Color My World

by beach

Summary

This is the third time the young man on the motorcycle has followed Asami and Takaba home. What are his intentions? And why does he look so sad? The dutiful secretary takes it upon himself to find out.

Notes

I wrote this because akihito_asami requested that I write a story about Kirishima and Kou. It's not a pair I usually ship, but it was an interesting challenge. This story does not overlap with my other stories.

I thought I'd put the notes about Japanese words at the beginning instead of the end this time. Let me know if you'd rather I keep them at the end instead.

shōchū: Japanese liquor
ojiisan: used to casually address an old man
keigo: honorific speech
Shinjuku Ni-chôme: Tokyo’s gay district
Geinki: a combination of the Japanese words “gei” (gay) and “genki” (energetic, in a good mood)
hiyayakko: chilled tofu with savory toppings
yakitori: grilled chicken skewers
goma-ae: vegetables served with a sesame dressing
oshibori: wet towel used to wipe one’s hands
fugu: pufferfish – this dish must be prepared very carefully to avoid the poisonous parts of the fish; poorly prepared fugu can be deadly
Kirishima Kei pulls up to the curb, slides the gearshift to park, and sets the parking brake. He slips out of the driver's seat and opens the back door, bowing as the two passengers exit.

"Goodnight, Asami-sama," he says, holding his bow until the pair have walked past the doorman and entered the building.

As he rises from his bow, his ears catch the familiar hum of a motorcycle. He looks across the street and observes the rider pull up to the opposite curb and watch the pair through the lobby windows as they wait for the elevator. Kirishima notes the license plate. He doesn't have to consult his tablet to know that it's the same rider who has observed the pair three times in the past week.

Today, though, the rider takes his helmet off and wipes beneath his eyes. As he puts the helmet back on, Kirishima slips back into the BMW and puts the car into gear. He pulls out into traffic, quickly accelerating and shifting smoothly into the flow of the middle lane.

The motorcycle's engine revs, and it flies past Kirishima on the left. Kirishima maneuvers behind it, staying right on its tail. The rider doesn't seem to notice he's being followed. He obeys the speed limit and traffic signals, and Kirishima only has to run one yellow light to stay with him.

The pursuit ends a mere 15 minutes later when the motorcycle pulls into a small parking garage. Kirishima follows him in, parking half a row away from the motorcycle.

The rider takes off his helmet and locks it to the bike before heading out into the night, towards the flashing lights of the bars. Kirishima observes the man carefully, mentally noting the longish black untidy hair, the cheap jeans and jacket, Nike running shoes, slumped shoulders, bowed head, and slow defeated gait. As the man turns a corner, Kirishima finally catches a good glimpse of his face: about 25 years old, clean-shaven, hair short in front, no scars.


Kirishima scans the profile as he walks, keeping one eye on Motomi. Motomi passes all the bright, flashy establishments and utterly ignores two hostesses who try to solicit him (none of the hostesses approach Kirishima). When Motomi turns down a dark, narrow alley, Kirishima slips his tablet back in his pocket. He follows Motomi down the alley warily, wondering if the man might have realized he was being followed, after all.

But Motomi shuffles into the smallest, dingiest establishment on the alley. The shop doesn't have a sign. Kirishima's hand slips into his pocket, close to his thigh holster, as he enters.

There's a solitary figure slumped at the four-person counter. The years weigh heavily on the back of the old man behind the counter, and his gravelly wheeze evinces decades of heavy smoking.

Kirishima sits next to Motomi. The bartender looks at him expectantly but doesn't say anything.

"I'll have what he's having," Kirishima says, gesturing to Motomi.

The bartender raises his eyebrows but shrugs. When he hands over the drink, Kirishima notices that the man's grimy thumb is touching the rim of the glass. Kirishima rotates the glass so that the thumb-
touched part is opposite of where he'll be drinking.

"Kanpai," Kirishima says, raising the glass. Motomi ignores him. The bartender turns to the sink to wipe another glass with a gray rag. Kirishima closes his eyes, hopes that the drink is of sufficient proof to disinfect anything unseemly on his glass, and takes a tentative sip.

It's shōchū. Kirishima lets the flavors wash over his tongue – sweet potato, oak, black koji – before swallowing.

He opens his eyes to see Motomi eying him curiously.

“You lost?” Motomi asks, taking in Kirishima’s carefully groomed hair, bespoke suit, and manicured hands.

“No, sir. I just wanted to have a drink away from my home this evening.”

Motomi snorts. “We’re two guys drinking at one of the seediest bars in Shinjuku – no offense, Ojiisan” – the old man waves a hand as if to say nothing could offend him – “so using that level of keigo is weird, especially since I’m younger than you and less advanced professionally.”

Kirishima tries to talk more casually. “I’m sorry. I’m used to speaking this way because of my job, but I will try my best.”

Motomi laughs. “Just relax. It’s a bar. There’s no need to ‘try your best.’”

Kirishima’s mind races. When was the last time I was at a bar? What am I supposed to say? He lets the first thing that pops into his mind slip out. “Do you come here often?”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Kirishima inwardly cringes. That sounded like a lame pick-up line.

Motomi eyes him as he takes a sip of his shōchū. He sets his glass back down. “Ni-chōme’s another half block that way.” He nods in the direction away from where they parked.

Well, that makes my job easier. “Is that where you’re headed?”

“Who knows?” Motomi says morosely.

“Shouldn’t you?”

Motomi shrugs. “In five years, this is the closest I’ve gotten, no matter how drunk I am.”

“Maybe you’re making too big a deal out of it?” Kirishima suggests.

Motomi gulps the rest of his shōchū and signals the bartender for another one. “Probably. What’s your name?”

“My name is Kirishima Kei. What is yours?” Why did I give him my real name? Kirishima adjusts his glasses and takes another sip.

Motomi snorts. “‘Kirishima’, huh? Whatever. I’ll just call you Kei-san, then. And you can call me Kou.”

Kirishima furrows his brow. “Do you find my name funny?”

Kou rolls his eyes. “If you’re going to make up a name, don’t use what you’re drinking.” He finishes
his second glass and gestures for a third.

Kirishima reads the label as the bartender pours the drink: Kuro Kirishima. He wonders if he should press the issue but decides not to. He shouldn’t have given his real name, anyway.

“Aren’t you consuming those rather quickly, Kou-san?”

Kou shrugs. “Isn’t that why people come to this kind of place? Isn’t that why Kei-san is here?”

Kirishima adjusts his glasses again. “But your evening will be over too soon if you drink that fast.”

“Are you trying to avoid someone at your house?” Kou looks into the depths of his third glass without drinking it.

Kirishima furrows his brow. “No. I live alone. Is there a reason why you thought that?”

“Just wondering why you didn’t want to go home. Going home to an empty house is the pits, eh?”

Kirishima is fascinated by the storm of emotions flashing across Kou’s face. How can he express so much just by slight movements in his brows and eyelids? Loneliness, sadness, disappointment, frustration, anger, guilt… When was the last time I felt so many things at once? Have I ever?

“What are you thinking?” Kou asks, looking at him curiously.


Kirishima picks up his glass and downs the rest of his shōchū.

“Relax,” Kou says. He signals the bartender to refill Kirishima’s glass. Kirishima puts his hand over the top of his glass, but Kou asks, “You’re not ready to go home yet, are you?”

“I suppose not,” Kirishima says. “But I can’t drink very much, so this will be my last one. At least here.”

“So what were you thinking?” Kou presses.

“I was wondering what happened to put so many sad emotions on your face.”

Kou grunts. “Nothing, really.” He takes a gulp.

“In my experience, it’s usually either work, love, or death,” Kirishima prompts.

“No one died,” Kou says.

“So it’s work or love.”

They sip their shōchū in companionable silence for several minutes.

Eventually, Kou breaks the silence. “It’s love for you, Kei-san?”

“What?” Kirishima asks. It’s been so long since either spoke, he’s forgotten the thread of the conversation with all his ruminations over how he should break the silence.

“Is it love trouble that brings you here tonight, on the edge of Ni-chōme, awkwardly trying to pick up a younger man?”
Kirishima chokes and sprays shōchū all over the counter. “I’m very sorry,” he says through his cough, standing and bowing to the bartender.

Without a word, the bartender comes over and starts wiping the counter with the same rag he was using on the dishes.

“Please, let me do that,” Kirishima offers.

But the bartender ignores him and finishes wiping down the counter before returning to the sink.

Meanwhile, Kou is laughing so hard, he grabs onto Kirishima’s shoulder to keep from falling off his stool.

“That was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen! I can’t believe you did an actual spit-take!”

*His hand feels warm. I wonder, when was the last time someone touched me so casually? I can’t remember. Before high school. Middle school? No, probably elementary school…*

“I was–” Kirishima stops abruptly. If he corrects Kou’s impression that Kirishima was trying to pick him up, Kou will probably stop opening up to him. And he still needs to figure out why Kou has been following Asami and Takaba.

“You were?” Kou prompts.

“I don’t know, actually,” Kirishima says. “My job is very demanding.”

“So you just wanted to let off some steam?” Kou asks. He looks faintly disappointed.

“That’s not it. I don’t find it stressful. I enjoy it. But it doesn’t really leave me any time to pursue a relationship.”

“That sounds lonely,” Kou says. He sips his shōchū.

Kirishima shrugs. “I’m used to it. I don’t know what came over me tonight.”

He’s never felt lonely – not until Kou suggested it, anyway. But now that Kirishima has felt the warmth of another, his shoulder suddenly feels cold. *That’s so odd.*

After another moment of silence, Kirishima ventures to ask, “What about you?”

Kou sighs. “Same old story. I know I’m gay, but –” He stops abruptly.

“But?” Kirishima encourages him to continue.

“Sorry. That’s the first time I’ve said that out loud. You’re really easy to talk to, somehow, despite your awkwardness.”

“Thank you,” Kirishima says, bowing slightly.

Kou blushes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that as an insult. I just usually find people who use keigo are trying to create a distance, but somehow I don’t mind when you do it. It suits you.”

“I told you; it’s just a habit. I’m trying. But you’re the first person who’s ever said I was easy to talk to.”

“Really? That’s strange.” Kou shrugs.
“So you know you’re gay, but you haven’t had the courage to go to Ni-chōme. Somewhere, I get the feeling there’s more to it than that tonight, though,” Kirishima says.

Kou sighs. “You’re right.” He takes another sip of shōchū. “I’m just feeling a bit sorry for myself. I always thought one of my childhood friends was gay, too, and I often tried to create opportunities for us to talk about it, but he always acted completely oblivious, like he didn’t even know being gay was a thing. I even suggested we try going to Ni-chōme together once, but he brought it up in front of a few of our other friends, and I had to pass it off as a joke.”

“So maybe he’s not gay,” Kirishima suggests.

Kou takes another sip. He’s nearly done with his glass. “That’s what I had decided, too, and I stopped trying. But last week, I happened to see him with a gorgeous man, and they somehow looked intimate. I followed them to what I can only presume is the man’s home, and the man helped my friend out of the car. I was shocked, but I wondered if maybe I was reading too much into it, so I followed my friend a few more times, and he kept going home with this man. Tonight, I realized that they’re living together.”

“And that makes you sad?” Kirishima asks. He sips his shōchū; he needs to catch up with Kou.

“No. Well, yes, but that’s stupid. It shouldn’t. I should be happy for him.”

“Are you in love with him?”

“No! Definitely not. I’ve never once thought of him like that; he’s like a brother to me. That would be weird. I’m just… jealous, I guess. Here I’ve been struggling for so long, and I tried reaching out to him for help, and he just brushed me off… And somehow he manages to sort it all out and find a gorgeous, successful partner?”

Kirishima nods. “That must be frustrating.”

Kou continues. “I should be happy for him. I am happy for him. But somehow seeing him so happy just reminds me of how miserable I am. And that makes me feel guilty for taking it out on him – especially when it’s my own fault for never having the courage to admit to anyone I’m gay. How could I possibly have a relationship with the way that I am? I’m such a coward.” He downs the rest of his shōchū.

“I think you’re very brave,” Kirishima says. “It takes a lot of courage to face your emotions, even the negative ones that you don’t want to admit to feeling.” I never pay any attention to my own emotions. I’ve always been afraid that if I let them out once, I’ll never be able to hold them back again.

Kou snorts. He waves to the bartender for another drink, but Kirishima puts his hand over Kou’s glass.

“Let’s continue to be brave, together,” Kirishima suggests. “I’ll walk with you the rest of the way down the block.” He knocks back the rest of his own drink.

“Have you ever been to Ni-chōme before?” Kou asks curiously.

“A few times, with my boss. When we were entertaining clients.”

“You entertain clients in Ni-chōme? What kind of business are you in?” Kou’s mouth is hanging open slightly.
“I work for a corporation that manages several clubs, among other things. My boss is bisexual.” Kirishima shrugs. He pulls out his wallet and indicates to the bartender that he’ll be paying both their tabs.

“Are you a host?” Kou asks suspiciously. “And no thanks.” He pulls out his own wallet and pays his own tab.

Kirishima laughs. The noise echoes off the walls of the small place, and he covers his mouth, embarrassed. “Me? A host? As if someone as awkward as me could ever be a host!”

“I think you’re really easy to talk to. You’re good at making people open up,” Kou says.

“You’re the only one who’s ever thought so in my entire life. I think you’re the one who’s easy to talk to and makes people open up.” Kirishima hesitates but decides to add, “Are you a host?” even though he knows the answer.


“A tortured artist,” Kirishima says as they stand and leave the bar together.

Kou chuckles. “I guess you could say that.”

He hesitates in the alley. Kirishima reaches for his hand. “Come on. Let’s walk.”

Kou takes his hand.

Once again, Kirishima is surprised by how warm it feels. The sensation travels up his arm and down into his belly. He smiles as he leads Kou down to the end of the alley. “See? It’s not so scary. It’s just a place.”

Kou looks around curiously. It really doesn’t look any different from where they just left. He lets Kirishima lead him across the street and down another block, clutching his hand as if it’s a lifeline.

Once they’re a block in, he notices that there are other men holding hands. One couple is standing on the corner, kissing right out in public. Kou gapes at them, then blushes and hurriedly looks to the side. He’s facing an alley, and he can see two shapes pressed against the wall, skin glowing faintly in the dim light cast from the cityscape. He hurriedly glances down at his feet and subconsciously presses closer to Kirishima.

“Do you want to go in?” Kirishima asks as he pulls to a stop. “I know this place. I think you’ll be very comfortable here.”

Kou glances up to see that they’re stopped in front of a small bar with a simple black and white sign that says “Geinki.”

“Geinki? That’s such a bad pun,” Kou says.

“Just don’t tell anyone else it’s your first time. A lot of people like to prey on fresh meat,” Kirishima warns.

Kou gulps but allows Kirishima to pull him inside. Once inside, Kirishima leads the way to a table in the back corner. Kirishima sits so that he can see the room, and Kou sits across from him.

Once again, Kirishima’s hand feels oddly cold after letting go of Kou’s.

“Are you hungry?” Kirishima asks Kou. “This place serves food as well as drinks.”
“I guess,” Kou says. “Do they have a menu?”

“My treat.”

“I couldn’t-”

“To celebrate your first time here. I insist.” Kirishima reaches across to a neighboring table to take its menu. He hands it across to Kou, faintly hoping that their hands will brush.

They don’t.


“Okay…” Kou says. After looking at the menu for a moment, he asks, “Is there anything you recommend?”

“We could start with the hiyayakko,” Kirishima suggests. “Their yakitori is also very good.”

“Do you like goma-ae?” Kou asks Kirishima.


“You must have a favorite,” Kou presses.

Kirishima pauses to think about it. He usually just orders whatever Asami does when they’re at a business meal – and most of their meals are business meals. When he cooks for himself, he just buys what’s on sale and looks good, preparing it simply and making sure it’s nutritionally balanced.

Kou laughs. “Is it really that hard to think of something? You said the yakitori is good…”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I guess I’m just used to eating whatever’s available. I’m used to letting other people pick.”

Kou hands the menu back to Kirishima. “Then tonight, you have to pick. And no trying to guess what you think I’d like, okay? Just order what you feel like, when you feel like it.”

Kirishima stares at him, mouth agape. He doesn’t take the menu.

“It’s a night for trying new things, right? So try it. I bet you’ll enjoy it once you start.” Kou takes Kirishima’s hand and presses the menu into it.

“Alright,” Kirishima says.

“That’s nice.”

“What is?” Kirishima asks.

“Your smile.”

“Oh.” Kirishima’s face smooths back into its usual expression.

“Oh, don’t stop! Sorry if I embarrassed you. I think you need to relax more. Stop thinking about work when you’re not working.”

“How did you know I do that?” Kirishima asks, surprised. *I didn’t say that, did I?*

“I could just tell. You’re very conscientious.”
The waiter hurries over with warm oshibori. “I’m so sorry for your wait, sirs,” he says, bowing.

Kirishima orders Sion Gold Label beers for them to drink. As soon as the waiter’s gone, he picks up the oshibori and wipes his hands thoroughly.

“That other place was pretty dirty, huh?” Kou says, snickering as he also wipes his hands.

“Did I really look that out of place?” Kirishima asks.

“Kind of,” Kou admits. “But I probably did, too. The only other people I’ve ever seen in that place are old geezers.”

“It seems like it would be a good place to sit and think when you don’t want to be home alone,” Kirishima muses.

“That it is.”

They drink in silence for a few minutes. This time, Kirishima just lets the atmosphere wash over him instead of searching for something to say.

Kou suddenly smiles.

“What is it?” Kirishima asks, smiling back.

“You’re finally relaxing.”

Kirishima can feel his face heating up. Oh no. I thought I got over this. When he was a kid, Kirishima was so shy, he’d blush anytime anyone talked to him. And blushing made him more embarrassed, which just made him blush harder, especially once the other kids started teasing him about it.

“Oh no! I had to say something and ruin it for you. I’m sorry. Please relax and enjoy yourself,” Kou says. He reaches over and pats Kirishima’s hand.

Kirishima lets out a slow breath and tries to relax his shoulders.

“That’s better.” Kou smiles encouragingly.

Over the next three hours, they eat and drink their fill, alternating periods of conversation with companionable silence.

“Do you like octopus?” Kirishima asks Kou at one point.

Kou clicks his tongue. “You’re not supposed to be thinking about what I might like,” he admonishes Kirishima. “Kei-san needs to order what he wants, remember?”

“How about fugu?” Kirishima asks.

“What did I just say?” Kou says, rolling his eyes.

“I’ve never tried fugu, and I’ve always wanted to,” Kirishima says.

“Really?” Kou says, raising his eyebrows.
Kirishima shrugs sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“Then go ahead and order it. I’ll try some,” Kou says.

When the pufferfish arrives, they both taste it.

“So yummy!” Kou cries.

Kirishima picks up a large piece and puts it on Kou’s plate.

“No, you eat it,” Kou says. “I can tell you like it, too.”

“It’s more fun to watch you enjoy it,” Kirishima says truthfully.

Kou turns red. “How can you say such a line with such a straight face?”

“Sorry,” Kirishima says, bowing slightly.

Kou laughs. “You’re- ” He pauses to search for a word.


Kou frowns. “I was going to say cute, but I was looking for a manlier way to say it.” He reaches across the table and takes Kirishima’s hand. “I already told you, you just need to relax and be yourself. I like you just the way you are, okay?”

It’s Kirishima’s turn to blush, but he doesn’t pull his hand away. He can’t think of anything to say, so he just gazes into Kou’s eyes. Kou apparently doesn’t feel the need to say anything else, either.

After a moment, Kou picks up his chopsticks with his free hand. He lifts the fugu and holds it up to Kirishima, saying, “We can’t let this delicious fugu go to waste, can we?”

Kirishima is about to protest, but it looks like the fugu is going to fall, so he eats it instead. He chews and swallows, then smiles. “Delicious.” He lifts a piece and holds it up for Kou. “You should eat some more, too.”

A large group of rowdy guys enters the bar. Kou says something, but Kirishima can’t hear him.

“What?” he half-shouts.

Kou repeats himself, but Kirishima still can’t hear. He tugs on Kou’s hand. “Come sit by me so we can talk,” he says.

Kou moves over to the chair next to Kirishima’s, pulling it close so he can also reach the small table. Their thighs brush against each other, and Kou presses his against Kirishima’s, smiling.

“Why are you so warm?” Kirishima asks.

Kou laughs. “Why are you?”

“Am I?” Kirishima asks, surprised.

“Yeah.” Kou looks up at him. Their faces are inches apart. Suddenly Kou closes the gap, pecking Kirishima on the lips.

He’s pulling away again just as quickly, but Kirishima leans in towards Kou, desperate to recapture
the feeling.

This time, when their lips meet, neither pulls away. After a moment, Kirishima opens his mouth. Soon, their tongues are entwined. It’s Kirishima’s first kiss, and from what Kou said, it’s probably his, too. If Kirishima had known kissing felt so good, he would have done it sooner.

They lose all sense of time and place until hooting and applause pulls them back to reality. They pull apart, their faces flushed, and look around.

The whole bar is staring at them. Kou buries his face in his hands. Kirishima waves his hand to say, “Show’s over.” He can feel the blush spreading down to his chest, but he’s too happy to care much. He waves the waiter over to settle the tab. “Let’s go someplace a little quieter,” he suggests.

“Where?” Kou asks. He checks his phone. “Wow, it’s late. I’ve missed the last train.”

“My place is within walking distance – a long walk, but walkable,” Kirishima says. “I have a spare futon.”

They walk hand in hand, Kirishima leading the way.

“Did you walk to the bar?” Kou asks curiously.

“No. I parked my car in a parking garage. I’ll have to get it in the morning. I drank too much to drive home.”

“Same here. Well, my motorcycle, not my car,” Kou says.

“Is it fun to ride a motorcycle?” Kirishima asks curiously. Another thing I’ve never even wondered about before tonight. There’s so much of the world I haven’t really paid attention to.

“It’s awesome! The wind in your face, the feeling of freedom… I’ll take you for a ride sometime,” Kou promises.

As they pass a convenience store, Kou pauses and asks, “Do you need any… supplies?”

“Supplies?” Kirishima asks blankly.

Kou flushes. “Supplies. Um… Never mind.”

It takes a moment, but Kirishima cottons on. He blushes even more than Kou does. “I- um-”

“Sorry, that was presumptuous of me. I’ve never done this kind of thing before,” Kou says miserably, looking down at his feet.

Kirishima gently lifts Kou’s chin with a finger. “It’s alright. Relax. Just be yourself.” Kou smiles. “I’ve never done this kind of thing before either. That was my first kiss back there.”

“Yours, too?” Kou asks in astonishment.

Kirishima nods. “So let’s take it slow, okay? Do you need anything?”

Kou looks at him curiously.

“Maybe a toothbrush? Clean underwear? And we should probably get something for breakfast…”

They walk into the convenience store still holding hands, but when the clerk looks at them curiously,
they realize and let go quickly.

“I’ll get a toothbrush; you can go get anything else you need,” Kirishima suggests.

They meet back at the front of the store. The clerk eyes their items and says casually, “The condoms are on aisle 3, towards the back, bottom shelf.”

Kirishima chokes, even though there’s nothing in his mouth. Kou pats him on the back and tells the clerk, “Thanks, but we’re good.”

The clerk shrugs and rings them up.

“I can never shop there again,” Kirishima says once they’re outside.

“He didn’t seem to care,” Kou says. “I doubt he’ll even remember you.”

“Maybe,” Kirishima says skeptically.

When they get to Kirishima’s apartment, Kou reads the nameplate. “Your name really is Kirishima,” he says, surprised.

Kirishima looks at him and shrugs.

“Sorry. I should have known you weren’t the kind of guy to give a fake name, Kei-san.”

“Is your name really Kou?” Kirishima asks, even though he knows it is.

“Yes. Motomi Kou. Nice to meet you.” Kou bows.

“I think I’m rubbing off on you.” Kirishima chuckles.

“That’s not a bad thing,” Kou says.

Once inside, Kirishima makes some oolong tea. As they drink it, Kou looks around curiously. “You really don’t spend a lot of time here, do you? It hardly looks lived in.”

Kirishima shrugs. “I told you, I work a lot. Sixty to eighty hours a week, sometimes more.”

“Your boss must be tough,” Kou says sympathetically.

“Actually, he’s always telling me to take more time off, especially recently, now that he’s in a relationship,” Kirishima says. “But I need to make sure everything gets done.”

“Do you have any employees under you? Can you delegate some of your responsibilities?”

“Probably, if I thought they’d get done right.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t give them a chance,” Kou says.

“That’s true,” Kirishima concedes. “I used to think that all I needed was work, but I’m beginning to realize there’s a lot more of the world I want to see.”

“What changed your mind?” Kou asks curiously.

“You.”

Kou blushes. “Again with the cheesy pick-up line.”
“I’m serious. Ni-chōme. Fugu. Motorcycles. And that was in just a few hours.”

Kou smiles. “You opened up my world, too. I can’t believe I actually went to Ni-chōme. Now I’m wondering why on earth I made it such a big deal. And fugu. And kissing.” He shyly leans towards Kirishima, and Kirishima happily leans back towards Kou.

After an hour, they settle back against the sofa for more tea.

“You can bathe first. Do you want a bath or a shower?” Kirishima asks.

“I’ll just take a quick shower,” Kou says.

Kou emerges from the shower with the towel wrapped around his waist. “Sorry, I didn’t think to buy pajamas,” he says.

“I can lend you some.” Kirishima pulls out a t-shirt and pajama pants and hands them to Kou.

When Kirishima emerges from his own shower, Kou is sitting on the couch waiting for him.

“Sorry, I should have gotten out your futon before I went in,” Kirishima says. He rubs his hair with a towel.

“Your hair looks so soft. Can I touch it?” Kou asks.

“Sure.”

Kou rubs his hand over Kirishima’s cropped hair. “It’s even softer than I imagined,” he says. His hand dips down and brushes Kirishima’s ear.

Kirishima shivers.

“Are your ears sensitive?” Kou asks, stroking it again.

A soft moan escapes from Kirishima’s mouth. He covers his mouth, embarrassed.

Kou smiles. He leans forward and sucks on Kirishima’s earlobe. Kirishima gets his revenge by sucking on Kou’s jawline. Soon, they’re engrossed in another make-out session.

After several minutes, Kirishima briefly pulls away. He glances at the clock. It’s three a.m. “It’s getting late. What time do you have to be up in the morning?”

Kou shrugs. “That’s one of the advantages of being a freelancer. I don’t have any appointments tomorrow. What about you?”

“I start at noon tomorrow,” Kirishima says. He usually goes in at ten, but he doesn’t have to be there until noon. It won’t kill him to go in on time for once.

“Then we should get you to bed soon,” Kou says.

Kirishima leads him into the bedroom. He pulls out the guest futon for Kou, but they end up on Kirishima’s bed, making out some more. They fall asleep, bodies pressed together, enjoying one another’s warmth.
Kirishima awakens slowly. His bed is so warm this morning, it makes him want to linger. He feels something stir beside him and opens his eyes.

He sees unruly black hair and blushes as the events of the previous evening come rushing back to him. Kou stirs again, and he rolls over to face Kirishima as his eyes flutter open.

“Good morning, Kei-san,” Kou says shyly.

“What time is it?” Kou yawns.

Kirishima glances towards the clock, but he can’t make out the time without his glasses.

Kou leans over him to see. “It’s nine o’clock. You said you have to be at work at noon. How long does it take to get there?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“Lucky!” Kou cries.

“Your commute is fifteen seconds, right?” Kirishima counters.

“Oh, yeah. But all of my clients are at least half an hour away. Most are an hour or more.”

Kou settles back down, laying his head on Kirishima’s chest.

“It’s weird, I don’t really feel tired despite how late we stayed up.”

“Same here,” Kirishima says, though six hours is actually more sleep than he usually gets.

Kou’s bare shoulder looks cold. Kirishima tentatively reaches a hand out to pull the covers up over it.

“Relax, remember? You can be yourself around me,” Kou mumbles.

Kou suddenly giggles.

“What?” Kirishima asks, smiling, though he doesn’t know why.

“I’m just happy,” Kou says.

“Me too.” Kirishima kisses the top of Kou’s head.

“Do you think it was fate that brought us both to that bar last night?” Kou asks, shifting so that he’s now lying half on top of Kirishima. His leg brushes against Kirishima’s crotch.

Kirishima freezes, his brain short-circuiting for two very different reasons. *I can never tell him I followed him there.*

Kou feels Kirishima stiffen, but he chalks it up to a certain part of Kirishima stiffening.

“Don’t worry; I’m the same way,” he whispers. He shifts again, and Kirishima can feel something pressing into his leg.

All worry about who Kou is flies out of Kirishima’s brain. He forgets about morning breath and leans down and kisses Kou.

The intensity quickly ramps up beyond anything that they experienced last night, and Kou shifts so that he’s lying fully on top of Kirishima. Kirishima widens his legs to facilitate closer contact, and soon they’re moving in a quick rhythm.

“Wai– That’s too – ah!” Kirishima gasps. He covers his face with his hand.
“It’s alright. I’m nearly there, too,” Kou says. He caresses Kirishima’s cheek and kisses him. Kou’s hand wanders down and squeezes Kirishima’s nipple.

Kirishima wraps his arms around Kou’s shoulders and pulls him closer. A few seconds later, Kou is pulled over the edge, too, and he collapses on Kirishima.

Kou shifts to the side, and Kirishima can feel the wetness on his leg through his pajama pants. He fidgets uncomfortably.

“I’m sorry. Was that too much? You said you wanted to go slow,” Kou worries.

“It felt good. It’s just… I want to take a shower now.”

Kou chuckles. “I understand. You go first, okay, Kei-san?”

Kirishima heads to the bathroom. As he’s rinsing off, his mind is whirling. What am I doing? He’s ten years younger than me. When I was starting college, he was in third grade. And he’s Takaba’s best friend! What will Takaba say? What will Asami-sama say? What will Kou say? What if he never wants to see me again? I hope the undersecretaries are able to get everything set up. They handle it fine on my days off, but I should have told them I wasn’t coming in early today. I wonder when I can see Kou-san again. How much can I cut back on my working hours without making Asami-sama suspicious? He’s always telling me to do so, but this is the first time I’ve wanted to.

When Kirishima exits the bathroom, he goes to pick up the pajama bottoms and underwear he left just outside, but they’re not there. He heads out to the living room.


“Thank you,” Kirishima says, bowing.

Kou smiles. “I would have started cooking, too, but I can’t even cook rice.”

“I’ll teach you,” Kirishima offers.

Kirishima stands behind Kou and looks over Kou’s shoulder as he reaches around on both sides to help wash the rice. While the rice is cooking, they engage in another brief make-out session before Kirishima reluctantly pulls away.

“We should get the rest of the food ready.” He teaches Kou how to steam fish and make miso soup. He pulls out some leftover vegetables from the fridge, and they’re soon sitting at the table ready to eat.

Kirishima presses his hands together, bows his head, and says, “Itadakimasu.”

Kou copies him, but before either can pick up their chopsticks, Kirishima’s phone rings.

“Go ahead and start,” he tells Kou before answering the phone.

Kirishima walks into his bedroom to take the call. It’s his assistant, Morita.

“Fuku-shacho-san! Just making sure everything is alright.”

“Yes, everything is fine. I’ll be in at noon today.”
“Oh. Yes, fuku-shacho-san! Is there anything you need done before you arrive?”

“Just the usual,” Kirishima says.

“Yes, fuku-shacho-san! Sorry for disturbing you.”

Kirishima chuckles as he heads back to the table. Kou looks at him curiously.

“Just my subordinate, making sure I’m not dead,” Kirishima explains.

“You shouldn’t joke about something like that. It’s bad luck,” Kou chides.

“Sorry,” Kirishima says. He clasps his hands together and says “Itadakimasu” again. As he picks up his chopsticks, Kou does the same. “You didn’t start,” Kirishima observes.

“I wanted to wait for you.” Kou takes a bite of fish. “Oh, wow, this is amazing! So moist. And it was so easy to make, I really feel like I could do it by myself.”

They linger over the meal, alternating periods of casual conversation with silence.

After breakfast, they sit on the couch in the living room.

“How old are you, Kei-san?” Kou asks curiously.

“Thirty-five.”

“Wow, that’s ten years older than me. You don’t look that old.”

“Thank you.” Kirishima bows.

Kou blushes. “Sorry, I’m not saying you’re old, but you look younger. Especially without your glasses.”

“How long have you had your motorcycle?” Kirishima asks.

“I got my current one when I was 20, but I got my first one when I was sixteen,” Kou explains.

Kirishima raises his eyebrows in surprise. “So young.”

“I grew up in Yokohama. I worked part-time when I was 15, and I saved up to get my license and buy a small, used motorcycle so I could do deliveries for my uncle’s restaurant. He paid more per hour, but he said I had to provide my own ride, and my parents told me I had to pay for it myself.”

“It sounds like they were strict.”

Kou shrugs. “No stricter than anyone else, I think. They just wanted me to appreciate the value of money. It also taught me how to be disciplined with my time, which has really helped with working from home. What about your parents? You’re very conscientious. Were they strict?”

Kirishima shrugs. “Not especially. They make kimonos, so I had to help out in the shop. Those kinds of traditional shops put a strong emphasis on manners. And then I got a scholarship to a private high school that was a bit strict.”

“You didn’t want to go into the family trade?”
“I have two older brothers and an older sister who all work at my parents’ shop, but my eyesight has always been bad, and the eye doctor said it would make it worse if I tried to do the detailed work required. Besides, I’ve always been a bit clumsy with my hands. It took a lot of practice to get decent handwriting, and I can’t draw at all.”

“I noticed you couldn’t even read your clock. Have you ever thought of getting that laser surgery?”

“I wanted to, but the surgeon said I’m not a good candidate for it, unfortunately. I can’t wear contacts, either, but I’ve been wearing glasses for so long, I’m used to it.”

“Glasses suit you,” Kou says, kissing Kirishima.

Five minutes later, they’re interrupted by the beeping of Kirishima’s phone.

“I have to start getting ready for work,” Kirishima says regretfully. He pulls out his ironing board and a suit.

“It looks like it’s already been pressed,” Kou comments.

“I press my clothes as they come out of the laundry, but I like to touch them up again just before I wear them.”

Kou grabs a pad of paper and a pencil. Kirishima raises his eyebrows.

“Oh. Sorry. I borrowed this while you were in the shower. When I’m feeling happy – or sad or mad or anything, really – I like to draw.”

“What are you drawing?” Kirishima asks curiously, trying to see. “I’m glad I keep my guns in the hidden safe.”

Kou lifts the pad higher so Kirishima can’t see. “I’ll show you when I’m done, okay?”

Kirishima focuses on his ironing. Occasionally, he glances at Kou, and every time, it seems like Kou hurriedly looks down at the paper.

“Are you drawing me?” Kirishima finally asks.

“Maybe…” Kou says sheepishly.

As Kirishima finishes ironing each piece of clothing, he puts it on. He feels a bit self-conscious. It’s just like changing at the gym or the onsen, he admonishes himself. But Kou’s gaze feels almost like a caress.

“Kei-san, about earlier…”

Kirishima looks up.

Kou looks uncomfortable, but he presses on. “I mean, when we woke up… You said you wanted to take it slow, and you said you were fine, but I just wanted to make sure you’re really okay with what happened. It sounded like you wanted to slow down, but by the time I figured it out…” Kou makes a vague gesture.

Kirishima blushes. “It really was fine. It was just a bit overwhelming, and I knew I was close to finishing.”

“You’re not just saying that, are you? I want to make sure you’re comfortable, and not just trying to
please me.”

“It’s fine. I’m not a girl.”

“Guys can say no, too, you know… Are you a tachi or a neko?”

Kirishima coughs. “I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it. What about you?” It felt good when Kou-san took the lead, but I’m older. Should I step up and be more assertive?

“I’m not sure, either. I’ve thought about it, but I don’t think you can really know until you try, can you? And what’s wrong with doing both if both feel good?” Kou blushes.

“That’s true,” Kirishima says. He’s never really watched or read any type of porn, but Asami has exposed him to more sex than he’s ever really wanted to hear through his years driving Asami around Tokyo (privacy glass is not soundproof, especially not at the volume Asami elicits from his partners). *Takaba certainly sounds like he’s thoroughly enjoying himself.* Kirishima blushed at the thought and refocused on his ironing.

When Kirishima’s dressed for work, Kou shows him the sketch he made. It shows Kirishima from the waist up, naked. He’s not wearing his glasses, and he’s got a shy smile on his face.

“It doesn’t look like me,” Kirishima says.

“Of course it does!” Kou protests, snatching the picture back. “This is exactly how you look, cute and shy and serious.”

“I’m not cute,” Kirishima protests.

“Yes, you are. You just have to accept it,” Kou says, standing on tiptoes to kiss him on the nose.

“I’ve got to get my car before work,” Kirishima says, pulling away reluctantly. “Can I have your number?”

“Of course. When can I see you again?” Kou asks.

“I won’t finish work until at least two a.m. tonight,” Kirishima says. “I don’t have to go in until noon again tomorrow, though.”

Kou pulls out his phone and looks at his calendar. He frowns. “I have a client meeting tomorrow at nine. It’s in Sagamihara, so I won’t be back until at least noon.”

“Sorry. My hours are different than most people’s because of the nature of our business,” Kirishima says.

“It’s fine. I mostly make my own hours, so it’ll work out. What about Friday morning?”

Kirishima pulls out his own calendar. There are meetings scheduled from noon until midnight, and there’s a shipment due to arrive at the harbor at 3am Saturday. “The weekends are really busy for me,” he explains.

“Then you’ll need to recover on Monday. How about next Tuesday?” Kou asks.

“That’s nearly a week away.” Kirishima frowns. “I’ll see if I can get away at least for lunch or dinner sometime during the weekend. Message me when you’re free, and I’ll let you know when I can sneak away.”
Kou smiles. He follows Kirishima outside. “Are you parked near the bar?” he inquires.

“Yes, in a parking garage about a block or two away. How about you?” Kirishima asks, keeping up the ruse that he just ran into Kou at the bar.

“The same. Can we go there together?” Kou blushes. “I don’t really remember which direction we walked last night.”

Kirishima smiles. He goes to reach for Kou’s hand, but one of his neighbors exits his own apartment, so Kirishima leads the way silently. “Let’s take the train,” he suggests. “It’ll be faster.”

When they get to the parking garage, Kou says, “I’m in here.”

“Me too,” Kirishima says.

“Wow, it really does seem like fate. We both walked past about fifty other places to get to that hole in the wall,” Kou says.

“Well, I kept walking until I saw someone who looked too sad and lonely and cute to pass by.”

Kou blushes. “I was pretty lame last night, huh? Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m glad I met you.” Kirishima glances around and sees that they’re the only people in the parking garage. He leans in for a quick kiss.

They reach Kou’s motorcycle first, and Kou insists that Kirishima try sitting on it.

When he gets off, Kirishima gives Kou one more kiss and says, “Drive safely, Kou-san.”

“You, too, Kei-san.”

Kirishima watches Kou ride off before getting into the Sion company car. He doesn’t want to risk Kou recognizing the car that Asami and Takaba have been riding in.

Kirishima pulls into the Sion parking garage and sees Asami just getting out of his car. He rushes so that he can ride up the elevator with Asami.

“Good morning, Asami-sama,” he says, bowing.

“Good morning, Kirishima. You’re running late this morning.”

“I thought I’d finally take your advice to delegate more,” Kirishima says.

Asami smirks. “I see you put your time to good use. Was it an extraordinarily passionate woman or a passionate man?”

“What do you mean?” Kirishima asks. He can feel the blush crawling across his face.

“Your neck is covered with kiss marks. Your collar hides most of them, but I can see the tops of at least six,” Asami says.

“I apologize for my unprofessional demeanor, Asami-sama,” Kirishima says, bowing.

Asami waves off the apology. “It’s about time you enjoyed yourself. Just make sure to give the
details of your partner to Suoh for a background check.” It’s Sion policy that outside relationships – particularly of a romantic nature – are screened for senior employees, to help prevent infiltration by corporate spies (or worse).

“The person in question has already been cleared,” Kirishima replies.

Asami raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Really? Do I know them?”

“I don’t believe you do,” Kirishima says.

“Well, it’s still company policy that you verify it with Suoh. No exceptions, even for you or me,” Asami says.

Kirishima nearly laughs but manages to turn it into a cough. *Like you followed company policy when you let Takaba into your home after your third meeting when he was clearly on the ‘dangerous to Sion’ list.*

Asami chuckles. “I can tell what you’re thinking even behind that poker face. You’re right. But that’s why I consulted with you and Suoh, to mitigate the risk.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to Suoh-san,” Kirishima says. *Kazumi is surely going to tell Asami-sama, and I’m never going to hear the end of this.* He sighs.

“Lovesick already?” Asami smirks.

“That’s not it,” Kirishima says. “I only–” He stops abruptly. *If I tell him I just met the person last night, he’ll just tease me more and get way too curious about it.*

Asami raises his eyebrows.

“Never mind. You have a meeting with Suzuki-san of Z Corporation in fifteen minutes. Did you receive the report from Morita-kun?”

“Yes. Your staff is very capable, you know. You really need to learn to rely on them more so they feel useful.”

“Yes, Asami-sama. Thank you.” Kirishima bows again.

As soon as Asami is safely in his meeting, Kirishima browses through the security program, picking out nine additional profiles that need updating (either because they haven’t been updated recently or their interactions with Sion now require a more thorough check). He sends the list to Suoh with Kou’s name in the middle of the list.

He quickly gets a message back. “Thanks, Kei. Asami-sama told me to expect one file from you. You’ve been busy, haven’t you?”

*When did Asami-sama have time to tell Kazumi? I was hoping Kazumi would already be done with all the screenings by the time Asami-sama followed up with him.*

An hour later, Suoh drops by his office. “I’ve nearly finished updating the security profiles, but I had a quick question about Motomi Kou’s. Should I change his sexuality from ‘unknown’ to ‘homosexual’?”

Kirishima freezes. He fights to keep the blush from crawling over his face by multiplying thirty-
seven times forty-three in his head. “That—” he starts but stops when Suoh snaps a picture of him with his cell phone. “What are you doing?” he splutters.

Suoh is laughing. “That was even better than I thought it would be! I knew if I asked by e-mail, you’d find a way to dodge the question. I’m sending this to Ryuichi.”

“What are you sending me?” Asami asks as he passes by the office.

“Check out Kei’s face.” Suoh chortles, showing him the picture. “Apparently his partner last night was Motomi Kou, Takaba’s friend.”

“What makes you think that? I gave you a list of ten names to update.” Kirishima tries desperately to deflect.

“His was the only one that didn’t actually need updating. You’re too conscientious,” Suoh says.

“I didn’t want to waste your time,” Kirishima mutters. “Though you seem to have plenty to waste…”

“Motomi Kou…” Asami says.

“Have you met him?” Suoh asks.

“No. He’s featured in a number of Takaba’s wilder stories of his escapades, though. So that was his motorcycle?”

Kirishima’s face falls. “You noticed, Asami-sama?”

Asami gives him a look that says “of course.” “Why has he been following us?”

“He saw you with Takaba-kun and thought you looked intimate, and he was worried about his friend. Yesterday, he pieced together that you’re living together,” Kirishima answers as truthfully as he can without violating Kou’s confidence.

“Will he be a problem?”

“He said he’s happy for Takaba-kun. Given his own sexuality –” Suoh gives a short bark of laughter, but Kirishima presses on, “– I don’t think he’ll be any trouble at all.”

“Is he in love with Takaba?” Asami asks.

“No. He said they’re like brothers. Besides…” Kirishima trails off as his face flushes.

Suoh tugs on Kirishima’s collar and tries to peek at his neck. “Besides, you certainly have deflected his interest, eh? Sheesh, how many kiss marks did you get in one night?”

“Shut up, Kazumi,” Kirishima snaps, trying to pull away.

“I’m glad my cousin is finally growing up, but don’t go crazy, okay?” Suoh pats him on the back. “You do know how to protect yourself, right?”

“Shut. Up.” Kirishima mutters through gritted teeth, his face flaming. Jerk. Don’t embarrass me in front of the boss just because you’re seven years older than me.

“It’s important, especially when your partner’s a man. Right, Ryuichi?” Suoh presses.

“Leave him alone, Suoh,” Asami orders. His use of the last name indicates that playtime is over.
After Suoh leaves, Asami tells Kirishima in a low voice, “Knowing you, you’re going to research the heck out of it, and there’s a lot of misinformation out there – some of it’s dangerous, but most of it will just needlessly scare you. I’ll have a decent book delivered to your house, okay? Just don’t read too much. This is one of those things best learned by experience.” He laughs and claps Kirishima on the shoulder. “Welcome to the family.”

He turns to head out the door, but Kirishima calls out at the last second, “Um, Asami-sama?” Asami pauses. “Could you please not tell Takaba-kun about this?”

“Are you asking me to lie?”

Kirishima gulps. “No. Just… I pretended like I met Kou-san by chance. I thought it would be easier to figure out his motives if he didn’t know who I was.”

“I won’t bring it up myself, but if Takaba mentions it, I’m not going to deny knowing about it,” Asami says, striding from the room.

“Fair enough.”

Once he’s alone, Kirishima buries his head in his arms. When his phone beeps indicating a message, he groans, thinking it’s Suoh harassing him some more. But he looks and sees that it’s from Kou instead.

Hi! Sorry for disturbing you at work. I’m sending my schedule now. Hope we can meet again soon. Work hard.

Kirishima smiles. He texts back.

Hi. Thanks for the schedule. I hope we can meet soon, too – I’ll message you as soon as I figure out a time. Work hard.

He frowns. The message doesn’t sound very good, but he can’t figure out how to improve it, so he sends it anyway. He gets a reply a few seconds later.

I was actually hoping to run something by you…

What’s up?

Remember that friend I mentioned?

The one you just figured out is living with a guy?

Yeah… I really want to tell someone about meeting you, and I thought he’d be safe to tell. Would you mind?

Kirishima freezes. No. No, no. Definitely not. But his fingers type

No problem.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, yeah. I changed the name of the fic because the first chapter's title was fine for a chapter, but not great for a longer work. I stink at titles...
A Whole Latté Drama (Yellow)

Chapter Summary

Kou and Akihito meet for coffee, and Kou is anxious to talk about his new relationship - and finally learn about Akihito's. Will they figure out that Kou's Kei-san is Asami's secretary Kirishima?

Chapter Notes

I'm working on the next chapter of Bittersweet Valentine (I've got about half of it done). Both that chapter and this one were a struggle, so I kept switching back and forth between them whenever I got stuck (which often meant I would reread one, then the other, then the first one again, then go check AO3 for new fics, not read any of the new fics because I should be writing, then reread the second, then maybe finally get one more sentence written...).

This fic takes place in the current manga-universe (obviously not in the current chapter, because Akihito has been stuck at the penthouse for a year... but given how angsty Aki is here, I guess it takes place sometime in the current arc). I don't like angsty Aki, so maybe that's why this chapter was such a struggle -- but this fic wouldn't work in my Checklist universe, so we're stuck with angsty Aki.

Anyway. Only one Japanese term this time (I defined one in context because it's a pun, and the rest I think you can figure out on your own).

Geta: elevated wooden sandals

Note: When Kou talks about how clingy Akihito says Asami is, he's referencing the time Aki told him he didn't want to use the key Asami left on his door after stealing all of Aki's stuff.

Characters (mostly for my own reference):
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation (some random person Asami is meeting that currently has little relevance to the story; I just don't want to accidentally reuse the name, so I'm listing it...)
Kana: Takato's wife (same name, not necessarily same character as in my Checklist universe)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kou arrives at their usual café fifteen minutes before the scheduled time. Instead of their usual table by the window, he sits in the booth at the back corner.

Akihito arrives right on time. He heads toward their usual table, and Kou calls out to him.
“Why’d you sit back here?” Akihito asks curiously, sitting across from Kou.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” Kou says. He’s a little nervous for some reason, even though he knows that Akihito will accept him. Or should accept him, unless he’s a complete and utter hypocrite. Which Kou knows he isn’t.

Akihito grins as he eyes Kou carefully. “You finally got a girlfriend?” he guesses.

Kou flushes. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh, come on. Your neck is covered in kiss marks. In that t-shirt, it’s like you’re deliberately flaunting them.”

Kou’s hand flies to his neck. “I didn’t realize,” he says, turning even redder.

Akihito laughs. The waitress comes over and takes their drink orders. When she’s gone, Akihito asks, “So what’s her name?”

“Why did you say ‘finally’?” Kou asks, suddenly frowning.

Akihito shrugs. “You’re always saying ‘I’m not currently seeing anyone,’ but you’ve never once actually said you are seeing someone. I’ve never even really seen you flirt with anyone. Am I wrong?”

Kou shakes his head. “But we just met last night, so I don’t know if you can call Kei-san my…” He trails off. What word would he use for someone he were dating seriously? Not girlfriend. Boyfriend? Partner? Lover?

Akihito interrupts his train of thought. “Kei-san? Is that short for Keiko?”

“No.” Kou can feel his face heating up. “Kei-san is a man.”

“Oh.” Akihito blinks at him.

The waitress arrives with their drinks, and Akihito takes a big sip, chokes, and starts coughing.

“Is it really that shocking?” Kou asks.

“No. Yes!” Akihito splutters. “The fact that you just said it so bluntly like that… And considering how you were in high school and college…”

“What do you mean?” Kou asks.

“You were always talking about which girls were hot. And you even made fun of me that one time, inviting me to Ni-chôme so that I would tell the others when I didn’t know what it was!”

“I wasn’t making fun of you,” Kou says hotly. “You were the one who told other people so I had to play it off as a joke. Thanks to that, I only made it to Ni-chôme for the first time last night.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me what it was? Then I would have known to keep it a secret, and I would have gone with you,” Akihito says.

“I thought you knew! Did you grow up under a rock or something?”

“That’s mean.”
Kou buries his face in his hands. “Are you seriously telling me all those times I tried to bring this up with you, you actually were totally clueless? It wasn’t an act?”

Akihito shrugs. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you know me. I wouldn’t pretend.”

Kou sighs. “I’ve been trying to tell you for years. I’d basically given up on ever being able to, until…” He trails off. After a moment, he picks up his latte and takes a calming sip.

“Until today?” Akihito finishes for him. “What made you change your mind? And to come out with it so bluntly…”

“I figured out where you’re staying,” Kou explains.


“I was riding through Shinjuku, and I saw you when you arrived home last night.”

“I- that was-” Akihito fumbles.

“You don’t have to hide it. His name is Asami-san, right? He’s the one who left that key at your old place, right? Now I know why you were so reluctant to move in with him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Akihito asks, eyes narrowing.

Kou tries not to smile. “There’s no way you can afford half the rent of the broom closet in that building, and I can’t see you being happy as a kept man.”

“I’m not a kept man!” Akihito splutters. “I- I’m going to move as soon as I save up the moving expenses! This is just temporary, because of Ai’s stalker case. And I do all the chores and pay for the groceries!”

Kou starts laughing in earnest. “Isn’t that the definition of a kept man?” he teases.

“Shut up,” Akihito says, crumpling a napkin and tossing it at him. “I said it’s temporary!”

“You left my place six months ago,” Kou points out. “How long does it take to save the moving expenses?”

“I’ve been busy,” Akihito mutters.

Kou reaches out and pulls back the collar of Akihito’s open button-down shirt, revealing a row of kiss marks. “I see,” he snickers.

Akihito blushes. “At least I have the sense to hide them.”

“I didn’t know I have them!” Kou defends himself.

“Ever heard of a mirror?” Akihito asks.

“I was kind of in a rush this morning. Kei-san had to go to work.”

Akihito stares at him. “I thought you said you just met last night.”

“We did,” Kou says.

“And you stayed at a love hotel?”
“No. I missed the last train, so I stayed at Kei-san’s house.”

“So you just went home with some strange guy you met in Shinjuku?” Akihito chides.

“We talked for a long time, and he was really nice. I could tell he wasn’t a bad guy,” Kou protests.

“You’re lucky he wasn’t a host trying to con you out of all your money. You did check your wallet, didn’t you?”

“Aki! That’s really uncalled for. Kei-san is nice. Besides, I could tell he makes a lot more money than me. If anything, he’s the one who should have been worried about me conning him.”

“But you’re not like that,” Akihito points out.

“And neither is Kei-san. I really like him,” Kou says. “We’re meeting again… soon. He works a lot, but he wants to see me this weekend if he can get away from work.”

“What does he do?” Akihito asks curiously.

“He’s a salaryman, I think,” Kou says. He frowns slightly. “I didn’t ask too much about it, but he has a lot of responsibility, so I think he’s some kind of manager. He said his company manages some clubs… among other things.”

Akihito’s eyebrows shoot up. “That definitely sounds suspicious. You know a lot of clubs in Shinjuku are run by the yakuza, right?”

“Aki! He’s not yakuza! He’s like the total opposite! I swear, sometimes I think your job has made you really jaded.”

“I’m just trying to look out for you,” Akihito protests. “Maybe you should ask for his business card next time. Do you know his last name? I could do a background search for you.”

“I don’t want you to do a background search!” Kou exclaims. “Kei-san will tell me himself. Sheesh, Aki. Is it because he’s a guy? You’re seeing a guy, too.”

“That has nothing to do with it.” Akihito takes a sip of his drink. He sets it down and sighs. “Or maybe it does. You’re right; I didn’t act like this when Takato met Kana. But they met in college – not at some shady bar in Shinjuku. Anyway, I’m sorry.”

“I do know his last name,” Kou says in a conciliatory tone. He snickers softly. “Actually, I thought at first he gave me a fake name, but when we got to his apartment, I realized it actually was his last name.” He smiles.

“It sounded that fake?” Akihito asks. “What is it?” Maybe it is fake; it’s not like your nameplate can’t be a fake name. He chides himself for being so suspicious.

“It didn’t really sound fake, but it was the same name as the shōchū we were drinking, Kirishima.”

Akihito’s eyes bug out. “Kirishima?! He splutters.

“Do you know him?” Kou stares at him in surprise.

“Asami’s secretary is named Kirishima, but I don’t know his first name. But there are probably a lot of Kirishimas in Tokyo.” But I wonder how many there are that work for a company that manages clubs ‘among other things.’ Should I warn Kou? But I just said he was Asami’s secretary…”
Kou eyes him curiously. “That would be quite a coincidence. What does Asami-san do, anyway?”

“He’s the president of a company,” Akihito says vaguely. He searches desperately for a way to change the topic, but Kou asks the inevitable next question.

“Does his company manage clubs?”

Akihito shrugs. “I think… maybe? Probably. They own a lot of different businesses.”

“Kei-san did say that his boss is bisexual. That would be quite a coincidence!” Kou says.

“Why did his boss’s sexuality even come up?” Akihito asks. He looks a little hurt.

“Sorry. Did you not know? Or maybe we’re not talking about the same person? Anyway, I asked Kei-san if he’d ever been to Ni-chôme before, and he said he’d been there to entertain clients. When I asked what kind of company would do that, he said his company manages clubs and his boss is bisexual.” Kou shrugs.

Akihito sighs. “I always assumed Asami was bi.” He takes a sip then asks casually, “Did Kirishima-san say when the last time he entertained clients in Ni-chôme was?”

Kou shakes his head. “Don’t read too much into it, Aki. He took me to an izakaya. It seemed like the kind of place you’d have a work drinking party – it just happened to be in Ni-chôme.”

“What does your Kirishima-san look like?” Akihito asks.

Kou grins. “He’s really hot. He’s very tall –”

“You think everyone’s tall,” Akihito snarks. “You think I’m tall.”

“You are tall!!” Kou protests.

“I’m average. You’re just short.”

Kou pouts. “You’re 4cm above average. I’m average.”

“With geta on, maybe,” Akihito teases. “Anyway, is Kirishima-san taller than me?”

“I think so,” Kou says. “I come up to about his chin. He’s pretty muscular; he’s even got a six-pack.” He blushes slightly.

“TMI,” Akihito gripes, reddening as well.

“He’s got a normal salaryman haircut, pretty short, but it suits him. He wears glasses, but he’s got really pretty eyes the color of milk chocolate, and he’s got a shy smile. He’s really polite and kind. And conscientious. And thoughtful.” Kou smiles softly as he sips his coffee.

Akihito processes Kou’s description, filtering out the poetic language. It matches Asami’s Kirishima, alright – except for the shy smile. I didn’t know that guy knew how to smile. “It sounds like it might be the same guy, but that description could match a lot of people. How did you meet him?”

“We both ended up at the same bar just outside of Ni-chôme.”

“Did you go straight from…” Akihito trails off. How is he supposed to phrase this without sounding like he’s accusing Kou of being a stalker? He knows Kou wouldn’t do that.
“Straight from your place? I just happened to be on that street, and I was stuck in traffic. When I saw your hair, I did a double take. I didn’t call out because I was across the street,” Kou lies smoothly. “Anyway, yeah, after seeing you, I decided to try my courage one more time and finally go to Nichōme. While I was at the bar trying to get some liquid courage, Kei-san showed up. When I told him I was nervous, he walked me down the rest of the block.”

“Hmm,” Akihito says. He sips his drink. *I’ll just have to ask Asami about it.* “Just be careful, okay? Take it slow. Get to know him.”

“You’re worrying too much. Anyway, Kei-san said he wants to take it slow.”

Akihito raises his eyebrows at him. “Going home with him the first night is taking it slow?”

Kou blushes and whispers, “It’s not like that! We didn’t do anything!”

Akihito eyes Kou’s neck skeptically.

“Well, okay, we did a little, but…” Kou turns even redder.

Akihito holds up his hand. “I don’t need the details. Just… I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t,” Kou says, shrugging sheepishly. “Or maybe I will; I don’t know. But right now, I’m happy.”

“That’s good,” Akihito says.

“What about you?” Kou asks. “How long have you been together with Asami-san? And how did you meet a rich CEO?”

Akihito chokes on his drink and sprays it across the table.

Kou laughs. “That’s the second time I’ve seen someone do a real spit-take in as many days.”

Akihito glares at him as he wipes the table with a napkin.

“Though Kei-san was much cuter when he did it,” Kou says. “He got so embarrassed.”

Akihito narrows his eyes. “What made him do it?” he asks casually.

Kou stops laughing while he thinks. After a moment, he shakes his head and says, “I can’t remember. Anyway, don’t change the subject. You’ve been holding out on me. I want all the details.”

“You’re so nosy,” Akihito gripes. But after a few more minutes of Kou’s cajoling, he sighs and gives in. “I met Asami through work.” Kou’s eyebrows shoot up, and Akihito quickly amends, “A photoshoot.”

“Oh. At first I thought you were going to say he was bribing a politician or something. What was the photoshoot for?”

Akihito’s mind races. What can he say? If he says it’s for one of Asami’s company’s products, he’ll be asked what the company sells – and the only things he knows Asami’s company deals with are weapons and drugs. If he says it’s for an interview, Kou might look it up – and Asami’s picture doesn’t appear anywhere in the press.

Akihito shrugs. “I don’t remember,” he says, mimicking Kou.
Kou narrows his eyes in suspicion. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing! Why is it so hard to believe? You couldn’t even remember something from last night!”

“He really was bribing a politician, wasn’t he?” Kou says. “And you took one look at that gorgeous face and your journalistic integrity flew right out the window.”

“I would never compromise my journalistic integrity!” Akihito protests hotly.

Kou softens. “I know. I was just teasing. It’s fine if you don’t want to tell me. At least tell me how long you’ve been together, though.”

Akihito shrugs. “I don’t know.” Kou rolls his eye, so Akihito clarifies, “We met about a year and a half ago, but we had a… slow start. Even now, I’m still not sure exactly what we are.” *That’s one way to put it.*

Kou gapes at him. “But you’re living together.”

“I told you, that’s just because of the stalker case.”

“I kind of feel sorry for Asami-san. No wonder he’s clingy. If he weren’t, you’d probably think he was just a friend.”

Akihito snorts. “If he weren’t so clingy, I wouldn’t even be his friend.”

“That’s really harsh, Aki,” Kou says, staring at him. “Are you secretly a tsundere?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Akihito says dismissively.

“I won’t know if you don’t tell me,” Kou says quietly. *Even though we’re the same, he’s still shutting me out. I guess maybe I’m not as good a friend to him as he is to me.*

“Don’t do that, Kou,” Akihito says plaintively. “Look, I’m sorry. Asami came on way too strong at the beginning, and I couldn’t stand him. Even now, I think he just likes the chase. If I give in to him, he’ll get bored. So I just… don’t give in.” He grins cheekily.

“That’s kinda sad, Aki. You’ve been living together for six months now, right? Give yourself some credit.”

“We belong to different worlds. His colleagues make sure I’m aware of that every chance they get. Including Kirishima-san,” Akihito mumbles.

Kou raises his eyebrows. “Kei-san is nice. He wouldn’t do that.”

“How well do you really know him?” Akihito challenges. “Of course we’re not sure it’s the same guy…” he adds doubtfully. *I’m sure, but I can’t tell Kou why I’m sure. If he’s playing Kou…*

Kou finishes his latté. “I still feel like you’re not telling me something important, but I guess I’m used to that.” He shrugs. “At least I can talk to you about this stuff. Right?” He casts Akihito a questioning look.

“Of course you can,” Akihito says, smiling.

“Great! Then I have a question. When you’re initiating things, how can you make sure you’re not going too fast for your partner?”
Akihito simply stares as his face progresses through fifty shades of red and into purple territory. He buries his face in the crook of his elbow on the table. His voice is muffled as he says, “No, never mind. You can’t.”

“Why? What’s wrong? You just said we can talk about it. Who else am I going to ask?” Kou asks.

“I don’t know. Not me,” Akihito avers.

“Aki-chan,” Kou whines.

“Don’t call me chan! And I don’t know, okay?”

“Oh. Oh! Ohhhhhhh,” Kou says. “So you’re a bottom? I guess that would make sense, given your personality and how pushy you say Asami-san is.”

Kou’s not quite sure if he understands Akihito’s response correctly, given that his head is still buried in his elbow, but he thinks he hears, “Kou, if you say another word, I will kill you. I will filet you, removing your organs one at a time, starting with your testicles and ending with your still-beating heart.”

“You’ve played way too many video games, Aki. But I’m sorry for embarrassing you. Anyway, how would you want Asami-san to treat you?”

After a long pause, during which Kou pretends to take several sips from his empty cup, Akihito finally says into his elbow, “I don’t know. Just pay attention to how he’s feeling. The fact that you’re even thinking to ask that question means you’re probably fine.”

“Thanks, Aki. Hey, so Kei-san knows about your relationship with Asami-san then? Well, assuming they’re the same person… Though I don’t think Kei-san would be mean to you like that… But can I ask him about it?”

Akihito shrugs, still burying his face. “You’re going to do whatever you want, anyway. Why am I friends with you again?”

“Cheer up, Aki. It’s no big deal. I don’t know why you’re so embarrassed. It’s just me, and you know I won’t tell anyone. I can just ask what Kei-san’s company is. Where does Asami-san work?”

“Sion.”

“Did you say ‘Shio’ [salt]? It’s hard to understand you with your head buried like that.”

Akihito lifts his head – about a fraction of an inch. “Sion,” he says louder.

Kou looks it up on his phone. “Oh, hey, they own Club Dracaena? Can you get us in there?”

“Why would you want to go there?” Akihito asks.

“A lot of young celebrities hang out there. Like the guys from Charlie’s Friends.”

“You like that band?”

“Their music is crap, but the guys are H.O.T.” Kou notes that Akihito’s ears are gradually growing less red.

“You some kind of shota?”
“Hey! They’re all in their twenties.”

“I thought you liked the salaryman look,” Akihito teases.

“I don’t have a type,” Kou says, shrugging. “Besides, I think personality is more important than looks.”

“But you want to go to Dracaena to see the boys in a J-pop band?”

“There’s no harm in looking,” Kou points out.

“You’ll probably be disappointed,” Akihito tells him. “I had a scoop tied to Dracaena, and everyone there looked like a stuck-up jerk.”

Kou shrugs. “Maybe. But if you’re not talking to them, what does it matter?”

“Besides, the manager is a real piece of work. Asking Asami to get us in would probably involve interacting with him, and believe me, it’s not worth it.” Akihito sits up again, finally distracted from his embarrassment.

“He can’t be that bad.”

“Knowing him, he would have the security throw us out – after roughing us up – and then later apologize for their roughness, as if he hadn’t ordered it.”

Kou gapes at him. “That’s really specific. Has that actually happened to you?”

Akihito sighs. “I was on a scoop.”

“And this guy works for your boyfriend? Why didn’t you tell Asami-san about it?”

“Like I could do that!” Akihito protests. “I can’t mix work with – with – with whatever Asami and I have. I can take care of myself.”

Kou rolls his eyes. “Oh, yeah. Like that time you got taken to Hong Kong or wherever.”

Akihito flushes. “Hey. I came back. Anyway, that was an extreme situation.”

“And having the crap beaten out of you at some club isn’t?”

“They didn’t break anything. Not even my camera. They just erased the pictures, and I lost the scoop.” Akihito shrugs.

“This is why me and Takato worry about you,” Kou says. He glances at his watch. “Hey, I’ve got to get back to work. I’ve got a deadline tomorrow. But we’ll catch up again soon, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Just don’t embarrass me like that again, okay? And it’s your treat today as payback, right?” Akihito asks.

“Fine,” Kou says, pulling out his wallet. “Er, actually, Aki…” He looks up, panic-stricken. “Can you cover the bill? All my money’s gone!”

“Seriously?” Aki asks, wide-eyed. *I thought it really was Asami’s Kirishima. Did Kou actually run into a grifter instead?*

Kou starts laughing. “Man, I really got you! You’re so gullible!”
Akihito gives him a good punch on the arm before leaving.

Chapter End Notes

Heights in Viewfinder: In Naked Truth 1, on the first page you can clearly see that Akihito and Takato are about the same height while Kou is about three to four inches shorter, but by Naked Truth 4, Akihito is substantially shorter than both Kou and Takato (when he hugs them, and then is standing next to them). I chose to go with Naked Truth 1 as canon, because Akihito is listed in the character book as 175cm (nearly 5’9”), which is more than an inch and a half (nearly 4cm) taller than the average Japanese man.

According to the character book, Asami is nearly 6’1”, only 4 inches or 10 cm taller than Akihito, even though they’re often drawn as Akihito only coming up to Asami’s shoulder. Kirishima (if that’s him) is shown as only a few inches taller than Akihito in chapter 1, and in Naked Truth 16 (Hong Kong 11), Akihito is shown as coming up to his chin – so Kirishima is shorter than Asami but taller than Akihito. I split the difference and made him about 5’11” (180cm).

Also, according to the character book, Kirishima is Asami’s “First Assistant,” not his secretary – but I doubt Akihito ever asked about his specific title.
Interlude (Purple)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima is flying high after he and Kou set up their first date. But when Kirishima discovers that Akihito figured out that he's Kou's new love interest and Kou suddenly stops contacting Kirishima, will their relationship even get off the ground?

Chapter Notes

I took a break from this story to write the Checklist universe Valentine's story, but I do plan to update this one occasionally. (I've already started on my next Checklist universe fic -- Akihito's cat photo exhibit -- so updates here will continue to be sporadic. I have to be in the right headspace to write in a universe where Asami and Akihito are still dysfunctional.)

Warning for mild language in this chapter.

Vocabulary:
- fuku-shacho: Kirishima's job title (basically, Asami's right-hand man)
- arigatō: thank you
- Torishige: restaurant in Shinjuku
- Showa Kinen Park

Characters (mostly for my own reference):
- Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
- Morita: Kirishima's assistant
- Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
- Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After his assistant gives his report, Kirishima asks him, “How would you feel about coordinating the Suzuki summit on Saturday?”

Morita’s face lights up. “Really, fuku-shacho-san? I can do it!”

Kirishima smiles at him. “Good. I’ll inform Asami-sama that you’ll be in charge.”

Kirishima’s office phone rings. It’s the receptionist announcing that lunch from Torishige restaurant has been delivered.

Kirishima arranges Asami’s lunch carefully on a tray then knocks on Asami’s door.

“Come in.”

“Your lunch is ready, Asami-sama,” Kirishima says. He sets the tray on Asami’s desk and bows.
“Thank you, Kirishima.”

“Asami-sama, I’ve asked Morita-kun to coordinate the Suzuki summit Saturday afternoon. I was wondering if you required my attendance there as well.”

Asami smirks at him. “You have it bad, huh? Go ahead and take Saturday morning off, too. I won’t need you until the Tanihara meeting at six.”

“Thank you, Asami-sama.” Kirishima bows again.

“Oh, and I had a book delivered to your house. It should arrive tomorrow.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Asami-sama.” Kirishima can feel the blush creeping across his face as he recollects Asami promising to get him a book when he found out about Kirishima’s budding romance with Kou.

“Nonsense. Knowing you, you would have started reading everything you can about it on the internet. Or worse, stopped by a bookstore and picked up the first BL manga you saw and tried to learn from that.”

“You and Kazumi are treating me like I’m some naïve little kid,” Kirishima mutters.

“Everyone starts off as a beginner. It doesn’t really matter when you start,” Asami says. “You know I’m always here for advice if you need it. But I know you’re not the type who would feel comfortable asking me for advice.”

“Actually…” Kirishima starts before he can stop himself.

Asami raises his eyebrows.

“Do you have any recommendations of where we could go?” Kirishima’s face is on fire, but a little embarrassment now in front of Asami might save him more embarrassment later in front of Kou when he can’t figure out where to take him on their date.

“Business hotels are easier than love hotels. Many love hotels don’t like two men sharing a room.”

Kirishima’s face flushes redder. “That’s not what I meant. I mean – before –” Of course Asami took it the wrong way; Kirishima should have expected it, given that Asami’s definition of a date consists of one thing only.

“A restaurant with a private room.”

“What else?” Kirishima asks. A meal would only take a couple of hours at most.

Asami furrows his brow in confusion.

“Maybe a movie? A museum?” Kirishima guesses wildly.

“Two guys together somewhere like that might attract attention,” Asami points out.

“Oh.” Kirishima’s face falls.

“Of course, you don’t have to worry what other people think. It’s none of their business, anyway. But knowing you, you probably wouldn’t feel very comfortable at places like that.”

“Somewhere more secluded?” Kirishima asks hopelessly.
Asami shrugs. “It’s not something I worry about. If I want seclusion, I go home.” He picks up his chopsticks, and Kirishima excuses himself.

He sits at his own desk after carefully arranging his lunch. He picks up his chopsticks, sets them down, and picks up his phone.

My boss is letting me go in late Saturday. I don’t have to start until 6. Do you want to do something?

Sure. What did you have in mind?

I don’t know. Lunch... And I don’t know what else. What do you want to do?

I knew you were going to say that. ( ̄ω ̄；)

Kirishima has helped Asami decipher numerous kaomoji received from Takaba, so he quickly goes to his best source for deciphering them. Cute and smug? Okay...While he’s thinking of a response, he receives another text.

I’ll show you something you never knew you wanted to see before.

Like what?

I don’t know. What do you want to see? \(\triangleleft\(°▽°\) /

( ー ‘o’ ー) ■

... ▼

I don’t know what that is...

It’s a motorcycle zooming down the highway.

Have you ever been to Showa Kinen Park?

No.

Do you like nature?

Sure.

Then let’s go there. We’ll take my bike.

Can we both fit on it?

Of course. ♥(つ’ω’つ)(’ω’)/♥

Is that us on the motorcycle?

Yeah. Sorry. My friends say I use too many kaomoji. I’ll try to cut back.

It’s fine. I’m sorry for not understanding all of them.

Have you ever used one?
They’re fun. You can show how you’re feeling when you’re too shy to say it.

Okay.

Do I need to get a helmet for Saturday?

No. I’ll borrow one from a friend for you.

I can pack a bento for us.

Oops. I mean, “Yay, Kei-san’s cooking is delicious.”

I understood that one.

Yay! You used a kaomoji! (■■■)

I’ve got to get back to work soon. Let’s meet at noon Saturday.

Sounds great. I’ll pick you up at your place.

Kirishima sets down his phone and picks up his chopsticks with one hand and a report with the other.

“Did something good happen yesterday, fuku-shacho-san?” Morita asks from the hallway where he’s passing by.

Kirishima gapes at him.

“You’ve smiled more today than I’ve ever seen you smile since I started working here,” Morita explains.

“I’m sorry I’m usually so gloomy,” Kirishima says.

“You’re not. You just look really happy today. Whatever it is, I’m glad for you,” Morita says.

“Thank you.”

After several back-to-back afternoon meetings, Kirishima finally gets a short break at 7pm. He checks his phone and notices several texts from Kou.

Hope you had a good lunch. I bought mine at the convenience store... again. (^_^;)

Lunchtime is over. Back to work. Need to finish preparing for the big meeting tomorrow. Work hard.

I bought rice at the store! I’m going to try to cook it myself for dinner.

Success! (◉‿◉)

Attached to that text is a picture of a steaming bowl of rice.
Of course the sides were still bought at the store…

Attached is a picture of karaage chicken and two vegetable sides.

Back to work now. Nearly done with the presentation.

Work hard. Hope you don’t get too tired working so late tonight.

Kirishima texts back.

I’m sorry I missed your messages. I’ve been stuck in meetings all afternoon.

Just as he finishes typing another text, he gets a response.

No worries. I hope all my texts didn’t bother you while you were working.

I hope that rice was as delicious as it looked.

Kirishima starts typing a response to Kou’s new text, but before he can send it, he gets another one.

It was! Thanks for teaching me how to cook it. ( •͈͈•͈͈) anguish.

It’s fine. I keep my phone silenced.

You type really fast.

Sorry.

We can make the bento together Saturday so I can teach you how to cook more things.

Okay! … What time are you working until Friday night?

Kirishima hesitates. It’s not a good idea to tell Kou too much about his work schedule. He did admit that Sion owns several clubs, and most clubs are open until the trains start running again, but still… He does some quick mental calculations. He should be home by 5:30am at the latest. If he gets four hours of sleep, he could meet Kou at ten. If he pretends he wants a more typical six to seven hours of sleep…

Two.

Oh. Then we really shouldn’t meet until noon, huh? You need to get lots of sleep.

How long does it take to get a bento ready?

I was thinking we could meet at ten.

If I set the rice cooker timer, we could cook the rest in less than 30 minutes.

10 wouldn’t give you much sleep! The park is only 30 minutes away. Noon should still give us plenty of time.

Alright. I will see you at noon then. I’ll teach you how to make your own karaage chicken.

Morita coughs. “Fuku-shacho-san? It’s time for the next meeting.”

“Oh! Thank you, Morita-kun.” Kirishima hurriedly texts a final message.
Thursday morning, Kirishima is ironing his clothes when Kou calls. He answers it. “Hello. How was your meeting?”

“It went great. After I got home yesterday morning, I had a sudden inspiration, and the clients really liked the new design. I only have to make a few modifications.”

“That’s great,” Kirishima says. He continues ironing.

“Are you getting ready for work?”

“Yes, I’m ironing my clothes.” Kirishima finishes ironing his shirt. “I’m going to put you on speaker.” He puts his shirt on.

“Are you putting your shirt on?” Kou guesses.

“Yes.” Kirishima blushes.

“I don’t want to bother you when you’re trying to get ready. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Kirishima’s blush deepens. “My voice isn’t anything special. But you’re not bothering me.”

Kou chuckles. “It’s special to me. Anyway, let me know if I bug you too much. Since I usually work alone and don’t get to talk to anyone, I probably text too often.”

“It’s fine. As long as you don’t mind me waiting to reply until I have time.”

“Of course! Don’t feel like you have to respond to every single one, either.”

Kirishima looks in the mirror and adjusts his tie.

“Are you almost dressed?” Kou asks.

“Nearly.”

“Darn.” Kou laughs again. “Sorry, did I say that out loud? I was just imagining you –” He suddenly stops talking.

“Imagining me what?” Kirishima asks.

“Sorry, I’m still in Sagamihara, just outside the building where my meeting was. One of the sales reps just came out, and I didn’t want him to overhear me saying I was imagining you naked.”

“Kou-san!” Kirishima splutters. You haven’t even seen me totally naked yet. Just what are you imagining in the middle of the day?

“Sorry. Does that bother you? I guess it would be more accurate to say I was imagining you shirtless.”

“That’s not any better!” Kirishima protests.

“Fine. I’m sorry, then. Is your suit today black as well?”
“Yes, how did you know?”

“You were wearing a black suit when we met, and you wore one yesterday as well. Do you have any other colors?”

“No,” Kirishima admits. He double-checks the papers in his briefcase. He secures the clasps and heads to the genkan, where he sits on a bench and slips his shoes on with a shoehorn.

“That’s totally fine!” Kou exclaims. “Black suits you. But you’d look great with a pink tie.”

“Pink?” Kirishima chokes.

“Yeah. You have to be pretty manly to pull off pink, but I think you could do it.”

“If you say so. I’ve got to head to work now,” Kirishima says.

“Yeah, I’ve got to head back, too. Thanks for chatting with me. Have a good day, Kei-san.”

“You, too, Kou-san. Do your best.”

“I’ll text you later. And if you want…” Kou trails off.

“Yes?” Kirishima asks.

“Sorry. Maybe I’m being too pushy. If you want to talk on the phone again, feel free to call me whenever. Well, before midnight. Or anytime tomorrow.”

“Okay. Have a good day.”

*If I called him, what would we have to talk about?* Kirishima wonders. *It’d be awkward if I can’t think of anything to say. How does the conversation flow from him so easily?*

Friday, Kirishima drives to Asami’s penthouse to pick him up. He watches through the lobby windows as Asami exits the elevator with Takaba. As they walk towards the door, Kirishima opens the door for Asami and bows. Out of the corner of his eye, Kirishima sees Takaba shoot him a dirty look before climbing onto his motorcycle and driving away.

“You’re busted,” Asami says casually as he slides into the backseat.

“What do you mean, Asami-sama?” Kirishima asks, freezing.

A car honks behind them, and he hurriedly closes the door and slips back into the driver’s seat.

As he pulls away from the curb, Asami lowers the privacy glass and explains. “Last night, Takaba asked me what your intentions are towards his friend. Apparently they met for coffee Wednesday. You gave Motomi your real name?”

“It slipped out,” Kirishima explains. “But he thought it was a fake name until he saw my—” He stops abruptly. There’s no need for Asami to know that Kou spent the night at Kirishima’s apartment.

“Did you give him a business card?” Asami asks.

“No…” Kirishima says slowly.
“Did you show him your license?”

“No…”

“So he saw your nameplate at your apartment. I’ve always thought it was dangerous to have a nameplate.”

Kirishima looks at Asami in the rearview mirror. Sure enough, he’s wearing his usual smirk. Kirishima decides to change the subject before Asami presses the issue of what exactly Kou was doing in Kirishima’s apartment.

“So what did Takaba-kun say about me to Motomi-san?” Kirishima asks.

“It’s interesting that you’re calling him ‘san.’ You know that he and Takaba are the same age.”

“He’s –” Kirishima stops abruptly. He was about to say Kou was more mature than Takaba. *Takaba is Asami-sama’s lover. You can’t call him immature to Asami-sama, even indirectly,* he chides himself.

“Kirishima.” Asami’s tone is chilly. Kirishima knows that he has to finish the sentence. Somehow.

“He’s practically a stranger. So I call him ‘san.’”

“I didn’t realize you and Takaba were so intimately acquainted for you to call him ‘kun.’”

*I usually don’t call him anything. He’s just a brat I’m constantly having to babysit.* “I’m sorry, Asami-sama. I meant ‘Takaba-san.’”

Asami chuckles. “I admit, that does sound weird. Call him whatever you’d like. I’m just giving you a hard time.”

Kirishima grits his teeth. He’s not sure he’ll ever understand Asami’s sense of humor. “And Takaba-san told Motomi-san… what, that I work for you?”

Asami finally relents. “He said he mentioned that there’s a ‘Kirishima’ that works for me, yes. But that’s all he told Motomi. He did give me a message for you, though.”

“What is it?” Kirishima asks, surprised.

Asami stares out the window. “I believe his exact words were, ‘Tell that glasses guy that if he hurts my friend, I’ll kick his ass.’”

“I don’t intend to,” Kirishima says.

“That’s what I told Takaba.”

“Really?”

“I believe my exact words were, ‘Don’t worry. Kirishima is apparently head over heels for him. If your friend hurts him, I’ll kick your ass.’”

“Seriously?” Kirishima stares at Asami so intently in the mirror, he nearly rear-ends the car in front of them. He slams on the brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision. “Sorry, Asami-sama.”

Kirishima inwardly groans. *At least Kou-san doesn’t know I followed him for work… Or at least it doesn’t sound like he knows.* He decides to avoid the whole subject unless Kou brings it up – and play dumb if Kou *does* bring it up. He’s worked in the underworld long enough to know that the easiest way to get caught is to accidentally say too much. But he’s also worked in the underworld long enough for deception to be second nature to him.

They ride in silence until they’re nearly out of Tokyo. Just when Kirishima thinks Asami must have fallen asleep in the back seat, Asami casually asks, “So, where are you going on your date tomorrow?”

“Showa Kinen Park,” Kirishima answers automatically.

“Are you going to have a nice picnic?” Asami teases.

“Yes, actually. We’re packing a bento together,” Kirishima says. *There’s nothing wrong with having a nice, old-fashioned date, and Asami-sama can think whatever he wants about it.*

“Sounds nice, if you don’t mind the bugs,” Asami says.

Kirishima relaxes. Maybe Asami isn’t making fun of him, after all. “I don’t mind them. I was a cub scout.”

Asami laughs.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“I was just wondering what your scout leaders would think of you now.”

Kirishima chuckles, too. “From the outside, they’d probably be proud of me, thinking I was still living up to the oath. I guess I mostly am – except for the ‘morally straight’ part.”

“Are you taking the BMW?” Asami asks casually. Kirishima can use the company car for personal use, as well. He knows that Asami is indirectly warning him to be cautious about Kou figuring out Kirishima was driving the car the night Kou followed Takaba and Asami home.

“No, we’re taking Kou-san’s motorcycle.”

“Kou-san?” Asami snickers.

Kirishima blushes when he realizes his mistake. Earlier, he told Asami he didn’t know Kou well enough to call him ‘kun.’ Now he’s suddenly calling him by his first name? He decides not to say anything at all.

“Have you ever ridden a motorcycle before?” Asami asks.

“No. I didn’t think it would be a particularly useful skill. Have you?”

“No. Is this some kind of midlife crisis?”

“Is that what Takaba-san is?” Kirishima retorts.

Asami doesn’t answer right away. Kirishima glances in the rear-view mirror, but Asami doesn’t look angry, just amused. “Maybe. But it’s certainly a fun one. I hope you enjoy yours.”
After a long day of inspections at various facilities, Kirishima and Asami finally head back to Tokyo as the sun is setting. Once inside Club Sion Building, Kirishima checks his phone. Kou hasn’t sent a text since two, which is unusual considering his pattern for the last couple of days. *Did Takaba tell him too much about me after all?*

Kirishima apologizes for his lack of response and replies to a few of Kou’s texts from lunchtime. He’s interrupted by Morita knocking on his door, signaling it’s time to make the rounds of the club. He sends one final text.

*Sorry, I have to get back to work now. I hope you are having a good evening.*

At nine o’clock, Kirishima finally gets a short, late dinner break. He orders food to be delivered from the club restaurant to his office. While he’s waiting for his food to arrive, he closes his office door. *Should I text Kou-san again? What should I say? Should I ask what Takaba said about me? No, that would just imply that I did something wrong, and I don’t think I did. Besides, I won’t be able to tell what he’s thinking from some words on a screen. If I could see his face or at least hear his voice…* He takes a deep breath and dials Kou’s number.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Kou-san. It’s Kei. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

“Kei-san, it’s good to hear from you.” Kou’s tone is distant and cool.

“Is something the matter?” Kirishima asks.

“No. I’m fine,” Kou says.

“Did I do something to offend you?” Kirishima worries. “I apologize for not answering your texts sooner. We had to make visits to several of our locations and customers today, and I spent most of the day driving my boss around.”

“You said you were going to be busy. That’s why I tried not to text you too much today,” Kou says.

“Oh.” Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief. “I thought maybe you were mad that I wasn’t responding quickly enough.”

Kou lets out a sigh of his own. “Somehow it makes me feel better to hear that you were worried. I was beginning to think that maybe I was the only one who wanted to continue deepening our relationship.”

There’s a knock on Kirishima’s office door. “Hang on a moment,” he tells Kou. He sets his phone down on his desk. A waiter is at the door with his dinner. “Set it there,” Kirishima says, gesturing to his desk. As soon as the waiter leaves, Kirishima closes the door and picks up the phone again. “Sorry about that. I’m back.”

“Welcome back. Do you have to get back to work now?” Kou asks.

“No. That was my dinner arriving. I have fifteen minutes left for my dinner break.”

“Oh, then I should let you go so you can eat!” Kou exclaims.

“I—” Kirishima starts then stops abruptly. *I can’t ask him to stay on the phone with me while I eat. No one wants to listen to someone else eating.*
“Go ahead,” Kou presses.

“I— I was just going to say that I enjoy reading your texts. It makes me feel closer to know what’s going on in your day, and they provide nice breaks to my day, even if it’s only a few seconds at a time.”

“Again with the smooth lines so easily,” Kou grumbles.

“I mean it,” Kirishima says. “I missed your texts today. I’m sorry. I know that’s very selfish of me to say when I’m not even able to reply to your texts until much later, and I never have anything interesting to say myself.”

“That’s not true,” Kou says. “I enjoy reading your responses very much. You’re so knowledgeable about so many different things.”

“I know I’m a pretty boring person,” Kirishima objects. “I can’t really help it; I’ve always been this way.”

“You’re not boring at all,” Kou says. “Besides, my texts are just about boring stuff, anyway. I mean, I send you pictures of my lunch. That’s not very interesting.”

“I just said I like reading about your life,” Kirishima points out.

“Well, I’m the same. Just tell me whatever you’re doing. It makes me feel like I’m getting to know you a little better.”

“Okay,” Kirishima agrees. Though I certainly can’t tell him what I’m doing at the harbor tonight. Then again, it’s not like I’m going to text him in the middle of the night, anyway.

“I’m really going to let you go now so you can eat,” Kou says. “Send me a picture of your dinner, okay? I can enjoy it vicariously through you.”

“Did you get yours at the convenience store again?” Kirishima asks.

“No. McDonald’s. That’s even worse.”

Kirishima chuckles. “Fine. I’ll send you a picture. And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, tomorrow!” Kou says happily.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is going to be the first date! I probably won’t get to write it until the end of the month (at the earliest).
Shopping Prelude in E-flat minor (Pink)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima and Kou's first date gets off to a rocky start as Kirishima oversleeps and the men discover their differences and face the judgment of others about their budding relationship. Will they be able to overcome these challenges and have a good time?

Chapter Notes

Characters (mostly for my own reference):
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Itoh: manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kirishima stumbles into his apartment at 7:30 in the morning. He glances at the clock and groans. The supermarket doesn’t open for another half hour, and he needs to sleep now – which means he’ll have to get up in two and a half hours so he’ll have time to pick up groceries for bento-making before Kou arrives.

He unbuttons his shirt from the bottom up, awkwardly undoing the last few buttons with just his left hand. He tugs the left sleeve down with his left hand and wriggles out of it. Once the shirt is nearly off, Kirishima gingerly removes the right sleeve, taking care not to disturb the bandage wrapped around his elbow.

He tosses the shirt in the trash, then reaches in to make sure the knife gash and bloodstains aren’t on the surface.

He was careless tonight.

Kirishima awakens to his phone buzzing. He fumbles for his glasses, and the bulk of the bandage reminds him of his injury when he bends his right elbow to put them on. He glances at the clock as he snatches up his phone.

Shoot.

It’s 11:15. He missed his alarm. That hasn’t happened since… ever. Did I even remember to set it last night?

There’s no time to worry about that now, though. He answers the phone, his voice thick with sleep.
“Kirishima.”

“Kei, were you still sleeping? Sorry, I thought you’d already be getting ready for your date. It starts at noon, right?”

Kirishima inwardly groans. He should have known Asami would tell Suoh about his date. “I forgot to set the alarm. Is everything resolved?”

“Yes. You have nothing to worry about. I was just calling to let you know that, and to say have fun on your date.”

Kirishima is confused. If his arm weren’t throbbing, he’d wonder whether he were still dreaming. Why is Kazu-nii being nice to me? He shakes his head. He must still be half-asleep to even think of Suoh with that honorific; he hasn’t called his cousin that since middle school. “Thanks,” he says hesitantly, still suspecting he’s being teased.

“You’ve got condoms, right?” Suoh asks.

“Kazumi!” Kirishima protests. “You’re such a jerk.”

“What do you mean? I’m just making sure you’re ready for your date. Do you need me to get anything for you?”

“No, thanks. Thanks for waking me up. Get some sleep.”

After hanging up, Kirishima eyes his wardrobe. He has two types of clothes: suits and workout clothes. Neither is appropriate for a picnic date. He sighs, selecting the black pair of pants from his most casual suit along with a blue dress shirt. He’ll leave the top button undone.

He wraps his right arm in plastic wrap, securing it to his arm with tape so he can take a shower. Once in the bathroom, he swallows an acetaminophen tablet for the slight fever he’s developed.

Buttoning his shirt one-handed is difficult, especially since he’s using his left hand, and by the time he’s dressed, it’s already 11:45. He’s already in the genkan slipping on his shoes when he remembers the rice.

Shoot.

He takes off his shoes and heads back to the kitchen, reluctantly pulling his phone out of his pocket. He dials Kou’s number, but he doesn’t answer. He’s probably already on his way and can’t hear it.

Kirishima leaves a message. “Hi, Kou-san, this is Kei. I’m sorry; I overslept this morning. I don’t have any ingredients for making the bento, but I guess we can go to the store together once you get here.”

After he hangs up, he washes the rice and starts cooking it. He usually eats brown rice for the health benefits, but he’s glad he keeps some white rice at home. It’ll taste nicer in the bento, and it cooks fast enough that it’ll be ready by the time the rest of the bento is.

The intercom buzzes just as Kirishima finishes prepping the rice. He glances at his watch on his way. 11:49. He’s very punctual.

Kirishima hits the button on the intercom panel to open the garage for Kou. A few minutes later, the doorbell rings, and he opens the door. Kou is standing there holding his phone to his ear.
“Hi, Kei-san! Sorry I’m early. I guess I was too excited. I just got your message.” Kou grins sheepishly as he hangs up the phone.

“I figured you couldn’t hear it ring because you were already on your motorcycle.” Kirishima opens the door wider and gestures Kou inside. “Do you want to go to the store now, or can I get you something to drink first?”

Kou smiles. “I’m ready to go if you are. But first…” He stands on his tiptoes and kisses Kirishima on the lips.

Five minutes later, they’re walking down the stairs. “Should we take my bike?” Kou asks.

“No. There’s a small market on the next block where we can get enough to make the bento.”

They walk side by side. Occasionally, the backs of their hands brush together, and it gives Kirishima a tingly feeling each time. He’s brought back to reality by the odd looks they receive from some of the elderly housewives doing their weekly shopping, and he can’t wait to get back to the privacy of his apartment.

“Don’t worry about what they think,” Kou says quietly when they turn down a relatively deserted aisle. “There’s nothing wrong with grocery shopping.”

“I just don’t like being stared at,” Kirishima tries to explain. How can Kou-san be so unbothered by it? Especially when he was so scared to even set foot in Ni-chôme.

Kou offers to pay for the groceries, but Kirishima doesn’t want to let him.

“You’re doing the cooking; the least I can do is pay for the food.”

“We’re doing the cooking together,” Kirishima corrects. “Besides, you’re paying for the gasoline to get to the park – unless you’ll let me fill up your tank for you.”

“No, you don’t have to do that,” Kou protests.

“See? So let me pay for the food. We won’t use it all, anyway, so I’ll be able to cook again with some of it.” It’s obvious I make more money than Kou-san. I wish he’d just let me pay for everything, but I don’t want to insult him.

Kou reluctantly agrees, and they head back to Kirishima’s place. When they get there, Kou says, “Let’s stop by my bike and bring up the gear. I hope it fits you. My friend Yoshida is about your size, but it’s hard to tell.”

Kou hands a helmet to Kirishima and pulls out a motorcycle jacket from the compartment under his seat. As soon as they get upstairs, Kou holds up the jacket for Kirishima to try on. Kirishima slides his right arm in first, grateful that he won’t have to reveal his injury. The jacket is a little tight in the shoulders, but it fits.

Kirishima’s phone rings. It’s Asami. “I’m sorry, it’s my boss,” he says, stepping into his bedroom and closing the door behind him. He answers the phone. “Asami-sama.”

“Kirishima. You have an appointment with Kurebayashi-sensei at 7:30 this evening.”

Kirishima sighs. “It was barely a scratch. I’m fine.”
Regardless, it’s policy.”

Anytime a Sion employee is violently injured, they have to be cleared by a psychologist before returning to work. It’s a good policy, but Asami allows no leeway. Not even for Kirishima, who has stood beside Asami in countless battles far more dangerous than last night’s minor scuffle with a small-time dealer who got too big for his britches and decided to attack with no warning in the middle of what should have been a routine business transaction.

Kirishima sighs again. “Yes, Asami-sama. Thank you.”

“Have fun on your date.”

Kirishima gingerly pulls the motorcycle jacket off before heading back to the living room. “I’m sorry about that,” he says, apologizing again.

“Do you have to go in?” Kou asks worriedly.

“No. He was just informing me of another appointment I have this evening.”

“I see.”

Kirishima leads the way into the kitchen. He checks the rice cooker. “Good, it’s ready. It’s best to pack it into the bento box first so it has time to cool down before you put the lid on it.”

Next, they marinate the chicken for the karaage.

“So far, this is pretty simple,” Kou says, “though I’m a bit scared to fry the chicken. I’ve heard too many stories about grease fires.”

“That’s why we have a lid next to the pot. There’s also a fire extinguisher in the cabinet. But as long as we’re careful, we really shouldn’t need either of them,” Kirishima says as he rummages through the fridge.

“What are you looking for?” Kou asks.

“I made some tsukemono Monday night. They should still be good. I’ll show you how to make them, but they won’t have enough time to marinate before we leave, so we’ll have to eat the ones we make today another time.”

“So we’re making that next?” Kou asks.

“We’ll start on it until the water boils and is ready for steaming the vegetables,” Kirishima answers.

They chop broccoli and carrots for steaming and cucumbers, radishes, turnips, and cabbage leaves for pickling.

“I’m not very good at chopping,” Kou says.

“It’s just a matter of practice. You’ll get better with time.” Kirishima adds the vegetables to the steamer while Kou finishes chopping the ones for the pickles.

As Kou is massaging the vegetables and yuzu peel in a plastic bag, he asks, “Is this really it? This is so easy!”

“Yes. You just have to remember to flip the bag over once in a while – at least every day. You can start eating the pickles after an hour, but they’ll taste better after they’ve sat at least overnight. Then
“It’s just a matter of eating them. They’ll last for up to a week.”

They place some of the already-prepared tsukemono in two silicon cups and put them in the bento boxes.

“How about we start with tsukemono?” Kirishima says.

Kou groans. “My mom tried to show me how to make it once, and I kept tearing the egg.”

“You can do it. Just like everything else, all it takes is practice. Besides, even if it doesn’t look very pretty, it’ll still taste good,” Kirishima says. He does the first layer to show Kou how to roll the cooked egg to the side to allow the next layer to cook, and then he hands Kou the chopsticks. “Just roll it carefully,” he says.

Kou rolls it. There’s a slight tear in the egg where the chopsticks poked through it. Kou frowns.

“Go ahead and pour the next layer,” Kirishima encourages him. “That’ll end up on the inside anyway. Just try to grip the egg a little more gently this time.”

Kou doesn’t tear the egg at all for the remaining layers.

“Now we roll it in a bamboo mat so it can set,” Kirishima says. He sets the mat over a bowl.

“What does that do?” Kou asks. “My mom doesn’t do that.”

“It just helps it cool down faster so we can add it to the bento,” Kirishima explains.

Kou nods.

By now, the oil is hot enough and the chicken has marinated long enough, so they start adding the chicken to the oil.

“I can’t believe I’m actually cooking,” Kou says.

“You are, and you’re good at it.” Kirishima smiles at him.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I haven’t set your house on fire, at least.” Kou leans up and pecks Kirishima on the lips. “Thanks.”

Kou wags his finger at him.

“I’m doing so well now. We can’t afford to get distracted and burn the chicken.”

“You’re right. Once the chicken’s done, we’ll have time while we’re waiting for the bentos to cool.”

They allow the bentos to cool for twenty minutes before Kirishima pulls away and says, “We should get going if we want to actually have our picnic.”

“Okay.” Kou eyes Kirishima from head to toe. “You should put on a pair of jeans. They’ll provide a bit more protection in case of a minor accident.”

Kirishima blushed. “I don’t have any,” he says.

Kou gapes at him. “Serious? Do you have anything thicker?”

Kirishima shrugs. “Sweatpants? But I didn’t think those were appropriate attire for today.”
Kou shakes his head. “Those aren’t any sturdier than the slacks you’re wearing. Let me see your closet.”

Kirishima opens the closet door, revealing his neatly lined suits.

“They really are all black,” Kou says. “Where are your casual clothes?”

Kirishima opens the bottom drawer, where there’s a small array of t-shirts, shorts, sweatpants, and sweatshirts.

“What’s in the other drawer?” Kou asks.

“Underwear and pajamas.”

“Huh. Well, we’ll just have to buy you a pair of jeans. I’ll help you pick one out.”

“Is that really necessary?” Kirishima asks.

“Safety first. Besides, jeans are really useful. I can’t believe you don’t own any casual clothes. What do you lounge around the house in? I can’t imagine you in sweats all day, even if you’re alone.”

“I work a lot. I usually stay in my work clothes until it’s time to take a shower, and then I change into pajamas,” Kirishima says.

“What about when you go out?”

“Most of my excursions are for work. I wear a suit to them.”

“Well, jeans are useful. I’ll buy them for you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Kirishima protests.

“I want to,” Kou says. “Please, let me.”

“I can pay for my own clothes.” Kirishima can’t wrap his head around letting a younger man who’s obviously on a tight budget buy him clothes. Kou’s face falls. “But I’ll let you pick them out for me,” Kirishima adds, smiling.

Kou brightens. “We can do a practice ride to the store before heading all the way to the park. I know a good shop that’s on the way. Do you want to change into one of your t-shirts?”

Kirishima freezes. If he changes into a short-sleeved t-shirt, Kou will surely notice his wound. Just the thought of changing into a long-sleeved t-shirt is excruciating, though.

Kou is still looking at him expectantly.

“I only wear them for working out. They’re not very nice. I don’t want to look bad.”

“Hmm. Well, you could definitely rock the button-down shirt with jeans look. You ready?”

Once they’re in the parking garage, Kou gives Kirishima a brief lesson on how to ride a motorcycle.

“If you want to stop, tap my right shoulder. We’ll be going to my favorite shop. They have a branch ten minutes from here, so it’ll be a nice practice ride.”
Kou climbs onto the bike and holds it steady. On his signal, Kirishima holds onto Kou’s shoulders and swings onto the seat behind him. He places his feet on the pegs and realizes just how close they’ll have to sit. His legs are spread on either side of Kou’s. As Kirishima places his hands on Kou’s waist as instructed and notes the small distance between them front to back, he thinks, *This might be bad.*

He doesn’t have too much time to worry about that as Kou shifts the bike into gear and takes off. Kirishima knows they’re not going that fast due to the traffic and the low speed limit, but somehow it feels much faster on the motorcycle than it does in a car. He’s just beginning to relax and enjoy the experience when Kou pulls up to the shop.

Kou steadies the bike so Kirishima can dismount then takes off his helmet. “How was it?” he asks, grinning broadly.

Kirishima removes his own helmet. “I was a little nervous at first,” he confesses, “but once I relaxed, it was fun. Though I can’t imagine going any faster than that.”

Kou laughs. “It’s okay. Slower speeds feel faster, but faster ones somehow don’t feel that much faster than the slower ones.”

Kirishima looks at him skeptically. He decides to change the topic. “So this is your favorite store?”

“Well. They have the best selection of vintage clothing at great prices.”

“Vintage?” Kirishima remembers overhearing an argument due to Asami throwing out a t-shirt Takaba claimed was “vintage.” “Doesn’t ‘vintage’ mean that someone else owned it before?” Kirishima tries to keep his tone and face neutral, though he really wants to wrinkle his nose at the thought.

Kou is able to pick up on Kirishima’s thoughts, however. His face falls. “Yeah, but they wash the clothes before reselling them. It’s like getting clothes from your big brothers.”

“I never did that,” Kirishima says.

“Well, sometimes you can find clothes that have obviously never even been worn before. It’s like someone bought the wrong size and eventually sold it here to try to make some of their money back.” Kou smiles encouragingly, so Kirishima smiles back.

Inside the store, Kou leads Kirishima to the men’s jeans section. He holds a few pairs in front of Kirishima, assessing for size, but when Kou finally picks out a few pairs for Kirishima to try one, Kirishima heads to the fitting room reluctantly.

He tries the newest looking pair on and looks in the mirror. They’re way too tight on his muscular thighs.

“Do you have them on yet? Let me see,” Kou calls out.

Kirishima opens the door enough to poke his head out. “They don’t really fit.”

“Let me see,” Kou insists.

Kirishima opens the door a little wider.

“Ah. You’re right. You need something with a more relaxed fit. What about the other pairs?”
Kirishima looks at the pile on the chair.

Kou sighs. “Never mind. Get your pants back on.”

Kirishima dresses and leaves the fitting room. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ll go somewhere else. I didn’t realize the thought of used clothes makes you that uncomfortable. Sorry for making you come here.”

“I’m sorry I’m being so picky,” Kirishima says.

“It’s fine. There’s a Uniqlo near here.” Kou leads the way down the sidewalk.

Kirishima gawks at the selection of fashionable clothes that are obviously marketed towards men ten to twenty years younger than him. He’s never worn anything like them in his life.

“Don’t worry. They have normal jeans, too,” Kou says, guiding him to a back corner of the store.

“Motomi-san! I thought that was you. Welcome,” a man dressed in a fashionable suit says.

“Itoh-san, it’s good to see you again. I hope you’re still satisfied with the displays,” Kou says. Turning to Kirishima, he explains, “I designed the in-store marketing for this branch a few months ago.” He turns back to the manager. “My friend here is looking for some jeans, but he’s struggling to find a pair that fit him properly because he works out so much.”

Kirishima’s face reddens, but Itoh whips out a measuring tape, takes a few measurements, and leads them along the jeans racks, pulling out two pairs in several different styles. “A bit of stretch should help,” he mutters to himself.

A minute later, Kirishima finds himself in the fitting room with a dozen pairs to try on.

“I want to see every pair on you!” Kou calls through the door.

The first few pairs fit okay, but they’re not very comfortable the way they cling to Kirishima’s bottom and thighs. Kou just “hmm”s at them.

When Kirishima gets to the pair Itoh muttered about, they’re very comfortable. Then he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and blushes. The jeans cling to every bulging ripple in his body. *Do people actually wear things like this? They look indecent.*

“Do you have the next pair on yet?” Kou calls impatiently.

“Yes, but they don’t fit right,” Kirishima says.

“Neither did the other pairs. Let me see,” Kou insists.

Kirishima grudgingly steps out, and Kou gives a low whistle.

“What do you mean they don’t fit right? They look perfect. Turn around,” Kou commands.

Kirishima turns around, and Kou whistles again. “Man, you are fine,” he whispers.

“Kou-san!” Kirishima yelps. He looks around to see if anyone overheard.

He catches Itoh’s eye, and Itoh approaches them. “I knew that would be the right pair,” he says. “What do you think of them?”
“I’m not sure. Aren’t they a little too tight?” Kirishima asks.

“That’s the point,” Kou says. “They look good on you. Doesn’t he look hot?” He turns and looks at Itoh for confirmation.

Itoh looks back and forth between the two of them. “Are you on a date?” he asks softly.

Kirishima can feel the blush attempting to steal over his face, but he needs to protect Kou, who is gaping at Itoh. Kirishima puts on his business armor. “Kou-san is being kind enough to take me for a ride on his motorcycle. It’s always been a dream of mine to own one, but I figured I’d better ride one at least once before I buy one. As you can see, I’m a bit clueless; I don’t even own the appropriate attire.”

Kou tries to arrange his face in a neutral expression. “That’s right,” he agrees.

Itoh smiles at them. “You don’t have to hide it from me. I’m the same way. I always got that vibe from you, Motomi-san, but I was afraid to approach you given our business relationship, just in case I was wrong. Looks like I’m too late now.” He bows to them. “I’ll just excuse myself, then.” He turns to Kirishima. “Motomi-san has excellent taste. I’m sure he’ll pick out a nice pair of jeans for you. If you would like additional assistance, I’ll be happy to help. Otherwise, I’ll be waiting to ring up your purchases whenever you’re ready.”

Once Itoh has left, Kou lets out a long breath. “That was close,” he says, leaning against the fitting room door for support.

“I’m sorry,” Kirishima says.

“Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault. I should have been more careful with what I said. I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful in front of others from now on.” Kou looks down at the floor.

“Hey, it’s okay. Everything worked out fine,” Kirishima reminds him.

Kou brightens. “Yeah. Okay, I can tell you’re not thrilled about that pair, even though they look totally amazing, so why don’t you try on the next one? But give me those as soon as you take them off.”

Kirishima eyes him suspiciously.

“They’re going in the ‘maybe’ pile, okay?”

Kirishima tries on the next pair, which also has a little stretch, though not enough to make it hug his body obscenely like the previous pair. “I actually like these,” he says as he looks in the mirror. They’re fairly comfortable, and they make his legs look… good? He blushes at the thought. How conceited am I?

“Well, let me see, then.” Kou says. Kirishima opens the door, and Kou claps his hands. “Yeah, these are more you. Turn around.” Kirishima does so more willingly this time, and Kou says, “They look great. And you look a lot more comfortable in them. I think we’re done.”

Kirishima turns to head back into the fitting room.

“Where are you going?”

“I was going to change into my slacks so we can pay for these.”
“That’s silly. You’re just going to change right back into them. We can pay for them while you’re wearing them, and I’ll cut the tags off for you.”

Kou slings the super-stretchy jeans over his shoulder and helps Kirishima gather the rest to put on the rack for reshelving. They head to the cash register, where Itoh is waiting.

“You found a pair,” Itoh says, smiling. “They look good on you.”

As Kirishima fishes out his wallet, Kou places the other pair of jeans on the counter. “I’ll pay for this pair,” he says.

Kirishima gapes at him. “But we already found a pair. You said that was the ‘maybe’ pile.”

“They look too good on you not to get,” Kou says.

“They were too tight,” Kirishima points out.

“They’re supposed to be tight. That’s why they look so good.”

“Where would I ever wear them?”

“To a club or a bar. On a long ride. Lots of places.” Kou shrugs.

