san.”

Asahi exhaled slowly. He looked down and tucked a loose piece of hair behind his ear. “I think
that could be arranged,” he said softly.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to notallbees for beta-ing this chapter!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

After writing this chapter, I decided to boost the rating of this fic to Explicit. If that’s not your cup of tea, then CTRL+F to the phrase "The slats of light from the window" to skip that portion and continue the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The walk from the station seemed to take a hundred years, though it was probably closer to twenty minutes. Nishinoya felt alternately thrilled and terrified. He wondered if there was a word for the sort of sensation that was tearing his stomach to shreds, the way he felt he could taste how Asahi had smelled on the train, how his hair gleamed in the afternoon sun. The dry-cleaners was open as they passed, the scent of it the same as the day before – laundry and steam and a chemical smell. It was already familiar. It smelled like Asahi’s apartment. Nishinoya quickened his pace instinctively, and Asahi matched him.

Up the creaking stairs they went. Nishinoya noticed Asahi's hand shake slightly as he put the key in the latch, and lightness began to slip inside him then. The night before, Asahi had seemed so confident, as though the whole thing had been nothing new to him – and in truth, Nishinoya wondered how his own inexperience would measure up. It was a bit of a relief to see that Asahi could still be nervous.

Asahi opened the door. Nishinoya had a repeat of the impulse to shove him inside, but he held it back. He wasn't going to fuck it up this time. When Asahi turned back toward him in the doorway, Nishinoya's heart sped up; when Asahi held out a hand for him, it felt like that heart leapt up into his throat. Nishinoya bypassed his hand and instead threw his arms around Asahi's neck, kissing him even before the door closed behind them.

With the blinds drawn and the lights turned off, the apartment was dark inside. Slats of afternoon sunlight fell across them from the windows, illuminating tiny pieces of the scene – Nishinoya's hand on the tail of Asahi's shirt, a tanned strip of Asahi's neck, the glowing embers of his eyes, the hint of red to his hair. Nishinoya pressed his thumb against Asahi's lower lip and was rewarded with a gleam of white in the darkness – Asahi smiling, open-mouthed.

Nishinoya shoved his hands up under Asahi's t-shirt and his undershirt beneath it; he kept pushing upward until they bunched under Asahi's armpits, then when he lifted his arms, Nishinoya tugged until the shirts came clean off. He tossed them aside. Asahi was wearing a silver pendant on a long black cord; it nestled snugly between his pectorals, dark against his bare chest.

Asahi grabbed the collar of Nishinoya's jacket and peeled it over his shoulders. He stopped with a fist on either side of Nishinoya's upper arms and leaned down to mouth the side of his neck. Nishinoya tilted his head to allow Asahi better access. He palmed his hands over Asahi's warm stomach. He could feel the furrows where Asahi's abdominal muscles seamed together, the soft hair beneath his bellybutton leading to the top of his jeans. Nishinoya put his hand on the waist of those jeans, and Asahi's breath hitched against his neck in response. Nishinoya undid the button and gave either end a tug; the waistband of Asahi's boxers peeked through the gap. He slipped his index finger in between the elastic and Asahi's skin. Then he stopped, unsure how to proceed.
Asahi murmured his name, and Nishinoya closed his eyes at the sound of it. When he opened them again, his will was set like flint to steel. He lifted his hands and pressed them flat against Asahi's chest. He pushed until Asahi pulled back.

“What is it?” Asahi murmured.

Nishinoya kept pushing. Asahi took a step back, then another, and then he backed into the couch. “Sit,” Nishinoya ordered, and Asahi did.

Nishinoya slipped one knee onto the cushions next to Asahi's thigh. He leaned forward to put his hands on the back of the couch and felt Asahi's arms slip around his torso as he did so. He pulled up his other leg until he was straddling Asahi's lap. As he settled down, Asahi grabbed his hip and pulled them close together.

Asahi's nose bumped against Nishinoya's temple. “You should take off your shirt,” he suggested into Nishinoya's hair.

Nishinoya slipped his hands down Asahi's bare back. “You think so?”

“Yes,” Asahi insisted, even as he slid his hands up under the hem of it, palms almost uncomfortably hot against Nishinoya's skin. He shivered at the contact.


“Wh—” started out of Asahi's mouth, but the word cut off abruptly as Nishinoya quickly pulled off his own shirt, undid his belt, and shucked himself out of his jeans. He was glad he'd had the opportunity to slip into a set of clean underwear at his family's house. The way Asahi's eyes fell on him and the jut of his growing erection in the front of his trunks was worth the discomfort of that earlier visit.

Asahi made a desperate noise in his throat, one that went straight down Nishinoya's spine to his groin. Asahi put his hands on his jeans and lifted his hips in order to push them down, but only managed to get them to his knees before Nishinoya, unable to stop himself, was clambering on top of him again. Asahi's arms went immediately around his waist and pulled Nishinoya tightly against him; their chests met, the soft press of warm flesh together – Nishinoya felt the hard pebble of Asahi's nipple just below his left pec and couldn't help the sound that came out of him – he tugged on Asahi's hair and kissed him so fiercely that his teeth mashed into his bottom lip. The fabric of Asahi's boxers was so thin that Nishinoya could feel every inch of him. He shuddered when he realized that the firm length under his thigh was Asahi's cock.

Asahi moaned, the sound of it muffled around Nishinoya's tongue. He slipped a hand around the curve of Nishinoya's ass and lifted him slightly. The action caused his fingers to curl underneath and brush against Nishinoya's perineum, and Nishinoya jerked forward with a sharp inhalation. His erection rubbed up against Asahi's firm stomach as he moved. Nishinoya groaned. He pressed his forehead against Asahi's and repeated the motion, shifting his hips forward once more. Asahi's thumb slipped over the elastic in Nishinoya's trunks and tugged them down until Nishinoya felt air against his hips and upper buttocks. Then Asahi slipped his hand entirely into the back of Nishinoya's underwear, over the swell of his ass and even further, down between the valley of his thighs until Asahi's fingertips met his balls.

Nishinoya gasped out loud and jumped at the contact. His chin tipped up toward the ceiling. He felt the hot velvet of Asahi's tongue against his Adam's apple, the continued torment of Asahi's fingers down between his legs, barely more than a tickle. He angled his hips back and then forward again, torn between the agonizing tease from behind and the press of his clothed cock into Asahi's
stomach. Nishinoya braced his hands on Asahi’s shoulders in desperation, fairly close to teetering off the brink of insanity. An embarrassing array of sounds escaped between his lips, but Asahi just mumbled husky affirmations into the skin of his throat in return.

In the haze of the tortuous sensations that were tearing him in half lengthways from his skull to his groin, Nishinoya slowly remembered his earlier assertion – and realized that he was the one supposed to be doing the touching this time. He lowered his forehead to Asahi's shoulder and clutched tightly with both hands. He could feel the hard flex of Asahi’s bicep and forearm curling around his back, holding him close.

“Asahi,” Nishinoya murmured into the smooth concave space where his shoulder met his neck. Asahi's arms tightened in response. With a groan, Nishinoya pushed against Asahi's shoulders and levered himself back. Asahi looked up at him with muddled curiosity through half-lidded eyes. “Ah...” Nishinoya sighed shakily, “I wanted to touch you, remember?”

Asahi blinked at him muzzily, then a throaty chuckle escaped him. He unwound one arm from around Nishinoya's body and curled his palm around his cheek. Asahi slipped his other hand out of Nishinoya’s underwear to rest at his hip. He drew their faces close together. “Then touch me,” Asahi whispered. His breath was hot against Nishinoya's mouth.

Nishinoya shuddered, his eyes closing briefly. He pushed on Asahi’s shoulders again and scooted backward over his thighs. When their hips came apart, he got his first real glimpse at Asahi’s erection inside his boxers.

The bulge of it angled toward Asahi’s left hip. The tent that his cock created in the fabric was more than impressive; the button holding the flap together in the front clung for dear life. A tiny wet dot had appeared – Nishinoya realized it was from the head of Asahi’s cock weeping against the cotton. He bit his lip to keep from sighing aloud at the sight.

The hems of Asahi's boxers had crept up under the movement of Nishinoya's legs and now a great deal of Asahi’s skin was visible beneath him; Nishinoya could see Asahi’s pubic hair peeking out from underneath. Nishinoya clenched one hand around the swell of Asahi's upper thigh, close to the seam of his hip. Asahi shifted his legs further apart until his thighs separated. In response, Nishinoya inched his thumb closer to Asahi's scrotum hanging visibly low in the fabric.

“How should I touch you?” Nishinoya asked tightly.

Asahi’s eyes slipped shut. He tilted his head back to rest on the wall. “God,” he breathed. His hand clenched on Nishinoya's hip. “Anyway you want, Nishinoya.”

Nishinoya swallowed hard. He slid his hand up Asahi’s thigh and tucked his thumb into the open leg of Asahi's boxers. He watched Asahi's face carefully as he pressed his thumb inward until it encountered tickling coarse hair. As the pad of it met the pebbled skin of Asahi's scrotum, Asahi’s forehead creased and his closed eyes tightened. His lips parted with a soft exhalation. Asahi shifted his legs as far apart as they would go with Nishinoya still straddling them. Nishinoya slipped the rest of his fingers into Asahi's boxers and joined them next to his thumb.

Asahi’s stomach jumped, his abs clenching as Nishinoya teased his balls. The wet spot in his boxers had grown to the size of a one-yen coin. Nishinoya felt his mouth water. He lowered his other hand from where it still rested on Asahi's shoulder, slipped it down over his chest and the hard flex of his abdomen, until he met the waistband of Asahi's boxers. He continued downward, until the heel of his palm met the swell of Asahi's erection. He pressed his hand down on it
experimentally, thrilled and encouraged when Asahi's legs shifted underneath him and Asahi moaned softly. Nishinoya curled his fingers around the length of Asahi's cock underneath the cotton and caressed him lightly. Asahi's hand shook on his hip in response. His tongue flicked against his lower lip and his teeth worried it after; Nishinoya watched the action with his own mouth open and mirrored the gesture.

At length, Nishinoya leaned forward. The movement caused Asahi to lift his head, which made him even easier to kiss. Nishinoya did so rather sloppily, but he didn't really care – and neither did Asahi, it seemed, based on his enthusiasm and the way he groaned outright into Nishinoya's mouth as Nishinoya continued to palm his cock through his boxers and touched his balls underneath.

“Nishi–” Asahi sighed, cutting off with a grunt as Nishinoya tightened his fingers. “Nishinoya,” he tried again. “Ah god...you're driving me crazy.”

Nishinoya felt a manic grin stretch across his face. Asahi's cock was rock-hard beneath his hand, the damp spot sticky and glistening against his fingers. Emboldened by the response, maddened by his own arousal, he curled his fingers into the front of Asahi's boxers and tugged downward.

The head of Asahi's cock emerged above his waistband, darkly flushed and shining. Asahi looked down at himself and mumbled “awfuck,” in a voice that didn't sound exactly sensible. He shifted again, his stomach flexing, and his cock slipped a centimeter to the side, leaving a small trail of precome as it went. The elastic of his boxers still held it close to his body, and as Asahi arched his hips, the head of his cock slid only the barest amount.

“Oh my god,” Nishinoya breathed. A swell of desire threatened to overwhelm him. Beads of sweat dotted Asahi's chest and neck, and it seemed like the most obvious thing in the world for Nishinoya to press forward and open his mouth against Asahi's throat, to taste the salt and heat of his skin. He pulled his hand out of the leg of Asahi's boxers and grabbed a handful of his hair, pulling Asahi's head to the side so he could access more of his neck. Nishinoya tightened his hand on Asahi's cock again and pressed his thumb up over the exposed glans. He ran it lightly along the crease of the head, over the slit, and felt the precome smear under the pad of his finger.

Asahi let out a loud, shaking moan at that moment. Nishinoya could feel his legs trembling. Asahi’s hand gripped his hip hard enough to hurt, his other hand curled behind Nishinoya's head. His hips surged upward, and the force of the movement was strong enough that it nearly unseated Nishinoya. He had to lean his weight forward to maintain his balance, which touched his own erection to the back of his hand still on Asahi's cock.

Nishinoya hissed at the contact and suddenly realized he was simply **aching** – his dick was so hard it literally hurt, his abs so tense it felt like he might pull a muscle. He let go of Asahi's hair and wrapped his arm instead around the back of Asahi's neck, then pressed his face into the flushed skin of Asahi's throat and groaned uncontrollably. Nishinoya pushed his whole weight forward and down, shoving his cock hard against his hand and Asahi's dick underneath. The cool metal of Asahi's pendant pressed into his chest, a sharp sensation against his heated skin.

Asahi made a throaty, desperate noise. His hand that had been clinging for life on Nishinoya's hip now moved to his ass and pulled them even tighter together. His other arm wrapped around Nishinoya's torso from under his armpit, crossing diagonally to grab at his opposite shoulder. Nishinoya's hand was effectively wedged between their bodies, but he didn't mind very much – Asahi's mouth was hot and wet against his shoulder, the warm air damp between them as their hips moved together. Despite the awkward angle, Nishinoya managed to keep rolling his thumb just under the head of Asahi's cock, back and forth again, the ridges of his thumbprint catching against the skin. The skin of Asahi's throat smelled amazing; strands of his hair tickled at Nishinoya's face.
Nishinoya used his hand curled around Asahi's neck to pull his hair out of the way and instinctively sank his teeth into Asahi's skin.

A sharp sound escaped through Asahi's lips, muffled into Nishinoya's shoulder but still loud so close to his ear. He leaned forward suddenly, shifting Nishinoya's weight so far back that Nishinoya nearly tumbled out of his lap, but Asahi's arm was tight around his waist, and he didn't fall. Asahi twisted and deposited Nishinoya on his back on the couch, then tried to climb on top of him and nearly fell over with his legs still tangled in his jeans. Nishinoya couldn't help the high-pitched giggle that burst out of him as Asahi sat back and pulled one leg free; it dissolved into a deeper sound as Asahi slipped between his legs and settled onto him. Asahi curled a hand around Nishinoya's thigh and coaxed his leg up around his hips – Nishinoya complied immediately, hooking his other leg over the back of Asahi's, until their bodies fit snugly together.

Nishinoya wrapped his arms around Asahi's waist and slid his hands downward until they met his ass. He shoved his hands into the back of Asahi's boxers without hesitation and found the firm contour of Asahi's buttocks flexing under his palms, the skin hot and smooth, light hair tickling between his fingers. Nishinoya clenched his hands hard and pulled, and Asahi groaned and rocked into him. Nishinoya could feel Asahi's cock pressing in next to his own, the shift of their bodies together – an electric current shot down his legs from his groin, and his feet flexed uncontrollably, toes curling of their own accord. Asahi's arms braced on either side of his head, his shoulders hunched downward, his face close to Nishinoya's. He was flushed all over, hair sticking to his sweaty forehead, his lips parted, his eyes glazed.

Nishinoya took one look at him, felt the zing of realization that this was happening, this was real, that Asahi was currently humping him into the cushions with enough force to push him through the couch and floor into the first story of the building. He pulled one hand up and hooked it over the back of Asahi's shoulder, used it to leverage himself upward against Asahi's weight. He lifted his head and pulled Asahi down the rest of the way until he could touch their lips together; they didn't kiss so much as their lips pressed and moved over each other. “Asahi-san,” Nishinoya whispered, “Asahi. Asahi. Asahi.”

Asahi flattened him back into the couch. He shifted awkwardly, and Nishinoya realized he was stretching his arm past Nishinoya's head and the arm of the couch above it, to the end table. Nishinoya heard the slide of a drawer and the clatter of unseen objects within, then Asahi brought his arm back with a tube of lotion in hand.

Nishinoya let go of his shoulder as Asahi lifted himself onto one braced arm; with the other he hooked his index finger into the waistband of Nishinoya's trunks and tugged them downward until his cock slipped free.

“A-Asahi–” Nishinoya stuttered, but he wasn't able to continue when Asahi popped the cap off the lotion and emptied a small amount onto his erection. Asahi tossed the tube aside, then closed his hand over Nishinoya's cock and gave it a firm stroke upward.

Nishinoya's back arched off the couch. He clung desperately to the cushion underneath him while his toes clenched tight enough to hurt – he flung his head back and couldn't stop the sounds that came out of his mouth. The sensation was almost too much – the sudden direct contact of Asahi's hand, hot and firm and nearly large enough to cover his entire erection from the base to the head. Nishinoya managed to lower his chin enough to look at Asahi's face and found him staring back with an intensity that made Nishinoya's stomach bottom out.

Asahi lowered himself back over Nishinoya as he stroked his cock. The bicep on his supporting arm bulged under his weight. Nishinoya curled his hand around the muscle; it was solid and
smooth, like a rounded stone under Asahi's warm skin.

“Fuck,” Nishinoya hissed under his breath – Asahi grinned at him in response like a feral animal, white bared teeth and flashing eyes. Nishinoya felt like he might swallow his tongue.

He put his hands on Asahi's shoulders and pushed. Somehow he managed to disengage his tongue from his teeth long enough to gasp, “wait, wait, wait.”

Asahi's hand stilled. He pulled back slightly, and his face fell a little bit. “What is it?”

Nishinoya bit his lip and stared at the ceiling past Asahi's head in an attempt to bring his mind back into order. Half of it was screaming at him that he'd said anything at all – why hadn't he just let Asahi keep touching him! – and the other half kept trying to find the words to ask for what he really wanted – something he couldn't quite formulate, something he still wasn't sure of. “You...” Nishinoya started, “you, too, I want...” He put his hand back on Asahi's bicep; the other he curled around the wrist of Asahi's hand still touching his aching erection. The previous night came to him – the curiosity of what had happened out of his sight. “I want to see you,” he said softly, “I want to watch this time.”

Asahi's face softened from the sharp edge it had gained. He leaned forward and kissed Nishinoya; Nishinoya tangled his hand into the hair at the back of Asahi's head and held him there for a moment. Then Asahi peeled slowly off him and sat up. He rested his weight on his heels between Nishinoya's open legs.

Asahi used his clean hand to push his disheveled boxers down his hips. His cock appeared, fully erect and curving slightly to the side – it was larger than Nishinoya had anticipated, only a bit longer than his own, but almost as thick as his wrist. Asahi's pubic hair was dark and neatly trimmed.

Asahi wrapped the hand he'd had on Nishinoya around his own cock. He used his other to brace himself against Nishinoya's hip – the bruised hip, Nishinoya realized, as a delicious twinge of pain jolted up his side. Asahi's mouth opened as he stroked himself, his eyes became unfocused, his gaze directed at Nishinoya's sternum.

Nishinoya ran his hand up the swell of Asahi's upper arm as far as he could reach – Asahi lowered back over him again, and Nishinoya slid his palm up along the ridge of his shoulder, until he could curl his fingers around the back of Asahi's neck. Nishinoya's gaze was fixed to Asahi's cock, the way Asahi's hand moved over it, how his foreskin slid and rolled over the base of his glans as he stroked upward. Nishinoya struggled to keep breathing. His hand drifted to his own erection.

Asahi kept leaning down. His forehead met Nishinoya's. His lower body pressed downward until their knuckles knocked together between them. Nishinoya was already stretched thin – his balls tightened between his thighs and he felt the pressure inside his cock building to a crescendo. “Asahi,” he moaned, as he dug his fingers into Asahi's skin, tightened his grip on his cock. He was unbelievably hard.

Asahi gasped; Nishinoya saw as his hand gave an erratic jerk and then moved fast in short, hard strokes. He lifted his hand from Nishinoya's hip and instead braced himself against the armrest beyond Nishinoya's head.

Nishinoya came all over himself almost before he realized it was happening. It only occurred to him that he was holding his breath when his vision grayed around the edges – then air came back into his lungs in a whooshing gasp – he choked, and Asahi winced, and Nishinoya realized he was digging his nails into Asahi's neck. As the initial pulse of his orgasm crested, he managed to
weaken his grip a little bit, though he shuddered through every subsequent wave of it, until he finally was able to withdraw his trembling hand.

He slid it down over the ridge of Asahi's shoulder near his throat, down over Asahi's clavicle and chest, as far as his fingers could reach down Asahi's sternum and his stomach. In his hypersensitive state, Nishinoya was keenly aware of the shifting muscles under Asahi's hot skin, the scent of sweat and semen between them. “Asahi,” he whispered, “Asahi-san...”

Asahi leaned so far over him that Nishinoya lost sight of his hand around his cock. He pressed his forehead down against Nishinoya's, breath stuttering. “Oh,” Asahi said, “oh, Nishinoya, I – oh!” Asahi's words cut off as he shuddered and gasped. Nishinoya sat up slightly, just enough that Asahi came off him, so he could watch the first shot of come land his stomach and mix with his own mess. Asahi grunted through the rest of his orgasm. Come spilled over his fingers just the way Nishinoya had imagined it, but more than he expected – so much that some of it slipped off Asahi's pinky finger and dripped onto Nishinoya's softening cock.

Asahi exhaled. He hung his head and panted hard as though he had been running. “Oh my god,” he said in hoarse voice. “That was...” He lifted his hand off his dick and placed it instead on Nishinoya's thigh beside him. He leaned heavily against his arm braced on the couch. “That was...” He looked up and his eyes met Nishinoya's. “That was amazing.”

Nishinoya smiled. “Yeah?”

Asahi nodded. He swallowed hard; his larynx bobbed visibly in his throat. “Yeah, I–” He cut off and blinked, then looked quickly at his hand against Nishinoya's leg. “Oh shit!” He lifted his hand and a strand of come came with it. “I'm so sorry!”

Nishinoya started laughing. “Asahi-san, look at me!” He gestured at the obscene state of his lower stomach. “You think I care at this point?”

Asahi smiled sheepishly. “Ah,” he said, “right.”

“You dummy,” Nishinoya laughed. He lifted his hands back to Asahi's shoulders and pulled downward, not relenting until Asahi acquiesced and settled onto him, skin to skin. Nishinoya curled his legs up over Asahi's hips. “There,” he said. He wrapped his arms around Asahi's waist and pulled their bodies tightly together. “Now we're even.”

“Hmm.” Asahi carded his clean hand into Nishinoya's hair. “So it would seem.” He kissed him again, slow and open-mouthed and easy.

The slats of light from the window were still bright when they finally came apart again. “What time is it?” Nishinoya asked.

“Not sure,” Asahi mumbled as he nuzzled against the side of Nishinoya's neck. “Afternoon.”

“D'you have to be anywhere today?”

“Nowhere I don't want to be,” Asahi said in return. “For now I'm happy right here.” He tapped against Nishinoya's side to illustrate the point.

“Okay.” Nishinoya shivered as Asahi's breath tickled against his throat. “It's just that...”

Asahi stilled and pulled back. “Something wrong?”

Nishinoya grinned apologetically. “I'm kinda... hungry.”
Judging by the expression on Asahi's face, he hadn't expected that kind of response. Then his look turned thoughtful. “You know what,” he said. “I'm hungry too, actually.”

Nishinoya found himself laughing again. “This is terrible, Asahi-san!” he said.

Asahi was smiling. “I guess we can clean up and make some food...”

Nishinoya groaned and threw back his head. He hung dramatically off Asahi's shoulders. “Damn this frail human body!” he shouted.

“Hey, hey, not so loud!” Asahi laughed. He sat up in between Nishinoya's legs. His boxers were still shoved down around his hips, though his dick was now flaccid and hung over the elastic waistband almost comically. Nishinoya noted it hadn't changed much in size, only slightly in length, more in girth – unlike his own, which had shortened as it softened until it was less than half his size while erect.

Was it weird to compliment another guy's dick? It would be if they hadn't just jerked off together – but what about now? Nishinoya wasn't sure what the answer was. Before he was able to come to a decision, Asahi was readjusting his boxers around his hips, and his penis disappeared from view. It made Nishinoya suddenly self-conscious about his own state of undress, and he pulled his underwear up to cover himself as well.

“You can go rinse off first,” Asahi said as he stood up. “I'll start cooking.”

“That's not fair, Asahi-san!” Nishinoya insisted.

“You cooked breakfast,” Asahi reminded him. “I don't mind making us a late lunch.” He still had one leg tangled in his jeans. The stiff fabric was bunched around his calf. “Come on,” Asahi said, and he reached out a hand. He looked so ridiculous and so handsome, his hair disheveled, his face open, his body still flushed where they had been pressed together. Something in Nishinoya ached at the sight of him.

“We can clean up together, can't we?” Nishinoya mumbled. “We can cook together.”

Asahi's smile turned wistful. “I'm just worried that if I go into the bath with you, we wouldn't ever get anything to eat after that.”

Nishinoya frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Ahhh...” Asahi covered his eyes with his hand. “Well. You know.”

“No, I--” Nishinoya cut off abruptly. Asahi was blushing. “Oh, you mean...”

“Yes,” Asahi choked. “God, Nishinoya, I almost took you apart at the ceramics studio.”

“Did you?” Nishinoya thought about how Asahi had pushed him into the wall in the courtyard, how his voice had gone thready and his eyes dark. He sat up on the couch. He felt a smile stretching at the corners of his mouth. “Do you really see me like that?”

“Don't make me say it again,” Asahi said. He was still hiding his face. His ears were bright red.

“Noooo!” Nishinoya sprang up from the couch and threw his arms over Asahi's shoulders. “Tell me, tell me, tell me!”

“Oh my god,” Asahi laughed.
Asahi-saan!

Asahi lowered his hand. He gave Nishinoya a bashful smile; it was completely mystifying to Nishinoya that Asahi could justify looking so sheepish after what had just happened between them. Asahi wrapped his other arm around Nishinoya's waist. He was a rosy shade of pink.

“You... you're...” he started slowly. He laughed. “You're very. Compact.”

“...compact?” Nishinoya pulled back and slipped his hands from behind Asahi's neck onto his shoulders. “Wait, what's that supposed to mean...?” He frowned. “Small?”

“M-maybe,” Asahi admitted. “But–” He tightened his hold on Nishinoya's waist, as though he was worried Nishinoya would pull away entirely. “It's not that you're small so much as...” He cast his eyes aside. “There's just so much of you, all packed in very tight.”

Nishinoya felt heat in his ears. He looked down at Asahi's chest. “Oh,” he said.

“And,” Asahi added, “your butt is. Really great.”

“What!” Startled laughter found its way out of Nishinoya's mouth. “My butt?!”

“Yeah,” Asahi said. “It's good.”

“Good is not the same as great, Asahi-san!”

“Your legs too,” Asahi continued. “And your hands.”

Nishinoya pressed his hot face into Asahi's sternum. “Okay, okay! That's enough!”

“And...” Asahi said. His hand touched the side of Nishinoya's head, and Nishinoya lifted his chin. “You're just really beautiful, Nishinoya.”

There was that word again. The look Asahi gave him was so lovely that Nishinoya felt himself immediately recoil. He tried to push away from Asahi's chest, but Asahi's arm stayed around his waist. The best he could do was lock his elbows and hold his upper body out at arm's length. He turned his head aside and stared at the floor. “That's...” Nishinoya mumbled, “that's too much, Asahi-san.”

Asahi didn't loosen his hold. “Why?”

“It's just – it's –” Nishinoya shook his head. He didn't know how to nicely accuse someone of lying. It was all well and good that Asahi seemed to want to sleep with him – but dishonesty and exaggeration weren't going to make him feel better. “You can't possibly believe that,” he said finally. “That's not the truth.”

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said in a low voice, but Nishinoya wouldn't look at him. “Nishinoya,” he said again, “don't you believe me?”

Nishinoya shook his head again. The conversation had put a weird feeling in the pit of his stomach, which made him feel bad since he'd been the one who prompted it. Asahi was just trying to be nice, Nishinoya told himself. He didn't have to ruin the sense of post-sex-contentment.

He leaned forward again and put his forehead against Asahi's clavicle. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

Asahi's warm hand came up the center of his back to rest between his shoulder blades. Nishinoya closed his eyes and let Asahi hold him – just for a minute, he told himself.
At length, Asahi murmured softly, “Hey. I have an idea.”

“What's that?” Nishinoya returned into the skin of his chest.

Asahi paused. Nishinoya could feel him shift. “What?” Nishinoya asked. His discomfort had lessened, so he turned his head up and looked at Asahi again.

Asahi gave him an apologetic grin. “On second thought, you might not like it,” he said.

“What is it?” Nishinoya asked again.

“How would you feel about coming to practice with me?”

“Practice?” Nishinoya blinked. The word moved through his brain like molasses. “Like. Volleyball?”

“Yeah, with the neighborhood team,” Asahi said. “We practice on Wednesdays and Saturdays, so we're meeting tomorrow.”

Nishinoya lowered his gaze to Asahi's sternum. “...why?” he asked slowly.

“Well, I mean...” Nishinoya felt Asahi's shoulders lift and settle as he shrugged. “I don't know. I thought it might make you feel better. You wouldn't have to play if you don't feel like it. I just thought...” He shrugged again and exhaled through his nose. “I just thought it might be nice to be on the court with you again.”

Nishinoya's eyes shot up. Asahi was still a bit pink, but the small smile on his face was genuine. A momentary image flashed through Nishinoya's mind: looking up a broad back under shiny black fabric, the number three blazing white before him. His throat felt thick, his eyes scratched.

“Okay,” Nishinoya whispered.

Asahi grinned at him. He curled his hand around Nishinoya's jaw again and kissed him sweetly. “No pressure,” he said. “Don't let Ukai-san bully you into playing if you don't want.”

“Ukai?” Nishinoya practically hiccuped the name.

Asahi gave him a quizzical look. “Yeah, he still organizes the team.”

Nishinoya's apprehension must have shown, because Asahi's brow furrowed and he asked, “What's wrong?”

Nishinoya wrestled a moment before answering. “Ukai wrote me a letter of recommendation,” he said finally. “What if he'll be mad at me now?”

“Mad?”

“Because I fucked it all up,” Nishinoya said. He regretted the statement almost immediately, when Asahi made an absolutely heart-wrenching expression in response.

“You – it's–” Asahi stuttered. “It's not like–”

“It's ok, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said. “Really.” He remembered abruptly their state of undress, his own sticky skin, the smell of come still heavy between them. “Sorry I kind of... ruined the afterglow,” he mumbled.
“No,” Asahi said, shaking his head. “Maybe I shouldn't have – I didn't think... We don't have to go if you don't want.”

“I want to go,” Nishinoya insisted. “I want to play with you.”

Asahi gave him another smile, more cautious this time. “I would like that,” he said.

Nishinoya slipped his hands back up around Asahi's neck. He went up on his toes so that he could hug Asahi as tightly as he possibly could. Asahi's arms closed around his back in response.

“I'm really glad I ran into you,” Nishinoya said fiercely into the warm space of Asahi's throat. “I really missed you, Asahi.”

Nishinoya felt him swallow. When he spoke, the sound of his voice was muffled against Nishinoya's head. “I missed you too,” he said softly.

Nishinoya cleared his throat and pushed away again, and this time Asahi let him go. “Okay, so...” he said. “I guess. I'll go clean up.”

“We both can,” Asahi offered. He gave Nishinoya an appeasing smile. “I'll be good, I promise.” Then he added, “for at least twenty minutes or so.”

Nishinoya snorted and rubbed at his forehead with the few clean fingers he had remaining. “Suppose we should be quick then,” he said.

~

Asahi was true to his word. Nishinoya managed to rinse off in the bathroom and change in the bedroom without being accosted – though there was a moment in the bathroom when Asahi slipped out of his jeans and boxers with his back to Nishinoya. The sight of Asahi's naked backside, firm and wonderfully pale with a perfect dent at the top of his outer thigh, coupled with the memory of how it felt shifting underneath his hands while Asahi rutted him into the couch, almost made Nishinoya throw out their decision to make something to eat. Instead, Nishinoya wrenched his gaze away, turned the water full-blast to cold, and leveled the showerhead directly at his face and chest.

In the bedroom, Asahi changed into a pair of skinny black jeans that were so tight Nishinoya swore he heard the seams groan. Over this he layered a soft white v-necked t-shirt, long and loose, then his pendant on the black cord.

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said as he slipped his own fresh shirt on, “are you trying to kill me?”

Asahi glanced up as he pulled his hair out over the collar of his shirt. His biceps flexed beneath the hems of the t-shirt sleeves as his arms moved. “Hm?”

Nishinoya fastened his watch to his wrist. He'd forgotten to put it on that morning and was vastly relieved his father's gift had not borne witness to what transpired in the living room. “Do you realize how ridiculous you are?” he asked. “Do you honestly know how good you look?”

Asahi blinked and looked down at himself. His feet were bare against the floor, long toes curling against the thin carpet. His big toes were slightly hairy, the nails trimmed short and neat. “Really?” he said.

Nishinoya made a frustrated noise in his throat. “Yes, really! Can you tone it down, like, three notches?” He shook his head. “Four notches, at least.”
Asahi plucked at the shirt against his chest. “Four notches,” he said. “What do you suggest?”

“Do you have a heavy coat, or like a ski mask or something?”

Asahi smiled at him. “So, layers is what you’re saying. Cover everything up?”

Nishinoya curled his hand around his chin. “No, you’re probably right. The more you put on, the more I’d probably think about what was underneath.”

Asahi started laughing. “What am I supposed to do, then?”


“Or what?” Asahi asked.

“Or I won’t be responsible for what happens.”

Asahi smiled at him, sly and languid. “What if I don’t mind what happens?” He took a step forward.

“Nope!” Nishinoya demanded. “Stop that! Food!” He held out his hand, palm up and rigid, fingers pointing at the ceiling. “Stay over there!”

Asahi continued toward him, until his chest met Nishinoya’s outstretched palm. He gave Nishinoya a predatory grin, then lifted his hand slowly to Nishinoya’s face.

Nishinoya swallowed hard. He felt sweat bead on the back of his neck.

Asahi poked him so hard in the forehead that he had to take a step backward to keep his balance. “C’mon,” Asahi said. He looped an arm around Nishinoya’s shoulders and dragged him out of the bedroom toward the front room and kitchen.

In the living room, Nishinoya finally remembered his phone, and he went for his bag as Asahi turned toward the kitchen. Nishinoya dug around until he found the dead phone and the wall adapter he’d packed at his house. After only a moment’s hesitation, he inserted the charger into the port on his phone and plugged the adapter into the wall. He waited a moment, staring at the screen until the little charging icon displayed, then set it on the end table next to the couch and joined Asahi in the kitchen.

“We have leftovers from breakfast,” Asahi said with his head in the fridge, “and pickles.”

Nishinoya remembered seeing the huge jar of daikon pickles that morning, a ridiculous size for a one-person household. “I get the feeling you always have pickles.”

“What gives you that idea?” Asahi asked as he pulled the oversized monstrosity out and set it on the counter.

They ate standing at the counter, picking up clumps of cold rice with their fingers and daikon slices right out of the jar. It felt indulgent and childish, something Nishinoya might have done as a kid home sick from school, when his mom wasn’t there to yell at him about making a mess.

The counters in Asahi’s kitchen were scuffed but clean. The paint on the wall behind the sink was intact and unstained. The fixtures were not new, but they were in good working order. Nishinoya had noted the ease with which Asahi lived there, the comfort and familiarity he had with the apartment. It wasn’t a bad place. Nishinoya was glad Asahi had found it. Asahi deserved good
“Asahi-san,” he said.

Asahi looked up with his mouth full. “Mm-hm?”

“What do you do?”

Asahi chewed and swallowed. “Do?” he echoed.

“For work, I mean?”

“Oh.”

Nishinoya noted the downturn of his tone. “What? Is it bad?”

Asahi blinked at him. “Bad? No!” He shook his head. “No, it’s fine. It’s just boring, you know?” He popped another pickle slice into his mouth. “I work in a bookshop that a friend of my mom owns.”

“A bookshop?” Nishinoya thought about this. He pictured Asahi surrounded by books, wearing a soft sweater and a pair of glasses with a pencil in his hair like an old granny. It did not seem terribly out of character.

“Yeah,” Asahi said. “It’s good. It’s just a little place and there are only four other staff besides me.” He shrugged. “I was terrible at first.”

“Were you?”

“Yeah,” Asahi said again. He winced at the memory. “I was afraid to talk to customers and I would panic when the phone rang.”


“Right?” Asahi smiled. “But I learned. It was a character I played at first, but I figured it out in the long run. I pretended to be confident and competent and good at my job, and then I found out I actually sort of was.”

“I already knew you were, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya insisted.

“You didn’t even know what I did until two minutes ago.”

“No, but–” Nishinoya leaned forward and grabbed a handful of Asahi’s shirt. “You’d be great at everything, Asahi-san. That’s no surprise to me.”

Asahi blinked again, and then his cheeks darkened and he grinned. “Maybe not everything,” he said.

“Everything,” Nishinoya repeated.

“No,” Asahi shook his head. “Not like you. I couldn’t do what you do.”


“You’re so brave,” Asahi insisted. “You went off to live somewhere else without even a thought. All you saw was the future.” Asahi shrugged. “I’m still stuck in the past a little bit.”
“That’s ridiculous!” Nishinoya half-shouted, and Asahi jumped slightly. “Look at you! Look at what you’ve done for yourself!” He gestured around the apartment. “And you – you’re.” He lowered his eyes, then reached out again and touched Asahi’s stomach through his t-shirt. He thought about Asahi at the bar, Asahi open and easy with friends, Asahi whose parents knew he was gay. Nishinoya had thought a new city might make him a new person, but here Asahi had done it in their home town. “You’re the one that’s brave, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya mumbled.

Asahi lifted his hand and tucked a finger under Nishinoya’s chin. He turned Nishinoya’s face up. “You were always the one that saw the me I didn’t see,” Asahi murmured.

“Doesn’t make sense,” Nishinoya said. His gaze was caught on Asahi’s mouth, the lips which split and smiled and showed a flash of teeth.

“It does to me,” Asahi said.

Nishinoya lifted onto the balls of his feet and put his hands to Asahi’s shoulders to hoist himself up. He kissed Asahi softly. Asahi’s hands found their way to his sides, where they pressed in gently against his ribs.

Nishinoya pulled away, just enough to break the contact. “Has it been twenty minutes yet?” he asked.

A throaty little laugh escaped from Asahi. He leaned forward and pushed Nishinoya into the counter. “Close enough,” he said.

Nishinoya wrapped his arms tightly around Asahi’s neck and kissed him again. Asahi’s mouth opened and Nishinoya felt his stomach clench when their tongues met.

Asahi slipped his fingers into the belt loops on Noya’s jeans and tugged hard. He lifted Nishinoya onto the counter and stepped in between his legs, shoving the jar of pickles out of the way as he went. Nishinoya bit back a groan as Asahi leaned forward with his hands against the counter on either side of Nishinoya’s hips. “This is ridiculous,” Asahi mumbled against his mouth.

“What is?” Nishinoya returned. He pressed their lips together again before Asahi could answer.

Asahi tilted his head and deepened the kiss. One of his hands slid up under the tail of Nishinoya’s shirt. His callused fingers touched Nishinoya’s skin just above the waistband of his jeans.

From across the room, Nishinoya’s phone exploded with noise. Chime after chime sounded from the device where it sat on the table. When the alerts finally died off, Asahi pulled slowly away.

“Well,” he said, “it seems that your phone is back on.”

“Oh yeah? What gave you that idea?” Nishinoya snarked. He put his hands on Asahi’s shoulders and pulled him down to kiss him again.

Asahi didn’t resist at first, but he pulled away after just a few moments. “Shouldn’t you check it?” Nishinoya felt his face crunch into a grimace. He slipped his hands up behind Asahi’s neck, pressing his face into Asahi’s shoulder. “Do I have to?” he mumbled.

Asahi snorted beside his head. “Okay, come on,” he said. He slid his hands under Nishinoya’s thighs and lifted.

“Woah, woah, wait, what’re you doing?” Nishinoya demanded as Asahi pulled him off the counter
and hugged his legs around his waist. Nishinoya instinctively linked his ankles together behind
Asahi’s back and tightened his grip on Asahi’s shoulders when it felt like he might tumble onto the
floor, but Asahi’s arm closed around his waist to hold him.

“Here we go,” Asahi said, when Nishinoya had secured himself into a full-on koala-type hug. He
stepped back from the counter and turned toward the living room.

“Wait, wait!” Nishinoya said, “This is stupid!”

“What’s that?” Asahi asked as he continued walking. “I can’t hear you over all this coddling.”

Nishinoya started laughing. “Stop it!” He smacked Asahi’s shoulder and kicked his heel against
Asahi’s butt. “Put me down, asshole!”

“Oops, too late,” Asahi said as they reached the table where the cellphone rested. “Guess you’ll
just have to deal with it.” He bent forward until Nishinoya’s back was parallel to the floor.
Nishinoya could feel the taut strength of the arm around his waist; the heat of Asahi’s body
between his thighs. Asahi’s other hand curled around the back of his head as he leaned forward,
and Nishinoya felt a little bit like a dancer being dipped. “Your phone, sir,” Asahi said.

“Were you always this dumb?” Nishinoya asked. “I seem to remember you being cooler than this.”
He dug around on the tabletop for the phone without looking away from Asahi’s grin, and finally
felt the rectangle of it knock against his fingers.

“I don’t know where you ever got the impression that I was in any way cool,” Asahi returned.
“You’re not setting the bar very high,” Nishinoya said. He curled his hand around his phone.
“Okay, I got it, let me up!”

Asahi straightened and pulled him up. Nishinoya couldn’t help but notice how effortless he made it
seem, lifting all of Nishinoya’s fifty-nine kilos as though he weighed nothing.

Nishinoya opened his phone. There were 14 messages and 7 missed calls, 6 with voicemail
attached. The first two were from his mom. Nishinoya hit ‘play’ on the first one and lifted it to his
ear.

“Happy Birthday!” sounded her voice in his ear. “Call me!”

The second message played. “I know you’re probably out having fun, but take five minutes to call
your mother, please.”

The third message was from his literature tutor. “Are you coming today? I’m waiting outside the
library. Let me know if you’re running late.” Guilt filled Nishinoya’s stomach. He’d forgotten to
cancel their meeting the day before.

The fourth message was from his father. “Yuu, call your mother, she is carving a path in the living
room with the vacuum. Stop making your mother clean.”

The fifth message began with a single word, followed by a pause. “Hey,” Tanaka said.

Nishinoya had been staring absently at the dip in Asahi’s clavicle peeking out of the collar of his
shirt, but at this his eyes shot upward and met Asahi’s.

“I know you’re busy,” Tanaka continued. His voice was subdued. Quiet. “I just wanted to call to
say happy birthday. Anyway, if you get the chance, give me a call, we need to catch up.” Nervous
laughter crackled through the speaker. “I dunno why I’m talking like an old lady. Fuck. Call me, Noya.” There was another pause. “Call me, I miss you.” The message ended.

The sixth message had been sent that morning. “Yuu,” his mother’s voice told him, “Please call home.”

Nishinoya pulled the phone away from his ear. On the display, he saw that the seventh call with no voicemail attached came from his coach just before noon. He swallowed hard.

“Okay?” Asahi asked.

Nishinoya nodded. His throat hurt. His ears felt thick as though he was underwater. He tried scrolling through the messages on his phone. A few birthday greetings from his team and classmates. /Your being dumb! Call mom!/ from his sister. Two from his tutor around the time of the missed call. A couple from his roommate, asking if he was out of town. /Brother are you ok?/ from Taka.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said, as Nishinoya felt a hot tear slip over his cheek.

“Shit,” he said. He scrubbed angrily at his eyes. Humiliation churned acidly inside him. “Sorry.”

“Nishinoya,” Asahi repeated in a slightly scolding tone.

More tears leaked out. His throat was closing up. “This is so–” His voice cracked. “This is so stupid–”

Asahi’s hand slid in between his shoulder blades. He pulled Nishinoya in against his chest, so that Nishinoya’s head fell on his shoulder. “It’s not,” he said.

The phone was wedged between them, still clutched in Nishinoya’s hand. “It’s so fucking stupid!” Nishinoya insisted. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” Asahi said. “Nothing.”

Nishinoya let himself be held. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the warm hand against his back, the strong arm around his waist. “It’s so dumb,” he mumbled into the collar of Asahi’s shirt.

“No,” Asahi insisted softly.

“Why am I doing this?” Nishinoya asked desperately. “Why am I running away from everyone? I didn’t used to do this.”

“I don’t know,” Asahi said gently.

“I’m so fuckin’ sick of this!”

“I know.”

“Ugh!” Nishinoya reared back away from Asahi’s shoulder. He lifted his hands to Asahi’s chest and pushed. “Put me down,” he ordered. He unlinked his ankles and dropped his legs so Asahi would have no choice but to comply.

Asahi set him down slowly. “Okay?” he asked again.

“I don’t know,” Nishinoya said irritably. He was embarrassed and angry with himself. He rubbed
his face against the sleeve of his t-shirt. He used his palm to wipe away the snot as best he could.

“What do you want to do?” Asahi asked. He had a wet spot near his collar. It turned the white fabric of his shirt translucent against his skin.

Nishinoya waffled. It would be easy to stay there, it would be easy to pretend he’d never come home at all, to respond to the messages as though he was still in his dorm on campus.

But he didn’t want to do that. Nishinoya wiped again at his nose with the back of his hand and sniffed hard. “I wanna see Ryuu,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who donated this month to help me and my husband! Thank you all very much, you’ve made a huge difference for us.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

"It takes one person to forgive, it takes two people to be reunited."
-Lewis B. Smedes

The restaurant was closed already for lunch and would not open again for dinner until six o’clock. But Nishinoya had been inside it many times off hours, had spent many rainy afternoons sitting at the bar with Tanaka while the latter’s father prepared for the evening crush. Once they spent an hour throwing things in tempura batter to see what was palatable after frying – a cherry: not bad, a chocolate bar: exquisite, an entire head of broccoli: revolting – before Mrs. Tanaka caught them and made them clean dishes for another hour in retaliation. They’d hosted a graduation dinner at the end of Nishinoya and Tanaka’s third year of high school, to which the entire team had been invited. Mr. Tanaka had gotten some good mileage out of that one; he didn’t seem to tire of the story about the day that a score of high school boys tried to bankrupt his business. Nishinoya heard it many times and knew the plot points by heart — both the real ones and those embellished.

So, Nishinoya knew the Tanaka’s restaurant almost as well as his own house. He knew the cramped dining room, the clean and shiny kitchen, the back hallway that Tanaka was convinced had been haunted. It was home to him as much as any other place.

He couldn’t understand why he looked at it now with such a sense of trepidation.

“How long since you’ve been here?” Asahi asked as they approached the door.

“I don’t know,” Nishinoya admitted quietly. “Not since before new year.”

Asahi’s mouth pursed. “Are you sure you don’t want to call him first? Make sure he’s here?”

Nishinoya shook his head. “He’s here,” he said.

The door didn’t have a proper bell, but a jangly wind chime hung above the frame and announced their entrance. The sound was as familiar to Nishinoya as the tones had been at school.

“Welcome!” came a voice from behind the counter. “Sadly, we do not open for another hour!”

The grizzled head of the elder Tanaka popped into view from below. “If you gentlemen could come back—” He cut off abruptly, and squinted hard at the pair of them on the threshold. His glasses were on top of his head.

Nishinoya gave him an awkward little wave, which he immediately hated himself for. “Hey, Pop,” he said.

“Is that—” Mr. Tanaka lowered his glasses onto his nose. “But no, this is impossible.”

“You look good. How’s the arthritis?”

“No, this is not real, you see,” Mr. Tanaka continued, “my son told me that Yuu was off to college and had said goodbye to our little town for good.”
“Pop, c’mon,” Nishinoya said.

“Dear! You’ll want to see this!” Mr. Tanaka shouted, and a moment later the spindly form of Mrs. Tanaka appeared from the doorway behind the counter, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Yuu!” she said.

“Hey, Mrs. Tanaka.”

“Oh, you see him too,” Mr. Tanaka said. “I thought he was a hallucination. Maybe we’re both going senile.”

Mrs. Tanaka smacked her husband on the back of the head so hard his glasses fell off. “Stop that, Katsutoshi! Leave him be!” She came around the counter while her husband disappeared behind it again. “Yuu,” she said, “my dear.” She held her hands out wide as she approached.

Nishinoya felt his throat tighten. Tanaka Maki was as much a mother to him as his own; she had picked him up from school when he was sick, she had made soup and hot chocolate on snowy days while he and Tanaka ran around in the cold. She was a handspan taller than him even when he reached his full height, and she always made him feel small and safe and loved. Nishinoya opened his arms to hug her.

She snapped forward like a snake attacking and pinched his ear so hard he yelped. “What have you been doing??’ she demanded. “Look how thin you are! What a mess! Why haven’t you called me, hm?” She started hauling him through the dining room toward the door of the kitchen.

“Ow, ow! Wait! Mrs. Tanaka!” Nishinoya looked toward Asahi for assistance, but Asahi had the expression of a mouse caught in an owl’s talons. He held up his hands and shook his head desperately as he followed them past the tables.

Mrs. Tanaka was still ranting. “You never call and you never visit and now here you are – not even the decency to let us know you’re coming! How am I supposed to feed you? I have nothing prepared!”

“You don’t have to – wait, I don’t want–”

She dumped him into the kitchen. “Wait in here and talk some sense into yourself! I’ll be back with the food.”

Nishinoya stumbled forward and caught himself on the edge of a sink near the door. He straightened and lifted his eyes, and found Tanaka staring at him from the other side of the kitchen. He was half-turned toward the counter on the opposite wall, standing in front of a cutting board with a knife in hand, vegetables strewn around him.

Nishinoya took a step backward and ran into Asahi behind him. Asahi’s hands fell onto his shoulders, warm and heavy.

“Noya…?”

“Hey, man,” Nishinoya said hesitantly.

Tanaka had been his mortal enemy on the first day of high school, and his best friend by the end of the second. He was the first person Nishinoya had told when he got an offer to play volleyball in college and the first person to know when he had managed to scrape his way to the exam scores which qualified his entry. He was the last person Nishinoya thought he would be brave enough to
talk to, and the only person he desperately wanted to see in that moment.

“Hey,” Tanaka returned as he slowly lowered the knife. He looked cautious and confused. His eyebrows hung low over his sharp eyes.

He glanced up above Nishinoya’s head. “Asahi,” Tanaka said. “Been awhile.”

“Yeah,” Asahi said. “Good to see you, Tanaka.” His hands squeezed Nishinoya’s shoulders. Nishinoya felt him shift, and then the weight on his shoulders lifted. Asahi touched his arm, and Nishinoya turned slightly to look at him. “I’ll be outside,” Asahi said gently.

Nishinoya nodded, immensely grateful. He grabbed Asahi’s hand and squeezed it hard, hoping Asahi would understand what he meant. Asahi gave him an encouraging smile before he stepped out the door.

“Y’know,” Tanaka said, “a call would’ve been fine.”

Nishinoya grinned at the floor before he turned back to face him. “Well, you know how I like to go against expectations.” Tanaka had grown his hair out into a stupid little topknot. Nishinoya loved it. “Look good, Ryuu,” he said, echoing Asahi’s words.


Nishinoya broke their eye contact and looked at the counter. He noticed a scratch in the surface and scraped at it with a nubby fingernail. “I just felt like coming home for a bit,” he said.

“What for?”

Nishinoya felt his hackles start to rise. “Do I need a reason?” he said sharply.

“You needed one before,” Tanaka countered.

Nishinoya tightened his lips together. It wasn’t an unfair accusation. He’d always had excuses for not coming home. “Well, I’m here,” he said. He thought about the voicemail, how awkward and muted Tanaka had sounded. He didn’t seem that way anymore. When Nishinoya looked back at him, he seemed sharp and angry, bristling tightly beneath coiled frustration.

God, Nishinoya missed him.

“Ryuu,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

Tanaka’s eyebrows came lower. He frowned. “You’re sorry?” he said.

“Yeah, I–” Nishinoya’s voice wobbled, so he cleared his throat. “I know I’ve been a pile of shit, and I’m sorry.”

It took a moment for Tanaka to speak again. “Noya…”

“You don’t have to say anything!” Nishinoya blurted, loud enough at his voice rang off the metal surfaces of the kitchen. “I already know!”

“Noya,” Tanaka said again.

“I know you don’t wanna see me and that’s fine! I’ll get out of your way soon – I just needed to say I’m sorry!”
“Noya, would you shut up?!?” Tanaka demanded. He slammed the knife onto the counter and dragged his apron over his head, then wadded it up into a ball and tossed it in with the linens in the corner. “I mean, fuck!” He finally turned fully away from the counter and stormed across the floor toward Nishinoya.

Nishinoya shrank back as Tanaka approached, eyes blazing and fists tight. “Ryuu,” he said, “Ryuu, wait—”

Tanaka descended on him with the same swiftness as his mother, and clutched at Nishinoya with both hands before dragging him into a hug so tight that Nishinoya was certain he felt his shoulder blades grind against his ribs.

“Ryuu…?”

“Shit,” Tanaka said roughly, “I’m really relieved.”

“Relieved?”

Nishinoya felt Tanaka’s head nod next to his own. “I been real worried about you, Noya.”

Nishinoya slowly lifted his hands to touch Tanaka’s back. “You worried?”

“Yes!” Tanaka made a noise that was half a bark of laughter and half a groan of frustration. He put his hands on Nishinoya’s shoulders and pushed him back at arm’s length. His eyes were shining. The fluorescents, Nishinoya told himself as he ignored the lump in his own throat.

“Of course I was worried, you idiot!” Tanaka insisted. “Now, can you say something more than two words at a time? You’re freakin’ me out!”

Nishinoya didn’t trust his voice enough to speak any louder than a mumble. “Why were you worried?” he asked. He knew it was a stupid question.

“That’s a stupid question,” Tanaka said, and Nishinoya felt a grin touch his lips.

His hands were still at Tanaka’s sides, so he tugged on his shirt to pull him close again. “I don’t know what to say,” Nishinoya said. “I been an idiot, Ryuu.”

Tanaka went into the hug easily. He pounded Nishinoya on the back. “Hell, I ain’t any better, you know?” he said. “I kept lookin’ at my phone, thinkin’ I should call you.”

“I wish you had!” Nishinoya warbled. He pressed his cheek into the fabric against Tanaka’s shoulder. “God, I wish I called you. I’m sorry.”

“I wish you would stop apologizing,” Tanaka said. His voice was equally as thick.

“I thought you’d be mad,” Nishinoya said. “We haven’t talked since your birthday.”

“I’m furious, but mostly at myself. I mean, I texted your brother a couple times to make sure you were okay. Not like it would have been much harder to actually text you.”

Taka had never said anything. Nishinoya scrunched his face up. “I was fine, I was okay, I was just stupid,” Nishinoya said. He shook his head and felt the agony swell up from inside him. “Aw fuck, man. I’m not okay, I’m not…” He stopped himself before it spilled out of control. “I thought I was okay,” he mumbled finally.

“I told myself I was giving you space,” Tanaka said, “but maybe I really was mad.”
Nishinoya knocked his forehead into the sharp ridge of Tanaka’s shoulder. “I deserve it,” he said.

“No,” Tanaka said, “it ain’t that hard to call somebody. I should’ve. I knew you were bad off.” He laughed brokenly. “I should’ve got on the train to come see you.”

“No, man, no,” Nishinoya insisted, “You had the restaurant and your dad to worry about, what if he had a flare-up or—”

“That ain’t your responsibility, Noya, my dad’s okay, alright? If I had wanted to visit, I could’ve.”

“Goddamnit, we can’t both just argue about who was the shittier friend here!”

“Why not? It seems to be goin’ pretty well so far.”

Nishinoya managed to laugh at that. He pushed Tanaka away. They spent a few moments awkwardly scrubbing at their faces in mutual embarrassment.

“How are you?” Nishinoya asked finally. He realized he hadn’t said it yet.

“Ah, you know,” Tanaka said as he rubbed the shaved back of his head. “Same as always. Mom’s tryin’ to get Pop to retire, so she wants me to do more to run the place.”


“I dunno if it’s awesome, but it’s something.”

Nishinoya rubbed his running nose on his sleeve and sniffed hard. “Man, you’ll be so badass. Your own restaurant.”

“It’s still my parent’s restaurant, I just would run more of the daily stuff,” Tanaka insisted. “Not really a big thing.” He sniffed too and cleared his throat. Then he asked, “What’re you doin’ here, Noya? Really.”

“Ryuu, I don’t even know,” Nishinoya returned. “I just grabbed some stuff and jumped on the train. I brought hardly any money. I dunno what I was thinking.”

“Didja just get here today?”

“No, I came in on Wednesday.”

“Wednesday!” Tanaka repeated. His eyes widened. “Noya, haven’t you been home?”

“No…”

“You haven’t stopped by, or called them or anything?”

Nishinoya looked away and shook his head. His phone had gone off a few more times since he’d turned it on — another call from his dad, texts from his siblings — but he hadn’t answered any of them. “No, I been staying with Asahi-san. No one else knows I’m home.”

“Aw fuck.” Tanaka rubbed his head again. “Noya, your mom called me last night. Asked if I had heard from you lately.”

Nishinoya’s stomach dropped. “What did you tell her?” he demanded.

“Well, I told the truth, of course! I told her I hadn’t heard from you in awhile!”
Nishinoya closed his eyes and grimaced. He tapped a fist against his forehead a few times. “Shit,” he said.

“She said you weren’t answering your phone. She sounded real upset, Noya.”

“I know, okay!” Nishinoya blurted. “I know…”

“What do you plan to do?”

Nishinoya winced. He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes and tangled his fingers in his hair, curling them so tight that his scalp ached. “I don’t know!” he said finally. “My brain’s all scrambled. I dunno what I’m doing.”

Tanaka sighed heavily. Nishinoya heard him shuffle around, then a short series of beeps.


Nishinoya’s head shot up. Tanaka was on his phone. When he noticed Nishinoya’s attention, he half-turned away and stared at the far wall. “No, everything’s alright,” Tanaka continued. “I just wanted you to know I got in touch with him.”

“Don’t tell her I’m here!” Nishinoya hissed. “Ryuu, please!”

Tanaka’s eyes shot at him then away again, his forehead creasing. “I… I think he’s been having trouble with his phone,” he said slowly. “But otherwise he sounded okay.”

Nishinoya nodded. He felt weak and nauseous. Thank you, he mouthed silently. Tanaka ignored him and continued.

“Yeah — yes. Yes, ma’am. I’ll tell him you said so. I know. Thanks, I’ll tell her. Goodbye.”

Tanaka ended the call and shoved his phone back in his pocket. “Was that so fuckin’ hard!”

“Ryuu, I was gonna handle it—”

“When you felt good and ready!” Tanaka insisted. “Meanwhile your parents were probably callin’ everybody they knew tryin’ to get in touch with you!” He looked furious again. “You need to think —”

“You think I haven’t?” Nishinoya snapped. He balled his hands into fists at his sides. “You think I’m not thinkin’ about them every day? What they’re gonna say? What they’ll do?”

Tanaka threw his hands up. “What they’ll say about what, Noya? What the fuck is going on with you?!”

Nishinoya felt his throat closing up again. His anger faltered, teetering like an off-balance top as it wobbled through the end of its circuit. His voice almost left him. “I’m gonna quit volleyball,” he finally managed. “I’m gonna drop out of school.”

Tanaka took a step back. It took him a moment to respond. “Noya, that’s… that’s crazy,” he said. “You’re what, six months from graduating?!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nishinoya said. “I don’t think I can last that long.”

“And quitting volleyball? You love volleyball!”
“Not anymore.”

Tanaka’s mouth fell open. “What the fuck?” he said. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Nishinoya said, “nothing happened. I’m just, I’m so—” Tears welled up for a third time that afternoon, and he felt sick to his stomach. “I’m so tired, Ryuu,” he mumbled. “And I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?”

Nishinoya sighed and shook his head. He looked past Tanaka and to the side so he wouldn’t have to look directly at him any longer. “What if this is all there is?” he said. “What if I’ve already wasted too much time?”

“Noya…” Tanaka said.

“Augh!” Nishinoya put his hands up and backed away. “Don’t make that voice at me!”

“What voice?”

“Your nice voice!” Nishinoya insisted. “The one you use with old ladies and customers!”

“I don’t have a voice,” Tanaka said.

“You absolutely have a voice!” Nishinoya continued. “And I don’t need you treating me all soft like that!”

“Soft!” Tanaka looked offended. “Okay, how’s this for soft!” He lifted a fist in front of his face. “If you drop out of college I’m gonna make you eat a spider!”

“A spider?”


“What about volleyball?”

“Eighteen spiders!”

“Eighteen all together or ten for college plus eighteen for volleyball?”

“Now it’s twenty!” Tanaka shot forward and looped his arm around Nishinoya’s neck, hauling him down. He shoved his knuckles into the top of Nishinoya’s head. “And I’ll throw in ten earthworms for good measure!”

“Earthworms!” Nishinoya repeated as he tried to wriggle out of Tanaka’s grasp. “What the fuck, man!”

“It’s more mercy than you deserve, giving me a heart attack like that!” Tanaka insisted. He released his hold on Nishinoya, though he kept a fistful of his shirt in hand. “Dropping in on me without warning, after your mom freaked me out, and then you tell me you’re gonna quit volleyball — Noya, you sound like you hit your head or something!”

Nishinoya rubbed the sore spot at the crown of his skull where Tanaka’s knuckles had dug in. “I know, I’m sorry,” he said.

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” Tanaka told him. “I want you to tell me what’s goin’ on. Really,
Nishinoya felt his mouth tug into a thin smile before he sighed again. “I think I ruined everything,” he said. “I kept fucking up at practice. I hurt my ankle over summer. Coach put me on probation.” He covered his eyes with his hands. “I think I’m failing half my classes.” His throat hurt. “I don’t wanna do this anymore. I can’t stop thinkin’ about getting on a plane and flying as far away as I can.”

Tanaka didn’t respond. Nishinoya slowly lowered his hands, and found that Tanaka was staring at him in what could only be described as mild distress. Nishinoya quickly looked away and rubbed his nose on his sleeve. “Pretty great, right?” he said. “If you’re speechless, I know it’s bad.”

“I’ve never seen you like this,” Tanaka said. “Noya, you regularly failed exams in high school. And you busted your elbow during freshman year and it barely slowed you down.” He shook his head, his eyes wide. “So what’s different now? What happened this time?”

“What am I gonna do after graduation?” Nishinoya asked. “I’ve never made a decision in my life that looked more than a month into the future! Before — there was time then. I could fix it. There was still time to figure it out.” He shrugged. “Back then, I didn’t have this feeling like I’m supposed to have it figured out by now.”

Tanaka made a surprised-sounding laugh. “What makes you think anybody has anything figured out right now?” he demanded.

Nishinoya shrugged again. “Asahi-san’s doin’ okay,” he said. “And you got the restaurant…”

“You think I know what I’m doin’ because I’m employed by my parents?”

A smile pulled at the corner of Nishinoya’s mouth. “Well…”

“Noya, you know how many times a day I wonder if this is what I wanna do for my life? I been helpin’ in the restaurant for ten years! You think I haven’t thought about doin’ something else?” He gave Nishinoya a little shake. “I never seen you run from this sort of thing! Since when are you worried about what’s gonna happen six months from now?”

Nishinoya put his hand on Tanaka’s wrist to steady himself. “You don’t want the restaurant anymore?”

“Ahh, I don’t know, I’m not sayin’ that.” Tanaka let go of Nishinoya’s shirt. He crossed his arms. “I just worry about doin’ a good enough job of it. Maybe they’d be better to hire somebody smarter to run it.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Nishinoya insisted. “Nobody could run this place better than you!”

Tanaka laughed again. “I dunno if that is true, but I’m the one they say they want.”

“Because they know you’re awesome,” Nishinoya said.

“Yeah, I am pretty awesome,” Tanaka agreed. “You’re awesome, too, Noya. You’ll figure out what you’re supposed to do after graduation.”

“If you say so.”

“Please!” Tanaka waved a hand. “Guy like you? I bet it’ll just fall right into your lap. You won’t even have to think about it.”
Nishinoya bit the inside of his cheek. “I think about stuff,” he said.

“Yeah, you’re real introspective.”

He felt his hackles rise but fought the feeling down. He didn’t want to argue with Tanaka anymore than he already had. “I hope so, at least,” he said.

“Is that why won’t you call your mom?” Tanaka asked. “Because you’re scared of graduation?”

“Maybe…” Nishinoya said. “She sorta expects me to have a plan, I guess.”

“Your mom’s intense,” Tanaka said. “I get it.” He made a placating gesture. “What about your dad? He’s a chill guy, you can talk to him about this stuff. Hell, I talk to him about all sorts of shit.”

Nishinoya felt his shoulders turn inward. “Yeah,” he said. “I could…”

“You don’t wanna talk to him either?”


Tanaka pulled a frustrated grimace as he exhaled hard through his nose. Finally, he said, “Alright.”

Nishinoya thought that might be the end of it. His shoulders started to relax.

“So what’s the deal with Asahi?” Tanaka asked, and Nishinoya’s shoulders clenched up again.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t think you’d been contact with him since high school.”

“I wasn’t,” Nishinoya said. “We ran into each other.”

“That’s lucky,” Tanaka said. “And he doesn’t mind you staying with him?”

“It’s just for a few days.”

Tanaka’s eyebrows came over his eyes in a look of deep contemplation. He looked as he had when they’d studied for exams in high school. At length, he said. “Y’know, you could stay here if you’d rather. Mom and Pop won’t mind.”

“No… that’s okay.” Nishinoya looked away, scratching the back of his hand. “It’s been nice catching up with him.”

Tanaka still had that expression on his face. Out of the corner of his eye, Nishinoya saw him peering carefully at him. “You’re acting weird,” Tanaka said. “Weird even for whatever is happenin’ with you and college.”

Nishinoya felt a flash of panic before he tamped it down. It was fine, he told himself, it was okay even if Tanaka figured it out. Asahi wasn’t hiding. He went to gay bars and his family knew. It was Nishinoya’s secret to protect, but he didn’t have to worry about protecting Asahi’s too.

“It’s nothing,” Nishinoya said. “We’re just hanging out.” He changed the subject. “He plays on Ukai’s neighborhood team, did you know that?”

“Yeah,” Tanaka said, “I went and hung out with them a few times.”
“Oh…”

“Oh…” Tanaka looked uncomfortable, and Nishinoya found himself recoil slightly in response. “Is there… something going on?”

Nishinoya looked away quickly. He picked at the counter again. “What d’you mean?”

“Well, Asahi’s… y’know.”

He had a bad taste in his mouth. “He’s what, Ryuu.”

Tanaka’s mouth pulled into a grimace. “Well, he’s… into men, isn’t he? You know that right?”

Nishinoya couldn’t keep the acid out of his tone. “Yeah, so? That bother you?”

“What?” Tanaka’s eyes went wide. He took a step back. “Of course not!”

“Oh no? What’s with the face then.”

“I don’t care about that!” Tanaka insisted. “I’m just worried about you!”

“I can take care of myself,” Nishinoya said.

“No, that’s not — Noya.” Tanaka leaned toward him and grabbed his shoulder. “I knew how you felt about him in high school.”

Nishinoya knocked off his hand and took a few steps back. “What?”

“Noya, it’s not. Don’t worry. It’s not like it was a big deal or nothing, but —” He shrugged. “I mean, you didn’t exactly hide it, you know? You almost quit volleyball for him.”

Nishinoya’s mouth dropped open. “That was — that was different!” he insisted.

“It’s okay!” Tanaka said, with his hands up defensively.

“I just. I wanted to play with him.” He thought about Asahi inviting him to play that afternoon and felt his throat tighten. “I always want to play with him.”

“I know, man,” Tanaka said. “It’s okay really.”

“You’re such an asshole,” Nishinoya said. “Why didn’t you tell me if you knew?”

“I thought you didn’t want me to!” Tanaka insisted. “I thought you were just leaving it as it was on purpose.”

“Oh my god,” Nishinoya said.

“I dunno, Noya,” Tanaka continued. “You never were scared of anything — I figured that you didn’t say anything because you had already decided not to for whatever reason. I thought if you wanted to talk about it you would’ve told me!”

Nishinoya wanted to bury himself. “Did anyone else know?” he asked in a small voice.

“I… I don’t think so,” Tanaka said. “I mean, no one ever said anything, y’know? And no one spent as much time with you as I did, so. Maybe wasn’t as obvious to them?”

“You don’t sound very confident.”
“Well, you’re not exactly the king of emotional nuance, Noya!” Tanaka said sharply. “But I think most of the time you were so happy-go-lucky that nobody thought there was ever much goin’ on that they didn’t see.”

Nishinoya’s stomach began to settle. “There really wasn’t much underneath,” he admitted. “Not like that was an act back then.”

“I know that,” Tanaka said. “You don’t got a false bone in your body.”

“You’d be surprised,” Nishinoya mumbled.

“Yeah, you’re a real mastermind,” Tanaka intoned.

Nishinoya managed to smile at that. “I’m a fuckin’ disaster, Ryuu,” he said.

“That’s a little bit,” Tanaka agreed. He held out his hand, and Nishinoya took it. Tanaka clapped his shoulder with his other hand. “You’ll figure it out, Noya.”

“If you say so,” Nishinoya said flatly.

“Nah,” Tanaka said. Their hands were still clasped together. “You’ll figure it out.”

Nishinoya grinned weakly. He closed his other hand over Tanaka’s and squeezed.

Tanaka squeezed back. He used his free hand to ruffle Nishinoya’s unkempt hair. “Man, you need a serious makeover, though,” he said.

“I know,” Nishinoya agreed.

“I can get Sis to help you if you like, she should be home later tonight.”

“No,” Nishinoya said. “I’ll take care of it later. She doin’ good?”

“Yeah, she’s fine.” Tanaka pulled a face. “She’s engaged. It’s disgusting.”

“Engaged! To who?!”

Tanaka’s eyebrows shot upward. “Oh my god, did I not tell you?” He lit up like a Christmas tree. “Holy shit, Noya! You won’t believe it.”

“Tell me already!”

“They started dating last year apparently. I dunno how she managed to not tell anyone — she said she was goin’ to Sendai for a job but —”

“Ryu, come on!”

Tanaka shook his head. “I still can’t believe it, it’s like a weird dream or somethin’. She’s marrying Tsukishima’s brother.”

Nishinoya stared at him blankly for a moment. “What?!” he blurted.

“I know, right? I’m gonna be brothers with Tsukishima.”

“Wait,” Nishinoya said, “hold on a minute. Tsukishima’s brother?” He digested the information. He tried to remember what the older Tsukishima looked like — the only face he could conjure was
the one belonging to his old teammate, superimposed on a broader body, standing next to Saeko in formalwear.

Nishinoya burst out laughing. “What the fuck!” he exclaimed.

“I know!” Tanaka began to laugh too. “We had, like, a dinner with them a few weeks ago, y’know?” He gestured as he described it, laying out the scene for Nishinoya. “Like me and Sis, Mom and Pop, and then Mr. and Mrs. Tsukishima, Akiteru-san and Tsukishima there across the table — it was so surreal, Noya!”

“You were like, in his house?”

“Yes!” Tanaka cried. “I hadn’t even seen him since we went to their tournament when they were third-years!”

“You got to see where he lives!” Nishinoya said. He had to brace himself against the counter. “Holy shit, you’ll see him like, at holidays and stuff!”

“I. Know. I half-expected him to have a lair or something he crawls into at night, but it was just a regular house. When he’s home from school at least, who knows what his living situation is there. Lair is still a possibility.”