“People would stare at me. I’ve never seen anyone wear pants that tight.”

“You haven’t been looking very carefully, then,” Itoh pipes up. “They’re very fashionable right now.”

Kirishima sighs. “I don’t think I’d ever have the guts to wear them. I don’t want you to waste your money.”

“It’s fine if you only wear them in front of me,” Kou says. “You won’t feel too embarrassed then, will you?”

Kirishima flushes scarlet.

“You guys are too cute,” Itoh says.

He comes around the counter to remove the tags from Kirishima’s jeans. When he reaches for the back pocket, Kou holds out his hand for the scissors. “I’ll do that,” he offers.

Itoh hands him the scissors, heading back to the cash register to ring up Kirishima’s transaction.

“Put them both on my bill,” Kirishima says, handing over a ten-thousand-yen note.

“That’s alright. I’m the one who wants you to get the second pair, so it’ll be my treat,” Kou says.

“I should probably have more than one pair of jeans, right?” Kirishima says.

“First date?” Itoh guesses. He takes the money from Kirishima and gives him change for both pairs, settling the disagreement.

Kou doesn’t protest anymore; he’s been distracted by a t-shirt hanging on the wall. It’s black with pink sakura petals running down the right side from shoulder to hip. “Itoh-san, does that shirt come in a large?”
Itoh follows his eye. “Yes, it goes up to extra-large.” He pulls down one of each size and hands them to Kou.

“Try this on, too,” Kou says.

“I already have a shirt,” Kirishima protests.

“But you said you didn’t have any nice t-shirts. Look, this one is mostly black, but it’s got just a pop of color.” He holds the shirt under Kirishima’s chin. “See? I told you pink would look good on you.”

“No, really-” Kirishima begins.

“Just try it,” Itoh encourages.

Kou grasps Kirishima’s right elbow in order to place the shirt in his hand. Kirishima flinches, pulling his arm away.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?” Kou asks, confused. “I’m really sorry; I didn’t think I grabbed it that hard.”

“That’s not it. I injured it yesterday,” Kirishima says.

Itoh discreetly steps away.

“When?” Kou asks, surprised. “You didn’t mention it when we talked.”

“Afterwards.”

“You should have said something sooner. Did I make it worse?” Kou fusses.

“It’s fine. It’s just a little sore. It’ll heal in a few days,” Kirishima says. “But it’d be hard to put on a t-shirt right now – and even harder to take one off.”

“Okay. I’m sorry,” Kou says again. “Well, how about I get it for you anyway? You can wear it when we go out again after your arm is better.”

“What if it doesn’t fit?” Kirishima worries.

Kou gestures Itoh back. “Which do you think would fit him better?”

Itoh holds up the two t-shirts next to Kirishima, in front and in back, measuring at the shoulders, upper back, and waist. Last, he compares the sleeve width to Kirishima’s arm. “I think you’d better go with the extra-large. It might be a little tight in the shoulders, but it should fit.”

This time, Kirishima lets Kou pay for the t-shirt. “Can’t I get you something?” he asks.

“I have more than enough casual clothes.” Kou laughs. “Maybe if we go someplace more formal, you can help me get a decent tie or something.”

By the time they leave the store, it’s nearly two o’clock. “We’d better get to the park if we want to have time for our picnic,” Kou says. They climb back onto the motorcycle, Kirishima feeling just as awkward about their proximity as he did before. Once they’re on the highway, though, he forgets about the awkwardness, clinging tightly to Kou in a mix of fear, excitement, and awe. He can hear nothing but the sound of the engine and the rush of wind past his helmet.  

*Maybe this dating thing isn’t so bad.*
The bento was loosely inspired by this one. Recipes for karaage chicken, tsukemono, and tamagoyaki can be found at Just Hungry and Just Bento. Kou and Kirishima shopped at Mode Off and Uniqlo, and this is the shirt Kou picked out for Kirishima.

The title of this chapter is a pun on Chopin's Prelude in E-flat minor ("The Devil's Trill").
Chapter Summary

Kirishima and Kou finally set off on their first date to picnic in the park. But what will happen when Kou confronts Kirishima about what Akihito said about him? And will Kirishima make it back to Sion in time for work?

Chapter Notes

Characters (mostly for my own reference):
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a moderate amount of traffic on the highway, but Kou maneuvers his motorcycle around as much of it as he can. The last stretch before the park has less traffic, and Kou accelerates through the turns. Kirishima remembers Kou’s instructions to stay neutral to the bike, but Kou leans into the turns, and it feels like they’re going to slide onto their side at any second. His world consists of the rush of wind blowing through his sleeves and roaring past his helmet, the blur of early spring foliage in a dizzying array of colors, the thrum of the engine, and the warmth of Kou’s back as he clings to it. The whole world is tilting back and forth, but Kou is the anchor that keeps Kirishima steady.

Kou finally pulls up to a stop and holds the bike upright for Kirishima to dismount. But Kirishima can’t move. Eventually, Kou puts down the kickstand and hops off himself, turning to ask, “Are you alright?”

Kirishima tries to take off his helmet, but he’s forgotten how.

Kou helps him with it. “Are you alright?” Kou asks again as he lifts the helmet off Kirishima’s head.

“I’m fine,” Kirishima finally manages. He becomes aware that his cheeks are hurting, and he wonders dazedly why that might be. Was it the wind? But I had a faceshield.

“I guess so,” Kou says, grinning down at him.

Kirishima tries to smile back, and only then does he realize that his face is already spread into a wide grin. So that’s why my cheeks hurt.

As the adrenaline starts to seep from his body, he becomes aware of another reaction he had to the motorcycle ride.
“Er, I can’t stand up just yet,” he says, blushing.

Kou glances down and notices Kirishima’s predicament. “That happened to me the first time I rode, too.”

“You were a teenager, though!” Kirishima points out, trying to hide his predicament with his hands without being too obvious about it.

“A first time is still a first time, no matter when you have it,” Kou says sagely.

Kirishima eyes him curiously. “My boss said almost the same thing to me just the other day.”

“Your boss is smart. Speaking of your boss… What’s the name of the company you work for?”

Kirishima is suddenly quite capable of getting off the motorcycle, and he does so, dismounting on the side away from Kou as he says as nonchalantly as possible, “Sion.”

Kou breaks into a broad grin. “That’s the company my friend’s partner works for. Maybe you know him…” His face suddenly falls. “But maybe I shouldn’t say… Actually, my friend was surprised when he heard your name, and wondered if maybe you did work for his partner, because you have the same family name as someone who does. But his description of you didn’t really match what I know of you, so we weren’t sure…”

Kirishima’s stomach turns to ice, but he doesn’t let it show. “What’s your friend’s name?” he asks as casually as possible.

“Hmm. I’d better not say. What do you think his name is?” Kou says cagily.

Kirishima freezes. Is this some kind of trap? Exactly what did Takaba say about me? That I treat him like a brat? That’s because he is a brat. I knew he’d try to ruin things for me.

“Why is it so hard? Does your boss have multiple lovers?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shakes his head. He just needs to focus on Kou and forget about Takaba. “I’m not sure he’s ever really had anything you’d call a lover.”

“Ah, so Aki’s his first? Maybe that’s why he keeps getting mixed messages. He said –” Kou stops abruptly.

Kirishima decides to give Kou the name he’s been fishing for. “Aki? You mean Takaba Akihito?”

“Yeah… He said… He said that he thinks Asami-san is just playing with him until he gets bored. That everyone around Asami-san makes sure he remembers that he doesn’t belong in Asami-san’s world. Including you…” Kou trails off, blushing.

“I don’t really feel comfortable discussing Asami-sama’s relationship,” Kirishima says stiffly.

“Oh! Of course. I’m sorry. Yeah, I guess this is pretty inappropriate.” Kou looks faintly disappointed, though.

_Did I just fail a test?_ Kirishima wonders. But he really can’t talk about Asami’s and Takaba’s relationship – especially knowing that Kou will repeat everything he says about it to Takaba, and Takaba will twist it and complain about it to Asami. And Asami will not be pleased if he has more problems with Takaba due to Kirishima idly gossiping about him. Especially since one of Kirishima’s duties is to make sure no one gets away with idly gossiping about Asami.
I shouldn’t have even said anything about Asami-sama not having lovers. But Kou misinterpreted it, so hopefully that won’t come back to haunt me. I’ll have to be more careful from now on.

“Sorry. It really bothered you. I won’t bring it up anymore. I was just a little worried about my friend, but of course it’s different talking about a boss than a friend. Let’s go have our picnic,” Kou says.

“It’s fine,” Kirishima says. “Thanks for understanding.”

Kou leads him on a lovely forested path with nice overlooks of a small lake.

“This is a nice place,” Kirishima says, smiling.

“It is. I’m taking you to my favorite spot.” Kou leads the way off the marked trail past a small copse of closely growing trees and around behind a small hill. Behind the hill is a large, flat rock. Kou climbs easily onto the rock. Kirishima pulls himself up with a little more difficulty because his feet keep slipping on the rock.

“How did you make it look so easy?” he grumbles when he finally gets on top of the rock with a little help from Kou.

“Sorry, I practice parkour, and I forget that most people don’t know how to do that kind of stuff,” Kou says.

“Parkour? What’s that?”

Kou whips out his phone and shows Kirishima a few videos of young guys scaling buildings and making dangerous leaps. So this is how Takaba learned his reckless behavior. Maybe we should look for some guards who’ve practiced this parkour; it seems like a useful discipline, at the very least for catching the brat when he runs.

“This is your favorite spot?” Kirishima asks, looking away from the screen to survey the scenery.

“Yeah. Those trees over by the lake turn a beautiful golden color in the fall. I think they’re even prettier than the gingko trees the park is famous for.”

“Those are beeches,” Kirishima says.

“Really? You’re really smart, aren’t you?”

Kirishima blushes, but before he can answer, his stomach rumbles. He blushes a deeper red. “Sorry, I didn’t have breakfast,” he admits.

Kou glances at his watch. “I’m so sorry! You should have eaten before we left! But let’s eat now.” They unpack the bentos and dig in.

“Wow, this is so tasty! I can’t believe we made this!”

“Do you think you can do it on your own?” Kirishima asks.

“Maybe. If I had a recipe… And I could understand what the weird cooking terms mean.”

“I’ll write the recipes down for you,” Kirishima offers.

“Thanks. Speaking of the time…” Kou blushes faintly. “I was wrong about how long it takes to get
here; I gave the time based on leaving from my house, but it took forty-five minutes to get here, and that was with me speeding a bit. What time do you have to be home to get ready for work?"

Kirishima does some quick mental calculations. He’ll need to shower, iron his clothes, dress, review his notes for the Tanihara meeting, drive to Sion, and arrive by 5:45 to make sure everything is ready for the meeting at six… If he skips the ironing… “Five at the very latest.”

Kou’s face falls. “Then we’d better leave at four at the latest, in case we run into more traffic on our way back.”

Kirishima glances at his watch. It’s already 3:25. “Sorry, we took too long with all the shopping we had to do because of me.”

“That would have been fine if I had been right about how long it took to get here. I guess we should have gone somewhere closer.”

“No, this is nice. I missed this,” Kirishima says.

“What do you mean, Kei-san?” Kou asks curiously.

“I used to be a cub scout, and we’d go camping and hiking a lot. I haven’t been in years, though.”

Kou smiles. “You were a boy scout? Somehow I can totally see that. Do you have any pictures of you in your uniform?”

“Why would you want to see that?” Kirishima asks, blushing. He used to wear his uniform whenever he wasn’t wearing his school uniform, and the other kids in his neighborhood teased him mercilessly about it. That was one of the reasons he quit scouting in middle school.

“I bet you looked cute in it,” Kou says.

Kirishima shrugs.

“Well, we’ll have to go on a longer hike sometime, then,” Kou says. “Somewhere a little less crowded than here.”

“This spot is nice, though,” Kirishima says.

“It is,” Kou agrees, leaning in for a kiss.

Thirty minutes later, they come up for air. Kou checks his watch. “Oh, no! It’s already four! We’d better hurry back!”

He leads the way back to the bike. The ride back is not quite as thrilling as the ride there, because Kirishima’s bottom is starting to get sore, as are his leg muscles from their awkward angle.

They hit considerable traffic heading into downtown, and though Kou navigates through back alleys to get them to Kirishima’s apartment faster, they still don’t arrive there until 5:10.

“I’m sorry!” Kou cries. “I’ll help you get ready.”

They’re interrupted by the apartment manager. “Kirishima-san! You’ve had a package in the office for two days already. Please pick it up now.”
“I’m sorry,” Kirishima says, bowing. “Thank you.” What could it be? I don’t remember ordering anything. As they wait for the elevator, he begins to unwrap the package, but when he sees a naked man on the cover of the book, he hastily covers it up again.

Kou looks at him curiously.

Did he see it? Just what kind of book did Asami-sama send me? “I’ll open it later. I don’t really have time right now,” Kirishima says.

“I’ll help you get ready,” Kou repeats.

“What can you do?” Kirishima asks, mystified.

“You like to iron your clothes right before you wear them, right? I can iron them while you go shower.”

“Okay. Let me show you where everything is,” Kirishima says, setting the package down on the coffee table.

“I can find it. I’ll pick out a nice outfit for you. You just get in the shower,” Kou says.

The thought of not picking out his own outfit makes Kirishima a bit nervous, but he decides to do as Kou suggests. It’s not like he can pick anything too outrageous; I don’t own anything showy, anyway.

As he unbuttons his shirt, though, he remembers his wound. “Er, actually, Kou-san, could you please help me with my injury?”

He hands Kou the roll of plastic wrap and tape.

“What happened?” Kou asks as he sees the wound for the first time. “Were you in a car accident?”

“No, it happened at work,” Kirishima says.

“It’s a pretty big cut. Was it broken glass?”

“Yes,” Kirishima lies. “I tried to catch a punch bowl that slipped off a tray.”

When he emerges from the shower, he sees Kou ironing his one blue dress shirt. How did he even find that?

Kou glances up from the ironing board. “That was fast. Here.” He holds the shirt up so Kirishima can slide into it.

“Actually… I always wear a white shirt to work,” Kirishima says apologetically.

“Is that company policy?” Kou asks.

Kirishima frowns. “No… I don’t think so… Not officially, but it might as well be. It’s what everyone wears.” Probably because it’s what I always wear, and everyone else has followed suit… I wonder what Asami-sama would think if I wore something other than white.

Kou sighs. “I figured that might be the case.” He reaches down and grabs a white shirt that’s hanging from the ironing board. “I ironed one of those, too, just in case.”
Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief. With Kou’s help, he dresses quickly. While Kirishima dresses his bottom half, Kou gathers the used plastic wrap and tape and heads to the kitchen to throw it out. He comes back into the room, holding up the bloodied shirt from last night, wide-eyed.

“It had to go through the shirt to get to my arm,” Kirishima points out.

“It’s a lot of blood,” Kou says. He takes Kirishima’s right arm and bends down, gently kissing the elbow.

“It’s fine. It’ll heal,” Kirishima reassures him. No one’s ever really fussed over him before, and he feels a little uncomfortable at the attention. “I really have to go,” he reminds Kou.

“Right. Here’s your briefcase. Are you driving to work?”

Kirishima frowns. With the current gridlock downtown, he’ll be late. But if he takes the train, he’ll be late, too. “I’d better call my boss,” he says. How could I let this happen? Asami-sama gave me so much time off and only asked that I be there at six. How can I possibly be late after he did all that for me?

“I’ll give you a ride,” Kou says. “We can make it faster cutting through the alleys.”

Kirishima’s mind races. “Are you sure?”

“Give me the address.”

Kirishima does, and Kou pulls up a map on his phone. He looks up a “walking” path, changes the route in a few places, and there are only two blocks that have to be done via road.

“I can enter the building here,” Kirishima says, tapping the screen. Kou changes the end destination, and there’s only half a block left along the road.

“I think it’ll take about ten minutes,” Kou says.

“That’s faster than when there’s little traffic.” Kirishima gapes at him.

“No traffic lights,” Kou explains. He grins cheekily. “Does that mean we have time for a kiss?”

Kirishima checks his watch. He hasn’t reviewed the documents yet, but Morita can help with the set-up, and Kirishima really only needs a few minutes to review the essential numbers.

“You’re so conscientious,” Kou says, giving him puppy eyes.

“We have three minutes,” Kirishima says, grinning back at Kou.

As they head out the door, Kirishima notes that the paper on the package on the coffee table has been torn a bit more.

“Did you look at it?” he asks, blushing.

“Sorry. I thought I saw a naked man when you started unwrapping it in the elevator, and I got curious. You ordered a book for us?” Kou asks, smiling shyly.

Kirishima relaxes a little, but his face is still flaming. “No. My boss did.”
“Your boss did?!?” Kou exclaims.

“He was worried I’d try to research it myself and find bad information. Or so he claimed. I think he just wanted to tease me,” Kirishima explains.

“You guys have a weird relationship.”

“What do you mean?” Kirishima asks.

“You obviously discussed us with your boss. Is that normally something you’d do? And you call him ‘sama.’”

“Sorry. He noticed the kissmarks the other morning and teased me about them,” Kirishima explains.

“It’s fine. I talked to my friend about it, after all,” Kou says. “Say, can I borrow that book when you’re done with it?”

“Sure,” Kirishima says. “Actually, I won’t get to it before Monday, so you can borrow it now, if you want.”

“Really? Okay.” Kou takes it from the coffee table and they head for the door.

As they ride down the elevator, Kirishima asks, “Is it legal to ride through the alleys the way you do?”

Kou glances to the side. “It’s a gray area… As long as there are no signs, it’s technically not illegal.”

“How often are there signs?”

“I don’t know… Sometimes,” Kou says cagily. “But the advantage of a motorcycle is that it’s hard to catch up to one, especially in narrow alleys. I have a perfect driving record.”

Kirishima smiles. “I wasn’t judging you.” He kisses Kou on the nose.

The elevator doors open, and they step awkwardly away from each other, trying to look nonchalant as a sour-faced older woman gets on.

Ten minutes later, they’re pulling up to a side door at Sion. “Do I look okay?” Kirishima asks as he takes off his helmet and hands it to Kou.

Kou helps him out of the borrowed motorcycle jacket and smooths down Kirishima’s sleeves. “You look fine. It’s a good thing your hair is so short,” he says as he reaches up to rub Kirishima’s scalp. “You can’t get helmet head.”

Kirishima glances around and steals a quick kiss before rushing inside. He gets to the meeting with five minutes to spare. Morita has already set everything up, so Kirishima quickly reviews the essentials.

“I didn’t think you were going to make it in time,” Asami drawls.

“Of course I would be on time!” Kirishima says indignantly. You can’t cut it that close again, he admonishes himself. There’s no room for mistakes, no matter how small.

“Did you have a good time on your date?”
“Yes.” Kirishima can’t keep the smile off his face, the stress of the last hour forgotten. “It was a golden afternoon.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Summary

Kirishima goes to work after his date, but somehow he feels distracted and out of rhythm. Between the prying of the Sion psychologist, the incessant teasing of Suoh, and the pressure of work, will he be able to hold onto that golden feeling after his date? Or will he decide he needs to slow down this relationship before it's even properly gotten off the ground?

Chapter Notes

Characters (mostly for my own reference):
- Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
- Morita: Kirishima's assistant
- Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
- Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
- Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
- Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
- Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Tanihara meeting goes smoothly enough, though there’s one instance in which Asami asks Kirishima for a number and he can’t recall it off the top of his head. Thankfully, long practice enables him to find it quickly in the document on his tablet, and only Asami seems to notice the slight pause before he recites the figure.

After the Tanihara meeting, Morita briefs Kirishima on the Suzuki summit that took place earlier. Kirishima nods in appreciation. “Good work. Send the summary to me by noon tomorrow, please.”

“Yes, fuku-shacho-san.”

Kirishima heads to Asami’s office to brief him on his upcoming meetings.

“Don’t forget your appointment with Kurebayashi-sensei at 7:30,” Asami says as Kirishima excuses himself.

“I won’t, Asami-sama.” Kirishima bows and leaves the room before glancing at his watch. It’s 7:27.

He races down the four flights of stairs to Kurebayashi’s office, arriving with twenty-three seconds to spare.

“Kirishima-kun. Nice of you to show up,” Kurebayashi says.

“Of course, Kurebayashi-sensei.”
“Most of you cowboys like to try to skip these meetings. Do you think it’s a waste of time, too?” Kurebayashi’s intense stare seems to pierce right into Kirishima’s brain.

“A bit.” Kirishima gasps. He hadn’t meant to say that. “I’m sorry, I just meant that –” Kurebayashi chuckles and gestures for him to take a seat. “It’s good that you feel you can be honest with me. That’s most important.”

Somehow, despite the lenient words, Kurebayashi’s tone makes him feel like a scolded schoolboy. “It’s just that the incident last night was so minor, I feel like I’m wasting your time. I’m fine, really.”

Kurebayashi simply eyes him, not saying anything.

Kirishima doesn’t have anything else to say, so he lets the uncomfortable silence stretch. *I can outlast you.*

Sure enough, Kurebayashi eventually breaks the silence. “Is there anything in your personal life that’s been distracting you at work?”

Though his outward expression doesn’t change, Kirishima inwardly frowns. *Just what has Asami-sama been saying about me?* “No.”

Kurebayashi clears her throat in a manner that implies she doesn’t believe him. They play the long silence game again, and once again, Kirishima outwaits Kurebayashi.

“Tell me about what happened last night,” Kurebayashi finally says.

“What’s to tell? It was supposed to be a simple business transaction. We deliver the goods; they deliver the money. Everything appeared to be going smoothly. Suddenly the other party decided he wanted the goods *and* the money, and he pulled out a knife, aiming for Asami-sama. I tried to knock the knife away, but I was a bit slow.” Kirishima shrugs.

“How does that make you feel?”

Kirishima stares at Kurebayashi. *How am I supposed to answer that?*

He waits for Kurebayashi to speak again. The silence drags on. Finally, Kurebayashi raises her eyebrows. “Was the question unclear?”

“No. I’m just wondering what exactly you’re looking for.”


Kirishima shrugs. “I don’t know. There wasn’t really time to think about what was happening; I just reacted. My arm will heal, so it’s no big deal.”

Kurebayashi makes that disbelieving sound in her throat again.

“It’s true,” Kirishima says defensively. “These kinds of things happen sometimes. I’ve been trained to handle them, and that training kicked in. Sure, I got injured, but the injury was relatively minor. It happens. But I’m not going to suddenly be scared that every business transaction is going to turn into the same thing. The situation was handled well. It’s over now.”

“Is this the first time you’ve been injured on the job?” Kurebayashi asks, flipping through a file
“No,” Kirishima says. They play the silence game again, and Kirishima finally sighs and adds, “In Hong Kong. I was shot.”

“Right. Hong Kong. Did you talk to anyone after that?”

Kirishima eyes her. Sure, he talked to Asami, explaining how Takaba managed to get away from Kirishima’s protection and put himself back into danger. But somehow Kirishima doesn’t think that’s what Kurebayashi means by “talking to someone.”

Kurebayashi sighs. “I’ll take that as a ‘no.’ Protocol was not followed in Hong Kong. How am I supposed to do my job if I don’t know what’s happened to my patients?”

“Hong Kong was a while ago,” Kirishima points out. “It wasn’t my favorite experience, but all things considered, I was actually pretty lucky. I fully recovered.” He shrugs again. “I don’t know; I don’t get why I’m supposed to make a big deal out of these things. Life happens. You deal with it as it comes. There’s no sense dwelling on the past.’

“Last night is not exactly the past,” Kurebayashi says.

“Last night was just a scratch,” Kirishima says.

“Does a scratch require seventeen stitches?” Kurebayashi retorts.

Kirishima shrugs. “Apparently. It really wasn’t that deep.” He bends and straightens his arm as much as he can to show that it’s fine.

“Don’t do that. You’ll pull on the stitches and increase scarring,” Kurebayashi admonishes.

Kirishima lets the arm drop to his side. “It’s fine. It really was no big deal. I’ve been in plenty of more dangerous situations before, and I know how to handle it.”

“Do you have a death wish?”

Kirishima laughs, thinking the psychiatrist is making a joke, but her face remains serious. “Of course not. But if I were to die protecting Asami-sama, it would be a good death. I wouldn’t regret it.”

“Do you often race motorcycles through the alleys of Tokyo?”

Kirishima furrows his brow. “I don’t even have a motorcycle.” But as he remembers his first time on one, just a few hours ago, he blushes faintly.

“I told you it was important to tell me the truth. Even if you don’t have one, you ride on one.”

“I did for the first time today,” Kirishima admits. “But we weren’t racing. It was just a…” Kirishima trails off. Even though it seems like Asami might have already told Kurebayashi about Kou, he doesn’t feel the need to talk about it. It has nothing to do with work.

“A date,” Kurebayashi finishes for him. “Asami-kun already told me you’re dating a boy.”

“He’s not a boy. He’s an adult,” Kirishima corrects.

Kurebayashi peers at Kirishima over the file folder. “You said that you’d be willing to die for Asami-kun. Are you in love with him?”
“What? No!” Kirishima splutters. He can feel his face starting to turn red from the mere idea of it. No, stop that. If you blush, she’ll think you’re lying. And he’s not lying. That much he’s sure of. Kirishima focuses on multiplying sixty-seven times seventy-three in his head, and the blush recedes.

Kurebayashi stares at him, playing the waiting game again.

Kirishima remains silent, determined to outlast her this time.

Finally, Kurebayashi says, “So how exactly do you view your relationship with Asami-kun? What are your feelings towards him?”

“I’ve known him since high school, and I owe him a debt of gratitude starting from that time. He’s someone I highly respect, and I will follow him wherever he leads me.”

“Even if that’s to prison? Or death?”

“Yes, if need be. Asami-sama would never ask me to go to prison in his stead, but I would if it would spare him. He would take care of me there and when I got out.”

“But you’re not in love with him.”

“No. I’ve never been in love with anyone…” Kirishima trails off. Don’t say too much.

Kurebayashi’s eyebrows shoot up. “Never? What about this boy – young man – you’re dating?”

“I don’t know. We just met each other last week. I do like him, but I don’t know him well enough yet to say I love him.”

“What about people you’ve dated in the past?”

“I’ve never dated anyone before,” Kirishima admits. This time, he can’t keep the blush from flooding his face. After a short pause, he adds, “I was too busy with work, and I never really felt the need to. I was satisfied with my life as it was.”

“What about now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you still satisfied with how you were living, now that you’ve started dating someone?”

“Sure. I mean, I’m enjoying dating Kou-san, but if we were to stop dating, I’d probably go back to how I was living before.” Kirishima’s tone is hesitant. Would I really be satisfied with that now, though?

After a few more questions about the incident the night before, Kurebayashi finally lets Kirishima get back to work. Due to coming in late and disrupting his routine with the meeting with the psychologist, Kirishima can’t seem to find his rhythm, and the workday feels unusually long (despite its actual shortness compared to his usual workdays).

At midnight, Kirishima finishes briefing Asami on the phone calls he has to make in the next hour. As Kirishima bows, ready to leave Asami’s office, he’s stopped by Asami’s voice.

“I just received Kurebayashi’s report,” Asami says.

Kirishima raises his head but doesn’t say anything.
“She says you’re woefully out of touch with your feelings. She called you ‘a ticking time bomb.’”

“Asami-sama, I –” Kirishima begins.

Asami waves his hand. “If you weren’t ‘cut off from your feelings,’ you wouldn’t be able to do your job. Still, she wants to meet with you once a week for the next six weeks, at least. I think it might be a good idea.”

“Very well, Asami-sama.” Kirishima bows and leaves the room. When he gets to his own office, he pauses at the door but passes it, heading to the kitchen. He needs some tea. He sits at the table in the kitchen, breathes deeply, and the soothing aroma of the tea calms him. How am I supposed to make it through six more sessions like that?

“Kurebayashi getting to you?” Suoh drawls from the door. He closes the door behind himself, grabs a chair, turns it around backwards, and straddles it, leaning on the back.

“That’s bad for the chair,” Kirishima chides him.

“Oh, she got you good, huh?” Suoh reaches over and pats Kirishima’s shoulder. “How’s the arm doing today?”

“It’s fine,” Kirishima says.

“No fever?”

“A slight one when I woke up. I took some medicine for it. I haven’t checked it since then, but I feel fine.”

Suoh feels Kirishima’s forehead with the back of his hand.

“That doesn’t really work, you know.”

“Why do you always have to be so difficult? You don’t feel warm.” Suoh watches Kirishima take a few more sips of his tea before continuing. “You just need to tell her what she wants to hear.”

“How am I supposed to know what she wants to hear?”

“Just pretend like you’re normal. Say you’re feeling what a normal person would feel.”

“I am normal.”

“Normal people aren’t ‘ticking time bombs’ out of touch with their emotions.”

Kirishima glares at Suoh. “Like you’re ‘in touch with your emotions.’”

“In front of Kurebayashi, I am.”

“Then what’s the point of Asami-sama even hiring her?”

“Look. Sometimes people get shaken by the things we see. Most people do, at some point. When they are, she helps them. We can’t have someone freaking out in the middle of a situation; it would put the rest of the team in jeopardy. Kurebayashi can figure out who’s likely to do that – and help them get over it so they can get back to the field. If they can’t get over it, we can reassign them permanently. But Kurebayashi won’t ever get people like us and Asami-sama. We freak her out. So you just have to pretend you’re normal.”
“So I should pretend I’m ‘freaked out’ by this scratch?”

“Not freaked out. Just… a little bothered. Be angry.”

“What’s the point of being angry at a dead man?”

“We can’t have Kurebayashi knowing he’s dead, can we? Anyway, normal people would still be angry. The other party being dead doesn’t change what they did to you.”

“Okay…” Kirishima says.

“And maybe pretend that it frightened you a little. Not too much – you don’t want her telling Asami-sama you’re unfit. But just say you had a nightmare about it or something.”

Kirishima stares at Suoh.

“What? I’ve had to see Kurebayashi after six different incidents. I never had to see her more than once for any of them, though.” Suoh claps Kirishima on the shoulder again.

“Thanks, Kazu-nii,” Kirishima says softly.

Suoh smirks.

Kirishima suddenly realizes what he called him. “Shut up. I’m tired.”

Suoh mercifully lets it go with a “You’re cute sometimes, Kei. You should try to let it out more often. Motomi would probably appreciate it.”

Kirishima tosses a napkin at him.

Suoh laughs. He stands up and puts his chair back. As he’s leaving the kitchen, he calls over his shoulder, “I want to hear how your date went later.”

In your dreams. No way will Kirishima be sharing any details with either Suoh or Asami. Wait, how did Kurebayashi-sensei know I was riding Kou-san’s motorcycle? I mentioned that to Asami-sama, I think... but she said something about racing through the alleys of Tokyo.

She saw us when Kou-san dropped me off.

Kirishima drops his empty teacup. Thankfully, it only falls a few inches and doesn’t break. He pulls out his tablet and writes a note for himself.

Rules for Dating

1. No PDA anywhere in public, even if you check for people – including elevators, hallways, and cars.
2. No dates anywhere in Shinjuku (except maybe Ni-chôme).
3. Dates must end at least 2 hours before work.
4. No dates outside of Tokyo except on days off.
5. Do not tell Asami-sama or Suoh-san anything.
6. No blushing.

That last one is probably impossible, but he’s sure going to try.

Kirishima washes his teacup and gets back to work. He doesn’t think to check his phone until he’s riding the elevator downstairs at three o’clock to go home. There are a few texts from Kou.
Hope you made it to your meeting in time. Sorry we cut it so close.

Next time we’ll make sure you’re home early. Or go out after work.

Are you mad at me? I’m sorry.

Heading to bed now. Hope you’re not mad at me.

Kirishima sighs and texts Kou back, hoping he silenced his phone and won’t be awakened by the message.

Good morning. I’m sorry for my late response; work was very busy.

The meeting went fine. I’m not mad. But I agree we should plan things better next time.

I hope you slept well.

Kirishima exits the elevator and looks around the parking garage for his car. After a few moments, he remembers that Kou dropped him off. He sighs and pulls out his phone again, ready to call for a taxi.

“Something the matter, Kei?” Suoh asks.

“I got dropped off and don’t have my car,” Kirishima explains.

“Dropped off? From your date?” Suoh smirks.

“Sorry, I can’t talk right now. I’m trying to call a cab.” Kirishima dials the cab company. “Yes, I’d like a cab at – ”

Suoh takes the phone from him and hangs up. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

“It’s alright. I wouldn’t want you to go out of your way.”

“It’s no problem. It’s the least family can do.” Suoh’s smirk tells Kirishima that Suoh just wants to tease him about his date. But he can’t refuse the ride after Suoh invoked their familial relationship, so he follows him reluctantly.

“I’m not telling you anything about the date, though,” he warns as he climbs into the passenger seat.

“You won’t have to. I’ll just ask, and your face will tell me everything, whether you want to or not.” Suoh chuckles to himself.

Kirishima inwardly groans but refuses to let his annoyance show on his face. He starts running through the stations on the Yamanote train line in his head.

“How was the park?”

Shinjuku.

“Did you enjoy riding a motorcycle?”

Chin bokki [erection]. No, Shin-Okubo! Kirishima can feel the blush starting to creep across his face. Takadanobaba. Mejiro. Ikebukuro.

“What happened on the motorcycle? Did you enjoy riding two-up?” Suoh teases.

“Are you doing multiplication in your head again? That won’t work on me,” Suoh says.


“The Yamanote line? That won’t work either. Osaki, Otsuka, Okachimachi.”

“Nippori,” Kirishima stubbornly continues on, refusing to be distracted by Suoh naming random stations on the line.

Suoh laughs. “Motomi must have a lot of skill for you to be so stubborn about it. You did use protection, right?”

“Kazumi! We were in a public park!”

“My first time was in a public park,” Suoh says, shrugging.

“You were a teenager, though, right? You probably had nowhere else to go.”

“Ah… so you guys waited until you got back to your place. Is that why you cut it so close this evening?”

“Kazumi! Pull over; I’ll walk the rest of the way home.” Kirishima scowls and looks out the window.

“Fine, I’m sorry. I’ll stop teasing you. You really need to learn how to lighten up, though.”

“I’m fine just the way I am,” Kirishima says. Kou-san says I am… And maybe he’s right.

“If you’re happy that way,” Suoh says.

Am I? Kirishima wonders. But he doesn’t have long to do so, because Suoh pulls into his parking garage and parks. “Thanks for the ride,” Kirishima says as he gets out of the car. “Why are you getting out, too?”

“I want to check on your wound. After your hike, the bandage should probably be changed, and you can’t do that yourself.”

“I didn’t get that sweaty. It’s still chilly out,” Kirishima protests.

“It’s still better to check it, see if there are any signs of infection. Who knows where that knife has been.”

Once inside, Suoh heads to the bathroom to get the first aid kit. He comes back out with a smirk on his face.

What now? Kirishima wonders wearily.

“He’s already keeping a toothbrush here? Does he have underwear and clothes here, too?”

Suoh starts to pull open Kirishima’s drawers, but Kirishima blocks him. “Lay off, Kazumi. That’s enough.”

“Fine. Give me your arm.” Suoh removes the bandage quickly. “You kept it pretty clean today.”

“I told you I did.”
When Suoh reveals the wound, they both see that the skin is a little red around the edges. “Have you been taking your antibiotics today?”

“I forgot,” Kirishima confesses.

Suoh checks the medicine cabinet but comes back empty-handed. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know.” Kirishima racks his mind. “I don’t think I ever took it out of my briefcase last night.”

Suoh rummages through one of the outer pockets until he pulls out the prescription, still sealed. “You haven’t taken it at all?”

“I’m sorry. I forgot.”

Suoh hands Kirishima two tablets.

“I thought it said to take only one at a time.”

“This will get it started working quicker. I’m setting your alarm for the next dose. Make sure you wake up enough to take it. And take a peek at the wound when you do. If it’s any worse, you have to go back to the doctor right away and get something stronger.”

Suoh rebandages the wound, leaving the bottom loosely attached so that Kirishima will be able to look at it more easily in a few hours.

“Should I stay here with you?” Suoh worries.

“You don’t have to. I’ll be fine. It’s just a scratch.”

“A scratch that’s well on its way to turning into blood poisoning. If it reaches that stage, it can progress rapidly.” Suoh starts typing on his phone.

“Who are you texting?” Kirishima asks.

“I’m letting Asami-sama know. And I’m having Yabu-sensei come check on it tomorrow morning. She’ll be here at ten.”

“That’s only six hours from now.”

“I know. So get to sleep.”

“It’ll probably be fine now that I’ve taken the antibiotics. I don’t want to waste sensei’s time.”

“Better safe than sorry. Goodnight, Kei.”

Suoh lets himself out.

Kirishima crawls into bed, but he can’t seem to fall asleep. Whenever he gets close, his body feels like it’s on the back of Kou’s motorcycle again, and it brings him back to full wakefulness. After fifteen minutes, he sighs and picks up his phone.

_I can’t fall asleep. I keep remembering how it felt to ride on your bike._

_I hope we can get together again soon._

He sets the phone down. He doesn’t really have anything exciting to say, after all. What was it Kou
told him again? Just to tell him whatever was happening, no matter how boring Kirishima himself finds it…

My cousin fussed at me because I forgot to take my medicine and my wound is turning red.

Oh, but I’ve taken it now, so it should be fine.

But my cousin is making me see a doctor in the morning. (^_^;)

Kirishima freezes. What if Kou starts worrying? Or thinks he’s being too melodramatic?

Sorry. It’s really no big deal. Just trying to share my day, but it was so boring (after our date, I mean! That was the best part). Too many meetings.

Anyway, good night. Hope you’re having sweet dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to leave it on a bit of a cliffhanger. It's the 21st century; blood poisoning is usually not very serious (and I'm not going to turn it into MRSA or anything), so you don't have to worry about Kirishima too much.

I plan to work on Exhibition (my current Checklist universe story) next. I need to revise the last chapter (there were a few issues of clarity and me just omitting important parts of the story) and post the next one, and I'm enjoying alternating between the two stories because they have different vibes (and I don't want to leave either hanging for too long).
Sickbed (Mauve)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima's stab wound takes a turn for the worse. Kou comes over to take care of him, but when Suoh shows up, too, will Kirishima's lies finally catch up with him?

Chapter Notes

This chapter ran a bit long. I knew where I wanted to end it, but Kou and Kirishima spent a bit more time flirting than I expected.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima’s assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

Japanese terms and customs:
okayu: a rice porridge often eaten when feeling sick (you can add vegetables, beans, etc. to it)
oyaji: middle-aged man
obasan: middle-aged woman
shogi: a Japanese game related to chess
ikebana: Japanese art of flower arrangement
Japanese business card culture: In Japan, business cards are presented and accepted with both hands. The receiver is expected to read it in its entirety (and during a business meeting, they would keep it out on the table for reference). Suoh’s handling of Kou’s card is rude and dismissive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kirishima groggily fumbles for the button to turn off his alarm. Why was it set so early? He reaches for his glasses and knocks something onto the ground. He sighs as he puts his glasses on and slides out of bed to see what it was. He can’t see anything on the floor, so he crouches down to look under the bed.

Oh, right. The antibiotics. He picks up the bottle and takes out a pill. He doesn’t have a glass of water, so he swallows it dry. He crawls back under the covers, ready to go back to sleep, but he feels compelled to check his phone. There’s an e-mail from Morita; it’s the Suzuki Summit report. That can wait until I’ve slept some more.

Nothing else is urgent from work, but there are a few texts from Kou. Kirishima smiles.
Sorry, you already told me your work is really busy. I should stop expecting you to reply during work.

I know how important your routines are, though, and I am sorry we cut it so close. We definitely won’t do that again.

Your wound is turning red? Isn’t that bad? Did we do too much yesterday? Did I wrap it wrong before your shower? I hope your medicine helped.

Let me know how you’re doing as soon as you wake up.

Actually, can I come over to see how you are? I understand if you’re too busy, but I’m worried about you.

Kirishima smiles. He’s acting like a mother hen. Kirishima is used to others calling him that, but he’s never had anyone fuss over him this way. It feels nice.

Kirishima starts to type that his wound is fine, but then he remembers Suoh’s admonition to check it when he wakes up. When he pulls off the bandage, the skin around the edges is still red. Is it worse than last night? I can’t really tell. I think it is, but I’m not sure. I should have taken a picture. Well, if it is worse, it’s not that much worse. It’s definitely not better, though.

Since the doctor’s going to be there in two hours, Kirishima decides not to worry about it too much. He texts Kou back.

Good morning, Kou-san. I just got up to take my next dose of medicine.

The bandage was still clean when I changed it last night. It’s just because I forgot to take the medicine.

When Kirishima finishes texting the second message, he notices there’s already a reply to the first.

Good morning, Kei-san! You haven’t slept very much.

How’s the wound now?

No, I’m heading back to sleep soon, but the doctor will be here at ten.

How’s the wound?

I don’t know. It’s not better, but I don’t think it’s too much worse.

That doesn’t sound good. I’m glad you’re seeing a doctor.

It’s probably a good idea.

Can I come over to help you around the house, help you get ready for work later, or anything?

Kirishima hesitates. He does want to see Kou again, but he doesn’t want to take advantage of his kindness.

It’s okay if you don’t want me to. I just remember how hard it can be to do things with one hand from when I broke my arm in college. Besides, I want to see you again. ( *˘▽˘* )

I want to see you again, too. But I don’t want to cause you any trouble.
It’s no trouble! I don’t have to work today, and the only thing I have planned is to hang out with my friend this evening.

Okay. The doctor is coming over at ten.

Oh, he’s coming to your house? Then can I come over then, too? You can sleep some more after the doctor leaves if you want…

Kirishima’s not sure how to respond. It feels weird to have Kou come over for his doctor’s appointment. Why does he even want to? Kirishima thinks about what he would want if their roles were reversed. I’d probably want to go over and take care of him, too.

I can do some chores for you while you’re sleeping, but if it’s too weird, please let me know.

Okay. If you don’t mind, please come over.

Are you sure? I don’t want you saying that just to be polite.

It’s fine, as long as it won’t be too much of a bother. Thank you.

Okay! See you at ten. Do you need anything?

Kirishima thinks about it. He’s still got some of the leftovers from making the bento yesterday, but there’s not much else prepared. He doesn’t feel hungry right now, which isn’t really surprising, but he feels off. Is it just fatigue? Or is it because of the infection? Either way, he won’t feel like cooking for a while.

I think I’m okay.

You sure? Your fridge looked pretty empty yesterday besides the bento ingredients. I can make you some okayu.

I’m not sick.

Yes, you are – or injured, at least. Or I can bring you something else if you’d rather.

Okayu would be fine. Don’t go to too much trouble, though.

Okay. Get some sleep. I’ll see you at ten. Unless you need help dressing before the doctor arrives…

Kirishima thinks about it. He thinks about Kou pressing his lithe athletic frame against Kirishima’s, their breaths mingling as they explore one another’s mouth… He suddenly feels hot. It wouldn’t be good to get all worked up before the doctor examines him.

No, thanks. I think I’ll be fine. See you at ten.

Kirishima’s awakened by the ringing of his phone. He snatches it up. “Kirishima.”

“You sound like crap. How’s the arm?” It’s Suoh.

Kirishima sighs. “It’s fine, I guess. Yabu-sensei will tell me in…” He glances at the clock. “How is it already 9:45?”

“Were you asleep?”
“Yes. I’m getting up now.”

“Good. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Kirishima hurries out of bed and starts getting ready. He pulls on a pair of sweatpants and notices that his right arm is now a bit achy. He feels chilly, so he pulls on a sweatshirt, too. Bending the arm hurts a lot more now than it did yesterday.

As he’s brushing his teeth, it hits him. *Kazu-nii said ‘we.’ Is he driving Yabu-sensei?*

His intercom buzzes. It’s Kou.

“Hi! How are you feeling now?” Kou smiles into the video feed.

“All right,” Kirishima lies. “I’ll buzz you up.” His mind races. He most definitely does not want Kou and Suoh to meet. How can he get rid of Kou before Suoh gets here without hurting Kou’s feelings? Or barring that, how can he get Suoh to leave instead of coming in with Yabu?

When Kirishima opens the door, Kou eyes him carefully. “You look worried about something. Are you really fine?”

“Yes,” Kirishima says. “Come on in.”

Once in the genkan, Kirishima leans in to kiss Kou, but Kou pulls back to look at him again. “Are you sure you’re okay?” He feels Kirishima’s forehead. “You’re burning up!”

“I am?” Kirishima asks. He shrugs. “Well, I guess it’s good the doctor is coming.”

“Yeah. Are you sure you’re alright? You’ve got a line between your eyebrows. Did you not want me to come? I can go…”

“That’s not it!” Kirishima says hurriedly. “It’s just… I think my cousin is coming with the doctor, and…”

“And he doesn’t know you’re into men?” Kou guesses. “I can pretend to be just a friend, if you’d prefer.”

Kirishima closes his eyes and tries to think, but his head is starting to hurt. He definitely hasn’t gotten enough sleep yet. After a moment, he shakes his head. “That’s not it. He actually knows about you. It’s just… he likes to tease me. And I’m not sure I’m ready for him to meet you.”

“Okay,” Kou says quietly. “I understand. I mean, I am a lot younger than you – and less successful.”

“That’s not it!” Kirishima protests. “I’m not embarrassed by you. I’m more embarrassed about what Suoh-san might say about *me* to you. *And to me about the two of us later.*”

Kou chuckles. “It’ll be fine. I can go if you want me to, but remember, I like you just the way you are. There’s nothing he could say that could change that.” He wrinkles his forehead. “Suoh-san? That sounds like a last name. Are you and your cousin not particularly close?”

“If anything, it’s the opposite. We work for the same company, so we use last names at work. Since we see each other at work more than anywhere else, sometimes I slip and still call him that in private, too.”

“Oh.”
There’s a knock on the door, and Kirishima doesn’t have any more time to think about how to avoid Suoh and Kou meeting. The only place Kou could hide in the apartment is probably under the bed, and Kirishima’s not going to ask him to do that. Especially since if Suoh does discover him, Kirishima will never hear the end of it. And he’d never be able to look Yabu-sensei in the eye again.

Kou sits on the couch in the living room, trying to look nonchalant. He sets a bag Kirishima hadn’t noticed before on the far side of the couch.

There’s a louder knock on the door.

“Kei? Are you in there?”

“I’m coming,” Kirishima calls.

He opens the door and lets Suoh and Yabu in. When Suoh notices Kou, he looks like the cat that swallowed the canary.

“You have a friend over?”

Kou quickly stands. “Yes, I’m Motomi Kou. When I heard about Kirishima-san’s injury, I thought I’d stop by and bring him a few supplies and see if he needed anything.”

“So you’re Motomi-kun, huh?” Suoh quickly scans Kou from head to toe, noting the helmet hair, off-brand t-shirt, cheap jeans, and generic sneakers. Suoh’s smirk tells Kou he knows exactly what kind of relationship he has with Kirishima, and Kou can’t help but blush a little.

“Yes. You must be Kirishima-san’s cousin. I’m sorry, I forgot your name.”

“It’s Suoh. This is Yabu-sensei. She’s here to examine Kei.”

“Nice to meet you. I’ll get out of your hair. I’ll just go put the things I brought away in the kitchen,” Kou quickly excuses himself, still flustered.

“Kazu-nii,” Kirishima says in a warning tone, the effect of which is muted by the unfortunate honorific that slipped out. Why do I keep doing that? Is it because Kazumi’s been acting more like his bullying younger self lately? Or because I’m regressing?

Suoh raises his eyebrows innocently. Before they can get into a discussion, Yabu interrupts. “You’ll need to take that shirt off if you want me to examine that arm.”

Kirishima rolls up his sleeve, but Yabu persists.

“Is the arm sore?”

“A little today.”

“More so than yesterday?”

“Yes.” Kirishima feels cold, so he grabs the blanket off the back of the couch and covers as much of his upper body as he can.
“Are you experiencing chills?”

“Yes,” Kirishima admits.

Yabu opens her bag and pulls out a thermometer. She sticks it in Kirishima’s mouth and takes his blood pressure on his good arm. “How many doses of your antibiotic have you taken? And how often have you been taking it?”

Suoh answers for him. “He took the first one just before four a.m. I gave him a double dose and set an alarm for the second dose at eight.” He looks at Kirishima. “Did you take it?”

Kirishima nods.

Yabu pulls out the thermometer and tsks. “You have a high fever. I’m going to examine the wound now.”

When she pulls back the bandage, Kirishima no longer has any doubts – it definitely looks worse than last night. There’s a faint red streak leading from the wound towards his armpit.

“I thought you said you were fine!” Suoh says.

“It didn’t look like that at eight,” Kirishima explains.

Yabu tsks again. “I’m going to have to take a culture. The antibiotic should have stopped it from progressing, at least, so there’s obviously resistance. First, let’s see how far the infection has progressed.”

She palpates various locations of lymph nodes and assesses for pain.

“Well, it hasn’t reached the lymph nodes in your armpit yet. I’m going to give you an IV of a different antibiotic. Hopefully, we’ll get lucky and pick one it’s not resistant to. The cultures will take several hours. If it progresses much further, I’ll want to admit you to the hospital.”

Kirishima nods.

“I need to ask Kirishima-san a few questions in private. Is there somewhere we can talk alone?”

“There’s the bedroom,” Kirishima says.

“That will work.” Once they’re alone, Yabu asks about Kirishima’s health history, specifically about whether he has any conditions that would affect his immune system.

“No. I was in perfect health at my last exam in October.”

“Have you engaged in any risky behaviors since then?”

“Risky? My job by its very nature is ‘risky.’ That’s why we’re here now.”

Yabu explains briskly. “This information is completely confidential, but it’s important for me to know so I can give you proper care. Risky as in intravenous drug use or unprotected sex, particularly with a sex worker, another man, or multiple partners. Anything where an exchange of body fluids might have taken place – well, besides kissing, unless you had an open sore in your mouth at the time.”

Kirishima blushes. “No.”
“Are you sure? It’s important to be honest, even if you’re embarrassed.”

Kirishima wants to bury his face under the covers, but he continues to answer the doctor’s probing questions.

Meanwhile, Suoh and Kou are left alone out in the living area. After several long moments of awkward silence, Kou asks, “Is Kei-san going to be alright?”

“Once Yabu-sensei finds an antibiotic that works, he’ll be fine. The problem is that we don’t know how clean that blade was.”

“Blade?” Kou asks. “I thought it was a punch bowl.”

Suoh inwardly curses himself. Kei’s going to be furious.

“There were several things on the tray when it fell. The bowl didn’t break until it hit the ground. Kei was trying to catch it, so he may not have even noticed the knife. It was used for a sushi demonstration, so it was very sharp,” Suoh lies smoothly.

“Oh.”

Kou still looks like he’s troubled, so Suoh decides some distraction is in order. The best defense is a good offense. “You just called Kei by his first name. How long have you known him?”

Kou blushes faintly. “Only about a week. I guess we just hit it off and became close quickly because we have a lot in common.”

Suoh’s eyebrows shoot up. “You do? May I ask what you do for a living?” He eyes Kou again quickly from head to toe, which somehow communicates, “You certainly don’t look like you belong to our social class.”

Kou squares his shoulders and lifts his chin. Kei-san told me he’s not embarrassed by my age or job. “I’m a freelance graphic designer.” He pulls out a business card and presents it to Suoh.

Suoh accepts the business card with one hand and only gives it a cursory glance before shoving it in his pocket. “So what could you possibly have in common with Kei?”

“We both want to experience more of the world,” Kou explains.

Suoh’s eyebrows shoot up again, but before he can say anything else, Yabu opens the door. “I’ve set up the antibiotic drip.”

Suoh and Kou head into the bedroom, where Kirishima is reclining on the bed, his back propped up with pillows. The IV bag is hanging from the light fixture.

Yabu says, “Once this is done, I need to drop these samples off at the lab. Someone should stay with you here and help monitor your condition.”

“I’ll do it,” Suoh and Kou offer at the same time.

“I’ll be fine,” Kirishima protests.

“You really should have someone else here; you can’t see all of the affected area yourself.” Yabu turns to the others. “If the red streak progresses more than two centimeters farther, you should head directly to the hospital. Don’t wait for me. But I’d appreciate updates every half hour. I’ll be back in
four hours to check things for myself, but I can return sooner if necessary.”

Suoh turns to Kou. “Thanks for checking on Kei. You can go ahead and go now. I’m sure you have things to do.”

But Kou looks at Kirishima. “Kei-san?”

Kirishima looks away as he blushes. “I’m sorry, Kou-san.” Suoh casts Kou a triumphant look. Kou’s face starts to droop, but Kirishima continues, “But do you mind staying with me?”

Kou’s face immediately brightens. “No problem!”

Kirishima turns to Suoh. “Thanks for offering to stay with me, Kazumi, but you’ve got to take Yabu-sensei back. Anyway, with me out of commission, Asami-sama needs you.”

Suoh nods curtly.

Yabu teaches Kou how to measure the progression of the infection.

“Should I send you pictures with my updates?” Kou asks.

Yabu frowns. “It’s so faint, I’m not sure it will show up.”

Kou adjusts the settings on his camera phone, zooms in on Kirishima’s arm, and snaps a picture. He shows it to Yabu. “Is this clear enough? Did I get everything important in the shot?”

Yabu raises her eyebrows. “Wow. That’s some camera you’ve got on that phone. Yes, please send me pictures with your updates.”

Soon, the antibiotic drip has finished, and Yabu and Suoh leave. Once they’re gone, Kou fluffs Kirishima’s pillows and smooths the blanket over him. “Can I get you anything?”

Kirishima nods. “Can you please bring me my briefcase?”

“You look exhausted. Can’t it wait?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’ll sleep better if I take care of a few things first. I won’t work long.”

Kou eyes him. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes; then I’m taking it away.”

“I need at least an hour,” Kirishima protests.

“Thirty minutes. That’s my final offer. You can do more after you rest.”

“Fine.” Kirishima sighs. He really is exhausted.

He skims the Suzuki Summit report and reviews his to-do list and Asami’s itinerary for the day. He’s finalizing the note for Morita when Asami calls.

“Asami-sama, my apologies for causing you trouble.”

“Kei, how are you?” Asami asks.

“I’m fine.”

“How are you really?”
“Tired,” Kirishima admits. “I should be fine once the antibiotics kick in and I get a little rest.”

“I should have given you the whole day off yesterday.”

“That wouldn’t have kept the infection from spreading,” Kirishima points out.

“But you might have noticed it sooner if you hadn’t been working so hard.”

“I wouldn’t have been working so hard if I hadn’t taken half the day off.”

“Touché. Still, take as much time off as you need. I don’t want to see your face before Tuesday.”

“I should be fine tomorrow,” Kirishima protests.

“I don’t want to have to listen to another hour-long lecture from Suoh about how much I’m overworking you,” Asami says with a note of finality.

“Yes, I understand, Asami-sama.”

As Kirishima is hanging up, Kou comes back into the room. “Time’s up.”

“I have to send this to my assistant,” Kirishima objects.

“We agreed to thirty minutes, Kei-san.”

“But I had to take a phone call.”

“Was it work?”

“It was my boss, but he was just asking how I was.”

“Fine. How much more time do you need?”

“Five minutes,” Kirishima promises.

“Okay. Have you eaten anything yet?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Your body still needs nourishment. The okayu’s going to take a while, but how about I bring you some of the leftovers from yesterday?”

Kirishima sighs. “Just a little, please. There’s already cooked rice in the freezer. You can thaw it in the microwave.”

When Kou enters carrying a tray, Kirishima closes his laptop and slips it and his papers back into his briefcase. Kou takes the briefcase and holds out his hand. “Your phone.”

“But what if it’s an emergency?”

“Then they can call someone else. They’ll survive for a few hours without you.”

Kirishima reluctantly hands his phone over. He feels almost naked without it, as if something essential is missing.

“Before you eat, I’m supposed to check your wound and update Yabu-sensei,” Kou reminds him.
Kirishima struggles out of the right arm of his sweatshirt.

Kou claps his hands together once. “I nearly forgot!” He races out to the living room and quickly returns carrying the bag he brought over. He pulls out a yukata and hands it to Kirishima. “I also got a few oversized t-shirts that should be easier to take on and off.” He rummages through the bag and pulls one out.

“It’s purple,” Kirishima observes.

“I know. I thought it would look good on you.” Kou helps Kirishima out of his shirt. “What happened here?” he suddenly asks.

Kirishima looks down where Kou is pointing at the long, wide scar from where the bullet grazed his side during the cruise ship showdown with Fei Long. “I fell out of a tree.”

“It doesn’t look that old,” Kou says. “Is it because it was such a wide scar? Did you get caught on a branch or something?”

“Yes,” Kirishima says. He shivers.

“Oh, sorry. Here, let’s get you dressed.” Kou holds the shirt out so Kirishima can slip his arms in.

When Kou inspects the wound, there’s no change from when he looked at it with Yabu. He snaps a picture and sends it to her. Her reply is quick.

No change. Good. Maybe the new antibiotics are working. Keep checking every thirty minutes though.

Kou shows it to Kirishima before helping him into the yukata.

“This will be a lot easier to put on and off. Thank you, Kou-san. Can I pay you back for it?” Kirishima asks.

“No, you don’t need to do that. It’s a get-well gift. May you live to wear it.”

Kirishima squints at him.

“It’s an Irish blessing you say to people when they get new clothes. I had an exchange student friend in college who taught me it,” Kou explains.

“It sounds kind of morbid.”

Kou shrugs. “I guess it is. Sorry.”

“No, it’s nice. Thank you.” Kirishima picks up his chopsticks and starts to eat. After the first few bites, his appetite kicks in, and he’s soon eating heartily.

“I heard there’s a nice urban forest in Setagaya. Maybe we can go there the next time we want to hike. It’s supposed to have a waterfall,” Kou says.

“That sounds nice. And it’s nice and close.” Kirishima smiles. “Have I said ‘thank you’ yet?”

“You have. Several times, in fact,” Kou points out.

“I mean for coming here. For taking care of me. For just… being you.”
Kou grins. “You’re cheesy when you’re sick.”

“I’m sorry.” Kirishima bobs his head.

“Don’t be. You’re adorable.” Kou leans down and kisses him.

Kirishima deepens the kiss, but Kou pulls away after just a minute.

“I’m supposed to be helping you rest, not tiring you out,” he reminds Kirishima.

“I know,” Kirishima sighs.

“Hurry up and get better so we can go out again,” Kou says.

“Or stay in,” Kirishima says as he picks up his chopsticks again.

Kou giggles. “You’re very forward today.”

Kirishima turns red to the roots of his hair. “That’s not what I meant! Well, I didn’t not mean it, either…” he mumbles.

Kou blushes, too. “I started reading that book you lent me last night. I brought it with me, in case you want to read it while you’re recovering.”

“Is it as… crazy as the cover suggests?” Kirishima asks, coughing.

“No, but it’s got a lot of good information. I guess it’s not really good convalescent reading material, though, is it?” Kou grins.

Kirishima feels so hot, he figures he must have reached maximum blush. He ducks his head and takes another bite.

When he’s finished eating, he can barely keep his eyes open.

“Time to sleep,” Kou orders. He arranges the pillows and blankets so that Kirishima’s right arm is covered by a single layer. “That way, I can check it without waking you up. Are you comfortable?”

Kirishima nods. “Thank you.”

Kirishima falls into a deep, dreamless sleep. He’s only awakened by Kou examining his arm.

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Ready to rejoin the land of the awake and healthy?” Kou smiles down at him.

As Kou’s words penetrate, Kirishima tries to sit up so that he can catch a glimpse of his arm.

“Just a second, I’ve got to take the picture to send to Yabu-sensei.” As soon as the camera clicks, Kou helps Kirishima sit up. “Look, it’s only at six centimeters now. It started at ten.”

“It did all that in half an hour?” Kirishima asks, astonished.

Kou chuckles. “Try three hours. You were totally out of it. Do you finally feel rested?”

“Yes,” Kirishima says. I can’t believe I slept so soundly with someone else in my apartment. Even alone, I have trouble sleeping. Just what kind of magic does Kou-san have? “I feel well enough to
“Slow down there, buckaroo. You didn’t really eat much, and you still look kind of tired. How does the arm feel now?”

“A little less sore, I think. Or maybe I’m just used to it now.”

“Yabu-sensei is going to be here in another half hour. The okayu is ready. Can you eat some now? She said she’s probably going to give you some oral antibiotics to make sure you really kick this thing, and it’s better to take them on a full stomach.”

Kirishima shrugs. “Only a little, please,” he says. Kou looks faintly disappointed. “Since I’ve just been sleeping, I’m just not that hungry. I’m sure it’s tasty,” Kirishima adds.

Kou’s face brightens. As he heads to the kitchen to get the okayu, Kirishima thinks, *He’s like a puppy, always seeking approval and encouragement. I need to be careful with his feelings.*

Kou brings in a steaming bowl of okayu with greens, leeks, and beans mixed into it. “I hope you like it. It’s an old family recipe. The vegetables are supposed to promote healing. And the leeks are supposed to fight infection.”

“How about you. Itadakimasu,” Kirishima says, clapping his hands.

While he’s eating, Kou starts casually asking questions about Kirishima’s job: what it’s like to work in the nightlife industry, how often Kirishima gets to go to the various clubs, whether he likes clubbing…

“Well, most of our clubs aren’t the dancehall kind that you’re probably thinking of,” Kirishima explains. “Most cater to an older, more sedate crowd. I don’t really fit in at the other kind, anyway.”

“But Sion has some in its portfolio, right? Like Dracaena? Have you ever been there?”

“I go there once a month to inspect it,” Kirishima says. He tries not to shudder as he remembers his last encounter with the disturbingly obsequious, Asami-obsessed Sudou.

“But you don’t ever go there for fun?” Kou asks. He’s trying to hide it, but Kirishima can sense Kou is slightly disappointed.

“If I did, it would be no fun for the employees. They’d think I was there for a surprise inspection.”

“Oh, that’s true. I guess you can’t really let loose with coworkers and subordinates around.”

There’s a short, comfortable silence before Kou starts speaking again.

“What about Friday night? You were on the floor of one of the clubs then, right? Was it Club Sion? What’s that one like?”

“It was,” Kirishima says, suddenly uneasy. Kou has brought up Friday night so casually. Kirishima wonders whether he’s reading too much into it, but he knows he has to tread carefully or Kou could easily catch him in a lie about his wound.

“What’s it like?” Kou repeats, smiling. “Is it ‘older and more sedate’? Wealthier?”

“Yes, most of Club Sion’s patrons are well-established in their careers. It’s like a gentlemen’s lounge. Very sedate.”
“Does it serve food as well as drinks?”

“Of course. We have a full kitchen. Why all the questions?”

“I’m just trying to picture where you work. Do you ever provide entertainment? Maybe ‘more sedate’ entertainment?” A smile is quirking at Kou’s mouth.

Kirishima grins back. “Just what kind of ‘more sedate’ entertainment are you imagining?”


Kirishima chuckles. “Well, we do have a few mahjongg and shogi sets, but only a handful of our patrons actually play regularly. But I’ve never seen ikebana or a cooking demonstration. Wouldn’t they be more appealing to obasans instead?”

Kou’s face suddenly clouds over. “I guess so,” he says. He smiles again, but it looks a little forced this time. “Do you ever have theme nights? Like with food and stuff?”

“What kind of theme?”

“I don’t know. I guess ramen night wouldn’t really suit a bunch of stuffed shirts, but maybe something like sushi night?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “No. It might be a good idea, though. Let me write that down.” He pulls his tablet out of his nightstand.

“Hey! You were hiding that from me when I confiscated your work stuff,” Kou chides.

“I forgot it was in there; that’s just where I always keep it. Besides, I didn’t work anymore, did I?”

“That’s true,” Kou says. He hesitates for a moment, his face clouded with doubt. “Kei-san? Can I ask you something?”

But before he can ask, there’s a knock at the door signaling Suoh and Yabu’s return.

Kirishima is restless during his exam despite Yabu’s excellent prognosis. What does Kou-san want to talk about? Why did he look so serious?

Suoh steps out of the room to take a phone call during the middle of the examination.

“You’re doing much better. It looks like we found an antibiotic that works,” Yabu pronounces. She hands him a prescription bottle. “Make sure you take them this time.”

“I will,” Kirishima promises. Suoh returns. He’s wearing his usual stoic face, but Kirishima can tell he’s worried about something from the tenseness around his mouth. “How is Asami-sama?”

Kirishima asks him.

“He’s fine. Don’t get too full of yourself, Kei. We can survive a day or two without you.”

“I know you can,” Kirishima says.

“But it’s much more difficult to, right, Suoh-san?” Kou asks.

Suoh gives a half-smile. “Yes, of course. Kei is a hard worker. Hurry up and get well.”
“Don’t work too hard. Give that arm a rest while you still can,” Yabu admonishes. “It’s going to be sore for a while yet. Even though the antibiotics are clearing the infection, your body is going to take a while to repair the damage already done.”

Kou coughs discreetly. “Um, Kei-san? I’m going to go now. I have that meeting with my friend, remember? Goodbye. Get well soon. I can come over again tomorrow if you’d like.”

Kirishima stares at him, surprised. *Isn’t this rather sudden? Didn’t you want to talk to me?* But he can’t find a way to voice the questions aloud. He swallows and says, “Thank you for all your help. I’m sorry I was such a stubborn, troublesome patient.”

“You weren’t. I put the leftover okayu in the fridge, so all you have to do is heat it up.” Kou bows and is gone before Kirishima can say anything else.

After Yabu and Suoh leave, all Kirishima can do is replay the conversation with Kou about Club Sion over and over in his head. *What did I say that offended him?* Then he remembers that Kou said he would be meeting his friend in the evening. *He’s avoiding me. I definitely did something wrong.*

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be from Kou's perspective.
Chapter Summary

After hearing from Suoh that Kirishima's injury was caused by a blade instead of a punch bowl, Kou wonders exactly what Kirishima is hiding from him. While Kirishima is sleeping, what will Kou find in his apartment? And what will Kou do with the information once he finds out?

Chapter Notes

They couldn't have smooth sailing forever. Lies eventually catch up with you.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

Japanese terms:
okayu: a rice porridge often eaten when feeling sick (you can add vegetables, beans, etc. to it)
tachi: seme/top
neko: uke/bottom
fugu: pufferfish, a Japanese delicacy
kaomoji: Japanese-style emoticons, such as (^_^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The problem is that we don’t know how clean that blade was.”

It takes a moment for Suoh’s words to sink in, but when they do, a shiver runs down Kou’s spine. Kei-san was stabbed? But Kei-san said it was an accident.

Suoh’s explanation doesn’t quite sound right. Wouldn’t you notice whether your arm was cut with a knife or a punch bowl? But could you really get such a long wound from a broken bowl, anyway?

Kou remembers something Akihito told him once: when people start telling an implausible lie, they often distract you with excessive details, or they’ll change the topic quickly. Suoh does both. Kou tries to shove it out of his mind. I’m probably just being paranoid.

While Kirishima is working, Kou starts making the okayu and cleaning the kitchen. Yesterday they
left the dirty dishes in the sink after packing the bento, thinking they’d wash them when they got back from their picnic. Since they were running late, they didn’t have time, and Kirishima obviously couldn’t take care of them when he got home from work sick last night. There aren’t that many dishes, though, and Kou finishes washing everything and cleaning the kitchen before Kirishima finishes working.

When Kou is carrying Kirishima’s briefcase and phone out to the living room so that Kirishima can sleep undisturbed, Kirishima’s phone buzzes in his hand. Kou glances at the display, but Kirishima has locked the phone. Did he think I’d snoop? Kou wonders, feeling a little hurt. He heads back to the bedroom to let Kirishima know about the incoming call, but Kirishima’s already asleep.

Kou sits on the couch and tries to read some more of the gay sex guide Kirishima lent him, but his mind keeps flashing back to the word “blade.” Somehow it sounds scarier than “knife.”

“You know a lot of clubs in Shinjuku are run by the yakuza, right?”

But Akihito said that his boyfriend is the president of Kirishima’s company. Akihito would have warned Kou if they really were yakuza, wouldn’t he?

Kou shakes his head. There’s no way Aki would date some yakuza. It’s Aki, criminal photographer.

“I met Asami through work.”

What if? When Kou made a joke about Asami bribing a politician, Akihito got flustered and claimed he couldn’t remember the exact circumstances. Could those circumstances have been a criminal stakeout? Akihito claimed he and Asami had a “slow start,” but he said he wasn’t sure exactly what they are to each other – and that if Asami weren’t clingy, Akihito wouldn’t even be his friend. Maybe Aki is caught up in something he can’t get out of. But why didn’t he ask for help? Kou rolls his eyes. Akihito never asks for help.

And Akihito admitted that the manager of one of Asami’s clubs had his security team beat him up for pursuing a scoop there. When Kou asked why he didn’t mention it to Asami, Akihito acted a bit scared at the thought.

Still, Akihito would warn Kou and not let him get involved unknowingly with a yakuza! Right?

“Just be careful. Take it slow. Get to know him.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“How well do you really know him?”

Wasn’t that Akihito trying to warn him? He could have been a lot more clear! But if Akihito is being forced by Asami, maybe he couldn’t be.

Kou closes his eyes and shakes his head. He decides there’s no use worrying about it on his own; he’ll just have to ask Akihito. But first, he needs to figure out what really happened to Kirishima’s arm. How much of what Suoh told him was the truth? It’s pretty clear that Kirishima’s wound was probably caused by a knife, but was it a sushi knife that fell off a tray? Or was it something else that would make both Kirishima and Suoh lie to Kou?

Kou pulls out his phone and starts typing a message.
Hey, Aki! Can we meet a bit earlier tonight? I need some advice.

Sure, no problem. As long as you don’t embarrass me again.

(◔‿◔) I won’t. Sheesh.

What time do you want to meet?

Will 5 work for you?

Sure. I suddenly have a stakeout tonight, so 5 is actually better.

What time is your stakeout?

I’ll need to leave by 9. We should have plenty of time to eat dinner and play some games.

Kou hesitates. He doesn’t really want to wait until he sees Akihito to figure things out, and he’s not sure how he can definitively determine whether Suoh was lying about Kirishima’s injury.

Remember how you told me that liars often give too many details or switch the topic? I just had someone do both.

Then they were probably lying.

The only thing is, I think originally they were telling the truth, but it made me catch someone else in a lie. It’s their cover story that I think was the lie.

And you want to prove that the first person was lying?

Exactly. Is there a way I can do that without them figuring out I’m trying to trap them?

I could give you better suggestions if I knew the whole story.

Kou hesitates. Akihito is one of the people who might have lied to – or at least misled – Kou.

It’s complicated, and I don’t have a ton of time right now.

OK. Well, one way is to ask the first person questions about the details the second person gave, but in a way that seems unrelated to the cover story.

They’re more likely to answer with the truth, so if there’s a contradiction, it can provide evidence that the cover story is false.

It’s not proof, exactly, but the more contradictions there are, the more likely you’ll be able to guess the truth.

Ok. Thanks. I’ll try it.

Do you need photographic evidence? I could maybe do some undercover work for you if it’s serious.

No, it’s fine. I’ll tell you the whole story tonight. Hopefully I’ll have all the answers by then.

Kou grabs a notepad from his bag. He makes a list of what he knows.

1. Kei-san said he was cut by a punch bowl that fell off a tray.
2. Suoh-san said they don’t know how clean “the blade” was.
3. I stupidly said Kei-san said it was a punch bowl.
4. Suoh-san said there were several things on the tray when it fell:
   a. bowl (didn’t break until it hit the ground)
   b. knife used for sushi demonstration
   c. Kei-san was trying to catch bowl, didn’t notice knife
5. Probably true: Kei-san was cut by some sort of blade (Suoh-san seemed very sure about this, and he didn’t change his story even when I contradicted him)
6. So why did Kei-san lie about a punch bowl? Could he really have thought that’s what cut him instead of the knife?
7. If Suoh-san is telling the truth, what would Kei-san know about?
   a. tray (they both mentioned a tray, so that doesn’t help)
   b. knife (but Suoh-san claims Kei-san didn’t notice it because he was focused on the bowl)
   c. sushi demonstration **** If there was no sushi demonstration, then Suoh-san probably made up the story of the knife being on the tray with the bowl. That means there was probably no bowl, and it was just a knife, and Kei-san lied. If there was a sushi demonstration, maybe Suoh-san’s explanation is correct, even though it seems far-fetched.
8. If Kei-san was stabbed and lied about it, what does that mean?
   a. it could have been a random attack in the club, and he didn’t want me to worry
   b. he’s a yakuza – Aki did hint at that… but then that means Asami-san is one, too
   c. Would Aki admit it? What has he said about Asami-san?

Kou’s phone beeps, indicating it’s time to check Kirishima’s arm again. He tucks the list back into his bag. Kirishima doesn’t stir when Kou examines the arm and takes a picture. It looks like the red streak has receded slightly, and Kou breathes a sigh of relief.

After sending the picture to Yabu, Kou turns to leave Kirishima’s bedroom, but he accidentally bumps against the nightstand, and something falls off it. When Kou bends down to pick it up, he accidentally kicks it, and it rolls under the bed. Kou bends over to see what it is. It’s a prescription bottle.

Kou tries to reach it, but it’s too far under the bed, so he has to wriggle under the bed to get it. He shudders. The last time he crawled under a bed, a spider dropped down from the bottom of the bed and landed in his hair. He decides to crawl under on his back so that he can see any spiders before they fall.

He turns on his phone’s flashlight feature and checks the underside of the bed for spiders as he makes his way towards the bottle. The light seems to catch on something metal in the very center of the bed, and he makes his way over towards it, curious.

It’s some kind of hidden compartment. Kou can’t help tugging on the handle, but it won’t open. After a moment, he realizes there seems to be some kind of scanner above the handle. It’s probably for a fingerprint or something.

The compartment is rather small, and you really have to be right under the bed to see it. Even if a thief were searching the place and moved the mattress and box spring, chances are he wouldn’t notice the compartment unless he were specifically looking for it. Neither would the police.

A shiver runs down Kou’s spine. I’ve seen too many action movies, he chides himself. Still, it seems a very odd place for a safe; it’s quite difficult to reach. Isn’t the whole point of a safe supposed to be that it makes your valuables easily accessible to you but no one else? The lock is supposed to be what keeps it safe, not being hidden. And if you wanted to hide it, wouldn’t you hide it behind a
painting or something? Or is that something they only do in the movies? Hiding it behind a painting always seemed like it was done more because the safe was ugly than to keep it secret, anyway.

Kou grabs the prescription bottle and wiggles back out from under the bed. He snaps a picture of the prescription bottle, focusing on the name and address of the prescribing doctor. He moves the picture to a different folder on his phone so that it’s not mixed in with the photos of Kirishima’s arm.

Kou puts the bottle back on the nightstand and scans its other contents, but the only things there are the alarm clock and Kirishima’s glasses. He starts to slide open the drawer, but Kirishima makes a grunting noise.

What am I doing? Kou chides himself. When did I turn into Aki?

He heads back to the living room and pulls out his list again. He picks up where he left off, wondering if Kirishima and Asami are yakuza – and what Akihito has shared about Asami.

c. Would Aki admit it? What has he said about Asami-san?
   i. president of Sion – owns a lot of different businesses, clubs
   ii. Kei-san is his secretary
   iii. Dracaena is owned by Sion
      a. manager orders security to rough people (media) up
      b. but manager apologizes for their roughness
      c. Aki seemed scared to mention this to Asami-san
      d. why was Aki investigating Dracaena, anyway?!
   iv. met through work (“a photoshoot” – “can’t remember” for what)
   v. they “belong to different worlds” – Kei-san makes sure Aki knows
   vi. bisexual (Aki assumes)
   vii. Asami-san is the tachi, Aki is the neko
   viii. doesn’t know how long they’ve been together (“slow start”)
   ix. met 1.5 years ago
   x. not sure what they are
   xi. wouldn’t even be friends if Asami-san weren’t clingy
   xii. couldn’t stand him at the beginning (“came on too strong”)
   xiii. thinks Asami-san is only in it for the chase, so won’t give in

Kou throws down the list in disgust. What is he doing, snooping into his best friend’s relationship like this? But now that I’m thinking about it, it doesn’t sound right. I was too caught up in my excitement about Kei-san to really pay attention to what Aki was saying, but he doesn’t sound happy. Kou skims the list again. Besides his company name, Akihito didn’t really tell him much about Asami – especially not anything good. Akihito’s always kept his troubles to himself; that’s what makes Kou worry about him so much. Like Hong Kong.

Kou sits up suddenly.

What did that long-haired Chinese guy say when he was talking to Akihito again? He was asking for data, saying it was impossible for Akihito to steal it. And then he said something about “satisfying someone in bed.” Kou had tried to tune out at that point because he didn’t want to know about it if Akihito did that sort of thing for a scoop. But Akihito wouldn’t do that type of thing just for a scoop, would he? Anyway, Akihito knew Kou and Takato had been kidnapped, so if he did sink that low, it was for Kou’s sake.

Kou doesn’t want to think about that, either.

But whose data was Akihito supposed to steal? Kou wasn’t listening carefully enough to catch the
name, but Kou remembers that moment of panic when that long-haired guy said he didn’t need them anymore because someone would come for sure now that he had Akihito.

_Could that someone have been Asami-san?_

Kou can’t remember. In one moment he thought he was going to be killed, and the very next he was released, but he was still terrified that Akihito had made some kind of stupid bargain to save Kou and Takato.

And then they were reunited with Akihito, but Akihito chased after some black car and then disappeared for months. When he finally returned, tanned and thinner, he told some wild tale about Hong Kong that sounded like he’d patched it together from several of their favorite action movies.

But when Akihito stayed with Kou, Kou saw the fresh scar on Akihito’s shoulder. Akihito tried to brush it off, but when Kou insisted on the truth, Akihito finally said it was from the shootout he had while escaping from Hong Kong.

_There’s no way Aki would be able to escape on his own. If he was really kidnapped – and he wouldn’t just disappear like that on his own, so he probably was – he must have had help escaping. Who else knew Aki was missing? And who convinced the police to ignore any missing person reports on Aki?_

Kou closes his eyes, trying to remember the events when Akihito got back. When they got to his apartment, all his stuff was gone, and there was a key on his door. _Asami-san’s key._

Kou had been checking up on Akihito’s apartment every other day, collecting his mail and making sure the landlady wasn’t doing anything with his stuff. The key showed up right when Akihito got back.

_So did Asami-san help Akihito escape from Hong Kong? If so, was he the reason Akihito got taken to Hong Kong in the first place?_

Kou shakes his head. He can’t ask Akihito about this. If Asami really were yakuza, Akihito is probably already in way over his head. Asking him might get Akihito in trouble. The kind of trouble even Akihito would have trouble escaping from.

Kou’s ruminations are interrupted by the timer going off again. He checks on Kirishima’s arm, resisting the urge to do any more snooping in his bedroom. He heads to the kitchen to check on the okayu. It’s ready, but it’ll keep until Kirishima wakes up.

Kou decides to make himself a cup of tea, thinking it might help calm his racing thoughts. As he searches through Kirishima’s cabinets to find the tea strainer, he notes once again how organized Kirishima’s space is. But it’s not just organized – it hardly looks lived in. Kou glances around again. There are no family photos anywhere, no notes taped to the refrigerator.

_Kei-san is really fastidious; maybe he just puts everything away._

But everybody has at least one messy space in their home, right? A junk drawer, a corner of the closet, a random box… Kou remembers how organized Kirishima’s closet was.

_He doesn’t have a home office, even though he works so much. Where does he keep his important papers?_

Kou opens the rest of the drawers and cabinets in the kitchen. There’s nothing there except what belongs in a kitchen.
Well, that’s true for my place too, mostly, except for the takeout and delivery menus.

Kou moves on to the living room. He remembers that when he borrowed the notepad from Kirishima’s side table to doodle, Kirishima had looked momentarily upset that he’d gone looking through his things. Kou opens the side table drawer, but the only things in there are the pad of paper and a pen. He lifts them out, checking the drawer for a false bottom, but he’s not really sure what he’s looking for.

*Is there even room to hide anything under this bottom?* He uses the pen to measure the depth of the drawer on the inside and then again on the outside. The outside is about four centimeters longer than the inside. *Definitely enough space to hide something.*

Kou kneels down to inspect the underside of the drawer. There’s about 3 centimeters between the bottom of the side and the actual bottom. *Oh. So there’s probably not a false bottom.*

But his eye notices something towards the back of the drawer. He crouches lower to see what it is. There’s a small black patch of fabric attached to the bottom of the drawer. *What in the world is that?* He takes a few photos on his phone, but he can’t figure it out. He moves the pictures to the folder that has the picture of Kirishima’s prescription bottle.

*“How well do you really know him?”*

Kou grabs his note pad and starts listing the things he knows about Kirishima.

1. Name: Kirishima Kei
2. Age: 35 years old
3. picks up guys on the edge of Ni-chôme

Kou hesitates. *Kei-san says he never kissed anyone before me, and he’s been kind of awkward with everything… So was he really trying to pick me up?*

Kou plays back the evening they first met in his mind. He saw the same black Mercedes pull up to the curb and let Akihito and Asami out. The driver bowed and watched them go in. Kou watched Asami grab Akihito’s butt while waiting for the elevator, and Akihito didn’t pull away.

Kou drove straight to the parking garage and walked to the bar.

And then Asami’s secretary showed up a few minutes later. After parking in the exact same parking garage.

*Boy, am I an idiot.*

Kou buries his head in his hands. *What did the driver look like?*

He racks his brain, but he can’t remember. He barely paid attention to the driver. *And here I was judging Kei-san for being so rude to the person who delivered his dinner when he was on the phone with me, and I was doing the same thing to him. Maybe. Probably.*

Kou crosses out the third item on his list and continues.

3. attracted to men? attracted to me? thinks I’m brave?

Kou sighs. How much of their relationship has been Kirishima trying to figure out why Kou was following his precious Asami-sama, determining whether Kou was a threat? Was it all an act?
But surely Kirishima must have believed what Kou said about merely being jealous of Akihito’s relationship with another man. Especially given Kou’s sincere interest in Kirishima himself. *Would a straight-laced germophobe really go as far as kissing another man? Agreeing to date him? Dry-humping him?*

Kou blushes faintly, but the memory makes him smile. *Kei-san definitely reacted to me. Maybe he really does like me? If our situations were reversed, and I had fallen for him after initially following him for some other reason, I wouldn’t be able to admit it, either. I’d be too afraid I’d scare him away before we really had a chance to begin.*

Kou picks up his pen again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. job: secretary to Asami, president of Sion Corporation (or some kind of manager?)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. works 60-80 hours/week (too hard – wears himself out!)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. works <strong>very</strong> late at night, especially on weekends (doesn’t start until noon)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. entertains clients in Ni-chôme with Asami</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>d. calls Asami “sama”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Asami gave him a gay sex guide!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Sion manages several clubs “among other things”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. lots of meetings, has subordinates <em>[This is way too vague!]</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. inspects clubs (Dracaena: once a month)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. has to visit locations and customers, drives boss around [<em>I’m an idiot</em>]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. “uniform” = black suit, white shirt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 5. kind and considerate, used to letting others choose |  |
| 6. likes to try new things (fugu, motorcycles, kaomoji) |  |
| 7. very polite, conscientious, a bit germophobic, likes his routines |  |
| 8. a good cook (and a good teacher) |  |
| 9. insecure, thinks others find him awkward or mood-killing |  |
| 10. really cute when he blushes |  |
| 11. warm |  |
| 12. a good kisser |  |
| 13. not sure if he’s a tachi or a neko, sounds like he’s open to both [*Get a hold of yourself, Kou! This is a fact-finding mission! Though this is an important fact to know…*] |  |
| 14. didn’t own jeans before yesterday |  |
| 15. rocks a pair of skinny jeans |  |
| 16. lies easily when necessary (or at least tells convincing half-truths… though Itoh-san didn’t buy it) |  |
| 17. never wore hand-me-downs – rich? (but what about scholarship?) |  |
| 18. scholarship to private high school |  |
| 19. was a boy scout |  |
| 20. likes nature (camping, hiking), hasn’t been in years |  |
| 21. cousin = Suoh [*That jerk didn’t even give me his first name.*] |  |
| 22. parents run a kimono shop with 2 older brothers and older sister |  |
| 23. bad eyesight, claims to be clumsy |  |
| 24. lives in a nice, tidy 1LDK in western Shibuya 15 minutes from work |  |
| a. hidden bed safe |  |
| b. weird fabric under living room side table |  |
| 25. has a car – what kind? (is it a black Mercedes?) |  |
| 26. makes Aki feel like he should be aware that he and Asami belong to “different worlds” |  |
| 27. works out a lot (or a little and is **very** genetically gifted) |  |
| 28. got cut with a knife (or a punch bowl) Friday night |  |
| 29. has a wide scar on his left side |  |
Kou freezes. *How did I not realize it sooner? That scar looks a lot like the one Aki has on his shoulder that he said he got from a shootout. Could it be from a bullet grazing Kei-san’s side? Or was it really from a tree branch as Kei-san said?*

Kou skims the list again. He doesn’t know a ton about Kirishima, but then again, he’s only known him a few days. And what he’s written doesn’t sound anything like a yakuza.

*I let my imagination run away with me.*

Kou crumples the paper in disgust. So what if Kirishima has a safe? A lot of rich people do. Maybe it just came with his bed, and he liked the bed so much, he didn’t mind paying a bit extra for a feature he doesn’t even use. Maybe a sushi knife really fell off a tray. And that scar on his side probably *was* from a tree branch; Kirishima was a very outdoorsy kid.

*I’ve watched way too many movies.*

Kou heads to the kitchen to throw the paper away, but he hesitates. What if Kirishima sees it and reads Kou’s wild theories? Kou puts the paper back in his bag instead.

When Kirishima finally wakes up, Kou can’t help guiding the conversation towards sushi demonstrations, though. *If he tells me there was a sushi demonstration Friday, I’ll be able to stop these crazy thoughts and let it go.*

But Kirishima *doesn’t* say there was a sushi demonstration Friday night; instead, he thinks a sushi demonstration is such a great idea, he writes it down.

All the doubt comes flooding back into Kou. *Kei-san and Suoh-san both lied to me. Kei-san was cut with a knife, but in a circumstance neither wants to share with me.*

But why? There’s only one way to find out.

Just as Kou is about to confront Kirishima, however, Suoh and Yabu return.

The first thing Kirishima does is ask about “Asami-sama.” Every time Kou hears Kirishima use that honorific for his boss, it grates on his nerves a little more.

*Even if I ask Kei-san, he probably won’t give me a straight answer. I should see what else he’s lied to me about first.*

Kou hurriedly excuses himself. He starts to head home to research on his computer, but halfway there, he realizes that might be a bad idea. *What if they can trace who did searches on them?*

He heads to an internet café instead, ready to find out as much as he can about the real Kirishima Kei. And Asami. *I’ve got two hours until my meeting with Aki. Let’s figure out who’s been telling lies – and why.*

Chapter End Notes

I’m not sure whether the next chapter will show Kirishima and Suoh or Kou and Akihito (or maybe I could split it and show both?). Let me know in the comments which you’d
rather see first.

Sorry about the formatting on Kou's lists. I've spent an hour trying to fix it in html, but AO3 seems to be ignoring some of the html codes, so I finally gave up. I think everything is at least in the proper alignment.
Chapter Summary

As Kirishima works to figure out why Kou is so upset, Kou starts researching Kirishima online to find out what he's been hiding. Will Kirishima find a way to talk to Kou before he discovers everything? And what will Kou do about his suspicions about Asami's and Akihito's relationship?

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up being from both Kirishima's and Kou's perspectives. Instead of doing a section from each, it made more sense to just share the thoughts of each as they came up. Hopefully it's not too confusing! (If it is, please tell me where it gets confusing, and I'll revise it to make it clearer.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

Japanese terms:
fuku-shacho: Kirishima's job title (basically, Asami's right-hand man)
ikebana: Japanese art of flower arrangement
okayu: a rice porridge often eaten when feeling sick (you can add vegetables, beans, etc. to it)
moshi moshi: hello (used on the telephone)

As soon as Kirishima realizes that Kou lied about having to leave to meet his friend, Kirishima decides he’s lain in bed long enough.

Did I say something that further upset him while Yabu-sensei and Kazumi were here?

Kirishima tries to recall the conversation, but he can’t think of anything.

So it was something I said about Sion? But what could it have been? Did he figure out that I followed him for work the night we met? But how could he have figured that out from me saying that Sion has board games? Or doesn’t have ikebana?

Kirishima heads into the living room to find his phone so that he can text Kou (as soon as he figures out what he should say). There’s a text from Morita and a voice message from Suoh. He decides to
Kirishima-fuku-shacho-san, sorry to disturb you while you’re resting. Chef Mineta stopped by to express his condolences about your accident Friday night. He has offered to bring you a sushi platter when you’re better.

Kirishima freezes. Chef Mineta? Who’s that? And why would he bring me sushi?

Kou’s words come floating back to him. “Do you ever have theme nights… like sushi night?”

With a sinking feeling, Kirishima enters his PIN to listen to the voicemail. Kazu-nii, what did you do now?

“Kei, I suspect you’re sleeping. I hope you listen to this as soon as you wake up. I slipped and said something about the blade that cut you when talking to Motomi about your injury, and he was pretty shocked. He told me you said it was a punch bowl, so I said that the knife was on the same tray as the punch bowl – that it was one used for a sushi demonstration, so it was pretty sharp, and you just didn’t realize what actually cut you. I didn’t give any more details than that, so if he asks you about it, feel free to embellish however you’d like. Look, I hope you get this before you talk to Motomi. I’m going to have Morita send you a text with the same story, so if you are sleeping, Motomi might read it and believe the sushi knife story. I’m really sorry. Anyway, hope you feel better soon.”

Chills run down Kirishima’s spine, but he’s used to remaining calm while dealing with anything thrown at him, and the rational part of his mind calmly works on the problem while the emotional side silently freaks out.

Okay, so Kou-san knows I was cut with a blade. And he knows that Kazumi made up a story about it. So I just need to admit that I was cut with a knife and lied about it. Why would I have lied? I didn’t want him to worry. When and where did it happen? Club Sion seems the safest bet. An argument between customers over a card game, maybe, and when I was trying to intercede… Yes, that will work.

Why did Kazumi lie? He realized I was going to be caught in a lie and decided to cover for me.

Kirishima nods. The cover story is simple enough, and he’ll apologize sincerely for deceiving Kou. Now he just has to decide when to tell Kou.

Is the friend he’s meeting Takaba?

If it is, Kou might start grilling him. And if he does, well… there’s no telling what Takaba might say about Kirishima. And Asami-sama.

Kirishima has always thought Asami is way too lax about security around Takaba, especially considering Takaba’s profession and known association with the police. Sion would practically own the publishing company of Weekly Headlines already if its bribes weren’t kept off the books. Even still, and despite the fact that Takaba is currently living with Asami, Kirishima wouldn’t be the least bit surprised to see an Asami Ryuichi exposé on the front page of Weekly Headlines one day.

Kirishima shakes his head. Never mind about Asami-sama. I need to talk to Kou-san before he talks to Takaba. It takes him thirty minutes to compose the text, but eventually he decides it’s good enough.

Kou pays extra at the internet café for a personal seat so that he can have privacy. He decides to start
with the list he made about Kirishima. *If his name’s not really Kirishima Kei, I’m screwed,* he thinks. But Kirishima’s nameplate, his landlord, Akihito, and Suoh all seem to confirm that the name is correct, so Kou puts a check next to the first item, “Name: Kirishima Kei.”

However, when Kou searches for Kirishima’s name on the internet, he finds several other Kirishimas and many other Keis, but very few things about “Kirishima Kei” – and some of the things he finds about “Kirishima Kei” seem to be about someone else, such as the scientific journal article about Norovirus. Kou clicks on the article and reads the university affiliations of the authors, jotting down the Japanese university of “Kirishima Kei.”

He tries searching for the romaji version of Kirishima’s name, and he finds a perfunctory LinkedIn profile that lists the same university – and Sion as current employer. *Bingo.* But there’s very little additional information on the profile, and Kou can’t check anything else off besides Kirishima’s job title (“first assistant,” not secretary).

Kou skips over researching Sion for now; that will be its own search. Instead, he focuses on the few facts he knows about Kirishima’s childhood, wondering whether he can find his parents’ kimono shop. On the second page, Kou finds a kimono shop in Nihonbashi run by the Kirishima family. The website is fairly simple, just listing the store hours, address, and contact information, but there’s an “about” page that describes the family:

"Kirishima Katsutoshi is a fifth-generation kimono maker. He is passing along the tradition to his sons Kiyoshi and Kenta and his daughter Kumiko. Kirishima Kazuko, Katsutoshi’s wife, has been running the storefront for thirty years."

*It doesn’t mention Kei-san. Then again, he’s not actually a part of the business, so why would it? And what’s up with all the “K” names?*

At the bottom of the page is a family photograph showing the three previous generations of kimono dyers along with the extended family. Kou zooms in to read the caption and study the photograph. The picture was taken in 1982, and the baby in Kazuko’s arms is listed as “Kirishima Kei.”

Kou checks off Kirishima’s age as 35 and his family as kimono makers. Now that Kou knows where Kirishima grew up, he tries searching the archives of the local papers to see if there are any announcements or articles about Kirishima, but he can’t find anything.

Kou is searching for Nihonbashi boy scout information when he receives a text.

*Hello, Kou-san. Thank you again for taking such good care of me today. You seemed upset when you left. I hope it wasn’t because I was such an uncooperative patient.*

Kou sighs. *I don’t want to worry Kei-san, but I feel like I need to figure this out on my own. But still, it’s nice to hear from him...* He types a reply.

*No worries. You were a great patient once I was able to wrestle your work away. I hope I wasn’t too much of a bother imposing on you like that.*

*Of course not. That okayu was very good. Thank you again.*

*Glad you liked it.*

*You said you wanted to talk, but then Yabu-sensei arrived and we didn’t get a chance. Do you want to talk on the phone?*

*I can’t. I’ve got to go meet my friend.*
OK.

Kou feels a little guilty about lying, but he’s just too confused. He’d rather confront Kirishima once he has more facts.

But his phone rings. He closes his eyes and answers it without looking at the caller ID. “Moshi moshi.”

“Sorry, Kou-san. I know you said you have to meet your friend, but I just wanted to hear your voice. You looked so upset when you left…”

“Sorry. I just have to go meet my friend earlier than originally planned because he has to work tonight.”

So it is Takaba, Kirishima thinks. “I understand. I just wondered if perhaps you were upset with me for some reason.”

Kou sighs. “I don’t know. Can we talk about this tomorrow, please?”

“Of course. It’s just –” Kirishima takes a deep breath and plunges in. “Kazumi – my cousin – told me that he accidentally told you how my arm really got injured, but he made up a story to try to cover for the lie that I told.”

“You lied to me, Kei-san?” Kou is startled that Kirishima is so readily admitting to the truth. But you don’t know if this is really the truth, either, he reminds himself. Maybe this is another cover story.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you the truth myself today, but… the longer I didn’t, the more afraid I was of how you’d react. I’m sorry. That was stupid.”

“How did your arm get injured?” Kou asks. He can’t accept the apology until he believes in its sincerity.

“Some of the patrons at the club got into an argument over a card game, and they’d both had a little too much to drink. One of them pulled out a knife, and when I stepped in to ask him to leave, he accidentally cut me.”

“Accidentally?” Kou asks. He’s heard that club fights can sometimes get out of control, but he thought Sion was a “more sedate” club.

“Yes, he tripped while he was struggling. He actually started crying when he realized what he’d done.”

“And this was at Club Sion?” Kou asks incredulously.

Kirishima chuckles. “Yes, as difficult as it may be to believe. This was a very rare occurrence, of course. It was seriously an accident, but I didn’t want to needlessly worry you.”

“It made me worry more when I realized you’d lied to me,” Kou says petulantly.

“Of course it would. I’m sorry. I should have told you the truth as soon as you arrived today.”

“Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?” Kou challenges.

“I couldn’t really explain it very well in front of your colleague in the department store, could I?” Kirishima counters.
But you made up the story about the punch bowl when we were alone in your apartment.”

“You looked so scared when you saw how big the wound was, and I was already running late for work. And I didn’t want to ruin the good feeling we had on our date.”

Kou doesn’t say anything. It’s exactly what he envisioned Kirishima’s reason for lying to him might be. Why can’t I just let it go?

Kirishima continues quickly, “Not that those are good reasons for not telling you the truth. There’s no excuse for that, and I regretted it as soon as I decided to fib. I really am sorry. And I’m sorry I took so long to own up to my mistake.”

“I don’t like being lied to,” Kou says quietly.

“Of course. No one does.” Kirishima hesitates. Is he testing me again? Did he figure out how we met? If he did, it’s better for me to confess it before he asks me about it. If he didn’t, well… he seems too intelligent not to have figured it out. “I want to make sure we’re starting off on the right foot, so there’s something else I want to tell you that I haven’t been completely honest about. It wasn’t a lie, exactly, but I didn’t correct erroneous assumptions you made.”

Kou takes a deep breath and holds it. Is he going to tell me he doesn’t really like me, and this was all for his boss’s sake? But he said “starting off on the right foot,” so that means he wants to continue, right?

Kirishima closes his eyes, steeling his nerves. This will work. It has to. “The night we met, I actually followed you to the bar. I told you I sometimes drive my boss around, right? I drove him home the evenings you followed him, and I wanted to figure out why you were doing that.”

“So all this time, you were just pretending to like me so you could make sure I wasn’t a threat to your boss?” Kou asks, trying to keep his voice from breaking.

“Of course not! You assumed I was trying to pick you up, and I was really surprised by that, remember? But I didn’t correct you because I still didn’t know your intentions. But I was already attracted to you, the way you were so earnest in your feelings. As soon as I realized you weren’t a threat, which happened really early on, I put all thought of business aside and just did what I wanted. And I do want to date you, Kou-san. If you’re still willing to date me. I promise to be more honest from now on.” As honest as I can be without putting Asami-sama or Sion in danger, of course.

Kou releases his breath. “Thanks, Kei-san. I actually had wondered about that once you said you drive your boss around occasionally. I was scared you were just playing me.”

Kirishima sighs softly. “Wow, I feel so much lighter now that everything is out in the open.”

“Have you ever been injured on the job before?” Kou asks.

“No,” Kirishima says. Then he remembers Hong Kong. What if Takaba tells Kou-san about it?

“That’s good. I’ve heard that some clubs are really dangerous.”

“Sion doesn’t run those kinds of clubs. We have very strict rules about conduct, and we have an excellent security team. The customer who injured me has been stripped of his membership.” That’s two lies, a truth, and a half-truth (dying is certainly one way to cancel a membership contract). I’m not very good at this honesty thing, am I?
“I have to confess something, too,” Kou suddenly says. If I don’t, I’m going to feel really guilty about researching Kei-san. “Before he knew who you were, when all he knew was that I met you in Ni-chôme, Aki warned me that a lot of clubs in Shinjuku are run by the yakuza. When I found out you lied about your injury, I let my imagination run wild. I’m actually at an internet café right now.”

“Are you looking me up online?” Kirishima guesses.

“Yes. Sorry.”

“I don’t blame you. It’s not a bad idea to do that for everyone you date, to make sure they are who they say they are. Did you find out anything surprising about me?”

“Yeah.” Kou grins, forgetting that Kirishima can’t see his face.

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

Kou chuckles. “You have a surprisingly low-profile internet presence for a young corporate hotshot. The only social media I could find you on was LinkedIn, and it looked like you just filled out the basic profile and never updated it again.”

Kirishima chuckles, too. “I don’t really have a lot of spare time, and I spend enough of my day on computers, phones, and tablets.”

“That makes sense. You were also an adorable baby.”

“What? Where did you see my baby picture?”

Was it from the birth announcement? But would that small paper really have digitalized its archives and made them publicly available?

“On your family shop’s page.”

“My what?”

“You told me your family runs a kimono shop, remember? Since I couldn’t find much about you, I tried looking you up that way, thinking I could figure out where you grew up and narrow my search.”

“I’ve been trying to get my father to make a website for the shop for years,” Kirishima says, still surprised by Kou’s discovery. “I volunteered to do it entirely myself, but he said it wasn’t necessary, because people need to come and see their kimonos in person to really understand the quality.”

“Well, I think the shop still has the same philosophy, because it was mostly just an hours/location/contact information page. It only showed up on the second page of the search results, though.”

Kirishima sighs. “I bet one of my brothers made it secretly without telling my father. I’ll have to contact them and help them with the search optimization. My father is stubborn, but the business isn’t sustainable in its current model, and my siblings are the ones who will bear the brunt of it if the shop goes out of business.”

“I’ll send you a link as soon as we hang up,” Kou says.

“Thanks. What time do you have to meet your friend, by the way? I’m sorry I was so pushy when you were so adamant about not talking.”

“I’m glad you were pushy. I feel much better,” Kou confesses. He glances at the clock on the
computer. “We’re not meeting until five, actually, but I’ve got to leave the café in twenty minutes.”

“Shall I let you go so you can research me some more?” Kirishima teases. *If I make him feel bad enough about this, he’ll be less likely to do it again – and less likely to ask Takaba too many questions, too.*

Kou laughs. “No. I’m sorry!”

Kirishima chuckles, too. “It’s okay. It’s totally understandable why you did that. I actually knew a little about you before we met, as well.”

“You did?”

“Yes, the company conducts a background search on people close to anyone Asami-sama dates.”

“Oh.” Kou gets quiet again.

“I’m sorry. It really didn’t have a lot of information in it, just that you were Takaba-kun’s childhood friend and a graphic designer.”

“It’s fine.” *Again with Asami-sama. Does Kei-san’s entire world revolve around Asami-sama?* Kou can’t ask that aloud, though; he knows it’s childish. *Asami-san is his boss,* Kou reminds himself. He decides to change the subject. “Did you really publish a paper on Norovirus?”

Kirishima laughs. “Wow, you found that? I helped out in a laboratory one semester in college, and they added my name to the paper because one of the figures was based on one of my experiments.”

“Were you a science major?”

“No. I just needed the extra money, and my uncle worked at the university. I met the professor through him, and it paid better than the other part-time jobs I could find.”

“Oh. You really are very smart, aren’t you?”

Kirishima laughs. “It was just a job. I didn’t actually help write the paper at all. Speaking of jobs…” He hesitates.

“Yes?” Kou asks.

“Would you mind not telling Takaba-kun about my injury, please? Given the nature of his job… We didn’t report it to the police because it was an accident, but we wouldn’t want it to get into the paper.”

“I’m not sure,” Kou says slowly. “I don’t like to lie.”

“I’m not asking you to lie, of course. Just don’t tell him about it,” Kirishima reassures him.

“I’m not very good at keeping secrets, either. I forget what I can talk about with whom, and I don’t like feeling like I need to hide things.” Kou gives a self-deprecating laugh. “I guess it’s because I’ve been so busy keeping my own secret about my sexuality for so long, I don’t have room for any others.”

“I understand. I didn’t mean for you to not tell him *anything,* of course; I just meant not to tell him about the cause of the injury. It would be bad for the club.”

“Oh. I could see that. So it’s okay for me to say that you were sick today, but I don’t need to say
why? I can do that, as long as he doesn’t ask me too many questions. I’m a terrible liar, and he always knows when I’m lying.”

“Again, I’m not asking you to lie. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have brought this up at all,” Kirishima says smoothly. *He’s much more honest than I thought.* “It’s complicated, dating someone who’s good friends with my boss’s…” Kirishima trails off; he doesn’t know any word that could accurately summarize Asami’s and Takaba’s relationship.

“I guess it is,” Kou agrees. “I don’t want to do anything that might get you in trouble at work, but I’m not really sure what might do that.”

“Thanks. I guess we should just try to avoid talking about Takaba-kun or Asami-sama from now on.”

“Why do you call Aki ‘kun’ and me ‘san’?” Kou bursts out. He really wants to ask about “Asami-sama,” but he can’t bring himself to.

*Kou-san, too? Asami-sama asked the same thing. I probably shouldn’t insult Kou-san’s friend. “I guess it’s because Asami-sama brings out the stubborn, childish side of Takaba-kun, so he seems younger than his age. But when I met you, you showed a real maturity in the way you faced your own feelings headlong. And you’ve introduced me to several new things, so you somehow feel older than your age. Besides, wouldn’t it be weird if I called you ‘kun’ when we’re dating?”

“I guess so,” Kou agrees. *He really doesn’t like Aki much, does he? I guess Aki can be a little hard to take at times, but he’s a good guy. But why did Kei-san say Asami-sama brings out Aki’s stubborn side? Was he just trying to be polite and not insult my friend directly? Or is it because their relationship is really that bad? “Kei-san, what do you –”* Kou stops abruptly.

“Yes?” Kirishima prods after a short silence.

“Never mind,” Kou says.

“No, please tell me whatever’s on your mind,” Kirishima encourages him.

“I was about to ask you something about Aki and Asami-san’s relationship, but we just agreed not to talk about them. We’re not very good at keeping to that bargain, are we?”

Kirishima chuckles. “I guess not. Well, I’ll just tell you one good thing about Asami-sama then.”

“What?” Kou asks, trying to keep the poutiness he feels welling up again out of his voice.

“Even though I’m doing much better, he insisted that I take tomorrow off, too. He told Kazumi to take away my computer, tablet, and phone unless I promise not to work.”

“Good,” Kou says, his mood instantly lightening.

“So do you want to go on another date?”

“You’re supposed to be using this time off to rest!” Kou says. “As much as I’d love to do something, I don’t want to make you worse.”

“I wasn’t suggesting another hike,” Kirishima says. “But maybe… a movie?”

“Is there something you want to see?” Kou asks.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen a movie since college.”
“Seriously?” Kou gasps. “Well, what did you like to see in college?”

“I don’t know. Whatever my friends wanted to see.”

“Kei-san! Do you remember any in particular that you really enjoyed?”

“Not really. They always took me to the ones with lots of explosions and shootouts, but I could never follow the story. There always seemed to be big holes in the plot, or an extreme lack of common sense.”

“Oh.” But they’re not supposed to make sense. They’re just fun and exciting, rocketing you towards the end, twisting and turning in surprising ways like a rollercoaster. Kou shakes his head. He and Kirishima are bound to have a few differences of opinion.

“Is that the kind of movie you like, Kou-san? I’m sorry for insulting it.”

“It’s fine. Different people like different things. I like action movies sometimes, but I also like other types, too. So you like artistic films then?”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever seen one.”

“Well, let’s try watching one tomorrow. They can be pretty deep and really make you think. I’ll check some reviews and find a good one, and then I’ll text you with the show times.”

“You have to work tomorrow, right?” Kirishima asks. “I don’t want to disrupt your work schedule just because I suddenly have a day off.”

“It’s fine,” Kou says. “I’m a freelancer, remember? My hours are flexible. Actually, where I work is flexible, too. Can I come over again tomorrow, help you with things when you need it, and just work while you’re resting?”

“I don’t want to bother you,” Kirishima says hesitantly. “I think you’re too nice, and I feel like I’m taking advantage.”

“You’re not,” Kou insists. “I want to see you while I can. I’ll make sure I’m not bothering you, and if I am, you can just tell me and I’ll go home.”


Alright, I’d really better go now before I run over my time on this computer. Get better soon.”

“Thank you. See you tomorrow.” Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief as he hangs up. That was close. If he’d talked to Takaba before I talked to him… Kirishima shudders.

Kou glances at the clock. He has fifteen minutes left on the computer. He opens the search engine to look up movies, but his fingers end up typing “Asami Ryuichi.”

He hesitates before hitting “enter” to complete the search. How would you feel if Aki did this for Kei-san? But then he remembers that Akihito offered to do just that. Besides, I’m worried about Aki. It doesn’t feel right.

The search engine shows a few things mentioning Asami’s role as president of Sion Corporation. There are also a few mentions in charity newsletters listing him as a donor. But as Kou goes through more and more pages, he’s startled by the lack of information. He can’t find mention of Asami’s age,
birthday, family, hobbies – absolutely no personal information, even when he adds to the search terms. Asami has absolutely no presence on social media. When Kou does an image search, not a single picture of Asami shows up, just the same few pictures of some of Sion’s clubs, obviously stock footage.

Kou switches his focus to Sion. *Aki said they met through his job, but when I teased him, he said he couldn’t remember what the photoshoot was for.* Sion doesn’t seem to sell any products; they seem to only own a handful of clubs. *Wouldn’t it be easy to remember that you were taking pictures of a club?* An image search for Sion shows the same few pictures of some of the clubs that the search on Asami revealed.

Kou tries searching for the club names one by one. Only Dracaena has photos that include people, but there aren’t many. He starts looking at the dates of the photographs. Only a few of Dracaena were taken within the past year and a half, and the photographer listed isn’t Akihito.

*Maybe the job was for photographs used internally within the company. Or maybe it’s not finished yet.*

Kou snorts. There’s no way there’d be a year and a half lead time on a photoshoot.

His time is up, so he gathers his stuff and heads home to get ready for his meeting with Akihito. *I believe Kei-san about his accident, but Asami-san still seems really fishy. Maybe Kei-san doesn’t know anything. Or maybe Asami-san is just really private, even more than Kei-san. But Aki definitely doesn’t seem happy, and the more I hear, the more something seems wrong.*

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is from U2’s "Who's Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses?" Apparently turquoise can mean both clear communication and deception. I thought it was especially appropriate for this chapter.

The next chapter will be from Kou's perspective, most likely. With Akihito, of course!

Assuming I post it... For the second time in a row, I've had serious issues copying and pasting using the "rich text" method. In this chapter, I have a lot of italics, and they were all screwed up. I want to spend my time writing, not re-formatting it to get it to publish here properly. If I can't get AO3 to do that well, I'm going to have to stop sharing my writing here. I tried copying and pasting shorter sections; I tried starting fresh in a new tab. It's copying from the exact same Word document as the earlier chapters, so there's no reason for it not to be working. (I also wanted to indent the text from Kirishima's family website on both sides, but I couldn't figure out how to do that, so I put it in quotes instead.)

That being said, I probably didn't fix the italics mess properly. If you see something that looks like a thought that isn't italicized (or something that's not a thought or a text message that is italicized), please let me know. Thanks!

Finally, totally unrelated to this chapter, but is there a new chapter for the Finder manga out? Or do we have to wait two more months?
Kou confronts Akihito about his relationship with Asami. But how much will Akihito be willing to share with Kou? And what will happen when Kou lets slip the details of Kirishima's injury?

This conversation did not go as I was expecting. I kept saying, "Hey, wait, you're supposed to talk about X, Y, and Z now," but the boys had their own ideas about how the conversation should flow. I let them run with it.

Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

“Kou, you in there?” Akihito raises his voice and bangs on the door.

“Hold on!” Kou’s voice is muffled. A moment later, he opens the door with one hand while the other finishes fastening his belt. “You’re disturbing the neighbors, sheesh!”

“I’ve been knocking for five minutes.” Akihito follows Kou into the small apartment, kicking his shoes off in the genkan.

“It was not five minutes,” Kou argues. “Anyway, I was in the john. You saw my bike; you knew I was home.”

“You could have gone out on foot,” Akihito points out.

“You could have texted me.”

“You brought your phone into the john with you?” Akihito wrinkles his nose.

“No,” Kou admits. “Whatever. Just be more patient next time.”

“Sorry. Hey, did you figure out if that person was lying to you?”

“They were. I caught them with the details the other person gave, just like you said. But before I could figure out how to confront them about it, they actually admitted to it and apologized.”
“I see,” Akihito says. He looks like he’s deciding whether to say something, but what comes out of his mouth next is, “I brought some snacks and a little beer. I can’t drink much because I need to be sober for my stakeout.”

“What?” Kou asks.

“What do you mean, what? I told you about the stakeout when we changed the time.” Akihito stops riffling through his bag and looks at Kou.

“Do you think they were insincere in their apology?”

“How would I know? I have no idea what the situation even is,” Akihito reminds Kou.

“But you made a face.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did. Like you thought something but didn’t want to say it.”

Akihito sighs. “Look, I don’t even know what this is about. Is it work-related?” Kou shakes his head. “Personal?” Kou shrugs and looks away nonchalantly. “Was it the person you’re dating?” Akihito eyes Kou intently.

Kou blushes and looks away.

Akihito sighs again. “I see. Kirishima-san?”

Kou nods.

“Then I probably really shouldn’t say anything.”

“No, tell me. Do you know something about Kei-san?”

Akihito smirks at the name Kou uses but doesn’t comment on it. “No. I don’t even really know him; I pretty much only see him in a business capacity.”

“During your photoshoots for Sion?” Kou asks, feigning nonchalance.

“No. I don’t have a business relationship with him, but he has one with Asami, and so I only see him when he’s working.”

“Kei-san said he sometimes drives Asami-san around. He said he drove the two of you home the night I followed you.”

“Yeah, that’s usually when I see him. Is that what he lied about?”

“No. But after he confessed to the lie, he wanted to make sure he wasn’t hiding anything from me, so he told me he followed me to make sure I wasn’t a threat to Asami-san, but he fell for me instead.”

Akihito looks unsurprised.

“Did you figure that out already?” Kou asks. “I mean, I guess you would have, since you knew he was the one who drove you home that night. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We weren’t sure it was the same guy, remember? But I did tell Asami to warn his goon that if he hurt you, I’d kick his ass. Asami said Kirishima really seemed to like you, so I decided to leave
things alone instead of stirring up trouble.”

“His goon? That’s a weird nickname for a secretary. Or a first assistant,” Kou clarifies, remembering what he learned about Kirishima’s job title.

Akihito looks away. “Kirishima is also trained as a bodyguard, I think. He’s always with Asami, after all. Anyway, I told you Asami was really pushy, right? Sometimes he would send Kirishima to pick me up when he wanted to see me. And Kirishima would make sure I came, even if I didn’t want to go.”

“He would force you?” Kou gapes. That doesn’t sound like Kei-san at all.

“How well do you really know him?”

“Force is a bit strong of a word,” Akihito says, but the way he looks away, Kou isn’t sure he can believe him.

“Aki? Is Asami-san forcing you even now?” Kou asks quietly.

“What? No! Of course not.” Akihito bites his lip.

“It’s okay. You can tell me anything. If you’re in trouble, we can figure out how to solve it together.”

“I’m not in trouble,” Akihito says. “It’s just… complicated.”

“I’m not that simple-minded. I might understand if you’ll just tell me.” Kou is growing frustrated.

Akihito closes his eyes. Kou waits as long as it takes – which turns out to be several minutes. Finally, Akihito sighs and opens his eyes. “I can’t,” he says, his voice breaking.

“Look, Yoshida’s dad is a cop, remember? We can –”

“I don’t need to talk to the police!” Akihito bursts out. “I told you, it’s not like that.”

“Okay…” Kou says. “Look, I don’t want to badger you to talk if you really don’t want to, but I’m really worried about you. And the less you say, the more worried I get.”

Akihito sighs. He thinks for a minute and says, “You remember that time we found those P.E. scooters and decided to pull each other on them behind our bikes? We knew it was stupid and it hurt – and we knew someone was bound to get really hurt in the end – but we couldn’t stop because it was so fun.”

“So you’re saying your relationship with Asami-san is like that?”

Akihito shrugs.

Kou closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before opening his eyes. “But you care about him?”

Akihito shrugs again, but his face turns red and he looks away in embarrassment.

“And he cares about you?” Kou presses.

Akihito shrugs a third time. That troubled look crosses his face again, but he says, “I think so. At least until he gets bored.”

“You said that before, but you also said you’ve been together a year and a half already. Wouldn’t he
have gotten bored by now if he were really that flighty?”

Akihito shakes his head. “I don’t know. We don’t really have anything in common. I’m just trying not to give him a reason to get bored.”

“You guys must have something in common. What do you do on your dates?” Kou asks.

“We don’t really go on dates,” Akihito says. “How could we? We’re both guys.”

“Kei-san and I went on a hike yesterday, and we’re going to see a movie tomorrow,” Kou says.

Akihito snickers. “Two guys at a romantic comedy? You’re certainly going to turn heads.”

Kou frowns. “I hadn’t thought of that. But we’re going to see an art film, so it should be okay.” His frown deepens. “At least I hope so. Kei-san is really shy, and he got really embarrassed when people were looking at us funny yesterday in the store.”

Akihito softens. “I’m sorry, Kou. I was just teasing. I’m sure it will be fine. Besides, who cares what people think?”

“You, apparently, since you won’t even go on a date,” Kou teases. “Surely you must spend time together inside your fancy digs, though, right?”

“Sometimes. Asami and I are both busy with our jobs, and our schedules don’t always match, so sometimes we go days without seeing each other.”

Kou rolls his eyes. “Now you’re being deliberately obtuse. When you do see each other, what do you do?”

Akihito blushes. “Things.”

Kou smirks at him. “What kind of ‘things’?”

Akihito’s blush deepens, and he tries to turn his face away. But Kou leans across him, trying to look at him.

“What are you hiding, Aki? Have you been a naughty boy?”

Akihito buries his face in his elbow on the couch armrest. “Shut up, Kou,” he mutters.

Kou tickles his stomach.

“Stop it!” Akihito cries.

Soon they’re wrestling the way they used to when they were kids, but Kou suddenly freezes when Akihito’s shirt rides up to reveal crisscrossing marks across his torso.

He blushes and stands up, turning his face away.

“What?” Akihito asks.

“Nothing.”

“What is it?!” Akihito huffs.

“Nothing. Pull your shirt down,” Kou says. He rifles through the bag Akihito brought and pulls out a
Akihito looks down and notices the marks. He quickly pulls his shirt down. “That’s –” He can’t think of an excuse.

Kou snickers. “So that’s how you keep Asami-san from getting bored, huh?”

“Shut up, Kou,” Akihito mutters. He sits down on the couch again and snatches the bag away from Kou, pulling out a bag of potato chips and popping it open. A few chips fly out of the top and land in his lap. Akihito picks them up one by one and eats them.


Akihito eyes him suspiciously. “We’ve watched a few movies together, but he doesn’t really seem into them. And I mostly cook, but sometimes Asami brings sushi home.” He remembers what happened the last time Asami brought sushi home and quickly changes the subject. “We watched the fireworks festival once.” Remembering *that* incident makes him blush harder, so he changes the subject again. “We don’t really talk that much, though.” He shrugs. “I think we both like our quiet at home.”

Kou looks like he’s about to say something, but Akihito decides he’s had enough of Kou’s twenty questions. “What do you and Kirishima-san have in common?”

“Lots of things,” Kou says. “We’re obviously still getting to know each other, but we both like trying new things, riding motorcycles, eating fugu, hiking…” He blushes as he remembers a few other things Kirishima and he have discovered they both find enjoyable. “And Kei-san is teaching me how to cook.”

Akihito stares at him. “You? Cooking? Does Kirishima-san have a fire extinguisher?”

Kou elbows him. “Shut up. He’s a very patient teacher. Anyway, I could always cook a little.”

“Vermont Curry doesn’t count,” Akihito teases. “Especially when you use microwave rice.”

“I know how to cook rice now,” Kou says. “Anyway, I’m sure Kei-san and I will discover even more things we have in common. He’s very smart, and he’s easy to talk to.”

“Hmm,” Akihito says.

“He is! He’s just really conscientious, so he’s not going to say much to you since he doesn’t want to inadvertently interfere in his boss’s relationship,” Kou explains.

“Hm.” Akihito’s tone is disbelieving.

Kou decides to drop it. “Anyway, what did you mean before by saying you didn’t think Kei-san’s apology was sincere?”

“I never said that.”

Kou rolls his eyes. “Not with your mouth maybe, but your face sure did.” He raises his eyebrows at Akihito expectantly.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there, remember? But you said he only ’fessed up once you caught him in the lie, right? If he had time to realize he’d been caught, that might mean his apology was insincere.”
“He seemed to really mean it,” Kou says doubtfully.

“I said maybe. How much time elapsed?”

“Not that long, but he had time to talk to his cousin who made up the cover story in the meantime,” Kou admits.

“See? So he probably knew he’d been caught. People are more willing to forgive and forget if you confess instead of admitting it after they come forward about it. I do it all the time with the cops if I think they’re unhappy with me for skirting certain laws to get the scoop. It takes the wind right out of their sails every time.”

“Well, Kei-san said once Suoh-san told him he’d made up the cover story, Kei-san wanted to confess right away because he’d already been trying to find a way to tell me all day but couldn’t work up the courage earlier. I actually didn’t want to talk to him, but he really pushed the issue.”

“Wait, Suoh-san? He’s Kirishima-san’s…” Akihito stares at him, dumbfounded.

“Cousin,” Kou confirms.

“Seriously?” Akihito’s mouth drops open. It takes him several moments to realize it and close it again. He swallows. “Wow. That’s pretty shocking. Those guys are so different.”

Kou raises his eyebrows and shrugs. “They don’t look that much alike, but they definitely act like family.”

Akihito shakes his head. “If you say so. Anyway, maybe Kirishima-san really was sorry. Like I said, I wasn’t there. Just… be careful, okay?”

“You really don’t like him, do you?” Kou asks.

Akihito shrugs. “He’s not my favorite person, no. I find him really hard to get along with, but I think that’s mostly because I can tell he really doesn’t like me.”

“Sorry,” Kou says, looking a bit troubled.

Akihito waves him off. “It’s fine. Look, I’m glad you found someone.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” Kou’s face suddenly brightens.

Akihito groans. “Your ideas are never good.”

“That’s not true! Anyway, why don’t we go on a double date? That way you and Asami-san can find more things you have in common, and maybe you and Kei-san…” Kou trails off at the withering look Akihito is giving him.

“See? Bad idea,” Akihito says.

“Why?! You and Kei-san just need to get to know each other better, and –”

“Would you want to go on a double date with your boss? Or your secretary?”

Kou’s face falls. “I guess not. But I think Asami-san and Kei-san have a close relationship. Asami-san gave Kei-san a –” Kou stops abruptly, his face turning red.

“Nothing,” Kou says. He takes a big gulp of his beer.

“No, you have to tell me!” Akihito cries.

“A guide to…” Kou mutters.

“A guide to what?”

“Use your imagination!” Kou snaps.

Akihito stares at him for a few seconds. “A guide to… gay dating?”

Kou looks away.

“No, that wouldn’t get you so embarrassed. A guide to… gay sex?” Akihito guesses.

Kou’s blush deepens to a purple.

“Seriously?” Akihito guffaws.

“Shut up,” Kou says. “Neither of us have any experience, okay? But it’s weird, right? To get that kind of thing from your boss?”

“Yeah,” Akihito says. “But Asami’s kind of forward like that. He doesn’t get embarrassed by anything. Until you said it was a guide, I was actually thinking maybe it was something a bit more kinky.”

“Like what?” Kou looks at Akihito curiously.

“Nothing,” Akihito mutters, his own face turning scarlet.

Kou decides to let the subject drop. “Do you think Kei-san is in love with Asami-san?” he asks. He didn’t mean to voice that doubt aloud, but he’s not too surprised that it slipped out considering it’s been on his mind all day.

Akihito gapes at him. “What? What gave you that idea?”

Kou shrugs. “I don’t know. He calls him ‘sama’ and he talks about him a lot. It seems like Asami-san is always on Kei-san’s mind.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s in love with him, though,” Akihito points out. “You said it yourself: he’s very conscientious, right? And they spend a lot of time together at work. I get the feeling Kirishima-san can’t turn off ‘work mode’ easily.”

“That’s true…” Kou says. “But still, today he was home sick from work, and as soon as Suoh-san showed up, Kei-san was all ‘How is Asami-sama?’”

Akihito shrugs. “I don’t know, Kou. I mostly only see him in the car or whatever. I just assumed he was a suck-up, but maybe there’s something there? Once Asami was home with a cold, and I got a call from Kirishima-san asking me to bring supplies. When I got there, Kirishima had already taken care of everything, even Asami’s laundry. He had cooked him food, too, so there really was no point to me even going over there. I assumed Asami had ordered Kirishima to call me, but Asami seemed surprised to see me.” Akihito shrugs again. “To me, it just seemed like Kirishima-san was being overly anal about what he thought were his duties, but you’d have to ask him.”

“I can’t do that!” Kou exclaims.
“Well then, there’s no use worrying about it. Asami said Kirishima-san seems to have fallen pretty hard for you, and you said he seems pretty interested in you too, right? So stop worrying about problems that don’t even exist. I’m sure you guys will find plenty of things to argue over soon enough.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kou huffs.

Akihito smiles. “Everybody has problems in their relationship eventually. I’m just saying there’s no point in making up any. Didn’t you already have one today when he lied to you?”

“That’s true,” Kou admits. He hesitates for a moment before finally blurt out what’s been nagging at the back of his mind since he discovered Kirishima lied about his injury. “You said that a lot of clubs in Shinjuku are owned by the yakuza, and Asami-san owns a club…” Kou pauses when Akihito gives him a withering look but decides to press on. “Is Asami-san yakuza?”

“Of course not,” Akihito says scathingly. He rolls his eyes. “Does Kirishima-san seem like some kind of yakuza to you?”

“No…” Kou says. “But he got injured by a knife at work Friday night, and that’s what he lied to me about.” Shoot! Kei-san asked me not to say! Arrggghh! I’m so bad at keeping secrets!

Akihito’s eyebrows shoot up. “He got injured? Was Asami there?”

“I don’t know. Wouldn’t you know?”

“I haven’t seen Asami since Wednesday,” Akihito says. A worried look crosses his face.

Kou hesitates. I shouldn’t give any details, but I don’t want Aki to worry needlessly. He won’t put this in the paper if I ask him not to. It would cause trouble for Asami-san’s club, after all. “It was an accident,” Kou reassures him. “Well, some clients at the club started arguing, and one pulled out a knife. Kei-san stepped in to ask him to leave, and the client tripped. Kei-san got wounded on his arm. That’s what he lied to me about, because he didn’t want me to worry when such things happen so rarely at Sion.”

Akihito’s worry doesn’t seem to be appeased. “And he asked Suoh how Asami was as soon as he saw him today?”

“No the first time,” Kou clarifies. “When Suoh-san came back from a phone call, that’s when Kei-san asked him, because Suoh-san looked worried about something. But Kei-san had already talked to Asami-san in the morning, and from his end, everything sounded fine. Normal. Kei-san also worked yesterday evening after our date, so I really don’t think he was worried about Asami-san so much as being overly conscientious. Or in love.” Kou makes a face at his earlier worries. Aki’s probably right that I’m being silly about that.

“Okay…” Akihito says. “Hey, I’ve got to use the bathroom, then let’s play some games, okay?”

“Sure,” Kou says. “Hey, don’t tell Asami-san I told you about Kei-san’s injury, okay? Kei-san asked me not to tell you; he was worried you’d put it in the paper. But you wouldn’t do something like that, right?”

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Of course not. I don’t have any good pictures, and it’s all hearsay. Who knows how Kirishima-san really injured his arm?”

“I just told you!” Kou bursts out.
Akihito holds up his hand in a placating gesture. “I meant from a news perspective. Calm down, Kou. I can’t run a secondhand account of a story – not that the incident even sounds newsworthy. Not unless someone died, was hospitalized, or was arrested.”

“You sound like an ambulance-chaser,” Kou teases.

Akihito gives him a noogie as he heads to the bathroom. He takes a few minutes in there, and Kou occasionally can hear his voice.

_He must be talking to Asami-san. I’d better tell Kei-san that I slipped. I did warn him that I’m horrible at keeping secrets. But why is Aki so worried about Asami-san? What does he think happened, if he doesn’t believe Kei-san’s story? He did say Kei-san is also trained as a bodyguard… I guess when you’re in a business that overlaps with the yakuza’s, you can’t be too careful. I just wish Kei-san and Aki would tell me the truth about the dangers instead of trying to hide it from me._

Kou sighs and finishes his beer. He thought talking to Kirishima and Akihito would make him feel calmer, but if anything, he feels even more uneasy. _What kind of world am I entering?_

Chapter End Notes

Next up is the second date! Now that Kirishima is feeling better, what will they get up to? Things are starting to heat up...

(Wow, this chapter posted fine, even though it was in the same Word document as the last one. Thank goodness; it's nice not to have to spend an hour+ reformatting things.)
Chapter Summary

Left alone in his apartment with nothing to do, Kirishima discovers the bag Kou brought over, which contains the guide book Asami gave him along with a few surprising items. Just what will the secretary get up to alone? And what will happen when Suoh and the doctor suddenly stop by? How will Kirishima react when Suoh reveals a shocking truth?

Chapter Notes

I thought the second date would be next, but Kirishima decided to take things in a different direction.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

Kirishima feels as if a weight has been lifted off his shoulders when he hangs up the phone with Kou. He breathes a big sigh of relief. It feels good to have everything out in the open, even the fact that their first meeting was orchestrated by Kirishima.

Well, almost everything. But Kirishima is used to compartmentalizing his life, and keeping the full details of his job a secret is just as much a part of his routine as brushing his teeth at this point.

Kirishima heads into the kitchen. He’s suddenly hungry, and the okayu that Kou made for him sounds incredibly appetizing. He steels himself to face the mess of yesterday’s dirty dishes, but he’s pleasantly surprised to find the kitchen neat and tidy. As he pulls out a bowl and spoon, he realizes that Kou managed to figure out where everything belongs.

While the okayu is heating up on the stove, he sends a quick text to Kou.

Thank you for cleaning my kitchen for me! (*^*^*)

He doesn’t get a response right away, but he figures that’s because Kou is already on his way home from the internet café. Kirishima snaps a picture of his steaming bowl of okayu and sends that to Kou, too.

And thanks again for the okayu. It’s delicious! (*^*^*)
After he finishes eating and wipes down the counters (even though they don’t really need it), Kirishima heads into the living room to see if there’s anything that needs straightening there. If he doesn’t find something to do soon, he knows he’s going to start working, and both Asami and Suoh will chide him if he does that.

Kirishima straightens the pillows on the couch. He sees the corner of a plastic shopping bag sticking out from under the back of the couch. He reaches down and pulls it out. When he sees the guidebook Asami gave him, he realizes it must be the bag of supplies Kou brought over. Kou must have shoved it under the couch so Suoh and Yabu wouldn’t notice what was inside it, and then forgotten it because he left in such a hurry.

Kirishima reaches in and pulls out the book. *I might as well read.* Once the book is removed, however, Kirishima finds a few more items in the bag. The Tokyo urban hiking magazine is thoughtful, but what’s underneath *that* makes Kirishima blush: condoms, a bottle of lube, a douche, something called “toy cleaner” and – Kirishima gasps and drops the bag when he figures out what the oblong-shaped thing with a face on it is.

He blushes. *Just what did Kou-san think he was coming over here for?*

As he bends down to pick up the bag, a piece of paper slips out of the middle of the book.

*Probably Kou-san’s bookmark.*

Kirishima picks up the slip of paper and notices that there’s small, neat writing on it.

*He has nice handwriting.*

As he skims the paper, he realizes that Kou must have been taking notes as he was reading. On the back side of the bookmark is written “Shopping List.” Kirishima chuckles.

*Kou-san studied hard.*

Sure enough, everything on the shopping list is in the bag. There’s a warm feeling in Kirishima’s chest that he’s beginning to associate with Kou. It feels nice to know that Kou is looking forward to exploring more things with Kirishima as much as Kirishima is.

Kirishima picks up the book and begins to read. *I’d better figure out what I’m doing, too.*

Twenty minutes later, Kirishima’s reading is interrupted by the sound of an incoming text.

*You’re welcome. It was only fair because I helped make the mess, and you were teaching me to cook.* ( #´・´# )♡

*You’re eating! Yay! Does that mean you’re feeling even better?*

Kirishima smiles as he starts typing a reply.

*Yes, I am, thanks to the good care you took of me.*

*Hey, I think I left something at your house. It was a bag that had your book in it... plus a few supplies – they were for me, not you.*

*Oh, I already found the bag.*
You did? Sorry! I hope you don’t think I was planning to use that stuff today.

Kirishima starts to type a response, but Kou is too fast.

*I mean, they *were* hopefully for us to use together, but later… whenever you’re ready.*

*I’m fully committed to taking it slow.*

Kirishima chuckles. Kou can type ridiculously fast, so he decides to just wait until Kou is finished.

*I guess I just got too excited reading the book, and since I was practically already in Shibuya… Anyway, if you’re offended, please feel free to throw them away.*

Kirishima starts typing a reply.

*Kei-san? Are you angry?*

Kirishima deletes what he was writing.

*No, I’m not.*

*You’re too fast.*

*Sorry! I’ll wait for you to answer from now on.*

*I found your shopping list in the book and figured it out already.*

*So you’re not mad that I was presumptuous?*

*No, I knew you didn’t come here for *that.** Does that mean you started reading the book?*

Kirishima blushes but decides to answer truthfully; it’s easier to be honest via text when Kou can’t see his face.

*Yes. I don’t have much to do right now.*

*Oh, I also got us a magazine about more local trails.*

*I saw that, too… but I guess your purchases got me curious.*

(*^▽^*) *I really enjoyed what I read of the book. I might have made it to Ni-Chōme sooner if I’d read it earlier.*

*That’s good. I look forward to reading it.*

*Oh, I’ve got to go. I think Aki’s here.*

*Have fun.*

*You, too! We can talk about the book tomorrow.*
Kirishima gulps. He always assumed that Suoh and Asami were just unusually forward, but maybe they’re normal and Kirishima really is a prude. *But it would be better to talk about it before rushing into anything...*

Kirishima wonders if they can have the discussion in the dark. Or maybe with a bag over his head. *It’s better not to think about it too much beforehand.* Kirishima picks up the book again and continues to read.

It’s hard not to imagine himself and Kou in the various scenarios mentioned in the book. Somehow he keeps imagining himself in the bottom role. *Is it because of what happened when we woke up that first morning?* But if he’s honest with himself, Kirishima knows that what he enjoyed even more than the physical sensation was letting go of control.

*Besides, Asami-sama’s partners always sound like they’re really enjoying themselves.* Kirishima blushes as he remembers the last time he drove Asami and Takaba. *But I’m older than Kou-san, so shouldn’t I take the lead?* When Kirishima reads the chapter on topping and bottoming, he realizes it’s not necessarily about age, control, or dominance. Both partners are still very much men, and you don’t lose anything by bottoming.

*Kou-san said he’d like to try both, but I get the feeling he likes taking the lead. And I like not having to be the one in charge for once, so I wouldn’t mind letting him.*

Kirishima’s reading is interrupted by a call from Kou. He smiles as he answers.

“Kei-san, how are you feeling now?”

“Much better, thank you. I finally feel rested.”

“How’s the book?”

Kirishima can tell Kou is grinning. He blushes. “It’s interesting,” he admits. “It’s given me a lot to think about.”

“I’d love to chat more about it now, but I actually have to warn you about something,” Kou changes the topic abruptly.

“What’s wrong?” Kirishima asks.

“I told you I’m really bad at secrets, right? I accidentally told Aki that you were injured by a knife. He got kind of freaked out – understandably so – I think he was worried about Asami-san since you work so closely with him. So I ended up giving Aki more of the details so he’d stop worrying. Now he’s in the bathroom, and I think he’s talking to Asami-san on the phone.”

Kirishima sighs.

“I’m sorry! Hopefully you won’t get in trouble at work for telling me, and I did ask Aki not to publish the incident in the paper. He said he wouldn’t, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“It’s okay, Kou-san. I’m sure it will be fine,” Kirishima says. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re not going to get in trouble, are you?” Kou asks worriedly.

“No,” Kirishima says. *Though Asami-sama’s not going to like having to deal with Takaba’s fussing.*
Kou breathes a sigh of relief. “I’m glad. I’m really sorry. Anyway, I’d better go before Aki gets back.”

After he hangs up, Kirishima debates calling Asami but decides against it. Based on what Kou said, it’s too late to warn Asami, and there’s no sense bothering him even more about it. He can apologize when he goes back to work Tuesday – or when Asami calls to chew him out, whichever comes first. In the meantime, Kirishima decides to go back to reading.

The introduction to anal intercourse chapter has a few surprises for Kirishima. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that only one in three gay men engaged in anal intercourse in their last sexual encounter, whereas three-quarters engaged in oral sex or mutual masturbation.

*I guess that last one is technically what Kou-san and I did, though it wasn’t what we planned to do.*

Judging by the items Kou bought, it seems obvious that he’d like to try anal intercourse at least once, and Kirishima has to admit he’s curious, too. He continues reading the chapter, but he pauses when he reads the suggestion to try it on himself alone first.

He glances at the bag Kou bought and blushes.

*I can’t really use my right arm well right now; it would be silly to try.*

But as he reads about the parts of his anatomy, his gaze keeps being drawn to the bag.

He shakes the items out onto the coffee table.

*I’m just looking at them.*

Forty-five minutes later, Kirishima’s phone buzzes, and he feels the compulsion to check it despite how occupied he is. He reaches across the bed to the nightstand with one hand and reads the text.

*Kei, I’ll be bringing Yabu-sensei by for a final check-up today. Should be there in about fifteen minutes.*

Kirishima gasps. He looks down and notices that he’s at more than half-mast.

*Sixty-seven times seventy-three is seventy squared minus three squared is four thousand nine hundred minus nine is four thousand eight hundred ninety-one.*

*Come on, go down!*

*Ninety-six times ninety-six is ninety squared plus two times ninety times six plus six squared is eighty-one hundred plus two times five-forty plus thirty-six is eighty-one hundred plus ten-eighty plus thirty-six is ninety-one eighty plus thirty-six is ninety-two sixteen.*

*Please go down, please go down; you’re going to get caught!*

But instead of things settling down, they seem to be getting more excited. *It’s only been two minutes since Kazu-nii’s text. Maybe I should just finish? I’d still have time to clean up.*

Five minutes before Suoh and Yabu are due to arrive, Kirishima rushes to the bathroom. He tosses the used tissue in the toilet and flushes, then washes the things that need washing. Once they’re dry,
he stuffs everything back into the bag. Where can I hide it? He looks around frantically.

_The drawers are too dangerous; what if Kazumi tries to get me a fresh t-shirt or something because I’m sweating?_

Kirishima decides anywhere in the bedroom is too dangerous. He heads to the kitchen but decides that’s too dangerous, too, in case Suoh or Yabu get hungry or thirsty. He’s looking around the living room frantically when there’s a knock at the door.

“Just a second!” he calls. He shoves the bag deep under the couch. He races back to the bedroom. _Does it smell?_ He gathers the sheets and pillowcases and runs them to the washing machine, closing the door but not taking the time to add soap or start the load.

Finally, he pulls on his underwear and the yukata Kou brought him, cinching the obi as there’s a louder, more impatient knock on the door.

“Coming!” he calls.

When he opens the door, Suoh grumbles, “Took you long enough. What were you doing?”

“Sorry, I was asleep and didn’t hear the message notification,” Kirishima fibs. “I only saw it a minute ago.”

Suoh eyes him suspiciously. “Why is your face flushed? Did Motomi come back?”

“No!” Kirishima says truthfully. “Maybe it’s from my fever breaking while I slept?”

“Or maybe your fever came back,” Yabu says. She makes Kirishima sit down on the couch while she assesses his wound. “You’re all sweaty,” she chides.

Kirishima shrugs. “Sorry. That’s why I’m only wearing this thin yukata.”

“You should keep warm,” the doctor admonishes. She sticks a thermometer in Kirishima’s mouth.

Suoh checks the kitchen and bedroom. Kirishima watches him curiously, wondering what he’s up to. Suoh bends down and looks under the bed.

_Thank goodness I didn’t hide the bag there._

“I thought you said you were sleeping,” Suoh says.

“I was,” Kirishima confirms, talking around the thermometer.

“But your bed is unmade,” Suoh points out.

Kirishima holds up a finger, buying time while he thinks of an excuse. Once Yabu removes the thermometer, he calmly says, “I was sleeping, until I woke up about five minutes before your arrival. I was sweaty, so I changed clothes and decided to wash my sheets. I had just stripped the bed when I noticed your message, and then I tried to finish loading the washing machine before your arrival. Obviously I wasn’t quite done.”

“It took you a while,” Suoh says, smirking. He peers in Kirishima’s bathroom, and Kirishima finally figures out that he’s looking for Kou.

Kirishima lifts his right arm. “I was being careful not to use this arm too much.”
Suoh’s expression changes from teasing to sympathy. “Oh. Sorry. You should have waited for me to do that for you.”

“I didn’t know you were coming,” Kirishima reminds him. Kirishima is glad that his ability to lie smoothly without blushing has returned, but thinking of Kou’s honest nature gives him a small twinge of guilt. *Where did that come from?* he thinks, quickly pushing the feeling aside.

Yabu finishes her examination. “Well, you definitely seem to have turned the corner. Send me a picture of it twice a day, and as long as it keeps improving, I’ll see you again on Wednesday at the clinic. But if there’s even a slight change for the worse, call me immediately.”

“I will,” Kirishima promises.

“I’ll help you make your bed. And I can wipe you down,” Suoh offers.

“I don’t want to hold up Yabu-sensei,” Kirishima protests.

She waves her hand. “I’ve got some dictation I’ve got to do. If I can just borrow your couch…”

“Of course,” Kirishima says. He brings her a mug of coffee before heading into the bedroom with Suoh to make the bed.

After they make the bed, Suoh says, “Take off your clothes so I can bathe you.”

Kirishima freezes. *What if there’s evidence left from what I was doing before he arrived? I didn’t have a lot of time to clean up…* “I can wash myself. Just wrap my arm for me, please,” he says.

“What are you getting all shy for?” Suoh asks. “It’ll be easier to just let me wash you.”

Kirishima sighs. “Fine.” He covers his privates with a washcloth and sits on the stool.

“Nice kissmarks,” Suoh snickers as he washes Kirishima’s back.

Kirishima slaps his hand to his neck.

Suoh laughs again. “I was just kidding, but what were you and Motomi up to earlier?”

“Nothing! I was sick,” Kirishima reminds him. “Besides, I was too busy apologizing for lying to him because he asked me about sushi demonstrations before I got your text.”

Suoh stops laughing. “Seriously? I’m sorry, Kei. I was just trying to cover for you.”

Kirishima sighs. “I know you were. And it’s fine. Now he knows about me following him, too, so it worked out for the best.”

“How’s that?” Suoh asks. “Lean back,” he adds as he starts washing Kirishima’s hair.

Kirishima closes his eyes. “Well, I figured he was likely to figure it out sooner or later, so it was better he heard it from me. He seems to really value honesty and openness.”

“That could be a problem, Kei,” Suoh says quietly.

Kirishima looks up at him. Some suds get into his left eye, and he tries to blink them out.

“Let me rinse that for you. Keep your eyes closed,” Suoh orders.
“I’m an honest person,” Kirishima says. “Or at least as honest as I can be.”

“You were, once,” Suoh half-agrees. “But you’ve gotten better at lying. It’s a necessity with the job.”

Kirishima gives a half-shrug. “I’m also good at keeping my mouth shut. You have to tell fewer lies that way.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt,” Suoh says softly. “I’m glad you finally found someone, but be careful, okay?”

“I am,” Kirishima says. You usually say I’m too careful.

“This isn’t what I’d call being careful,” Suoh argues, hitting Kirishima’s right elbow.

“Ow!”

“Sorry, I thought I avoided the cut.” Suoh doesn’t look very sorry.

“The infection affected the whole arm, remember?” Kirishima grouses, rubbing the sore arm with his other hand.

Once they’re finished with the bath, Suoh helps Kirishima into another of the oversized t-shirts Kou brought him. “I’ll wash this yukata for you,” Suoh offers, heading towards the washing machine.

He’s already in the laundry room before Kirishima remembers he never started the sheets wash. “Wait, Kazu-nii!” he calls.

Suoh turns back. “What? Got something else to wash?”

“I just remembered I never started the sheets,” Kirishima explains, pushing past Suoh to add the yukata and soap to the wash.

“I could have done that.” Suoh smirks. “You really are hiding something, aren’t you?”

Kirishima can’t stop the blush from creeping up his cheeks. “I already told you no!”

Suoh pats him on his left shoulder. “It’s fine. Nice to see you finally growing up, Kei.” He leaves to let Kirishima start the laundry.

Just when I think he’s the most insensitive jerk in the world, he pretends like he’s learned some sensitivity, but it never sticks, Kirishima grouses to himself.

After Suoh and the doctor leave, Kirishima tries to read again, but he can’t concentrate because he keeps remembering how close he came to getting caught. He sighs and puts the book down, reaching for his tablet. I might as well get at least a little work done so I’m not so far behind when I go back.

He opens the tablet case to find a sticky note on the screen:

Kei-san, if you’re trying to work because you’re bored, try calling me instead, whatever time it is. You’re supposed to be resting, remember? (°◡°).: ◡ Kou
Kirishima smiles and picks up his phone. It’s already kind of late, so he decides to text instead.

*Hi, Kou-san. Are you still awake?*

*Yes. I see you are, too.*

*I’m not really tired. I think I slept too much today.*

*Let me guess. You tried to work.*

*How did you know?*

*You saw my notes.*

*Notes? I saw the one on my tablet.*

*I left some on your laptop and in your briefcase, too. I wanted to make sure you saw it whatever you decided to use for work.*

Kirishima starts typing a reply, but the phone rings before he can finish. It’s Kou.

“*I told you to call, silly,*” Kou chides.

“*I wasn’t sure if you’d be awake.*”

“*I told you it didn’t matter, but thank you for your thoughtfulness.*”

Kou sounds happy, and it makes Kirishima smile, too.

“*Did you get bored of the guide already?*” Kou teases.

“*Not bored,*” Kirishima mutters, blushing furiously. “*It’s just my cousin brought the doctor by again and kind of killed the mood.*”

“*You were in a mood?*” Kou asks in a sultry voice.

Kirishima blushes deeper. “*Not anymore,*” he says cagily.

“*What did the doctor say?*” Kou asks, letting the subject drop.

“*It’s continuing to improve. She wants to see me again on Wednesday, though she still wants pictures twice a day.*”

“*That’s great! I can take a picture when I come over in the morning,*” Kou says. “*What time do you want me there?*”

“*You live a ways from downtown, right?*” Kirishima asks, deliberately vague because he doesn’t want to admit that everything on Kou’s Sion profile is seared into his memory.

“*Yeah, in Musashino,*” Kou says. “*You should come over sometime – though I have to warn you my place is really small.*”

“*How about you come over after rush hour?*” Kirishima says. “*I don’t want to make you deal with all that traffic.*”

“*Alright. That will give you a chance to sleep in,*” Kou agrees. “*Shall we say ten o’clock?*”
“Sure,” Kirishima agrees.

“What can I bring you?” Kou asks.

“You don’t have to bring me anything,” Kirishima protests. “You’ve already given me so much. Those t-shirts and yukata are really convenient.”

“You’ve got to be bored with okayu by now. If you don’t want me to buy something prepared, I can at least bring you some groceries.”

“Let’s go together when you get here,” Kirishima suggests. *That way I can pay for the groceries.*

Kou sighs. “You’re supposed to be resting, but I suppose that’s fine as long as you don’t tire yourself out. But I’m carrying the bags, okay?”

Kirishima smiles. “You’re like a mother hen,” he teases.

“All my friends say that. I can’t help it,” Kou confesses.

“I’m the same way. It feels nice to have someone fussing over me for a change,” Kirishima says. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he wishes he could take them back. He’s thankful Kou can’t see the ridiculous level his blush has reached.

“It feels nice to have someone to fuss over,” Kou answers softly.

They let a comfortable silence stretch for several moments before Kou breaks it.

“Kei-san, were you using the things I bought when your mood was interrupted?”

Kirishima freezes. His tongue seems to be too big for his mouth, and he lets out a wheezing gasp so he doesn’t choke.

“Seriously?!” Kou asks. “Wow, I was just teasing you a little; I didn’t think you actually would.”

Kirishima still finds speech impossible.

“Wow, that’s really hot,” Kou continues. “I’d ask you to tell me what you did, but that wouldn’t be taking it slow. So I’ll just imagine it in my head.”

“Kou-san!” Kirishima finally finds his voice. “It’s not what you’re thinking.” *Actually, it’s probably exactly what you’re thinking.*

“What is it then?” Kou asks innocently.

Kirishima chuckles. “Nice try, but I’m not going to fall for that.”

“Darn. Guess I’ll just have to rely on my imagination for real then.”

“Did you?” The words are out before Kirishima can swallow them.

“What was that?” Kou asks.

“Nothing,” Kirishima says quickly.

“Oh. Did I try them? I didn’t have time; I went straight to your place after buying them, remember?”

Kirishima feels foolish. *Why would Kou-san have tried them, anyway? He obviously wants to top.*
“I kind of wish I had them now, though, now that I’m imagining you using them.”

Kirishima’s blush zooms back to critical level.

“Sorry. Does that make you uncomfortable?” Kou asks.

“No, just embarrassed.” Kirishima casts wildly about for a change of topic; he’s tested the hypothesis that you can actually die of embarrassment enough for one night. “I haven’t gotten a chance to look at that magazine you got yet,” he says as his eyes light on the periodical.

“Sorry, I really did make you uncomfortable. There’s an article about that place in Setagaya I mentioned to you, but hopefully it’s got some other good places to go, too.”

“Maybe I’ll take a look at it when we get off the phone,” Kirishima says. “Do you want to go hiking again next week? Maybe on a weekday?”

“Sounds good.” Kou stifles a yawn.

“You’re getting tired. I should let you go.”

“Sorry,” Kou says sheepishly.

“No, I’m sorry for bothering you so late.”

“I’m glad you did. I’ll see you at ten, okay, Kei-san?”

“Yes.”

“And don’t work! Try to sleep so you can be awake for the movie tomorrow. If you need another distraction, call me.”

“Thank you, Kou-san. Goodnight.”

Kirishima settles into bed with the urban hiking magazine. After reading it for half an hour, he turns off the light, ready to fall asleep. But in the dark, Suoh’s warning comes back.

“That could be a problem… I just don’t want you to get hurt… Be careful.”

A prickle of some faint emotion tugs at Kirishima’s heart. Kirishima tries to identify it but can’t.

“If you weren’t cut off from your feelings, you wouldn’t be able to do your job.”

But Kurebayashi called him “a ticking time bomb.” Am I really that dangerous? I’ve never been good at identifying my feelings; I was always taught to just put them aside and focus on what needs to be done.

He remembers Kou’s face when they were in the bar at the edge of Ni-chōme, how so many different emotions flickered across it strongly enough for Kirishima to know exactly what Kou was feeling. I like that. I like how honest and open he is.

With a shock almost as great as the first time he heard it, Kirishima remembers what Suoh said about him not being honest anymore. It’s true; I have gotten good at lying. I’m almost proud of my lying ability. When did that happen?
For the first time in a long time, Kirishima finds himself wondering what he wants for his life. *I decided to serve Asami-sama for the rest of my life back in high school. That’s not going to change.*

But that decision has changed *him*.

*Do I like who I’ve become? Would Kou-san like me if I let him see all of who I am now?*

*I don’t even know who that is.*

Kirishima shakes his head. He’s too old and practical for an existential crisis. He breaks the seal on the bottle of pain pills Yabu prescribed and shakes out two tablets after checking the dose. *That should knock me out. I just hope Asami-sama really doesn’t need me in the next twelve hours.*

Chapter End Notes

There will be a (brief) time-skip at some point. I'm debating doing it before the next chapter. Do you want to read another round of Kou taking care of Kirishima, more shopping together, and a movie date? Or would you rather move ahead a little? (The characters will ultimately decide, but I value your opinions.)
Chapter Summary

After their makeout sessions keep devolving into a game of "Red Light, Green Light," Kirishima and Kou finally have a frank talk about their relationship. But as he falls harder for Kou, Kirishima's worry deepens about Kou discovering the realities of his job.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long; I began writing the next one but realized there were some things I needed to take care of first. (So the next one should be a bit quicker, though I'll be updating "Exhibition" first.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

Kirishima is awakened by something buzzing. He fumbles for his phone but realizes the noise is coming from farther away. He finds his glasses and puts them on, feeling a bit woozy when he stands up too quickly. He's got a slight headache and his mouth feels like it’s lined with cotton.

He follows the buzzing to the door, where he finally figures out it’s the intercom.

“Hi, Kei-san! Were you still asleep? I’m sorry!”

Kirishima smiles. “I’ll buzz you up.” He heads to the laundry room and finds that the yukata is dry, so he ties it around his waist. Then he heads to the bathroom to quickly brush his teeth.

“Sorry, I woke you up, didn’t I? I guess I should have come later,” Kou says sheepishly, scuffing his foot on the hallway tile.

“It’s fine. I’m sorry I overslept again. I didn’t think to set an alarm last night. You must think I’m really irresponsible, but I hadn’t done it since middle school before this weekend,” Kirishima explains, bowing in apology. He opens the door wider and gestures to Kou to enter.

“It’s fine. You’re sick. You should sleep as much as you can,” Kou says, coming inside. As soon as
the door is closed behind them, he stands on his tiptoes and kisses Kirishima. “Minty fresh.” Kou grins.

Kirishima blushes.

Kou holds up a bag. “I know we said we were going to go shopping together, but I brought some stuff for breakfast. My mom always told me it’s not good to shop for food on an empty stomach.” He laughs. “Not that I ever listened to her before now.”

Kirishima chuckles, too.

“Alright, so I figured you still had plenty of okayu left, so I went simple and brought natto and eggs. I figured I could also make some miso soup with whatever you’ve got on hand.” Kou looks up at Kirishima. “Do you like natto? If the smell bothers you, I don’t need to eat it, either…”

“Natto is fine. Thanks for bringing breakfast.” Kirishima kisses Kou again, and they end up on the couch.

“You’re not wearing anything under your yukata,” Kou observes as he slips his hand inside it.

“I didn’t want to make you wait,” Kirishima says.

Kou leans down and swirls his tongue around Kirishima’s nipple.

He looks up, and Kirishima blushes. “What are you doing?” Kirishima asks.

“Exploring to learn your erogenous zones. How does this feel?” Kou squeezes Kirishima’s other nipple.

Kirishima shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“How about this?” Kou asks. He sucks on the first nipple while his hand tugs and twists the second one.

Kirishima lets out a little breath.

Kou looks up, a pleased smile lighting up his face. “I know you got embarrassed on the phone last night, but what did you do yesterday after reading the book?”

“Kou-san!” Kirishima covers his face, mortified.

“You don’t have to give me specifics if you don’t want to… Just in general.”

Kirishima shrugs. “Use your imagination.”

“Did you use everything in the bag?”

Kirishima thinks about it. He didn’t use the urban hiking magazine. “No.”

“What didn’t you use?” Kou asks in a playful tone. “The condoms?”

“I don’t want to play this game,” Kirishima grumbles, covering his face again. He can feel his blush spreading down onto his chest.

“Fine. I’m sorry I pushed you so hard.” Kou takes Kirishima’s left hand and presses it to his lips. “I promise I’ll be a perfect gentleman for the rest of the day.” He stands up and offers his hand to
Kirishima. “Let’s go make some breakfast.”

Kirishima stands up. As Kou leads him into the kitchen, Kirishima mutters, “I never asked you to be a total gentleman.”

“What was that?” Kou asks, looking back at Kirishima.

“Nothing,” Kirishima says, blushing again.

“It’s okay, I heard you.” Kou leans against the kitchen doorway and tugs Kirishima towards him, wrapping his arms around Kirishima’s neck and giving him a kiss.

Kirishima leans in closer, wanting to feel Kou’s warmth as much as possible. As Kirishima presses their torsos together, Kou spreads his legs, and Kirishima finds himself straddling one of Kou’s. Kirishima’s neck begins to hurt from their difference in heights, so he bends his knees to bring his head lower.

Kou gasps, and Kirishima registers where his thigh is touching. He opens his eyes to meet Kou’s eyes heavily lidded with desire. Kirishima moves his thigh again, and Kou lifts his own thigh in response, bringing it up to meet Kirishima’s groin. When Kou senses that Kirishima is as hot as he is, he smiles.

Kirishima deepens the kiss. He becomes aware that his hands are on Kou’s bottom, pulling him closer to himself.

“Kei-san, that’s a –!” Kou gasps.

Kirishima pulls back a little and looks at Kou. His face is flushed and contorted as if he’s in pain. “Sorry. Are you alright?” Kirishima asks, disentangling quickly.

“I’m fine. Sorry.” Kou’s face turns even redder. “I just –” He gestures vaguely.

Kirishima is confused. He looks down at Kou’s pants, which are still tented. “Sorry, was it getting a little too heated?”

“Yeah. Especially in these skinny jeans.” Kou fidgets uncomfortably.

“Uh –” Kirishima’s not sure what to say or do here. Should he offer to let Kou take his pants off? And then what?

Kou looks equally confused and uncomfortable. They’re both spared trying to figure it out by Kou’s stomach emitting a loud rumble.

“Sorry, I wanted to eat breakfast with you, but I’ve been up for hours,” Kou confesses, reddening to rival one of Kirishima’s deep blushes.

“You didn’t have to do that, but thank you,” Kirishima says. “Let’s get you some food.”

Kirishima’s phone rings during breakfast. “Sorry, it’s Asami-sama,” he explains as he excuses himself from the room.

“Kirishima, just what are you telling people about your injury?” Asami asks.

“I’m sorry, Asami-sama. I tried to say it was caused by a punch bowl, but I had to change the story. I
didn’t want to change it too much, so I said it happened at Sion.”

“We don’t need rumors going around about what people bring to Sion,” Asami says cagily.

“Of course, Asami-sama. I’m very sorry.”

“Well, the only person Motomi told was Takaba, and it’s unlikely he’ll tell anyone else considering
the secret nature of your relationship. Just be more careful from now on, Kei.”

“Yes, Asami-sama.”

“Not for Sion’s sake, Kei. I’m telling you to be more careful for your own sake. Kazumi said
Motomi spent the day there yesterday, even while you were sleeping.”

“Motomi-san isn’t a corporate spy,” Kirishima says. “And anyway, I have everything password-
protected, even my phone.”

“I just told you I’m not worried about Sion. I’m worried about you. Not everyone is as understanding
as Takaba.”

Kirishima can’t help making a disbelieving cough.

Asami chuckles. “Exactly. He took things about as well as can be expected, and he knew the kind of
man I am from the beginning.”

“Thank you for your concern. I’ll be fine,” Kirishima says. Couldn’t this have waited until
tomorrow?

“One more thing, Kei,” Asami says, his voice full of mirth.

What did Kazu-nii say about me now?

“I’m sorry, but I can’t reciprocate your feelings.”

“What?!” Kirishima splutters. Was it Kurebayashi-sensei? If so, I’m not going to see h –

His thoughts are disrupted by a hearty burst of laughter from Asami. “I’m sorry, Kei. I just couldn’t
resist. Apparently Motomi is worried that you’re in love with me, and he somehow convinced
Takaba that it might be true. Takaba was grilling me about it last night.”

Kirishima squeezes the bridge of his nose, closes his eyes, and counts to ten. “Asami-sama, if there’s
nothing else, I’d like to get back to my breakfast.”

“Sorry, Kei. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? Suoh looked worried about something yesterday.”

“It can wait, Kei. Enjoy your last day of freedom. Just a moment.” Asami’s voice is muffled as if
he’s covered the mouthpiece with his hand, but Kirishima thinks he can hear him talking to Suoh.
Asami is soon back. “Sorry, Kei. Suoh wanted me to tell you that you’ll be having at least one and a
half days off each week. No exceptions. Let me know your preferred day, though there will have to
be some flexibility. And make it a weekday.”

“Thank you, Asami-sama. See you tomorrow.”

When Kirishima returns to the table, Kou’s face is drawn, but he immediately covers it up with a
smile. “Welcome back!” His face falls slightly as he asks, “You don’t have to work today, too, do you?”

“No, I still have the day off.”

“Then your boss shouldn’t be bugging you at home when you’re home sick because of an injury at work,” Kou says.

“Asami-sama was just checking up on me,” Kirishima says. He observes how the light seems to go out in Kou’s eyes for a brief moment when Kirishima says Asami’s name. “Actually, he told me I have to take at least one full day off every week from now on.”

“Really? That means we can have a long date!” Kou says excitedly.

_He really is like a puppy, so easy to please._ Kirishima smiles. _I always wanted a dog as a kid._ “Yes – but unfortunately it has to be a weekday.”

“That’s okay; I’m a freelancer, remember? I mostly set my own hours.” Kou looks at Kirishima. “Feel free to tell me no, okay? But I really enjoy just being in your company. Like yesterday, even when you were sleeping, it was soothing to know you were nearby. So I’d like to see you more often, if possible.”

“I’d like to see you more, too, but my work schedule is really busy,” Kirishima says.

“I understand that. That’s why I’m saying I don’t mind having a ‘date’ that’s just hanging out at your place. Something short, just cooking and eating together. Even just packing your lunch together. Or – you work out, don’t you? Or are you just insanely genetically gifted to have a body like that?”

Kirishima blushes. “I try to keep in shape, yes.” _Good thing we didn’t meet six months ago at the end of my bulking cycle; you’d have thought I was a fat slob instead._ I thought I was a fat slob, though Kazu-nii says it’s necessary for adding strength.

“So could we work out together? I don’t want to mess with your routine too much, but maybe sometimes? I could show you parkour sometime, and you could show me – whatever it is you do to keep in shape.”

“That sounds… fun,” Kirishima says.

“Are you sure?” Kou asks. “I know how important alone time can be to some people; Aki was always griping at me when he stayed with me that I didn’t give him enough space.”

“If I need more alone time, I’ll let you know,” Kirishima says. “But making that bento together was fun instead of just a chore. I think it would be… fun.”

“You already said that,” Kou says, grinning.

“I don’t want you having to do all the traveling, though,” Kirishima says. “I can go to Musashino sometimes.”

“Okay.”

Kou leans in closer, and soon they’re engaged in another makeout session on the couch.

This one heats up nearly as quickly as the last one. Soon, Kou is untangling the obi around Kirishima’s yukata.
“Wait,” Kirishima says.

Kou immediately draws back. He sighs and sits back on the couch. “I know you find this embarrassing, Kei-san, but this is something we’ve got to talk about. I can’t read your mind, especially when you’re giving me conflicting signals.”

“I don’t mean to,” Kirishima says.

“I know. And I’m sure I’ve been giving you mixed signals, too, like just before breakfast. This is new for both of us, okay? I have no idea what I’m doing, either.” Kou reaches out and takes Kirishima’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” Kirishima says.

“You don’t have to apologize. Let’s just talk, okay?” Kou gives Kirishima’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Okay.”

“You said you want to take things slow. What do you mean by that?”

“I’m not sure,” Kirishima confesses. “It’s just… when things get heated up, I feel like I can’t think, and I start to worry.”

“What are you worried about?”

“I’m not sure. Whether I’m doing things right. Whether you’re feeling good. Whether we should be doing this. Whether you really like me, or maybe you just like who you think I am …” Kirishima trails off.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m worried about all that, too,” Kou says.

“But I really like you!” Kirishima says, blushing as he realizes what he just said. “I mean, you’re so honest and open with your feelings, I don’t think I like some pretend version of you…”

“Are you pretending with me, Kei-san?” Kou asks. “Are you actually some uncouth boar with terrible manners who never thinks of others first?”

“Of course not. But I know I’m not very expressive.”

Kou squeezes Kirishima’s hand again. “I think you actually are; the fact that you’re not focused on yourself and your own feelings is expressing your extreme consideration for others. Remember that first night, when I told you to order whatever you liked, and you couldn’t even remember what you liked? That told me more about you than you saying you liked fugu would have.”

“I do like fugu,” Kirishima says, a smile playing at his lips.

“Me, too,” Kou says, grinning back. “So let’s get to know one another more so that we can both feel more secure. I’ve waited twenty-five years for my first kiss; I can wait a bit longer for anything more.”

“Okay,” Kirishima nods.

“So, you want clothes to stay on?” Kou asks.

Kirishima nods.
“Okay. Do you want to establish rules for hands?”

“What kind of rules?” Kirishima can finally feel his blush fading away. The longer they talk, the less embarrassing this seems, and he begins to wonder why he made it such a big deal.

A few hours later, Kirishima emerges from his bedroom having finished the urban hiking magazine. Kou is sitting on the floor of the living room, focused on his laptop screen. He looks up and smiles, rubbing his eyes.

“If you’re not careful, you’ll be needing glasses yourself soon,” Kirishima says.

“I’ll be fine. I do eye exercises regularly.”

“Eye exercises?”

“To keep the muscles balanced. I have a book about it; I’ll bring it over next time.” Kou touches a thumb to his nose and draws it slowly away until his arm is fully extended then brings it back to his nose, keeping his eyes focused on the thumb the whole time. “Like that.”

“Do they really help?” Kirishima asks skeptically.

“Sure they do. Your eyes have muscles just like everything else. There’s an eye chart in the book. When I started using it, I was a little bit near-sighted, and now I’ve got better than 20/20 vision.”

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. “I guess it’s worth a try,” he says. “Glasses certainly haven’t helped; my eyes just seem to get worse and worse.”

“That’s because the glasses do the work for you, so your muscles get lazy.” Kou stands up and stretches. “I think I’m at a good stopping point. Did you finish the magazine?”

“Yes, I marked a few places that sounded interesting.”

Kou grins when he sees several color-coded sticky notes jutting out of the magazine. “I see.”

“You never said what time the movie was,” Kirishima points out. “You sounded really excited about it, so I don’t want you to miss it.”

Kou glances at his phone. “There’s a showing at five. Do you want to go to that one and then eat dinner out afterwards?”

“Sure.”

“Could you…” Kou trails off, looking away, embarrassed.

“What?” Kirishima asks.

“Never mind.”

“No, please tell me.”

“No, it was a selfish thought. Never mind. Seriously.”

“Kou-san? Please? You can be a little selfish sometimes. I don’t mind.”
“I mind. You’ll probably say yes even if you don’t want to, and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Just tell me, please. Now I’m really curious. I’ll say no if it’s too much to ask.” Kirishima hugs Kou and kisses his forehead.

Kou sighs. “Fine. I was going to ask if you could wear the outfit I picked out for you when we went shopping together. But don’t feel like you have to.”

Kirishima chuckles.

“Sorry! I know it’s a silly request,” Kou says. “That’s why I didn’t want to say it.”

“That’s not why I’m laughing. I’m laughing because you were so hesitant to ask for such a small thing. Sure, I’ll wear it.” Kirishima says.

“The skinny jeans, too?” Kou asks.

Kirishima steels his resolve. “Sure. The movie theater will be dark, right? Just distract me if too many people are staring at me.”

“I can only think of one way to distract you, but it might make people stare more.” Kou grins as he stands on his tiptoes to kiss Kirishima. After a minute, he pulls back and says, “I’m going to have killer calves before too long, dating you.”

Kirishima looks down and notices Kou is on his toes. “Why don’t we sit down?” He suggests.

After Kou leaves that evening, Suoh’s and Asami’s warnings play in Kirishima’s mind. He decides to thoroughly inspect his own apartment, making sure there’s nothing weird that Kou could find. Although I don’t know what he could possibly find; I keep my guns in the hidden compartment in the bed.

Kirishima decides to check there, first. He uses the program on his phone to activate the hydraulics in the bed to tilt it so he can reach the safe. He frowns when he sees that the wooden panel that matches the bedframe is stuck in its retracted position. How long has it been like that? Good thing I didn’t ask Kou-san to hide under the bed when Kazu-nii came over with the doctor.

Kirishima pulls out his toolkit and fixes the panel. After watching it slide back and forth a few times, Kirishima lowers his bed again, satisfied. Not that it was likely he’d find that, and it’s not unusual to have a safe.

Next, he goes through his closet and drawers carefully. He usually keeps his gun harnesses on a hook on the front wall of the closet: easy to reach, but out of sight unless someone is really searching. He pulls them out. Would you be able to figure out what they were if you didn’t know? Probably. Unless you thought it was some kind of S&M equipment. But if you didn’t actually pull them off the hook, you’d probably just think they’re suspenders.

He contemplates where he should hide the harnesses, but he can’t think of a better place. They won’t fit in the safe because it’s so small. Well, I do have a license. If Kou-san asks… Kirishima shrugs. I’ll just have to be careful if I ever undress in front of him. It’s a good thing I’m shy.

Kirishima inspects the rest of the furniture in his bedroom, but he’s very careful about not leaving any Sion materials out, and there’s nothing to find. The kitchen produces a similar result. Kirishima
finally ends up in the living room. He carefully searches inside the couch (removing the cushions) and under it. *Nothing. Why were Suoh and Asami-sama so insistent?*

Kirishima looks at the end table. Asami gave it to him when he decided it didn’t match the décor in Sion’s VIP room. It was only in the room for a day, but Kirishima decides he’d better examine it closely. He notices the drawer seems rather shallow compared to the outside, but there doesn’t seem to be a false bottom. When he inspects the underside of the drawer, he notices the gun holster. *Did Asami-sama put that there? Or did one of our clients?*

They’ve managed not to have any violent incidents inside of Sion, which is fairly remarkable considering the nature of its clientele. Kirishima carefully removes the holster from the table, wearing gloves and being careful not to disturb any fingerprints that might be present. He slips it into a plastic bag then buries it in the deepest pocket of his briefcase, sliding in an umbrella on top of it. *It’s a good think Kou-san didn’t see that; it would have been pretty hard to explain. It’s one thing to have a gun for hunting or personal protection; it’s another to have a table set up to aim that gun at another person…*

When Kirishima tries to go to sleep that night, he recalls Kou asking, “Are you pretending with me, Kei-san?” He reaches for the bottle of pills on the side table and shakes two into his palm.

He stares at them for a moment.

*Don’t be stupid, Kei. You have to work tomorrow. Remember how you felt this morning? You can’t protect Asami-sama if you’re fuzzy-headed.*

He opens the bottle and drops the pills back inside.

Two weeks later, Kirishima finds himself confessing to considering using the pain pills to help him sleep during his third session with Kurebayashi. He finds the psychologist as aggravating as ever, especially since her habit of asking seemingly unrelated questions makes him admit to things he didn’t mean to. Like the pills.

“Have you ever used substances to help you avoid thinking about things before?” Kurebayashi asks.

“No. And I decided not to, remember?”

“So what other coping mechanisms do you use?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I just try not to think about it. I’ve done what I can to make sure Kou-san doesn’t find out about the parts of my job he may not like. Why does it even matter, anyway? It has nothing to do with how I function at work.”

“Humans aren’t computers,” Kurebayashi says. “You can’t compartmentalize your life into separate files like that. Your personal life affects your job performance, just as your job can affect your personal life.”

“Not mine,” Kirishima says stubbornly.

Kurebayashi actually rolls her eyes. “That’s because you’ve never allowed yourself to have a personal life before. Your over-the-top dedication to Asami-kun has prevented you from developing in other areas until now.”
“It’s not over-the-top,” Kirishima says sullenly. “I was nothing before I met Asami-sama. Nobody liked me – least of all me. He helped me find a purpose in life.”

Kurebayashi studies him. “What exactly are you worried about Kou-kun finding out?”

“He’s so honest and caring and good, if he finds out who I really am, he won’t want to be with me anymore.” Kirishima bites his lip. He didn’t mean to say that, either.

“Why not?”

“Because if he knew the real me, he wouldn’t like me.”

“Do you like yourself now?”

Kirishima stares at her. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“You don’t like the question.”

“I don’t see why it’s relevant.”

“Self-loathing often leads people down destructive paths. It can make them sabotage their own relationships. Or make them feel they deserve to remain in abusive relationships.”

“No one’s ever abused me,” Kirishima says, furrowing his brow in confusion.

“There are many kinds of abuse, not just physical.”

“I know that. No one’s ever abused me,” Kirishima repeats.

“What don’t you like about yourself? Your behavior or your personality?” Kurebayashi changes the question.

“Both. I mean neither.” Kirishima closes his eyes and waits for Kurebayashi to lambast him for that slip of the tongue. How does this devil of a woman make me talk about things I don’t even want to think about?

“What about your personality don’t you like?”

Kirishima sighs and opens his eyes. Maybe I’ll just give her a dose of cold reality. “The same things no one else likes: how punctilious and serious I am. Everyone’s always been telling me to lighten up, to stop being so serious, ever since I was a kid. I’ve tried, but I just can’t help it.” He shrugs. “No one likes that. I can understand why myself – I don’t like it in other people. But as much as I try to ‘relax,’ when I see something that needs to be fixed, I can’t help fixing it.”

“What about Asami-kun? Does he tell you when your work is executed well that it should be submitted more sloppily?”

“No…”

“What about your other colleagues? When you tidy up the breakroom everyday without being asked, or brew a fresh pot of tea when you notice it’s gotten stale, do they complain?”

Kirishima stares at her. “How did you know I do that?”

“I hear things.” Kurebayashi waves her hand. “Your high expectations can be a little hard on your subordinates at times, but they appreciate that Asami-kun always sees their work in its best light, and
you give credit where credit is due. People respect a hard worker.”

Kirishima shrugs. “Well, sure, I guess those traits are fine at work, but off the clock, people aren’t exactly lining up to sit next to me at drinking parties.”

“We’re not all party animals. Do you think people want to sit next to a psychologist while they’re letting their hair down?” Kurebayashi counters, a smile playing at her mouth. “It’s not about the number of people you have in your circle; it’s about having people you can trust, however small it is. You’d be surprised how many ‘life of the party’ types have similar worries. ‘Sure, people will talk to me at parties, but I don’t have anyone I can confide my problems to. No one really likes me.’”

Kirishima stares at her.

“You said you can’t help being serious and – was it ‘punctilious’?”

Kirishima nods.

“Have you been that way around Kou-kun?”

“Yes, probably. He laughs when I’m too formal, and he said I’m a good influence on his manners.”

“That doesn’t sound like he doesn’t like you.”

“But that’s only because we’re still getting to know each other. Once he realizes I’m always like this, it will start to wear on him.”

Kurebayashi studies him for a few moments. Kirishima waits for her to speak again. “What behaviors of yours don’t you like?”

“I don’t know,” Kirishima says. “It was pointed out to me recently that I’m not as honest as I once was. And I’ve always thought of myself as an honest person, so that came as somewhat of a shock.”

“Anything else?” Kurebayashi asks.

Kirishima glances at his watch for the fiftieth time that session. “I’d love to talk about this more, but I’ve got to get back to work now, and your next patient is probably waiting.”

“We’ll pick up where we left off next week,” Kurebayashi says. “And don’t expect me to fall for some made-up bullshit.”

Kirishima grits his teeth as he hurries out of Kurebayashi’s office.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: another bit of a time skip and a double date with Asami and Aki! You guys asked, and Kou delivered.
Double Date (Silver and Gold)

Chapter Summary

When Aki and Kirishima continue to drag their heels, Kou decides to take matters into his own hands and orchestrate a double date. But will things go as he planned?

Chapter Notes

After rereading what I'd already written for this chapter, I realized it was more ready than I thought, so I decided to go ahead and post it.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima’s assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past

Parkour terms (links are to videos of the moves; try at your own risk!):
- wall run: running up a wall
- cat leap: leaping onto a wall, landing with your hands on top and your feet on the wall
- precision jump: jumping from two feet and landing on both feet (often on top of an obstacle)
- underbar: diving feet first through a space under a bar
- tic-tac: stepping off a wall to gain height or change direction
- parkour roll: a safety move used to help absorb impact when jumping from a height

Kirishima resists the urge to check his watch. This unexpected Suzuki morning meeting is cutting into his parkour date with Kou, but Asami would never have agreed to a morning meeting if the situation weren’t critical. Kirishima focuses on the participants, observing the slight perspiration erupting on the brow of Suzuki’s fourth-in-command.

Kirishima locks eyes with Asami and communicates with a slight nod of his head, and the meeting adjourns soon afterward.

“Take me home, Kirishima.”

“Yes, Asami-sama.” That’s an extra twenty minutes away from my date.

“And cancel my lunch meeting. Cancel everything until four o’clock. You can take off until then, too.”
“Thank you, Asami-sama.” Well, that makes up for it.

While Asami places the reports he needs to read in his briefcase, Kirishima sends a text to Kou.

When he looks up again, Asami is frowning. *Is he mad because I’m on my phone?*

But Asami is clenching his own phone in his fist, and Kirishima surmises that he tried to summon Takaba but was rejected. *Just don’t send me to track him down.*

A block from Asami’s penthouse, Asami rolls down the partition in the car to ask, “Kirishima, just how much do you like Motomi?”

“Sir?”

“Because I may have to kill him.”

Kirishima slams on his brakes and pulls over to the curb. He looks over his shoulder to see if Asami’s playing a weird joke, but he looks serious. “Asami-sama?”

“Why is your boyfriend sending me threatening, naked pictures of Takaba from Takaba’s phone?”

“What?!” Kirishima bursts out. He starts to reach back for the phone but stops himself before Asami is able to see the gesture. *Do not imply that you want to see naked pictures of Takaba, Kei,* he chides himself. He closes his eyes. “May I ask the context?”

“I just told you the context.”

“Was the picture taken inside or outside?”

“Outside.”

“Was there a note accompanying it?”

“Yes.”

Kirishima waits.

“‘If you want to see more of Akihito, come join us.’ There’s an address.”

Kirishima’s brain races. “Is the address in Musashino?”

“Yes.”

“Is it Musashino Art University?”

“Are you part of this, too, Kirishima?”

“I’m supposed to meet Kou-san there to practice parkour. It was supposed to be just the two of us.”

“So you don’t know why Takaba is naked?”

“How much of him is showing?”

“Just his shoulders.”

“Maybe he got hot and took his shirt off. Or maybe he’s practicing a move that might mess up his clothes.” Kirishima shrugs. “Should I continue to your home?” he suggests
“This ‘parkour’ – it’s the new skill Suoh is training the security team in?”

“Yes, Asami-sama.”

“And you’re learning it, too?” Asami sounds surprised.

“Just for fun. I don’t really have the right body type for it. It favors a smaller frame with a better strength-to-weight ratio,” Kirishima explains.

“Let’s go,” Asami says.

“What?” Kirishima understands; he’s just hoping his understanding is wrong.

But no.

“Musashino Art University,” Asami says.

“Yes, Asami-sama,” Kirishima says, internally sighing. Kou has been trying to get both Akihito and Kirishima to agree to a double date for weeks, but since neither is particularly keen on the idea, it hasn’t happened. It looks like Kou-san finally took matters into his own hands.

Before he pulls out into traffic, Kirishima grudgingly says, “Asami-sama, parkour requires casual clothing and athletic shoes. Do you want to stop by your home to change first?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Asami says.

Kirishima ponders where he will change. Usually he changes at Kou’s, but if Kou is already at the parkour spot with Takaba, that won’t work. And changing in the car with Asami present is out, too.

Kirishima parks three blocks from the university, grabbing his gym bag off the passenger seat. He feels awkward opening the door for Asami here, but he does it.

“Open the trunk,” Asami orders.

Kirishima complies, puzzled until Asami pulls out his gym bag. Oh, right. I forgot he keeps one in the car.

Kirishima holds out his free hand to take the gym bag, but Asami says, “I’ll carry my own.”

Kirishima bows.

“Relax, Kei. We’re off the clock. I’m just Ryuichi.”

“Yes, Asami-sa – Ryuichi.” Kou-san will like that even less than he likes ‘Asami-sama.’

“Where are they?”

Kirishima checks his phone, which buzzed three times while he was driving.

Is Asami-san coming with you? Hope you don’t mind; I think it will be really good for Aki.

We’re on the rails by the pyramid.

Aki wanted to practice wall runs and cat leaps, so we’re near the bike parking lot.
He texts back.

I just parked. I still need to change. Is there somewhere I can do so on the way?

Is Asami-san with you?

Kirishima decides not to answer that as a small act of revenge for Kou orchestrating this “double date.”

Are you mad?

No.

No, Asami-san’s not with you? Or you’re not mad?

I’m not mad. Where can I change?

You are mad. Sorry! m(_ _)m If it’s too awkward, we can go our separate ways.

Who can?

So he’s not with you?

I didn’t say that.

So he is?

I didn’t say that, either. (^_^)

“Stop flirting and let’s go,” Asami grumps.

“I’m sorry. I was trying to figure out where we can change. Kou-san won’t tell me unless I tell him whether you’re with me.”

“That is flirting,” Asami explains.

Kirishima’s phone buzzes.

Fine. You can change in the library building. There’s a changing room on the first floor for faculty. It should be open.

Kirishima leads the way across the empty campus.

“Do we need to change first?” Asami asks, impatient as always to see Takaba.

“It’s on the way,” Kirishima says.

“Fine.”

When they get to the bike parking lot, Asami looks around. “Where are they?”

“They said they were climbing,” Kirishima says, scanning the walls. He doesn’t see them on any of the walls surrounding the parking lot, but movement catches his eye from higher up. “There,” he says, pointing to the side of a building.
“They’re crazy,” Asami says.


Asami raises his eyebrows at Kirishima. “You do this kind of shit?”

“Not that high. But it’s fun. And I’m getting in better shape than years in the gym have gotten me.”

Asami watches them climb nearly to the top of the building. Akihito suddenly flies off the wall and catches the railing of an external staircase landing. Asami lets out his breath in a rush. “He’s a fucking idiot.”

Kirishima can’t help but notice the tenting in Asami’s pants. He blushes and looks back up to watch Kou climb from the wall to the railing. Once both young men are safely on the staircase landing, Kirishima whistles and waves.

Kou’s face breaks out into a wide grin, but Akihito looks none too happy to see Asami standing next to Kirishima. They come down the stairs, Kou leading the way. Kirishima and Asami climb up the flight of stairs leading from the parking lot to the second-floor patio of the building.

“You made it!” Kou grins, giving Kirishima a big hug.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Kirishima says, disengaging as quickly as he can. He knows his face is bright red. “Asami-sama, this is Motomi Kou-san. Kou-san, this is Asami Ryuichi-sama, my boss.”

Asami frowns at the honorific. He politely shakes Kou’s hand, but his eyes are on Akihito, who’s fidgeting.

“I see you put your shirt back on,” Asami says coolly.

“What are you talking about?” Akihito asks. “How did you even know I took it off? It was only for like a second, and that was like half an hour ago.”

Asami raises his eyebrows. “You don’t keep track of what happens on your own phone?”

Akihito wheels on Kou. “Kou, what did you do when you borrowed my phone? You said you had to text Kirishima-san and left your phone at home… but you have your phone!” Realization suddenly dawns on Akihito as he remembers seeing Kou texting on his own phone a few minutes ago.

Kou shrugs. “I’ve been trying to set up a double date for ages, and you two haven’t been cooperative at all, so I decided to invite Asami-san myself. He could have said no.”

“That was an invitation?” Asami asks.

Kirishima chuckles. “Asami-sama thought it was a threat.” He changes the honorific midstream in deference to what Asami asked him earlier, but he can’t call him Ryuichi in front of Kou. Asami (and Kirishima’s work schedule) have been a source of tension for them since the first week. Having to cancel three dates (and postpone this one) at the last minute for work in the past two weeks hasn’t helped.

Asami casts Kirishima a look that tells him he’ll pay for that comment later, but Kirishima can’t bring
himself to care too much right now.

“What did you send, Kou?” Akihito asks. He opens his phone and laughs a little but then turns red as he scrolls through his message history.

*Was one of their recent conversations sexting?* Kirishima wonders.

“Have you ever done parkour before?” Kou asks Asami, wisely deciding to change the subject to something safer.

“No.”

“Alright. We can start with the basics. You look like you’re in pretty good shape. Do you work out?”

Asami shrugs and raises his eyebrows as if to say, “Have you seen this body?”

“Hmm. What do you want to do? We could start with vaults – that’s jumping over things – or precisions – jumping to an object and landing on it – or climbs. Or maybe we should start with landings and rolls for safety.”

Kou looks at Akihito for suggestions, but Akihito shrugs. “I don’t think Asami would like parkour.”

“What makes you say that?” Asami asks.

“Because it’s something I can do better than you,” Akihito teases, sticking out his tongue.

“We’ll just see about that, brat,” Asami says.

Kirishima chuckles softly, turning to the side so Asami won’t notice.

“What?” Kou whispers, smiling.

“This will be good. Asami-sa–n is a naturally gifted athlete, and he practices martial arts and strength-trains. He’s probably better than me, but there’s no way he’ll be as good as you or Takabakun,” Kirishima says as they watch Akihito and Asami argue.

“No way. You’ve been practicing for two months, and you were in decent shape when you started,” Kou says loyally.

“Well, I’m sure we’re about to find out. This could be fun to watch; Ryuichi hates to lose.”

Akihito comes over to them. “We’re going to make an obstacle course and have a race,” he announces.

As he starts to describe the route, Kou interrupts him. “That’s way too long. Let’s start with something short and simple.” Kou suggests a simple route across the parking lot to the top of the herringbone building second-floor patio.

Akihito and Kirishima nod.

“We can go any way we want?” Asami asks.

“Yep,” Akihito says. “Why don’t you go first?”

“No, after you,” Asami says.
“Let Kei-san go first,” Kou says.

The smirk on Asami’s face tells Kirishima he’ll be hearing about the way Kou addresses him for weeks to come. Like I haven’t heard enough about how I call him Kou-san. Kou-san is going to owe me big-time for this. “Do I have to?” Kirishima asks resignedly. Kou always makes him try obstacle runs first so Kirishima can develop his parkour eye and figure out the best flow. But in front of Asami…

Kirishima sighs and gets ready.

“Hold on, we’re timing it,” Akihito says.

When he says go, Kirishima races across the parking lot, easily jumping over the bike racks. When he reaches the low wall before the stairs, he precision-jumps onto it and then leaps for the highest part of the stair railing he can reach, performing an underbar through the railing, landing about halfway up the stairs. He tic-tacs off the wall and lands at the top of the stairs, shouting “Done!”

He jogs back down the stairs. Kou runs up to him and gives him a hug, slapping him on the back. “Great job. Nice underbar!”

“Thanks,” Kirishima says, blushing. Kou only taught him the underbar last week, but Kirishima’s been practicing it every night on the railings in the parking garage at his apartment complex (no one else is ever around when he gets home, and it cuts the distance from his assigned parking space to the elevator by more than half).

“Twelve point seven seconds,” Akihito calls out.

Asami raises his eyebrows at Kirishima. “I didn’t know you could move like that.”

Kirishima shrugs. When Asami took him under his wing in high school, Kirishima was the clumsiest, slowest kid in his grade. I’ve come a long way since then, largely thanks to you. Parkour is just the latest part of that journey.

“Next up is Asami,” Akihito calls eagerly.

“I’ll go last since this is my first time,” Asami says.

“No, newbies have to go first to train their eye,” Akihito argues.

“Let him go last since it’s a race,” Kou suggests. “Time me.”

Kirishima pulls out his phone and times Kou. Instead of heading to the staircase, Kou runs to the right where a column supports the patio. He runs partway up the column, grabs onto the edge of a shed roof next to the column, and pulls himself up and over the raling to the patio.

“Eight point nine seconds,” Kirishima calls.

When Kou comes back down, he holds his arms out for a hug.

Kirishima gives him a quick one. “Nice job.”

Akihito gives Kou a quick, brotherly hug, too. “Not bad, but you still need to work on your wall run.”

“No way. Not even you could make it all the way to the top,” Kou challenges. “It’s got to be over five meters high.”
“Five? It’s not even four,” Akihito scoffs. “You play it too safe.”

“Fine, go ahead and show me,” Kou goads.

Kirishima starts the timer, and Akihito races up the column effortlessly. He manages to grab the top of the concrete wall with his hand, and then it’s an easy climb over the railing onto the patio.

“Seven point eight seconds,” Kirishima calls.

Kou shrugs. “He can run faster than me.”

“You still did great,” Kirishima says.

“Ha! In your face! Told you I could make it,” Akihito gloats. He turns to Asami. “No more stalling. Now you have to go.”

Asami steps up to the starting position, a look of fierce determination on his face. When Kirishima calls, “Go!” Asami sprints across the parking lot straight for the column.

“He’s fast,” Kou says.

Kirishima nods. Asami was not just the fastest kid in his grade, but in the entire school – even faster than the kids on the track team (at least for short distances).

“He ever done a wall run before?” Kou asks worriedly as Asami’s speed doesn’t decrease as he approaches the wall.

Kirishima doesn’t have time to answer before Asami’s at the wall. His speed ends up being a little too much, and he bounces away from the wall, but he manages to get high enough that one hand is just able to reach the shed roof Kou used. Asami swings his other arm up and climbs onto the roof and over the railing, not quite as gracefully as Kou, but still pretty quickly.

“Eight point one seconds,” Kirishima calls.

Asami comes down the stairs with thunderclouds roiling behind his eyes, but Akihito either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care as he runs up gloating. “Ha! Told you I was better than you!”

“That was amazing, Asami-san,” Kou says, elbowing Akihito. “Aki, be nice. You couldn’t do that the first time you tried a wall run.”

“That obviously wasn’t his first wall run,” Akihito says, elbowing Kou back. “Where’d you learn to do parkour?”

“I didn’t realize ‘parkour’ was just another name for running around. I should have figured,” Asami says.

Akihito looks a little hurt, but Kou says, “Yeah, a lot of people do parkour as kids, but they’re encouraged to ‘grow out’ of it. If you keep it up instead, you can do some really amazing things. And it really helps to watch other traceurs to learn good technique.”

“Okay, let’s do a longer course now,” Akihito says excitedly, eying the herringbone wall again.

“Look, Asami-san is strong, but let’s keep it close to the ground for safety,” Kou says.

Akihito rolls his eyes. “You might have beaten me last time if you hadn’t played it so safe.”
“Fine. Let’s do the same course again. Everyone, just try to focus on beating your own time.” Kou pulls Kirishima aside. “What you did last time was great. Don’t go trying a wall run just because the rest of us did it.”

“I know,” Kirishima says, though he is feeling a little inferior since his time was so much slower than everyone else’s. Why does Asami-sama have to be so effortlessly good at everything? He realizes that he’s not being fair, though. Asami used to run around with a pretty rough gang back in high school, and he probably spent a fair amount of time running through alleys jumping walls and fences.

“Who’s up?” Akihito asks. “Same order?”

The rest shrug, so Kirishima steps up to go. This time, he notices that there’s a similar support column on the left side of the patio, closer to their starting point. He can’t run up it, but it’s close enough to the low wall near the stairs that he might be able to cat onto it and climb to its top. From there, it would be easy to climb over the wall onto the patio.

Everything goes as planned until he’s in midair and realizes that the top of the column is both a bit higher and a bit farther away than he thought. I’m not going to make it!

He sticks out his right foot and tic-tacs off the column to the left away from the patio (because he doesn’t want to smash his head on its edge). He lands on his feet and dives into a roll to help absorb the impact – his first parkour roll on pavement. His glasses go flying off, and he scrabbles around for them, hoping he can find them quickly, even though his time is already going to be ridiculously slow.

“Kei-san, are you alright?” Kou cries. He hands Kirishima his glasses, and Kirishima turns to run up the stairs, but Kou grabs his arm. “Wait. We’ll give you a do-over. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. You’re right, rolls don’t feel great on pavement, but I’m perfectly fine.”

Kou leans up to give him a quick peck on the cheek. “That was an amazing save,” he says.

Even Akihito looks impressed. “Great bail. And I didn’t even notice that line. That was ballsy.”

Kirishima is mortified. He’s so bad, he’s being praised for screwing up.

Kou takes his turn while Kirishima is given time to recover from his scare. Kou runs up Akihito’s column, reaching for the top of the wall. He manages to grasp it and pulls himself over the railing.

“Eight-even,” Akihito calls. Asami tries to look nonchalant, but Kirishima can see that his competitive beast has been unleashed, and there are two targets in his sights.

Kirishima repeats his run, choosing the same course he did the first time and shaving a few tenths of a second off his time.

Akihito tries Kirishima’s route, making the leap to the column easily. The wall on that side of the patio is higher than the railing though, and he only shaves a tenth of a second off his time.

Asami tries the wall run again, making the same mistake as last time.

The four run the same route twice more each, sticking to their first routes with slight modifications each time. Kirishima’s last run is a full second faster than his first. On Asami’s final run, he finally nails the wall run and pulls himself over the wall quickly.

“Seven-five,” Kirishima calls.
Akihito and Asami lock eyes. “Who’s better?” Asami smirks.

“We tied. And that’s only because the course is so short. When we pick a longer route, you’re toast, old man,” Akihito retorts.

As the two continue to bicker, Kou pulls Kirishima aside. “Is Asami-san always this competitive?” Kou asks worriedly.

“He hasn’t even really started yet,” Kirishima admits.

“That’s what I was afraid of. Neither has Aki. I guess they have that in common, at least.” Kirishima looks confused, so Kou explains, “Aki’s worried they don’t have much in common. They’ve never even been out on a date before.”

Kirishima is unsurprised. Asami’s social calendar is so full of work obligations, the introvert prefers to spend his precious time off unwinding at home alone. Or alone in the company of a sex partner, anyway. “This is an interesting first date,” he says aloud.

“As long as they don’t end up letting their egos get them hurt,” Kou mutters. “I’m going to do everything I can to keep the challenges reasonable. Back me up, okay?”

“Of course. But Asami-san isn’t one to back down from a challenge, so he’ll agree to almost anything, no matter how ridiculous it is,” Kirishima explains.

“Aki’s the same way. And apparently for some reason he won’t rest until we have a longer challenge,” Kou says.

Kirishima feels a little bad betraying his boss, but in the interest of safety, he says, “Takaba-kun probably wants a longer course because Asami-san is a heavy smoker.”

“That explains it!” Kou exclaims. Kirishima looks at him in surprise. “Sometimes I’ve caught a whiff of smoke off both you and Aki, but I know neither of you smokes.” He snaps his fingers. “So we just need to make a longer challenge that’s on the ground.”

Kirishima nods. “What about all those precisions and vaults over by the quad?”

“That’s perfect.”

Akihito calls over to them. “Okay, the fastest way to the roof of the herringbone building for the next challenge.”

Kou flicks him in the forehead. “Kei-san is a beginner, and just because Asami-san can do wall runs, that doesn’t mean he’s insane like you.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” Akihito asks sullenly.

“I promised Kei-san he could practice designing a run today. He wants to go over to the quad.”

Akihito sighs. “The quad is boring.”

Kou shoots him a look.

Akihito glances at Kirishima and says, “Sorry, Kirishima-san.”

“A true traceur can make any place interesting,” Kou teases Akihito.
Akihito grins. “You’re right. I really am sorry, Kirishima-san.”

Kirishima shrugs. “I’m sorry I’m so boring.”

“You’re not. How many times do I have to tell you that before it sinks in?” Kou asks, standing on his tiptoes to kiss Kirishima.


“Sorry,” Kou says. “You’re just too cute.”

As they walk over to the quad, Asami falls into step beside Kirishima. Akihito and Kou walk ahead of them chattering about free running moves they’re working on.

“You look happier than you have in a long time,” Asami says quietly.

Kirishima shrugs. “I guess I am, but I was never particularly unhappy with my life.”

“Perhaps not. But lately, I’ve been wondering whether maybe there’s more to life than just indulging in the finer pleasures of life and not being unhappy.”

Kirishima stares at Asami. “Aren’t you too practical for an existential crisis?”

“Aren’t you?” Asami retorts.

Kirishima flushes. “What has Kurebayashi-sensei been saying about me?”

Asami’s eyebrows shoot up. “I told you last week that she cleared you for work with the offer to continue your sessions for another month if you thought they’d be beneficial. She’s always careful to keep things confidential, reporting only mental fitness for various types of work. You know that.”

“Yes, of course,” Kirishima says quickly.

Asami continues to eye him curiously. “So you really are going through an existential crisis?”

Kirishima chuckles. “No, of course not. I also wasn’t a ticking time bomb, either.”

The lie might have been able to fool most people. Certainly Kirishima’s immediate family, and probably even Suoh. But Asami still looks skeptical. “Is it because of Motomi?” he asks quietly.

Kirishima shrugs. “I really like him. He’s one of the most genuine, kindest, most caring people I’ve ever met.”

“Sounds like you’re describing yourself. You’ve found your match.”

“Hardly,” Kirishima scoffs at the idea.

“Maybe some people wouldn’t see that in the ‘you’ now. I’ve corrupted you. Well, I won’t take all the credit – I’ll let Kazumi take some. But you’re still the same person inside, and anyone who knew you in high school would agree.”

Kirishima makes a disbelieving noise in his throat (a habit he annoyingly picked up from Kurebayashi).

“I remember the first time I saw you lie. Your face got so red, I wondered whether it was the first lie
you ever told in your life – and it was on my behalf,” Asami recalls.

“It wasn’t,” Kirishima says, even though it was.

Asami eyes him carefully. “It really was? I really did corrupt you, huh.” Asami’s expression doesn’t contain any trace of shame or remorse; his tone is casually observant.

Kirishima shakes his head. “You defended me from that gang. You didn’t deserve the same punishment as them for fighting, but the school rules were too strict. Lying was the right thing to do then.”

Asami shrugs. “If you say so. I would have been fine even if you hadn’t stepped in, but I appreciated the help.”

That’s probably true. Ryuichi had most of the teachers and administrators eating out of his hand. He always knew how to play both sides. Kirishima shrugs, too. “Likewise.”

“What are you slowpokes doing back there?” Akihito calls from the quad.

Kirishima jogs to catch up, Asami following a few steps behind.

“What were you guys talking about?” Kou asks.

Kirishima blushes. He doesn’t want to admit they were talking about how much he likes Kou.

Asami notices Kirishima’s embarrassment and covers for him. “We were just remembering how we met back in high school.”

Kou’s face falls.

He’s going to start thinking I’m in love with Asami-sama again. Kirishima clears his throat, “Actually, we were talking about you, and it only turned to our high school days at the end.”

Kirishima’s face is burning, but when Kou’s lights up like a puppy greeting its overdue owner, he decides it’s worth the embarrassment.

“What were you saying about me?” Kou asks.

“That’s a secret,” Kirishima says.

“Was it good?” Kou asks.

Kirishima doesn’t respond, but his deepening blush gives the answer away.

Kou gives him a hug, whispering in his ear, “Man, you’re so adorable right now, I really want to kiss you.”

“Stop flirting, you two,” Akihito says, also looking a bit pink around the edges.

Chapter End Notes

Musashino Art University is real, and I actually kind of really want to go there to do parkour now after exploring it on Google Maps (street and satellite view). The
herringbone building is the northern building on the quad (which is marked by the pin with the university's name). To view the area where the guys were, drop the street-view guy on the first north-to-south-running path to the east of the herringbone building and then look west.

I'll be posting the continuation of the date next before returning to Exhibition for a chapter or two. These guys just wouldn't let me leave them mid-date.
**Chapter Summary**

As the double date continues, friction arises within both couples. What are Asami and Akihito getting up to now? And how will Kou and Kirishima weather their first fight?

**Chapter Notes**

Asami and Akihito tried to take over this chapter in a couple of places, so it's a little longer than usual. Thanks to everyone who leaves comments; they really keep me motivated, and I enjoy reading your thoughts and reactions to the story.

Characters:
- Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
- Morita: Kirishima's assistant
- Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
- Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
- Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
- Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
- Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
- Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors

Parkour terms (links are to videos of the moves; try at your own risk!):
- **wall run**: running up a wall
- **cat leap**: leaping onto a wall, landing with your hands on top and your feet on the wall
- **precision jump**: jumping from two feet and landing on both feet (often on top of an obstacle)
- **underbar**: diving feet first through a space under a bar
- **tic-tac**: stepping off a wall to gain height or change direction
- **parkour roll**: a safety move used to help absorb impact when jumping from a height
- **double gainer**: a double backflip performed while traveling forward
- **triple cork**: a flip that involves three horizontal full-body rotations before landing

AV: adult video

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kou reluctantly pulls away from Kirishima. “Alright, Kei-san, what are you thinking for your course?”

Kirishima looks around the quad. “I definitely want to include Tic-Tac Alley and Motomi Pass,” he says, grinning at Kou.

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Are you still calling it that? You haven’t been a student here for nearly as long as you were one.”
“Can someone enlighten me, since I seem to be the only one who has no idea what you’re talking about?” Asami asks.

“We’ll walk along the route to make sure everyone understands, and we’ll let you go last again,” Kou reassures him.

“I also want to include the picnic tables if no one’s using them,” Kirishima says, “but I can’t think of an interesting way to connect them.”

“It’s fun to make challenges that let you use moves you’re working on, but the whole point of parkour is moving efficiently from one place to another. Sometimes the most efficient way is plain old regular running,” Kou says.

Akihito wrinkles his nose. “That’s why free running is more fun.”

“You’re free to add in some free running moves to make it more interesting, but when you come in last place because of it, I don’t want to hear about it,” Kou says.

Akihito mutters, “I bet I could beat you even if I did throw in a double gainer or a triple cork.”

“You can’t do a triple cork off a ten foot wall landing in a foam pit,” Kou retorts. “Anyway, enough stalling. Let’s get a move on.” He turns to Kirishima. “Have you figured out your route yet?”

“How about from the stairwell of the inside-out building, to the tables, to Tic-Tac Alley, and along Motomi Pass back to the tables?” Kirishima suggests.

“Checkpoints near the tables, at the end of Tic-Tac Alley, and at the bottom of Motomi Pass?” Kou asks.

Kirishima nods. He leads the way but lets Kou and Akihito explain the layout of the university to Asami.

“You can go however you want to – over, under, through, around – whatever you think is fastest – but you have to reach the three – well, four since the tables are in there twice – checkpoints in order,” Kou explains.

“And the person who reaches the fourth checkpoint the fastest wins,” Asami says, nodding.

“It’s so weird to see you doing parkour,” Akihito bursts out.

“Would you rather I sit and watch you?” Asami asks.

“No way, you’re not getting out of it. I have to beat you!”

Asami sighs. “Let’s get this over with then.”

“Are they always like that?” Kou asks Kirishima in a low voice as they lead the way to Tic-Tac Alley.

Kirishima remembers all the times he’s seen Asami throw Akihito over his shoulder, carrying him like a child having a tantrum. But he shrugs noncommittally.

“That bad, huh?” Kou asks. “No wonder Aki’s so insecure. I wonder why they stay together, then. The sex must be amazing.” He blushes slightly as he realizes what he just said, but then he catches the expression on Kirishima’s face. “Seriously? You’ve seen them?!” Kou whispers furiously.
“Of course not!” Kirishima protests. “This is Tic-Tac Alley,” he calls over his shoulder to Asami. “The buildings are so close together, you can get good tic-tac practice in. But you don’t have to. The checkpoint will be here.” He taps a blue pipe on the L-shaped building that closes off the alley. “And the next checkpoint is this way.”

He turns around to lead the way out of the alley.

“You can’t make that kind of face and not tell me the story!” Kou hisses. “Did you watch them?”

“I told you, that’s not it!” Kirishima hisses back. “Do you think I’m some kind of pervert?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Kou whispers. “So you saw them accidentally?”


“Where? At the office?” Kou asks.

“Do you really want to know? Anyway, it was while I was working. You know what some of my duties are.”

Kou stops for a second then jogs to catch up to Kirishima again. “Oh. In the car?” he whispers.

“Eww.”

“The car has a privacy window,” Kirishima explains.

“But you can hear enough through the window that it made you make that face? I really didn’t want to know that!”

“That’s why I tried not to tell you,” Kirishima retorts.

“What are you two whispering about?” Akihito calls out from behind. “It’s very suspicious, you know.”

“Nothing,” they both reply guiltily at the same time.

“Uh-huh.”

“So we have to go down this alley just to come back up it again?” Asami asks.

“Not necessarily,” Kirishima says. “The shortest route between the two checkpoints is over this building.”

“So why didn’t we go that way?”

Kirishima looks at Kou and Akihito, who both shrug.

“Come on,” Akihito says, leading the way. “There are at least five different ways you can scale this building. We’re taking the easiest way for now, but it’s not the fastest.”

“This is Motomi Pass,” Kou explains. “When I was a student here, I had a class over in a building just northwest of the library –” he points towards the alley that branches away from the building they’re crossing – “that always let out late, and my professor for my class in that building –” he points to one across a small courtyard from the one they’re on – “had the most ridiculous punishment assignments if you were even a few seconds late for class.”

“Why didn’t you just cut through the building?” Asami asks. Kirishima smiles; he asked the same
question when he first heard the story.

“It’s restricted access.” Kou rolls his eyes. “But climbing it is so easy, I could even manage it on rainy days, though it wasn’t very fun.”

“Here’s the third checkpoint,” Kirishima says, tapping the edge of a fountain once they’re off the roof. “And then it’s just back to the picnic tables.” He leads the way.

“So the timer should be at the start and move to the finish, right?” Akihito asks. “But how will they know the person went through all the checkpoints?”

They station one person at each checkpoint, alternating who’s where so Asami can see how each section of the course is completed by at least one of the others.

Kirishima finishes the route in a minute and forty seconds, which he thinks is respectable considering it’s about four hundred meters long. Akihito goes second, and he finishes in a minute and seven seconds.

“Dang. I wanted to break a minute,” he gasps.

Kou’s up next. Kirishima is stationed at the Tic-Tac Alley checkpoint, and someone opens the door right next to the checkpoint. “Can you hold this door?” the man asks.

Kirishima holds it open and watches the man jog across the alley to the library, opening a door that’s been held ajar by a rolled-up newspaper. Two people carrying a large item wrapped in burlap pass through Kirishima’s door and cross the alley. None of them look behind, so Kirishima continues to hold the door for Kou.

Kou sees him and breaks into a grin, bolting into the building. Kirishima jogs out of the alley. He reaches the tables after Kou.

“How’d you do?” Kirishima asks nonchalantly.

“Fifty-nine point six.” Kou grins widely.

Akihito is apoplectic. “You went through the building! That’s cheating!”

“No, it’s not,” Kou says. “The only rule is that you have to reach all the checkpoints in order. Kei-san, did I reach the Tic-Tac Alley checkpoint?”

Kirishima nods.

“That’s not fair!” Akihito protests.

“You agreed to the rules. ‘Under, over, through, around.’ Stop being a sore loser,” Asami says.

Akihito crosses his arms over his chest. “I can still beat that time, even if I don’t cut through a restricted building,” he avers.

“Go ahead,” Kou says. “Or maybe you’ll get lucky and find a way into the building, too.” He smirks, and Kirishima and Asami chuckle at the face Akihito makes at that idea.

“Motomi Kou-san!” A voice calls from across the quad.

“Uh-oh,” Kou says, hanging his head like a schoolboy caught making mischief – which, it turns out, he basically is. “Professor Yoshizuki,” he says politely, bowing.
“I thought that was you. Didn’t you have enough of running through buildings while you were a student here?”

“I’m sorry, Professor. We were in a race, and the door just happened to be open, so I couldn’t resist. I usually try to stay outside the buildings and out of people’s way now.”

“What are you doing with yourself now? You’re very free on a weekday, even if it is a holiday.”

“I’m a freelancer working on various advertising campaigns. One of my current projects is Uniqlo’s in-store rebranding campaign.”

Yoshizuki’s eyebrows shoot up. “That was you?”

“Yes, Professor.”

Yoshizuki eyes Kou’s companions more closely. Kirishima stands as professionally as he can in his gym shorts and t-shirt. At least I’m wearing one of the ones Kou-san picked out for me instead of the five-to-a-pack kind. Yoshizuki’s eyes settle on Asami, taking in the perfectly gelled hair, manicured nails, and designer t-shirt. “Oh, are you entertaining clients?” Yoshizuki asks. He bows and introduces himself.

Kou introduces the others in order, starting with Kirishima. “This is Kirishima Kei, first assistant to Asami Ryuichi, president of Sion Corporation. And this is Takaba Akihito, photojournalist for Weekly Headlines.”

Yoshizuki bows. “I’m afraid I don’t have a business card,” he apologizes.

“That’s quite alright; we don’t either,” Asami lies smoothly. Kirishima carries Asami’s and his own business cards in all his bags, including his gym bag, but Asami is choosy about who actually receives them.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you any longer, Motomi-san. Just try to stay out of the building, please. We’re moving several vases into the library exhibit space, and I’d really rather not have to explain to the Chinese Embassy how we managed to break one.”

Kou’s eyes widen. “Yes, Professor. Of course. I’m sorry. We’ll be careful.”

“And Motomi-san, stop by my office this week. I have something I’d like to discuss with you. Bring your portfolio.”

After Yoshizuki is gone, Akihito finally releases the laughter he’s been holding in. “Only you, Kou!”

“What?” Kou grouches.

“Only you –” Akihito is laughing so hard he has to hold onto Kou’s shoulder for support. “Only you would get busted for running through a building” – another pause for giggles – “and end up getting invited to review your portfolio! You’re lucky Asami was here!”

Kou frowns. “I hope that’s not why Professor Yoshizuki –”

Kirishima interrupts him. “I’m sure it’s not. He seemed to know about your Uniqlo campaign and was impressed by it.”

“Either way, I’ll make it clear to him that you and Asami-san are not clients when I meet with him,” Kou resolves.
Kirishima kisses him on the forehead. “Whatever you want to do is fine by me.”

Kou gives him a challenging look but softens when he sees that Kirishima’s wearing a respectful smile. “You know I wouldn’t—”

“I know,” Kirishima says, smiling down at him. *It would never have even occurred to you, but you’re going to go out of your way to make sure that you’re not even accidentally deceiving someone.*

“Get a room,” Akihito gripes, and Kou and Kirishima step away from each other.

“Shall we move on?” Asami asks. “It’s probably better we avoid the alley.”

“No way. Don’t even *think* you’re getting out of this,” Akihito says. “It’s your turn.”

Asami raises his eyebrows. “While I’m sure I could afford to compensate the Chinese Embassy for one of its historical vases, no amount of money could actually *replace* a national treasure.”

“You won’t break anything.” Akihito rolls his eyes. “Kou will be down the alley, and he’ll make sure you and the priceless vases are safe.”

“I’m supposed to time this time,” Kou says.

“I’m timing. It doesn’t really matter, anyway, does it? The rest of us have already gone.”

“You just want to cheer Asami-san on at the finish line,” Kou teases.

Akihito turns beet red. “I just want to see how slow he is!”

“Uh-huh,” Kou says in a skeptical tone.

“You ready, bastard?” Akihito asks.

Asami nods curtly.

When Kirishima sees him descending the building, he knows that Asami will beat his own time. Asami seems to be slowing down, though, and Kirishima is able to keep pace with him to the finish line.

“One-thirty-five. Ha! Take that, old man!” Akihito gloats.

Asami doubles over, overcome by a racking cough.

“Are you alright, Asami-sama?” Kirishima asks worriedly. He fumbles in his gym bag for a spare bottle of water, but by the time he pulls it out, Akihito is already handing his own to Asami.

“Drink this,” Akihito says.

Asami takes a sip, but the coughing doesn’t subside. He hunches over, coughing up phlegm.

“That’s disgusting,” Akihito observes, alternately patting and rubbing Asami’s back.

Kirishima digs in his bag and finds a throat lozenge. “Here, Asami-sama,” he says.

Asami takes the lozenge. “Thank – you – Kei.” He takes a few more sips of water, and his cough
gradually subsides.

Akihito glares at Kirishima before turning back to Asami. “How often do you cough like that?” he asks.

“Not often,” Asami says.

Akihito looks at him suspiciously.

“You’ve not heard me before, right?” Asami asks defensively.

“No…” Akihito admits. “Still, don’t you think maybe you should cut back on the smokes? At least a little? Look at what you’re doing to your lungs.”

Asami frowns. “My lungs are fine.”

“Really? Then why did Kou and I smoke you just now?”

Kirishima and Kou discreetly step a bit farther away.

“You do this stuff every day, don’t you?” Asami retorts. “I guess I’ve just let myself get a little out of shape.”

“Fine, whatever,” Akihito huffs. “Live in denial if you want, but you know you’re killing yourself, right?”

“What does it matter to you?” Asami asks icily.

Kou shoots Kirishima a worried look.

Tears run down Akihito’s cheeks, but he brushes them away angrily. “I want to punch you right now.”

“Go ahead.” Asami smirks.

Akihito raises his fist and brings it down in an easy arc as if he were tossing a ball. Asami easily catches it and pulls Akihito to him, giving him a kiss that leaves both Kou and Kirishima blushing.

“Bastard,” Akihito says when Asami finally releases him, but he’s clinging onto Asami’s shoulders as if his legs are incapable of supporting him. Akihito glares at Asami. “I bet you’re too weak to quit.”

Asami’s eyes flash. “I could quit if I wanted to. I just don’t want to.”

“Prove it,” Akihito challenges.

“I don’t want to,” Asami says.

“That’s because you can’t.”

“How long?” Asami asks.

“What do you mean?”

“How long would prove it to you? A day? A week?”

“A month,” Akihito says.
Asami snorts. “What will you give me?”

“What do you mean? It’s for your own sake.” Akihito frowns, suspecting where Asami’s thoughts are headed.

“It’s a bet, right?” Asami asks. “So when I win, what do I get? How about I get to decide?” His grin sends shivers down Akihito’s spine.

“I somehow feel like I’m watching an AV,” Kou whispers to Kirishima. Kirishima shrugs. Compared to what he’s seen in the past, this is tame.

“No way. Let’s make it a challenge instead,” Akihito says.

“What’s the difference?” Asami asks.

“I have to give up something, too. Whoever makes it the longest wins.” Akihito grins triumphantly.

“That brings us back to my point. What do I get when I win?”

“The satisfaction of being able to breathe without coughing up a lung isn’t enough for you?” Akihito asks.

Asami whispers something in Akihito’s ear that turns him instantly crimson. Asami’s mouth moves to Akihito’s collarbone, and Kou and Kirishima step even farther, carefully examining the design of one of the picnic tables.

“They can’t design glass thick enough, can they?” Kou whispers to Kirishima.