“That is fuckin’ crazy, Ryuu!”

“Believe me, I know.” Tanaka had the long-suffering look of a man at war. “I asked Sis why she was doing this to me, and she said it wasn’t about me! How rude is that!” He put his hand over heart and staggered back a step. “My own sister!”

“When are they getting married?”

“In December.” Tanaka said. “It’s a nightmare.”

Nishinoya grinned at him and patted his shoulder. “Stay strong, Ryuu.”

“I’m trying, man. I’m trying.”

Nishinoya glanced at the clock on the wall. “How uncomfortable do you think Asahi-san is right now, hangin’ out with Pop?”

“Depends on if Pop has moved on to complaining about the birds shitting all over our porch or how the business board is trying to make him join that community revitalization committee.”

“Maybe we should put him out of his misery.”

“Probably.” Tanaka gave him a sidelong look. “Are you sure there’s nothing going on? You guys had kind of… a moment.”

Nishinoya shuffled his feet and looked at the ground. “I dunno, Ryuu. I haven’t thought it out that far.”

“I’m so surprised.”

“Hey!” Nishinoya slugged him in the arm. “It’s complicated, ok! I gotta go back eventually. Doesn’t make much sense to get him all tangled up in this bullshit.”

“Have you talked to him about that?”
“I don’t want to mess things up for him,” Nishinoya mumbled. “He’s got a good thing here.”

“Noya, you…” Tanaka made a frustrated noise. “You always do this. You feel like you gotta handle everything for everybody.” He poked Nishinoya hard in the chest. “You gotta let someone do something for you once in awhile. Let someone else hold you up for once.”

Nishinoya knocked Tanaka’s hand away. “I can handle it,” he said. “I don’t need somebody to save me.”

“That’s not — Noya.” Tanaka grabbed both of his shoulders and faced him square on. “It’s not about someone saving you,” he said. “It’s about having people in your corner to help you save yourself.”

The words lodged inside Nishinoya somewhere underneath his shoulder blades, a sharp corner of a brick pressing into his spine. “That’s pretty profound, Ryuu,” he said. “When did you get so smart?”

“I read that in a pamphlet at Pop’s clinic,” Tanaka explained, and Nishinoya smiled. Tanaka looked over his shoulder at the door. “This is all very touching and awkward,” he said. “Why doesn’t Mom come in and interrupt us with some food?”

“Maybe she’s busy telling Asahi-san all about her hot flashes. God knows I’ve heard a lot about them.”

“It’s horrific, Noya. The woman has no boundaries.”

“I remember hearing about that mole on her back every day for a year.”

“Oh god! I remember that — I think she forgot about it. Don’t remind her, okay?”

Nishinoya’s smile grew and stuck. “I guess we should probably go relieve Asahi-san,” he said. “If Pop hasn’t attempted to put him to work already.”

Nishinoya laughed. “He wouldn’t be able to say no,” he said. “He’d be stuck here for the rest of his life.”

“Forever listening to the list of Mom’s many ailments and Pop’s beef with the pastry shop down the street.”

“Oh man, are they still in business?”

“Yeah, god, you gotta go while you’re here, they have this strawberry thing now — I think it took a year off my life, but it was worth it.”

“What if Pop finds out?”

Tanaka gave a dramatic sigh, put his hand to his chest, and stared forlornly into the middle distance. “Ours is a forbidden love,” he said. “My father can never know, or I will be disowned and kicked out of the house.”

Nishinoya laughed and gave him a hard shove. “You’re so dumb, honestly.”

“I’m the dumb one? You’re the one who’s having the crisis here, buddy.”

“Yeah, yeah, shut up.”
“What d’ya think, should we see what the damage is out there?”

“I guess it’s only fair.”

As predicted, out in the dining room they found Asahi sitting in a booth with both of Tanaka’s parents hovering over him.

“Look at this — you see this mark? You ever seen a spot like this? I’ll be dead by the end of the year, I know it —”

“And they want to have a Local Foods Week, you know what that is? An excuse to extort money from me in exchange for very little advertising, on the promise that it will turn into tourist revenue —”

“I’m so sorry — no, that sounds very inconvenient —”

“Mom! Pop!” Tanaka bellowed. “Leave him alone, already!”

“My son doesn’t care,” Mrs. Tanaka said to Asahi without turning around, “I point these things out to him, and he can’t even be bothered to listen.”

“We put a roof over his head,” Mr. Tanaka continued. “We employ him out of familial charity. And he acts as though every conversation is an imposition.”

“Charity!” Tanaka echoed. “What kinda lame charity is it if you’re working me to the bone without pay!”

“We pay him,” Mrs. Tanaka told Asahi.

“Don’t listen to him,” Mr. Tanaka said.

Asahi looked between them, wide-eyed and silent, clearly unsure how to respond.

Nishinoya edged around Tanaka’s parents and slid into the booth across from Asahi. He put his elbow on the table and propped his chin on his hand. “Didn’t you promise to feed me?” he asked Mrs. Tanaka. Her attention turned to him, to Asahi’s visible relief.

“Ryuunosuke,” she said, her eyes still fixed to Nishinoya, “bring some soup and salad.”

“Why do I gotta—”

“Katsutoshi,” Mrs. Tanaka continued over her son’s objections, “why don’t you make tonight’s special for them?”

“Dear, I—”

“Do I need to repeat myself?” Mrs. Tanaka demanded. She whirled to face the two men and focused the sharpness of her glare upon them. She put her hands on her hips.

“No, dear,” Mr. Tanaka said.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Tanaka added.

“You don’t have to—” Asahi tried to say, but Nishinoya reached across the table and covered his mouth with his hand.
“What mark are you worried about, Mrs. Tanaka?” Nishinoya asked.

She turned back to him, practically beaming. “Oh, Yuu,” she said. “I’m certain I’m not long for this earth.” She patted his hand. “But don’t worry, dear. You’ll get Ryuunosuke’s portion in the will.”

“I heard that!” Tanaka shouted from the doorway of the kitchen.

“Perhaps my daughter will give me some grandchildren before I die,” she continued. “Seeing as how my son can’t seem to get his act together to carry on the family name.”

“Mom, I’m right here!” Tanaka griped as he approached with the tray.

“I know that,” she returned mildly, “that’s why I said it.”

Tanaka edged by her to put the tray down on the table. “Jeez, Mom, go help Pop or something,” he grumbled. “We gotta open in an hour, remember?”

“Don’t get smart with me,” Mrs. Tanaka said, but she went off all the same.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Asahi,” Tanaka said when she was out of earshot.

“It’s fine,” Asahi said. He laughed. “They were only mildly terrifying.”

“I don’t get an apology?” Nishinoya asked, and Tanaka flicked him on the side of his head.

“I gotta get back to work,” Tanaka said. “You guys holler if you need anything else.”


After he had stepped away, Nishinoya grabbed one of the soup bowls off the tray. “You can have both salads,” he said to Asahi.

“I think you should probably eat yours,” Asahi returned.

Nishinoya groaned. “Some friend you are,” he said, “what a betrayal.”

Asahi laughed at that. “Suggesting you eat vegetables is a betrayal?” he asked.

“I’m offended that you think otherwise.”

“Maybe you should eat both salads then.”

“Asahi-san!”

By the time they finished their dinner, it was almost time for the restaurant to open. Nishinoya said his goodbyes to Tanaka’s parents — “Come see me when you are home for Christmas,” Mrs. Tanaka insisted, “so I can fatten you up.” — and then popped back into the kitchen to say goodbye to Tanaka himself.

“Heading out?” Tanaka asked without turning around from the counter.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya said. “Better get out of here so you only gotta babysit your parents.”

Tanaka laughed. “Ah, they’re alright,” he said. “Pop’s got a clinic appointment on Monday, so I think they’re both trying to burn off steam about that.”

“Will you let me know how it goes?” Nishinoya asked.
“Sure thing,” Tanaka said. “I don’t think they expect any changes, so don’t worry.”

Nishinoya hovered in the doorway, unsure how to continue the thread of conversation. He hated the feeling in his throat, like the words weren’t coming, the empty space between them remaining unfilled.

“What’re you doin’ next month?” Tanaka asked.

Nishinoya blinked. “I… dunno,” he said. It seemed difficult to see as far ahead as the next week, let alone the next month.

“It’s gonna be nuts with planning Sis’s wedding — they want to use the restaurant for the party — but I think I can probably come visit one weekend if you’re down with it.”

Nishinoya couldn’t help the frown that tugged at his mouth. “If you want,” he said. *If I’m still there*, he didn’t.

Tanaka looked over his shoulder, meeting his eyes across the kitchen. “Remember what I said, Noya,” he suggested. “Spiders and earthworms.”

“Right, right,” Nishinoya said with a wave of his hand. “I’ll remember.”

“Don’t make me come down to Chiba and smack you,” Tanaka insisted. “I’ll do it.”

“Big words from a man who is elbow deep in eggplants.”

“These are strategic eggplants. Specially bred. Very high tech.”

“I’ll be on the lookout for you and your eggplants, then.”

“Too right,” Tanaka said.

Nishinoya resisted the urge momentarily, but ultimately failed to keep in his next question. “Ryuu,” he said, “was it really that obvious with Asahi-san?”

“What d’you want me to say, Noya?” Tanaka returned with a shrug. “I think you should probably talk to him about it.”

“We talked,” Nishinoya insisted.

“Did you tell him you’ve been in love with him since high school?”

Nishinoya clapped his mouth shut. At length, he managed to choke out, “Have not.”

“Haven’t told him?”

“Haven’t been!” Nishinoya insisted.

“Noya,” Tanaka said.

“It’s really not like that, Ryuu!” Nishinoya crossed his arms and looked away. “It’s just been good seeing him. Makes me feel more like I did in high school.”

“If you say so,” Tanaka said.

Nishinoya frowned but let the matter drop. “You gonna be around for a few more days?” he asked.
“Probably, seein’ as though I ain’t got a life outside this kitchen.”

“I’ll come see you again, then,” Nishinoya said.

“Before you go back?”

Nishinoya closed his eyes and grimaced in a tight line. At length he said, “Yeah. Before then.”

“Yeah, I’ll be here,” Tanaka said. “If you come by on Sunday I’ll have the day off.”

“Yeah,” Nishinoya said. “That sounds good.” He didn’t have to make any decisions until then. He didn’t have to think about it over the weekend. “Well, I’ll see you then, okay?” He turned to go.

“Hey, Noya?”

Nishinoya turned back around and saw Tanaka looking at him over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Give your mom a call, alright?”

Nishinoya looked at the floor. He nodded. “I will,” he said.

“Soon, probably. Tonight.”

“Alright, already!” Nishinoya exclaimed. “God, when did you become such a old lady?”

Tanaka stared into space. “I’m turning into my mother, I don’t know.”

“You could do worse, I guess.”

“Aaahhh!” Tanaka groaned. “Get outta here! We’ll get customers soon and you’re not supposed to be back in the kitchen anyway.”

“I’m goin’, I’m goin’.”

“See you Sunday, Noya.”

“Yeah, see you, Ryuu.”

He took one last glance at Tanaka chopping eggplants before he stepped back through the door toward the dining room. There, Asahi was waiting for him in the booth, engrossed in his phone. He hadn’t glanced up yet, and Nishinoya had a moment to look at him. Asahi wore a pensive expression as he stared at his phone with a crease in his forehead and his mouth pursed thoughtfully. His messy hair was falling out of the loop he’d tied back with an elastic. Soft tendrils of it spilled around his neck, just tickling his shoulders. Asahi was still wearing that white t-shirt with a collar so wide that Nishinoya could see an ample amount of his sternum. The black cord of his pendant disappeared behind the fabric, tucked away unseen against his chest.

Asahi had worn that pendant every day they were together, Nishinoya realized. He wondered for the first time where Asahi had gotten it, and why it seemed so special to him. It struck Nishinoya once more that Asahi had a whole life that he wasn’t a part of. He had friends and a job, a place of his own, a niche in which he belonged.

Nishinoya told himself once again that he was making the right decision. He would just mess things up for Asahi if he tried to make the past few days more than they were. Regardless of what he decided, Nishinoya would have to leave Asahi’s apartment at some point. He knew he should make it sooner rather than later — he’d promised they’d go to practice the next day, but he could
probably leave early on Sunday — wasn’t that when Asahi had to go back to work? So Sunday then. He could leave Asahi’s apartment, spend a little time with Tanaka, then decide where to go from there.

Yeah, Nishinoya thought. That would probably be best. He’d leave, and then Asahi would be able to go back to that life that Nishinoya had crashed so rudely into.

Asahi looked up and caught his eye. He put his phone down and gave Nishinoya a soft smile. When Nishinoya reached him, he asked, “Everything good?”


Asahi nodded, looking pleased. “Good,” he said. “I’m glad.”

Yes, Nishinoya thought. Absolutely the right decision.
It was nearly dark by the time they headed back to Asahi’s apartment. It had been clear all day with low humidity, and the temperature began to plunge as the sun went down. Noya had forgotten the jacket that Asahi’s mom lent him, so he spent the trip shivering until Asahi noticed and looped an arm around his shoulders on the train, tucking him in close to his side. Asahi was warm as a space heater and smelled incredibly good; Nishinoya allowed himself to lean his head on Asahi’s shoulder and drift until they got to the right stop.

When they got to the apartment, Asahi turned to him with a sheepish expression. “I hate to say this,” he said, “but I really need to do some laundry.”

“Okay,” Nishinoya returned.

“I was putting it off ‘til the last possible day anyway,” Asahi continued. “And then I put it off longer when you got here.”

“Asahi-san, it’s fine.”

“I got like one pair of boxers left, and they’re the ones with the bad elastic.”


Asahi gave him a grateful smile. “You can hang out here if you like,” he said. “The coin laundry isn’t far. I don’t think it will take more than an hour or two.”

“Coin laundry!” Nishinoya echoed. “Why don’t you have a washer?”

Asahi’s eyebrows slanted downward on the ends. “Well, I do,” he said slowly, “but it doesn’t work.”

“What? And your landlord won’t replace it?”

“I…haven’t told her that it doesn’t work…”

“Asahi-san!”
He held up his hands defensively. “I know, I know,” he said. “I just. I hate bothering her. I haven’t been brave enough to report it yet.”

“So you spend money to do your laundry because you’re too shy to ask to have your washer fixed?”

“Well, it sounds dumb when you say it like that…”

Nishinoya frowned and crossed his arms. “How long has it been broken?”

“I don’t know… A month or two?”

“Asahi!!”

Asahi laughed nervously. “I know,” he said. “But at this point I can’t call ‘til Monday, and I’ll need clean underwear before then.”

Nishinoya puffed up his cheeks and let out the air slowly. “Well, how much do you got?”

“Not that much, only two loads worth. But the washer and dryer each take thirty minutes, and then I have to fold them.”

“You actually use the dryer?”

Asahi scratched his cheek and looked away. “The first time I brought them home wet,” he explained, “And then I left them in the bag until they were smelly.”

“What!”

He turned back to Nishinoya with an apologetic grin. “Since then,” he continued, “I’ve decided it’s better if I can get them all dry before I get home, so that they’ll at least stay clean even if I don’t put them away.”

Nishinoya shook his head slowly. “Well,” he said. “I guess if that works for you…”

“Feel free to watch tv or something while I’m gone. I’ve got a laptop in my room if you want to get on the internet.”

“Are you kidding?” Nishinoya said quickly. “Of course I’m going with you.”

“It’s not a big deal, really, I’m pretty used to–”

“Asahi-san.”

“Okay.”

True to Asahi’s word, the nearest coin laundry was only a twenty minute walk away. This time Nishinoya remembered his jacket, though he missed the feeling of Asahi’s arm around him. They still had another full day together, Nishinoya told himself. There would be time to touch him again. Maybe even enough to satisfy Nishinoya’s infinite need.

The coin laundry was small, clean, and bright. It was busy at that hour with more than half the machines running, but only one other person lingered in the small space folding clothes on one of the tall counters.

Asahi sorted the clothes they had carried into two loads, jeans and t-shirts in one machine, boxers
and undershirts in the other. Nishinoya hiked himself up to on an empty machine; from there he watched Asahi measure detergent and count the money for each load. It seemed practiced and familiar – a confident process of ordinary life – and Nishinoya felt an inexplicable pang somewhere inside him while he observed. He put his hand against his chest and rubbed with the heel of his palm, as though he could massage away the ache.

After Asahi set the loads and started the machines, he turned back to Nishinoya with a small smile. “Well,” he said, “now we have thirty minutes to kill. Do you wanna hang out here or should we take a walk?”

“Walk sounds good,” Nishinoya returned. He was full of nervous energy, still on edge after his reunion with Tanaka at the restaurant. Furthermore, he didn’t want his time with Asahi to be marred by the presence of a stranger in the room with them. He slipped down off the machine.

They went out the door and turned down the street in the opposite direction from Asahi’s apartment. Nishinoya wasn’t familiar with the neighborhood. Karasuno wasn’t really that big, but his own house was practically on the other side of town. He’d never had much cause to come so far off his beaten path.

The street was narrow and had barely any sidewalk to speak of, but no cars passed as they walked along it, so they were able to walk abreast of each other. Small shops dotted street-level of the tightly packed buildings, many with apartments above such as Asahi’s. A few of the buildings seemed to be vacant. Not many people were out, but a few milled around smoking in front of a building with a neon sign in the small window.

Nishinoya realized with a shock that it was the bar he’d gone into on his first night home, that disastrous night he ran into Asahi and drank himself into shameful oblivion. The memory swam up inside him, the ghost of nausea twisting in his stomach as he remembered the close hot air of the bar, the tears on his face and Asahi’s arm around his side.

Nishinoya shoved his hands into his pockets and began walking faster; Asahi matched his pace. They passed by the building – the smell of cigarettes lit briefly in Nishinoya’s nostrils, then faded again – the door of the bar was open and noise spilled out onto the street, coating them as they went by.

Asahi lingered for a moment; he put a hand on Nishinoya’s elbow to halt his progress. “There’s a band tonight,” he said, gesturing back at the bar with a thumb over his shoulder, back toward the light and scent and animated sound of many voices together. “My friends were planning to go,” Asahi continued. “It might be fun to join them later.”

Nishinoya shook his head quickly. He twisted his arm in Asahi’s grip, flipping his forearm around until he could grab Asahi’s wrist, and tugged him away from the bar with all the speed he could muster. He didn’t breathe again until they were around the corner.

He could feel Asahi looking at him in a mix of confusion and concern. Nishinoya hunched up his shoulders around his neck and put his hands in his pockets again. “I don’t wanna go back there,” he said tightly.

“We don’t have to,” Asahi assured gently. “It was just an idea.”

He felt stupid and selfish. “You can meet up with them if you want,” Nishinoya offered. “It’s okay, I can just hang out back at your place.”

“Why would I do that?” Asahi asked. “I can go out with them any dumb day.”
“It’s just…” Nishinoya felt the desperate need to explain, to find the words that would convince Asahi he wasn’t acting ridiculous – the words that would convince himself as well. But they didn’t form in his brain; they didn’t find their way to his mouth. “It’s just.” He grimaced.

“That was a bad night,” Asahi suggested.

Nishinoya nodded. “I was acting really stupid,” he said. He finally managed to turn his gaze to Asahi and found him looking back with a sympathetic expression.

“You were trying to escape,” Asahi told him. “It’s not that ridiculous, really.”

Absurdly, Nishinoya felt a lick of irritation. “Yeah,” he said.

They started walking again. The feeling persisted inside Nishinoya even as distance grew between them and the bar. Why did Asahi have to be so understanding about everything? There was too much softness to his voice, too much gentleness. Nishinoya almost wished that Asahi would get mad at him instead.

“How often you hang out there?” Nishinoya asked, trying to deflect the frustration lingering inside him.


Wednesday. That had been the day he’d come into town. It was just part of Asahi’s normal routine, then. Nothing special or lucky about it. Nishinoya remembered how Asahi’s friends had teased him about going off to have a drink with him. How many of Asahi’s Wednesdays had ended the same way?

“That’s nice,” he mumbled. A cold wind passed over them, tugging at the collar of Nishinoya’s borrowed jacket. He shoved his hands further into his pockets. The night was fully dark now, and they stepped in and out of pools of golden light as they walked along beneath the glowing streetlamps.

At length, Asahi asked, “Do you have anything like that?”

Nishinoya wasn’t quite sure what he meant. “Like what?”

“Ah, you know…” Asahi said. He shrugged. “Like what I do with my friends.”

Nishinoya frowned. Was Asahi asking if he picked up guys at a bar on Wednesdays? “Like, do I go drinking once a week?”

“I just mean, a regular thing like that. Drinks after practice? Study group? Pizza night?”

“Pizza night?” Nishinoya echoed.

“I don’t know!” Asahi insisted. “I’m just asking. You haven’t told me anything about your friends at school. You said you went drinking for your last birthday.”

Nishinoya’s twenty-first birthday felt like it had belonged to another lifetime. “I went with some of the guys from my team,” he said.

“Yeah?” Asahi prompted.

Nishinoya chewed on his lip as he fought to remember. How many were in their group that night?
“Matsuda-san,” he said, “Daisaku, Hori, Toshio.” Was that all? “Oh, and Yuta.” Nishinoya grinned a little at the last addition. “He was only eighteen then. We paid an upperclassmen to borrow his ID for a night so we could sneak Yuta into the bar with us. And then they didn’t even ID him when we got there.”

Asahi laughed. “How much did you pay?”

“Five thousand.”

Asahi whistled. “Well, it’s for the best,” he said. “You would’ve gotten in big trouble if you had been caught.”

“Maybe,” Nishinoya conceded. “He didn’t even drink that much. I think he had half a beer.”

“Even with his seniors pressuring him?”

“Hey, it wasn’t like that!” Nishinoya insisted. “He’s a good kid. We just wanted to have a good time.” And it had been a good time that night. Nishinoya remembered laughing about it for days afterward, when they suddenly recalled after the fact that Daisaku had spent the night taking pictures on his phone; there had been many incriminating images in the collection.

“They’re awesome guys,” he continued. “Matsuda-san graduated last April. Toshio’s in my year, and Hori and Daisaku are a year behind me.”

“And they’re all on the team with you?” Asahi asked.

Nishinoya nodded. “Yeah, Toshio and Hori are both starters. Yuta’s getting there. He’s a libero like me.” Nishinoya thought about the LINE conversation they shared; he hadn’t responded to any of their messages since he’d been put on probation. His stomach dropped and the smile left his face. “I guess it’s good they have him now,” he mumbled. “I won’t feel as bad about leaving the team if he’s gonna be there to take care of things behind me.”

"Do you really want to leave them?" Asahi asked.

Nishinoya didn’t answer. He turned his gaze aside.

Fallen leaves crunched underfoot as they continued along the road. Nishinoya had no context for how long they’d been walking; he assumed Asahi had some idea how far was far enough, when they’d need to turn around and head back to the coin laundry. Asahi didn’t repeat his question, and for a time they walked in silence. Asahi turned right at a corner for an unspoken reason, changing the direction of their path, and Nishinoya followed.

He hated feeling this way. He’d felt so much better earlier, present in each moment: kissing Asahi at the ceramics studio – the leisurely afterglow on the couch – the solid weight of Tanaka hugging him – the physical reassurance that they were still friends. But passing the bar had reopened the wound in his mind; shame redistributed in his body, welling up from underneath where he had buried it.

Less than forty-eight hours, he thought suddenly. Less than two days. That was all the time he had left with Asahi. How could that be enough – how could any amount of time possibly be enough? The feeling came up his throat like a panic. Before he could stop himself, his mouth opened, and his voice was too loud when it came out.

“Asahi-san!” he shouted.
Asahi jumped beside him, his steps faltering briefly before he caught himself. “Yes?” he asked.

Nishinoya bit his tongue. He didn’t have a follow-up statement. He’d spoken Asahi’s name without a plan for anything else to say.

“How much longer?” he finally asked. When the laundry was finished they could go back to Asahi’s apartment, where the world felt so much smaller and more contained. Easier to deal with. Easier to take it out one small bite at a time.

“We’re about halfway,” Asahi returned. “We’ll loop back around to the coin laundry in about the right amount of time.”

Nishinoya nodded. The unsettled feeling remained in his gut, though he left it unvoiced for the remainder of their walk.

The laundry had emptied of its lone occupant when they returned to it. They cycled Asahi’s clothes to a pair of dryers. Nishinoya gave Asahi an elbow in the side as he put the coins in. “Alright, already,” Asahi laughed. “I know, I know.” This time, he didn’t suggest another walk – Nishinoya wasn’t sure if that was for his benefit or if Asahi himself wanted to stay. The air was cooling outside; in comparison, the coin laundry was warm and well-lit. The running machines made a calming white noise in the small space. It seemed to quiet some of the tumult in Nishinoya’s brain.

Nishinoya hopped back up onto an empty machine. His legs dangled over the side. Asahi stood close to him, leaning forward with his chin on his hand and his elbow braced on top of the machine. Nishinoya abruptly recalled the parallel to their arrangement earlier in Asahi’s kitchen, when he sat on the counter with Asahi between his thighs. He felt the hair on his forearms raise; his skin alive with goosebumps as he remembered the way Asahi’s breath had passed over his lips.

Nishinoya stared hard at the tiled floor and tapped his heels against the side of the machine in an attempt to distract himself from Asahi radiating heat next to him. He felt the dull thud of each soft impact as it vibrated through the metal up into his body.

Less than two days, he thought again. How could that possibly be enough? He felt as though a bottomless pit had opened inside him. He couldn’t see any way to close it up again.

When the clothes were dry, he helped Asahi fold them – or tried his best, anyway. Some of the t-shirts didn’t seem to line up properly, and his jeans resisted Nishinoya’s attempts to keep the seams straight. Nishinoya never really folded his clothes back at his dorm; he tended to take the clean ones off the line as he decided to wear them, and then left the rest in a pile next to his bed, wearing and rewearing until he finally broke down and washed them. A fidgety sensation grew inside him at the soft domesticity of it – Asahi’s clothes still warm from the dryer, the easy way they stood close together while folding. He was relieved when they finished, piled Asahi’s clothes back into his laundry bag, and then headed for his apartment.

They returned the way they came, the same short walk before the creaking stairs, and Nishinoya breathed a sigh of relief as soon as they got through the door.

"Alright?" Asahi said.

"Yeah..." Nishinoya returned. "Just tired I guess."


"You're too nice, Asahi-san," Nishinoya said.
"Too nice?"

"Yeah," Nishinoya insisted. "Shouldn't you, like... get mad at me or something?"

The crease was back between Asahi's eyebrows. Nishinoya hadn't seen it in a number of hours; it infuriated him. "Why would I get mad?" Asahi asked.

"Because I've been such a hassle to deal with."

Now Asahi frowned. "Nishinoya," he said, "have I done something to make you think--"

"Stop!" Nishinoya cut in. "Just stop. It isn't anything you did." He pinched the bridge of his nose. His neck and shoulders had felt tense since they passed the bar, and he was getting a headache. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "I shouldn't have said that. I just feel like I'm fuckin' up everything for you right now."

"I don't have that much going on," Asahi said. "There's not much to fuck up, honestly."

Nishinoya looked up. Asahi's expression had lost the note of concern, but he was still watching Nishinoya carefully. Asahi continued. "I don't know why you seem to think I've rearranged my life around your visit," he said. "The only thing that's been different from what I usually do is I took a couple days off work."

Nishinoya wasn't sure that he believed him. But he didn't want to talk about it anymore. "Okay," he said. He reached out and grabbed the laundry bag in Asahi's hand. "Let me put your stuff away, at least."

Asahi didn't let go. "No, why would you--"

"Please," Nishinoya insisted.

Asahi was frowning again, but he released his hold on the bag. "Alright," he said at length. "Underwear goes in the top drawer. Shirts go in the one below."

Nishinoya nodded. "I can handle that."

"I'll make some tea or something," Asahi said.

"That sounds good." The tense air remained between them. Nishinoya waffled for a moment before he turned away and headed for the bedroom.

As he stepped through the door he saw first the still-unmade bed across the room. It already felt like a hundred years since the night before, when Asahi had destroyed him with a few soft words and the hot interior of his mouth. Nishinoya shook his head to clear the cobwebs of that memory. Two days, he thought. Less than two, now. Closer to one.

He opened the drawers of the dresser until he found the places to put Asahi's jeans and shirts. Undershirts he assumed went with the t-shirts. He figured Asahi would find them either way. He left Asahi's boxers for last; he was thankful that they were all the same kind of simple cotton with a button flap, in varying shades of blue, gray and black. He wasn't sure how he would feel if Asahi had more elaborate tastes.

When Nishinoya opened the top drawer, something clattered around inside it. He saw a square lump underneath the lone pair of boxers remaining in Asahi's drawer. He couldn't help his curiosity; he lifted the boxers and looked beneath.
It was a box of condoms.

Nishinoya froze. He hesitated briefly, then reached into the drawer and took the box out. He saw that the seal was broken, which meant the box had already been opened. It was a six pack. Nishinoya lifted the flap and saw three condoms left inside.

He stood there a long moment. Then he closed the box, replaced it in the drawer, and put Asahi’s clean boxers on top of it. He slid the drawer closed.

When he stepped back out into the living room, Asahi was in the kitchen pouring water from the electric kettle into a pair of mugs – the same ones from that morning. Nishinoya came up and put his elbows on the counter. He remembered the oversized mug from the night before, when they’d had hot chocolate.

“Did you make those?” Nishinoya asked.

Asahi nodded. “Yeah, I made a whole set. One of the first things I ever got fired. Mom has some that match. Dad has one too, I think.”

Nishinoya’s head and neck still ached. He lowered his head to rest his cheek on the counter and looked at Asahi sideways. “All the way in Tokyo?”

“Lonely without it’s brothers, I’m sure.”

“Mm.” Nishinoya picked at a scuff on the countertop. “It’s hard being a mug all by itself,” he said.

“It is,” Asahi agreed. He placed one of the mugs by Nishinoya’s head on the counter and turned the handle toward his hand.

Nishinoya didn’t move at first. Then he slowly lifted his hand and traced a finger down the gritty-smooth side of the earthenware. The mug was already hot to the touch, but not scalding.

“We can just watch a movie or something,” Asahi suggested. “If you’re tired.”

Nishinoya wanted to argue, but he was tired. And sore. And there was a weird feeling in his stomach, crawling around like a centipede inside him.

“Movie is fine,” he said.

They settled together on the couch, and Asahi put his arm around Nishinoya’s shoulders, as he had on the train. Nishinoya put the heels of his bare feet up on the couch, which brought his knees nearly to his chin. He held his mug in both hands with the handle between his legs. He didn’t drink it, just let the heat of it seep into him.

Asahi had put in a sports documentary, the only option in his meager supply of movies that seemed to appeal to both their tastes. Nishinoya didn’t really care what they watched, as long as it meant he got to close his eyes and lean his weight into Asahi’s side. He was determined to soak up every possible moment of contact between them until he planned to leave on Sunday.

They were an hour into the documentary when Asahi’s shoulder shifted, jostling Nishinoya’s neck. Nishinoya couldn’t help the wince that came out of him in response.

Nishinoya felt Asahi’s hand tighten on his arm, then he leaned forward to peer around at his face. “Are you okay?”
“Yeah, no, it’s fine,” Nishinoya said. “I’m just stiff.” He rolled his neck, grimacing a little. “It’ll be fine,” he repeated.

Asahi slowly took his arm away from Nishinoya’s shoulders. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You should have said.”

“No!” Nishinoya insisted. “No, it’s not a big deal. I’m fine.” He wanted to tell Asahi to put his arm back, but such a direct request sounded embarrassing in his head, so he managed to leave it unvoiced. Instead he put one hand on the back of his neck and finally took a drink of his tea; at this point, it was barely lukewarm.

Asahi watched him for a moment longer. “D’you want…” he started. “I could…”

“You could what?”

“I could give you a massage or something,” Asahi said.

Nishinoya blinked at that. His voice came back after a couple seconds. “You don’t have to do that,” he said carefully.

The corner of Asahi’s mouth came up. “I don’t mind,” he said. “I’m sure this evening was difficult. It could help you relax.”

“Well I’m not gonna argue about you putting your hands on me,” Nishinoya said, and Asahi laughed in response.

“Good.” He sat back and spread his legs apart, then gestured between them. “Sit here, on the floor.”

Nishinoya slid off the couch and took the indicated space, sitting cross-legged in front of Asahi with his back to him. “You don’t have to do it very long if you don’t feel like it,” Nishinoya said.

Asahi’s hands suddenly curled around his shoulders on either side of his neck, and Nishinoya almost jumped. “I’ll touch you as long as I want,” Asahi returned, dangerously close to his ear.

Nishinoya felt the heat in his face. “Hey. I thought this was supposed to be relaxing.”

“You’re right,” Asahi said. “Sorry.”

“I mean, you don’t have to apologize,” Nishinoya insisted. “I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.”

Asahi’s hands were warm. He touched Nishinoya gently at first, just the barest amount of pressure on either side of his neck. His fingers trailed up to the base of Nishinoya’s skull and down again the to collar of his shirt. Nishinoya felt himself shiver at the contact.

After a few minutes, the pressure against his shoulders increased. Asahi’s fingers curled over to touch his clavicle, and his thumbs dug firmly into the muscles on either side of Nishinoya’s spine. One hand slid up the side of his neck, fingers tracing solid shapes against Nishinoya’s skin. Nishinoya leaned his head forward to allow better access. Asahi’s hand covered the whole of his neck from the knob of his spine to his hairline. A soft sigh escaped from between his lips.

A languid feeling was just starting to tingle his extremities when Asahi’s hand found a hard knot of tension just behind his right shoulder, near the base of his neck. Nishinoya flinched and couldn’t help the hiss that came out of him. His shoulders tightened up once more.
Asahi’s hands stilled against his skin. Then his thumb pressed into the knot again, and Nishinoya grimaced. He bit hard on the inside of his cheek so that he wouldn’t make another sound.

“Nishinoya.” Asahi’s voice was close to the top of his head. He threaded his other hand into Nishinoya’s hair. “Let yourself go.”

Nishinoya lowered his head onto his hands. “If I do,” he said, “I don’t think I’ll be able to stop.”

“Then don’t.” Asahi pushed his thumb hard into the knot, and Nishinoya groaned in response, his toes curling at the pleasure-pain of it.

Slowly he felt the threads of his tension untangling as Asahi worked out the spot, then found another, and then another. Nishinoya couldn’t help but recall how Asahi’s hands had looked while he was making the bowl on the wheel – his blunt fingers steady and confident, the star tattoo on his hand standing out in stark relief against his skin. He imagined the way they looked against him; he imagined he was the clay, and Asahi had the fast-spinning wheel under control.

Asahi’s hands curled around either side of his neck, palms flat over his shoulders, thumbs pointed toward his spine, fingers brushing his collarbones. Nishinoya let his head loll backwards until it met the edge of the couch cushion. Asahi slipped one hand forward so that it disappeared into the collar of Nishinoya’s shirt. Nishinoya opened his eyes – not realizing they were closed until he did so – and found Asahi’s face close to his, upside-down from his perspective. It wasn’t hard for him to lift an arm, put his hand around the back of Asahi’s head, and pull him down to kiss him.

He felt his nose bump into Asahi’s chin, sand-paper rough against his skin, then found his lips after a brief moment of fumbling. Asahi’s mouth opened immediately, willing and pliant, and his tongue touched Nishinoya’s with an electric zing. As their lips moved softly over each other, one of Asahi’s hands brushed lightly up the front of Nishinoya’s throat. His fingertips tickled over Nishinoya’s Adam’s apple, up to the underside of his chin, and back down again.

Asahi pulled back. Nishinoya realized it was probably an awkward angle for him, but he didn’t look uncomfortable in any way. “Was it too distracting?” Asahi asked softly.

Nishinoya’s neck and shoulders felt a hundred times better, and the din inside him had quieted again. He braced his hands against the floor and stood up; Asahi straightened in his seat as he did so. With Asahi sitting and him standing, Nishinoya remembered again the ceramics studio, how he’d stood in front of Asahi just that way before he kissed him. Asahi had been more than willing then.

“Let’s go to bed,” Nishinoya said.

“It’s barely ten.”

“Did I stutter?” Nishinoya offered his hand, palm up.

Asahi grinned at him. “No, I guess not.” He stood and took Nishinoya’s hand. “Let’s go to bed then.” Nishinoya tugged, and Asahi followed.

Afterward, while they lay together on top of the rumpled sheets on Asahi’s bed, Nishinoya stared at the ceiling of his room. Asahi’s head rested on his bare chest, his hair spilling out across Nishinoya’s skin, while his arm was wrapped loosely around his waist. Nishinoya had one arm around Asahi’s shoulders; the other picked absentely at the bed clothes beneath them. Asahi breathed deep and even, and Nishinoya knew he was already half-asleep.

One full day left, Nishinoya thought again. That probably wasn’t going to be long enough to empty
that box in Asahi’s dresser. But he could make it count, at least. That would be something.

~

When the morning came, Nishinoya woke up first, just as he had the day before. This time, instead of climbing out of bed as he had done then, he rolled over against Asahi’s chest and burrowed under his arm. Asahi didn’t stir, but his arm instinctively closed around Nishinoya’s shoulders. Nishinoya grinned. He put his hands against Asahi’s chest, the flats of his palms curling over the swell of muscle, and stretched his neck to reach. He planted a kiss on Asahi’s chin, then squinted up his face afterward. Asahi would have to shave that morning, for sure. Nishinoya squirmed up the bed a few centimeters, until he could reach Asahi’s slack mouth with his own.

It only took a few moments for Asahi’s lips to purse against his in response, and then the arm around Nishinoya tightened. Nishinoya wrapped one hand around the back of Asahi’s head and kissed him harder; Asahi’s mouth fell open, which Nishinoya used as a signal to press in close to him with urgency.

They had fallen asleep nude the night previous, and Nishinoya felt everything between them, each place they touched skin to skin. By the time they finally parted for air, his hips already moved, his body shifting against Asahi’s with obvious intent.

“Oh,” Asahi said, his voice hoarse from sleep, “good morning.”

Nishinoya could feel Asahi’s cock responding in kind against his thigh, so he pressed his leg forward, slipping his foot between Asahi’s calves. Asahi closed his eyes and groaned softly. “Good morning,” Nishinoya returned.

Asahi rolled onto his back, pulling Nishinoya on top of him. He parted his legs and Nishinoya’s knees slipped down between them. Nishinoya’s erection rubbed against Asahi’s lower stomach; he shuddered in response.

“You are,” Asahi started, “a total mess.”

Nishinoya scoffed. He reached a hand down between them and gave Asahi a squeeze. “You’re one to talk,” he said.

“It’s a physiological reaction.”

“That’s a fancy word,” Nishinoya returned. He tightened his hand again and was rewarded with a soft exhalation. Asahi’s head fell back against the pillow. Nishinoya couldn’t reach his mouth without letting go of the cock already firm and hot against his fingers, so he kissed instead at Asahi’s chest. After a brief – very brief – moment of hesitation, he braced his free hand against Asahi’s ribs and closed his mouth over Asahi’s left nipple.

Asahi’s breath shuddered in his chest. His arm around Nishinoya shifted, his huge warm hand splaying out over Nishinoya’s back; his other hand tangled itself in the short hair on the side of Nishinoya’s head. Asahi’s nipple stiffened under Nishinoya’s attention until it was a hot little pebble against his tongue.

The night before they had just touched each other, soft but quick – a quiet epilogue to their long day together. Now Nishinoya thirsted for more – and he already knew what he wanted to do.

Nishinoya let go of Asahi’s erection, eliciting a sigh. He shifted toward the middle of Asahi’s chest, kissed the furrow of his sternum between his pecs, down along the centerline of his body leading to his bellybutton. Asahi’s hands found his shoulders, fingers trembling against his skin –
his hot cock was a firebrand against Nishinoya’s stomach, burning straight through him to his spine. Nishinoya mouthed at the warm skin below Asahi’s bellybutton, felt the tickling hairs against his chin as he moved downward, and took in the scent and heat of Asahi beneath him, the musk of sleep and lingering remnants of the night before.

“N-Nishinoya,” Asahi stuttered. Nishinoya lifted his head and caught sight of Asahi’s reddened face, the desperate gleam of his eyes, his lips parted and breath coming in shuddering gasps. Asahi’s tongue flicked out to wet his lips. His hair was still tangled from sleep, sticking out in odd looping curls around his neck.

Nishinoya shifted downward immediately, settling into the valley of Asahi’s parted thighs. He grabbed the base of Asahi’s cock and held it steady while he wrapped his lips around the ruddy head.

Asahi made the most wonderful noise, half a moan and half a whimper, and Nishinoya couldn’t help the way his hips pressed down into the bed between Asahi’s legs. He had never done this before, but he’d thought about it many times – how it would taste, how it would feel against his tongue, how deep he could go. He experimentally hollowed his mouth, tongue curling in a ‘U’ around the head of Asahi’s cock, and pushed his lips down.

Not far was the answer to the last question, but Asahi didn’t seem to mind, if the way he threw his head back was any indication. Nishinoya couldn’t help but think of the night of his birthday, when Asahi had taken him in all the way to the hilt. He felt a remembered ache in his perineum, and pushed his hips down again into the mattress.

What he lacked in experience, he made up in enthusiasm. He found that if he curled his fingers around Asahi’s erection and pushed his lips down until they met the loop of his thumb and forefinger, then he could stroke Asahi in time with the bob of his head. One of Asahi’s hands was pressing into the crown of his skull, and Nishinoya could feel the sharp tug on his hair as his fingers found purchase. Nishinoya lifted his gaze to look at Asahi’s face, and found that Asahi was covering his eyes with his other hand, his mouth open and catching on sighs and groans. Nishinoya redoubled his efforts and added his other hand to the mix, bringing it in from underneath to tease at Asahi’s tightened balls.

“Oh, god, god,” Asahi moaned, the last word catching in his throat like a sob as he slammed a fist into the bed beside them. Nishinoya closed his eyes and sucked down again as far as he could, until his throat spasmed in a gag. Saliva poured into his mouth; it leaked out where his lips stretched tight around Asahi and aided the glide of his hand. Nishinoya’s hips were still working against the bed down between Asahi’s legs, humping his aching erection against the soft sheets as he choked himself on Asahi’s cock.

Asahi cursed, drawing out the consonants as his abs clenched in front of Nishinoya’s eyes. Then Nishinoya felt his balls pull upward against his hand, and hot semen filled his mouth. It was salty and thick, bitter against the back of his tongue; he coughed as he came off of Asahi’s cock while it still shot come all over his stomach.

Asahi made a strangled noise. “I’m gonna come,” he gasped. His fingers tightened in Nishinoya’s hair again, tugging hard enough to hurt, a mixed sensation of pain and pleasure. Nishinoya nodded without taking his mouth off him. He stroked his hand faster, the slick-smooth heat and glide of flesh counterpoint to the rough sensation of fabric beneath his shifting hips.

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Nishinoya barely took the time to admire Asahi’s shuddering form, the sheen of sweat on his chest and the way his larynx bobbed as he swallowed, before he scrambled his way back up Asahi’s body, straddled his hips, and pressed his chest against Asahi’s to seam them together from sternum
to groin. Nishinoya pushed his face into the side of Asahi’s neck and started moving his hips quickly, rubbing his rock-hard cock against Asahi’s body, slickened now with sweat and come.

He felt Asahi’s hands on him, one on his ass and the other pressing into his back, the solid weight of his arm curled around Nishinoya’s ribs. Nishinoya dug his fingers into Asahi’s chest and closed his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Asahi murmured, close to his head. Nishinoya felt his mouth open in a wordless cry as his hips snapped forward erratically; he clenched his eyes so tightly shut that white sparks bloomed behind his eyelids. He heard desperate moaning and realized the sound came from his own throat. His orgasm came on him as though from a long way off, like the deafening roar of a wave crashing into land with a spray of foam. When his hips finally slowed, unsteadily pressing down a few more times before his shaking muscles gave out, he managed to pull his face away from Asahi’s neck and look at him while the lingering tremors tangled up his body.

Asahi looked amazing, still sleepy and soft even though he was completely debauched, his face and chest flushed pink, his lips full and kissable. Golden morning light filtered in through the blinds on the window above the bed. Asahi smiled at him, even though Nishinoya was still too strung out to return it. He curled a hand around the back of Nishinoya’s head and pulled him forward to kiss him.

“Mm,” Asahi hummed against his mouth, “hello there.”

Nishinoya was still breathing hard. “Was it good?” he asked, unable to help his anxiety now that the edge of arousal was off.

Asahi kissed him again, his lips gentle. “It was great,” he said. “You know how to wake a guy up.”

Nishinoya grinned in relief. He lowered his head onto Asahi’s chest and let his breath out in a long shaking sigh as it came back under control. He relaxed, his body spilling languid over Asahi like icing drizzled on a cake. “I’ve never done that before,” he admitted quietly to Asahi’s sternum.

Asahi’s hands hesitated against his skin briefly, then resumed tracing light circles along his back. “It was great,” he repeated, his voice soft.

They lay together for awhile drowsily, until the light streaming in from the window made them uncomfortably hot and sticky. Then Nishinoya managed to peel his body apart from Asahi’s – it made a terrific squelching noise as they separated, and Nishinoya couldn’t help but laugh while Asahi gave him an embarrassed grin. A quick rinse in the bathroom was an absolute necessity before anything else – then there would be coffee and food.

Over breakfast, Asahi suggested, “would you like to go for a run?”

“A run?” Nishinoya echoed with his mouth full of rice and egg, which prompted Asahi to smile and roll his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said. “We can go out to the park near the elementary school, it has a good track.”

Nishinoya chewed and swallowed before he spoke again. “I’m out of shape,” he said. It wasn’t exactly a lie; the only sort of workout he’d done in a few weeks was hunching his shoulders as he walked as quickly as possible past the gym where the volleyball team practiced.

“That’s fine,” Asahi said. “Maybe I’ll actually be able to keep up with you then.”

Nishinoya considered the listless feeling he’d had the night before, the nervousness that was
already crawling in his gut at the thought of going to practice with Asahi later that evening, the quiet anxiety of his plan to leave the next day still slumbering deep inside. Also, by some miraculous measure, he’d worn sneakers the day he left campus, and there was an old pair of gym shorts in his bag that he had never bothered to take out. Maybe a run was a good idea. He’d always used to run when he didn’t want to think. “That sounds good,” he said.

It was a little after ten by the time they made it to the park. As to be expected at mid-morning on a Saturday, there seemed to be quite a few people around, even though it was overcast and cool. Such a thing had never bothered Nishinoya before – probably he wouldn’t even have noticed it before – but all the same, he couldn’t help feeling self-conscious. He tried to shake off the sensation as he stretched beside Asahi near the start of the track.

Asahi wore a shiny navy shirt and a pair of shorts over three-quarter length tights. He’d tied his hair back into a ponytail. The sight of him stretching in those clothes, his strong legs flexing and shifting as he moved from one position to another, made Nishinoya regret the decision to leave his apartment. How many hours remained? It was under twenty-four. How many more opportunities did he have to touch Asahi before their time together ended?

“I usually try to do four laps,” Asahi said as they started off together. Nishinoya nodded. Four laps wouldn’t take very long. Then they could go back, and he’d peel those tights off Asahi’s legs.

Nishinoya let Asahi set the pace. Asahi had always been slower than him, but his legs were longer and Nishinoya was out of practice. His own legs felt heavy as they rounded the first bend of the track, which took them through a grove of trees and then into the open again, where the whole of the park spread out below them. A pair of baseball fields took up the most of the grounds; they were full of kids at practice. There were tennis courts on the far end, and a soccer field between. The track weaved around the fields, in and out of patches of trees that dotted the periphery of the park.

A full lap of the track took about five minutes to complete; Nishinoya predicted it was around a kilometer and a half. Four laps was more than doable. There was a rise near the end of course before they returned to where it began, which put them up above the park again. Nishinoya’s calves burned as he came up the incline, but when they reached the top of it, he felt like he might grow wings and take off. By the time they had completed a second lap, he was already pulling ahead – though Asahi increased his speed to match.

Four laps, he thought. Would that be enough? How far would that be? Five times four was twenty minutes, Nishinoya remembered that much math – would only twenty minutes be able silence the desperation inside him?

The third time up the rise, he found he had to clench his teeth to keep the pace. It wasn’t good practice, he knew this, but he wasn’t about to stop. His insides still felt like gravel – if he could shake it all loose, if he could burn it all away – maybe then he could look ahead with clearer eyes and see the path in front of him.

He didn’t slow throughout the fourth lap, though his chest was screaming when they came around the last turn. The rise was in front of them – Nishinoya could see it lifting away from him. He wanted to keep going; he wanted to run until there was nothing left inside him. He put his head down and forced himself up, forced his legs to keep churning.

Four laps, Asahi had said. But Nishinoya didn’t stop. He blew through where the track looped on itself without slowing. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Asahi was still keeping up, though his face was tight with strain. Nishinoya faced forward again and felt a dark grin curl on his lips. He inhaled hard through his nose and increased his pace once more.
By the fifth time he made it to the rise, he realized that Asahi was no longer behind him. Nishinoya’s legs wanted to keep going, but he felt a sharp spike of concern – had Asahi fallen? Had he stopped without saying anything? Nishinoya ground to a halt near the start of the track, pushed the heel of his hand hard into the stitch in his side, and waited.

A few minutes later, to his great relief, Asahi’s tall frame came into view from around the last bend. He appeared to have slowed considerably and only just managed up the incline. At the top, as he halted next to Nishinoya, he had to put his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

Finally, when he managed to straighten again, he used his sleeve to wipe his face. Nishinoya couldn’t help but notice the way Asahi’s shirt clung to his chest. “Looks like you’re still faster than me,” he huffed, but he was smiling.

Nishinoya shifted his weight from one aching leg to the other. “Well, I don’t have as much to carry around,” he said.

“Hey,” Asahi said weakly, “how is my size my fault?”

Nishinoya was still staring at his chest. Sweat ran down his neck and soaked into the collar of his shirt. “We can’t all be perfect, I guess,” he said.

~

Once they returned to Asahi’s apartment, it took barely ten minutes for Nishinoya to find a way to see him naked again, which was the length of time it took for Asahi to get a drink and then head to the bathroom. Nishinoya followed in behind. He let Asahi strip down; he let him turn on the water and start rinsing off with the showerhead. Then, conscious of the way he had felt the day before, when he had watched Asahi undress and forced himself not to touch, Nishinoya now gave in to the temptation with four quick steps across the tiled floor and a hand against Asahi’s arm to turn him around.

Nishinoya ended up with his back pressed against those cool tiles, while Asahi’s warm body pushed down on him from above, and Asahi’s lips coasted along the sensitive skin of his neck. Nishinoya was hard again already, with his legs wrapped around Asahi’s waist and his ankles linked together; he couldn’t help but tighten his legs, pulling his hips upward until his cock was pressed between them. The floor was wet, and their bodies slid together easily. Nishinoya groaned against the side of Asahi’s head, tugging hard on Asahi’s damp hair as they shifted together on the floor.

At length, Asahi pushed off of him, breaking the circle of his legs. Nishinoya tried to follow, but Asahi grabbed one of his wrists and pushed it down above his head; Asahi kept his other hand tight on Nishinoya’s hip, holding him to the floor. Nishinoya flexed his arm to test how hard Asahi would push – Asahi’s grip was firm but not painful, and it sent a delightful spark down Nishinoya’s spine.

Asahi pulled his hips back, separating their lower bodies until he could shift his legs over Nishinoya’s. Then he used his knees to bring Nishinoya’s legs together until they touched. Asahi lifted his hand from Nishinoya’s hip, took ahold of his erection, and pushed it down into the tight space between his thighs.

“Oh fuck,” Nishinoya hissed. Asahiexhaled hard and braced his arm on the floor beside Nishinoya’s hip. He lowered himself down again, keeping his legs around Nishinoya’s, holding them together so tightly that Nishinoya could feel his cock all the way around. Nishinoya tried squeezing his thighs together, and Asahi made a sound low in his throat.
Their eyes met, and Asahi’s were dark, hooded with desire. His lips parted, the flesh sticking together slightly as they separated. His wet hair clung to his face. “Nishinoya,” he whispered. He lowered even more, past Nishinoya’s line of sight, until their faces touched cheek to cheek. Asahi’s hand on Nishinoya’s wrist loosened; he shifted up until their palms met. He laced their fingers together, pushing Nishinoya’s hand hard into the floor. “Nishinoya,” Asahi said again, before he began to move his hips.

Nishinoya closed his eyes and wrapped his free arm around Asahi’s shoulders while Asahi gasped hotly against his throat and fucked his thighs. He groaned aloud as every shift of his cock between their bodies sent a twinge through him, tortuous and not-quite-enough. Soon he felt himself unraveling like a spool of yarn, fraying at the edges as the sensations piled one on top of each other – Asahi’s heaviness, the heat of him versus the cool tiles underneath, the unyielding floor beneath him and the soft flesh above – Asahi’s cock between his thighs, brushing his balls on every thrust – the sounds that Asahi made near his ear, guttural and deep – he wanted more, he needed more –

He grabbed a fistful of Asahi’s hair and pulled – hard. Asahi’s head wrenched back; his breath came out in a grunt that sounded almost pained. Nishinoya’s stomach clenched in response, and it wasn’t exactly unpleasant. A desperate fluttering started under his diaphragm – it felt a little like panic. “Asahi,” Nishinoya gasped, “please…”

Asahi pulled his hand out of Nishinoya’s and used it to grab his chin. He pushed Nishinoya’s head into the floor; his fingers dug into Nishinoya’s cheeks. Asahi lowered himself until their mouths touched, but didn’t kiss him – he just breathed hotly against his lips and said in a voice dangerous and low, “Tell me what you want.”

The unrelenting pressure of Asahi’s body on his tamped down the anxiety inside him. Determination sparked up instead, and Nishinoya forced the panic back behind it. “I want you to fuck me,” he said sharply.

Asahi exhaled hard against his mouth and came down with so much force against it that Nishinoya’s teeth hit his bottom lip. Asahi’s tongue delved inside while his hand still held Nishinoya’s head in place – Nishinoya grunted and squirmed under the onslaught. At length, Asahi pulled back, and Nishinoya sucked in a hard breath, refilling his screaming lungs.

Asahi lifted off of him, up onto his hands and knees, and Nishinoya almost protested, but then Asahi’s hand was on his shoulder. “Turn over,” he said sharply.

Nishinoya felt a spike of excitement tangled with alarm, but he obeyed the instruction, wincing as his stomach and cock met the hard tiles. Asahi’s hands closed over his hips, over the still-sore bruises, and pulled upward until Nishinoya came onto his knees.

The alarm grew as Nishinoya felt Asahi move in close behind him. Was this how it would happen? Wouldn’t there be more to it? He couldn’t help but feel that he’d lost the thread of the encounter somewhere – that it had taken a turn he didn’t expect. Nishinoya lowered his shoulders until he could rest his forehead on his clenched fists and then stared at the floor.

Asahi’s hand slid up his back, along the knobs of his spine. It was gentle despite his previous forcefulness, and Nishinoya relaxed slightly. It was still Asahi. Asahi wouldn’t hurt him. He could trust that Asahi knew what to do, what should happen. When he felt Asahi’s lips against his back, he sighed softly. His erection had flagged, but as Asahi continued to touch and kiss his skin, curls of arousal began to return to him like little tendrils of smoke in his abdomen. Nishinoya could feel Asahi pressing against him, could feel the heat and sturdiness of him as his body rested against Nishinoya’s ass and thighs. Asahi’s knees were still on either side of his. Nishinoya’s were already starting to complain against the hard tile; he could only imagine that Asahi’s must feel worse. But
Asahi didn’t stop, didn’t waver. He slid a hand around Nishinoya’s hip to touch him.

Nishinoya choked down a moan and bit his lip. Asahi stroked him gently until he was hard again, while his other hand slid over Nishinoya’s ass and down, in between his thighs from behind, tickling his perineum and balls. Soon Nishinoya was back to the shuddering mess he had been before, and at that point Asahi pressed in even closer. His legs tightened around Nishinoya’s, pushing his thighs together again. Nishinoya almost jumped when he felt Asahi’s cock against the back of his thighs – but Asahi didn’t shift higher. Instead, he pushed forward, sliding his cock once more between Nishinoya’s legs.

When they were flush together, Nishinoya tucked his chin into his chest, looking down his body toward his legs. He could see the head of Asahi’s cock peeking between his thighs. Asahi’s hands went back to Nishinoya’s hips, and then he started to move.

Nishinoya shifted forward on the floor when Asahi thrust back into him. He ended up having to brace one hand against the edge of the tub so that he wouldn’t lose his position. The head of Asahi’s cock touched the underside of Nishinoya’s every time Asahi hit home. Nishinoya could feel his overworked legs starting to tremble, the agonizing ache of being so hard he thought he might burst. He reached down with his free hand to grab his erection and palmed the head of it; he let his fingers curl over down the length, so that he could feel Asahi’s cock touching against his own with his fingertips.

Nishinoya felt a tickle on his back and knew Asahi was leaning over him, his hair spilling down as he went. He felt Asahi’s forehead touch against skin, the hot pulse of his breath on Nishinoya’s back, quick and shuddering as his hips pounded against Nishinoya’s thighs.

“Fuck,” Asahi said softly, then louder, “oh, fuck!” and then Nishinoya felt come all over his fingers, the hot wetness of it between his thighs as Asahi’s body shook against his. Nishinoya whined out loud; the sound of it echoed in the bathroom. His hand, now slick with Asahi’s come, moved fast and hard over his erection until he was gasping and trembling himself, staring down at the mess on the floor between his aching knees.

He collapsed when it was over, immediately boneless in the aftermath. One of his hands still rested limply against the tub. He put his hot cheek to the cool tiles and closed his eyes until his brain was once more capable of higher-order functions.

“Are you okay?” Asahi asked quietly. “That was… a lot.”

Nishinoya smiled weakly against the floor. He managed to give Asahi a thumbs-up. Eventually he made himself roll over and groaned his way into a sitting position. Asahi sat at his feet and was looking at him with concern painted over his face.

“Well, I’m the one who jumped you,” Nishinoya insisted. He leaned back against the side of the tub. “So yeah, I’m okay.” When that didn’t seem to appease Asahi, he couldn’t help the frustrated sound that came out of his mouth. “You don’t believe me?”

“Did I hurt you?” Asahi mumbled.

“Hurt…?” Nishinoya remembered how hard Asahi had pushed him into the floor, how aggressive he had been in response to Nishinoya’s desperation. He sat up straighter and crossed his legs so he could lean forward over them, fighting back a wince as he did so. His knees still smarted; he suspected they might be as purple as his hip in another day. But he’d be gone by then, and Asahi wouldn’t see them. “Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said. “You didn’t hurt me. I promise.”
Asahi gave him a tight, nervous smile. “I didn’t mean for it to go like that,” he admitted.

“It was kinda interesting,” Nishinoya agreed. He put an elbow on one knee so he could rest his cheek against his hand.

The thread of conversation drifted off. Asahi didn’t seem to want to look at him for very long. It sat badly in Nishinoya’s gut, swimming uncomfortably inside him. Eventually, Asahi clambered to his feet. “We should clean up,” he said. “Then maybe have some lunch.”

Lunch, Nishinoya thought. The day was already half over. His time was running short. “Yeah,” he said. “Lunch sounds good.”

By the time they finished eating and cleaned up after, it was almost two. Nishinoya couldn’t help but repeatedly look at the clock on the stove as he washed dishes. How many hours, how many minutes?

“When do you go to work tomorrow?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

“The shop opens at ten, but I need to be there by 9:30 to set up and make coffee,” Asahi returned as he wiped down the counter.

Nine-thirty. How long was his commute? “When do you need to leave?”

“No later than 8:45,” Asahi said. “I set my alarm for 7:30, since I’m gonna hit the snooze at least four times before I get up. Sorry in advance.”

How many hours? Nishinoya tried to do the calculation in his head, but he was shit at numbers. He finished the dishes, then turned around while drying his hands. “You probably want to go to bed early,” he said.

Asahi nodded. “But it’s a short day tomorrow, since it’s Sunday,” he offered. “They’re only open ’til five, so I’ll be home after that.”

_Won’t do me any good_, Nishinoya couldn’t help but think. Frustration and anxiety burned hot inside him. The run had helped silence the feeling temporarily, but it was rising to the surface once more. How long until practice that night? Hadn’t Asahi said seven?

Three condoms, Nishinoya remembered. Five hours until practice.

Asahi finished tidying the counter and turned back toward him. “What do you want to do this afternoon?” he asked.

Nishinoya responded by crossing the small kitchen and pushing Asahi into the counter. Asahi made a surprised grunt, which was muffled as Nishinoya pulled him down by his shirt and kissed him hard.

Asahi kissed back after his initial shock wore off – but only a minute later put his hands on Nishinoya’s shoulders and pushed away, breaking their contact. He made a weird-sounding laugh that felt like a brick in Nishinoya’s stomach.

“Three times so close together is a little much for me,” Asahi said. “You gotta give me a break for a bit.”
Nishinoya had a flash of how Asahi had looked the night of his birthday, backed up against the wall after pushing Nishinoya away. He thought again of the expression Asahi had worn in the bathroom, when he wasn’t able to meet Nishinoya’s eyes.

Nishinoya backed away slowly. Guilt and the sting of rejection sat heavy in his chest. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be,” Asahi said. “It’s not like I want to say no.” He let out another huff of nervous laughter. “I just gotta refill the tank, that’s all.”

Nishinoya nodded, but the feeling inside him remained. Would the bathroom be the last time? Would that awkwardness after be what Asahi remembered about their time together?

But, no, there would be another chance after practice, if Nishinoya could wait that long. He could make that encounter mean something. He could make sure Asahi would remember it, would remember him.

The afternoon passed slowly – they cleaned Asahi’s apartment, since he quietly admitted he hadn’t done so properly in many weeks. Dust had accumulated in the corners of shelves, scum under the toilet seat, science experiments growing in containers shoved into the back of the fridge.

“How is this possible?” Nishinoya asked him, as he decided a particular container was best left closed and thrown away whole. “Your place didn’t look this bad when I first came in.”

Asahi winced as he pulled out a mysterious object covered in plastic wrap. It was definitely an interesting shade of mottled blue. “I’m... really good at covering up messes,” he said. “I’m good at ignoring them. I’m not so good at actually cleaning them up.”


“I know, I know,” Asahi said. “I’m always such an idiot for letting it get this bad, but I never seem to learn.”

Nishinoya paused, frowning. He looked up at Asahi’s face, which bore a mild expression while he considered a package of carrots. He didn’t look upset in the slightest, which somehow made it seem worse to Nishinoya; like it was an everyday kind of thought to express.

“You’re not an idiot,” Nishinoya said.

Asahi blinked and turned toward him. “What?”

“You’re not an idiot,” Nishinoya repeated. “Don’t call yourself one.”

Asahi gave him a curious look. “But you just called me dumb,” he said.

“No, I–” Nishinoya shook his head as he backtracked. “I didn’t – didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean that you’re dumb.”

“It’s fine, I know,” Asahi said. He put the carrots down on the counter. “I’m just kidding.” His voice was light, but Nishinoya still felt guilty and unsettled from the conversation.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, and Asahi looked at him again. “I didn’t mean it.”

Asahi gave him a soft little smile. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Nishinoya felt himself flush uncomfortably, and he turned away. He tried to cover his reaction by
sticking his head into the fridge. “Nothing,” he said. “Did we get all the old stuff out?”

Nishinoya felt Asahi put pressure against the door, and he backed out of the fridge so it wouldn’t close on him. The door made a *whump* when it hit the frame. When Nishinoya finally turned back to face him, Asahi wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Did I say something wrong?” Asahi asked.

Nishinoya exhaled hard through his nose. He crossed his arms and leaned against the fridge. “I don’t like it when you knock yourself down like that,” he said.

Asahi’s expression turned quizzical. “What do you mean?”

“You called yourself an accident the other day…”

“That was a joke, Nishinoya.”

“Even so!”

“I mean, you’ve teased me too. I don’t understand.”

Nishinoya hated the way Asahi’s face had transformed from the mild look he had worn earlier, now twisted into confusion – and there was even a growing flash of irritation in those dark eyes.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter!” Nishinoya blurted.

“Well, it obviously matters to you, or you wouldn’t have said anything.”

Nishinoya covered his face with his hands and groaned out loud. “Fuck, I’m *sorry*, alright?” he spat out. “I don’t know why I’m saying half the shit I’m saying!”

Asahi grabbed his wrists and pulled them away from his face. His expression still bore hints of his frustration. Nishinoya tried to break out of his grasp, but Asahi held him tightly in place. “What’s this about?” he asked, his voice low. “What’s bothering you?”

Nishinoya wanted to let it out then. He wanted to come clean on everything. He wanted to tell Asahi his plan; he wanted Asahi to fight him on it and make him stay. But, in an uneven voice, all he said was, “I just want you to see yourself the way I see you.”

Asahi’s hands loosened on his wrists. His face was measured when he asked, “and how do you see me?”

Nishinoya felt his face crease in response. How could he express what Asahi meant to him without giving everything away? Tanaka had said that they should talk about what was happening between them, but Nishinoya still felt it would be better for Asahi if he stepped back out of his life.

“You,” he started. “You’re.” He fought for the words. Asahi waited for him to find them.

“In high school,” Nishinoya finally managed, “you were my hero.”

Asahi blinked at that, and his expression took a note of incredulity. He leaned back, and lowered Nishinoya’s wrists, though he didn’t release him. “What do you—” he started, but Nishinoya cut him off.

“God, Asahi, why do you think I was always such a brat about you?” he demanded.
At that statement, the corner of Asahi’s mouth came up. “I don’t know if ‘brat’ is the word I would use,” he said.

“A jerk, then.”

“Not that one either.” Asahi’s grip on Nishinoya shifted, sliding up from his wrists until he held Nishinoya’s arms just above the elbow on either side. “And I’m not sure I really deserved that, back then.”

“You absolutely did!” Nishinoya insisted. Then he added, more softly, “you still do.”

“That’s how you feel now?”

Nishinoya lowered his gaze to stare hard at Asahi’s chest. It would be so easy – so easy to admit everything. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m glad I ran into you. I missed having you to look up to.” Neither statement was a lie, at least.

Asahi stood there for another moment, then finally released him. “Well, I’m still not really sure I deserve it,” he said. “All I got to my name is an apartment with a broken washer and some pottery I made because I didn’t have anything better to do.”

“No, that’s not true,” Nishinoya said quickly, his gaze snapping back up. He was relieved to find that Asahi’s face had lost some of its sharpness. “You’ve got a lot,” he insisted. “You’re so – so–” He grimaced in frustration. None of the words that came to him seemed to fit. At length, he said, “I wish I could be like you.”

Asahi looked genuinely shocked at that statement. “You can’t possibly be serious,” he said.

“I am!” Nishinoya insisted, his voice unintentionally raising in volume. “I mean, you’ve made a life and everything! And you–” Nishinoya remembered suddenly the square box in his dresser, and his emotions dampened. “You know what you want,” he said, somewhat quieter. “You know who you are.”

Asahi didn’t say anything at first. Finally, he reached out again and took one of Nishinoya’s hands in his own, lifting it up between them. “This is how you see me?” he asked softly.

Nishinoya nodded. He didn’t trust himself to say anything else.

Asahi made a thoughtful sound. “Well,” he said, “I’m sorry if I upset you.”

Nishinoya shook his head quickly. “No, don’t,” he said. “I’m the one being a shit about it. I don’t know why I keep saying dumb crap.”

Asahi’s mouth turned up, but his eyebrows stayed where they were, slanted in anxiety under his creased forehead. “C’mon,” he said, “you were just griping about me calling myself dumb.”

“Well, that’s different.”

“How?”

Nishinoya huffed loudly. “It just is!”

Asahi shook his head, but a genuine smile was starting to come back to his features. He leaned forward, and Nishinoya felt his heart speed up as he pulled in close. Asahi still held his hand between them, but his other cradled the side of Nishinoya’s head, opposite to where he placed his
lips next to Nishinoya’s temple.

Nishinoya’s free hand clenched into a fist against the fridge. He bit the inside of his cheek and tried not to give in to his desperation, as he had in the bathroom. When Asahi pulled back, he was relieved.

“Maybe you’ll start seeing yourself the way I see you too,” Asahi said quietly.

Nishinoya lowered his eyes and cast them aside. “Maybe,” he conceded, desperately wishing it would end the conversation. It seemed more likely that Asahi would realize the kind of person he really was.

Asahi let go of his hand and stepped back. “I’ll tell you what,” he said as he put his hands on his hips. “I’ll take out the garbage if you wipe out the fridge.”

Nishinoya nodded without lifting his gaze. He stayed against the fridge for another long moment, then he mumbled again, “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Asahi said. “Everything’s fine.”

Nishinoya did not agree.

They finished the kitchen, vacuumed the living room, cleaned the toilet and then the bathroom. Asahi’s bed was made, the old sheets stripped and replaced with a clean set. When they’d exhausted the apartment of things and spaces to clean, Asahi flopped down on the couch dramatically and let out a heaving sigh.

“This is the cleanest this place has ever been,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve vacuumed since I moved in.”

“Why d’you have a vacuum then?”

“Daichi got it for me as a housewarming gift.”

Nishinoya grinned despite himself; he had to pinch his lips together to keep from laughing. He sat down beside Asahi and curled his legs up, wrapping his arms around them. He put his cheek on his knees and looked at Asahi sideways. “You really still talk to them?” he asked. “Suga-san and Daichi-san?”

“Of course,” Asahi said. “They’re my best friends. It hasn’t been so long since high school that I’ve forgotten that.”

“Yeah,” Nishinoya said, “of course.”

Asahi lifted his arms onto the back of the couch, stretching one out behind Nishinoya. He peered at Nishinoya’s wrist, and Nishinoya realized he was looking at his watch. “Wow, it’s after five already,” Asahi said. “We’ll have to get ready to go before too much longer.”

Nishinoya tried to keep the sinking feeling in his stomach from showing on his face. How many hours were left? How many minutes?

“Allright,” he said. “Sounds good.”

~

The Karasuno Neighborhood Association Team practiced in a gymnasium at the rec center in a
local community park – one that, Nishinoya noticed, wasn’t too far from his parent’s house. He did his best to ignore the unsettled feeling that realization gave him and followed Asahi into the gym.

There was nothing particularly special about the facilities – they weren’t even as nice as the ones his college team practiced in. But, all the same, from the moment they entered the front lobby until they stepped through the double doors into the gym itself, Nishinoya felt the same concentrated hush fall over him as it always had before – the same tightening in his core, the same excitement in his legs, his arms. His hands tingled. The skin on his scalp prickled.

He hadn’t realized how much he had missed the sound of sneakers on polished floorboards, the heavy slap of a ball meeting skin, echoing voices after the loud thud of a point well scored.

There were about a dozen men in the gymnasium. A few already knocked a couple balls around the net, but most were still at the edge of the court, stretching and chatting. Asahi waved as they approached the group. Nishinoya recognized one of the men as Asahi’s friend from the bar – it was the man with the wide face and gap in his teeth.

"Azumane!" the man called. "Hey, you're early for once!"

"Hey, c'mon, Kenichi," Asahi returned as they closed the distance. "You know I'm usually coming from work."

Nishinoya couldn't help but hang back a little, slightly behind Asahi. He didn't recognize any of the other men in the gym – where were the guys that he remembered? The ones that came to their games in high school. And where was...

"Well, I'll be goddamned," a voice said behind them. "Is that who I think it is?"

Nishinoya felt his shoulders tense. He didn't turn around, though Asahi did.

"Ukai-san," Asahi said. "I hope this is alright." He placed a hand on Nishinoya's shoulder.

"Why wouldn't it be alright?" Ukai’s voice spoke again. It sounded just as it had years earlier: slightly rough around the edges, a little loud, but ultimately kind. Nishinoya mentally steeled himself and turned to face his old coach.

He looked almost exactly as Nishinoya remembered, save for the fact that his hair was solid black and somewhat longer, almost long enough to tie completely back. It seemed like he had more holes in his ears, though it was hard to tell since he wasn’t wearing any studs. But his face had the same edge to it, the same slant of his brow, the same sharp grin as he crossed his arms and beamed down at Nishinoya.

"Our old guardian," Ukai said, "is always welcome here."

Nishinoya managed to grin back, though his stomach swam inside him. “Thanks,” he said quietly, and tried to ignore the immediate response, which was a slightly confused look that clouded the smile on Ukai’s face.

“Where’s Keizan?” Asahi asked, and Ukai’s attention left Nishinoya, to his great relief.

“He’ll be in later,” Kenichi explained. “His ex was running late to pick up Tarou.”

“Makoto will be late too,” Ukai said. “He had to close tonight.”

“Well, that hardly matters!” another voice joined. Nishinoya turned and recognized the speaker – it
was Takinoue, who still wore his hair bleached, which made him look exactly the same as he had those years before. “After all, we have two members of Karasuno’s revival team here tonight!” He clapped one hand on each of their shoulders. “The team that led us back to nationals!”

“But I’m here every week,” Asahi said mildly.

It wasn’t difficult for Nishinoya to go on autopilot as the practice began. The motions came easily to him, muscle memory taking over when his mind blanked out, and he found himself on the edge of the court, jumping slightly in place to keep his legs hot, while he waited his turn in the receiving drill.

How long had it been? At least three weeks. Nishinoya wasn’t sure. Maybe a month. But when the ball hit his arms it felt like it’d been just the day before – the force that bent his legs underneath him as he came up under the ball, the sting on his skin in the aftermath. Volleyball had always made sense to him when nothing else did. It was the catalyst of every good thing that had happened to him since he was ten years old.

He was relieved – that it could still feel that way – even briefly. All too soon, as his turn ended and he moved aside, the burning in his gut returned.

So it went for the first few drills; when he was active the tumult in his brain silenced, but the moment he stopped moving... Nishinoya knew he was being quieter than expected, that his stilted manner was drawing a more than a few curious looks. But Asahi returned repeatedly to his side, a warm solid presence in the back of his mind, a softness against his hard edges. Ukai’s voice sounded echoed in the space – counting, directing, praising and admonishing in the same breath. If Nishinoya closed his eyes, he could almost imagine they were in the old gym at Karasuno High, when he knew who he was and what he wanted, or at least he never worried if he didn’t. Slowly his body eased into a rhythm, fluidity returning to his limbs as practice continued, until he had almost forgotten the tightness that had crippled him earlier.

Asahi’s other friend showed up about half an hour later, while they rested between rounds of 3-on-6 scrimmages.

“The cavalry arrives,” Kenichi said from the bench, and Keizan flipped him off in response. He had close-cropped black hair and wore sports glasses. As he came to stand beside them and began stretching, Nishinoya noticed he was even taller than Asahi.

“How’s Tarou?” Asahi asked. “Everything alright?”

“He’s fine,” Keizan said. “My ex-wife got held up at work and I had to get him from daycare.”

“You could’ve brought him, Keishin wouldn’t care.”

“He’s four, Kenichi.”

“Well, we gotta start ‘em early, don’t we?”

Keizan made a noncommittal noise and turned his attention aside, where it caught on Nishinoya. “Ah,” he said. “I wondered why you skipped out on us, Asahi.”

Nishinoya felt his cheeks heat despite himself and couldn’t help the irritation that boiled up inside him.

“I wanted to stay in,” Asahi said quickly. “Nishinoya is only staying for a few more days, so I wanted to spend the time with him.”
“We’ve been replaced,” Kenichi explained, and Asahi laughed. Nishinoya wanted to say that they were the replacement, but he bit the comment back.

“Nishinoya! Azumane! Yatagawa!” Ukai shouted from across the court, cutting off their conversation. “You’re up next!”

Kenichi stood. He was shorter than Asahi, but had wider shoulders and big hands. “Well,” he said, “let’s go.”

The three of them waited off-court for the current rally to finish. Nishinoya watched the neighborhood team as they shuffled between positions – the goal was for the side of three to score by any technique or means necessary. Until they did, they were trapped on the short side, constantly switching off and moving together and adapting to the full team across from them. Nishinoya had always liked this drill. It was one of his coach’s favorites.

He had a flash of memory, a moment a few months previous – a scrimmage just like the current one, where the round had stretched into many long minutes, the six-man side repeatedly knocking the ball down before they had a chance to score and rotate out. He remembered a particularly impressive dig, how he had skinned his elbow with the effort. He’d had the bruise for a whole week after, but it was worth it when Toshio was able to slam the ball down and end their round.

Would he really never play with them again?

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said, drawing his attention back to the present. “It’s our turn.”

On the court, the perspective was familiar, though Nishinoya hadn't seen it in a long time – Asahi's back in front of him, his tense shoulder blades evident under his t-shirt as he stood at the ready, waiting to receive the other team's serve. Nishinoya closed his eyes and breathed deeply, then let it out in a long, slow exhale. When he opened his eyes again, the din had receded; he bent his knees and held his hands out, palms up.

It was simple – it didn't have to be complicated. Not this part, at least. This was all motion and physics – Nishinoya assumed, since he didn't know much about physics – the arc of the ball through the air, speed and angle and the point of impact. He never really had to think about it; his body knew where it needed to be, and he had trained it to get there in the span of an eye-blink. If he felt a little slow, that made sense. It had been a month, after all. But it only took a couple missed receives before he found the six-man team's rhythm, and then he could get under it and send it up again.

Kenichi was a solid receiver, though his frame was stocky and his jump was short. That meant it was pretty much up to Asahi to get the ball over, and Takinoue had him marked from the other side of the net. As the three of them fell into sync, Nishinoya found himself setting as often as receiving – and wasn't that something? He'd developed the skill with Asahi in high school and polished it in the years that followed, taking it into his college team and their official matches. Now here he was again: Karasuno, Asahi in front of him and the link between them, the thread of getting the ball to him so that he could slam it home.

Too soon – perhaps half a dozen rallies, give or take – the ball got through all six men on the other side, and their round was over. Nishinoya's stomach clenched as the ball impacted, the sound of it echoing down into his core. Asahi and Kenichi gave each other a high-five. Then Asahi rounded on Nishinoya, threw an arm around his shoulders, and rubbed his palm hard into the disheveled hair on Nishinoya’s head, right against his scalp.

“That was great!” Asahi said, laughing. “That felt great.”
Nishinoya found himself grinning in response to his bright enthusiasm. It had felt great; he’d somehow forgotten how it felt – he didn’t know how that was possible. His hands were already itching to get under the ball again.

“Move, Azumane!” someone shouted, giving the pair of them a shove toward the net so they could step under and rotate to the other side.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Asahi returned as he pulled Nishinoya along. He released him on the other side of the net. When Nishinoya looked up, Asahi was smiling at him. “Ready?” he asked.

Nishinoya was already stepping into position. “I was born ready,” he insisted.

~

As practice was winding down, after they’d stretched and started cleaning up, Nishinoya felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and found that it belonged to Ukai. “Good to have you today,” Ukai said. “Come back anytime.”

Nishinoya nodded and looked away. The agony was too sweet, playing with Asahi on the court, with his old coach watching from the sidelines. He couldn’t bear it. “It was good to be here,” he said, and he meant it.

“Nishinoya.”

He slowly cast his eyes back up to meet Ukai’s.

Ukai’s gaze was sharp. “You don’t seem like yourself,” he said.

Nishinoya felt his mouth turn in a frown before he could stop it. What use would it be to try at this point? He looked away again. “Yeah,” he said. “Sorry.”

“You’re getting pretty close to graduation, aren’t you?”

The sick feeling settled in his stomach again, knocking out the warmth that had grown while he was on the court. “I guess so…”

Silence stretched long. The clean-up was almost finished. Soon they’ll disperse to the world, and he’d go back to his last night at Asahi’s apartment.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nishinoya saw Ukai cross his arms. “Well,” he said gruffly, “I’m not gonna pull that bullshit that adults always do around college students.”

Nishinoya looked up again in surprise.

Ukai continued. “When I came back home, it was the first question out of everybody’s mouth. Not, hi, how are you, you look good – it was always, ‘what do you plan to do now?’” He shook his head, frowning heavily. “I hate that shit,” he said. “I ain’t gonna ask it.” He put his hand back down on Nishinoya’s shoulder. “Everybody’s gonna be full of advice for you, but don’t listen to any of it, it’s all useless anyway. No one knows what’s inside you but yourself.”

Nishinoya blinked. The warmth came back – he realized belatedly it was gratitude, relief. He managed a small smile. “I thought you would be mad at me,” he said.

“Mad?” Ukai shrugged. “Hell, Nishinoya,” he said. “I had just started working in my mom’s shop when I was your age. I didn’t have anything going for me. I couldn’t find a real job in the city so I
just came back home again with my tail between my legs.” He looked out over the gym, where the stragglers of the team mingled before they headed out. “I didn’t even know what was ahead of me then. You all, the team, and Take-san.”

Nishinoya felt his ears pink. He looked out onto the court as well. Asahi was across the way, chatting with Keizan and Kenichi, his face open and easy. He seemed so casual, so confident. “I guess sometimes things turn out how you don’t expect,” Nishinoya said.

Ukai’s hand hit him so hard in the back that he stumbled forward. “Stop moping!” Ukai demanded. “It doesn’t suit you at all!”

When Nishinoya turned in shock, craning his hand up the middle of his back where the impact still smarted, Ukai grinned at him – the same grin Nishinoya remembered, in the same face. He was young, Nishinoya realized suddenly, he couldn’t be too much into his thirties yet – he had been so young when he started coaching them, only a few years older than Nishinoya was now. He’d seemed so much older then, so much wiser.

“If you decide to retreat here and lick your wounds,” Ukai said, “we’ll be happy to have you.” He pointed with his thumb toward the court. “If you can keep up, of course.”

Nishinoya felt the smile tugging at his lips even before he realized what was happening. “That sounds like a challenge,” he said. “Maybe you’ve forgotten already.”

“Forgotten what?”

Nishinoya shoved his thumb into his chest. “That I’m Nishinoya Yuu of Karasuno,” he said.

Ukai’s chin tipped in; his grin turned sinister. “I never forget anything,” he said.

Nishinoya felt the gleam in Ukai’s eye reflected back inside him. The words had felt familiar in his mouth; he could still say them, even if he didn’t know that they were still true or not. It was a relief, in a way. That he could still find that voice inside himself.

“Get out of here before I make you sign up for real,” Ukai said. “Then you’ll have to pay dues and everything.”

“What the heck do you need dues for?”

“Mostly for alcohol. But we also gotta rent the space, of course.”

Nishinoya laughed. “Well,” he said, “I guess I’d better go then.”

“Yeah, go on.”

Nishinoya turned to leave, but Ukai’s voice spoke again. “One last thing…”

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. Ukai’s face had lost the grin. “I know that you’re not the type…to hide anything,” he said.

“Yeah?” Nishinoya returned.

“I just think you should know,” Ukai continued, “that there are some things to be said about discretion. In certain circumstances.”

Nishinoya pinched his face, his eyebrows sinking low over his eyes in confusion. “Okay?” he said.
“I think you’ll know what I mean,” Ukai said. “Later on.”

Nishinoya wasn’t confident in that regard. He thought about pushing for an explanation, but decided against it. If Ukai had wanted to say more, he would’ve. “Alright,” Nishinoya said finally.

“Be careful getting back,” Ukai said. “Come back anytime.”

“I will.”

Nishinoya mulled his words over as he crossed the court, heading to where Asahi stood with his friends. He would’ve really turned in circles around it, if it weren’t for the fact that he noticed Asahi’s face as he approached – he had looked so content earlier, but now there was an edge to it, a frown on his lips, tension in his brow. Keizan had a hand on his shoulder. Nishinoya quickened his pace almost to a jog.

“– to be careful,” Keizan was saying, “or –”

“I know what I’m doing!” Asahi snapped, louder and sharper than Nishinoya expected, and he pulled up short.

Asahi noticed him from the abrupt movement. His face immediately smoothed out, though Nishinoya wondered if it was genuine. Still, his voice was light when he said, “Nishinoya. You ready to head back?”

Keizan looked over his shoulder, down at Nishinoya. He lowered his hand.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya said, without lowering his eyes. He glared at Keizan. What had made Asahi so upset?

“I won’t keep you,” Keizan said as he turned away. “Just think about what I said.”

Kenichi cut in before Asahi could reply. “He’s a big boy, Keizan,” he said, his voice exasperated. “He can handle himself.”

Nishinoya crossed his arms. “Can handle himself doing what?”


“Perhaps slightly important,” Keizan returned, at which point Kenichi grabbed his shoulders with both hands, turned him in place, and started pushing him toward the door.

“Ignore this asshole!” Kenichi said as they departed. “He’s just mad that he doesn’t get his kid this weekend!” His voice increased to a shout as the distance grew. “Azumane! We still gonna work out on Tuesday?”

“Sure!” Asahi called.

Keizan said something else, but by that point they were too far away for it to be intelligible.

Asahi turned back toward Nishinoya. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Ready to go?”

“How long have you been friends with them?” Nishinoya asked with his attention still on the retreating pair.

“Oh, a few years,” Asahi said. “Since I joined the team, I guess.”
Nishinoya felt the frown pulling at his mouth. He had more he wanted to say, but no way to articulate it; the words felt clogged and jumbled in his head. “More than two?” he asked finally.

“I think so,” Asahi returned. “Why?”

“Just curious,” Nishinoya said, feeling defeated. Asahi had played with those men for longer than they had been on the same team together. Maybe he was the interloper after all.

Asahi gave him a curious look, though he didn’t push further. “Let’s head home,” he said.

Home, Nishinoya’s mind echoed. Asahi’s apartment. Their last night together. He couldn’t waste it moping about what he couldn’t change.

“Yeah,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They left the gym together. The night had come on in full; it was dark as they made their way back toward the platform. Nishinoya knew this end of town well – he knew there was a convenience store up ahead, and he knew they had an ATM machine. He needed more money for the commute back to campus. The location would show up on his parent’s next account statement, but Nishinoya hoped they wouldn’t see it for at least a few weeks. Long enough to cloud memory of the transaction, long enough for reasonable doubt on who had made the withdrawal. Either way, he could deal with it then.

“Let’s stop up here,” he said, when the front window came into view.

It was bright inside the shop, and mild music played over the speaker. “You want anything?” Nishinoya asked. “The oden’s good here.”

“Hm.” Asahi looked genuinely conflicted. “Maybe…”

Nishinoya couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on his face. “You go look while I hit the ATM.”

“Don’t encourage my vices,” Asahi said. “I’ll get spoiled.”

“Maybe I wanna spoil you.”

The grin that Asahi gave him in return pinged around inside Nishinoya’s ribcage. They needed to get out of there, they needed to get home, Nishinoya needed to get his hands on him immediately. It would be enough, he told himself. It would have to be enough. He had no other choice about it. He’d set his will like tempered steel by the time he stepped around the end of the aisle, heading for the cash machine. The rest of the evening would be perfect, he decided. He’d make sure of it.

Unfortunately, as he began to put his card into the slot, his entire world came crashing down around his ears, shattering with the sound of a trainwreck, throwing his whole plan into disarray. A high-pitched voice hit his ears with a familiarity that made his blood run cold.

“BROTHER!”

Nishinoya felt every muscle in his body seize up. His breathing stopped. His heart stuttered in his chest. He retracted his card with a shaking hand, then slowly turned around.

There, at the other end of the aisle near the bank of coolers, with a soda in one hand and a magazine in the other, staring at him with shock and confusion and – and anger, she was so angry, he could see it in her eyes and the open snarl of her mouth, there with the weight of his whole
world behind her, there stood his younger sister.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! There are six chapters left in this story. My goal is to finish in 2017. Thanks for your patience and your comments and messages. They all mean so much to me.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I do want to put a brief warning at the top of this chapter, as it is not so fun. Please remember that this is a story about someone going through significant depression and anxiety. Exercise self-care below.

“Suzu,” he said helplessly, fixed to the spot as she barrelled down the aisle toward him.

“What are you doing here?” Suzume demanded. “Why aren’t you answering your phone? Why haven’t you called Mom?!” Each question came in a louder volume in the one before, until it reached The Nishinoya Volume, as his mother called it. That’s from your side of the family, his dad would say.

“I’m – I–” Nishinoya stuttered. At fifteen, Suzume was already as tall as he was; as she approached she seemed to tower over him, so large was the presence of her anger. They both favored their mother in looks – they had the same pointed face, the same large eyes. Suzume had gotten her hair cut into a short bob since he’d been gone. She wore a orange clip above her left ear. Nishinoya knew he probably looked like crap between the exertion of practice and his already disheveled appearance.

“Brother! Say something!”

“Suzume,” he tried again. “I’m just. I was.”

At that moment, Asahi skidded around the end of the aisle into view. His eyes were wide, his forehead creased with anxiety. He had probably heard Suzume shouting from the other side of the shop. Nishinoya caught his eye and felt a bit braver.

“I’m visiting a friend,” he said finally. “Just for a few days.”

“You’re WHAT?”

“Visiting my friend,” Nishinoya said again. He pointed over her shoulder at Asahi, who sprang upright like a soldier at attention. Suzume looked over her shoulder at him for a moment – during which Asahi made a pained expression that was probably meant to be a smile. When she turned back to face Nishinoya, she was frowning with her entire face.

“How long?” she asked.

“What?”

“How long!” she repeated, somehow even louder than before. “How long have you been here? Did you plan to tell anyone you were here?”

“Suzu, lower your voice, you’re gonna get us thrown out–”

“I can’t believe you, I can’t believe you’re here and you didn’t call Mom, d’you know–” Suzume’s words cut off as her mouth snapped shut.
Nishinoya realized her lower lip was trembling, and the bottom of his stomach fell out. “Suzu–”

“D’you know how worried she’s been?” she burst out. “How worried–” Sudden tears spilled down her cheeks. “How worried we all are?”

Nishinoya felt his throat gum up. Guilt and shame churned like acid inside him. “Suzu,” he said, “Suzu, I’m sorry–”

Suzume sprang forward, dropping both the magazine and the soda, and threw her arms around his neck. She buried her face against him and wailed out loud.

Nishinoya felt his face contort. He put his hands gently on Suzume’s back while she sobbed against him. He lifted his eyes and found Asahi still at the end of the aisle. Asahi didn’t speak or move; he just watched the scene with a nervous expression. Nishinoya lowered his gaze once more.


“I hate you,” Suzume hiccuped, though the way she clung to him seemed to contradict the statement. “You’re s-so mean.”

Nishinoya did his best not to flinch. He leaned the side of his head against hers. “I know,” he mumbled, and then said a third time, “I’m sorry…”

Asahi cleared his throat quietly, catching Nishinoya’s attention. When Nishinoya glanced back at him, Asahi used his head to silently gesture at the door.

Nishinoya nodded. He put his hands on Suzume’s shoulders and pushed her away at arm’s length. Her face was a red mess; the little bit of makeup she wore had smeared across her cheeks. She was staring at his chest, her shoulders still shaking, so Nishinoya bent his knees slightly to meet her eyes. “C’mon,” he said, “let’s go outside.”

Suzume’s gaze snapped up. Her anger was already coming back, overlaying distress with defiance. She shook him off, then rubbed her cheeks with the backs of her hands. She shoved past him and stalked her way toward the door.

Nishinoya looked back at Asahi, and the weight of Asahi’s gaze felt like a hundred words that Nishinoya could never name. There was sympathy there, and apology – a troubled anxiety – confusion and nervousness. But there was also a tinge of something else, a shadow that he could not decipher.

Asahi gestured with his head again, this time his face said go, so Nishinoya went. When he reached the door, he tried to ignore the sound of Asahi’s voice some distance behind, apologizing to the clerk behind the counter. Nishinoya grimaced. He put his hand on the push bar and opened the door.

Suzume sat on the curb facing away from him when he stepped outside. Nishinoya took a moment to look at her properly before approaching. She wore an oversized sweatshirt over floral tights with pale blue Timberlands. Her short hair allowed him to see her shoulders as she hunched over her knees; he was relieved to see that they no longer were shaking.

"Suzu," he said.

She turned slightly, until he could see the side of her face. "What?” she snapped.

Nishinoya sighed and came to sit beside her. "I don't know what you want me to say," he said.
Suzume sniffed hard and rubbed her nose on her sleeve. "Tell me where you've been," she demanded.

"I've been at school," he said. "You know that."

"Have you?" Her voice was sharp. "Mom called your coach and he said you hadn't been to practice in weeks."

Nishinoya felt his own flash of anger. "I was on fucking probation!" he insisted, his voice approaching a shout. "Why the fuck is everybody in my business?"

"Because you won't tell anyone anything!" Suzume yelled back. "How are we supposed to know what's going on? How are we supposed to know that you're okay!"

"I don't know," Nishinoya bit out, "maybe just trust me or something? I'm an adult and I can take care of myself!"

"Adult!" Suzume laughed darkly. "What kinda adult does this kind of thing?" She gestured back at the shop. "Comes home and doesn't tell anybody?! I swear Mom was about to call the police! If Ryuu-nii hadn't called then--"

Her words cut off, realization crossing her face like a forest fire. She leaned forward. When she spoke again her voice was quieter, but her tone was low and acidic. "You made him call, didn't you? You made him do that so Mom would leave you alone."

Nishinoya recoiled. "No!" he insisted. "He did that without even asking me!"

"Because he's a better person than you are!" Suzume returned, and Nishinoya flinched. "Because he was actually thinking about how other people felt!"

Nishinoya hunched over his legs, unable to look at her anymore. "I don't know what you want me to do," he said. "I can't go back on what's already done. What do you want from me? What am I supposed to do?!

"I can't believe you!" She grabbed his shirt and tugged hard. "You're coming home, of course! You need to apologize properly to Mom and Dad! You owe them an explanation!"

He knocked her hand off as he pulled quickly back. "No," he said.

"What? Brother--"

"No!" Nishinoya said again. He stood up and backed away.

Suzume clambered to her feet after him. "What do you mean, no!" she shouted. "Are you that horrible? How can you say no to that!"

"Nishinoya," came the soft voice behind them. They both turned in unison, mirror images of each other. Asahi visibly quailed under the double scrutiny, but he turned his gaze to Nishinoya and spoke again. "Maybe you should go with her," he said.

Nishinoya felt his face crumple. Asahi's expression fell in response, but Nishinoya almost didn't care, so sharp was the sense of betrayal in his gut. How could Asahi say that, after the last few days – hadn't he said Nishinoya could stay as long as he wanted? Didn't he understand why Nishinoya couldn't go home?
"I can't," he said, his voice small as he shrank inward on himself. "I can't see them right now."

Suzume's attention snapped back onto him from Asahi. "What do you mean you can't see them? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Please, Suzu," he said, "try to understand."

She looked at him like she had never seen him before. "I don't understand! Don't you care about them at all?"

"I do!" Nishinoya insisted.

"Then, why – why–" Suzume looked like she might cry again, even through her anger.

"I just can't right now!"

"What if–" Asahi's voice cut in again. "What if we go tomorrow?"

Nishinoya's eyes flicked toward Asahi again, then returned to Suzume. She was breathing hard, her hands fisted at her sides, staring at Asahi. She pointed at him and turned her attention back to Nishinoya. "Who is this?" she demanded.

"It doesn't matter who he is," Nishinoya said sharply. "He's my friend."

Suzume didn’t seem to like that answer. “Is he more important than us? You’d rather be with a friend than your family?”

Nishinoya glanced briefly at Asahi once more to gauge his reaction, but Asahi’s expression was closed. “It’s… it’s not like that, Suzu,” he said. “I’m just…” Nishinoya shook his head. “I’m figuring a few things out, okay?”

“What am I supposed to do with that information?” Suzume spat. “What do you expect me to tell Mom and Dad!”

The panic was coming back. Nishinoya felt his heart speeding up. He forced it down again, like swallowing bile in his throat. “Don’t,” he said weakly, “please don’t tell them you saw me.”

“You can’t expect me to–”


Suzume continued to glare at him, so he kept going before she could say anything. “Please, Suzu,” he said, “I just need some time to think about what I’m going to say to them.” When she still didn’t speak, he added once more, in a smaller voice, “please.”

Suzume’s face contorted, flipping between half a dozen emotions before settling on frustration. She crossed her arms and looked away from him, out across the street. At length, she said, “I’ll give you twenty-four hours. If you’re not home by this time tomorrow, or if you don’t call Mom before that…” She turned her head back, pinning him with all the considerable intensity her slight frame could muster. Nishinoya suddenly realized why he sometimes made people nervous. “If you flake out on them,” Suzume continued. “I will tell them everything.”

Nishinoya nodded slowly. “Yeah, okay,” he said.

“Listen, Brother,” she said. “Think of Taka. He’s just a kid. If you break his heart, I will never
forgive you.” Her eyes flashed. “Never.”

Nishinoya felt his stomach clench. “I understand,” he said, with a sinking heart.

Suzume gave him an icy stare for a moment longer, then she turned on her heel. Without even so much as a goodbye, she took off at a full run in the direction of their house. She was out of sight before he could even formulate something to shout after her.

In the aftermath, Nishinoya stood dumbly on the sidewalk. He wasn’t sure the time or where the platform was. He couldn’t seem to get a single thought into his brain besides the realization that this was it. This was the moment – this was the instant that he would look back on – this was the day he would remember as the turning point where his life had gone completely to shit. The ease he’d had on the court was gone. The feeling of warmth wasn’t even a memory any longer. Had it ever been real in the first place? Nishinoya realized he was shaking.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said somewhere to his left, slightly behind him. Nishinoya closed his eyes.

“I want to go,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Alright,” Asahi said. “Come on.”

They didn’t speak again along the entire trip back to Asahi’s apartment. They sat together, thighs pressing into each other, but Nishinoya couldn’t feel it. He hunched over his legs with his elbows on his knees, resting his forehead on the heels of his hands, staring at the floor of the train beneath his feet.

It was over then, wasn’t it? It would all be over soon. He wondered how the next few days would play out. What would Suzume say to them when he didn’t show up for dinner as promised? What would their reaction be? Would they cut him off? Would they throw out all his things, turn his room into a storage space or a guest bedroom? Would he ever be welcome there after that? The house he’d lived in since he was in kindergarten... Maybe he’d never step through the door again.

Taka, he thought, Suzume. He loved them so intensely that it hurt inside his chest. He remembered being six years old and insisting that he be allowed to wear his school clothes when they brought Suzume home from the hospital. He had wanted to impress her – he had wanted her to see how big and cool and smart her older brother was. He was nearly nine when Taka came home and by that time more than ready to have a little brother after two years of Suzume’s screaming. He’d never understood how Taka had become so soft-hearted and quiet when the two of them were both so loud.

Suzume, he thought, Taka. He felt the tears rolling down his cheeks but did nothing to stop them, could do nothing to stop them. Suzume already said she would never forgive him, and he believed it. Taka might, one day – but it was probably best if Nishinoya never asked him to. Nishinoya chewed on the inside of his cheek so the tears wouldn’t turn into more. He covered his eyes with trembling hands.

A warm, heavy weight settled on his shoulder – Asahi’s hand, he realized. That tie would be broken too, of course. Who would Nishinoya have left after that? Tanaka? Unless he sided with Nishinoya’s family, faced with the unforgivable actions of their prodigal eldest son.

If he withdrew from the volleyball team he would lose his scholarship, but his tuition was already paid through for the current term. There was only one more he’d have to worry about – assuming, of course, that he passed all his in-progress classes – and if he couldn’t find a way to pay for it, well that didn’t matter either. He’d leave the university and figure out what to do from there.
Asahi’s hand squeezed his shoulder, and Nishinoya looked up. He realized they were close to Asahi’s stop. The desperation seized in his chest again – their last night together. How much time remained – how long did they have? Practice had taken a couple hours, and then there was transit, and the run-in with Suzume. What time was it? When would Asahi want to go to sleep?

When they got to his door, Asahi opened it and stepped aside so that Nishinoya could enter first. It was dark inside, but the air felt close and muted, calming and familiar. He heard the door close behind him. Nishinoya turned, and without speaking, walked the few steps back to Asahi. When he reached him, Nishinoya leaned forward and pressed his face into Asahi’s chest.

Asahi’s hands came down on his shoulders. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Nishinoya closed his eyes and breathed in; Asahi’s shirt smelled like sweat and laundry detergent. “No,” he said finally. “I’m really not.”

Asahi tightened his hands. “Take your time,” he said.

Irritation came up into his throat again. Nishinoya couldn’t help the noise of frustration that escaped him. “What the hell am I taking my time for?” he asked. “I’m pretty sure my sister hates me, and tomorrow the rest of my family will too.”

The pressure on his shoulders increased as Asahi pushed him away at arm’s length. “They don’t hate you, Nishinoya,” he said. “They don’t now and they won’t tomorrow.”

When Nishinoya looked up at his face, he saw that Asahi was wearing the same expression he had in the shop, which infuriated him. Why couldn’t Asahi ever just say what he felt? It was always vague words and inconclusive actions – a look on his face that said ten conflicting things except for the one that united them, which was pity. Asahi pitied him.

“How would you know?” Nishinoya said darkly. “You don’t even know them.”

“I don’t,” Asahi agreed. “But I know you. It’s impossible that anyone could hate you.”

Nishinoya had to look away. You’ll change your mind tomorrow, he thought. Out loud he only said, “You’d be surprised.”

“Do you want me to go with you tomorrow?” Asahi asked.

His gaze snapped back. “What?”

Asahi gave him a small, tight smile. “If you need someone to your family’s with you, I can go.”

“You would… do that?”

“Of course,” Asahi said. His face turned pensive. “I mean, if you’d rather it be someone else, that’s fine, of course. They know Tanaka, maybe he would be better–”

“No,” Nishinoya cut in. If he tried to ask Tanaka, if he brought another person into the lie – “No,” he said again.

Asahi gave him the weird smile once more, softer this time. “Just think about it,” he said. “We don’t have to make any decisions tonight.”

Nishinoya looked away again. “Yeah,” he said.

Asahi patted him on the shoulder with one hand, then he let go. He stepped around Nishinoya into
the apartment proper. “Are you hungry at all?” he asked. “Sometimes I need something between practice and bed.”

“When do you plan to go to bed?” Nishinoya asked, sidestepping the other question.

“Usually I try to turn in around eleven. Doesn’t always happen though.”

Nishinoya could see the clock on the stove from where he stood near the door. It was already almost ten. “I’m not hungry,” he said. He wasn’t sure if it was a lie or not – there was an odd queasiness in his gut that could’ve been hunger, but he had no appetite and no desire to eat.

“Maybe a bath, then,” Asahi suggested. “I know I need one.”

It would take up more of their time, but a bath would be good – Nishinoya wanted their last time together to be perfect, didn’t he? It wouldn’t help matters if they were both disgusting from practice. “Okay,” he agreed.

“I’m going to make a snack, so you can go first.”

Nishinoya frowned. “Okay…” he repeated. When Asahi didn’t respond and instead began opening cabinets, Nishinoya turned and stalked toward the bathroom.

He washed quickly but thoroughly – he hadn’t forgotten his plan, he still wanted to make the last few days real somehow, to make them count. He wondered how it would happen, if it would hurt. He didn’t really care, but. Asahi probably would feel bad if it did.

Nishinoya took a deep breath. He leaned forward against the side of the tub, and reached back behind himself.

It didn’t really hurt, he eventually decided, but he wasn’t sure if it felt good. Maybe it would feel different if it was someone else’s finger, or… Nishinoya remembered suddenly how thick Asahi’s cock was in his hand and felt a stab of nervousness. Was this going to work? It seemed difficult enough with just his finger, and Asahi was certainly wider than a finger, Nishinoya’s especially.

No, he thought, it would be fine. Asahi would know what to do. He had the condoms; he had lubricant. Asahi would know how to make everything work. And anyway, if it hurt, Nishinoya would deal with it. He was no stranger to aches and pain.

Nishinoya didn’t bother with actually getting in the bath – he just finished scrubbing down his skin til it was pink, taking extra time around his genitals, underneath his balls, between the cheeks of his ass. He had the vague suspicion there was more that could be done; he wasn’t sure what, so he left it at that. He was drying his hair when Asahi came into the bathroom.

“Done already?” Asahi asked. He pulled off his shirt and tossed it in the bin.

Nishinoya made no effort to hide the way his eyes lingered on Asahi’s chest and stomach. “Yeah,” he said. “Didn’t feel like a long one.”

“That’s fine,” Asahi returned as he slipped out of his pants. He wore a pair of gray compression shorts underneath, which highlighted the curve of his ass and the swell of his thigh as he turned his back to Nishinoya.

Nishinoya hadn’t seen much point in redressing, so he had just wrapped a towel around his waist when he was finished. When Asahi turned back toward him, he deliberately removed the towel and returned it to the rack. He slowly lifted his eyes in what he hoped was a demure, inviting way.
“Don’t take too long,” he said.

Asahi’s larynx bobbed in his throat as he swallowed hard, and Nishinoya took it as a victory. He walked past Asahi out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

In the bedroom, he took the time to smooth out the sheets and make sure they were securely tucked around the mattress. He spread out the comforter until it was nice and flat. Nishinoya wondered if he should fluff up the pillows against the headboard. What did people usually do to set the atmosphere for sex? Candles? Nishinoya remembered that Asahi had some driftwood candle holders in the living room. Would those work? Or would they be too much...

Nishinoya heard the door of the bathroom open. He quickly climbed onto the bed and sat up against Asahi’s headboard; he considered trying to arrange into a more enticing pose but didn’t have time to think of one before Asahi appeared in the doorway.

His hair was wet. The ends curled against his clavicle, leaving beads of water on his chest as it heaved with breath. He held a towel at his hip with one hand, but otherwise wore nothing.

Nishinoya tried to stop his hands from shaking. Their last time, wouldn’t it be? The last chance – unless, in the morning, maybe – no, that wasn’t fair to Asahi – he had to work; he needed sleep; he couldn’t be late. It would have to be the last time.

He lifted his hand and hid the trembling with a beckoning gesture. “What’re you standing there for?” he asked. “C’mere.”

Asahi crossed the room to the bed, but he didn’t drop the towel. He sat down on the edge of the mattress, out of Nishinoya’s reach.

Nishinoya lowered his hand. “You don’t want to?”

Asahi shook his head. “It’s not that,” he said. He put his hands in his lap and looked at the floor. The edge of the towel came open at his hip, and Nishinoya caught a glimpse of the side of his buttock and thigh through the gap.

“Then what?” Nishinoya said, a little too tightly.

“It’s just…” Asahi laced his hands together. “Are you sure… that you want to?” he asked.

Nishinoya sat back in surprise. “What?”

Asahi raised his eyes and met Nishinoya’s. “Look, tonight was…” He frowned. “I mean, practice was great, but after. With your sister.”

“Can we please not talk about my sister when I’m sitting naked in your bed?”

Asahi’s ears flushed. “Sorry,” he said. He looked at the floor again. “I know that it was rough, seeing her,” he continued. “It must’ve felt horrible.”

Nishinoya didn’t say anything to that. His stomach was all knotted up.

“Maybe it would be better if we just went to bed,” Asahi suggested.

“No!” Nishinoya said quickly, too quickly, and Asahi glanced up at him in surprise. Nishinoya winced and forced himself to calm down. “No,” he said again, softer, “please, I just…” He felt miserable heat in his own face, mortification that he was actually begging. “Asahi,” he said. “I just
want to...to forget for a little bit. Please.” He reached out his hand once more. “Help me forget?”

Asahi had that crease in his forehead again. Nishinoya held his breath as he waited for response through the long silence that followed his request. Finally, without a further word, Asahi slowly leaned forward and closed his hand over Nishinoya’s.

It wasn’t how Nishinoya had wanted it to go – he wanted Asahi to look at him again as he had the day before on the couch, like a ravenous animal that couldn’t be satiated. He would’ve taken the sleepy softness of that morning, the way Asahi had looked after Nishinoya sucked his cock. He would’ve even accepted the hard edge that Asahi’s face had held in the bathroom when his fingers dug into Nishinoya’s cheeks. But this, this… the expression that now graced Asahi’s features put a sour taste in his mouth. Still – he couldn’t give this up, not this last chance. It would have to be enough. He would make it enough.

Asahi climbed over him on the bed, his towel falling aside, until he was also sitting up against the headboard. Then he lifted his arm around Nishinoya’s shoulders, put his other hand against Nishinoya’s chin, and drew him in to kiss him.

Nishinoya wrapped an arm up around Asahi’s neck and licked his way into his mouth. He shifted, entwining their legs together as he slid his body up onto Asahi’s.

Asahi kissed him for a long time, softly and sweetly, resisting Nishinoya’s attempts to intensify the moment. At length, he pushed Nishinoya back, only enough to look him eye; he kept his arm around Nishinoya’s shoulders. His lips were pink and wet, his face flushed. Nishinoya wanted to devour him whole.

“Asahi, you know what I want?” Nishinoya insisted. He put his hands into Asahi’s wet hair and tugged. “Please, c’mon, I’m dying!”

Asahi smiled at that, just a little bit. The crease was easing. “I don’t think you’re actually dying,” he said.

“How do you know? I might be.”

“Fair enough.” Asahi took ahold of Nishinoya’s waist in both hands and pushed him down until he was flat on his back against the mattress.

If there had been more time – if there had been another chance after – then Nishinoya may have allowed Asahi to take things as slow as he clearly wanted to. Nishinoya was tempted, of course, tempted by the idea of something soft and unhurried, something comforting. But there wasn’t more time, and there wasn’t another chance. Nishinoya grabbed Asahi’s face in both hands and kissed him hard. He pulled Asahi down on top of him and wrapped his legs around Asahi’s hips.

Asahi seemed to take the hint. He grabbed Nishinoya’s wrists and pushed them up above his head. He held them there against the mattress while he mouthed the sensitive space under Nishinoya’s ear. Nishinoya couldn’t help but shudder at the tickling sensation of Asahi’s lips against his skin. He flexed his wrists, pushing hard against Asahi’s grip, but Asahi had him pinned.

Time was running out. Nishinoya had to make this happen. “Asahi,” he said.

“Hmm,” Asahi mumbled against his skin.

“Will you…could you...” Now that it came down to it, Nishinoya wasn’t sure how to ask the
question. *Could you shove your dick in me?* would certainly get the message across, but he couldn’t help but feel like it might ruin the moment.

Asahi pulled back. “Will I what?” His voice was soft and encouraging.

Nishinoya had to look away. His cheeks were hot as he spoke. “Could we have sex?” he asked. It felt weird saying the word out loud – after all, they’d never actually used it.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Asahi tip his head to the side. When Nishinoya turned his gaze back to him, he found Asahi looking at him with a quizzical expression.


Asahi’s visible confusion grew. “I mean,” he eventually said, with an awkward laugh, “haven’t we been?”

Nishinoya sighed and knocked his head back against the mattress a few times. “No,” he said. “I mean like… real sex. Y’know.” He stared at the ceiling. “Inside.”

Asahi was still for a long moment. Then he let go of Nishinoya’s wrists, pushed himself up and off of him, and sat back on his heels in between Nishinoya’s legs. Nishinoya suddenly felt miniscule and unshielded as he sprawled naked beneath Asahi on the bed, the implication hanging heavy between them. “God,” he choked, “would you just say something?” The bite of rejection was already stabbing under his diaphragm.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said carefully, “it’s all been real.” After a short pause, he added, “To me, at least.”

Nishinoya covered his face with his hands so he wouldn’t have to look at Asahi any longer. “No,” he said, “no, that’s not what I meant. What I want is–”

“I know what you meant,” Asahi cut in. “But… Nishinoya, listen.” He grabbed one of Nishinoya’s wrists and pulled his hand back. “The thing is, there’s nothing particularly special about… penetration.” He grimaced. “Sorry, that’s a terrible choice of words.” He closed his fingers around Nishinoya’s other wrist and pulled it down as well. “What I mean is, well… it’s all been…” Now his cheeks were darkening, matching the heat still lingering in Nishinoya’s. “It’s all sex to me,” Asahi concluded. He slid his fingers from Nishinoya’s wrists to curl around his hands. Softly, he said, “I don’t consider any of what we’ve done to be something less than that.”

A wave of shame hit Nishinoya like running into a brick wall. “I’m sorry,” he said finally. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No,” Asahi insisted, “I want you to ask for… what you want.” He gave Nishinoya a cautious smile. “It’s just, this isn’t something I have a lot of experience with.”

Nishinoya thought about the condoms in the dresser. He wondered if Asahi was lying. A small part of him wanted to back off – to say it was fine, that they didn’t have to do it – but the desperation still twisted inside him: ceaseless, urgent, and deafening. Last time, their last time, they’d never have another, this was it, this was the only chance he’d have. “Can’t we try?” Nishinoya suggested in a small voice.

Asahi still held his hands. He squeezed Nishinoya’s fingers gently. “We might not have time for everything tonight,” he said. “But we can try a few things.”
Time, time, Nishinoya would make the time. He didn’t care if it hurt; he didn’t care if he hated it – he just wanted something, some memory to take back with him, some moment that he could say was important. He tightened his hands around Asahi’s and nodded.

Asahi let go of his hands and came down over him again. Nishinoya shuddered as Asahi’s flat stomach rubbed over his cock. Asahi slid up the length of his body, kissing Nishinoya’s skin as he went, until he made it to Nishinoya’s clavicle. Then he moved all the way up until he could press his forehead into Nishinoya’s and bury long fingers in his hair.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Asahi said.

“You won’t.” Nishinoya didn’t plan to tell him if he did, anyway.

Asahi kissed him, his mouth desperate and hot inside. When he pulled back, he murmured against Nishinoya’s lips, “one sec.” He peeled completely off Nishinoya and went for the drawer of his nightstand. Nishinoya was disappointed to see he only came back with lubricant.

Asahi lay back down beside him, up on one elbow and hip. He leaned down to kiss Nishinoya again, and Nishinoya let him. He drank in the smell of Asahi, the heat of him. He tried to commit them to memory. Nishinoya couldn’t help but flinch when he heard the cap of the lube click open. Asahi lifted up to look at him curiously, but Nishinoya just pulled him down again.

He yelped in surprise when cold lubricant hit his cock. Asahi laughed and mumbled, “sorry”, then he wrapped his hot hand around him, which made Nishinoya gasp instead. Asahi gave his erection a toe-curling stroke upward. He touched Nishinoya until he was shuddering against the bed, and then Asahi sat back up and squeezed more lube onto his fingers.

Asahi leaned down over Nishinoya with one arm braced against the mattress and the other down between his legs. His fingers coasted down Nishinoya’s perineum to the cleft of his ass. Asahi pushed gently, probing between his buttocks, until Nishinoya felt a light pressure against his asshole. He jumped at the cold touch to the sensitive flesh and grabbed at Asahi’s bicep.

Asahi smiled at him and lowered himself until his forehead touched Nishinoya’s again. “Alright?” he asked. His fingertip circled Nishinoya’s asshole, not pushing inward, but also not retreating.

It was half a tickle, half something else. Nishinoya felt anxiety tangling with his arousal, but he squashed it down. “Yeah,” he said. “Keep going.”

“You tell me immediately if it doesn’t feel good.”

“Asahi, c’mon. Just do it, okay?”

Asahi nodded. Nishinoya felt the pressure increase, the odd unfamiliar stretch, the heat of Asahi’s finger as it slowly shifted inside him. He tightened his grip on Asahi’s arm and closed his eyes.

“Alright?” Asahi asked again.

Nishinoya gave him a frustrated groan. “If you keep asking me that I’m gonna lose my hard-on.”

Asahi’s breath passed over his lips, agonizingly close. “Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

Nishinoya grabbed the back of Asahi’s neck with his free hand and yanked him down to kiss him.

The sensation still felt strange, even after his body had settled around Asahi’s finger as it slowly shifted inside him. Nishinoya wondered if there was supposed to be more to it. Maybe if – there
would need to be – if he was going to be able to handle everything, a single finger wasn’t going to cut it.

“I want… more,” he said, when he found a break between the tangle of lips and tongues and teeth.

“Wait a little bit,” Asahi said softly. He pressed his lips against Nishinoya’s temple. “You’re still so tense. I got you, don’t worry.”

“Asahi…”

“I got you,” Asahi repeated as he moved to kiss his neck.

Nishinoya felt his lips trembling. How much time was left? They had to go faster. “Asahi, please…”

“Shh, it’s okay.”

Nishinoya felt the desperation jump into his throat to smother him. “Would you just do it already?!” he demanded, loud and sharp.

In the moment that followed, in which silence fell over them like a thunderclap, Nishinoya immediately regretted the words. He hadn’t even realized they were forming in his mouth until they came bursting out. Now he felt Asahi go rigid against him.

“Asahi,” Nishinoya said quickly, desperately, “Asahi-san, I’m sorry.”

Asahi pulled back. His hands left Nishinoya.

“Please,” Nishinoya repeated, “I’m sorry.”

Asahi sat up, mimicking the pose from earlier, but this time his face held none of that softness, and when he spoke, his voice was tight. “I think I’m done for tonight,” he said.

“Wait,” Nishinoya said, as Asahi moved to the edge of the bed. Nishinoya sat up. “Don’t go.”

Asahi was silent. He sat with his back facing Nishinoya; the line of his form was tense. When the quiet between them stretched Nishinoya to his breaking point, he couldn’t help but try again.

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya pleaded, “I’m–”

“Look,” Asahi said without turning around, “I’m not really harboring any illusions about this. I know what’s happening here and I’m fine with it. But…” His shoulders tightened. “Are you even considering my feelings at all? Does it even matter to you?”

“Look,” Asahi said without turning around, “I’m not really harboring any illusions about this. I know what’s happening here and I’m fine with it. But…” His shoulders tightened. “Are you even considering my feelings at all? Does it even matter to you?”

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya pleaded, “I’m–”

“I know you’re upset right now,” Asahi cut in, “but I’m not just a thing for you to use.”

Nishinoya rocked backward as though he had been slapped. “No, no, no,” he said, voice quavering, “that’s not what–”

“Isn’t it?!” Asahi shouted, so loud that his words rang off the bedroom walls, which stunned Nishinoya into silence. The outburst seemed to startle even Asahi; he suddenly jumped to his feet, his back ramrod straight. When he finally looked back over his shoulder, his face was aghast. “I – I – I don’t mean that,” Asahi said. “I’m sorry.”

Nishinoya looked down at the bedspread. He could already see the path out before him. He could
already see its end.

They were both still naked. It would be comical to Nishinoya if he wasn’t devastated.

Asahi sat back down on the bed, though this time he stayed turned toward Nishinoya. “It’s okay,” he said. He reached across to touch Nishinoya’s hand. “I think we’re both tired right now.”

Nishinoya stared at Asahi’s fingers against his own. He nodded.

“I’m gonna go clean up,” Asahi said. “Then I think we should go to bed.” Nishinoya nodded again without saying anything. Asahi gave him a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’ll be right back,” he said, as he stood up.

Nishinoya expected him to be gone for at least a few minutes, but he almost immediately came back into the room holding a washcloth. Asahi carried it over to the bed and held it out toward Nishinoya, who stared at it dumbly for a moment before he realized what it was for.

The cloth was warm but not too hot; Asahi had clearly put care into making it comfortable to the touch. But all the same... it was humiliating. Nishinoya felt his entire body flush unpleasantly as he lifted onto his knees and cleaned himself down between his legs. At length, he handed the washcloth back to Asahi without looking at him. Asahi took it and left the room again.

Nishinoya felt weirdly numb. He slipped off the bed and crossed to where he’d left his bag in the corner. He took out a pair of sleeping shorts and pulled them on. Then, he went back to the bed, crawled under the covers, and waited.

When Asahi came back in, Nishinoya curled toward the wall. The light clicked off overhead. Nishinoya felt the bed shift as Asahi climbed in, the tug on the bedspread as he slipped underneath. He expected that to be the end of it. They’d go to sleep and then the day would be over.

Nishinoya started as Asahi sidled up behind him. His knees met the backs of Nishinoya’s legs; his arm closed over Nishinoya’s body. Asahi found his hand in the darkness and laced his fingers into Nishinoya’s limp ones. Nishinoya felt his lips against the back of his neck.

Something inside him began to hurt.

“Let’s watch a show or something to calm us down before we try to sleep,” Asahi suggested in a soft voice next to his ear. Nishinoya didn’t trust his voice enough to answer, so he only nodded in response.

Asahi’s arm left him for a brief moment as he fumbled for his phone, then came back around. “Will you hold it?” he asked. “I don’t have a stand.”

Nishinoya took the phone out of his hand and held it horizontal on the bed. “What are we watching?” he managed to ask.

“Whatever you want,” Asahi said. “I use my brother’s account for streaming.” He wrapped his arm back around Nishinoya’s ribs and pulled him in close against his body, then tucked his chin over Nishinoya’s shoulder.

Nishinoya managed to pick something out of the service – a dumb show, a comedy game show that his dad liked – god, his dad, would his dad ever speak to him again? Would anyone?

They watched with the volume turned down, so low that the dialogue was barely understandable. The feed went through an episode and a half before Nishinoya noticed that the curl of Asahi’s hand
around him was loosening, his grip growing limp as his body relaxed. It was only a little longer before Asahi’s breath evened out into a soft snore. Warm air brushed Nishinoya’s neck on every exhalation.

It was only when Nishinoya was absolutely certain that Asahi was asleep that he allowed himself the tears he’d bottled up since he laid down. He cried silently, with every muscle tensed as he tried not to disturb Asahi. The feed on Asahi’s phone played through into the next episode. The cheery laughter of the studio audience passed over him, perfectly audible even at that low volume.

~

Nishinoya spent the long night in an agitated state. He eventually slipped out from under Asahi’s arm, careful not to wake him, and then wandered out into the front room of Asahi’s apartment.

He took time to pick through everything – all the cabinets, the drawers. He dug through Asahi’s mail on the counter. Asahi had a subscription to a magazine about ceramics, which Nishinoya would’ve found amusing if it didn’t make his chest ache. There was a junk drawer that held everything from take-out menus and loose change to rubber bands around pieces of a broken vase. The end tables next to the couch each had a small drawer – one held power cables, the other had tissues and the bottle of lotion that made Nishinoya feel like a fever was breaking all over his body.

How was it that the apartment had seemed so comforting to him before, and now it felt like he was slowly suffocating inside it?

He tried to sit for a time and thumbed his way through a few of Asahi’s books. The words ran together on the page, defying his attempts to string them together into anything coherent. The queasy pseudo-hunger returned, so he went back into the kitchen and looked through the cabinets for something palatable. The only thing he could manage to put in his mouth was a handful of crackers.

The hours passed slowly. Nishinoya expected himself to eventually calm down enough that he might be able to rest, but instead his agitation only seemed to ramp up and up. It was okay, he told himself. He would sleep on the shinkansen. He just had to get to the Furukawa station in one piece.

At some point, Saturday had crossed over into Sunday without him realizing. Moments began to blur together, and his eyes scratched behind his dry eyelids. Nishinoya felt almost delirious by the time a gray light started to peek in the window. What time was it? How long until Asahi would wake up? Nishinoya decided he would make breakfast again as a goodbye, as an apology both for what had happened and what would happen. Maybe Asahi would forgive him one day, but he wasn’t confident about it.

When the clock finally clicked past seven, he finally gave in to the smothering loneliness and went back into the bedroom to wake Asahi up.

Asahi was sprawled beneath the covers, almost on his stomach. His hair fell across his face. His arm, the one that had been around Nishinoya, stretched toward the end of the bed where he had been earlier. Nishinoya wanted to crawl back underneath that arm, to burrow under the blankets next to Asahi’s warm body. He wanted to turn off Asahi’s alarm and make him sleep in. One more day… couldn’t he have just one more day? But no. It would be selfish. He needed to minimize the damage he was causing.

Nishinoya came up beside the bed. He leaned over with one hand on the mattress until he could reach Asahi’s shoulder with the other. “Asahi-san,” he said softly, as he gave him a shake.
“Hm…”

“Are you ready to get up?”

His eyes were still closed. “Mmnn… what?”

“It’s morning,” Nishinoya told him. “You should get up.”

Asahi slowly lifted his head off the pillow and blinked blearily. “What?” he said again.

Despite his anxiety, Nishinoya couldn’t help the cautious affectionate spark that lit somewhere inside him. He managed to smile and sat down on the bed. “Hey,” he said. “I made coffee. I’ll make you a proper breakfast too.”

Asahi’s eyes finally began to clear, and he rolled over in the bed. “Breakfast?” he mumbled.

Nishinoya leaned down over him. “Yeah, don’t you know it’s good for you?”

“Hmmmmm…” Asahi rubbed his face with one huge hand. “Sounds like some kinda anti-sleep propaganda to me.”

“Now that’s just quitter talk.”

“Oh yeah?” Asahi returned. “You think so, huh?” Nishinoya didn’t manage to see Asahi’s sly smile before he grabbed Nishinoya’s shoulders and tugged him down onto his chest. “Maybe you should join me in the quitter’s club.”

Nishinoya opened his mouth to respond; he wasn’t able to speak before Asahi put a hand around the back of his neck and kissed him. A moment passed, and then another, until Asahi’s grip loosened and he pulled back.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Aren’t you…” Nishinoya fumbled for the words. “You’re not still mad?”

“Mad?” Asahi echoed.

“About last night.”

Comprehension touched Asahi’s face, then he took on a sheepish expression. “Ah,” he said. “No.” Asahi smoothed his hand over the back of Nishinoya’s head. “I think I probably overreacted.”

Nishinoya felt his hands shake where they were braced against the mattress. He clutched them into fists and tried to ignore the way his heart seemed to be fluttering out of rhythm. “It’s okay,” he said. “I was wrong too.”

After they clambered out of the bed, Nishinoya went back into the kitchen to cook, while Asahi got ready to go to work. It was nearing eight o’clock by the time Asahi came back out into the main room, clean-shaven and dressed in a polo and dark slacks. His hair was tied back neatly in a bun, which did terrible things to Nishinoya’s stomach and heart as a wave of nostalgia passed through him.

“Wow,” Asahi said, as he took in the array of dishes laid out on the counter. “You made a lot.”

“There’s some for now and some for later,” Nishinoya explained. “Breakfast and lunch.”
The look that passed over Asahi’s face at that statement – Nishinoya tried to take a snapshot of it with his brain, tried to log it away someplace where he would never forget it. “You didn’t have to do that,” Asahi said.

“I wanted to,” Nishinoya returned. His heart kept doing the wonky thing, throbbing off-tempo in his chest.

“Thank you,” Asahi said softly.

They ate breakfast at Asahi’s low table just as they had the previous two days. Nishinoya felt the moments slipping out between them like sand in an hourglass. He tried to grasp each thing Asahi said, the sound of his voice; he tried to log the shape of his jaw, the curve of his ear, the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. Nishinoya tried with everything he had in him to stay calm and not give away the fact that all his insides felt like they were being slowly torn out through his bellybutton. He hid his hands in his lap under the table. He’d made the mistake of drinking a huge cup of coffee, thinking it would help him get through the day without sleep; instead it just made his hands tremble uncontrollably.

The clock on the stove read 8:35 when Asahi sighed and stretched. “I guess I should go,” he said.

Nishinoya clenched his hands so tight that his nails cut into his palms. “Yeah,” he said.

Asahi stood up and moved to take his plate, but Nishinoya cut in with, “No, I’ll take care of the dishes, you go.” Just go, he thought desperately. If he had to hold on a moment longer, he’d crumble and the whole thing would shatter.

Asahi grinned at him sympathetically. “If you just want to rinse them and put them in the sink, that’s fine.”

Nishinoya looked at the table and nodded. He carefully clambered to his feet as well – perhaps too fast; he felt slightly dizzy and off-center – and followed Asahi to the door.

“I’ll be back after five,” Asahi said, and Nishinoya nodded as he stared at a point on Asahi’s chest. “Feel free to hang around as much as you want. If you feel like going out, there is a spare key in my nightstand.”

“Sure,” Nishinoya mumbled.

Asahi’s hand touched his chin and tipped his face upward. Nishinoya tried to keep his expression neutral as he met Asahi’s eyes. “I’m sorry to leave you,” Asahi said. “Will you be okay while I’m gone?”

“Of course I will,” Nishinoya insisted. “I can handle myself.”

Asahi smiled, but his eyebrows were still turned down at the ends. “Okay,” he said. “Call me if you need anything. I mean it.”

“I’ll be fine, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said. “Just go.”

“Alright.” Asahi leaned forward, still holding his chin, and Nishinoya closed his eyes. Asahi’s lips were soft and warm, slightly parted – his mouth hit slightly high, his lower lip slipping between Nishinoya’s. Nishinoya still kept his hands fisted at his sides; he didn’t trust himself to do anything else. When Asahi pulled back, Nishinoya tried not to lean with him as he went. Asahi rubbed the corner of Nishinoya’s mouth with his thumb, then he stepped away. “See you tonight,” he said, as he reached for the handle.
Nishinoya nodded. He couldn’t speak.

Asahi gave him the anxious smile again, then he opened the door and went out. It closed behind him. Nishinoya heard him go down the creaky stairs. Then there was nothing. Asahi was gone.

Nishinoya crumpled in place, hunching down over his knees with his hands in his hair, and fought back the desperate wail that surged up his throat. “Asahi-san,” he sobbed, “Asahi-san.” He grabbed at his shirt as his breath became sharp and tight – his heart was still pounding in an irregular pattern. “Fuck!” he shouted. "Fuck! FUUUUCCK!

He stayed curled on the floor like that for a long time, until he finally managed to get his breathing under control. His hands kept shaking, but that was from the lack of sleep and the coffee.

He was still supposed to see Tanaka – could he even see him in that state? But no, no, he couldn’t flake again, not after the other day. It would just have to be a brief visit, just a show of good faith. And wouldn’t it make him feel better? Tanaka always seemed to make him feel better.

Nishinoya broke a plate as he tried to clear the dishes, which almost sent him back into another frenzy. At that point he gave up – dirty dishes were better than ruined ones, after all – and went to the bedroom to change and pack.

He didn’t have very much scattered around, and it only took a few minutes for him to grab everything. He tracked down his charger and his deodorant, his dirty clothes, the old flannel he’d worn on his first day in. He shoved it all into his bag without stopping. He left the jacket Mrs. Azumane had lent him laid out on the bed where Asahi would find it. Nishinoya didn’t hesitate for a single moment until he found his watch on top of Asahi’s dresser.

Nishinoya held the watch up. It was easily the nicest thing he owned – considerably more expensive than any of the other accessories that he ever picked out for himself. Detailed in black and silver, the round face of it was burnished and shining under the delicate hands as they ticked along their assigned path. It had a black leather band and a sturdy buckle closure. It made Nishinoya feel sick to his stomach.

He opened the top drawer. He shoved the watch underneath a stack of Asahi’s boxers. Then he closed the drawer again, and leaned his forehead against the top of the dresser while he silently counted to ten. He took a deep breath through his nose and pushed away; he continued tracking down his remaining few possessions.

In the front room he halted. He had packed everything; he had double-checked the bedroom and the bathroom – not that it mattered that much to him, of course. But anything to keep him there for a moment longer, anything to prolong his inevitable departure. He knew he’d never be back in that apartment again. He thought briefly about leaving a note on the counter, but what would it say? Sorry I showed up. Sorry I made you take care of me. Sorry I couldn’t even be considerate enough to say goodbye.

Finally he had to admit to himself that there was no good reason to stay any longer. He hiked his bag up his shoulder and walked to the door. There, Nishinoya froze with his hand halfway to the handle. His hands still trembled; his heart still thundered a staccato beat. “Oh fuck it,” he said quietly.

He turned on his heel and stalked back toward the kitchen. He opened a cabinet and reached in. He moved quickly, afraid to stop for even a second, afraid that reason might catch up with him. He wrapped the mug up in a t-shirt and shoved it down into his bag. Then he ran for the door again, opened it and stepped through, out into the world beyond.
By the time Nishinoya got to the Tanaka household, the shaking in his hands had taken over the rest of his body. He’d barely been able to send a few texts to Tanaka, asking where he was and if he was awake. At their front door he paused before going for the handle – in the past, he’d always just barged right in; he’d never worried about whether he was welcome or not. Now he clenched his hand into a fist, then extended his index finger and pressed the doorbell instead.

There was shouting inside the house, one voice high-pitched and the other low, and then the door opened and Tanaka stood grinning behind it. “Hey, Noya, you–” His face fell. “Oh, uh…are you okay?”

Nishinoya burst into tears.

Tanaka’s hands flew up. “Woah, woah, holy shit.”

Nishinoya covered his eyes with one hand and held his bag with the other in the white-knuckled grip. “C-can I come i-in?” he hiccuped between sobs.

“Yeah, I mean, yeah, of course,” Tanaka returned. Nishinoya felt a hand grab his shoulder and tug him inside the door.

The interior of the house smelled just the right kind of familiar, like Saturday afternoons and rainy days during summer. Nishinoya took deep gulping breaths of it, soaking in the air around him, swallowing up the house that had been a second home to him.

“Uh,” Tanaka said beside him, “are you okay?” His hand was still on Nishinoya’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya finally managed, as he began to calm down. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s okay.”

Tanaka eyed him nervously. “Did something happen?”

Nishinoya shook his head. “No, no,” he said, “I’m just…” His throat closed up again. He stopped talking.

“…you wanna come upstairs?” Tanaka asked, and Nishinoya nodded. Tanaka led him by the shoulder out of the foyer and into the front hallway. His mother appeared in the open doorway of the kitchen at the end of the hall, and Tanaka gestured frantically for her to go away.

“Don’t be rude to your mother, Ryuunosuke,” she said irritably, but she went back into the kitchen.

They went up to Tanaka’s bedroom. He pulled open the sliding door and pushed Nishinoya inside, then closed it behind them. After that, he finally released Nishinoya’s shoulder. “You’re freakin’ me out,” he said. “Are you really okay? You don’t seem okay, Noya.”

“I’m…” Nishinoya swallowed hard. He couldn’t bring himself to lie anymore. “I’m going back today,” he said softly. “Back to Chiba.”

Tanaka leaned back. “Just like that? Did you ever go see your family?”

Nishinoya’s heart was doing the weird pattern again. He could feel the flutter in the center of his chest, like a bird stuck inside. “No…” he said. He chose not to tell Tanaka about the run-in with Suzume.

“Noya…”
“Don’t,” Nishinoya bit out. “Don’t start with me. I can’t fuckin’ do it, Ryuu. I can’t see them.”

“It ain’t gonna get easier the longer you put it off, I mean your mom can be scary but–”

“I can’t do it!” Nishinoya shouted, and Tanaka took a step backwards. Nishinoya clutched the front of his shirt. His heart, his heart, why wouldn’t it calm down?

“Noya,” Tanaka said, “what the fuck?”

“Please,” he choked. “Stop.” It was racing, his chest hurt – what the fuck? Was it a heart attack? Could that even be possible?

“Are you – Noya, what’s wrong?”

He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, his vision was graying out – holy shit, was he going to die? That didn’t seem fair to Tanaka, if Nishinoya died in the middle of his bedroom – still, at least he was with family, at least he wasn’t alone.

He could hear yelling from far away. Nishinoya suddenly realized his eyes were closed, so he opened them and found himself staring at the ceiling of Tanaka’s room. He was half-laying on the floor with his legs bent under him – how had that happened? His knees hurt. Tanaka was holding him around his ribs, and he was shouting for his mother.

Mrs. Tanaka came barrelling into the room; the door nearly came off its runner as she slammed it open.

“Mom!” Tanaka cried above him. “Mom, help!”

Mrs. Tanaka was already down on her knees by Nishinoya’s side. He felt her arm go under his shoulders; her other hand pressed down against his chest. Nishinoya wanted to tell her he was fine, but he couldn’t seem to make his mouth work yet. He felt cold all over; he was shivering uncontrollably.

“Call your father,” Mrs. Tanaka said. Tanaka scrambled to his feet and went out the door. To Nishinoya she said, “alright, my boy, you’re alright, my dear. Come on, now. I have you. I’ll take care of you. You’re alright.”

Nishinoya managed to lift his hand to grab hers against his chest. She would take care of him. Mrs. Tanaka always had. She would know what to do. He pressed his face into her. He closed his eyes and listened to her heartbeat.

He had almost stopped shaking by the time he heard Tanaka’s footsteps outside the bedroom.

“Mom, is he…”

“He’s fine, he was hyperventilating. It was a panic attack.”

What, Nishinoya thought. That didn’t seem like it could be right. He opened his eyes and peered over his shoulder, and saw Tanaka looking terrified in the doorway.

“Are you sure? He fell…”

“He just got a little faint. He didn’t pass out, it’s alright. He’s okay. Aren’t you, my dear?” This last question she directed at Nishinoya.

“Y-yeah,” he returned shakily. His throat was dry. He felt sick to his stomach. “I’m okay,” he said.
To Tanaka, he said, “I’m…I’m sorry.”

Tanaka didn’t respond to him. He looked back at his mother. “Pop called his parents, they’re coming over.”

Nishinoya sat up abruptly, shoving away from Mrs. Tanaka. He still felt dizzy. “No,” he said, “no, please.”

“You’re being ridiculous, Yuu.”

“No!” he cried. “Call them back! Tell them not to come!”

“Calm down, Yuu, you’ll make yourself sick again.”

Nishinoya was crying again. He looked desperately at Tanaka, who looked like he might cry too. “Please don’t do this to me!” he begged. “Aren’t you my friend? Please, Ryuu?”

Mrs. Tanaka grabbed his arm. Her nails dug painfully into his skin. “They’re already on their way, Yuu. This isn’t his fault. It’s yours.”

“No…” Nishinoya repeated weakly.

“You’re hurting people, dear,” Mrs. Tanaka said. “You’ve hurt Ryuuunosuke, and you’ve hurt your family.”

Nishinoya curled on himself. He hugged his arms around his body and pressed his eyes into his knees. “I can’t, I can’t,” he said.

“You are going to,” Mrs. Tanaka told him. “This has gone on long enough.”

“Mom…”

“Go put a kettle on, Ryuuunosuke.”

Her hand was still on Nishinoya’s arm. She pulled on it, hard. “Sit up, Yuu. There’s nothing to be done for it now. I’ll stay with you until your mother and father get here.”

“Please, Mrs. Tanaka,” he whimpered against his knees. “Don’t make me do this.”

Her voice softened. “Oh, Yuu…” Nishinoya managed to lift his head and look at her. “I know I seem like a terrible bitch right now,” she said, “but I am a terrible bitch because I love you. You may not believe me, but I do. Now, come on, dear. Let’s wash your face. They’ll be here soon.”

Nishinoya let her pull him to his feet. He let her take him into the bathroom, and he let her wipe his face with a washcloth, like he was a child. Then Nishinoya let her lead him downstairs and sit him at the table with a blanket around his shoulders and a cup of tea in front of him. Tanaka sat on the other side of the table, peering at him with a heart-rending expression – concern, guilt, fear, anger. Nishinoya wanted to say he was sorry, but he didn’t have the words for it anymore.

His parents showed up in just under a half an hour. Mrs. Tanaka went to answer the door – Nishinoya thought briefly about bolting, going out the back door, but he was tired, he was so tired, he was so sick of running away. He heard his father’s voice in the hallway. He closed his eyes and put his head down on the table.

“Yuu,” his mother’s voice said, only a moment later.
“Mrs. Nishinoya,” Tanaka said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Ryuunosuke,” she returned.

Nishinoya felt an arm go around his shoulders. He slowly sat up. His eyes first met Tanaka’s across the table. Then Nishinoya turned his head, looked up, and saw his dad standing over him.

“Come on, son,” his dad said. “Let’s go home.”
“Kouyou, take him to the car. I’ll be out in a few minutes.” Nishinoya’s mother hadn’t spoken to him directly since she had first called his name. Now she wouldn’t look at him either; she stood facing toward Mrs. Tanaka with her eyes coldly locked forward.

“Yes, dear,” his dad said. He tightened his grip on Nishinoya’s shoulder and helped him to his feet. Nishinoya wanted to tell him he was perfectly capable of walking by himself, but the truth was that his legs were unsteady; he leaned on his dad more than he cared to admit.

At the door they stopped for a moment, so Nishinoya could put on his shoes with trembling hands, and slip the blanket off his shoulders. He left it in a pile in the hallway – he should’ve folded it, he thought briefly, but his dad had already opened the door.

The air outside was clean; the day was bright – how could the sun be shining, what time was it? It felt like hours and hours had passed since he’d woken Asahi up that morning. Why wasn’t his dad at work? The salon was usually open on Sundays. He was wearing a scratchy sweater. Nishinoya’s cheek rubbed against it as they walked together.

The car beeped as they approached where it was parked on the street. Nishinoya noticed belatedly that his dad had the key fob in his hand. He opened the door to the backseat and held Nishinoya’s elbow as he climbed in, then closed the door behind him. After that, his dad went around the car to the driver’s side and settled behind the steering wheel.

“Be sure to buckle your seatbelt,” his dad said in an even voice, the first words he’d spoken since they left the house. Nishinoya could see a portion his face in the rearview mirror; his expression was strange and rigid. He gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands.


“Let’s wait for your mother,” his father returned. “Buckle up,” he ordered again.

Nishinoya felt his face crumple. Hot tears slid down his cheeks once more as he grabbed the seatbelt and fastened it with a click. When he looked up again, his dad was watching him in the mirror.

“Yuu,” his dad said, and his voice was softer this time, “it’s going to be alright.”

Nishinoya nodded and rubbed at his face with the heels of his hands. God, he felt like a little kid; he couldn’t seem to stop crying. Humiliation sank into his stomach like a lead weight.

“Here she comes,” his dad said, and Nishinoya looked up to see his mother stepping down off the Tanaka’s porch. As she approached the car, he got a proper look at her expression.

When he was younger, he’d never been pleased about how much his features resembled hers – it seemed like a cruel joke that the universe had played on him, giving him both his mother’s height and her face. Later he realized how terrifying she could look when she was angry, how intense her eyes became, how intimidating and impressive she needed to be to succeed as an attorney as well as she had, and thought to himself that perhaps it was not so unfortunate. He often wondered what her clients felt like when she was on their side, how her opponents felt when she was against them.

Now, as she came toward them, practically glowing with the heat of her anger, he had some idea of the latter. When she reached the car, she opened the front passenger side, climbed up into the seat,
and slammed the door so hard that the car rocked on its shocks.

“Ria—” his dad said.