Kirishima closes his eyes and shudders slightly. “But Asami-sama has never even considered giving up smoking before. I’ve tried buying nicotine gum and lozenges when he’s sick, but he just has me set them out in the smoking lounge for anyone who wants them.” Maybe Takaba is more than just another plaything, after all. He certainly knows how to manipulate Asami-sama better than anyone else – including me.

“Kirishima,” Asami calls him over. “Make sure all the cigarettes are removed from the cars and the office.”

“Yes, Asami-sama.” Kirishima reaches into his gym bag, pulls out a pack, and tosses it in the trash.

Behind him, Kou’s face falls, but by the time Kirishima turns around, Kou has brightened again. “What’s Aki going to give up?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right! I’ll let you pick, but I’m not really addicted to anything, so it doesn’t really matter. I’m totally going to kick your butt!” Akihito taunts.

Asami smiles. “Junk food.”

Akihito’s face falls for a moment, but his grin quickly comes back. “Just for a month? No problem! That’s just sweets and salty snacks, right?”

“Kirishima, make a list of what constitutes junk food. We’ll start tomorrow morning,” Asami says.

“Yes, Asami-sama.”

Kou gapes at them.
“And order some of those nicotine things. Whatever has enough to match a Dunhill.”

“Hey, wait, you can’t do that! That’s cheating!” Akihito cries.

“Is it?” Asami asks. “It’s not smoking. The deal you made was that I wouldn’t smoke.”

Akihito sighs. “Fine.”

Kou looks back and forth between the two of them. “Aki’s screwed, isn’t he?” he whispers to Kirishima.

“Completely,” Kirishima agrees. “Especially when Asami-sama starts delivering vast amounts of sweets at all times of the day and night.”

“He would do that?” Kou asks. “That’s evil.”

“You don’t think Takaba-kun will be placing cigarettes and lighters in Asami-sama’s normal smoking places?”

Kou laughs. “True enough, even though the whole point of him doing this is to encourage Asami-san to quit. They really are a lot alike, aren’t they? But Aki’s still screwed.”

“Like when he threw that punch?” Kirishima asks, raising his eyebrows.

“He’s going to lose on purpose?! But it’s Aki… Oh. Ohhhhh.” Kou blushes. “How can you be so nonchalant about this? You’re not even blushing!”

Kirishima shrugs. “I guess I’m used to it. As used to it as anyone can get, anyway.”

Kou sighs. He tries to bring Asami and Akihito back out of their own little world. “Alright, I guess we’re done with parkour for the day?”

Kirishima feels a little disappointed, but Asami is still coughing occasionally, so Kirishima nods reluctantly. Asami nods curtly once. Akihito looks around at them then at Asami and sighs but nods.

“Kei-san and I were planning to go back to my place and make lunch together. I already bought the ingredients, but there’s enough for four. You’re welcome to join us – though I have to warn Asami-san that my place is small – or we could go out to eat somewhere.”

“What are you making?” Akihito asks.

“Chicken teriyaki with rice and vegetables,” Kou answers.

“Yummy!” Akihito cries.

But Asami says, “Thank you, but we’ll have to decline. We don’t want to interrupt your date any more than we already have.”

Akihito frowns, but he can’t really argue with Asami’s logic.

“Kei, should I call for another car? Or maybe I could arrange for another to pick you up when you’re ready to leave?” Asami suggests.

“I can drive you back, Asami-sama,” Kirishima offers automatically.

Kou frowns but doesn’t say anything.
“That won’t be necessary. I still know how to drive, you know,” Asami says. “I just don’t want to leave you stranded.”

“I can give Kei-san a ride when he’s ready to go,” Kou says resolutely, giving Kirishima a defiant glare.

“Then I’ll see you at four, Kei,” Asami starts walking back to the car but stops when he notices Akihito isn’t following him. “Hurry up, brat.”

“My bike is this way,” Akihito says, gesturing in the opposite direction.

“You can get it later.”

“That’s stupid. It’s a waste of time and gas.”

“Ride with me,” Asami orders.

“No way!”

“Akihito,” Asami says in his warning tone.

Kirishima stands there awkwardly observing the standoff. Kou keeps glancing at him as if Kou expects Kirishima to do something, but Kirishima isn’t sure what he should do.

“Stop being a brat and come on. I don’t have all day.”

“Shut up, bastard. I’ll see you later.” Akihito turns and starts walking. He doesn’t make it two steps before Asami is grabbing his arm.

“Wait a second,” Kou interjects. Asami and Akihito both turn to look at him as if they’d forgotten he was there.

Kou gives Kirishima a panicked look as if saying, *Help me up with something!*

Kirishima is still out of ideas, so he gives a half shrug.

Kou starts talking through the situation aloud. “Aki has his bike here. Asami-san has his car. I can ride a bike, and Kei-san can drive, but we’ll only have my bike once you both leave…”

“See? So leave your bike, and Motomi can bring it to you when he brings Kirishima back,” Asami says.

“How is Kou-san supposed to get back home if we take Takaba-kun’s bike?” Kirishima asks. “I don’t have a motorcycle license yet, so I can’t ride either bike.”

Akihito sighs. “Fine. You can ride with me, Asami. That leaves Kirishima-san with the car. That way Kou won’t have to drive downtown and back.”

Asami’s jaw practically drops at that idea, but after a few seconds of contemplation, he gets a wicked grin on his face.

“Bastard, you’d better not try anything. You could cause an accident,” Akihito says, blushing.

The two start to head in the direction of Akihito’s bike, but Kou calls after them, “Hey, wait! You don’t have a helmet for Asami-san.”
Akihito shrugs. “He can wear mine. I’ll be careful.”

He starts to head off again, but Kou grabs his arm and flicks him in the forehead.

“Ow! Stop doing that!” Akihito rubs his head, glaring at Kou.

“I will when you stop being an idiot. You can borrow my helmet. Kei-san will bring it back to me.”

“Fine. Sheesh. You could have just said that at the beginning.”

“You’re welcome,” Kou says.

“Thanks. I’ll meet you there,” Akihito says, jogging towards his bike.

Asami starts to follow him.

“Asami-sama, we’ll ride over in the car and meet him there,” Kirishima says.

“He’ll ditch me,” Asami predicts darkly.

“He wouldn’t do that,” Kou says.

He looks like he’s gearing up to say something, so Kirishima shakes his head slightly at him. Kou frowns.

“Wow, this is a really nice car,” Kou exclaims when Kirishima opens the front passenger door for him. It’s his first time in the car because they’ve always driven separately or taken Kou’s motorcycle on their dates.

The ride over to Kou’s is quiet until Kou blurts out, “Asami-san? What do you think about Aki?”

Kirishima shoots him a warning glance, but Kou is turned around in his seat, focused on Asami.

Asami shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t see why that’s any of your business.”

“I guess it’s not,” Kou acknowledges, “but Aki’s my best friend. I just want him to be happy. Even if you don’t want to tell me, maybe you should tell him sometime.”

“Did Takaba tell you he wasn’t happy with me?” Asami asks stiffly.

“No…” Kou says. “But he just doesn’t seem very confident in your relationship. He thinks you’re going to get bored and cast him aside.”

“I don’t have any intention of letting him go.”

“Then tell him that.”

“I already have.”

“Oh.” Kou chews on that thought for a moment. He looks like he wants to say more. Kirishima reaches out and gives his thigh a warning squeeze. Kou looks at him then glances at Asami in the mirror. “Have you considered couple’s counseling?”

“Kou-san!” Kirishima squawks. “I’m sorry, Asami-sama.”

“What? It’s not a bad thing. My parents had some, and it made things a lot better at home.”
Kirishima parks the car. “There’s Takaba-kun,” he observes. He nudges Kou and gives him a look.

Kou sighs. “I’m sorry if I was too forward, Asami-san.”

Kirishima heads to the rear door to open it for Asami. As he does so, Kou brushes past him.

“I’m heading up to grab my helmet,” Kou says.

“I’m very sorry, Asami-sama,” Kirishima says, bowing.

“It’s fine, Kei.”

When Kou returns with the helmet, he holds out his hand to shake Asami’s. “It was nice to meet you, Asami-san. We should do this again sometime – it doesn’t have to be parkour.”

Asami shakes his hand and nods curtly, taking the helmet and swinging onto the bike behind Akihito without a word.

“I can’t believe you talked to my boss that way,” Kirishima hisses as soon as they’re out of earshot.

“I can’t believe you tried to interrupt our fourth date in two weeks just so you could drive your precious ‘Asami-sama’ home!”

“That’s my job!” Kirishima protests.

“You’re off the clock until four o’clock!”

“Well, I wouldn’t have even been with Asami-sama if you hadn’t invited him to crash our date.”

“You could have come separately.”

“One of my duties is to drive Asami-sama. I’m not done until he reaches his destination. We were only a block from his home when he decided to change course.”

One of Kou’s neighbors passes them, looking over his shoulder curiously as he climbs the stairs.

“Can we continue this discussion inside?” Kirishima asks.

“Fine.”

As soon as they’re inside Kou’s apartment, Kou says, “It always comes back to ‘Asami-sama.’ Your whole life revolves around him.”

“Because that’s my job.”

“You said your gym bag was so heavy because you keep various supplies in it just in case you need them. But the cigarettes and throat lozenges are just in case ‘Asami-sama’ needs them!”

Kirishima pinches the bridge of his nose. He can feel a headache coming on. “When I take Asami-sama to the gym, I work out at the same time. It’s just easier to keep those things in the bag all the time. It’s not heavy to me.”

“Why do you need to carry them at all? Can’t he do anything for himself? Do you wipe his ass for him, too?”

“Kou-san!” Kirishima gasps.
Kei flumps onto his bed. “I’m sorry, Kei-san. That was uncalled for.” He rakes his hands through his hair. “I just – I guess I just get a little jealous of Asami-san. Especially since you seem to hide how close you are to him.”

“What do you mean?” Kirishima asks, sitting next to Kou.

“Like today, you called him Ryuichi once, but the rest of the time you made sure to call him Asami. And when he said you were reminiscing about your high school days, you said you were actually talking about me. But you’ve known him since high school?”

“Yes, he was my senpai.”

“Did you call him ‘sama’ back then?” Kou asks, still frowning.

Kirishima chuckles. “Of course not. I started that when we started the company. I was Asami-sama’s first employee. I didn’t know anything about corporate culture – my family owns a kimono shop, remember? – so I just called him the way we would call our customers. I had no idea how odd that sounded, but it was actually helpful to our business, so it stuck.”

“What do you mean?” Kou asks.

*Be careful, Kei! Don’t slip and tell him the real nature of Sion’s business.* “Most service industries call their customers ‘sama’ and use speech that humbles themselves below the customer, right? But Sion’s clubs are exclusive and elite. While the staff of course treats the members with deference, it’s a privilege for them to belong, and Asami-sama is the one who makes those decisions. So he’s on the same level as the customers, not below them. It helps add to the prestigious image of our company.”

Kou is looking at Kirishima skeptically through most of this explanation, but he slowly nods. “Okay. But that doesn’t address my question about why you called him Ryuichi earlier today.”

Kirishima sighs. “It’s like when I’m with my cousin. At work I call him Suoh, and I sometimes call him that when we’re off the clock, too, out of habit.”

Kou still looks glum.

Kirishima takes his hand. “Asami-sama actually told me to call him Ryuichi today since we were off the clock. I didn’t want to because I knew that would make you upset.”

“How did you know?” Kou asks, surprised.

“You told Takaba-kun a while back that you were worried that I was in love with Asami-sama, right?”

Kou turns pink.

“Takaba-kun told Asami-sama who told me. Since then, I’ve tried to be careful about how I talk about Asami-sama so that you’d realize you have nothing to worry about.”

“And I misinterpreted that carefulness to think you were hiding something about your feelings for Asami-san.” Kou buries his face in his hands. “I’m so sorry, Kei-san.”

Kirishima puts his arm around Kou’s shoulder and gives him a gentle squeeze. “It’s alright, Kou-san. I guess I should have talked to you about it instead. I have absolutely no interest in Asami-sama. I’ve never even thought of him in that way.”
“Really? Not even way back in high school? He’s gorgeous,” Kou teases.

Kirishima levels his gaze. “Do I have something to worry about?” he asks.

“Of course not! He’s good-looking, sure, but he’s kind of an a– I mean, he’s totally not my type at all. You’re way more adorable.”

Kirishima blushes slightly. “Like I said, I’ve never thought of Asami-sama that way. I guess I still see him as the cocky, gawky kid from high school. You’re the first person I’ve ever been interested in.”

Kou frowns. “That’s weird.”

“I’m sorry,” Kirishima says, feeling himself go redder.

“This isn’t some mother duck syndrome, is it?” Kou asks, his frown deepening.

“Mother duck syndrome? What does that mean?”

“Like, maybe I was the first person to show interest in you, so you just imprinted on me like a duckling does, thinking the first thing it sees after hatching must be its mama?”

Kirishima’s jaw drops open. He closes it, swallows, and says delicately, “That’s impossible. I’m not a baby duck. Besides, you weren’t…” He trails off.

Kou’s hand flies to cover his mouth. “Oh! I’m sorry! Of course I wasn’t the first. That was stupid of me. I bet you’ve had men and women hitting on you since forever. It’s a miracle you were single when we met.”

Kirishima makes a disbelieving sound in his throat. “There weren’t that many. Besides, most of them weren’t interested in me so much as how they could use me. Or they said they liked me but would offer suggestions on how I could improve myself. You were the first person who seemed to like me for who I actually am, and I like the fact that you’ve never told me I need to change.”

“Why would I tell you that? I like you just the way you are,” Kou says, turning to kiss Kirishima.

“And I like you just the way you are, too,” Kirishima says. “When we were talking about you earlier, it started because Asami-sama said I looked happier than I have in a long time. And he’s right. I wasn’t unhappy before, but I’m happy with you.”

“I’m happy with you, too,” Kou says.

Soon they’re lying on the bed making out.

“My day off is the day after tomorrow,” Kirishima reminds Kou.

“I know,” Kou says. “What do you want to do?”

“I was wondering if you wanted to spend the night at my place starting tomorrow night.”

Kou pulls back a little to look at him. “On the guest futon?”

Kirishima blushes. “No. I was thinking maybe it was time to change our rules.”

Kou grins. “Are you sure?”
Kirishima nods. “I get off late tomorrow, but I can give you a spare key. You can come over whenever and just go to sleep when you want.”

“Will you wake me when you get home?”

“Of course.”

Kou kisses Kirishima deeply. When they pull back for air, Kou frowns a little. “What if you have to work again? Asami-san hasn’t been honoring your days off lately.”

“I’ll make sure he does this time,” Kirishima promises.

Kou chuckles. “Are you going to tell him why?”

Kirishima purples, but he says resolutely, “I will if I have to.”

Chapter End Notes

The inside-out building is the one directly southeast of the quad. The tables are on the open ground floor of the building directly south of the quad, while Tic-Tac Alley is the alley just south of the library. Motomi Pass goes over the westernmost building just south of Tic-Tac Alley.

Next up: Kirishima and Kou’s first time (though I will be writing at least one chapter of "Exhibition" before that, so it will probably be at least a week).

I might write Asami's and Akihito's challenge as a stand-alone one-shot, but it wouldn't be until I finish both "Color My World" and "Exhibition." Let me know if you'd be interested to read it.
Naked Truth (Scarlet)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima has invited Kou to spend the night and relax their "clothes on" rule. How will their first time go?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slow update. Real life has been busy and will continue to be through the end of the month, at least.

Thanks to everyone who reads, gives kudos, and/or comments! You really keep me motivated.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation, has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors

After Kirishima has finished briefing Asami on his adjusted schedule and handed him the stack of reports, Kirishima stands awkwardly, trying to figure out how to broach the subject of his day off.

“What else are you hiding from me?” Asami asks.

“Nothing, Asami-sama. It’s just… about Wednesday.”

Asami looks at him. “Does this have something to do with the Suzuki mess?”

“No, it’s… my day off.”

Asami’s eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn’t say anything.

Kirishima rushes on. “I know the Suzuki situation is precarious, but I haven’t had a full day off in three weeks, and Kou-san has been getting upset about it.”

“Kei, I realize you’re overworked. We all are. As soon as the Suzuki situation is resolved, you can have a whole weekend off. But Motomi needs to understand that this is your reality. Sometimes your job gets busy. It’s better to set the ground rules early so they learn whining won’t be effective.”

“I know, Ryuichi,” Kirishima says, while thinking, I'm not sure I want to model my relationship on
yours. “It’s just… We have special plans for Wednesday.” He can’t help but turn scarlet.

“Don’t tell me you’re celebrating some anniversary. If you get sucked into that nonsense, it’ll never end.”

“That’s not it,” Kirishima says, looking at the floor, feeling himself turn even redder.

“What – oh, is it sex?” Asami asks bluntly. “You didn’t have time earlier, even though Takaba and I left you alone?”

_That was for you, not us._ “We h-haven’t –” Kirishima stammers. His skin feels like it’s on fire, and he wonders how ridiculous he must look.

Asami blinks at him for several seconds before comprehension dawns. “Oh. Fine. Just keep your emergency cell on, okay? Who knows when this Suzuki mess will blow up.”

“Of course, Asami-sama. Thank you.” Kirishima bows and hurries out of the room. _Please don’t let him tell Kazu-nii._

Work is so busy for the next day and a half, though, that Kirishima doesn’t have time to worry about whether Asami has told Suoh anything about his upcoming date with Kou. If Kou didn’t stop by to cook him breakfast and iron his clothes for him during the six hours between his shifts, Kirishima wouldn’t have had time to give him the spare key.

The second day’s work is even longer than the first. Kirishima arrives at noon, and at midnight, he’s still neck-deep in analyzing Suzuki Corporation’s recent financial statements (delivered by one of their moles in the accounting department). By three a.m., he’s found the proverbial smoking gun that proves that Suzuki was the real power behind the small-time dealer who tried to attack Asami (wounding Kirishima’s arm instead).

He marches straight to Asami’s office, barely waiting at the door for Asami’s “Come in” before opening the door. “I found it!”

Asami’s sadistic grin would have sent a shiver down Kirishima’s spine if he weren’t so used to it. “Excellent work, Kirishima.”

The next three hours are spent planning and laying a trap for Suzuki. When Kirishima, Asami, and Suoh are so bleary-eyed with fatigue they can barely focus any longer, Asami calls it a night. “Enjoy your day off, Kei. Just don’t tire yourself out too much. You’ve got to be in top form for action Thursday.”

Kirishima blushes. Suoh’s eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Good night, then.” Kirishima hurriedly excuses himself before the two can start in on the teasing that’s inevitably coming.

He’s nearly at the door when Asami calls after him. “Takaba says that a warm bath really helps the soreness afterwards.”

Kirishima doesn’t dignify that remark with a reply. He pretends he didn’t hear, hurrying to grab his briefcase. His face is burning all the way down the elevator. _How does Asami-sama know I want to bottom?_ Kirishima wonders. The two security guards in the lobby glance at him curiously, and he nods curtly at them as he passes. As he makes his way to his car, though, the blush finally fades as
excitement flutters his stomach. He can’t help but grin at the thought of Kou waiting for him in his bed.

Kirishima smiles when he passes Kou’s motorcycle in the parking garage. In the elevator, he taps his foot. *Is this thing broken? It’s going so slowly today.* He opens his front door carefully, trying not to make any noise. He tiptoes to the open bedroom door, the early morning sun providing just enough light for him to see Kou’s sleeping form under the blanket.

Kirishima tiptoes into the room and pulls out a pair of pajamas and clean underwear from the drawer. He pulls the bedroom door carefully closed behind him so he doesn’t awaken Kou. As he removes his suit jacket, he freezes. Kou is in the bed. His gun safe is on the bottom of the bed. *How am I supposed to put my guns away?*

Kirishima racks his brain. The kitchen is out; Kou is likely to wake up before him and grab some food or tea. Same with the laundry room; Kou might notice Kirishima’s overflowing laundry basket and start a wash for him. The bedroom would be the safest bet – if Kou weren’t already asleep in it. Kirishima sighs.

He finally buries the guns and shoulder holster deep in the big pocket inside his briefcase, setting it in its usual spot under the table by the front door. He deposits his dirty clothes in the laundry room then heads to the bathroom for a shower.

When he returns to the bedroom, he slides into the bed next to Kou carefully. But Kou rolls over and opens his eyes, blinking several times before a slow smile spreads across his face.

“Welcome home, Kei-san. When’d you get home?”

“Just a bit ago. I took a quick shower,” Kirishima explains.

“It’s already light out.” Kou glances at the clock. “You weren’t kidding about working late.”

“I know,” Kirishima says wearily, “but we finally had a breakthrough. Hopefully things will settle down soon.”

“I hope so. You work too hard. Good job.” Kou shifts closer to Kirishima and gives him a kiss. Kirishima tries to deepen it, but Kou pulls back after a moment. “You must be exhausted. Sleep. There’s plenty of time for that later.”

Kirishima can’t help feeling disappointed, especially since the latent promise in Kou’s words has invigorated him.

“Don’t pout,” Kou says, smoothing the furrow between Kirishima’s brows with a finger. “We can still snuggle.” He wraps his arms around Kirishima, and Kou’s steady heartbeat quickly lulls Kirishima into a dreamless sleep.

Kirishima awakens to an empty bed. The room is bright as he fumbles for his glasses. It’s eleven o’clock. He sees a glass on the nightstand containing a small sprig of sakura blossoms. Kirishima smiles as he reaches for the note under the glass.

*Kei-san,*
I went for a run because I was worried I would wake you if I stayed inside any longer. Sorry. I guess I’m just too keyed up. Anyway, call me as soon as you wake up, and I’ll come back. There’s breakfast in the kitchen for you. Oh, and I started the laundry. It might be ready to hang up. Don’t forget to call me right away!

(*˘ ³˘)♥

-Kou

P.S. Your sleeping face is adorable.

Kirishima blushes. He picks up his phone and dials the second contact on his “most frequently called” list.

“Kei-san! You’re already up? You didn’t sleep very long,” Kou chides. He doesn’t sound out of breath at all.

“Good morning, Kou-san. I slept for over four hours. That’s enough for me,” Kirishima replies. “Are you still running?”

“Yeah. I’m in Yoyogi Park. But I can come back now.”

“That’s nearly two kilometers away,” Kirishima says.

“It’s less than ten minutes running. I thought you’d be asleep a lot longer, so I figured I’d do some laps. But it looks like I’ll be running only five kilometers today.”

“You can run longer if you’d like,” Kirishima says. “I could come meet you.”

“No, that’s okay. You should take it easy today; you’ve been working too hard lately. I’ll see you in ten minutes. Go ahead and eat, okay?”


Once he hangs up, Kirishima reaches into the nightstand drawer for his tablet, but his hand hits the bottle of lube he placed there instead. Oh, right. He blushes, glad Kou isn’t there right now.

Kirishima peers into the drawer, but the tablet’s not there among the romantic supplies. That’s right; I left it in my briefcase so I wouldn’t wake up Kou-san.

He pulls out his briefcase and remembers he never put his guns away last night. He stashes them in the safe under the bed and hangs the shoulder harness on its hook in the closet. After the guns are safely stowed, he opens his tablet.

There’s a very brief note from Morita assuring Kirishima that his assistant has everything under control and that he should enjoy his day off. Kirishima smiles and shakes his head at himself. I can’t help but worry about the Suzuki situation, though. But we can’t make our move until tomorrow, anyway, and everything’s already ready.

He heads to the kitchen to find the breakfast laid out on the counter: natto, rice, miso soup, eggs, and vegetables. He’s just sitting at the table when Kou knocks on the door. Kirishima heads to the door to open it for him.

“You could have used the key,” Kirishima says. “Welcome back.”

“I’m back. Sorry for disturbing,” Kou says. He’s dripping with sweat.
“Did you race back here?” Kirishima leans in to kiss Kou.

Kou kisses him back but maintains a respectful distance. He blushes a little as he explains, “Sorry. I didn’t want to waste any of our time together. Sorry I’m so sweaty. I’ll go shower now.”

“Okay. I just started eating. Do you want me to wait until you’re done?”

“No, I ate before I left. Sorry, I was really hungry.”

“That’s fine.” Kirishima grabs a clean towel for Kou then heads to the table to finish eating before Kou gets out of the shower.

As Kirishima’s washing up his breakfast dishes, Kou comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. “Sorry, I forgot to bring a change of clothes in with me,” he explains sheepishly.

“That’s fine. You can change in the bedroom.” The sight of Kou’s lithe, athletic figure makes Kirishima gulp.

Kou looks faintly disappointed as he heads off to the bedroom.

Did I do something wrong? Kirishima wonders. Inviting Kou to spend the night wasn’t nearly as difficult or embarrassing as he’d thought it would be, but now that he’s here, Kirishima doesn’t know what they should do. Usually when they’re together, things tend to heat up naturally, and they both have to frequently apply the brakes to uphold their agreed-upon “rules.” But so far today, Kou seems to keep pushing him away: first when Kirishima arrived home, and just now when Kou came back from his run.

After several minutes of trying to figure it out, Kirishima decides he should just ask Kou. He knocks on the bedroom door.

“Come in,” Kou calls.

Kirishima pushes open the door.

Kou is standing near the closet, wearing a pair of skinny jeans. He’s holding a t-shirt in one hand. “What’s up?” he asks.

Kirishima clears his throat awkwardly. “I just… Are you mad at me?” His face turns instantly red. I sound like a little kid.

“Of course not!” Kou rushes over and kisses Kirishima. “What made you think that?” Kou asks, pulling back for just a moment to ask.

Kirishima shrugs. “You kept pulling away from me when I tried to kiss you, and –”

“When did I do that?” Kou looks honestly puzzled.

“When you got home –”

“That’s because I was all sweaty and didn’t want to gross you out.”

“And last night when I got home.”

“That’s because you looked exhausted, and I knew we had all day today once you were rested.”
“And just now, when you said you were going to get dressed, you made a face.”

“I did?” Kou pulls back a little to see if Kirishima is being serious. “What kind of face?”

“I don’t know. Like I did something you didn’t like.”

Kou blushes. “That’s not it… I just…” he trails off, looking down at the floor.

“What is it?” Kirishima places a finger under Kou’s chin and gently lifts it so he can look him in the eye.

“I wanted to seduce you,” Kou confesses. His blush deepens, and he looks away again. “But I didn’t know how.”

Kirishima chuckles.

“You’re my first boyfriend! I don’t know what I’m doing,” Kou cries.

“I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at the fact that I was worrying about the exact same thing. You’re my first, too, you know,” Kirishima reminds him. He leans down and kisses Kou, and this time, Kou doesn’t pull away.

The angle is as awkward as ever, and Kou guides Kirishima towards the bed, pushing him down so that he’s sitting on it. Kirishima pulls Kou down towards him, hungry for his warmth. Kou tugs at Kirishima’s t-shirt. As soon as it’s off, they tip over, Kou on top, Kirishima’s legs wrapped around Kou’s waist.

Kou’s mouth abandons Kirishima’s as he traces his way down his neck, along a collarbone, and then down to a nipple. He nips and tugs at it while his other hand pinches and teases the other one. He glances up to gauge Kirishima’s reaction, and their eyes lock. Kirishima tugs on Kou’s shoulder, and their mouths meet again.

Kirishima rolls them to the side, and it’s his turn to explore Kou’s body. With his fingers, he gently traces along the lithe muscles of Kou’s shoulders and arms.

Kou grins. “That tickles.”

“What about this?” Kirishima smiles as his hands wander over Kou’s chest and dance lightly across his abs.

Kou laughs. “Stop! That really – giggle – tickles!”

Kirishima moves one hand back up to Kou’s chest while the other wanders down to his jeans and undoes the button. “Those look uncomfortable,” Kirishima observes as his hand traces Kou’s bulge.

“Getting there,” Kou grunts. “Can I take them off?”

Kirishima nods, and Kou rolls onto his back. Kirishima helps him tug the jeans off.

“What about you?” Kou asks. “It’s not fair if I’m the only one.” He reaches down and pulls at the elastic waistband of Kirishima’s pajama pants. Once they’re off, Kou sits back a little to eye Kirishima from head to toe. “Damn, you’re fine.”

Kirishima takes in Kou’s tousled hair, pink cheeks, swollen lips, supple limbs, and narrow hips. He can’t find the words to express his appreciation of Kou’s body, but Kirishima’s eyes speak for him as they lock with Kou’s, both full of desire and promise.
Kirishima reaches up and cups Kou’s face gently with a hand. “I don’t deserve you,” he says softly.

Kou’s eyes cloud. “What do you mean? If anything, it’s the opposite…”

Kirishima shakes his head. “You’re so amazing. I never knew I could feel this way about anyone. I’m lucky to have you.”

Kou takes Kirishima’s hand from his own face and kisses it. “Then we feel the same way.” He leans down and traces gentle kisses along the fresh scar on Kirishima’s elbow.

Kirishima tugs at him.

“Does it hurt?” Kou asks.

“No. But my mouth misses yours.” Kirishima has no time to feel embarrassed over his cheesy line as Kou’s mouth crushes his. Soon they’re a tangle of limbs again, their gentle synchronized rocking quickly escalating into full-on humping.

Kou is just starting to tug Kirishima’s briefs off when Kirishima’s cell phone sounds a klaxon alarm twice. They both freeze momentarily, but then Kirishima worms his way out from under Kou.

“That’s my emergency signal.” Kirishima reaches for the phone and barks “Kirishima” into it as he heads for the closet, pulling out his favorite suit for action, one made of a somewhat stretchy fabric that allows for full mobility.

Kirishima listens intently as he pulls the pants and shirt on. “Understood. E.T.A. ten minutes.”

He hangs up and turns to Kou. “I have to go. Sorry, but can you leave the bedroom for a second? I need privacy.”

“What do you mean you have to go? It’s your day off!” Kou protests, still kneeling on the bed.

“I told you it’s an emergency. Please! I don’t have time!”

Kou rolls his eyes. “What kind of emergency can a salaryman have?” he asks, jumping off the bed. “It’s not like you’re a doctor. What, the club might lose some money? It’s not like it’s a matter of life-or-death!” He stalks towards Kirishima.

“It is!” Kirishima retorts furiously. He activates the hydraulics for his bed. “For the last time, give me some privacy. Please.”

Kou is momentarily frozen with shock, but a mulish look comes over his face as he crosses his arms. “Just tell me what’s wrong first. Maybe I can help.”

“You can’t help,” Kirishima says dismissively. “It’s my job.”

He gestures one more time for the door, but Kou doesn’t move.

“Suit yourself,” Kirishima mutters. He puts on his shoulder harness, then opens the safe, checks his guns, and loads them.

Kou gasps. “What the –”

“That’s why I asked you to leave. I have a license,” Kirishima explains feebly.

“So you really are a bodyguard?” Kou asks. “Isn’t it too dangerous?”
“It’s my job,” Kirishima repeats as he pulls on his suit jacket. “I have to go.”

“But you’re off-duty. Surely someone else is already there – ”

“Asami-sama’s in danger! I have to go!” Kirishima shouts. Kou’s face falls. Kirishima squeezes his eyes closed for a moment, opens them, and says, “Takaba’s with him. I’ll make sure they’re both safe.”

He heads to the genkan and puts his shoes on quickly. “You can wait here if you’d like. Hopefully I’ll be back quickly. I’m sorry, Kou-san.”

Kirishima reaches over to give Kou a hug. At first, Kou resists, but suddenly he’s squeezing Kirishima back fiercely. “Be safe, Kei-san,” he whispers in his ear before letting him go.

Kirishima rushes out the door, casting one apologetic look over his shoulder before rushing forward. As he races down the stairs to the parking garage, using his parkour training to save valuable time, he tucks Kou into a corner of his mind so that he can devote full focus to the current crisis.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger! It was the right place to end the chapter, though. I promise I won't leave Asami and Akihito hanging as long as Sensei has...

The chapter title was obviously borrowed from the manga, but it was too fitting not to use. Poor Kirishima. That's really not the ideal way to let Kou in on the reality of your job...
Chapter Summary

Kirishima has rushed off to help Asami and Akihito, who are in danger. Kou is left alone in Kirishima's apartment with his worries and fears. Will Kirishima return safely? And how will Kou react now that he's glimpsed the darkness in Kirishima's world?

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took so long. My first attempt at it went astray, and I had to set it aside for awhile before I was able to figure out how to fix it (which hopefully I did). Hopefully the next chapters will come a bit faster (I have a basic plan for the rest of the story, barring any curveballs the characters throw at me).

Thanks to everyone who reads, gives kudos, and/or comments! You really keep me motivated, especially through the tough writing times.

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Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors

Kou paces back and forth across the living room. He feels like he has to move, but he has no idea where Kirishima went, and anyway with guns involved, he'd just be in the way. He gulps hard and takes a shaky breath.

Kou closes his eyes and counts to ten then exhales slowly.

Think, Kou, think! What can you do?

But nothing comes to his mind other than the image of the cold metal weapons in the same hands that had been caressing him moments before.

Has Kei-san ever killed anyone?

His breath comes faster. He can’t catch it. He can feel his heartbeat drumming in his ears. His breathing grows shallower and blackness encroaches from the sides of his vision.

His legs give out, and Kou collapses heavily on the couch. He puts his head between his knees.
Get a grip, Kou. It’s Kei-san. He’s not a murderer.

A shiver runs down his spine.

What if he is? How well do you really know him?

Kou shakes his head.

Aki said he’s not yakuza. So did Kei-san. He’s a bodyguard. Even if he has killed someone, it was probably self-defense.

Another shiver ripples through him.

Even in self-defense, I don’t think I could kill anyone.

Memories of Kirishima’s angry knife wound, of his bloody shirt in the trash, flood Kou’s mind.

What if Kei-san were in danger? Could I kill someone to save him?

Kou swallows, his mouth so dry it’s painful. He honestly doesn’t know the answer to that.

“Asami-sama’s in danger! Takaba’s with him.”

And Kirishima is their bodyguard.

Bodyguards get between attackers and their targets. Kei-san, is ‘Asami-sama’ really that important that you’d risk your own life for his?

Kou doesn’t really have to ask.

I can’t compete with that.

Kirishima has told him repeatedly that Asami is just a boss and a friend, but he left Kou’s side to risk his own life to help Asami.

If Aki called and was in trouble, you’d rush to help him.

But it’s different. It’s different. Kou can’t put his finger on why it’s different, but he just knows that it is. For one thing, if Kirishima offered to help, Kou would accept. And there’s a difference between helping out a friend in trouble and planning your whole life around protecting someone.

Kirishima’s knife wound flashes in his mind again.

Was he protecting ‘Asami-sama’ then?

Kou always thought the wound was a little too long to be an accident. He remembers the lies Kirishima and Suoh told.

Even when Kei-san confessed, he lied to me. He lied to me while he was apologizing for lying to me!

Kou leans back, pulling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them tightly. He can’t stop shivering.

“Please be safe, Kei-san. Please be safe.” Kou remembers that Akihito is there, too. “Please be safe, Kei-san and Aki. Be safe. Be safe. Be safe.” Kou chants it like a mantra, as if the words can weave a protective net around them.
He loses all sense of time.

*Should I call them? Text them? I need to know what's happening! But what if they're hiding and their phone gives them away? Or what if I distract them and they get shot?*

As much as he wants to know, he can’t do it. Not if there’s even the slightest chance of it putting them in even more danger.

Kou pulls his knees even tighter to his chest. His arms ache from holding them so close, but he welcomes the pain.

_Hurt me, not them. Hurt me, not them._

“Be safe. Be safe. Be safe.”

Eventually, Kou wonders why his boxers are soaked. He finally releases his death-grip on his knees and sees a trail of snot and tears pooling in his lap.

“Nasty.” _When did I start crying?_

He rinses his legs off in the bathroom. They’ve been curled up so long, his hamstrings don’t want to let his legs straighten all the way. He hobbles back to the bedroom and pulls on a clean pair of underwear and his jeans from yesterday (not his skin-tight seducer jeans he can barely move in). He adds a t-shirt and sweatshirt on top and slips his wallet, phone, and keys in his pockets. Now he’s ready to leave at a moment’s notice if Kirishima calls him.

*If only Kei-san would call!*_

Kou tries to focus his attention on the physical state of his body to distract his mind. He stretches his muscles, limbering up for action.

_He’s not going to call until it’s over._

But maybe Kirishima will think of a way Kou can help. Anyway, even if he _doesn’t_ get the call until it’s over, he’ll still want to hurry to wherever Kei-san is.

*And Aki._

Kou feels terrible that he’s focused more on Kirishima than Akihito. _I’ve only known Kei-san for two months. I’ve known Aki since I was two months old!_

“Please be safe. Please be safe. Please be safe. Both of you, please be safe.” Kou finds himself on the couch again, reciting his mantra.
Finally, finally, his phone buzzes.

**Everyone okay.**

**It’s over?**

**Yes. Will call when I can.**

It’s the first time Kirishima has used such shortened sentences when texting Kou; usually the man is precise and specific (overly “fastidious” or “legalistic,” many might call him, but Kou has always found it charming). The short messages are enough to knock Kou’s worries down a few pegs, but if everything were totally fine now, wouldn’t Kirishima have called instead of texted?

Kou decides it’s safe to text Akihito.

**You okay?**

**I’m fine. Don’t worry.**

*You always say that. I can never believe you.*

*I thought Kirishima texted you. It’s over.*

**What is ‘it’?**

*Look, we’ll have to talk later, okay? I’ve got some stu*

Kou waits, but Akihito doesn’t continue.

**Everything still okay?**

After a few minutes, Kou gives up and stuffs his phone back in his pocket (after making sure the volume is set to high). *He’s probably making out with Asami-san.*

The thought calms him, but only then does he realize he never gave a moment’s worry for Akihito’s partner.

*Well, it’s not like I really know him.*

Still, he’s important to both Akihito and Kirishima.

*But it’s his fault Kei-san was in danger.*

Is that really fair, though? For all Kou knows, Akihito got into trouble pursuing one of his scoops, and Asami and Kirishima had to rescue him.

*I never would have even met Kei-san if Aki weren’t dating Asami-san.*

Kou already can’t imagine his life without Kirishima. What did he used to do with all his free time? He’s never really liked being alone, and yet his freelance job means that he spends much of the day alone. His friends put up with his random texts, but they rarely respond. Even though Kirishima’s busy, he tries to answer every single one, even though Kou has told him repeatedly he doesn’t have
I guess I owe Asami-san a debt of gratitude for indirectly bringing Kei-san into my life.

It’s still hard not to resent the man who monopolizes Kirishima’s time, however.

An hour later, Kou is going stir-crazy. Why won’t Kei-san call? He pulls his phone out, fingers hovered above the on-screen keyboard, but he doesn’t want to seem too needy. Kirishima said he would call. He’s obviously busy. Kou just needs to wait.

Instead, he starts scrolling through the pictures on his phone. He sees an unnamed folder and wonders what’s in it. When he opens it, he remembers the background research he had done on Kirishima after his elbow injury.

Kou chuckles to himself. I was so paranoid back then.

He pulls up the picture of the list he made of things he knows about Kirishima, curious about what he thought he knew after only knowing the man for a week.

Kou softly smiles as he reads the things he wrote about Kirishima. I guess I knew a fair amount about him already, considering.

When he gets to the last item on the list, however, Kou frowns. He remembers how much the scar on Kirishima’s left side resembles Akihito’s scar that Akihito claimed was from a gunshot wound while escaping Hong Kong. Kei-san said it was from falling out of a tree when he was a kid, but it doesn’t look that old. Could it really be from a gunshot wound?

A shiver of fear ripples down Kou’s spine again.

Kei-san’s safe. He texted you.

Kou flips through the other photographs in the unnamed folder. There’s the prescription bottle. Kou chuckles. What was I even thinking when I took that picture? There’s the under-the-bed safe. Now I know why the safe is so hidden. And there’s that odd piece of fabric under the side table in the living room.

Kou frowns.

What the heck is that? He squints, but he can’t quite make out the shape. When he crawls under the table to get a closer look, it’s not there.

“What are you doing?” a voice asks from the genkan.

Kou sits up quickly, banging his head hard on the drawer of the table. “Ow.” He rubs his forehead and blinks to get the stars out of his eyes as he wriggles out from under the table. “You’re home!” He charges at Kirishima, throwing his arms around him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call. My phone died,” Kirishima says, squeezing Kou back. After a moment, Kirishima lets go, but Kou continues to cling to him like a sailor clinging to the mast in a storm. Kirishima holds him again, waiting for the tempest of emotions to pass. “Are you crying?” he eventually asks as the wetness soaks through the shoulder of his suit.

“Sorry,” Kou murmurs into Kirishima’s shoulder.
“No, I’m sorry for worrying you. It’s alright now.” Kirishima slowly shuffles them over to the couch. They sit, but Kou still clings to Kirishima. Kirishima kisses Kou on the top of his head. “How’s your head?” he asks.

“It’s fine,” Kou mumbles. “You smell like sweat and… metal. Are you bleeding?”

“No,” Kirishima says. “I told you, I’m perfectly fine. Everyone’s fine.”

After another moment, Kou finally lets Kirishima go.

“You have a huge lump,” Kirishima says, gently fingering the tender spot.

“Ow.” Even the slightest touch is painful.

Kirishima starts to get up, but Kou reaches out, his arms automatically wrapping around his waist.

“Don’t go.”

“I’m just going to the kitchen to get you some ice. I’ll be right back,” Kirishima says. After a moment’s hesitation, Kou reluctantly lets go.

Kirishima returns quickly and presses the ice pack to Kou’s head. Kou flinches and turns away, but Kirishima gently guides him back.

“I know it’s sore, but this will help. Just give it a second. Why don’t you try lying back?”

Kou places his head in Kirishima’s lap. Kirishima blushes but doesn’t say anything. That wasn’t what he meant, but he’s certainly not going to object.

“What were you doing down there, anyway?” Kirishima asks. “Did you drop something?”

“No…” Kou says, blushing faintly. “I had seen something under there – some sort of fabric – the day I took care of you because of your arm injury. I was trying to pass the time waiting by looking through the pictures on my phone, and I still couldn’t tell what it was, so I decided to take another look.”

“It’s not there anymore.”

“I noticed. What was it?”

Kirishima sighs. Kou looks up at him expectantly.

Kirishima sighs again and pushes his glasses up his nose. “I suppose I can tell you now, but this is strictly confidential. You can’t even tell Takaba-kun.”

Kou hesitates for just a second before nodding. “I promise.”

“Asami-san bought that table for Club Sion. It was only in the club for a brief time before he decided it didn’t match the décor and offered it to me since I’d been meaning to get a side table for a while.”

“Okay…”

Kirishima looks at him. “That fabric was an under-table gun holster.”

Kou gasps.
Kirishima chuckles softly. “That was my reaction, too, when I discovered it. Obviously one of our clients put it there. Like I told you before, we’ve never had an incidence of violence in the club –”

“Except your arm,” Kou corrects.

Kirishima’s face gets that closed-off look it often gets when talking about work. “Right, but that was an accident.”

“You don’t have to lie to me. You’re a bad liar.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were protecting Asami-san, weren’t you? That’s really how you got injured.”

Kirishima studies Kou for several moments. “Yes, it’s true.”

“You lied to me. Even while you were apologizing for lying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I told you I don’t like being lied to.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“If I can’t trust you, we can’t have a relationship.”

Kirishima locks eyes with Kou. “You can trust me.”

“You’ve been lying to me from the beginning.”

“I really am sorry.” Kirishima is startled by the hurt in Kou’s eyes. He knew Kou valued honesty, but he didn’t realize how much his dishonesty would hurt the frank young man. Kirishima carefully shifts Kou off his lap and slides off the couch, bowing down in seiza. “I really am sorry. Please forgive me.” He gazes up at Kou. “I promise to be honest from now on. If I can’t answer your questions, I’ll tell you that instead of lying.”

Kou still looks skeptical, so Kirishima bows down again, keeping his eyes lowered, until Kou sighs and says, “Fine. You’d better, though.”

“I will,” Kirishima promises. “Like earlier today, when I asked you to leave my bedroom instead of making up a lame excuse to get you out.”

Kou gives a brief half-smile. “I guess that’s true.”

Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief, thinking he’s managed to skirt the issue of the gun holster.

But Kou isn’t going to forget about something like that so easily. “Did you figure out who put the gun holster on that table?”

“Yes. The person who injured my arm had a very small business contract with us and caught us completely by surprise with the attack; I should have been able to stop him without getting injured. But it didn’t really make any sense for him to attack; the business deal was mundane and fair. When I discovered the gun holster, we reviewed security tapes and suspected that a member of one of our long-time client’s companies was responsible, but given the long relationship we had with them, we needed to be certain.”
“Is that why you’ve been so busy the past month?”

“Yes. I found evidence linking that company with the person who injured me. But we still didn’t know why they wanted to attack us, nor who their target was in Club Sion. We were able to obtain information from within their company, evidence that one of their senior leaders was actually a spy from a yakuza group that owns several clubs in Shinjuku.”

“Rival clubs?” Kou gasps.

Kirishima nods. “We were planning to provide evidence to our client tomorrow, but things came to a head today, and we had to assist our client.”

“But you’re not yakuza, right?” Kou asks, his brow furrowing.

“I most certainly am not,” Kirishima says stoutly. “Unfortunately, many in our business are, including some of our clients. We have to be very vigilant to keep this kind of situation out of Club Sion. Most of our clients are business leaders, senior politicians, and government officials. They don’t want to be exposed to that kind of thing.”

“Is that why you have guns?”

“Yes. Yakuza have guns, and while I’d prefer to never use mine, you can’t fight a gun with your fists.”

“Have you ever shot anyone?”

Kirishima eyes Kou again. “Yes. Only in defense, and only as a last resort.”

“How many people have you killed?” Kou holds his breath, dreading the answer.

“I don’t know.”

“Is it that many?” Kou’s jaw drops.

“It’s not like in the movies. If you stick around to have a shootout, you’re likely to end up dead. When the guns come out, we’re trying to get to safety. You don’t stick around to see if you’ve successfully shot someone; you just keep moving. It’s actually pretty hard to hit a moving target, so chances are you missed. Besides, even if I knew I struck someone, I wouldn’t know if they survived the wound or not. Not unless I ran into them again. So the number is probably very low, but I don’t know.”

“Oh.” Kou leans over and kisses Kirishima’s cheek. “I’m sorry for making you talk about unpleasant things.”

“I’m sorry for making you think about unpleasant things.”

Kou’s brow furrows again. “Wait, why was Aki there tonight, then? Does he usually go to work with Asami-san?”

“I’m not one hundred percent certain, myself,” Kirishima answers, “but based on what I overheard, it sounded like he was pursuing a scoop at our client’s office – I’m not sure, but perhaps it was related to the yakuza infiltration, perhaps not – and got caught. He contacted Asami-san, and the situation escalated from there.”

“Oh.” Kou scrunches up his face, opens his mouth as if to say something, and then scrunches up his
face again.

“What are you wondering about? You can ask me anything. I may not be able to answer, but I won’t get mad at you for asking,” Kirishima says.

“How often do you use your guns?”

“Not often,” Kirishima says. “The last time was…” He hesitates, but if Kou’s going to trust him, he has to be more forthright. “… In Hong Kong.”

“Hong Kong? Was it –” Kou stops abruptly.

“Yes, it was when we were rescuing Takaba. He was kidnapped by…” Kirishima trails off. How can he explain Fei Long’s relationship with Asami when there’s so much he doesn’t know about it himself?


“Because of his relationship with Asami-san.”

Kou gapes at him. “So he was being held for ransom?”

“If it were that simple, we wouldn’t have had so much trouble getting him back. I actually don’t know the history, so I really shouldn’t say anything, but based on what I observed, it seemed like perhaps Fei Long was a former lover of Asami-san’s.”

“Oh. Oh!” Things are beginning to click into place for Kou. “So all that had nothing to do with Aki’s job?”

“I believe he got Fei Long’s attention because of his job. How Fei Long was able to deduce Takaba-kun’s relationship with Asami-san, I have no idea.”

“You’ve been really trying hard not to call him ‘sama’ in front of me. Thank you.”

“It’s hard. I’m bound to slip up.”

“That’s okay.” Kou kisses Kirishima.

Soon they’re horizontal on the couch.

“I should go shower,” Kirishima says.

“It’s fine,” Kou says, reaching up to lock lips with Kirishima again.

“You said I smell.”

“I don’t mind. Even your sweat smells good.”

“That’s weird.”

“Eek!” Kou suddenly shrieks.

“What?” Kirishima asks, pulling back to look at him.

“Sorry. The ice pack…” Kou pulls the leaking ice pack out from under his back. “Sorry, it was cold.”
Kirishima takes it to the kitchen and tosses it in the sink. When he gets back to the living room, Kou is blotting up the water spot on the couch with a wash cloth.

Suddenly, Kou’s stomach growls loudly.

“Have you eaten anything since breakfast?” Kirishima asks.

Kou shakes his head. “I was too worried.”

“I’m sorry. I haven’t eaten, either. Let’s order some sushi.”

Kou’s face lights up. “Can we?”

“Of course we can.” Kirishima makes a quick call to place the order. “I’ll go take a quick shower before the food arrives,” he says.

“It’s really bothering you, isn’t it? Sorry I said you smell.” Kou kisses Kirishima.

“If we start that again, I’ll never make it to the shower.”

Kou reluctantly let’s Kirishima go.

As they’re feeding each other sushi, Kirishima says, “The good news is that thanks to the situation being resolved today, I don’t have to go into work tomorrow now. But what about you?”

Kou looks at him and sets his chopsticks down, a serious look settling on his face. “Actually, there’s something I need to talk to you about. I met with Professor Yoshizuki yesterday. The one we ran into while doing parkour?”

Kirishima sets his own chopsticks down. “Yes, I remember.” He looks at Kou, an odd feeling of trepidation in his stomach.

“Professor Yoshizuki wants to recommend me for a fellowship.” Kou takes a deep breath. “In America. I’m meeting with him tomorrow to discuss it some more and make selections from my portfolio for the application.”
Chapter Summary

Kirishima and Kou talk about the fellowship in America and try to get back on track with their date over a romantic dinner. Will they finally get to finish the date, or will things go off track again?

Chapter Notes

I know basically where the rest of this story is going, but the boys keep taking over. For a while I wasn't sure they were going in the same direction as my plans, but it all worked out in the end.

Thanks to everyone who reads, gives kudos, and/or comments! You really keep me motivated, especially through the tough writing times.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Kodama: the yakuza group that infiltrated Suzuki Corporation

Japanese terms:
fuku-shacho: Kirishima's job title (basically, Asami's right-hand man)
nigiri: sushi consisting of a small ball of rice and a piece of sashimi (raw fish)
megane: glasses (Akihito's nickname for Kirishima)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18: Breakdance (Ice blue)

“America?” Kirishima asks blankly. He’s just gotten used to having Kou in his life, and now he has to go back… to what he had before? “How long?”

Kou shrugs. “The fellowship can last anywhere from one to four years. The average is two years.”

Kirishima gulps. Four years? Even one year sounds too long. But… “It’s an amazing opportunity. You have to consider it.”

“I know, but…” Kou trails off. “Would you miss me?”
“Of course,” Kirishima says. “But there are telephones.”

“And Skype,” Kou adds. “The time difference might be a problem, though…”

“It’s thirteen hours in the summer, fourteen in the winter,” Kirishima says. “With my late work hours…” He trails off as he thinks through it. “I usually start between ten p.m. and three a.m. New York time, so we could talk before you go to bed. And I finish anywhere between one p.m. and five p.m.” He frowns. “You’d be working then. Still, we could talk once a day.”

“Maybe I could take a late lunch or afternoon break,” Kou says. “There’s a lot of solo work.”

“And you’ll get vacations occasionally, right?”

“Yeah… But I’d probably only be able to afford to come back once a year. Plane tickets are expensive, and the fellowship doesn’t pay that much.”

“I could help pay for the ticket.”

“But…” Kou objects, frowning.

“Americans get more vacation than Japanese do,” Kirishima points out. “So if I want to see you… though I’m sure you’ll want to see your family and friends, too.”

“We don’t even know if I’ll get the fellowship,” Kou says. “There are people applying from all over the world.”

“They’d be idiots not to pick you,” Kirishima says loyally.

Kou smiles briefly before growing serious again. “But what about…” He trails off.

“What about what?” Kirishima asks.

“I’m worried that you’ll just go back to your old life and forget about me.”

“That wouldn’t happen,” Kirishima protests. “It’d be like… My brother Kenta is colorblind. As you can imagine, growing up in a family of artisans, it was a little tough for him. I remember he asked me once to describe what seeing red and green is like. But I couldn’t – how can you possibly explain something like that? I tried drawing him a picture with my crayons, but of course he couldn’t see all the shades. I wished so much that I could just fix his eyes and show him. That’s what you did for me. I didn’t realize there was anything wrong with the world I was living in, but you colored my world. I can’t go back to seeing in black and white. I don’t want to.”

Kou blushes in a hue that would rival Kirishima’s most intense one. He comes around the table and throws his arms around Kirishima’s neck. “You did the same for me,” he murmurs in Kirishima’s ear.

“No,” Kirishima says.

Kou looks up at him in surprise.

“You were already living in a vibrant world. All I did was help you get over one little fear –”

“It was a big fear,” Kou corrects.

“But you make the most out of life. When you get to New York, your world’s going to expand into a universe, and you’ll explore every corner of it. I’m the one who should be worried.”
“Even if I do, that’ll just give me more things to show you,” Kou says, smiling.

“Then I’ll look forward to it,” Kirishima says, hugging Kou again so Kou can’t see Kirishima’s face.

*He really wants to do this. And he really is going to see so much and meet so many new people… He’ll realize how much better he can do than me. ‘Mother duck syndrome,’ he accused me of having… Isn’t he the one who imprinted on me?*

But Kirishima can’t voice any of these fears aloud. He has no right to tell Kou not to go. It’d be like telling an eagle not to fly.

Kou sits on Kirishima’s lap and pulls the sushi platter closer. “Tell me if I’m too heavy,” Kou says, picking up a *nigiri* with his chopsticks, dipping it in soy sauce, and holding it up for Kirishima to eat.

“You could never be heavy,” Kirishima says before eating the morsel.

“You’ve got a grain of rice,” Kou says, leaning down and licking it off the corner of Kirishima’s mouth.

It takes them an hour to finish eating dinner due to their multitasking. Finally, they move to the bedroom.

“What time do you have to be up tomorrow?” Kirishima asks.

Kou scrunches his mouth as he thinks. “My meeting’s at one, but I want to go through my portfolio one more time and read over the information Professor Yoshizuki gave me. I’m having trouble thinking in dollars instead of yen."

“I’m used to dealing with different currencies. I could help you with the calculations,” Kirishima offers.

“That’d be great! My portfolio is on my computer, though… So I think I’d like to be up by nine.”

“Will that give you enough time to do everything and ride to Musashino?” Kirishima asks doubtfully.

“Yeah, it should be plenty of time. I’m free after my meeting, too…” Kou says, grinning at Kirishima.

“Are you sure? You took today off.”

“I have a deadline Monday, but I don’t mind working through the weekend. You rarely get a day off, and I don’t want to miss out. Anyway, enough talking.” Kou claims Kirishima’s lips, guiding the pair to the bed.

“Let me set the alarm before you distract me too much,” Kirishima says. He turns towards the nightstand.

“Do it later,” Kou suggests as he pushes Kirishima onto the bed.

“I might forget later,” Kirishima protests. “And I don’t want to be worrying about it until I do it.”

He tugs himself free and leans across the bed, setting the alarm quickly. His eyes are drawn to the nightstand drawer, and he can’t help but blush remembering the supplies waiting there.
“What’s that look for?” Kou asks, smirking as he follows Kirishima’s eyes. Kou reaches across Kirishima and tugs the drawer open. “Can we use these?” he asks, his grin widening mischievously.


“Sorry, I’m not teasing you. I got some, too. They’re in my bag,” Kou says. He pulls out the lube and the pack of condoms and sets them on the nightstand. “You still want to, right?” he asks, looking at Kirishima intently.

“Of course. Don’t you?” Kirishima asks. What if he doesn’t want to after this afternoon?

“Absolutely.” Kou leans in and kisses Kirishima softly. “Just tell me if you change your mind midway.”

“Okay.”

Somehow it feels more awkward than it did before Kirishima left. He lets out a small sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Kou asks.

“Nothing. I just wish that phone call hadn’t interrupted us earlier.”

Kou’s face immediately clouds over.

Kirishima mentally kicks himself. Why did I bring that up?

“Me, too,” Kou says. “But… if you hadn’t gone, something might have happened to Aki, right? Or Asami-san?” he adds almost as an afterthought.

Kou leans down and kisses the scar on Kirishima’s elbow. Then Kou tugs up Kirishima’s t-shirt and kisses the scar on his left side.

Didn’t I tell him that was from a tree branch? Kirishima wonders. But when Kou looks up at him, Kirishima understands. “That was actually from… Hong Kong,” he confesses.

“I figured.”

Kirishima’s eyes widen. How?

“It looks similar to Aki’s, and it’s faded about as much in the same amount of time. Was yours also a bullet wound?”

Takaba told him that? Is he an idiot?

Kirishima nods. “Sorry.”

“Yours is a lot bigger than Aki’s. If it’d been a little farther over, it’d have hit your spleen, right? Couldn’t you die from that?”

Kirishima gives a half-shrug. “It depends. I’m not a doctor, so I’m not really sure. When did you study anatomy?”

Kou gives a shrug of his own. “I got mono in college, and my spleen was inflamed. I was told I wasn’t allowed to ride my bike because it had an increased chance of rupturing if I got into an accident, and it could be fatal.”
He leans down and kisses Kirishima’s scar again.

“T’ll not sure I can get used to the idea of you risking your life to save other people all the time,” he says quietly.

Kirishima freezes. “It’s not all the time. Just when I’m needed.”

“You’ve gotten seriously hurt twice in the last six months. And that’s just what I know about,” Kou counters.

“Those were… exceptions,” Kirishima says. “Hong Kong was an exceptional circumstance. Anyway, in both situations, I had let my guard down because I wasn’t expecting the other party to attack. In Hong Kong, we’d just successfully made the exchange for Takaba. There was absolutely no reason for the Russians –” He stops abruptly.

“T’ll the Russians?” Kou asks incredulously. “I thought that Chinese guy had him! You really are living in a James Bond world, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m mostly just a salaryman. I only have to fulfill my bodyguard role occasionally. Anyway, the Russians only got involved to get Fei Long’s attention. Like I said, it was an exceptional circumstance, one unlikely to occur again. Everyone in Japan knows not to cross Asami-sama.”

Kou sits up and stares at him. “I thought you said you’re not yakuza.”

“I’m not,” Kirishima says stoutly.

“And yet the yakuza are scared of Asami-san?” Kou asks incredulously.

“Because of his influence,” Kirishima tries to backpedal. “I told you that Club Sion’s clients are elite business leaders, top government officials, and senior politicians.”

“And that’s enough for the yakuza to leave him alone,” Kou says disbelievingly.

Kirishima gives a half-shrug. “Most of the time. Except in this most recent case – and even then, they tried to hide what they were doing, using a spy deeply embedded in a legitimate company.”

Kou is still frowning. “When I told Aki about you and he figured out who you were, he tried to warn me away from you. And he said he met Asami ‘through work.’ When I asked for specifics, he said it was a photoshoot for a product he couldn’t remember.”

Kirishima raises his eyebrows but doesn’t say anything.

“You know what Aki’s main job is, right?”

Kirishima shrugs. “He also does a lot of photoshoots, right?”

Kou scowls. “What was the product?”

“I don’t know.”

“You arrange everything for Asami-san, right? So you should know,” Kou presses.

“It was a long time ago. And I’m not directly involved in arranging photoshoots; that kind of work is done by my subordinates.”

Kou’s face softens a little, but then he says, “You said you have yakuza clients, too.”
Kirishima sighs. “Look, the yakuza are an important part of the business world. Despite the new laws, they’re integral to business in Japan, and people can’t simply start ignoring them all of the sudden. The world doesn’t work that way. So they need a place to meet safe from prying eyes. Anyway, yakuza don’t attack civilians; they keep their skirmishes to themselves.”

Kou eyes the scar on Kirishima’s arm. “Are you still lying to me? First you tell me you were attacked by the yakuza, but you’re not yakuza. Now you’re saying yakuza don’t attack non-yakuza. Which is it?”

Kirishima closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Both. In general, the yakuza don’t attack civilians. In this case, they paid someone else to attack Asami-sa-n, hoping we wouldn’t figure out it was them. That’s why I said it was an exception. Anyway, I should have been able to avoid this attack. I wasn’t paying attention and was caught by surprise.”

“But if you’re not attacked often, wouldn’t that mean that every time you are, you’ll be caught by surprise?” Kou asks.

“That’s why I keep my training up,” Kirishima retorts. “I told you, I wasn’t paying attention that night.”

“That was right after we met,” Kou says quietly.

“It was,” Kirishima agrees, wondering where this is going now.

“So it was my fault? I was the distraction?” Kou asks.

“No,” Kirishima says, but he can’t quite meet Kou’s eyes.

“I was,” Kou says, his eyes clouding with tears. He takes Kirishima’s arm and kisses it once more. “This is my fault.”

“No! It was my fault. I shouldn’t have let my attention wander like that, even if it was a mundane business deal.”

“I don’t want you to get injured because of me,” Kou says. Kirishima starts to protest again, but Kou says firmly, “Not even indirectly.”

Kirishima looks at him for a long moment, steeling himself. “What are you saying?” he finally asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to break up?” Kirishima asks, his face set in its impassive business mask.

“If that’s what you want,” Kou mumbles, looking away.

*It’s not what I want, but it’s what you want, isn’t it? But you want me to take the blame? I knew this would happen sooner or later… It’s just much sooner than I was hoping for.*

“Maybe that’s best,” Kirishima says.

Tears splash down Kou’s face. “Yeah, maybe. I – I’ll get my things.” He stumbles around the bedroom, gathering the spare clothes he kept in one of the drawers, his toothbrush from the bathroom, his clean clothes from the laundry room.

Kirishima sits frozen on the bed.
I can’t believe this is happening.

“Goodbye. Thanks for… everything,” Kou says softly.

Kirishima doesn’t move.

Only the click of the door closing behind Kou startles Kirishima out of his stupor. He hears the lock turning and the sound of metal scraping along the floor.

Oh. The spare key.

Kirishima can’t bring himself to move.

How is it over?

The room is growing darker by the minute, but he still can’t move.

The world has no color anyway, with or without light. It’s better this way. I belong to the darkness. I made that choice fifteen years ago. Kou-san and I belong to different worlds. Kazu-nii and Ryuichi were right.

Kirishima squares his shoulders. There’s work he should have done before rushing home – work he neglected in his haste to see Kou. Worse, he didn’t even charge his phone. What if Asami needs him again?

Kirishima stands up and dresses for work. As he’s fixing his tie, he sees a black hair on the pillowcase. He reaches for it but ends up picking up the entire pillow instead.

It smells like Kou.

Kirishima pulls his face out of the pillow, sitting hard on the edge of the bed, clenching the pillow with both fists.

It would have been better to never taste happiness than to have it yanked away like this.

He closes his eyes, willing himself to forget.

After a moment, he realizes his hands are aching. He opens his eyes to see that he’s torn the pillow open. A cloud of feathers is wafting through the air.

Kirishima shakes his head, grabs the vacuum, and cleans up his mess. He tosses the torn pillow in the garbage. As he gathers his things to leave for work, he glances around the bedroom one more time.

He sees the supplies on the nightstand. He snatches them up and tosses them in the trash.

I should take this out now.

But it’s not the correct day for combustible trash. He ties off the bag and sets it on his balcony for now.

As he picks up his briefcase and heads out the door, he can feel his shoulders gradually relax.

I just need to get back to my routine.
When he arrives at the office, Morita rushes over. “Is everything alright, fuku-shacho-san?”

“Of course,” Kirishima says. “You’ve been working hard all day. Why don’t you go home for the day? I can finish whatever’s left.”

“But what about your day off?”

“I’ve already taken enough time off. I’ll be in tomorrow morning as well.”

A dozen questions are dancing in Morita’s eyes, but he says only “Yes, fuku-shacho-san.”

Two hours later, Suoh comes into Kirishima’s office. “I wasn’t expecting to see you until Friday.”

“I’ve taken enough time off. I need to make sure the Suzuki situation is completely resolved.”

“We’ve already taken care of that.”

“I’m making sure there are no loose ends.” Kirishima turns his attention back to his computer.

“Did something happen with Motomi?”

Kirishima can feel the muscles of his jaw tighten, but he wills his face to remain neutral. “Nothing unusual. Why do you ask?”

Suoh eyes him suspiciously. “Did you get into an argument over who would top or something?”

Kirishima ignores him.

“Or maybe… you got cold feet?” Suoh guesses.

“If you’re done with the vulgar talk, prepare a report on Kodama’s infiltration of Suzuki.”

“It’s already in the works.”

“I want it by one a.m.,” Kirishima sayscoldly.

Suoh doesn’t answer. Instead, he turns towards the door, pulling his phone out of his pocket before he reaches it.

_He’s probably going to tell Asami-sama some stupid conjecture._ Kirishima sighs but remains focused on his work.

The next morning, Kirishima’s alarm goes off at nine o’clock. It takes him a moment to remember why he set it for then. _Might as well go into the office now that I’m up._

Morita’s eyebrows fly up when he sees him. “Fuku-shacho-san, you’re early today!”

“This is my usual arrival time,” Kirishima counters.

“Well, it was… until about two months ago,” Morita says.

“And it will be again starting today. I’ve been slacking off too much lately, setting a bad example.”
“Oh no, fuku-shacho-san. You would never slack off! Seeing you take a day off made the other employees feel like they could, too, and production has actually been up.” Morita searches his desk and pulls out a thin file. “I had noticed it and wanted to be sure my observations were correct, so I’d actually prepared this for you.”

Kirishima takes the report and glances at it. Morita’s conclusions appear to be correct: despite putting in fewer hours, the secretarial branch has been producing reports at a faster rate and making fewer errors. “Tell everyone to maintain their current schedules,” he orders Morita.

“Yes, fuku-shacho-san. But what about you?”

“It’s fine. I like to work. And I should work more hours than anyone else, right? I have more responsibilities.”

After providing the daily summary, Morita bows and leaves Kirishima’s office.

Kirishima works hard for the next hour until he hears the elevator ding. He wonders who’s there, since all the employees are already there, and it isn’t time for him to pick up Asami yet. He stands up.

He’s only taken two steps towards the door when Takaba comes striding in. The journalist says nothing, but his face indicates that he’s extremely angry.

Before Kirishima can register what’s happening, he feels the sudden bloom of pain on his jaw. His glasses are gone, so he can’t see very clearly, but he feels the industrial carpeting under his fingers and wonders briefly how he ended up on the floor.

He can make out a blurry outline of two figures, one restraining the other. Kirishima feels around on the floor for his glasses.

“Let go, bastard! I warned you that I would kick his ass if he hurt my friend!”

“What are you talking about?” Asami asks.

“That asshole dumped Kou last night!”

“Kou-san is the one who wanted to break up” slips out of Kirishima’s mouth before he can help it.

“Liar! He said you dumped him!”

Kirishima finally finds his glasses and puts them on.

Asami is holding both of Takaba’s arms behind his back, while the journalist is squirming and kicking, trying to break free. Asami drags the young man out the door and to his own office.

Kirishima wonders briefly if he should follow them, or if that will just make the situation worse.

“Kei! In here!” Asami barks.

Kirishima grudgingly walks into the office. Asami has produced a pair of handcuffs and fastened one to Takaba’s wrist and the other to a bar connected to the wall next to the couch. Akihito is still kicking and punching at the air, and trying to pull the bar out of the wall.

“If you keep doing that, you’ll hurt your wrist, brat,” Asami says.

“Let me kick his ass!” Akihito screams.
“So you broke up with Motomi,” Asami says, looking at Kirishima for an explanation.

“Yes.” Kirishima keeps his business mask firmly in place. “I won’t let it affect my job.” He stares coldly at Takaba.

“I’m sorry for bringing him. He was acting relatively normal until we got off the elevator, though I was wondering why he suddenly wanted to accompany me to work.” A faint look of disappointment flits across Asami’s face.

Did he think the brat wanted to have office sex with him? Ryuichi is delusional.

Kirishima tries not to let the amusement of the thought show on his face. Apparently he fails, because Takaba starts screaming at him instead of Asami.

“What are you smirking at, bastard? I tried to warn Kou you were a cold-hearted bastard who was just using him –”

“Takaba. This is my place of business. If you cannot conduct yourself in an appropriate manner, you will be asked to leave,” Asami says in a clipped tone.

“Whatever, bastard! I shouldn’t have believed you when you said this asshole cares about Kou!”

Asami presses the intercom. “Suoh. I need two members of security to escort Takaba out of the building. Tell them to bring a gag. And use the private elevator. I don’t want anyone to hear him.”

“You’re kicking me out?!” Takaba asks incredulously.

“Be prepared for your punishment when I get home,” Asami says.

“What are you talking about, bastard? I told you I’d kick Megane-san’s ass.”

“And I told you that if Motomi did something to Kirishima, you’d be punished for introducing them.”

Kirishima’s mouth drops slightly open. Apparently Asami wasn’t kidding about that.

Takaba’s mouth drops open all the way, before he closes it with a snap, stubbornly setting his jaw.

“But Megane-san dumped Kou! Kou was up crying all night! His eyes are all red and puffy.”

“Nevertheless, Kirishima said Motomi dumped him. He has no reason to lie.”

“Neither does Kou!” Takaba cries.

“We’ll discuss this more at home,” Asami says icily as Suoh enters with another guard.

“I won’t say anything,” Akihito says, eying the dirty rag in Suoh’s hand.

Asami sighs and shakes his head at Suoh.

“But if you make a single peep…” Suoh leaves the rest of the threat off.

Once they’re gone, Asami raises his eyebrows at Kirishima. “You want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Did Motomi really dump you?”
“He didn’t like how dangerous my job is.”

Asami’s eyebrows shoot up nearly into his hairline. “Did you tell him where you were going yesterday?”

“Of course not. Not the specifics. But… he saw my guns. He wouldn’t leave, and I had to put them on,” Kirishima explains.

Asami nods. “I warned you most people wouldn’t be as understanding as Takaba.”

Kirishima shrugs. “I know. Don’t worry. I won’t let it affect my work.”

“Go put some ice on your jaw,” Asami suggests.

As Kirishima walks to the kitchen for an icepack, he notices that most of the department is watching him – each looking away quickly as soon as he turns towards them. He can hear a buzz of whispering at his back, growing louder as he passes more of the office.

*How much did they hear?*

He’s never been one to bring his personal life to work before. Until Kou, he never *had* a personal life.

*It’s fine. I just need to get back to normal.*

Kirishima figures if he says it to himself enough times, maybe he’ll start to believe it. Until then, he’s going to ignore this icy hand that seems to be clenching his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry. It had to happen, but don’t worry - it’s not the end of their story.
**Chapter Summary**

After the break-up, Kirishima tries to go back to his old routine, but he discovers he's not the same person he was before he met Kou. Kirishima ends up finding comfort from an unexpected source. But what will happen the next time Kirishima and Kou talk?

**Chapter Notes**

Thanks to everyone who reads, gives kudos, and/or comments! You really keep me motivated, especially through the tough writing times.

Characters:
- Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
- Morita: Kirishima's assistant
- Suzuki: president of Z corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
- Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
- Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
- Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
- Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
- Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
- Kodama: the yakuza group that infiltrated Suzuki Corporation
- Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
- Saji: one of Akihito's guards
- Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
- Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym

Japanese terms:
- fuku-shacho: Kirishima's job title (basically, Asami's right-hand man)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Look, Kou was crying his eyes out. And that unfeeling bastard was just working as usual. It’s obvious that he never cared about Kou,” Akihito argues.

“Kei is one of the most generous, caring people I know. He just doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve. He has his pride as a man,” Asami says.

Akihito is momentarily stunned by Asami actually talking about feelings, but he quickly recovers. “Kou has his pride, too! It was just shattered when Kirishima dumped him!”

“You don’t know what happened. It’s between them, and it should really stay that way.” Asami picks up his chopsticks to continue eating.

Akihito folds his arms across his chest. “Too bad. Kou needs a friend who understands, and I’m
“going to be there for him.”

“That’s fine, but I will not tolerate you attacking my first assistant again.”

“He had it coming. I warned him that if he hurt Kou –”

Asami pauses with his chopsticks halfway to his mouth. “Once again, brat, you fail to recognize that when a relationship ends, both parties end up hurt, and it’s not necessarily because either wanted to hurt the other.”

“Then why did Kirishima dump Kou?” Akihito pushes the food around on his plate with his chopsticks.

“You don’t know that’s what happened.”

Akihito slams his chopsticks on the table. “Yes, I do! Kou told me!”

“And you heard Kirishima say that Motomi was the one who wanted to break up.”

“Well then, one of them is lying, and Kou doesn’t lie.”

“Neither does Kei. Did it ever occur to you that they’re both telling the truth?” Asami takes another bite.

“How?” Akihito splutters.

“You should eat while the food is warm. If it was clear to Kirishima that Motomi wanted to break up, but Motomi wouldn’t actually say the words, Kirishima would say them. I told you, he has his pride as a man.”

Akihito gapes at Asami. Asami picks up a morsel of food and pops it into Akihito’s open mouth. Akihito swallows and says, “But Kou didn’t want to break up.”

“Neither did Kirishima. If that’s true, maybe they’ll work things out,” Asami says.

“But –” Akihito starts.

Asami interrupts again. “‘You don’t know everything that went on between them. That’s why I said to stay out of it. If you try to meddle in other people’s business, you could lose a friend.”

Akihito huffs. “Kou and I have been friends forever. He’s like a brother to me. And I’m going to help him however I can.”
“Akihito…” Asami says in his warning tone.

A mulish look slips over Akihito’s face.

“There’s still the matter of your punishment,” Asami says, setting down his chopsticks on his empty plate.

“I didn’t do anything! And I’m still eating!” Akihito hastily shovels a few bites of his mostly untouched dinner into his mouth before Asami picks him up and carries him off to the secret room.

The next two weeks pass as uneventfully for Kirishima as his life did before meeting Kou, but somehow even though he keeps as busy as possible with work, he still feels the emptiness. He tries to work himself to exhaustion, but he still has trouble falling asleep when he finally crawls into bed each night. He wishes he still had the remaining pain pills from his arm injury.

On Sunday, Asami summons Kirishima to his office.

“Kei, you’re taking tomorrow off,” Asami says.

“I don’t need it,” Kirishima protests.

“Yes, you do. You’re driving Morita and the undersecretaries batty. Stop doing their work for them.”

“I told them they can have more time off,” Kirishima says defensively.

“They don’t need more time off. You do. Have you been sleeping?”

“As much as I can,” Kirishima says, dodging the question.

“That bad, huh? You should see Kurebayashi again.”

“I don’t need to. I’m fine!” I really am fine, too. I’ll get over this. I just need to get back to my usual routine. It’s enough for me.

“Then take tomorrow off. If you show up, you’re going straight to Kurebayashi’s office.”

“Fine.” Kirishima drops the reports in his arms on Asami’s desk and stalks out of the room without another word.

Later, when they get into the car to go home, Asami says, “Have a drink with me tonight.”

“Where?”

“Your place, if you don’t mind.”

“Then how will you get home?”

“Suoh will drive me.”

Kirishima is grateful that Suoh won’t be joining them for the drink. Suoh means well, but he’s been overbearing in his efforts to cheer Kirishima up, alternating between being overly solicitous, giving long diatribes about how Kirishima is better off without Kou, and trying to pretend the whole thing didn’t happen (but failing utterly by his constant worrying and hovering).
Asami, on the other hand, has been as matter-of-fact as ever, going about business as usual. Kirishima is grateful for it; he doesn’t want to talk about it with anyone else, and he’s not sure he ever will. Apparently, however, Asami’s patience has run out.

Kirishima sighs.

The rest of the ride is silent. When Kirishima parks in his assigned parking space, he heads straight for the elevator. Asami looks at him a little curiously, and it’s only after Kirishima performs his usual underbar through the railing that he realizes how weird it must look.

“You still doing that parkour shit?” Asami asks as he climbs over the railing to follow Kirishima.

“It’s not shit,” Kirishima retorts before he can bite it back.

“Are you still practicing it?” Asami amends in a conciliatory tone.

“I don’t know where to go,” Kirishima admits. Kou introduced him to all the parkour spots he knows, and while Kou tried to teach him how to observe the environment to identify his own spots when traveling, Kirishima can’t bring himself to just do parkour on his own – especially somewhere he’s not sure it’s allowed.

“You can train at the parkour gym with the security team,” Asami says.

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. He didn’t realize there was such a thing as a parkour gym, but now that he thinks about it, Suoh wouldn’t have the men training in public parks.

As they ride up the elevator, Asami texts on his phone. Kirishima assumes he’s telling Takaba he’ll be late, but when they arrive at Kirishima’s floor, Asami tells him the time and location of the training session the next day.

“Will Suoh be there?” Kirishima asks as he opens his door.

“No. He’ll be at Sion,” Asami replies, sounding slightly puzzled by the question until Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief. “Is he bugging you that badly?”

“He’s trying to be helpful,” Kirishima says, more to remind himself than to explain to Asami.

Asami pulls out a cigarette. “Mind if I smoke?” he asks.

“What about your bet with Takaba-kun?” Kirishima asks, startled, as he pulls out an ashtray from a kitchen cabinet.

“I won it yesterday,” Asami says.

“You haven’t smoked all day,” Kirishima observes.

Asami shrugs. “Takaba had a point; it’s definitely affected my fitness. It’s not a bad idea to cut back a bit, only smoke when I truly want to, rather than out of habit.”

Asami lights the cigarette and takes a long drag on it. Kirishima watches, mesmerized by the way the red color of the end intensifies as Asami inhales.

“What are you thinking about?” Asami asks.

“The way the fire burns the brightest and most intensely just before it turns to gray ash,” Kirishima murmurs absentmindedly.
“So your midlife crisis isn’t over,” Asami says.

“What?” Kirishima looks up. “What midlife crisis?” Then he remembers the conversation in which Asami asked if Kou was a midlife crisis, and his face falls. “No, Kou-san and I haven’t talked. It’s really over.”

Asami waves his hand. “Motomi was just a symptom, right? You wanted things to change. He might have been the catalyst, but once the fire’s going, it can still burn once you take the catalyst away.” He waves his cigarette, and the end glows brighter.

“You’re not usually one to speak in metaphors,” Kirishima says, dodging the indirect question.

“You started it,” Asami retorts. “Anyway, go to the parkour training tomorrow. But don’t take it seriously – you don’t have to be the boss. Just enjoy yourself. Remember, it’s your day off.”

“I will,” Kirishima says. A peculiar feeling comes over him, and it takes a moment for him to recognize it as excitement. **How did Asami-sama know parkour is just what I needed?**

Asami doesn’t press the issue of Kirishima’s ‘midlife crisis,’ and Kirishima pushes it out of his mind. **I’m happy with my life the way it is. I don’t need anything else.**

Asami has never been a man to feel the need to fill silence with endless prattle, and Kirishima’s grateful for it. They drink two glasses of scotch in companionable silence before Asami calls Suoh to come pick him up.

“Kurebayashi’s door is always open to you. She won’t tell me what goes on,” Asami says as he puts on his shoes.

“I’m fine,” Kirishima says for what feels like the hundredth time in the past two weeks.

Suoh knocks on the door, and Kirishima braces himself for the inevitable “How are you, Kei?”

“I’m fine,” Kirishima says through gritted teeth.

Suoh feels Kirishima’s forehead with the back of his hand. “Are you sure? You look pale. Are you getting sick?”

Kirishima pushes Suoh’s hand away. “I’m fine, Kazu-nii. Stop being such a worrywart.”

“You haven’t been eating or sleeping much,” Suoh notes.

“I eat plenty,” Kirishima retorts, which is true if he’s referring to sating his appetite. He simply hasn’t had much of an appetite lately.

“Kei –” Suoh starts, but Asami interrupts.

“That’s enough, Kazumi. He’s a grown man. He can take care of himself.”

Kirishima shoots Asami a grateful look.

Asami gives him a single firm pat on the shoulder as he heads out the door. “Enjoy your day off tomorrow, Kei.”

“Thanks, Ryuichi,” Kirishima says quietly. He locks the door behind them and immediately feels the emptiness of his apartment. As he prepares for bed, he checks his phone, but he has no texts. Kou somehow managed to worm his way into every part of Kirishima’s daily routine. He can’t even
brush his teeth without noticing there’s only one toothbrush in the bathroom now. He sighs and slips under the covers, but a smile briefly flits across his face as he wonders what the parkour gym will be like tomorrow.

_I wonder if Kou-san has ever been to a parkour gym._

Kirishima is halfway through typing a text before he remembers that they’ve broken up. His finger hovers over the “delete contact” button, but he can’t bring himself to press it.

_Maybe Kou-san will change his mind._

When Kirishima walks into the locker room of the parkour gym, he nearly turns around and walks back out. As soon as he enters, all conversation dies away, and the men bow, murmuring “Fukushacho-san.”

Kirishima forces a smile. “Relax. I’m just here to work out with you all today. I’m not here to evaluate you. I’m sure I’ll be learning more from you than the other way around.”

He’s already dressed in his gym shorts and t-shirt, so he pulls out his water bottle and stows his gym bag.

The gym instructor, Tokawa, has set up an obstacle course for them to warm up on. The starting point is on top of a wall. There’s a set of bars leading away from the wall, three bars set six feet apart. Beyond the bars, there are several walls creating a kind of maze of varying levels. The end point is on the other side of one of the walls that juts out. The most direct way would be to climb over the wall, but it could be slower than going around it—except that there are a series of boxes and overhanging obstacles that would slow you down going that way. Then just before the finish there’s another wall with a small rectangular hole in it with a bar above it, giving you the option to go through the hole or around the wall over various obstacles again.

“Newbie first!” Tokawa calls, so Kirishima steps up to the start.

“Any checkpoints or restrictions?” Kirishima asks once he’s understood the starting and ending points.


Kirishima takes off. He grabs onto the first bar to swing down from the wall, but he ignores the next two bars, knowing running will be faster than lachés. Since climbing isn’t his strong point, he goes around to the side of the wall, jumping onto the first box, from there onto the top of the first bar, and then onto the wall. He leaps off the other end of the wall, barely registering the gasps of the others as he prepares for the landing. He lands as softly as possible, transferring his vertical movement into horizontal movement by diving into a roll. He performs an underbar to cut through the hole in the next wall to reach the end.

“Sixteen point five. Not bad!” Tokawa calls out.

Several guards start clapping. “What was that last move through the hole?” one of them calls out.

Kirishima shrugs. “I was told it’s an underbar,” he says sheepishly. _Are they patronizing me? These guys are way more athletic than I am._

“I haven’t taught these guys underbars yet,” Tokawa explains. “And they don’t practice their rolls
enough, either.” He glares at the others, who look a little sheepish.

“I can’t believe you just leapt off that fifteen-foot wall like that!” Yoneda, Akihito’s main bodyguard, says.

Kirishima shrugs. “You have to do it often to keep up with Takaba-kun, right?”

Yoneda shrugs. “When I have to, yeah… But you just went for it!”

“Yoneda, you’re next!” Tokawa barks.

Yoneda leaps from the top onto the bars, but he laches across the bars, spinning on the last one so that he’s on top of it. From the top, he leaps across the gap, catching the top of the wall and climbing up. He follows Kirishima’s lead, leaping off the top of the wall, but instead of rolling, he taps his hands down and then hops to get his feet back under him.

He tries to copy Kirishima’s underbar, but his shins slam into the ledge under the hole. He grunts but pulls his feet up slowly, sliding ungracefully through the hole.

“Sixteen point oh,” Tokawa calls.

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. Yoneda should have had a much better time than him. *Kou-san would have been under twelve seconds.*

After everyone else tries the route, they go into a proper warm-up. Tokawa stands next to Kirishima, talking with him between calling out the various warm-up moves.

“Where have you trained before?” Tokawa asks.

Kirishima shrugs. “Just with a friend.”

“Outside?”

“Yeah.”

“What spots?”

“Mostly in Musashino,” Kirishima says vaguely.

“I know a guy who trains over there, at the art university,” Tokawa says. Kirishima stiffens, but Tokawa changes the subject, asking “How long have you been tracing?”

“A couple of months.”

Tokawa whistles. “You learned a lot. You have nice flow.”

“Thanks. My friend always makes me go first to develop my eye.”

“That’s a good strategy. I try to change things up as much as I can here, but with so many guys training at once, they inevitably spend most of their time copying the route of the guy in front of them and rarely have to choose their own route.”

Kirishima nods. “I noticed that in the warm-up.” Most of the security team had copied Yoneda’s route as much as they were able to, only varying it when they couldn’t physically perform one of his moves.
After their warm-up, Tokawa asks each of the men how much they think they can improve over their original time on the course.

Kirishima guesses between one and two seconds, and Tokawa nods, jotting it down.

Yoneda also says two seconds, but Tokawa shakes his head at him. “What do you think, Kirishima-san?”

Kirishima is startled that Tokawa asked his opinion, but he says hesitantly, “He should easily make it in under thirteen. Under twelve if he can get that underbar down.”

Tokawa says, “Yep. Your goal is under thirteen, Yoneda.”

Yoneda raises his eyebrows but shrugs.

After everyone has their goals for the session, Tokawa shows them video footage of each part of the course. His software timed how long it took each person to reach various transition points in the course, and the fastest and slowest runs over each section are shown.

Kirishima is surprised to discover he had the fastest time on the first section (from the start through the bars). The slowest time belongs to Saji, a guard who lachéd like Yoneda, but then hopped down off the bars to get to the wall instead of reaching the top from the bars. Saji was slowed down even more by the fact that it took him two to three swings on each bar to gain enough momentum to jump to the next one.

“I guess I’m taking out the bars from my run,” Saji says after much ribbing. “Then again, if I don’t practice them, I won’t get better at them.”

“Very true,” Tokawa acknowledges. “There’s a balance between being the most efficient in the current run and working on your weak areas so you can be more efficient in your next run.”

The next segment is the transition from the bars to the top of the wall. Kirishima has the slowest time this time. “I can’t do wall runs yet, and I knew I couldn’t make the jump from the bars to the top of the wall,” he explains.

“It’s good to know your limitations, but you have the speed and technique to learn the wall run,” Tokawa says.

Yoneda has the fastest time from the first wall to the wall with the hole, because he was the only one who managed to land without rolling.

“It takes conditioning to take a high landing. Don’t skip the roll to shave off fractions of a second until you’re confident you don’t need it,” Tokawa warns the rest.

Kirishima is not surprised to find that he had the fastest time getting through the hole to reach the end of the course since the others’ attempts at underbars were even worse than Yoneda’s.

“That’s a textbook underbar,” Tokawa says, slowing the video of Kirishima down and explaining the technique to the others. “I thought you said you’d only been tracing for two months. When did you learn the underbar?”

Kirishima shrugs, blushing at the attention. “I only learned it three weeks ago, but I practice it every day going to and from my car in the parking garage at my apartment.”

Some of the others laugh.
“I have a lousy parking space. It saves valuable time,” Kirishima explains, which just makes them laugh harder.

Kirishima blushes even redder, but they move on. Before they try running the course again, Tokawa reviews three techniques: lachés, wall runs, and underbars. Those who already have a technique down practice working on whatever they want while the lesson is going on. Some practice on the course, but others work in different areas of the gym.

Kirishima attends the first two technique reviews. He notices out of the corner of his eye that Yoneda is practicing precisions and long leaps across the gaps between various walls. *I guess he needs that skill the most to chase Takaba over rooftops.*

Tokawa’s instructions for lachés are similar to Kou’s. Kirishima just hasn’t had much practice with them because there’s only one good outdoor spot for practicing them, and there’s not much else near the spot for working on other techniques.

Kirishima manages to master the wall run fairly quickly. He works on it a few times, practicing it on the course while everyone else learns the underbar. After his third successful attempt, he feels confident he can do it while running the course, so he heads back over to the laché bars.

Before he can reach the bars, however, Tokawa calls him over to a different set of bars. “Kirishima-san, can you show us the underbar again?”

Kirishima obliges, sliding between the rungs of a ladder leading to the bars.

“Thanks, you can go back to your training,” Tokawa says.

Kirishima practices lachés but watches curiously as Tokawa strings a piece of painter’s tape between the two support poles underneath a bar. He understands when the men start practicing and a few of them mess up: the tape easily gives way, causing no injury. Kirishima remembers the scrapes and bruises he got on his back and legs practicing the technique and thinks maybe there’s something to be said for learning in a gym.

After an hour of lessons and practice, the men gather to attempt the course a final time. Kirishima manages to make the wall run and shaves 2.5 seconds off his time. Yoneda makes the underbar and just manages Kirishima’s prediction of “under twelve” with an 11.9.

“Thanks, fuku-shacho-san,” Yoneda says after his run. “I might not have pushed so hard if you hadn’t given me such a difficult goal.”

Kirishima nods.

After everyone has beaten their original times, Saji calls out, “Let’s see you do it, Tokawa-san!”

Tokawa jumps from the wall to the top of the bars, sprinting along the side bar that connects them as if he were running on the ground. He leaps from it to the other wall, landing on top of it. After a single step, he leaps onto the taller wall with the hole, climbing up after he catches the top edge. He leaps off that wall and rolls into the finish.

“Nine point six,” Yoneda calls as all the men burst into applause.

“If I could do an underbar as well as Kirishima-san, it would have been even faster,” Tokawa says, not even out of breath.

After their runs, they go through conditioning and strength training for another half hour before
Tokawa ends the session with stretching and mobility exercises.

As the men head to the locker room, Tokawa calls Kirishima aside.

“How was your first day in the gym?” Tokawa asks.

“It was good. Thanks for letting me train,” Kirishima says, grinning.

“You’ve got good technique, and you pick things up quickly.”

Kirishima blushes. “I had a good teacher. I’m actually very clumsy.”

“How did you learn from again? I know a lot of the guys in the community.”

Kirishima steels himself as he says, “Motomi Kou.”

“I thought it might be him! Kou’s really skilled, and he’s good at breaking down techniques into smaller pieces. I tried to recruit him as a teacher when I opened the gym, but he said he didn’t have time on top of his day job.”

Kirishima nods.

“What is he up to these days?”

Kirishima freezes. How is he supposed to answer that? The news about the fellowship is Kou’s to tell, and anyway, Kirishima doesn’t even know what Kou’s final decision about it was.

“Still working hard in graphic design,” he hedges. “I haven’t seen him in a couple of weeks. We’re both busy.”

“I hear you,” Tokawa says. “Well, come back and train with us whenever you can. Suoh-san gave you the schedule, right?”

Kirishima nods. “Thanks.”

When he heads into the locker room this time, the conversation continues as normal. It’s the first time subordinates haven’t gotten tenser when Kirishima enters a room, and he somehow feels his shoulder growing even more relaxed than they were from the workout and stretching.

“How about yakiniku?” Yoneda calls out. Then he notices Kirishima. “Oh, fuku-shacho-san, we usually go out to eat after Tokawa-san puts us through our paces. Please join us.”

“Oh, that’s alright, I wouldn’t want to intrude,” Kirishima says.

Several of the others chime in inviting him so enthusiastically that Kirishima gets the feeling it’s not just them being polite.

“Alright,” he agrees. “Where are we going?”

“Is there somewhere you’d like to go?” Yoneda asks doubtfully.

“You said yakiniku, right?” Kirishima says. “Is there somewhere nearby? Wherever you usually go is fine.”

“If you’re sure…” Yoneda says.
I’m not a food snob like Asami-sama… but I guess I can’t say that aloud. Kou often took Kirishima to cheaper restaurants, and the food was usually delicious, if perhaps not as nutritionally balanced as Kirishima usually strives for. But after a strenuous workout, counting calories isn’t important.

At the yakiniku place, the men start talking about parkour again while waiting for their meat to cook.

Yoneda says, “You said you’ve been training parkour for a couple of months, fuku-shacho-san. Where have you been practicing?”

“Just with a friend,” Kirishima says vaguely.

“Outside?” Yoneda asks.

Kirishima nods.

“Tell us some good spots!” Saji cries. “I’m sick of practicing in the gym.”

Kirishima shrugs. “My friend lives in Musashino, so most of the spots I know are around there.”

“That’s okay,” one of the other men says.

Kirishima tells them about the few spots Kou showed him closer to downtown.

“What about Musashino?” Yoneda asks.

Kirishima hesitates. *Takaba will throw a tantrum if he runs into his guards at his parkour spots... and he’ll know who told them.*

“Well?”

But if Kirishima doesn’t tell the guards, he’ll have to explain that his ‘friend’ is Takaba’s friend… which will be rather awkward.

“There are a lot of good spots around the universities there,” he finally mumbles vaguely.

Yoneda nods. “Yeah, Tokawa-san said that universities often make great parkour spots.”

“We should go to one!” Saji cries.

The guys start chattering about where they should go and figuring out who will have the same day off to train together.

As Saji reaches for some meat that’s finished cooking, he stops and rubs his shoulder. “Man, I don’t think I did that roll right. It was my first time doing one as a transition from a move.”

“Me, too,” several of the other guys say.

“Once I saw fuku-shacho-san do it, I decided to go for it, but I guess I needed more practice,” Saji says.

Kirishima tries not to look like he’s insulted, but Saji quickly adds, “No offense, fuku-shacho-san. I was impressed and felt I needed to step up my game.”

“You said you practiced outside, right? Do you do rolls on pavement?” a guard named Sakuragi asks
Kirishima shrugs. “I have, once.” A few of the others whistle, and Kirishima feels he ought to explain. “I misjudged a leap and had to bail so I didn’t faceplant into a column. I didn’t really have a choice.”

The others share their own stories of bails and crash landings. Eventually, the talk comes back around to practicing outside.

“You should come with us when you can, fuku-shacho-san,” Saji says.

“I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your fun,” Kirishima says.

“No way! You’ve got way more experience outside than anyone else – even Yoneda,” Sakuragi says. “Please teach us, fuku-shacho-senpai!”

“I’ve only been practicing parkour a couple of months,” Kirishima reminds them.

“That’s as long as we have,” Saji reminds him. “If you don’t want to, it’s fine, but if you ever want to train and your friend can’t make it, we’d love to train with you again.”

“Are you on Twitter?” Sakuragi asks. “We coordinate this kind of stuff there. Someone will post a time and place for training, and whoever can make it will show up there.”

At the guards’ insistence, Kirishima hands over his cell phone and they set up a Twitter account for him.

“There. Now you’ll know. Just make it when you can, if you want to.”

As Kirishima heads back home, a feeling of contentment settles over him. *Maybe things don’t have to go back to exactly the way they were before.*

Once he gets home, though, he doesn’t know what to do with the rest of his day off. He starts giving his apartment a spring cleaning, even though it isn’t spring.

As he’s cleaning the back of his washing machine, he remembers how much fun he had at the parkour gym and picks up his phone. Halfway through composing the text to Kou, he remembers once again that they’ve broken up.

*Kei, you idiot. That's the whole reason you went to the parkour gym in the first place!*

But after erasing the text, Kirishima’s fingers hover over the digital keyboard.

*Does breaking up mean we can never talk ever again? I really like Kou-san, even if he just wants to be friends. Does he want to be friends?*

Kirishima types, erases, types some more, erases again… It takes him thirty minutes, but he finally has a text that he thinks strikes the right balance.

*Hi, Kou-san. I went to a parkour gym today, and it made me think of you. Hope you’re doing well.*

After sending the message, Kirishima clutches his phone for a few seconds, wondering if he made a mistake. After a few minutes, he goes back to his cleaning.
Ten minutes later, his phone beeps, indicating an incoming text, and he pulls it out of his pocket with shaky fingers, leaning against the wall for support.

*I'm sorry, Kei-san, but I'm really hurting right now. Maybe someday we can be friends, but I need some time to heal first.*

Kirishima drops the phone and slides down the wall, burying his face in his hands.

*You need time to heal? Weren't you the one who wanted to break up in the first place?*

Chapter End Notes

Once again, the characters took it in a slightly different direction than I expected (which at this point should be the only thing I expect). Sorry to those who don't like the parkour scenes, but I enjoy writing them. I don't think there will be too many more of them, but I can't make any promises since the characters are in control.
The break-up continues to shake Kirishima's confidence. Will advice from Suoh and one of Akihito's guards help him or drive him further into self-doubt?

Thanks to everyone who reads, gives kudos, and/or comments! You really keep me motivated, especially through the tough writing times.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima’s assistant
Suzuki: president of Z corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou’s college professors
Kodama: the yakuza group that infiltrated Suzuki Corporation
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym

Japanese terms:
tatemae: the behavior and opinions one presents in public
honne: one's true feelings
fuku-shacho: Kirishima’s job title (basically, Asami’s right-hand man)
senmu: Suoh's job title

Kirishima hears several sets of footsteps rapidly approaching. He searches wildly for a hiding spot and notices the bottom of the fire escape ladder behind the bushes next to the incinerator. He flips over the empty trashcan, climbs on top of it, and manages to leap up to the second rung. As he pulls his feet up to the first rung, the trashcan tips over, falling behind the bushes. Kirishima squirms and wriggles, finally managing to get one hand on the next rung. Now that his feet can support him better, he quickly climbs the ladder to the roof.

“Where’s that geeky four-eyed brown-noser?” Yamaguchi asks, kicking at a crumpled piece of paper next to the incinerator.
Kirishima quietly crawls onto the roof, turning around and peering back over the ladder.

“I still don’t think he’s the one who told Tachibana-sensei,” Togawa says. “He didn’t tell him when he caught us with the cigarettes.”

“How else did Tachibana know we snuck out of the dorms?” Yamaguchi retorts. “No one else would have had the balls to rat us out.”

“But did Kirishima-kun even know about it?” Togawa asks. “He was asleep when I got back last night.”

“They sneaked out of the dorm? Are they idiots?” Kirishima whispers to himself.

“If they don’t know how to avoid the motion-sensor cameras, they are,” a voice says from beside him.

Kirishima jumps, and his glasses nearly slip off his face towards the ground below. He turns and sees a tall, lanky boy languidly leaning against the low wall edging the roof. “Asami-senpai,” Kirishima breathes.

“I don’t know you,” Asami says in reply. “Why would I know a useless dork like you that nobody likes? Get off my roof.”

“Yeah, go die. No one likes you anyway,” Kou says.

Kirishima feels hands pushing him, and before he knows it, the ground is racing towards him.

He wakes up with a start. **Kou-san never said that. And that’s not what Asami-sama said, either.**

Well, Asami did say that he didn’t know Kirishima – but he was merely surprised because very few students hadn’t stopped by Asami’s room to get their uniforms altered by that point in the school year.

**The part about being a useless dork that nobody likes was true. Still is.**

Kirishima shakes his head.

*I’m not useless.*

Of course he’s not useless. He learned long ago that when people need you, they tolerate you.

*I never made Kou-san need me.*

Kirishima reminds himself that he doesn’t need anyone, either. It takes a long time to fall back asleep.

Over the next few days, Kirishima makes a concerted effort to return to the work schedule he kept while he was dating Kou. He heads to the gym before and after work – the regular gym. He finds that if he runs fast enough and hard enough on the treadmill, he’s able to tire himself out enough to fall asleep, especially if he lifts weights before work.

But somehow, working out inside a gym just doesn’t have the same satisfaction as it does outside, whether it’s hiking, running, or parkour. Kirishima tries switching things up, running in parks before
work and lifting weights after work, but he finds it hard to fall asleep after strength training.

During lunch one day, Suoh stops by Kirishima’s office, closing the door behind him. “You didn’t like the parkour gym?” he asks.

Kirishima looks up, surprised. “I did,” he says. “Tokawa-san is a good instructor.”

“Were my guys too forward and impolite?”

“Not at all.”

“So why haven’t you been back?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I didn’t really fit in. I don’t want to make the guys feel uncomfortable.”

“Where are you getting that from?” Suoh asks.

“It’s obvious. The gym is a time for them to bond and let off some steam. They can’t do that in front of top management.”

“They’re not there to ‘let off some steam’; it’s mandatory training for their job. Besides, they knew you were simply there to train yourself. You didn’t act like management.”

“Well, of course they’d show tatemae, but their honne is obvious,” Kirishima says.

Suoh rolls his eyes. “You suck at figuring out honne. You always assume the worst of people so you won’t get hurt, but you just end up hurting yourself, anyway.”

Kirishima blinks at him. “What do you mean?”

Suoh makes a vague gesture. “Like this parkour thing. You want to train at the gym again, right?” He looks at Kirishima expectantly, so Kirishima reluctantly nods. “And you want to go train outside with my guys, right?”

Kirishima nods again.

“So do it. Stop holding yourself back. They wouldn’t have helped you create a Twitter account if they didn’t really mean it. Tatemae would have been inviting you but not creating a way for you to know when and where they would train.”

Kirishima blinks at Suoh.

Suoh sighs. “The same thing happened with Motomi, right? You didn’t really want to break up with him.”

Kirishima looks away. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Ryuichi told me you just assumed Motomi wanted to break up with you, so you said it first.”

“Kou-san made it pretty clear!” Kirishima bursts out. “And he just reinforced it when I tried to text him a few days ago.”

Suoh snatches Kirishima’s phone off his desk.

“It’s locked,” Kirishima points out.
Suoh tries guessing Kirishima’s PIN.

“After three wrong guesses, the phone deletes itself,” Kirishima reminds him.

“It’s backed up. Anyway, it won’t take me three,” Suoh says triumphantly as his second guess grants him access to the phone. “You need to change your PIN.”

“Kazu-nii, give it back!” Kirishima says, jumping up and trying to grab the phone away from Suoh.

Suoh turns his back to Kirishima and holds the phone out above his head. He opens Kirishima’s text history with Kou and sees the most recent message. As he looks over at Kirishima, Kirishima takes the phone back.

“How does ‘I’m really hurting right now’ indicate to you that he wanted to break up?” Suoh asks.

“He was just being polite, making an excuse for why he doesn’t want to stay in touch with me.”

“Then why did he say that maybe someday you could be friends?”

“He was just being polite!” Kirishima doesn’t need salt thrown into his open wound.

Suoh sighs. He says slowly, as if speaking to a small child, “Or maybe he’s actually hurt because he didn’t want to break up, and maybe someday after he’s gotten over that hurt, he’d like to have you in his life again.”

“He made it very clear that he didn’t want to be with me anymore,” Kirishima says stubbornly.

“How?” Suoh challenges.

Kirishima looks away. I don’t want to think about it more than I have to. “He just did, okay?”

Suoh stares at Kirishima for several moments, but Kirishima won’t say anything more about it. Finally, Suoh sighs. “You’re always looking for signs that people don’t like you. I know you had some issues when you were a kid with your classmates, but it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“I didn’t want to break up with Kou-san,” Kirishima says quietly.

“I know you didn’t.” Suoh clears his throat. “Well, my guys really want to practice parkour with you, so if you’re interested, get on your Twitter account and make it happen. And you have the gym schedule.” He leaves Kirishima’s office, closing the door behind him.

Two days later, Kirishima nervously arrives at the giant Gundam in Odaiba. He walks slowly around it until he hears someone call “Fuku-shacho-san!”

Kirishima turns, and Yoneda is smiling and waving at him. A couple of heads look curiously at the pair dressed in gym clothes. “Since we’re off the clock, why don’t you call me Kirishima?” Kirishima suggests.

Yoneda looks doubtful, but he says, “Yes, Kirishima-fuku-I-mean-san.”

Kirishima chuckles as Yoneda blushes. Kirishima glances around. “Where are the others?”

“Takaba-sama had a dangerous assignment, so both Saji and Sakuragi had to work. It looks like it’s just us today.”
“Oh.”

Yoneda glances around. “There are a lot of people, and I don’t really see anything to climb. Except for the Gundam, but somehow I don’t think security would like that.”

“They wouldn’t,” Kirishima agrees. “Let’s walk into the park away from the shops a bit. And we should check in the parking garages, too.”

As they walk through the park, Kirishima points out various areas that would be good for practicing one or two moves, but they don’t stop at any of them. After the third one, Yoneda asks, “Should we do the moves we can?”

“I’m sure there’s a better spot,” Kirishima says. “We just have to find it.”

They finally come across an area near the amusement park that looks promising. Kirishima leads Yoneda down some steps from the promenade.

“Here.”

“Here?” Yoneda looks around skeptically. He sees a simple flight of stairs leading down to a busy road, lined on each side by a handrail. “We could do precisions from one rail to another, I guess…but they’re pretty close together, and anyway, aren’t they sloped too steep?”

Kirishima points up at the wall supporting the promenade (which extends into a bridge over the road below). “We can practice wall runs and climbs on that. As you go down the hill, you can make the wall run bigger, so you can measure your progress. There’s that little ventilation hut that you can use to practice precisions and cat leaps from the handrails on the stairs to the promenade, and see down there? There’s a fence leading to underneath the bridge, but I bet there’s some stuff we can do there – gate vaults, if nothing else. Anyway, we can practice vaults and underbars on the stair railing, too. We’ll have to see what the underside of the bridge looks like to see if we can practice any brachial movements.”

“Wow,” Yoneda says. “I didn’t realize we could do all that. I guess I got spoiled at the gym and was looking for something like that.”

Kirishima laughs. “You’re not going to find a lot of places with as many obstacles as the gym. Maybe a back alley somewhere, if you have to duck laundry lines and hurdle trash cans.”

Yoneda laughs, too. They start practicing. Yoneda hasn’t learned the gate vault yet, so Kirishima teaches it to him.

“I’m not very good at it,” Kirishima apologizes.

“You’re good at breaking it down,” Yoneda says after successfully practicing it over the stair railing. “You can do it on the fence, too?”

“I had a good teacher. I can’t, but I bet you can,” Kirishima says. “Just remember to orient your hands how you want them to be when you land. Start on the other side, and I’ll spot your landing.”

Yoneda climbs the fence. Once over it, he pulls himself up to the top and reaches down, grabbing the fence on the opposite side. “Is this right?”

“Looks right,” Kirishima says. “Remember, if you have to bail, just let go, and I’ll guide your hips down.”
“Got it. Ready? On the count of three.” Yoneda counts down and performs the gate vault flawlessly, landing on his feet next to Kirishima. “Awesome! I always wondered how Takaba-sama did that so easily.”

“He’s hard to keep up with, huh?” Kirishima asks.

“Yeah. It’s frustrating because just when you think he’s given up on trying to shake you, he manages to give you the slip.”

Kirishima nods. He’s been there. Not that he’s ever been able to keep up with Akihito on foot.

Yoneda helps Kirishima work on his wall run, and Kirishima increases the height he can climb by two feet. After that, Kirishima works on his precisions and vaults while Yoneda works on his underbar.

When they’ve done everything either can think to do at the spot, they look at the underside of the bridge, which is covered with rectangular grills of narrowly spaced bars. Yoneda starts to do a wall run to jump up and grab one of the bars, but Kirishima calls, “Wait!”

Yoneda comes back down. “What?”