The ride back to their house was stiff and silent. Nishinoya leaned the side of his head against the window and watched the town slide past. The path was well-known to him, but little details had changed since the time his parents used to drive him back and forth to the Tanaka’s with regularity. A familiar building had burned and was now condemned, a particular shop had changed hands and bore a new name, an empty lot sat where a playground used to be. It somehow felt both known and unknown, both old and new. He felt himself drifting, the sensation almost like drunkenness, sliding in and out of rational thought and halfway into dreams. He dreamt that the road was flowing beneath the car, the pavement loose and surging like the ocean, dark and thick enough to suck down the tires and swallow them up. He dreamt that he was six years old on the way home from school; he’d gotten in trouble for cursing in class, even though he hadn’t known what the word meant, only that it got a reaction from his teacher. He dreamt he was on the train back to campus, that everything was fine, that he’d wake up in his dorm room and go off to morning practice and classes after – he dreamt the last six months of his life was nothing more than a mirage.

“Yuu,” his dad said, and Nishinoya woke up with a start. The car had stopped moving; they were home. His mother was already gone from the seat in front of him. Nishinoya’s dad stood beside him outside the opened door, his hand on Nishinoya’s shoulder.

“Dad,” he croaked. His throat was dry. He must’ve been breathing through his mouth. He wondered if he had snored.

“Let’s go inside, come on.”

Inside the house, Nishinoya could hear the television going in the living room. He could hear the creak of someone moving upstairs. The house was warm and bright, completely transformed from the empty quietness that had hung over everything when he had come with Asahi. Had that only been two days earlier? That didn’t seem quite possible.

Nishinoya hung back in the foyer while his father dropped his knapsack aside, slipped into house shoes, and stepped up into the hallway. He clutched at the front of his shirt with both hands.

“Dad…” he said again, desperately, to his retreating back. “Are you…are you mad at me?”

His father froze for a moment. Then he put his hands on his hips and sighed heavily. “Yes,” he said. “I am.”

Nishinoya swallowed hard. “I didn’t mean for—”

“I know, Yuu.” His dad half-turned in place, so that Nishinoya could see his expression. His face was calmer than it had been earlier. “We can talk about it later after you’ve had some rest.”

Nishinoya still held onto his shirt. He couldn’t seem to make his feet move forward. He lowered his gaze to his father’s chest and gave him a short nod in response.

“Oh, come on,” his dad said. He stepped back toward him, pausing at the lip of the hallway, and lifted his arms. “Come inside.”

Nishinoya felt something break. He dropped his hands. He stepped forward into his father’s arms. “What about Mom?” he mumbled into the scratchy fabric of his sweater.
“Yeah, she’s pretty pissed off.” His dad put his hands on his shoulders and gently pushed him back. “She’ll calm down in a little while, and then we’ll all sit down and talk about everything.”

“All?” Nishinoya echoed.

“Well, you and your mother and I.”

Nishinoya looked down. “...did Suzume...?”

“Did Suzume what?”

“Ah…” Maybe he’d never stop feeling so ashamed. “Nevermind.”

His father stepped back. “You’re exhausted. Why don’t you go lay down for a bit?” he said. “We can talk later.”

“Oh,” Nishinoya mumbled. He stepped around his dad in the hallway and went for the stairs. As he passed the archway that led to the kitchen and dining room, he could see his mother banging around through the cabinets with her back to him. Nishinoya ducked his head and quickened his pace. At the base of the stairs, he looked up and saw Suzume standing at the top.

She didn’t say anything as he came up the staircase toward her, only stood there with her feet planted apart and her hands on her hips. She blocked his path into the hall, so he stopped two steps below her. “Suzu, what is it.”

“Did I do what, Brother?” she spat. She turned and stomped toward her room, then slammed the door behind her.

“Suzume!” his mother shouted from down below. Nishinoya booked it up the last few steps and down the hall toward his own door.

“Suzume!” his mother shouted from down below. Nishinoya booked it up the last few steps and down the hall toward his own door.

Taka’s door was cracked. Nishinoya saw one dark eye peek out at him and then quickly away. Nishinoya couldn’t help but smile a little. He stepped over and pushed the door the rest of the way open. “Hey, kiddo,” he said.

Taka stood just inside the door, wringing his hands. “Sorry,” he said, “I didn’t want to bother you.”

Something twinged inside. “You don’t bother me, Taka.” As Nishinoya stepped closer, he realized that Taka’s sightline was just above his own. That was new. “Wow, you’re getting tall.”

“Not as tall as Dad,” Taka insisted.

“He’s not that tall,” Nishinoya returned. “You might pass him.”

“Oh, I hope not.”

Taka still looked anxious. Nishinoya cleared his throat and looked aside. “How is school going? You liking junior high?”

“I don’t know,” Taka replied. “It’s okay I guess.”

“Well–”

“I’m sorry, Brother!” Taka said quickly. “I didn’t mean to keep you from resting!”

“Taka, I’m fine–”
“Mom said we should leave you alone for awhile! She said you weren’t feeling well.”

“Mom said–”

“I just wanted to see you, I wanted to know you were okay. You can go to your room.”

Nishinoya put his hand on his forehead and groaned. “Well, shit.”

“Brother…”

“Taka, I’m – I’m–” Nishinoya looked back at his brother’s face and saw there the apprehension, the nervousness, the unhappiness. He lowered his hand. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. He stepped out of Taka’s room and moved down to his own.

In the hallway, he could hear his mother and Suzume arguing in her room. He put his hand on his chest and rubbed his sternum with the heel of his hand. It still ached from earlier, though the panic had subsided. He reached his door, turned the knob, and went in.

The room looked exactly the same as it had two days before. He could even see the rumpled depressions in his comforter where he and Asahi had sat together on the bed. The old picture frame was set aside, on his desk. Nishinoya picked it up and flopped down on his back in bed.

He looked at the photo of the two of them. He took in his own wide grin, Asahi’s glowering frown. He smiled despite himself; Asahi had never been very photogenic, had he?

Nishinoya flipped the frame over. He undid the fastenings and pulled the backing off. Carefully, he extracted the photo from where it was folded over and wedged tightly in the small frame, and then set the frame aside. His hands shook as he turned the photo back around.

Him and Asahi, Asahi and him. Nishinoya’s eyes blurred. He unfolded the rest of the photograph, revealing everyone else in their old team. They all looked so pleased. He remembered the day being bittersweet – it had hurt more than he had expected to say goodbye to all the third years. Daichi and Suga, Kiyoko and…

“Asahi,” he whispered aloud. Nishinoya pulled the photo down against his chest and held it there with both hands. He closed his eyes and tears ran down his temples. “Asahi.”

He’d been too stupid to really admit it to himself back then, of course. It was embarrassing, actually, how oblivious he was – more oblivious than other members of their team, if Tanaka was to be believed. He had been able to tuck the feelings away under a hundred things, his last year in high school, getting the team once more to the prefecture finals, then trying to get into college – the entrance exam almost destroyed him, but Ennoshita had helped him cram every night after practice, and he finally managed to scrape the scores together. Nishinoya had been so excited, feeling like everything was sliding into place. It had been easy to shove it aside back then; it had been easy to dismiss the little twinge that would pop up from time to time as a simple homesickness, the bittersweet nostalgia of an old admiration.

But he’d been in love with Asahi all that time, hadn’t he?

Tanaka had been right about him – of course, Tanaka was always right about him. Oh, god, Nishinoya thought. His friend, his best friend, what would he say the next time he saw him, how could he ever apologize enough for what had just happened between them. Nishinoya flung an arm over his face. How many people had he hurt? His friends back on the team, his family, the Tanakas, and Asahi…
He rolled over onto his side, facing the wall. He set the picture beside him on the mattress. He wondered if he wished hard enough, if he prayed, if he promised to live a life from then on that was honest and true – maybe something somewhere would hear him, and reset his life at the age of seventeen, when he had the whole world ahead of him and no fear of anything.

Nishinoya slept on and off through most of the afternoon. Once, he woke fitfully, feeling hot and smothered in his clothes – he pulled off his shirt and shucked out of his jeans before he noticed the glass of water and pack of crackers sitting on his desk. He’d left his phone on silent, so he didn’t hear the messages that came in. There were a couple from Tanaka, asking if he was alright and to call when he got the chance. There was only one from Asahi, sent around midday – probably his lunch break. It was short, only eleven words: How are you doing? Let me know if you need anything. It made Nishinoya think about what Asahi might come home to – broken dishes, an empty apartment, and no explanation.

He really was an asshole, wasn’t he?

It was after four o’clock before he finally began to feel human again, but mostly he really had to pee. Nishinoya slipped on a fresh t-shirt and a pair of athletic shorts and went for his door. He put his ear against the wood before he opened it, listening for any sort of movement or sound, any hint of someone in the hallway beyond. After that, he turned the knob as slowly and silently as possible, and opened the door the barest crack. The coast seemed to be clear, so he pushed the door open and stepped into the hall.

He was coming out of the toilet when he ran into Suzume in the hallway.

“Suzu–”

She halted right in front of him. He couldn’t believe how much her angry face looked like their mother’s. She had kept his secret, hadn’t she? She had planned to keep it just as she promised in front of the shop.

“Oh, Suzu,” he whispered brokenly, before he threw his arms around her and hugged her tightly. He pressed his face into her shoulder as she froze in place.

“Yuu.”

Nishinoya lifted his head. Their mother stood at the top of the stairs. Though her expression wasn’t exactly happy, it had lost some of the furious edge it had held at the Tanaka’s. She was carrying another glass of water, another packet of crackers.

His eyes filled with tears. He pushed Suzume out at arm’s length and let her go. “Mom,” he said. He put the heel of his hand against one eye. “Mom, I–”

His mother stepped toward them. She handed the snacks to Suzume, who stood dumbfounded off to the side. Then she took his shoulder in one hand, put the other around the back of his head, and pulled him down against her shoulder.

Nishinoya breathed against her. He clutched his fingers into her shirt. He closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and let the agony come out.

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Later, after he had washed his face, he sat with his parents around the dining table. His siblings had been banished upstairs; Suzume had not spoken a word since his breakdown in the hallway. His mother sat across the table, and his father was beside him with his arm over the back of
Nishinoya’s chair. It made him feel a little bit less like he was being investigated for some sort of terrible crime.

“So, you’ve been on probation for about a month?” his dad asked.

Nishinoya nodded and stared at the table.

“Did you plan on telling us?” his mother asked.

“I don’t know,” Nishinoya admitted. “Probably I would’ve, eventually.”

“Eventually doesn’t really help us much after you’ve already flunked out.”

“Ria.”

“I didn’t say it was a good plan,” Nishinoya said.

“Let’s start with why you’re on probation,” his dad suggested.

Nishinoya chewed on his lip. “Grades,” he said. “And I got in a fight. And I was messing up a lot, making really sloppy mistakes. Coach probably would’ve just benched me if not for the fight.”

“Yuu…” His mother pinched the bridge of her nose. “I thought you had grown out of this sort of thing.”

“I know,” he mumbled.

“What was the fight about?”

“It was stupid, there was no good reason for it.”

“Yuu.”

“I’m serious!” Nishinoya insisted. “He just said some crap and then I said some crap and then he slugged me.”

His dad sighed and leaned an elbow on the table. “Yuu, you can’t keep doing this sort of thing. You’ll lose what you’ve worked so hard for.”

Nishinoya hunched over but didn’t respond, and they were quiet for a time. Gradually, he became aware of his phone buzzing in his pocket. He dug it out and looked at the outer display.

Asahi was calling him.

Nishinoya’s head shot up to the clock on the wall – it was already after five. Asahi must’ve made it home.

“Are you listening to me? Put your phone away.”

He looked across at his mother; she did not look pleased. “Sorry!” he said quickly. “I really need to answer this!”

“Yuu!” his mother said sharply, but he was already pushing back his chair and standing up. He stepped toward the hallway, opening the phone as he went.

“Hey,” he said.
He closed his eyes, internally breathing a sigh of relief, as Asahi’s voice sounded in his ear.

“Hello?” Asahi said, when it took a moment for Nishinoya to speak again.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya said shakily, “sorry, I’m here.”

“Are you alright? Where are you?”

“I’m fine. At my house.”

“With your parents?”

“Yeah…”

“Well, okay…” Asahi’s voice was awkward. There was an undercurrent of disappointment, which Nishinoya couldn’t understand. “I just wanted to know that you were okay. You can call me later if you want, but you–”

“Asahi.” Nishinoya swallowed hard. His throat hurt. He tried not to say the words, not to give into the selfishness again, but they came out anyway. “Can you…come?”

“To your house?”

“Yeah.” Nishinoya buried the fingers of his free hand in his hair and tugged hard. What was he doing? Couldn’t he just leave it alone?

“Of course,” Asahi returned. “I’ll be there soon.”

His mother’s voice sounded behind him from the dining room. “Yuu!”

“I gotta go,” Nishinoya said quickly. “Please come.”

“I’m on my way, I’m leaving now.”

Nishinoya’s voice wobbled. “Thank you,” he said.

“See you soon,” Asahi said.

Nishinoya nodded. He took the phone away from his ear and clicked it shut.

“Yuu,” his dad said, close behind him. Nishinoya turned and saw him standing in the archway. “Come sit down.”

Back at the table, his mother was frowning. “I hope, for your sake, that was important,” she said.

“It was the friend I’ve been staying with,” Nishinoya admitted as he settled back into the chair.

“Yes, I was able to get it out of Ryuunosuke,” she said. “Apparently you’ve been in town for awhile.”

“Not that long,” he mumbled.

“Long enough,” his mother said tightly.

“Yuu,” his dad said, with a quick glance at his wife, “we’ve been very worried about you. It wasn’t
fair to us for you to behave this way.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“We need to be able to communicate with each other,” his dad continued.

“I know,” Nishinoya repeated.

“Why did you come home in the first place? Why didn’t you come here?”

Nishinoya bit the inside of his cheek. “I...I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just had to...get out of there. Get away from everything.”

His parents exchanged a look. Finally, his mother spoke, “how long have you felt like this?”

“Since spring.”

Another look. His dad slid his hand off the back of the chair and onto Nishinoya’s shoulder. “Yuu, why didn’t you tell us?”

He tried to swallow back the tears and mostly succeeded. “I didn’t want to let you down,” he said.

His mother sighed. “If you were worried about school, we could have arranged more tutors or extra lessons.” She rubbed her temples with her fingers. “If we had known, we could have helped you.”

Nishinoya looked aside. “I’m sorry,” he said again, his voice unsteady. “I know I messed up. I should’ve...I should’ve tried harder.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” she said, and he glanced back toward her. His mother put her hands down on the table. “We are your parents, Yuu. If you feel like you need help, you should feel like you can come to us. We should be the first ones you go to.”

“It concerns us that you don’t seem to feel that way,” his dad added.

Nishinoya lowered his eyes and twisted his hands together in his lap. “It...it wasn’t like that...”

“We need you to be absolutely honest with us, Yuu. We need you to be absolutely honest with yourself. Why didn’t you tell us how you felt?”

Nishinoya continued staring at the table as though it could give him an answer. Finally, he managed to string together a few words. “Maybe I didn’t know I felt like this,” he said quietly. “Not at first, at least. And then by the time I realized something was off, it seemed like it had grown too big.” He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the sensation. “I didn’t have any words for what it was.” When he opened his eyes again, he found them both watching him, waiting for him to finish. “I guess, I just thought that…” A thin smile tightened his face. “I thought that if I tried to ignore it and just keep moving like I always had, eventually it would go away, and I’d be fine. Like I had always been before.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Guess it didn’t work out so great this time.”

His mother rapped her manicured fingernails on the table a few times as she contemplated his answer. “Tell me what happened at the Tanaka’s,” she said.

Nishinoya felt his shoulders tense. “What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean.”
“I was just upset,” he mumbled.

His mother’s nostrils flared. “Now, listen,” she said, “you know my bullshit meter is very fine-tuned – professionally fine-tuned, in fact. So, I’ll ask you again. What happened with the Tanaka’s?”

His shame was so intense that he almost felt nauseous. “You talked to them, didn’t you?”

Nishinoya mumbled. “You already know.”

His mother frowned, but she didn’t repeat the question. “Has this happened before?”

“No…”

“I can’t believe you did that to poor Ryuunosuke, I’ve never seen him look so frightened. I hope you at least had the decency to let him know you were alright.”

Nishinoya swallowed hard against the lump that still stuck in his throat. “It’s not like I did it on purpose…”

“Tell us what happened, Yuu,” his dad said.

Nishinoya had to look away from the intensity of his mother’s glare. His lips trembled. He closed his eyes and was furious with himself when he felt another tear slip out. “I was planning to go back to school,” he admitted. “I got really scared.” What else could he say? He couldn’t tell them about Asahi, about how he’d ruined everything, about how he hadn’t even been able to say goodbye. And that was only a small part of the story, anyway.

“Scared of what?”

“I…I don’t know,” he said. “Everything. Going back. Talking to you. Talking to anyone, really. I just wanted…” He rubbed his cheek with the heel of his hand. “I was so tired. I didn’t want to see anybody. I just wanted to go to sleep.” His voice petered out as he concluded with, “I was gonna sleep on the train.”

“Are you still planning to go back?” his dad asked.

Nishinoya laced his fingers together in his lap and cracked his knuckles one by one. “No,” he said, at length.

“No, not right now, or no, not at all?”

He shook his head without responding, and his mother sighed.

“What do you want us to do?” she asked.

Nishinoya shrugged in response.

“That’s not very helpful.”

“Ria,” his dad said.

“Well, it isn’t.”

Nishinoya mumbled, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Now his dad sighed. “Tell us about your classes,” he said.
They talked for awhile, discussing Nishinoya’s chem scores and his third attempt at passing statistics – “Haven’t you retained anything?” his mother asked in exasperation. He’d only been to his kinesthiology class a few of times since the semester began.

“It’s still early in this term,” his dad said. “Examinations aren’t until February, right?”

Nishinoya nodded. He was still behind on his program requirements; it was going to take at least one extra semester. What would he do if it took longer than that?

“So nothing’s unfixable right now. There’s still time to get things back on track.”

“Yeah,” Nishinoya muttered.

“And you’ve been on probation before, it’s unfortunate, but you know that you’ll get yourself back out of it.”

“Yeah...”

“So we just have to put some grease in the wheels and get things sorted out.”

“...yeah...”

Nishinoya’s mother had been staring at him the entire time his dad had spoken. After Nishinoya’s third unenthusiastic response, she cut in. “Yuu, we’re not interested in you agreeing with us just to get us to shut up. You should know by now that shutting up isn’t something our family can do well.”

He felt the corner of his mouth go up. “I guess not,” he said.

“Where do you see yourself in a year?” she asked.

Nishinoya shook his head. “I can’t see that far ahead,” he mumbled.

“In a month then.”

“I...”

“I’ll shorten the scope,” she said. “Do you see yourself back at school? Or here at home.”

Nishinoya didn’t know how explain that all he saw in front of him was an impossible dark nothingness, a future of living with all the mistakes that threw his life off track. So he said nothing.

The silence was broken by a knock on the door. Nishinoya sat up straight. He didn’t miss the confused look that passed between his parents.

“Who is that?” his mother asked, and his dad shook his head in response.

“It’s my friend,” Nishinoya said, drawing their attention back to him. “I asked him to come. For back-up.”

“Back-up!” his dad laughed, even as his mother leaned forward.

“You’re bringing a stranger into this discussion?”

“He’s not a stranger,” Nishinoya said. “He’s my friend.” He pushed back from the table and went for the door.
When he pulled the door back, Asahi stood on the stoop, still in his work clothes but considerably more unkempt than he had been that morning. He had mud on his pants and his shirt was wet. Stray hair was plastered to his forehead. Nishinoya realized it was raining outside. It had been sunny when they left the Tanaka house, but that was hours earlier. He hadn’t even noticed...

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said, shame already hot inside him, “you didn’t have to–”

“I promised, didn’t I?” Asahi said. He was out of breath, like he had been running.

Nishinoya felt the twinge again, deep inside. God, he was still in love with him; he was still in love with Asahi. And he had already fucked it all up.

“Come in, you dummy,” he muttered. “Why didn’t you bring an umbrella?”

“It wasn’t raining at my apartment,” Asahi insisted, as he came dripping into the foyer. Nishinoya wasn’t sure if he believed him, but when Asahi turned that sympathetic smile onto him, the relief that hit Nishinoya was so acute that it almost took his knees out from under him.

Suddenly he didn’t care – he didn’t care that Asahi was soaking wet, that his parents were down the hall, that he’d had every intention of walking back out of Asahi’s life and never bothering him again. Nishinoya went straight toward him, pausing on the lip of the hallway, where he could just reach Asahi’s shoulder if he stretched into the foyer. He grabbed a handful of Asahi’s shirt and pulled him forward.

Asahi’s hands hit on his upper arms, maintaining a safe distance between them. “You shouldn’t,” he said softly. “I’m a wreck.”

Nishinoya flexed his hand against Asahi’s shoulder. He wasn’t even wearing a jacket. Nishinoya could feel how cold he was under the wet shirt, but Asahi gave no outward indication of discomfort. Standing on the raised lip over the floor of the foyer, Nishinoya was almost the same height as him. He smoothed his hand over the sleeve of Asahi’s shirt.

Asahi lifted his eyes over Nishinoya’s shoulder, looking at something behind him. Nishinoya felt the twist in his gut, the anxiety of worlds suddenly mixing. He realized he hadn’t really thought the whole thing out.

“Yuu?” his dad said.

Nishinoya’s eyes darted across Asahi’s chest. They were standing so close together – too close together – but he couldn’t seem to make himself back away.

“Is this your friend?”

Asahi pushed him back slightly, enough to look at his face. He must’ve seen that Nishinoya wasn’t able to speak yet, as he stood up straight and said over Nishinoya’s shoulder, “Hello, I’m sorry to intrude.”

There was a long moment during which the only sound was the rain dripping off Asahi’s clothes onto the floor of the foyer. Then Nishinoya’s dad spoke again. “Yuu, why don’t you get your friend some towels?”

Nishinoya lifted his eyes then, meeting Asahi’s. At length, he nodded. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Ten minutes later, they were back around the table again, but now Asahi sat on the end in his
undershirt with a towel around his shoulders. Nishinoya’s mother alternated between staring hard at him and then turning her glare onto Nishinoya.

“I’m sorry for the trouble,” Asahi said quietly, when she turned back toward him again.

“It’s no trouble, Azumane-kun,” Nishinoya’s dad assured him. “We just would’ve appreciated our son giving us some advance warning that we could expect company.”

Nishinoya shrank down, his shoulders turning inward. “I didn’t plan it ahead of time,” he said. “It just kinda came out.”

“Not that it matters,” his mother said. “If you think bringing him into this conversation means I’m going to stop asking you questions, you’re mistaken.” She turned to Asahi. “In fact, all you’ve done is give me another source of information.”

“Mom, c’mon, he didn’t do anything. It was all me.”

“Well, of course it was,” his mother agreed. “But you’re not exactly reliable right now, are you?” To Asahi, she asked, “Now, Azumane-kun, how do you know our son?” Nishinoya knew she was looking at his long hair, the tattoo on his hand. He’d been dressed for work, but the rain had destroyed that polished look.

“We were on the team together at the high school,” Asahi said.

“Oh,” she replied, sitting back in her chair. “So you’re from Karasuno.”

“Yes, my mother lives just outside of town.”

“And Yuu came to visit you?”

“Ah, well. He…” Asahi’s eyes strayed toward Nishinoya.

Nishinoya realized Asahi was trying to figure out if he should lie. “No,” he cut in, before Asahi could say anything else. “We just ran into each other.”

His mother frowned at him. “So you imposed on his generosity without any prior warning?”

“No,” Asahi said quickly, “it was no problem. I offered that he stay.”

“How did this happen?”

“Well…”

“I was drunk, okay?” Nishinoya declared. “I was bein’ stupid and I drank too much, and Asahi-san took me home with him because I couldn’t even walk straight.”

Nishinoya’s dad gave him an alarmed look, then looked at Asahi. “Is this true?”

Asahi looked down at his hands laced together on the table. “Yes,” he said. “I could tell he was upset about something.” He lifted his eyes slowly and met Nishinoya’s. “I just wanted to know he was somewhere safe.”

His mother sighed, even more loudly than before. “Well, thank you for keeping him safe,” she said. “I’m sorry that responsibility fell to you.”

“It was no burden.” The edge of Asahi’s mouth came up. “It was nice to reconnect.”
Nishinoya’s chest hurt again. He swallowed hard.

“You better be grateful for the people taking care of you,” his mother said.

“Of course I am,” Nishinoya insisted. He couldn’t bear to look at Asahi any longer, so he looked back to his mother.

“Why were you drinking so much in the first place?” his dad asked.

“Same reasons as before. I didn’t really know what I was doing.” He shrugged. “I just wanted to stop thinking for awhile.” Lastly, he added, “I guess I wanted to forget how much I’d screwed up.”

It was a long moment before his dad spoke again. “Where did you think you should be right now?”

Nishinoya turned and blinked at him. “What?”

“By whatever your original plan was. Or what you were thinking before things felt like they were going wrong. Where were you expecting to be, right now?”

Nishinoya felt his eyebrows drop down. “I don’t know, I guess,” he admitted. “I don’t know that I had planned so far ahead.”

“How do you expect to move forward without a plan?” his mother said sharply. “How do you expect to do anything without a focus?”

“Dear,” his dad said, as he waved a calming hand at her. He turned back to Nishinoya. “Here is where we are right now,” he said. He laid out his hands on the table, palms up, one at a time. “You have one more term before you either need to take your degree or enter the graduate program. Or….” He turned his hands over. “Or you come home right now and we decide some other path.”

“If you choose to come home now, you’ll probably lose that offer from Tokyo,” his mother said. “You should think hard about that one, Yuu.”


Nishinoya couldn’t look at him. His mother answered instead. “Yuu has a tentative offer to play professionally,” she said. “Depending, of course, on how the next year goes.”

In his peripheral vision, Nishinoya saw Asahi sit back heavily in his chair. “Oh…” he said.

"It's just the Challenge League," Nishinoya mumbled. "It's no big deal."

"It's a job, isn't it?" his mother insisted. "One you could start immediately after graduating."

Nishinoya kept looking at the table. "I don't know what I'd be doing for them," he said. "They didn't say what the job would be."

"It doesn't matter what the job is," his mother said, "They are planning to make a place for you in the company so they can put you on their team."

His dad spoke. "Weren't you the one who said he would rather play volleyball forever than do anything else?"

Nishinoya snuck a glance at Asahi from the corner of his eye. Asahi was staring aside, his expression conflicted and unreadable. Nishinoya returned his gaze to the center of the table.
"Do you not want that anymore?" his dad asked.

"I don't know," Nishinoya said.

He finally lifted his eyes to look at his mother across the table. Her mouth was in a tight line, her eyebrows sharply slanted over her eyes. "What do you mean, you don't know?" she asked.

"Dear," his dad said.

"No, I'm serious," she continued. "Isn't this what everything has been for? Why you put so much of yourself into volleyball at the expense of everything else?" She didn't look angry so much as confused, perhaps even slightly shocked.

Nishinoya felt his throat closing up again, which made absolutely no sense. "I thought..." he started. He shook his head. "I mean, it was never like, a plan or anything. I just made the decisions I did so I would be able to keep playing." He picked at the tabletop. "It wasn't like I was really looking ahead."

Asahi still hadn’t said anything. Nishinoya glanced at him again and found that Asahi was staring at his mother. The familiar crease was back in his forehead. At length his eyes turned back to Nishinoya’s, meeting them for a brief moment before he looked aside. It made Nishinoya’s stomach churn.

"So what do you want to do?"

His mother’s question made Nishinoya snap his attention back to her. She was giving him a very pointed look. He had the distinct impression she hadn’t missed his glance at Asahi.

“What?” Nishinoya asked.

She tapped her index finger into the table, her nail clacking against the wooden surface. “You tell us what you want to do. Your father gave you the options. Which do you choose?”

“You want me to decide right now?”

“We need to make a plan for you from here,” his mother insisted forcefully. “The only way to move forward is to make a decision.”

“Ria,” his father said, “he doesn’t need to decide tonight.”

“If not tonight, then when? It doesn’t do him any good to continue languishing—”

“He’s had a difficult enough day, he doesn’t need more—”

“Kouyou, I’m not going to let this go on another day.”

“You don’t help him by—”

“I’m not just going to watch him suffer! You expect me to do nothing—”

“Stop!” Nishinoya shouted desperately, and his parents both looked at him as though they had forgotten he was there. His hands were clenched in fists on the table. “Please, stop!” He curled over himself to press his forehead against his knuckles.

After a beat of silence, his dad said, “We’re sorry, Yuu, we didn’t mean—”
“Can’t you give me a break!” Nishinoya’s breath was hot in the pocket of air between his face and the table. “I don’t need to be reminded of how much of a failure—”

“Yuu!” his mother shouted, sharp and angry, and Nishinoya lifted his head. His eyes burned; his cheeks felt tight.

“Yuu,” she said, somewhat softer. “You’re not a failure.”

“This is just a bad patch, son,” his dad said. “It’s going to be alright.”

Nishinoya lowered his forehead to his hands again. He could feel them shaking. “Can we stop?” he asked. “I want to stop.”

His dad’s hand came down heavy on his shoulder. “Of course,” he said.

“Kouyou—”

“Of course,” his dad insisted, more forcefully.

His mother didn’t object that time, and Nishinoya breathed out a sigh of relief. He relaxed his hands, turning his wrists until his face rested in his palms. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

“Well, it’s time for dinner anyway,” his mother said irritably. “Are you staying, Azumane-kun?”

Nishinoya lifted his head abruptly. Asahi was looking at his mother with an uncertain expression; her question was a pop quiz, and he was terrified of giving the wrong answer. “I...” His eyes flicked aside to Nishinoya, as though asking for a hint on the appropriate response.

“No,” Nishinoya answered for him. “He should try to get home early. He has to work tomorrow.”

Asahi’s eyebrows came low over his eyes, and his mouth creased in a tight line. After a moment, he turned back to Nishinoya’s mother. “He’s right,” he said, “I should probably be heading back.”

“If you want, but you’re welcome to stay, of course. It wouldn’t be more than an hour.”

Asahi looked at Nishinoya again. He still had the conflicted expression. “No, sorry,” he said at length. “Thank you for the offer.” He stood up, stepped away from the table, and pushed in his chair. “Thank you for your hospitality,” he said.

“Of course, Yuu’s friends are always welcome.”

Asahi gave them a wan smile. His hands were still over the back of the chair. He absently tapped his fingers against the frame a few times. “Well,” he said, “I guess I should get my shirt.”

“I’m coming too.”

Three sets of surprised eyes turned onto Nishinoya.

“Excuse me?” his mother said.

“I’m going with him,” Nishinoya said. He looked directly at Asahi. “Right, Asahi-san?”

"O-of course," Asahi said, though his face still appeared unsure. "If... if you still want to."

"I do," Nishinoya returned.
"You should stay home, Yuu," his dad said, at the same time his mother snapped, "We're not done talking about this."

"I can come back, can't I? It's not like I'm going out of the country or something."

"Yuu—"

"Come on!" Nishinoya insisted. His brain spun its wheels for a moment, trying to find an adequate excuse. He remembered the fury on Suzume's face, the unhappiness on Taka's. He gestured toward the ceiling and the second floor above. "It's just too much to deal with right now – I can't handle making Suzu and Taka upset – I don't want to be here if it's going to make them upset."

"They'll be upset if you leave, too," his dad said, and Nishinoya deflated a bit.

He closed his hands into fists again on top of the table. "You asked me what I wanted to do right now," he said. "This is what I want to do."

His parents looked at each other once more. Nishinoya wondered, not for the first time, if they had some sort of secret telepathic connection. Finally his mother looked back at him. "I do want to talk about this more," she said.

Nishinoya nodded.

"And I do want us to make a plan forward."

He looked down at the table as his stomach twisted inside him. He nodded again.

His dad added, "But we can take some time for it. Nothing is set in stone right now."

"Then I can go?"

His mother sighed. "You're an adult, Yuu," she said. "Legally, at least. If we keep you here against your will then that's technically kidnapping."

"Dear, I don't think that's the best logic in this case…"

"As though any logic is best in this," she said.

Nishinoya slowly slid his gaze across the surface of the table, then up to where Asahi stood silently beside it, watching him carefully. "Okay," Nishinoya said. "I want to go with Asahi-san."

"I have two conditions." The severity in her tone made Nishinoya's shoulders tense up. He turned back toward her, encountering her stern expression. She raised her index finger. "First, you must swear to be honest with us through everything. You don't do yourself or us any favors when you lie or withhold information. Second..." Her middle finger went up beside the first one. "You answer the phone when I call you. No matter where you are, or who you are with. I don't care if you're asleep, I don't care if you're in the middle of class. You will answer the phone, or I will come down there and bring you home myself." Her eyes flashed as she spoke, and Nishinoya knew she meant every word.

"Yes, ma'am," he said meekly.

"You can text if you're in class," his dad appended, earning a momentary glare from his mother before she conceded.

"Alright. You can text in class."
“What if my phone is confiscated?”

“Yuu!” his mother chided, but the tightness had left her face, and his dad was hiding a grin behind
his hand. Nishinoya sat back in the chair in relief. The tightly clenched fist around his heart
loosened.

He looked again at Asahi who stood by as a silent statue, separated from their conversation by an
invisible veil. Nishinoya tried to give him a smile, to let him know the worst had passed, but Asahi
didn’t return it.

Nishinoya’s smile dropped.

“Are you heading out, then?” his dad asked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Nishinoya answered with his eyes still on Asahi. Asahi’s cheeks darkened a bit
and he looked away. Nishinoya frowned.

“You should say goodbye to Taka and Suzume,” his mother ordered. “You owe them that.”

Apprehension sank inside him. “Yeah…” Nishinoya agreed. “Alright.” He pushed away from the
table.

He left Asahi in the dining room with his parents – momentarily nervous that his mother might
interrogate him – and made his way upstairs. He skipped Suzume’s door and went for Taka’s
instead.

Nishinoya knocked briefly on the door before he grabbed the handle and pushed it partway open.
“Hey, kid, can I come in? I just wanted–”

His words cut off when he poked his head through the gap, and saw Suzume and Taka sitting
together in a circle on the floor, a haphazard shuffle of cards between them. They looked up at him
simultaneously, almost the parallel of their parents, with Suzu so much like their mother and Taka
like their dad.

Taka looked like he might’ve been crying. It hit Nishinoya like a punch in the gut.

“What?” Suzu asked. “We’re in the middle of a round and I’m winning.”

“You’re not,” Taka insisted. “You don’t know what’s in my hand, Sis.”

“I know what your face looks like when you have a good hand.”

“I’m not that bad!”

Nishinoya cut in. “Hey, guys. I’m. I’m heading out.”

The cards were forgotten as the pair clambered to their feet and came toward the door, their voices
intertwining as they spoke over each other. “You’re leaving? – You just got here – How can you
leave – Brother, I wanted to – How can you just
leave?”

Nishinoya stepped fully into the room and held out his hands, catching each of his siblings on the
shoulder. “I’m coming back,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’m coming back.”

Taka didn’t say anything, though he looked heartbroken. Suzume grabbed the front of Nishinoya’s
shirt and tugged. “This isn’t fair!” she said.
“Soon,” Nishinoya promised. “It’ll be soon, don’t worry.” He slid his hands forward, around their shoulders and their necks, and hugged his brother and sister together. They’d been so small once, he remembered. So small he could grab them both in one arm; so small he could hoist them one at a time onto his shoulders and carry them around the yard. Now Suzu was just as tall as he was, and Taka even taller. They’d be all grown up soon.

“I love you guys,” Nishinoya whispered, his voice catching. “You know that right? I love you so much.”

He felt Taka’s hand tug on the side of his shirt. Suzume put her forehead against his shoulder and kicked him hard in the foot. Nishinoya smiled. He pushed them back again. They were all three crying.

“You’re an asshole,” Suzume said.

“Sis,” Taka gasped, and Nishinoya laughed.


“Brother...”

“I mean it, boys are all terrible, don’t let them get close to her.”

“Brother, I can handle myself.”

“I know you can,” Nishinoya said. “Hell, you scared the shit outta me, y’know?”

She managed to smile through her tears. Then the smile dropped. “Brother,” she said hesitantly, “I’m...”

“No, don’t,” Nishinoya said. “I deserved every bit of it.”

She shook her head. “I don’t hate you,” she said quietly. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Nishinoya squeezed her shoulder. “I know, Suzu, it’s okay. You can hate me a little bit. I deserve it.”

“Do you really have to go?” Taka asked.

“I feel like I need to right now,” Nishinoya said. “I can’t really explain why. I promise I’ll be back soon.”

“How soon?” Suzume demanded.

“Soon,” he assured.

“Tomorrow?”

Nishinoya laughed. “Suzu, you’re as bad as Mom.”

“She’s worse,” Taka corrected.

“Only because you two are such idiots,” Suzume huffed. She reached forward and pinched Nishinoya’s ear. “When?” she asked again. “Tomorrow? Next week? Next month?”
“It can be tomorrow,” Nishinoya said. “I can come back tomorrow.”

She gave his ear a hard tug, then released it. “Okay,” she said. “Same deal as before.”

“Got it.”

Nishinoya pulled them in again. “I’ll see you soon,” he said. “I promise.” When he pushed them away once more, Suzume’s eyes were already dry. She grabbed Taka’s hand. “You better,” she said. “Don’t forget what I told you.”

Nishinoya nodded. “I won’t,” he said.

Before he went back downstairs, Nishinoya stepped into his room for a minute. He still had some clothes in his bag and didn’t really need to pack anything else, but he couldn’t help but feel he was forgetting something. His eyes fell on the photo laid out on the bed, and then Nishinoya felt like a fever had broken – he was hot then cold, then weak and sweaty after. What would he say to Asahi? How would he be able to tell him?

They had all night, he supposed. He would find the words somehow.

He was coming down the stairs when he heard Asahi’s voice in the dining room. Nishinoya paused briefly, then resumed his descent more quietly. He stepped over the creaking stair and put his weight on the bannister as he slowly came to the first floor of the house.

“I understand,” Asahi was saying. “Please feel free to call me anytime.”

Nishinoya stepped on his toes across the hallway and pressed his back against the wall. He slid along it until he reached the edge of the archway, but he stayed out of sight from the dining room and its occupants.

“We’re sorry to put this burden on you,” Nishinoya’s dad said.

“No, it’s fine,” Asahi insisted.

Nishinoya heard his mother’s voice. “And this is your address? What part of town is this?”

“It’s across the river. Probably fifteen minutes or so by car.”

“And we gave you our numbers too.”

“Yes, I put them in my phone. Let me give you my mother’s information as well.”

Nishinoya frowned. Were they all planning to babysit him without letting him know? He went back to the stairs and thumped loudly on the bottom step, which silenced the voices in the dining room. When he came through the archway, the three of them were looking at him carefully.

Nishinoya crossed his arms. “What?” he asked. He took a wide stance and stared at them hard, daring them to admit to their conspiracy.

Asahi spoke first. “Are you ready to go?” he asked. He’d regained his shirt while Nishinoya was upstairs.

“Yeah, I guess so,” he returned.

His parents followed them into the front hallway. “Remember that you can always come home, Yuu,” his dad said, placing a hand on Nishinoya’s shoulder. “Anytime, no questions.”
“Probably a few questions,” his mother corrected.

“Minimal questioning,” his dad said. “After food and rest.”

“We’ll negotiate the terms,” his mother said.

Nishinoya felt his shoulders relax minutely. They weren’t too angry – didn’t seem to be at least. That was something. He put on his shoes and grabbed his bag. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” he said. “I promised Suzu.”

“Well, we know you can’t break a promise to Suzu,” his dad said. “I’d rather break one to your mother than her.”

“Kouyou, I’m standing right beside you.”

“You won’t get my life insurance policy if you murder me.”

“Only if I’m convicted.”

“I’m leaving now,” Nishinoya reminded them.

“Yes, yes, we know,” his mother said. She reached forward and took his chin in her hand. Standing on the lip of the hallway, she was a few centimeters taller than him. “Don’t be stupid, Yuu,” she ordered. “And don’t languish. If you need someone to kick you forward, I’ve got an excellent set of boots.”

“That’s kinda messed up, Mom,” Nishinoya said.

“Well, you’ve never done anything traditionally,” she returned mildly. “You’re rather like your father in that.” She let go of his chin and then shoved him toward to door. “Leave if you’re going to leave. I need to start dinner.”

“Alright, already.” Nishinoya hiked his bag up his shoulder. “See you.”

“Be safe,” his dad said. His mother had already turned around and was heading for the kitchen.

Nishinoya nodded. He motioned for Asahi to open the door, and Asahi did.

It was only after Nishinoya had pulled the door closed behind them that he realized he was still wearing shorts, and the air was cooling rapidly as the sun dipped below the horizon. Well, it didn’t matter, he thought to himself, they wouldn’t be outside that long. And even if they would – there was no way he was going back inside that house, not at that moment at least.

Asahi didn’t say anything. He stood at the bottom of the stairs with his hands in his pockets. Nishinoya was relieved to see his clothes had mostly dried. The rain had stopped, though the clouds still hung heavy in the sky, ready to spill again.

Nishinoya jumped down the three steps to the paved walkway, then headed for the gate. He figured Asahi would follow close behind.

They were a good distance down the road before Nishinoya spoke. “Thanks for coming,” he said.

“I didn’t do anything,” Asahi insisted beside him. “I just sat there like an idiot.”

Nishinoya felt himself smile a little. “I’m still glad you were there,” he said.
They lapsed into silence once more. Nishinoya fought for something to say, tried to think of some thread of conversation to fill up the emptiness between them. The air felt tight and awkward – suddenly it seemed that a weird shift had happened when he wasn’t looking. Maybe it had happened inside himself.

“Are you hungry?” Nishinoya finally asked, as he chanced a sideways look. “I could buy us some food on the way.”

Asahi shrugged. “I suppose,” he said. “We should probably eat what I have at home though, it will go bad.” He was staring straight ahead down the road. He still had that terrible expression on his face, the conflicted look he had worn in the dining room when he sat quietly glowering at the end of the table.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya agreed, “okay.” He felt a drop of water hit his cheek, then another on his shoulder. Nishinoya stopped walking. He lifted his hand, and a couple more droplets landed in his upturned palm.

Asahi halted a few steps in front of him and half-turned back.

“It’s starting to rain again,” Nishinoya said.

“It will pass quickly,” Asahi returned. “We should keep going.” His voice had a strange quality, a stiffness that Nishinoya didn’t remember.

He remembered again how bedraggled Asahi had been in his foyer and felt a stab of guilt. “Let’s find somewhere to wait it out,” he suggested.

Asahi looked aside, out into the street. Lights shown out of store fronts; streetlamps glowed above them – there was enough illumination that Nishinoya could see his face clearly. “Okay,” Asahi said, and he started walking again. Nishinoya followed close behind.

A little further down the road they found a shop with an awning overhanging the front window. “Just hope someone doesn’t call us in for suspicious loitering,” Asahi said, with a cautious glance through the glass at the lit interior of the shop.

“You worry too much,” Nishinoya told him as he leaned against the building. He tipped his head back against the wall behind him and closed his eyes. Even with the restless sleep he had gotten, he was still absolutely exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to curl up next to Asahi in bed and sleep for a week.

“Maybe…” Asahi mumbled.

The rain kept coming. It seemed a few times that the downpour might slow, but it always picked up once more. Eventually, the cool air became too much for Nishinoya – he hugged his arms close to his body and stuck his hands in his opposite sleeves.

“We can just go,” Asahi suggested. “We’ll get wet but we’ll get home faster.”

“It’s fine,” Nishinoya insisted. He never used to mind the cold before. Perhaps he just needed to get used to it. He hopped in place a few times to warm himself up.

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said beside him, and his voice was sharp and low.

God, he was tired. “What.”
Asahi didn’t respond verbally, but Nishinoya saw him moving out of the corner of his eye.

He jumped when he felt the loose edge of his shorts lift. Asahi had ahold of the hem and was pulling upward, which exposed his knee to the air.

“Is this...” Asahi started. “Is this from... yesterday?”

Nishinoya blinked at him in confusion. Eventually he looked down, and he saw that Asahi was staring hard at his uncovered knee, which bore a gray-blue bruise from the center of his kneecap over the ligament beneath and almost to the top of his shin.

“Oh,” he said. Oh shit, he thought. “Maybe.” He glanced back up at Asahi’s face.

Asahi’s eyebrows were sharply slanted beneath his creased forehead. He looked upset.


Asahi’s gaze lifted and met his. His brow still hung heavily over his eyes. His mouth opened. “You really scared me,” he said, as he let go of Nishinoya’s shorts.

“What?” Acid burned in Nishinoya’s stomach.

“Last night,” Asahi said quietly. “Then this morning. And then when I got home—”

"I was fine,” Nishinoya insisted.

Asahi frowned. "I came in the door and you weren't there," he said. "Your stuff wasn't there."

Nishinoya pulled his hands out of his sleeves so he could properly cross his arms. He turned away. "I didn't realize I wasn't allowed to leave," he huffed.

"That's not what I mean. And you know that." Asahi grabbed his arm. He pulled until Nishinoya faced him again. "What was I supposed to think? What did you expect me to think?"

The rain still poured around them, a misty chill on Nishinoya's skin. In comparison, Asahi's hand was a firebrand against his arm. "I don't know," Nishinoya said. "I don't ever know what you're thinking."

Asahi pulled back, but he didn't let go. "When you answered the phone I was relieved," he said. "I thought—" He shook his head. "I guess it doesn't matter what I thought."

Nishinoya had to swallow against the bile that burned in his throat. "Goddamnit, just tell me."

Asahi's frown deepened. "I thought you were gone. For good."

Nishinoya had to look away. He thought he might be sick.

"How did you end up at your parents?"

God, he was going to be sick, wasn't he? "I went to Ryuu's," he said.

"Oh," Asahi returned. His grip on Nishinoya's arm loosened. "And he convinced you to go?"

Nishinoya shook his head. He still couldn't look at Asahi. "I got... sick," he said. "They called Mom and Dad."
Asahi paused at that. "Sick how?"

Nishinoya was gonna throw up, he was sure of it. He could feel it coming on him, rising in his gullet – he put a hand to Asahi's chest to push him out of the way, so he could barf in the street instead of on the sidewalk – but he realized belatedly that it was words, not vomit, and that he wasn't going to be able to stop them from spilling out of his mouth.

"I was gonna go," he said quickly.

"To your parents?"

Nishinoya shook his head again. He tightened his fingers in Asahi's shirt. "To Chiba."

Under his hand, Nishinoya felt the way Asahi's body tightened, the way all his muscles locked up at the same time. When Asahi finally spoke again, his voice had an edge that made Nishinoya feel like he might bleed from it. "So I was right," he said.

Nishinoya fought to get the words past the suffocating thickness in his throat. "No," he choked, "I was, I just meant to–"

"I was right." Asahi let go of him and knocked his hand away.

"Asahi-san—"

"Just stop, alright?" He pulled back and stepped into the rain, which plastered his hair immediately to his head. Asahi turned and started walking.

"Wait – no–" Nishinoya dove into the rain after him. "Asahi!" he bellowed, and Asahi finally stopped. His shirt clung to his back; his hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

"Asahi-san, please!" Nishinoya cried. "Let me explain!"

"I don't need an explanation," Asahi said without turning around.

"Asahi—"

"If you're ready to go back then you can go back, I'm not going to stop you."

Nishinoya stormed forward and grabbed Asahi's arm. "I don't want to go back!" he shouted. "I want to stay with you!"

Asahi wouldn't look at him. "It's not going to get easier the longer you wait," he said, "if you just keep running back to my apartment."

"Your fucking apartment has nothing to do with it!" Nishinoya stepped around in front of him and grabbed his other arm as well. "Asahi, I want to stay with you! I don't ever want to go back!"

"Nishinoya…"

Nishinoya tightened his hands until Asahi winced. "Can I stay with you? Will you let me stay?"

Asahi finally met his eyes. He looked more unhappy than Nishinoya had ever seen. "I don't think you should," he said.

"You don't think I should," Nishinoya spat, "or you don't want me to?"
Asahi’s face looked like a thunderstorm. He lifted his hand, grabbed one of Nishinoya’s wrists, and pulled it off his arm. “Does it matter?” he asked.

Nishinoya felt like he’d been punched in the chest. He dropped his other hand, and then Asahi released his wrist. The rain continued, a muted roaring backdrop against the wall that had formed between them.

Asahi turned away again. “We should go,” he said.

Nishinoya felt the tears come up, felt them hot against his face in counterpoint to the cold rain. “Asahi,” he said desperately, “Asahi, I love you.”

Asahi froze. There was a long pause, and then he said, “Nishinoya, you’re confused.”

“I’m not—”

“You are.” Asahi turned back toward him, and the anger was gone from his face. Instead, he looked mournful, like a doctor giving someone bad news. “You’re still just looking for a way to hide. I know that if you don’t go back you’re going to regret it. You were always too big for this place.”

Nishinoya exploded. “What would you know about it?! You never even left this fucking town!”

“I know what kind of life I have,” Asahi muttered. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“Why didn’t you try to do more?” Nishinoya demanded. “You could have done something – you could have done anything! Why didn’t you?”

“I made my decisions,” Asahi said.

“Did you never have any ambition? Were you always this much of a loser?!”

The flash of anger came back to Asahi’s eyes. “This isn’t about me,” he said darkly. “You don’t know anything about my life or the things I wanted.”

It felt like an iron rod had been shoved into Nishinoya’s stomach, and his insides twisted around the wound. His eyes still stung. He felt the words come out of his mouth, felt them stab forward like a knife. “You’re right. I don’t know anything about your life,” he agreed. “How many guys have you slept with?”

Asahi looked like he had been slapped. “What?”

There was no vindication on Nishinoya’s end, no satisfaction, but he didn’t stop. “How many?” he asked again. “What number am I? Where do I fit on the list of guys you’ve brought home from the bar?”

Asahi’s mouth worked, but words didn’t come out. Finally, he managed, “I didn’t know that was an issue.”

Nishinoya still didn’t stop. “Do I even matter to you?” he demanded. “Do I mean anything at all? Or did you just fuck me because you felt sorry for me?”

Asahi put his hand over his mouth. The anger was totally gone; no hint of it remained. “You – I don’t—” He closed his eyes and didn’t say anything else.

“What?” Nishinoya pressed. “Did I get it right?”
Asahi opened his eyes again, but he didn’t look at Nishinoya. He lowered his hand. “I made a mistake,” he said unsteadily.

Nishinoya felt like a broken piece of glass, sharp and ruined. “Maybe you did,” he said.

Asahi lifted his gaze. Instead of meeting Nishinoya’s, he looked across at the awning they had taken shelter under, the glow of the window underneath. He shoved past Nishinoya and began walking back toward the shop.

“Hey!” Nishinoya shouted. “I’m not done talking!”

“I’m done listening!” Asahi choked back, his voice thick with tears. “I don’t have to stand here and let you say whatever the fuck you want to me!” He broke into a run and went for the door.

When he was gone, Nishinoya stood by himself in the rain. He let it pound over the top of his head, let it thunder onto his shoulders. His feet squished in his shoes. His shorts clung to his legs.

Nishinoya turned around. He stared down the street as far as he could see into the dark and the mist. He started walking. He started running. He didn’t look back.
Chapter 11

He was cold.

It was just about the stupidest thing he had ever done – save perhaps the time when, as a kid, he'd boarded the train without his parent's permission and ended up three towns over. His mother had grounded him from video games for an entire month. Longest month of his life, at least until high school.

Nishinoya's sneakers squished around his feet as he ran down the darkened street. He wasn’t familiar with the neighborhood he found himself in. He wondered if he was still in Karasuno.

When he started running, he didn’t have a plan for anywhere to go. He’d taken a convoluted series of turns in an attempt to cloud his path, and in doing so confused himself. Everything looked different in the dark and rain. It didn’t take long for him to lose track of his location.

Nishinoya wasn’t sure how long he had been running, only that his chest screamed, his legs ached. He would’ve kept going, except he tripped on some uneven pavement and tumbled forward onto his hands and knees.

Pain scrambled its way across his skin, burning at his knees and the heels of his hands. He slipped onto his elbow as he tried to push himself up into a crouch, and managed to remove a few centimeters of the surface layer of skin along his forearm. Nishinoya tried again, more slowly this time against the wet pavement. He sat up and examined the heels of his hands. Droplets of blood welled up from the scuffed skin, appearing as dark red jewels on his hands until raindrops diluted them and cast them away in pink trails.

It was definitely the stupidest thing he’d ever done. Even worse than when he’d knocked Suzume’s tooth out – it was just a baby tooth! Even worse than when he’d forged his dad’s signature on a permission slip – his dad hadn’t said no about the field trip, he’d just forgotten to ask until it was too late. It was even worse than when he’d borrowed his mother’s debit card and racked up a small fortune in clothing and accessories, all black, many with studded detail – he had to be ready for high school, he’d tried to explain to her afterward. For some reason she hadn’t found that to be a suitable excuse and made him return everything the same day.

No, this was much worse. This was it. This was the peak of his terribleness.

Nishinoya could still see the shock in Asahi’s face. He could still see the way Asahi’s resolve had cracked, the way that fracture had split into a gaping chasm.

And he’d said–! Nishinoya pressed his hands against his eyes. He’d said the words, he hadn’t meant to, but suddenly there they were between them.

And they had slipped right off Asahi like an oil slick.

Nishinoya dropped his hands into his lap. Well, at least he knew now. He knew that Asahi didn’t love him back. He examined his palms again and saw that most of the bleeding had stopped. His knees were still stinging, but that didn’t matter. He’d dealt with enough scraped knees in his life.

It occurred to him briefly that if his current state was a scene in a movie, this would be the part where the music swelled, where the audience choked back tears as the hero faced his demons. But it wasn’t a movie, and he wasn’t a hero. He was just a kid – sitting in the street, in the rain, with scuffed up knees. He was a jerk who’d hurt the people he loved. He was the asshole who’d made
the sweetest guy he’d ever known run away in tears.

He was cold.

What time was it? How long had he been out there? The watch was still in Asahi’s dresser. Nishinoya dug in his pocket until he extracted his phone, but the screen was blank. He tried a few times to turn it on – he’d just charged it, it should’ve been fine. Eventually he realized the issue. He was soaking wet, all the way through his clothes. The phone had gotten water-logged.

Nishinoya leaned back and turned his face toward the sky. He couldn’t help the laugh that came out of his throat. So much for his promise to his mother. He climbed slowly to his feet, wincing at each ache, each twinge as his injured skin stretched and moved over wearied joints.

God, he was cold.

He needed to get out of the rain, needed to regroup. He’d somehow managed to keep his bag with him, probably through sheer numb instinct. Maybe something had managed to stay dry in there. Nishinoya hiked his bag onto his shoulder and started moving again, walking this time, pausing here and there to take in his surroundings.

He appeared to be in a mostly residential neighborhood, one with houses packed tightly together, growing tall like weeds between the narrow streets. The buildings closed in around him as a faceless claustrophobic mass, all sharp edges and old balconies and zigzagging powerlines. It felt real, at least. Felt like a real place. Felt lived in. He, on the other hand, felt almost disembodied as he continued through the neighborhood – as though he was watching himself walking along the street, as though he was a resident peering out the window from one of the tall houses.

Eventually he came upon a bridge. The creek underneath was swollen and dark, but there were spaces tucked beneath the ends of the span where he could climb in between the support posts and get out of the rain. The concrete slanted sharply toward the water, so he placed his feet carefully.

Nishinoya sat down facing the creek below, with his knees high and his feet braced in front of him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The scent of wet earth filled his nostrils. He let the sound of rain and rushing water flow over him, drowning out the howling lament inside of him, until he could think again.

Where could he go from here? Asahi’s place was totally out of the question. Couldn’t show his face in that doorway, not after what he’d said. Tanaka came to mind, but Nishinoya had the suspicion that they’d call his parents again. Maybe he could sneak in a window…

That left his parents’ house. Certainly they’d take him in. They’d been reluctant to let him leave in the first place. No, he was no longer afraid that he wouldn’t be welcomed home, but…

But it almost felt like, if he went back there, he’d somehow be accepting defeat. After all his posturing about going home with Asahi, his parents would have a hundred questions about how he’d ended up back on their doorstep, soaking wet and scraped up.

So what were his options? He contemplated this while he shivered with his arms tucked between his thighs and his body.

His dad had laid out three possibilities. Nishinoya found it almost a relief – words to the terror, knowing the unknown. Go back to school and apply for the graduate program, finish his degree and take the job in Tokyo, or come home. Graduate school seemed a very distant possibility, so he went ahead and crossed that off the list. That left two options: graduate or withdraw.
His dad wouldn’t have offered the latter if he didn’t think it was a viable option. That comforted Nishinoya somewhat, that life could go on even if he made a decision like that. But what life would that be? He’d already torn Asahi out of it. Would he really be able to cut volleyball out as well? Anyway, it wouldn’t matter either way if he failed all his classes.

Nishinoya pressed his face into his knees. He was so worried of making the wrong decision, so terrified about turning down the wrong path and setting his life forever off course. He’d never felt like that before. It had always seemed that the world was laid out in front of him; he moved from moment to moment without thinking, confident the ground would rise up to meet his feet even if he didn’t watch where he placed them.

Now it felt as though he was sliding on loose gravel, dangerously close to a cliff’s edge. Was it better to jump and take the risk? Or was salvaging what he still had more important? If only there was some way to look five years in the future and see how either decision would play out.

He was still cold. Had he put his hoodie in his bag? Maybe something in there was still slightly dry, at least. Nishinoya separated his knees and put his heels together, then set his bag down in the bowl created by his legs. He undid the zipper and started digging.

Shirts came out, each wadded into a wrinkled lump, all damp. He spread them out on the concrete. A pair of dark jeans, a pair of shorts to sleep in, his grungy running shorts. Deeper he found his deodorant, his toothbrush, his phone charger, and the hard lump of Asahi’s mug wrapped in his last remaining shirt. Nishinoya pulled the mug out and unwrapped it. He set the shirt aside.

The mug was cool and solid. Nishinoya turned it over in his hands. The indirect glimmer of street lamps reflected across its shiny surface, dipping and distorting in small flaws in the glaze. He tightened his fingers around the mug and pressed it to his forehead.

Would that be his last interaction with Asahi? Would that be the last time he spoke to him? Yelling at him, making him cry? Accusing him of – Nishinoya knocked the mug hard against his forehead.

“Stupid,” he hissed, “stupid, stupid, stupid!” He lifted his head, leaned forward, and shouted, “STUPID!!” so loudly that he heard the word echo back at him from the other side of the creek. The return of the outburst almost made him feel relieved, like breaking the seal on a new game, or popping open a soda and listening to the hiss inside the can.

He couldn’t leave it like that, could he? But would going back be selfish – even if he was planning to apologize, to return the mug – would it cause Asahi more harm than good? He could write a letter, maybe – mail the mug from campus, then Asahi wouldn’t have to look at his face again.

But, god... Nishinoya wanted to see his face again, wanted to see him so desperately it felt like a sinkhole inside him, dragging everything else down. He’d never been the sort of person who could do things by halves – either he was going back to Asahi’s apartment in person, or he was never going back at all. There could be no middle ground, no in-between.

Asahi came when Nishinoya had asked. He’d run to Nishinoya’s house in the rain without even stopping to change. He’d taken Nishinoya in without hesitation – he’d opened up his home and his schedule and had made a place for him to feel safe – and Nishinoya had torn it all to pieces.

Nishinoya lowered the mug. He needed to apologize – Asahi deserved an apology. If he couldn’t forgive him, that was fine. If he never wanted to see Nishinoya again, that was okay. But Nishinoya needed to give him one; he needed to say it. He needed Asahi to hear it, even if it couldn’t fix anything between them.
That was it, then – that was what he’d do. Go back to Asahi’s and apologize, and then… well, then he’d figure something else out.

Nishinoya set the mug down against his heels. He moved to change out his shirt for a drier one, but as he shifted, the mug came loose from behind his feet. It began to tumble end over end down the slanted concrete slab, heading for the creek below.

Nishinoya leapt forward without thinking, throwing his bag aside. His sneakers slid along the wet concrete – he felt a burn on his left elbow as it made contact with the rough surface – but there was the mug, clattering just beyond his reach, suddenly in two pieces – Nishinoya snapped his hands out and caught the mug in one and the broken handle in the other – and then he saw with terrible shock the dark rushing water of the creek directly below, close enough to grab him and drag him under. Nishinoya just barely managed to arrest his downward tumble before that happened. He sat on his butt with his feet braced in front of him, the mug in his hands, water sucking at him a spare few centimeters from his toes. He sat there a long time, shuddering and breathing hard, conscious of his own wild foolishness.

When he finally managed to climb back up to where he had left his things, he found his bag upended. Gone were his toiletries, the phone charger – perhaps lost in the flood below. His clothes were still spread on the concrete where he left them; these he gathered up with shaking hands and shoved back in his bag. He climbed out from underneath the bridge, back into the rain. Better to be cold and wet than lost and drowned, he decided.

The rain was letting up. Visibility increased, the flicker of streetlamps spreading out in soft misty halos as Nishinoya went across the bridge and continued through the neighborhood. As he crossed a street he saw a brighter glow down toward his left – stoplights above the road and the neon flare of retail. He turned and headed for this intersection a few blocks away.

When he reached the crossing, he found himself in a shopping district, though many of the doors were shuttered, the windows darkened. One store had a LED display in its window that showed the time, date, and temperature – 21:47, October 14, 15°C. A little further down he found a street sign that was labeled with the district number – he was only a few districts over from where Asahi lived, which was a little comforting.

There was a bus stop on the next corner with a sheltered bench. Nishinoya crossed over to it, praying all the while that he hadn’t missed the last bus. When he reached the bench, he immediately curled up on it, drawing his knees in as he tucked his arms between his chest and thighs. He stayed there shivering in a tight ball until a bus showed up about fifteen minutes later.

The trip to Asahi’s neighborhood seemed to pass by him in a blur. Nishinoya was somewhat conscious of the buildings sliding past the window, the lights streaking in the dark as the bus lumbered down the street. His mind was already far ahead, considering what he would say, what he would do. What words could possibly make up for the things he had said before?

He still didn’t have an answer when he stepped off the bus. He didn’t have one as he walked along the road until it grew more familiar, past the coin laundry, past the bar, all the way to the dry cleaners and Asahi’s apartment above it.

Nishinoya stood at the base of the stairs, hugging his arms to his sides and shaking uncontrollably, though he wasn’t sure if the latter was from chill or fear. He wouldn’t be surprised if Asahi hated him. He certainly deserved it.

He put his foot on the bottom stair, and then somehow managed to get his other foot to the next one. He listened to the familiar creak as he climbed – how could it be that the sound had become
so ingrained in his memory in so short a time? Soon he found himself on the landing, and it was there that he froze.

Nishinoya felt the world still around him; the air grew thick and close. His ears felt like they were full of cotton, muffling all the sounds around him. He stared hard at the door to Asahi’s apartment, the numbers on its face. He found that he couldn’t move his hands; he couldn’t reach forward to knock. It suddenly dawned on him that he shouldn’t have come – the panic from earlier came up sluggishly from where he had buried it under sleep and anger and cold. Nishinoya turned around, back toward the stairs.

The door opened behind him.

His breath caught. He looked out over the stairs, out into the alleyway between the buildings. He clenched his hands so tightly that his nails bit into his palms. His feet were glued in place; his entire body locked up. Nishinoya couldn’t move; he couldn’t speak. Eventually, through sheer force of will, he somehow managed to turn his head enough to look back over his shoulder.

Asahi stood in the doorway. He still wore his disheveled work clothes. His hair was a tangled mess, half loose around his shoulders. His face was torn. His eyes were red.

Nishinoya opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He shook his head and turned back to look down at his feet. He heard Asahi step onto the landing. A warm hand closed around his arm. Asahi tugged him around to face him, and Nishinoya caught an eyeful of his chest. Asahi kept a tight grip on his arm as his other hand took ahold of Nishinoya’s chin and tipped his head up.

He met Asahi’s gaze but was still too afraid to speak. Asahi’s eyes darted over his face, searching – for what, Nishinoya didn’t know. Finally, Asahi either found what he was looking for, or he gave up the search. He dropped his hand from Nishinoya’s chin but used the other to pull him toward the open door and inside the apartment.

Asahi closed the door behind them. He tugged Nishinoya across the front room toward the hallway, and from there, into the bathroom. Asahi held onto his arm until they reached the counter.

Nishinoya leaned against it while Asahi grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his shoulders. He hugged the edges of it against his chest while Asahi used another to begin drying his hair. Asahi’s touch was brusque and perfunctory, almost rough. When Nishinoya looked up into his face, an impenetrable expression greeted him. Asahi’s eyes were fixed to his forehead.

Nishinoya couldn’t bear it any longer. “Asahi-san,” he whispered.

“Don’t,” Asahi said, “don’t say anything.”

“I’m sorry,” Nishinoya tried again.

“Don’t!” Asahi said sharply. His hands halted on either side of Nishinoya’s head. Nishinoya felt the way his fingers splayed over the towel, against his temples, his ears. Asahi’s shoulders were shaking. When Nishinoya looked up into his face again, Asahi’s eyes were closed. Tears tracked down his cheeks.

“Oh,” Nishinoya breathed, “oh no, please, I’m sorry, I–”

“Would you just shut up for a second?” Asahi choked. “Just for a minute!”

Nishinoya clapped his mouth shut. He bit the inside of his cheek. He was still shivering uncontrollably in his wet clothes, even underneath the towel.
“God,” Asahi said finally. He exhaled with enough force that Nishinoya’s half-dried hair tickled at his forehead. He opened his eyes again and looked directly at Nishinoya. “I’m just – I’m – I’m so angry with you, I can’t even think straight!” He took his hands away from Nishinoya’s head, and the towel fell. He started briskly rubbing at Nishinoya’s arms. “I waited at that goddamn shop for almost an hour, Nishinoya!”

“Oh–”

Asahi cut him off. “I kept expecting you to come back – I was worried that if I left, you’d come back when I wasn’t there–”

“Asahi–”

“Do you know how scared I was?” Asahi demanded. He shook Nishinoya hard by the shoulders. “I didn’t know what to do!” He was still crying. “I finally went back to your parents, thinking you went there!”

“No, no, they didn’t–”

“Oh, god,” Asahi said, as his hands halted again, “your dad is probably still out driving around somewhere. We have to call them. You have to tell them you’re okay.”

“Will you…” Nishinoya’s shoulders turned inward. “Will you make me go back?”

Asahi let out a long, shaky sigh. He took a step back. “I should,” he said, wiping at his face with the heel of his hand. “I should tell him to just come pick you up.”

Nishinoya crumpled inside. He felt a sob swell up in his throat. “Please,” he said, “don’t send me away – I want to talk to you – I want to…” His voice petered out. “Please,” he murmured, as he clutched the towel against his chest with both hands.

Asahi was quiet for a the span of a few breaths. “You’re still shaking,” he said.

“It’s okay,” Nishinoya muttered. He stared at the floor through blurring eyes. “It’s my own stupid fault.”

“Why don’t you get in the bath? Just call your dad first.”

“My phone is busted. Got wet.”

Asahi sighed again. “I’ll go get mine,” he said.

While he was gone, Nishinoya quickly stripped out of his sodden clothes and left them in a pile in the corner. The bath was already hot – maybe Asahi had turned it on for himself, and then Nishinoya had interrupted him? He was even more of a shithead than he thought. He climbed in without washing first – he’d clean Asahi’s bath later, he’d clean the whole bathroom if he needed to – and let the water swallow him whole.

At first, a sharp chill ran up his body, the last gasp of the cold that still gripped his skin, but soon the heat enveloped him, and his trembling began to calm. Nishinoya bent his legs up against his chest, hugged his arms around his thighs, and pressed his face into his knees. He was still in that position when Asahi returned.

"Here. Call now."
Nishinoya looked up and found Asahi standing over him, holding the phone out. He lifted his hand out of the water.

"Don't drop it in the bath," Asahi said. "The case won't protect it from that."

Nishinoya nodded and carefully took the phone from him. He could see that Asahi had already brought up the number. All that needed to be done was to press the call button. Nishinoya stared at it for a good ten seconds before Asahi reached over and pressed it for him.

Nishinoya closed his eyes and lifted the phone to his ear. He listened to it ring three times before he heard a beep, a sound like fabric over the receiver, and then his dad's tense voice said, "Yes? Any news?"

"D–" Nishinoya's voice cracked. The tears finally spilled over. "Dad– I–"

"Yuu?"

Nishinoya pulled the phone away from his ear. He put his face back against his knees and began to sob.

He felt Asahi pluck the phone out of his hand. "Mr. Nishinoya? Yes, sorry. He's alright. No, he's just upset."

Nishinoya took a gulping breath, inhaling the steam of the bath and the air of Asahi's apartment. He lifted his head and leaned backward until he met the edge of the tub. He looked at the ceiling and fought hard to regain control.

"Yes, just now," Asahi was saying. "I'm not sure."

Nishinoya lifted his hand again. "Let me, let me talk to him."

Asahi looked uncertain, but he handed the phone over once more. Nishinoya inhaled through his nose and tried again. "Dad."

"Yuu, are you alright?"

"Yeah," he said. He took another deep breath. "I'm fine, sorry. I just freaked out a little."

"You're not hurt, though? You're safe?"

"Yeah," Nishinoya said again. "Asahi-san is taking care of me."

"...do you want me to come get you?"

"No," he replied, "I want to stay here." He tried to ignore the way Asahi shifted in his peripheral vision.

His dad paused, and then said, "To be perfectly honest with you, Yuu, I’m about eighty-seven percent decided that I don’t really care what you want in this case. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t drive over there right now."

"I – I know," Nishinoya said. "I know I – I fucked up."

"Let’s be clear. You ran away without explanation, immediately after a promise to your mother that you would be honest and answer your phone."
“I tried!” Nishinoya insisted. “It got wet in the rain. Won’t turn on anymore.”

“I’m still waiting on a reason, Yuu.”

Nishinoya exhaled hard. “Dad,” he said, “I really need this. I need to be here. I need…” He looked up at Asahi standing over him. “I need to talk to Asahi-san about everything. I need to tell him I’m sorry.”

Asahi looked away, and Nishinoya lowered his gaze back to the bath.

His dad sighed. “You still plan to come tomorrow, right?” he asked.

“You’ll let me stay?”

“I want to trust you, Yuu. But you need to meet me halfway. You can’t do this to your mother and I. Or your friends.”

“I know,” Nishinoya said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“If you’re really sorry, you’ll keep your word from now on. You’ll remember that your actions affect other people too.”

“I… I’ll try,” he said.

“Well, it’s a start, at least.” His dad’s voice grew a bit lighter. “You should come by the salon tomorrow, though. I’m embarrassed to admit you’re my son right now.”

Nishinoya felt relief so intense that he felt weak inside. He managed a wobbly smile. “I’m sorry to smear the Nishinoya family name,” he said. The smile dropped. “What about Mom?” he asked.

“I’ll handle her for tonight,” his dad returned. “But yeah, you’re probably in for it tomorrow, fair warning.”

Nishinoya nodded, forgetting his dad couldn’t see him. “Okay,” he said. “Tell her… tell her I’m really sorry.”

“You can tell her tomorrow.”

“I will.”

“I’ll let her know about the phone too.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I better call her,” his dad said. “Let her know where you are.”

“Okay.”

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Okay,” Nishinoya repeated.

“Call if you need anything. I love you, Yuu.”

Nishinoya’s throat closed up again. “I love you too, Dad,” he whispered. “And Mom. Tell Mom for me.”
“I will. Goodnight.”

“Night.” Nishinoya closed his eyes and waited for the beep that indicated his dad had hung up. Then, he slowly took the phone away from his ear. He lifted it to Asahi, who had looked back toward him again.

Asahi took the phone from him. “Feel better?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya returned, “I really do. Thanks.”

“Well.” Asahi cleared his throat. “I’ll be in the front room if you need me.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!”

Asahi stopped, but kept his back toward Nishinoya.

“Will you… Nishinoya swallowed hard. “Will you stay with me? Just for a little while.”

There was a long tense moment, during which Nishinoya wasn’t sure if Asahi would even respond at all. Maybe he’d just go out the door without saying anything, and leave Nishinoya there alone. But – that didn’t happen. Instead, he turned around and came back to the tub. He sat down on the floor with his back against it, facing away from Nishinoya. Then, nothing. He was silent again.

Nishinoya shifted his arms around his legs once more. He turned his head and leaned his temple against his knees, staring at the back of Asahi’s head. He closed his eyes. The only sounds were the drip of water in the drain, the low resonant hum of Asahi’s fridge through the thin walls.

“I didn’t mean it,” Nishinoya said quietly.

“Didn’t mean what?”

“I didn’t mean it when I said that you were a loser.”

Asahi sighed. “Didn’t you, though?” he asked. “You’re right that I’ve never left town.”

“Yeah, but…” Nishinoya lifted his head and rested his chin on his knees. “You’ve made a life here,” he said. “You have friends and you go out and do stuff. You have a job.” He frowned at himself, the twinge of guilt in his stomach. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’ve done so much for yourself.” He felt his voice wobble again and forced it down. “I’m the real loser here.”

“Nishinoya, I’m not really interested in hearing you insult yourself, if you think it’s going to make me less mad at you.”

“I really am, though,” Nishinoya mumbled. “I’m all twisted up for no damn reason, and I keep hurting everyone I care about. I really should’ve just gone and left everybody alone. They’d all be better off without me.”

Asahi’s voice was quiet. “I wish you wouldn’t say things like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’d be doing anyone a favor by leaving them. It’s terrible to hear something like that.”

“I don’t…” Nishinoya trailed off, unsure how to continue.

Asahi finally turned. “I thought you were going to hurt yourself,” he murmured.
“What?” Nishinoya leaned away from him.

Asahi reached his hand into the tub and grabbed his arm tightly. “I was scared, Nishinoya,” he said. “I thought I might never see you again.”

Nishinoya suddenly saw how exhausted he was, how difficult the evening must’ve been. He turned in the bath until he could face Asahi directly and grasped the hand against his arm. “I’m so sorry, Asahi-san,” he said. “I really am, I mean it. I shouldn’t have said any of that. You didn’t deserve it. You’ve been so…” He closed his eyes and exhaled hard through his nose. “You’ve been so good to me, you just give and give and give and I can’t even say thank you like a decent person, and I’m just, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. You don’t have to forgive me. But I don’t want you – I didn’t mean any of it, I don’t want you to think it was true.” He opened his eyes again, grateful that he’d managed to get it all out without breaking down again. “If you want me to go, I’ll go,” he concluded.

Asahi’s thumb curled over Nishinoya’s bicep. “I don’t want that,” he said, and Nishinoya breathed a sigh of relief. “I just… God, I can’t decide if I want to hug you or throttle you.”

Nishinoya laughed breathlessly. “You could do both, I guess.”

“It’s tempting,” Asahi admitted, though he made no move forward.

They sat together quietly for a time, Nishinoya curled up in the bath and Asahi beside him, his long fingers gentle around Nishinoya’s arm. Nishinoya realized he was getting drowsy when his head nodded forward; he sat up quickly and shook himself to clear the fuzz.

Asahi’s hand moved from his arm to his shoulder. “Why don’t we get some dry clothes on?” he said.

“Yes,” Nishinoya agreed. He stood up out of the water, and Asahi followed suit.

Nishinoya saw Asahi’s eyes fall on his scabbed knees, the scrape on his forearm. Asahi’s face creased, a frown curling his mouth downward as he took Nishinoya’s elbow in his hand and turned his arm to get a better look. He carefully examined the scuffed heels of Nishinoya’s hands.

“It’s okay,” Nishinoya said, “I slipped and fell down.”

Asahi’s gaze met his, his eyes dark and searching.

“What?” Nishinoya asked.

Asahi started to open his mouth, but instead he just shook his head.

Nishinoya made a frustrated noise. “Asahi-san, you gotta start telling me what you’re thinking,” he said. “I’m really trying, but I’ve never been very good at filling in the gaps between what people say and what they mean.”

Asahi’s face softened for the first time since he’d pulled Nishinoya through the door. He lifted Nishinoya’s hand, turned it palm upward, and ran the fingers of his opposite hand over the scraped flesh. Quietly, he said, “I was just thinking that you’ve gotten so many bruises since you’ve been here.” He slid his thumb into the bowl of Nishinoya’s palm and squeezed his hand tightly. “I was thinking about how I had caused most of them.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Nishinoya insisted as he pulled his hand away. “I did it all to myself!”
Asahi gave him a thin smile that didn’t match the slant of his brow. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get those clothes.”

In the bedroom, Asahi pulled sweat pants and a t-shirt from his dresser. Nishinoya wasn’t sure where his bag had ended up – it had dropped from his grip somewhere between the landing and the bathroom. He knew it would be a total mess, though.

Asahi laid the clothes out on the bed. “My boxers might be a little big for you,” he admitted as he stepped back to the dresser and opened the top drawer.

“Not like the pajamas won’t be,” Nishinoya said.

“That’s true. I think I have some that are tight on me, let me look for those…”

Suddenly, Nishinoya remembered that morning – he remembered what he had placed in the top drawer. “Wait,” he said, “wait. I don’t need–”

It was already too late; Asahi had stopped moving. “What–” he started. He lifted his hand out of the drawer. He was holding Nishinoya’s watch.

Asahi turned slowly. His face was a mask of confusion. Nishinoya could feel his eyes searching again, looking for an answer. “Why did… why is this here?”

Nishinoya wanted to hide again; he wanted to go back in time and slap sense into himself. But he had promised. He was trying. He needed to try. He sat down on the bed instead and clenched his hands together between his knees. “I… I wanted…” Nishinoya stared at the floor so he wouldn’t have to watch Asahi’s expression. “My dad gave it to me as a graduation gift,” he said. “I feel like a failure everytime I look at it.”

“But why put it in my dresser?”

Nishinoya felt naked in every sense of the word. “Maybe I wanted… to leave you something. To remember me by.”

There was a long silence before Nishinoya heard Asahi set the watch down. He lifted his head, and saw Asahi coming toward him. When he reached the bed, Asahi sat down next to Nishinoya and mimicked his pose.

“I don’t need something for that,” he said, voice soft. “I’ll never need help remembering you.”

Nishinoya closed his eyes. He felt a grimace crease his face. He leaned forward and lowered his head into his hands.

“Nishinoya…”

“I don’t want to be your mistake,” Nishinoya said quickly, before Asahi could speak again.

“What?”

Nishinoya shook his head. He curled his fingers into his hair. “Earlier. In the rain. You said I was a mistake. I don’t want you to remember me like that.”

“That’s…” Asahi fumbled. “Nishinoya, that’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you meant, though.”
“No,” Asahi said. “Oh, no, no, no.” The warm weight of his arm settled across Nishinoya’s shoulders. “That’s not what I meant. That’s not what I meant at all.”

Nishinoya lifted his head. He looked up into Asahi’s face. “It isn’t?”

“God, no.” Asahi’s smile was starting to take that familiar bearing again – softness, sympathy, sincerity. “Is that why you ran?”


Asahi’s hand tightened against him. “You’re not a mistake, Nishinoya. I made a mistake, yes, but it wasn’t ever you.” The smile faded from his face, and he turned forward. “I was trying to give you a safe place to figure things out,” he said. “And instead I gave in to my own selfishness.”

“What? How?”

“I should’ve told you no that night after your birthday dinner,” Asahi explained. “I shouldn’t have given in. I was trying to help you figure things out, and all I ended up doing was confusing you even more.”

Nishinoya felt like his stomach had fallen out. “That night… you didn’t want to?”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Asahi insisted. He let out a frustrated sigh. “I’m not explaining myself very well.” He looked back at Nishinoya again. “I absolutely wanted you. I wanted you that first night in the bar and every moment since.” His eyebrows drooped again, the outer ends slanting downward. “But that’s the problem, isn’t it? I wanted you too much, and I gave in to that want.” His was soft as he concluded. “Now I’ve clouded your judgment, and jeopardized your future.”

Nishinoya found himself frowning. “You really think so little of me?” he asked.

“What? No.”

“I can make my own decisions,” Nishinoya insisted. “I don’t need you to make them for me.”

Asahi pulled his arm back. “That’s not–”

“Yeah, I’m confused,” Nishinoya cut in. “I dunno what I want to do about school or the future. I’m not convinced I haven’t wasted everyone’s time. But I’m not confused about you.” He leaned forward. “I love you, Asahi-san. I’m not confused about that.”

“It’s only been four days–”

“It’s been six years,” Nishinoya corrected, which Asahi had no response for.

“Now,” Nishinoya continued, “if you don’t love me, that’s fine. But I want you to believe me, at least.” He stopped and leaned back. “Wow. I really wish I wasn’t naked right now.” Nishinoya twisted and grabbed the t-shirt Asahi had laid out.

He was pulling the shirt over his head when he heard Asahi’s voice. “There haven’t been that many.”

Nishinoya popped his head through the neck hole and looked at him curiously. “What?”

“Other guys,” Asahi said.
“Oh god,” Nishinoya said quickly, as he lifted his hands with his palms forward. “No, you don’t have to – I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have –” He groaned and covered his face. “That was such a shitty thing for me to say. I don’t even care about that, honestly. You don’t have to explain anything.”

Asahi’s fingers closed around his wrist, and he pulled Nishinoya’s hand away from his face. “Why did you say it, then?”

“Because I’m an asshole,” Nishinoya said.

“Well, I’m not arguing with you on that one,” Asahi said mildly. “But I still want to know.”

Nishinoya’s stomach roiled inside him as he tried to find words to explain the outburst. “I guess I just – you were just so – confident, I don’t know. And your friends teased you that night in the bar and I guess I just thought, maybe you brought someone over to them a lot. God, but that–”

Nishinoya shook his head at himself. “Honestly, that doesn’t even matter.” He felt a lump come up in his throat. “I just – I just wanted to know – that I meant something to you. I wanted to know you’d remember me.”

Asahi stared at him a long time, then he let out a slow sigh. The corner of his mouth came up, though his expression was sardonic. “My friends do tease me,” he said. “But it’s not because I bring a lot of guys home.”

“No, you don’t have to explain–”

Asahi covered Nishinoya’s mouth with his hand, cutting off his response. “They tease me because…well, to be honest with you, I kind of have a type.”

“Um tymp?” Nishinoya echoed, muffled against Asahi’s palm.

“Yeah,” Asahi said. He pulled his hand back. “You know. I didn’t notice it at first, but they sure did.” He sighed again and looked down. “I always went for guys who were kind of brash. Maybe a little loud.” Asahi’s eyes flicked up to Nishinoya’s. “On the shorter side,” he concluded.

Nishinoya frowned. “Well,” he said, “I guess I could fit into those categories.”

“Nishinoya, you are the category.”

“What?”

Asahi gave him the weird half-grin again. “Every guy I had any interest in,” he said, “I did because they reminded me of you.”

Nishinoya’s brain turned out of sync, like offset gears. “I don’t understand.”

“You know, on the way to my mom’s, you asked if there was anyone in high school.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I wasn’t lying when I said I wasn’t comfortable about it. But there was someone.” Asahi reached over and took his hand. “There was you.”

Nishinoya stared down at the fingers curled around his own. Then, he snapped his attention back to Asahi’s face. “You’re saying–”

“I told you that I’d been hoping I would run into you in that bar,” he said.
“Asahi!” Nishinoya said sharply. “You know I can’t always read between the lines!”

Asahi smiled. “I know,” he said. “And, honestly, I was being deliberately vague.” He turned Nishinoya’s hand over in his own and rubbed his thumb over the roughened skin on Nishinoya’s palm. “I thought it would be better for you if I kept the extent of how I felt to myself.”

Nishinoya wanted to tear his hair out. “I can’t believe this,” he muttered. “Are you telling me that you liked me back in high school?”

Asahi laughed awkwardly. “It’s dumb, isn’t it.”

“How didn’t you say anything!”

“How was I supposed to know how you felt!” Asahi insisted. “And even if I did – I was terrified of how I felt. I couldn’t tell anyone, especially not you.”

“This is so stupid!” Nishinoya groaned. “I’ve been just–” He covered his eyes again. “I thought you were just trying to be nice to me.”

“Nice!” Asahi echoed as he squeezed Nishinoya’s hand tightly. “What would’ve been nice about sleeping with you if I didn’t care about you? I told you I’m not built for that sort of thing.”

“I don’t get it,” Nishinoya mumbled as he dropped his hand from his face. “Why did you think it was better to not tell me?”

“Ahh,” Asahi sighed as he turned away. “Well. I’m just…” He slipped his fingers out from Nishinoya’s and laid back against the bed. Nishinoya looked down at him over his shoulder and saw that Asahi was staring at the ceiling. His forehead wore that crease again.

“What do I have to offer you?” Asahi said. “I have a dead-end job that I didn’t even get for myself. I never went to school, I never left home. I was too scared to go away.” He lifted his hand and ran the tip of his finger over the skin of Nishinoya’s upper back, exposed by the too-large neck hole. “And you have… there is so much in front of you. You deserve so much more than this boring little town. And…” His eyes turned aside. “And, to be honest, I didn’t really think I meant that much to you. I knew you liked me, that you found me attractive. But I didn’t think…”

“That I loved you?” Nishinoya laid down beside him, tucking inside Asahi’s arm against his side. He put his hand on Asahi’s chest and rested his chin on it.

Asahi nodded. His arm closed around Nishinoya’s shoulders. “I assumed I was just a distraction for you, and I told myself I was fine with that. I thought if I told you how I really felt, it might confuse you into thinking you wanted to stay, when you really didn’t. I thought…” He stopped talking and stared again at the ceiling. Nishinoya realized he was close to tears. “I thought you’d come to resent me.”

“That’s impossible,” Nishinoya said.

“It’s not,” Asahi returned. “Even if you do love me.”

Nishinoya frowned as he tried to think of how to respond. “Don’t say ‘if’,” he finally said, “I do love you.”

Asahi laughed brokenly and used his other hand to wipe his eyes. “Here you’ve said it three times and I haven’t even said it once.”
Nishinoya felt hot and cold all over. “Then…do you…”

“Well, of course,” Asahi replied. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. “It’s been six years for me too. But I…I never thought it was even a possibility…I spent all this time trying to move on, but then I took one look at you that first night and I was right back there again.”

It wasn’t quite how Nishinoya had expected a love confession to be, him with nothing on underneath the oversized shirt, Asahi with a runny nose. Also, he couldn’t help but feel that it wasn’t the admission he wanted. “You still don’t want me to stay, do you?”

Asahi sighed heavily. “Of course I want you to,” he said. “Having you here with me, getting to wake up beside you, it’s been like a dream to me. But that doesn’t change the fact that I think you would eventually regret it.”


“You should though,” Asahi said. “You need other things to care about – otherwise you’re – you’ll be unhappy, I know you will.”

Nishinoya curled his fingers in the fabric of Asahi’s shirt and closed his stinging eyes. “You can’t tell me what I want,” he mumbled.

Nishinoya felt fingers thread into the hair on the back of his head. Softly, Asahi said, “I just never want to be the reason you might look back with regret.”

They were going in circles. Nishinoya’s stomach burned throughout the conversation. He was so tired still – tired, and sad, and lonely. The heat of the bath had dissipated from his skin. Nishinoya shifted his weight, pulling his arm out from underneath his side, and slowly sat up. Asahi’s arm slid off his shoulders until his hand came to rest at Nishinoya’s hip.

“So, what,” Nishinoya started, “that’s it, then?” He frowned down at Asahi. “I love you and you love me, but I still just gotta go back and act like this never happened?”

“I have nothing to offer you,” Asahi repeated. “I have nothing going for me. My life is going nowhere, and yours is just getting started. I can’t be the lead weight that holds you back.”

“That’s so stupid!” Nishinoya declared. “Haven’t you been listening to me this whole time? What do you mean you have nothing!” His voice rose nearly to a shout. “Would you look at yourself? You’re brave, you’re nice, you’re so frustrating!”

“Is that last one a compliment?”

“Would you listen?” Nishinoya insisted. He rapped his fist against Asahi’s chest. “You think I would love you if you were what you say you are? Asahi-san, you’re completely blind to yourself!” Nishinoya leaned forward. “And why are these the only choices? If I go back to school, I can’t be with you? Is there nothing in between we can agree on? Isn’t there some way I can go back and also be with you?”

Asahi looked suddenly surprised, as though this possibility hadn’t occurred to him. “I…”

Nishinoya pressed on. “I mean, my family is here, you dummy! It’s not like I’m never coming back again!” He lifted his hands and slammed his palms against the mattress on either side of Asahi’s head. “What makes you think I’d be able to get over you now, when I couldn’t before? I hadn’t even known what it felt like to kiss you then, and I still mooned over you for years!”
Nishinoya stared hard into Asahi’s eyes, at the shocked expression on his face. “How could you ever think a life without you could somehow make me happier than a life with you?”


He saw the precise moment that Asahi shattered, the instant his face crumpled. Nishinoya pulled back in concern – what had he said, had he hurt Asahi’s feelings, was it too much? Then he felt Asahi’s hands slide over his sides, around to his back, before Asahi pulled him down into a tight hug. One hand cupped the back of Nishinoya’s neck, guiding him until their cheeks pressed together. Nishinoya felt Asahi breathe next to his ear.

“I should’ve known,” Asahi murmured.

His hot breath sent a shiver down Nishinoya’s spine. “Should’ve known what?” he asked. Asahi loosened his hold on Nishinoya’s neck; Nishinoya pulled back enough to look at his expression.

He wore a brilliant smile, despite the tears on his cheeks. “You always end up saving me,” Asahi said. “Even from my own stupidity.”

Nishinoya felt heat in his face. “I dunno about that,” he mumbled. “If I’m supposed to be the smart one then we’re definitely in trouble.”

Asahi let out a laugh. He moved his hand to cradle the back of Nishinoya’s head, then pulled him down to kiss him.

Nishinoya broke away after a moment. “Don’t think this is the end of the argument,” he said. “I still want to know your answer.”

Asahi pulled him in again. “We can figure it out later,” he murmured.

Nishinoya pushed himself back a second time. “Are you still mad at me?” he asked.

This time Asahi settled back against the bed, and his hands slid down to Nishinoya’s waist. “I don’t know,” Asahi admitted. “It’s been a bit of a day, hasn’t it?”

“You’re tellin’ me,” Nishinoya returned. Asahi was still bedraggled beneath him in his ruined clothes. Nishinoya felt a stab of guilt. He pushed away and sat up again. He fiddled with the buttons of Asahi’s polo. “I really am sorry,” he mumbled.

Asahi sat up beside him. He pulled one leg onto the bed so he could turn toward Nishinoya, then curled his hand around the back of Nishinoya’s head and pressed their foreheads together. “Can you promise me that something like that will never happen again?”

Nishinoya frowned. “I don’t know if I can promise I won’t get upset about stuff sometimes.”

“I don’t mean that,” Asahi said. “I mean, you planning to leave without telling me. You running away and me having no idea where you are or when you’re coming back, if you’re coming back.” He gave a shuddering sigh. “I don’t… I couldn’t bear it, Nishinoya. I couldn’t bear going through that again.”

Nishinoya dropped his eyes. His throat hurt. “Okay,” he said, “I promise.”

“Alright. Then I’m not mad anymore.” Asahi tipped his head up to kiss Nishinoya’s forehead, then pulled back. “I’m not saying you can’t get upset, I just mean I want you to talk to me when you
are. I don’t want you to bottle it all up inside.” He put his hand flat against Nishinoya’s chest. “You can always talk to me about anything.”

Nishinoya’s face creased. “That goes for you too, Asahi-san.” He grabbed Asahi’s hand against him and squeezed it tight. “You can’t keep things inside either. No more trying to make my decisions for me.”

“It’s a deal,” Asahi said.

Nishinoya wiped his nose with his sleeve and cleared his throat. “So what now?” he asked.

“Hell, I don’t know,” Asahi returned. “We are way off my game plan.”

Nishinoya reached up and tugged on a loose clump of Asahi’s hair. “Maybe you should shower,” he suggested.

“You’re probably right.”

“Um, but… I’ll need to… clean the bath.”

Asahi smiled again, his lips curling upward just as his eyebrows came down on the ends. “Don’t worry about it right now,” he said. “There will be time tomorrow.”

In that moment, it was as though something had released inside Nishinoya – like a plug on a drain had been pulled, and all the mud inside him was beginning to seep out. There would be a tomorrow – for the two of them, for his family, for himself. He would wake up and have a whole new day to see everyone, and try to do it right this time. Nishinoya breathed out slowly, hardly daring to believe the possibility.

Asahi’s hand cupped his cheek. When Nishinoya met his eyes, Asahi’s expression was gently quizzical. He still looked tired, but he had lost the haggard quality from earlier. Nishinoya lifted one hand and pinched Asahi’s already-rough chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“Did you eat any dinner?” Asahi asked quietly, and Nishinoya shook his head. “Yeah, me either.”

“I could put something together,” Nishinoya said. “While you shower.”

“There’s some instant things in the cabinet. We can just eat those.”

Nishinoya nodded. “What time do you have to go to work tomorrow?” he asked.

“Not until noon, but I’m scheduled to stay until eight.”

He nodded again. Nishinoya’s eyes prickled, but no tears came. He leaned forward and pushed his forehead into Asahi’s chest. “I want to be here when you get home,” he mumbled.

Asahi closed his arms around Nishinoya’s shoulders and pulled him in tight. “I’ll be ready to come home to you,” he said. Nishinoya could feel the firm heat of his chest, the strength in his arms. He closed his eyes and slowly, cautiously, let himself relax.

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Nishinoya poked in the cabinets as Asahi showered. He found ramen bowls in the cabinet and couldn’t help but smile as he remembered the way Suga used to berate Asahi when he bought the same kind from the shop every day for lunch.
The dishes from breakfast still were on the table. A hard jolt of guilt dropped his stomach like the first hill of a rollercoaster. Nishinoya gathered up the plates and put them in the sink to wash. The broken one he left on the counter in plain sight – better to keep living up to his mistakes, keep them in the open.

Nishinoya had already boiled and poured the water and set the containers aside on the table to cook by the time Asahi came out of the bathroom. He had dressed in a ratty old t-shirt and a fresh pair of boxers, his wet hair twisted up in the same claw clip he’d worn on Nishinoya’s birthday. Nishinoya felt weirdly shy as Asahi came into the kitchen. It seemed ridiculous, given all that had happened, all that had passed between them in the last few days. But he’d been scrubbed bare, all the layers peeled away until only the truth existed beneath – his truest self, his longest secret, his deepest fear, his weakness and his wants. Nishinoya had thought before that he was the clay on Asahi’s wheel – now he began to wonder if he was the broken plate instead.

They ate together without speaking. Nishinoya had the sudden flash to that morning, when he’d been trying to somehow both stretch the moment out and still end it quickly. The fear, the desperation – it had been so blinding and oppressive. He’d suffocated underneath it. But now, as he sat next to Asahi and watched him slurp noodles, he couldn’t help but be struck by how normal things seemed. It felt as though the entire day had been a weird sort of fever dream. Maybe he’d actually fallen asleep the night before without realizing, and everything that happened after was a strange nightmare that he hadn’t been able to wake from.

After they finished eating and threw away the empty containers, Asahi’s gaze finally landed on the plate on the counter. It had split into three pieces, two long slivers and a larger bit shaped like a gibbous moon. Nishinoya stood next to him and held his breath as Asahi lifted up the large piece.

Asahi started to speak. “When I got home and you weren’t here, I wasn’t worried at first.” He ran his finger along the broken edge. “Then I saw the dishes on the table – and then I realized all your things were gone.” His face was anxious. His voice grew soft. “I never meant to make you feel unwanted,” he said.

“No,” Nishinoya breathed. “It wasn’t that, I promise.”

Asahi’s mouth twisted into a half-smile, but his expression didn’t ease. “You say that,” he continued, “but I can’t help but think it might have been true.”

Nishinoya reached forward and grabbed his arm. “I’m just an idiot,” he insisted, “I just feel like I crash-landed into your life, and I felt like...it would be better for you if I left.”

Asahi lowered the plate and turned toward him. “I kept telling myself I would be fine if you did,” he said. “I told myself that it would be enough for me – to have just a few days with you.” He shook his head. His face was still torn. “But then you were gone and I felt like...”

Nishinoya still had ahold of his arm. He tightened his grip. “Asahi-san,” he said.

Asahi exhaled hard. He continued in a wavering voice. “I felt like – I was just so stupid – because it was never going to be enough.” He lightly touched the side of Nishinoya’s head with his fingertips.

Nishinoya pinched his lips together. He swallowed. “Where did my bag end up?” he asked.

Asahi’s expression took a turn toward confusion. “I think it’s next to the door.”

Nishinoya nodded. He slipped his hand down Asahi’s arm and closed it around Asahi’s fingers. He stepped back and pulled him toward the front room. Nishinoya spied his bag next to his shoes,
which had left a small puddle near Asahi’s door. He let go of Asahi’s hand and retrieved the still-wet bag. He undid the zipper. He pulled out the broken mug.

Asahi made a soft noise. Nishinoya couldn’t look at him as he held out the handle-less body of the mug and shoved it into Asahi’s hands. “I took it,” he said. “I’m sorry.” He dug out the handle as well. This he held onto while he set the bag down again.

“You took it,” Asahi echoed.

Nishinoya nodded again. “It fell,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Why? Well, I wasn’t really watching where I set it down, and—”

“No, not that,” Asahi cut in. “Why did you take it?”

Nishinoya finally glanced up and met Asahi’s gaze. “You already know why,” he said. After a beat, he added, “Because I wanted to keep a piece of you, somehow.”

Asahi turned the mug over in his hands. He touched a chip in the glaze around the lip of it. “If you had asked,” he said, “I would have given it to you.”


Asahi turned the mug over again. “I forgot about the bowl I promised you,” he said quietly.

Nishinoya looked down at the handle he still held in both hands. He tightened his fingers around it. “I’m sorry,” he said again, barely above a whisper.

On the edge of his vision, he saw Asahi shift. He barely had time to look up before Asahi closed one arm around his shoulders and the other around his waist. He pulled Nishinoya in and hugged him so tightly that Nishinoya felt winded. The mug pressed hard against his shoulder where Asahi still held it in his hand.

“I don’t care about a dumb mug,” Asahi murmured next to his head. “You can have all of them, it doesn’t matter.”

“No, I–”

“Nishinoya,” Asahi said. He pushed him back out again at arm’s length and looked Nishinoya in the eye. “It’s just stuff. How can I be upset about a mug or a plate when twice today I’d thought I’d lost you?”

Asahi threw the mug behind him over his shoulder. It clunked hard out of sight against the floor. He took Nishinoya’s head in both hands, tilting his chin upward until he could touch their foreheads together. Asahi sighed aloud; the hot air passed over Nishinoya’s face. “I’d break all of them if it meant I got to spend another day with you,” Asahi concluded.

Nishinoya could barely suppress the whimper that almost came out of him. He closed his hands into the fabric of Asahi’s shirt. “Asahi-san…” he mumbled, at a loss for other words.

Asahi sighed again. He slid his hands down either side of Nishinoya’s neck to his shoulders. He lifted his head and pulled back. “I’m so tired,” he said, and he looked it. “Let’s go to bed.”

In the bedroom, Asahi pulled down the covers and clicked off the bedside lamp. Nishinoya
climbed in on his side, and they met in the middle of the mattress, curling toward each other. Asahi had one arm under Nishinoya’s neck. He used the other to pull the covers up and over them. Nishinoya shifted forward until his legs met Asahi’s, until his hands pressed against his chest. He felt Asahi’s arms encircle him in response.

Nishinoya exhaled in a long sigh of relief. He felt entirely empty, like everything both good and bad had been drained out of him. He was so tired that his eyes hurt. They were already drooping when Asahi spoke.

“You’ll stay tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Nishinoya mumbled against him.

“You won’t leave me?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

Nishinoya clutched at Asahi’s chest through his shirt. “I promise,” he said.

He felt Asahi nod, and then a hand touched his face, tilting it upward. Asahi’s lips fumbled next to his mouth in the darkness before they hit home.

They kissed softly, open-mouthed, while Asahi cradled the side of Nishinoya’s head and held him close. Nishinoya tasted salt and realized Asahi’s face was wet – after the fact realizing his own was as well. Nishinoya pulled away and sniffed hard. Asahi followed, kissing his eyelids, his cheeks, his forehead.

They stayed that way, nestled close together, sharing breath and warmth, sharing comfort as the night crept on and pulled them both down into sleep. Nishinoya’s final conscious thought hinged on the concept of tomorrow – when he’d see his family again, when he’d get to talk to his dad, when Asahi would be there in the morning and come home in the evening, and Nishinoya would be there waiting for him.
Chapter 12

Something was touching his face. That was Nishinoya’s first thought as he lumbered up into awareness. Slowly, he noticed other sensations: the bed beneath him, the fabric of the sheets against his skin, the warm body pressed against his own as they lay close together underneath the covers.

Nishinoya opened his eyes and blinked away the fog of sleep. He found Asahi above him, propped up on an elbow next to Nishinoya’s side. Asahi’s hair was frizzy from sleeping on it wet; it spilled over his shoulders in a mess of brown tangles. He looked soft and drowsy, safe and happy. His fingers coasted over Nishinoya’s skin again, tracing a line from his temple to his chin.

“Hello,” Asahi said quietly.

Nishinoya lifted his hands and slid them over Asahi’s shoulders. He laced his fingers together behind Asahi’s neck. “What time is it?”

“Early. Are you still tired? You can sleep more if you like.”

Nishinoya shook his head. He was already alert, fully awake, and he couldn’t bear to sleep again with Asahi so gorgeous and so warm and so near.

“Do you feel better?”

“Mm,” Nishinoya hummed. “What about you?”

“Much better,” Asahi said. He curled his hand around Nishinoya’s forearm, ducked his chin to the side, and kissed the tender skin. “Last night wasn’t a dream, was it?”

“I hope not.”

Asahi leaned down over him. He placed his other elbow on the bed against Nishinoya’s opposite side. His face drew close. “If you tell me one more time,” Asahi murmured, “I might start to believe it.”

“Tell you what?”

Asahi’s cheeks darkened. Nishinoya pulled one hand back, and Asahi turned his face into his palm. He kissed the heel of Nishinoya’s hand. “What you said last night.”

“...what did I say?” They’d talked about so many things; most of the previous night was a blur.


“Oh, that.” Nishinoya wrapped his fingers around a lock of Asahi’s hair and tugged. “I love you,” he said sternly.

Asahi’s expression looked almost pained, but he smiled at Nishinoya as he cradled his head. “Once more,” he said.

“I love you,” Nishinoya repeated, tugging harder.

Asahi exhaled wonderfully. He lowered his forehead to meet Nishinoya’s. “You love me,” he breathed.
“Of course I do.”

“Well, that’s good,” Asahi said, “because I love you.”

Nishinoya felt himself shiver all over. He grabbed Asahi’s head in both hands and kissed him hard.

It would occur to him later that perhaps he should’ve felt awkward, given the terrible way their last intimate encounter had ended. But in the moment, he wasn’t – all he could think was that Asahi loved him, that he was so relieved to wake up next to him and find him there, that there existed a new day between them. Nishinoya tangled his hands into Asahi’s hair and arched his body up against him; Asahi responded with a marvelous noise in his throat. His arms slid underneath Nishinoya, wedging in between his back and the mattress beneath. Nishinoya was suddenly supremely conscious of the firm thigh resting between his own. He lifted his leg and curled it over Asahi’s, which made Asahi’s breath hitch. When his lips parted, Nishinoya took it as invitation to slip his tongue into his mouth.

He didn’t know that he expected it to feel any different than it had before, but touching Asahi felt somehow both familiar and new, known and strange at the same time. The way Asahi sighed against his mouth, the way his body responded. Desire burned inside Nishinoya hot enough to melt steel. How could he have ever thought he’d be able to give such a thing up?

Nishinoya pushed on Asahi’s shoulders until their lips came apart, ignoring the look of confusion on his face, and quickly shifted upward before Asahi had time to react. He twisted as he moved with his hands still tight on Asahi’s shoulders, until he’d flipped Asahi onto his back against the bed. Asahi went without resistance; he only looked at Nishinoya as though he would follow him to the edge of the world. His hair splayed out in an uneven halo across his pillow. His eyes had that hooded look – the dark one Nishinoya had longed for. Nishinoya lifted himself up and straddled Asahi’s hips, then curled over him and kissed him once more, burying his hands in Asahi’s hair on either side of his head.

He was so warm he felt sweat against his back – he so rarely slept in anything heavier than a pair of shorts. And Asahi radiated heat beneath him, a slow-burning fire under his hands and between his thighs. Asahi’s hands closed over his hips and rearranged Nishinoya on top of him; Nishinoya couldn’t help the moan that slipped out when he felt Asahi’s burgeoning erection press against his own through the few layers of fabric between them. He lowered his forehead to Asahi’s shoulder and moved his hips slowly, reveling in the soft sounds that came out of Asahi in response. One of Asahi’s hands slipped up his back, pushing his shirt up as it went. His hand felt like a hot stone against Nishinoya’s skin exposed to the air. It wasn’t long before Nishinoya slipped the shirt over his head and discarded it.

The sweatpants he wore were too large for him, and they rode lower and lower on his hips as he shifted against Asahi beneath him. Soon the waistband had slipped so far that when Nishinoya looked to where their bodies pressed together, he could see pubic hair peeking above the elastic. He knew his ass was half exposed – a theory confirmed when Asahi’s hand curled over his right glute and his thumb hooked into the waistband, tugging the pants down even further. Asahi grabbed the rounded muscle and squeezed hard; his fingers slipped into the cleft of Nishinoya’s ass as he did so. Nishinoya moaned and rocked his hips forward so hard that the bed frame knocked against the wall.

“Oh,” he gasped as he stilled his hips and lifted his head from Asahi’s chest. “Oops.”

“...why are you talking about deposits right now?”

“Ah… I don’t know. Maybe I’m a little nervous.”

“Nervous?” Nishinoya put his hands against Asahi’s stomach and pushed himself up. “How can you be nervous at this point?”

Asahi was still blushing. “I...don’t know,” he repeated.

Niishinoya exhaled slowly. He looked at the ceiling. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. Finally, he returned his gaze to Asahi. “We can wait,” he suggested. “If you want.”

Asahi tilted his head to the side and offered him a little smile. His hands slid over Nishinoya’s thighs. “I’m not saying that,” he said.

“Okay, that’s good,” Nishinoya returned, “because I think I’m about to catch on fire here.”

Asahi laughed again – a quiet, throaty sound. “You’re so sweet,” he said.

“Sweet!” Nishinoya repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Asahi abruptly shifted underneath him. He sat up so quickly that Nishinoya slipped down in between his legs, but Asahi wrapped an arm around his waist and hauled him back up, before hooking a hand under his ass. Asahi’s breath cascaded over the skin of his throat – a hot tickle of damp air, and then a soft brush of lips against the sensitive flesh. Nishinoya shivered at the sensation. “You’re so sweet,” Asahi repeated quietly. He kissed just underneath Nishinoya’s jaw.

Nishinoya tucked down his chin, and Asahi’s roving mouth found his. His fingers slipped even lower, down between Nishinoya’s thighs from behind. With a sharp gasp, Nishinoya tightened his legs around Asahi’s waist and clung to his shoulders to keep himself upright.

Sunlight streamed in from the window above the bed. Slats of light fell against them, touching highlights in Asahi’s hair, Nishinoya’s forearm where it wrapped around Asahi’s shoulders. Nishinoya slid his hand down Asahi’s back as far as he could reach – the fabric beneath his fingers was warm and soft. Nishinoya grabbed a handful of the shirt and hissed out loud. He couldn’t manage much else while Asahi continued the teasing caress below.

The sweatpants became unbearable – if only because they limited Nishinoya’s ability to get as close to Asahi as possible. As he pushed back, Asahi’s hand slipped from between his legs, which was both a relief and a disappointment. Nishinoya drew up his knee and wrestled one leg free from the pants.

He looked down between them and saw the wet spot in Asahi’s boxers, close to where his own cock left dots of precome on the thin cotton. He slid his hand down off Asahi’s shoulder, over his clavicle and chest, over his tense stomach, until he met the bulge of Asahi’s erection through the fabric. He pressed the pad of his thumb against the patch of wet cotton.

Asahi exhaled hard in response. His hands clenched at Nishinoya’s sides, and he lowered his forehead onto Nishinoya’s shoulder. Asahi breathed raggedly against his collarbone; Nishinoya realized his hands were shaking. He felt something wet against his skin, and his hand against Asahi stilled. Nishinoya put the other one on Asahi’s shoulder and pushed him back so he could look at him.

“S-sorry,” Asahi said.
Nishinoya lifted his hand off Asahi’s shoulder and used his finger to catch one of the tears on Asahi’s face. “What’s wrong?” he asked. He couldn’t have hurt Asahi; he knew that well enough – he couldn’t have pushed too forcefully or touched too much.

Asahi shook his head in response. “Nothing,” he said, “nothing.” He put a hand around the back of Nishinoya’s head, pulled him forward, and kissed him hard. After only a breath of hesitation, Nishinoya wrapped his arm around Asahi’s neck and kissed him back with equal ardor. Asahi’s hand closed over Nishinoya’s on his boxers, pulling it tightly against himself.

Soon those boxers were down around his hips. Asahi wrapped an arm around Nishinoya’s waist, holding their bodies close together. Nishinoya sucked air in through his teeth when he felt Asahi’s cock touch against his own – that inhale became a groan when Asahi’s long fingers closed around both of them. Nishinoya pushed his upper body back so that he could turn his gaze downward and watch Asahi’s hand move. Asahi’s forehead came to rest against his.

Nishinoya was mesmerized by the sight. Asahi tugged gently, slowly rolling skin over the hardness underneath. On each stroke, wonderful shivers cascaded down Nishinoya’s spine and legs, all the way to his toes. He curled his hand around Asahi’s, though he made no attempt to guide him – just entwined their fingers and let Asahi lead them both. Asahi’s breath escaped in a thready moan. He shifted Nishinoya up, then crossed his ankles together and settled Nishinoya back down into the bowl of his legs.

Nishinoya tangled his hand into the hair at Asahi’s nape and pulled him forward to kiss him. Asahi’s arm was tight around his waist, his legs warm underneath Nishinoya’s, his lips soft as they moved. Nishinoya did his best to stay still, though he squeezed his thighs together on Asahi’s sides as the pressure built inside him. Asahi kept up the tortuously slow pace – patient, steady, unyielding. Nishinoya sighed against his mouth and kissed him languidly, more than happy to take the moment to feel the heat of Asahi near him, the way his chest moved as he breathed, the rough sandpaper of his jaw, the firm gentleness of his hands on Nishinoya’s skin. There was time. They had time.

When it finally came upon him, Nishinoya edged around the crest of his orgasm for a good handful of seconds before he shuddered and dug his fingers into Asahi’s skin. He came hard with a loud cry and found himself shaking in the aftermath. Nishinoya lowered his head onto Asahi’s shoulder. He pressed his face into the skin of Asahi’s neck as his limbs grew heavy and weak. He was in such a daze that he hardly registered the way Asahi’s breath caught another minute later, the way his body grew rigid against Nishinoya’s before he relaxed. Nishinoya was dimly aware of Asahi wiping his hand on the one leg of sweatpants he still wore.

Afterward, Asahi wrapped both arms around Nishinoya’s waist and pulled him close. Nishinoya tucked his arms in against Asahi’s chest, blinking drowsily as he regained his bearings. It was only then that he heard Asahi sniffle and realized he was crying again.

He sat back in Asahi’s lap, pushing off his chest so he could look at his face. Asahi started to turn his head aside, but Nishinoya grabbed his chin and held him in place. “What?” he asked. “What is it?”

Asahi shook his head. His shoulders heaved once, then Nishinoya saw his larynx bob in his throat as he swallowed. When Asahi spoke, his voice was rough and thick. “No,” he said, “it’s okay, really.”

Nishinoya felt a frown tug at his mouth. “You gotta tell me what you’re thinking, remember?”

Asahi laughed despite the tears on his face. “I remember,” he said. “And I’m really being honest, I
promise. I’m just…” He cleared his throat. “I’m – I’m a little bit. Overwhelmed, I think?” He wiped at his face with his clean hand and kept the other firmly around Nishinoya’s waist. “Part of me is terrified this isn’t real, and part of me is terrified that it is.”

Nishinoya lowered his hand back to Asahi’s chest. “What do you mean?”

“Well…” Asahi sniffed hard and cleared his throat again. “It’s just… I wanted this, so badly, and for so long.” He put his hand to the side of Nishinoya’s neck, thumb brushing over his jaw. “And now I’m almost scared to believe it – I feel like any moment it’s going to end, like the universe is playing a practical joke on me, and the other shoe is just about to drop.” His touch was feather-light, his tone soft. “I never thought this would happen, that I’d get to hold you and touch you, and tell you how I felt. And—” His voice caught. “And that you might say it back to me.”

Nishinoya slid his arms behind Asahi’s neck and pressed up close against him. “I’ll say it a hundred times, a million times,” he insisted. “It’s not a joke. I’m not gonna change my mind.”

Asahi gave him a smile that looked grateful and nervous at the same time. “No, you don’t do that often, do you?”

“That’s not a dig, is it?” Nishinoya pinched the skin at the base of Asahi’s neck.

“No, no!” Asahi returned. “It’s a relief, actually.” He shifted forward, hands smoothing up Nishinoya’s bare back, and moved to kiss him again.

Nishinoya leaned back. “You never did give me an answer last night,” he said.

Asahi paused. “An answer?”

“To my question. If we can find somehow to make this work.” Nishinoya felt the way Asahi’s body stilled underneath his hands. He tightened his arms and pulled close again. “I don’t want to leave you,” he continued. “I want to stay here.”

The expression on Asahi’s face turned wistful. “I want you to stay here,” he said.

Asahi’s tone didn’t satisfy Nishinoya. “But you won’t let me?” he asked.

“I think it needs to be your decision,” Asahi said. He continued quickly before Nishinoya had a chance to reply. “And I really mean this – I want you to think really hard about the options in front of you. Whatever you decide, I’ll support. But don’t make that decision rashly, that’s all I ask.”

Nishinoya frowned. “I don’t have to think about it,” he said. “Not about you.”

“I want you to,” Asahi insisted.

“Asahi—”

“Until tonight, at least,” Asahi cut in. “Promise me you’ll think about what you really want.”

Nishinoya settled back in the bowl of Asahi’s legs. He slid his hands over Asahi’s shoulders, down to his upper arms. “I’m not gonna change my mind,” he repeated.

Asahi gave him a small smile. “I just want you to be sure,” he said.

“I’m already sure,” Nishinoya reiterated.

Asahi groaned out loud. He pulled Nishinoya close and pressed his nose into his hair. “Just humor
me,” he said against Nishinoya’s temple. “I’m still worried you’re eventually going to regret this. I just want to know that you thought about it, even for a minute.”

Nishinoya sighed against Asahi’s skin. He pulled his arms in again and pressed his hands to Asahi’s chest, warm through his t-shirt. “Okay,” he conceded. “I’ll think about it.”


“What if I decide to stay?”

“Well, we’ll figure that out.”

Nishinoya paused a moment, chewing his lip. “What if I decide to go?”

When Asahi finally spoke, his voice was soft. “Then I’ll at least know you chose something for yourself instead of me.”

Nishinoya felt his face crease in response. “I’m not gonna go,” he said. “Just so you know.”

“We can talk about it more tonight,” Asahi returned quietly.

Nishinoya sighed again. “Okay,” he said.

Asahi’s warm hands smoothed over his back. Nishinoya couldn’t help but remember when Asahi had given him the massage – when he’d been so sure he was doing the right thing, making the right decision – when he was certain he should leave.

Now he didn’t know. He knew what he wanted, or at least thought he did. But he didn’t know what was best – for him, for Asahi, or for his family.

Nishinoya sighed again and closed his eyes. “This is so dumb,” he said.

“What is?” Asahi murmured. His hands still moved on Nishinoya’s back.

“Why’s it gotta be like this? I still just want to crawl under the covers and never come out.”

Nishinoya squinched his face in displeasure. “I don’t understand how I’m supposed to know what the right decision is.”

“I guess you just have to think about it and hope for the best.”

“Ugh,” Nishinoya returned. “I just wanna be done with it.”

He felt Asahi’s hand cup the back of his head. “Well, we don’t have to do anything right at this moment,” Asahi said. “Except maybe breakfast. Or...” He shifted underneath Nishinoya, bending forward with his arm tight around Nishinoya’s waist as he turned. Nishinoya found himself deposited on his back against the mattress with Asahi close above him. “Or,” Asahi continued, as he leaned his weight onto Nishinoya’s body, “we could stay in bed a bit longer.”

Nishinoya felt the grin tug at his mouth. The unsettled feeling in his stomach eased. Asahi loved him, right? That was what mattered. He lifted his hands and wrapped his arms back around Asahi’s neck. “What a good idea,” he said.

~

Ten-thirty came quicker than expected, though they did eventually find a little time to eat breakfast. Nishinoya borrowed Asahi’s phone while he got ready in the other room. Thankfully,
Asahi had more than one set of clothes appropriate for work. Nishinoya planned to take the soiled ones with him to his parents house so he could launder them there.

He sat on the couch and dialed the number. Nishinoya closed his eyes and listened to the ring on the other end of the line. Hopefully it wasn’t too busy yet at the restaurant – they opened for lunch at 11:30, if Nishinoya’s memory was accurate, so plenty of time still to–

The other end clicked. “Hello?”

“Ryu, it’s me.”

“Noya! Noya, what the fuck?” Tanaka’s voice was both relieved and furious. “Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry I didn’t call you back.”

“Sorry!” Tanaka echoed. “Noya, don’t be an asshole! Your mom called me last night and told me you ran away!”

Nishinoya rubbed his temple with his free hand. “Yeah, that might have happened, yeah.”

“She wanted to know if you’d gone back to my house. I tried to call you about a hundred times!”

“Ah, yeah… Phone died in the rain…”

“Noya, tell me what happened!”

“There’s really not much to tell!” Nishinoya insisted. “I got upset and ran away, I wandered around in the rain for awhile, and then I came back to Asahi-san’s place.”

“You’re really okay, though?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You didn’t – did you… again, you know.”

Nishinoya groaned. He drew his knees up and put his feet on the couch, then wrapped his free arm around his legs. “Did I faint again?”

“Yeah.” He sounded hesitant, nervous. Nishinoya knocked his forehead against his knees. Why didn’t he try to call back the day before?

“No,” he said finally. “That didn’t happen again.”

“Ah... okay. Good.”

Awkward silence lapsed between them. Nishinoya heard Tanaka take a slow breath, then clear his throat. “So...” he started slowly, "what do you–"

“Ryu,” Nishinoya blurted, "I'm really sorry, honestly. I'm sorry.”

“You–"

"I should've just been honest with everyone from the start, my family and you and Asahi-san. I should've just talked to people and not run away from–"

"Noya!” Tanaka cut in. "Noya, stop! Really. It’s okay.”
“It’s not though!” Nishinoya remembered the way Tanaka’s face had looked across the table. “I never meant – I’m, I’m sorry. I know I freaked you out.”

“Well, I can’t say you didn’t.”

Nishinoya grimaced. “I know. I know. I freaked myself out too.”

“...has that ever happened before?”

He shook his head for a moment before remembering that Tanaka couldn’t see him. “No, never. I don’t know why that happened.”

“You need to take better care of yourself, Noya.”

Nishinoya looked at the ceiling and swallowed hard. “I know, Ryuu,” he said quietly. “I’ll try, okay?”

“Okay.”

Nishinoya couldn’t help but ask the next question. “You didn’t lose sleep over me last night, did you?”

“Well, your dad did call me later to say you were okay. But I wasn’t exactly relaxed, Noya, no.”

Nishinoya pushed his thumb against his eyelid until he saw sparks. "I shouldn't have done that. I wasn't thinking right."

"When are you ever thinking right?"

He smiled weakly at Tanaka's sardonic tone. "I'm not gonna do it again," he said.

"Good. I'd hate to have to strangle you. Your mom could probably keep me out of jail, at least."

"She might beat you to it, actually. I haven't talked to her about last night yet."


"Right. It was bad enough yesterday."

"Yeah, I'm kinda surprised they let you go after that? After you and your dad went outside, your mom was so upset, I thought she was gonna bust something."

Nishinoya closed his eyes and exhaled hard through his nose. It took him a moment to speak again. "I feel like such a piece of shit, Ryuu. I kept thinking they were gonna be angry or disappointed – that they might start hating me or something."

"That's stupid, Noya."

"I know," he returned, "I just can't help it."

"Listen, I – I don't know if I really understand what you're feeling right now." Tanaka's tone was about as serious as Nishinoya had ever heard. "But that doesn't mean I don't want to – to – to help if I can. So, don't, like... try to spare me or nothing? You can lay it on me if you need to. You know what I mean?"

"Okay. Good." A roar of static crossed through the line to Nishinoya's ear, and he realized that Tanaka must have exhaled right into the receiver. "So!" he said. "You didn't go to Chiba, clearly."

"No, I guess I didn't."

"Are you planning to go back later on?"

"I'm... not sure yet." Nishinoya fiddled with a stray thread on the fabric of the couch. "Asahi-san wants me to think about it." He paused. "You were right, actually."

"Well, of course I was, but about what specifically?"

"About me and him." His cheeks burned. "About... how I felt about him."

"Oh. Yeah, that was pretty obvious, Noya."

Nishinoya groaned. "God, you know, Ukai said something really weird to me when I tagged along to their practice. Now I'm wondering if he noticed too."

"Weird, how?"

"Like, something about being discreet?"

"Oh, shit..."

"Right..." Nishinoya sighed. "You were also right that we should've talked about it. I dunno why we both were so... not. Talking."

"I dunno how I ended up being the most perceptive one in this situation," Tanaka intoned. "That doesn't really sound like something that should happen."

"Right. Who knew you were such a relationship expert."

"If I'm the expert, why don't I have a girlfriend?"

"Because no girl deserves you, clearly."

"I don't care if she deserves me or not!" Tanaka insisted. "I just wanna touch a boob before I'm thirty, you know?"

Nishinoya couldn't help the laugh that came out of his mouth. "I think they have services for that in the city."

"Oh, like you know."

"I might know!"

"The Great Worldly Nishinoya, Master of the Urban Underworld."

"Shut it! Like you're so much better!"

Nishinoya was still laughing when Asahi came out from the bedroom. He paused just inside the front room and gave Nishinoya a cautious smile.

"Ah, okay," Nishinoya said. "I gotta go. I'll let you know when I get a new phone."

"Okay, Noya."
"Are you gonna be free tomorrow at all?"

"I'll be here at the restaurant but there's the break after lunch."

"Okay. I'll probably come by."

"I'll be here. Don't freak me out again."

"I won't. See you later."

"Bye, Noya. Don't be an asshole anymore."

"I won't," Nishinoya repeated. He took the phone away from his ear and ended the call. He set it aside, then returned his gaze to Asahi.

Asahi wore a dark red button-up with black jeans. His hair was back in the bun again. Nishinoya felt the nostalgic pang in his heart, the same one he'd felt the day before, yet it hurt in such a different way this time. There was still a desperation, but the panic was gone, replaced instead by something softer. Something warmer.

"Hey," Asahi said.

"Hey," Nishinoya returned.

Asahi crossed over and sat down beside him. Nishinoya kept his feet on the couch as he leaned his weight against Asahi's side. A warm arm slid around him. Nishinoya rested his head on Asahi's shoulder and felt Asahi thread a hand into hair.

"How do you feel?" Asahi asked softly.

"Great," Nishinoya returned.

Asahi laughed. "Great?"

"Well, pretty good, at least," Nishinoya clarified.

"I'll take pretty good." Asahi's fingers brushed pleasantly over his scalp. Nishinoya closed his eyes.

They sat together quietly for a few moments before Asahi spoke again. "What's your plan for today?" he asked.

Nishinoya shrugged. "Dad's salon and then my parent's house, I guess."

Asahi hummed thoughtfully against the top of his head. "Are you nervous?"

"Not really," Nishinoya said.

"That's surprising. I'm kind of nervous and I'm not even the one in the frying pan."

Nishinoya grinned. He used his elbow to jab – lightly – into Asahi's ribs. "You'd be nervous about getting struck by lightning on a sunny day."

"That's probably true."

"It's absolutely true," Nishinoya leaned back and pushed himself away from Asahi's shoulder so he could look at his face. "I'm really not, though. I sorta feel like, I kinda already fucked up about
as bad as I could right now?” Asahi’s face fell; Nishinoya backtracked quickly. “No, I don’t mean in a bad way, I just mean – well, what’s done is done, right? It already happened. So there’s no use being nervous about it anymore.”

Asahi’s expression softened. He lifted his hand and tucked Nishinoya’s hair behind his ear. “Well, alright then,” he said. “That does sound like very Nishinoya logic.”

“Hey!”

Asahi ducked his head, but it didn’t hide his smile. The warm feeling inside Nishinoya grew.

“Besides…” Nishinoya started quietly. Asahi looked up again.

“Besides,” he repeated. Heat bloomed in his face. He reached forward and grabbed Asahi’s hand. “If I get to come home to you afterward, I think I can survive anything.”

Asahi exhaled hard. He looked for a moment like he might cry again, but he didn’t. Instead he lifted his hand to Nishinoya’s head, pulled him forward, and kissed him so sweetly it made Nishinoya’s heart flip over. When Asahi pulled back a moment later, Nishinoya almost followed.

Asahi rubbed the corner of Nishinoya’s mouth with the pad of his thumb. “I’ll be ready for you,” he said.

Nishinoya did move forward then, slid his hands over Asahi’s shoulders, and kissed him once more. He felt Asahi’s hands close around his back.

He wanted so badly for Asahi to stay home; he wanted to climb back in bed and stay there the rest of the day, napping and fooling around and curling up together under the covers afterward as they had earlier that morning. He wanted to stay in that warm cocoon indefinitely. But Asahi needed to go to work – trusted him enough to go to work again, and that was a gift that Nishinoya couldn’t ignore. And he did actually want to see his mom and dad, to talk to them in a way that had been impossible the day before, and that was a conversation that needed to happen without Asahi distracting his focus.

No, this really was the best course of action. And Asahi would be home again in just a few hours, just a few minutes. Nishinoya would be there waiting for him.

When it came time for Asahi to leave, they said goodbye at the door the same as they had the previous day. This time, Nishinoya tugged him down and licked his way into Asahi’s mouth, and Asahi eventually had to push him away, breathless and laughing.

"Alright!” he said. "Alright. I'll never get out of here at this rate.”

Nishinoya eased back on his heels, though he kept his hands against Asahi’s chest. "You could be a little late."

"Oh yeah, I think my boss would totally understand. Sorry, ma'am, I was too busy getting felt up." Asahi nodded. "Very professional."

"Not the worst thing that could happen," Nishinoya insisted.

"Hm." Asahi's hands smoothed over his shoulders. "I won't say it's not tempting."

Nishinoya couldn't help his grin. He reached up and pinched Asahi’s ear. "I guess you can go," he said.
"How charitable." Asahi touched his chin. "I should be home by nine."

Nishinoya nodded. "I'll be here," he said.

Asahi's expression wavered slightly. Nishinoya felt his stomach clench with guilt in response. "Asahi-san." He squeezed Asahi's ear. "I'll be here," he repeated, "I promise."

A small smile flitted across Asahi's face, though it didn't quite reach his eyebrows. "I know you will," he said. "I trust you."

Nishinoya pulled him down again and kissed him once more, softly this time. "Come home soon," he murmured. Asahi nodded in return. He lingered for another moment before he finally pulled away and went for the door.

Nishinoya watched him go – he watched the door close behind Asahi, heard the click of the latch and then the creaky stairs. Afterward, when he was sure Asahi was gone, Nishinoya exhaled slowly into the quietness, then went to clean the kitchen. No broken dishes this time.

Nishinoya cleaned the bathroom after the kitchen, and then he set to work on the front room, especially where he had dripped over the floor the night previous. It wasn't much, but he wasn't sure how else to make things up to Asahi, to make himself feel like he had earned at least a fraction of Asahi's affection.

The afternoon passed with all the interminable quality of a chemistry lecture. Nishinoya planned to go to his dad's salon around four, when they would be nearer to closing time. He realized that he had no way to tell his dad this plan – he just had to hope that his dad would understand and not worry too much.

Without Asahi there, Nishinoya eventually grew agitated in the quiet emptiness of the apartment. He wandered room to room, looking for things to do – he didn't want to read any of Asahi's books or watch any of his movies. He didn't want to get on the computer or watch TV. Nishinoya couldn't help but remember the long night he'd spent in misery, waiting for the end of the world. Suddenly the apartment was suffocating; he felt like his head was stuffed with cotton, like acid burned in his gut.

He looked at his watch. It was only two o'clock. He tried to think about how long it would take to walk to the salon.

Long enough, he eventually decided. He borrowed the jacket Asahi's mom had lent him, wrote a quick note – just in case – and went out the door, locking it behind himself with the spare key.

~

It took Nishinoya less than twenty minutes to get lost. He'd only had a vague idea of the direction of his dad's salon – the apartment was across the river, hadn't Asahi said? Which meant he'd need to cross back over at some point. With no phone in his pocket, his navigation skills were somewhat lacking, even in his hometown.

The day was overcast but dry. The clouds blanketing the sky were light gray and held no hint of rain. Nishinoya was incredibly thankful for this; he couldn't wear any of Asahi's clothes out of the apartment, and his own were still damp from the day before. At least he'd be able to dry out along the walk.

He wandered generally east as far as he could tell, and tried to remember how the districts of the city were laid out. Which one was he in now? Which one held his dad's salon? Nishinoya
meandered around until he found a bus stop with a map. He was relieved to see he wasn’t too far off course.

It was a long walk, longer than he anticipated. But that wasn’t really a bad thing – it gave him a chance to clear his head outside the halcyon atmosphere of Asahi’s apartment, helped him remember there still existed a world beyond it. It gave him the opportunity to think about his next course of action. Thinking long-term was still too difficult, but maybe he could plan out to the end of the week?

Slowly the neighborhoods around him became more familiar. He began to recognize streets and buildings, passed an elementary school that he knew wasn’t too far from his destination. It was only a little longer before he found himself on the right street, no more than a mile down from the salon.

He checked his watch as he hiked through the last leg of his journey. It was not quite four o’clock. He’d be only a little past his self-imposed deadline when he got to the salon.

It felt like almost no time had passed at all before he had the familiar window in front of him, his fingers curled around the door handle. When Nishinoya opened the door, he felt the chime resound down into his chest, clenching around his heart. The chemical smell of the place flooded his senses – how many times had he been there? How many haircuts? How many afternoons had he done his homework in the back room, waiting for his dad to finish up and take him home? Too many to count.

His dad’s booth was at the far end. A few of the other chairs held customers, though the other stylists gave Nishinoya hardly any notice as he passed them, headed for the back.

His dad had a client in the chair. Nishinoya held back for a moment, unsure if he should disturb the work or go sit down in an empty seat. Before he could decide, his dad looked up and caught sight of him in the mirror.

His eyebrows lifted. “Oh, Yuu! There you are.”

“Yeah, hey Dad. Sorry.” Nishinoya scratched at the new scab on his forearm. “I got a little lost.”

His dad turned his gaze down to his work again. “Let me finish Mrs. Ishida, and then I’ll take care of you.”

Ishida? Why did that name sound familiar? Nishinoya glanced at the woman's reflection for the first time, and saw the old lady from Asahi's ceramics studio looking back at him with those same shrewd eyes. Nishinoya took a step back, suddenly feeling like he'd been caught stealing.

When the woman spoke, her voice creaked like a rusty bike wheel. "This is your son, Kou-kun?"

"Yes, Yuu is my eldest."

"Ah, I see." Mrs. Ishida pulled her attention away from Nishinoya and returned it to the magazine in her lap.

Nishinoya's dad used his head to gesture toward the back room without taking his eyes off his work. "Yuu, I've got something for you. Why don't you go get it? It's in my bag in the back."

"Okay," Nishinoya returned. He turned and stepped toward the open doorway that led to the back hall. He was still unsettled from Mrs. Ishida's sharp gaze. Had she recognized him? And if she did, had she realized what had occurred while she was out of sight at the studio? Would she tell his
father?

The back room was half storage, half break-room, all cluttered mess, and just as Nishinoya remembered it. His dad had carried the same leather satchel for at least fifteen years – this Nishinoya found in one of the tall metal cabinets against the far wall. He undid the buckles and lifted the flap. Inside were a few folders, an empty flat container that must have held his lunch, and the small box of a new phone.

Nishinoya stared at it a moment before he put his hand into the bag and pulled out the box. It was a newer model, not the latest but the one released just before. The seal had been broken. Nishinoya set his dad’s bag down to free his hand and opened the box.

There was a receipt folded up inside. It was dated for that morning. Nishinoya extracted the phone and turned it on; it booted up smoothly and beautifully quick, brand new battery and processor.

“Shit…” he mumbled.

He sat in the back room for about a quarter of an hour while he downloaded his contacts and apps from the cloud. Nishinoya worried that he had lost all the messages and pictures on the old phone, but hopefully it had backed-up automatically at some point, and he’d still be able to access them. He still had his old LINE conversations, at least. He pulled up a groupchat from his friends.

\textit{dai what s the plan for next friday}

\textit{Why do i gotta plan everything}

\textit{bc toshi is shit at it}

\textit{Hey fuck u}

\textit{what abt that bar next to the place w/ the fish}

\textit{You gotta be more specific buddy}

\textit{THE PLACE WITH THE FISH! COME ON.}

\textit{fuck u guys i’m going home}

\textit{Hori baby we love u dont go}

\textit{Is anyone interested in seeing a movie? I have a few passes that haven’t expired yet.}

\textit{Ok who votes we totally impose on yucchan’s generosity and go to the movies}

\textit{aye aye sir}

\textit{And then the bar next to the place with the fish wherever that is}

\textit{FUCK U GUYS IM NOT TAKIN U ANYWHERE}

Nishinoya smiled even though his heart panged sharply in his chest. The last message was time-stamped just a couple hours earlier.

He hadn’t chipped in on any conversations since his probation. He’d been so ashamed of what had happened and how he’d been acting – Nishinoya was sure they’d all given up on him. But even so…
His thumbs hesitated over the keys. Finally he typed, *room for one more?* He closed his eyes and squinched up his face. Then he took a deep breath, looked back at the phone, and hit send.

No one had responded by the time his dad came into the back room a few minutes later. “Yuu?” he said. “I’m ready for you now.” He didn’t seem unnerved or upset, which gave Nishinoya a small amount of relief. Maybe Mrs. Ishida hadn’t said anything.

Out in the main room, Nishinoya’s dad lowered the chair with practiced ease. Nishinoya crossed his arms and glared at him.

“Don’t give me that face,” his dad said. “Your mom gives me the same one.”

“What face.”

“The *stop-reminding-me-I’m-short* face.”

Nishinoya felt the grin breaking through. “Well, you’re the jerk who didn’t give me the right genes.”

“The genes I gave you are perfectly fine. Get in the damn chair.”

When he was seated, his dad levered the chair up to the correct height. He draped a towel over Nishinoya’s shoulders, followed by the cape. Nishinoya felt the familiar snap as he closed the neck tie snugly.

“No!” his dad said. He spun the chair once in a full rotation, like he used to do when Nishinoya was little just to make him laugh. “What can we do about this, hm?”

“I don’t really care,” Nishinoya said.

“Hmm.” His dad ran his fingers through the mess. “Well, I could buzz it all off then, that would be very easy.”

“Uh, maybe not that.”

His dad’s grin was reflected in the mirror. “See, you care a little.” He rubbed his chin. “Maybe some color, what do you think?”

Nishinoya shrugged. “That sounds okay.”

“And we’ll need to give you something that matches your personality, something that suits you. Maybe something obnoxious.”

“Hey!” Nishinoya said.

His dad laughed. “Obnoxious in a good way! Obnoxiously good.”

“Dad,” Nishinoya said, “do whatever you want. I know it’ll be great.”

His dad tapped his chin thoughtfully with a couple fingers. At length he lowered his hand, and went for the cabinet. “I think I have something in mind for you,” he said.

The salon usually closed around six, except for the occasional late appointment. Some of the other stylists had already packed up and left by the time Nishinoya’s dad lowered him to the sink to wash the color out of his hair. They were the only ones left on that end of the salon, so Nishinoya didn’t feel self-conscious when he asked, “How mad is Mom about last night?”
“Oh, pretty furious, I think,” his dad replied as he worked shampoo into Nishinoya’s hair. “When I got home, she looked ready to kill something. I thought she was going to jump right in the car and drag you back home.”

Nishinoya winced. “And you stopped her?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t easy.” His dad paused. “I’m pretty furious too, Yuu.”

Nishinoya looked away. “I know,” he said, “I’m sorry.”

“You can’t do this sort of thing anymore. If you want us to trust you, then you have to communicate with us.”

“I know.”

“Anyway.” The water was warm against Nishinoya’s head as his dad rinsed out the shampoo. “We talked about it for awhile last night, and your mother called some people she knows. We’ve set you up with a counselor in Chiba.”

Nishinoya’s eyes shot back to him. “What? Dad–”

“It will be up to you on whether or not you go see them, but Yuu–” He turned off the water, then leaned over Nishinoya and brushed wet hair back from his forehead. “We both think that you should. And we would appreciate if you tell them that they can share your information with us.” He pulled back and started on the conditioner.

“You’d ask them what we talk about?”

“Well…” His dad hesitated. “No, we won’t. Mostly just so we can check in from time to time and make sure you’re going to your appointments.” The conditioner smelled like lilacs. “We don’t intend to betray your trust, but this would go a long way to helping you regain ours.”

Nishinoya blinked as he digested the information. He felt a lump forming in his throat. “Do you think I’m crazy? That I’m...broken? That’s why you wanna send me to somebody?”

“No, that’s not it at all,” his dad insisted. “You shouldn’t think about it like that.” He turned on the water again. “You’re not broken and you don’t need fixing. We just think that it would help if you had someone to talk to about how you’ve been feeling.”

Nishinoya cast his eyes down. “Okay.”

“Why don’t you just try it for a couple months and see how it goes?”

“Okay…”

The spray clicked off once more. Nishinoya closed his eyes as his dad squeezed out the excess water before wrapping his head in a towel. He felt the clunk of gears in the chair, and then he was upright once more. His dad turned him to face the mirror.

"Yuu, listen to me."

Nishinoya opened his eyes and met the gaze of his dad's reflection. "I'm listening," he said.

His dad gave him a gentle smile before he started drying Nishinoya's hair. "There's nothing wrong with you," he said. "Your mother and I don't think that at all." He lowered the towel and began combing out the tangles. With his hair wet and combed flat, Nishinoya finally realized how
shamefully long it had gotten – how shamefully long it had been since the last cut, since he’d last been home.

"Are you sure?" Nishinoya mumbled.

"I'm absolutely sure," his dad insisted.

Nishinoya didn't reply. He watched his dad working in the mirror, combing his hair one way and then another, appraising the shape of his head like a sculptor might a piece of marble. He couldn’t see any color variation at all with his hair dark and wet. His dad pulled out the dryer and turned it on, which effectively halted the conversation for many minutes.

As his hair dried, Nishinoya gradually saw dark red streaks appear in his hair – they were subtle, only a few shades different than his natural black. Perhaps not what he would have chosen for himself, but it did seem to warm his complexion.

Eventually, his dad turned off the dryer and picked up the scissors. “Do you remember how old your mom and I were when you were born?”

Nishinoya blinked at the question. "Uh... like. Twenty-five?" He did the math in his head. "Twenty-three?"

"Yeah. We were just about your age when we found out.” Nishinoya heard the snip of the scissors against his hair as his dad spoke. “She wasn’t done with school. She hadn’t even taken her first exam yet, let alone done her training. We had no idea what we were going to do. We weren’t married, I didn’t have a steady job, it felt like a nightmare. We strongly considered... other options.”

“Wow, thanks, Dad.”

His father snorted. “Don’t misunderstand me. In the end, that wasn’t the right decision for us. And we do not regret the one we did make.”

“But wasn’t it hard, though?” Nishinoya felt the churn in his gut as he asked the question. “Didn’t I make it hard then?” He paused before adding, “don’t I make it hard now?”

His dad twisted the chair to bring Nishinoya around to face him. “Yes,” he said, “it was very hard. But…” He put his hand on Nishinoya’s shoulder. “That wasn’t your fault.”

Nishinoya blinked and lowered his gaze. “But wouldn’t it’ve been easier without–”

“Yuu,” his dad cut in. “Life was always going to be hard. Yes, having a kid made it a different kind of hard. But it was never going to be easy, even if you hadn’t come into the picture.”

“But–”

Nishinoya’s next sentence was halted when his father covered his face with a splayed hand, smoooshing down his nose and lips. “Hush, child,” he intoned.

“Dad–!” Nishinoya couldn’t help but laugh as he knocked his hand away. “C’mon!”

His father flicked him on the side of the head and spun the chair back around. “The truth is, no one knows what would’ve happened,” he said. He resumed trimming Nishinoya’s hair, drawing up one section at a time between his fingers. “Maybe it would’ve been less complicated. But that doesn’t mean it would've been better.”
Nishinoya watched him work in mirror. His hands were a soft, familiar touch against his scalp. “I
know you already know this,” his dad said, and Nishinoya met his eyes in the reflection. “Just
because things are tough doesn’t mean they’re not worth it. In fact, sometimes the toughness makes
it worth it.”

He continued. “My point is, we had no idea how things were going to turn out. There was no way
to know then how challenging and difficult and amazing our lives would be.” He put down the
scissors and turned on the clippers.

Nishinoya dropped his eyes at the word ‘amazing’ and stared at the counter. The clippers vibrated
slightly against his scalp, the low buzz of them a tonic note to his father’s words. “I know it’s scary
not knowing things. But it’s impossible for you to predict the path in front of you.”

“What if there’s no path in front of me?” Nishinoya mumbled.

“Now, I don’t believe that for a second.” His father moved the clippers up his scalp slowly,
working from left to right in small sections behind his left ear. “There’s a morning tomorrow, isn’t
there?”

“I guess,” he returned quietly.

“Yuu, don’t you know that you should never cut down a tree in the winter?”

“What?”

“Never make a big decision in a low moment,” his dad explained. “You don’t have to have it all
figured out right now. In fact, I’d be worried if you thought you did.”

Nishinoya lifted his eyes again. “You would?”

“Good god, yes. Then I’d know you were delusional.”

“Dad.” Nishinoya found him smiling in the mirror.