“What if they’re just decorative and can’t support your weight? And they look kind of rusty; they could have sharp edges.”

“Good point,” Yoneda says. “How do we find out?”

Kirishima frowns. “I don’t know. It’s pretty high. Can you hold onto the top of that column and shimmy across the ledge until you’re under the grill?”

“No problem,” Yoneda says. When he finally grabs one of the bars, he calls down, “No good. They’re really rusty, and there are sharp parts. They’d tear our hands up.”

“We could go back and try one of those arches we saw earlier,” Kirishima says doubtfully. The arches are small, but they have several slats, making it easy to practice small brachial movements.

“I thought I saw some walls across the river,” Yoneda says. “Let’s explore a little more.”

As they cross the bridge, Yoneda falls quiet. Kirishima searches for something to say, feeling more and more foolish as time elapses.

Finally, Yoneda breaks the silence. “Senmu-san said that you were the one who told him about parkour.”

“That’s right. When Kou-san –” Kirishima stops abruptly. “When my friend showed me parkour, I thought it could be a useful skill, especially for those assigned to Takaba-kun.”

“By ‘Kou-san,’ you mean Motomi Kou-san, Takaba-sama’s friend, right?”

“That’s right,” Kirishima says, racking his brain for a quick subject change, but his mind is blank.

“I was guarding Takaba-sama on the day you met up to do parkour in Musashino a few weeks ago.”

“Oh.” Kirishima blinks as he feels his face heat up. Of course Takaba’s guards must have been watching him – Asami-sama never dismissed them. “I never saw you.”

Yoneda grins. “Sometimes it’s easier to guard Takaba-sama if you pretend he’s given you the slip. It
doesn’t always work because he knows who we are.”

Kirishima chuckles. “I could see that.” He breathes a silent sigh of relief that they’ve managed to change the topic.

But Yoneda says, “About Motomi-san… Sorry, I’m probably overstepping my bounds here…”

Kirishima doesn’t say anything, hoping that Yoneda will take the hint.

But Yoneda presses on. “I – uh – I was guarding Takaba-sama the night he went over to Motomi-san’s after your… break-up –” Yoneda turns a little pink himself and glances over at Kirishima, but Kirishima tries to put his business mask on. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help overhearing. And they fought last night, and I couldn’t help overhearing that.” Yoneda glances over at Kirishima again.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that Motomi-san’s walls are really thin, so even though I was trying not to listen…”

“I know,” Kirishima says, hoping Yoneda will just come out with whatever he wants to say. Despite his best efforts, Kirishima can feel himself turning pink around the edges.

“Anyway… from what I heard, Motomi-san definitely didn’t want to break up with you.” Yoneda shrugs. “If you need someone to talk about it with, I’m here to listen, but if you don’t want to, I understand. Maybe it doesn’t matter to you, but I thought you might want to know.”

When Yoneda’s done, the silence grows as Kirishima tries to figure out what he should say. What ends up coming out of his mouth is “Why are you telling me this?”

“You’ve both looked so miserable lately…” Yoneda explains. “About a month ago, I had a misunderstanding with my long-distance girlfriend thanks to a picture posted by one of the guys on Twitter, and we nearly broke up over it. I got stubborn about it, hurt that she didn’t trust me, but Sakuragi knocked some sense into me and helped me patch things up. At the time, I was miffed that he was butting into my business, but now I’m really grateful.”

“I look miserable?” Kirishima asks, surprised. I thought I was doing okay.

“Kind of,” Yoneda says. “I mean, you’re putting on a brave face for the world, but when you get lost in your thoughts, you look really down. And Motomi-san… Well, he’s not putting on a brave face, at least not in front of Takaba-sama.”

“Maybe Kou-san didn’t want to break up,” Kirishima mutters, considering the possibility seriously for the first time, “but… he said he couldn’t deal with my job.”

Yoneda nods. “I’ve had arguments with my girlfriend about that, too. The odd hours… The time I injured my arm… The fact that I can’t tell her too much about it…”

“How have you dealt with that?” Kirishima asks. The only people he feels he can talk to about this kind of thing are Asami and Suoh. But Suoh has no interest in serious relationships, and he teases Kirishima too much. And even though Asami has offered advice, Kirishima’s not really interested in the same kind of lopsided relationship Asami has with Akihito. If Yoneda-san is offering… I really could use some advice.

Yoneda shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s an ongoing thing. The important thing is to really talk about it, you know? Ask her what exactly she doesn’t like, try to help her understand how important my job is to me, help assuage her worries however I can. And don’t rush things.”

“Rush things?” Kirishima asks.
“When I took the job at Sion, we spent some time talking about the logistics and things. She’s not a big fan of Tokyo, but she’s also never lived here. And who knew how I was going to like it? So instead of breaking up just because I was moving away for a job, we decided to try long-distance. And even though it’s hard with my schedule and the long-distance thing, we can’t really decide if my schedule is too much until we’re living in the same city.”

“Is she moving to Tokyo?”

“Not right now. Her grandfather is very ill, and she’s helping out with his care.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Kirishima murmurs.

“These are the walls I saw from across the water,” Yoneda says, leading the way underneath the bridge on the opposite bank.

“Wow, this is much better than the other spot,” Kirishima says. “I guess we stopped too soon.”

“I wanted to stop even sooner,” Yoneda reminds him. “Anyway, we wouldn’t be able to do gate vaults and underbars here.”

The two of them practice on the walls. Their session is cut short after fifteen minutes when a security guard for the hotel asks them to move along so they can set up for a wedding.

As they head back towards the station, Yoneda says, “The only thing we didn’t get to practice was brachial movements.”

“I only know of one okay spot for that, and it’s not near anything else,” Kirishima says. “Maybe Tokawa-san knows a place.”

As they pass the amusement park, Yoneda looks longingly at the Ferris wheel. “I bet that would be fun to climb.”

Kirishima looks up at it. “Maybe. As long as it wasn’t spinning or rocking.”

A security guard looks at them suspiciously, and they both crack up as they start walking again.

“I bet someone’s climbed it before,” Yoneda mutters.

Kirishima chuckles. “Probably.”

At the same time, they both say, “Do you think Takaba-sa—” Yoneda adds a “-sama” to the end of his.

“You could ask him,” Kirishima says.

Yoneda shakes his way. “No way. I’m not giving him any ideas.”

Kirishima imagines just how reckless the photographer would be on the Ferris wheel. “That’s probably wise.”

When they reach the station, Kirishima clears his throat and says, “Thanks for… earlier. Your advice. It was really helpful.”

Yoneda grins. “No problem. I hope things work out for you.”
When Kirishima gets home, he decides to text Kou one more time. After ten minutes of typing and erasing, he takes a deep breath. *I need to be more honest.* He quickly types a message and hits send before he can overthink it. After it’s sent, he reads it over:

*I’m really hurting, too, and I miss you. I didn’t want to break up, but I thought you did. Can we talk?*

He’s barely finished reading it when a reply comes through.

*Okay. I’ve got a huge work deadline tomorrow. How about Saturday at ten a.m. at Light Up Coffee?*

Chapter End Notes

My real life continues to be hectic, so I don't know when I'll get to write. Next up will be either Exhibition or The Shadiest Bachelor.
Tracing Your Own Path (Yellow)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima's existential crisis deepens as he makes a major mistake at work. Meanwhile, Akihito asks for Asami's assistance for the first time. Can Kirishima earn back Asami's trust as he and Asami try to find out what trouble Akihito has gotten himself into now?

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long delay in publishing this chapter. I had some sudden unforeseen circumstances come up in my personal life and several months of a very busy working schedule. Things have mostly settled down now, so I hope to get back to a more consistent writing routine.

Thanks to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support keeps me going.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym

Japanese and other terms:
fuku-shacho: Kirishima's job title (basically, Asami's right-hand man)
tracing: the act of doing parkour
Sasuke: the Japanese extreme obstacle course competition/TV show on which American Ninja Warrior is based
koma: the piece in shogi (Japanese chess) that Asami compared Akihito to during their first encounter

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kirishima releases a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. *It feels like I’ve been holding it for three weeks.*

He rereads Kou’s text, and he can feel the muscles in his shoulders coiling again.

*Wait. He didn’t say he didn’t want to break up. And he wants to meet in public. Isn’t that bad?*

Kirishima takes a deep breath.

*There’s no sense worrying yourself, Kei,* he chides. *At least he’s willing to meet you.*

The next morning, Kirishima heads over to the parkour gym before work. A few of the guards are warming up. Tokawa grins wickedly. “Kirishima-san! You chose a great day to come back. Today is met-con day!”

All the other guards groan. Kirishima whispers to Saji, “What’s a met-con?”

Saji rolls his eyes. “Metabolic conditioning. High intensity interval training, but Tokawa-san likes to make the ‘rests’ high-intensity intervals in a different muscle group.”

“Sounds intense,” Kirishima says.

It takes Saji a second to realize it was a joke. He chuckles. “They’re no joke. But you feel good afterwards – if you think feeling like all your muscles have turned to jelly and you’re going to puke feels good.”

Kirishima gulps. He doesn’t have too long to get worried before Tokawa is throwing them into the routine. The half-mile run isn’t so bad, and while the three rounds of jump roping, lunges, sit-ups, and quadrupedal movement (bear crawls, army crawls, and inchworms) are a little uncomfortable, Kirishima starts to wonder what Saji was making a big deal about.

Until Tokawa calls out, “Okay, warm-up is over. Come over to the board and check out the workout!” On the board is a list of exercises with numbers beside them. “You have twenty minutes to complete as many rounds as possible,” Tokawa explains.

Kirishima scans the list: precision jumps, jumping jacks, push-ups, squats, burpees, pull-ups, handstand push-ups… None of those exercises are exactly easy. Tokawa divides the guards into pairs and assigns them to different exercises to start so that no one will have to wait for any of the equipment. Kirishima is assigned to burpees with Saji, who groans.

“We’ll have to do more burpees than anyone else, if the time stops mid-round,” Saji gripes.

When Tokawa blows his whistle, Kirishima puts his hands down on the ground, kicks his feet back, does a push-up, hops his feet forward, hops up into a standing position, and jumps again once he’s upright. By the time he’s finished one burpee, Saji’s already finished two.

“Move faster, Kirishima-san! Just throw yourself down on the ground!” Tokawa shouts.

Kirishima goes as fast as he can, but Sakuragi and his partner have joined them before they’re finished. Saji moves on to the next station, and Kirishima tries to work harder. He’s already out of breath, and the sweat is starting to pour off of him.
I’m only on my tenth burpee. I’m so out of shape.

By the time Kirishima finishes his second circuit, Saji rejoins him at the burpee station to start his fourth. Kirishima takes a moment to wipe his brow, but Tokawa’s right there, shouting for him to keep going.

Kirishima has quickly given up trying to keep pace with the other men, but it’s still embarrassing to be lapped by them. What’s worse is that they’re all like robots, not seeming to slow down or even look winded as the time goes on, while Kirishima’s shirt is completely soaked through. Tokawa keeps shouting at Kirishima to pick up the pace. Kirishima knows that he’s slowed down, but he’s honestly going as fast as he can, and he can barely catch his breath.

Two minutes before the time is up, Kirishima makes a detour between the handstand push-up station and the precision jump station. Tokawa shouts, “Keep moving, Kirishima-san!” but stops when Kirishima leans over the trash can and pukes.

Kirishima wipes his mouth and trots back to the precision station. If I hurry, I might finish the round before time is up.

He just manages to.

Tokawa nods at the group as they gather. “Good job today. How many rounds did you complete?” He holds his marker to the board, ready to record everyone’s scores.

Kirishima feels embarrassed when most of the other guys say eight or nine. Sakuragi shouts “ten” with a wide grin, and the others clap him on the back. When everyone else has given their scores, Tokawa calls, “Kirishima-san? How many did you get?”

Kirishima looks down at his shoes. “Five.” The others start to clap, but he waves them off. “I’ve obviously got a lot of work to do. Sorry I didn’t do better.”

“You worked so hard you puked, fuku-shacho-san! And you didn’t let even that stop you!” Sakuragi cries.

“Is that what that smell is?” Saji asks.

“Sorry, I can take out the trash,” Kirishima offers to Tokawa, his face turning even redder.

Tokawa waves him off. “You guys have to cool down.” As they start to stretch, Tokawa comes over to Kirishima. “Sorry if I pushed you too hard today. I just assumed you could keep up considering how well you did last time.”

Kirishima grunts. “I’ve been running on the treadmill lately, but I’ve always been pretty slow and clumsy.”


Kirishima shakes his head. “Just regular running. A few miles after my strength-training sessions or in the evenings, nothing too hard, though sometimes I might push the pace a bit.”

Tokawa nods. “How often do you strength-train?”

“I used to do it four or five times a week, but I cut back a bit once I started doing parkour. I recently got back into it, but I missed parkour.”
Tokawa nods again. He calls out to the group “Now stretch your hamstrings” before turning back to Kirishima. “What are your fitness goals?”

Kirishima opens his mouth to answer but realizes he doesn’t have an answer. He shrugs. “Just to stay in good shape for the job. Kazu- er, Suoh-san has always made my workout plan for me.”

“Since you started working for Sion? How long ago was that?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “Since high school. Suoh is my cousin.”

“I see.” Tokawa calls out to the others, “Great job today, guys! Sakuragi-san, you’ll have to wait and see whether your record will hold up when everyone else does the workout.”

Sakuragi rolls his eyes. “No way. Yoneda is going to cream me.”

The men start to get up to head to the locker room, but Tokawa says, “Got a minute, Kirishima-san?”

Kirishima shrugs as he checks his watch. He told Morita he’d be in at noon. “I’ve got a few.”

“How much did Kou – er, Motomi-san – tell you about parkour as a lifestyle?”

Hearing Kou’s name is like a punch to the gut, but Kirishima focuses on trying to remember. “A little, I guess. We were focused more on actually doing things.” He tries not to blush as he remembers what they spent much of their time together doing.

“Parkour is about finding your own way. It applies not just to training or tracing, but to everything in life.”

Kirishima furrows his brow. “I thought parkour was about overcoming any obstacles in your path by adapting your movements to the environment.”

Tokawa chuckles. “That sounds like Kou, alright. Yes, that’s true… but first you need to be aware of what your path is – and choose your own movements, not the movements someone else chooses for you.”

“I get that… When you set a course, each person should choose their own path, of course… but I wouldn’t know how to do anything in parkour if Kou-san hadn’t taught me. And even after all these years, I still have no idea how to create my own workout plan.” Kirishima bites his tongue before he can point out that Tokawa is obviously creating a workout plan for the Sion employees.

Tokawa nods. “Community and sharing knowledge are important aspects of parkour, too.” He grins wryly. “And obviously your company is paying me to coach your employees to make sure they’re in good shape for their duties. But each of the guys has his own individual fitness goals, as well. Sakuragi-san is training for a triathlon and is working on his conditioning, which is why he was so stoked to get the highest number of rounds completed today. Saji-san wants to go on a rock-climbing trip this summer, so he’s working on his upper body strength. Yoneda-san wants to compete on Sasuke, so he trains harder than anyone else.”

Kirishima feels the embarrassment creeping over him again. “I don’t have any goals like that. I mean, I like hiking and parkour, and I like seeing how I’m improving, but I’m never going to win any races or anything. As long as I’m fit enough to do my job, I just want to have fun.”

Tokawa nods. “You’re part of the inner bodyguard squad, right? So you’ve got to keep your overall strength and tactical skills up.”
Kirishima shrugs and nods.

“To some extent, that’s going to make your advancement in parkour a little more difficult, because strength-to-weight ratio is more important than overall strength in parkour.”

“I know,” Kirishima says. He checks his watch again. “Thanks for talking with me, but I’ve got to go so I can make it to work on time.”

“Of course,” Tokawa says. “But think about your goals, and we can meet and discuss how to adjust your workout schedule to meet all your fitness goals, both professional and personal.”

“Okay. Thanks.” As Kirishima heads to the locker room, he remembers how when Kou asked Kirishima what food he liked the night they met, he couldn’t think of anything. *I haven’t really gotten any better, have I? Maybe Ryuichi is right: maybe I am having a midlife crisis.*

Kirishima pushes his conversation with Tokawa out of his mind as he drives to Club Sion. The Suzuki Corporation leaders have requested a debriefing about the Kodama infiltration from Sion’s perspective, and Kirishima needs to be completely focused.

Kirishima’s presentation goes well until Suzuki’s fuku-shacho interrupts Kirishima to ask, “So how exactly did you discover that Yamazaki diverted Suzuki funds to pay for the assassination attempt on Asami-sama?”

Kirishima blinks, his mind gone blank. After a second, he stalls for time, saying, “I – er – actually –” Nothing is coming to mind, and Suoh kicks him under the table. Kirishima finishes lamely, “I wasn’t in the office that day, so I’m not 100% positive. Suoh-san, perhaps you can explain?”

Suoh flawlessly gives the plausible explanation that they’d concocted earlier. Kirishima keeps his face impassive, but he inwardly breathes a sigh of relief that Suoh is able to salvage the situation and keep the mole in the Suzuki accounting department safe.

After they’ve gone over how Sion supposedly discovered the yakuza spy, Asami calls for a break. As Kirishima pours tea for Asami, Asami says in an undertone designed to sound like it’s for Kirishima’s ears only (yet loud enough for Suzuki’s president to overhear), “Kirishima, you’re looking a bit pale. Are you still feeling under the weather?”

Kirishima steals a quick glance at Asami’s face and understands. “I’m sorry, Asami-sama. I thought I’d recovered, but I’m starting to feel faint again.” He makes his excuses and exits the room.

As he walks down the hall, up the stairs, and through the executive suite to his own office, he tries not to let the blush creep across his face. Despite seeing every head turn to look at him curiously as he passes, Kirishima just manages to maintain his stoic expression until he closes the door of his own office behind him.

*Shit.*

*Shit shit shit.*

Asami has never dismissed Kirishima from a meeting before.

Then again, Kirishima has never screwed up this badly. Heck, the nearest he ever came was when he had to look up one of the statistics during the Tanihara meeting after Kirishima’s first date with Kou – a misstep that only Asami himself noticed, and that only lasted a fraction of a second.
But this – this was potentially career-ending. In other organizations, it could be life-ending.

*Shit shit shit. What the heck just happened?*

Kirishima doesn’t have an answer. And he’s going to need one for Asami as soon as the debriefing concludes.

Five minutes later, Kirishima is still staring stunned at his empty desk. He’s stirred by a quiet knock at the door.

“Come in,” he says automatically, straightening as he wonders who it could be.

It’s Morita’s assistant. “Fuku-shacho-san, I brought you a cup of tea. Do you need anything else?” the man stammers, not daring to look anywhere but at his own shoes.

Amusement tickles a distant corner of Kirishima’s brain. *The poor fellow obviously drew the short straw among the office gossips.*

Kirishima looks at him coolly. “Thank you for your consideration. Morita-kun will be here momentarily to assign you with more tasks if you’ve already finished all your work.”

“I haven’t!” the man squeaks. “I’m sorry for disturbing you.” He rushes out, bowing repeatedly as he closes the door behind him.

Kirishima sighs and pulls the stack of reports on the corner of his desk towards him. Sitting and stewing isn’t getting him anywhere, so he may as well get some work done. Maybe he’ll be able to figure out what went wrong if he lets his subconscious work on it, since that’s the part of his brain used to dealing with these types of things.

Thirty minutes later, another knock at the door has Kirishima jumping to attention. But it’s Suoh who opens the door, not Asami.

Suoh closes the door behind himself, not bothering to ask whether he’s interrupting anything.

Kirishima closes the report on his desk and braces himself for the worst.

“I’d ask what happened, but I can tell by the look on your face that you don’t know,” Suoh says.

“I don’t,” Kirishima admits. “I’m sorry. I –”

Suoh holds up a hand, and Kirishima stops talking.

“Ryuichi wants you to go see Kurebayashi-sensei as soon as we’re done here,” Suoh says.

Kirishima nods curtly. “Thank you for –”

Suoh interrupts him. “You don’t have to live the rest of your life based on a promise you made as a kid.”

Kirishima’s head snaps up, and he looks at his cousin properly for the first time. “What?”

“No one could expect you to.”
“But Asami-sama –”

“Ryuichi would understand.”

Kirishima snorts. “No, he wouldn’t. Betrayal is the one thing he can’t tolerate.”

“If you regret your promise, it’s only a matter of time before you will betray him.”

Kirishima tries to answer, but no sound can get past the lump in his throat as Suoh’s expression relays the rest of the thought he can’t bring himself to finish saying: “like you nearly did just now.”

Suoh sighs and continues, “You didn’t know what you were getting into. Ryuichi knows that.”

Kirishima snorts again. “Fifteen years is a little late to back out now. You told me yourself, I’m not the same person I was back then. This is who I am.”

Suoh shakes his head. “I was wrong. You never would have followed Ryuichi so naïvely if you hadn’t worshipped me as a kid.”

“I didn’t worship you,” Kirishima retorts.

Suoh shrugs. “Close enough. Mom told me not to expose you to Dad’s family business, but I wanted you to think I was cool. You weren’t supposed to follow me down that path – I wasn’t even supposed to go down this path myself. If Mom or Auntie knew the real nature of our business…”

“I chose my own path,” Kirishima says. The phrase brings to mind his earlier conversation with Tokawa.

Did I?

“Talk to Kurebayashi. Figure it out. If you decide you want to take a different path, just tell me. I’ll make sure Ryuichi accepts it. He’s not so generous to tell you himself, but he will accept it. Eventually.” A familiar mulish look slips over Suoh’s face, and Kirishima feels like he can fully exhale for the first time in almost an hour.

Kirishima braces himself before knocking on Kurebayashi’s door. When he enters her office, she levels her best no-nonsense stare at him.

“Kirishima-kun. Are you ready to try this again? I won’t tolerate any bullshit this time.”

Kirishima gulps but slowly nods as he steps into Kurebayashi’s office.

Whatever Kazu-nii says, I want to keep my vow to Ryuichi. But I also want to be a man worthy of Kou-san. Maybe Kurebayashi-sensei can help me figure out how to do both.

Kirishima checks his phone as soon as he leaves Kurebayashi’s office. The text from Asami is to the point:

My office as soon as you’re done.
When Kirishima enters the office, he bows and says, “I’m sorry, Asami-sama. It won’t happen again.” He knows Asami isn’t interested in hearing excuses, so he doesn’t offer any.

“Stand up,” Asami says impatiently. He studies Kirishima’s face as if trying to decide what to do with him. “Kazumi thinks I should give you more time off, but I don’t think that would help. I think maybe you’re thinking too much, and more time would amplify the problem.”

Kirishima grimaces. “That’s probably true. I really am sorry.”

Asami sighs. “I know you are, Kei. If it were anyone else…” he trails off absentmindedly, no threat latent in his words.

Asami’s lack of anger just makes Kirishima feel worse, but before Kirishima can say anything more, Asami changes the subject. “We need to rearrange tonight’s schedule.” He holds out his phone for Kirishima to read.

Meet me at midnight under the Karabori River bridge on Yamamomo Street. Access via park on SW corner. Bring a friend – one should do.

“Takaba-san?” Kirishima asks, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Of course.”

“Any idea what he’s up to?”

“He mentioned investigating something going on at the water treatment plant.”

Kirishima quickly searches on his tablet. “The water treatment plant is about one kilometer downstream. Karabori River isn’t navigable. For much of the year, the riverbed is dry.”

Asami shrugs. “A water treatment plant is a large facility. Plenty of places to hide things. It could be an interior way station for a smuggling route.”

“Or it could be a site of low-level government embezzlement.” Kirishima adjusts his glasses again. “Has he ever asked you to bring back-up before?”

“No. He doesn’t usually ask me for any kind of help.” Asami frowns.

“He won’t tell you anything else?” Kirishima asks.

Asami doesn’t answer, lost too deep in thought.

Kirishima focuses on examining the evening’s schedule, seeing how he can rearrange it.

After a moment, Kirishima says, “I don’t think we can move the Tanihara meeting, but Suoh could handle that.” Kirishima remembers that he’s in the doghouse and quickly adds, “Or I could.”

Asami continues to frown down at his phone.

After another moment, Kirishima clears his throat. “I’m actually somewhat familiar with the area where the meeting is supposed to take place. I think I’ve been in that park before.” He walls off the memories of learning underbars and gate vaults from Kou in the park. Not now.

“Are you prepared? Can you focus?” Asami asks, gazing intently at Kirishima.

“Yes, of course! I- I’m not sure why I fumbled earlier, but it won’t happen again,” Kirishima
Asami’s face tightens. “Kurebayashi thinks you won’t have a problem when it comes to physical reaction time. Suoh agrees – he says the neuromuscular pathways are grooved deep enough to bypass the brain.”

“That’s true,” Kirishima says, reddening slightly. Just how much did Kurebayashi-sensei tell Asami-sama? They only had a couple of minutes to talk while I walked from her office to his.

Asami nods curtly, pulling the stack of reports towards him. Kirishima hurries out of the room to finish rearranging the schedule, hoping that Kurebayashi and Suoh are right.

I can’t let Asami-sama down again.

Kirishima is so busy behind the scenes handling all the rescheduling that he can’t attend any of the meetings with Asami.

Did Asami-sama arrange it that way because he doesn’t trust me anymore?

Kirishima can’t worry too much about that. The fastest way to re-earn Asami’s trust is to do his job impeccably.

As midnight approaches, Kirishima is filled with a growing sense of unease. He calls in Yoneda to help develop contingency plans. Knowing the kind of trouble Takaba can attract and having so little information about tonight’s meeting, Kirishima wants to make sure every possibility is accounted for. Yoneda and two of Takaba’s other guards head to the bridge at eleven to set up the extra escape routes and secure the area as unobtrusively as possible. They’ll provide back-up from under the next bridge over, a few dozen meters away.

In the car on the way to Higashiyamato, Kirishima briefs Asami on the preparations.

“Good,” Asami says, staring tensely out the window.

Kirishima parks outside a convenience store on the other side of the river from the rendezvous spot. It’s the nearest inconspicuous spot he could find, and Yoneda’s surveillance confirmed that the river is low enough that they should be able to get back to the car even if the bridge is compromised.

“Asami-sama, you should probably change your shoes,” Kirishima says, passing a pair of black sneakers over his seat.

Even though Asami’s dress shoes have a decent grip, they won’t be good enough for a wall run if they need to escape. Asami grunts but accepts the shoes.

Kirishima leads the way to the park, acting as if they’re just two salarymen cutting home along the bike path. He passes the locked gate to the stairs leading down into the park, instead waiting until they’re overlooking the handicapped ramp. He checks quickly in all directions and then performs a gate vault, disappearing down below eye-level in the blink of an eye.

Asami quickly mimics the movement, grumbling, “Was that really necessary?” as he straightens up.

“We’re rather exposed,” Kirishima mutters back, performing a gate vault onto the next level of ramp.
after the switchback. He darts diagonally across to the final railing, performing an underbar through it down to the riverbed.

Asami curses softly as he slams his shins into the bars when he tries to copy the move.

“Sorry,” Kirishima whispers as he runs under the shadow of the bridge. The moon is nearly full, and he wants to get them out of the range of visibility as soon as possible. The bridge, the bike path on the south bank, and the road on the north bank are all lined with thin metal railings to preserve as much of the scenic view as possible, and despite their dark clothing, Kirishima feels as conspicuous as if he were running around in neon colors in broad daylight.

They arrive under the bridge safely. Their earpieces crackle, and Yoneda reports, “All clear.”

“Koma’s ETA?” Kirishima answers, using the codename for Akihito.

“Three minutes. He’s parking his scooter a few blocks southwest.”

Kirishima is startled a minute later when something drops off the bridge, but he manages not to visibly jump.

Asami puts his gun away and says, “Idiot. I could have killed you, brat.”

“You knew I was coming,” Akihito says defensively. “Did anyone see you arrive?”

“No,” Kirishima says.

Akihito swivels towards him. A grin flits across his face momentarily before he scowls and says, “Good.”

“You going to tell us what’s going on?” Asami asks.

“Nah. You’ll see soon enough,” Akihito says. “He should be here within five minutes.”

The familiar hum of a motorbike sounds along the road. It turns just before the bridge, obviously heading down the bike path a short way before the motor is cut off.

A figure quickly descends through the park.

Asami pulls out his gun, but Kirishima doesn’t bother.

Even though it’s been three weeks, Kirishima would recognize the figure from ten times as far away in a new moon.

“It’s Kou-san.”

Chapter End Notes

I fit a bit more into this chapter than I expected. I think I’ll probably write the next chapter of this story next, since I’ve got a lot of ideas flowing for it. The next chapter
may or may not be from Kou's perspective; it's been a while since we've heard things from his P.O.V.
Dance with You in Vienna, Wearing a River's Disguise (Violet)

Chapter Summary

Why did Kou appear at Akihito's stakeout location? And what will happen when he and Kirishima finally talk?

Chapter Notes

I wasn't sure as I wrote this chapter whether it would end up being one or two. I decided to make it one longer chapter since I wanted to end it where I did, and it wasn't quite long enough for two. The characters once again took the story in directions I hadn't envisioned, but we're still on pace to finish it in 4-9 more chapters.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name)

Japanese and other terms:
mugicha: barley tea
drink bar: many Japanese family restaurants have a “drink bar” similar to American restaurants’ salad bar, granting you unlimited access to a wide variety of drinks such as hot teas, soft drinks, juices, and various coffee beverages; see this video as an example
daimon: the insignia of a yakuza group
kaisendon: a rice bowl topped with a variety of fresh seafood
kinpira gobo: a stir-fried dish of carrots and burdock served in a sweet-and-salty sauce
namasu: a type of pickled salad
katagi: a yakuza term for non-yakuza
enka: a genre of Japanese music popular decades ago that has roots in traditional
Kou makes the final touch-ups to the design and steps back to look at it, frowning. The client was pleased enough with the design, requesting very few changes, but Kou knows that he should have done better.

Yoshizuki-sensei always said you can’t expect to be personally pleased with every single one of your own designs. If you are, that means you’re not listening to your clients enough.

Still, Kou thinks he could have come up with something that would have pleased his client and himself a little more, if he’d only been able to concentrate better. He shakes his head and rubs his tired eyes, then automatically starts doing some of his eye exercises.

He checks the time: 10:30pm. He promised to send the final documents by midnight, but he always likes to deliver them early. He stands and stretches, grabbing a glass of mugicha before sitting down and reviewing the documents a final time.

Kou is clicking “send” on the e-mail thirty minutes later when his phone buzzes.

He sighs when he sees it’s Akihito. Akihito has been supportive since the break-up, but Kou is getting a little tired of Akihito bashing Kirishima. Aki means well, but he doesn’t know Kei-san as well as I do. Kou sighs again and reads the text.

Have you finished your project?

I just finished. ε-(´・`)』

Great! Can I ask a favor? (*^_^)/

Okay…

I need back-up on a stakeout.

What kind of back-up? You know I suck at taking pictures…

I’ve got a lead on a water treatment plant. I need your parkour skills.

Aki, I can’t afford to get arrested.

Duh!! Me neither! We won’t get arrested. We’ll be on public property. That’s why I need your help.

(*´Д´)=з Fine. When?

Midnight…

Aki, I just turned in my assignment, and I’ve got an appointment in the morning.

Can’t it wait until tomorrow?

No… (*^_^)/
Can I even get there in time? It’s already 11.

It’s only ten minutes from your house. That’s why I asked you.

Should I head over there now?

No! Actually, don’t leave your house until midnight. We have to avoid security.

Aki! I already told you, I’m not doing anything illegal.

We won’t, I promise. Anyway, meet me under the Yamamomo Street bridge.

Got it.

Kou sighs and tosses his phone on his bed. He hasn’t bathed in two days – or even barely moved from his chair. He decides to take a quick shower before limbering up a bit.

Well, hopefully Aki won’t talk to me about Kei-san if he’s distracted by this investigation. He hasn’t asked for my help on a case in a long time. I wonder what he’s gotten himself into now…

Kou is grateful for the distraction, though. He’s been trying not to think about his meeting with Kirishima tomorrow morning, which wasn’t too hard while Kou was so focused on his assignment. But he knows he’ll be up all night worrying about it – unless he can tire his body out enough running around with Akihito.

Despite himself, Kou feels himself grinning as he stretches and does a dynamic warm-up.

Maybe Aki asked me for my sake as much as his. He could have waited until after my meeting with Kei-san tomorrow, though.

Kou pauses.

Did I tell Aki about that?

He shrugs. He probably didn’t. Ah, well.

Hopefully we’re not out too late. And hopefully Aki’s not involved in something too crazy again. What could be going on at a water treatment plant, anyway? Isn’t that where I get my water from?

Kou sniffs himself. He didn’t notice anything when he showered, and he doesn’t seem to smell now.

Unless I’m used to it.

He goes to grab his refillable water bottle but decides to stop at a convenience store to get some bottled water instead.

As Kou hops over the final railing to the riverbed, he sees something reflect moonlight from under the bridge. He retreats into the shadows, hoping it’s Akihito.

“Kou!” Akihito’s voice calls out.

Kou jogs over, and three figures emerge from under the bridge. Kou’s heart skips a beat when he
recognizes Kirishima.

_The light must have reflected off his glasses._

The third figure takes a moment longer to emerge from the shadows. Kou pulls up short when he recognizes Asami. He looks at the trio uncertainly.

_Deid Aki ask them for help, too? But Asami-san doesn’t really do parkour…_

Kou remembers that Kirishima carries a gun in his bodyguard role. Kou’s unease grows.

“Aki? What’s going on?” he asks, his attention shifting to his friend.

“Yes. Do tell,” Asami says, his voice dripping with what sounds like sarcasm.

Kou casts a quick glance at Asami’s face. Asami looks displeased. Kou sneaks an even quicker glance at Kirishima, who looks confused and a little taken aback.

_Is he disappointed to see me? But he was the one who wanted to meet tomorrow._

Kou focuses on Akihito again, who’s grinning like he just successfully pulled a prank.

“Aki. Tell me you did not drag me out here in the middle of the night to –” Kou starts.

“Shut up, Kou! You’ve been miserable. Kirishima-san has been miserable. Neither of you wanted to break up, but you’re both being stubborn fools.”

The exasperation hits Kou like a wave. He shoves aside the accompanying tiny amount of affection and gratitude towards Akihito for attempting to help repair a relationship he doesn’t even approve of.

Kou sighs and says as if to a small child, “Aki, do you remember when you asked me to come out here tonight? I told you I was exhausted from working on my project nonstop for the past several days, and that I had a morning appointment tomorrow. That appointment is with Kei-san.”

Akihito’s jaw drops. “I didn’t know that! How was I supposed to know? Last we talked, you said you’d told him not to contact you anymore!”

Kou frowns. “That’s not what I said.” He steals a quick glance at Kirishima, but Kirishima is scanning the far river bank, his face cloaked in shadow. “Anyway, it’s bad enough dragging me out here in the middle of the night, but weren’t Kei-san and Asami-san working? All the way in Shinjuku?”

Asami interjects. “Is there any reason we need to have this conversation in a riverbed in the middle of the night?”

Akihito finally starts to look a little sheepish. “No.”

“Then let’s move somewhere –” Asami starts to say.

“Under the bridge!” Kirishima says in a low tone that nevertheless carries so much authority Kou obeys without thinking.

Kirishima’s earpiece crackles. After a moment he relaxes and says, “It was just Yoneda.”

“Who’s Yoneda?” Kou asks.
“Takaba-san’s bodyguard,” Kirishima answers automatically. His face immediately closes off as if he regrets answering.

“Why does Aki need a bodyguard?” Kou asks, looking back and forth between Kirishima and Akihito (who is glowering at Kirishima).

It’s Asami who answers. “Because he does stupid shit like this.”

“Oh. Right. And Hong Kong,” Kou says. At the mention of Hong Kong, both Kirishima and Asami tense.

“Hong Kong wasn’t my fault!” Akihito snaps.

“You went chasing after that car after we were all safe,” Kou reminds him.

“Can we move?” Asami asks. “There’s no actual investigation into the water treatment plant, right?” he double-checks.

Akihito sighs. “Right. Sorry. There’s a family restaurant a couple of blocks from here. We can walk there.”

He walks under the bridge and starts to climb a ladder built into the stonework leading up to the bike path.

“Wait, Aki!” Kou hisses up at him. “Don’t Kei-san and Asami-san have to go back to work?”

“They drove all the way out here. They must be hungry,” Akihito says.

Kou looks over at the pair and rolls his eyes. “I’m sorry my friend is an inconsiderate moron. Feel free to tell him no.”

Kirishima’s stomach takes that moment to growl loudly. Even in the pale moonlight, it’s easy to see the intense blush creeping across his face.

“… or we could eat,” Kou offers. “Whichever you prefer.”

“Might as well,” Asami says.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to eat earlier,” Kirishima apologizes.

“See? Told you!” Akihito calls down as he resumes climbing the ladder.

Kou quickly scampers up the ladder next. When he reaches the bike path, he flicks Akihito in the forehead. “Kei-san wouldn’t have had to skip dinner if you hadn’t dragged him all the way out here in the middle of work. Don’t you know the weekends are their busiest times?”

Asami looks amusedly between Kou and Kirishima. “He really is a lot like you,” he says to Kirishima.

“What?” Kou asks, trying to duck out of a headlock and away from the noogie Akihito is giving him.

“How?” Akihito asks, letting go of Kou and looking back and forth between him and Kirishima.

Asami ignores the questions.
Akihito starts walking down the street. “The restaurant is this way.”

“Hold on, I have to get –” Kirishima and Kou say at the same time, Kirishima finishing with “the car” while Kou says “my bike.”

“Can’t you get them later?” Akihito asks. “It’s really not that far.”

“I parked illegally in case we needed a quick escape,” Kou says, “so no.”

“It makes more sense to have the vehicle nearby when we’re ready to leave,” Kirishima explains.

Akihito eyes them suspiciously. “You’re not going to just drive off, are you?”

Kou gapes at him. The thought hadn’t occurred to him, but actually…

*It’s going to be really awkward while we’re eating. I’ve barely managed to say a word to Kei-san, and he’s barely spoken at all.*

“Kou! Don’t you dare!” Akihito exclaims.

“I won’t,” Kou mutters, embarrassed that Akihito read his thoughts so clearly. “Are you talking about the restaurant across from Matsuya? I’ll meet you there.”

Akihito nods, and Kou starts walking across the street towards his bike.

“You can ride with me,” Asami tells Akihito.

“Wait, Kou-san,” Kirishima calls out.

Kou turns around.

“Why not have Takaba-san ride behind you? Our car is across the bridge. There’s no need to make him walk that far,” Kirishima says.

“He doesn’t have a helmet,” Asami says.

“It’s only a couple of blocks,” Akihito points out.

He starts jogging to catch up with Kou, but Asami grabs Akihito and drapes him over one shoulder.

“Hey, put me down!” Akihito cries.

“We need directions, brat,” Asami says.

Kirishima sighs and starts following them, calling over his shoulder to Kou, “We’ll meet you there.” Kirishima’s face looks grim.

Akihito is still kicking and shouting. Kou is not sure what to do. He watches the others walk away for a moment before hopping on his bike and heading over to the restaurant. The parking lot only has two cars parked near the back, so he parks near the entrance and waits on his bike.

The Mercedes pulls into the space next to him a minute later. Kirishima gets out and walks over to Kou’s bike.

“Let’s go inside and wait,” Kirishima suggests.

Kou tugs off his helmet and locks it to his bike. “Wait for what?” he asks.
Kirishima blushes and shrugs, glancing at the car before looking away quickly. Kou looks at the car more closely and notices that it’s rocking.

*And what’s that sound? Is that Aki? Oh…*

Kou instantly turns as red as Kirishima. Kou swings off his bike and follows Kirishima inside, whispering, “Seriously? It was only like a two-minute car ride!?”

Kirishima shrugs. He chooses a booth next to the window so he can observe the parking lot.

“Can’t we sit further inside?” Kou asks, trying not to look at the still-rocking Mercedes.

“I have to keep an eye on things,” Kirishima explains.

“Gross,” Kou says.

Kirishima levels a gaze at Kou. Kirishima says softly, “You know I’m a bodyguard. I’m keeping them both safe. They’re too preoccupied to notice if someone were to approach the car.”


Kirishima doesn’t answer, but his face gets that closed-off look.

Shit. What am I doing? Kou wonders. I’m finally talking to Kei-san, but all I’m doing is snapping at him.

“I’m sorry,” Kou says. “I just…” He shakes his head. “I don’t want to think about what they’re doing out there.”

“Me neither,” Kirishima says. “We can at least order drinks while we wait.”

“Do you think they’ll be long?” Kou asks. “You must be starving…”

Kirishima shrugs. “The time can vary. They could be five minutes or an hour.” He blushes and picks up a pair of menus off the table, handing one to Kou.

Kou snorts. “Let’s order then. It’ll serve them right to have to watch us eat while they wait for their food.”

Kirishima chuckles. “That’s a petty revenge.”

Kou breathes a soft sigh of relief. *At least we’re finally talking normally.*

They both order the drink bar. “Do you want me to get yours for you?” Kou offers.

“Yes, please. I’ll just have oolong tea. Thanks.”

Kou gets a glass of cola for himself and the tea for Kirishima. As he turns to head back to the table, a group of four men enter the restaurant. One of the men nods at a booth next to the drink bar, and they start down the narrow walkway towards Kou.

Kou carefully holds the drinks up as he squeezes to the side to pass the men, but the shortest man, who’s leading the way, suddenly shifts to his left, bumping Kou hard in the shoulder. Kou manages
to shift the drinks to his right side as he turns. The second man, burler than the first, bumps Kou harder than the first did, and Kou sets the drinks down on a table, giving them a little scoot before placing his hands on a chair and flipping over it.

Kou lands next to the chair and turns to face the men. “Do you have a problem?” he asks angrily.

“Kou-san, are you alright?” Kirishima asks. In the time it took for Kou to move away from the men, Kirishima has managed to cross the restaurant and insinuate himself between Kou and the others. Kirishima keeps his eyes focused on the men.

“I’m fine,” Kou says.

“I’m not. You spilled your hot tea on me,” the short man says. “I need compensation for medical bills.”

“And you spilled your cola on me. I need a cleaning fee,” the burly man says.

Kirishima starts to put the men in their place, but Kou’s laugh drowns him out.

The four men and Kirishima all turn to look at him, startled.

“You’re really bad at this. Where’s the damage?” Kou asks. “I didn’t spill a drop. Look at the glasses!”

Sure enough, the glasses are completely full.

The men glance down at their suits, but there’s not even so much as a drop on them.

“You’re lucky you didn’t spill,” the short man says grudgingly. “Next time, be more careful.”

“Look who’s talking,” Kou mutters.

“What was that?” the burly man asks, rushing towards Kou.

Kirishima deftly steps between them again. “We’re just trying to have a nice quiet meal. We’ll go back to our seats now. Why don’t you do the same?”

The man glares at Kirishima, but Kirishima doesn’t back down. After a moment, the man looks away. “Whatever,” he mutters, following his companions to their table.

“Thanks, Kei-san,” Kou says.

“I’ve got to tell Asa-” Kirishima starts, stopping when he sees Asami and Akihito walk into the restaurant. Kirishima positions himself so that he can keep one eye on the table full of men as he heads back down the aisle towards their own table. Kou looks back at the men, too.

The short man looks at Asami and his face goes pale. He nudges his companions.

Kirishima says, “Come on, Kou-san,” and Kou follows. Kirishima gives no outward indication that anything is wrong, but Kou thinks he hears Kirishima give a small sigh.

As soon as they’re seated at their table, Kirishima hands menus over to Asami and Akihito. He says in a low tone, “Those men are members of Kodama-gumi. Probably very low-level, since I don’t recognize any of them, but the one in charge is wearing their daimon.”

Kou jumps and has the urge to look over at the other table again, but since he’d have to turn his
head, he controls himself. Asami and Akihito both look completely normal as they take in the information.

Get a hold of yourself, Kou. You knew they were up to no good when they tried to scam you. Since they backed down after Kei-san stepped in, they’re probably not going to try anything again.

Asami frowns at the menu. “Is the kaisendon any good here?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never had it,” Akihito says. “Isn’t Kodama the group who –”

“Have you ever had the kaisendon here, Motomi?” Asami interrupts.

Kirishima glances with apparent interest in Kou’s direction, but Kou can see that Kirishima is actually looking past Kou at the other table.

“No, sorry,” Kou says. He feels suddenly tense. What’s going on? Is that the group that attacked Kei-san?

“They recognized you, Asami-sama,” Kirishima says. “And it appears that they’re making a phone call.”

Kirishima reaches under the table and takes Kou’s hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

Kou feels the warmth spread up from his hand.

Why does Kei-san always feel so warm? I missed this.

He lets out a breathy sigh and squeezes Kirishima’s hand back.

“I’ve had the kaisendon here before, Asami-sama,” Kirishima says. “It’s good, but may I suggest pairing it with the kinpira gobo, which isn’t too sweet here, or the namasu.”

Akihito gapes at Kirishima. “When have you been here before?” he asks loudly.

Kou kicks Akihito under the table, and Akihito flushes.

“Oh. Never mind.”

Kirishima pulls his hand out of Kou’s. Kou looks down and sees that Kirishima is typing a text with one hand as he points to the menu with his other and asks Akihito, “Is the unadon any good here?”

“It’s okay,” Akihito says, “though I prefer their ramen.”

Kou can’t take the tension anymore. He whispers into Kirishima’s ear, “Is Kodama-gumi the group that attacked you?”

Kirishima stiffens slightly before giving a nearly imperceptible nod.

Kou draws in an involuntary breath. He’s tried not to think about what Kirishima told him the night they broke up, but of course Kirishima hasn’t had that luxury.

What happened after that, anyway? I mean, once the yakuza starts targeting you, what can you even do about it?

Kou shudders.
Surely Asami-san and Kirishima-san must have some kind of plan. Even if they can’t go to the police, there has to be a way to make the yakuza stop. Kou-san said the situation was resolved, but how?

Kirishima slips his phone back in his pocket and takes Kou’s hand again, giving it another squeeze.

Kou looks at the others.

*How can they sit here so calmly? I’ve got to do something.*

He drains his drink and says, “I’m heading back to the drink bar. Asami-san, Akihito, would you like something?”

“You’ll have trouble carrying three drinks,” Akihito says. “I’ll come with you.”

Asami frowns but lets the pair go, his eyes following them.

Kou mentally kicks himself as they approach the yakuza table.

*What the hell was I thinking?*

He resolutely ignores the men as he gets himself another glass of cola. “What would Asami-san like?” he asks Akihito.

The burly man gets up from their table. Kou sets his glass down and turns to face the man. Maybe the others can pretend something’s not going on, but there’s no way Kou can keep his back to someone so dangerous.

But Akihito turns around, too. He folds his arms across his chest and waits.

“Move,” the man grunts at Kou. Kou steps aside. The man fills a glass with juice. As he heads back to his table, he throws out an elbow towards Kou, but Kou is expecting it. He nimbly steps to the side, and the man stumbles, sloshing juice down his hand.

“Look what you made me do!” the man snaps.

He tosses the juice towards Kou, but once again, Kou is too quick. This time, he dives into a roll down the aisle towards their table. The burly man gets another refill and sits back at his table, cracking his knuckles.

Akihito tries not to snicker as he follows Kou back to their table. “Wow, they’re like the incompetent low-level bad guys out of a shounen manga.”

“Are we ready to order?” Asami asks them when they return, not commenting on their lack of drinks or what just happened.

Asami raises an arm to signal for the waitress. “You’re supposed to use this,” Akihito says, pressing the call button.

A waitress hurries over. “Sorry for the inconvenience,” she says, taking a quick glance over her shoulder at the other table. “Can I get your drinks for you?”

“Do they come here often?” Akihito asks.

“No. Well, not until this week, anyway.” The waitress grimaces. “I’m very sorry. This is the third time they’ve come in around this time. Hopefully they will find somewhere else to go soon.”
“We’ll get our own drinks,” Asami says.

After they order, Asami says, “Move” to Akihito. Akihito slides out of the bench, and Asami walks over towards the drink bar.

Akihito follows him. “I’ll get your Coke,” he says to Kou.

Asami ignores the yakuza table as he passes them, but they tense up and keep a close eye on him while he helps himself to tea. Akihito gets two glasses of cola and heads back towards the table.

As Asami passes the yakuza table with his tea, he says, “If you want to continue wearing that daimon, I suggest you follow the code and don’t mess with katagi.”

“We’re deeply sorry,” the short yakuza says, bowing deeply in his seat. He glares at the other men until they do the same.

Asami ignores them and continues back to the table.

“That shorty’s the leader?” Kou exclaims, earning him a glare from the yakuza.

Akihito snickers, and even Kirishima can’t contain a chuckle, though he quickly composes himself. A loud burst of enka music comes from the yakuza table. The short man pulls out his cell phone and says, “Yes, boss?”

“Enka?” Akihito mouths at Kou, and they try not to burst into outright fits of giggles.

“No, boss.”

Asami shoots Akihito a withering look, and Akihito tries desperately to control himself.

“We didn’t. I swear!”

Kou tries not to look Akihito in the eye, knowing that he’ll slip over the edge if he does.

“But we just ordered.”

Kirishima elbows Kou, and he sits up straight, trying to look normal.

“Fine.” The yakuza hangs up and tells the others. “We’ve got to go.” He throws a few bills on the table and stalks out the door, leaving the others scrambling to follow him.

Kirishima finally relaxes, but he stiffens when Kou asks, “What was that about?”

“Just some low-level thugs trying to feel more important than they are,” Asami answers smoothly. “You couldn’t figure that out?”

“No, I mean –”

Kirishima gives Kou a warning glance, but Kou is too worried to heed it.

“I mean, what happened after that incident a few weeks ago?”

Akihito kicks him under the table, glancing sharply in the direction of the kitchen.

Kou lowers his voice. “I mean, is everything okay now? How do you make a yakuza group stop trying to hurt you? I assume you can’t just go to the police…”
“What?” Akihito asks, suddenly growing very still. “Someone tried to hurt you? Is that when Megane-san hurt his arm?” His eyes grow wide. “And does that have to do with what went down at Suzuki Corporation?”

Asami gives Kou a glare that helps Kou begin to understand how Asami is able to go toe-to-toe with yakuza. Kou tries not to shiver.

Kirishima clears his throat.

“Well?” Akihito asks, growing louder.

“The food is here,” Kirishima says.

They wait until the waitress leaves before Akihito says, “You know this isn’t something I’m just going to forget if you ignore me long enough.”

Asami doesn’t say anything. Kirishima clears his throat again. He casts a tentative glance at Asami before offering the following explanation: “It’s not like the entire organization was part of the plan. The leaders don’t want to lose an important business connection. If they can’t come to Club Sion, they can’t network effectively.”

Kirishima glances at Asami, who nods resignedly.

“That organization is undergoing some internal struggles. Someone was trying to get the attention of the leadership. The leadership is taking care of things.”

Kou gapes at him. “And you’re just going to leave it at that? How do you know they’re really taking care of things?”

Kirishima says, “I can’t answer that.”

Kou scowls.

Akihito says, “You know, if you’d told me, I could have done an exposé and taken down the whole organization.”

“You think an exposé is going to take down the third largest yakuza group? You’re still too naïve,” Asami says scathingly. “Besides, you’d have done something stupid and I’d have had to come save your ass again, causing more complications for me.”

It’s Akihito’s turn to scowl, but he can’t refute what Asami has said.

Kirishima looks over at Kou. “We’re taking care of it, okay? We’re being careful.”

His earpiece crackles.

“Yoneda says they’ve really left.”

Kou remembers that Yoneda is Akihito’s bodyguard. “Is that who you texted earlier?”

Kirishima nods. “We had three back-up guards and have more on the way.” He picks up his phone and tells Yoneda to cancel the back-up.

Akihito picks up his chopsticks. “We might as well eat while the food is warm.”

For the next several minutes, they’re too busy eating to talk much.
Akihito’s face suddenly turns red. “I’ll be right back,” he mumbles. He rushes off to the bathroom.

A moment later, Asami gets up and heads in the same direction.

“What was that about?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shrugs.

“I don’t want to know, do I?”

Kirishima shrugs again. “Neither do I. Some things you’re better off not thinking too hard about.”

They go back to eating, but the silence feels more awkward when it’s just the two of them.

Kou finally can’t take it anymore. “Kei-san, I know we’re meeting tomorrow — and we can push our meeting back later if you need more sleep — but maybe we can talk a little now?”

Kirishima looks at him and blushed. “I’d like that.”

And then neither of them can think of anything more to say.

Kirishima breaks the silence. “I really didn’t want to break up with you. It just sounded like you did, but you couldn’t bring yourself to say it.”

Kou shakes his head. “I didn’t. I just — I don’t know — I can’t bear the thought of you getting injured because of me.”

“I didn’t.” Kirishima says, more sure of himself this time. “Remember I told you that you colored my world? I wasn’t exaggerating. I’ve always focused exclusively on work. I never had a life outside of that. It took me a little while to get my bearings, but I can focus completely on work when I need to.”

Kou still looks skeptical. “But —”

“Remember when I had to leave suddenly when you were staying over? After what you saw, I wasn’t sure if you’d still be there when I got home. But I was able to focus on what I needed to do. I mean, yeah, I was worried about leaving you behind, but I was able to put it aside until I was done.”

Kou lets out a shaky breath. “Okay. That makes sense. I’m… not sure I can handle this type of stuff, though.”

“You mean like tonight?” Kirishima asks, frowning.

Kou shrugs. “Yeah. But — I know that tonight wasn’t your fault. And I’m glad you were there. I forgot to thank you for earlier. That guy might have hit me.”

“I wouldn’t let him do that,” Kirishima says, “but it’s not really a great idea to go mouthing off to yakuza.”

“I didn’t know they were yakuza. How did you know?”

Kirishima points to the top button on Kou’s jacket. “The leader had the group’s daimon right here.”

“But how did you know that was their daimon?”

“It’s my job to know,” Kirishima says. “It’s part of being a good bodyguard. Anyway, those guys look like they would have started something whether I was with you or not.”
“That’s true,” Kou says.

“I’ve been working for Asami-san since high school.”

“High school?” Kou asks.

“He had a tailoring business.”

“Tailoring?” Kou asks, laughing until he realizes Kirishima is serious. “That’s not dangerous.”

“True. Neither is Club Sion. Not really. He started it a year after college, and I’ve only gotten injured twice in all that time. I already explained why those were extraordinary circumstances.”

Kou slowly nods. “It’s still scary, though.”

Kirishima remembers the advice that Yoneda gave him. “I understand that. You’re not used to seeing yakuza or knowing anyone who deals with them on a regular basis – besides Takaba-san,” Kirishima amends. “And I can assure you I’m not nearly as reckless as him.”

Kou laughs again. “True, not many are.”

“But you came out here tonight to help him?” Kirishima presses.

Kou nods. “I guess I’m not being fair.”

“Your concerns are legitimate,” Kirishima acknowledges. “But maybe you just need to get used to the idea, to see whether it’s actually as scary as you think it is.”

Kou nods again. “That sounds fair.”

“And…” Kirishima takes a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said about honesty. I really am sorry I lied to you.”

Kou’s face clouds over.

“I don’t want to see you make that face again,” Kirishima says. “When I’m around you, you make me want to be a better person. I can’t promise I won’t mess up again. But I can promise that I’ll keep trying to become a man worthy of you.”

Kou’s face crumples. “Why are you always putting yourself down? I told you the night we met that I like you just the way you are.”

Kirishima presses. “You didn’t like it when I lied to you, did you?”

Kou shakes his head.

“Neither did I.”

“So… are we back together?” Kou asks.

Kirishima smiles, “We are if you want to be.”

“I do,” Kou says, smiling back. He takes Kirishima’s hand and squeezes it gently. “I wish we could do more than hold hands right now,” he says shyly.

“Me too,” Kirishima says, blushing a little.
His blush intensifies when Kou glances towards the kitchen and bathroom then moves in for a quick kiss.

“Kou-san! What if someone sees?” Kirishima protests, but he can’t hide his own widening grin.

“Let them,” Kou says, but he doesn’t move in for another kiss.

Kou looks around again.

“What’s taking Aki and Asami-san so long, anyway?”

Kirishima frowns. “I suppose I’d better go check on them.”

“I can do it,” Kou offers.

“Are you sure you want to?” Kirishima asks, reddening again.

“Gross! Again?”

When Kou finally reaches his apartment an hour later, he’s not just exhausted but actually tired for the first time in weeks.

_I don’t know if I’ll actually be able to sleep, though._

He smiles softly to himself as he quickly gets ready for bed. Once he’s settled underneath the covers, he grabs his phone to set his alarm. Kirishima and Kou set their meeting time back to noon, but it’s so late now, he’s afraid he’ll oversleep.

When Kou opens the phone, he sees a missed text:

_Motomi-kun, this is your friend Yoshida Misaki’s father, Detective Yoshida of the Organized Crime Division. I need to talk to you as soon as possible. Can you come to the Higashiyamato Police Station tomorrow morning?_

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from the song "Take This Waltz" by Leonard Cohen, which was adapted from the poem "Pequeño Vals Vienés" by Federico García Lorca.

I'll probably write a chapter for Exhibition before working on this one again, but I'll be back to Color My World soon. I'm anxious to bring this roller coaster to a full and complete stop.
Kirishima is awakened by the buzzing of his phone at eleven o’clock the next morning. *I forgot to set the alarm again! Why does this only happen when I’m meeting Kou-san in the morning?*

Kirishima snatches his glasses and phone from his bedside table.
Kei-san, can we change the location of our meeting to Motomi Pass? Sorry, I know it’s farther away for you, but I want us to meet somewhere we can talk privately.

Kirishima smiles softly.

No problem. (˚钢铁)♥

I won’t have time to do much parkour, though, since I have to be at work at three.

That’s okay. We don’t have to do any parkour.

Kirishima hops out of bed and starts pulling on the sakura blossom shirt and (non-skinny) jeans Kou picked out for him. After brushing his teeth, he glances at the clock again and realizes he’d better text Kou.

I might be a little late depending on traffic.

I know. I’m sorry. See you soon.

Tokyo traffic actually seems to be on Kirishima’s side for once, however, and he makes it to the Musashino Art University parking lot with five minutes to spare – just enough time to run over to Motomi Pass.

Kirishima cuts through Tic-Tac Alley and eyes the shortest section of the building that makes up Motomi Pass.

I can wall-run up that.

He smiles and executes the wall run flawlessly. Once he’s on top of the shorter roof, he does another wall run up to the second-story roof. As he reaches the top, he grins, hoping to surprise Kou with his new skill. But when Kirishima peeks over the top, he can’t see Kou.

Kirishima’s smile fades for a moment, but he hoists himself over the wall onto the rooftop. There’s one more section of roof to check, across a small gap. Kirishima wouldn’t trust his skills enough to jump the gap were there nothing underneath, but thankfully there’s a small section that connects the two buildings, allowing people to move between them without getting wet during the rainy season. The roof is a bit lower over the connection, but it still provides a measure of safety for the gap jump.

Feeling confident after his wall runs, Kirishima decides to practice combining the two precisions required to make it across the gap: one up onto the wall and the second across the gap. He runs across the roof, timing his steps to make the jump onto the wall without losing momentum.

He makes it onto the wall just fine, but as he jumps across the gap, he’s startled to see someone lying on the small connecting roof. Kirishima wobbles a little on the landing as he hears, “Kei-san!”

Kirishima manages to get his balance enough to hop down off the wall onto the larger roof. He turns around and peers over the wall down at Kou.

“What are you doing down there?” Kirishima asks.

“Just thinking,” Kou says, hopping up to grab onto the wall next to Kirishima. As Kou swings himself over the wall onto the roof, he asks, “Did you come up a different way? I didn’t hear you until you were running across the roof.”
“I did a wall-run,” Kirishima says, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. Now he feels a bit silly for wanting to show off.

“You can do wall-runs now?” Kou asks.

“I learned at Tokawa-san’s gym,” Kirishima explains.

“Oh, right, you mentioned that,” Kou says. “Great job!”

Kirishima’s a little disappointed that Kou doesn’t give him a congratulatory hug.

“Anyway, hello,” Kirishima says awkwardly, pushing his glasses up his nose and smiling shyly.

“Hi,” Kou answers.

Kou usually initiates their kisses, but Kirishima decides if Kou isn’t going to greet him properly, Kirishima will just have to take matters into his own hands.

He leans down, but Kou turns his face at the last second, and the kiss lands just to the side of his mouth.

“We need to talk,” Kou says.

Kirishima looks at Kou more closely. Kirishima had assumed Kou’s red-rimmed eyes were from not getting enough sleep last night, but Kirishima wonders if maybe Kou has been crying.

“Is everything alright?”

“Let’s sit down,” Kou says. He sits cross-legged in the shade of one of the solar panels on the roof.

Kirishima does the same, facing Kou while trying to control his own heartbeat.

“What’s wrong?” Kirishima asks.

Kou looks away. “I found out the real nature of your job,” he says flatly.

Everything inside Kirishima freezes. His first instinct is to lie, but he can tell by the look on Kou’s face that it won’t help.

*Be careful, Kei. He could be bugged.*

Kirishima clears his throat. He opens his mouth to speak, but he can’t think of a single thing to say.

“You lied to me.”

“No, I didn’t,” Kirishima protests.

“A lie of omission is still a lie,” Kou spits out.

“There are some things I can’t say,” Kirishima says carefully. “I told you that, but I also promised to tell you when that’s the case from now on. I’m sorry.”

Kou laughs brittlely. “I’m sorry? Is that all you can say? Why did I have to fall in love with you? Had I found out the night we met, I would have been disappointed, but it wouldn’t hurt so much.” He fights back tears.

Kirishima’s own heart is breaking. He reaches over to cup Kou’s face, but Kou jerks away from him.
Kirishima freezes again. “What exactly did you hear?” he asks. “No, don’t answer that.” If Kou-san is bugged, I won’t have plausible deniability about what I’m admitting to unless we both remain vague. “How did you find out? Was it Takaba?”

“Aki?” Kou asks, his mouth hanging open. “He knows?” Kou’s face hardens as he spits out, “Of course he does.”

“Well, I’m not actually sure exactly what he knows,” Kirishima amends. If it wasn’t Takaba, who was it?

“But he knows enough, doesn’t he?” Kou asks, not relenting. “You met through his normal job after all, didn’t you? You’re a bad liar. And so is he.”

“He was pursuing a case about one of our clients,” Kirishima admits. “But you already knew we have a diverse range of clients.”

Kou snorts. “You make it sound so noble. ‘At Club Sion, we value diversity.’ Anyway, Aki lied to me, too.”

Kirishima squares his shoulders. I knew he was stubborn, but I didn’t realize the extent of it. This is going to be hard. “If you didn’t hear it from Takaba, who was your source? Maybe they exaggerated,” Kirishima offers weakly.

Kou snorts and folds his arms across his chest. “After what I found out, I’m not going to answer that. I don’t want you targeting them. Anyway, they told me out of concern for me – which is more than you or Aki showed.” A few tears leak out of Kou’s eyes, but he brushes them away angrily. “They had no reason to lie to me. Or exaggerate, as you say. They told me they saw the evidence with their own eyes.”

Kirishima gulps. “Kou-san, I love you, too. I don’t want to lose you. Isn’t there any way we can salvage this? I told you last night, I want to become a man worthy of you.”

Kou looks at Kirishima sadly. “I’ve been replaying our conversation over and over in my head after what I learned this morning. You said I make you want to be a better person ‘when you’re around me.’ I need you to be the same man whether you’re around me or not.”

“I can do that,” Kirishima pleads.

“I don’t think you can, given your current job,” Kou counters.

Kirishima feels his body go rigid. “Are you asking me to choose between you and my job?” he asks woodenly.

“No! I mean, I’m not trying to give you some kind of ultimatum or anything. I just – can’t.”

“I made a vow to Asami-sama fifteen years ago. If I don’t honor that vow, I’ll never be the man you want me to be,” Kirishima says.

Kou recoils, but he brushes away another tear. “Well, you’ll either have to find another way to keep that vow, or this is goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” Kirishima repeats, taken aback. “Can’t we at least be friends?”

Kou shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Kei-san, but I don’t have the strength to be friends with you. Besides, I’ve got to think about the fellowship application. I made the first round, but if I fail a
background check, I won’t qualify for a visa.”

“Congratulations!” Kirishima exclaims, happy for Kou for a split moment before he realizes what that will mean for Kirishima himself. “So this really is goodbye? I don’t want that. I’ll – I’ll think about what you’ve said, but…”

Kou smiles sadly. “I don’t expect you to give up your job for me. That wouldn’t be fair of me. And I won’t wait for you, so if by some miracle you do decide to, you’d better make up your mind quickly.” Tears splash down Kou’s cheeks. This time he doesn’t wipe them away.

Kirishima senses something wet on his own cheeks. It takes him a moment to realize that he’s crying, too. It’s an unfamiliar sensation; even as a small child, he rarely cried.

Kou leans in and brushes Kirishima’s cheek. “Thank you for your tears, Kei-san. Can I give you one last kiss?”

Kirishima nods, and Kou leans in and gives Kirishima a quick peck. Kou starts to pull away, but Kirishima leans in and deepens the kiss.

It’s so much like their first kiss, and it similarly makes Kirishima lose track of time and place.

*Can’t this moment last forever?*

But too soon, Kou is pulling away.

He breathes in Kirishima’s ear, “Don’t worry; I didn’t tell them anything about you.” Kou pulls back a little and says, “Goodbye, Kei-san. Thank you for everything.”

“Goodbye, Kou-san. Thank you for coloring my world.” Kirishima’s face falls as he thinks about how bleak his life will seem now without Kou in it. The last few weeks were hard enough, but he still had hope then, as remote as it was.

Kou hops down onto the connecting roof. He gazes up at Kirishima. “Your world always had color. I just helped you look up and see it. Don’t forget to look around you, Kei-san.”

Before Kirishima can reply, Kou is leaping down. Kirishima walks over to the edge of the roof. By the time he gets there, Kou is already across the quad and slipping between buildings.

Kirishima gives a small laugh as the tears splash down his face once again.

Kirishima rides the elevator up to Asami’s apartment with a slight feeling of unease. Usually when Kirishima picks Asami up, Asami comes out to the car. Kirishima knows that Asami can’t be overly worried about the Kodama situation, so why does he want Kirishima to come to his apartment door?

*Does Asami-sama want to talk more about my blunder yesterday?*

Kirishima tries not to think too hard about it.

*This has been the worst twenty-four hours of my life.*

He squares his shoulders as he steps off the elevator.

*Whatever will happen will happen. I’ll deal with it as it comes, just like I always do.*
He rings Asami’s bell, pushing his glasses up his nose as he waits.

“Let yourself in,” Asami says over the intercom.

Kirishima pulls out his spare key and opens the door. Once inside, he removes his shoes in the genkan. He heads down the hall towards Asami’s office. Kirishima catches a glimpse of Akihito peeking down from the end of the hall, but Kirishima ignores him.

If he hadn’t arranged that stupid meeting last night in the same restaurant as Kodama-gumi members… Kirishima thinks angrily. He’s had a couple of hours to think about it, and the only scenario that makes sense to him is that Kou’s informant was a police officer. Kirishima knows that he and Asami weren’t followed by the police, and Yoneda’s team would have noticed if Takaba had been. The police don’t waste their time following civilians like Kou. Therefore, the police must have been observing the Kodama-gumi members.

Kirishima takes a deep breath, holds it for a moment, and releases it before knocking at Asami’s open office door.

“Come in,” Asami says, not looking up from the report he’s reading.

Kirishima enters and stands next to Asami’s desk.

“What’s he doing here?” Akihito asks angrily from the doorway.

“Ah, Takaba. I thought Kirishima might be the reason you wanted to accompany me to work again.”

“What the hell did you say to Kou? He said he never wants to talk to me again!” Akihito shouts, striding towards Kirishima.

“I’m sorry, Asami-sama, but this is something I have to do just once.”

Before Akihito can react, Kirishima has cocked back his fist and let it fly. He holds back as he punches Akihito, but the young man still ends up flat on his back.

Asami has risen from his chair, his face stormy with anger.

Kirishima stands up straight. “I have my pride as a man.”

“Kirishima, explain,” Asami says in a clipped tone. Kirishima can see the slight twitch of Asami’s trigger finger and knows that his boss is using every ounce of restraint that he possesses.

“Kou-san and I are finished – for good – thanks to the stunt he pulled last night.” Kirishima nods at Akihito on the word “he.”

“Don’t call me ‘he’; I have a name,” Akihito complains, rubbing his jaw as he slowly stands up. “And what do you mean, you broke up because of last night? When we left the restaurant, you were both gooey-eyed at each other again!”

“That’s none of your business,” Kirishima says coldly.

“What the hell? How can you blame me for something I had nothing to do with? Did you convince Kou it was my fault, too?”

“I have no further relationship with Motomi-san,” Kirishima says, putting on his business mask. “Whatever decision he made about your friendship was his alone, and I said nothing to influence him. If you have a problem with him, perhaps you should take it up with him.”
“I can’t. He won’t answer my calls or texts,” Akihito says glumly.

“I warned you that if you meddled in other people’s affairs, it could cost you,” Asami says. “Now if you have no further business with me, kindly get out so I can get to work.”

“But Kou isn’t ‘other people’; he’s my best friend. Anyway, if Megane-san told Kou about your business, why are they both blaming me?!” Akihito bursts out.

“What?” Asami asks, going deadly still.

Kirishima knows he’s in even more danger than when Asami was twitching. “I didn’t. Someone saw us together last night; they were the one who told Kou-san.”


“I’m guessing it was the police following those Kodama-gumi guys,” Kirishima says shortly.

“Well, that’s not my fault! Anyway, I don’t get why Kou’s so mad at me. I did try to warn him not to get close to you, but he wouldn’t listen!”

“Takaba, out. Now. I need to talk to Kirishima.”

Asami’s tone leaves no room for argument, not even from Akihito at his most cantankerous. He scurries from the room, closing the door behind him.

“Kirishima, explain. We have protocols for this.”

“I know. I already initiated them.”

“One of them is notifying me.”

“Which I just did. I only found out about it a couple of hours ago myself, and I’ve been doing damage control.”

“He knows about your guns,” Asami reminds Kirishima. “Does he know where you keep them?”

“Yes,” Kirishima admits. “Yoneda’s already implemented the salvage protocol.”

“You shouldn’t have picked me up,” Asami gripes. “Now I can’t carry my guns, either.”

Kirishima gulps. I didn’t think of that. To be fair, though, neither did Suoh.

Asami sighs. “It’s too late now. Maybe I’ll just ask Takaba for a ride.”

“You need a helmet and jacket. Perhaps Yoneda –” Kirishima worries.

“I already ordered my own,” Asami says. “They arrived last week. But I’m surprised you’re not putting up more of a fuss.”

“Well, you really only have to worry about an ambush, and the motorcycle would be much better for escaping. To be honest, I really don’t think we have anything to worry about. Kou-san told me he didn’t betray me.”

“We can’t rely on that.”
“I know, but he’s not the type to lie. He’s stupidly honest.” Kirishima gives a nostalgic grin at the memory of Kou worrying about accidentally misleading his professor about Kou’s professional relationship with Asami.

“Honest, but also law-abiding. If he made a deal with the cops…” Asami says.

“I don’t think he’d do that – and if he did, he wouldn’t go out of his way to lie to me and tell me he didn’t. But Takaba-san knows him far better than I do. Perhaps we should ask for his opinion on the situation.”

“That’s the second time in as many minutes you’ve shown confidence in someone you felt deserved a sucker punch not five minutes ago,” Asami observes overly casually.

Kirishima blushes as he stammers, “I really am sorry about that.”

“Don’t make a habit of testing the limits of my patience,” Asami keeps his tone casual, but Kirishima knows him well enough to know that Asami is deadly serious.

“Of course, Asami-sama.” Kirishima bows.

Asami strolls over to the intercom. “Takaba, could you come to my office, please?”

As Asami turns back around, Kirishima’s not quick enough to hide his look of surprise at Asami’s polite tone.

Asami shrugs. “He’ll come quicker and be more cooperative if I say ‘please.’ Besides, it keeps him on his toes.”

Kirishima has to work hard to keep the amusement off his face when Akihito slinks into the room a moment later, eying them both suspiciously.

Asami dives right into the issue at hand. “Is Motomi the kind of man who would rat someone out?”

“Of course not,” Akihito says stoutly. “What kind of question is that?”

“A very relevant one, after last night,” Asami says.

Akihito gulps, suddenly looking a bit chastened.

He actually cares about Asami-sama, Kirishima realizes for the first time.

“How certain are you? What if Motomi were intensely pressured, convinced he were helping society? Or even his friend?” Asami presses.

Kirishima adds, “Would he be willing to lie to someone to get them to let their guard down?”

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Of course not. You don’t even know that much about him? Sheesh.”

“How are you so certain?” Asami asks, locking eyes with Akihito.

Akihito sighs. “Look, Kou never ratted anyone out – not even back in elementary school, and not even when he was blamed for someone else’s actions.” Akihito looks away for a moment as he blushes, but then his face suddenly lights up. He snaps his fingers. “Okay, here’s a story that’s so typical Kou, you’ll understand. Once during our senior year of high school, we were racing with Misaki – another classmate – on our bikes. Things got a little out of hand…”
Kirishima can feel his impatience growing as the story continues, but every time he tries to signal to Asami, Asami seems engrossed in the vivid description of the race.

“Anyway, in the end, Misaki ended up hitting this black Mercedes. Misaki’s bike came out mostly okay – just a small dent in the front fender and discoloration from the Mercedes’s paint, but the Mercedes had a really deep scratch across the entire driver’s side. Misaki got scared it belonged to a yakuza, so we hightailed it out of there.”

*Is there a point to this story?* Kirishima wonders but refrains from saying aloud.

“Someone in the neighborhood recorded Misaki’s plate number, but he ended up telling the cops that it was *Kou* who hit the Mercedes. Kou got hauled down to the police station, but even then, he wouldn’t rat Misaki out.”

“Even though Misaki betrayed him?” Asami asks, his eyebrows shooting up.

“Yeah. It looked like they were going to throw the book at Kou – his mom was real worried he’d get kicked out of school if things went much further.”

“What happened?” Kirishima asks, having gotten sucked into the story despite himself.

“I went down to the station and told them what that asshole Misaki had done, of course,” Akihito says as if it were the only obvious ending to the story. “And when the morons didn’t believe me because Misaki’s dad is a cop, I brought them pictures of the damage to Misaki’s bike. Misaki caught me taking the pictures and fixed the bike the next day so he could claim I was trying to frame him out of loyalty to Kou, but I found the receipt for his repair, and the body shop confirmed that the pictures were legit. That’s how I got started in criminal photography.”

“But Motomi is an adult now. He’s no longer a rebellious juvenile delinquent,” Asami presses.

“Doesn’t matter,” Akihito says. “He still wouldn’t rat out someone he cares about.”

“Not even if that person betrayed him?”

“I just told you!” Akihito bursts out. “Sheesh, don’t you listen? Anyway, we’re still friends with Misaki. Misaki was pissed at me for a while, but he knew he’d been really shitty to Kou, so he understood why I ratted him out.”

“But Motomi is no longer friends with you,” Asami points out.

Akihito looks like he’s just been slapped. After a moment, he shakes his head and declares, “He will be eventually. It’s not like he just rolled over and forgave Misaki right away, either. Kou’s no pushover. But he’s also not going to betray someone just because he’s angry at them.”

“But you would?” Asami asks, gazing intently at Akihito.

Akihito looks up in surprise. “Hey! I wouldn’t have ratted out Misaki to save myself, but he threw Kou under the bus! I wasn’t going to let him get away with that.”

As Asami and Akihito’s conversation evolves into their weird version of flirtation, Kirishima opens his tablet and pulls up the profiles of Akihito’s friends and quickly finds Yoshida Misaki.

*Yoshida? Surely not…*  
But sure enough, Misaki’s father is the same Yoshida who nearly brought down Sion eight years
ago, when Asami had to regroup in Hong Kong and negotiate with Tou to replace the smuggling routes compromised by the police investigation.

And he’s still in the Organized Crime Division. Higashiyamato Station. That clinches it.

Kirishima sighs.

No wonder Kou-san freaked out. There’s a huge difference between using a gun for personal protection and smuggling them into the country illegally.

“Kirishima?” Asami asks, looking at him over Akihito’s shoulder.

“I figured out Kou-san’s source,” Kirishima says, already busy typing a coded message to Suoh to send over their secure, encrypted channel.

Sion’s spies in the police department have been keeping track of Yoshida’s investigations, and he hasn’t officially tried to infiltrate Sion again after being reassigned, but cops like him tend to hold grudges. And after seeing Asami last night still walking as a free man, Yoshida is likely to start sniffing around again.

Once Asami has managed to get Akihito to leave the room, Kirishima brings Asami up to speed.

“It’s time we headed to Sion,” Asami says.

Kirishima starts gathering the reports on Asami’s desk while Asami lights a cigarette.

“You know, Kei, I knew when I assigned Yoh to Fei Long that I’d lose him eventually. But I also knew that he would fulfill his promise to me in the end.”

Kirishima looks up, wondering why Asami is telling him this. Asami is looking at Kirishima expectantly, so he asks the question he’s almost certain Asami is waiting for. “Then why did you assign him to Fei Long?”

“He was the right man for the job. The only man for the job. I knew that he would be fascinated by Fei Long and become as devoted to him as he was to me. No one would have been able to fool Fei Long – not for seven minutes, much less seven years.”

“But his primary loyalty was always to you,” Kirishima reminds Asami.

“Was it? I wasn’t confident enough to put it to the test. Do you think I would have spent so much money on that deed just to let Fei Long save face? I had no intention of backing Yoh into a corner. If you know someone has conflicting loyalties, you’re a fool to force their hand and make them choose between them.”

Kirishima stares at Asami. Asami is never this frank about his weaknesses, not even with Kirishima.

“Why are you telling me this?” The question slips out of Kirishima’s mouth before he can stop it.

“Yoh never asked to be released from his fealty to me, but he knew that I recognized that he’d done enough at that point to fulfill any promise he’d ever made to me. It cost him what he’d built with Fei Long, but Yoh was able to serve us both faithfully to the end, even if Fei Long was too blind to recognize it.”

Kirishima bites his lip. He can guess where this is going, and it’s too dangerous to say anything.

“Suoh spoke to me earlier. Tell me honestly, do you think you’ve done enough already, Kei?”
“What?!” Kirishima bursts out. “I have no intention of backing out on the promise I made to you, Ryuichi. What the hell did Kazumi say?!”

Asami leans back in his chair and takes a big drag on his cigarette, visibly relaxing. “Good.”

*Good? That’s it?*

But Kirishima knows not to press his luck. He’ll just have to find out what Suoh said from the man himself – and give him a thorough chewing out.

As they head down to the parking garage after work, Kirishima asks Suoh, “Will you come to my place for a bit?”

“Sure,” Suoh says. “Need to talk?” He smiles sympathetically.

Kirishima scowls and doesn’t reply.

They’re barely inside Kirishima’s apartment when Suoh says, “So Motomi knows Yoshida, huh? Tough luck.”

Kirishima whirs around. “What the hell did you say to Ryuichi, Kazu-nii?”

Suoh stares at him in surprise for a moment. “What are you – oh, I just started laying the groundwork for what we discussed yesterday.”

“I told you I have no intention of backing out on my promise,” Kirishima says angrily.

“No, you didn’t,” Suoh says. “You said it was *too late* to back out, but you never actually said you didn’t *want* to.”

“I may not have used those exact words, but I thought I made myself pretty damn clear! Since you’re so thick-headed, I’ll say it again: I have no intention of ever backing out on my promise to Ryuichi.”

“Why are you so angry, Kei? I’m just trying to make sure that you can follow whatever path you choose.”

“I already chose my path! Just what kind of ideas are you putting into Ryuichi’s head? I’m already facing an uphill battle to regain his trust after yesterday’s blunder and today’s security nightmare. I don’t need you needlessly making things harder for me,” Kirishima grits out.

He’s never felt more like decking his cousin than he does right now. The only reason he holds back is that he doesn’t want to give Asami any more reason to think Kirishima has lost his self-control.

Suoh sighs. “I’m sorry. You just seem so… lost lately.”

“I do?” Kirishima asks. “Because of Kou-san? Just so you know, we broke up again. For good.”

“I heard. But I don’t think it’s that. I think Motomi was just a symptom.”

“You’ve been talking to Ryuichi too much,” Kirishima grumbles.

“What do you mean? Besides our conversation last night, we’ve barely talked about you.”
“Ryuichi thinks I’m going through a midlife crisis,” Kirishima grudgingly explains.

“Ah. So he’s noticed it, too.” Suoh nods.

“I —” Kirishima swallows. “I really like Kou-san, but when he asked me to choose between him and my job, he made the decision for me. I don’t regret the promise I made to Ryuichi.”

“But you regret who it’s turned you into,” Suoh says, his eyes boring into Kirishima’s.

Kirishima can’t completely deny it. “I was just surprised. I looked up for the first time in fifteen years and realized I wasn’t the person I thought I was. But if I were to go back on my promise to Ryuichi, I would never be that person again.”

“There’s a lot more to life than work,” Suoh says.

“Look who’s talking,” Kirishima retorts.

Suoh chuckles. “I have my hobbies, even if I’m not the settling-down type right now. I might never be. But at least I know that. This is the first time you’ve really taken the time to explore yourself. Tell me truthfully, did you ever even have another friend before Ryuichi? And I don’t count.”

Kirishima looks away. He can feel the blush creeping over his face.

“That’s what I thought.”

“But I can still explore things even though I’m no longer dating Kou-san,” Kirishima says. “I’m still doing parkour, and Tokawa-san is helping me adjust my workout schedule so I can keep up my fitness for the job at the same time.”

Kirishima doesn’t mention the conversation he had with Yoneda. Was that the beginning of a friendship, or was it a one-off thing?

Suoh studies Kirishima. “I’m glad you’re expanding your world – and paying more attention to who you are and who you want to be. But if you reach a point – emphasis on the if, okay? – if you ever decide that you want to choose another path, I’ll make sure that’s open to you.”

“You don’t think there’s any way to keep my promise to Ryuichi without actually working for him, do you?” Kirishima asks.

Suoh stares at him.

Kirishima quickly adds, “Yeah, that’s the same conclusion I came to, too.”

“I’d love to say there are other fish in the sea, but if Motomi is your type, you’re going to be hard-pressed to find someone who can handle your job. Ryuichi was insanely lucky to find Takaba. Don’t expect lightning to strike twice. But there are plenty of people willing to date men like us.”

Kirishima snorts. “Like the type you date? No thanks.”

“Hey, that’s rude! And I already told you, I’m not the settling-down type, so I wouldn’t mess around with someone who is. There’s a wide variety of people. I can show you where to look.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’m not interested in anyone else.”

“Well, of course you’re still hurting, but when you’re ready, just ask.”
Kirishima bites his lip so nothing will slip past.

*I’ll never be ready. I don’t think I’ll ever meet someone like Kou-san again. Kou-san said that my world already had color and I just need to look around, but it’s not the same without him. Can I really do this?*

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from the song "Take This Waltz" by Leonard Cohen, which was adapted from the poem "Pequeño Vals Vienès" by Federico García Lorca. (If you know the song, it was a bit of foreshadowing since the full couplet is "Who is it climbs to your picture/ with a garland of freshly cut tears?")

I feel a little bad about the emotional roller coaster, but to be fair, it's largely the characters' doing - Asami and Akihito weren't supposed to give them enough time to talk last chapter, so it's all their fault.

And some might be upset about Aki and Kou, but I felt it had to happen that way.

There are still 3-8 chapters left (probably towards the higher end of that range). I'll leave them both in a good place, I promise.

I have no idea which story I'll work on next. Whichever is more persistent, though this story is being really insistent right now, so there's a good chance it will be more CMW.
Kou told Kirishima his world has always had color. But will Kirishima be able to find it on his own?

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima’s assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

Japanese terms:
Shinkansen: Japan's "bullet" train
genkan: the entrance to a Japanese home

The parkour spot they visit at the end of this chapter is the one featured in this video.

“Good job, Kirishima-san,” Tokawa calls out as Kirishima passes by on his way to the next station. Kirishima grins to himself as he knocks out ten burpees (with a pull-up at the top of every jump).
He’s breathing hard, but he doesn’t feel like puking, and he has been able to maintain a decent pace throughout the twenty-minute workout. Each met-con has gotten a little easier, and while he’s usually still one of the slowest in class, he now finishes only two or three rounds behind the leader instead of five.

It’s been two months since the break-up. The day after his final talk with Kou, Kirishima had planned to skip the gym and wallow in bed until it was time to go to work. But a text from Yoneda woke him up.

>You’re coming to the gym today, right? I messed up that gate vault you taught me when I tried it yesterday. Can you teach me again, please?

Kirishima froze. He knew Yoneda was guarding Takaba two nights earlier: the night he and Kou made up – and kissed in plain view of the restaurant window. But did Yoneda know about what happened yesterday? Was he guarding Takaba during his friendship breakup with Kou?

Kirishima sighed. He was being stupid. Yoneda must have suspected something was up when he removed Kirishima’s guns from his apartment. Kirishima texted Yoneda back.

_I’m tired. I was thinking of skipping today._

*Sometimes when you’re tired, exercise can help lift your mood.*

Kirishima stared at the message. Yoneda knew. Before Kirishima could compose himself to reply, Yoneda sent another text.

_Then again, sometimes you really do just need to… ‘rest.’_

Yoneda definitely knew… which meant everyone else at Sion probably knew, too, knowing how rumors spread. Kirishima sighed again.

_You know, don’t you?_

_Know what?(^_^;)_

Kirishima remembered how much Yoneda’s advice had helped when trying to reconcile with Kou. Kirishima realized he never really properly thanked Yoneda.

_Thanks again for your advice. It worked – until Kou-san found out too much._

*Sorrry things didn’t work out for you._

_Well, it can’t be helped. Um…_

,Yes?

_How many other people know?_

About you and Motomi-san?

Yes.

Well… I mean, it’s part of his file, so everyone who’s part of his surveillance team knows. But we’re all professional. It’s not like we discuss your private business._

_I see._
Is that why you don’t want to come to the gym? I promise it’s fine. No one is going to say anything to you about it.

No, but they’ll be thinking… things.

They won’t. They know how to be professional. Is this because I brought it up when we met in Odaiba? I’m sorry. I really should have minded my own business.

No, please don’t apologize. Your advice really was helpful. I’m sorry for making you uncomfortable.

You didn’t. Let’s not get stuck in an endless apology circle. (^_^;)

Okay. (^_^;)

Look, if you really don’t want to come to the gym, that’s fine. But please don’t let worries about how we’ll behave keep you away. It’s better to keep coming, and things will be the same as always.

Well…

That makes a lot of sense, actually. I’ll see you soon, I guess.

Yay! I expect another lesson on that gate vault.

And so Kirishima had continued to go to the parkour gym. When he met with Tokawa to discuss his fitness goals, he still didn’t have a big goal in mind, but Tokawa took care of that for him.

“I’ve been thinking about how you can combine your love of hiking and the outdoors with parkour, and I discovered there’s a mud run at Camp Fuji in June,” Tokawa told him excitedly.

“Mud run?” Kirishima asked blankly.

Tokawa pulled out his phone and showed Kirishima a short video. “It’s five kilometers, with about twenty to thirty obstacles of varying difficulties.”

“And mud?” Kirishima asked, wrinkling his nose faintly.

“That just makes some of the obstacles harder,” Tokawa explained. “Look, they have a team competition as well as an individual competition. Some of the other guys are interested in the team event, too, but you could also do the individual event if that’s more your style.”

Kirishima wasn’t sure about the race that many participants called “the toughest thing I’ve ever done,” but he’d gone ahead and signed up to be on a team with Yoneda and Sakuragi. *Kou-san told me not to forget to look around me. I’ve got to color my own world now.*

“Time!” Tokawa calls as Kirishima finishes his last pull-up.

Tokawa starts recording the number of rounds everyone’s completed. The other guys enthusiastically call out their scores. Kirishima, as usual, waits to call out his until closer to the end.

“Nine,” Sakuragi calls out.

“Really? I could have sworn you lapped me twice,” Saji says, raising his eyebrows. “Did I only get
seven?”

“Nah. I didn’t finish my last one. I was two precision jumps away,” Sakuragi says, groaning in frustration. “I’m sure Yoneda creamed me again.”

“I only got ten,” Yoneda says. “I was only a couple of exercises into the round.”

“You still beat me,” Sakuragi says.

“Kirishima-san?” Tokawa calls out.

“Nine,” Kirishima says quietly, trying not to look too pleased with himself.

Several of the other guys clap.

Sakuragi pats Kirishima on the shoulder. “Great job, teammate. See? You did as well as me.”

“I barely finished that last round,” Kirishima explains. He’s been worried that he’ll slow Sakuragi and Yoneda down in their race, despite the other two’s assurances that they’re happy to have him on their team. Not wanting to be a burden has been one of his main motivations for working so hard at Tokawa’s intense conditioning program.

“Finishing is what counts,” Sakuragi says. “Anyway, you’ve made amazing progress the past two months.”

“Yeah, no more puking in the trashcan.” Kirishima grins.

“That means you’re not working hard enough,” Yoneda teases.

“Like you’ve ever puked mid-workout,” Sakuragi retorts.

“Nah, but I have afterwards.”

“You had food poisoning. That doesn’t count.”

As they head to the locker room, Saji crows, “Yakiniku on Yoneda!”

Yoneda rolls his eyes. “Not that stupid ‘winner has to treat everyone else again’. That’s getting really old.”

“I’ll treat,” Kirishima offers.

“You don’t have to, Kirishima-san,” the others say.

“I know, but I want to. Don’t think this will become the new tradition or anything, though, Saji-kun.” Kirishima warns as he towels off before donning a fresh t-shirt.

Kirishima takes in the easy banter as the guys wait for their meat to cook over the charcoal grill. He grins softly to himself. *Is this what having friends feels like?*

Sure, Asami has been a great friend to Kirishima, but their relationship began as one of senpai-kouhai, and it quickly became one of boss-subordinate when Kirishima started working for Asami’s tailoring (and contraband courier) business while they were still in high school. And Suoh doesn’t really count as a friend since he’s family.
Granted, Kirishima is the guys’ superior, and that relationship is respected through the honorifics they use with one another, but he’s not their supervisor, and since they almost exclusively interact outside of the work environment, their relationship feels more like friends than coworkers. Kirishima is included in the playful ribbing, and he’s learned to give as good as he takes. None of the guys have ever taken it too far or made him feel inferior because of his lack of certain skills or athletic prowess – or even his social awkwardness.

Yoneda in particular has been very supportive of Kirishima. Not long after the break-up, in the locker room before practice the guys talked about setting up another outdoor parkour jam. They started hounding Kirishima for good spots, and Yoneda spoke up and said that they should discuss it on Twitter after the workout.

When the others went out to the gym to warm up, Yoneda asked Kirishima to hang back with him. “Are you worried about showing up at the same spot as Motomi-san?”

Kirishima nodded. “He showed me all the spots I know.”

“And he practices with Takaba-san, too… Takaba-san would be livid to find us at any of his spots.”

“Exactly,” Kirishima agreed.

“I’ll ask Tokawa-san for a few spots, and then I’ll text you their names, and you can tell the guys, okay?”

“You don’t mind?” Kirishima asked, surprised that Yoneda would go that far for him.

“If I tell them the spots Tokawa-san suggests, they’ll keep asking you for more spots. They might keep asking about Musashino, but if we get enough spots closer to here, maybe they’ll forget about that.”

“Was that time in Odaiba the first time any of you trained outside?” Kirishima asked.

“Kind of. When we first started learning, we went to a spot Tokawa-san recommended, but we didn’t really know what to look for and only managed to practice a couple of moves,” Yoneda admitted. “You saw it in Odaiba – I didn’t realize how many moves we could practice at that one spot. It’s different when I’m following Takaba-san; I just copy what he does, or figure out an easier way if what he’s done is too crazy.”

“I guess when you train in a gym, you get used to doing the moves there,” Kirishima said.

“Probably. I guess we expected there would be similar places outside, like you see in those parkour videos online. But when I was watching you guys at the university, each individual area didn’t have that much to practice, so you moved around and did what you could at each place, same as Odaiba.”

“Exactly,” Kirishima confirmed. “I’ve seen a few videos, too. I assume they cut out the movement from one place to another.”

“That makes sense,” Yoneda said. “Well, I’ll send you what I can squeeze out of Tokawa-san. Anyway, since you’ve got a good eye, we’ll be able to practice more moves at each of the spots he suggests.”

Yoneda had proven as good as his word, and Kirishima shared with the guys a few spots Tokawa recommended that Kirishima hadn’t been to with Kou. Outside parkour jams had become a biweekly event, and while no one could make all of them, Kirishima arranged his schedule to make at least one of them each week.
A few days after they signed up for the mud run together, Yoneda confessed to Kirishima and Sakuragi that he had no experience trail running or even hiking, and that he’d fallen four times in the first kilometer when he tried running on a “moderate” level of trail. Kirishima discovered that his hiking experience translated well to trail running. It came intuitively to him, but when Sakuragi and Yoneda struggled, Kirishima was able to break down what he was doing to maintain speed and footing into concrete suggestions.

The teammates have been going on weekly trail runs of gradually increasing difficulty together, and these long runs have given them a chance to bond. Yoneda continues to have challenges in his long-distance relationship. A couple of weeks ago, a mile into their run, he said, “I don’t know how much longer Shiharu-tan and I will last. She’s getting more and more frustrated with how little we can even talk, between my crazy schedule and her increasing duties taking care of her grandfather.”

“Has he gotten worse?” Sakuragi asked.

“Sort of. But the doctors can’t say whether he has six months left or six years left. And it’s not like it’s a linear thing. Sometimes he seems completely lucid and normal, but most of the time he doesn’t really know where he is or who anyone is. It changes day by day. Hell, sometimes it changes minute by minute.”

“That must be really hard on the whole family,” Kirishima said.

“Yeah. Most of the time he calls Shiharu-tan by her mother’s name. It’s really hard on her; she says it feels like he’s completely forgotten she ever existed.”

“Does she take care of him around the clock?” Kirishima asked.

“No. She works at a department store, but she cares for him a lot when she’s at home, to give her mother a break.”

“When was the last time she got a break?” Sakuragi asked.

“Not for a long time,” Yoneda said. “Even when I visited last month, we spent most of our time in the house just in case her grandfather needed anything.”

“When was the last time she visited you?” Kirishima asked.

“Not since about two months after I moved here,” Yoneda admitted. “It’s a lot easier on her if I go there, and I’m the one who moved away…”

“But it sounds like she needs a break, and she can’t really get one there. Besides, it’s important that she understands what your life is like here so she can still feel like she’s a part of it. Why don’t you invite her for a visit? Explain it to Suoh and I’m sure you can get a few days off in a row.”

“The rest of us would definitely be willing to cover the extra shifts for you,” Sakuragi chimed in.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Yoneda said, breaking out into a grin. Then his face fell. “But where would she stay? We’re not supposed to have overnight guests in the corporate apartments. I guess I could get a hotel room…” He started muttering to himself as he calculated the costs of the Shinkansen ticket.

“You can borrow my place,” Kirishima offered, surprising himself. “It’s just me, and I don’t mind.”
“You’d really do that?!” Yoneda asked. “I couldn’t possibly…”

“Really, it wouldn’t be a problem. We can just trade for a few days. Anyway, the corporate apartments are even closer to work than my place, so it’d save me time.”

Yoneda continued to protest until finally Sakuragi interceded. “Dude, just accept it. You and Shiharu-san both need a break, and someone’s finally offering you one.”

“Thank you,” Yoneda said. “I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“You don’t have to,” Kirishima said, blushing a little, though he doubted anyone would notice since they were running. “Take it as payback for your advice earlier.”

Yoneda’s girlfriend is arriving today. As they leave the yakiniku place, Kirishima tells Yoneda, “I left my spare key at home. Do you want to meet me there? Or I can give you a ride over…”

“I’ve got my bike. I’ll meet you there, but thanks for the offer.”

Kirishima ends up driving behind Yoneda. As Kirishima watches Yoneda lean into the turns, Kirishima’s heart is filled with an aching longing. Even though he has his own helmet and jacket, he hasn’t been on a motorcycle since the break-up. He misses the sensation of tearing down the road, the world a blur of colors, wind, and engine’s thrum. But most of all, he misses the warmth and solidness of Kou’s back anchoring him to reality.

Suoh suggested last week that Kirishima consider getting his own motorcycle license and bike, but Kirishima can’t imagine the experience without Kou. Kirishima pushes the memories out of his mind as he parks in a visitor’s spot and waves Yoneda into Kirishima’s assigned spot.

“The elevator is over there,” Kirishima says, leading Yoneda back along the row of spaces as he points across a metal barricade towards the opposite side of the garage.

“You don’t think I can handle your underbar shortcut?” Yoneda flashes a teasing grin.

Kirishima chuckles. “Good point.” He changes course and leads Yoneda the direct way, slipping between two bars of the barricade and through two slightly offset bars of the adjacent barricade protecting the facing row of cars.

Yoneda’s eyebrows shoot up. “No wonder you got so good at underbars so quickly. When you described it, I envisioned big gaps like there were in the railings on that staircase in Odaiba.”

Kirishima shrugs.

Yoneda performs the underbar flawlessly on his first attempt.

“You got pretty good at them quickly yourself,” Kirishima points out. “The first dozen times I tried it, I nailed my shins on the bar.”

Yoneda leans back over the barricade. “You’re not afraid of heights, are you?”

Kirishima looks over the barricade, too, observing the narrow gap between the barricades that affords a view of the very bottom of the parking deck three floors below. “I’m not. But I never really looked before. It’s too narrow to fall down, and you’d really have to screw up the underbar to have any risk even if it weren’t.”
“True,” Yoneda agrees, still staring down between the barricades.

Kirishima looks at him more closely. “Are you?”

“Am I what?” Yoneda asks, leading the way to the door to the elevators.

“Afraid of heights. You are?” Kirishima asks incredulously. How is he able to chase Takaba-san across rooftops?

“Only if I stop to think about it,” Yoneda confesses. “As long as I practice enough, I get used to it.”

Kirishima leads the way to his apartment, taking care to point out the location of the fitness facility and trash receptacles on their way up. Once inside, he gives Yoneda a brief tour.

“I’ve cleared out a little space in the closet. I hope it’s enough,” Kirishima says, opening the door to show Yoneda. “And here’s an empty drawer.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Yoneda says.

“It’s okay; it was already empty,” Kirishima replies. He hasn’t had the heart to put anything in it after Kou emptied it. Wanting to distract himself, Kirishima leans down and pulls open the cabinet where he stores the extra futon. “There’s a spare futon in here if you need it. Or not.”

Kirishima fights to keep the blush off his face as he closes the cabinet again. He decides it’s time to head to a safer room: the kitchen.

“I made a few dishes if you want to eat them. You don’t have to, of course, but in case you’re hungry and don’t want to eat out or feel like cooking. Feel free to use whatever you find in here.”

Yoneda gapes at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even think to do anything like that. I have no idea what’s in my fridge. Why don’t you take what you cooked with you so that you have good food to eat over there? My kitchen is not nearly as nice.”

“It’s fine. I made it for you,” Kirishima insists.

“You’re already being so nice to me. I still can’t believe you offered to let me borrow your apartment. I really shouldn’t have accepted it.” Yoneda’s frown deepens.

“It’s fine. It’s really the least I can do to thank you,” Kirishima presses.

“For our conversation in Odaiba? That was hardly anything, and anyway, it didn’t even really help you, did it?” Yoneda says.

“It really did, at least until that whole Yoshida mess happened,” Kirishima says quietly, “but it’s not about that. Well, it is a little, but you’ve really helped me these past couple of months. If you hadn’t encouraged me to come back to the gym right away, I probably wouldn’t have ever gone back, and I’d have gone back to my old workaholic habits and pretended everything was okay.”

“Aren’t you doing that anyway?” Yoneda asks. “Are you really okay?”

“I’m fine,” Kirishima says quickly. Yoneda continues to quietly study him, so Kirishima considers the question for a moment before answering again. “I really am fine. I wouldn’t have come back to the gym if you hadn’t urged me to, and then I wouldn’t be training for the mud run, wouldn’t be able to talk to you and Sakuragi-kun on our runs, wouldn’t be attending any parkour jams or unwinding with yakiniku afterwards. It might be presumptuous of me to say, but I really value your friendship. I
– I really respect Asami-sama, but there are some things you just can’t say to your boss.” By the time he’s finished, Kirishima’s face is aflame.

Yoneda grins. “Like offering unsolicited love advice?”

“I’m not your boss,” Kirishima points out. “Not directly. Look, I’m still sad about the break-up, but I’m trying to move on with my life. You’ve been a big part in helping me to do that, so thank you.”

Kirishima’s blush has faded a little as he’s said this, but now Yoneda’s cheeks are turning a bit pink. “Well, you and Sakuragi have been a great help to me, too. I seriously don’t think Shiharu-tan and I would have made it without your help and advice. I really hope this visit helps.” Yoneda lets out a shaky breath.

“Me too,” Kirishima says softly.

Two days later, Kirishima is lacing up his sneakers in Yoneda’s genkan when there’s a knock at the door. Sakuragi and Saji are there. “You ready to head to the park?” Sakuragi asks.

Kirishima nods as he picks up his parkour bag (a much smaller – and lighter – bag than his usual gym bag, since it only contains a water bottle, sunscreen, bug spray, a face towel, and a small first aid kit). The trio head down the stairs to the parking garage.

“Are you heading back here after the jam?” Kirishima asks.

“Yeah,” the other two answer. Sakuragi adds, “The others are coming straight from their shifts, so they’re riding separately.”

“I can drive us all then,” Kirishima offers.

Thirty minutes later, he pulls into the parking lot of Hanegi Park in Setagaya. “This is pretty close to Kodama headquarters,” he mutters.

“We’ll be careful,” Sakuragi says. “Besides, we’re dressed in our gym clothes. I don’t think they’d even recognize you.”

Kirishima glances down at his attire. They probably wouldn’t recognize me without Asami-sama next to me whatever I was wearing, he admits to himself.

“Is this it?” Saji asks, looking across the road at the tree-lined playground.

“This is awesome,” Sakuragi says. “Look at all those rails. So many great lines to choose from.”

“We can hit the rails on the way back to the car if you guys haven’t had enough,” Kirishima says. “But let’s check out the real spot first.”

Sakuragi’s eyebrows shoot up. He’s been trying to train outdoors as often as possible in preparation for the mud run, and he knows that the current location would usually be considered a great spot.

Kirishima leads them around the baseball fields. When the play area with concrete walls and rails taking advantage of the naturally hilly landscape comes into view, even Saji gives a low whistle.

“Wait until you see the maze,” Kirishima says.
“Over here!” Yoneda calls. “This is Shiharu-tan,” he says, gesturing to a pretty, shy-looking girl beside him. “She wanted to meet my friends.”

Yoneda introduces them in turn. When he says Kirishima’s name, Shiharu says, “Oh! You’re the one who lent us your apartment. Thank you very much. That was so kind of you.”

Kirishima takes in Shiharu’s jeans, t-shirt, and tennis shoes. “Are you going to practice parkour with us?” he asks.

Shiharu shakes her head. “I don’t really know how.”

Sakuragi nudges Yoneda.

“I can teach you a few things,” Yoneda says.

Shiharu breaks into a broad grin. “Finally.”

Everyone laughs.

“I didn’t know you wanted to!” Yoneda protests.

“He’s kind of clueless, Shiharu-san,” Sakuragi apologizes.

“I know,” Shiharu says. “I suppose I could have asked myself.”

They’ve just finished warming up when Saijo, one of the other guards, calls out to them from across the park. He sprints over, out of breath, casting a worried look at Kirishima.

“What is it?” Kirishima asks.

“It’s, uh –” Saijo glances at Yoneda for assistance, but Yoneda just raises his eyebrows. “Um, Motomi-san and Tokawa-san are out for a run. They started at the gym, but they seem to be heading in this direction.”

“Are you sure? How far away are they?” Yoneda asks.

“Less than a kilometer. We couldn’t get close enough to confirm without potentially being compromised, but at this point, there aren’t any other destinations that seem likely.”

Chapter End Notes

I thought I could take this chapter a little further, but it got too long, and this seemed like a good stopping point. I plan to write one from Kou’s perspective soon, though I don’t know yet whether it will be the next one or the one following (I’m leaning towards the one following the next).

I’ll probably write another chapter of this story next since I already have some material for it. We’re getting closer to the ending, but there are at least five more chapters left, probably more.
A Scent of Jasmine and a Rasp of Sand (Buff)

Chapter Summary

What secret will someone from the security team share? And more importantly, what will happen when Kirishima finally sees Kou again after two months?

Chapter Notes

"The smell of jasmine makes people tell their secrets." – Jandy Nelson, I'll Give You the Sun

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

parkour terms:
tracing: practicing parkour

safety vault: a safe, easy way of jumping over an object by placing opposite hand and foot on it

kong vault: a method of jumping over an object by placing both hands on the object and passing one's feet between one's hands

Japanese terms:
izakaya: a type of Japanese bar that also sells food
Kirishima feels a buzzing in his ears. He shakes his head. He wants nothing more than to see Kou—
but Kirishima still hasn’t figured out a way to keep his vow to Asami without working for him.

“If I fail a background check, I won’t qualify for a visa.”

Kirishima shakes his head again. *I’m too close to Kodama-gumi headquarters. I can’t run into Kou-
san here. “I’ve got to go,”* Kirishima says. He takes off towards the car.

“Kirishima-san, calm down!” Yoneda calls, but Kirishima isn’t listening.

Kirishima only makes it ten steps before remembering he gave Sakuragi and Saji a ride. He turns
around and trots back to Sakuragi, handing him the car keys. “I’ll take the train back. You take the
car when you’re done.”

“Wait, Kirishima-san!” Sakuragi says, putting a hand on Kirishima’s shoulder to stop him.

“We’ve all got to leave,” Yoneda explains. “Tokawa-san knows us. There would be too many
questions, especially if he mentions you.”

“It’d blow our cover,” Saijo explains.

Yoneda scowls at Saijo before taking a quick glance at Shiharu and frowning at her worried
expression.

“Okay, let’s go then,” Kirishima says. He knows how fast both Tokawa and Kou can run.

“It’ll be okay,” Saijo says as they head towards the car. “I can find out which way they’re coming.
They won’t see us.” He listens to his radio and directs them back towards the parking lot.

Kirishima takes several deep breaths. He glances over and notices that Shiharu and Yoneda are
trying to hide a whispered argument. “Yoneda-kun, you can tell Shiharu-san about my relationship
with Kou-san,” he announces.

Everyone looks at him in surprise.