“Hell,” his dad continued, “I turned forty-five this year, and I’m only just now
starting to feel like I
got a handle on things.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I think most people feel that way.” Abruptly, his father stared into the middle distance.
“Except for your mother, of course. I think she had everything planned out from the time she was
six years old.” He brightened again. “But even that plan got derailed.”

“Because of me?”

“Yes, Yuu,” his dad said in a patient tone. “You were definitely a curveball. But that’s my point,
really. She thought she had everything all lined up, but it’s not what happened. We couldn’t have
predicted what would happen.”

Nishinoya frowned as he tried to decipher his dad's meaning. "So it's useless to make plans, you
mean?"

"No, no, that's not it. Plans are good. Plans give you focus. For example!" He put his hand on the
crown of Nishinoya's head and pushed it forward. "If you don't look down right now, I will
completely mess up the back of your head, and then my plan will be ruined."
Nishinoya snorted but did as he was told. The clippers buzzed along the back of his head in vertical passes.

His dad continued. “What I’m trying to say is, no one knows what’s going to happen, not in the next five years or the next twenty. Your life can change at any moment for good or bad.”

Nishinoya clenched his fists in his lap under the cape. “What am I supposed to do then?” he asked. “What’s the point of doing anything? If it’s all just gonna be for nothing in the end...”

“Yuu.” A hand squeezed his shoulder. “The uncertainty is why you need to do things. Because you don’t know when the next opportunity will be. You don’t know that a chance will come around again.”

Nishinoya swallowed hard. “What if I missed all my chances already?”

His dad sighed. “Yuu,” he repeated. The clippers clicked off. Nishinoya looked up and met his gaze in the mirror. “No one’s life is determined at the age of twenty-two,” he said. “There are always more chances – different ones maybe, but always more.” He adjusted the guard on the clippers. “I mean, when I was your age, I had nothing except your mom, and she was a pretty big unknown to me at the time. You weren’t here, and your brother and sister weren’t even a glimmer of a possibility yet.” The low hum clicked on again. “I didn’t even get my certification until I was almost thirty.”

“Dad!” Nishinoya blurted. “I don’t want to have to wait until I’m thirty before things get better! I don’t want to have to wait for something new just to happen! What am I supposed to do in the meantime?” His didn’t realize how loud his voice had gotten until he saw his dad glance across the room to the few remaining stylists and customers. Nishinoya started again, somewhat quieter. “I’m sick of watching everybody else go on with their lives, and I’m still here waiting for mine to even get started.”

“I know that you feel that way,” his dad said. He trimmed once more over the sides of Nishinoya’s head. “And I know that you might not believe me if I tell you that feeling is a complete illusion.”

“It’s not,” Nishinoya insisted. “You don’t know.”

There was another adjustment on the clippers, and then another pass. “Yuu, be reasonable. You don’t know either. You never really know how things are going for other people.”

Nishinoya frowned but didn’t immediately respond. He thought about Asahi, about Tanaka – weren’t they doing okay? But then he remembered Asahi’s anxiety over his own worth; he remembered Tanaka’s uncertainty about the restaurant. Nishinoya thought again about his parents and tried to imagine, with limited success, how he’d feel if he suddenly found out he was going to be a father at his current age.

But how old had Tanaka’s dad been when they found out about the arthritis? How old had Asahi’s mom been when Asahi was born? Nishinoya suddenly realized that there had existed a life for all of them before those moments, a life completely different from the one that had existed after.

Nishinoya thought about Ukai and the advice he’d offered that night in the gym.

He looked back up at his dad, who made another adjustment to the clippers and trimmed around Nishinoya’s hairline behind his ears. Who had his dad been at twenty-two?

“You’re being unnervingly quiet,” his dad said. He stood back from Nishinoya and examined the side of his head carefully, Nishinoya noticed for the first time that there now existed a gradient in
his hair, as it started very thin near the base of his sideburns and beneath his ears, increasing in length until it reached the still-shaggy top of his head. His dad picked up the scissors again and began to even out the margins between the varying lengths.

“Extremely, unnervingly quiet,” his dad clarified.

“I’m thinking, okay!” Nishinoya insisted. “It takes me a minute!”

“I know, Yuu, I’m sorry.” He moved to the other side of Nishinoya’s head. “I’m not trying to talk over you or make you think that your feelings aren’t valid.” The scissors played lightly over his scalp, sensitive where it had been newly exposed to the air. His dad continued. “I just hate the idea that you’re spending your days in misery because you think everything is already decided.”

He started pulling up lengths of the hair at the top of Nishinoya’s head, trimming the ends before moving to another section. “And I don’t want you to be expecting there to be a day when you have everything magically figured out, because that’s never going to happen.” He continued through the hair over the crown of Nishinoya’s skull, then down the back. “Some things might get easier, but other difficult things will pop up. This is not the last time you’re going to feel unhappy or pessimistic.” At length, he lowered his hands to Nishinoya’s shoulders and faced him in the mirror. “The only real sure thing is that nothing is permanent, not the good or the bad. That’s why we have to try to recognize and nurture the good while we have it.”

Nishinoya felt his heart pang again. He hesitated before speaking. “But I’ve already ruined most of the good I had.”

His dad squeezed his shoulders. “I promise that you haven’t,” he said. “There are still so many good things out there for you to be optimistic about. I bet if you think very hard right now, you can come up with at least one thing that makes you feel good, even just a little bit.”

Nishinoya felt heat in his cheeks. He looked away. “Maybe,” he said. “Yeah, maybe one thing.”

“Probably a lot more than one, if you really started looking for them. The counselor can help you out with that.”

A little tendril of warmth flickered inside Nishinoya. “Okay,” he said.

His dad groaned and rolled his eyes. “Ugh, I’m literally preaching at this point. I’ll stop now.” He fluffed his hand through Nishinoya’s hair once more. “Anyway, I’m almost done. What do you think?”

Nishinoya looked at himself in the mirror. The length was considerably shorter, not only on the tapered sides but on top as well, where his hair was textured and streaked with dark red. All in all it was fairly mundane, especially compared to some of the other haircuts he’d had in the past. “It’s…” Without the unruly mane, his face looked sharper, his eyes larger, his neck longer. He looked in the mirror and saw more of himself looking back. “It’s not bad,” he said, as he turned his head to the side. “It’s pretty good.”

“Wait, I haven’t done the best part.” His dad picked up a jar from his workstation; Nishinoya saw it was styling gel.

His dad worked the gel into the hair at top of his head, drawing it upward from both sides to a sharp peak in the center. He turned the chair and worked more in at the back of Nishinoya’s head; Nishinoya realized he didn’t know what the back looked like. His dad spun him toward the mirror once more, and Nishinoya finally got a proper view.
He realized it was a mohawk – a short one, but distinct nonetheless. The gradient flowed smoothly with no sharp breaks from his hairline to the spiked ridge over the crown of his head.

“Take a look at the back.” Nishinoya’s dad put a small mirror in his hand and turned the chair again. The mohawk continued down the center of his head, terminating in a sharp ‘V’ in at the base of his skull.

“What do you think?” his dad asked again.

Nishinoya put the mirror down. He looked up at his father – the expectant expression, the flecks of gray in his hair, the laugh lines around his mouth.

“Dad,” he breathed. “It’s perfect.”

~

There was one appointment remaining on his dad’s schedule, so Nishinoya went home ahead of him. Along the trip, he willed himself to pull out the phone and check his messages. He saw that there were new ones in the conversation.

Yeah man come if you want

Noya you have to buy everyone a round for being a dick

toshi fuck off. Don’t listen to him noya

Nishinoya-san, I hope you can make it.

Noya do you know what bar hori is talking about with the fish? we can’t figure it out and he won’t tell is now

ITA NEXT TO THE PLAVE WITH THE GDAMN FISH TOSHIO

Nishinoya put the phone against his forehead and laughed out loud. He felt weak with relief. At length he lowered the phone and typed a reply.

ill be there just tell me when. hori means the bar next that tropical fish store i think

Nishinoya closed the conversation and opened one with Tanaka.

dad bought me a new phone. Talk tomorrow?

He’d told Asahi that morning that he wasn’t worried, and it was still the truth. The absolute disaster of the previous day had somehow lanced the boil of his anxiety; he felt surprisingly light along the walk to his house. Yeah, his mother was gonna be pissed, but that was familiar enough. She’d been more angry than he’d ever seen the day before – how much worse could it be? His dad hadn’t seemed apprehensive of sending Nishinoya on his own to meet her, so not that bad, surely.

It was already almost six by the time he made it to the house – he probably wouldn’t have been much later if he’d just stayed after and let his dad drive them home. But it was too late; he’d committed to that course of action, and it was already done.

Nishinoya came in the door without hesitation. "I'm home!" he shouted. He heard a thump upstairs, followed by another, and then Suzume came thundering down the stairs so fast she slid on the hardwood floor of front hallway and ran into the opposite wall.
A bark of laughter escaped Nishinoya, then he clapped his hand over his mouth and fought it down again. "You okay?"

She glared at him. "I guess you're in by the deadline," she said. "Just barely."

"Come on, Suzu, I was with Dad."

"I can see that!"

Nishinoya lifted his hand to the side of his head and felt the buzzed length tickle against his fingers. "You like it?"

Taka appeared on the stairs. "It looks really cool," he said as he came down to the first level.

Nishinoya put his hands on his hips and turned his nose up. "As though there was any doubt," he said.

"Yuu." Their mother's voice came from the direction of the kitchen. "Come here, please."

Nishinoya looked back and forth between his siblings. They both had the same expression, which he was sure matched his own. It was never a good thing when she was so polite.

He made a little shooing motion toward the stairs. "Escape now," he whispered.

"What do you want me to put on your gravestone?"

"Sis, don't say that."

"Yuu," came the stern voice again.

He swallowed hard. Maybe he should've been a little worried, after all. As he passed the stairs, Nishinoya put his hand on Taka's shoulder. "Avenge me, little brother," he said.

Nishinoya found his mother sitting behind the island that separated the kitchen and the dining room. With her hands neatly folded in front of her, she had the appearance of a magistrate poised to lay down judgment.

"Ah," he said, "hey, Mom."

"Yuu. I see your father has gotten to you already." She gestured at one of the high stools across from her. "Sit down."

Nishinoya did as he was told. He hooked his heels over the support bar under the stool and put his hands in his lap.

She clasped her hands together again. "I think you should explain yourself," she said evenly.

"Um..." Nishinoya bounced one knee as he considered what to say. "I don't know... what you expect me to explain." Her nostrils flared, and he backpedaled in response. "I know I did something wrong," he said quickly. "I know I shouldn't have done what I did last night. Or..." He winced. "Or any of this week, really." Nishinoya lowered his gaze to the countertop. "I don't know that I have an explanation," he admitted. "I feel like a lot of things went wrong inside me, and I just wanted to run away."

"Run away from your family? From your friends?"
"From everything," Nishinoya clarified.

She sighed. "I supposed your father already talked to you about the counselor."

"Yeah."

"I got a very good recommendation from an old colleague," she said. "And I expect you to take this seriously."

Nishinoya lifted his hands onto the counter. He began to pick at his cuticles. “I will,” he said quietly.

“Running away is not the solution, Yuu.”

“I… I know,” he replied.

“All it does is hurt yourself and those around you. Do you know how upset your father and I have been this last week? How upset we were last night? Your friend as well.”

Nishinoya felt his throat close up. His eyes burned. “Jeez, Mom, I already feel like shit about it, okay?” He tried unsuccessfully to keep his voice from wavering. The countertop blurred. “You don’t have to keep harping on it, I get it, alright?”

His mother didn’t immediately reply. When she finally did speak again, her voice was sharp. “What is your relationship with that boy?”

Nishinoya’s gaze shot up; he was suddenly oblivious of the tears that had escaped down his cheeks. “What?” he asked. “Me and Asahi-san?”

“Yes.”

“We’re friends,” he said. “We go back a long way.”

Her nostrils flared again, her mouth pursing into an angry little rosebud. Nishinoya felt his heart constrict.

“Yuu,” she said evenly, “I asked you to make two promises yesterday. Do you remember what those were?”

Nishinoya tried to swallow, but his throat was thick and dry. “Yes,” he said.

She held up two slender fingers, one after the other. “You promised to answer your phone, and you promised to tell the truth.”

“I know,” he said.

His mother lowered her hand as she continued. “Now, as you’ve already broken one of these promises, I want you to reconsider whether or not you want to break the other one too. So I’ll ask you again. What is your relationship with him.”

Nishinoya looked at his fingernails where his hands rested against the counter. They were dirty, uneven – he’d taken to chewing them again, a habit he’d had in middle school.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“Yuu.”
“I really don’t!” he insisted. “We… we’re kinda…” He fought for the correct word. “He’s.” Nishinoya groaned and put his elbows on the counter, then buried his face in his hands. “I kind of… love him? It’s complicated.”

His mother didn’t speak again for a long time. Nishinoya looked up and found her expression pensive and complicated. Finally, she said, “So it is romantic, then.”

“I don’t know,” Nishinoya repeated. “We haven’t really worked it out yet.”

“Well, he obviously loves you, so I don’t really understand why you’re confused about it.”

He blinked at her. “How can you tell?” he asked.

She gave him a pointed look. “You should have seen how upset he was when he came back here last night. He was inconsolable. Your father had to drive him home.”

Nishinoya felt the sick guilt rise up again like nausea inside him. “Oh,” he said.

“Yes, ‘oh’. What sort of obstinate blindness have you been living in? It’s painted all over his face!” Her voice had risen nearly to a shout as she gestured broadly with one hand. “Did you think you were hiding it? I recognized it as soon as he sat down at that table!”

“Well, we’re not all as smart as you, Mom!” Nishinoya shot back.

“Apparently!” She sat back and lowered her hand to the counter. She rapped her fingernails once on the laminated surface, rolling smoothly from her pinky to her thumb in a rapid sequence of sharp taps.

She spoke again, and this time her voice was low and serious. “Did you leave school for him? Is that why you came home?” she asked.

"No!" Nishinoya insisted. "That part wasn't a lie. I did just run into him once I got here."

"After you had been drinking?"

Nishinoya nodded.

His mother still wore that pensive expression. "How long has this been going on?" she asked.

"I don't know, Mom," he returned. "I've only been staying with him for less than a week."

"Less than—" She looked surprised for the first time in the conversation. "You mean you weren't involved with him before now?"

He shook his head.

"Yuu," she said, "this is unreasonable. I find it hard to believe that you have harbored these feelings when we've never learned of his existence until now."

Nishinoya rubbed his temple with his hand. He was getting a headache. "You have," he corrected. "Learned of him, I mean."

When he glanced at her, Nishinoya saw that she'd lifted one scrutinizing eyebrow. "Explain," she said.

"Back in high school," he said. "End of first year."
Comprehension spread on her face. "Your suspension. You were in a fight with another student."

"That was Asahi-san," Nishinoya admitted.

"You were sixteen then," she said. "Are you certain that you're not just confusing feelings you had as a teenager with those you have now?"

"Yes," he said firmly.

His mother watched him carefully for another moment. "You're vulnerable right now," she said.

"Mom..."

"You are, Yuu," she insisted firmly. "Even if you don't want to admit it." Her mouth turned downward. "Is it possible that he is taking advantage of your situation?"

"What? No!" Nishinoya leaned forward across the counter. "He would never do something like that!"

"Can you be sure?" she countered.

"Yes!" Nishinoya insisted. "You don't know him – he would never."

"Even if you're right, you're still vulnerable." She tapped her index finger on the counter to emphasize her point. "Even if his intentions are true, you are at a crossroads where he can influence you. If he convinces you to give up the opportunities you have–"

Nishinoya cut her off. "He didn't. He doesn't. He won't."

His mother crinkled her nose in distaste. "You're young," she said. "You may think you understand choice and consequence, but you lack perspective."

"Cool, Mom," he said. "Anything else I'm bad at?"

"Yuu!" she snapped. "I'm trying to tell you something here!"

He sat back obediently and looked down at his hands.

"As I was saying." She stared him down as though daring him to speak again. "You're young, and you don't have the perspective of someone who has been out in the world more than you."

"But," she continued, and Nishinoya glanced up. She sighed again. "But I was foolish at your age too. I let love cloud my judgment. And perhaps that makes me biased in this case."

Nishinoya frowned. "Dad said you guys didn't regret your decision."

"I don't," his mother agreed. "But there is a difference between genuinely regretting something and simply wondering how life would have gone under different circumstances." She reached forward and took his hand. "I only hope that you never come to regret the decision you will make now."

Nishinoya looked at her fingers closed around his, the contrast between her fair skin and dark red polish. Save for the moment in the hallway the day before, his mother had never really been one for tenderness or physical affection. He tightened his hand around hers and felt a small smile tug on his mouth.

"Asahi-san said the same thing to me," he said.
His mother pulled her hand back, and Nishinoya let go. "He did?" she asked.

"Yeah... He told me he wants me to think about what I want to do, so I don't end up regretting choosing him."

She paused. "Do you plan on choosing him?"

Nishinoya twisted his fingers together. "Yeah," he said.

"Does that mean you don't plan to finish school?"

"Yes. No. Maybe?" Nishinoya groaned and lowered his head onto his arms. "I don't know," he said. "I want to believe that I can do both – finish school and still keep him." He sighed. "I guess I still want to try to finish."

"A college degree will certainly open more doors for you in the future, whatever it is that you decide you want. All the same..." Her voice drifted off, and Nishinoya lifted his head.

She wore a look he had seen very rarely, usually reserved for Taka. Nishinoya remembered it from when he'd gotten the acceptance letter to his university. "It can be difficult," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"Everything," she clarified. "Just life in general." She reached forward, lifting her hand toward his forehead. Nishinoya crossed his eyes as they followed her approaching index finger. He almost flinched when it reached him, but all she did was tap her finger on the sharp peak at the front of his mohawk.

"Love isn't some magic balm that will fix all your problems. But, when you have someone there for you, it is a little easier," she admitted. "You know this, right? When you have a good team behind you, you can do lots of difficult things."

"Like finish college?"

She nodded. "Or go to nationals. Or raise a kid. No one ever does anything in a vacuum." She tapped his hair once more, then drew her hand back. "Love like that doesn't grow on trees," she said. "If you find it, maybe you should hold onto it."

Nishinoya sat up and blinked at her in surprise. "Is this some kinda blessing or something?"

"Consider it an abdication of responsibility," she said. "I'm saying I'll respect your choice as your own. And..." She grimaced. "And I'll try not to make it for you."

Nishinoya leaned back. "Wow," he said. "You're being so... nice."

"Don't get used to it," his mother ordered.

The sound of the front door opening reached them where they sat together in the kitchen. Nishinoya heard his dad's voice in the foyer.

"Even if I do go back, I'm still worried I'm gonna flunk out," Nishinoya admitted.

"We can arrange more tutoring," his mother returned. "And the counselor can help you balance everything a little better." She looked up over his shoulder, toward the doorway.

Nishinoya heard his dad behind him. "Well, looks like everybody is still in one piece."
"Kouyou, should I be concerned that you always seem to expect me to have a violent reaction to things?"

"No, dear, of course not."

"What if—" Nishinoya cut in. "What if I do flunk out?" He felt his forehead crease. "What if I break down again and have to come home?"

His dad's hand came down on his shoulder. Nishinoya glanced at him. "Then you'll come home," his dad said. "We'll be here either way."

The tightness in his chest eased. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Of course," his dad returned.

"Alright, alright!" his mother exclaimed as she waved her hands above her head. She slid off the stool. "I believe I've hit my emotional quota for the day. Let's make dinner."

"I'm so proud of you, dear."

"You be quiet. I still need to have words with you about what you did to our son's head."

"You mean my masterpiece? Tell me how brilliant I am, go on."

Nishinoya looked away as his dad looped an arm around his mother's waist, and she pressed her hand flat against his face to hold him back. "I'm – uh – going upstairs," he said.

"What?" his dad said. "Are you embarrassed by how wonderful your parents are?"

"Kouyou, you have ten seconds before I kick you in the shins."

"What was that you were saying about violence, my love?"

Nishinoya clambered off the stool and power-walked toward the front hall.

"Hey!" his mother called after him. "I expect you to help!"

"Oh, let him go. You and I can – ow! Ria!"

Nishinoya covered his mouth with his hand to stifle his groan. He wondered how he could've ever worried his family wouldn't love him anymore, when they were all so ridiculous themselves.

When it was time for dinner, Nishinoya couldn't believe how absurdly natural it felt to sit around the table with his family. He couldn't remember the last time he had done so, and yet seemed as though he'd never left. Suzume talked with her mouth full and got a sharp rebuke from their mom – their dad piled twice as much on Taka's plate as anyone else's while shouting, "Gotta help the tall one grow!" – meanwhile Taka was trying to slide off his chair under the table, so Nishinoya grabbed the collar of his shirt and hauled him back up again. It went by quickly – too quickly. It wasn't long before eight o'clock rolled around, and Nishinoya decided he had better get back to Asahi's apartment.

He stood in front of the doorway, dressed in fresh clothes and holding a container of leftovers, while his parents perched above him on the lip of the hallway.

"When are you going back?" his mother asked. "It better be soon, or you'll miss too much to catch up."
"I don't know," Nishinoya said. He thought for a moment, his stomach twisting unhappily. "Not tomorrow. Maybe... the day after tomorrow?" That would give him time to say a proper goodbye to Asahi, at least.

"Do you need one of us to come with you?" his dad asked.

Nishinoya shook his head. "No, I'll be okay. I can handle it." He fiddled with the container in his hands. "I don’t know that I’ll see you again before I go,” he said. “I might just stay at Asahi-san’s place until then.” Nishinoya glanced aside at his mom. He wondered if his dad knew as well.

“Why don’t you plan to come back sometime soon?” his dad suggested. “The weekend after next, maybe?"

Nishinoya looked at them, his parents, his dad with his arm around his mother, her stern face staring him down. But he knew the softness she’d shown him earlier. He knew his dad could wring it out of her.

“Yeah,” he said. “Weekend after next. I can handle that.”

~

Nishinoya made it back to the apartment before Asahi did. He let himself in with his key and stepped over the threshold. He hadn't left any lights on, so the apartment was dark and quiet inside.

Asahi said he would be home by nine, and it was already after eight-thirty. Nishinoya knew he would be there soon. He tried making something for Asahi to eat, but he was too agitated to stand still – his stomach tumbled over itself, full of butterflies at the thought of Asahi coming through the doorway, with all the truth now between them and his future still undecided. It was strange, though. He wasn't as terrified of the unknowable entity in front of him, not with his family still a part of it, with his friends still around, with Asahi–

With Asahi, whom he loved. Asahi, who loved him.

Whatever decision Nishinoya made, he knew one thing for certain. He was never going to let Asahi out of his life, not ever again. Asahi and his weird rock in the bathroom and his enormous jar of pickles and his ridiculously tiny tattoo. Nishinoya never wanted to let any of it go.

He heard the creak of the stairs outside and sprang forward from where he paced in the kitchen. He’d almost reached the door by the time he heard the click of the latch. The handle turned, and the door opened, and Asahi stepped inside.

Nishinoya would never forget, not for a million years, the look on Asahi’s face when his eyes found Nishinoya's, the way his mouth opened and his forehead knitted together. Nishinoya would never forget the way he stumbled forward, tripping as he pulled off his shoes, and tumbled down into Nishinoya's waiting arms.

Nishinoya's feet left the ground as Asahi wrapped him up. His back hit the wall even before he realized they'd moved across the room. Nishinoya felt his shirt ride up as Asahi's legs slowly crumpled beneath them, sliding him down the wall. Eventually they sat together in a tangle on the floor, Asahi resting on his folded legs and Nishinoya's thighs sprawled over his. His hand found the back of Nishinoya's neck. Their mouths found each other.

When Asahi finally pulled back, his face looked more composed, though still fragile. Nishinoya reached up and took ahold of his head in both hands. He tugged Asahi forward until their foreheads met.
Asahi closed his eyes and exhaled. "I'm home," he said softly.

"Welcome home," Nishinoya returned.

He felt more than heard Asahi laugh. "You're here," Asahi said. His voice trembled, his tone full of awed disbelief.

"You didn't think I would be?"

"I... I was afraid to believe it," Asahi admitted. "If I had believed it, and then you weren't here..." He shook his head.

Nishinoya's hands slid around the sides of Asahi's neck until his fingers curled behind it, and his thumbs rested in front of Asahi's ears. "I'm here," he said, and Asahi nodded.

Nishinoya felt Asahi's hand touch his scalp and realized Asahi had noticed his hair. He felt his cheeks pink in response; he was suddenly self-conscious of the cut. "What do you think?" he asked. "Do you like it?"

Asahi rubbed his fingers lightly over the soft fuzz on the side of Nishinoya's head. The sensation sent a tickling chill down his spine. At length, Asahi lowered his eyes and met Nishinoya's. "It looks just right," Asahi said. "It makes you look like you." His mouth split into a smile. "I love it," he added.

Nishinoya exhaled. He wrapped his arms around Asahi's neck and kissed him again. He didn't plan to let go anytime soon.
They had to get off the floor when Asahi’s legs fell asleep. From there they went into the kitchen, where Nishinoya hopped up onto the counter while Asahi heated up some soup. He braced his feet against the lower cabinets and bounced his knees as they spoke together in gentle tones.

"I love the days when the new shipments come in," Asahi was saying. "When I break open the box and it smells so good inside."

"What does it smell like?"

Asahi laughed awkwardly as he stirred the soup. "Uh... like new books, I guess. Fresh paper, you know? I guess a little bit like adhesive."

"That might be kinda weird, Asahi-san."

"It's hard to describe. There is something very unique about it." Asahi shrugged. "It might be weird, but it's still my favorite thing. Although..." He held up his left hand with his index finger and thumb extended. Nishinoya noticed that he had a band-aid stretched over the web of skin between the two digits. "I always seem to end up cutting myself."

"With the knife?"

"No, on the box."

"On the box?" Nishinoya echoed. "How do cut yourself with a box!"

"Don't make it sound so ridiculous! It's basically a papercut!"

Nishinoya started laughing. "How do you cut yourself with a box?!" he repeated.

"It's easier than you think!" Asahi insisted.

When the soup was ready, Asahi stepped over to Nishinoya, looped an arm around his waist, and lifted him off the counter. Nishinoya scoffed as Asahi set him down on his feet. "Are you always gonna be picking me up?" he asked.

Asahi grinned at him and didn't take his arm away. "Probably," he admitted.

"Maybe I'll get really fat so you can't lift me anymore."

"I'll just have to work out more, I suppose."

Nishinoya considered this. "If you get much bigger you won't be able to jump as high." He wrapped a hand around Asahi's firm bicep. "Not that I'm really complaining, I guess."

"Oh, really?" Asahi's eyes crinkled at the corners. "So you like it?" he asked, and Nishinoya flicked
his chin in response.

As they ate, Nishinoya realized that they had been avoiding the conversation – subconsciously on his end, but maybe Asahi’s hesitation was intentional. Nishinoya put down his empty bowl.

"So, I talked to my parents today," he started.

Asahi stilled almost imperceptibly. When he spoke, his voice was light. "How did that go?"

Nishinoya chewed on his lip, trying to think of the words to say. "Dad got me a new phone," he said finally. "And cut my hair, obviously."

"I noticed."

"And we talked about things," Nishinoya added. "About me and school, about the future."

Asahi set down his bowl. "I see," he said.

Nishinoya could see the gears in Asahi’s brain turning, even though Asahi was holding back the words. "Tell me what you're thinking," Nishinoya reminded him.

Asahi sighed and gave him an uncertain smile. "I just don't know how to feel," he said. "Whatever your decision is, I'm not sure what my reaction will be."

Nishinoya leaned forward across the table. "Asahi-san," he said in a serious voice, "do you want me to stay?"

"I don't think—"

"I'm not asking what you think," Nishinoya cut in. "I'm asking what you want."

Asahi lowered his gaze. He pushed his bowl with his index finger and shifted it a centimeter across the tabletop. "Of course I want you to stay," he said quietly. "I want you to be here with me."

Nishinoya felt the fist around his heart loosen its grip. “Okay,” he said. “I want to be with you too.”

Asahi didn’t look up. His chin wobbled. At length, he spoke again. “Nishinoya, I don’t think that you should.”

“Why not?”

“Because… I don’t…” Asahi grimaced and shook his head. “Your mom said you had that offer. I really think you should take it.”

“It’s not really an official offer, not yet,” Nishinoya clarified.

“Still.”

Nishinoya frowned. “Asahi-san, don’t you love me?”

Asahi still wasn’t looking at him. “Yes,” he said, “I do.”

Nishinoya leaned back and crossed his arms. “Well, then I don’t understand what you mean! Even if I do end up taking that job, I don’t see how that means that I can’t be with you.”
Asahi blinked a few times and glanced up. “But...” he started, “wouldn’t you need to go back and finish up?”

“Yeah? So what.”

He still looked confused. “You won’t be able to graduate if you stay here.”

“I know that.”

“So... I...” Asahi seemed to fumble with what to say. “So, how do you plan to stay here and go back at the same time?” he finally managed.

“Well, I mean.” Nishinoya put his hands down on the table and drummed his fingers against the surface. “Obviously I can’t be in both places at once. But I can still come home a lot. Probably not every weekend, but I might be able to do a couple times a month.”

Asahi’s forehead creased, his mouth twisting unhappily for a moment, before Nishinoya saw the light click on. “Wait,” Asahi said. His eyebrows jumped up his forehead. “You’re saying–”

“When I do come home,” Nishinoya cut in, “I want to come home to you.”

“Oh!” Asahi said, as all his breath came out in a sigh. His hand jumped forward to grab one of Nishinoya’s. “You’d come back – here, to me?”

“Yes.” Nishinoya felt a spike of apprehension. “I mean–” he added. “If you want me to, I guess.”

“If I want you to! Of course I want you to!” Asahi leaned forward and tightened his hold on Nishinoya’s hand. “I never want to lose you again. After everything that’s happened, I couldn’t go back to not having you in my life.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so!” Nishinoya demanded. “You really thought I was gonna just leave and never come back here again?”

“I don’t know! I just. I guess.” Asahi pulled back and shook his head again. “I’m still afraid I’m going to weigh you down.”

Nishinoya pulled his hand away from Asahi’s and instead grabbed a handful of Asahi's shirt at his shoulder. "Asahi-san, don't you get it?"

"I know that you care about me, but--"

"It's not that," Nishinoya insisted. "I mean, it's not just that."

Asahi looked back at him, quiet and uncertain.

Nishinoya barreled on. "The thing is, before... this whole mess. Before I came home last week. I thought I was all alone, I thought no one would understand what I was feeling, I thought everybody would think I was weak and stupid if they found out."

"That's not true at all," Asahi said.

"I know that now," Nishinoya said. He frowned before continuing. "Or, I'm figuring it out, at least,” he amended. “But you... you just, opened right up, you didn't even hesitate. You just took me in and listened to me and you didn't even make me feel like... like the way I felt was dumb?"
That I was dumb for feeling it."

"Nishinoya..."

"No, please," Nishinoya insisted. "Let me get it all out." He exhaled hard through his nose and tried to think of the words to properly express what he wanted to say. "I'm not good at... at..." He frowned again. "Before, I never had to worry about trying to explain what I felt. And I still don't think I really know how." He looked up and met Asahi's eyes. "But you seemed to understand, right away. You gave me words for it. You--" Nishinoya leaned forward across the table. He put his palm flat against his chest. "You make me feel like – like what I'm feeling is real, like I am allowed to feel this way, like--" He cut off.

Nishinoya loosened his grip on Asahi's shirt. He smoothed his hand over the creases he'd put into the fabric. "I still don't know what I want to do," he admitted in a quieter voice. "I don't know if I want to come home for good or if I want to still try to graduate. After that, I'm even less sure what I want. But..." He pulled back. "But."

He looked up again and found Asahi watching him, his face guarded, eyes dark and searching. Nishinoya pressed on. "But I feel like, if I have you here? If I can come home to you. If I know you'll be there to listen to me when I feel scared or unhappy."

"Nishinoya," Asahi murmured, and Nishinoya closed his eyes.

"If I have you," he continued, "then the rest of it doesn't seem so big. I feel like I can handle it. I feel like, even if I mess up out there, I'll still have you in here, so I don't worry about it as much."

Nishinoya opened his eyes. Asahi's face looked like porcelain, delicate and breakable. "Is that selfish?" Nishinoya asked. "I don't want to be a burden to you."

Asahi shook his head, though he didn't say anything.

Nishinoya managed a smile. "You don't weigh me down, Asahi-san," he said. "You hold me up. You make me feel like I can handle everything else a little better."

"Oh," Asahi breathed. His voice shook. "Nishinoya, I..." He lifted his hand and reached forward to slide his fingers around the back of Nishinoya's neck. His thumb coasted over the line of Nishinoya's jaw. "I don't... I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," Nishinoya returned. He gave the table a shove to get it out of the way; it groaned across the floor as it went. Nishinoya moved in close and put his hands against Asahi's chest. "Just tell me I can come home to you when I need to."


Nishinoya shivered. He slid his hands up and over Asahi's shoulders, around to the back of his head. "Tell me again."

Asahi breathed against him. "I love you," he whispered, "Yuu."

Nishinoya felt his eyes burn. He tilted Asahi's head until their lips met.
After the dishes were rinsed and placed in the sink, they curled up on the couch together. Asahi’s legs sprawled lengthwise on the cushions while Nishinoya sat in his lap and leaned against his chest, listening to his heart beat.

“So Wednesday,” Asahi said.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya returned. He curled his finger around a loose tendril of Asahi’s hair and gave it a tug. “Wednesday.”

Asahi made a thoughtful noise in his throat. “You came into town on Wednesday,” he said.

Nishinoya lifted his head and looked up at Asahi’s face. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“I was just thinking about how so much had happened in a week.” Asahi’s eyes crinkled; his mouth turned up. One of his hands slid up over Nishinoya’s shoulder to the side of his neck.

Nishinoya let the thought sit a moment. “I hadn’t thought about it like that,” he said.

Asahi laughed. “I’m bad about assigning meaning to things that probably shouldn’t have them.”

A frown crossed Nishinoya’s face. “What does that mean?”

“Oh, you know. I’ll probably always be a little sentimental about Wednesdays now.”

Nishinoya felt himself pink a little. He lowered his head back to Asahi’s chest. “Well, that’s okay,” he said.

“You say that now,” Asahi returned. “Wait a few Wednesdays and you might feel different.”

His voice was warm and rumbled through his chest like the dull, comforting roar of a train. Nishinoya closed his eyes and let the sound reverberate into his own body. He was conscious of the time passing by, the end of the day drawing near.

“What time do you have to get up?” he asked.

“I’m opening again, unfortunately.”

Nishinoya frowned against Asahi’s shirt. “So... early, I guess,” he said.

“Yeah.” Asahi’s breath puffed over the crown of his head. “But I think I can survive losing a little sleep.”

The tone of his voice made Nishinoya pull back. When he glanced up, he found the heavy look to Asahi’s eyes, the one that had grown familiar over course of the week. A grin tugged at Nishinoya’s mouth as he felt the heat of that gaze all the way in his stomach, the twinge under his belly button when he realized what Asahi meant.

Nishinoya turned and grabbed the back of the couch as he moved. He shifted up from Asahi’s lap until he was kneeling on the couch, straddling one leg. He felt Asahi’s hands slide up under his arms, around his ribs to his back. A knee slid up between Nishinoya’s thighs.

Asahi tipped his head to the side; the top of his ear peeked through his hair. He gave Nishinoya an innocent smile. “I don’t know what you could possibly mean,” he said.
“Yeah, right,” Nishinoya returned. He put a hand on Asahi’s shoulder and pushed him back against the armrest with no small force.

“Besides,” Asahi said, “it’s not like you’re one to talk. You’ve spent almost the whole week jumping me.”

The familiar guilt came up again, and Nishinoya looked down at Asahi’s chest. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m not.”

Nishinoya shook his head. “I should’ve thought more about your feelings,” he said. “It was all tangled up in me, y’know? How bad I wanted you and how scared I was that our time was almost over.”

“It didn’t have to be over,” Asahi said mildly.

“I know that now.” Nishinoya let out a frustrated huff. “I was just being real dumb about it.” After a beat, he repeated, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I pushed so hard.” His cheeks burned with shame. “I’m sorry if I made you do something you didn’t want,” he concluded.

“Yuu,” Asahi said quietly. It sent another trill up Nishinoya’s spine, and he lifted his gaze until their eyes met.

Asahi continued. “I could’ve said no to you at any time,” he said. “It was my choice that I didn’t.”

“But–”

Asahi cut him off. “I was more than willing then.” His hand slid up Nishinoya’s back. “I’m more than willing now,” he added.

“I still should’ve been more thoughtful,” Nishinoya insisted. He frowned again. “I have that problem a lot, I think.”

“Well,” Asahi said. “You’re fully welcome to make it up me.” He was smiling as he spoke, and Nishinoya’s own smile began to return. “Anyway,” Asahi continued, “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.” His hand moved into the arch of Nishinoya’s lower back and came to rest the waistband of his pants. “I really just want to take you to bed right now.”

Nishinoya had to laugh at that. “You make it sound so corny!”

“Oh, that’s no good? Well how about…” Asahi tugged Nishinoya down against his chest. His mouth touched Nishinoya’s ear. His breath was hot, his lips teasing. “I want to fuck you,” he murmured. “I want to suck your cock. I want to make you come all over yourself.”

Nishinoya felt winded. His stomach flipped over itself. “Holy shit, Asahi,” he said.

“What, not allowed?”

“No, I mean…” Asahi’s breath cascaded over Nishinoya’s ear again, and Nishinoya shuddered at the sensation. “I just can’t believe you actually said that,” he admitted.

Asahi hummed next to his temple. “Why shouldn’t I say it?”

Nishinoya was already half-hard and had the desperate temptation to rub himself against Asahi’s thigh. He shuddered again as Asahi kissed the freshly exposed skin on the side of his head.
“Let me take you to bed, Yuu,” Asahi insisted.

Nishinoya groaned. “Take me anywhere you want,” he said.

Asahi’s hand slid over the seat of his pants. His fingers hooked under Nishinoya’s ass. “I intend to,” he said.

It took a good ten minutes for them to get off the couch, though Nishinoya didn’t have much reason to complain, not with Asahi’s arms around him and his lips against his skin. He had already divested Asahi of his shirt by the time he pushed him up against the bedroom door and latched his mouth to his chest, just under his clavicle. Nishinoya sucked hard enough that Asahi made a strained noise. When he pulled back, the spot was bright red, already raised in the middle, shining where his tongue had touched.

Asahi grabbed the back of his head and pulled Nishinoya forward to kiss him forcefully – Nishinoya’s bottom lip mashed into his teeth, and he pushed Asahi hard against the door once more. It suddenly opened behind Asahi; Nishinoya realized belatedly that he must have gone for the door handle out of sight.

They went tumbling into the room together. Nishinoya nearly fell down as Asahi moved backward, but Asahi grabbed him quickly and tugged him close again. His lips found the space behind Nishinoya’s ear.

The distance from the door to the bed was only a few short paces, but it took an inordinate amount of time for them to cross over – perhaps because Nishinoya couldn’t seem to let go of Asahi, couldn’t seem to stop kissing him with desperate urgency, as though he was an animal half-starved and Asahi a feast.

Asahi’s hands found the hem of his shirt, somehow managing to get it over his head and thrown aside. Nishinoya undid his pants himself and kick-stepped his way out of them. Asahi laughed at that, and Nishinoya pushed him hard in response, which brought Asahi’s legs against the side of the bed. Nishinoya tried to push him back onto the mattress, planning to crawl on top of him, but Asahi’s arm found its way around his waist again; Nishinoya felt his feet leave the ground.

"Hey! No fair!" Nishinoya tried to break out of Asahi's grip, but Asahi was still laughing. His hand grabbed at the back of Nishinoya’s upper thigh and hiked him up higher, until their faces were level with each other. Nishinoya instinctively closed his legs around Asahi’s waist.

"Jerk," Nishinoya mumbled, but he pinched Asahi’s chin and tugged his mouth open, then delved his way inside. Asahi made a muffled noise around Nishinoya’s tongue that zinged all the way to his groin; he tightened his legs and shifted his hips up, pressing his erection against the flat span of Asahi’s stomach. Asahi’s hand hooked under his ass and pulled him even closer. Nishinoya felt him turn, felt the axis shift as Asahi bent over – then the mattress was beneath his back, and Asahi’s body above him.

Asahi’s hand fumbled out of sight, though Nishinoya felt his knuckles brush over his inner thighs – then there was skin against skin, and Nishinoya realized he had shoved his pants down. Asahi lowered his whole weight onto Nishinoya and pressed him hard into the bed.

Nishinoya fist ed his hands in the bedspread while Asahi moved against him. Asahi’s elbows were braced against the bed on either side of Nishinoya’s shoulders, his hands curled around his head, fingers digging into Nishinoya’s scalp. Asahi’s forehead pressed into his as he breathed hot against Nishinoya’s face. Their lips touched between them, open-mouthed without kissing. “Yuu,” Asahi moaned, “Yuu.” Nishinoya closed his eyes and squeezed his legs as tightly as he could around
Asahi’s hips.

At length, Asahi sighed aloud. He stillied his hips and pushed himself up, and before Nishinoya could react he was already sliding down in between his legs over the edge of the bed. Asahi tugged at the elastic of Nishinoya’s underwear, and gripped his cock in one hand as it came free from the fabric. Nishinoya couldn’t hold back the cry that came out of his mouth when Asahi sucked down on him with barely any warning.

“Ah fuck!” Nishinoya curled upward until he was sitting up, his body curved over Asahi’s head, his fingers buried in his hair. Asahi pulled his underwear off his legs and over his feet, then slipped his arm under one of Nishinoya’s thighs and lifted it onto his shoulder. The sounds he made down between Nishinoya’s legs were obscene and wonderful; Nishinoya’s body tremored with each bob of his head as he continued to destroy every shred of resolve that Nishinoya had somehow managed to cling to.

Nishinoya put his thumbs on Asahi’s forehead, hands around either side of his head, and pushed slowly back. Asahi’s face tilted up, though he didn’t take his mouth away. Nishinoya watched the way Asahi’s cheeks moved, the way his cock disappeared between Asahi’s lips. He let out an agonized groan at the sight.

“A-ah,” Nishinoya stuttered, as an electric wave of pleasure jolted up from his perineum into his stomach. “God, I’m so close.” He braced one hand behind him on the bed and wrapped the other around the back of Asahi’s head. He lifted his hips experimentally, pushing his cock deeper into that hot mouth, and then Asahi grabbed at the thigh on his shoulder and squeezed it tightly in his hand. He closed his eyes and nodded his head, and Nishinoya realized the permission for what it was.

He lifted his hips again, a little more quickly than before, and then immediately repeated the action, even faster. Asahi’s mouth was slack, his eyes closed, his face turned upward as though in prayer – and Nishinoya lost it. He tightened his fingers in Asahi’s hair and snapped his hips forward – he was rewarded with a grunt and Asahi’s sharp intake of air through his nose. “Oh fuck,” Nishinoya moaned. He threw his head back and fucked Asahi’s mouth with abandon.

He didn’t last very long, but it hardly mattered; he was still coming hard even after the initial pulse had crested. When it was over, Nishinoya fell weakly back against the bed – his hands tingled; his legs felt like jelly where they hung limply over the edge of the mattress. It seemed almost impossible to even lift his head.

Asahi’s mouth came off him, and then he clambered up from the floor and put a knee on the bed beside Nishinoya’s hip, braced his hand on the mattress above his shoulder – Nishinoya distantly registered that he had his cock in his hand, that he was impressively, beautifully erect – his chin was shiny and wet, his chest darkly flushed. Nishinoya watched the way Asahi took a moment to spit in his hand, the way he stroked himself, the way his mouth opened and his teeth bared before he let out a wordless exclamation and came all over Nishinoya’s stomach.

He breathed hard, his body shuddering through the aftermath. He slowly lowered his forehead to Nishinoya’s shoulder, and stayed there a long moment. Then he rolled over and flopped onto his back on the bed, his chest still heaving, his skin glistening with sweat. Strands of hair stuck to his face.

Nishinoya loved him so so much.

He sat up, casting his gaze around quickly for something to clean himself with – his eyes landed on his underwear on the floor. He bent down to grab them and did the best he could in that moment.
Then he rolled back toward Asahi and nestled up under his arm, throwing his own over Asahi’s waist, and pressed his face into his side.

“Hm,” Nishinoya hummed thoughtfully, when it seemed like Asahi had caught his breath. “You kinda like that, don’t you?”

Asahi’s chest shook as he laughed. “Yeah,” he returned, his voice rough and thick. “I really do.” His warm hand curled over Nishinoya’s shoulder and pulled him close. “I thought about doing that all day,” he admitted.

“You did?”

“Yeah. It was a little bit distracting.”

Nishinoya let this sit for a moment. “I thought you were worried that I wouldn’t be here,” he said.

“Ah, well…” Asahi’s hand played over Nishinoya’s skin. He was warm and soft where their bodies touched together. “I knew you would be here, I trusted you,” he clarified, “I was just scared of being wrong.”

Nishinoya rubbed his hand over Asahi’s chest and felt the hair tickle against his fingers. “I don’t want you to be scared anymore,” he said quietly.

“I’m probably always gonna be scared about something,” Asahi said. He squeezed Nishinoya’s shoulder and hugged him tightly. “But I’m not scared about you.”

A smile touched Nishinoya’s lips. He pressed them to Asahi’s ribs. “Okay,” he said.

Gradually he felt Asahi’s heart slow under his palm, while the clock ticked on the wall above them and their skin began to cool. Nishinoya wondered what time it was, but not enough to actually get up and look. He drowsed against Asahi’s side, vaguely conscious of the air on his naked skin, counterpoint to the heat of Asahi next to him.

Asahi shifted, drawing his attention back to the present. “Your hair is poking me,” he said.

Nishinoya blinked a few times, then burst out laughing. He pulled his head away from Asahi’s side, then tucked his chin down and shoved the spiky part of the mohawk right into Asahi’s armpit.

Asahi jumped. “Hey!” He turned over quickly, rolling Nishinoya onto his back, and pinned him to the bed.

Nishinoya was still laughing even as Asahi’s weight settled heavy on top of him. “You’re too easy, Asahi-san!”

Asahi gave him a smile disguised as a glare, then lowered his head and blew a loud raspberry against the side of Nishinoya’s neck.

“Hey, that tickles!” Nishinoya squirmed underneath him. He dug his fingers hard into Asahi’s sides and tried to push, but Asahi was solid as a rock and didn’t even budge. “C’mon! You win already!”

“What was that about being easy?” Asahi asked against his throat. Nishinoya shivered at the sensation of air flowing over the sensitive skin.
“Yeah, yeah,” he groused, trying to keep his voice steady as Asahi started kissing his neck instead. He tilted his head to the side to allow for better access, and bit his lip as his breath began to stutter.

When Asahi pulled back, his face was gentle, his eyes soft. He put his hand to the side of Nishinoya’s head.

Nishinoya tipped his cheek into Asahi’s hand. “What?” he asked, when Asahi continued to look down at him without speaking.

“I’m just trying to make sure I will remember this moment,” Asahi explained. “Something to sustain me when you aren’t here.”

Nishinoya felt a sudden lump in his throat. He remembered how he’d been so desperate to commit everything about Asahi to memory, when he thought he might never see him again. Nishinoya lifted his hands and curled them around either side of Asahi’s face. “I don’t know if I wanna go or not,” he admitted. “I don’t want to say goodbye to you – I don’t know if I’m even gonna make it to graduation anyway. What if it isn’t even worth it to go?”

“It will be worth it,” Asahi assured. “And even if it isn’t.” His fingers brushed through the short fuzz on Nishinoya’s head, over the curve of his ear. “If it isn’t, I’ll still be here. You can come home.”

Nishinoya exhaled and pulled Asahi down to kiss him. “I’ll try,” he said. “I’ll try to do it.”

Asahi kissed his forehead, his cheek, his chin. “We’ll reassess in a month,” he suggested. “How does that sound? If you still feel like you can’t handle it after a month, we can make a decision then. We don’t have to decide anything else right now.”

Nishinoya nodded. “I think I can do a month,” he said.

“I know you can.” Asahi smiled at him. “And if you can do a month, you may find you can do the rest of the semester too.”

“And I can come home on weekends,” Nishinoya added.

“Of course,” Asahi agreed. “I’ll be here.”

“Or you can come visit me.”

“Anytime you want. You won’t be able to stop me.”

Nishinoya exhaled again and managed a weak smile. “I can do that,” he said. “I can do that.”

“I know, you can do anything,” Asahi returned. “That’s why I love you.”

Nishinoya looped his arm behind Asahi’s neck and drew him in. They kissed without the impatience from earlier, this time slow and easy, soft and sweet. Nishinoya thought he might melt right through the bed into a puddle on the floor beneath. Tendrils of arousal began to stir again below his bellybutton, though the edge of it was less sharp this time.

Asahi’s hand roved over his side from his shoulder over his ribs and down to his hip. Nishinoya realized Asahi was somehow still wearing his pants, which seemed entirely ridiculous. He wrapped his leg around Asahi’s hip and put his heel on the back of his thigh, then used it to tug down on the jeans. “Why are these still on?” Nishinoya asked.
Asahi gave him a breathless laugh in return. “I got distracted,” he said.

“That is unacceptable!” Nishinoya insisted. “Take them off!”

“Okay, okay!” Asahi rolled off of him onto his back, then braced his feet onto the mattress and levered his hips upward so he could push his jeans and boxers down together. He kicked the clothes off his legs and turned back over, propped up on his side. “Better?” he asked.

Nishinoya turned to face him. He ran his hand along Asahi’s side, over his hip, and then down between their bodies. Asahi’s eyes closed and his mouth opened in a soft sigh. “Much better,” Nishinoya said. He threw his leg over Asahi again and moved in close.

Asahi’s arms slipped around him, one down around his waist and the other up his back so that a warm hand could close around his head. His breath puffed across Nishinoya’s lips. “Yuu,” he said.

“Yeah?”

His fingers trailed down Nishinoya’s back, past the dip in his spine, until they met his ass. “Do you…” His hand slid a little further, so that he could trace a finger over the cleft between the cheeks. “Do you still want this?” Asahi asked.

Nishinoya shivered at the light touch, barely more than a tickle. His stomach clenched when he realized what Asahi meant. His mouth felt dry at the thought. “I think so,” he said. Then he pursed his lips sternly, forehead creasing. “No,” he amended, “I know I do.” He grabbed Asahi’s face in both hands. “I want to be with you, Asahi-san, in every way that’s possible, every way I can.” Nishinoya brought Asahi’s face to his and closed his eyes. “I want to know what it feels like to have you inside me,” he said softly.

Asahi’s breath escaped him in a shaky sigh. “Ah,” he said. “I… I want that too.” His chest heaved against Nishinoya’s arms. “But… it will take time. I want to take our time with it.”

Nishinoya frowned and opened his eyes. “Is that a no?” he asked.

“No,” Asahi said. “I’d just rather we wait until tomorrow to try it.”

Nishinoya lowered his hands to Asahi’s shoulders. “Tomorrow?” he echoed.

Asahi nodded. “I want to make sure it will be good. That I don’t hurt you.”

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said, “I know you won’t hurt me.”


Nishinoya clenched his hands on Asahi’s shoulders until his knuckles began to turn white. “Yeah,” he said, as a yawning ache opened under his stomach. He tightened his leg around Asahi’s hip. “Yeah, I want that.”

Asahi kissed him once more. He closed his hand over one side of Nishinoya’s ass and squeezed the muscle so tightly that Nishinoya grunted in response. Then Asahi released him and pulled away. He went for the drawer of the end table.

This time, Nishinoya let him lead, let Asahi touch him in the slow, gentle way he had wanted
before. When Asahi’s fingers found their way back to him, Nishinoya spread his knees open with his heels against the bed to give him better access. Asahi sat on his heels between Nishinoya’s legs and leaned forward; Nishinoya reached up and rubbed his thumb against the bruise already forming below Asahi’s clavicle.

Asahi pushed a finger into him. Nishinoya felt his body stretch again in that strange, unfamiliar way. Heat pooled under his belly, sinking low between his legs. Asahi’s thumb pressed into his perineum, just underneath his balls.

Asahi bent down over him and opened his mouth against Nishinoya’s chest; his tongue was hot when his lips found Nishinoya’s nipple. Nishinoya pushed his heels against the bed and lifted his hips as Asahi’s finger moved inside him.

“Does it feel good?” Asahi asked in a low voice.

Nishinoya closed his eyes. It felt hot and tight and unusual. It felt very, very good.

“Yes,” he breathed. “Don’t stop.”

Asahi’s lips played over his skin. “I won’t,” he said.

Nishinoya’s stomach did flip-flops while the curious sensation continued and built inside him. He gasped as a twinge of pleasure passed from behind his balls to his cock; his hips stuttered, muscles clenching, and Asahi’s other hand took ahold of him and guided his hips back to the bed.

“Asahi...” Nishinoya closed his eyes tightly. “Asahi.”

Asahi’s hand drifted from his hip to his half-flagged erection. Nishinoya dug his fingers into the bedspread and clung for dear life. “Asahi,” he whispered.

“I’ve got you,” Asahi returned.

Nishinoya opened his eyes. Asahi’s face hovered over him, close enough to touch. Nishinoya slowly lifted his hand and curled it around Asahi’s cheek. Asahi turned his head and kissed the heel of his hand. His hot tongue slipped into the bowl of Nishinoya’s palm. Nishinoya groaned as another wave moved through him, a spike of pressure followed by the most wonderful ache.

Distantly, he heard the cap of the lubricant pop open. He sucked in air through his teeth as a cold drizzle slid between his buttocks, over his asshole. Then Asahi braced his hand next to Nishinoya’s hip on the bed, leaned over him again, and slowly began to ease another finger inside him.

Nishinoya grabbed at his arm beside him, and Asahi paused. “Too much?” he asked.

“No,” Nishinoya said, “just – just give me a minute.” His legs trembled in either side of Asahi’s body. He took a few deep breaths and gradually, consciously, made himself relax one muscle at a time.

He took his hand off Asahi’s arm and instead reached up to wrap it around the back of his neck. “Okay,” he said. “I’m ready.”

Asahi went up onto his knees so that he could bend down and put his forehead against Nishinoya’s. As he began to push again, Nishinoya’s mouth opened in a long, wavering moan. It was hot, burning hot, and so tight he felt like he might go insane – but it was good, it was so good, and he wanted everything Asahi could give him.
Asahi exhaled shakily against him. “God,” he said, “you’re beautiful. You’re so beautiful.”

That word again. This time it made Nishinoya’s chest heave with breathless laughter. Asahi really did mean it, didn’t he? He’d meant it the whole time.

“Asahi,” he whispered, “I love you.”

Asahi’s mouth came down to his, and Nishinoya thought he might die from it. How could he feel so much and still have anything left? How could there be any air left in his lungs, any electricity in his heart? It felt as though every floodgate on his senses had been opened, that every nerve ending in his body was alive and shouting, and all of them said Asahi.

Nishinoya came with his hand around his cock and Asahi’s fingers still inside him. His breath came out in a sobbing moan, muffled against Asahi’s lips. He felt tears sting behind his eyelids. Asahi held onto him as he shook and gasped, until the wave of it was over. Nishinoya wrapped his arms up around Asahi’s neck and buried his face into the warm skin of his throat.

Nishinoya let out a shocked moan as Asahi’s fingers slipped out of him. “Oh,” Asahi groaned from somewhere beside his head, his arm behind Nishinoya’s back. He pushed his fingers back into Nishinoya’s body, and they went in so easy and quick this time that Asahi sucked in a sharp breath in response. “I wanna fuck you,” he said, “I wanna fuck you so bad.”

“Do it,” Nishinoya mumbled against his throat, though he was so tired he could barely keep his limbs from trembling.

Asahi shook his head. “No, it’s… I shouldn’t, not right now.” He flexed his fingers, and Nishinoya gasped. “But, I could…”

He pulled out again, drawing another shuddery sigh. Then Asahi laid Nishinoya back down against the bed, lifted himself up, and moved his knees to the outside of Nishinoya’s legs. “Turn over,” he said.

“The sheets—”

“No, I don’t care,” Asahi insisted. “Please turn over.”

His voice was so thin and desperate that Nishinoya made his complaining muscles comply; as he flipped over onto his stomach he tried not to notice the wetness he left against the bedspread. He bent his elbows up in front of him and rested his head on his forearms.

Asahi’s hands curled warm and firm over Nishinoya’s ass, one hand on either cheek. Nishinoya dug his fingers into the bedspread when Asahi pulled them apart and he felt the stretch of his skin, the shock of open air on his asshole. Asahi’s thumb circled the ring of muscle, and a low whine escaped from Nishinoya in return. Asahi pushed his thumb into him, drawing him open once more.

“A-Asahi,” Nishinoya stuttered. His stomach jumped and his toes curled from overstimulation. He felt the ache in his softening cock.

“Oh, Yuu,” Asahi sighed. Nishinoya felt him shift closer. He heard the click of the bottle again before a slick hand returned to his skin.

Then Nishinoya felt a different sensation, something warm and firm and thick as it slid into the cleft of his ass. It was Asahi, he realized, it was his cock. The thought of it made him shudder. He closed his eyes and took a deep breathe to calm his fluttering stomach. Asahi settled onto him, one hand against the bed, the other curled around his side. His body was hot where it covered
Nishinoya’s and pressed him hard into the mattress. Nishinoya bit on his fist when Asahi started to move against him, sliding his cock between Nishinoya’s buttocks.

Nishinoya breathed hard and fast, grunting every time Asahi’s hips slapped against his ass. The sounds Asahi made above him were strained and needy, so Nishinoya arched his back and angled his hips upward. His feet scrabbled for purchase, toes digging into the fabric as Asahi moved. Nishinoya tightened his hands in the bedspread in front of him and braced himself as much as he could, tried to make his body into everything Asahi needed.

It took less than a handful of minutes before Asahi crumpled against him, flattening Nishinoya into the bed. Asahi’s left hand found his and laced their fingers together. His hips kept moving, his voice growing tinny and tight next to Nishinoya’s ear before he finally jerked forward and cried out, and Nishinoya felt hot come shoot up his back between their bodies.

Asahi sobbed raggedly for breath against him. Nishinoya felt his lips on the back of his neck. “Yuu,” Asahi whispered brokenly. “Yuu…” Nishinoya tightened his grip on Asahi’s hand; he brought it to his lips and kissed the knuckles. He felt strung out and exhausted, stripped of every defense.

Nishinoya put his other hand flat on the mattress and pushed. Asahi seemed to take the hint and lifted off of him. As he rolled onto his side, Nishinoya turned to press against him as close as he could manage. Asahi’s arms went around him and held tight. It was many long moments before they managed to speak again. Nishinoya lifted one hand between them and ran his fingers lightly over the mark he’d made on Asahi’s chest.

They were an absolute mess, covered in sweat and come and lube. Asahi’s hair stuck everywhere to his face and neck. Nishinoya pushed away a curl of it plastered to his cheek. Asahi’s hand lifted and caught his; he pulled it away from his face and kissed Nishinoya’s palm.

Nishinoya noticed he was only using his left hand. He crinkled his nose when he realized why. “We should go clean up,” he suggested.

Asahi gave him a weary grin. “You’re probably right,” he said.

Despite their agreement, it still took them an inexplicably long time to peel themselves out of bed. “We’ll clean the sheets later,” Asahi said, when Nishinoya went to untuck the corner of the bed. “But…”

"It's just a little come," Asahi insisted. "We can take care of it tomorrow."

Nishinoya rolled his eyes, but he had to admit he understood the strong inclination to just sleep for tonight and deal with the mess later. "Okay," he agreed, "but let's go wash up, at least."

In the bathroom, they took turns with the showerhead. Nishinoya used Asahi’s shampoo to wash the gel out of his hair, and then he gave in to Asahi’s offer to wash his back. He sat on the stool for much too long and closed his eyes while Asahi’s warm hands touched him, applying soap and scrubbing gently, and then rinsing it away.

The hands touched the small of his back, then up between his shoulder blades to the base of his neck. They spread over Nishinoya’s shoulders, fingers curling over his collarbones. Asahi’s lips found the back of his neck, the knob at the top of his vertebrae. Nishinoya felt himself shiver. He turned on the stool into Asahi’s arms and pulled him down to kiss him properly.
Back in the bedroom, they dressed in fresh pajamas – Nishinoya in the clean shorts he had picked up at his family's house, Asahi in a pair of thin cotton pants and an old tanktop. Asahi turned out the light, Nishinoya pulled down the covers, and then they were already tangled together in the middle of the mattress.

Asahi smelled like shampoo and body wash, his clothes like laundry detergent; his bed smelled like his apartment – and his apartment smelled like home. Nishinoya closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He felt the air swirl down inside him to his core, warming him from the inside out.

"I'll be home earlier tomorrow," Asahi murmured against his temple.

"Good," Nishinoya returned. "I'll try to get home before you."

He felt the stretch of Asahi's skin against his as he smiled. "Sounds perfect," Asahi said.

Nishinoya leaned his head against Asahi’s chest. It seemed, for once, that the emptiness inside him had been quieted – for a little while, at least. Asahi’s hands smoothed over his bare back. He tucked his own around Asahi’s waist, underneath his shirt.

“When was it?” Asahi asked quietly, breaking the silence between them.

“When was what?”

“Back in high school. When did you decide that you liked me?”

Nishinoya managed to laugh despite his tiredness. “Well!” he huffed.

“Oh no,” Asahi said, “should I not have asked…”

“No, I mean, I’m just not sure, really!” Nishinoya tightened his grip on Asahi and grinned against him. “When I first met you, you seemed so badass, y’know? Big and scary. It was awesome.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah!” Nishinoya nodded. “But…then I got to know you.”

“Oh…”

“You were so weird,” Nishinoya admitted. “I couldn’t figure you out at all.”

“I see.”

“I spent so much of that first year just trying to understand you, how you could look one way and then be something completely different.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.”

Nishinoya laughed again at his downcast tone. “You take everything so seriously, Asahi-san!” He pushed away from Asahi’s chest and looked up at him – just barely seeing his face in the dark. “At some point I think it kind of switched over. Instead of being confused about you, I was… fascinated?”

“I’m starting to sound like a science experiment.”
“You dummy, listen for a second.” Nishinoya reached up and pinched his chin. “You were – I
never knew how you did it, how you could be so many different things at once. I only ever knew
how to be one thing at a time.” He found Asahi’s hand and squeezed it. “Like, somehow you knew
how to be strong and gentle? Even though I knew you could probably crush my skull with your
arms–”

“You.”

“But I knew you never would. I was never scared of you. Because you were so.” Nishinoya
frowned. “Nice.” He wished he knew the perfect word to somehow describe everything that
Asahi was. He wasn’t sure what it could possibly be. “That sounds really lame, I know,” he
continued. “But it was amazing to me. You were amazing to me.” He laced their fingers together.
“You still are,” he said. “And if you’re asking when I fell in love with you – I don’t really know,
honestly. I know that I was then, and that I am now.”

Nishinoya paused before continuing. “I know I could be – forceful,” he said, and Asahi snorted. “I
know!” Nishinoya insisted. “But it was because I knew how amazing you were, and I wanted you
to be able to see it too.” He shrugged. “I guess maybe… I was always a little bit in love with you.”

Asahi shifted against him. He slipped his hand out of Nishinoya’s and instead curled it around
the back of his head. He brought their foreheads together. “You were?” he asked.

Nishinoya nodded. “I know that I always wanted to protect you. I always wanted to be there.” He
closed his hand in the fabric of Asahi’s shirt. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, when did you decide you liked me?”

“Oh. Well…” Asahi’s fingers played through the hair on the back of Nishinoya’s head. “I think
was the first week of your first year.”


He felt Asahi nod. “You were… so much, so quickly. And you were so brave and reliable. I – I
thought it was very admirable.”

“Admirable,” Nishinoya echoed.

“Yes,” Asahi said. “At first I thought, oh. I just – I want to be like that.” His voice had a curious
tone. “Remember that I said I wasn’t comfortable yet admitting – even to myself – that I was gay.”

Nishinoya frowned at that. “I wish I had known then,” he said. “I wish I had been able to tell you it
was okay.”

Asahi shook his head. “It’s alright,” he said. “Anyway, at some point, I think I realized that…I…“
He let out a huff of nervous laughter. “I was really aware of you? Like, I’d always know exactly
where you were, even if you weren’t in my line of sight. And I, I thought a lot about how you
might perceive me – what you thought of me.”

“I told you, I thought you were amazing.”

Asahi nodded again. “You did,” he agreed. “But sometimes I wasn’t sure if you meant it, or if you
were right. Or if you were just trying to boost my confidence to make me play better.”
“Asahi-san, why would I say something if I didn’t mean it?”

“I didn’t say it made sense.” He blew out a long sigh. “There was one day – I think it was that winter? Before – before Dateko.” His hand moved down the side of Nishinoya’s neck to his shoulder. “It was Saturday, and I ran into you and Ennoshita and Tanaka downtown. You were wearing this – completely unseasonable, I felt cold just looking at you – you wore this blue t-shirt.” His hand slid around to Nishinoya’s chest. “And it said right here.” Asahi traced the characters. “A Promise Worth A Thousand Gold. And that was the day that I knew.”

“You knew you liked me?”

“I knew I loved you.”

Nishinoya was quiet a moment. “You never said anything,” he finally mumbled.

“What was I supposed to say?” Asahi asked. “I had no idea that you were even – well, you never gave me any indication that you liked me. Of course I assumed that there was no way you could ever even consider me in that way. Especially not with you and Tanaka going on about Shimizu all the time.”

Nishinoya felt his cheeks color. “I guess… that was kinda dumb.”

“Was that all an act, then?”

He considered this. “No,” Nishinoya concluded. “I do like girls. Especially pretty girls like Kiyoko-san.”

“Ah.”

“But!” Nishinoya said quickly. “Guys too, y’know? I don’t seem to care between them. And, you especially.” He smoothed the front of Asahi’s shirt. “I was always hung up on you, no matter how pretty anybody else around me was.”

“Pretty,” Asahi repeated. His voice now held a note of amusement. “Am I pretty?”

Nishinoya pinched him. “You know you’re pretty,” he said.

“Is that something that I know?”

“Well, it’s something you should know.”

“I don’t know how I feel about being pretty.”

“Ooooohhh!!” Nishinoya groaned. “Fine then! Very handsome, very masculine, good muscles, very strong, your dick is good too–”


“Well, you started it!”

“Okay, okay, I did.” Asahi’s hands moved slow across his skin. After a moment, he added, “You’re quite pretty though.”

“Asahi-san!”

Asahi kept laughing, low and sweet against the side of Nishinoya’s head.
They talked a long time before finally giving in to sleep – perhaps longer than was really advisable, given the early alarm set on Asahi’s phone. But there was something wonderful about the soft dark that enveloped them, the drowsy contentedness of the words they shared, their warm bodies tangled close together underneath the covers. Neither of them were inclined to break that spell.

~

The morning came too soon, but that was inevitable. They stuck to the routine of the past days – breakfast at the low table, and Nishinoya cleaned up after while Asahi got ready for work. At the door they said their goodbyes; Asahi looked happy despite the bags under his eyes.

“I’ll shoot you a message when I’m heading home,” he said.

“Yeah,” Nishinoya returned. “I’ll let you know if I’m gonna be late.”

Asahi smiled. He was so lovely when he smiled. Nishinoya wanted to make him smile forever. He reached forward, wrapped his arms around Asahi’s torso, and pressed his face into his chest.

Asahi hugged him tightly in return. “I’ll see you soon,” he said.


“I will.” Asahi was warm under his clothes. “I love you,” he murmured against Nishinoya’s hair.

Nishinoya’s eyes burned. “I love you,” he echoed.

After Asahi was gone, Nishinoya sat down on the couch and tried to think of what needed to be done to prepare for the rest of the week – what phone calls needed to be made, what appointments arranged, what should be packed and what should be left behind.

He called his tutor first.

“Gakuhara-san, I’m sorry!” he blurted, as soon as the call was connected.

“Nishinoya,” came the response.

“I’m really sorry!” Nishinoya reiterated. “I should have called you last week!”

“That would’ve been nice. But it’s fine, I just ended up doing my own homework in the library. I still claimed the time.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Only mildly inconvenienced.”

Nishinoya sat back in relief. “Okay,” he said. “Good. I’m sorry about ditching.”

“Are we on for this week?”

Nishinoya paused before answering. He closed his eyes. Somehow he felt the decision was still stewing inside him, unvoiced and unconfirmed.

“Nishinoya?”

He opened his eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “But I can’t make tomorrow. Can we do a couple hours on
Thursday?” Nishinoya leaned forward. He could already feel the familiar sense determination start its slow burn in his stomach. “I gotta catch up,” he said.

The next stomach-dropping call Nishinoya made was to his coach, though he was out of the office and Nishinoya was forced to leave a halting, abrupt message on his voicemail. After that he wasn’t sure what else to do. He looked at his watch. There were hours left before the break at the Tanaka’s restaurant. But…

Food couldn’t hurt, right? And to pass the time until their lunch hours, he could take Asahi’s sheets to the coin laundry and bring them back to dry. Then he could head to the restaurant early and eat there. Yes, that what he would do. Having a plan made the day feel more manageable, and that plan seemed as good as any other.

The day was clear and cool, with low humidity and a moderate breeze. Nishinoya wore the borrowed jacket as he walked along the street while dry brown leaves clattered around him. The air against his shorn scalp chilled him refreshingly; Nishinoya could breathe, it seemed – the air entering his lungs was crisp and cold and wonderful.

He made it to the restaurant a little after 11. They weren’t technically open yet, but Nishinoya went through the door anyway. The bells made the same jangling sound as before, the same familiar noise that was ingrained into his soul.

“Yuu!” Mrs. Tanaka cried from where she stood in the center of the dining room. Her hands were full of paper placemats, disposable chopsticks, napkins – Nishinoya saw that only half the tables were set. He moved forward quickly and held out his hands when he reached her. He took the place settings away from her and started laying them out himself.

“Yuu,” she repeated, and this time there was a stern note to her voice.

“What?” he returned, as he finished one table and moved to the next one.

She didn’t reply. Nishinoya laid out another setting to avoid looking at her, but he finally gave in and lifted his gaze.

She was standing with her feet apart and her hands on her hips, glaring at him with considerable fierceness. Nishinoya ducked his head again. He began to put down another placemat on the table.

“Are we going to talk about what happened?”

“Do we have to talk about it?” he asked quietly. “I already got an earful from my own parents.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” she said. “Someone needed to get some sense into you.”

“Not sure how much of that happened,” Nishinoya said, as he continued to a new table. “This is my parents we’re talking about here.”

“Hmm.” In the corner of his eye, he saw Mrs. Tanaka move. She had a lighter in her hand, which she used to begin lighting the candle in the center of each table. “I suppose so,” she agreed. “But anything was better than that ridiculous display you put on for poor Ryuunosuke.”

Nishinoya paused. His hand clenched around the packet of chopsticks he held. He felt the thin wood creak under his fingers. Slowly, he made his grip relax, and then he set the chopsticks down. He moved to the next chair.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “About that. What happened. I’m sorry.”
“Yuu, what’s done is done. Everyone is still here and you’re still in one piece. Things will be alright.”