“Kou-san is my ex-boyfriend. He’s friends with the owner of the parkour gym.” Kirishima looks
intently at Shiharu. “This is top secret information, okay?” She nods. “You know that Yoneda-kun is
on the security team. Even the most casual sharing of anything I’m about to tell you could endanger
Yoneda-kun’s charges—and Yoneda-kun himself.”

“I understand,” Shiharu says. “I know how to keep a secret.”

“Good.” Kirishima glances around to make sure no one can overhear them. “Someone in one of the
upper leadership’s family has a job related to criminal investigation. Yoneda-kun actually leads the
team protecting that person, especially on the job. Kou-san is good friends with that person; that’s
how I met him. And Kou-san helped him recently on an investigation, so at my request, the team has
been providing protection to Kou-san. But Kou-san doesn’t know about it. Even though we’ve
broken up, I still want him to be safe, but if he finds out I’ve been having people follow him…”
Shiharu nods. “I get it. Thanks for telling me. And don’t worry; I won’t tell anyone.”

Yoneda shoots Kirishima a grateful look.

They gather around Kirishima’s car in the parking lot. “I can give everyone a ride back to the dorms, but it would be a tight squeeze,” Kirishima offers.

“I’ve got my bike, but we’ve still got time. Let’s just move to another spot,” Yoneda says.

The other guys enthusiastically agree.

“How about Shinjuku Chuo Park?” Sakuragi suggests.

Kirishima really isn’t feeling it anymore; he just wants to be alone. But I drove everyone.

Yoneda claps a hand on his shoulder. “Come on. It’s better than thinking too much, right?”

Kirishima nods.

When he’s concentrating on parkour moves, Kirishima is glad he came. But while he’s taking a break, waiting for his next turn, his mind keeps wandering to Kou. I wish I could have at least seen him. I wonder how he’s doing.

When the others talk to Kirishima, they have to say his name several times before he realizes it. Finally, Yoneda sits down next to him.

“He’s… doing okay,” Yoneda says quietly, choosing his words carefully. “He spends most of his time at home or outside practicing parkour alone, or rarely with one of a few different friends. I don’t know if this is typical, but he traces for two to three hours at a time. Most days he’s getting at least two sessions in.”

Kirishima nods. “Thanks. Sorry I’m bringing the mood down.”

“It’s okay. You’re not. We’re just worried about you,” Yoneda says.

“I’m fine. I just…” Kirishima sighs. “He said we could stay together if… if I give up my job. But that’s impossible.”

“But you want to,” Yoneda says.

“No! I mean…”

“I understand. I wish I could erase the miles between Tokyo and home, so that I could see Shiharut-an more often but still have my life here.”

“It’s different,” Kirishima says, trying to keep the bitterness he’s feeling out of his voice.

“I know. Sorry. I wish I could help you figure out a way to have both. Or could help you… move on. But you’re not ready for that yet, are you?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “Kou-san was the first person I ever liked,” he confesses. “I don’t know if I’ll ever meet anyone else like him.”

“Well… No one is the same. But when you’re ready, I’m sure you could find someone you like as
much – maybe even more – and who’s okay with your job. You weren’t really looking before meeting him, right?”

Kirishima gives a sad laugh. “I wasn’t even looking when I met him. I never would have chosen to fall for Takaba-san’s best friend.”

Yoneda nods. “They haven’t met since…”

“Theyir friendship break-up?” Kirishima guesses.

Yoneda nods. “I’m not sure they’ll ever make up. Takaba-san has stopped going over to his house.”

Kirishima sighs. “They’ve known each other since childhood. I suppose that’s my fault.”

Yoneda shrugs. “It sounds like he was mad at Takaba-san because of what Takaba-san chose to do.”

“But Takaba-san couldn’t betray Asami-sama. I put him in the position where he had to choose.” Thank goodness he did choose Asami-sama. Asami-sama never would have forgiven me if he hadn’t.

“You can’t help who you fall in love with.”

They both lapse into silence for a few moments.

Yoneda finally breaks the silence. He focuses on Sakuragi’s run across a series of railings as he says, “Uh… Shiharu-tan asked me something as we were getting on the bike. I pretended I didn’t hear her, but I’m sure she’ll ask me again. I wanted to ask how you wanted me to answer.” Yoneda blushes slightly.

“What is it?” Kirishima asks.

“She asked if Motomi-san was a guy.”

Kirishima laughs. “Well, he is. I don’t mind if you tell her. Will she mind? Will it weird her out, staying at my place?”

Yoneda finally looks at him. “No. The opposite. She’s a bit of a fujoshi.”

“What’s that?”

“A fan of boys’ love manga.”

“Oh.” Kirishima blushes slightly but shrugs. “Well, like I said, Kou-san is a guy. It’s better not to lie unless you have to.”

“Like you did back there,” Yoneda says. “Technically everything you told her about my job was true. Thanks for that.”

Kirishima shrugs. “It’s tricky, knowing how much is safe to share. If you don’t share anything, it makes people more suspicious. I’ve had a lot of experience finding that balance.” So why did I screw it up so badly with Kou-san?

They watch Shiharu’s attempt at the line. She’s already doing safety vaults at speed, but her attempt at a kong vault results in her slamming her shins on the bar.

Yoneda rushes over to her.
“I’m okay. I guess that one is harder than it looks,” Shiharu says sheepishly.

“My friend had me practice the movement on the ground first.” Kirishima demonstrates how to practice konging across the ground. “Once you can comfortably land with your feet past your hands, then it’s safe to try it on an obstacle.”

Shiharu nods and tries it. Ten minutes later, she tries it on the railing again and clears it.

“You should take her to the gym,” Kirishima suggests. “I think she’ll enjoy it, and it’ll give you a chance to show off a little, too.” He elbows Yoneda.

That night after work, Kirishima is sitting alone in Yoneda’s room when someone knocks on the door.

“Kirishima-san, I hope I’m not bothering you!” Sakuragi calls.

Kirishima opens the door, grinning as he says, “Of course you’re bothering me. Don’t you know how late it is?”

“Saji said he rode up the elevator with you. I knew you wouldn’t be asleep yet,” Sakuragi explains. “Anyway, we’re playing video games in my apartment if you’d like to join us.”

“I’ve never played video games before,” Kirishima confesses.

Sakuragi’s eyebrows fly up. “You’re kidding. Then you’ve got to come. Hurry up and put on your shoes.”

Kirishima complies and follows Sakuragi down the hall to his apartment. When Sakuragi opens the door, Saji shoots a quick glance at them before returning his attention to the screen where he’s locked in a fierce gun battle with Saijo. “Oh, great! You convinced –” Saji cusses as his screen turns red. “Sorry, Kirishima-san,” he mutters, setting his controller aside.

Kirishima laughs. “It’s fine.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” Sakuragi offers. “And we have snacks.” He gestures to a bag of chips on the table.

“I’ll just have some tea, thanks,” Kirishima says.

Sakuragi hands him a can of tea.

“Let’s play co-op. Kirishima-san says he’s never played before,” Sakuragi suggests.

“Call of Duty? A first person shooter?” Saji asks.


Kirishima nods, his face flushing. “My family was very traditional.”

“But you’ve never even been to an arcade?” Saijo gapes at him.

Kirishima shakes his head. “I went to a boarding school, and it was pretty strict. There was no arcade nearby.” That didn’t stop Togawa and his gang from sneaking out to go play occasionally, but they never invited me… Kirishima can feel his cheeks flushing.
“Well, that’s fine. We’ll teach you. It’s fun,” Saji says. He hands Kirishima a controller and quickly explains how to use it.

“There are too many buttons,” Kirishima gripes.

“You’ll get used to it,” Sakuragi assures him.

At first, Kirishima keeps walking into walls and getting shot, but he soon gets the hang of it.

“I knew you’d be good,” Sakuragi grins. “Some experiences translate well to video games, right?”

Kirishima eyes him. Even in the corporate apartments, Sion guards are trained to be very careful with what they say. Kirishima clears his throat and says, “Yeah, I guess all that time multitasking on my tablet helps.”

“I was thinking more of the quick reflexes you developed in parkour,” Sakuragi says, grinning mischievously.

“That too.” Kirishima chuckles.

During the next cut scene, Saji opens another beer for himself.

“Aren’t you hitting it pretty heavy?” Saijo asks. “Don’t forget, Yoneda isn’t supposed to cover if we need more guards on a shift.”

“I know,” Saji says. “This will be my last one.” He sighs.

Kirishima glances between them with concern. “Is this a common occurrence?” he asks, frowning.

“Don’t go into boss mode,” Saji pleads. “It’s not, I swear. Right, guys?”

Sakuragi and Saijo both nod.

“So is something going on with you, Saji?” Sakuragi asks.

Saji blushes. “No…”

Sakuragi and Saijo both put down their controllers. “Something totally is,” Saijo says. “Spill.”

“It’s nothing,” Saji says. He picks up his controller. “Can’t we just play?”

“If that will make it easier for you to talk to us,” Sakuragi says, picking up his own controller again.

“Sheesh. You guys are making it into such a big deal, there’s no way I can talk about it now,” Saji gripes.

“Then we won’t bring it up. Just start talking when you’re ready,” Kirishima says. “Now how do I change weapons again?”

Sakuragi shoots him a look but explains the procedure again. “You’ve already changed weapons like six times,” Sakuragi mutters.

“Give him space,” Kirishima mutters back.

Fifteen minutes later, Saji casually asks, “So, Kirishima-san, how old were you when you figured out
Kirishima drops his controller. His character immediately dies.

“Saji!” Saijo cries. “Isn’t that a little personal?”

As Kirishima picks up his controller, he looks at Saji, but Saji is focusing intently on the screen. A suspicion begins to form in the back of Kirishima’s mind. “I’m not sure I am,” he admits. Saji’s face falls slightly, so Kirishima continues, “Kou-san was the first person I ever liked, so I guess… thirty-five.”

“Oh.” Saji says.

“How old were you?” Kirishima asks.

It’s Saji’s turn to drop his controller. The team fails their mission as Sakuragi and Saijo both turn and stare between Kirishima and Saji.

“I – um – I – I don’t know that I am,” Saji stutters.

“It’s okay if you are,” Kirishima says. “No one here is going to judge you, right?”

Saijo and Sakuragi both nod.

Saji takes a deep breath. His face is red, but he says, “I’ve suspected since high school, but I thought I could just ignore it. You know, date girls like everyone else, get married, have a normal life. But lately…”

“Is there someone you’re interested in?” Sakuragi asks.

“No!” Saji says too quickly. His face grows redder.

“There is!” Saijo cries. “We can tell by that face you’re making.”

“It’s not anyone on the team, though! You guys are like family. I would never look at you like that.”

*It must be someone he saw today for him to get so worked up about it now.* “Is it Kou-san?” Kirishima asks, trying to keep his tone neutral.

Saji stares at him. “Dude. What kind of question is that? He’s totally off limits.”

“So… Tokawa-san?” Sakuragi guesses.

Saji is now the color of an overripe tomato. “I can’t help it. But I’m pretty sure he’s straight.”

“Dude, even if he’s not, you can’t start dating Tokawa-san,” Saijo says. “He’s our trainer.”

“I know,” Saji says. “But the way he moves…” He shrugs helplessly. “So I figure I better admit it and find someone else quick.”

“And you want us to help you find someone?” Sakuragi guesses.

“I was thinking maybe Kirishima-san knows where I could meet someone,” Saji admits. “But I guess maybe I was wrong.”

“I’ve been to Ni-chôme with Asami-sama more than a few times over the years,” Kirishima says. “I
know quite a few places. If your type is Tokawa-san, the best place to go would be Geinki.” Kirishima’s face clouds as he remembers the bar where he and Kou went the night they first met.

“Want to go now?” Saijo asks. He stands up.

“It’s three a.m.,” Sakuragi points out, “but let’s go tomorrow night when we get off work.”

“I’m working the overnight shift tomorrow,” Saijo grumbles.

“You guys would come with me?” Saji asks.

“Of course,” the other three say in unison.

Saji blushes. “Wouldn’t that be weird?”

“No weirder than you coming to Dracaena with us when we’re picking up girls,” Sakuragi retorts.

“I won’t be able to go until next week if we don’t do it tomorrow,” Kirishima says.

“Then let’s make it tomorrow,” Saji declares. “Sorry, Saijo.”

Saijo shrugs. “It can’t be helped. Kirishima-san is your tour guide, after all.”

This makes Kirishima and Saji both blush. Kirishima picks up his controller. “Are we going to beat this mission or what?”

The next night at work, Kirishima tells Asami, “After midnight, Morita-kun will be taking over for me.”

Asami’s eyebrows fly up. “You have… plans?”

Asami seems to have changed the last word of the question at the last moment, but Kirishima can’t figure out what Asami might have been about to say, and Kirishima doesn’t have time to ponder it.

“Yes, with some of the guys from the security team.”

“Where are you going?” Asami asks.

“Ni-chōme.” The answer slips out before Kirishima can bite it back.

He’s filled with instant regret as Asami’s trademark smirk flashes. “Perhaps I’ll join you.”

“You can’t,” Kirishima says, quickly adding, “You’ve got too much work to do.”

“I’m sure that could be rearranged,” Asami says.

Kirishima fights the urge to roll his eyes. “The guys won’t be able to relax if you’re there, Asami-sama. Please don’t ruin it for them.”

“But they can relax with you?”

“I’m not their direct supervisor. Or their direct supervisor’s direct supervisor,” Kirishima explains.

*Why would Asami-sama want to go to Ni-chōme with the guys, anyway? Wouldn’t he rather do that with Takaba-san?* Kirishima muses to himself. He recalls Kou saying, “*They’ve never even been on*
The parkour double date was engineered by Kou. Kirishima doubts Asami has initiated another. “No wonder Aki’s so insecure.” Kou did have a point.

Kirishima decides to help Asami and Takaba out. Maybe someone can have a happy ending. “You know, if you really want to go to Ni-chôme, try asking Takaba-san.”

Asami considers the idea for a moment before pulling the stack of reports closer to him and getting to work.

Well, I tried. Maybe he’ll ask me to set something up for him once he coordinates their schedules.

At midnight, Kirishima heads to the parking garage. He takes his gym bag from the trunk and slides into the backseat. It’s ridiculously roomy for a Japanese car, and Kirishima tries not to think about why Asami insisted on the roominess – or the privacy window and tinted glass.

Kirishima pulls his jeans and sakura blossom t-shirt out of his bag. He slips the t-shirt over his head, but when he has the jeans pulled halfway up, he frowns. **Have I gained weight?**

But his suits have been fitting more loosely lately, not tighter. Kirishima lies back on the seat and pulls the jeans the rest of the way up. He looks down and finally realizes his mistake: he packed his skinny jeans instead of his regular jeans. Kirishima frowns. He’s only worn the skinny jeans in public once before, when Kou asked him to wear them to the movies.

**No one stared at me then,** Kirishima reminds himself. He still doesn’t feel comfortable in the skinny jeans, though. **Maybe I should wear my suit pants instead.**

But the t-shirt doesn’t really go with the suit pants, and besides, Kirishima is a lot older than the other guys. He doesn’t want to stick out too much, and the guys will all be in t-shirts and jeans.

Kirishima decides to keep the jeans on.

Once he’s dressed, Kirishima crams his wallet, train card, and keys into his pocket. **How am I supposed to fit my phone?** He discovers the phone will barely fit in his back pocket when he’s standing. He sets off for the nearest train station at a brisk pace.

Kirishima sends a quick text to Saji while he waits to cross the street.

*I’m heading to the station now.*

*I should be there in about ten minutes. Will you wait for me before getting on the train, please? (¬_¬)*

*Of course.*

Kirishima waves when Saji appears at the end of the platform. Saji jogs over, and the two step forward to wait for the next train together.

“Thanks for waiting for me,” Saji says.

“Are you nervous?” Kirishima asks.

“Yeah,” Saji admits, licking his lips. “I don’t know why.”
“It’s okay,” Kirishima says. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’m also kind of excited,” Saji confesses.

Kirishima chuckles. “That’s good. Is Sakuragi-kun on his way?”

“His shift ended a little late, so he said he’d meet us there. Yoneda and Shiharu-san will meet us there, too.”

Kirishima’s eyebrows rise at this news. Saji had asked them not to tell anyone else for now but promised he would tell the rest of the guys soon.

Saji explains. “Since Yoneda’s in charge of the team, I figured it was better he know what’s going on, just in case it causes any problems.”

“It shouldn’t,” Kirishima quickly assures him. After all, everyone on the team was selected to protect Asami-sama and his male lover.

“I know, but just in case, you know? Anyway, Yoneda said Shiharu-san really wanted to see Ni-chōme for some reason, so he asked if they could come along.”

Yoneda-kun said that Shiharu-san is a fan of boys’ love manga. I hope she’ll be discreet. But Yoneda-kun is sensitive, so it should be okay, right?


Kirishima decides that Saji is nervous enough without Kirishima adding to his worries. “A lot of bars in Ni-chōme don’t allow women in,” Kirishima explains, which is true enough. “We’ll be able to get into Geinki since Sion owns it, but it might upset the regulars.”

“Oh.” Saji frowns.

“We can go get some food at an izakaya first,” Kirishima suggests. “Maybe that would help you relax before we go to the bar, and that way if things get too uncomfortable at Geinki, Shiharu-san will have still had a good time.”

“That sounds good,” Saji says. “I’ll let Yoneda and Sakuragi know.”

Kirishima looks up the address of Uoya-itchō and shares it with Saji as the train pulls into the station. Once on the train, Saji falls into a fidgety silence. Kirishima can’t think of anything to say to help, so they end up riding quietly.

The awkwardness slowly dissipates when they’re moving again, Kirishima leading the way with unnecessary announcements of their path (“We’ll turn left at the next corner”) just to fill the silence.

Once at the izakaya, Saji finally starts to relax. He looks around at the men (and occasional women) eating in pairs or small groups. “The food smells good,” he says, giving a small grin as he looks at his menu.

“It is. See anything you like?” Kirishima asks.


“I meant the food!” Kirishima says, coloring a little himself.

“Oh. Of course. The food,” Saji mutters. He pulls his menu up higher, hiding his face.
“I heard the cheese fries are good,” Kirishima suggests.

“First date?” a voice asks from behind Saji.

Kirishima’s head jerks up from his menu in time to see Saji punching Sakuragi hard in the shoulder. “Not funny.”

Sakuragi laughs even as he rubs his shoulder. “Actually, I thought it was. You should have seen your faces.”

Saji rolls his eyes. “I knew you weren’t the right guy to tell. I should have only told Yoneda and Kirishima-san.”

“Why did you tell me, then?” Sakuragi grouses.

Kirishima can’t help but wonder whether Sakuragi is trying to hide his hurt with his indifference.

Saji seems to have picked up on it, too. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it. I’m glad I told you. Just – try not to be too much of a jerk, okay? I’m really nervous.”

“I know. Sorry, I was just trying to lighten the atmosphere.”

“No worries. I heard the cheese fries are good here. Want to split them?” Saji says.

“Only if you’re treating,” Sakuragi answers.

“I’ll treat,” Kirishima quickly offers. He knows how expensive a night on the town is, and while the guards make an adequate salary, it’s nothing compared to his.

“You just treated us the other day,” Saji points out.

“I know, so it’ll be a while before I do so again. But you should let your ‘senpai’ pay for your Ni-chōme debut. It’s only going to happen once, so enjoy it while you can.”

Sakuragi lets out a weird choking sound while Saji blushes so hard he’s nearly purple.

*Did I say something wrong?* Kirishima wonders.

“How can you say something like that with such a straight face?” Saji asks.

Once again Kirishima is flashing back to the night he met Kou. “Sorry,” he mutters, blushing himself.

“It’s fine,” Sakuragi says. “And thanks for treating us!”

“It’s not your debut,” Saji points out to him.

Sakuragi blushes a little, but Kirishima says, “I meant I’d treat everyone.”

“Should we order or wait for Yoneda and Shiharu-san?” Saji wonders.

Kirishima’s phone buzzes with a message.

*Shiharu-tan has to get her excitement out of her system first, so we might be a while. Go ahead and order.*

“Yoneda-kun says he’s running late and we should order,” Kirishima tells the others, his worry
ticking up slightly. **Saji is nervous enough. I hope Shiharu-san doesn’t inadvertently make it worse.**

As they wait for the food, Sakuragi tries to fill the awkward silence the other two keep creating. “See anyone you like?” he asks, nudging Saji with his elbow.

Saji chokes on his beer. “Sakuragi!” he hisses.

“What? That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?” Sakuragi asks matter-of-factly. “Our waitress isn’t half bad. See? It’s not so difficult to say. It’s normal.”

Saji’s blush gets redder as Sakuragi keeps talking.

“I don’t think you’re helping,” Kirishima points out to Sakuragi. Sakuragi’s face falls, so Kirishima hastily adds, “I know you’re trying to, but…”

Sakuragi sighs. “I give up.” He takes a giant sip of his beer. “I wish Yoneda and Shiharu-san would hurry up.”

“Sorry,” Saji and Kirishima say at the same time.

Kirishima racks his brain for a conversation topic. “Oh! I ordered a book about training for obstacle course races. It didn’t give a ton of specifics, but it said you could do gate vaults over high walls.”

“What would you hold onto?” Sakuragi asks.

“It said you just have to put your hand flat on the wall and push into it while you pull on the top of the wall with your other hand,” Kirishima says. Sakuragi still looks confused. “It didn’t make a lot of sense to me either,” Kirishima adds, “but I thought maybe Tokawa-san might know how to do it. It could save us a lot of time.”

Once they start talking about parkour, Saji relaxes. Their food arrives just as Yoneda and Shiharu finally show up.

“Sorry we’re late,” Yoneda mutters. “We got a little lost while we were walking around.”

Shiharu blushes a little. “It was my fault,” she says. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Sakuragi says. “Here are some menus.” He gets up and walks over to talk to the waitress.

“He didn’t have to do that,” Shiharu says.

Saji rolls his eyes. “He just wants to flirt with her.”

“Oh,” Shiharu blinks, trying to hide the confusion on her face.

Yoneda laughs softly. “Not everyone in Ni-chôme is gay, you know. We’re not, right?”

“Oh. Oh! Of course. Sorry. I mean, I knew Sakuragi-san wasn’t…” Shiharu trails off, ducking her head behind her menu in embarrassment.

“Did I hear you talking about brachial movement?” Yoneda asks.

“Yeah. Sakuragi just found a 30-day hanging challenge that looks like it might help with my grip strength,” Kirishima answers. He shows Yoneda the website.
They continue to talk about parkour as they eat and drink. Yoneda frets that they might be boring Shiharu, but she’s excited about their planned trip to the gym the next day, and she looks up all the moves they talk about on YouTube.

When it’s time to move on to Geinki, Yoneda says, “Shiharu-tan and I are going to head back. We have to get up early to hit the gym and do some sightseeing.”

“Thanks for letting me tag along,” Shiharu says. “I hope I didn’t bother your guys’ night out too much.”

The others reassure her that they were glad for her company and turn to walk over to Geinki. Before they’ve taken ten steps, Sakuragi’s phone buzzes. When he reads the text, he cusses softly. “I’ve got to go. Code Orange.” Kirishima and Saji both understand this means Takaba has slipped his guards.

“Should I go, too?” Saji asks.

“No, I’ve got it covered. Enjoy your night!” Sakuragi calls over his shoulder.

“Will he be okay?” Kirishima wonders. “He drank a couple of beers.”

“He ordered Kirin Free,” Saji says, referring to a nonalcoholic beer. “They’d better call me if they need me.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Kirishima reassures him. “Anyway, you haven’t been drinking Kirin Free, right? So you’re in no shape to go.”

“That’s true,” Saji mutters. “I suppose I should have waited until my day off to do this.”

“It’s too late now. You’re already here. Are you still nervous?” Kirishima asks.

“Of course I am. We haven’t even really started yet, right? That izakaya was almost like being in any other part of Shinjuku.”

“Relax. All of Ni-chôme feels like that.”

As they walk, the duo drifts back into silence, but it’s more comfortable this time. Kirishima opens the door to Geinki and sees Asami sitting at the corner table. What’s he doing here? Even as Kirishima wonders, he notices Takaba sitting next to Asami-sama. My big mouth. I should have known…

Kirishima lets the door swing closed again.

“What’s wrong?” Saji asks.

“Does Takaba know what you look like?” Kirishima asks.


Kirishima calls Sakuragi. “You can cancel the Code Orange. Takaba is at Geinki with Asami-sama.”

Sakuragi sighs. “I’ll call it off. Thanks. And I guess I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“We might be relocating,” Kirishima says. “I’ll let you know once we figure it out.”

Kirishima’s phone buzzes as he hangs up with Sakuragi. Kirishima sighs as he shows the message from Asami to Saji.
Inside. Now.

“Should I go in, too?” Saji wonders.

Kirishima shrugs. “May as well. Does Takaba know Sakuragi-kun? Since he’s such a runner, it’s better if he doesn’t figure out the identities of anyone else on his team, but if it’s just us, you should be safe.”

“I’m not sure. I’ll ask Sakuragi,” Saji says, composing a quick text.

“Going in?” someone asks.

Kirishima and Saji step aside to let the man go first. As he passes, his eyes travel up and down Kirishima’s body, lingering on his legs.

“I hope you do, and soon,” the man adds with a grin before going in himself.

Kirishima blushes scarlet. He follows the man inside with Saji trailing behind him. As they make their way over to Asami’s table, Takaba’s mouth drops open as he gets a good look at Kirishima. Takaba blushes a little as he takes in Kirishima’s skintight jeans, but Takaba’s expression hardens as they draw close.

“On a hot date?” he accuses, not casting more than a cursory glance at Saji.

“Just out with a friend, not that it’s any of your business,” Kirishima retorts. He raises his eyebrows at Asami, who’s actually looking a little… sheepish? Must be my imagination.

“I didn’t know where you were going,” Asami explains. “I followed your suggestion.”

“That’s fine,” Kirishima says. What else can I say? “Maybe we should head somewhere else,” he tells Saji.

“Don’t leave on my account,” Asami says. “I’m sure we’ll be leaving soon ourselves.” He shoots a look at someone eying Takaba that sends the looker scurrying out the door of the bar.

Kirishima nods. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” He bows and leads Saji over to a small, chest-high table in the opposite corner.

“Sakuragi is on his way,” Saji says as he slides his phone back into his pocket.

They stand at the table awkwardly for a brief moment before the man who entered the bar just before them makes his way over.

“So you decided to come in. I’m glad. Can I buy you a drink?” he asks Kirishima.

“No, thank you,” Kirishima answers coolly. “I’m just here with a friend tonight.”

“Suit yourself,” the man says, turning to eye Saji for the first time. “You’re not bad yourself. Are you as cold as your friend?”

Saji casts a helpless look at Kirishima. Kirishima raises his eyebrows, trying to communicate go ahead if you’d like. Apparently Saji gets the message, because he’s soon walking over to the bar with the man.

Kirishima flags down a waiter to order.
“Fuku-shacho-san, I’m sorry! I didn’t recognize you! I should have known you’d be here when I saw Asami-sama here.” The waiter bows repeatedly in apology.

Kirishima assures him, “It’s fine. I just got here, and anyway, I’m only here as a customer tonight.”

After ordering, Kirishima tries to seem casual as he looks around the bar. The door opens, and he turns, hoping it will be Sakuragi. Kirishima’s heart thrills when he sees Kou instead.

A moment later, it feels like someone is squeezing Kirishima’s chest when he notices the possessive hand on the small of Kou’s back, attached to the manager of the clothing store Kou took Kirishima to on their first date.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from James Morris. (White) jasmine symbolizes friendship and gracefulness.

This chapter ran a little longer than usual, but I needed it to end where it did. The next chapter will be from Kou’s perspective, so please don’t assume too much until you hear his side of things. I think I’ll probably write that next. I may finish this work (at least until the end of the main story) before I go back to “Exhibition.”
Inside the Pocket of Your Ripped Jeans (Pink and Purple)

Chapter Summary

Tokawa and Kou meet up for some parkour. How has Kou been doing since the break-up? And what does he want to talk to Tokawa about?

Chapter Notes

We get to see what Tokawa is like outside a professional setting. Warning for language (apparently he has a potty mouth).

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)  
Morita: Kirishima's assistant  
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion  
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation  
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation  
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion  
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion  
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion  
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past  
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors  
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards  
Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend  
Saji: one of Akihito's guards  
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards  
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards  
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym  
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami  
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

PASMO: a type of Japanese debit card which can be used at train stations, convenience stores, taxis, and some vending machines for fares and purchases

parkour terms:
tracing: practicing parkour  
traceur: someone who practices parkour  
strides: a jumping run, usually from one small obstacle to another  
precision: jumping from and landing on two feet, usually from one narrow obstacle to another
Kou takes a deep breath before opening the door to the gym.

“Kou!” Tokawa waves a hammer from atop a wall on the far side of the gym. “I’ll be done in just a sec.”

Kou jogs over. “Need any help, Daiki?”

“Nah. I’ve got like five more nails to go. Why don’t you warm up?”

Kou starts in the nearest corner and works his way around the perimeter of the gym, making a counterclockwise spiral. When he reaches the laché bars in the center of the gym, he flies from one to the next, flipping feet over head in between, before dismounting from the last bar with a double gainer.

“Where the hell did you learn that?” Tokawa calls over as he jumps down from the wall.

Kou shrugs. “I was playing around at Nakamura’s new gym in Setagaya.”

“Diamond gym? I haven’t been over there yet, but I thought it was a rooftop gym. They’ve got a foam pit? Or even mats?”

“Nah,” Kou says. Tokawa eyes him suspiciously. “I was careful! Nakamura spotted me.”

“That shit’s not easy to spot. Especially on concrete. You got a death wish like Aki?”

Kou scowls, ignoring the reference to Akihito. “I made it, didn’t I? Did I look like I needed a mat?”

Tokawa shrugs. “True, you’ve obviously got it down now. What the hell are you training so hard for, anyway?”

“I’m still not as good as you,” Kou says defensively. “Besides, who says I’ve been training hard?”

“Look at you,” Tokawa says. “You’ve got more bruises and scrapes than I can count, and even though it’s still spring, you’re tan as fuck. And everyone who’s stopped by lately has said they had a marathon session with you after running into you at one of the usual spots.”

“You couldn’t tell by how much I improved?” Kou pouts.

“Dude, that’s a given. I don’t think I could have done that circuit as fast as you did. That was hella long, and you were full out sprinting the whole time. Again, what are you training for, Sasuke?”


“You should think about it,” Tokawa says.

Kou flashes his full smile. “That’s a huge compliment coming from you, but I won’t be around for it this year.”

“You got the fellowship?! Say that shit sooner!” Tokawa gives Kou a giant bear hug that nearly knocks him off his feet.

Kou laughs. “Yeah, I got a phone call at three o’clock this morning. I nearly cussed them out for calling in the middle of the night before I realized who it was – not that they’d have understood!”
Tokawa examines Kou’s face. “You actually look happy for the first time since I ran into you again last month.”

Kou looks away. “I’ve been dealing with… things.”

“A bad break-up?” Tokawa’s guess is confirmed by the surprised look on Kou’s face. “I guess that explains the excessive training. I do the same thing.”

Kou shrugs. “It helps – at least while I’m moving. And I sleep better at night if I tire myself out.”

Tokawa nods. “I get that. Hopefully the fresh start will do you some good. Is that why you applied for the fellowship?”

Kou shakes his head. “I found out about it before. But when the shit hit the fan, it was one of the few things keeping me going.”

“Are you definitely going to New York?” Tokawa asks.

Kou nods, grinning. “Jealous?”

“Of course! L.A. would be even better, but the U.S. is so much more accepting of parkour, and New York has a huge community.”

“Yeah. You ready to go?”

“Let me put the tools away and lock up.”

Kou watches as Tokawa prepares to leave the gym. Should I tell him now? I don’t want to ruin our session, but what if he’s in a rush when we get back here?

“What time do you have to be back?” Kou asks as casually as possible.

“Not until the brats get out of school,” Tokawa answers as he locks the door.

As they start their run, Tokawa says, “Speaking of Aki… How’s he been? I haven’t seen him in ages.”

Kou feels like he’s just been punched in the gut, but he manages to sound casual as he replies, “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him in a couple of months myself. But last I saw, he was the same as ever.”

Tokawa stops running.

It takes a couple of steps for Kou to realize and turn around. “What?”

“What the hell happened? You two were always thick as thieves. You’re childhood friends, right?”

Kou shrugs. “I’ve been busy. I’ve got to wrap up all my work and get ready to move out of the country.” He can’t bring himself to look Tokawa in the eye; he’s never been good at lying – even by omission.

“Bullshit,” Tokawa says. “It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it, but you just found out you got the fellowship a few hours ago, and you’ve been tracing all over Tokyo for weeks. You telling me you never thought to invite Aki to a session? Bullshit.”

To his horror, Kou can feel tears pricking his eyes. He tries to swallow the lump in his throat.
“Dude, I’m sorry. Did you guys have a fight?”

Kou shakes his head but lets out a choking, “I guess you could call it that.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Kou shakes his head more vigorously. “Let’s just run.” He takes off again, setting a quick pace that will make conversation impossible.

A block and a half from the park, Kou sees a familiar-looking car turn onto the street in front of them, heading in the same direction. He picks up the pace further, but of course he can’t catch up to the car.

*What would I do even if I did catch up? I can’t see Kei-san again – especially now that the visa application is being processed.***

Kou sprints the rest of the way to the structural playground in the park.

“Holy fuck,” Tokawa gasps, collapsing onto the ground. After a minute, he sits up and says, “I’m glad my guys didn’t see that. I definitely need to work on my cardio.”

Kou straightens up, removing his hands from his knees. “Me too.”

Tokawa snorts. “Yeah, right. You know… Kirishima-san told me, ‘Parkour is about overcoming any obstacles in your path by adapting your movements to the environment.’ I know he got that from you.”

Kou once again feels like he’s been hit in the gut – this time by a four by four of a name. He puts his hands back on his knees, pretending to still be out of breath.

Tokawa continues. “Parkour is a way of life. It’s not just about physical obstacles. But if you keep running away and pretending the obstacles aren’t even there, you’ll never overcome them.”

“I’m not running away,” Kou says automatically, keeping his eyes downcast.

Tokawa sighs. “Whatever.” He stands up and starts doing some dynamic stretches. “I’m a good listener, you know. And I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

Kou starts stretching, too. “How can you overcome an obstacle if you have no idea how?” he bursts out. “You make it sound so easy!”

“I never said it was easy,” Tokawa says. “When you face a physical obstacle you can’t beat, what do you do? Maybe talk it over with another traceur, try one way to conquer it. If that doesn’t work, either keep working to master the skill or try another way.”

Kou nods. “That’s true. I’ve never really made parkour a way of life for me. I’ve always been a coward.” He remembers the conversation he had with Kirishima the night they met, when Kirishima helped Kou overcome his fears and accept his homosexuality. “Or I was until Kei-san —” Kou stops abruptly when he realizes he’s speaking aloud.

“You mean Kirishima-san?” Tokawa asks. “If you’d rather talk to him, I understand. Just talk to someone, dude. Or figure out some other way. Beating your body up with parkour obviously isn’t working.”
“I can’t,” Kou whispers, on the verge of tears again.

“Did you get into a fight with him, too?” Tokawa asks, surprised. “How did you two meet, anyway? It doesn’t seem like your social circles would overlap. Was it through work?”

Kou shakes his head before he can stop himself. *That would have been a perfect excuse.* Instead, he tells the truth. “We met at a bar in Shinjuku. I was trying to gather my courage to… face my fears about something, and he helped me. We just hit it off.”

Tokawa nods. “I can see that. He gets along with some of the guys our age who train in the gym, too.”

Kou tries to ignore the pang of jealousy Tokawa’s words cause. *Don’t be stupid. You told Kei-san you wanted him to look around and remember to experience the world. You should be glad he’s making friends.* “Is he doing okay?” The words slip out.

Tokawa studies him. “Yeah. I think so. We only have a professional relationship, but he’s training hard for a mud run.”

“Mud run?” Kou stares at Tokawa in surprise. Somehow Kou can’t imagine Kirishima deliberately getting dirty.

Tokawa laughs. “That was Kirishima-san’s reaction when I suggested it to him, too. But I think it’s a great opportunity to combine his love of nature with parkour.”

Kou nods. “Yeah. I guess that makes sense.”

“Dude, if you miss him so much, why don’t you try making up with him? Whatever it is, just try saying you’re sorry. You’re a good guy. He obviously knows that.”

“It’s not like that,” Kou says.

“Did he do something you can’t forgive him for?”

Kou shakes his head. “That’s not it, either. It was… irreconcilable differences.”

Tokawa stares at him. “With a friend? Okaaay… I’m not sure I understand. So you want to be friends with him again but feel like you can’t?”

Kou nods. “I guess that’s as good a way of putting it as any. I – I actually wanted to talk to you about it – or something related, but not here. When we get back to the gym.”

Tokawa nods. “No problem. Shall we start?”

They spend the next two hours practicing various moves, taking turns setting a line, or declaring challenges consisting of a certain combination of moves. Kou is shocked to discover that nearly half the time, he’s the first to complete a challenge, and there are only a couple of challenges that Tokawa can complete that Kou can’t.

“I can’t believe I’m actually mostly keeping up with you,” Kou says when they stop for a water break.

“I can,” Tokawa says. “With the business, I haven’t been able to train as much as I like. I’m always noticing something that needs to be done, like fixing that wall earlier. Meanwhile, your training schedule has been insane. How many hours have you been putting in – fifteen a week?”
“About twice that, sometimes closer to three times as much,” Kou admits.

Tokawa whistles. “Dude. And you’re still working full time? Do you ever sleep?”

“Yeah, I sleep as much as I can. I’m a freelancer, remember? I’ve only been picking up smaller projects I can complete quickly, in case I got the fellowship. And I don’t have a commute most days, which saves me a lot of time. When I do have to meet clients, I trace at nearby spots afterwards for the variety.”

“It sounds lonely,” Tokawa says. “Everyone who’s run into you says you were training alone. It was the same with me, remember?”

Kou remembers. Unsure whether he could handle talking about Kirishima, Kou had tried to avoid Tokawa. Thankfully Tokawa hadn’t brought Kirishima up. They’ve met a couple of times since then, but their conversations were focused mainly on parkour, as they’ve always been.

“I like to train alone,” Kou says defensively. “Anyway, there have been plenty of times I’ve run into people randomly, and sometimes our schedules match so I can meet up with someone, like today.”

“Alright,” Tokawa says, letting the subject drop. “How about you set the next challenge?”

Kou chooses a series of strides and precisions around the maze and onto some of the railings.

“That’s a long progression. Think you can keep your momentum up?” Tokawa raises his eyebrows.

“I know I can. Can you?” Kou retorts, sticking his tongue out.

“Fine. Then you go first,” Tokawa challenges.

Kou executes the combination flawlessly, nailing the final nine-foot precision over a rocky outcropping and onto the highest railing.

“Nice run.” Tokawa starts off his own run strong, but he comes up just short on the final precision, his right foot sliding backwards off the rail. He kicks his leg back to reach for the top of the rock, and there’s a ripping sound as Tokawa teeters for a fraction of a second before losing his balance. He falls backwards onto the rock, sliding down it. “Fuck!”


“I think so,” Tokawa says, trying to sit up.

“Slow down. Are you sure you should be moving?” Kou asks.

Tokawa gingerly tests his limbs. “I’m fine.” He slowly sits up. “Fuck, that hurts, though. How bad is it scraped?”

Kou looks at Tokawa’s back. “Your shirt is basically cheese-gratered, but I don’t think the skin is too bad. I’ve got a fresh water bottle. I can clean it out for you.”

Tokawa nods and grits his teeth as Kou pours the water over the abrasion.

“It’s actually not too huge, but there’s some debris in there,” Kou announces. “It’d be better to get back to the gym to clean it out properly. Are you sure you’re alright? That was a pretty big fall.”

Tokawa stands and stretches. “I’m going to have one hell of a bruise, but I’m pretty sure that’s it. I got lucky.” He turns to look back over his shoulder at Kou. To Tokawa’s surprise, Kou is muffling a
“Laugh. ‘What?’ He grouses. ‘It wasn’t that funny.’

“It’s not that! It’s…” Kou can’t keep a giggle from escaping. “Dude! Pink bunnies?!”

“What?” Tokawa asks. A suspicion forms in his mind as he twists around to look at his backside.

“And they’re purple! Where’d you get those boxers?” Kou isn’t even trying to hide his laughter anymore.

Tokawa sighs. “My ex. I should have thrown them out, but I need the extra pair to make it to laundry day. How bad is it?”


Tokawa eyes him suspiciously. “How big is little?”

Kou holds up his hand with the fingers outstretched. “A little bigger than the distance between my thumb and pinky. Oh, and there’s a little flap hanging down, too…”

Tokawa feels around for the flap and tries to tuck it back through the hole.

Kou shakes his head. “It’s hopeless. I have some athletic tape in my bag for calluses. Let’s see if we can fix it in the bathroom.”

Unfortunately the tape is designed for skin, not cloth, and it barely holds the fabric together. After fifteen minutes of finagling, Kou steps back and checks out their handiwork.

“I think this is the best we can hope for. It’s not visible right this second, but…”

“But the tape’s going to come loose as soon as I start moving.” Sighing, Tokawa completes the sentence for Kou.

“Sorry,” Kou says.

“It’s not your fault. Thanks for helping. I think I’d better not run. Are you up for a slow walk back to the gym?”

“Yeah,” Kou says. “I wish I’d brought a sweatshirt, but it was too warm today.”

“At least you had the tape,” Tokawa points out as he leads the way out of the restroom. “That’s a huge help.”

“It’d be more helpful if it actually worked,” Kou grumbles, reaching out to resecure a loose piece. “I think it’s hopeless. You got any money? You could buy some new pants at the convenience store.”

“I didn’t bring any. I only have like one fare on my PASMO right now – not enough for pants. Could you spot me? I can pay you back once we’re back at the gym.”

“I don’t have anything, either. Sorry,” Kou answers.

The walk back is slow going. After a few blocks, Kou observes, “You’re starting to limp. We should take the train.”
“I think I tweaked my ankle,” Tokawa admits, adding, “but I can’t get on a train like this!”

They’re nearing the shopping district, and an idea strikes Kou. “I’ve got a friend who’s the manager of a clothing store near here. Let’s stop in. Maybe he can at least lend us a stapler or some better tape to hold your pants together.”

“I can’t go into a shop like this,” Tokawa hisses.

“You can’t get on a train like that, either,” Kou reminds him.

Tokawa can’t argue with that logic. “I don’t want to embarrass you in front of your friend,” he offers as one last feeble protest.

“You won’t,” Kou says. “He’s really laidback. I think you’ll like the fashion there, too.”

He stops in front of the shop.

“Uniqlo?” Tokawa asks incredulously. “Seriously?”

“Hey, don’t knock it. We can’t all afford to buy the latest parkour fashion from the pros around the globe.”

“I get most of that stuff for free, as promo material for the gym,” Tokawa explains.

“Cheapskate,” Kou teases.

Tokawa shrugs. “Hey, if they’re willing to give it away, I’ll gladly accept. Clothes aren’t cheap. Except Uniqlo’s.”

“When was the last time you’ve been in a Uniqlo?” Kou asks.

“Not since high school,” Tokawa confesses.

“They’ve undergone a significant rebranding campaign over the last few years, hiring a number of top-notch designers and moving away from fast fashion. Anyway, we’re just here for the stapler.”

“What if your friend’s not here?” Tokawa asks.

Kou shrugs. “Then you’ll have to flash your bunnies.”

Tokawa groans. “Well, it’s worth a shot. Thanks.”

They head into the store, and Kou breathes a sigh of relief as Itoh rushes over to them. Itoh gives the customary greeting for all customers.

“Hello, Itoh-san,” Kou says.

Itoh’s head snaps up. “Motomi-san? I hardly recognized you! You’ve gotten so buff!” He reaches out and feels Kou’s bicep.

“Hello, Itoh-san,” Kou says.

Itoh’s head snaps up. “Motomi-san? I hardly recognized you! You’ve gotten so buff!” He reaches out and feels Kou’s bicep.

Kou blushes. “This is my friend, Tokawa Daiki. Daiki, this is Itoh-san, the manager.” Kou notes that Itoh’s face falls slightly at the lack of honorific given to Tokawa. “Daiki is in a bit of a pickle,” he continues. “We were working out, and he had an accident with his pants.”

Tokawa has been standing to the side with his back to a clothing rack.
Kou grabs his arm. “Show him,” Kou urges.

Tokawa reluctantly turns around. Itoh’s mouth twitches for a moment before he manages to return to his professional demeanor. Then Itoh’s gaze travels up and he notices Tokawa’s bloodied shirt.

“Whoa, what happened? Are you okay?”

“I slipped at the park,” Tokawa explains. “And we had run there from my gym, so we’ve still got a few kilometers left to get back.”

“We wanted to take the train back since Daiki seems to have hurt his ankle as well,” Kou finishes explaining.

“You can’t take a train like that,” Itoh says, pointing out the obvious.

“We know,” Kou says. “I used some athletic tape to try to hold the pants together, but it’s obviously not working. Could we borrow something that might work better? Even a stapler?”

Itoh tsks. “It makes more sense to buy a new outfit. We have a first aid kit, too.”

Kou glances at Tokawa and confesses, “Neither of us has any money on us.”

“But the gym’s not far, right? Do you have money there?”

“Of course,” they both answer at the same time.

“So you can bring the payment later. It would have to be today, though,” Itoh warns.

“Of course! I could bring it within the hour,” Kou exclaims. “Thank you so much.”

Itoh grabs the first aid kit from behind the counter and leads them over to a rack of athletic gear. “Size medium?” he guesses.

Tokawa nods. Itoh starts selecting clothes. “Why don’t you take the first aid kit and head to the bathroom? I’ll place the clothes in the fitting room for you to try on when you’re ready.”

Kou quickly takes care of the scrape on Tokawa’s back, cleaning it and putting on a bandage. When Tokawa heads into the fitting room, Kou waits outside.

“New guy, I see,” Itoh says in a quiet voice.

Kou shoots a warning look and whispers, “He really is just a friend. He doesn’t know.”

“Okay,” Itoh says, holding his hands up. “Things still going hot with the other guy then?”

Kou’s face falls. “We broke up.”

“So you’re single now?” Itoh’s smile lights up his face, and Kou suddenly remembers what Itoh said about being too late when he found out about Kou’s sexuality.

Kou blushes a little as he mumbles, “I’m not really ready to date again yet. It was a hard break-up for me.”

“I understand,” Itoh says. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“You were right about Uniqlo being much better now,” Tokawa calls from the fitting room. He
walks out the door as he says, “I think these will work.” Tokawa stops short when he realizes Itoh is standing next to Kou. “Sorry,” Tokawa mutters.

“We’re pleased that you approve of our efforts to improve our clothing lines,” Itoh answers smoothly.

Tokawa glances properly around the store for the first time. “Wow, it looks really different, too!”

“Motomi-san designed the in-store rebranding for this branch,” Itoh says.

Tokawa’s mouth drops. “Dang! No wonder you won that fancy fellowship.”

“Fellowship?” Itoh asks.

Kou blushes. “It’s no big deal.”

Tokawa rolls his eyes. “It’s in New York. He beat out other designers from around the globe.”

“Congratulations!” Itoh says. “I see my timing is as impeccable as ever.”

Kou wonders what that means but doesn’t dare ask in front of Tokawa. “I’m glad you were here. Thank you so much for your help. How do you want to ring up the sale?”

“I’ll ring it up now and pay for it myself so the register stays reconciled,” Itoh decides.

“Oh, thank you,” Tokawa says. “Are you sure that’s alright?”

“It’s fine. I know Motomi-san is very honest. He’ll definitely bring the payment back.”

“That’s okay! I’ll bring it back myself! I wouldn’t want to put Kou out,” Tokawa says.

“That’s stupid. You’ve got to open the gym soon, and you’re hurt. I’ve got my bike, and it’s practically on my way home. I don’t mind,” Kou argues. Tokawa still doesn’t look convinced, so Kou adds, “Besides, I want to get some new clothes before I leave the country. I heard it can be hard to find clothes that fit in America.”

As Itoh rings up the sale, he says to Kou, “You’ve got to let me take you out to congratulate you for the fellowship. Does tomorrow night work for you?”

“I’m not sure; I’ve got a deadline coming up,” Kou says. Shit. What the hell is Itoh-san doing, asking in front of Daiki? Itoh gives a big grin. “That’s not necessary. You’ll be bringing the payment, after all. But we can argue more about it tomorrow evening.” He finishes ringing up the sale. “I can throw your other clothes away for you,” he offers.

Tokawa examines the pants. “I think these might actually be pretty easy to fix, but thanks for the offer. You can toss the shirt, though.” Tokawa frowns at the ruined shirt. “That was one of my
favorites, and it was limited edition. I doubt I can replace it.”

Itoh checks out the design on the front. “Cool. What’s Tempest?” he asks.

“One of the best parkour teams in the world,” Tokawa explains.

“Parkour? You mean like what Bond does in the beginning of Casino Royale?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Tokawa confirms.

“Is that what you guys were doing at the park?”

“Yes,” Tokawa answers again since Kou is still silently freaking out about the potential awkwardness of going out with Itoh tomorrow night. Tokawa continues, “I’ve got a parkour gym not too far from here. If you’re interested, you should stop by sometime. First visit is on the house.” Tokawa pulls a business card from his pocket and presents it to Itoh.

Kou finally stirs himself to speak. “You carry business cards but not money?” he teases.

“I always have one on me,” Tokawa defends himself. “It’s smart business practice, and if I lose it, maybe it’ll actually provide free publicity. If I lose money, on the other hand…” Tokawa shrugs.

As Tokawa and Kou head to the train station, Tokawa says, “Your friend was really nice. I can’t believe he hooked me up with a new outfit like that.”

“I know.”

“And you were going to reject him when he asked to treat you as congratulations for your fellowship?! You should have been the one offering to treat Itoh-san,” Tokawa chides. Before Kou can reply, Tokawa adds thoughtfully, “Actually, I should have been the one. I’ve got a private lesson late tomorrow evening and another early the next morning, or I’d join you…”

“That’s okay,” Kou quickly says. “I’ll make sure to thank Itoh-san properly.”

“You’d better,” Tokawa says. “When we get back to the gym, I’ll give you some cash to treat him with.”

“You don’t have to do that!” Kou objects.

“I know, but I want to. Besides, it’s to thank you, too. You really helped me out back there.”

“You would have done the same for me,” Kou points out.

“No, I wouldn’t have. I didn’t have jack shit to help you with. The only thing I could have done would have been to try to stand behind you and keep anyone else from seeing too much.”

“Well, you would have done that.” Kou grins.

Back at the gym, Tokawa heads to the office to get some cash. When he comes back, Kou is playing around on the laché bars again.

“I’ve got a line I want you to try,” Tokawa says. He shows Kou the line he set up for the team on
Kirishima’s first day in the gym.

Kou approaches the line much as Tokawa did, though he cats onto and climbs up the second-to-last wall instead of landing on top of it.

“You didn’t try the underbar,” Tokawa calls out after Kou has finished.

“Because I’m not suicidal,” Kou counters. “Can you do it?"

“Not from the top of the other wall,” Tokawa admits. “I can running up to it, though.”

“Well, yeah, that seems doable after a few practice runs,” Kou says. “The hole is small, but if your run-up is right, it should be easy enough.”

“What about with no practice run?” Tokawa challenges.

Kou shrugs and tries it. He manages to get his feet through the hole, but his back scrapes along the bottom of the hole, slowing him down. He slides awkwardly out. “Yeah, I definitely screwed up the approach.”

“Interesting,” Tokawa says.

“What?”

“Kirishima-san made it his first try. He said he’d only been tracing for two months, and you’d only taught him the underbar three weeks beforehand. I wondered if you were some kind of underbar master.”

Kou’s heart clenches again at the mention of Kirishima, but he forces a laugh, “I wish. That guy took to them pretty quickly, though.”

“Other than underbars, he’s pretty average,” Tokawa notes.

Kou shrugs. “Aren’t we all like that? Some things come easier than others.”

“I guess,” Tokawa says. “Anyway, you said you wanted to talk to me about something related to him?”

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is taken from the song "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran.

I kept giggling while writing this chapter, remembering how Tokawa was glad the guys at his gym weren't watching him get toasted by Kou during the run, and knowing that Sion guards were actually watching throughout the entire chapter.

I thought I could fit Kou's perspective into a single chapter, but it became obvious I was wrong, so I found a good stopping place (a cliffhanger, of course!). I've only got about 650 words of the next chapter written, though - but I know what's supposed to happen in it, so hopefully it won't take too long to write. My current estimate on how many chapters are left is still in the 5-7 range (I'm really bad at estimating, though, so take that with a grain of salt).
A Thing Which Does Hang on a String (Red)

Chapter Summary

What does Kou need to talk to Tokawa about? And what happens when Kou and Kirishima run into each other in Ni-chôme?

Chapter Notes

This chapter ran a little long, but not long enough to separate into two, and I really wanted to end it where I did. Warning for nonconsensual touching (nothing illegal or too extreme, but I always like to provide a warning). Oh, yeah - and mild profanity.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

Japanese terms:
bōryokudan: “violent group” (police designation for yakuza/organized crime groups)
organized crime exclusion ordinance: recent laws intended to crack down on organized crime, including by making it illegal for other citizens to do business with members of a bōryokudan
okama: a gay man, especially one who dresses in drag
mama: the proprietor of a gay bar
Megane-san: "Mr. Glasses," Akihito's nickname for Kirishima
seiza: a kneeling position
Kou’s mouth suddenly feels dry. He closes his eyes and recalls the photo of the missing Yama-san, along with an e-mail Yama-san had sent Akihito with a lead relating to Club Sion a few days before Yama-san went missing. The pictures of the stockpiles of illegal weapons that had somehow disappeared from right under the nose of the police, and the list of superiors who suddenly denied ever having seen them. The photos of the carnage at the hotel the same night Akihito was taken to Hong Kong: all those dead Chinese triad members, the lobby that looked like an explosion had gone off with so much splintered furniture and blood splatters. The security footage from the convenience store six blocks away that showed Kirishima’s car leaving the area, even though the hotel’s footage had been wiped.

Kou opens his eyes, steeling his resolve. *If I’m going to be mad that Aki didn’t warn me, I can’t do the same to Daiki.* “What do you know about Article 18 of the organized crime exclusion ordinance?”

Tokawa blinks several times. “I have a clause in all of my contracts,” he finally answers, “but I’ve never had to use it.”

“I see.” Kou gulps. *I can’t betray Kei-san, but I also don’t want Daiki to get in over his head. If something happens, he could get in trouble for training Sion’s men, even though he doesn’t know anything.*

“It only applies to organizations that have officially been declared bōryokudan by the police,” Tokawa says after a long silence. “Do you know of any groups that have such a designation that I should be aware of?”

“None that have it right now,” Kou says, “but... the future is vast.”

“Are these the ‘irreconcilable differences’ you mentioned earlier?” Tokawa asks.

Kou gives an almost imperceptible nod.

Tokawa softens. “You’re a good friend. Thanks for your concern. I teach parkour. I overhear things, and I know that the specific people I’m training are using their skills to keep… certain ‘other people’ safe – including certain people some might view as helping the police themselves, though I’d never say it to their face.”

Kou blinks as he remembers what Kirishima said about Akihito having a bodyguard, and how Asami claimed it was because Akihito did “stupid shit” like meeting people in riverbeds in the middle of the night. *So Daiki trains Aki’s bodyguard? Or bodyguards, I guess? It would make sense to have more than one given Aki’s crazy schedule – and I’m sure he tries to lose them so he can do really stupid shit. I guess Asami really does care about Aki.*

“Yeah. Okay.” Kou nods. “I just… know what it was like not to be warned before getting too close to a potentially dangerous situation, and I didn’t want to do that to you.”

“Again, thank you. And Kou… Maybe I’m just over-thinking things, but if – I’m just saying if – that’s caused problems with someone else, maybe just remember the difficulty you had in deciding to warn me. Sometimes it’s even harder, for various… reasons.” Tokawa trails off.

*Does Daiki know about Aki and Asami? Obviously Kou can’t ask outright, and Tokawa isn’t going*
to give it away unless Kou makes it clear that he knows about their relationship – but obviously Kou
can’t make it clear unless he’s sure Tokawa already knows about it.

Kou’s head is beginning to hurt. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. I should get going.”

“Here’s the money for Itoh-san.” Tokawa holds out two five-thousand yen notes.

“The clothes were less than half that,” Kou points out, taking only one of the bills.

“The rest is to treat both of you as thanks for your help.”

“You know I can’t accept that,” Kou protests.

“Fine. Will you at least accept these jeans? Tempest sent me several pairs.”

Kou takes the plastic-wrapped pair of pants. “These are cool! Thanks. Wait… Child’s large? Are
you making fun of me?”

“They’re American sizes! You’re thin; they should fit you,” Tokawa explains.

“Well, thanks.”

Kou rides his scooter over to Uniqlo. When he walks into the store, Itoh seems surprised to see him.
“I thought we’d confirm over the phone.”

“I brought the money back,” Kou explains, handing over Tokawa’s bill.

Itoh laughs. “You could have brought that tomorrow night. Or were you just looking for an excuse
to see me?”

“Um, about tomorrow night…” Kou starts. “I’m sorry, but I’m really not up to going out right now. I
did want to thank you again for helping us out, though. Could I treat you to some coffee instead
sometime, maybe?”

To Kou’s surprise, Itoh shakes his head. “I’m not letting you off the hook that easily. I’m really
looking forward to it. Besides, if you’re feeling so down about your break-up, that’s all the more
reason to go out and let off a little steam in Ni-chôme.”

“You want to go to Ni-chôme?” Kou gulps painfully as his throat suddenly goes dry.

“It’s the best place to let off a little steam for guys like us, isn’t it?” Itoh says.

“I don’t know. I – I’m really not up to dating right now, especially since I’m leaving the country
soon,” Kou tries explaining one more time.

Itoh waves his hand impatiently. “Who said anything about dating? You’re not ready; I got the
message loud and clear. I’m just offering to help you blow off some steam as a friend.”

“As friends? Okay,” Kou finally says reluctantly.

Kou looks around the store, but his heart isn’t into shopping, so he heads home.
The next evening, when it’s time to get ready to meet Itoh, Kou tries on the new jeans that Tokawa gave him. They’re baggy, which isn’t really the style in Japan right now, but he decides he’ll feel more comfortable in them than his skinny jeans. *I don’t want to give Itoh-san the wrong impression,* Kou continues to worry. He knows he should be excited about going out, but he really rather go have another session tracing at a nearby park. Parkour is the only time Kou can fully get his mind off Kirishima – and then only if he’s really concentrating on difficult movements. Going to Ni-chōme is going to bring up painful memories. Not that Kou and Kirishima spent much time there together – they preferred to relax at one or the other’s homes or outside (whether doing parkour, hiking, or going for a ride on Kou’s motorcycle). Still, Ni-chōme was where they met.

Kou pulls on a t-shirt, runs a comb through his hair, and gathers his keys, phone, and wallet. When he reaches into the jeans pocket, he feels a folded piece of paper inside. *I should have known.* Sure enough, when Kou pulls out the paper, it’s a five-thousand yen note. He shoots Tokawa a quick text.

*Very clever. Thanks for the treat, I guess. But next time we hang out, I’ll treat you.*

*I have no idea what you’re talking about.*

*_(ō 3 ó)_*/ Well, thanks again.

*Have fun tonight! And tell Itoh-san thanks again.*

Kou takes the train into Shinjuku. He exits the station and turns down the street towards Ni-chōme. As he approaches the gay district, his palms start sweating.

*Will I ever get used to this?*

Kou reminds himself that six months ago, he didn’t even have the guts to finish the walk down the street. *I’m doing good compared to then.*

His heart pangs as he remembers who was responsible for getting him to go down the rest of the street. Kou takes a deep breath and remembers the feel of Kirishima’s warm hand surging courage into Kou as they made that walk.

Kou is just starting to relax when an arm is draped across his shoulder. He startles and shrugs away before he realizes it’s Itoh.

“No, it’s cool.” Itoh mutters. “I thought you were cool.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! You surprised me,” Kou explains.

Itoh falls into step with Kou. “You looked lost in thought.”

“I was just remembering… things.”

“Oh-huh. We’re here tonight to try to forget those things, remember?” Itoh drapes his arm back across Kou’s shoulder.

Kou doesn’t want to offend Itoh again, but it feels weird and uncomfortable. “Let’s go in here,” he says desperately, turning into the first bar he sees as a pretense to get out from under Itoh’s arm.

Itoh looks amused. “I didn’t know you like bears. I thought you were more into the office worker type.”
The burly, bearded men in the bar are staring at Kou with unsmiling faces.

“Uh… Maybe somewhere else would be better,” Kou says, backing quickly out of the bar.

The sound of the bears’ laughter follows them as they start back down the street, Kou making sure to leave enough space between them that Itoh won’t be tempted to reach out his arm again.

Itoh laughs softly. “You haven’t been in Ni-chōme much, have you?”

“No,” Kou grudgingly admits. “I’ve only been a handful of times.”

“Well, let’s go to a café and grab a bite to eat while you check out the scenery,” Itoh suggests.

“Okay.”

Their conversation over the next hour is actually fairly pleasant. Itoh has lots of questions about the fellowship in New York, and Kou finally feels flutters of excitement as the reality sinks in that he’ll be moving halfway around the world for the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Man, I’d love to be there in February,” Itoh sighs.

“What’s in February?” Kou asks, biting back the only American holiday he can think of during that month, Valentine’s Day. Don’t lead him on, Kou.

Itoh’s eyes bug out. “Fashion Week, obviously! I mean, of course Paris would be the best, but New York is amazing in its own right.”

“Do you want to design clothes?” Kou asks. Itoh-san is very competent as a manager, and he certainly knows a lot about fashion, but I didn’t know he was that serious.

“Oh, heavens no,” Itoh says, giggling a little as he waves the thought away. “I don’t have any creativity myself, but I certainly know what works together. And Fashion Week is all about what works together. Mm-hmm. And those models definitely ‘work together,’ if you know what I mean.” Itoh nudges Kou with his elbow.

“So you like the model type, Itoh-san?” Kou asks, starting to feel relieved. Maybe I misunderstood him, after all.

“I like many different types,” Itoh says, “but I like your type the best, Motomi-san.”

Kou blushes. “Itoh-san!”

Itoh giggles. “I’m kidding. I don’t actually have a type – like I said, I have many types.”

“You’re really different tonight, Itoh-san,” Kou observes, taking a giant gulp of his beer. He doesn’t know how to handle this Itoh. Kou can’t tell if Itoh is teasing him, making fun of him, or trying to flirt with him. Or is he doing all three at once?

“Ni-chōme is the only place I feel like I can truly be myself,” Itoh says, draining his own glass.

“So you needed to let off some steam, too?”

“Yeah. So let’s move on to somewhere we can do that a little better.” Itoh signals their waiter for the check.
I thought we were already letting off steam. But Kou has already figured out that Itoh will end up getting his way in the end, so Kou chooses not to say anything. Instead he smoothly picks up the check and hands it back to the waiter along with Tokawa’s five-thousand-yen note.

“I’m supposed to treat you as congratulations,” Itoh protests.

“Blame Daiki. He tricked me into accepting this money to treat you as thanks,” Kou explains.

“What’s the deal with you two, anyway? You seem very close, but you said he doesn’t know about you. Is he your straight crush?”

Kou nearly spits out the last dregs of his beer. He coughs for a minute before finally managing to gasp, “No way! Daiki? He’s like my little brother. The parkour community is very small, so we’re practically family. That’s all.”

“Would it bother you if I went to his gym?” Itoh asks.

“Of course not! Why would it?”

Itoh shrugs. “I don’t know. It looks fun, so I think I want to go, but I wasn’t sure if that’d be weird for you.”

“As long as you don’t tell Daiki about... you know.”

Itoh rolls his eyes. “I know. Now let’s go.”

Kou doesn’t really know his way around Ni-chôme. It’s interesting peeking into the different bars and seeing the different types at each establishment, especially with Itoh’s running commentary.

“This is an okama bar. You should see their float at Rainbow Pride.”

“What’s Rainbow Pride?”

Itoh rolls his eyes. “You really don’t get out much, do you? It’s Tokyo’s gay pride parade. It’s coming up. You should come.”

“You might fit in here. They like jocks.” But Itoh continues walking briskly past the establishment. When Kou peeks in, he notices the jocks are not-so-subtly flexing their muscles as they stand around.

“Keep away from the twinks. They’re full of themselves.” Itoh doesn’t slow down, and Kou barely catches a glimpse of the young men eying each other while trying to strike flattering poses.

“You don’t want a daddy, do you?” Again Itoh rushes past without waiting for an answer.

How much older does your partner have to be to count as a daddy? Kou wonders. Kei-san never felt that much older than me, and he didn’t act superior.

“You’re thinking too much again,” Itoh chides. “Want to get a sex massage?”
Kou squeaks.

“If you’re nervous, we could get a couple’s massage,” Itoh says but immediately bursts into a fit of giggles. “Your face!” he gasps. “Relax, I was joking.”

Kou doesn’t peek into the massage parlor.

“How about a leather bar?” Itoh smirks as they walk past.

Kou stares wide-eyed at the men clad in collars, cuffs, and studded leather pants and shirts. “They look like Hard Gay Razor Ramon.” Kou gasps when he notices some of the collars are attached to leashes.

As he hurries away, Itoh gives him the side eye. “Did you like him?”

“No! I just… He was the only gay person on TV besides okamas, you know? And I just wondered…”

“Whether all gay people are like that?” Itoh finishes the thought for him. “I did, too. Turns out he’s not even gay.”

“Oh.”

“We could go to a public bath,” Itoh suggests. “Literally let off some steam.”

Kou finds himself shaking his head before he even really has time to think about what it’d be like in a bath where the men are all checking each other out.

“The mama here speaks English. You want to go in and talk to him?”

Kou peeks in at all the tall foreigners. *I’m already short by Japanese standards. I’m going to be treated like a kid in New York, aren’t I?* “I’m good,” he says as one of the foreigners licks his lips and leers suggestively at him.

Itoh laughs. “He looks like he wants to eat you.”

“I don’t want to be eaten,” Kou declares, walking a little faster.

“You’re a seme?!” Itoh stops dead on the sidewalk, staring at Kou and asking a little too loudly.

A group of men walking in the other direction burst out laughing.

Kou blushes. “No! I mean, not no, but not yes, either.”

“You’re reversible?”

Kou shrugs. “I don’t know. I want to try both. Maybe I’ll have a preference, I don’t know. But I think… it’s probably more yes than no?”

Itoh’s eyes bug out as his mouth drops in shock. “You didn’t do it with that office worker?”
Kou scowls and starts walking again. “We’re supposed to be taking my mind off Kei-san, remember? Now wasn’t there somewhere you wanted to go?”

Itoh rushes to catch up with him. “Sorry. But wait… you said you want to try both – does that mean you’ve never tried either? You’re still a virgin?”

Kou glares at Itoh but says. “Kei-san was my first boyfriend. We were going to, but… things happened.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry if I upset you. I had no idea you were such fresh meat.” Itoh grins, and once again Kou wonders if Itoh is making fun of him or flirting with him.

Kou shrugs.

“Alright, this is the place I was telling you about,” Itoh says, turning a corner.

Kou sees the simple black-and-white sign and freezes. “Not here,” he says.

“Itoh asks. “They have good food, and it’s a quiet place with a nice atmosphere. No assholes.” Itoh has placed his hand on Kou’s back and is leading him to the door.

What if Kei-san is here? But even as Kou’s heart flutters in anticipation, he realizes that it’s unlikely. Kei-san said he’d only been to Ni-chôme a few times with Asami to entertain clients – but since Asami has Aki, he wouldn’t need to entertain clients in Ni-chôme anymore, right?

While Kou is lost in thought, Itoh has been guiding him towards the door. Itoh opens the door for him, and Kou stumbles in. He can’t help but look around just in case Kirishima is there.

Kou doesn’t even really have to look. His eyes are immediately drawn to the face that haunts Kou’s dreams every night, the face Kou has to push out of his mind a thousand times a day so he can focus on work or conversations with friends or even just brushing his teeth.

His heart leaps at the expression on Kirishima’s face, but even as Kou begins to smile, Kirishima’s face falls. Kou feels Kirishima’s gaze on Kou’s back, and he finally notices the presence of Itoh’s hand there.

Kou immediately shrugs away, but he has little room to maneuver as a waiter stops to unload a tray laden with food and drinks at the table right in front of the door. Meanwhile, someone enters the bar behind Itoh, pushing him closer to Kou.

“Kirishima-san!”

Kou’s head whips around. He takes in the athletic young man in t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. He looks like someone who’d show up at a jam.

Kou feels a stab of jealousy as Kirishima waves over the young man with a “Sakuragi-kun!”

As the young man rushes over to the corner to join Kirishima, Itoh observes in a low tone, “He’s wearing the outfit you picked out for him to pick up someone else. That’s harsh. Sorry.”

Kou barely registers what Itoh is saying as Kou watches Kirishima point out another young, athletic man to his companion.

“Hey, is this where you two met? You were saying you didn’t want to come in here, but you didn’t
want to go anywhere else, either, so I just assumed you were nervous. Sorry,” Itoh continues.

Kou finally stirs himself to answer. “Sort of. We didn’t meet here, but this is where we ended up the night we met.”

“Was that your idea or his?” Itoh asks.

“His,” Kou admits, trying not to stare as Kirishima flags down a waiter and orders a drink for his companion. *They look so natural together. Is that my replacement?*

“Maybe we should –” Itoh stops talking abruptly as a hand waves in front of Kou’s face.

“Earth to Kou!” Akihito says loudly.

Kou finally tears his eyes away from Kirishima. He hadn’t even noticed Akihito was here. “Aki, don’t…”

“Don’t what, Kou? Talk to you? Hasn’t your little pout-fest gone on long enough?” Akihito pleads.

Kou tries not to roll his eyes. “Seriously, Aki. Please. I can’t right now.”

“Well then, when will be a good time? You blocked my number, so I can’t call you. And you won’t pick up when I call from someone else’s number.”

“You were calling me at all hours of the day and night. What was I supposed to do?” Kou counters.

“You never minded before,” Akihito points out. “Can’t you forgive me already? I’m sorry.”

Kou’s anger ebbs, but it’s replaced by a heavy fatigue. “Do you even know what you’re sorry for?” he asks wearily.

“No. Just tell me, and I won’t do it again,” Akihito pleads. “I’m really sorry.”

Kou sighs. “Aki, I already told you. Grow up a little, okay?”

“But Kou-ou,” Akihito whines.

“Aki, I can’t. Not right now, okay?” Kou’s voice cracks. He glances over at Kirishima’s table again. Both Kirishima and his companion hastily look away.

Akihito follows Kou’s gaze. “Are you still hung up over Megane-san? If he means that much to you, I’ll try to convince him again what a great guy you are, though he’s really stupid not to have figured it out already.”

“That’s not it,” Kou mutters.

“What is it?” Akihito asks.

“It’s… Aki, where were you when –” Kou stops abruptly when he notices Itoh is listening. I can’t ask Aki about the night before he was taken to Hong Kong here.

“What?” Akihito asks again.

“Never mind. We’ll talk about it later,” Kou mutters.

“When?” Akihito demands.

Itoh’s eyebrows are raised, but to his credit, he doesn’t say anything as he follows Kou out the door.

“Shall we try somewhere else?” Itoh suggests in a fake cheery tone.

“I’d rather just go home,” Kou says, his voice breaking again. His eyes fill with tears, but he fights them back as he starts walking at a brisk pace, hoping Itoh won’t notice.

“Hey,” Itoh says, placing a gentle hand on Kou’s shoulder.

Kou instinctively jerks away again, but Itoh doesn’t remove his hand, instead giving Kou’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“Hey, I can tell you’re really hurting right now. It’s okay. I’m not trying anything. Sorry for teasing you so much earlier, but I’m seriously just trying to be your friend right now.”

Kou freezes. Can I really believe him? But after a moment, Kou relaxes. What he really needs right now is a friend, and Itoh’s hand feels warm and comforting.


Once they’re out of public view, Itoh wraps his arms around Kou in a brotherly hug. Kou’s breath hitches as he finally loses the fight he’s been having with his tears.

“It’s okay. Let it out,” Itoh soothes.

Kou cries softly onto Itoh’s shoulder. “I can’t believe he replaced me already.”

“I don’t think he did,” Itoh says.

Kou looks up, his tears stopped by his surprise.

Itoh continues. “I could be wrong, but he looked like he was still hung up on you. And I think he’s just friends with the other two guys. I know you were focused on your ex, but the friend who came in behind us looked really uncomfortable. I’m pretty sure he’s straight. And the other one – well, if you even noticed the other one, you noticed he was really into someone else.”

Kou gapes at Itoh. “Seriously?”

Itoh chuckles. “It was really obvious. You seriously only had eyes on your ex, huh?”

Kou blushes, but there’s no point denying it.

“Well, except for the pushy guy. Was that another ex?”

It takes Kou a moment to realize who Itoh is talking about. “You mean Aki?! No way! He’s my childhood friend.”

“And he’s gay, too? That must have been nice to have each other growing up.” Itoh can’t quite keep the jealousy out of his voice.

Kou laughs. “It wasn’t like that. Aki was oblivious. Once I invited him to Ni-chôme and he didn’t even know what it was. He told some of our other friends, and I had to pass it off as a joke. I didn’t
end up coming out to him until after I started dating Kei-san.” Kou swallows the tears that are threatening to overflow again at the thought of Kirishima.

“Well, he’s certainly figured things out for himself now. He was hot and heavy with his sexy boyfriend.”

Kou hadn’t even noticed Asami was there, but Kou doubts Akihito would ever go to Ni-chôme by himself. Kou shrugs.

“You guys are in a fight, huh? Do you have anyone else who knows about what you’re going through with the break-up?”

Kou shakes his head. “But I’m doing okay.”

Itoh laughs. “Sure. You look like you’re handling it fine right now.” He gestures at Kou’s tear-streaked face.

Kou sighs. “Okay. I’m a mess. But I’m trying to move on. I’m hoping going overseas will help.”

“Or make you even lonelier,” Itoh counters.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Kou says.

Itoh leans towards Kou. At the last second, Kou realizes Itoh’s intentions.

Kou turns his head, and the kiss lands on his cheek.

“Sorry,” Itoh says. “I know I said I wasn’t going to try anything, but I can’t stand seeing you so sad.”

“I’m sorry,” Kou says, tears running down his cheeks again. “You’re a nice guy, but I’m just not ready.”

“That guy is an idiot,” Itoh mutters. “Can I at least walk you to the train station?”

The next day, Kou is attempting to concentrate on finishing up his work project when his phone buzzes. He tries to ignore it, but he’s stuck, anyway, so he finally fishes it out of his pocket.

The text is from an unknown number.

Congratulations on the fellowship! You absolutely deserved it, and I know you’ll make the most of the opportunity.

Kou is still trying to figure out who the text is from when another from the same number appears.

Kou-san, I know this is really selfish of me, but I’m still trying to figure out how to keep my promise and be the man you want me to be. You said you won’t wait, and I understand. Just know… I still want to be that man, even if it’s too late.

Kou sets his phone down on his desk and retreats as far away as he can in his small cramped apartment. He ends up curled on his bed, his hands over his ears, trying to silence Kirishima’s voice in his head.

That’s not fair, Kei-san.
It took everything Kou had not to contact Kirishima over the past two months. For the first two weeks, Kou wrote and erased countless text messages. After waking up one morning to discover he’d fallen asleep composing yet another text, Kou deleted Kirishima from his contacts so he wouldn’t succumb in a moment of weakness.

*I should have blocked his number.*

But there’s no way Kou could ever do that. Somewhere deep inside, he’s been nurturing a tiny hope that somehow Kirishima will turn out not to be a gun-smuggling murderer.

Kou lets out a harsh laugh. *Why wasn’t that knowledge enough to make me stop loving him?*

He brings to mind the photographs Detective Yoshida showed him, which have worked as a talisman to ward off any temptation to contact Kirishima over the past two months.

It isn’t working this time.

Finally, Kou can’t take it anymore. He jumps off his bed and races out the door to the nearest parkour spot – Musashino Art University.

He’s avoided coming here over the past two months, having spent way too much time here tracing with Kirishima, but Kou needs to move now. He doesn’t have time to go to a spot any farther away.

He starts off on the herringbone building near the bike parking lot, climbing quickly up the side of the building. He wants to try to get on the roof, but there’s no way to reach it from the outside of the building, not even when standing on top of the pole that goes through the center of the external spiral staircase.

Kou cats down the railing of the staircase instead.

“Hey!” someone calls from below. “That’s dangerous!”

When Kou gets to the bottom, an older man walking his dog approaches him. “Young man, are you a student here? You really shouldn’t –”

Kou runs off into the neighborhood next to campus. Once he’s a couple of streets away, he heads west, re-entering campus near the library.

*Hopefully that guy won’t notify the security guards.*

Just in case, Kou decides to take to the roofs to avoid security for as long as possible. He practices across the gaps along Motomi Pass, for the first time not worrying about what’s below him.

*Aki does it all the time. I’m in good condition; I don’t know why I was so cautious before.*

Kou tries his first big gap-jump, landing easily on a building one story shorter. He barely feels the pain of rolling across the hard concrete through the exhilaration of successfully defying death.

Kou grins. *Now I get why Aki does it. This is amazing.*

After fifteen minutes at Motomi Pass, Kou needs a bigger challenge to get the same thrill. He heads over to the student center, which has several square-shaped openings providing natural light to the tables on the open bottom level. The gaps are much too large to jump, but there are lights in the center of each mini-quad, supported by four wires in an X-shape from the corners. Kou climbs down from the roof to test the wire.
The wire is surprisingly taut and feels strong, so Kou decides to walk across it towards the light fixture. When he’s nearly at the light fixture, a gust of wind shakes the wire, and Kou’s right foot slips. Kou lunges forward, grasping the wire with his hands. He’s easily able to catch himself, but the sudden movement catches the attention of students sitting at one of the tables below.

They gesture up excitedly, and one rushes off.

*Shit.*

It’s too high to safely drop from the wire, so Kou decides to climb across on the underside hanging with his arms and legs, figuring it will be faster than he can walk across the top. By the time he pulls himself onto the roof, Professor Yoshizuki is waiting there with arms folded across his chest.

“Motomi-kun, congratulations on the fellowship. But how would it look for the university if word got out that an alumnus committed suicide on campus the day after receiving a fellowship the university recommended you for?”

“I’m not trying to commit suicide,” Kou says defensively.

“Right,” Yoshizuki answers, eying the scrapes and bruises Kou finally feels for the first time. “You were just catapulting down stairs, leaping from rooftops, and dangling from wires for fun?”

“Yeah, actually…”

Yoshizuki sighs. “As soon as I heard the security guards scrambling, I knew it had to be you. I had to talk them out of calling the police. Go home before you’re banned from campus. We need you to take a picture for the alumni magazine this week. Try not to scratch up that face. And don’t get arrested and waste this opportunity.”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” Kou says.

He jogs home to find his landlady in his apartment.

“Motomi-san! Thank goodness you’re safe. Shinoda-san from next door saw that you’d left your door open. Your cell phone was ringing on your desk, with your wallet and keys sitting right next to it, so he was worried something had happened to you.”

“I’m sorry,” Kou says. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” the landlady says, coming closer. “You’re bleeding! Were you in an accident on your motorcycle?”

“Of course not. I didn’t have my keys or my helmet, remember? I was just exercising,” Kou says.

“Well, be more careful to close and lock your door. We don’t want to attract thieves,” the landlady chides.

When Kou goes into his bathroom to wash up, he finally understands Yoshizuki’s and his landlady’s reactions. He’s got scrapes on both legs, bruises starting to bloom on his calves and forearms, and a bloody gash on his right shoulder from where he ended up rolling over broken glass on one of his roof jumps.

*I barely even felt them.*

After bathing, Kou checks his phone. There’s a message from his client. After deleting the texts from
Kirishima, Kou immerses himself in his project.

The next several weeks pass in a blur of finishing up work projects, filling out forms, shopping, packing, and saying goodbye to friends and family. The day before it’s time to leave, Kou heads to Hanegi Park an hour before the jam is supposed to start.

When he arrives at the park, Kou is surprised to see Tokawa already waiting for him.

“I knew you’d come early,” Tokawa grins.

Kou snorts. “I could say the same about you.”

Tokawa shrugs. “There’s someone who wants to talk to you. He’ll leave before the jam starts if you want him to, but he’d really like you to hear him out first.”

Kou’s heart starts thumping wildly. I haven’t really had a chance to even think about Kei-san. What will he say?

Tokawa calls out, “It’s okay to come out now!”

From inside the maze, Akihito’s head pops up.

Kou can’t hide his disappointment.

“Kou, please,” Akihito begs. “Just let me say this, and then you can punch me or whatever.”

Tokawa wanders off to the far end of the maze and starts practicing some freerunning moves.

“Okay,” Kou says, steeling himself for a repeat of their conversation in Ni-chôme.

“I’m sorry,” Akihito says. He drops down into seiza and places his forehead on the ground.

“Get up, you idiot,” Kou says, glancing around to see if anyone is watching. Akihito stands back up.

“What are you sorry for?” Kou asks.

“For not warning you properly. I didn’t realize you would fall so hard for Megane – er, Kirishima-san. I had no idea he was hiding that kind of body under those suits of his.”

“Aki!” Kou buries his face in his hands in embarrassment.

Akihito shrugs. “I told you back when you first started dating him that we never really got along. I only saw him in work mode, and I didn’t realize he was the kind of guy you could fall so hard for. I – I tried to warn you, but –” Akihito shrugs helplessly. “I didn’t do enough. I’m really sorry, Kou. I know that doesn’t help heal your broken heart.” Akihito hangs his head.

“Aki…” Kou says. Suddenly he feels small for needing to hear the apology. “It’s okay. I get it.”

Akihito’s head snaps up. “But…”

“No buts. Looking back, you did try to warn me – though you also led me astray when I got worried.”

“I never actually lied, but… no, I did lie. I’m sorry.”
“I get it. You couldn’t betray Asami-san. I just wish…” Kou squeezes his eyes shut.

“You just wish things could be different,” Akihito whispers softly. “I do, too.”

Kou opens his eyes to study Akihito. “For me? Or for you?”

“For both of us.”

“Me, too. But… you don’t really wish that for yourself, right? You’re happy.”

Akihito shrugs. “For now.”

“You need to have more confidence. I… saw the pictures of the hotel the night you were taken to Hong Kong.”

Akihito’s eyes widen. “What? How?”

Kou shrugs. “Things like that get… investigated.”

Akihito narrows his eyes. “Who –”

“Never mind who,” Kou says. “Asami-san risked a lot for you, didn’t he?”

Akihito licks his lips. “I betrayed him that night.”

Kou decides it’s best not to ask how. “And yet he still followed you all the way to Hong Kong?”

Akihito sighs. “Point taken.” He clears his throat. “But what about you?”

“Me? I’m going to New York.”

“I know that. What about you and…”

Kou shakes his head. “It’s over. It has to be.”

Tokawa heads back over in their direction after Akihito gives Kou a bone-crushing conciliatory hug.

“Hey, I want to tell you both something,” Kou says.

They both turn and look at Kou expectantly.

“I – um… I…”

“Spit it out, Kou,” Akihito says as Tokawa pulls out his water bottle for a sip.

“I’m gay,” Kou announces.

Tokawa sprays water out of his mouth and starts coughing.

Even Akihito turns red. “Kou! Did you really have to say it like that?”

“What? You’re the one who told me to spit it out!”

“I didn’t know what it was!”
Tokawa finally recovers enough to choke out, “That – that actually makes a lot of sense. So were you and –” He stops abruptly, looking at Akihito.

Akihito stares back at Tokawa for a second. “Wait, do you know Ki-er, Megane-san?”

“Aki!” Kou protests.

“What? I didn’t say his name! If Daiki knows, he’ll know who I’m talking about. If he doesn’t, he’ll have narrowed it down to half of Tokyo. Or I guess a quarter of Tokyo: glasses-wearing men.”

Tokawa nods. “Yeah. That makes so much sense.” It’s obvious things are clicking into place for Tokawa in a way that can’t be undone by any amount of protest.

“That’s not going to be a problem, is it?” Kou worries. “I really only meant to tell you about myself because I plan to live more openly in New York, and I didn’t want you to find out on social media.”

Tokawa waves a hand. “It’s fine. I really don’t care about stuff like that. Thanks for telling me.”

As if to prove his point, Tokawa starts practicing his freerunning moves again.

Kou starts bounding and vaulting across the maze. Somehow his steps have never felt lighter.

Before he knows it, Kou is sitting on the airplane. He stares out the window at the rainy sky.

“Business trip?” the man sitting next to him asks.

“Something like that,” Kou answers. He still can’t really believe he’s leaving Japan. He searches the horizon, but Shinjuku’s towers aren’t visible through the low-hanging clouds. Even as the plane takes off, though, his eyes are still drawn to the spot where he knows Sion to be. Forced to sit still, Kou becomes aware of the quiet tugging feeling in his chest he’s been trying to ignore for the past three months.

*Goodbye, Kei-san. I’ll always love you.*

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is taken from the song "The Labouring Man's Daughter" by Karan Casey.

I actually hadn't planned on having Akihito and Kou make up before Kou left, but your comments changed my mind.

Next we go back to Kirishima's perspective. We still have about five chapters left, I think (give or take a bunch, since I'm horrible at estimating).
Addicted to a Certain Kind of Sadness (Spindrift Blue)

Chapter Summary

Will seeing Kou with another man finally push Kirishima to figure out his 'midlife crisis'?

Chapter Notes

Once again the characters led me in unexpected directions. Kirishima insisted I start the chapter where I did, and the first 4/5 of the chapter happened thanks to his decision.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

Japanese terms:
senmu: Suoh’s job title
shōchū: a Japanese liquor that's 90 proof (45% alcohol by volume), much stronger than beer or sake
goukan: a drinking party for men and women to meet potential dating partners
bian: a lesbian

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
When Sakuragi enters the bar, Kirishima tosses back his drink and busies himself with calling the waiter, trying to distract himself from looking at Kou and his date. But Kirishima’s eyes can’t stop peeking. At least Kou-san is kind enough not to do too much PDA in front of me.

“Is that Motomi-san?” Sakuragi whispers, his eyes following Kirishima’s.

Kirishima sighs and nods. “That guy hit on him while we were on our first date. I guess he moved in as soon as he found out Kou-san is single.”

“We’d know if he were living with someone. We haven’t even seen him with anyone before – besides his parkour friends and business clients. It’s got to be a first date,” Sakuragi reassures Kirishima.

Kirishima is too caught up watching Kou and Akihito’s interaction to register what Sakuragi is saying. Kou suddenly glances over at them, and Kirishima and Sakuragi both look away quickly.

“Is he doing it on purpose?” Sakuragi whispers.

“What?”

“Did he bring that guy here to get a reaction out of you?”

Kirishima ponders the question for a fraction of a second before shaking his head. “That’s not Kou-san’s style. Besides, he wouldn’t have had any reason to think I was here.”

Which means Kou-san didn’t come here looking for me. Kirishima reminds himself of the bitter truth that Kou won’t come looking for Kirishima ever again. He gulps down the rest of his drink.

“Motomi-san looks really uncomfortable. I don’t think the date is going well,” Sakuragi whispers encouragingly.

Kirishima grins ruefully. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up. They look far more suited to each other than Kou-san and I ever did.”

Sakuragi stares at Kirishima. “You need to get your eyes checked. I think you need new glasses.” Sakuragi looks again at Kou and Itoh and shakes his head.

Kou glances over at Kirishima and Sakuragi again.

“See?” Sakuragi hisses. “He keeps looking to gauge your reaction. Do you want me to pretend to be with you?”

Kirishima bites back a laugh at the nervous expression on Sakuragi’s face just thinking about it. “No thanks. He hates dishonesty. Besides, I don’t mind if he realizes I still wish we could be together.”

Wishing won’t make it happen, though. Kirishima empties his glass.

Kou and his date leave soon afterwards, and Kirishima tries his hardest to push all thoughts of Kou aside so Kirishima can focus on helping Saji have a good Ni-chôme debut.

It’s nearly impossible. Saji is so busy hitting it off with the stranger that he doesn’t notice, but poor Sakuragi has to bear the brunt of Kirishima’s broodiness.

“Sorry,” Kirishima apologizes for the fourth time when the conversation dies again. “I’ve never been a great conversationalist.”

“That’s not true,” Sakuragi protests. “Sure, you’re a bit quiet, but that’s just because you wait until
you have something interesting to say rather than chattering mindlessly just to fill the silence. Relax. We don’t have to talk.” He sips his beer and looks around the room, his eyes falling on Asami and Akihito. He chuckles softly. “I almost feel sorry for Takaba-sama.”

Kirishima follows Sakuragi’s gaze. Akihito’s face is aflame as he struggles to get out of Asami’s embrace.

“Would you let go already?” Akihito bursts out. “People are staring!”

“That’s only because you’re making so much noise,” Asami says. “But if you’ve had enough of our date, let’s go home.”

“Date?!” Akihito splutters. “You dragged me from work like a caveman and brought me here only to pester me. This is hardly a date. We didn’t even get a chance to eat anything.” While Akihito complains, Asami picks him up and tosses him over his shoulder, heading towards Kirishima’s table.

“Thanks for the idea, Kei,” Asami says. “Sorry if I intruded too much on your atmosphere.”

Kirishima tries not to let the surprise show on his face at this unexpected apology, but an instant later he realizes Asami’s true intentions for coming over when Asami continues speaking.

“Nice jeans, by the way. Kazumi asked for a picture. Do you mind?” Asami laughs heartily as Kirishima blushes all the way to the root of his hair. He tries to cover his embarrassment by slugging back his fresh drink.

Asami heads out the door, still laughing, as Akihito continues to pound ineffectually on his shoulder, screaming “Put me down, bastard! I can walk!”

“How long have you known Asami-sama?” Sakuragi finally breaks the silence, keeping his face carefully neutral behind his glass.

“Since high school. He was my senpai,” Kirishima mutters, scowling.

“I see.” Sakuragi takes a sip of beer while Kirishima eyes him suspiciously, wondering whether the smirk Kirishima detects on Sakuragi’s face is just Kirishima’s imagination. Sakuragi sets his glass down carefully as he asks, “Is it the same for Senmu-san?”

“No. Kazu-nii’s my cousin.” The truth slips out before Kirishima can stop it.

“I see.” Sakuragi takes a sip of beer while Kirishima eyes him suspiciously, wondering whether the smirk Kirishima detects on Sakuragi’s face is just Kirishima’s imagination. Sakuragi sets his glass down carefully as he asks, “Is it the same for Senmu-san?”

“No. Kazu-nii’s my cousin.” The truth slips out before Kirishima can stop it. I really need to stop calling him that.

Sakuragi raises his eyebrows. “That actually...” Kirishima braces himself to hear how different they are, but Sakuragi surprises him by continuing, “… makes a lot of sense.”

“It does?” Kirishima asks before he can help himself.

“Yeah.” Sakuragi nods. “Maybe I should be surprised, but somehow I’m not. You’re both exceptional in a wide range of skills and abilities, you’re both very intelligent, and you’re both good listeners.”

Kirishima blushes. “I’m really not –”

Sakuragi waves his hand dismissively. “I find that Japanese false modesty annoying. You don’t have to bother with it.”

“But –”
Sakuragi sets his glass down. “I’m going to check on Saji. We don’t want him imprinting on the first man he sees in Ni-chôme.”

“Imprinting?” Kirishima asks.

“You know, like a baby duck thinking the first thing it sees is its mother. I’m going to make sure this guy is okay.”

“He did seem like a bit of a player,” Kirishima observes. As he watches Sakuragi converse with Saji and his new friend, Kirishima tosses back the rest of his drink.

Mother duck. Kou-san said something like that about me once. But if I did imprint on anyone, it was probably Asami-sama. When Kazu-nii asked if I’d ever had a friend before meeting Asami-sama, I couldn’t deny the truth. Asami-sama attracts ducklings. He cares about us, but he also uses it to his advantage.

Kirishima shakes his head. There’s no use thinking about Asami’s manipulative behavior now. Besides, manipulation isn’t really the right word – it implies some sort of deliberate attempt at deception on Asami’s part. Kirishima knows better than anyone that Asami has always been this way. His analytical mind is too clever and quick-witted to ignore any potential ramifications of the actions he takes. When making decisions, everything is considered together at once, the way a grandmaster chess wizard can play ten games simultaneously, deciding on each move in a fraction of a second.

Kirishima is startled when an arm is draped over his shoulder. He raises his eyebrows at Saji, who quickly removes his arm.

“Sakuragi said you’re brooding. Sorry, I didn’t even notice when Motomi-san came in. We can check with the other guards, find out if anyone’s ever seen him with that guy before.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I don’t want to think about that right now. What happened to your guy?”

Saji shrugs. “He had to catch the last train. Besides, he’s not ‘my’ guy. He was alright, but he was the first guy I met.”

Kirishima drains his glass. “Want to move on to another shop? Maybe we can find someone more your type somewhere else.”

Sakuragi and Saji exchange quick looks.

“What? Going to one shop and talking to one guy for a few minutes is hardly a debut, is it?” Kirishima asks. “Let’s give you a proper Ni-chôme debut.”

“It’s not like I can drink that much,” Saji points out. “I’ve got to be ready in case they call for back-up.”

Kirishima waves his hand. “Takaba is with Asami-sama. They won’t need back-up for at least five or six hours. Probably longer; Asami-sama seemed especially horny.”

Sakuragi picks up Kirishima’s glass and sniffs it. “When did you switch to shōchū, Kirishima-san?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I don’t think I ever switched. Now let’s move on to the next shop. This place is too stuffy.”

Sakuragi and Saji look at each other again but shrug and follow Kirishima out the door.
Kirishima doesn’t actually know where he’s going; he just couldn’t stand sitting inside the small, stuffy room anymore. He heads off down the street, Sakuragi and Saji tagging along behind him. Kirishima occasionally turns down one alleyway or another. After fifteen minutes of this, Saji finally ventures to ask, “Um, Kirishima-san? We’ve passed a lot of places, and I don’t think there’s much left in Ni-chôme. Is there a specific place you have in mind?”

Kirishima glances down the side streets at the next intersection and spots an outdoor café. “Here,” he mutters, leading the way.

“Didn’t we already pass –” Saji starts but stops when Sakuragi kicks him in the shin.

Kirishima doesn’t notice. He tests the metal railing that encloses the café’s seating area. “Do you think this is stable enough for parkour?”

Without waiting for an answer, Kirishima performs an underbar through the railing, which wobbles a little but remains upright.

Sakuragi and Saji hastily jump over the railing behind Kirishima, being careful not to topple it.

“Um, Kirishima-san, maybe we should…” Sakuragi trails off as Kirishima sits down at a table and calls a waiter over.

“We’ll have oolong tea,” Saji quickly orders for everyone.

“Make mine a shôchû,” Kirishima corrects, frowning.

“Kirishima-san, I thought you had to work tomorrow,” Sakuragi reminds him.

“I’m not that much of a lightweight. Do you remind Asami-sama about work when you’re guarding him and Takaba?”

“Of course not. I’m sorry,” Sakuragi murmurs. He exchanges another helpless glance with Saji, who shrugs.

“So? Do you see anyone interesting?” Kirishima asks, taking in the other men around the café.

Saji looks around, too. “Not really.”

“What about him?” Kirishima says, openly pointing to a wiry young man in ripped jeans and a muscle shirt, shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail, arms folded across his chest.

Saji shrugs. “He looks okay, but he doesn’t look like he wants to be disturbed.”

“Maybe he’s just shy,” Kirishima counters. He gets up and heads over towards the man.

The man raises his eyebrows at Kirishima. “What do you want?”

“My friend thinks you’re cute,” Kirishima says, gesturing back at Saji.

The man gets up and strides across the café to Saji, grabbing a fistful of his t-shirt. “What did you say about me, punk?”

“No- nothing,” Saji stammers, exchanging a confused glance with Sakuragi, who has risen to his feet.
“Did you call me ‘cute’? Don’t fucking insult me!” The man pushes hard against Saji’s chest, but Saji and Sakuragi are ready. Saji’s chair tips back, but Sakuragi catches it and rights it while Saji kicks out with both feet.

The man backs up, narrowly avoiding the kick, and strides out of the café without a backwards glance.

Saji stands up, but Sakuragi puts a restraining arm on his shoulder. “It’s not worth making trouble for Asami-sama. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“I’m fine,” Saji says, scowling. He wheels on Kirishima, who has stumbled back to the table, mouth agape. “What the fuck did you say to him?”

“I just told him you thought he was cute,” Kirishima says. “I had no idea he was so… unstable.”

Saji breathes out hard through his nose. “A dude like that doesn’t like being called cute.”

“So I observed. I’m sorry,” Kirishima says.

A bubble of laughter erupts from Sakuragi. Both Kirishima and Saji turn to stare at him.

“What’s so funny?” Saji demands.

“Just… This is way more fun than a goukan.”

“It’s not funny,” Saji mutters.

“Dude, you could have totally taken him.” Sakuragi tries to placate Saji.

“Let’s just drink our tea and go home.” Saji sits back down with a huge sigh.

“I’m sorry I ruined your debut,” Kirishima says, frowning as he pushes his glasses up his nose.

“You didn’t,” Saji says, smiling reassuringly. “It was fun. But it’s been a long day, and it’s late. Nihonmachi will still be here tomorrow. You’ll come with me again sometime, right, Kirishima-san?”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Sakuragi whines.

Saji rolls his eyes. “You’re welcome to come, too, but don’t annoy the bians too much.”

“Bians?”

“You know that waitress at the first shop was gay, right?”

Sakuragi’s mouth drops. “What are you talking about? She was really nice to me!”

Saji laughs. “Are you an asshole to dudes because you don’t want to date them?”


Saji shrugs. “Actually, I have no idea. She might have been straight for all I know. I was just messing with you.”

Sakuragi punches Saji in the arm while Saji and Kirishima laugh.

Saji rubs his arm but turns to face Kirishima. “It’s good to finally see you smile. It’s been a rough night for you, huh? I’m sorry.”
“It’s not your fault. Anyway, I’m fine,” Kirishima says gruffly.

“Should we try to get a taxi?” Sakuragi suggests when they finish their drinks.

“Let’s walk,” Kirishima suggests. “It’s not that far, right?”

Saji and Sakuragi exchange looks again.


“Sorry,” they both say.

“It’s just – please don’t go telling strange guys I think they’re cute again,” Saji says.

“I won’t! I already learned my lesson. I’ll be a good wingman and stand by your wing from now on,” Kirishima promises.

“And don’t go doing any more parkour in sketchy places,” Sakuragi adds.

Kirishima sighs. “That railing held up just fine. I tested it first.”

As soon as they’ve made their way out of Ni-chôme, Kirishima spots a railing separating the sidewalk from the road. “Hey, we can do some balance work!”

He climbs up onto the railing and starts walking across its top, wobbling unsteadily.

“Kirishima-san, come down,” Sakuragi pleads, tugging on Kirishima’s shirt.

Kirishima loses his balance and hops down next to Sakuragi, frowning at him. “You made me fall.”


“I wouldn’t be stupid enough to fall in front of a car,” Kirishima says. He climbs back onto the railing.

“Kirishima-san, please. You’re being really troublesome,” Saji says. He holds Sakuragi back from pulling Kirishima down again, whispering, “He seems like the obstinate type when he’s drunk. If you push too hard, it will just make things more difficult.”

“I’m not obstinate,” Kirishima protests. “If it makes you happy, I’ll stick to cat crawls. That’s boringly safe, right?”


“You could join me. It’s good training for all the barbed wire crawls in the race,” Kirishima points out.

“I’ve trained enough today, and we’ve got an early session at the gym tomorrow,” Sakuragi retorts.

Saji hops up on the rail behind Kirishima. “Why not?” he says. “Whenever you can squeeze in some extra training, right? It’s more fun than walking.” But by the time they reach the end of the short block, Saji is happy to hop down. “Okay, that’s enough. Man, that’s a good arm workout.”
As soon as they cross the street, Kirishima climbs back up on the railing. Sakuragi groans when Kirishima walks on the top of the railing again.

“The light’s red. No cars are coming. I’ll get down as soon as it changes,” Kirishima promises.

A truck turns left and rattles past Kirishima, the side mirror nearly knocking him in the shoulder. He loses his balance avoiding the mirror and hops over the bushes onto the sidewalk.

“Will you knock it off now?” Sakuragi asks tensely. “This is more stressful than guarding Takaba-san.”

Kirishima glares at him. “I don’t need you to watch me. Anyway, I’m being careful. Nothing happened.” He strides across the next street, and Saji and Sakuragi jog to catch up to him.

Thankfully, there are no more railings for the next few blocks. Sakuragi groans when the railing reappears.

Kirishima scowls at him. “Fine. I’ll go over there instead.” He runs across the road to where he’s spotted a couple of buildings with outside staircases.

“Kirishima-saaaan,” Saji calls as he sprints after Kirishima.

“Can you please not kill us all?” Sakuragi asks, placing his hands on his knees as he tries to regain his breath.

“What? It was a crosswalk,” Kirishima says.

“You crossed against the light!” Sakuragi explodes in frustration.

“There’s not that much traffic now. It was safe,” Kirishima defends his actions.

“For you, maybe…” Sakuragi mutters, shaking his head. “Let’s go home now, okay?”

Kirishima does a gate vault over the fence blocking the end of the alley leading to the outdoor stairs.

Saji sighs but follows him. “You realize it’s the middle of the night, right? We don’t want to wake anyone up.”

“I’ll be quiet,” Kirishima says, jumping up to a horizontal support bar, climbing onto it, and then grabbing the underside of one of the stairs. He shimmies to the end and pulls himself up the railing. He climbs over the railing and looks down at Sakuragi and Saji staring up at him. “This is a great spot!” he calls down. “What are you waiting for?”

Sakuragi and Saji have a hasty whispered conversation. Sakuragi hisses back, “It is a good spot, but we’ll come back in the daytime. Let’s go!”

“But we’re already here now. I don’t want to go home yet.”

Saji doubles over, clutching his stomach.

“Are you okay?” Sakuragi cries, looking concerned.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Saji says, covering his mouth with his hand.

Kirishima hurries back down. “Let’s get you home,” he says, putting an arm around Saji’s waist.
Once they’re in the corporate apartment building, Saji straightens up. “Thanks. I feel a lot better now.”

Kirishima stares at him. “That was quick.”

“It was the only way we could think of to make you stop acting crazy,” Saji confesses.

“I wasn’t acting crazy!” Kirishima protests.

“You kind of were, Kirishima-san. Are you going to be okay? Promise us you’ll go inside and go straight to sleep,” Sakuragi says.

Kirishima scowls. “I told you I can hold my liquor.”

“Yeah, you’re holding it alright,” Saji says, “just not very well.” Kirishima starts to protest, but Saji holds up a hand. “Maybe it’s not the liquor. Maybe you’re just upset about seeing Motomi-san. I understand. But injuring yourself isn’t going to make you feel better.”

“I wasn’t trying to injure myself. I was being careful!”

“You were being reckless. That’s not like you,” Sakuragi says. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I think you’re right; I should just go to bed. I’m sure I’ll be able to put things into perspective in the morning. I’m sorry for being so troublesome tonight. Thank you for your help.” He bows and heads up the stairs.

“Kirishima-san, it’s okay. We’re not mad. We’re just worried about you,” Saji calls after him.

But Kirishima doesn’t turn around. Once he’s in Yoneda’s apartment, he takes off his shoes and collapses on a chair, covering his face with his hands in embarrassment.

What the hell am I doing? That’s not like me. I was supposed to be helping Saji-kun, not the other way around.

Kirishima’s mind drifts back to the moment when he saw Itoh’s hand on Kou’s back.

Sakuragi is probably right – things didn’t seem to be going well between them. But it doesn’t change the fact that sooner or later, Kou-san is going to find someone else – unless I can figure out how to be worthy of him soon. Kou-san said he wasn’t going to wait, and Kou-san doesn’t lie.

Kirishima sits up. Is that his answer? He takes a deep breath.

Even though I have the guys and parkour and the race and my job and Asami-sama and Kazu-nii, it’s not enough. I don’t want to live my life without Kou-san.

Kirishima slumps back against the chair.

But what about my vow to Asami-sama?

He rakes his hand through his hair.

I was so young when I made that promise. I never thought I’d regret it.

Kirishima shakes his head.
No. I don’t regret it. I really don’t. I just… how long is ‘enough’?

Kirishima groans as he rubs his head again.

“Tell me honestly, do you think you’ve done enough already, Kei?”

Kirishima sits up again.

“I don’t know, Ryuichi. What would ever be enough for you? Yoh spent seven years in Hong Kong. You know I would have done the same if I could have – but I never could have fooled Fei Long. Still, I’ve given you more than twice as many years since making my vow. And I’ve served you faithfully for over twenty years now – more than half my life, and the age I was when I made my vow to you. Isn’t that enough?!”

Kirishima’s voice echoes off the walls, and he claps his hand over his mouth.

“I’ve got to be careful what I say out loud. I said too much to Yoneda-kun yesterday, too.

Kirishima rubs his eyes. He knows he would never betray Asami – and Asami knows that, too.

“If you regret your promise, it’s only a matter of time before you will betray him.”

Suoh sounded so sure when he said it. At the time, Kirishima thought it was ridiculous – but he hadn’t truly started regretting his promise to Asami yet.

Wait, does that mean I regret it now?

Kirishima shakes his head.

I don’t regret it. I just… don’t want to be beholden to it anymore. I’ve had enough.

“But that doesn’t mean I’d ever betray Asami-sama, Kazu-nii,” he mutters resolutely.

Kirishima’s ruminations are interrupted by an overwhelming urge to pee. He pushes himself out of the chair and stumbles on his way to the bathroom, catching himself on the doorframe.

Am I actually drunk? But I didn’t drink that much…

He thinks back over the evening and remembers that the waiter recognized him. He never gave us the bill, either. Kirishima tries to recollect how many drinks he finished. He loses count at eight – and that was just at Geinki.

Kirishima groans. I embarrassed myself. He sends a quick text to Saji and Sakuragi.

Sorry for the trouble tonight. The waiter kept refilling my glass, but I should have kept better track. Thanks for taking care of me tonight. Next time will be my treat.

Sakuragi’s reply comes quickly.

Go to bed, Kirishima-san.

Kirishima glances at the clock. How did it get so late? Just how long was I moping?

He starts to compose another apology text but realizes it will wake the guys up again. Instead, he
heads to the kitchen for a big glass of water. Hydration is vital for both sobering up before work and preventing a hangover.

Kirishima sits down at Yoneda’s small table with a legal pad and pen. While Kirishima rehydrates, he composes a letter. By the time he’s finished three glasses of water, there are piles of crumpled papers scattered across the table, but Kirishima reads the draft in front of him and nods with grim determination. He leaves the paper on the table and heads to bed.

The next morning, Kirishima rereads the letter. He folds it and places it in his breast pocket. Then he sends a text to Kou before he can change his mind.

*Kou-san, I know this is really selfish of me, but I’m still trying to figure out how to keep my promise and be the man you want me to be. You said you won’t wait, and I understand. Just know… I still want to be that man, even if it’s too late.*

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from the song "Somebody I used to Know" by Gotye. Because the majority of this chapter was unplanned, it ended where I thought it would basically begin, but I'll be starting the next chapter soon, and the story will really move forward in it (including a bit of a time jump to catch up with Kou).
Chapter Summary

Kirishima and Takaba finally have a real conversation. But what will happen with things heating up in the Kodama-gumi situation?

Chapter Notes

This chapter was hard to write because I knew how it would end and really didn't want to write that part, but it's necessary to the story. Please keep in mind that "no archive warnings apply." Warning for language in this chapter. Note: I can't remember using any Japanese or technical terms in this chapter, but if I did, please let me know so I can add them to this note.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda: the head of Akihito's guards
Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Motherfucker. Let me go to Asami already.” Takaba glares at Kirishima.

“My instructions were to keep you here, safe. That’s what I plan to do,” Kirishima answers calmly.
Dealing with Takaba takes a special kind of patience, but Kirishima has had plenty of time to develop it.

“You want to go, too. It’s killing you not to be in the action,” Akihito taunts.

His words sting more than he could know. Kirishima has done everything he can to rebuild Asami’s trust after his mistake in the Suzuki meeting four months ago, but the situation has gotten worse, and tensions in Tokyo are at an all-time high. While Asami has been relying on Kirishima as much as ever, Kirishima still can’t help wondering if he was chosen to guard Takaba because Asami still doesn’t trust Kirishima one hundred percent anymore.

Sensing Kirishima’s weakening resolve, Takaba presses harder. “What if it were Kou? You’d want to help keep him safe.”

Kirishima takes a deep breath to bring himself back to his senses. It’s Takaba. He’s just trying to rattle you. Don’t rise to his bait – and don’t get distracted. Kirishima notes that Takaba is glancing at the narrow window above the door again. Even if he tries to get through that, I can get through it, too, if he somehow manages to block the door.

Kirishima sets his face in his sternest expression. “If I were in Asami-sama’s shoes, I would want Kou-san to be safely away so I could take care of things and not get distracted.”

“I want to help Asami, not distract him!” Takaba protests. He crosses his arms across his chest, groaning in frustration. “Don’t you want to help him, too?”

“I do, and I am. Keeping you away is the best help I can give him right now.”

“Asshole,” Takaba mutters. He turns away from Kirishima and flumps down on the concrete floor.

Kirishima only allows himself to relax slightly. The records room is not the most comfortable place for them to stay, but because it is located in the basement, no matter how much of a fuss Takaba raises, he’s unlikely to reveal their location. As a bonus, there is only a single, sturdy door, to which Kirishima has one of the three keycards. A keycard is required both for entry and exit. The only other vulnerabilities are the small window above the door and the air duct.

Takaba leans back against one of the stacks of shelves. He casually rests his feet on the opposite shelves, but Kirishima isn’t fooled. He can tell that Takaba is testing the shelves to see how sturdy they are.

Too bad. They weigh over seven hundred kilograms fully loaded. You could catapult off your scooter trying to knock them over, and they wouldn’t budge.

“Stop smirking! Why won’t you let me go help Asami?” Takaba snarls.

“Help him? Like you did with your little exposé on Kodama-gumi? Asami-sama warned you not to go near that story. You used the information we shared to assuage Kou-san’s worries to advance your career at Asami-sama’s expense,” Kirishima spits out. Even now, saying Kou’s name is painful. When Kou never answered Kirishima’s last texts, Kirishima couldn’t bring himself to do anything with the letter he still carries in his breast pocket each day.

“I would never use Asami to advance my career!” Takaba cries. “That exposé was supposed to make things less dangerous!”

“Well, it backfired,” Kirishima says tersely.
Akihito’s face crumples, but he quickly hides it in his hands. “I just want to help Asami,” he mumbles.

“Really? Why don’t you quit that job of yours, then?”

Akihito glares up at Kirishima. “Like I could do that! It’s not that easy. It’s not like you’d just quit your job for Kou, right?”

Kirishima blinks. His mind is as scrambled as if he’d just been sucker-punched. “That’s different,” he mutters.

“You know how hard it is to get a visa to America these days? If Kou hadn’t –”

“I know!” Kirishima snaps back. “Shut up.”

It’s Akihito’s turn to look surprised. “Sorry. I didn’t mean… But you get it, right? I just…” He sighs and buries his face in his knees.

“You really care about Asami-sama, don’t you?” Kirishima says softly despite himself.

Akihito looks up again, his face soft and honest. “Of course I –” His face reddens and he abruptly tries to change tack. “I mean, who would care for an old yakuza like him?”

Kirishima can’t help chuckling. “You could try telling him sometime, you know.”

Akihito scowls. “Who would? That guy’s ego is big enough.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “You’d think so…”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Akihito challenges.

“Nothing,” Kirishima says quickly. “Anyway, we’re stuck here for a while, so you might as well get comfortable.”

Kirishima sits down with his back to the door. He takes out his tablet but keeps one eye on Takaba while he works.

After about fifteen minutes, Takaba bursts out, “How can you sit there so calmly when Asami’s in danger?”

Kirishima looks up in surprise. “Believe it or not, I’m doing my job to help keep Asami-sama safe. Anyway, Asami-sama is perfectly capable of handling things.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Are you doubting Asami-sama’s capabilities?” Kirishima raises his eyebrows.

“Of course not. But he wouldn’t keep me away if it weren’t dangerous,” Akihito mutters.

Kirishima chuckles. “There are plenty of aspects to our business that Asami-sama doesn’t want a criminal photographer privy to.”

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but he doesn’t lock me in a closet anytime I write an article. If he did –” Akihito can’t seem to find words to express what he’d do, but his glare makes words unnecessary.

“So you understand at least that much,” Kirishima says absentmindedly as he focuses back on his
Kirishima is already too absorbed to notice Akihito’s question.

“What did you mean by that?” Akihito demands.

Kirishima looks up again. “Mean by what?”

“That I understand at least that much?”

Kirishima furrows his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know! You’re the one who said it!” Akihito bursts out, frustrated.

“Did I? I don’t remember. Anyway, I’ve got to concentrate.” Kirishima focuses once again on the data, trying to find any clue that might reveal how far Kodama’s infiltration into Sion’s VIP clients went.

After a few more minutes, Akihito stands up and walks down the aisle between the shelves.

“Those records are all classified,” Kirishima says without looking up. “Anyway, they’re mostly boring corporate documents submitted to the government. Legal and boring.”

“I’m just stretching my legs,” Takaba says. “This room is too small. I’m bored.”

“Don’t bother trying to plant any bugs or cameras in here,” Kirishima says. “Even if we need to access a record, we don’t look at it in here.”

“I can tell,” Takaba says. “This room is too stuffy. And when was the last time you dusted?” He runs a finger along the shelf and holds it up.

“I’ll make a note to have someone take care of that. Now if you don’t mind, please don’t stir up the dust too much. I’m allergic.”

“You’re boring,” Takaba whines. “I really don’t get –” he stops talking abruptly.

“What?” Kirishima sets down his tablet, trying to keep his annoyance hidden. Don’t let him bait you.


“Just spit it out already,” Kirishima says. “You’ve already distracted me. You might as well finish.”

Takaba blushes redder. “It’s just… Kou said you two had a lot in common, and that you were really interesting to talk to. But every time I try…” Takaba shrugs. “I guess you only talk to people you like.”

“I’m really not that interesting; I’m actually very awkward. But could we please not talk about Kou-san?” Kirishima asks, keeping his voice and face as neutral as possible. He picks up his tablet again.

“Sure, no problem,” Takaba agrees, sounding farther away.

Kirishima glances up again. “Where are you? Stay where I can see you.”

“I told you I’m bored. I’m just going to stretch my legs. Got to stay limber in case there’s some
There’s a scuffling sound. Kirishima peers around the corner to see Takaba swinging his leg back and forth. “Don’t damage the shelves,” Kirishima chides.

“It’s industrial-strength steel. I couldn’t damage it if I wanted to. Look, there’s enough room for me to practice parkour in here. If you let me, I’ll be good.”

“What on earth are you going to practice without using the shelves?” Kirishima asks, looking around.

“Tricking. I guess that’s technically freerunning, not parkour, but whatever. I won’t touch your precious shelves.”


“Thanks! I’m going to put on some jams, too.” Takaba pulls out his phone and a portable speaker.

Kirishima sighs again but decides it’s better to let Takaba occupy himself with parkour than continue to stew and contemplate escape. Kirishima settles back against the door and resumes his work. He’s soon able to tune out the sounds of the grinding noise rock music and Takaba’s footfalls as he practices tricks.

Thirty minutes later, Kirishima realizes he hasn’t actually looked at Takaba in a while. Not wise, Kei. Kirishima stands and stretches his stiff legs as he says, “Had enough practice yet?”

He turns the corner and sees Takaba climbing the far end of the shelf, reaching towards the air duct. Kirishima starts to jog down the aisle and nearly trips over the piles of materials that have been cleared from the bottom three shelves. Takaba abandons the air duct cover and scoots across the top of the shelf towards Kirishima instead.

“Sorry, but it’s time for me to go help Asami,” Takaba says as he leans his hands back on the shelf from the neighboring aisle and kicks as hard as he can at the shelf facing Kirishima.

The shelf wobbles, and Kirishima ducks as materials fall off the top two shelves. He dives between the lower shelves that had been cleared of materials, just managing to avoid being hit as the shelf crashes into the one opposite it in the aisle.

The sound of breaking glass diverts Kirishima’s attention from the shelf. *Takaba must have gone out the window above the door.*

Kirishima scrambles up the remaining shelf between him and the door. He grabs the emergency exit sign and performs an underbar through the window.

On his way down, he crashes into Takaba, knocking him off his feet. The impact throws off Kirishima’s balance, and he can’t quite get his feet under him for the landing. The ground knocks the wind out of him, but he remembers to spread the impact over as much of his body as possible.

Takaba has already scrambled to his feet. Kirishima snakes out a hand and grabs him by the ankle, yanking hard.

“Asshole!” Takaba cries as he tumbles to the ground. “I could have seriously gotten hurt. What the hell was that tackle?”
Kirishima stares at him. “And had that shelf landed on me?”

Takaba blushes and looks away, scowling. “I knew you could dodge it,” he says uneasily.

“We’re going back in the room now. Don’t make me bring out the handcuffs,” Kirishima says, grabbing Takaba’s arms behind his back and hauling him to his feet.

Takaba kicks out behind him, but Kirishima is ready for it.

He lowers Takaba back to the ground, pinning him with a knee to the back. “Seriously? I thought we were past this nonsense.”

Takaba fruitlessly wiggles around, trying to get loose. “Me, too. Locking me in a room? You’re such a toady.”

“I’m keeping you safe. If you would just listen for once,” Kirishima grits out as he tries to hold the thrashing Takaba down.

“Listen?! I’m not a kid! I can make up my own damn mind!” Takaba shouts.

“You don’t know the risks,” Kirishima says dismissively.

“I would if you’d just tell me.”

Kirishima manages to get his knee over Takaba’s hands. Kirishima reaches into his pocket to grab the handcuffs. “Asami-sama already told you. You ignored him.”

“He didn’t tell me shit!”

Takaba bucks up, and his hands come free. Kirishima scrambles to recapture them with his free hand, but Takaba is ready for that and makes it as difficult as possible by flailing his arms as best he can in the awkward position.

Kirishima leans forward to grab Takaba’s right arm, and Takaba has just enough room to draw his knees to his chest. He rolls to the side at the same time, and Kirishima is thrown in the direction of the records room.

He quickly scrambles to his feet and runs after Takaba. Kirishima is still not fast enough to quite keep up with Takaba, but it’s close. He follows Takaba down the maze of corridors. Kirishima can’t help but be impressed by Takaba’s unerring sense of direction as the photographer leads the way back to the elevator without missing a single turn, despite the fact that Takaba was blindfolded on the way to the records room.

When they’re two turns away from the elevator, Kirishima’s earpiece crackles, and Suoh says, “Kirishima, take cover immediately!”

“Takaba, we need to –” Kirishima starts but stops when he hears the chime for the elevator arriving at their floor.

“Where’s the records room?” a stranger’s voice snarls.

“I told you, I think it’s in the executive suite on the top floor!”

Kirishima’s heart sinks when he hears Yoneda’s voice. Takaba obviously recognizes it, too, as he skids to a stop.
Kirishima claps a hand on Takaba’s shoulder and gestures for him to follow Kirishima. They tiptoe as quickly as they can back down the corridor, Kirishima racking his brain to determine the safest nearby room to take refuge in.

“And I told you that my boss overheard one of Asami’s men say it was in the basement. If you’re not going to be useful, I should just get rid of you right here.”

“The highest security doors require a fingerprint and retinal scan, but go ahead. Just remember to take my finger and eye with you – but I’m not telling you which you’ll need. Three wrong attempts and you’ll set off the alarms. You have a 20% chance of getting it right,” Yoneda retorts, keeping his voice deliberately loud.

Kirishima can’t help but grin at the bold-faced lie. Yoneda is quick on his feet. *It’s actually only a 14% chance, though. Thanks to Yoneda’s continuous talking, Kirishima is able to lead Takaba farther away from the danger.*

“Would you hurry up? And shut up. I don’t like math,” Yoneda’s captor orders.

Suoh communicates with Kirishima again. “I’ve told Yoneda to take him to the records room as slowly as possible. Take cover in the mechanical room.”

Kirishima leads Takaba to the mechanical room and eases the door open.

The mechanical room door automatically locks behind them, but the door has a safety feature such that it can be opened from the inside regardless of whether it’s locked. Kirishima sighs as he looks around the room at all the equipment Takaba could wreak havoc with.

“Don’t touch anything,” Kirishima warns as he settles down with his back to the door.

“I won’t,” Takaba snaps. “I’m not stupid.”

Kirishima is barely able to restrain his urge to roll his eyes. *Easy, Kei. Don’t let him rattle you. That’s his goal, remember?*

Takaba paces restlessly back and forth a few times before bursting out, “Why are we still hiding? They’re way down the corridor. We need to get upstairs and help Asami!”

Kirishima sighs. “You heard them. They’re looking for *you*, not Asami-sama. Let’s not make their job easy for them.”

“How do you know they’re not looking for you?” Takaba retorts.

Kirishima blinks. “No one would look for me.”

“You’re Asami’s right-hand man. You know more than me. Why wouldn’t they look for you? Anyway, please move.”

“No,” Kirishima leans back against the door. *No one has ever targeted me. Is that because of Asami-sama’s ruthless reputation? Or because I’m just so easily overlooked?*

“Come on,” Takaba pleads. “You heard him. If Asami gave away our location, he’s obviously in trouble. Especially if they managed to catch *that* guy.” Takaba nods in the direction of the records room, indicating Yoneda.

“It’s rare for Takaba to acknowledge anyone’s skill, especially anyone working for Asami-sama.
Yoneda must have really impressed him. Maybe we should give him more responsibility. Aloud, Kirishima explains, “They didn’t catch Yoneda. It’s a ploy to figure out what they know and how they know it – and how they’re communicating.”

“You really expect me to believe that Asami would have you lock me in that closet and then let them find out?!” Takaba scoffs, balling his hands into tight fists.

“You wouldn’t have been in any danger if you had just stayed put,” Kirishima points out.

“We were in a dead-end. One way out. Were we supposed to just sit there and hope they didn’t shoot the door open?”

“We were inside a firesafe. You can’t just shoot through that door – or the walls, either. In a fire, the dampers would close, and we’d have sufficient air to last for over a day.”

“None of that would have mattered if that judoka had let him in,” Takaba retorts.

“Who? You mean Yoneda? He couldn’t have even if he wanted to. Access is very limited.” Kirishima rubs the top of his head. His whole head is starting to ache.

I didn’t hit my head when I landed outside the records room, did I?

Takaba folds his arms across his chest. “You’re so determined to pretend like everything’s under control, but I can tell you’re worried, too. Let’s go help Asami.”

Kirishima gestures to his tablet. “I am helping. I’d be doing a better job of it if you weren’t distracting me so much.”

Takaba rolls his eyes and pantomimes slamming his head against the wall. “Fine. I’ll find another way out then.”

He follows a large duct deeper into the mechanical room. Kirishima decides to ignore him. There’s no other way out, and he knows he has to keep quiet.

Kirishima refocuses on his work. He pulls up various security feeds from earlier, starting from when the man searching for Takaba entered Sion. Kirishima observes the man carefully, alert for any covert signals such as rubbing his eye, putting his hands in his pocket, or coughing. Kirishima marks any potential signals to review later. Next, he carefully observes the people in the same room as the man when the potential signals occur, to identify anyone who seems to be watching him.

Kirishima identifies three other men who might be observing the man, though it’s hard to tell because they’re positioned in seats facing him. Kirishima goes back to the footage of the potential signals and watches to see what the potential observers do after each signal.

“Bingo,” Kirishima mutters as one of the observers makes a phone call thirty seconds after the man checks his watch. Kirishima is in the process of sending the information to Suoh when he hears pounding footsteps in the corridor.

“Takaba Akihito! If you want Asami to live, come out now!” someone shouts.

Kirishima stands up. “Takaba,” he says as loudly as he dares, “it’s a trap. Asami-sama is fine.”

“Whatever. I found another way out. I’ll go check for myself,” Takaba calls. His voice sounds far away – not just far back behind the machines, but overhead as well.

Shit. Kirishima races towards Takaba’s voice as the man outside stops running.
“Takaba? Where are you? Come out, come out wherever you are!” The man shouts.

Kirishima runs as fast as he can between the machines. “Where are you?” he hisses. He pauses, looking around and up. He can’t see a ladder anywhere. *I didn’t think the mechanical rooms were connected from one floor to another.*

There’s a soft thud behind him. Kirishima spins around, but he has to jump back when a cloud of steam streams out of a valve in front of him.

“Sorry, got to go help Asami!” Takaba shouts as he races towards the door.

Kirishima takes off his fogged-up glasses. He slides underneath the steam and gets back on his feet as quickly as he can to race after Takaba.

“Stop! Asami-sama is fine!” Kirishima shouts.

But Takaba is already yanking the door open.

“Stop! Kou-san would never forgive me!” Kirishima shouts as he lunges at Takaba, tackling him.

There’s a deafening sound, and Kirishima feels someone pushing on his back. *Please tell me that’s Yoneda.*

Kirishima tries to roll off Takaba to pull out his gun, but he can’t move. Kirishima reaches for the gun instead, but his arm won’t work, either. It suddenly feels like his back has been stuck with a hot poker.

*Shit. I’ve been shot.*

Kirishima tries to ignore the sensations in his body and focus on what’s going on around him. There’s a scuffling sound off to his left, and Kirishima turns his head to look. Everything’s blurry.

*Is that from blood loss? I must be losing blood rapidly.*

Takaba is squirming beneath him. “Get off me.”

Kirishima focuses his attention on the scuffling noises. *Is that Yoneda and the shooter?*

“Take cover, Takaba!” Kirishima barks.

“I would if you’d get off – hey, what’s that?” Takaba finally manages to pull his torso out from underneath Kirishima. “Hey, you’re bleeding! Are you alright?”

“Suspect neutralized,” Yoneda wheezes.

Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief.

“Are you two okay?” Yoneda asks, his voice sounding nearer. “Oh, shit! You were both hit?!”

“Take care… of Takaba… first,” Kirishima pants.

“I’m fine,” Takaba says. He holds Kirishima’s head as Yoneda lifts his feet and pulls him the rest of the way off Takaba.

As Yoneda leans closer, his face comes into focus.
Oh, I guess I just lost my glasses. But even as Kirishima thinks this, he realizes his mind is having trouble focusing. Maybe I am losing too much blood, after all.

“Get Takaba... to safety. And make sure... the information... I sent to Suoh... went through,” he orders Yoneda through fractured breaths.

Yoneda’s earpiece crackles. “Help is on the way. We can stay here,” he says. He pulls out a knife and cuts Kirishima’s suit jacket and dress shirt away. “You’ll be okay,” Yoneda says as he cuts a strip off the dress shirt and presses it to a spot on Kirishima’s chest.

Kirishima groans.

“Sorry, got to stop the bleeding,” Yoneda says softly. “Takaba-san, can you hold this here? Press as hard as you can while I roll him on his side. I’ve got to check the exit wound, too.”

Kirishima groans again as he’s moved.

“Sorry. I’m being as gentle as I can. Please hang in there, Kirishima-san,” Yoneda says, not quite succeeding in hiding the worry in his voice.

It must be bad.

Kirishima’s vision turns to white as Yoneda presses on a spot on his back.

This might be the end.

“Tell... Kou-san...” Kirishima pants.

“Tell him yourself!” Takaba retorts, pressing harder on Kirishima’s chest as tears stream down Takaba’s face. “He’ll never forgive me if you die here.”

“Sh. Let’s not talk about such things,” Yoneda says, his voice sounding more worried than ever. “We'll have to stay like this until the medics get here. Should be any minute now.”

Kirishima takes as deep a breath as he can. “Tell Kou-san...” he presses on, “that I'm sorry. And I... love him.”

Kirishima focuses on Takaba’s face until Takaba nods.

“Promise,” Kirishima demands.

“I promise,” Takaba swears.

Kirishima relaxes, giving into the blissful temptation of unconsciousness, where he can hopefully feel no more pain, as the medics burst out of the elevator.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from the song “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran. I'll try to write the next chapter as fast as I can so you're not sitting on pins and needles too long.
Thick Skin and an Elastic Heart (Loam Brown)

Chapter Summary

While waiting for news on Kirishima's condition, Akihito and Yoneda have their first real conversation. But how is Kirishima?

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry! I know I said I'd try to write the next chapter quickly. I actually have been spending a lot of time on this story, but when I started writing this chapter, I realized I needed to do quite a bit of research to make the story as realistic as possible. Much of that research will apply to later chapters, but I needed to make certain decisions now. Anyway, I probably spent ten times as long researching as writing. I'd say the next chapter will be faster, but I know there's a bit more research I still need to do. (^_^;)

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him

Japanese Terms:
fuku-shacho: Kirishima's job title
"Onna no burūsu": "Woman Blues," a popular Enka song by Fuji Keiko from 1970
Megane-san: "Mr. Glasses," Akihito's nickname for Kirishima
Mansion: In Japan, a mansion is a large apartment building
The medics quickly take over, pushing Takaba and Yoneda to the side. Yoneda picks up Kirishima’s tablet and ensures that the data finished transmitting. He keeps one eye on Takaba, making sure he doesn’t try to run away again.

“Asami-sama is fine,” Yoneda says. “See?”

He pulls up a live security feed of the VIP room and shows it to Takaba. Asami is sitting with Kodama and Suzuki. Myriad subordinates from the three organizations are sitting or standing behind their respective bosses.

Takaba takes a shaky breath as he nods at the attacker. “That guy said…” He trails off.

“I know. It was a bluff,” Yoneda says softly.

Takaba gives a jerky nod.

“We’ve got to get you safe,” Yoneda says. “They’re obviously using Asami-sama to get to you, not the other way around.”

Takaba’s jaw drops. “No way! Why would they want to go after me?!”

“You exposé?” Yoneda reminds him.

Akihito’s face crumples. After a second, he shakes his head. “I’m just a photographer. Besides, Kodama is right there next to Asami. What if it wasn’t a bluff?”

“Asami-sama has plenty of help. And his guests are unarmed,” Yoneda assures Takaba. He types a quick message on Kirishima’s tablet before sliding it into his own bag and turning back to the medics. “How is Kirishima-san?”

“We need to get fuku-shacho-san to the hospital immediately. Where is the pilot for the helicopter?” the junior medic answers.

Yoneda gulps. “Kirishima-fuku-shacho-san is the pilot. He’s been training me. I’ve completed the training, but I’m still waiting for official approval for my license.”

“Then you’re in charge. Prepare the helicopter,” the senior medic orders.

Yoneda looks at Takaba. “You can ride in the copilot’s seat.”

Takaba shakes his head. “I need to help Asami.” His phone blares out the opening notes to Onna no burūsu, and he quickly answers it. “Asami, I-”

Asami interrupts. “Takaba, I need your help.”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“I need you to watch over Kirishima for me.”

“But-” Takaba starts to object.

“He’s very vulnerable right now. I’ll have guards posted, of course, but you’re an expert investigator. You’ll notice if anyone unseemly is snooping around, and you’ll be able to figure out who they’re
“Yeah, of course I could do that,” Takaba says, standing up a bit straighter.

“Good. Then ride over to the hospital with Kirishima, please.”

“Okay.” Takaba picks up his bag. He automatically grabs Kirishima’s crumpled and bloodied suit jacket and shirt, too. As he picks them up, the folded piece of paper falls out of the suit breast pocket. Takaba reaches down for it, but Yoneda snatches it up first.

“I’ll give this to Kirishima-san when he wakes up,” Yoneda offers as explanation.

“I was going to do that,” Takaba says, holding his hand out for the paper.

Yoneda gives him a rueful grin. “Could you really resist the temptation to read it?”

Takaba scowls. “Maybe.”

The elevator arrives with more guards. Once the attacker is secure, Yoneda and Takaba ride to the top of the building while the medics load Kirishima onto the stretcher. Yoneda finishes the preflight check as they finish securing Kirishima in the back bay, and they’re soon racing across the sky towards Kyorin University Hospital.

Akihito types on his phone, groans, and erases what he’s written. “Why did Kou choose a trip that takes nearly a week?” he grumbles.

“A week? I thought he was going to New York.” Surprise causes the words to slip from Yoneda before he can stop himself.

“How did you know that?” Akihito eyes his bodyguard suspiciously.

Yoneda shrugs. “I overhear more than you think.”

“You hear too much. Anyway, Kou found a cheap flight to L.A. with a day’s layover in Sichuan, and then a domestic flight to New York a few days later. He saved enough on the plane ticket to cover cheap lodging in Sichuan and L.A.”

“What’s he going to do in Sichuan?” Yoneda asks.


Yoneda whistles.

Akihito looks at him askance. “You know what Tempest is?”

Yoneda grins. “You think I could keep up with you if I didn’t know a thing or two about parkour?”

Akihito crosses his arms and scowls.

“Have you told Motomi-san anything yet?” Yoneda asks.

Akihito’s face immediately falls. “I can’t. If I left a voice or video message, he’d know something was wrong, and I don’t want him to figure that out at a bad time - who knows when he’ll be able to
check his phone overseas? And I can’t figure out what to text him.”

“How about just asking him to call you when he can?” Yoneda suggests.

Akihito frowns. “I started to, but it’s weird, right? I mean, he just left… He’s going to worry if I phrase it like that.”

Yoneda shrugs. “If you don’t phrase it like that, he probably won’t call, right? And he’s got reason to worry.”

The furrow between Akihito’s eyebrows grows deeper. His eyes focus through the narrow window next to the waiting room door, peering down the hallway towards the surgical suite. “How much longer do you think it’s going to be?”

Yoneda shakes his head. “I have no idea. It’s already been nearly two hours.”

“They haven’t even scanned his brain yet… I really hope he didn’t hit his head too hard.”

Yoneda frowns. When Akihito told the doctors about Kirishima falling to the ground and then rubbing his head as if he had a headache, Yoneda had pulled up the security feed and watched in slow motion. Kirishima’s head had indeed hit the hard concrete floor as he fell after going through the window of the records room, but the doctors said they couldn’t even worry about that until they stopped the bleeding from the gunshot wound and stabilized Kirishima.

The door opens, and an intern walks inside. She clears her throat nervously. “The main sources of the bleeding have been contained. There was significant blood loss, but the patient is stable. Once the surgeon has finished the procedure, the patient will be taken for a head CT scan. The surgeon will be by in about thirty minutes to provide further clarification on the extent of the injuries, the expectations for recovery, and the potential need for additional surgeries. Do you have any questions in the meantime?”

“So Kirishima-san will be okay?” Akihito lets out a slow breath.

“I can’t make any promises, but he’s made it through the first surgery, which is a good sign.”

After the intern leaves, Akihito breathes a sigh of relief. "They stopped the bleeding and the surgery is over. He'll be okay."

Yoneda starts to say something but swallows hard instead. He knows a little too much about the survival rate of various gunshot wounds; it was part of his training, to reinforce which parts of the body are most vital to protect. Stopping the bleeding is only the first hurdle; there will be significant organ damage and a high chance of infection. The intern mentioned further surgeries, implying that there was significant damage that couldn't be fixed in this preliminary surgery.

Yoneda clears his throat. "Are you going to text Motomi-san now?"

Akihito frowns slightly in concentration. After a moment, he shakes his head. "I guess it makes more sense to wait until Megane-san wakes up. He should decide what he wants Kou to know."

Yoneda nods. I just hope he wakes up.

They both fall quiet again. Eventually, the doors to the operating suite open, and Akihito and Yoneda watch through the waiting room window as Kirishima is wheeled past on a gurney. His face behind the oxygen mask is ghostly pale, and he’s so still he looks like a mannequin. Neither of them can find anything to say after seeing Kirishima, and their silence remains unbroken until a few
minutes later when the surgeon enters, wiping his brow with a handkerchief.

“Your friend is a very lucky man, at least when it comes to the penetrating trauma wound,” the surgeon begins. “The projectile entered the right upper torso between the fourth and fifth ribs. It narrowly missed the aorta, heart, and spinal column before exiting between the fifth and six ribs in the front. Somehow the projectile missed all bones. The only organ affected appears to be the right lung. The patient has hemo-pneumothorax - a collapsed lung and subsequent increased pressure in the chest wall - but due to the emergency response team inserting a chest tube shortly after the injury, there is minimal damage. A pulmonary tractotomy has successfully controlled the bleeding while sparing the lung.”

Yoneda and Akihito both breathe a sigh of relief.

“What about his head?” Akihito asks.

The surgeon sighs. “That’s outside my area of expertise. The neurosurgeon will have to explain things better, but right now there are a few areas of concern relating to the patient’s nervous system. The bullet passed so close to the spinal column, there could be some damage from the shockwave. We’ll have to wait and see. The damage could range from no effect to a spinal concussion - which would resolve by itself in a few days - to a complete spinal cord injury, which could be life-changing.”

Akihito gulsps.

“It’s too soon to tell if there’s anything to worry about. I just don’t want to set you up with false expectations. As you mentioned, the patient also hit his head. Because he fell with considerable force, there’s a chance that there is some bleeding on the brain. The patient is being scanned right now. He remained stable throughout the surgery, so if there is any bleeding, it might be treatable with nonsurgical methods. If the bleeding is more serious, he’ll have to go in for another surgery quickly. Either way neurological assessments will have to wait until the patient wakes up.”

“What are the potential complications?” Yoneda asks. “And what signs should we look for when we’re in the room with him?”

The surgeon bristles. “We have trained nurses monitoring our patients carefully.”

“Of course, but just in case…. It’s better to know as soon as possible, right?” Yoneda presses.

The surgeon sighs. “The most common complication is infection. We’ll be changing the dressings often, but if the patient complains of pain, itching, or burning coming from the entrance or exit wounds or the chest tube, please let a nurse know immediately. Until the patient wakes up, keep an eye out for redness in the skin near the wounds and chest tube, or increased rate or shallowness of respiration.”

Yoneda nods his head.

The surgeon clears his throat. “Obviously we’ll know more after the brain scan, but it will be important to watch for symptoms relating to the head injury as well. I’ll let the neurosurgeon explain those to you.”

The surgeon bustles out of the room, and Yoneda and Akihito are left waiting again. After a moment, Akihito pulls out his phone. “We should tell Asami.”

But he doesn’t dial. Yoneda raises his eyebrows.
“Um… did you catch everything the doctor said?” Akihito finally asks, blushing a little.

“I’ll update Asami-sama,” Yoneda replies.

Akihito nods and dials. He holds the phone up to his own ear.

“How’s Kei?” Asami asks without preamble.

“He’s out of surgery and stable.” Akihito answers, raising his eyebrows at Yoneda for confirmation that he’s wording things correctly. Yoneda nods, and Akihito continues, “They’re scanning his brain now and still have to do some other tests. Yoneda-san will tell you more about that stuff. Is everything - are you - when will you get here?”

“Do you miss me?” Asami’s voice takes on that slight mocking tone that always raises Akihito’s ire.

“As if, bastard. I just assumed - any decent human being would check on his friend.” Akihito cringes at his own words.

“I’ll be there when I get there. Let me talk to Yoneda.” Asami’s voice betrays no hint of emotion.

Akihito mutters “Heartless bastard” as he hands his phone to Yoneda. Akihito stands, stretches his arms overhead, and walks out the door without a backward glance.

Yoneda continues his explanation to Asami. Takaba is unpredictable, but even if suddenly decided to leave without his phone, Sakuragi and Saji are watching.

Akihito returns just as Yoneda finishes answering Asami’s questions. Akihito hands a can of coffee to Yoneda before opening a second can for himself.

“Thanks,” Yoneda says, surprised by the gesture. “Asami-sama wants to talk to you again.” Yoneda hands Akihito’s phone back to him.

Akihito holds the phone to his ear without saying anything.

After a second, Asami asks, “Akihito, are you there?”

“Yeah,” Akihito mutters, barely audible.

“My meeting has finished. I’ve got a few more things to finish up, but I should be there within the hour. Don’t worry.”

“Who’s worried?” Akihito retorts even as the worried line between his eyebrows nearly disappears.

Yoneda can’t quite hide his chuckle at Akihito’s stubbornness.

“Shut up,” Akihito whispers. “No, not you. That asshole Roof-chaser-san.”

Yoneda’s eyebrows shoot up. He had no idea Takaba had a nickname for him.

When Akihito finally hangs up with Asami, Yoneda says, “Thanks again for the coffee. I didn’t know you knew my name.”

“What’s so surprising about that?” Akihito scoffs. “You follow me around twenty-four/seven.” He watches Yoneda from the corner of his eye as he continues, “Your name is Yoneda Takuya-san. You live in Unit 328 of the Sion Corporate Mansion in Shinjuku. You’re from Ama in Aichi Prefecture just outside of Nagoya, and your girlfriend Kato Shiharu-san still lives there with her
Yoneda is nonplussed, but he does his best not to let it show on his face. *I really shouldn’t be surprised. Takaba-san is an investigative journalist, after all.* Yoneda keeps his face impassive and doesn’t confirm nor deny what Takaba said.

After a few seconds, Takaba bursts out, “Aren’t you going to ask how I found all that out about you?”

Yoneda raises his eyebrows. “Would you tell me even if I did ask?”

“No,” Takaba admits.

Yoneda laughs, and after a second, Akihito joins in.

“I guess you’re not *such* an annoying guy after all,” Akihito says.

Yoneda shrugs.

“This is the part where you’re supposed to say I’m not that annoying either,” Akihito prompts.

“I value my job. I really shouldn’t say that people might find you annoying, even by implication.” Yoneda wears a playful expression and only slightly emphasizes the word “say.”

“Hey! You just did!” Akihito cries indignantly, but he quickly follows it with a short laugh. Just as quickly, his face sores up when a nurse rushes past the waiting room.

They both fall silent. After a few minutes, Akihito quietly says, “This is the second time he’s taken a bullet for me.”

“Hong Kong?” Yoneda guesses.

Akihito’s face clouds over briefly before it settles into a look of confusion because Yoneda didn’t start guarding him until a couple of months after Hong Kong.

“I saw the scar and asked him where he got it,” Yoneda explains. “He didn’t tell me any of the details.”

“Oh.” Akihito is quiet for a few seconds before asking, “What am I supposed to say to him? He already hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Yoneda immediately corrects.

Akihito looks skeptical.

“Your personalities are very different, but he… appreciates how important you are to Asami-sama.”

Akihito’s face falls further.

Yoneda tries again. “He knows you’re not trying to use Asami-sama for his money or power. He knows you’re a kind, big-hearted person. As is he. He’ll be glad you’re okay.”

Akihito bites back a retort, remembering that Yoneda seems to be Kirishima’s friend. *And both Kou and Asami have said similar things about Megane-san. Besides, he did save my life. Twice.*

“He really is,” Yoneda says, accurately reading Akihito’s thoughts from his face.
“I believe you,” Akihito mutters, blushing a little.

“You could start with ‘thank you,’” Yoneda suggests.

“That hardly seems adequate,” Akihito says. “I wish he’d - I wish I’d listened to him.”

“You wanted to save Asami-sama,” Yoneda points out, “but in the future, it’d help if you realized that’s what we’re trying to do, too. You can rely on us. We’re on the same team.”

Akihito gapes at Yoneda. “But Megane - I mean Kirishima-san - was keeping me locked up in that records room so that I couldn’t help Asami.”

“Sometimes the best help you can give Asami-sama is to stay out of his way,” Yoneda counters. Akihito opens his mouth to object, but Yoneda continues, “That goes for us, too. And you don’t have the tactical experience we do.”

Akihito opens his mouth, lets it close, opens it again, and finally says, “But when Asami is in danger - what if it were Kato-san? And you could help her?”

“It depends on the situation. If Shiharu-tan were being held hostage, I certainly wouldn’t rush in without a plan. It’d be more likely to get her killed. And if I let myself get captured, it would make it that much harder to help her escape.”

Akihito gulps as he remembers the events in the parking garage that led to Asami getting shot and Fei Long taking Akihito to Hong Kong. He swallows a painful lump in his throat and nods. “But I’m better at moving on instinct and trusting my body to do the right thing. If I slow down to think…”

“That’s useful in parkour, but when you’re planning a stakeout, aren’t you very meticulous? You’re always aware of multiple exit routes.”

Akihito nods. Another silence falls between them as Akihito contemplates what Yoneda said. It’s not like my way of doing things has worked out so well. Asami lives in a different world than me. The stakes are higher. I can’t afford to screw up again.

After a few more minutes, Akihito pulls out his laptop. Yoneda can’t help peeking over Akihito’s shoulder. Is he playing a game? Not that I’d blame him for trying to preoccupy himself. The wait is excruciating.

But Akihito instead opens up a program that lists various WiFi connections. He chooses the hospital staff network. Yoneda watches as Akihito creates a fake network almost identically named. While waiting for hospital staff to fall for the fake network, he plugs the laptop in.

“Should I even ask what you're doing?” Yoneda asks.

“What Asami asked me to do,” Akihito mutters absentmindedly as he watches a list of usernames grow. Once there are ten names on the list, he terminates the fake network.

“Now let's see what the password requirements are,” he mutters. He accesses the employee portal, types in one of the usernames, enters a random password, and then reads the “incorrect password” screen. “Bingo.”

Yoneda gives a short chuckle at the reminder that passwords must contain at least one uppercase letter, one lowercase letter, and one number, and be at least eight characters long. “You’ve still got a
lot of possibilities, though,” he points out.

Akihito clicks the “forgotten password” button. Two security questions pop up.

“You're not going to use a cracking program?” Yoneda asks.

“Didn’t you read the rest of the ‘incorrect password’ screen? The accounts will lock after three wrong guesses. This will be easier,” Akihito says.

He opens the public staff directory and finds the names and ages of the staff whose usernames he’s obtained. He searches the internet for the youngest staff member and opens their social media pages. “This guy seems like a good bet,” Akihito mutters.

He opens the “forgotten password” page for the orderly. “Favorite baseball team? Too easy.” He snorts as he types in “giants.”

“What if he capitalized it? Or used Yomiuri instead?” Yoneda asks.

“If I get unlucky, I'll try those next. But usually young guys are kind of lazy. They'll type it the fastest way possible unless forced.”

Yoneda nods. *Now that I think about it, I do the same thing. Maybe I should strengthen all my passwords.*

“That's probably a good idea,” Akihito says.

“Did I say that aloud?” Yoneda wonders aloud.

“You didn't have to.” Akihito searches through a news archive database for the orderly's birth announcement. He finds it quickly and jots down a few notes. The orderly's parents' wedding announcement reveals his mother's maiden name, which Akihito enters into the second security question box.

“That seems way too easy,” Yoneda says.

“He'll get an e-mail notification that I've changed his password,” Akihito points out. “Hopefully he won't check for a while, and I'll have enough time to do what I need to do.”

“Can they trace this back to you?” Yoneda worries.

Akihito rolls his eyes. “I'm using a virtual network. I'm not stupid.”

He starts typing quickly, and Yoneda refrains from asking any more questions.

*I know I shouldn't be surprised, but he's actually very good at his investigative work.*

Yoneda continues to glance occasionally at what Akihito does, taking note of the names of the programs he uses.

Akihito downloads information on all personnel in the Trauma and Critical Care Center. He even manages to find shift schedules for several departments that might work even indirectly on Kirishima (thanks to Yoneda's assistance in identifying the relevant ones).

After thirty minutes, Akihito sighs. “I guess that's all we can get from this account. I'd better log off before I'm caught in the act.”
“Caught in the act of what?” a voice asks from the doorway.

Akihito shoves his laptop at Yoneda, who busies himself with logging out of the orderly's account while Akihito throws himself into Asami’s arms.

Asami cuts their kiss uncharacteristically short to ask, “Any more news?”

“No,” Akihito says as he tries to pull out of Asami’s arms.

Asami sits down on Akihito’s chair and pulls Akihito onto his knee.

“Let me go,” Akihito murmurs, reddening as he glances over at Yoneda.

“I thought I told you not to toss my heart around,” Asami growls as he holds Akihito’s wrists and turns him so that Asami can confirm there’s no damage. “None of this blood is yours?”

Akihito’s eyes well with tears. “No. It’s all Mega -- Kirishima-san’s.”

Asami tears Akihito’s shirt apart to confirm for himself.

“Hey!”

“It’s not like you were going to wear it again,” Asami points out as he nuzzles Akihito’s chest.

“I should have someone get some clean clothes for Takaba-san and myself,” Yoneda says as he makes a beeline for the door without a backwards glance.

As Yoneda stands in front of the vending machine outside of the room to collect himself, he hears the double doors at the end of the hall open. He turns and stands with his back to the waiting room window to guard Asami and Akihito from any wandering eyes as a medical team pushes a gurney through the double doors.

Yoneda gulps as he gets a close-up of Kirishima’s wan face. “Is he –?” He begins but doesn’t know how to finish.

“We’re taking him to the ICU,” the neurosurgeon says. “Someone will escort you and your friend to the family room there.”

“I’ll come with you,” Yoneda says. He raps sharply on the window behind him, waiting until the team has fully passed before stepping away.

When Yoneda steps onto the elevator, he notices but doesn’t acknowledge Sakuragi in the back. Yoneda ends up sandwiched between the gurney and the side of the elevator. “Can I touch him?” he asks.

The surgeon nods, and Yoneda takes Kirishima’s hand. “Kirishima-san,” Yoneda starts, but he doesn’t know what to say. He gives a gentle squeeze to Kirishima’s hand. “Kirishima-san!”

Kirishima’s eyes flutter open.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from “Elastic Heart” by Sia.
Knock Me Down, Not Forever (Sea Green)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima finally regains consciousness. How is he? And what are Suoh and Asami deciding behind his back?

Chapter Notes

Well, this chapter took less than half as long as the last one to write. Three weeks isn't so bad, right? I'm nearly done with all the research I had to do, so hopefully there won't be any super-long delays with the last few chapters, either.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write. I apologize for not getting a chance to reply individually to your comments on the last chapter, but I did read and appreciate them all.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. I have no experience whatsoever with any hospitals in Japan, and all experiences in the hospital were created for drama, not to represent what happens in any actual hospital.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon

Japanese Terms:
Megane-san: "Mr. Glasses," Akihito's nickname for Kirishima
Kirishima groans as he wakes up. The light is too bright, and anyway his eyelids feel heavy, so he lets his eyes close again after blinking a few times.

“Kirishima-san!”

There’s that voice again.

Is it Kou-san? But why is he calling me by my surname? The memory of the break-up hits Kirishima again like a shot to the chest.

“Wha-?” he starts, but it feels like he’s talking with cotton in his mouth. And why is his throat so dry?

“How- how are you?”

Kirishima finally recognizes Yoneda’s voice. What happened? There’s only one overwhelming sensation in Kirishima’s body: pain. When he tries to isolate where the sensation is coming from, however, it seems impossible through his massive headache.

But that’s not all that hurts. Kirishima is aware of a throbbing ache somewhere in his chest area, as well as a shooting pain from his right hip down his thigh.

Did I fall doing parkour?

Kirishima struggles to open his eyes again. He blinks against the strong light. I don’t think it’s the sun. Where am I?

A stranger’s voice says, “You’re in the hospital. We’re moving you to the ICU.”

It feels like the floor is dropping away. Kirishima hears a chime followed by the sound of doors opening. We must be in an elevator. What happened?

He searches his memory, but the last thing he can remember is waiting in the records room with Takaba.


“He’s downstairs with Asami-sama. He’ll be up soon,” Yoneda says.

Kirishima strains to focus on Yoneda’s face, but everything is blurry. “Is he -” Kirishima tries to sit up, but his body is sluggish, and anyway several pairs of hands are holding him down.

“He’s totally fine,” Yoneda says quickly. “Sorry. You saved him. You were the only one injured.”

Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief and settles back down. As the gurney starts rolling, he drifts back to sleep.
“Kei!”

Kirishima groans. Kazumi is always so annoying in the mornings.

“Come on. Time to wake up, Kei!”

Kirishima tries to roll away from the arm insistently patting his shoulder, but his body doesn’t seem to want to move. It feels heavy. And sore.

“Shut up… Kazu-nii,” Kirishima moans. There’s something on his face. He tries to reach up with his left arm, but it’s stopped by something wrapped around his wrist. “Very… funny. Un-… un-... Let me go,” Kirishima says.

“You have an IV in that arm. Try not to move it too much,” Kazumi says.

“A what? Can't we... skip... today?” Kirishima squeezes his eyes closed, willing himself back to sleep, where hopefully his head won’t hurt.

“Skip what?” Kazumi sounds genuinely puzzled.

“The gym. Still… sore... from… from... from... the day before.” Kirishima furrows his brow. Why are words so hard? If only my head would stop hurting...

“You're in a hospital, Kei. There was an accident. The doctors need to do some tests now,” Kazumi says.

Kirishima groans but tries to blink his eyes open. The light is too bright. Why is it directly overhead?

Kirishima can’t make out anything else in the room beyond vague shapes and shadows. “What… happened?” he asks.

An unfamiliar voice says, “What's your name?”

“Who are... you?”

The woman chuckles. “That's a fair question. My name is Yamamoto. I'm a neurologist. I'd like to ask you some questions if you feel up to it.”

“Okay.” Neur… neur? Did I fall and hit my head?

“What is your name?”

“Kirishima… Kei. What's… on my… my… chin?” Kirishima frowns. Chin isn't the correct word, but he can't think of the right one.

After a long pause, Yamamoto-sensei says, “There's an oxygen mask to help you breathe. If it's bothering you, we could try taking it off, but if you're not able to get enough oxygen on your own, we'll have to put it back on.”

Kirishima nods.

“There you go. How does that feel?”

Kirishima takes a couple of breaths. He can't really feel a difference without the mask, but his face

“I don't know...” Kirishima feels hot. His skin is sticky and itchy. His arm isn't really sore anymore, but it still feels heavy. He feels tired. He wants to go back to sleep...

“Kei!”

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Kirishima nods.

“There you go. How does that feel?”

Kirishima takes a couple of breaths. He can't really feel a difference without the mask, but his face
itches where the mask had been. “I… I…” Kirishima blows air through his pursed lips in frustration. He tries to think of another way to say it. “Want… to… scratch.”

Kazumi reaches over and scratches Kirishima's chin.

“Not there. My… my… higher.”

“Your cheek?” Kazumi guesses, scratching along the line formed by the oxygen mask.

Kirishima sighs and closes his eyes. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“What day is it?” Yamamoto-sensei asks.

“I… don't know. How long… have I… been here?”

“What year is it?”

“Heisei thirty. 2018.”

“Excellent. And what's the last thing you remember?”

Kirishima furrows his brow in concentration. He wishes his head wouldn't hurt so much. He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment.

“Are you in pain?” Kazumi asks.

Kirishima's eyes snap open in time to see Yamamoto-sensei shake her head at Kazumi.

“My head... hurts,” Kirishima says, “esp… esp… especially when I think.”

“What's the last thing you remember?” Yamamoto-sensei prods again.

“What happened?” Kirishima realizes no one ever answered his question.

“You -” Kazumi starts but is interrupted by Yamamoto-sensei.

“If you interfere with my test again, Suoh-san, you'll have to wait outside. You're as bad as -” Yamamoto-sensei snaps her mouth closed mid-sentence. She directs her attention back towards Kirishima. “Kirishima-san, I'll answer your questions once the test is over, but in order to evaluate your condition to the best of my ability, I need you to answer my questions first. Alright?”

Kirishima nods. “Fine.” He closes his eyes and concentrates again. “I remember... remember... Takaba-san in the… the… room with all the… papers.”

“Is that the absolute last thing?” Yamamoto-sensei presses.

Kirishima nods. “I… think so… unless… Did we have this… this… talk before?” He looks quizzically at the doctor.

“What else do you remember?” Yamamoto-sensei smiles encouragingly at Kirishima.

“Was… Yoneda-kun here? And Takaba-san? And… Ryuichi… br… for a… short time?”

Yamamoto-sensei’s smile widens, but Kirishima is distracted by the rattling of the side rail on his bed.

Kazumi is gripping the rail so tightly his knuckles have turned white. “I'll wait outside,” he says, his
face thunderous. He doesn't so much as glance at Kirishima before stomping out of the room.

Kirishima falters. “Did I… did I… make… why… Kazu-nii… nii… mad?” He groans in frustration. It's obvious why Kazumi is angry; he'd be frustrated by someone talking so slowly, too.

“Some people get angry when they feel helpless,” Yamamoto-sensei explains. “Do you remember what you ate for breakfast?”

Kirishima thinks hard. Have I had breakfast? An image of a traditional Japanese breakfast floats into his mind. “... Fish... so... soba... No... Saba. And... soup... soup... miso. Rice... brown... but I didn't... like... soup.”

Yamamoto-sensei smiles. “Very good. I think you're turning the corner.”

This is me “turning the corner”? Just how bad was I before?

The examination lasts an hour, and by the end of it, Kirishima is exhausted - and scared. The most frustrating part is not being able to fully understand and process everything Yamamoto-sensei is telling him. He knows that he should easily be able to do so, but the buzzing in his brain won't let him focus.

Yamamoto-sensei is patient and doesn't seem to mind repeating things until he understands, but Kirishima minds. His intelligence has been his defining attribute, the trait that enabled him to always be useful to Asami.

Who am I if I'm not ‘me’ anymore?

“So this Brown… Brown… Brown…” Kirishima begins.


“Yeah… that. It might… go away?”

“You’ve already regained fine touch sensations on your right side, and you can move your toes. You can sense heat on your left side. That's a good sign, but we'll have to wait and see how it progresses.”

Kirishima swallows. “And if… if… it doesn't… pro-... pro-... get… better… Will I… be able to… walk… again?”

“Seventy-five percent of patients with Brown-Séquard Syndrome can walk without assistance after rehabilitation. And remember, your symptoms are not completely consistent with Brown-Séquard Syndrome because you still have some movement and sensation on the right side and pain and temperature sensation on the left, and your spinal cord was not severed. Your chances of recovery from the spinal injury related to the penetrating chest trauma are very good.”

Kirishima nods. “But… my brain?”

“You have a mild traumatic brain injury from striking your head. Right now, your symptoms are mostly consistent with concussion, but you also seem to have additional deficits across various regions of the brain, including those responsible for motor coordination. This is complicating the assessment regarding the spinal injury.”
“Compli…eating… how?” Kirishima asks.

“You have more significant deficits related to your sacral nerves compared to what we would expect from Brown-Séquard Syndrome, but that area was not impacted by your injury.” Yamamoto-sensei shuffles through several pages of Kirishima's chart. “Wait…”

Kirishima waits several moments while Yamamoto-sensei pores through the chart, turning a page occasionally. When he can't take waiting any longer, he asks, “What's wrong?”

Yamamoto-sensei stands up. “Your lower spine was never scanned. Could there have been an undetected injury there? I've got to order that scan.” She hurries out of the room, and Kirishima is left alone for the first time that he can remember since the injury.

What does that mean? I might have more injuries? Don't I already have enough?

Kirishima tries to move his right foot, but he can't tell whether it's working, and he can't see his foot.

Yama…-sensei didn't say what's wrong with my eyes. Is that related to the brain injury? How did it happen again? No one told me!

Kirishima racks his brain, trying to remember what happened after he and Takaba were in the records room.

“What's wrong, Kei? Are you hurting?” Kazumi rushes back to the bedside.

“I'm fine,” Kirishima says. “What happened?”

“You were just talking to Yamamoto-sensei. How did your tests go?” Kazumi answers, putting his hand on Kirishima's forehead.

“I don't have a… fever,” Kirishima says, trying to twist away from the touch.

“Just checking.” Kazumi pulls his hand away. “You don't remember Yamamoto-sensei’s tests?”


“Kei… I can't…” Kazumi clears his throat. “Focus. Please try to remember. I don't want to keep telling you.”

Kirishima frowns. Apparently they've already had this conversation. “I'm… sorry. Never -”

Kazumi takes Kirishima's left hand. “Don't apologize. You can't help it. I'm sorry. I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it.”

“How… many… so… far?” Kirishima asks.

“Three,” Kazumi answers, squeezing Kirishima's hand. “You hit your head when you followed Takaba out of the records room doing that parkour shit.”

“Not… shit,” Kirishima protests.

Kazumi continues as if Kirishima hadn't spoken. “Shortly after that, you got shot protecting Takaba from one of Kodama's men.”

Kirishima gasps. “How many… times?”
“Just once,” Kazumi answers. “It hit your back and came out here.” He places his hand gently on Kirishima's chest.

“Did it really… miss… my… my… spine?” Kirishima asks.

“Yeah, at least Yamamoto-sensei seems pretty sure about it. And your heart and everything else important. They were able to save your lung, too,” Kazumi pulls his hand away and leans back.

“Except my… brain?” Kirishima says.

“That wasn't the gunshot,” Kazumi growls.

“I… don't remember,” Kirishima confesses.

“Yamamoto-sensei says you may never remember it. Does that bother you?” Kazumi asks.

“Yeah.”

“I can show you, if you want to see,” Kazumi offers

Kirishima's mouth suddenly goes dry.

“You don’t have to, but I know you. It bugs you not to be able to remember. It's up to you.” Kazumi pulls his tablet out of his jacket pocket.

Kirishima nods, but when Kazumi holds up the tablet, Kirishima realizes it's fruitless. He shakes his head. “Can't… see. Did Yamamoto-sensei say… why?”

Kazumi frowns. “You can't see anything? Let me -” he stands up, ready to fly out the door again.

“Wait!” Kirishima exclaims. “I can see… vague… shapes. Just not… the screen.”

“Oh. That’s the same then.” Kazumi sits back down. “It’s because of the brain injury. Did Yamamoto-sensei explain it to you? Several areas of your brain were impacted, including those responsible for speech, short-term memory, and vision. And maybe movement.”

Kirishima nods. “She says… I’m… getting… better.”

There’s a long pause before Kazumi says, “Does she? That’s good.”

“You don’t… think so,” Kirishima observes.

“I didn’t say that! I’m not a doctor, so I’m not sure how to tell. You’re at least keeping up with the conversation now. And… well…” Kazumi scratches the back of his head, not sure what to say.

He’s saved by a knock at the open door.

“I heard someone was awake,” Takaba says, standing in the door. “Can I come in?”

Kirishima nods, and Takaba enters, a shape bobbling by his head. As he draws nearer, Kirishima realizes it’s a balloon.

“They said you can’t have flowers in here,” Akihito announces, “so I got you this ‘get well soon’ balloon.”

“Thanks,” Kirishima says as Takaba ties it to the rail of his bed.
Kazumi snickers.

“What’s so… funny?” Kirishima demands.

“It’s got hearts on it!”

Kirishima strains, but all he can see is red.

“They didn’t have a big selection in the gift shop. Somehow I didn’t think Kirishima-san would like Doraemon,” Akihito mumbles.

“It’s fine. I can’t see the… hearts… anyway,” Kirishima says.

Akihito looks at him. “Where are your glasses?”

Kirishima blinks in surprise. He tries to lift his hand to his face, but he’s stopped by the restraint on his wrist.

“Fuck. I’m an idiot,” Kazumi mutters. He opens a drawer next to the bed and fumbles through it. He slips Kirishima’s glasses onto his face.

“Oh!” Kirishima says. He sighs with relief. “That’s… normal.”

Kazumi sighs, too. “I can’t believe none of us remembered before now. Yamamoto-sensei never asked.”

Kirishima notices that the balloon is heart-shaped with flowers and hearts decorating the message in pink and red hues. He snickers.

“Sorry! I can throw it away if you don’t like it,” Akihito says, blushing.

“No… Leave it. It’s… cheerful. Thank you,” Kirishima says. Now that he can properly see, everything else in the room is shades of white or gray.

“I should be the one thanking you,” Akihito mumbles, bowing his head. “For… you know. Saving me. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to… apologize,” Kirishima says.

“Of course I do!” Akihito’s eyes fill with tears. “I didn’t realize it was a trap.”

Kirishima can’t keep the confusion off his face.

“He doesn’t remember,” Kazumi explains to Akihito.

“Oh. Sorry. Maybe you don’t want to talk about it?” Akihito says.

“No. I want to… know,” Kirishima says. He nods at Suoh’s tablet. Suoh shows him the footage of the failed underbar. Kirishima grimaces at the hard landing.

“I didn’t know you’d be coming right behind me like that,” Akihito says.

“Not your… fault,” Kirishima says. “Mine.”

Akihito shakes his head. He grins ruefully. “You’ve got to spot your landing better next time.”

Kirishima laughs, but it causes a sharp pain in his chest, and the laugh sputters into a cough, which
hurts just as bad.

“Sorry!” Takaba yelps.

Kazumi offers a spoonful of ice chips to Kirishima, and Kirishima gratefully swallows a few. The cough subsides. Kirishima takes a few measured breaths, collecting himself.

“I’ll get a nurse,” Kazumi fusses, pushing out his chair to stand up.

“I’m fine… now,” Kirishima says. “Just don’t… make me… laugh… again.”

“Sorry,” Akihito says again.

“The other… video, Kazu-nii,” Kirishima says, nodding back at the tablet.

“Are you sure you want to see?” Kazumi asks.

Kirishima nods, but Kazumi still holds the tablet protectively.

“I… need to,” Kirishima asserts.

Kazumi sighs and shows the video of Kirishima’s shooting.

Kirishima nods curtly. “I was… lucky.”

“I’m sorry,” Akihito says again, hanging his head. “I’m glad you’re… alright. Or you’re going to be alright.” He clears his throat. “I, um… I haven’t told Kou anything yet. I wanted to wait until I knew more, and you were awake.”

“No!” Kirishima yelps, causing another coughing fit. Kazumi spoons more ice chips into Kirishima’s mouth, and the coughing soon subsides.

“He’d want to know,” Akihito insists.

Kirishima shakes his head. “No.”

“But if he were the one hurt, wouldn’t you want to know?” Akihito presses.

“Of course. But he’s just getting… settled in… America, right? Anyway, we… broke up.”

“He’d still want to know. He’ll get mad at me if I don’t tell him soon.”

“Why? We have… nothing… to do with… each other… anymore.” Kirishima sets his jaw, trying not to reveal any emotion.

Akihito studies him for a long moment before sighing. “I, I won’t say anything for now. But you’re making a mistake. He still cares about you, you know.”

Kazumi clears his throat and tries to signal something to Akihito with his eyes, but Kirishima doesn’t look up quick enough to catch it.

“I should let you rest,” Akihito says. “I brought you some stuff. Magazines, manga, some slippers…” he hands the bag to Suoh and heads for the door, but he turns and adds, “If you need me to do anything, whatever it is, just let me know.”

“Like… what?” Kirishima asks.
Akihito shrugs. “I don’t know. Like watering a plant or feeding a goldfish. Or doing something for you here - maybe reading to you, or running errands. Sneaking in better food.”

“Thanks. I’m… good… for now,” Kirishima says.

“We’ll talk more about what I should tell Kou and when the next time I visit,” Akihito says as he ducks out the door, nearly colliding with some techs who are hurrying into the room.

“You've got to have another scan,” the younger tech tells Kirishima.

“What is this for?” Kazumi asks.

“Of Kirishima-san's lower spine. Didn't Yamamoto-sensei explain? It was never done.”

“I'm coming with him,” Kazumi says, following them out of the room.

When the elevator doors open, Asami is waiting to exit. Suoh takes one look at Asami's face and steps aside, nodding at Yoneda to escort Kirishima down instead.

“Where's Yamamoto-sensei?” Asami demands, his voice nearly a growl.

“She's in an emergency surgery,” a nurse squeaks.

“Tell her she needs to come out and talk to me now,” Asami demands.

“Asami-sama,” Suoh says, placing a hand on Asami's shoulder and giving him a warning look. “Let's go wait for Kei in his room.”

Suoh waits until the door is closed behind them before asking, “What's wrong?”

“They didn't even do all the necessary tests.” Asami throws a stack of papers onto the tray connected to the bed. “If I find out someone is sabotaging Kei's care…”

“Slow down. What's going on?” Suoh asks.

“Where were they taking Kei?”

“To scan his lower spine. Apparently it was overlooked earlier, and he has some symptoms that might indicate an injury there.”

Asami sighs. “That's what the expert in America suggested, as well.”

“The one who specializes in cases of both brain and spinal injury?” Suoh asks.

Asami gives a curt nod. “We’re getting the best treatment in Japan, but it's not good enough.”

“You sent them the videos, too, right? We never showed them to Yamamoto-sensei.”

“She knew there was a fall!” Asami snaps.

“She knew Kei hit his head. She didn't really understand what happened,” Suoh reminds Asami.

“It's important to start treatment right away to preserve function.” Asami breathes hard through his nose.

Suoh looks at him carefully. “Are you blaming yourself, Ryuichi?”
“Kazumi. Don't start.” Asami's voice is deadly quiet.

“Kei knew what he was getting into.” Suoh’s tone is matter-of-fact.

“He wanted out.”

“He wouldn't have left before the Kodama situation was resolved. He still hadn't given you his resignation notice, right?”

Asami sits down heavily in the chair by the bed. He tugs absentmindedly on the string of the balloon. “There's always going to be another Kodama situation. I...” he clears his throat and looks at Suoh out of the corner of his eye. “I played on his sense of duty.”

Suoh snorts. “Of course you did. And he knew exactly what you were doing. No one knows you better, Ryuichi - probably not even yourself.”

“Not just his sense of duty. His lack of self-confidence. I made him compare himself to Yoh.”

A muscle twitches in Suoh’s jaw. It takes a moment for him to unclench his teeth and grind out, “No matter what, he still wouldn’t have left before the Kodama situation ended.”

“You're mad at me,” Asami observes.

“Does that help ease your guilt? I’m not going to do that.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“And that’s exactly why it is easing it.”

Asami shrugs. “You know me almost as well as Kei does.” After a moment, he says. “I'm going to accept his resignation.”

“If you do it now, he’s going to think you’re throwing him away.”

Asami swallows. “I know.”

Suoh grabs a chair and pulls it up to the opposite side of the bed. He sits in it and leans forward. “Then do it.”

Asami draws back in his chair. “What - ?”

“Really throw him away.”

“Kazumi.” Asami’s calm, quiet tone belies the rage Suoh knows is boiling just below the surface.

“It’s the only way he'll be free. You owe him at least that much,” Suoh stares Asami in the eye, not backing down.

Asami sets his jaw in a way that reminds Suoh of Takaba. “I’ll make sure he’s taken care of for the rest of his life.”

Suoh waves his hand. “Obviously - though he won’t accept it. But you can’t have any contact with him ever again, no matter how desperate you might become for his advice.”

Asami forces the air out of his lungs through both nostrils. “Fine.”
“Promise me.”

Asami raises his eyebrows. “What will you give me in return?”

“She.”

“I already have you.”

Suoh sits up straighter and looks Asami right in the eye. “Not like you have Kei, but from this day forward, you will.”

Asami snorts. “You’re a poor substitute.”

“I know. Consider it your penance.”

Asami eyes Suoh. “Don’t try to act like Kei. It’s annoying.”

“I’m not your yes man anymore; I’m your new mother hen.”

Asami ignores Suoh’s last comment as he stands and stretches. “How long does this scan take?”

Suoh shrugs.

“I’m going to smoke. Let me know as soon as it’s done.”

Asami takes a long drag on his cigarette as he looks across the meager garden sandwiched between the hospital building and parking lot. He holds the smoke in his lungs for a moment before blowing it out again in a steady stream. He can feel rather than hear someone approach, but he doesn’t bother to turn around.

A hand reaches up and takes the cigarette. Asami watches as Akihito draws the cigarette to his own lips and inhales. He barely draws any into his lungs before he’s doubled over with a coughing fit.

Asami takes the cigarette back and pats Akihito on the back.

“That’s - disgusting!” Akihito sputters. “How can - you smoke - those things?”

“First time smoking?” Asami asks sanguinely as he takes another puff. He savors the rich flavor of Dunhill’s premium blend as the nicotine exerts its calming effect on his mind.

“Of course not,” Akihito snaps, his stubborn look sliding across his face.

Asami’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Is he bluffing? But Akihito’s eyes are open and honest as he slowly grins in delight at having surprised Asami.

“A buddy in high school smoked kreteks. I tried them a couple of times after a few beers,” Akihito explains.

“Those don’t count,” Asami says dismissively.

Akihito shrugs. “They didn’t taste like licking an ashtray, but they’re still smokes. But I didn’t want to get hooked. My grandpa died of emphysema.”

He doesn’t say anything more, silently watching Asami take a couple more drags.
Asami sighs and stubs out the cigarette.

“I didn’t say anything,” Akihito says.


Asami drapes an arm across Akihito’s shoulder and pulls him around the side of the rain shelter.

“People in the parking lot can still see,” Akihito grumbles without pulling away. No one is walking by, anyway. He turns and looks up at Asami. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Asami’s face is stoic.

“Your best friend is in the hospital.”

A muscle twitches in Asami’s cheek. “I’m not the one in the hospital, though.”

He waits for Akihito’s taunt of “bastard,” but it doesn’t come. Instead Akihito hugs him around the waist.

“You don’t have to pretend to be strong all the time,” Akihito mumbles into Asami’s shirt.

“Who’s pretending?” Asami growls, pulling Akihito tighter against him.

“You can let me have a turn being the strong one, you know.” Akihito rubs Asami’s back while keeping his face buried, granting Asami the privacy of his facial expression.

Asami indulges him for a long moment before muttering “Cheeky brat” and kissing Akihito on the top of the head.

Akihito continues to hold Asami tight. He finally pulls back a little as he says, “Megane-san won’t let me tell Kou anything.”

Asami holds still. Without a trace of emotion, he asks, “What would Motomi do?”

“I don’t know! He’s already in America, but I met him just before he left, and he’s still head over heels in love with Kirishima-san. And obviously Kirishima-san…” Akihito trails off. He hasn’t told Asami what Kirishima shouted just before shielding Akihito from the gunshot, and he’s not sure it’s a good idea.

“Haven’t you learned your lesson about interfering in other people’s business?” Asami presses.

“It’s not other people; it’s my best friend. And yours. Besides, Kou will be pissed if I don’t tell him anything soon.”

“And what about Kirishima-san’s feelings?” Asami asks.

“He’d want to know if Kou were the one hurt.” Akihito crosses his arms and gives Asami his most mulish look.

“Would Motomi want Kei to know if the situation were reversed?” Asami presses.

Akihito frowns. “Probably not…but if things worked out, he’d forgive me eventually!” He claps his hands together, apparently coming to a conclusion.
Asami places a hand on Akihito’s shoulder. “Hold on. Kei isn’t Motomi.”

“I know that.” Akihito waves his hand as if trying to wave that fact away.

“And Motomi is on the other side of the world.”

“I know that, too.” Akihito frowns as if to ask, “And your point is?”

“Let’s give it a little more time. Kei is already feeling like he’s lost control over his life.”

Akihito’s eyes fill with tears. He gives a jerky nod. Asami slips his hand into Akihito’s and leads him back inside the hospital.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from the song "White Flag" by Sabrina Carpenter

Asami’s and Suoh's conversation was originally planned as an omake, but I couldn't figure out how to leave it out without jumping around too much.

Oh, and the glasses thing was kind of ridiculous, but once it got into my head, I just couldn't drop the idea. Sorry if it freaked you out too much! Kirishima is only as blind as he's ever been...
Kirishima Kazuko visits her son. What is Kirishima's family like? And what does Asami need to tell Kirishima?

I wasn't sure where to start this chapter, but then Kazuko told me she needed to visit her son. And then she kind of took over (those Kirishimas really like to take charge!). I've had the broad outline of this work planned since I decided to expand it beyond a one-shot, but every chapter there are little twists and turns before getting around to the plan.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima)

Japanese Terms:
Oicho-Kabu: a Japanese card game similar to baccarat; a pair of nines is an excellent hand, and the combination of 8 (ya), 9 (ku), and 3 (za) is the worst hand in the game (equal to zero points and the origin of the name "yakuza")
okā-san: a way of addressing one's mother (Asami addressing Kazuko this way
demonstrates they have an unusually close relationship)
oba-san: a way of addressing one's aunt
The Tale of Genji: Japan's first novel, written in the eleventh century
kimono styles: there are so many styles, such as uchikake, kurotomesode, irotomesode, furisode, and hōmongi, each worn by a different type of wedding participant
-nee: an honorific for an older sister (similar to -nii for older brother)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kei-chan.”
Kirishima’s eyes flutter open.

“Kei-chan.”
Mom sounds so sad.
Kirishima automatically reaches for his glasses on his bedside table. His hand knocks into the bedrail instead.

“Mom?”
She places his glasses in his hand. Kirishima puts them on and tries to sit up, but it hurts his chest. He glances down at his hospital gown and remembers.

“Kazu-nii… called you?” he guesses.

“An hour ago. I’ve been here for fifteen minutes. I wasn’t going to wake you up, but it sounded like you were having a nightmare. Or are you in pain? Should I get a nurse?” Kirishima Kazuko busies herself feeling Kei’s forehead, adjusting the blankets around him, and fluffing the pillow on either side of his head.

“I’m… fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Kazuko says, blinking back the tears that have filled her eyes and setting her face in a stoically determined expression that Asami would find familiar. “But you’re going to be.”

“Thanks for… coming, Mom,” Kirishima says.

“Of course I came! I would have been here three days ago if Kazu-chan had bothered to call me when he should have!”
Kirishima smiles as his heart is filled with a wave of nostalgia. I never thought I’d miss her fussing.

“Now, what do you need?” Kazuko asks.

“Nothing.”

“Well then, what do you want?”

“Nothing.” Kirishima honestly can’t think of a single thing he desires right now. Except Kou-san back in my life, but I can’t tell Mom that.

“Kei-chan...” Kazuko sighs in mock exasperation. “You’ve been like this since you were a child. If
there was ever a time to be a little selfish and needy, it’s now when you’re in the hospital.”

“Sorry, Mom. I really can’t think… of anything,” Kirishima says.

“Don’t apologize.” Kazuko brushes the hair off Kirishima’s forehead, even though his hair is too short for the action to be effectual. “You’ve never let me spoil you.”

“You weren’t… the spoiling type.” Kirishima grins.

“Of course not. But I wasn’t that strict, either. I just wanted to make sure you would become capable adults,” Kazuko huffs.

“Wasn’t… complaining,” Kirishima says, reaching for her hand.

She takes it. “Maybe you have learned how to be spoiled, at least a little.”

After a long moment, the silence grows awkward to Kirishima. What can I talk about? It’s been too long since I’ve been home. How long has it been?

He strains to think of a safe conversation topic. “How’s the… shop?”

“Kenta-chan and Kumiko-chan can manage just fine without me for a few hours,” Kazuko snaps. “You haven’t been home in two years, even though you live thirty minutes away, and you’re trying to get rid of me already?”

“Didn’t… mean… I meant… in general.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Kazuko purses her lips. “You don’t need to worry about that right now.”

“That bad?” Kirishima furrows his brow as he remembers Kou telling him about how poorly designed the shop’s website was. I meant to help fix it. I never got around to it. I never even looked at it.

“We’ll survive. We always have.” Kazuko kisses him on the forehead.

Kirishima blinks in surprise. They were never a particularly affectionate family, and he can’t remember his mother ever kissing him before.

“I’m… sorry,” he says.

“For what?” Kazuko stares down at him in surprise.

“For not… coming home more. Been… busy.”

“I know how stressful your job is.” Kazuko sighs. She starts sorting through the items on his bedside table, arranging them by size. She glances at the cover of one of the magazines and freezes for a moment, blushing before hurriedly covering it with another magazine.

“What was that?” Kirishima asks. “I haven’t looked… at any of those… yet. Head hurts too much.”

“Where did they come from? You were never into manga.” Kazuko holds up one of the mangas Takaba brought Kirishima.

“Friends who’ve… stopped by. They know I like… to read.”

“I see.”
Kirishima is bothered by the deliberately neutral look on Kazuko’s face. *Is it something Takaba brought? One of the guys? Asami-sama?*

He freezes.

*Asami-sama wouldn’t have brought that gay sex book to the hospital, right?*

Kirishima takes a deep breath and forces himself to relax.

*It was a magazine, silly. Probably just had an actor Mom has a crush on or something.*

Before Kirishima can worry himself too much, Yamamoto-sensei enters with Asami for the next set of neurological tests.

Kazuko insists on staying, interrupting the doctor more than once to ask questions about the results. Yamamoto-sensei is more patient with her than she was with Suoh.

Once they reach a certain point in the testing, however, Kirishima asks for privacy with the doctor.

“I gave birth to you, you know. There’s nothing I haven’t seen,” Kazuko objects.

“Mom… please,” Kirishima grits out. It’s embarrassing enough having a bag of piss strapped to his bedside for all his visitors to see (though to their credit, everyone has pretended not to notice it). He doesn’t need them to see how the doctor assesses his current bladder and bowel function.

“Kazuko-Okā-san, I need to talk to you about something. Would you come have some tea with me?” Asami asks.

Kirishima casts Asami a grateful look. Asami pats him on the shoulder once before leading Kazuko into the hallway.

At the door, Asami directs his attention towards Yamamoto-sensei. “Our teleconference is scheduled for right after this.”

“I know, Asami-san,” Yamamoto-sensei answers. “I’m confident you’ll be back in time for it.”

Asami raises his eyebrows but doesn’t say anything more. It’s rare that anyone pushes back against him, and he grudgingly has to give the doctor respect for making it clear that the hospital is her turf.

“Teleconference?” Kirishima asks.

“With the specialists in the U.S. who are consulting on your care,” Yamamoto-sensei explains.

“Oh.”

Yamamoto-sensei purses her lips but doesn’t say anything more on the topic. “Well, let’s continue your neurological exam.”

Thirty minutes later, Asami and Kazuko return, with Kazuko looking subdued but resolved about something.

“Shall we go to your office for the teleconference?” Asami asks Yamamoto-sensei.

“Can't you have it here?” Kirishima speaks up. Yamamoto-sensei has been explaining things to him.
as they go along, but he'd like to hear the opinion of the experts first-hand, even if his brain still can't process everything.

“Yamamoto-sensei needs to access her computer for the conference,” Asami explains. “Besides, you’ve barely had any time with your mom. I’ll make sure to tell you everything afterwards.”

“But...” Kirishima starts, but Asami interrupts.

“Kei, you're amazing at taking minutes, so I haven't had to in years, but I assure you I'm equally capable of remembering and summarizing a discussion.”

Asami frowns slightly as if he’s offended by Kirishima unwittingly insulting him, though Kirishima is alert enough to recognize this is mostly an act. Nevertheless, Kirishima stammers, “Of - of course, Asami-sama.” He watches helplessly as Asami and Yamamoto-sensei leave.

“I brought some cards,” Kazuko says brightly, pulling a deck out of her handbag. “Are you up for a game?”

Kirishima shrugs.

Kazuko deals out two cards. “How about Oicho-Kabu?”

“Okay.”

Kazuko deals a second card to each of them. Kirishima can’t hide his smile when he sees he has a pair of nines.

After several rounds, Kirishima starts to relax. His brain can do simple arithmetic with the same apparent ease it could before his injury, and he’s grateful it’s doing at least one thing normally still.

But within half an hour, he’s tired.

“Let’s stop,” Kazuko says.

“One last round,” Kirishima says, aware that he sounds like a little kid, but not quite able to help it. Lying on his back for days on end is boring.

When Kazuko hands him his third card, he freezes. His hand is an eight (ya), a nine (ku), and a three (za): the lowest possible hand of the game, and the origin of the name “yakuza.”

“You’re not yakuza, right?”

Kirishima remembers the look on Kou’s face when he asked that - and his expression when they broke up.

“Why did I have to fall in love with you? Had I found out the night we met, I would have been disappointed, but it wouldn’t hurt so much.”

Kirishima’s face clouds over. He may not be yakuza, but he’s still ya-ku-za: the lowest of the low. I’ve been so selfish. Even when I met Kou-san, I just did what I wanted to do. I talked a big game about being a better person, but even after the break-up, what did I do? I just focused on myself and parkour. Sure, I’m working less, but I didn’t use any of that extra time to call my family. I didn’t even remember to check the website after Kou-san told me how bad it was. Doing parkour and hanging out with the guys doesn’t make me a better person.
“Kei-chan? Are you okay? Are you in pain?” Kazuko asks, bringing him back to the present moment.

“I’m fine,” Kirishima mumbles. “Just tired.” He fakes a yawn.

“Then how about I read to you instead?” Kazuko picks up the item on the top of the stack of reading materials on the bedside table: a hiking magazine that Yoneda brought yesterday. She starts reading an article about climbing Mount Tsukuba, and Kirishima tries to focus on the story to calm his mind down. Soon he’s drifting off to sleep.

He’s awakened a short time later by someone riffling through the materials on the bedside table. He opens his eyes and sees Saji holding up a guide to the spring nightlife in Ni-chôme.

“Sorry, Kirishima-san,” Saji whispers, grimacing. “I heard your mom was here, and I accidentally left this here earlier. Sakuragi gave it to me as a joke. I wouldn’t have brought it here.”

“Ah. That explains... the look on Mom’s... face,” Kirishima says.

Saji pales. “Oh no! Did she already see it? I can tell her it’s mine.”

“Don’t bother,” Kirishima answers. “She didn’t say... anything about it, and besides... it’s not like it’s not... not mine, right?”

Saji looks confused for a moment, but he slowly nods. “If you’re sure... I’m really sorry. Do you need anything? Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine.”

“You really haven’t been eating enough. Your body is in recovery mode. You need to give it good fuel to help it recover as fast as possible.”

“Recovery mode?” Kirishima is bemused by the comparison between the day after a tough workout and this.

“Your body’s rebuilding. You can come back stronger than ever,” Saji assures him.

“It doesn’t... work like that.” Kirishima doesn’t want any false promises.

“Well... maybe not stronger than ever.” Saji scratches the back of his head in embarrassment. “But you were pretty strong to begin with, and you will recover. So give your body the fuel it needs!”

Kirishima sighs. “I’ll try.”

Saji claps his hands together. “Good. Now what do you want us to sneak in for you?”

“Sneak in?” Kirishima asks blankly.

“Yeah. To eat. It’ll be easier to eat if the food is tasty, right? You said you like fugu, but it’s not really in season anymore...” Saji frowns in concentration.

“Anything is fine,” Kirishima protests.

“I don’t think we could sneak a grill past hospital staff, so yakiniku wouldn’t work... Okonomiyaki would be too messy... The doctor said you shouldn’t have sashimi for a while... What about
takoyaki?” Saji asks, clapping his hands together.

“Sounds good.” Kirishima can’t help but smile at how hard Saji is trying. “Thanks, Saji-kun.”

The guys have been so supportive in their own ways. Sometimes they can be a little awkward, but they keep trying, and when Kirishima has trouble finding a word, they pretend like nothing’s different and just wait for him to finish talking. Suoh is still terrible at hiding how upset he is, and even Asami’s mask has slipped a time or two - or maybe it’s that Kirishima is still too good at reading Asami’s mood behind the mask.

Saji sits down in the chair next to Kirishima’s bed. “You still look tired. Want me to read to you until you fall asleep again?”

Kirishima shrugs. Saji opens up the gay magazine and starts reading an article about the izakaya they went to for Saji’s debut. Soon Kirishima is drifting back to sleep.

Kirishima awakens slowly. He becomes aware of voices talking quietly nearby, but he doesn’t feel like opening his eyes yet, so he simply listens.

“... and when I told the guys that I thought I might be gay, they offered to go to Ni-chōme with me. Sakuragi gave me this magazine to read when I was waiting for Kirishima-san to wake up.”

I told Saji-kun he didn’t have to do that.

“And Kei-chan went with you to Ni-chōme?” Kazuko asks.

“Well, yeah. He’d been there before - for work!” Saji answers, hurriedly tacking on the last part when he realizes he almost gave Kirishima away.

What is Mom going to make of that? Just what kind of work brings you to Ni-chōme? She’s not going to assume Asami has work mixers there!

“He’s been friends with Ryu-chan since high school. They’ve always been close.” Kirishima detects a note of pride in her voice.

Oh. Maybe she does get it.

“You mean Asami-sama?” Saji’s voice is so incredulous, Kirishima can’t help opening his eyes to peek at Saji’s expression.

Kazuko is flustered. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I mean - um.”

Kirishima decides it’s time to speak up. “Mom, it’s okay. Asami is... out to... everyone at work.”

“Out?” Kazuko asks.

“Everyone knows he’s... gay. He’s dating... someone now.”

“Oh. I’m glad for him.”

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. “Another man,” he clarifies.

“So I gathered,” Kazuko answers. “That pair of matching yukata you rush-ordered last summer weren’t in your size. But one of them was Ryu-chan’s.”
I knew Mom suspected Asami was gay, since he’s never been subtle about it, but I didn’t expect her to be so… accepting.

“Don’t give me that look,” Kazuko admonishes. “I may run a kimono shop, but I’m not totally stuck in the last century. Besides, if you look at our history, it’s only since western influence that there’s been a taboo about it. Even *The Tale of Genji* has scenes that would make a fujoshi squeal.”

“Mom!” Kirishima protests as blood rushes to his face. “How do you even... know that word?”

“What word? Fujoshi? Kumiko-chan has been using it since high school.”

Kirishima hides his face in his hands. Why couldn’t this stupid blushing be affected by the incident?

“Did you know that we provided the kimonos for one of Japan’s first gay traditional weddings?” Kazuko continues.

Kirishima pulls his hands away. “And Dad was... okay with that?”

“I didn’t give him a choice,” Kazuko says. “There’s no way we were turning down the sale of two brand-new uchikake as well as kurotomesode, irotomesode, furisode, and men’s formal kimonos for both brides’ relatives, and hōmongi rentals for the rest of the guests. Plus the traveling fee for several dressers, since it was a destination wedding.”

Kirishima whistles. “Sale? Not... not... borrowing?” He frowns. That wasn’t the right word.

Kazuko shrugs. “Naomi-chan’s father owns one of the biggest companies in Japan. He’d always said he would spend however much she wanted for the wedding of her dreams, and while it took a few years, he finally accepted Mari-chan. It was a beautiful ceremony.” She looks at Kirishima. “So… Kei-chan. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“Like what?” Kirishima asks as casually as possible.

Saji stands. “I should - I have to -” He rushes out the door without coming up with an excuse as Kazuko says, “You’ve never told me about dating anyone. You can, you know.”

“I’m not… dating anyone.” Kirishima feels acutely again the pain of the break-up.

Kazuko seems to pick up on it. “But you have, haven’t you? Want to tell me about them?”

Kirishima sighs. *Why not?* “There was… this year. For the… first time. But we… broke up.”

“What was their name?” Kazuko has a knowing look on her face.

*How long has she thought I was gay? I’m still not sure that I am!* But Kirishima gives her the truth anyway. “Kou-san. Motomi Kou-san.”

Kazuko smiles widely.

*Mom said Kumiko-nee was a fujoshi - don’t tell me Mom is one, too!*

“And?” Kazuko asks. “What is he like?”

“Don’t… really want…” Kirishima’s face clouds over.

“I’m sorry.” Kazuko reaches over and smooths his forehead. “I just… you’ve never told me much about your life. It makes a mother worry. I’m glad you’re not pining away for Ryu-chan anymore.”
Kirishima tries to sit up, but he’s stopped by the traction device. “What?” he demands, staring at his mother. “Ew... gross, Mom!”

Kazuko’s eyebrows shoot up. “You’ve been following Ryu-chan around since high school.”

“That doesn’t mean... I like him. I... admire him... but... just... no. He’s... he’s... he’s...” Kirishima gives up; apparently finding words is even harder when he’s feeling stronger emotions.

“Okay. I believe you. Just don’t hide things from me, anymore, okay? I’m your mother. I want to know what’s going on in your life.”

A laugh escapes from Kirishima. If you only knew what I’ve been doing with my life since college.

Thankfully, Kazuko assumes his reaction is to her deduction that he’s gay. “I just proved I’m not that oblivious, right? I don’t want you feeling like you can’t come home because we don’t accept you. I’ve missed you.”

Kirishima’s heart is full again. “I’m... sorry,” he says again. “I... I just... got too... focused on myself. Won’t... won’t... won’t...” He groans in frustration.

“It’s okay,” Kazuko says. “Just come home more moving forward, okay? You still haven’t even met Kisho-chan. He’s already two.”

Kirishima gulps at the mention of his first nephew. I really am terrible.

Kazuko decides to change the subject. “So what do you think of Saji-kun?”

“Mom!”

Once he gets his mother off the topic of dating, Kirishima spends a relaxing afternoon catching up with her. He enjoys the stories of Kisho’s escapades, especially the time he slipped into the workshop and managed to run a spool of thread around everything.

“Let me show you a picture,” Kazuko says, pulling out her phone.

Kirishima stares flabbergasted at the web of thread that connects sewing machines, cutting tables, storage shelves, even the light fixtures on the ceiling. “How -?”

Kazuko laughs. “I have no idea! Kiyo-chan swears he was only in the bathroom for a minute, but it took him six hours to unravel it!”

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. “Six hours? Couldn’t he... just... cut it? At least... once?”

Kazuko shakes her head. “That child has expensive taste. It was a specialty thread for an uchikake, two percent gold. Four thousand yen a meter.”

Kirishima looks at the picture again and imagines his oldest brother trying to untangle the mess without damaging the thread. He starts laughing. “Poor... Kiyo-nii!” he gasps.

Kazuko joins in his laughter. “So... you’ve started hiking again?” she asks, picking up the hiking magazine once more.

“Sort of. Actually, I’m doing more... trail-running. I’m... training for a... mud run.” Kirishima glances down at his body. “Or I was...”
“Sorry. We can talk about something else.” Kazuko quickly says, setting the magazine down again.

“No, it’s okay. I can’t do... the race... this year, but I’ll do it... next year,” Kirishima resolves. “I may not do it... fast, but I will... through it.”

“What exactly is a mud run, anyway?” Kazuko wrinkles her nose at the thought.

“That was my... first reaction,” Kirishima confesses, chuckling a little. Soon he’s telling Kazuko all about parkour and the gym. He shows her a few Youtube videos on his phone.

“Do you have any videos of you?” Kazuko asks.

Kirishima blushes a little but opens up his messages and shows a few videos some of the guys have taken. “I’m not very good,” he warns Kazuko.

“You’re amazing!” Kazuko seems genuinely impressed. “I had no idea you were this talented. As a child...” She trails off, leaving the rest unsaid.

“I was... clumsy,” Kirishima admits. “I... still am.” He gestures to his head and his hips. “This was... because I messed up... an underbar.”

Kazuko’s face falls. “Maybe you shouldn’t do the mud run next year. It’s too dangerous.”

“They have... safety precautions. Water or... hay under the... obstacles. And no underbars,” Kirishima explains.

“Still...” Kazuko says.

But Kirishima is determined. Saji is right; he is in recovery mode. And it’s time he started acting like it. He resolves to discuss what he can do to regain his strength with Yamamoto-sensei the next time she stops by. She’s mentioned physical and occupational therapy, and Kirishima is ready to get started.

Kazuko sighs; she knows her son well enough to recognize that determined expression. “Well, just be careful. If it’s going to motivate you... Just listen to the doctor.”

“I will,” Kirishima promises.

An orderly comes by with the dinner cart. Kirishima actually feels a little hungry for the first time in the hospital. He looks at Kazuko. “Do you... want...”

“Go ahead and eat. I’ll get something from the cafeteria later.”

Kirishima tucks in, and remembering what Saji said about needing good nutrition to help his body heal, he tries to eat as much as he can. But not having eaten much over the last few days, he feels full before he’s even eaten half the meal.

“You don’t have to force yourself to eat it all,” Kazuko says. “Just eat what you can.”

“Do you want some?” Kirishima offers.

Kazuko eyes his plate but shakes her head. “You should save it. Maybe you’ll have room in a little bit.”

Kirishima shrugs and pushes the bedside table away.
Asami and Suoh enter the room.

“Oba-san,” Suoh says, “I’m so glad you came.”

“Of course I came as soon as you told me. You should have told me sooner.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I was just overwhelmed,” Suoh says in a conciliatory tone. “Can I take you out to dinner to make up for it?”

“But -” Kazuko looks at Kirishima, obviously not wanting to leave him. Her stomach gives a loud rumble, betraying her hunger.

“You haven’t had anything besides vending machine food since this morning, have you?” Suoh asks. “There’s a family restaurant less than a kilometer away. I’ll have you back in no time.”

“Go, Mom,” Kirishima urges.

“You’ve spent all day with Kei, and you haven’t seen me in a long time, either, Oba-san,” Suoh gently teases.

Kazuko reluctantly follows him out the door. Asami shuts the door behind them and sits in the chair next to Kirishima’s bed, making sure he’s oriented so that Kirishima doesn’t have to turn his head to look at Asami.

“Kei, I need to tell you something,” Asami says. “Actually, two things.”

Kirishima’s heart races. “Is it about the... consultation with the... Americans? Is something else... wrong with me?”

“No. You’re recovering function hour by hour. But it is about the consultation. The rehabilitation center in America is one of the best in the world. The resources here are adequate, but in comparison, there is no comparison. I want you to get the best care possible.”

“So you want to... send me... to America?” Kirishima asks. “But what about... my job?”

Asami stares at him. “You can’t work right now.”

“I can... do... something ,” Kirishima protests. “I... I...”

“You can’t even talk,” Asami points out.

Kirishima recoils. “I can... write. And... read. And... do math...” The more frustrated he gets, the slower the words are coming out, just proving Asami’s point. Kirishima feels his face burning. He takes a calming breath. “I can... think just fine!”

“You need to focus on recovering. There’s a limited window for making rapid improvements; after that, your recovery will stall. Don’t you want to be you again?” Asami grinds out.

“I’m still me,” Kirishima objects.

“You know what I mean,” Asami says.

“Of course I want to... recover. But I also want to... work.”

Asami pulls a rust-splattered, folded piece of paper from his inside suit pocket. “Do you?” he asks icily.
“I never... gave that... to you,” Kirishima says.

“No, you just carried it around with you twenty-four/seven for over a month,” Asami says drily.

“But I... never... gave it!” Kirishima repeats, struggling to sit up but once again stopped by the traction device.

“I told you only a fool would force someone’s hand who has conflicting loyalties.”

“I... don’t!”

“I’m no fool. And even if I’d never force your hand, someone else already has,” Asami points out.

“I chose... you!” Kirishima’s breathing is ragged. He forces himself to get it under control.

“Did you?” Asami raises up the piece of paper again.

“That... I never gave you that!” Kirishima doesn’t know what else to say.

“You were just trying to find the courage, but you pretended to yourself that you were waiting for the Kodama situation to resolve.” Asami’s tone is as stony as his face, and Kirishima can’t read any emotion behind it.

I thought I could still read behind his mask. “I just... wrote that... in the heat... of the moment,” Kirishima tries to explain.

“So why didn’t you destroy it when you calmed down? You know never to put anything in writing you don’t want discovered.”

Kirishima gulps. “I was... going to. I just... forgot about it.” The lie barely makes it out of his mouth; he knows how ridiculous it is.

“You forgot as you placed it inside your new outfit every single day,” Asami mocks.

Kirishima swallows. “I... you told me... to talk to... Kurebayashi-sensei. I... was working... it out.”

“You made your choice,” Asami says, holding up the paper for a third time. “Every day for a month. Over and over, you chose.” A muscle clenches in Asami’s jaw.

“I never... broke... my vow to you! And I never would!” Kirishima shouts.

“It’s enough, Kei!” Asami raises his own voice. “Your vow - consider it fulfilled.” He crumples the piece of paper and drops it on the bedside table.

“But-” Kirishima starts, but Asami is already rising out of his chair.

“Your true loyalty showed on Saturday,” Asami says as he walks toward the door without a backwards glance.

Kirishima can do nothing but sit and blink. What the hell just happened?

He racks his brain, trying to figure out what Asami meant by Saturday. He snatches today’s paper off the table, checks the date, and deduces that Saturday was the day he was injured.
But why does Asami-sama think I betrayed him? I saved Takaba-kun, didn’t I?

Is Asami calling the fact that Kirishima got injured a betrayal? But I got injured saving Takaba-kun! Besides, Asami-sama seemed to be implying that I chose Kou-san over him. What does Kou-san have to do with Saturday? Did I talk to him at some point?

Saji knocks on the open doorway. “Kirishima-san? Mind if I come in?”

Kirishima shrugs before he really thinks about it. Saji quickly checks the hall before closing the door behind himself.

“I couldn’t help overhearing. Did Asami-sama just fire you?”

Kirishima shrugs again. “I think… so,” he finally acknowledges. Tears prick his eyes, but he blinks them back quickly. Kou was worth crying over. If Asami’s going to throw him away just because he’s temporarily not as useful…

You know that’s not it, Kei, a small voice in the back of his head says. It’s easy to ignore the voice since Saji continues talking.

“But why?! Because you got injured?! That’s ridiculous!”

Kirishima shrugs. “He thinks I betrayed him.”

“By getting injured?! That’s even more ridiculous!” Saji bursts out.

Kirishima shakes his head. “No… I think… something I… said… or did… Saturday. But I can’t… remember.”

Saji’s mouth drops open, but he snaps it shut again. “That’s also ridiculous. You would never betray Asami-sama.”

Kirishima shrugs. “His standards are… high. Maybe… I did?”

Saji rolls his eyes. “Don’t start doubting yourself. You know you wouldn’t.”

But Kirishima is remembering that Suoh insisted on muting the video of the shooting before showing it to Kirishima. He saw that he shouted something when he tackled Takaba, but he can’t remember what it was. “Can you… show me?”

“Show you what?” Saji asks, not privy to Kirishima’s thoughts.

“The video of… my… shooting,” Kirishima says.

Saji pales. “I’m not sure… That might be…” He shakes his head.

“I’ve already… seen it. Just want… to hear… audio,” Kirishima explains.

That doesn’t seem to convince Saji any. “But…”

“I’m fine. I just… need to know. If I… said anything.”

Kirishima stares into Saji’s eyes until Saji finally nods. “Fine. But I’m stopping it if you get too upset or anything.”

“I won’t.”
They watch the video in silence.

“Ah,” Kirishima says after hearing himself mention Kou’s name.

“That’s it?!” Saji asks, incredulous. “Asami-sama would fire you over that?”

Kirishima shrugs. “To Asami-sama… that’s… a betrayal.”

“Then who could possibly be loyal?” Saji demands.

“For me,” Kirishima amends.

“What does that mean?” Saji asks. “You’re allowed to fall in love. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “Not… me.”

“That’s ridiculous! Asami-sama has Takaba-sama. You’re not allowed the same?”

“I… am. Just… not.” Kirishima is suddenly feeling emotionally and mentally drained. He can’t find the words to explain why the rules are different for him than everyone else, especially when it doesn’t seem to make sense to him anymore. “Sorry… can’t…” He gestures helplessly.

“You’re exhausted, aren’t you?” Saji pats Kirishima on the shoulder. “Get some rest. Don’t worry; this isn’t over. I’ll figure something out.”

“No… It’s…” But Kirishima is asleep before he can finish.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from "In Between" by Linkin Park.

My friend has a t-shirt that says "The only women who don't like gay romance are those who haven't read it yet." In this story, apparently, that's true.

I wanted to post an explanation for what Kirishima was trying to explain at the end, but I think I'm going to leave it to you to figure out. The same rule would technically apply to any bodyguard, but it's particularly relevant because Akihito and Kou are good friends.
All That You Measure (Iris Blue)

Chapter Summary

As Kirishima prepares to leave Japan, the full magnitude of all that he's leaving behind starts to sink in. What realization does he come to regarding his relationship with Asami? Just where is he going in America, anyway? And who dares to call Suoh "kun"?

Chapter Notes

I was trying to get to Kirishima's departure in this chapter, but once I hit 6000 words (with quite a bit more to go), I realized it was going to be two chapters. I chose what seemed to be the best natural spot to break it up. I think the next chapter will be posted fairly quickly after this one since it's already partially written.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanimura: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima); Megumi (Kiyoshi's wife), Kisho (Kiyoshi and Megumi's son)

Japanese Terms:
the number ten: sounds like the word “enough”
Kirishima hears several people running towards him. He sees the bottom of the fire escape ladder above the bushes next to the incinerator. He runs up the wall and leaps, catching the bottom rung of the ladder. He pulls himself up and quickly ascends the ladder to the roof.

“Where’s that geeky four-eyed brown-noser?” Yamaguchi asks.

Kirishima quietly turns around and peers back over the ladder.

“I still don’t think he’s the one who told Tachibana-sensei,” Togawa says. “He didn’t tell him when he caught us with the cigarettes.”

“How else did Tachibana know we snuck out of the dorms?” Yamaguchi retorts. “No one else would have had the balls to rat us out.”

“But did Kirishima-kun even know about it?” Togawa asks. “He was asleep when I got back last night.”

“They sneaked out of the dorm? Are they idiots?” Kirishima whispers.

“If they don’t know how to avoid the motion-sensor cameras, they are,” a voice says from beside him.

Kirishima jumps. He turns and sees Asami leaning against the low wall edging the roof. “Asamisama,” Kirishima breathes.

“My useful little assistant. Have you finished the deliveries?”

“I’ve done half of them. I was just… taking a little break.”

“A break? Didn't you vow to serve me faithfully and loyally for the rest of your life? Tell me honestly, do you think you've done enough already, Kei?”

Kirishima feels hands pushing him, and before he knows it, the ground is racing towards him. He sees someone else falling.

It’s Takaba.

Kirishima pushes through the air as if it's water, and he manages to reach Takaba. The swimming pool is fifty meters away. Kirishima pushes Takaba as hard as he can towards the pool.

He breathes a sigh of relief as he sees Takaba splash down safely. A split second later, the wind is knocked out of Kirishima as he slams into the concrete.
Everything hurts so bad, Kirishima has to fight to keep from vomiting. But he rolls over and tries to crawl towards the pool to help Takaba out. It's excruciatingly slow, but centimeter by painful centimeter, Kirishima manages to make progress.

A gentle hand grasps his shoulder. “Stop. We've got this.”

“But -” Kirishima grits out.

“It's enough, Kei! Your vow - consider it fulfilled.”

Kirishima is filled with peace but also sadness. He stops struggling and relaxes, quickly succumbing to blissful unconsciousness.

Kirishima slowly blinks himself awake. His cheeks feel wet. He reaches for the bedside table and finds his glasses on the edge nearest him.

Saji must have taken them off for me.


He turns on the bedside lamp and eats the pudding that's been left in place of his dinner remains. Then he pulls out of the stack on his bedside table a pad of paper, a pen, and the new tablet Suoh bought him yesterday, pausing as a sudden realization strikes him. But after a moment, he unlocks the tablet, finds the family's website (now on the fifth search page), and starts making notes.

Fifteen minutes later, Saji pops his head in the doorway. “Kirishima-san? You're awake? Do you need anything? Maybe some tea?”

“That sounds good, actually,” Kirishima answers.

Saji heads to the vending machine and returns a minute later with two warm cans of tea.

“Thanks,” Kirishima says as he opens a can.

They sit and drink in companionable silence for several minutes until Saji says, “I just finished my shift. Do you want to talk about… anything?”

Kirishima shrugs.

“About what happened earlier.” Saji clears his throat before continuing, “I talked to Yoneda about it, and -”

“Wait,” Kirishima says, holding up a hand. “Asami-sama didn’t… fire me. He only… accepted my… resignation.”

Saji's eyes bug out. “But -”

“I've been carrying my… resignation letter around for… a while.” Kirishima gestures to his left chest. “Maybe you noticed?”

Saji nods.
“I… hesitated about giving it to Asami-sama because I made… a vow to him… a long time ago. Did you know I was his… first employee? Back in… high school.”

“High school?” Saji gapes. “I thought Asami-sama founded Sion after college.”

“During his… last year, actually. But he had a… tailoring business… in high school.”

“Tailoring?!” Saji laughs but stops when he realizes Kirishima is serious.

“His family… were tailors. For the… movers and shakers of Tokyo. But they also… acted as… couriers between their… clients.”

“Ah,” Saji says as understanding dawns.

“My family runs a kimono shop,” Kirishima explains. “Anyway, I made a… vow to Asami-sama when we... started Sion. That's why I'm… different.”

“But you didn't betray Asami-sama! You're allowed to fall in love. You're only human,” Saji objects.

“That's not… it.” Kirishima draws in a deep breath and tries to explain slowly. “I wasn't thinking… of my charge… first.”

“But you still saved Takaba-sama,” Saji points out.

“Only because he's… important to… both Kou-san and Asami-sama. What if… Kou-san and Takaba-kun had been… together? And I could only… save one?”

“You would…” Saji starts but trails off. He shakes his head. “How likely is that, anyway?”

“Considering that… Kou-san is Takaba-kun’s… best friend? And he… helps him with… investigations… sometimes?”

“But you're not even Takaba-sama’s guard.”

Kirishima shrugs. “I am… often enough. Anyway… as I said, Asami-sama didn't… fire me.”

“But you didn't want to quit!” Saji bursts out. “Did you?” he adds doubtfully, remembering what Kirishima said about a resignation letter.

Kirishima shrugs again. “I told you I… hesitated because of… my vow. It was for… life. I wasn't sure I'd done… enough for Asami-sama… yet. Asami-sama was letting me know I… had.”

Saji's eyebrows shoot up. “That's not what it sounded like.”

“I just… didn't understand… at first. In case you hadn't noticed, my... brain is a little slow… right now.” Kirishima chuckles, but Saji just looks sad.

“But then why didn't Asami-sama make sure you understood?” Saji presses.

“Ah. I'm guessing that's… because of Kazu-nii.” When Kirishima notices Saji’s confused expression, he clarifies, “Suoh.”

“Oh.”

Saji doesn't ask for any additional explanation, so Kirishima continues, “I think… Kazu-nii asked
Asami-sama to… make it easier on me. And Asami-sama can be… a bit clueless about relationships… sometimes.”

“I noticed.” Saji immediately slaps his hand over his mouth as he realizes what he's said.

Kirishima chuckles. “He'd be the… first to admit it. But I still won't… tell him what you said.” He laughs harder at Saji's horrified expression at the thought, but Kirishima's laughter soon turns to coughing. He takes a sip of tea to help soothe his throat.

“Are you sure that's what happened?” Saji asks.

“Yes. My brain may be… slower, but it's not… not…” Kirishima groans. He can't think of the word he wants.

“You're still you,” Saji says.

“Exactly. Thanks for… being concerned about me. But I'm… okay now.”

Saji opens his mouth, closes it, takes a deep breath, and asks, “Can I ask you something, Kirishima-san?”

“Of course.” Kirishima straightens up as much a he can to show he's listening.

“Why did you want to resign?”

Kirishima gives a small smile. “I didn't know… exactly where my life would lead. I made my… promise when I was… very young. I woke up recently and realized… I didn't really recognize the man in the… mirror.”

“Did Motomi-san have something to do with that?” Saji asks, blushing a little.

“Yeah.” Kirishima's smile turns sad. “Yes, he did. He reminded me… of who I… used to be. And who I still… want to be.”

“He's in America now, right?” Saji asks casually.

“Yes.” Kirishima realizes for the first time he's going to the same country as Kou. More to keep himself from getting too excited, he adds, “It's a huge country, though. You can... fit twenty-six Japans... inside of it.”

“Do you know where Motomi-san is?” Saji presses.

“New York City,” Kirishima says. He frowns. He can't remember the name of the rehabilitation center he's going to, and no one has mentioned its specific location.

“Is that close to New Jersey?” Saji asks nonchalantly.

Kirishima tries to ignore the sudden acceleration of his heart rate. He raises his eyebrows in feigned nonchalance as he says, “Very close. Why?”

Saji smiles. “That's good. You'll be able to see him again.”

“What?!” Kirishima's heart thrills but immediately plummets. “But we broke up.”

“Well…” Saji shifts uncomfortably. “You had asked us not to tell you anything else about Motomi-san, but given the circumstances…”
Saji pauses, apparently giving Kirishima a choice about whether he should proceed. But there’s no way Kirishima could tell him to stop.

Saji continues, sharing the details he overheard of Kou’s and Takaba’s reconciliation. “He definitely hasn't moved on yet,” Saji concludes. “And he's only been in New York for like a week.”

“But that doesn't change the fact that he broke up with me,” Kirishima says.

“But you're both still hung up on each other. Just apologize for whatever it was.”

“It was my job,” Kirishima says quietly.

“Oh.” Saji blinks a few times. “So that's why you resigned. So it's okay now, right?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I didn’t actually make... the decision to... resign, though. I’ve still got… work to do to become a… better person.”

Saji studies him carefully for several long moments before asking softly, “Are you scared he’ll reject you when he finds out about your injuries?”

Kirishima recoils but meets Saji’s gaze. “No. The… opposite.”

Saji’s brow furrows in confusion.

“Kou-san is too… nice. I don’t want him… to… to… out of pity.”

“But…” Saji starts but can’t seem to figure out how to finish. He sighs. “If the situation were reversed, you’d just be glad to be back together, right?”

“But I wasn’t the one... who wanted to break up in the... first place.”

“But...”

Kirishima shakes his head. “It might be... too late for us. Even if it isn’t, I need to... show Kou-san I’ve... changed. Once I’m a… better person…”

“You’re already a great person!” Saji protests. “And you’ll recover, but you shouldn’t have to wai -”

“I’m not… talking about… my body,” Kirishima says.

“How will you decide when you’ve changed enough?”

Kirishima frowns. “I… don’t know.”

“Shouldn’t Motomi-san be the one to decide? But how will he if you won’t even see him?” Saji presses.