Nishinoya glanced back at her again. Mrs. Tanaka was still stepping from table to table, lighting the candles as she went. She was older than his own mother, though not as old as Asahi’s. Her arms were thin and spindly, but he knew she was strong, stronger than her husband, almost as strong as her son. Nishinoya remembered how those arms had felt curled around him when he was too terrified to breathe.

“Thank you.”

She glanced up at the words. Nishinoya swallowed hard and continued. “Thank you,” he repeated, “for taking care of me.”

Mrs. Tanaka looked surprised for the barest hint of a second, and then her face smoothed into a sardonic expression. “Well, of course, my dear,” she said. “Did you think I was just going to leave you lying on the floor?” She turned and picked up the next candle. “Besides, if you had hurt yourself, Ryuunosuke would be completely useless for at least a week. We would’ve had to hire extra help, and I’m not sure we could’ve afforded it.”

Nishinoya felt a relieved smile breaking on his face. “Couldn’t have that,” he said.

“I’m afraid not,” Mrs. Tanaka agreed.

“Thanks for calling Mom and Dad.”

Now she looked at him directly. She set down the candle in her hand. “Now that’s a change in your tune,” she said.

“Yeah, I…” Nishinoya felt himself color as he remembered his previous behavior. “I was wrong. I dunno what I was thinking.”

“I suspect that you weren’t very much.”

He smiled thinly. “Not like it’s my strong suit anyway.”

“That’s probably true.”

Nishinoya exhaled through his nose in surprised amusement. “Mrs. Tanaka,” he said, “aren’t you supposed to say, ‘oh no, Yuu, don’t say such things about yourself!’ or something?”

“Self-honesty is an important virtue, who am I to deny it.”

“Mrs. Tanaka!”

At that moment, Mr. Tanaka entered the dining room from the kitchen. He carried a covered metal pan that had condensation coating its sides. When he saw Nishinoya, he looked shocked enough that he almost dropped the pan. “Yuu!” he said sharply.

“Hey, Pop,” Nishinoya returned. “Sorry about the other day.”

Mr. Tanaka looked carefully across to his wife before replying. “Well, I’m just glad to see you looking more like yourself,” he said. He carried the pan behind the counter. “I’d be more friendly but we’re opening in ten minutes. Dear!”

“I know, Katsutoshi, you don’t have to remind me.” She thrust the lighter at Nishinoya. “Finish
this up for me, will you? I’m going to check on our derelict offspring.”

Nishinoya did as he was told, then he settled himself at the smallest table in the corner to get out of the way. He pulled out his phone to check his messages – nothing new since that morning. He wondered how Asahi’s day was going. He resisted the urge to text him for all of fifteen seconds.

*Hope you’re having a good day*

Would it be too much to add emoji? Nishinoya suddenly wasn’t sure the etiquette of texting… whatever Asahi was to him.

Was boyfriend the right word? It sounded weird to Nishinoya. But he didn’t know how else to describe their relationship. Lover? That sounded gross. Partner sounded like something else entirely. Nishinoya put his elbow on the table and put his forehead against his knuckles as he stared at his phone. He chewed on his lip as he thought hard.

*I dunno what to call you*, he typed out finally.

“Alright, alright, alright!” bellowed Tanaka’s voice out of sight, in response to something unintelligible deeper in the kitchen. Nishinoya perked up and lowered his phone to the table.

Tanaka came into the dining room with his apron around his waist and a pencil behind his ear. He almost immediately noticed Nishinoya in the corner and did an obvious double-take.

Nishinoya smirked at him. He leaned back, slung his arm over the backrest of the chair, and gave Tanaka a mock salute.

Tanaka’s momentary shock passed, and then a wild grin grew on his face. “Hey, buddy,” he said. “Where you been?”

“Oh, you know,” Nishinoya replied. “Some asshole has been really holdin’ me up.”

“I’ll have to punch him for you,” Tanaka said.

“He probably deserves it,” Nishinoya agreed.

The bells jangled as customers came in. “Later,” Tanaka said, before he turned for the door.

As he stepped away, Saeko came out from the kitchen wearing a bib apron over a pink tank top, her hair tucked underneath a handkerchief. “Ryuu!” she called. “Don’t forget the specials!”

“I know, I know, already!” Tanaka returned. To the entering customers he said, in his most hospitable voice, “Good morning, thank you for coming. How many for your table?”

Saeko turned and saw Nishinoya. “Yuu!” she cried.

“Hey, Sis.”

She put her hands on her hips in a perfect parallel of her mother. “I heard you were in town!” she said. “I can’t believe you didn’t stay to say hello to me!”

“I would’ve—” Nishinoya started.

“I’m hurt. Hurt and offended. I can’t believe you.”

“Sis!” Nishinoya laughed.
“And here I was going to invite you to the wedding, but now this betrayal...”

“It’s not like that!”

“Hey!” Tanaka cut in, as he returned to their side of the dining room. “We should invite everyone from the old team! I mean, practically half of them are gonna be there anyway, if Noya’s gonna bring Asahi.”

“Ryu,” Nishinoya said carefully, with a glance at Saeko.

She didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest. “I’ll tell Akiteru!” she said brightly.

“No, no, no,” Mr. Tanaka interjected as he appeared suddenly at Saeko’s elbow, “you’re not allowed to invite anyone else, we’ll be stretched enough as it is, we don’t have enough seating in here~”

“Dad, I never asked to have the party here~”

“What, am I such a bad father that I can’t even provide for my only daughter’s wedding?”

“All you’ve done is complain about how expensive everything is! You don’t have to buy all that shit, you know!”

“Ingratitude, that’s what it is, ingratitude.”

“Dad! Would you stop acting like you’re the victim here!”

“Pop! Sis! Can you stop fighting in front of the customers?! This is why we keep getting those reviews!”

“Don’t get me started on you, Ryuunosuke!”

“What did I do!”

Nishinoya ducked his head and covered his grin with his hand as the quarrel continued on in front of him. Mrs. Tanaka came storming out of the kitchen brandishing a huge spoon, and her family scattered like disturbed fish in a pond.

His phone buzzed on the table. Nishinoya lifted it and turned the screen toward himself.

*Whats wrong with calling me Asahi?*

He felt the twinge under his sternum, the wonderful pain of it somewhere inside his chest.

*Nothing, he texted back, you’ll just be my asahi ok?*

There was a short pause before Nishinoya saw the bubble that indicated Asahi was typing again.

*Sounds good to me,* came the response.

Nishinoya lifted his phone and tapped the corner against his mouth as he watched the Tanaka family bickering as though on natural instinct. The sound of their voices jangling together was too perfect and too familiar, and Nishinoya had to close his eyes. He didn’t understand how he could’ve possibly forgotten the way they all felt like home.

“Sounds good to me,” he agreed.
Chapter End Notes

We are almost to the end! One more chapter and an epilogue to go.

The idiom that Asahi remembers from Nishinoya's shirt is written as 一諾千金
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Here we are at the last chapter of this fic. Just an epilogue left to go. Thank you to everyone who has come along with me on this journey.

“So what’s the plan?”

Tanaka asked the question almost immediately after they stepped into the alleyway behind the restaurant. They’d closed down after lunch, and Nishinoya had somehow convinced Tanaka’s parents to let him take a break — just for a little while, he promised.

The alley was so narrow that three people would’ve had trouble walking abreast of each other. Nishinoya leaned against the side of the building and slumped down to sit on the deformed pavement beneath their feet. “I dunno that there is a plan right now,” he admitted.

“Well, that’s dumb.”

“Hey, c’mon!” Nishinoya grabbed the tail of Tanaka’s shirt and pulled him down beside him. “You really are turning into a mom, you know that right?”

“Give me a break, Noya!” Tanaka pulled a rubber ball out of his pocket. He tossed it overhand across the alley; it bounced off the pavement, hit the building opposite them, and ricocheted back to his hand. He threw it again in the same way. “You want me to pretend like the last six months didn’t happen?” he said. “You want me to pretend like you didn’t collapse in my bedroom on Sunday?”

Nishinoya watched the ball hit and come back a few more times. “I didn’t mean for that to happen,” he said quietly.

“I know you didn’t mean it!” Tanaka returned. “That’s not the point!”

He kept throwing the ball. He didn’t look at Nishinoya when he spoke again. “Noya, that’s about as scared as I’ve ever been in my life.”

Nishinoya snatched the ball out of the air before it reached Tanaka’s hand. “Ryuu,” he said, “I’ve been…” He searched for the right word. “Sick. For awhile.”

“I know,” Tanaka said. He drew his knees up and rested his forearms against them. “I know you have. That’s why I think you should have a plan.” He rubbed his hand over the shaved back of his head.

“A plan to do what?”

“I don’t know, Noya, like. A back-up? In case things go south again.”

“Oh.” Nishinoya threw the ball at such an angle that it bounced back to Tanaka. “Well, I guess there is kind of a plan for that.”
Tanaka caught the ball and sent it back. “There is?”

“Yeah.” They fell into a rhythm passing the ball back and forth. It formed a steady counterpoint to Nishinoya’s words and helped him give them shape. “I’m going back for now, but if it happens again, I’ll come home for good.”

“Your parents are okay with that?”

Nishinoya shrugged. “They want me to finish,” he said. “Asahi-san, too.” The ball thwacked solidly into his hand and he sent it back with a flick of his wrist. “But they all said I could come home if I needed to.”

The ball made a few more passes before Tanaka responded. “How about what you want?”

Nishinoya caught the ball again and held it this time. He rolled it over in his hands. At length, he admitted, “I’m not sure what I want.”

“D’you think it’s a good idea to commit to something you’re not sure about?”

Again, Nishinoya didn’t reply right away. Finally, he threw the ball and bounced it toward Tanaka again. “I’m sure about stuff,” he said. “I know who’s behind me now. I know it’ll be okay if I fail.” He shrugged. “Don’t really want to fail, though. And…” The ball came back to him, and he returned it. “And I really miss volleyball,” he concluded. His eyes stung after he said it out loud. He’s been afraid to admit it, before.

Now it was Tanaka’s turn to catch the ball and hold it. He turned toward Nishinoya where they sat together on the pavement. “I knew you would,” he said. “You’re like, half of a person without volleyball.”

Nishinoya laughed. “I’m not that bad! I have other stuff I like!”

“To the same level as volleyball? Be honest here, Noya.”

“Yes!” he insisted. “I like soda ice, and Suzu and Taka, and you, and…and…” He sat back and looked aside. Somehow it was still difficult to admit out loud to someone else. “And Asahi-san,” he added finally.

“So…” Tanaka prompted. “That’s definitely a thing now?”

To his immense frustration, Nishinoya felt heat in his face. He nodded. Still looking aside, he reached out his hand for the ball, and Tanaka handed it over. Nishinoya threw it hard at the opposite wall, so that it ricocheted back with a dangerous amount of force, but he caught it just before it beaned him in the nose. He threw it again, somewhat more gently. “Yeah,” he said. “We’re a thing.”

“So he’s like. Your boyfriend now or whatever?”

Nishinoya thought about the brief text conversation they’d exchanged. My Asahi. “Yeah, something like that.”


Their conversation in the kitchen from a few days previous came back to Nishinoya. Tanaka had said it didn’t bother him, but…
“Are you okay with that?”

“Sure,” Tanaka said. “Honestly, I’m glad.”

Nishinoya caught the ball again and looked at him. He allowed himself to be cautiously hopeful.

“Yeah?”

“Well, of course, you idiot!” Tanaka grabbed his shoulder and shook him hard. “You’re my best friend, Noya! Don’t you think I want you to be happy?”

It was hot behind Nishinoya’s eyes again. “Yeah,” he repeated.

“I mean, shit. You know, when I found out he was gay, I almost called you.”

“I’m so mad that you didn’t,” Nishinoya said. “How long have you known?”

“I dunno, about a year I guess.” Tanaka shrugged. “I told you I played with their team a few times.”

“And he told you?”

“Not exactly,” Tanaka said. “It’s not like he walked around telling everybody. But it wasn’t really a secret, you know?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” Nishinoya said. “I’ll probably never forgive you.”

“How was I supposed to know you’d wanna know, Noya!” Tanaka snatched the ball out of his hand. “You were too dense to even really know how you felt, remember?”

Nishinoya grinned. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me that, either.”

“Why do I gotta be your romantic keeper! How did that possibly become my responsibility!” He threw the ball, and they settled into a rhythm again.

The ball hit and returned four times before Tanaka asked, in a quiet voice, “I wasn’t thinking earlier, should I not have mentioned Asahi in front of everybody in there?”

“Nah, it’s okay,” Nishinoya said. “It’s not really a secret.” Ukai’s advice about discretion came back to him briefly. “I mean, don’t put an announcement in the window or anything. But Asahi-san isn’t hiding. And my mom knows.”

“Your mom! Holy shit, Noya.”

“I know!” he returned. “It was crazy! I think she even kind of… approved? Somehow?”

“Holy shit!” Tanaka repeated.

Nishinoya laughed. “Right? I think she’s been replaced by some kinda alien or something.”

“Well, if you want to bring him to the wedding, that’s cool. Don’t pay attention to what Pop said.” Tanaka rolled his eyes. “He isn’t happy unless he’s complaining about something.”

“That would be okay?”

“Sure. Honestly, it’s gonna be a disaster no matter what, someone could bring the Prime Minister and it wouldn’t make a difference.”
Nishinoya grinned at him. They had somehow forgotten all about the ball; it ended up on the pavement next to Tanaka’s foot.

“You think she’ll be happy?” he asked.

Tanaka leaned back against the wall and looked upward. “I think so,” he said. “She’s got Akiteru-san completely brainwashed, y’know? The guy is doomed.”

“He’s lucky,” Nishinoya corrected. “You don’t meet a girl like her every day.”

“Thank god.”

Nishinoya grinned again and shoved Tanaka in the shoulder. “Don’t act like you don’t love her,” he ordered.

Tanaka responded by wrapping his arm around the back of Nishinoya’s neck. He dug his knuckles into the crown of his head.

“Hey, quit it!” Nishinoya tried to squirm out of his grasp. “You’re gonna mess up my hair!”

“Can’t have that,” Tanaka said. “Not the precious Nishinoya hair.” He doubled his efforts.

“Ryuu!!” Nishinoya pinched the underside of his upper arm and twisted his fingers hard.

“Ow ow ow fuck okay!” Tanaka let him go and leaned away, rubbing at his arm. “Okay, I… I guess I tolerate her.” He turned his nose up. “But Akiteru-san is in for it. She’s loud and pushy, she’s always hogging the bathroom, and she never cleans up after herself!”

Nishinoya drew his knees up and hugged his thighs. He made no attempt to hide his smile. “You’re such a sap!” he said. “You’re really gonna miss her, aren’t you?”

“Oh, you know it,” Tanaka said. “What am I supposed to do when she moves out? I won’t have anybody to help me rein in Mom and Pop.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” Nishinoya said, but then he frowned. “I meant to ask about your dad’s appointment yesterday. I been too focused on myself, sorry.”

“It’s cool, man,” Tanaka returned with a shrug. “I would’ve told you if they said somethin’ new. They might up a few of his meds but that’s it.”

Nishinoya nodded and allowed himself a small sigh of relief. “It must be hard…”

“Ah, maybe.” Tanaka kicked the ball half-heartedly. “It is what it is,” he said. “Mostly I worry about him lying about if he’s hurting or not.” Nishinoya glanced toward him; the side of Tanaka’s face was pensive for all of a few seconds before he grinned again. “Mom can always tell, though,” he said brightly.

Nishinoya snorted. “Yeah, your mom won’t let him get away with it.”

“Nope.” He leaned back against the wall of the building and looked upward. “Guess there’s not much to be done besides keep going,” he said. “The restaurant’s gotta stay open and he doesn’t want to retire anyway.”

“Yeah…” Nishinoya thought again about his mom’s advice. “At least he’s got a good team on his side.”
Tanaka looked at him sidelong and then burst out laughing. “Are you serious?” he said. “That’s so cheesy!”

“Shut it!” Nishinoya put his hand over Tanaka’s face and shoved him. “Didn’t you say the other day how you needed people in your corner?”

“I read that off a motivational pamphlet, Noya!”

“It’s still good advice!”

“What, you gonna start writing self-help books next?”

“Ryu!” Nishinoya laughed. He elbowed Tanaka hard in the side and laughed again when Tanaka doubled over in mock-pain.

“Hey,” Nishinoya said. “I’m coming home again the weekend after next. Let’s go do something, watch a shitty movie or something.”

Tanaka put his elbow against his braced leg and rested his chin in his hand. He grinned at Nishinoya. “Sounds like a date,” he said.

Nishinoya grinned back. He leaned over and grabbed the ball from beside Tanaka’s foot. “What d’you wanna bet I can hit the drainpipe more than you can?”

“Oh, buddy,” Tanaka said. “I been coming out here on my break every day since I was thirteen.” He stretched out his arms with his fingers laced together and cracked his knuckles. “You are going down.”

“It only counts if you hit above that top bend.”

“You’re on.”

As Nishinoya drew his arm back with careful aim, he felt so light and free that it seemed he might launch himself into the air as well. With one eye closed and a flick of his wrist he let the ball fly, fast and true, heading straight for his goal.

~

After Nishinoya said his goodbyes to the Tanakas, he walked around town for a long time. The weather was brilliant and clear, and he didn’t want to return to the apartment just yet. He wasn’t far from the shopping district that he’d stumbled upon that disastrous night he’d gotten lost when he felt his phone buzzing in his pocket.

Nishinoya looked at the caller ID and saw that it was his coach returning his call. He let it ring four times before he got the nerve to answer.

“Hello?”

“Nishinoya.”

Nishinoya inhaled hard through his nose. He stepped off the sidewalk and ducked into a little alleyway between two buildings. “Hey, Coach.”

“You called earlier?”

“Yeah — yes. I did.” He shoved his free hand into the pocket of his jeans so he wouldn’t have to
deal with his sweaty palm. “I wanted to talk to you about…” Nishinoya drifted off. How was he supposed to word it? Once again he threw a frustrated thought at whatever powers had aligned to make it so hard for him to think before he spoke. He tried again. “I just need to find out… what I gotta do. To come back.”

His coach was silent on the other end of the phone.

“To the team, I mean,” Nishinoya added, when the pause stretched too long for comfort.

“Well, actually showing up for practice might be a start,” his coach said. His tone was even, his voice calm.

Nishinoya felt a surge of relief. “I can do that!” he blurted. “I’ll be there!”

“You know, your mother called me the other day.”

Nishinoya winced. “Yeah, I know,” he said.

“I’m not going to pry into your situation, but she did seem very upset.”

“Yes,” Nishinoya repeated. “I’ve talked to her. It’s okay.”

“Alright,” his coach returned. “I’m not really cut out to facilitate family communications. That’s a bit above my paygrade.”

“I know, I’m sorry about that.”

His coach was quiet for another moment. Nishinoya could see him in his mind’s eye: close-cropped hair and shrewd eyes, and a long frame that implied he’d been thin when he was younger. He’d be tapping his pen on the desk, a telling habit that spoke of his impatient displeasure with a particular conversation. Nishinoya knew he was more comfortable at practice or in the gym; he was unfortunately familiar with how much his coach hated the sort of meetings that took place in that office.

“Nishinoya,” his coach started.

Nishinoya stood up straight. “Yes!”

“I think there are some things we should talk about.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“Why don’t you come by on Friday? I’ll have some time around four or so.”

Nishinoya’s legs felt weak. He took a step back and encountered the wall of a building. He leaned against it. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s good. I’ll be there.”

~

When Nishinoya got back to the apartment later that afternoon, he was surprised to find that Asahi was already there. It became immediately apparent that he’d been dozing on the couch before stirring at the sound of the door.

Nishinoya’s initial shock gave way to affection as Asahi blinked blearily at him and slowly sat up from where he was sprawled over the cushions. Nishinoya stepped through the door and closed it behind him, then put his hands on his hips. “Asahi-san,” he said sternly, “did you come home just
to take a nap?”

“No, I—” Asahi cut off as he covered his mouth with his hand; his loose hair shivered as he yawned. “It wasn’t busy so I asked to leave early,” he continued. “I just wanted to spend as much time with you as I could before tomorrow.”

Again came the twinge in Nishinoya’s chest, and he had to pull a face and groan out loud. “You can’t keep saying nice things like that,” he said. “You’re probably gonna kill me.”

“You’re one to talk,” Asahi replied as he rubbed one closed eye with the heel of his hand. “With all that ‘my Asahi’ business.” He looked back at Nishinoya, who felt heat in his ears. “I think my brain had to reset after that one.”

Nishinoya huffed loudly to cover his sheepishness and stalked over to sit down beside him. He brought his feet onto the couch and crossed his legs. “I was just trying to decide what to call—” He gestured between them. “Whatever this is.”

Asahi gave him a small grin. He reached out and covered Nishinoya’s hand on the cushion next to him. “We don’t have to call it anything yet,” he said. “All that matters is that this is home and we’re here together.”

The word settle inside Nishinoya, slotting into place like a puzzle piece. He shifted his hand until he could lace their fingers together. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Home.”

Asahi’s face was pink, his eyes still heavy with sleep, but his smile was bright and genuine. After a moment, he said, “I have a surprise for you. Well, two surprises.”

Nishinoya perked up and straightened in his seat. “What is it?” he asked, already tense with excitement.

“It’s… well. Um.” Asahi’s cheeks darkened, and he looked away. “Honestly, it might be… a little too much.”

“Asahi-san, come on! You can’t say you have a surprise and then backpedal on it!”

“Right, sorry.” Asahi leaned back until he could fit his hand into a front pocket of his pants. Then he extracted something small enough that it was hidden in his closed hand. “I… don’t have a lot to offer you,” he began.

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said sternly, “you absolutely do.”

“No, no,” Asahi returned with a grin, “I know. But. I mean, in a material sense, I don’t have much.”

“Oh.” Nishinoya furrowed his brow. “Well, that’s okay,” he concluded. “I don’t need, like, financial support or anything.”

“I know,” Asahi said. “I don’t mean it like that.” He opened his hand, and Nishinoya saw that in his palm rested a small resealable plastic bag with something silver coiled up inside it. Asahi took Nishinoya’s hand, palm up, and put the bag into it.

When he looked closer, Nishinoya saw that it was a finely linked chain. Puzzled, he looked up. “What’s this for?”

Asahi used his opposite hand to pull off his thumb ring. He held it up. “It’s for this,” he said. He
gave Nishinoya an apologetic look. “I kind of realized it probably wouldn’t fit you.”

Nishinoya blinked at the ring for a moment before he glanced at Asahi’s face in alarm. “Are you giving me a ring?”

“No!” Asahi blurted. “Well, technically, yes — but not like that!” His blush had spread from his cheeks, covering his neck before it disappeared into the collar of his shirt. “I just — I wanted to give you something — and — I don’t have a lot, you know? So, I…” He grimaced and put the ring back on. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking, I’ll get something better.”

“No, no, wait!” Nishinoya insisted as he reached forward to grab Asahi’s hand. “I didn’t mean that I didn’t want it!”

“No, it’s weird, I’ll think of something better.”

“Asahi-san!” Nishinoya tugged Asahi’s hand forward and pulled the ring off his thumb. He curled his fingers tightly around the warm metal and the plastic baggie together and held them close to his chest.

“I want it,” he said quietly.

Asahi’s expression broke into a vulnerable smile. He closed his hand around Nishinoya’s between them. “Then it’s yours,” he said.

Nishinoya held his hand out in front of him and opened his fingers to look at the silver ring and chain in his palm. “What’s it for?” he asked again.

“Ah, well.” Asahi plucked the bag out of his palm. He opened it and poured the chain into his own hand. “I did say it was a little much,” he prefaced. Nishinoya watched as he unraveled the chain and undid the clasp. “It probably sounds stupid,” Asahi continued, “since it’s only been a few days since we…reconnected.” He picked up the ring next and slid it onto the chain, then leaned forward holding an end in either hand.

Nishinoya closed his eyes as Asahi drew near, conscious of the heat and scent of him, the way his fingers tickled over the back of Nishinoya’s neck as he fastened the clasp. Nishinoya lifted his hand and curled his fingers loosely over Asahi’s forearm. “What’s stupid about it?” he asked.

Asahi huffed out a laugh. “Well, it’s. I guess you can think of it as a promise?” He pulled back, though he kept his hands on Nishinoya’s shoulders.

Nishinoya opened his eyes again as Asahi moved. “A promise?”

“That I’m here,” Asahi said. “That you can come home, and I will be here.” He lowered one hand and hooked his index finger into the ring resting against Nishinoya’s chest. “I…I don’t know what the future holds,” he admitted. “But I do know that I love you, and I want to try to…”

Nishinoya wrapped his hand around Asahi’s and pulled it tight to his chest. “Try to…?”

Asahi gave him the soft smile again, the one that made him look young. “I want to do this for real,” he said. “I want to be with you, I want to be a part of your life, and I want you to be a part of mine. And I don’t want that to ever stop.”

The twinge behind Nishinoya’s sternum turned into a sharp ache, and he squeezed Asahi’s hand around the ring against him. His voice was thick when he finally found it again. “That’s not stupid,” he said. “It’s perfect.”
Asahi leaned forward once more, and Nishinoya closed his eyes. The chain was cool against his neck, Asahi’s fingertips rough on the side of his head, his other hand clasped tightly in Nishinoya’s. Asahi tasted both hot and cool; his mouth was warm inside, with a hint of toothpaste. He’d been ready for him, Nishinoya realized.

When Asahi finally pulled away, Nishinoya desperately wanted to drag him close once more. He only just managed to hold himself back.

Asahi spoke again in a low voice. “It can also help remind you, if you find yourself feeling hopeless and lost, that I still love you, and everything will be okay.” His thumb coated along Nishinoya’s jawline. “I just wanted to give you something of mine to keep with you in case that happened again,” he concluded.

“That’s not fair!” Nishinoya said quickly. “You should get something too!”

“No, it’s okay—”

Nishinoya pressed on. “I want you to have something to think of me too!”

Asahi stopped him with a hand against his shoulder. “I do, though,” he said. “Sort of.” He held up his other arm. “It’s this,” he said.

Nishinoya looked closely. It was the same hand he’d worn the ring on, the same with the tattoo, and he wore another wristband — a different one than before; this one had black leather woven into a smooth braid with a silver fastener.

Nishinoya frowned. “I don’t get it,” he said.

Asahi lowered his arm. He pulled his other hand away from Nishinoya’s shoulder and fiddled with the wristband. “Well, it’s really dumb. And sounds super weird, honestly.” He laughed. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you…”

“Asahi-san!”

“It’s this,” Asahi said, pointing at the wristband. “I have a few of them and… Ugh, I said it was dumb.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Nishinoya said as he waved his hands around. He leaned forward and put them down on his knees. “Your wristbands make you think of me?”

“Sort of. I didn’t start buying them for that reason.” Asahi was blushing again. “I just — well. They seemed like something cool you might wear. And, I thought...maybe I’d look cool...too…” He covered his face with his hand and groaned. “God, that sounds so stupid, now that I’ve said it out loud I can hear how stupid it is.”


Asahi laughed. “I guess it’s okay, if you think so,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Nishinoya demanded. “You’re fucking gorgeous!”

“Oh!”

“Don’t act surprised by that! Why do you think I can’t keep my hands off you!”
Asahi kept laughing. “Okay, okay, okay!” he said. “I get it.” He gently extracted himself from Nishinoya’s grip and took hold of his hand instead. “But yeah, the point is, they do make me think of you,” he said.

Nishinoya sat back, still frowning. “I still want to properly get you something,” he said.

“That’s fine,” Asahi returned. “But don’t worry about it right now, okay?” He still had that soft look about him, and Nishinoya relaxed.

He looked down at his chest at the ring again. The chain was long enough that it hung over his sternum. Nishinoya lifted it slowly in front of his face. “So you got the wristbands because of me,” he said. “What about the other stuff?”

“Other stuff?”

“Yeah, like…” He turned the ring over in his hand. “Like this.” He dropped it and reached forward to tap his index finger on the tattoo. “And that. And…” Nishinoya lifted his hand until it found the black cord that disappeared into the collar of Asahi’s shirt. He hooked a finger around it and slowly tugged, drawing out the length of it until the pendant came free and tumbled down in front of Asahi’s chest. “And this,” Nishinoya concluded quietly.

Asahi exhaled through his nose and smiled. “Well, I wasn’t lying when I said it was a boring story.” He lifted his hand and caught the pendant in it. “Do you know what a token is?” he asked.

Nishinoya shook his head.

“It’s sort of like. It represents something. A reminder of a time or a place or a thing. Or a feeling. Or a person.”

“Like the wristbands?”

Asahi nodded. “In a way, yes.” He held up the pendant. “My dad gave me this,” he said. “A couple years ago.” He reached forward and took Nishinoya’s hand in his own, then laid the pendant into Nishinoya’s palm. The metal was warm from his skin.

Nishinoya looked closely at the pendant for the first time. It was oval-shaped, heavy and thick; the metal was a dark, varnished silver color — pewter, perhaps. There was a stamp of a small fish in the middle of it.

“It’s supposed to represent perseverance,” Asahi explained. “He got it for me when I was...I was going through a tough time.”

Nishinoya glanced up quickly. His eyes darted over Asahi’s face, but Asahi’s expression didn’t tell him much. “What happened?”

“Well…” Asahi ran his finger over the little fish. “I got fired.”

“Fired?”

“Yeah. I was working at this office, I was a gofer. Did a lot of odd jobs around the place. But, the owner’s son was—” Asahi stopped. “Let’s just say they found out I was gay.”


Asahi rubbed his neck. “It’s awkward to talk about,” he said. “Especially with you.”
Nishinoya frowned and grabbed Asahi’s hand above his, wedging the pendant between them. “Tell me.”

A corner of Asahi’s mouth tugged sideways. His brows were low over his eyes. “I was just stupid,” he said. “I got involved with the owner’s son.”

“Involved, like…”

“Yeah, involved.”

Nishinoya sat back. “Oh,” he said. He tried to ignore the stab of jealousy that came up.

“I’m sorry,” Asahi said. “It was a long time ago.”

Nishinoya shook himself to clear his head. Asahi loved him, he told himself. Asahi wanted to be with him.

“It’s fine,” Nishinoya said, and he meant it. “You don’t have to explain.”

Asahi gave him a tight smile. “Well, we were dumb about it and we got caught.” He dropped his gaze to their hands still clasped together. “They couldn’t very well fire the heir to the company, so I got the boot instead, and then the whole thing got swept under the rug.” He shrugged. “That’s it, really.”

Nishinoya absolutely hated these people, and he’d never even met them. He wanted to bang down their doors and demand an apology, demand they see Asahi for what he was worth. “Asahi-san, that’s awful! Why the hell would you want to remember that!”

“I don’t,” Asahi clarified. “I don’t wear this for that.” He pulled his hand free of Nishinoya’s and brought the pendant close to himself again. “My dad got me that job in the first place. The owner was someone he knew professionally, and it was a favor to my dad and a good opportunity for me, but then I just…” He winced. “I thought he was going to be furious.”

Asahi was quiet for a moment. At length, he added, “I was really scared about what was going to happen.”

Nishinoya leaned forward and touched Asahi’s leg. “Asahi-san,” he said.

Asahi exhaled and his face eased. “It’s okay,” he said. “Really. It was a long time ago.” He loosened his grip on the pendant. “Anyway, I came home and — Mom told me Dad was on his way home, in the middle of the week, even — and I was sure it was going to be terrible, I was sure…” He shook his head. “But in the end, when he got there, he didn’t really say that much about it.”

“Did they know, then? About you?”

Asahi nodded. “I actually told them on my twentieth birthday.” He laughed mirthlessly. “I guess I was worried they might start trying to set me up with someone. But yeah, they knew already. At least that was something.”

Nishinoya reached for Asahi’s hand again. “Tell me what happened next.”

“Well, he gave me this,” Asahi said as he lifted the pendant up. “He gave me this and told me—” He shook his head again, but this time a smile touched his face. “I’ll never forget how he put it,” he said. “He told me that it would always be difficult to swim upstream.”
Nishinoya must’ve worn a confused look, because Asahi squeezed his hand and explained, “He meant that it wasn’t going to be easy going against the flow.”

“Oh,” Nishinoya said. He sat back. “I guess that’s true.”

“Yeah,” Asahi agreed. “So, anyway, that’s the end of the story.” He used his free hand to pat the pendant against his chest. “I keep this close,” he said, “so it will remind me to swim upstream.”

A smile tugged at Nishinoya’s own lips. “Upstream, huh?” he said.

Asahi nodded. “As for this—” He pointed at the tattoo on his hand clasped in Nishinoya’s. “That one really is dumb.” He laughed, and it was genuine this time. “I was out with Kenichi and Keizan and — god.” He covered his eyes.

“What? Tell me!”

Asahi shook his head and continued. “They had finally convinced me to — to come out to my parents. And, I don’t know, it just. It felt like such a momentous thing, like I needed to mark it somehow, make it permanent.” He lowered his hand from his face. “And those two still make fun of me today for getting this and not something else.”

Nishinoya pulled his hand forward. He rubbed his thumb over the little star. “I like it,” he said. “It suits you.”

“Y’know, I think Mom was more mad about me getting the tattoo than being gay.”

Nishinoya blinked at that, then started laughing. He could just imagine Mrs. Azumane in her house shoes, brandishing a newspaper in anger. Asahi grinned back at him.

“And the last thing is the ring,” Asahi said. “Suga got it for me and told me that it would somehow help me get a date? I still don’t understand that one.”

Nishinoya pulled the ring up on its chain by one finger. “Hold on a second. Are you telling me you’re regifting this?”

“Oh!” Asahi sat back in surprise. “I guess I didn’t — I didn’t think about that—”

Nishinoya couldn’t help but laugh again at his expression. “I’m just messing with you!” he insisted. “I don’t care where you got this, it’s mine now and I’m keeping it.”

“Alright, alright,” Asahi said. “You keep that and I’ll keep you.”

“Asahi-san! That almost sounded smooth!”

“As almost,” Asahi agreed with a smile. He reached for Nishinoya’s shoulders and pulled him in against his chest. Nishinoya felt Asahi cover the top of his head with his hand so he could tuck him under his chin.

For a little while, he let himself rest against Asahi, firm and warm next to him. Nishinoya lifted his hand and traced his finger over the fish on Asahi’s pendant. “Upstream,” he said again.

“Mm,” Asahi returned. “It probably won’t ever be easy.”

Nishinoya thought again about his dad’s advice in the salon and his mom’s after. “Guess that’s why we gotta stick together,” he suggested. He pushed away from Asahi just enough to look at his face. “That way we can help each other along.”
Asahi gave him the most wonderful look — not quite a smile, but happy, hopeful, and open. “Yeah,” he agreed quietly. “Good plan.” His hand rubbed over Nishinoya’s shoulder. “You know,” he said, “I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?”

“Well.” Asahi’s expression took a turn toward uncertainty. “The thing is…until last week, I kind of thought…well, I thought my life was sort of done.”


“Oh, just.” Asahi sighed. “I mean, it wasn’t bad or anything. I was happy enough. Or, I thought so, at least.” He smoothed down Nishinoya’s shirt again. “But I kind of thought, you know, maybe that was it. Maybe that’s all it was ever gonna be.”

“You…” Nishinoya was a little lost on his meaning. “Are you saying you gave up?”

“Maybe a little,” Asahi admitted. “I didn’t think that I did, but looking back on it — maybe I decided that I had already reached the end of anything new. Which is.” He leaned back and looked at the ceiling. “Which is just ridiculous, isn’t it?”

Nishinoya grabbed the front of his shirt. “No!” he insisted. “I felt exactly the same way!”

Asahi looked back at him. “I felt like I’d missed something — like there was some stop where I was supposed to get off, but I was asleep or something and passed it.” The corner of his mouth quirked. “And so I was just kind of.” He shrugged. “I guess I was just kind of doing what I could to pass the time.”

Nishinoya remembered what Asahi had said a couple nights before. I have nothing going for me. My life is going nowhere. He tightened his hands in Asahi’s shirt. “Asahi-san,” he said, “you’re not done yet. I know you still got awesome things you’re gonna do one day.”

“Maybe,” Asahi said, “maybe not. But…” He closed his hands over Nishinoya’s. His dark eyes were soft, his face relaxed. “But I think I might be ready to try,” he said.

“Might be!” Nishinoya echoed. “Say that you are, not that you might be.”

Asahi laughed quietly. “One step at a time,” he said. “It’s not easy swimming upstream, remember?”

Nishinoya let out a frustrated huff, but he didn’t push any more. “What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I don’t really know yet. I only just started thinking about it.”

“Well, we can figure it out,” Nishinoya said.

“Yeah,” Asahi agreed. He reached for Nishinoya’s shoulders and drew him in again.

Nishinoya let Asahi pull him down to his chest; he let himself relax against him. At length, he asked, “Does that mean you might want to leave town eventually?”

Asahi made a thoughtful noise. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe.” There was a pause, and then he added, “I think my mom might want to move though.”

There was something about his tone that made Nishinoya tilt his head to look at his face. Asahi
had taken a nervous cast — expressive eyebrows slanted over his eyes, his mouth twisted unhappily.

“What makes you say that?”

“Well…” His hand coasted over Nishinoya’s shoulder. “I don’t know. It’s not like she’s really talked about it much, but.” He shrugged. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? I moved out so that Dad could retire, but then he didn’t. And now my brother’s family and the twins and him all live together there, and it’s just Mom and me here. Sometimes I think she might just be staying in town for me.”

Nishinoya took Asahi’s other hand into his own. He ran his fingers along Asahi’s palm. “Maybe she doesn’t want to go live in the city,” he suggested.

“Yeah,” Asahi said. “Maybe.”

“Even if she does,” Nishinoya said, “you don’t have to leave. You can stay here and I’ll be here with you, and my family will too.”

Asahi closed his eyes and his mouth stretched into a thin smile. “What about that offer?” he asked quietly.

“Huh.” Nishinoya chewed on his lip. “Well, I could come home on weekends, probably.” He shook his head and squeezed Asahi’s hand. “Anyway, I don’t even know if the offer will still be there in a year, or if I’ll wanna take it! So I don’t wanna worry about it right now, okay?”

“Okay,” Asahi agreed. He leaned forward and hugged Nishinoya tightly against him. “But… if you do,” he said softly. “I don’t want to only see you on weekends. I don’t want that kind of life.”

Nishinoya’s heart sank. “Well, I won’t take it then,” he said. “I’d rather have you than volleyball.”

“No, no,” Asahi said quickly, “I don’t mean that we’d break up, I just mean. I’d probably come with you.”

Nishinoya felt himself pink around the ears. “Oh,” he mumbled. “I. That’s.”

“Is it crazy to say something like that so soon?” Asahi asked. “I feel like it might be crazy.”

Nishinoya shook himself. “No, it’s just… What about your job, your friends? The team, your pottery? You don’t wanna give that stuff up, do you?”

“No,” Asahi returned. “Not right now, at least. But like you said, that’s at least a year away. We can decide what we want to do then. Anyway, I’m sure there are pottery studios and neighborhood teams wherever you might end up.”

“But…” Nishinoya still had that feeling inside him. “It wouldn’t be the same, would it…?”

“Probably not, but you can’t guarantee things will stay the same anyway, even if you try not to change them.”

Nishinoya let this thought sit for a moment. “That’s kinda scary to think about,” he said.

“It is,” Asahi agreed. “That’s probably why I’ve tried to avoid thinking about it for so long.”

Nishinoya looked down at his chest and the pendant that hung against it. “That’s what it means to go upstream, I guess,” he said.
“Yeah,” Asahi returned.

Nishinoya groaned and knocked the side of his head into Asahi’s shoulder. “This whole being-an-adult thing sucks, you know that? I think I’d rather go back to high school, honestly.”

Asahi laughed. “I wouldn’t,” he said. “I was such a mess then.”

“You’re not a mess now?”

Asahi lifted a hand and pinched his nose. “I’m a much more honest mess these days, I’ll have you know,” he said. “And you’re not one to talk.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Nishinoya conceded as he knocked his hand away. “Anyway, didn’t you say you had another surprise for me?”

“You’re kinda pushy, you know that?”

“Asahi-san!” Nishinoya flopped dramatically against him and tried to do the best puppy eyes that he could.

“Alright, already!” Asahi laughed and pushed him away. “Let me grab my phone. I left it charging next to the bed.” When he stood up, Nishinoya followed suit.

In the bedroom, Nishinoya sat down on the bed while Asahi retrieved his phone. He tapped his thumb a few times on the screen, then held the phone to his ear.


“Asahi-san—”

Asahi held a hand up to silence him, and Nishinoya bounced his leg so hard that he almost vibrated off the bed. Asahi grinned and rolled his eyes in return. Then his attention moved away from Nishinoya as he reacted to something on the other end of the call.

“Yeah, hey,” he said. “Can you hear me alright? Good. Yeah, he’s right here, I’m gonna hand it over. Okay.” Asahi lowered the phone and held it out to Nishinoya.

Nishinoya gave him a suspicious look, but Asahi continued holding the phone toward him with an obvious excitement, so he lifted his hand and took it.

He put it up to his ear. “Hello?” he said carefully.

“You’d think he’d be more excited to talk to us.”

Nishinoya’s stomach clenched at the unexpected voice. His eyes swung back to Asahi, who was still grinning at him. “Suga-san?”

“You didn’t even give him a chance to react, Suga.”

He clutched at his shirt. “Daichi-san!” he cried.

“What’s all this we hear about you running away from school?” Suga asked.

Nishinoya felt blindsided. “I — it was—”
“We can’t all make it seem as effortless as you, Suga.”

“I’m sorry!” Nishinoya blurted.

“You don’t have to apologize, Nishinoya,” Daichi said. “You’re allowed to have an existential crisis once in awhile.”

“And you’d know all about existential crises, huh Daichi?”

“You be quiet.”

Nishinoya’s eyes prickled. Their voices sounded so sweet in his ear, pooling into him like warm water, filling his chest with butterflies. “It’s—” He swallowed hard. “It’s so good to hear from you,” he said quietly.

“Oh my god, listen to him. Asahi broke him.”

A startled laugh made it past the lump in his throat. “No, no!” he insisted. “Everything’s fine!”

“Put us on speaker, Nishinoya, I want to talk to that lunkhead too.”

He nodded despite the fact they couldn’t see. He pulled the phone away to search the screen for the speaker option. After he found it, Nishinoya reached out a hand for Asahi and pulled him down to sit on the bed beside him.

“What’s up?” Asahi said.

“What did you do to him, Asahi?” Suga asked.

“What? Nothing!”

“You did something. Since when is he so demure?”

“Suga!” Asahi leaned forward over the phone in Nishinoya’s hand. “It’s not like that!”

Daichi spoke next. “Maybe it’s someone impersonating him,” he suggested. “Asahi’s probably too blind to tell the difference.”

Nishinoya couldn’t hide his smile at Asahi’s stricken expression. “So I’m an imposter, then?”

“Maybe you’re a collection of hamsters in a raincoat,” Suga suggested.

“I’m not even wearing a coat!”

“That’s disturbingly specific, Suga.”

“I would know the difference!” Asahi insisted.

“Oh, that’s right, you’ve gotten that raincoat off, haven’t you?”

Nishinoya looked up at Asahi in surprise. Asahi flushed the color of a tomato and grabbed the phone. “Suga, shut up!” he hissed.

“You told them?” Nishinoya asked.

“No!” Asahi insisted. "I mean, sort of? But not really!"
"Relax, Asahi," Daichi cut in. "Nishinoya, he didn't tell us anything specific."

"Yeah," Suga agreed, "just that it was magical."

"Oh my god," Asahi moaned plaintively. He covered his face with his free hand. "I didn't say that, I swear!"

"We inferred it from his dreamy tone."

"I think he was unintentionally composing a sonnet."

"Guys!" Asahi cut in as he dropped his hand. "This isn't why I called you!"

Nishinoya burst out laughing. He couldn't help it — it was like being transported in time, save for the fact that Daichi and Suga weren't in the room, that Asahi's hair was longer, his shoulders more broad. Nishinoya reached toward him and grabbed his face in both hands. He pressed a clumsy kiss beside Asahi's nose, just below his eye.

Asahi's hand came up to his shoulder; the wrist of the one holding the phone pressed against Nishinoya on the other side. He broke into a wobbly smile. His face was hot under Nishinoya's hands. "I promise I didn't say anything," he said.

"Like I care!" Nishinoya insisted. "I don't give a shit who knows we shacked up!"

"Okay, now I believe it's him," Suga said.

"ANY. WAY." Daichi's voice cut loudly over everyone else's. "Nishinoya, he did tell us that you were struggling with school."

_Sorry_, Asahi mouthed.

Suga's voice still held a note of amusement. "Just because something doesn't come easy doesn't mean you're automatically gonna fail at it, you know."

"What makes you think college doesn't come easy to me?" Nishinoya asked. He let Asahi go and leaned back.

"Because we were the ones that had to tutor you through high school."

"You're so close to the end," Daichi added. "Think what a waste it would be right now if you didn't finish."

"Not necessarily a waste," Asahi corrected. "But trying to finish is definitely worthwhile."

"Listen to these nerds," Suga said.

"Suga, you're the one who graduated with full honors."

"Yeah, so I can tell a nerd when I see one."

_The point is," Daichi continued. Nishinoya could almost hear his eyes rolling back in his head. "The point is, no one thinks less of you for having a rough go of it. Certainly not us."

"It's not like it's super easy for anyone else, you know," Suga said.

"Even getting as far as you have is an incredible achievement," Asahi added.
"Okay okay okay!" Nishinoya waved his hands around in embarrassment. "Okay, I get it!"

"What's he look like, Asahi, do you think he's listening to us?"

Asahi gave him an apologetic look. He reached forward and brushed the knuckle of his index finger on the underside of Nishinoya's chin. "He's listening," he said.

"Well, good. It would be unfortunate if we had to come knock some sense into him."

"Suga."

"You could—!" Nishinoya started loudly. He caught himself and spoke again in a lower voice. "You could still come visit. If you want."

"I should be around during winter break," Daichi said.

"Yeah, might not be a bad idea to check in on them and make sure they're behaving," Suga suggested. "I'll try to get off work for a couple days and give you some back-up."

Nishinoya glanced up at Asahi, who looked back at him with that perfect little smile.

"Either that or I'll make you two come here," Suga continued.

"No," Asahi said emphatically.

"Asahi, that was one time! You can’t avoid visiting me for the rest of your life."

"I can try."

"You know," Daichi said, "usually I just tell him I've got a big test coming up. Three out of four times it gets him to back off for another week."

"You two are the most ungrateful people I've ever met. Nishinoya still loves me though, right? You'll come visit your poor lonely upperclassman, won't you?"

"Yes!" Nishinoya insisted. "I'll come any time!"

"Don't listen to him," Asahi said. "He doesn't know what he's saying."

The conversation went on for awhile longer, until the light from the window had turned golden and Nishinoya's stomach started growling. Then it was time for goodbyes, bittersweet and wonderful — a weighted pain inside Nishinoya's chest.

"Nishinoya, you'll keep an eye on Asahi for us, won't you?" Suga said. "He’s hopeless without us."

"He’s okay," Nishinoya said.

"And don’t forget what we said," Daichi ordered.

"Um…"

"You’ve already forgotten it, haven’t you."

"I’m sorry!"

"Things are gonna be alright," Suga said. "Even when they suck, and everything seems so dark and
insurmountable, and you don’t see how they could possibly ever be alright again—”

“Suga.”

“Anyway!” Suga concluded. “The point is, they’ll be alright. As long as you don’t stop moving, you’ll eventually get somewhere, right?”

“Doesn’t even necessarily have to be the place you planned on originally,” Daichi said.

“That’s so amenable, Daichi,” Asahi replied.

“He’s grown so much,” Suga cut in. “I’m so proud.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Alright, alright. I’m starving anyway. I don’t suppose you’d want to buy me a pizza and have it delivered here, would you?”

“Goodbye, Suga.”

“Bye, guys,” Asahi said.

“Nishinoya,” Daichi said.

“Yes!”

“Take care of yourself, alright?”

Warmth swelled inside him. “Yes,” he said, “I will.”

“Okay. If I find out you didn’t, I’ll have to slug you.”

“So violent, Daichi.”

“Are we hanging up or not?” Asahi said.

“Well, that’s rude! Maybe someone wants to get that raincoat off their hamst—” The rest of Suga’s sentence was cut off when Asahi abruptly ended the call.

He was blushing again, even up to the tips of his ears. “I’m sorry about that,” he said quickly. “I didn’t know they were going to tease us that much.” He winced. “Though I guess I probably should’ve expected it.”


Asahi gave him the little smile again, cautious and sweet. “Good surprise?” he asked.

“Great surprise,” Nishinoya returned. Then, as the thought came back to him, he leaned forward right into Asahi’s personal space. “I just remembered! I have a something for you too!” he said, barely a few centimeters in front of his face.

Asahi pulled back in surprise. “You do?”

Nishinoya nodded vigorously. “Yeah! Although…” He sat back. “It’s not something nice like a ring or something.”

“Well, that’s okay…”
Nishinoya dug into his pocket and extracted the small tube, which he held up between them. “I got this while I was out.”

Asahi looked at it in confusion. “Superglue?”

“Yeah, to fix your mug and plate. The ones I broke.”

“Oh!” Asahi’s eyebrows dropped low over his eyes. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to!” Nishinoya insisted. “I already got the glue, just let me try!”

“But…” Asahi shook his head, his forehead still knit together. “It really doesn’t matter, I don’t want you to feel bad about some dumb dishes.” He wrapped his fingers around Nishinoya’s hand between then and slowly lowered it. “Besides, superglue isn’t food-safe, so we couldn’t use the plate again anyway.”

“Asahi-san!” Nishinoya said loudly, which made Asahi jump. Then, in a quieter voice, he added, “Please. I want to.”

Asahi’s shoulders relaxed. The corners of his lips tugged upward as he exhaled slowly. “Okay,” he said. “How about you do that while I make some dinner?”

Nishinoya’s face creased. He lunged forward and threw his arms over Asahi’s shoulders, then hugged him so tightly that Asahi let out a little grunt.

“Thank you,” Nishinoya mumbled into the skin of his throat.

Asahi’s arms closed over his back. His lips pressed into the side of Nishinoya’s head. “Of course,” he said.

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Later on, Nishinoya sat on the floor of the living room while Asahi moved around the kitchen. He’d spread out some paper to protect the carpet — “Won’t make too much difference,” Asahi had said, but he still felt responsible for the mess.

The plate was pretty simple to put back together, as it had broken cleanly into the three pieces. The glaze would never be the same, of course, split as it was by long arcing cracks in the glassy surface. But the pieces fit snugly; the glue held. Nishinoya felt better when he set the mended plate down on the paper and it stayed together.

The mug proved more challenging. It was not only that the break between the handle and the mug itself was more jagged — there were bits missing, chips hacked from the edges, and the glaze was irrevocably scratched from its tumble across the concrete. But Nishinoya wasn’t the kind of person who quit things easily. By the time Asahi came into the living room carrying two steaming plates, he’d gotten the handle and the mug to hold together long enough for the glue to set.

“Any luck?” Asahi asked. He set a plate on each end table, and then sat on the couch.

Nishinoya nodded in response. He held up the mug and turned it slowly — one end of the handle was secured, but the other was separated from the body of the mug by almost a centimeter of open air. He had to have lost a chunk of it somewhere. Probably at the bottom of that creek, the one he’d nearly fallen into himself.

“I guess that’s as good as it’s gonna get,” he finally conceded.
“That’s alright,” Asahi said. He patted the couch next to him. “You don’t have to fix it.”

Nishinoya frowned, but he put down the mug and stood up, then crossed over toward the couch. “I just feel like,” he started, “you know, if you can fix something that you broke — shouldn’t you at least try to do it?” He met Asahi’s gaze and found him looking back with a startled expression. “Oh,” Nishinoya said, “is that dumb?”

“No,” Asahi returned. He held his hand out, and Nishinoya took it. Then Asahi pulled him down to sit on the couch. “It’s not dumb,” he said softly, as he touched his thumb to Nishinoya’s bottom lip.

“Of course you’re gonna say that, Asahi-san,” Nishinoya returned with a grin. “You’re probably gonna be way too nice to me from now on.” He thought a moment. “Not that you weren’t too nice before.”

"Actually," Asahi said, "now that I’ve got you in my trap, I have no reason to be nice to you anymore." He swiped his thumb over Nishinoya's lip as he leaned in with a sly look. "In fact, I plan on being very not-nice to you later tonight." He curled his fingers under Nishinoya's chin and tipped his head up.

Nishinoya was surprised for the span of a heartbeat, and then he burst into laughter. "Asahi-san!" he said. "Who knew you were such a lech?"

"Well, men can be driven to extremes with the proper inspiration."

"Inspiration!" Nishinoya echoed. "What's that supposed to mean!" He put his hands on Asahi's shoulders and pushed him until he fell backwards against the couch; Asahi's hair spilled out over the cushion as he went. Nishinoya climbed on top of him and straddled his waist, grabbing his wrists in the process so he could shove them over Asahi's head. Asahi didn't resist any of it, just looked at Nishinoya with the most infuriating grin — one that sank like a hot stone through Nishinoya's stomach and below.

"Inspiration," Nishinoya grumbled again as he leaned down over Asahi laid out beneath him, stopping only when their noses could almost touch between them.

"You don't like being called inspiring?" Asahi still wore that grin; his eyes were heavy-lidded.

"You're so cheesy," Nishinoya said.

"I don't hear you complaining all that much," Asahi returned. He flexed his wrists, just enough to indicate he could break free if he wanted, though he made no other move to do so.

Nishinoya pressed down against him until their chests were flush together. “Only because you’re hot,” he said. He quickly pressed his lips over Asahi’s before he could retort.

Asahi tried to say something else, muffled into Nishinoya’s mouth; the sound turned into a soft moan in his throat when Nishinoya opened his mouth and let his tongue touch against Asahi’s. Asahi did break one wrist out of his grasp at that point — only so he could curl his hand around the back of Nishinoya’s head and hold him in place as he deepened the kiss further.

It wasn’t until Nishinoya started undoing the buttons on his shirt that Asahi pushed him back. “Wait,” he said, “I made dinner, remember? We need to eat it before it gets cold.”

Nishinoya whined and pressed his face into Asahi’s neck. “Can't we reheat it in the microwave later?”
Asahi laughed. He put his hands on Nishinoya's shoulders. "C'mon," he said. "It's already made. And honestly, it's decent at best right now anyway — later it will be even worse."

Nishinoya pushed himself up until he sat on Asahi's stomach. "First you're a lech and then you're a prude," he said. "There's got to be a law against that sort of thing somewhere."

"Waiting until after dinner is illegal?"

"Should be."

Asahi got his hand underneath his side and levered himself up off the couch; he slipped an arm around Nishinoya's waist as he moved and held him upright against him. "Remind me never to let you run for any sort of office," he said.

"What, you don't trust me?"

"Not with matters of national importance," Asahi returned.

"Pssh!" Nishinoya pinched the side of his neck. "Some boyfriend you are!"

He felt a shock immediately after he'd said the word; Asahi's expression indicated a similar level of surprise. Nishinoya was nervous for half a second, but then the corner of Asahi's mouth came up as the ends of his eyebrows turned down. His hand curled over Nishinoya’s shoulder and pulled him close.

His cheek pressed hard against the side of Nishinoya’s head. "I'll work on it," he said quietly.

Nishinoya's expression contorted. He turned his face into Asahi’s throat and nodded.

Once they started eating, Nishinoya suddenly realized he was famished. Before Asahi was able to eat even half of his plate, Nishinoya had already devoured everything on his own and gone back for seconds.

They cleaned up the kitchen together after the food was gone. Nishinoya was washing dishes, up to his elbows in soapy water, when Asahi came up behind him. Asahi’s hands slid around his sides; his breath puffed over the top of his head.

Nishinoya shivered in response, though he found himself grinning. “Hey,” he said. “I’m not done yet.”

“Aren’t you?” Asahi returned. “You weren’t objecting earlier.” His knees knocked into the back of Nishinoya’s legs as he bent down, and then there were soft lips against the side of Nishinoya’s neck.

He couldn’t stop himself from closing his eyes at the tickling sensation, or fight the way it made his stomach clench. Nishinoya had to slip his hands out of the water and brace himself against the counter as Asahi pressed in close to him.

Nishinoya's breath caught as one of Asahi's hands found the lower hem of his shirt, slipping underneath until rough fingertips brushed over his stomach. He let out a shaky sigh as Asahi's hand slid higher and pushed his shirt up as it went. Nishinoya tilted his head back and to the side, which gave Asahi better access to the skin of his neck.

Asahi's mouth continued against Nishinoya's skin, soft pressure and wet heat of his tongue between his lips; before long, Nishinoya felt his legs start to weaken. He wiped his hands on his pants, then
lifted his arm to wrap one around the back of Asahi’s head in order to steady himself.

"I thought about you all day," Asahi said, his voice like velvet on Nishinoya's skin.

“Oh yeah?” Nishinoya fought to keep his voice even. “What did you think about?”

“I thought about how good you look standing in my kitchen or sleeping in my bed.” Asahi’s hot breath coasted along his neck, up behind his ear. “I thought about how you smell and how perfect you feel in my arms.” His hand splayed over Nishinoya’s stomach. “I thought about how I never want to stop touching you.”

Nishinoya sighed out loud. His fingers tightened in Asahi’s hair, and he gave a sharp tug. “Then don’t,” he murmured.

Asahi’s breath hitched against his skin. Then his hands moved, sliding down over Nishinoya’s stomach, past the waistband of his jeans, until they met the growing bulge below. Nishinoya pulled in air between clenched teeth as Asahi palmed his erection; he shifted his hips backward into Asahi’s, felt him hot and hard against his backside.

“Ah,” Nishinoya exhaled. He reached back with the hand he didn’t have tangled in Asahi’s hair and grabbed at his hip. He tugged him closer, and Asahi responded by pressing forward, pushing him hard into the counter.

Asahi’s deft fingers found the zipper of his jeans. Nishinoya moaned when his hand cupped him through only his briefs; he shoved his ass back again into Asahi, and Asahi put one hand against the counter to brace himself — he moved the other down over the swell of Nishinoya’s cock in his underwear, fingers curling down between his thighs to tease at his balls.

Nishinoya’s stomach somersaulted over itself. He slid his hand over Asahi’s thigh behind him. He erratically shifted his hips forward and back again, torn between wanting to rut against Asahi’s hand or rub back against him. The air grew hot and damp between them as Asahi panted against his neck. Nishinoya bent at the waist and leaned forward; he let go of Asahi’s hair and instead placed his hand over Asahi’s against the counter, lacing their fingers together.

Asahi’s thumb curled into the waistband of his briefs and tugged them down; the elastic caught for a moment over head of his cock, which made Nishinoya shudder and gasp out loud as it sprang free. Then Asahi’s long fingers wrapped around him, and Nishinoya had to put both of his hands against the counter to keep himself upright.

It took barely a minute before Nishinoya felt the pressure building, the growing ache behind his balls, and he realized he was already dangerously close to coming. He found his voice and choked out, “Wait, wait.”

Asahi’s hand stilled. “What is it?”

Nishinoya shook his head. He flexed his calves until they hurt, until he trembled with the effort of holding himself up. That was enough to bring down the immediacy of his arousal and back away from the cliff. “I don’t want to come yet,” he said. “I still want… I still want to…” He swallowed hard. “You said last night, we could…” His lips suddenly trembled, and he found himself holding back tears.

“Oh,” Asahi breathed. “That’s okay.” He kissed gently behind Nishinoya’s ear. “We have time, it’s okay.” He let go of Nishinoya’s cock and moved his hand back up over his stomach. It tickled slightly, and Nishinoya’s abs clenched in response. Asahi continued, “I just, I want to take that
slow, and I don’t think I can go slow right now.” His tone was thready, with a slight tremor. “But we can cool it down, if you want to wait until later.”

Nishinoya closed his eyes. The desperation had come up so suddenly, a phantom of the pain he’d felt just a few days before. This time, though, he was able to voice it. “I’m leaving tomorrow,” he mumbled. “I don’t want our last time together to be over too fast.”

Asahi was quiet against him. His hand tensed where it rested on Nishinoya’s stomach. At length, Asahi exhaled slowly. He pulled his hands back as he lifted his body away. He took hold of Nishinoya’s shoulders and turned him in place.

His face came into view, holding an expression that was almost sad, but his mouth curled in a smile, his eyes crinkled in that familiar way. “Yuu,” he murmured, “this isn’t the last time, not by a long shot.” He drew him close again. His hand curled around the back of Nishinoya’s neck. “Not even for tonight,” Asahi added. “I won’t let you go that easily.”

Nishinoya’s breath caught behind the lump in his throat. His relief was so profound that he felt weak. There was time, he reminded himself. They had all night, and there would be a next time as well. He could survive that. Nothing was finished. There could always be more.

He slipped his hands up over Asahi’s shoulders and curled them around the back of his head. “Never let me go, okay?” he said.

Asahi shook his head. “Never,” he agreed, and Nishinoya pulled him down to kiss him.

After a moment, he grabbed Asahi by the shoulders and turned him so that Asahi’s back was against the counter. Nishinoya slipped his hands up under his shirt to touch his stomach; the muscles jumped and tensed under his fingers. Asahi’s breath stuttered, and Nishinoya grinned. “Ticklish?” he asked.

Asahi grabbed his wrists and held his hands still. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I think you are,” Nishinoya returned, and he brushed his fingertips again over Asahi’s abdomen. “Don’t!” Asahi laughed.

Nishinoya slid his hands upward, pushing his shirt up as he went. His fingers roamed higher until they encountered the firm curve of Asahi’s pecs — then Nishinoya splayed his hands wide, searching for the soft peaks of Asahi’s nipples. “Not fair,” Asahi said weakly when Nishinoya found his intended targets.

Nishinoya teased each one lightly until they grew stiff under the tips of his fingers. He flicked his index finger over Asahi’s left nipple, catching his nail against the tightened skin. Asahi shuddered in response, and his eyes slipped shut. Nishinoya kept his hands on his chest as he bent down; he pushed the shirt up higher with his left hand, then opened his mouth against the hot skin of Asahi’s stomach.

Asahi jumped at the contact, his breath catching in a sharp exhalation, and Nishinoya grinned against him. He pressed a kiss in the center of Asahi’s abs, then trailed his tongue down the central crease until he met the divot of his navel. He kissed below it, where tickling hair brushed against his lips, and his chin bumped against the button of his pants. Nishinoya lowered one hand from Asahi’s chest and fumbled with the button and zipper until he managed to get them undone — he dropped to his knees on the kitchen floor and was pleased to discover he was only slightly short of
the perfect height. He tugged down on the pants until they cleared Asahi’s hips, and then took in
the sight of his erection tenting the front of his boxers before leaning forward and hungrily pressing
his mouth against the stretched fabric.

“Oh,” Asahi breathed. One of his hands clutched the counter behind him; the other curled around
the side of Nishinoya’s head, over his ear and the curve of his cheek as Nishinoya mouthed his
cock through his boxers. Asahi’s legs shook slightly, flinching with strain, and he bent at the
knees, which made Nishinoya’s angle almost perfect — he closed his lips around the tip of him,
tasted the tang of precome even through the cotton between them. He pushed a hand in between
Asahi’s thighs and curled the palm upward to cup his balls.

It wasn’t until Nishinoya finally tugged down on the waistband to expose the head of his cock that
Asahi’s hand left the side of his head and curled under his chin. He lifted gently, pulling
Nishinoya’s mouth away from him and tipping his face upward.

“You don’t have to right now — or — or right here,” Asahi said. “We can move somewhere more
comfortable — like the couch?”

Nishinoya didn’t respond verbally. He only pulled down more on Asahi’s boxers until he came
completely free of the elastic. He wrapped one hand tightly around Asahi’s hip, the other around
the root of his cock, and then wrapped his mouth around him.

“Ah!” Asahi’s fingers flexed under Nishinoya’s chin. When Nishinoya glanced up, Asahi’s face
was turned down, his chin tucked in, and his eyes were closed. When Nishinoya ran his tongue
along the underside of his glans, Asahi’s face contorted; his forehead creased, and he let out a soft
gasp. He relaxed again as Nishinoya pushed his lips down further along his cock.

His eyes opened and met Nishinoya’s. His hair shivered on either side of his head; his chest
heaved. His cheeks were dark, his pupils blown wide. Nishinoya wanted to eat him alive.

He sucked upward, drawing his lips along the length of him, until they caught on the ridge of the
head, then he pushed down again as far as he could and used his hand to compensate for where he
couldn’t reach. Asahi responded wonderfully; he shuddered silently and breathed hard through his
nose as his eyes slipped shut and back open again. Nishinoya tried to go slow — he really did —
but Asahi was all around him, his legs tense on either side of Nishinoya's body, his fingers still
curled under Nishinoya's chin. The scent of him was overwhelming, heavy and masculine and
intoxicating. Nishinoya lifted his hand from Asahi's hip and brought it back to tease at his balls
between his thighs — it was then that Asahi jerked with a groan, tightened his fingers around
Nishinoya's jaw, and pulled.

Nishinoya gagged as Asahi went too deep into his throat; he came off him coughing for breath,
tears winking into his eyes.

"O-oh—" Asahi stuttered. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I—"

"No," Nishinoya croaked. He shook his head quickly and rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his
hand. "It's okay." He leaned forward again. "Just go slow if you're gonna move, okay?"

Asahi nodded. "I'm sorry," he said again in a small voice.

Nishinoya shook his head once more. "Don't be," he said, before he closed his mouth over him
again. He pushed downward slowly, judging carefully the depth he could handle. When he was
sure he’d gone as far as he could, he wrapped his hand around Asahi’s cock at that location, and
then pulled back off again. He looked up at Asahi's reddened face.
"Okay," Nishinoya said, "if you want to move, you can."

"No, it's fine," Asahi said, "you don't have to—"

"Asahi." Nishinoya frowned at him. "I'm not gonna break. You won't hurt me."

He saw Asahi's larynx bob as he swallowed before responding. "I don't want to do something you don't want," he said.

"You think I wouldn't tell you if I didn't like something?"

"I guess not..."

"Do what you want," Nishinoya insisted. "I can take anything you give me."

Asahi let out a long sigh. His hand curled back around Nishinoya's chin and drew him forward — Nishinoya went willingly, lips parting when they met the head of Asahi's cock, and then stretching wide as Asahi pushed slowly into his mouth.

Nishinoya closed his eyes. His lips met the barrier of his fingers and went no further; he didn't gag. Asahi's other hand closed around the back of his head, and then Asahi pulled backward until his cock almost came free. He thrust into Nishinoya's mouth once more.

"Oh, fuck," Asahi breathed. Nishinoya opened his eyes and lifted them; when their eyes met, Asahi sucked in a sharp breath. His fingers tightened around Nishinoya's jaw. "You're so hot, Yuu."

Nishinoya would've smiled if his mouth wasn't otherwise engaged. The sight of Asahi unraveling above him was so delicious that he felt a corresponding ache down below. Nishinoya brought his other hand to his own erection where it lay hot and heavy between his thighs.

Asahi fucked his mouth slowly and carefully; Nishinoya wanted to tell him that he didn't need to, but that would mean taking his lips off him. Instead, he sped up the bob of his head of his own accord until Asahi matched him — soon Asahi was panting heavily, and Nishinoya's hand slid along his cock freely as Asahi drove into him again and again. Nishinoya’s jaw ached, his eyes watered, but an intense wave of sensation coursed through him from the pressure of Asahi’s hands on his head down to his knees against the floor, Asahi’s hot cock in his mouth and Nishinoya stroking himself in tandem. He moaned around Asahi, which earned him a shudder in return.

Asahi's voice was thready and tight when he gasped, "oh god, I'm gonna come, oh fuck — fuck!"

He shoved himself hard into Nishinoya's mouth — almost too far, but Nishinoya managed to pull back slightly before choking — and then curled down over him, fingers digging into Nishinoya’s scalp.

Nishinoya tried to swallow the heat that filled his mouth, but his throat spasmed and didn't cooperate. As he pulled off of Asahi’s cock, come slid over his chin and down his neck. He coughed again and wiped at his mouth with his hand.

Asahi dropped down to his knees in front of him. He ran his thumb over Nishinoya's chin and slid his hand down the front of his throat. Then he brought that hand back to his own mouth and licked his palm, between his fingers, wherever the streaks of his come had collected.

"Oh man," Nishinoya sighed softly. He moved forward, grabbed Asahi's face in both hands, and kissed him hard. His tongue delved into Asahi's mouth as Asahi kissed back; the sharp bitterness on his tongue made Nishinoya feel as though he might boil over inside. He fumbled to grasp at Asahi’s wrist and pulled his hand to his cock — Asahi took the hint; he pushed him back until he
hit the floor, closed his lips on Nishinoya’s throat, and took him apart until Nishinoya arched off the tiles with a gasp.

When Nishinoya’s toes finally uncurled, and he relaxed again on the floor, Asahi moved his hand from his flagging cock up to his stomach. His other arm slipped under Nishinoya’s shoulders and pulled him up to a sitting position between his sprawled legs.

Nishinoya leaned hard into him, suddenly sleepy. He was sore where his body rested on the unyielding floor, but Asahi was warm against him; he smelled safe and soft and perfect. Nishinoya lifted his trembling hand and placed it on Asahi’s flat stomach under his shirt.

“This is too ridiculous,” Asahi mumbled, and Nishinoya grinned weakly in return.

“What is?”

“I feel like I can’t even be around you for more than five minutes before I want to get your clothes off.”

Nishinoya laughed out loud. He grabbed the front of Asahi’s shirt. “Well, I think we’ve fucked in every room of your apartment now except the toilet.”

“Yuu, I love you, but I’m not having sex with you in the toilet.”

He laughed again. “I wasn’t suggesting that!” Nishinoya levered himself away from Asahi’s chest to look at his face and tugged him forward by his shirt. “I guess we haven’t done it in the hallway yet.”

“Yuu!” Asahi laughed. He threw his arms around Nishinoya and hugged him tight.

Nishinoya let him hold him for a moment before he spoke. “My knees are killing me,” he said.

“Oh!” Asahi pushed back again and put both hands on Nishinoya’s shoulders. “I didn’t think about — I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Nishinoya ordered. He clambered to his feet, grabbing Asahi’s hand as he went so he could tug him up as well. “Let’s just go sit somewhere softer before we make out any more, okay?”

Asahi smiled. He slipped his free hand around Nishinoya’s waist to the small of his back and pulled him in. “Okay,” he said.

In the bedroom, Nishinoya stripped off his disheveled clothes, then held back and watched Asahi do the same before he sat down on the edge of the bed. Asahi patted the spot on the bedcovers next to him, indicating that Nishinoya should join him there.

An abrupt surge of heat prickled up Nishinoya’s spine to the crown of his head. Suddenly he realized — he’d known before, of course, but it hadn’t been so imminent, so near, so real — he realized what was going to happen, and a tiny spark of nervousness sprang up in his stomach.

Asahi seemed to notice his discomfort. “You can change your mind,” he offered. “I’ll be happy either way.”

Nishinoya shifted his weight over one leg and put his hands on his hips. “You’re too accommodating, Asahi-san.”
“This isn’t something to not be accommodating on,” Asahi returned. He leaned his weight back on his hands behind him against the bed. He looked entirely relaxed. His dick lay flaccid against his thigh.

Nishinoya felt himself center again. Slow, Asahi had said. They’d go slow.

He went to the bed and sat down. Asahi’s arm slid around his shoulders as he moved in close. “I still want to try,” Nishinoya said.

Asahi gave him a small smile. “We can try, then.”

Nishinoya pushed him down against the mattress and climbed on top of him.

He spent a long time kissing Asahi, mapping the course of his features so he might remember them later — the way his chin scratched, his lashes tickled — the way a sigh sounded in his chest, or the feeling of his heartbeat through the pulse point in his neck. At one point, overcome with the knowledge that they wouldn’t be together the next evening, Nishinoya dug his shaking fingers into Asahi’s shoulders and pressed his face into the center of his chest.

"I don't want to go," he mumbled. "I want to stay."

Asahi's hands curled around his shoulders. "I know," he said softly. "I want you to stay too."

"Why am I going back again?" Nishinoya asked. The ghost of that old desperation wisped back to life inside him once more.

"It's not for forever," Asahi reminded him. "You'll be home again soon."

"What if you're wrong about me? What if I'm just deluding myself?"

"You aren't," Asahi returned. "And I'm not wrong about this." The tone of his voice made Nishinoya look up again.

Asahi gave him a sad smile. "I wish I could tell you that it's all gonna be fine from here," he said, "but I can't. And now — after having you here — it's going to feel so empty in this place without you." He shook his head. "It's funny how things can change so much so quickly."

Nishinoya lowered his cheek to Asahi's chest and slumped down. "Yeah," he mumbled.

"Yuu," Asahi said quietly. Nishinoya closed his eyes and nodded against him.

One of Asahi's warm hands slid into the center of his back. "I know that if you don't do this now, you'll always regret it."

"But what if it's the wrong decision?"

"Maybe it is," Asahi said. "We can't know that right now." His fingers trailed over Nishinoya's skin. "All the same," Asahi continued, "I really do believe this is the best thing for us to do right now."

"Two days ago you were telling me to leave and not come back," Nishinoya reminded him.

"Yeah, well. I was wrong, wasn't I?" His hand moved down Nishinoya's side to his hip. He was quiet for a moment. "Actually," he said softly, "I don't think I ever apologized for that."

Nishinoya's eyes sprang open at that statement. He put his hands on Asahi’s chest and pushed
himself up until he sat on Asahi’s stomach, glaring down at him from above. “What do you mean, apologize!” he demanded. “What’re you apologizing for?”

“Well…” Asahi cast his eyes aside. “I can’t help but think…if I had been honest with you from the beginning…” The crease had reappeared between his eyebrows for the first time in a long while. “If I’d told you my feelings or if I’d been willing to accept yours, maybe we could’ve avoided hurting each other.” He turned his gaze back to Nishinoya. “So, I’m sorry for that. I was scared, and I was selfish about it.”

There was a pain in Nishinoya’s chest, and it wasn’t the lovely ache of before — now it was heavy and sad. “Asahi-san,” he said. “You thought you were doing the right thing.”

“Or I’d just convinced myself I was.”

“Asahi-san!” Nishinoya repeated. He lifted his hand to Asahi’s face and rubbed his thumb over the crease in his forehead. “You’re the nicest person I ever met,” he continued. “All the good things you did for me this week, and now you’re apologizing because you weren’t perfect about it? What kinda ridiculous standards are those?” He pulled his hand back and was relieved to see that Asahi’s face had smoothed somewhat. “Anyway, I’m pretty sure that if I hadn’t broken down all the way like that, I’d be even worse off right now.”

Asahi shook his head. “You shouldn’t have to get so bad off before you can start feeling better,” he said. “I don’t want you to think that’s how it works — you don’t have to have a breakdown before you can ask for help.” His hands tightened where they gripped Nishinoya’s legs on either side of his body. “Don’t make that part of it, okay?”

“Okay,” Nishinoya said. “No more breakdowns.”

“No, that’s not what I mean either,” Asahi insisted. He sighed. “I just — we need to communicate. You have to talk to me before it gets to that point again.”

Nishinoya frowned. “I can be honest with you,” he said. “But, I don’t — Asahi-san, I can’t dump on you like that all the time.”

“Yuu—”

“No, I mean it!” Nishinoya said firmly. “I’ll tell you how I’m feeling, I’ll tell you what’s going on, but if I make it all about me then—” He leaned forward with his hands on Asahi’s chest. “If I make it all about me, you might end up closing off again, keeping your own stuff inside like before. I don’t want to do that again — not knowing what you’re thinking or how you feel.”

“But—”

“I ain’t gonna keep it all in anymore,” Nishinoya continued. “I’m not saying that. I told you about the counselor, remember?”

Asahi still looked uncertain. His eyebrows sloped downward toward the ends. “But, I want to be able to help you,” he said.

“You do help!” Nishinoya smacked his chest with one hand, and Asahi winced. “Damnit, haven’t you been listening to me? If you’re here, if I’m with you, I can handle everything else! You’re what makes me feel strong enough to do that! And…” His voice lowered in volume. “And I want to be able to support you too,” he concluded.

The tightness to Asahi’s expression finally eased. “Yuu,” he said, “you’re the most incredible
person I know. You’ve been an inspiration to me since the first day I met you.” His hands moved to cover Nishinoya’s against his chest. “I wouldn’t be who I am today without your support, back then and right now, I’m sure of it.”

Nishinoya felt heat in his face. “Asahi-san, that’s too much.”

“You said you wanted to know how I feel,” Asahi continued. “That’s how I feel.”

“You need to give yourself more credit,” Nishinoya insisted. “I didn’t make you into the person you are, you did that yourself.” He looked down at Asahi’s hands over his own. “I wasn’t even here,” Nishinoya mumbled. “I didn’t help you through that time at all.”

“That’s not true,” Asahi said. “Do you know how many times I was in a tough spot and I asked myself, how would Nishinoya handle this?” His fingers squeezed around Nishinoya’s.

Nishinoya lifted his eyes. “Is that true?”

Asahi nodded. “Many times.” He thought for a moment before adding, “Now, sometimes I asked myself that so I could be sure to do the opposite, but the point still stands.”

“Hey!” Nishinoya laughed.

“You told me a few days ago that I was your hero in high school,” Asahi said. “Did you mean that?”

Nishinoya felt a flash of remembered embarrassment over that conversation. “Yeah, I did.”

“Well, you were my hero too.”

Nishinoya dug his fingers into Asahi’s skin. He lowered himself down again, until their faces were close together. “Listen to yourself,” he said. “How could you ever think I didn’t love you?”

Asahi smiled at him. “I’m an idiot,” he said.

Nishinoya pressed forward and kissed him again before he could say anything else. When he pulled back a few minutes later, Asahi’s eyes were heavy, his mouth pink and wet. “Are you ready?” Nishinoya asked.

“Isn’t that supposed to be my question?”

“Well, are you?”

Asahi laughed quietly. He ran his hands up Nishinoya’s arms, then around to his back. Nishinoya shivered at the sensation of warmth against his bare skin. Asahi spoke again in a low voice. “I’ve been ready for you for a long time,” he said.

“You’re so cheesy,” Nishinoya reiterated.

“Stop complaining,” Asahi returned. He grabbed the back of Nishinoya’s head and pulled him in.

Their next kiss increased in intensity until Nishinoya’s toes curled. He was aware of the smell of Asahi beneath him, the hair on his chest under Nishinoya’s fingertips, the sure firmness of his hands coating over his skin. Nishinoya felt himself responding, his cock growing full where it lay against Asahi’s stomach. Asahi’s hands slid down from his waist and closed over his ass, one palm flat against each cheek, fingers splayed wide. He pulled forward so that Nishinoya rocked against
him. Nishinoya sucked in air between his teeth in response, which broke the kiss.

Asahi’s breath escaped with a sound that was half a laugh and half a sigh. “Hm, I have a better idea.”

“Better…?” Nishinoya echoed.

Asahi nodded. He closed his hands around Nishinoya’s waist and lifted him off and to the side before sitting up himself. Then he slipped off the edge of the bed, taking hold of Nishinoya’s hand as he straightened up. “Come on,” he said, as he gave it a tug.

He led Nishinoya back out of the bedroom, across the hall to the bathroom. There, he released Nishinoya’s hand and motioned for him to sit.

“What are we doing?”

“Relaxing,” Asahi said. “And preparing.”

Impatient nervousness had begun to bloom inside Nishinoya’s chest, but it muted as Asahi’s hands touched his skin. Asahi washed him with obvious care, his warm hands coasting along Nishinoya’s back and shoulders. The scratch of his calluses sent pleasant shivers down Nishinoya’s spine. His hands moved around Nishinoya’s sides, over his stomach, and then lower as Nishinoya felt his chest press into his back.

Asahi touched him until he was shaking. He washed between Nishinoya’s thighs, under his balls. Nishinoya ended up with his face pressed into the crook of Asahi’s throat, Asahi’s arm around him, his hand on Nishinoya’s ass. His fingers teased at Nishinoya’s asshole, slipping between the cheeks and back out again. Water cascaded down Nishinoya’s back from the showerhead in Asahi’s other hand; it spilled over his ass and down his legs onto the floor.

Nishinoya arched against Asahi’s chest with a gasp as Asahi pushed a finger into him up to the first knuckle. “S-slow,” he said.

“I know,” Asahi responded. “Don’t worry.”

They stayed in the bathroom until Asahi could get two fingers all the way in. Back to the bedroom, Asahi grabbed lubricant and a condom before climbing into the bed beside Nishinoya. Though Nishinoya was relaxed and buzzing with sensation from their time in the bathroom, he still felt a twinge of impatience spill through him when Asahi tossed the little foil packet onto the bedspread.

“Asahi, come on,” he said. Nishinoya reached his arms up toward him. “I want you, please hurry.”

Asahi stretched out beside him. He put his hand back between Nishinoya’s legs. “I will,” he promised. Even so, he moved without haste, slowly and gently drawing Nishinoya open until he was unraveling against the bed with three of Asahi’s fingers inside him.

Nishinoya writhed on top the bedspread, his hands clenching and unclenching without conscious thought. His legs shook on either side of Asahi’s body between them.

“Oh, Yuu,” Asahi breathed as he leaned down over him. His voice sounded just as desperate as Nishinoya felt.

“Now,” Nishinoya said, “now, come on, I’m ready, I’m ready.”

Asahi’s larynx bobbed in his throat. To Nishinoya’s great relief, he nodded. He pulled his fingers
Asahi settled his weight back on his feet with his knees parted. His cock bobbed heavy and flushed between his thighs. Nishinoya looked up at him, knowing immediately that he would always remember this moment: the color high on Asahi’s cheeks, the way he tucked his chin in and bit his lip as he rolled the condom on. Nishinoya sat up as well; he took the lubricant out of Asahi’s hand and poured it into his own — probably too much, as some of it dripped into the bedclothes beneath them. He wrapped his fingers around Asahi’s cock and gave him a few firm strokes, noting the odd, slick feel of the latex and how tightly it stretched over Asahi’s skin. Asahi leaned forward with a groan to press his face against Nishinoya’s shoulder; his hands found Nishinoya’s upper arms and gripped tightly. Nishinoya tangled the fingers of his free hand into Asahi’s hair.

At length, Asahi took hold of Nishinoya’s wrist to pull his hand away. He pushed back, and their eyes met; Asahi’s were dark, the pupils blown wide. “I won’t last like that,” he said in an uneven voice.

Nishinoya exhaled hard. He tightened his grip on Asahi’s hair and pulled him forward to kiss him.

Asahi’s hands slid down his back, pulling when they reached Nishinoya’s hips, so that Nishinoya fell back against the bed again as Asahi pressed in close over him. “Lift your legs,” Asahi murmured. He hooked his fingers underneath one of Nishinoya’s thighs and tugged upward. Nishinoya bent his knees obligingly and put his feet flat against the bed.

Asahi sat up once more between his legs, and this time his gaze was fixed downward at the apex of Nishinoya’s thighs. One hand curled around Nishinoya’s half-hard cock, prompting him to moan softly; the other slid down, fingers coasting over his balls and perineum until they met his asshole. Asahi pushed in easily, and Nishinoya squirmed at the sensation.

“Asahi.” Asahi said.

Nishinoya nodded. “I will.”

Asahi took a breath. He pulled his hand back — Nishinoya gasped as his fingers slid out — and then grasped his own cock. He shifted forward on the bed, close against the undersides of Nishinoya’s thighs. Nishinoya felt the firm heat of Asahi’s cock against him, the head of it slipping a little until it found Nishinoya’s asshole.

Asahi kept a grip on his cock as he leaned down over Nishinoya. He began to push in.

Nishinoya sucked in a sharp breath at the immediate and overwhelming feeling of his body stretching to accommodate the intrusion. He grabbed desperately at Asahi’s arm beside him, digging his fingers in.

“Alright?” Asahi whispered.

Nishinoya nodded, unable to speak.

“Relax,” Asahi said, and Nishinoya nodded again. He consciously let his muscles go lax, legs falling open. After that, it felt a little less as though he was being torn in half.

It was slow going, between Asahi’s insistence for caution and Nishinoya’s need for a few breaks. But eventually Asahi’s thighs drew flush with Nishinoya’s body, and they spent a long moment holding each other, Asahi’s head pillowed against Nishinoya’s chest and Nishinoya’s legs wrapped around his hips.
“You’re so tight,” Asahi breathed. “Are you okay?”

Nishinoya managed to laugh at the question. “What d’you mean, am I okay?” His hands slid over Asahi’s trembling shoulders. He shifted a little in Asahi’s lap, which made Asahi gasp against his skin. Nishinoya grinned and hugged him tightly. “I’m better than okay,” he said, “I’m amazing!”

Asahi let out a laugh then, breathless and strained. “You are,” he agreed, “you really are.”

Nishinoya shifted again, which drew a long groan out of Asahi. “If you don’t stop moving I’m gonna come,” he said shakily.

Nishinoya sighed aloud as the words sent a twinge of pleasure through him. He was starting to get uncomfortable and desperately wanted to move, but the feeling of Asahi over him and around him and inside him was more than perfect. He didn’t want it to end too quickly.

He curled a hand around Asahi’s jaw and turned his face up until their eyes met. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said softly.

Asahi gave him a wobbly smile. “Yuu,” he whispered. He closed his eyes, and Nishinoya saw that his eyelashes were damp. Nishinoya pulled him forward until their lips met; they kissed slowly and sweetly, soft lips parted around a velvety tongue, and only the barest hint of teeth. At length, Asahi slid one hand underneath Nishinoya, down his back and over his ass, until his fingers met the place where their bodies linked together. He held Nishinoya in place as he shifted his hips back, then pushed into him again.

“Oh,” Nishinoya moaned, breaking the contact between their lips. He tightened his arms around Asahi’s shoulders and pressed his nose and open mouth into Asahi’s cheek as Asahi moved again, drawing out of him and thrusting in once more. “Oh, oh, Asahi, it’s—I’m—”

Asahi panted next to his ear. “God,” he murmured, “Yuu, you feel so good, it’s so good.”

The discomfort Nishinoya had felt was quickly replaced by pleasure, ramping up each time that Asahi pulled his hips back. He gasped against Asahi’s cheek when he thrust back into him and sent a white-hot jolt up his spine, all the way to his tingling fingers where they dug into the skin of Asahi’s back. The sensation was overwhelming, and Nishinoya couldn’t do anything besides cling to Asahi and try not to fall to pieces. Tears stung at his eyes. “Please,” he said, “Asahi, please—”

“I’ve got you,” Asahi said, “I’ve got you.” His hand cradled the back of Nishinoya’s neck, holding him close as he sobbed for breath.

Asahi fucked him tortuously slow. Nishinoya got used to the feeling enough to push against Asahi’s shoulders until he could look at his face, wrecked as it was with his hair sticking to his sweaty skin. Nishinoya put one hand on the back of his head and pulled until their foreheads touched. “Keep going,” he said, barely more than a whisper. “Asahi, fuck me, come on, please.”

Asahi groaned and shuddered, then he shifted forward until Nishinoya’s back was flat against the bed. He pulled back until their chests came apart — Nishinoya almost complained at the loss of contact and heat, but then Asahi put one hand on the underside of his thigh and pushed his knee up toward his chest. He braced his other hand against the bed beside Nishinoya’s head and rocked his hips forward so hard that the bed creaked beneath them.

Nishinoya threw his head back with a strangled cry as Asahi continued to pound into him; Asahi’s mouth found the side of his neck, and there was a pinch of teeth against his skin. Nishinoya’s hands scrabbled against Asahi’s chest between them, searching for purchase, for anything to hold
It was only a handful of minutes before Asahi pulled back. “Yuu,” he moaned, “can I come inside you?”

Nishinoya couldn’t speak, so he only nodded wordlessly. He put his hands on Asahi’s cheeks and brought their foreheads together again. He held him there as Asahi came apart completely, choking out a sobbing moan as his hips staccatoed to an uneven finish.

There was a pause, a breath of quiet, as Asahi trembled with aftershocks and Nishinoya held him. But eventually the stillness grew unbearable to Nishinoya, wound tightly as he was, almost ready to snap in two.

“Asahi,” he begged.

Asahi pulled back again; his hand found Nishinoya’s cock. Their bodies were still joined together when Nishinoya finally shook with a loud gasp, and come shot up past his stomach toward the center of his chest. He grabbed at Asahi’s face and crushed their mouths together, tasting salt, not knowing if it was sweat or tears, and not caring either way.

Nishinoya’s entire body shuddered as Asahi pulled out of him; he whined when Asahi moved away and got out of bed to throw the condom away. But he came back a moment later with a small towel; this he used to clean between Nishinoya’s legs as Nishinoya lay limply beneath him, sprawled out on the bedclothes like a dead starfish.

“We should wash again,” Asahi said quietly.

Nishinoya groaned in displeasure. He reached up and pulled Asahi down on top of him. “Later,” he mumbled.

He felt the tug of Asahi’s smile against his cheek. “Okay,” Asahi agreed. His hands slid underneath Nishinoya’s back, and he rolled them onto their sides. “In a little while, then.”

Nishinoya sighed happily and burrowed his face into Asahi’s chest. He was exhausted, entirely spent, and perfectly content to never leave Asahi’s bed again.

After Asahi finally dragged him to his feet, after they cleaned up and put on pajamas, after they returned to the cocoon of Asahi’s blankets and curled up together against his pillows, Nishinoya fought hard to keep his heavy eyelids open. Their last evening, he thought vaguely -- but the memory of his panic from a few days previous was like a distant ghost, something someone else had felt, something he’d read in a book. Asahi’s arms were tight around him, his body solid and warm. Nishinoya felt safe and contained. He wasn’t afraid.

~

On his last morning in the apartment, Nishinoya woke up before his alarm went off. As he came fuzzily into awareness, he reached out toward the center of the bed, expecting to encounter the solid lump of Asahi beside him.

But Asahi wasn’t there. Nishinoya’s eyes popped open, and he pushed himself up into a sitting position as he came fully awake.

Asahi’s pillow was rumpled, the covers shoved over to Nishinoya’s side, but there was no other sign of him in the room. His phone wasn’t on the nightstand.
Nishinoya had the sudden, absurd thought that Asahi had gone off to work without waking him, without saying goodbye. He panicked for all of a minute, wondering if he was expected to go to the station by himself, wondering if he had misstepped somehow, if he had done something wrong.

Then he heard a loud thump in the hallway, followed by a muffled curse.

Nishinoya let out a relieved sigh. He slid off the bed and went to see the damage.

When he opened the door, Asahi was standing in the hallway holding a tray of food and an empty mug. Nishinoya knew it was empty, because Asahi was wearing what must’ve been the entire cup’s worth of coffee all down his front. Asahi looked up at the movement, blinking wide-eyed in surprise.

Nishinoya covered his mouth to keep from laughing outright. “Problems?” he asked, muffled into his hand.

“I guess you could say that,” Asahi returned.

The tray wobbled in Asahi’s hand, and Nishinoya moved forward to grab it. “What were you trying to do?”

“Bring you breakfast…?”

Nishinoya looked at the tray; on it lay eggs and rice, pickles from Asahi’s ridiculous jar, a steaming bowl of soup. He blinked at the spread and then glanced back up at Asahi. “This is all for me?”

Asahi gave him a tentative smile. “I woke up early and...I thought I’d try to surprise you.” The smile dropped, and he plucked at his wet shirt with a groan. “I guess I succeeded at that part.”

A sharp emotion rolled up from inside Nishinoya, filling him like a wave. He shoved the tray forward into Asahi’s hands. “Hold this,” he said. Asahi caught the tray awkwardly as Nishinoya released it; the dishes rattled ominously, but nothing spilled over.

“Wh—” Asahi started, but the word cut off when Nishinoya’s hands closed over his cheeks. Nishinoya pulled him down and kissed him soundly. He smelled like coffee; he tasted like sugar.

At Nishinoya’s insistence, they ate together in bed after Asahi had changed his shirt. Asahi had to be at work at noon again; Nishinoya planned to take the 10 o’clock shinkansen out of Furukawa. He could feel that time limit looming over them as a heavy shadow, but Asahi was solid where Nishinoya leaned against him, and he did his best to stay in the present moment where he was safe and warm in Asahi’s bed.

They talked about nothing in particular, laughing together as the slats of light from the window shifted and across the bedcovers. Asahi picked a grain of rice off Nishinoya’s cheek; Nishinoya flicked him in the chin in response.

When breakfast was finished and the tray of empty dishes was set aside, they lay next to each other on top of the covers. Nishinoya raised his hand to Asahi’s face and touched his lower lip with his thumb. Asahi smiled at him, a white gleam of teeth peeking between his lips.

“You’ll be okay?” Nishinoya asked.

Asahi’s eyebrows turned down on the ends, but he nodded. “I’m more worried about you,” he admitted.
Nishinoya scoffed and pinched his chin. “I can take care of myself, Asahi-san,” he said.

“Of course you can,” Asahi returned. “But that doesn’t mean that I won’t still worry.” He lifted a hand and took hold of Nishinoya’s, lacing their fingers together. “You’ll forgive me if I call a lot?”

“I guess it can’t be helped,” Nishinoya said. He tried to keep his tone casual, but his relief was probably obvious.

Asahi’s face was open, his mouth close. Nishinoya wasn’t sure who moved first, only that the kiss was tender, their lips soft against each other. Nishinoya’s breath hitched; his chin wobbled. He pulled back slowly.

“Can we—” His voice was thick, and he had to clear his throat to try again. “Can we just lay here for a little while?”

Asahi’s lip trembled. “Of course.” He took ahold of Nishinoya’s shoulders and pulled him close to his chest. “Of course,” he repeated, voice waveriing. “As long as you need to.”

Nishinoya nodded against him and tucked his arms in between their bodies. He breathed deeply of the air around them, Asahi beside him and the bed beneath, surrounded by the ambience of home.

~

The station was surreal, bright and busy and full of people going on about their lives, entirely unaware that Nishinoya was fighting a battle inside himself, trying to force his hands to let go of Asahi’s before he missed his train.

“I’ll call you,” he said. “I’ll call you when I get there. I’ll call you tonight.”

Asahi gave him a small smile and squeezed his hands. “Please,” he said. “Whenever you want. If you don’t call I will.”

Nishinoya laughed despite his burning eyes. He remembered his birthday, when they’d stood outside, and he held Asahi’s phone hostage before giving into the desperate impulse of begging to stay.

“I’ll be back next Friday,” Nishinoya said. “I’ll come home again then.”

“I’ll be here,” Asahi said.

“Just nine days,” Nishinoya said.

“You’ll be fine.”

Nishinoya nodded. “Yeah,” he said.

How things had changed since that afternoon. Nishinoya still had the wreckage inside him, but the panic had lessened; now, he felt like he might actually manage to find a way out.

“Don’t forget to eat a proper breakfast,” he ordered, which made Asahi laugh.

“I’ll do my best.”

“I mean it!” Nishinoya insisted. “You’ll feel so much better!”

“Yes, sir, of course,” Asahi said in a placating tone.
“If I learn you aren’t taking care of yourself when I’m not here—”

“Yuu!” Asahi laughed. He squeezed Nishinoya’s hands again. “I’ll be good, I promise.”

“You better,” Nishinoya said.

The watch on his wrist clicked toward the train’s arrival. They had a few minutes left.

“Asahi-san,” Nishinoya said, “I’m sorry for everything that happened this week.”

Asahi shook his head. “Don’t be,” he returned.

“No, really,” Nishinoya insisted. “It could’ve been different, if I had been able to meet you again some other way and ask you out properly, then—”

“Yuu,” Asahi cut in. He let go of one of his hands so he could slide his palm up Nishinoya’s arm toward his shoulder. “Believe me. Proper is overrated.” His hand continued over Nishinoya’s shoulder until his thumb and forefinger brushed against the base of Nishinoya’s neck. “Something brought us together last week. Things after that happened the way they did, and no, they weren’t all good.”

“Some of them sucked,” Nishinoya clarified.

Asahi gave him a wincing smile. “Yeah, some of them did. But still…” The pad of his thumb touched against Nishinoya’s skin. “It doesn’t really matter how we got together,” he said. “I’m excited to see where things go from here.”

Nishinoya felt a twinge up his spine. For the first time in a long time, he looked to the future with something that wasn’t dread.

“Asahi,” he said, “I’m excited too.”

Asahi’s expression smoothed and his smile became more genuine. “Good,” he said.

The minutes still ticked away. Nishinoya checked his watch again. His throat grew tight. “I better go,” he mumbled.

Asahi nodded, still smiling, but then all at once his face crumpled. He closed his eyes and tears escaped to slide down his cheeks. “I don’t want you to go,” he whispered.

Nishinoya didn’t care that they were in public, that the train station was full of people. He surged up on his toes and threw his arms around Asahi’s neck, hugging him tightly. “I’ll call you,” he said again. “I’ll text every day.”

Asahi was nodding against him. His breath hitched against Nishinoya’s ear.

“I love you, Asahi,” Nishinoya said fiercely. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Asahi returned. “Yuu, you’re everything to me.”

Nishinoya nodded. “I gotta go,” he said brokenly.

“I know,” Asahi whispered.

Nishinoya tightened his arms instead of letting go. “Nine days,” he said. “I’ll be back in nine days.”
“Nine days,” Asahi echoed. “I’ll count them down.”

Nishinoya sniffed hard against Asahi’s shoulder and finally pushed away from him. “I gotta go,” he repeated.

“Don’t look back,” Asahi said, “I couldn’t bear it.” His face was like a broken window, and everything was pouring out.

“Okay,” Nishinoya said. He took a step back, his hands falling from Asahi’s shoulders. Asahi’s hands came to rest at his sides. Nishinoya sniffed again and rubbed his face on the sleeve of his shirt. “I’m going now,” he said.

Asahi nodded. “Be safe,” he said softly. “I’ll be waiting for you to come home again.”

Nishinoya clutched at the front of his shirt. He gave Asahi one last look and saw his own desperate longing reflected back at him. He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. “I love you,” he said.

Asahi nodded again. “I love you,” he returned.

Nishinoya took in a sharp breath. He made himself turn, made himself walk away from Asahi as quickly as possible, before he could change his mind. A good distance away he was overwhelmed by the urge to glance back over his shoulder — one more look, just one more — but he remembered Asahi’s request, and kept his gaze turned forward.

The train came just as scheduled at ten a.m. sharp. Nishinoya went through the doors the moment they opened and found his seat before they closed. He shoved earphones into his ears and put on the loudest music he could stand — anything to drown out the agony inside him.

The train had just lurched back into motion when his phone buzzed in his hand.

I miss you already.
You can handle anything. You’re going to be amazing.

Nishinoya’s fingers shook as he responded.

you too, he typed. you’re already amazing i can’t wait to see you again soon

He lifted the phone and pressed it against his chest, slightly to the left of center, where the ache was the strongest. He could imagine what Asahi looked like when he sent the text — his eyes red and damp, his beautiful face curled into an anxious little smile. Nishinoya turned to rest his forehead against the window. Through stinging eyes he watched as the town gave way to sparse, open fields and distant green trees beyond.

~

He slept most of the trip, which seemed a small mercy. The route involved changing trains three times, but all the stops were familiar to him after four years of bouncing back and forth between the university and home. He grabbed lunch from a cart and sent messages to the groupchat with his friends, where Toshio was going on and on about the girl in his sociology class — she’s my soulmate you guys i know she is — toshi you only say that bc she gave you that candy that one time — IT WAS A GESTURE OF LOVE. THAT WAS HEART CANDY. FROM THE HEART. — that sounds disgusting man what the hell

Nishinoya resisted texting Asahi for as long as he possibly could, until his fingers itched toward the
name in the contact list and he sent a quick *i miss you i love you i wish you were here with me.*
Asahi didn’t reply immediately, but that was alright. He was at work. He’d get the message on his
break.

He made it to the university in the late afternoon. The weather was warmer than it had been that
morning in Miyagi; as Nishinoya hiked his way across campus toward his dormitory, he found
himself sweating under his shirt, and he had to strip off his flannel.

He already had plans to meet with his tutor the next day, and his coach on Friday. Then he’d meet
up with the guys Friday night. His first appointment with the counselor was the following Monday.
After that, it would only be a few more days until he could go home again, until he’d get to see his
family, until he’d get to fall asleep in Asahi’s arms. He could do that. Only a few more days.

The door to his room was unlocked when he made it up to his floor. Nishinoya turned the knob and
went inside. His roommate Hiyashi was laying in bed on top of the covers, reading — or
pretending to read, at least — a novel for his literature class.

“Nishinoya!” Hiyashi said. He sat up abruptly, and his book (and his phone, which had been in
between the book and his face) fell into his lap.

“Hey, man,” Nishinoya said. He tossed his bag and flannel onto his own bed.

“You — you’ve been gone awhile.”

“Yeah,” Nishinoya agreed. He moved to his desk and opened the bottom drawer, pulled out the
chemistry book. The corner of the resignation letter stuck out haphazardly between the pages.

“Everything okay?”

Nishinoya pulled the paper out and crumpled it into a tight ball without even glancing at the words
on it. He threw it overhand into the bin — two points. “Yeah,” he said again. “Just needed to go
home for a little while.”

His phone buzzed in his pocket. *miss you too so much already*

Nishinoya allowed himself a little smile despite the twinge in his chest. He messaged back. *Made it
to campus gonna grab dinner call tonight?*

The response came almost immediately. *I’ll be home after nine. I’ll call then.*

Nishinoya nodded. *Sounds great*

*love you*

*u too my asahi*

*Stop you’ll kill me*

*No thats not allowed*

*okay*

The smile turned into a full-fledged grin. Nishinoya set his phone down on the desk and went back
to his bag. He dug around for a moment, until he found the items he was looking for.

Nishinoya returned to his desk. He set the broken mug down first, then grabbed his haphazard spill
of pens and pencils and shoved them into it.

The photo frame he handled more carefully, taking the time to look at the picture first, to wipe the lingering dust off the outer frame before he set it down with a soft clack. Asahi, stiff and uncomfortable, glowering in that black uniform. Nishinoya himself, grinning broadly, looking at the camera as though he feared nothing and no one. Who was that person, the one he’d used to be? A week previous, Nishinoya hadn’t been able to remember at all.

He put his hand against his chest and gripped at the ring on its chain under his shirt. “Upstream,” he murmured to himself.

“What’s that?”

Nishinoya shook his head. “Nothing,” he said. “Just some things I’m trying to figure out.”

He had time. He had help. And he had people to go home to when things got too hard. Maybe one day he’d find that person again, maybe not. Either way, Nishinoya was finally ready to look forward once more, to look at who he’d been before and from there find out who he could become.

He had time. There was no need to rush. All he needed to do was keep swimming upstream.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Here we are, finally, at the end of this story. Thank you to everyone who came along with me on this journey.

When Nishinoya stepped off the bus, a blast of cold air hit him with such force that it took the wind out of him. The sun was setting, and the temperature had dropped drastically since he’d left home earlier that day. He stood for a minute on the sidewalk with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, stomping his feet to keep feeling in his toes.

The time stretched long, and he pulled his sleeve back to check the time on his watch. He wasn't early, was he?

"Yuu!"

The familiar voice washed over him, warm and wonderful like the first dip in a hot bath, the first touch of a springtime sun. Nishinoya looked up, his mouth already splitting into a grin, and saw Asahi running toward him. His legs tensed beneath him like coiled springs, and then he was launching himself forward.

They met in the middle. Nishinoya's feet left the ground as he jumped; Asahi made a shocked sound, just barely catching him as Nishinoya crashed into him and nearly took them both to the ground.

"Yuu!" Asahi laughed as Nishinoya peppered his face with kisses, "Yuu, please!" He tightened one arm around Nishinoya's waist and used his other hand to push his shoulders back. "Come on, there's people around!"

"Don't care," Nishinoya whined. "I missed your dumb face too much." To emphasize his point, he planted his lips against Asahi's cheek, just under his eye.

Asahi grabbed his waist in both hands and lifted him bodily up and away, setting him on his feet at arm's length. "You saw me three days ago," he said.

"Feels like three years," Nishinoya whined. He leaned closer to bury his face into Asahi's jacket, wrapping his arms tightly around his ribs. "Why'd you have to go so far away, anyway?"

“I always spend New Year's with my family.”

Nishinoya frowned. “Why couldn’t they come to Karasuno, then?”

Asahi laughed again. “Yuu, be reasonable.”

“I’m perfectly reasonable!”

“It's easier for everyone to meet at my brother’s house,” Asahi said. “And they have the twins anyway, it’s better to come to them.” He reached out and pinched Nishinoya’s lower lip. “Don’t pout,” he said.
Nishinoya knocked his hand away. “I’m not!”

Asahi still wore the grin. His eyes crinkled in that familiar way, the one that always made Nishinoya fall in love all over again. After a brief internal battle, Nishinoya scoffed and wrapped an arm around Asahi’s, sliding his hand down and twining their fingers together.

“Well, go on then,” he said. “Lead the way to this reasonable arrangement.”

“You sound like Takeshi,” Asahi said. “If it were up to him we’d all meet at the mountain, he never wants to leave it.”

“It’s winter? Is the mountain even open?”

“You know, I don’t even know,” Asahi said. “I’m pretty sure it isn’t.”

Asahi’s brother’s house was larger than Nishinoya expected, larger than his own family’s house back in Karasuno. Once they passed through the gate, Nishinoya had a flash of uncertainty.

“I’m not intruding, right?” he asked as they walked toward the front door. “They’re okay with me being here?”

Asahi gave him a curious look. “Of course,” he said. “Everyone said it was fine. They want to meet you.” He winced. “Mom keeps telling everyone how great you are.”

“What!” Nishinoya blurted. “That’s not fair!” His face grew hot. “She can’t build me up like that—what if I don’t match up to it?”

Asahi smiled. “Don’t worry,” he said, reaching for the doorknob, “you will.”

The house was warm and bright, counterpoint to the frigid December air. Nishinoya could hear voices emanating from somewhere inside, though it wasn’t until Asahi called “We’re back!” that the sounds grew in volume and pitch, coalescing into a discordant pair of squeals before two small girls came bounding clumsily around the corner into the front hallway.

Asahi laughed and crouched down, holding his arms wide as the girls half-stumbled into him. Behind them came Asahi’s mother and another tall woman that Nishinoya recognized from photos as Asahi’s sister-in-law.

“Ayame! Emiko!” Mrs. Azumane put her hands on her hips and planted her feet apart. “Give them a moment to breathe!”

“It’s fine, Mom,” Asahi said. He looped an arm around each giggling toddler and hoisted them up as he stood.

His sister-in-law stepped forward and held out her arms. “I’ll take one of them,” she said. “Who wants to come with Mama?”

One of the girls turned her face into Asahi’s neck, and the other dug her fingers into his shirt with a scowl. The look of fierce determination on her face made Nishinoya laugh out loud, which drew the girls’ attention.

The girl who had scowled looked at Nishinoya carefully, appraising him like a jeweler might a diamond. She had straight black hair cut into a bob that matched her mother’s.

“Who’s that?” she asked.
Asahi turned around to face Nishinoya. “Ayame,” he said gently, “this is my friend Yuu.”

The other girl turned her head slightly to peek from Asahi’s neck. Her hair was soft and brown like Asahi’s, held back from her face with a sparkly pink clip. “Yuu,” she echoed.

Nishinoya grinned and stepped forward. He held out his hands to the girls, crossing his forearms as he held his right hand to the left and his left hand to the right. “My name is Nishinoya Yuu! It’s very nice to meet you!”

Ayame considered him shrewdly for a moment, but then she laughed and reached forward to smack his hand. Emiko was more cautious; at length, she stretched out her little arm and curled her fingers around his. It made Nishinoya think of his younger siblings, and something inside him grew painfully wonderful and sweet.

“Lemme down, Uncle,” Ayame said, and Asahi obeyed. As he moved, Emiko let go of Nishinoya’s hand and wrapped her arms back around Asahi’s neck.

Ayame stepped over to Nishinoya and grabbed his hand. “C’mon,” she said. “Let’s go play.”

“No!” Ayame stomped her foot. “I wanna now!”

“It’s okay,” Nishinoya said. “I don’t mind.”

"Nishinoya-san hasn't even met everyone yet, Ayame," Asahi's sister-in-law said. "You must be patient."

Ayame's face turned almost purple. She looked ready to explode.

Nishinoya knelt beside her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Aya-chan," he said. "We can play in just a little bit, okay?"

Fat tears rolled down her round cheeks, but the anger left her eyes. "B-but," she blubbered.

"I promise," Nishinoya insisted. "We'll play very soon."

Nishinoya sensed movement beside him as Asahi knelt down as well. He still held Emiko in his arms; she had begun to suck her thumb. "We'll all play with you," Asahi said. "Yuu and I, and Emi-chan too." He looked at Emiko. "Right?"

Emiko nodded without taking her thumb out of her mouth. She reached out her free hand to Ayame.

Ayame stared at the extended hand, her mouth twisted in a furious pout, tears still slipping from her eyes. After a long moment, she sniffed dramatically. "We'll play," she said, "soon."

"That's right," Nishinoya said.

"Three games," Ayame insisted.

"Okay."

She reached up to touch Emiko’s hand. "And Emi-chan is the princess."

Asahi laughed. "Yeah, of course," he said.
Ayame took a shuddering breath and rubbed her cheeks with the backs of her hands. Mrs. Azumane appeared beside them. "Come here, Aya-chan," she said as she bent over. "Let Granny get you cleaned up. We'll have a snack as well, okay?"

"Cookies," Ayame said in a wavering tone.

"We'll see what we can do," Mrs. Azumane said. She took Ayame's hand and stood up again, then led her, still sniffling, deeper into the house.

Asahi's sister-in-law stepped forward toward them. "Do you want to come too, Emi-chan?"

Emiko nodded again. She reached out with both arms toward her mother.

As she took Emiko out of Asahi's arms, Asahi's sister-in-law addressed Nishinoya. "I'm Shio, by the way."

Nishinoya blinked at her. "Nice to meet you!" he said quickly, and she gave a small smile in return.

"Please forgive Ayame," Shio said. "They're both tired and hungry. Their father indulges them in everything."

Nishinoya shook his head with a grin. "No, it's really nice," he said, "They remind me of my little brother and sister."

Shio's smile persisted. "Watch out," she said. "Ayame won't let you off the hook once you've promised her something."

"It's really true," Asahi added.

"That's fine!" Nishinoya insisted. "I look forward to it!"

"Mama," Emiko said, her voice quiet.

"Of course, baby," Shio said as she patted Emiko's back. "We'll catch up with Granny and Sissy. Can you say hello to Nishinoya-san first?"

Emiko glanced quickly at Nishinoya and then away again, burying her face into Shio's shoulder. "H'lo," she said.

Nishinoya leaned forward. "Hello, Emi-chan," he said. "I really like your hair-clip."

She looked up shyly at that and reached one tiny hand to the clip in her hair.

"What color is that?" Nishinoya asked her. "Is it your favorite?"

Emiko nodded.

"Can you tell him the color, Emi-chan?" Asahi prompted.

"P..." Emiko's cheeks turned the color of the clip. "Pink," she whispered.

Nishinoya laughed and clapped his hands. "That's very good!" he said. "Pink is my sister's favorite too!"

She smiled at that.
"Tell Nishinoya-san thank you," Shio said.

Emiko balled up her fists against her chest. "Thank you," she said. "N-nish'ya-san,"

"Yuu," Nishinoya said. He reached out his hand toward her. "Call me Yuu, okay?"

Emiko curled her fingers around his again. "Yuu," she said, her voice tremulous and sweet. Her cheeks were still lightly flushed.

Nishinoya bit his tongue to keep from exploding in delight.

"Jun's in the living room," Shio said. Belatedly, Nishinoya realized this statement was directed toward Asahi.

"Okay, thanks for the warning," Asahi said.

Shio gave him a commiserating look before turning away and heading the direction that Mrs. Azumane had gone.

When she had gone, Nishinoya glanced at Asahi. "Warning?" he echoed.

"Do you remember what I told you about my brother?"

"He has a tattoo of a mountain?"

Asahi shook his head. "That's Takeshi. Do you remember what I told you about the older one? Jun?"

Nishinoya furrowed his brow. At length, he said, "You called him a shithead."

Asahi winced, then chuckled. "Yeah," he said. "Please don't judge him too harshly, though. He's not all bad." He paused, then clarified, "Most of the time, at least."

He turned and started down the hallway. Nishinoya could only follow him as curiosity sparked inside him.

In the living room, Asahi's brother sat on the couch. He stood up as they approached. Nishinoya could tell how tall and slim he was, and how much he resembled Asahi’s father from photographs. He gave them a calculating look.

"Asahi," he said coldly, "you're too predictable."

Asahi seemed to ignore the comment. "Yuu," he said, "this is my brother Jun."

Nishinoya could feel himself already frowning at Jun. He’d been prepared for something unusual, but not the outright animosity in Jun’s expression. He took a step forward to place himself between Asahi and his brother. "I'm Nishinoya Yuu," he said. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm sure," Jun returned.

He was even taller than Asahi, and Nishinoya had to crane his neck to look at him. All the same, he faced Jun directly, meeting his glare head-on.

"Ah," Asahi said, "u-um—"

Jun cut him off. "So," he said, without breaking eye-contact, "what are your intentions with my
"Excuse me?" Nishinoya said.

"Hey, Brother, don't—"

"He's a total pushover, you see," Jun continued. "I'm certain that he would let a demon into his house if it was raining." He smirked. "Yes, I'm afraid Asahi is quite helpless when it comes to judging people's intentions and character."

His tone rankled Nishinoya. "That's funny," he said tightly, "because he happens to be the best person I know."

A long beat of silence followed his words, but Nishinoya didn't back down. He kept glaring at Asahi's brother, daring him to look away first.

"You're such an ass," another voice called.

Nishinoya whipped around to see who had spoken—it was Asahi's other brother, the park ranger. He looked stern where he stood in the doorway with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Brother!" Asahi said.

Jun made a noise like he'd been stepped on, then burst into laughter. Nishinoya's attention shot back to him, just in time for him to see Jun double over and brace a hand against his knee.

"What—" Nishinoya started.

"Your face!" Jun said. "You should have seen it!"

"Why're you such a jerk?" Asahi's other brother said as he came into the room. He wasn't as tall as Jun, but his frame was more broad than Asahi's.

"That was priceless!" Jun continued.

Nishinoya looked back and forth between the brothers in mounting confusion. "Wait," he said, "what's happening?"

Jun managed to hold back his laughter long enough to straighten up. He pulled a stern-looking face and said in a gruff voice, "He's the best person I know." Then he doubled over again, which put him off balance when Asahi's other brother reached him and knocked him over with a hard shove.

"Please ignore our dickhead brother," he said in an apologetic tone. "Just because he was born first doesn't mean he ever matured." He turned back toward Nishinoya. "I'm Takeshi," he said. "I'm the nice one."

"Are you kidding?" Jun said, muffled from the couch. "No one in this house is nice except for baby Asahi."

"Not even your wife?" came a voice from the hallway. It was Shio, standing in the doorway with Emiko still in her arms.

"Especially not my wife," Jun returned.

Nishinoya craned his head around to look at Asahi, who seemed unmoved by the inexplicable scene unfurling around them. Asahi shrugged in return. "I've been dealing with them since I was a
"You're still our baby, Asahi-chan," Jun said, and Takeshi sat on his face.

Takeshi turned back toward Nishinoya again. He acted as though he didn't notice the scrambling limbs and muffled shouting happening underneath him. "So, you're Yuu," he said.

"Yeah," Nishinoya returned.

"Asahi has told us a lot about you."

"Brother, please..." Asahi mumbled.

"Oh, calm down," Takeshi said. "I'm not saying anything he doesn't know, I'm sure. Mom talks about him more than you do anyway."

“What’s he said?” Nishinoya asked as he turned a thousand-watt grin onto Asahi.

"If you're planning to suffocate your brother I wish you'd do it somewhere else," Shio said. "Dinner will be ready soon, and I don't want to have to call the police beforehand."

"Who says the police need to be involved?" Takeshi asked. "We can just bury him in the backyard." But he stood up all the same, and Jun gasped dramatically beneath him.

"I am going to kill you in your sleep!" he hissed.

As the bickering continued, Nishinoya stepped closer to Asahi and slipped a hand into his, lacing their fingers together.

Asahi looked at him with a curious smile. "What is it?" he asked.

"I'm just thinking," Nishinoya returned, "that everything about you makes so much sense now."

Asahi laughed at that, a warm sound that Nishinoya felt all the way to his fingertips. "God, I hope that's not true," he said.

Nishinoya grinned and squeezed his hand.

Asahi glanced over at Shio. "Where's Dad?" he asked.

Takeshi answered from where he had Jun in a headlock. "In his office," he said. "I think he wanted some quiet time before dinner."

"I can't imagine why," Shio said.

Asahi turned toward Nishinoya. "Want to go meet him?"

Nervousness fluttered in Nishinoya's stomach for reasons he couldn't quite identify, but before he had the chance to reply a sharp squeal came from the doorway. Ayame bolted into the living room, beelining for Takeshi and Jun. When she reached them, she started knocking her little fists into Takeshi’s thigh.

“Let him go!” she demanded. “Let Papa go!”

“Save me, Aya-chan!” Jun wailed. “Your evil uncle is torturing me!”
“Stop it, stop it!”

“Oh!” Takeshi released his brother and clutched at the leg Ayame attacked. “Oh, you got me!” He crumpled in place on the floor. “Aya...too strong...” Takeshi lifted a hand weakly toward her. “How...could you betray me...?”

“Go on!” Jun said, “finish him!”

Ayame crouched beside Takeshi on the floor and slapped his shoulder.


Ayame leaned down over him.

“Tell...tell your father...” Takeshi milked the moment for all it was worth, his chest rattling with wheezing coughs. “Tell him...” He clutched at Ayame’s hand.

“Tell Papa what?”

“Tell him...he’s...a poophead.”

Ayame shrieked with laughter as Takeshi’s head lolled to the side and he stuck his tongue out in a comically grotesque imitation of death.

“Oh, very good,” Shio said. “Only high class drama here.”

Jun knelt at Takeshi’s side and grasped his hand. “My brother!” he cried. “I shall avenge you!” He rounded quickly on Ayame, who shrieked again as her father grabbed her and blew a loud raspberry against her neck.

“Two out of five stars,” Shio continued. “Absolutely no consistency in characterization or story. What do you think, Asahi?”

Asahi laughed. “I’ll still probably see the sequel,” he said. He turned to Nishinoya. “What do you think, Yuu?”

Nishinoya shook his head. “You know what this story needs?” he asked.

“What’s that?” Asahi returned.

A devilish grin grew on Nishinoya’s face. “It needs,” he said, “A TRUE VILLAIN!” He didn’t even wait for Asahi to react before he swooped toward the trio of performers and struck a dramatic pose.

“Ah,” Nishinoya said, in a voice as theatrical and booming as he could muster. “I see you have taken out my henchman, Brave Ayame. You will find I do not bend so easily.”

Ayame’s mouth dropped open in shock. She turned to her father.

Jun gave her a fiendish look. “Get him,” he ordered.

Ayame bubbled over in delight, then jumped toward Nishinoya without another hint of hesitation.

“Come on, Asahi-san!” Nishinoya shouted.
“How did I get dragged into this?” Asahi said, but he did as ordered all the same.

~

It was a long time before Nishinoya managed to disengage himself from Ayame’s clutches, and even then it was only because Shio ordered them to stop so that she could get the twins ready for dinner. Ayame had protested, but Nishinoya promised her they’d play more later, and that made her more amenable.

“Where’s the toilet?” Nishinoya asked Asahi, after Shio had carted off the girls and Asahi’s older brothers dispersed.

“Down the hall and to the left,” Asahi said. “I’m gonna go see if Mom needs help finishing dinner up.”

Nishinoya nodded and went to relieve himself. After he finished, he stayed for a moment in the restroom, looking at himself in the mirror while his hands hung limply in the sink.

His face was fuller than it had been in October, his eyes less hollow. He’d let his hair get unruly again, but he’d be home in a few days and his dad could fix it. Nishinoya tried smiling at himself, and found that his muscles moved easier, that his face seemed to remember how to do it properly.

“Okay then,” he said. “We can work with this.”

He finished washing his hands and exited the restroom, then stepped back toward the living room. Only one person was in the room when Nishinoya reached it. With a jolt of shock, he realized it was Asahi’s father. The man stood along the far side of the room, quietly holding a tumbler of dark amber liquid. He looked up as Nishinoya came in.

Asahi’s father was just as tall as his eldest son. And he was old, even older than Asahi’s mother. The face behind his glasses was not at all like Asahi’s, not playful and kind like Mrs. Azumane, not open and smiling like Takeshi, not even calculating and fiendish like Jun. It was closed and even, carefully measured, and almost severe.

Nishinoya swallowed back a flicker of apprehension. He reminded himself that, despite his stern appearance, Asahi’s father had been the one to give Asahi the pendant. He squared his shoulders and stepped toward Mr. Azumane. “Hello,” he said. “I’m Nishinoya Yuu.”

Mr. Azumane looked down at him. “Ah,” he said. “Of course. It’s nice to meet you, Nishinoya-kun.” His voice was low and soft; he sounded like Asahi.

Nishinoya’s confidence grew. “Very nice to meet you, sir,” he said.

“My son tells me you are almost finished with your degree,” Mr. Azumane said.

Nishinoya nodded. “Yes, I should have one more semester after this one.”

“I see.” Mr. Azumane looked away from Nishinoya to focus on a point at the opposite wall. “I understand that you are far from home in Chiba.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We are much closer here to you than Karasuno,” Mr. Azumane continued. “You should contact us if we can be of assistance to you as you finish your schooling.”
Nishinoya blinked at the statement. It took him a long moment to find a response. “Thank you,” he said, “I will.”

Mr. Azumane nodded. He continued to direct his attention at the far wall. “I believe my son is in the kitchen,” he said. “If you would like to join him there.”

“Oh,” Nishinoya said. “Sure, okay.”

Silence reigned between them. Nishinoya fidgeted underneath the weight of it. “Mr. Azumane,” he said.

Mr. Azumane’s gaze finally returned to him. His face remained impassive, but his eyes weren’t unkind.

Nishinoya swallowed hard. He thought again of the pendant that Asahi wore. “Mr. Azumane,” he repeated, “I want you to know that I care about Asahi a lot.”

For a brief instant a strange emotion twitched over Mr. Azumane’s face, but then it was gone. “I see,” he said quietly.

“I really, really do,” Nishinoya insisted. “And I’m gonna take care of him, so don’t worry.”

This statement seemed to take Mr. Azumane off-guard. At length, he turned his eyes downward to the glass in his hand. The corner of his mouth twitched into something that almost resembled a smile. “Well,” he said, “I’ll remember that, then.” He looked so much like Asahi in that moment that a wonderful tremor passed up Nishinoya’s spine.

A flash of movement caught the corner of Nishinoya’s eye, and he glanced over to see Asahi step into the doorway from the hall.

“Asahi-san!” Nishinoya called. Mr. Azumane looked up toward his son.

Asahi pulled up short as he came into the room. “Oh,” he said. “Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Mr. Azumane returned. “We were just becoming acquainted with one other. Right, Nishinoya-kun?”

Nishinoya nodded firmly. “Yeah,” he said.

Asahi gave him a cautious smile, which grew when Nishinoya grinned back at him in return. “Okay,” he said. “Mom says dinner will be ready soon.”

“I’ll start rounding up your brothers, then,” Mr. Azumane said. “I believe that the twins are in the bath.”

“Sounds good,” Asahi said. He looked at Nishinoya again. “Yuu, would you come with me for a second?”

Nishinoya stepped forward. Asahi held out his hand as he approached, and Nishinoya took it. Just before they went through the door, he turned back.

“Mr. Azumane,” Nishinoya said. Mr. Azumane glanced at him again, his gray eyebrows lifting above his sharp eyes.

“Thanks for talking to me,” Nishinoya said.
Mr. Azumane’s lips twitched again, the almost-smile. He nodded once, then turned and headed for the other door.

When he was gone, Asahi asked, “What was that about?”

“Nothing,” Nishinoya said. “I think we just understand each other is all.” He tightened his grip on Asahi’s hand. “Now! What did you wanna show me?”

“It’s outside on the balcony,” Asahi said. “Come on.”

He led Nishinoya through the house to a set of sliding glass doors. Asahi pulled a jacket from the coat rack on the wall and draped it over Nishinoya’s shoulders, then looped a scarf around his neck, even as Nishinoya laughed and squirmed away from his hands.

“Asahi-san!” he said. “Stop it!”

“It’s cold out there,” Asahi told him. “And I don’t trust you to respect that.”

In response, Nishinoya grabbed his arm and pinched him, hard.

Outside, night had come on fully; it was was even colder than it had been earlier in the day. It ate into Nishinoya’s legs inside his jeans, numbed the tip of his nose. He made an effort to react as little as possible to avoid giving Asahi the satisfaction of being right.

“What is it?” he asked. “What did you want to show me?”

Asahi pulled him toward the far edge of the balcony. “Here.”

When they reached the railing, Asahi put his hands on Nishinoya’s shoulders and turned him to face outward toward the city. He pressed in close behind him, his warm bulk pinning Nishinoya into the railing. Asahi put an arm down on either side of him and rested his chin on top of Nishinoya’s head.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“What do I think about what?” Nishinoya returned.


Nishinoya frowned and looked out again on the city more carefully. Asahi’s brother’s house was a split-level design built into the side of a ridge, and they were slightly above the suburban sprawl of houses packed together in the valley. Lights filled the space below all the way to the edge of the visible horizon, where patchwork smudges of luminescence suggested dense clusters of civilization beyond view. Nishinoya could see the suggestion of streets in condensed lines of brightness leading off in every direction, the line of a river cutting a dark, empty path through the scene. The sky above was clear, and a few stubborn stars fought through the urban night-glow, unwilling to concede defeat.

It was different from Karasuno, where the nights were darker and the stars brighter, where pockets of wilderness sprang up between houses on the outskirts of town and the mountains pulled the horizon in close enough to touch. But it wasn't bad, and Asahi was solid where he pressed in behind Nishinoya, grounding him to the scene.

"It's nice," he said. "Why'd you want me to look?"
Asahi's hands squeezed his shoulders. "I know you have that interview scheduled after finals. I wondered if you'd thought any more about what you wanted to do after graduation."

Nishinoya shoved his chilled hands into his pockets. "I've talked a lot with my coach and Mom and Dad," he said. "I do wanna keep playing as long as I'm able."

Asahi's chin rubbed into his head as he nodded. "You know, they have a spare room here," he said.

Nishinoya craned his neck around so that he could look up at Asahi's face. "What are you suggesting?" he asked.

Asahi smiled at him. He lifted a hand to rub over the shaggy crown of Nishinoya's head, where his mohawk was growing out. "You need a haircut," he said.

"Don't change the subject." Nishinoya knocked his hand away. "Are you saying I'd live here?"

"Well, not indefinitely," Asahi said. "It would be a bit of a commute. But it would be an option until you were more certain about things. Until you felt comfortable enough to get your own place."

Nishinoya lowered his eyes. "I couldn't impose like that..."

"It's okay," Asahi returned. "I already talked to my brother about it. He said it was fine."

Still uncertainty burned in Nishinoya's stomach. "I...I don't know."

"Yuu," Asahi said gently.

Nishinoya lifted his gaze again. Asahi's eyes glittered with reflected multipoints of light. His expression was soft. "It's okay to let others help you," he said.

The jacket around Nishinoya's shoulders smelled like him, like home. Nishinoya took a deep breath of cold air to help quell the nervous energy inside him. "I know," he returned.

"Just think about it, okay?"

Nishinoya nodded. "I will," he said. He reached up to grab Asahi's hands and laced their fingers together as he pulled Asahi's arms around him. "You'd be here with me?"

"Of course," Asahi said. "I wouldn't abandon you to my crazy family."

Laughter bubbled from Nishinoya's chest. He squeezed Asahi's hands. "Asahi-san, you met my family already. You think yours is anywhere near as weird as mine?"

"Just wait," Asahi returned. "You'll see." His voice was warm. Nishinoya couldn't help but lean back against him with a grin.

They were quiet together for a long moment before Nishinoya spoke again. "You know, I should be mad at you."

"What? Why?"

"I've been here for like two hours and you haven't kissed me yet."

Nishinoya felt the responding laughter catch in Asahi's chest. "Well!" Asahi said. "Who knew you were so demanding?"
"Don't act so surprised," Nishinoya told him. "You made me this way."

"That's the biggest lie I've ever heard," Asahi said. "You've been this demanding since the day I met you."

"I have not!"

"You absolutely have," Asahi insisted. He pulled his hands loose from Nishinoya's and turned him in place. "The first time you came in the gym at Karasuno you ordered me to spike the ball at you as hard as I could."

Nishinoya huffed. "I did not," he said. "And you didn't do it, anyway. I know you held back that day."

"Well, I thought I was gonna break your arm," Asahi said. "I didn't know how ridiculous you were just yet."

"Ridiculous!" Nishinoya echoed.


Nishinoya's face burned. He lifted both hands and covered Asahi's mouth. "Okay, okay!" he said. "You can stop now!"

Asahi grabbed his wrists and pulled his hands away. "Never," he said, then leaned down and kissed Nishinoya soundly.

The jacket fell from Nishinoya’s shoulders when he lifted his arms to wrap them around Asahi’s neck, but Asahi’s hands were warm where they slipped under his shirt against his back. Nishinoya shivered at the contrast of heat and chill, which Asahi must have taken as some sort of sign. He pushed Nishinoya back against the railing and parted his lips. It still amazed Nishinoya how quickly Asahi could turn his knees into jelly with only a kiss. He hoped it would never change.

The distinct sound of someone clearing their throat reached them; Asahi pulled back immediately. Takeshi stood in the doorway, looking equal parts exasperated and amused. "Dinner's ready, guys," he said.

"Brother!" Asahi sputtered. "I'm sorry—"

Takeshi held up a hand to silence him. "I don't think anyone here is under the impression that you don't kiss your boyfriend, Asahi. But maybe—" He shrugged. "Maybe subtlety is something you should aim for. For Mom and Dad’s sake at least."

"Oh god," Asahi moaned, even as Nishinoya burst out laughing.

"I'll tell everyone you’re on your way," Takeshi said, as he slipped back into the house and closed the door behind him.

Nishinoya put his hands on his hips. Lightness infused his chest. "Still think you wanna live here?"

"Only temporarily," he mumbled between his fingers. "Only for a little while."
Dinner was a chaotic affair, even by Nishinoya standards. Mrs. Azumane and Shio teamed up against the twins, attempting with questionable success to get more food in their mouths than on the floor. Jun and Takeshi got into an argument about baseball teams that escalated into outright shouting. In contrast, Asahi and his father sat quietly next to each other at the far end of the table; Asahi watched the rest of his family warily, but Mr. Azumane ate his food in placid silence, as though nothing of interest were happening around him. For his part, Nishinoya sat beside Asahi and nudged him with his elbow until Asahi cracked a smile.

Mrs. Azumane appeared across from them at the table. “Yuu, did Asahi tell you that he has been researching art schools?”

Nishinoya craned his head around so quickly his neck popped. “Really?!”

Asahi almost shrank away from his attention. “Mom, it’s not even anything,” he said, “I’ve just looked at a couple places.”

“That’s amazing!” Nishinoya insisted.

Asahi shook his head and poked at his food. “I don’t even know if any of them would take me since I’m so old,” he said.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Azumane insisted. “How can you know until you try?”

Nishinoya nodded emphatically. “I’m sure you’ll get in somewhere!”

Asahi looked back and forth between them. “You two won’t let up, will you?”

“Never!” Nishinoya declared, and Mrs. Azumane laughed and patted his hand.

“Think about it, dear,” she said.

“Upstream, Asahi,” Mr. Azumane said without looking up from his dinner plate.

Nishinoya caught Asahi’s eye with barely suppressed delight, and Asahi smiled back at him.

“This is disgusting,” Jun moaned aloud from behind them, which made Asahi nearly jump out of his seat in surprise.

“We can’t all be as heartless as you, Jun.”

Jun put his hand on his chest, looking injured. “I’m not heartless,” he insisted.

“Coal doesn’t count,” Takeshi cut in.

“My own family,” Jun said. “I don’t believe this.”

“Excuse me,” Shio called from the other end of the table, “if you are so keen to show how selfless you are, Ayame needs to use the potty.”

“Do not!” Ayame shouted.

“You heard her,” Jun returned.

Mrs. Azumane stepped toward them. “I’ll take her. Come here, my darling.” She scooped Ayame
into her arms and carried her out of the dining room.

“See?” Jun said. “I knew it would all work out.”

Takeshi smacked him in the shoulder.

“Boys,” Mr. Azumane said.

It was only a single word said in a mild tone of voice, but it was enough to send both Takeshi and Jun back to their seats.

“He started it,” Jun said.

Shio spoke before Takeshi could respond. “You hear that, Emi-chan? Your father is the least mature person at this table.”

“Don’t turn my daughter against me.”

“We have two, you can have the other one.” Shio handed Emiko a clump of rice. “Mama is your favorite, right Emi-chan?”

Emiko took the rice and carefully shoved it into her mouth. “Mm-hm,” she said.

“I don’t believe this!”

“Mama,” Emiko said, as grains of rice stuck to her chin. “Mama and—and—”

Jun leaned forward expectantly.

Emiko looked at him. “Mama and—”

“Yes, baby,” Jun said, “Mama and…?”

Mrs. Azumane came back into the dining room with Ayame in tow. Emiko’s attention turned immediately toward her, her face lighting up like the sun. “Mama and Granny!” she said.

Jun slumped down over the table in defeat.

“Are we done here?” Takeshi asked. “Is it time for dessert yet?”

“Dessert now!” Ayame shrieked, which earned Takeshi a scowl from his sister-in-law.

Nishinoya glanced at Asahi. “Is it always like this?” he asked.

Asahi opened his mouth to reply, but Mr. Azumane beat him to it. “Worse,” he said, in the same mild tone as before.

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After dinner, the twins were put to bed—a process, Nishinoya learned, that involved a few false starts and many turns among the adults who were present. At long last, when the girls were finally settled, the rest of the family sprawled around the living room in front of the television.

Takeshi fell asleep sitting up long before midnight, and Jun spent at least half an hour trying to toss corn puffs into his open mouth from increasing distances across the room. Mrs. Azumane spread an unfinished blanket over her legs and took up a pair of knitting needles. Mr. Azumane retired to
his study. After one last check on the twins, Shio sat in an oversized chair with her legs drawn up and scrolled through her phone.

Nishinoya observed it all from where he was tucked against Asahi’s side on the couch. “Very lively,” he said.

“Adulthood is tiring, Yuu-chan,” Mrs. Azumane told him.

“Speak for yourself,” Jun said. A corn puff bounced off Takeshi’s cheek and fell into his lap. “I feel like I could run a marathon right now.”

“Of course, dear,” Mrs. Azumane said mildly.

“Why don’t you go get started,” Shio suggested. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Jun crossed over to her and slumped on the floor at her feet, draping himself over her lap dramatically. “Why do I get the feeling you’d just strand me out in the cold?” he asked.

Shio gave him an innocent smile. “I’d never do that, darling,” she said, and she pinched his neck so hard that he yelped and clapped a hand over the skin.

Asahi turned toward Nishinoya. “Would you want to go down to the shrine? It’s a little bit of a walk, but not too far from here.”

Though Nishinoya was curious to see more of Asahi’s family, the idea of stretching his legs and burning off some energy sounded extremely appealing. He was staying for a couple days, anyway. “Yeah,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

It was almost eleven by the time they had bundled up sufficiently for Asahi’s mother to let them leave. They left the bright warmth of the house behind and stepped out into the cold evening. Streetlamps illuminated their path as Asahi led them down the sidewalk.

When they were some distance away from the house, Nishinoya asked the question that had been burning inside him since they’d been together on the balcony. “Did you mean what you said earlier?”

Asahi glanced aside at him without slowing his forward movement. “About what?”

Nishinoya looked away quickly, his ears burning. “About me,” he clarified. “About—me being strong?”

Asahi blinked at him, mouth pursed thoughtfully for a moment before he smiled. “Ah,” he said. “Of course I did.” He paused. “No way that’s a surprise to you, right?”

“I mean.” Nishinoya sighed. “I guess not?” he said.

“I’m certain I’ve told you before,” Asahi said.

“I know, I know,” Nishinoya returned. “It’s just…” He chewed on his lip before continuing. “I still don’t really feel all that strong,” he admitted as he shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. “And I don’t know if I’m still that person you met in the gym that day.”

“Yuu.”

Asahi had stopped walking. Nishinoya paused as well, and turned to face him.
“Yuu,” Asahi said again, “do you think I would lie to you?”

Nishinoya frowned and stared at a spot on Asahi’s chest. “No,” he said.

Asahi took a step forward and put his hands on Nishinoya’s shoulders. “You don’t have to be that person anymore, Yuu. But, even so, you definitely still are.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely,” Asahi repeated. “You are the old you and the new you, all together at once. It’s not one or the other. You can become a new version of yourself without losing who you were before.”

Nishinoya looked up at his face, cast as it was in pale thin light from the streetlamps, and saw that familiar blend of sympathy and sincerity. “You think so?” he asked.

Asahi nodded firmly. “I know so,” he said. He lifted one hand to curve around the side of Nishinoya’s head. “Listen, it’s only been a few months,” he said. “You need to be patient.”

Nishinoya huffed out loud in frustration. “I hate being patient,” he grumbled.

A smile quirked at Asahi’s mouth. “I know,” he said.

“Anyway,” Nishinoya said, “what about you, then?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. What about art school.”

“Ah...” Asahi looked aside. “I’m not sure how realistic a goal it is,” he said. “I was just looking to see what my options were.”

“Are you gonna apply somewhere?”

“Probably a little late for this year,” Asahi said. “But maybe next year.”

Nishinoya nodded. “I can help you study,” he said. “You’ll do great!”

Asahi laughed. “You offering to help me with school? You really must’ve changed after all.” He shrugged. “I really don’t know, though,” he said. “I’m not sure I want to make it into a career, honestly. What if the stress of that ruins what I like about it?”

Somehow, that thought hadn’t occurred to Nishinoya. He shifted his weight back on his heels. “Oh,” he said. “I—I know what you mean...”

Asahi continued. “It may be better to go to a trade school and see if I can get a decent job afterward.” He met Nishinoya’s eyes. “Then at least I would know I could support you while you go pro.”

Nishinoya took a step back. “N-no,” he said, “Asahi, come on...you can’t do that, you can’t put aside something you want for me like that.”

“I wouldn’t be,” Asahi assured him. “It’s just something I’m considering, that’s all.”

Nishinoya reached out and took a hold of his hands. “Will you promise me that you’ll make this decision for yourself, and not for me?”
“Yuu…”

“Promise me!” Nishinoya demanded.

“Alright, alright!” Asahi held up a hand in defeat. “I promise,” he said. “I’ll think about what I want to do.”

Nishinoya rocked back in relief. “Okay,” he said. “Good.”

“Just trust me, okay?” Asahi said.

“I do,” Nishinoya returned without a hint of hesitation, and Asahi smiled again.

“I do,” Nishinoya returned without a hint of hesitation, and Asahi smiled again.

“Okay then,” he said. He leaned forward and down, and Nishinoya rose up on his toes to meet him halfway.

“Hey,” Nishinoya said, when they parted again a few moments later, “you know I love you, right? And I love you even if you never go back to school or get a different job.”

Asahi’s smile grew. “I do,” he said. “Thanks.” He rubbed his thumb over Nishinoya’s bottom lip. “The same is true for you, of course. Graduating or not, going pro or not.” His eyes flicked up and met Nishinoya’s. “I’ll still love you, always.”

Nishinoya’s eyes burned. He wrapped his arms around Asahi’s neck and hugged him fiercely. “Okay,” he said.

Asahi’s breath puffed hot against the skin of his cheek. “We better get moving if we’re gonna make it to the shrine in time,” he said.


Asahi laughed against him. “Come on,” he said. He pulled away from Nishinoya and grabbed his hand to tug him along.

It was almost midnight when they reached the shrine, where a crowd of people had gathered to observe the new year. Nishinoya’s nose was going numb, so he covered it with his gloved hand while they waited.

A thought occurred to him. “Hey, Asahi-san.”

“Hm?”

Nishinoya lifted his head to look at him.

Asahi was framed by the glow of a lamp directly behind him, which traced his form with an ethereal yellow-white halo. The shape of his body, the way he stood, how his feet planted against the ground and his weight settled above them—all these had become so intimately familiar to Nishinoya that he almost forgot what it felt like to not know them.

When Nishinoya peered closer at Asahi’s face, he could see that Asahi’s cheeks were red, his eyes bright. He gazed back at Nishinoya expectantly, waiting for his answer.

Nishinoya grinned at him. “Tomorrow’s Wednesday,” he said.

Asahi blinked for a moment, confused, until the meaning dawned on him. “Oh,” he said softly. “It is, isn’t it?”
“Yeah.”

The look Asahi gave him then—the tremulous quality of his tender smile, the way his damp eyes sparkled in the reflective light—Nishinoya was certain he’d never forget it. “That’s perfect,” Asahi said.

Around them, the crowd stirred. Nishinoya looked at his watch. It was almost time.

“Ready?” he asked.

Asahi reached over and took his hand. “Yes,” he returned. “Absolutely.”

Nishinoya bit his lip. He couldn’t decide if he felt like laughing or crying. Maybe it was both. “Okay,” he said, fighting to keep his voice steady. “I’m ready too.”

As the people around them began to count down, Nishinoya kept his eyes on Asahi. He didn’t know what the next year held for them, but that uncertainty was not as terrifying to him as it had been before. Less than a year earlier he’d only been looking backward, convinced that all his good days were behind him, that he had wasted every opportunity for a worthwhile future. Back then, he’d been convinced that his life was as good as over. Now, standing in the cold as the bell chimed and echoed around them, Asahi’s hand tight in his own, Nishinoya wondered if it had even yet begun.

It was the day before Asahi’s twenty-third birthday, and Nishinoya was finally starting to realize that their best days could still be ahead of them, somewhere unseen, somewhere unknown, somewhere just over the horizon.

End Notes

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Tumblr user dead-rabbit-comics drew amazing cover art for this fic! Go check it out.

Thank you to all my readers. Your comments and kudos mean everything to me. Your support is what allowed me to stick with this story and complete it.

Works inspired by this one Vienna Waits For You by doodeline

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