“I… will. Once I’ve… changed enough.” Kirishima sighs in frustration.

“Okay,” Saji says. “I just know if it were me, I’d be upset you thought you had to go through this alone. I would want to be there with you. And I know you want that, too.”

“Not if… it’s pity!” Kirishima bursts out.

Saji recoils. After a moment, he says softly, “No one is pitying you. We’re here because we care about you.”
“I… know,” Kirishima says, even though he doesn’t know.

“Motomi-san still cares about you, too, but I’ll drop the subject, okay?”

Kirishima nods.

“Do you need anything else before I leave? Do you want me to stay and hang out with you for a bit? We can do whatever you like.”

“And you know anything about… websites?” Kirishima asks. “My family’s shop’s website is a… mess.”

“I actually have my own website,” Saji says. “I ship manga to people overseas.”

Kirishima raises his eyebrows. “Manga?”

“People don’t want to wait for the international version, if one even exists. As some titles have become available online, my sales have gone down some, but I specialize in the smaller publications that might not ever get licensed overseas. I do a pretty steady business. Can I see the website?”

Kirishima shows Saji his tablet.

Saji studies the website for a few minutes. He tries searching for it and frowns when it doesn’t appear at the top of the search results. “What kind of analytics are you running?”

“I’m not… sure. I have to ask… my siblings how… they set it up.”

“I have tomorrow off. I can bring my laptop; I’ve got some editing and analytical software that will help. But we’ll need passwords and permissions to access the analytics.”

“I’ll ask… in the morning. And I’ll text you… when I have… the information,” Kirishima says.

“Sounds good. Do you need anything else?” Saji asks.

Kirishima glances at the clock and shakes his head. “I guess I should… sleep some more. Don’t want my… schedule to get thrown off… too much. Thanks for… everything.”

Saji waves it off. “Goodnight, then. See you tomorrow.”

The next morning, Kazuko arrives early with Kirishima’s oldest brother Kiyoshi, Kiyoshi’s wife Megumi, and their son Kisho, but Kirishima is busy with his morning assessment, sponge bath, and dressing change. Megumi walks Kisho up and down the hall while they wait, while Kazuko and Kiyoshi wait in the corner of the room despite Kirishima’s protestations.

“What the hell happened to you, Kei?” Kiyoshi asks.

Kirishima freezes. He has no idea what Suoh told his mother. “I… I… I can’t… really… remember,” Kirishima says, trying to stall for time.

Kazuko admonishes Kiyoshi. “Kiyo-chan, I already told you. Don’t make Kei-chan talk about it. I’m sure the car accident was very scary.”

“Car accident?” Kirishima asks blankly. How is that supposed to explain the gunshot wound?
Kazuko doesn’t notice the nurse and her assistant exchange glances over Kirishima’s bed. Kazuko gently explains, “You were crossing the street when you were hit by a delivery van running a red light.”

“Oh.” Kirishima blinks. Well, that’s easy enough to remember. And since I don’t remember anything, it’s not weird if I get the details wrong.

Once the exam is over, Megumi returns with Kisho. Kiyoshi takes the boy’s hand and leads him over to the bed. “Kisho-chan, this is Kei-oji-san.”

Kirishima freezes. Oji-san? He’s known that he’s an uncle for a while now, and he’s had other young people call him that on the street, but it’s weird to actually be an uncle. He smiles awkwardly at Kisho. “Hi, Kisho-chan.”

Kisho clings to Megumi’s leg, hiding his face behind her knee.

“Go on, Kisho-chan,” Kazuko chides, trying to push him forward.

“Don’t… force him,” Kirishima says. “Kisho-chan… do you like…” He casts his eyes wildly around the room for something a child might like. “Balloons?” He tugs on the string of the balloon Takaba brought him.

Kisho nods and takes a step forward.

“You can… play with it,” Kirishima offers, holding the string down so Kisho can tug on it.

Kisho laughs when the balloon bobs up and down at his command. The string slips from his fingers, and Kirishima unties it from the bed and hands it to Kisho, who squeals with delight as he makes the balloon dance.

“What do you say, Kisho-chan?” Kiyoshi prompts.

“Thank you, Kei-ji-chan,” Kisho says, smiling widely. He tugs on the string and catches the balloon in both hands, squeezing it as hard as he can.

“Be careful or you'll pop it,” Megumi warns.

“It's okay even if... he does,” Kirishima tells her. “It's not like I can... take it with me.”

“When are you leaving?” Kiyoshi asks.

“I don't know. As... soon as they say I can... travel.”

“When are you coming back?” Kazuko asks.

Kirishima tries to answer, but the words catch in his throat. If I'm no longer working for Asami-sama, I can't come back to Japan. At least not for several years. But Kirishima can't tell his mother that. How could he ever explain why?

He swallows and finally says, “I don't... know.” At least it's the truth. “I'll be there for... several months at least,” he adds.

Kazuko nods. “I'll try to come visit as soon as the summer festival season is over.”
Kirishima's eyebrows shoot up. His mother has only been overseas once, when she went to Hawaii for a week for her honeymoon, and if her stories are anything to judge by, she didn't make many fond memories.

Suoh walks in. “Hello, oba-san, Kiyoshi, Megumi-chan. And this must be Kisho-chan.”

Kisho takes one look at Suoh and tries to climb over the rail onto the bed. Megumi pulls him back down, but he continues to struggle.

“It’s okay,” Kirishima says, smiling. “If he’s on my… left side and can sit… still, it should be okay.”

Megumi looks skeptical but carefully lifts Kisho up and places him in the crook of Kirishima’s arm. Kisho pulls Kirishima’s arm across his own face, hiding Suoh from his view.

“You’re… scary, Kazu-nii,” Kirishima teases.

“Yeah, scawy,” Kisho’s muffled voice echoes.

Suoh frowns. “No, I’m not. I’m much nicer than Kei.”

“Kei-’ji-chan is nice! He gave Kisho a - a - a baboon!” Kisho insists, glaring over Kei’s arm at Suoh.

Suoh raises his hands. “Okay, okay. Yes, Kei is nice. But do you like…” Suoh fumbles in his pockets for anything interesting. “- magic?” He raises a hand to Kisho’s ear. Kisho flinches but stays still. “I think there’s something in your ear,” Suoh says, pretending to pull out a one-hundred yen coin.

Kisho’s eyes widen. He holds out his hand, and Suoh gives him the coin. Kisho smiles widely up at Suoh and pops the coin into his mouth.

“Hey! Don’t do that! Spit it out!” Suoh shouts, grabbing Kisho’s face and sweeping the coin out of his mouth.

Kisho starts bawling. Kirishima gives him a gentle squeeze. “It's okay… Kisho-chan. You can't… put money in your mouth… but you can use it to… buy things.”

“Buy?” Kisho asks.

Suoh holds out the coin again. “You give someone money, and they give you what you want. Let’s see… Say you wanted this balloon. If you give me the coin, I'll give you the balloon.” Suoh grabs the balloon string while holding the coin closer to Kisho.

“Noooo! That's mine!” Kisho shouts, snatching the balloon from Suoh. “Kei-’ji-chan gave it to me!” Kisho glares at Suoh again.

By now, all the other adults in the room are laughing. Suoh sighs and stands over by the window.

“I can't handle kids,” he mutters. “Anyway, you've been cleared for travel, Kei. As long as things continue to go well today, you'll leave for America tomorrow.”


“I'll pack them for you with the help of some of the guys. I need to know what you want to take with you.”

“I… don't know,” Kirishima says, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. I've got a day left in Japan,

“I can help pack,” Kazuko offers.

Kirishima freezes. No way. What if she finds my guns? Or my private stuff?

Suoh comes to his rescue. “You should spend as much time as you can with Kei, oba-san. We’ll make sure he has everything he needs.”

Kazuko likes this idea. “Well, I can help pack up everything here,” she says, rearranging the items on the bedside table. “I should get a bag…”

“I think you can get one in the… gift shop,” Kirishima suggests.

“Kei, I’m sorry I can’t stay longer. I should get back to the shop,” Kiyoshi says.

“Wait…” Kirishima says. “I need to talk to you.”

After his mother has left, taking Megumi, Kisho, and the balloon with her, Kirishima gets all the information he can about the family website from Kiyoshi (which requires a phone call to Kenta, who was the one who set it up).

“Is it really that bad?” Kiyoshi asks.

“It doesn’t show up on… the first page… of search results,” Kirishima explains. “It should be… the very first… result.”

“But you can fix it?”

“Is the shop… doing that bad?” Kirishima asks.

Kiyoshi grimaces. “It’s not good. We’re barely staying afloat. If things get any worse, we’ll have to close within a year or two.”

Kirishima gasps. He had absolutely no idea.

“But that’s not for you to worry about,” Kiyoshi says.

“I can… help… with the business… side of things,” Kirishima resolves.

“You’ve got to focus on recovering,” Kiyoshi argues.

Suoh looks up from his tablet on which he’s been busy working. “If Kei wants to help, let him,” he tells Kiyoshi.

“But…”

“He’s always been more capable than you give him credit for. He helped Ryuichi build one of the largest entertainment corporations in East Asia from scratch.”

Kirishima blushes. Suoh rarely praises him.

Kiyoshi snaps, “You’re always trying to make me out to be the bad guy, Kazu-kun. Kei is my
brother. I know how smart he is. I just want him to focus on getting better. He’s always taking on too much.”

Suoh raises his eyebrows as if to acknowledge the point, but he says, “It’s just one small thing. Kei’s a part of the family, too. Let him help.”

“I never said I wasn’t going to. I already gave him the passwords.”

“My friend… is going to help,” Kirishima explains. He sends a message to Saji. “It won’t be… too much, Kiyo-nii.”

“If it is, don’t worry about it. We can hire someone.” Kiyoshi pats Kirishima on the shoulder. “I really do have to get back. Heal quickly, and get your ass back to Japan. Then don’t be a stranger. Kisho-chan is going to cry until he can see his Kei-ji-chan again. You’re already his favorite uncle.”

Kirishima raises his eyebrows in surprise. “More than Kenta-nii?” Kisho must see Kenta regularly.

Kiyoshi smirks. “Kisho-chan has never once called Kenta ‘chan.’ That kid fell in love with you at first sight.”

“More like… first balloon,” Kirishima acknowledges.

Kiyoshi laughs. “Megumi will bring Kisho-chan back to say goodbye. Let her know if he gets to be too much.” He shakes Kirishima’s hand and is soon out the door.

Once Kiyoshi is gone, Suoh pulls up Kirishima’s “just in case” documents every Sion employee fills out. “You updated your documents in April. Has anything changed since then?”

Kirishima considers the question for a long moment before shaking his head.

“You didn’t open any new accounts after meeting Motomi-san?” Suoh prods.

Kirishima flinches upon suddenly hearing Kou’s name. “I met Kou-san… before April,” Kirishima reminds Suoh.

“I know. But maybe you forgot to put them on your form.”

“I didn’t,” Kirishima says.

“Okay. I’ll make sure all your money gets transferred to America. Or would you like some of it offshore?”

“No. That’s… fine. I trust you.”

“Okay. The car belongs to the company. That leaves just the items in your apartment. Let’s start with the furnishings,” Suoh says.

“Give them to… one of the guys. Whoever… wants them.”

“What came with the apartment? What do we need to leave behind?”

“Nothing. I bought… the stove, the fridge, and… the washing machine.”

Suoh nods, taking notes on his tablet. “Okay. How about the kitchen? Anything you want to take from there?”
Kirishima groans. “I think… there’s food in the… fridge. It’s probably… rotten by now.”


Kirishima shakes his head. “Give it… away.”


Kirishima thinks for a moment. “I don’t know. I can’t… remember.”

“You really don’t have that much. I’ll send it for you to go through later.”

Kirishima shrugs.

“Any artwork?”

“I don’t… have any.”

“Nothing from Motomi-san?” Suoh prods.

Kirishima flinches again, but he remembers the sketch Kou did of him their first morning together. He blushes a little and says, “Maybe… in one of the… drawers?”

“Do you want it?” Suoh asks.

“Of - of course!” Kirishima exclaims, immediately reddening at his own enthusiasm.

“Okay,” Suoh says, not even looking up

Suoh leads Kirishima through other categories of items until he finally ends with clothing. “Your suits?” he asks.

Kirishima considers for a moment. They were already getting too loose before the incident, and based on what everyone keeps saying when they see him, he’s lost even more muscle mass in the hospital. “They… probably won’t… fit anymore. Give them to… the guys,” he says.

Suoh nods. “I’ll pack the rest of your clothes. If you don’t have enough, I’ll buy you a few things.”

“That’s… okay,” Kirishima says.

“You’ll want real clothes at Kessler,” Suoh says, “and I don’t know how long it takes laundry service there.”

“I have… enough,” Kirishima says. “There’s a yukata… in my closet. Make sure… you pack it, please. And the… sakura t-shirt. And my… jeans. I’ll… order stuff in… America if I need to.”

Suoh finishes writing down Kirishima’s requests and stands up. “I’ve got a lot of work to do, but I’ll be back to see you off, Kei.”

“Don’t forget… my helmet and jacket,” Kirishima suddenly remembers.

“Kei…” Suoh says in his disapproving-older-brother tone that sounds remarkably similar to Kiyoshi’s.

“Kazumi,” Kirishima insists in a level tone. Suoh sighs and writes it down.

As Suoh heads once again towards the door, Kirishima calls, “Kazu-nii?” Once Suoh is focused on
him, he says, “I don’t… suck at figuring out… honne.”

Suoh looks puzzled, but Kirishima doesn’t offer an explanation.

Suoh is almost out the door when Kirishima adds, “Tell Ryuichi to come… say goodbye. He owes me… at least that much.”

Kisho is an exhausting ball of energy, but Kirishima can’t bear the thought of sending him away, especially when Kisho looks up at him every other second with a giant, trusting grin and an enthusiastic “Kei-ji-chan!”

Throughout the morning, most of the guys stop by in ones or twos for a brief visit and to wish Kirishima well. Kirishima asks a few who are into tricking to show Kisho their best (small) moves, and Saijo becomes almost as popular as Kirishima with the boy after Saijo demonstrates his monkey flip.

“Have you talked to Saji… today?” Kirishima asks Saijo while he’s taking a breather from monkey flipping.

“No,” Saijo says, not quite meeting Kirishima’s eyes. “Is something up?”

“Not really. He just… said he would… help me with something, but he’s… not answering my texts,” Kirishima explains.

“If I see him, I’ll tell him to check his phone. Sorry, I’ve got to get back to work. Good luck, Kirishima-san. Recover quickly and completely.”

After three more monkey flips, Saijo leaves. Kisho throws a tantrum after the ‘monkey man’ is gone, and Megumi glances at her watch. “It’s almost his naptime, and I’ve still got to feed him lunch. It was good to see you again, Kei-kun. I just wish the circumstances were more pleasant. Get better soon.”

“I want to stay with Kei-ji-chan!” Kisho screams when he realizes he’s expected to go with his mother. He runs over to the bed and tries to climb up again.

Kirishima unties the balloon from the railing and hands it to Kisho. “You’ve got to take your… balloon home… now. It’s… tired and needs… to rest. Do you have… a good spot… where it can rest in your… room?”

Kisho thinks hard for a moment. “Yes, on my bed!”

Kirishima ties the balloon string around Kisho’s wrist. “Very good. I’ll… talk to you… soon,” he promises.

Kisho’s lower lip quivers. “When?” he demands.


“Noooo! Today!”

“Okay. Today. After your nap.”

After they link pinkies and exchange a warm hug, Kisho follows his mother out.
“You look exhausted. Do you want lunch before you sleep?” Kazuko worries.

Kirishima shakes his head. He can’t imagine doing anything but sleep right now.

Takaba enters the room. His eyes shift to Kirishima’s bedrail and then quickly glance away.

“Sorry… I gave your… balloon to my… nephew,” Kirishima explains.

“No problem,” Takaba says. “I’m sure a little kid will enjoy it more anyway. It looks like he wiped you out. Should I come back later?”

“Yes, please,” Kirishima agrees. Takaba turns to go, but Kirishima adds, “Come… when Asami-sama does. But maybe… don’t tell him. I need to talk… to you both.”

The visitors start again during Kirishima’s lunch. The first knock comes when he’s enjoying his second mouthful of rice. He looks up and groans when he sees Kurebayashi-sensei standing in the doorway.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from "Walk On" by U2.
Kirishima meets with Kurebayashi-sensei, and we get to meet the rest of Kirishima's family. Kirishima says his final goodbye to the guys, but where is Saji?

I finished writing up to the point where Kirishima leaves Japan, and this chapter turned into two chapters. (If you remember last chapter, the same thing happened, so what I thought would be one chapter turned into three.) I'm posting the first chapter now, and I'll post the second in a week, because real life is hectic and I won't have time to write for the next couple of weeks. I had notes of everything that had to happen before Kirishima left, and it's all in there, but of course the characters added a bunch of important things I didn't realize were needed.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saizo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima); Megumi (Kiyoshi's wife), Kisho (Kiyoshi and Megumi's son), Manabu (Kumiko's fiance)

Japanese Terms:
Yakisoba: a fried noodle, vegetable, and meat dish (often found on kid menus)
Taiyaki: a fish-shaped waffle filled with sweet red bean paste (or chocolate)
Takoyaki: a savory snack made with octopus (really delicious)
Omamori: amulets sold at shrines that provide protection; many provide specialized protections within a certain area of life, such as health or education
Ganbatte: "Do your best"
Tamagoyaki: a rolled omelette

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kirishima-kun, so glad to see you, too,” Kurebayashi says.

“Who’s this?” Kazuko asks.

“Another doctor,” Kirishima says. “Sorry, Mom, but can you please… leave for a bit?”

Kazuko frowns; she’s just gotten back from the lunch break she took while Kirishima was napping.

“We’ll only be half an hour, Kirishima-san,” Kurebayashi tells her.

Kazuko sighs as she stands up. “I guess I’ll take a stroll in the garden.”

As soon as the door closes behind Kazuko, Kirishima asks, “You think… thirty minutes is enough… to cover everything… since our last meeting?”

“Of course not. Had someone not pretended to be asleep the last five times I stopped by…”

“I was only pretending… twice,” Kirishima corrects.

Kurebayashi sighs. “We’ll go as long as you can. I only said that to placate your mother, but I doubt we’ll get more than thirty minutes anyway, so let’s dive right in.”

Kirishima scowls. “I’m not… not…” He sighs.

Kurebayashi raises her eyebrows. When it’s clear Kirishima is done, she prods, “You’re not what?”

“I’m not… stupid!” Kirishima bursts out.

“I know that. I wasn’t implying that you were. But you are recovering from some serious injuries, and your mind and body require more rest right now.”

Kirishima blushes a little. He doesn’t know why his temper seems to be boiling just below the surface, ready to erupt at any moment. I’m usually even-tempered. It’s one of my strengths.

“Has someone else made you feel like you’re stupid?” Kurebayashi asks in that annoyingly direct way she has.


“I see. In what way?”

Kirishima stares at Kurebayashi. She’s not actually going to make me say it, is she? But Kurebayashi has always made Kirishima speak uncomfortable truths aloud. After their usual waiting game, he finally mumbles, “My… my… I can’t… find the words I want to say.”
“Your aphasia,” Kurebayashi says. “Does it affect your thinking?”

*I don't know. I haven't noticed.* Kirishima tries to remember a time when it has. “No. I don't think so,” he says, a little surprised.

“How about your writing? Or typing?” Kurebayashi presses.

Kirishima shakes his head. “I haven't written much before... today, but I don't think so.”

“And your comprehension?”

This time Kirishima isn't sure how to answer. “Sometimes... maybe? I need... people to slow down... a little... sometimes. Especially... Yama...-sensei.”

“But isn't the aphasia improving?”

Kirishima frowns. “Sometimes I think it is, but... other times, it seems to get worse.”

“Have you noticed any factors that contribute to that?”

“When I'm tired or excited or... frustrated.”

“And have you discovered any ways to cope with it?” Kurebayashi asks.

Kirishima nods. “When I'm upset, I try to calm down.” He realizes he’s just said a whole sentence without the aphasia affecting him.

“Do you find yourself getting upset more easily?” Kurebayashi doesn't verbally add “like you just did with me,” but her face seems to say it anyway.

Kirishima sighs. “Yeah. But I think that's... understandable. Don't you?”

“It is,” Kurebayashi concedes. “Does it bother you?”

“Not really,” Kirishima says, not quite able to meet her eye.

Kurebayashi makes the throat-clearing noise that ostensibly means “Yes, continue,” but somehow seems disbelieving when she does it.

“I’m still in a lot of pain,” Kirishima explains feebly.

“Is your pain management plan inadequate?” Kurebayashi asks.

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’m not really in... *too* much pain.” He realizes he’s just contradicted himself. “I mean... it’s the... headaches. My head... hurts whenever I think too hard.”

“Are you sure it's your head?”

“What do you mean?” Kirishima asks, wondering whether his lack of understanding is caused by the aphasia or Kurebayashi’s overly blunt communication style.

“Are you sure it's not your heart - your *feelings* - that are hurting instead?”

Kirishima’s mouth drops open. He snaps it closed. “I know the difference.”

“Do you?” Kurebayashi asks mildly.
Kirishima doesn’t dignify 
that with a response. He’s not forgotten how to play the waiting game with the psychologist.

“Speaking of feelings…” Kurebayashi prods. Smooth segues have never been her specialty.

Kirishima groans.

“You do know that’s why I’m here, right? We were making so much progress until…” she trails off delicately.

“Until I fucked my brain up,” Kirishima finishes for her.

Kurebayashi’s eyebrows shoot up.

Kirishima shrugs. He’s never been much of a cuss, but for some reason those words have been some of the easiest for him to remember. And Kurebayashi has always told him not to censor himself.

Kirishima takes a deep breath. “Well, that’s not something we need to… discuss anymore…. Asami-sama settled that for me!” The words come out with far more force than Kirishima intended.

“Ah.”

Kirishima sighs, but he doesn’t say anything else.

“And how do you feel?” Kurebayashi finally prompts.

Kirishima’s mind says “angry,” but what comes out of his mouth is “useless.”

Kurebayashi raises her eyebrows.


Kurebayashi clears her throat disbelievingly. “You can feel more than one emotion at once, you know.”

Kirishima nods, though he’s not sure he actually does know. For so long, he buried whatever feelings he had, and it’s taken him months to get in touch with even the surface layer of feelings so he could stop being a “ticking time bomb,” as Kurebayashi put it after their first meeting.

“Useless,” Kurebayashi repeats.

_of course she wants to talk about that first._

Kirishima shrugs. “Yeah. Well, I am.”

Kurebayashi clears her throat again.

“Asami-sama said as much when he… ‘accepted’ my… resignation.”

“Did he.” Kurebayashi’s face pinches as she hides her emotions from Kirishima.

Kirishima shrugs again. “Well, it’s true. For… now, anyway.”

“Are you only useful if you’re working as Asami-kun’s first assistant?”

“No. But I can't do any… job right now.”
“I saw your family here earlier. Your nephew, is it?” Kirishima nods, and Kurebayashi continues, “He can't do any job right now. Would you call him useless?”

“Of course not! His… job is to learn and grow.”

“Can't your job right now be to recover?”


“So he's not a complete idiot,” Kurebayashi mutters. Out loud, she says, “Besides, you still have that other job I gave you: figure out what you want to do instead of being Asami-kun’s first assistant.”

“I don't want… to talk about that… right now,” Kirishima says. Right now, he can't even bear to think about it. His whole identity has been wrapped around his relationship with Asami for so long, he's not sure who he is without that. *Which is why I could never give him my resignation letter*, Kirishima admits to himself.

“Then… Why angry?” Kurebayashi brings the conversation back to her favorite topic: feelings.

Kirishima knows why he's angry, but it's hard to put into words, especially now. For the first time he appreciates Kurebayashi's silent patience. After a long moment, he haltingly begins, “Not… angry. More… more… more… frosted.” He frowns. *That's definitely not the right word*. “Fro- fro- fro- frostbitten.” *That's not right, either.*

Kurebayashi waits patiently for a long moment. When it's clear Kirishima isn't going to say any more, she says, “I think I know what word you're thinking of. Would you like me to say it?”

Kirishima nods. “Is it 'frustrated’?”

“Yes. Fru- fru- frustrated.” But now Kirishima has lost his train of thought.

After another long moment, Kurebayashi prompts, “You're angry at - or rather frustrated with Asami-kun for…” She trails off, leaving the rest for Kirishima to fill in. Kurebayashi is usually very good at not making any assumptions. This time, however, she has failed.

“Not Asami-sama. Maybe… a little, but… I'm… frosted - fro- fru- frustrated with… myself.”

Kurebayashi raises her eyebrows but otherwise does nothing to reveal her surprise. “Because?”

“I didn't… Asami-sama…” Kirishima pauses to gather his thoughts. “I didn't make… the decision. Asami-sama did.”

“To resign?” Kurebayashi asks.

Kirishima nods.

“But you said he accepted… Ah. Did he read your letter?”

Kirishima nods again.

Kurebayashi takes a moment to gather her own thoughts. “We talked about what would happen if anyone read that letter, right?”

Kirishima nods. He remembers. That's why he always kept it on his person or locked safely away.
And yet you persisted in carrying it with you. You could have destroyed it. It would have been easy enough to rewrite when you were ready to give it to Asami-kun."

Kirishima shrugs. He has no idea where Kurebayashi is going.

"Why do you think you carried it with you?"

Kirishima shrugs again, but Kurebayashi waits for a response. Kirishima tries to outlast her, but he finally sighs and says, "Because… I was using it as a… a… talisman."

"A talisman?" Kurebayashi asks to urge him to continue.

"To get the… courage… to get… unstuck."

"I had a client who was deathly afraid of heights. He worked for a small firm. For corporate bonding, they went skydiving. My client also was trying to gather his courage. Do you think he managed to jump out of the airplane in the end?"

Kurebayashi actually waits for an answer. Kirishima ponders the question briefly. "If he's a… typical Japanese… salaryman, probably."

Kurebayashi shakes her head impatiently. "Would I be telling you this story right now if he had? Of course he didn't jump out of the plane."

"But… he didn't… not do it… either," Kirishima guesses.

"Exactly. He did what he could face doing at the time, which was talking to his tandem-jumping instructor and making a deal that he would just hold on to his harness and close his eyes, and the instructor would push him out. Then it was just a matter of getting on the plane and following the agreement." Kurebayashi flashes a triumphant smile.

"That… analogy is weak," Kirishima challenges. "Courage… isn't the right word for what I needed."

"The analogy holds," Kurebayashi counters. "You weren't able to make the leap, but you paraded that paper around, provoking the curiosity of everyone around you. Subconsciously, you knew it was only a matter of time before someone read it and pushed you out of the plane."

Kirishima blinks.

Kurebayashi continues, "Courage is the act of being afraid but doing what you fear anyway. You made it out of the airplane, and it doesn't really matter how you got there."

Kirishima swallows. "I'm still… terrified. What am I going to do with… the rest of my life? What… can I still do?"

"You have time to figure that out. Your injuries are relatively mild, and you're still in the very early stages of recovering. You'll be able to do almost anything you want to do."

"What if… I can't remember my… English?"

"You mean at the rehabilitation center?"

Kirishima nods.

"Kessler has patients from around the world. Interpreters will be available. They also have therapists…" Kurebayashi draws in a long breath. "It's easier to conduct therapy sessions in person,
so I understand if you want to change to a therapist there. But if you'd like to stick with me, we can continue via Skype.”

Kirishima blinks. “I… I don't know,” he confesses. “I haven't… really had time… to think about that.”

“Of course you haven't. But there's a lot we won't have time to cover before you leave: the incident leading to your injuries, adjusting to your injuries, Motomi-san, ending your codependent relationship with Asami-kun, your career explorations…” Kurebayashi trails off, frowning as if she's trying to think of even more things, or perhaps regretting the lack of time left to delve into Kirishima's personal business.

Kirishima groans.

Kurebayashi checks her watch. “How are you feeling? Is there anything you'd like to talk about now?”

Kirishima nods. “Actually… it's about Asami-sama. And Takaba-san.”

Kurebayashi looks confused. “Who's Takaba-san?”

By the time Kurebayashi finally leaves (after a thorough discussion about Kou, at Kurebayashi’s insistence), Kirishima is so tired he has to take another nap. Before he does, he texts Takaba.

I need to talk to Asami-sama before I leave.

Please make sure he comes.

Please come, too. You can come separately.

Kirishima falls asleep before he receives a response.

When he wakes up, Kazuko is back at his bedside. “Are you hungry? Kumiko-chan made your favorites.”

Kirishima blinks in surprise. I have favorites? He remembers his conversation with Kou the night they met. “What is it?”

Kazuko frowns. “Did you forget your favorites? Hamburger and yakisoba. And taiyaki - well, Kumiko-chan didn't make those.”

Kirishima tries not to laugh. Those haven't been my favorite since elementary school. I don't think I've even had them since elementary school.

“Those aren't your favorites anymore, are they?” Kazuko asks, her face falling. “I should have known. What do you like now?”

“Fugu,” Kirishima says automatically. “But I haven't had… hamburger or yakisoba in a… long time. Or… taiyaki.”

“Let me see how close they are.” Kazuko pulls out her phone. After a moment, she says, “Oh, they're on the elevator.”

Kirishima hardly has time to wonder who “they” are before his father Katsutoshi, brother Kenta, and
sister Kumiko are swarming around his bed.

“Kisho-chan wanted to come, too,” Kumiko says, “but Mom said you were really tired. Can Megumi bring him by tomorrow before you leave?”

Kirishima nods. He can't believe how quickly he’s gotten attached to his nephew - and more amazingly, how quickly Kisho got attached to him.

Kazuko unpacks the food Kumiko brought, and Kirishima's eyes bug out. It's enough for three of the guys after one of Tokawa's brutal met-cons, and Kirishima can't imagine eating even half of a hamburger right now.

“You guys are eating, too, right?” he asks.

Kumiko's face falls. “We weren't planning to. Do you not like it anymore?”

“I just don't have much… appetite,” Kirishima explains. “I've been lying in… bed for days.”

“Oh. I'll help you eat, then,” Kenta says, reaching for a hamburger.

Kazuko slaps his hand. “Let Kei-chan eat first.”

“Of course. I was just going to cut it for him.”

“M... hands work fine... Kenta-nii.” Kirishima cuts the hamburger and slides the bigger portion towards Kenta. Next, he uses his chopsticks to place some yakisoba next to his hamburger.

Kumiko frowns slightly.

“Mom said you also got me some... taiyaki, Kumiko-nee? I want to save room.” Kirishima smiles up at his sister. “Thanks for bringing me my… favorites.”

While Kirishima eats, he listens to Kumiko describing her fiance. “I wish you could meet Manabu, but he's on a business trip to Okinawa until tomorrow night. He couldn't come back early.”

“He doesn't have a 'k' in his... name,” Kirishima observes. “Do Dad and Mom approve of him?”

“Neither does Megumi-chan, but nobody made a big deal about that,” Kumiko says crossly.

“I'm... sorry,” Kirishima says.

“It's fine. I've just heard that from Kenta-nii a hundred times already. It's getting old.”

“You could have told me,” Kenta points out.

“I already have. Three times,” Kumiko retorts.

“Oh.”

“Does... anyone else want some of the... food?” Kirishima asks. “Kenta-nii, want more?”

“No, thanks, I'm good,” Kenta says.

Kirishima remembers the two guards who have been rotating outside his door around the clock. He suspects he missed the shift change during his two naps, so he's not sure who's there now. “My... friends are in the... hallway. Could you please see if they're... hungry?”
Kazuko ducks out and soon returns with Saijo. “Your other friend said he’d wait in the hall,” Kazuko says with a faint air of disapproval.

“Are you… hungry?” Kirishima asks. “I’ve got… yakisoba and hamburgers here.”

“Really? That's awesome! Sakuragi was just saying he's starving. Thanks!”

Kumiko divvies the food between two plates.

While he's waiting, Saijo clears his throat. “Um, I heard from Saji. He's… really busy today.”

“I thought he had… the day off,” Kirishima says before he can stop himself.

“You know how the job is,” Saijo says, not meeting Kirishima's eyes. “Anyway, he says he'll stop by before you leave tomorrow. And he'll definitely still help you with the website.”

“Website?” Katsutoshi interjects. “Is Asami-kun making you work in the hospital?”

“Of course not,” Kirishima answers. Kenta looks nervous, so Kirishima tries to think of an excuse that will placate their father. “I… have to hand over… my projects, right? Saji-kun is… helping me do that.”

“Then why was he planning to come in on his day off?” Kumiko asks. Kenta stamps on her foot.

“Oh! Is it… because the hospital is so far away from the office?”

“Exactly,” Kirishima agrees as Katsutoshi looks suspiciously between his children.

Saijo steps up to cover the awkward silence that threatens. “Oh, Saji also asked me to get you some takoyaki, but I guess it’s too late for me to do that, huh? Should I bring it by later?”

Kirishima frowns. Based on his appetite since the incident, he’s probably not going to eat much more tonight. He’s already wondering if he can eat an entire taiyaki. “How about for… lunch tomorrow? Would that work?”

Saijo explains to the others, “We wanted to bring Kirishima-san Japanese food that he would miss overseas. I guess you had the same thought. Well, I should excuse myself so you can get back to family time.”

“Wait. Do you know… something that might amuse a… two-year-old?” Kirishima asks. “My… nephew is coming again… tomorrow.” Kirishima has realized that Kisho took the balloon home, and Kirishima doesn’t know how else to entertain the child from his hospital bed.

“I’ll ask the guys, and we’ll figure something out.” And with that, Saijo is out the door with the plates.

I wonder if Saji really had to work. Maybe he decided the website was too much work, and he changed his mind about helping. He could have just told me.

Kirishima doesn’t have time to dwell on it, however, as his family sweeps him back into the conversation. With so many participants, Kirishima has to concentrate to follow the conversation, and before he knows it, his eyes are drooping again.

Kazuko shoos the rest of the family out the door, allowing them just a few minutes to make their goodbyes. Kenta gives Kirishima an omamori for safe travels. Katsutoshi hands him one for education and learning.
Kirishima looks up at his father, confused. “I’m not a… student.”

Katsutoshi taps Kirishima’s head. “We’re always students in life. You, especially - you’ve always been so bright. Work hard at recovering and nothing will stop you. Ganbatte.”

Kumiko gives Kirishima an omamori for healing. “You’ve got to hurry up and get better so you can come back for the wedding. Manabu and I will wait until you’re well enough to come back.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “Don’t… do that. If this… incident taught me… anything, it’s that… life is too… precious to postpone… happiness.”

“But…” Kumiko says.

“There’s… technology. Kenta-nii won’t mind holding up… his tablet so I can watch on… on… Skype.”

Kenta snorts. Kumiko playfully slaps him behind the ear with the backs of her fingers. “Of course I will,” Kenta says.

Kazuko pulls an omamori out of her pocket, too. “If everyone else is giving theirs now…” Kirishima stares in wonder at the protection for sports.

“I thought you… didn’t like…”

“I just want you to be careful and safe. This will help you recover the skills you need to keep you safe.”

Kazuko stays behind after the others leave. “I’m just going to stay until you fall asleep, if that’s alright with you, Kei-chan,” she says.

Kirishima is so tired, he barely has the energy to nod his assent.

When Kirishima awakens the next morning, Kazuko is slouched sideways in the easy chair next to the bed. *When did she get here?* he wonders. Then he realizes she’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Tears prick his eyes. *I’ve been a terrible son. But I’ll do better from now on. I wonder when Saji will get here.*

His final few hours in Japan prove hectic. After his morning check-up, bathroom protocol, and sponge bath, such a huge group of the guys come by that Kirishima is surprised they’re all allowed in the room at once. The guys encourage Kazuko to take a short break in the garden. They’ve brought her tea and a rice, fish, tamagoyaki, and miso soup bento.

Yoneda and Sakuragi are both here, so Kirishima takes the opportunity to finally say something to both of them that’s been weighing on his mind for several days. “I’m… sorry about the… mud run. I’m sure one of the other… guys can fill in for me. You can pick… whoever you’d like.”

Sakuragi and Yoneda exchange glances. Yoneda speaks up. “We don’t want to do the race with anyone but you. Maybe next year…”

“We all know that can’t… happen,” Kirishima says. Even if he *does* come back to Japan someday, he won’t be able to contact anyone affiliated with Sion, whatever the context. “Please… do the race. I feel bad… enough that I can’t do it. Don’t make me feel… guilty, too.”
Sakuragi and Yoneda look at one another again, holding a silent conversation. After a few seconds, they turn back to Kirishima. “Okay. If that’s what you want, we will,” Sakuragi says.

“But it definitely won’t be the same without you,” Yoneda adds.

“We’ve got the takoyaki coming for lunch. Is there anything else you want to eat? One last taste of Japan?” Saijo asks.

Kirishima shakes his head. “Just rice and… tofu.”

Yoneda clears his throat. “I wish we could get you out of this hospital, let you see whatever you want to see one last time.”

Kirishima sighs. “I wish that, too. It’s weird not to ever see my… apartment again. Or Sion.”

Things get a little awkward, but Kazuko comes back in before it gets too awkward.

“We should get going,” Yoneda says.

In ones and twos, the guys each offer Kirishima a final parting word, give him a small gift (mostly a quintessentially Japanese snack, though a few also give a hundred-yen-store toy for Kisho), and leave. Kirishima is alone with his mother again only briefly before Suoh comes in.

“Most of your things are on their way to America. Here’s a suitcase with the things you’ll need right away. Is there anything else I should get for you?” Suoh opens the suitcase and shows Kirishima the contents item by item.

Kirishima is pleased to see Suoh remembered his t-shirt and jeans. “What about… my helmet and… jacket?” he asks.

Suoh’s eyebrows shoot up. “I sent them with your books and other things. You won’t need them for a while, right?”

Kirishima reddens. “That’s true.”

“You mean a bike helmet? Will you need it there?” Kazuko fusses. “By the time you’re back on a bike, won’t you be home in Japan?”

Neither Suoh nor Kirishima know how to answer that. Finally, Kirishima says, “I guess I wasn’t thinking… straight.”

When Suoh holds up the yukata, Kazuko snatches it from him. She frowns at the mass-produced garment, looking at Kirishima as if he has betrayed the entire family.

“It was a… gift,” Kirishima explains. Kazuko doesn’t look at all placated, so he finally adds, “from Kou-san,” turning instantly red.

“Oh!” Kazuko hurriedly folds the yukata and puts it carefully back in the suitcase. “I understand.”

After he’s finished going through everything, Suoh asks if there’s anything else Kirishima would like to bring with him. Kirishima can’t think of anything; Suoh seems to have thought of everything.

*My whole life, reduced to a single suitcase.* Kirishima supposes it’s not that strange; his whole life has been reduced to a single hospital bed since he awoke.

“I have to take care of some paperwork regarding your transfer, but I’ll be back to say goodbye,”
Suoh promises.

“Is Asami-sama coming?” Kirishima asks.

“Yes. He should be here soon,” Suoh replies.

Chapter End Notes

I have to brag a little - since I posted the last chapter, I completed my first real underbar! The gap was gigantic compared to what Kirishima can do, but it was still legit.

Chapter title taken from "Kite" by U2.
Sayōnara Nippon (Sweet Pea Purple)

Chapter Summary

What does Kirishima have to say to Asami and Akihito? While Kirishima finishes his final preparations for leaving Japan, Saji finally shows up. What surprise does he have for Kirishima?

Chapter Notes

I've started the next chapter, but it's going slowly because I'm pretty busy. It will be from Kou's perspective. Updates will probably be slow until the end of the month.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima); Megumi (Kiyoshi's wife), Kisho (Kiyoshi and Megumi's son), Manabu (Kumiko's fiance)

Japanese Terms:
Sayōnara Nippon: "Goodbye, Japan" (with a tone of finality)
Takoyaki: a savory snack made with octopus (really delicious)
Honne: one's true feelings (in contrast to tatemae, the behavior and opinions one presents in public)
But the next visitors are Megumi and Kisho. Megumi has brought a box full of new yukata for Kirishima. Kirishima examines them one by one, realizing that his family must have put their other work aside and worked late into the night during their busiest season to get them ready in two days.

“I didn’t know about the one from Motomi-san,” Kazuko frets. “I didn’t mean…”

Kirishima cuts her off. “These are… amazing. Thank you.” Even though it’s been seventeen years since he’s helped out in the family shop, it’s not like he’d ever forget the symbolism of the various colors and patterns: lucky blue with pink cranes for good health and longevity, restorative green with orange bamboo for knowledge and perseverance, strong brown with yellow pines for a long and fortune-blessed life, natural yellow with purple plum blossoms for renewal.

When he sees the final yukata, he gasps. The fabric is varying shades of blue, tie-dyed to look like rippling water. Scattered across it are dragonflies, symbols of power and victory, but delicate-looking and subtly colored in hues of blue and green. There are also Japanese irises, symbolic of good news.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Megumi asks.

Kirishima nods. “Who designed it?”

“Kumiko-‘ba-chan,” Kisho says. “Are you done yet?”

“Almost.” Kirishima chuckles and hands the yukata back to his mother to pack. “I didn’t realize Kumiko-nee was so… talented.”

“She’s been coming out with an exclusive line every summer for the past few years. It’s become quite popular. We already have plenty of pre-orders, even though we haven’t revealed this year’s design yet,” Kazuko explains.

“You’d better get a lot of that… fabric made,” Kirishima suggests. “It’s beautiful.”

Kazuko frowns at all of Kirishima’s gifts. “You’re going to need another suitcase.”

“Call… Kazu-nii,” Kirishima suggests.

“Nooooo!” Kisho cries, tugging on Kirishima’s arm. “He’s scawy, remember?”

“That’s right,” Kirishima says, patting Kisho’s cheek.

Kazuko excuses herself to make the phone call and change into the clean clothes Megumi has brought her.

“Now play with me!” Kisho demands.

Kirishima pulls out the first toy from the small pile on his bedside table left by the guys. “Watch this… top carefully,” he tells Kisho. “When it gets… excited, it will stand on its… head.”

Kisho looks up at him wide-eyed. Kirishima realizes Kisho can’t see the top of the bedside table from his position on the floor, so Megumi lifts Kisho into the bed. Kisho squeals and claps when the top flips upside down, but he gets sad when the top falls on the floor. After the third time it falls, Kazuko hands Kirishima a plate to spin it on, and the lip of the plate keeps the top from falling.
“Can I try?” Kisho demands, reaching for the top before Kirishima can say yes.

Kirishima teaches Kisho how to spin the top, but Kisho can’t spin it fast enough to get it to flip.

“I’m not making it ’cited enough.” Kisho pouts.

Kirishima reaches for a different top, a wooden one with an optical illusion design. “Try this one. I bet you can make it… excited.”

Kisho spins the top and claps his hands when the red and blue splotches turn into purple rings. “I made it ’cited! It turned purple!”

“Great… job!” Kirishima says.

Kisho gets bored of the tops after five minutes, and Kirishima moves on to the next toy. He’s grateful that the guys brought so many - and everything they picked out keeps Kisho entertained for at least a short time. The water-marker coloring book keeps the toddler’s interest for a full fifteen minutes as he and Kirishima take turns making hidden pictures appear.

“What do you think will be… hidden on this… page?” Kirishima asks, turning to a page with a firetruck in front of a firehouse. “What’s on the… steps?”

Kisho furrows his brow in concentration. “A kitty-cat,” he decides. He starts coloring in the steps. “It is! No… It’s a doggy.”

“You were right that it was an… animal,” Kirishima soothes, recognizing the telltale sign of Kisho’s bottom lip trembling.

“I think he’s getting hungry,” Megumi says.

As if on cue, Saijo comes in carrying a bag of food. He looks at the number of visitors and says, “I hope I brought enough.”

When he starts laying out the multiple containers of food, Kirishima says, “There’s plenty. Thank you so much for bringing all this.” He looks at Megumi. “Will Kisho-chan eat any of this?”

“He’s never had takoyaki before, but of course he’ll eat rice and tofu. And most vegetables except for peppers.”

Saijo turns to leave.

“Wait! Don’t you… want to eat, too?” Kirishima asks.

“I’m not sure there’s enough,” Saijo worries.

The others insist he stays, and he does a few monkey flips at Kisho’s request.

“You don’t have to do any more. Come eat,” Megumi says.

“But…” Kisho starts.

“He’ll do one more for you before he leaves, but Saijo-nii is hungry, too. Let him eat in peace.”

After lunch, Saijo says his final goodbye to Kirishima, and Megumi takes Kisho home for his nap.
Kirishima takes a nap himself, but he’s awakened by his mother after only fifteen minutes.

“Ryu-chan is here to say goodbye,” Kazuko says.

Kirishima is instantly awake.

Kazuko steps out of the room to “get some tea.”

“Suoh said you want to talk to me,” Asami says gruffly, his business mask tightly in place.

Kirishima tries not to smirk. *You think that has ever worked on me? I know you too well, Ryuichi.*

“There’s… something I wanted to say to you,” Kirishima says. He glances toward the door. *Where is Takaba-san?*

“Go ahead.”

Kirishima’s mind races as he searches for a way to stall for time. “Sorry. I’m still a little… groggy from my nap. Could you… get me some… tea… please?”

Asami’s eyebrows shoot up at the role reversal, but he heads out to the vending machine. As soon as he’s gone, Kirishima sends a couple of quick texts.

Asami has barely handed Kirishima the tea when Takaba comes in, saying, “I came to say good- Oh, I didn’t know you’d be here, Asami.”

“Wait outside,” Asami says.

“He can stay,” Kirishima says. “What I have to say is for… both of you.”

Asami looks like he’s about to leave.

“Give me… five minutes. You… owe me at… least that much, Ryuichi.”

Asami stills.

All the things Kirishima has rehearsed about what to say have flown from his mind. He takes a slow breath to calm himself down. *I can do this.*

“Ryuichi… if you don’t… change, you’re going to… lose Takaba-san.”

A flash of anger flicks across Asami’s face, but he clenches his jaw and tries to keep his business mask on. Takaba shifts restlessly from one foot to the other, looking like he wants to flee now, as his face reddens.

“I - uh - that’s not -” Takaba stutters.

“Are you really in the position to be giving relationship advice?” Asami asks coldly.

Kirishima recoils. “Perhaps… not. But maybe… since I’ve learned from… personal experience, I’m exactly the… person. Besides, you wouldn’t listen to… anyone else. There’s a… chance you’ll listen to me.”

Asami snorts.

“You both… care about… each other… very much. Takaba-san, I’ve never seen Ryuichi fall like
this… for anyone else. Ever.”

A muscle in Asami’s jaw twitches.

“Ryuichi has had… a tough life.” Asami looks like he wants to flee again. “Don’t… worry. I won’t… tell him any… details. That’s for… you to share, Ryuichi. But he needs to understand… how you’ve been hurt in the… past.”

Asami snorts again.

“Ryuichi, you… falling in love is like… jumping off an airplane.” I can’t believe I’m using Kurebayashi’s analogy after making fun of it. “For someone… scared of heights…”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” Asami cuts Kirishima off.


“No, I’m not,” Takaba objects.

Kirishima chuckles. “You two are so… alike in… many ways. Anyway… let me finish. For someone afraid of… heights, jumping off an… airplane can be too scary. But they might be able to stand in the… doorway… close their eyes, and let themselves be… pushed out.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Asami demands.

“Consider this your… push.” Kirishima clears his throat. “Kurebayashi-sensei?” he calls.

Kurebayashi enters the room.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Asami mutters.

“Asami-kun, you hired me to help Sion employees with their mental health. You recognize the importance of taking care of oneself, and the role that psychotherapy can play in that,” Kurebayashi says.

Asami scowls. “My mental health is just fine, but thank you for your concern.”

“Even people with good mental health can benefit from psychotherapy,” Kurebayashi says.

“Psychotherapy can help couples learn how to communicate better and to break unhealthy patterns of behavior.”

“And you did such a good job helping Kirishima and Motomi,” Asami retorts.

“That’s not… fair,” Kirishima says. “Kurebayashi-sensei… has helped me. And I… well, once I’m a… good enough person, I’ll see if Kou-san is still… single, and maybe he’ll give me… another chance.”

Asami raises his eyebrows at Kurebayashi. “This is your proof of the effectiveness of psychotherapy?”

Kirishima suspects that Asami’s insulting him, but his head is starting to hurt again. Thankfully, Kurebayashi steps up. “Kirishima-kun at least realizes now that he deserves happiness, that he can think about himself and place his desires first sometimes. Everyone has a different starting point.”

“I pay you to make my employees healthy, not to convince them they’d be better off not in my employ.” Asami’s voice is quiet, but Kirishima can sense the rage boiling just beneath the surface.
Kurebayashi either can’t sense it, or she’s immune to it. “I don’t ‘convice’ my patients of anything. There would be no point in leading someone from one codependent relationship into one with me.”

“Codependent,” Asami repeats, and this time there’s no mistaking his anger.

Kurebayashi still doesn’t back down. “Kirishima-kun built his entire life around you. You not only tolerated it, you encouraged it by employing him in a role that required him to be available to you around the clock. What would you call it?”

Asami clenches his jaw. For once he has no comeback, but Kirishima knows Asami is on the verge of stomping out of the room.

“That’s not… important,” Kirishima says, trying desperately to change the topic. “This isn’t about me. It’s about… you and Takaba-san.”

“As I said, I’m fine. And Takaba said he is, too.” Asami turns to leave.

He’s only halfway to the door when Takaba, who has been staring down at the floor, says quietly, “Wait.”

Asami stops mid-step.

“Maybe it’s not such a bad idea,” Takaba says slowly. “I mean, it can’t hurt, right?” His face reddens, and he’s still concentrating on the floor. He continues, “Kou said it helped his parents. I only knew a little about what was going on at the time, but they were fighting all the time. We could hear their arguments from our house, and sometimes we could hear things being thrown. Kou used to stay over just to get away from it, and we were sure they should just hurry up and get divorced. But suddenly things got a lot better. I didn’t know why at the time; I was just happy for my friend. Now his parents act like newlyweds.”

“If you want to play newlyweds, we can go home and do that right now,” Asami says smoothly.

Takaba turns even redder, but he glares up at Asami. “That won’t fix this! Sex can’t solve everything!”

“What exactly do you think needs fixing?” Asami asks coldly, his arms crossed.

“And that’s a great conversation that we can all have together. I’ve borrowed an office down the hall,” Kurebayashi says. She puts one hand on Takaba’s shoulder and another on Asami’s.

Asami turns around and gives her a deadly look. She doesn’t take her hand away. “I thought you weren’t afraid of anything,” Kurebayashi says in her no-nonsense way that leaves no room for argument.

Had it been a taunt, Asami would have been able to ignore it and do as he wanted. But he lets himself be led away, looking like he’s not sure what’s just happened.

Kirishima chuckles quietly to himself. He knows that feeling all too well. There’s a reason Asami and he selected Kurebayashi as the chief psychologist for Sion, but it’s disconcerting to find out that, contrary to your own sense of superiority, you are not at all impervious to her powers when she directs their full force at you.

Kirishima struggles to fall back asleep after Asami and Takaba have left, but he soon has to give up
the attempt as he’s subjected to a thorough exam and prepared for the long flight.

Suoh returns as the medical team is finishing. “Where is Asami-sama?” he asks. “He’s not answering his phone.”


Suoh’s jaw drops open. “That’s what you wanted to talk to him about? How the fuck did you convince him to do that?”

Kirishima snorts. “I didn’t. Like I… could. It was Kurebayashi-sensei and Takaba-san… mostly. But really, I think… deep down he knows he… needs it.”

Suoh looks like he’s worried about Kirishima’s brain injury again. Suoh screws up his face for a moment, as if deciding something, before finally blurting, “Did you say anything else to him?”

“What do you mean?” Kirishima is honestly not sure what Suoh is thinking about.

“You said yesterday that you can figure out honne. Were you talking about Asami-sama?”

Kirishima shrugs. “Yeah. You told him… to say that, right?”

“To say what?” Suoh asks.

“To… throw me away.”

Suoh averts his gaze. “I would never put words in Ryuichi’s mouth. Like he would be my parrot, anyway.”

“You know… what I mean,” Kirishima says. “Don’t be an asshole.”

The surprise at the cuss word coming out of Kirishima’s mouth makes Suoh meet Kirishima’s gaze again. “It’s better for both of you to make a clean break. It’s the only way you can ever truly be free of this life.”

“I know,” Kirishima says.

“You wouldn’t have been able to do it on your own,” Suoh says, looking away again.

“Maybe,” Kirishima acknowledges. “I was… certainly stuck for… a while.” There’s a long moment of silence. Kirishima adds, “But I’m… stronger than you think, Kazu-nii.”

“That’s my line. I’ve been telling you that for years, you impudent brat.” Suoh comes closer to the bed and ruffles Kirishima’s hair. “You’re going to be okay, kid.”

Kirishima rolls his eyes and pushes Suoh’s hand away. “You just had to… ruin it, didn’t you? I’m not… a kid.”

“I know,” Suoh says, clapping Kirishima on the shoulder. “I have something for you.” He pulls a cell phone out of his pocket. “I know it’s probably stupid to get you one here, but it’s unlocked and should work over there once you select a carrier. I wasn’t sure how easy it would be to get a Japanese-language one overseas.” Suoh unlocks the phone. “I set it up with your old PIN for now. You can change it when you’re ready. And I already put in the family contacts.” He opens the contacts to show Kirishima.

Kirishima notices “Kazu-nii” between “Kazuko” and “Katsutoshi.” “Kazu-nii… really?”
“Hey, I put the honorifics on Kiyoshi’s, Kenta’s, and Kumiko’s names as well. But my point was that I’ll always be your Kazu-nii. And in that capacity, we can stay in contact.”

“Oh.” Kirishima blinks. He hadn’t thought about having to cut off contact with Suoh.

“Don’t worry, I changed your contact in my phone, too,” Suoh says. He shows Kirishima where he’s now listed as “Kei-chan.”

“Hey!” Kirishima reaches for the phone, but Suoh holds it out of his reach. “You know, you could have used… ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’ instead of their… given names.”

It’s Suoh’s turn to blink. “Yeah. Well, you can change that later. I put one other number in for you.” He takes back the phone and scrolls down to the bottom of the contacts.

“Oh.” That’s all Kirishima can say when he sees Kou’s name.

“You can get his American number once you’re settled in, but Takaba said he’s still checking his other accounts regularly to keep in touch with all his friends and family here.”

“But -” Kirishima starts to object.

“Well, it’s there if you want it.” Suoh clears his throat and changes the topic. “I know you got pretty close to some of the guys in my division. You can keep in touch with them on any private accounts you have, as long as you’re careful, especially when using names.”

Kirishima feels like he’s just set down a weight he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “I can?”

“These protocols are for your safety. You’re the one who created them, and I know you’ll use your best judgment to be prudent.” Suoh checks his watch. “I’d love to see you onto the plane, but I’m having a hell of a time right now. Do you realize we’re going to end up hiring at least ten people to replace you? Not that the new hires will be allowed anywhere near any of your tasks. But it’s been a monumental restructuring effort, with promotions that have had ripple effects all the way down the organization.”

“I’m... sorry,” Kirishima says.

“One last thing,” Suoh says. “Did you tell Asami-sama that you figured it out?”

Kirishima doesn’t have to ask what Suoh means. Kirishima shakes his head.

Suoh lets out a long, slow breath. “Good. Please don’t. This is going to be a lot harder on him than it will be on you.”

Kirishima blinks in surprise. How is that possible? I’m the one leaving everything and everyone I know behind.

“You have other friends and interests. You’re the only person Asami trusts completely and implicitly.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “You. Kuroda. Takaba-san. Yoh... at one point.”

“None of us are even a close second. Obviously Takaba-san is special, but...” Suoh shrugs. “Well, there’s a reason you got them to talk to Kurebayashi. I still can’t believe you pulled that off.”

It’s Kirishima’s turn to shrug.
“Take care of yourself, Kei. And don’t wait too long to contact Motomi, okay? Whatever happens, I know you’ll find your happiness.”

“Thanks, Kazu-nii. For… everything.”

Suoh offers his hand, and Kirishima shakes it. And then Suoh is walking out the door.

Takaba leads Asami back into the room a short while later. Takaba’s eyes are red-rimmed, and Asami is as stoney-faced as ever, but Kirishima senses a new intimacy between the two of them. *I hope they can make it work.*

“We just came to say goodbye,” Takaba says. “Thanks again for… saving my life, Kirishima-san.” Takaba reaches down and gives Kirishima an awkward hug that’s over before Kirishima can register what is happening.

They both blush all the way to the roots of their hair.


“Same, Kei.” Asami shakes Kirishima’s hand.

Takaba is jittering around like he needs to pee. He finally bursts out, “Ugh! I’m sorry, Asami, but I just can’t not say anything! Kirishima-san, can’t I please tell Kou you’re in the hospital? He deserves to know!”

Asami glares at Takaba, but Kirishima says, “It’s alright. I’ve… been thinking maybe… that would be… okay. But don’t tell him… where I’m going.”

“But-” Takaba starts to object.

“Let me get… settled in first. I’ll tell him when I’m… ready,” Kirishima says.

Takaba sighs but nods. “At least I don’t have to feel like I’m completely lying to him anymore.”

After another round of goodbyes and well wishes, Takaba and Asami are walking out the door, and Kirishima is left alone in his room.

*I can’t believe I’m really leaving Japan all by myself.*

He can feel his heart beginning to race, and he starts sweating.

*I can’t do this.*

Just then, Saji finally walks into the room. Kirishima can’t shake off the disappointment he’s felt over the past two days after Saji failed to follow up on his offer to help with the family website.

Then Kirishima notices the large suitcase Saji is lugging behind him.

“You didn’t think we’d let you go to America all by yourself, did you?” Saji asks, grinning broadly.


“Well, pretty much everyone wanted to go - and it’s not because we thought it’d be a cushy
assignment,” Saji explains with a twinkle in his eye. “Sakuragi and I especially know how much of a pain in the ass you can be - remember the night in Ni-chôme?”

Kirishima does, all too well. “I’m… sorry,” he apologizes.

Saji waves him off. “Anyway, I was given less than a day to get all my shit together and empty my apartment - can you believe they wouldn’t keep it for me? Apparently there are going to be a bunch of new hires or something.”

Saji shudders at the memory of cleaning his apartment. Kirishima can’t help but laugh; he’s seen Saji’s apartment and knows it would have taken a miracle to finish in a week’s time. He can’t imagine how Saji got it done so quickly. “Did the other… guys help?”

Saji scowls. “Barely. They were all busy helping pack your shit. Not that your place needed the help. Anyway, I think they were jealous I was the one chosen to go.”

Kirishima rolls his eyes; he can’t imagine people were actually fighting for the “honor” of becoming his glorified babysitter.

“You think I’m joking? It took an hour for Yoneda to calm us all down and get us to agree on a selection process. Which thankfully boiled down to the fact that you asked for help with the website, and I was the only one with the experience to help with that. I may have exaggerated the amount of help needed, but only by a little bit.”

Saji laughs, and Kirishima can’t help but join him. After the anxiety of thinking he was going alone, Kirishima feels light and carefree… and maybe even a little excited.

I can do this.

Kazuko comes rushing into the room. “I fell asleep in the lounge!” She rushes over to the bed and takes Kirishima’s hand. “I was so scared I’d missed your departure.”

The flight medical team enters the room, and it’s really time to say goodbye.

“Call whenever you like. Don’t worry about the time difference,” Kazuko admonishes.

“I will,” Kirishima promises.

“Take care of yourself. Do what the doctors say. I’ll pray every day at the shrine for you.” Kazuko can’t help offering more advice as Kirishima is wheeled down the hallway. “Make sure to keep your stomach covered. Eat your vegetables. Don’t go out in the cold.”

“I’m not… a kid, Mom. I know,” Kirishima says softly.

“Well, good. Get better quickly, Kei-chan.” Kazuko kisses him on the forehead, and tears prick his eyes.

“I… Thanks, Mom. I’ll do my… best.” Kirishima can’t bear to say goodbye, so he says, “Ittekimasu,” giving the usual announcement when leaving one’s house and expecting to return soon.

“Itterashai,” Kazuko gives the usual answer through her tears. She pulls Kirishima’s hand to her lips and kisses it before they load him onto the ambulance.
As the plane takes off, Kirishima looks out the window at the Tokyo skyline. He doesn’t blink until his homeland is no longer in view.

*Sayōnara, Nippon.*
Kou groans as another train screeches past. When he'd seen how close the rental was to the train tracks on the map, he'd assumed the trains were underneath the street, not elevated above it, and that they'd be only as noisy as the trains in Tokyo. But New York trains are as loud as lawn mowers, and the thicker walls compared to his old apartment in Musashino are still no match for the raucous din that occurs every two minutes during rush hour, every eight minutes during the “slow” parts of the day, and every twenty minutes throughout the entire night. Apparently when they call New York the city that never sleeps, they're being literal.
Kou groans again. *I really need to buy some earplugs tomorrow*, he promises himself for the second night in a row. *And an air conditioner.* Right now he has the windows closed against the train noise, but it's unbearably stuffy. He'd read that American homes largely have central air conditioning, but apparently New York City hasn't gotten the message - at least not any of the places he could remotely afford, anyway.

His current rental is a short-term lease that will end in six weeks - just before the nearest subway stop reopens. The owner has said that after the first two weeks, if they both agree to it, Kou can sign a long-term lease. Right now, the train is definitely making the prospect seem less than agreeable to Kou.

He rolls over to the far side of the single bed, where the sheets have cooled down slightly below his body temperature. He flips his pillow over, punches it flat, and rests his head again.

He wants desperately to fall back asleep, but the knowledge that the next train will be by again in... Kou snatchs up his phone from the bookcase that doubles as a nightstand. Eight more minutes…

Kou sighs. He unlocks his phone and checks his messages. It’s late afternoon back in Japan, so there’s actually a chance someone might have messaged him since he last checked. Sure enough, there’s a text from Akihito.

*Kou, when you get this, can you please call me? I’ve got something important to tell you. Don’t worry about the time.*

Kou hesitates with his finger over the “call” button in the app. This is the third message he’s gotten like this from Akihito since Kou left Japan. The last two times, Akihito hasn’t actually told Kou anything. While they chatted, Akihito seemed distracted, not even interested when Kou talked about his adventures at Tempest Freerunning Academy.

When Akihito gets like this, it worries Kou. In the past, Kou has always chalked it up to Akihito’s job - and often, it has been job-related - though now Kou wonders how much of Akihito’s troubles over the past two years have been more Asami-related. And Kou doesn’t want to get tangled up in Akihito’s relationship issues. After arriving in the U.S. and seeing the local news, Kou has discovered that Yoshida’s dad was, if anything, *understating* the dangers that being affiliated even indirectly with organized crime could pose to Kou’s visa.

*Aki did just do that huge exposé on Kodama-gumi. Maybe he’s in over his head again. Asami-san warned him not to do it, but Aki just can’t seem to help himself.*

Kou sighs. There’s no way to disentangle Akihito’s job-related and relationship troubles, is there? And anyway, Akihito doesn’t have anyone else to talk to about his relationship. When Kou decided to rekindle their friendship, that meant accepting all of Akihito - including his relationship with Asami.

*We’ll just have to work out some code words or rules for how we discuss things.*

Kou hits the call button.

Akihito answers quickly. “Kou? Is that really you? Isn’t it the middle of the night? Did my message wake you up?”

Kou laughs quietly. “You been hitting the coffee too hard again? Yeah, it’s me. I can’t sleep; the trains are too noisy here. What’s up?”

“Ah, well…”
Kou didn’t use the video chat feature because he didn’t want to turn a light on, but he can imagine Akihito awkwardly scratching his head while he tries to work up the courage to ask for help.

“Did that Kodama exposé get you into hot water again?” Kou knows from experience that if he brings up the cause for Akihito’s need for assistance, it helps Akihito get over his initial resistance to asking for help or advice. Otherwise it can take Akihito up to thirty minutes to stop beating around the bush - if he ever does.

Akihito doesn’t say anything.

*Did I guess wrong?* Kou backtracks. “Or maybe it’s something with your… lover?” he encourages.

“How did you know about the Kodama exposé?” Akihito asks quietly.

*Ah, so it is the exposé.*

Kou feels his worry tick up. His place has always been a safe haven for Akihito, but where will Akihito go now that Kou’s place is across an ocean?

*Oh, but he has Asami-san now, and that swanky high-security apartment. And bodyguards.*

“I read it in the paper before I left. It took up the entire front cover,” Kou reminds Akihito.

Kou realizes he’ll just have to wait until Akihito decides to tell Kou whatever’s bothering him.

*I hope he does soon, though.*

The last time Akihito was so reticent, he ended up disappearing for several months - and Kou and Takato spent a night being held hostage by that Chinese mob boss.

“Well…” Akihito says.

Kou sighs. “Aki, just tell me what’s going on. You know I worry when you get like this.”

“If… if you knew something about someone… No. If someone you knew - or used to know…”

Kou grits his teeth, but he knows that if he tries to rush Akihito, he’ll just end up taking longer to say whatever he wants to say. Now that he’s started, the best thing to do is wait for him to gather his thoughts.

*For a journalist, he can be pretty inarticulate.*

“I mean… If I knew something about someone you used to know but no longer have anything to do with, would you want to know?”

Kou’s stomach lurches. “Is this about Kei-san?” he asks flatly.

*I should have known.*

“Would you want to know?” Akihito asks again.

The lack of denial is as good as a confirmation. “Aki, if he’s dating someone else, I really don’t need to hear about -”

Akihito cuts him off. “It’s not that. If it were something like that, I wouldn’t tell you.”
Kou’s heart starts beating a little faster. “Then what is it?”

Is Kei-san in trouble? Was he arrested?

“Um… let’s see. How should I tell you? The most important thing is that Kirishima-san is alive.”

“Alive”? Not “okay” - just “alive”? That makes it sound like he might not be alive much longer!

“What - when -” Kou can’t even form a complete sentence. His heart is thudding in his chest.

Akihito starts to say something, but the blasted train comes roaring past again, and Kou can only make out snippets of what Akihito is saying: scary words like ‘attack,’ ‘coma,’ ‘collapsed lung,’ and ‘chest tube.’

“I can’t hear you!” Kou says as loudly as he dares. Shut up, motherfucking train!

“Man, you weren’t kidding about that train,” Akihito says as the noise slowly recedes. “I could hear it through the phone. Anyway… as I was saying, last Monday, uh… well, someone from Kodama-gumi attacked me. And Kirishima-san pushed me out of the way.”

“Attacked you how?” Kou grits out.

Akihito clears his throat. “Well… Kirishima-san ended up falling and hitting his head pretty hard. And his lower back. And he had a … wound to his chest, but that’s… that’s actually healing pretty well.”

Kou takes a steadying breath, trying to calm his racing thoughts. A ‘wound’ - so he was shot again? Or maybe he was stabbed again? But Akihito doesn’t want to say… so shot, probably. But… that’s healing? But he’s only ‘alive.’

“How hard did he hit his head?” The words tumble out of Kou’s mouth.

“He fell from about two meters up,” Akihito says. “He’s awake and talking and everything, but…”

“But what? Aki, just hurry up and tell me!” Kou bursts out.

Kou’s roommate thumps on the wall.

“Sorry - I mean, Sorry,” Kou stage-whispers, switching to English.

“I’m not a doctor, so I don’t know how to explain it very well,” Akihito says. “He’s got a little trouble talking - well, remembering words when he talks, and some issues with his… nerves or brain or… they’re not sure which it is, or maybe both, but anyway, he’s having trouble moving parts of his legs.”

“So he’s paralyzed?” Kou asks. He squeezes his eyes closed, trying not to picture Kirishima broken and bleeding in the hospital.

“No, not that,” Akihito says. “The doctors say he’s got a really good chance of making a good recovery. He should be able to walk again.”

“Walk? But not…” Kou trails off, thinking of all the activities he and Kirishima used to do together: riding, running, hiking, parkour… Kou remembers Kirishima’s beautiful underbar, the best Kou has ever seen - even Tokawa was impressed by it.

“It’s too soon to know,” Akihito says. “It depends on how the therapy goes. And that’s going to take
weeks, maybe months. Anyway, I thought you would want to know. I would have told you sooner, but that guy didn’t want me to tell you.”

Kou gulps. “He didn’t?”

“Well, more like he was scared you wouldn’t want to know. I told him he was being an idiot, and I finally convinced him that you definitely would. So… give him a call, would you? He’s going through a really rough time right now.”

Kou nods. Of course he’ll call. But wait... “I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? What kind of person -”

Kou cuts Akihito off. “I deleted his contact information. Can you give me his number?” Kou opens up his contacts list and clicks to create a new contact.

“Uh, sure. It’s… Wait a second. I’m not sure the number I have will work anymore.”

“What? Why?”

“He’s… moving to a new facility today. A long-term rehabilitation facility. I’ll get his new information and send it to you as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Aki. Tell him that I… hope he recovers quickly. And I’ll call him as soon as I can. I - I don’t know when I can get back to Japan…”

“He understands that,” Akihito says. “I’m sure he’ll just be glad to hear from you.” There’s a long pause before Akihito says, “Why did you delete his contact information?”

Kou facepalms. “Dude. Do you really have to ask? The break-up was really hard on me, and I didn’t want to be tempted to contact him.”

“Oh.”

Kou can hear Akihito shifting uncomfortably.

“Thanks again for telling me,” Kou says.

After hanging up, Kou sets his phone back on the bookshelf with trembling hands. Monday was the day he arrived in Los Angeles. Or was it? Crossing the international date line was confusing.

I didn’t feel anything.

Kou remembers the feeling of foreboding he felt when the plane left Tokyo, but he’d chalked that up to the weather and nerves - and anyway, that was two days before the attack. It’s weird to think that Kirishima has been fighting for his life while Kou is beginning a new chapter in his own.

He’d wanted to send messages to Kirishima, both in Sichuan and in L.A., but of course Kou hadn’t. He’s been fighting the urge to contact Kirishima for weeks, but now that’s all he wants to do in this world. And he can’t.

Aki better message me soon.

Kou grabs his phone again and makes sure the volume is turned up. Then he opens his contacts
again, trying to remember Kirishima’s phone number, e-mail address, Line account, anything. But Kou’s phone has always done the remembering for him. He pulls up Sion’s page, but there’s no contact information for Kirishima there.

*It’s not like he’ll be checking his work accounts anyway, dummy.*

Kou opens the unnamed folder on his phone. He’s long since deleted the pictures of Kirishima’s under-table holster and the list Kou made of what he thought he knew about Kirishima, but the folder is now filled with pictures of Kirishima. Not photographs, because Kirishima doesn’t like having his taken.

But Kou’s memory captured Kirishima’s every expression perfectly, no matter how fleeting, and he was able to recreate them on paper at his leisure. Or while he was supposed to be working, after the break-up. There was one assignment to create a character for a technology company, and no matter how hard Kou tried to prevent it, the character kept turning into Kirishima. Finally, the night before the project was due, Kou bribed Takato to pose for him, and he finally was able to stop drawing Kirishima.

Kou flips through the pictures one by one. Most are quick doodles, but long practice helped him reduce the essence of Kirishima down to a handful of lines. Kou stops on the first sketch he ever drew of Kirishima, the morning after they met. Kirishima’s shy smile still melts Kou’s heart.

*Be safe, Kei-san. Be well.*

Kou thinks it over and over, as if his thoughts can help heal, even from a distance. He remembers reading an article that purported to prove the power of positive thinking in double-blind clinical trials.

It feels totally insufficient.

*I just want to see him.*

For weeks now, Kou has been using the images of the hotel the night Akihito was taken to Hong Kong to ward off any thoughts of Kirishima. When Kou had first seen the photos, he’d been so shocked at the damage and knowing that Kirishima helped cause it, Kou had never stopped to think of the danger Kirishima was in during that exchange. Now the images come floating to Kou’s mind despite his best efforts to suppress them, but instead of seeing Kirishima as the perpetrator, Kou imagines Kirishima surrounded by a dozen armed men.

*Kirishima-san pushed me out of the way.*

Kou squeezes his eyes shut, but it does nothing to stop the image of Kirishima diving off the second floor balcony to protect Akihito.

*Kei-san said he only ever shot people in self-defense. That night... Akihito said he betrayed Asami-san. So Kei-san and Asami-san had to defend themselves.*

The movie continues to play out in Kou’s head. He scrunches up his face as he sees the bloodstain spreading across Kirishima’s chest, his body eerily still.

Kou digs his nails into his palms and forces himself to open his eyes. He looks again at the sketch he drew of Kirishima.

*He’s safe now. He’s going to be okay.*

Kou realizes his cheeks are wet. His t-shirt is soaked with sweat. Kou takes off his shirt and drops it
Another train comes rumbling through, but the sound barely registers as Kou focuses once again on his mantra.

*Be safe. Be well.*

At five a.m., Kou realizes that sleep will be impossible. He rolls out of bed, pulls his t-shirt back over his head, and grabs socks and shoes. There’s no genkan, but he tiptoes to the doorway and slips his shoes on there. He’s weirded out by his roommate wearing shoes in the house, but he knows it’s the custom here, and anyway, it’s only a temporary arrangement.

Kou locks the door and slips his phone and keys into his elastic waist pouch, which he wears under his t-shirt. The waist pouch was a gift from some of his parkour buddies who were worried about him being mugged in the city. They also made him promise not to do parkour at night - at least not alone, or at least not until he knows where it’s safe - but some promises just aren’t meant to be kept.

Besides, technically it isn’t night anymore. It’s predawn.

*It’s always darkest before the dawn.*

Kirishima had said that to Kou one morning when they woke up before sunrise to beat the traffic for a hiking date out of town.

Kou had laughed. “What does that mean? It gets lighter before sunrise, not darker.”

Kirishima shrugged and said, “I have no idea, actually. I just heard it in a song by Florence and the Machine.”


“It’s called ‘Shake it Out.’” Kirishima pulled up the song on his phone and played it for Kou. “It’s good driving music,” Kirishima explained defensively.

Kou stared at Kirishima in wonder. Kou knew he should stop being surprised by Kirishima’s worldliness, but Kirishima’s knowledge of pop culture was so scattershot, Kou couldn’t help being surprised sometimes.

“What’s that grin for?” Kirishima asked, smiling back at Kou.

“I’m just imagining you jamming out to Florence. Do you do it while you’re driving Asami-san?”

Kirishima frowned slightly, as if confused by the question. “Sometimes, when the soundproof partition is up. Why?”

“I’m just imagining his face if he were to put the partition down,” Kou explained, his grin cracking wider.

“If he were to do that, I’d turn the music off because he’d obviously want to talk to me,” Kirishima answered, straight-faced.

“But what if he were on some important business call and had a question for you?” Kou pressed.
Kirishima furrowed his brow. “Then he would use the intercom, and I’d turn the music off before I replied.”

“Oh. The intercom. Of course.” At that point, Kou had dropped the topic, not knowing how to explain why the thought of Kirishima jamming to Florence + The Machine with Asami in the backseat was so amusing without potentially hurting Kirishima’s feelings.

Kou shakes his head and runs quietly down the stairs and out onto the street. He doesn’t have much of a mental map of the area yet, but the streets are mostly a grid, and he knows the river is west, so he heads in that direction. The night skyline of Manhattan plays peek-a-boo through the trees and buildings lining the road until, after a half-dozen blocks, Kou reaches a construction site, and the whole sky opens up. It’s only another block to the East River.

Kou pauses to admire the iconic view for a moment before turning south. He soon reaches a park, but to his surprise, the gates are locked tight, with a giant sign stating hours from 9am-8pm.

*Isn’t 9:00 really late to open?*

Kou peers past the gate.

*Is that a giant head?*

He reads the sign for the park: Socrates Sculpture Park.

*Ah, so it’s not a normal park. I’ll have to come back and check it out later.*

Kou continues south, but at the next block, he’s stopped by the “Noguchi” banner.

*I had no idea I was so close to the Noguchi Museum.*

He crosses the street and jogs around the triangular block containing the museum. He knows there’s a sculpture garden, but it’s surrounded by a high wall topped with a fence. Apparently the museum takes security seriously, and Kou quickly moves on, not wanting to seem suspicious to any security cameras. The Noguchi Museum was one of the reasons he’d looked at the Astoria neighborhood to begin with, and he’ll *definitely* be checking it out later.

He crosses Vernon Boulevard again upon spying another park. Rainey Park’s gates are open, and Kou ignores the sign that says the park opens at 6:00 a.m.

*Close enough.*

Kou feels uncertain, though. In Japan, when he goes somewhere he’s not supposed to, he can easily smooth things over with enough apologies, smiles, and bowing. He’s not sure that will work here - especially when he’s struggling in a foreign language. Another runner is coming towards him across the park, and when the runner nods at Kou and continues on his way, Kou relaxes.

By the time he reaches the far end of the park and sees the climbing walls and artificial hills, he feels comfortable enough to start tracing on the playground equipment. He spends about thirty minutes running various lines until he’s distracted by the beauty of the sun’s first rays skipping across the river.

Kou sits down on some steps leading down to the water’s edge. He’s on the wrong bank to actually watch the sunrise, but observing the way the clouds and water change color is peaceful. As he’s
looking up and downstream, Kou notices a bridge a short way’s away.

*Can I actually walk all the way into Manhattan?*

He pulls out his phone and checks the map. The bridge actually leads to Roosevelt Island, not Manhattan, but the realization thrills Kou nevertheless. When he’d searched online for parkour spots in New York, there had been several videos filmed on Roosevelt Island.

He jogs south down Vernon Boulevard until he reaches the drawbridge. The island is bigger than he initially thought, but he soon finds the playground featured in several of the videos. He’s been tracing for about half an hour when someone shouts, “Hey, kid! Be careful there!”

Kou looks around from his perch on top of a wall to see if he can help the child in danger. He scans the water’s edge, wondering if a toddler is too close to the river. Upon not seeing anything, he shrugs and precision-jumps onto the top of the playground.

“Never mind,” the voice calls again.

Kou looks up and sees a couple of guys jogging towards him. “*Were you - were you talking to me?*” He remembers to switch to English mid-sentence.

“Yeah, sorry. I wasn’t sure you had the skills to do that,” says the guy on the left, who’s wearing a weird pair of red pants with the crotch extended to the knees, along with a sideways matching baseball cap.

Kou jumps down from the top of the playground, rolling to absorb the impact before standing to get a closer look at the guys. They’re both at least a head taller than him, and the second one has a fuller beard than Kou’s ever seen on anyone in Japan.

*He looks like Santa Claus.*

Except that the guy’s hair and beard are a bright orange rather than white. Orangebeard nudges his friend. “He’s not a kid, dummy.”

“My bad,” Droppedcrotch mutters, looking away. “He’s younger than us, anyway.”

“I’m Chris,” Orangebeard says, offering a hand, which Kou shakes. “And this is Slider.”

“My name is Kou,” Kou answers. “Nice to meet you, Chris-san - er, Chris and Sriduh.”

“Are you Japanese?” Chris asks.

Kou’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Yes. How could you tell?”

“Your name. And you started to speak in Japanese earlier. And you called me ‘san.’”


“A little,” Chris says. “Anyway, can we jam with you?”

“Jam?” Kou asks.

“Trace. Do parkour.”

“Oh! Of course.”
Chris and Slider like to create challenges. Kou plays along, but he discovers that he’s a better traceur than either of them, and he’s able to nail all their challenges on the first try. He’s worried that he might be perceived as showing off, but they’re soon setting challenges exclusively for him to master while they work on their own.

“Dang, you’re mad lit. How old were you when you started tracing?” Slider asks.

Kou doesn’t know what “mad lit” means, so he focuses on the question. “About forty.”

“Forty?!” they exclaim at the same time, and Kou realizes his mistake.

“I mean fourteen.”

“Wow. So you’ve only been tracing a couple of years?!” Slider asks.

Chris nudges him. “Son, that’s rude.”

“What?” Slider asks.

“Eleven years,” Kou corrects.

Slider’s eyes bug out. “Seriously? You’re five years older than me?!”

Chris nudges him again. “B!”

“What? Stop fronting. You totally thought he was younger than us, too, didn’t you?”

Chris shrugs. “I didn’t know.”

Slider snorts. “Whatever. Anyway, sorry about the ‘kid’ thing earlier. Now I feel mad dumb. But I also feel less bad, knowing you’re not some child prodigy showing me up, too.”

Kou laughs uncomfortably.

Chris tactfully changes the subject. “How long have you been in the area? We come here pretty often, and we know a lot of guys in the community. We would have heard about your dumb lit moves.”

“I just arrived two days ago,” Kou explains. I’ve got to look up what ‘lit’ means later.

“From Japan?” Slider asks.

Kou nods. “Tokyo.”

“What’s the scene like there?” Chris asks.

Kou’s not sure how to answer that, but the guys ask more specific questions that Kou is able to answer, and soon he’s talking about the handful of gyms that have opened, and how hard it is to find somewhere to practice outside without getting run off because of the culture of not disturbing others.

“That’s usually not too much of a problem here,” Slider says. “Maybe upstate, but the local fuzz is cool with it as long as you’re not wildin’.”

Chris translates into plainer English for Kou. “The police don’t bother us unless we get too loud.”

“Ah. Okay. That’s good.” Kou had thought he had pretty decent English after his classes in
university and chatting with people in online games, but talking with Slider and Chris worries him.

*What if I can’t keep up with anyone? Will I have to go back to Japan a failure?*

The guys show Kou a few more of the spots on Roosevelt Island until Kou’s stomach gives a loud rumble.

“Sorry,” he says, blushing a little. “I mean, sorry.” But he had used the English word already, as he often does in Japanese, and the guys laugh good-naturedly.

“That’s our cue to cop some grub,” Chris says, clapping Kou on the shoulder. “Where you staying?”

“Queens. Uh, Astoria,” Kou stammers, not sure exactly how he’s supposed to answer that.

“We’re in Long Island City. We usually go to a diner just back over the bridge. Everything’s overpriced here.”

“Oh, Okay,” Kou agrees.

The diner is just a few short blocks on the other side of the drawbridge Kou had crossed a couple hours earlier. There’s a short line, and Slider asks, “You had a real New York bagel yet?”

Kou shakes his head. “I’ve never had any kind of bagel before.”

“Oh, you gotta try one, then.”

Kou suddenly remembers something. “Oh, wait. Sorry, I’m actually fine. I’ll try one next time.”

“You gluten-intolerant or something?” Slider looks offended.

“No…” Kou says. Both of them look a little put off, so he sighs and comes clean. “I forgot until just now. I don’t have any money on me.”

“Oh,” the other two say.

“Yeah, sorry. Will they mind if I don’t order anything? Or I could just go… But I’d love to jam with you again.”

The other two whisper hurriedly together.

“We’ll treat you,” Chris says. “We can’t let you leave without trying your first bagel. You might end up getting one somewhere weird.”

“Oh, that’s okay, you don’t have to…” Kou trails off as the other two each grab one of his shoulders and steer him towards the counter.

“It’s just a bagel,” Slider says.

“He’ll have a plain with schmear,” Chris orders.

“What’s -” Kou starts, but Chris continues talking over him, “And I’ll take an everything with butter.”

The line moves quickly from getting their bagels to paying, and soon they’re back outside heading towards the playground they had passed on the previous block.
“Let me teach you something about New York,” Slider says as Chris hands Kou his bagel.

“Mmm,” Kou says.

Slider raises his eyebrows.


“You always got to keep it moving. On the sidewalk, in a deli, standing on line… just keep it moving. You don’t stop to ask questions, you don’t hold people up while you take your time to choose.”

“But what if -” Kou starts.

“If you got to stop, just step out of the way. Do your thing before jumping back on the escalator.”

“Escalator,” Kou repeats nodding. “It makes sense. Parts of Tokyo are the same way.” He looks at the bagel. “Now what’s schmear?”

“Cream cheese,” Slider says. He vaults over the fence that separates the playground from the street, and Chris and Kou follow him.

They sit on a bench, and Kou finally holds the bagel up to his mouth, only to catch them both staring at him.

They don’t look away, so Kou shrugs and takes a tentative bite.

And keeps biting.

The bagel is nothing like bread should be. Instead of the soft, airy texture Kou is expecting, the bagel is dense and chewy. He finally manages to rip a piece off and chews it.

“It’s very interesting. It has a… mochimochi texture,” Kou doesn’t know the English word to describe the texture.

Chris grins and pats him on the back.

Slider glances at Chris. “What’s mochimochi?”

Even Chris has trouble expressing it in English. “It’s like… like… like the texture of mochi,” he finally says, shrugging.

“Except not,” Kou says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He feels like it would be rude not to eat more, so he takes another, smaller bite. This time, he notices the flavor of the cream cheese and the bagel. By the time he’s halfway through, he’s gotten used to the texture. “Hey, this is really good!” he says.

The other two are nearly done with their own bagels. They laugh happily and clap him on the back again.

Kou has just stuffed the last of the bagel in his mouth when his phone beeps loudly (its volume still on maximum). “Sorry,” he says, pulling it out of his pouch (the sight of which causes the other two to exchange amused glances).

Akihito has sent Kou a contact card. Kou’s heart thuds loudly in his chest.
How could I have forgotten about Kei-san?

He hadn’t entirely forgotten, of course, but still.

“I’ve - I’ve got to go,” he says, standing up. “Thanks again for the bagel. I’ll pay you back next time.”

“No you won’t,” Chris says. “I told you it was our treat, B. You can spot us next time we’re short.”

Kou nods, assuming Chris means that Kou can treat them next time. “Are you on Line?”

They blink at him. Finally Chris clears his throat. “Of course.”

Kou holds up his phone. “Want to exchange contact info so we can jam again?”

Chris and Slider pull out their phones and open their contact apps, ready to start typing.

Kou holds his phone out to share via infrared, but they just look at him blankly.

“You don’t have… sekigeisan?” Kou asks. “Where our phones can… talk to each other with - with -” He pulls up a translation service. “In-fu-ra-re-du.”

They still don’t understand, so he shows them the phone.

They exchange another glance. “We don’t have that on our phones,” Chris finally says, “but that’s wavy!”

“Oh.” Kou opens his contacts, ready to enter their information the old-fashioned way.

“You on Snapchat? Instagram?” Slider asks.

“Line?” Kou asks.

They shake their heads. “Never heard of it,” Slider says.

“Line?” Chris asks. “Oh! I think we learned about that in Japanese class. I meant to sign up and never did.”

They end up exchanging phone numbers for now, after Kou finally finds his new U.S. number, which he hasn’t memorized yet, on his phone.

“But you got to get on Snap,” Slider says. “That’s the main way we set up jams.”

Kou promises to, and then he’s off, racing back to his apartment where he can call Kirishima in privacy.

When Kou gets home, his roommate is in the kitchen. Thomas raises his eyebrows in surprise. “I thought you were in your room. You must have left hella early.”

“Yes. Um, sorry about waking you last night. I - I got some news about a friend.”

“Bad news? Are they okay?” Thomas seems genuinely concerned.

“Um, I'm not really sure. I only heard from another friend, but it doesn't sound good.”
“What's your friend's name? I'll pray for them.”

Kou blinks in surprise. That's not something Japanese people usually offer, but it can't hurt, and it's really thoughtful of Thomas. Tears prick Kou’s eyes, and he clears his throat before answering. “Kei-san. Kirishima Kei-san. I mean, Kei Kirishima.”

Thomas studies him. “Kay? Is she your girlfriend?” Kou blushes. “Oh, man, that's rough to be separated at a time like this.”

“No!” Kou hastens to correct the misunderstanding. “Not my - my - not anymore.”

“Ah, your ex? That's still tough,” Thomas says.

Kou feels like he should clarify. “Kei-san is a man.”

“Oh. Oh! You're gay? Sorry, I just assumed… Kay is a girl's name here,” Thomas explains.

Kou blinks in surprise. “It's a boy's name in Japan.”

“Well, thanks for telling me. I'm gay, too.” Thomas clears his throat. “I guess now's not really a good time, but if you ever want to just… unwind, I know of a few good gay bars in stumbling distance of here.”

“Oh. Thanks,” Kou says, a bit flustered since going out drinking is the last thing he feels like doing.

“Anyway, I'll keep Kei in my prayers. I'm heading to work now. See you later.” Thomas grabs his lunch off the counter and heads out the door.

Kou sits on his bed and pulls up the contact card Akihito sent him. There's no phone number, but Kirishima's Line account is there. Kou hesitates. Should he use the regular calling feature or video chat? He really wants to see Kirishima, but Akihito said Kirishima didn't want Kou to know about his injuries. Maybe Kirishima doesn't want Kou to see him while he’s vulnerable.

Kou decides to call. He'll ask if he can video chat next time. He dials and waits for Kirishima to pick up, but the call goes to voicemail.

_Oh, right. Aki said he was moving to a new hospital today._

Kou takes a deep breath and says in one big rush, “Hi, Kei-san; it's Kou. Aki told me about your - your - injuries. I'm really sorry to hear about that, and I hope you get better soon. Feel free to call me back any time. I'd love to hear how you're doing.”

He hangs up and sighs. The message feels so inadequate.

_I wouldn't call me back._

Well, if Kirishima doesn't, Kou will just have to call him again.

Kou stashes his phone back in his pouch and heads back out the door. He pauses on the landing, then quickly jogs up the stairs to the roof door. Surprisingly, it’s unlocked, and he surveys Astoria from the roof - or what he can see of Astoria from the top of a three-and-a-half story building, anyway. He sees a much taller, larger roof on the other side of the neighboring block, so he races back down the stairs and over to the building, only to discover it's a high school - and school is in session.

_I'd better not go in there._
Across the street from the high school is an apartment tower with multiple fire escapes leading all the way to the roof. The ladder to the nearest one is within easy jumping distance, but there are too many people on the street. Kou skirts the building - which is huge, seeming to be several buildings of various ages connected to one another - and finds a narrow alley running down the back of the building, also equipped with fire escapes.

He circles the block and enters the alley from the opposite side, acting like he does it every day. He ducks behind a trash can and pretends to tie his shoe, waiting to see if anyone has noticed him. When no one makes any kind of fuss, Kou quickly climbs the wall separating the alley from the neighbor’s yard and jumps to the fire escape, catching the railing leading up to the bottom landing. He could have used the ladder, but experience has taught him that the ladders make an awful racket when they fall to the ground under someone's weight.

Kou quickly climbs the stairs to the roof. The roof is amazing, with plenty of variations in height provided by the adjacent buildings, stairwell huts, ducts, equipment, and walls; gap jumps in a range of distances; and an assortment of surfaces of varying grades. But Kou is caught up short by the view. He can see all the way to the river, including three different bridges, and the cacophony of the city is swept away by the stiff breeze.

*I wish Kei-san could see this with me.*

Kou’s heart is filled with an aching longing he’s been covering up with the bustle of work and preparing to move.

*Why was I so stubborn?*

The wind pulls tears from the corner of Kou’s eyes, and a ship signals out on the river. Kou’s not sure he’s ever heard such a mournful sound.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from Florence + the Machine’s “Shake It Out.”
High Hopes and Low Expectations (Honey)

Chapter Summary

Kirishima arrives in America. What will he do when he hears Kou's message?

Chapter Notes

Whenever I'm dealing with new places, new characters, and new-to-me situations, I have to do a lot of research before (and during) the writing. This chapter has all three. But here's some good news: I wanted to end it a little later, so I kept writing, but this really was the right break for the chapter. That means I have about a third of the next chapter already written (and most of the research done for that chapter), so it should be published sooner. My goal is to publish a chapter every two weeks, at a minimum, until this story is done. How many more chapters will that be? I honestly have no idea at this point. Less happens in each chapter than I anticipate, but we're getting there. I know the broad strokes of what has to happen.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saio: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima); Megumi (Kiyoshi's wife), Kisho (Kiyoshi and Megumi's son), Manabu (Kumiko's fiance)
Kirishima doesn’t have long to dwell on his homeland before the discomfort of the flight brings his attention back to his body. Every bump shoots lightning bolts of pain radiating down his legs. Each time, the medics ask questions to take note of where the pain sensation starts and stops.

After the fifth time in fewer minutes, Kirishima bursts out, “Do we really… need to do this… every single time?”

“It’s important to observe any changes,” one of the medics says. “You’re demonstrating increased pain sensation on your left side compared to your chart.”

“It’s the same… every time,” Kirishima says, inhaling sharply as they hit another patch of turbulence. “I’ll let you know… if it changes, okay?”

The medics finally leave him alone for a few minutes, but the pain continues.

“The turbulence should get better once we reach Siberia,” Saji says. “Let’s play a game to distract you.”

“What kind of… game?” Kirishima asks.

“Hm. How about… Thinking of all the places we’ll miss in Japan,” Saji says.

“At least you can go back,” Kirishima mutters.

Saji’s face falls. “I’m sorry. That was really insensitive of me.”

Kirishima grits his teeth through another wave of pain. “No… it’s fine. Actually, I like that… idea.” He closes his eyes and tries to think of a place. The image of Kou tic-tacing his way through an alley flashes through his mind. “Motomi Pass.” Kirishima opens his eyes and blushes when he realizes the name he gave. “Uh… Musashino Art University.”

Saji nods. “I’m thinking of Hanegi Park. We never really got a chance to jam there before we had to leave.”

“Odaiba,” Kirishima says. “That spot in front of the… hotel by the water was awesome. We got kicked out of there… early, too.”

“Geinki,” Saji says, blushing a little.

“Yeah…” Kirishima closes his eyes as another wave of pain washes over him and he remembers the night he met Kou. “They have… good fugu.”

“Is that…” Saji stops mid-sentence. “Never mind.”

Kirishima opens his eyes again and looks at Saji. “What?”

“No, nothing.” Saji looks away, reddening a little.

“That’s where Kou-san and I ended up… the night we met,” Kirishima answers the question he
guesses Saji is hesitating to ask.


“The boulder overlooking the… beech trees and the lake in… Showa Kinen Park,” Kirishima says.

“What boulder?” Saji asks.

Kirishima shrugs. “Just a big… rock you could climb on.” He notices that Saji is typing on his phone. “Are you taking… notes?”

Saji finishes typing and shows Kirishima his phone. “I was just trying to remember the name of this place.” Kirishima looks at the website for Min Min Akasaka and raises his eyebrows. “They have the best gyōza. Oh, man! I should have had the guys bring you some gyōza along with the takoyaki.”

Kirishima chuckles. “I can make gyōza.”

“You can?!” Saji exclaims.

“I’ll teach you,” Kirishima offers. “You need to… start eating better.”

Saji rolls his eyes. “Your turn,” he reminds Kirishima.

They continue to play the game for awhile, Kirishima with his eyes closed. It does help to distract him from the pain, and as the turbulence finally settles down, Kirishima drifts off to a fitful sleep.

Kirishima wakes up when the medics check him over in preparation for landing. There’s no privacy on the plane, but Saji looks soundly asleep. Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief once they finish changing the catheter bag. More difficult to adjust to even than the dependency on others is the utter lack of privacy and dignity. Kirishima’s almost gotten used to the medical personnel seeing him at those times, but he hates when family or friends are present.

The plane is scheduled to land within minutes of when it took off, according to local time. Kirishima has always found that fact disorienting, but with his brain not functioning at one hundred percent, it’s even more so. Even though he never saw it, he knows they must have had at least a short night on the flight.

At least my messed up sleep schedule should make the jet lag easier to deal with.

Saji wakes up as the plane begins its final descent. He’s instantly alert, his body already used to an ever-changing sleep schedule necessitated by his job.

They pass through customs quickly. A Sion American security team meets them and equips Saji with a taser and pepper spray (the only weapons he can legally carry in New Jersey, though the security team has firearms). Kirishima and Saji ride in the ambulance while the security team follows in a car. Eventually, Kirishima will no longer need Sion protection, but for now, he knows way too much about Asami and his business for the company to risk someone tracking him down.

The orientation at Kessler is a whirlwind. Kirishima is startled to hear Nancy Smith, his case manager, talking about his discharge plan already.

Did I remember the meaning of that word correctly?
Kirishima listens carefully to the translator.

“Do you mean… when I leave here?” Kirishima asks.

Nancy smiles at him. “Yes. That’s what we’re working towards, so everything related to your care is directed towards that goal.”

Kirishima nods. The thought of leaving is scary - especially since he has no idea where he’ll go or what he’ll do. He focuses his attention back on the description of what his life will be like at Kessler. Between assessments, career planning, physical therapy, occupational therapy, cognitive rehabilitation, speech therapy, group and individual therapy sessions, support groups, and practicing what he’s learning on his own around the facility and during supervised outings, it seems like Kurebayashi wasn’t kidding about recovering being his full-time job.

“Tomorrow, we’ll assess the stability of your spine, and as long as your condition is the same as it was when you left Japan, we should be able to fit you for a wheelchair.”

The word is like ice-water down Kirishima’s back. “Wheelchair? I thought I was going to… w-walk again,” he stammers.

Nancy smiles at him gently. “That will be a long process. In the meantime, we’ve got to keep your muscles as strong as possible. Besides, a wheelchair will give you some mobility and autonomy until you’re back on your feet.”

Kirishima takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

You knew this was going to be a long road, Kei. You can do this. This is the first step.

Saji reaches over and squeezes Kirishima's shoulder. Kirishima looks at Saji, and he gives Kirishima an encouraging smile.

Kirishima tries to smile back.

They save the tour of the facility for after Kirishima is in his wheelchair. After Nancy leaves, Saji gets Kirishima's phone set up on the WiFi network while Kirishima eats his dinner.

“You already have a message,” Saji says.

“Can you play it on speaker, please?” Kirishima asks, his hands messy from his sandwich.

He wishes he'd taken a moment to wipe his hands when he hears Kou’s voice.

“Want me to play it again?” Saji offers.

“That's okay.” Kirishima takes another bite of his sandwich, but he finds his mouth is suddenly dry.

“Do you want me to leave so you can call him back?” Saji offers.

Kirishima shakes his head.

“But you'll do it later?” Saji presses.

Kirishima shrugs noncommittally.
Saji rolls his eyes. “You're really stubborn, Kirishima-san. You said you didn't want to contact him because you wanted to wait for him to contact you first. Now he has.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “That's only because… Takaba-kun told him about… the incident. Of course Kou-san… called.”

Saji lets out an exasperated sigh. “I'm doing this for your own good.” He presses the button to return the call and puts it on speaker.

“Saji-kun!” Kirishima protests, reaching for the phone, but Saji holds it out of reach until Kou’s familiar voice ends Kirishima's resistance.

“Kei-san?” Kou asks. “Isn't it really early there?”

Kirishima stalls while he tries to figure out what time it is in Tokyo. “Is it? My sleep schedule is… off.”

“Oh. Did I call at a bad time earlier? Now that I think about it, it was kind of late at night there…”

Saji sets the phone down next to Kirishima's dinner and walks out of the room, shutting the door behind him to give Kirishima privacy.

"As I said in my message, I heard from Aki today about your... injuries," Kou says. "I would have called sooner if I'd known."

"It's okay," Kirishima says quietly.

See? Kou-san only called out of a sense of obligation. This is why I didn't want him to know.

"How are you, Kei-san?" Kou's voice cracks on Kirishima's name, and Kou clears his throat before continuing. "I mean... Sorry, that was a dumb question. But... Well, I just wish..." Kou's voice cracks again, and he stops talking.

"I'm okay," Kirishima says. "Really, I was... lucky."

"That's... good. Aki said you left the hospital yesterday? And now you're at a rehabilitation center?"

"Yes." Kirishima doesn't know what else to say.

But before Kirishima can gather his thoughts, Kou starts talking again.

"That's a good sign, right? How do you like it?"

"I don't know. I haven't gotten... a chance to see... much of it yet." Kirishima remembers that Kou thinks Kirishima is still in Japan and arrived at the rehabilitation center yesterday. "I'm getting... getting... fi- fi-... to try out... a wheelchair tomorrow."

"Oh. I thought... Aki said..." Kou trails off awkwardly.

"It's just... temple... tempo... for a little... while," Kirishima explains. Calm down, Kei. Getting upset about your aphasia just makes it worse.

But Kirishima can't help wishing desperately to sound normal for Kou.

"Oh That's good. Great news." Kou lets out a gentle sigh. "That's progress then?"
"Yeah, it is," Kirishima says, squaring his shoulders. "I'm going to start... physical therapy soon, too."

"That's really good. I know you'll work hard, and I'm sure you'll be back on your feet before you know it."

Kirishima can't help but smile at the earnest optimism in Kou's voice. Somehow when Kou says it, Kirishima feels like it really might be true.

“How’s... New York?” he asks.

“Oh. It’s good. I’ve only been here a few days, but I’ve already found a couple of good parkour spots near where I’m staying. I met a couple of traceurs, too.” Kou swallows. “Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t talk about that.”

“It’s okay. I like to hear about it. It feels... normal,” Kirishima says.

“Oh, okay. There was this one railing on top of a wall that was the perfect setup for an underbar. It made me think of you.”

Kirishima freezes. He can hear his heart thudding in his ears as his breath quickens.

“Kei-san? Are you still there?”

Kirishima tries to speak, but his throat is too dry. He takes a sip of water. “Y-yeah, I’m here.”

“Are you okay? Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have talked about it, after all. That was really insensitive of me.”

“No, it’s not... that.” Kirishima still finds it hard to get words out. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “It’s just... that’s how I hurt my head... and back. Doing... an underbar.”

“Oh. Aki said you fell while protecting him.”

“That’s not -” Kirishima starts before he can help it.

“You don’t have to talk about it. I mean, if you do, I’ll listen, but please don’t feel like you need to explain it to me,” Kou says.

His consideration makes Kirishima’s heart hurt, especially since he knows that Kou is probably imagining all kinds of wild scenarios.

“It’s... fine. I... You know what... Takaba-kun is like. I was trying... to protect him, but he went out... the window over the door. I followed him.”

“Oh,” Kou says quietly.

“I don’t think he... realized I could do... an underbar like that,” Kirishima says, grinning ruefully. “I ended up... kicking him, and it... messed up... my landing.”

“Seriously?!” Kou exclaims. “I’m so sorry, Kei-san! I shouldn’t have taught you -”
“You always… warned me… to think about what was on… the other side of an… obstacle,” Kirishima says.

“Well, that’s true, but when it’s a person… I should have taught you how to bail better.” Kirishima shakes his head. “No, you taught me how to… bail just fine. I just didn’t have… time.”

“Is that because -” Kou stops abruptly.

Kirishima has no idea where Kou is going, so he waits for Kou to continue.

Eventually Kou asks, “Is that when you… got your other injury? The one to the chest?” Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. So Takaba-san told Kou-san about that. I hope he was careful.

“No,” Kirishima admits. “That happened… a little later. Like… five minutes later.”

“Ah. Okay.” Kou says. “But that one’s healing well?”

“Yes,” Kirishima says. “I was very lucky.”

“Aki said he was lucky to have you watching over him,” Kou says. “Thanks. And I’m sorry my friend is so stupid.”

“He wasn’t… I didn’t do… enough to convince him that… Asami-san was safe.”

“Oh. But still… I’m sorry you got hurt.” Kou’s voice is barely audible.

_I shouldn’t have mentioned Asami-sama._

“Have you gotten to see the… No-No-No- Noguchi Museum yet?” Kirishima changes the topic.

“Yeah. I went today. I’m actually staying pretty close to it. Oh, and I tried a bagel today. Have you ever had one?”

“Yes. It was… chewy,” Kirishima says.

Kou laughs. “Yeah, I thought it was weird at first, but it was good!”

Kirishima stares down at his sandwich on chewy bread. “I guess.” He stifles a yawn.

“Sorry, have I kept you on the phone too long?” Kou asks.

“No,” Kirishima says quickly. “It’s good… to talk to you.”

“Yeah. I’ve missed this,” Kou’s voice grows soft. “I’ve missed you. Would it be alright if I call you again? Maybe on video chat next time?”

Kirishima stiffens. _Kou-san wants to see me? Like this?_

“I just want to see that you’re okay,” Kou explains. “I’m… I’m really sorry. I know I’ve been selfish, breaking all contact, and now trying to worm my way back into your life…” He trails off.


_I’m still not the man Kou-san wants me to be… but I’m closer to that man when I’m around him, so maybe he can help me learn to be that man all the time._
“When is a good time for me to call you?” Kou asks. “I’m thirteen hours behind you, right?”

Kirishima ignores the second question as he glances at his schedule. “I think… the evenings would be best. I’ll sometimes have… support groups, but after five o’clock would be okay… most days.”

“Five o’clock? That’s… four o’clock in the morning for me,” Kou quickly calculates. “That’s a little early. What’s the latest I should call?”

“I meant five o’clock… your time,” Kirishima says.

“Oh. You have support groups that early in the morning?” Kou asks.

“No. I got… confused,” Kirishima says. His head is beginning to hurt. I wish I could just tell Kou-san we’re in the same time zone, but at this point, it’d be weird. “The hospital has turned me into… a morning person. Anytime after five o’clock… your time would be okay.”

“What time do you start therapy?” Kou asks.

“It depends. I’ll know more after my… assessments, but anytime between… eight and ten.”

“So seven and nine my time. Alright. Can I video-chat with you tomorrow at five o’clock?” Kou asks.

Tomorrow evening seems so far away. But Kirishima knows that he’ll be busy with assessments in the morning, and he has no idea how the jet lag will affect his sleep and bodily rhythms.

Besides, I don’t want to seem too needy. Kou-san just started talking to me again. I can’t scare him away.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Kirishima murmurs.

“Me, too. Goodnight, Kei-san. Er, I mean have a great day!”

“You can come back in now, Saji-kun!” Kirishima calls after he hangs up. Saji doesn’t answer, but Kirishima’s phone buzzes before he can worry about Saji further.

It’s a video call from Kazuko.

“Good morning, Mom,” Kirishima says as he clicks open the app.

But it’s Kisho’s beaming face that greets Kirishima. “Good morning, Kei-ji-chan!”

“Good morning, Kisho-chan,” Kirishima says, his own grin widening. “It’s early there, isn’t it?”

“No-o-o-o,” Kisho says. “Kisho had to waited long time. Long long time.” He sighs. His arms must have grown tired, because Kirishima now has a nice view of the ceiling.

The view shifts again, and Kazuko’s face appears next to Kisho’s. Her eyes are rimmed with dark circles. “He's been begging to call you since three a.m.”

“I'm sorry,” Kirishima says. “He wouldn't go… back to sleep?”

“No. I told him he had to wait until six, but every five minutes he would ask whether it was six yet. I
even drew a picture of what six o’clock looks like, but then he kept asking if the clock was broken
because it wouldn't show six o'clock.”

“Kei-ji-chan, you flied a airplane?”

“That's right. I’m in… America now.”

“Kisho wants to see!”

Kirishima pans around the room.

“Where's the airplane?” Kisho demands.

“I'm already off the airplane,” Kirishima explains.

Kisho's bottom lip droops. “Bā-chan called too late!”

“Saji-kun took… pictures from the plane,” Kirishima quickly soothes his nephew. “When he comes
back -”

“Kisho wants to see no-o-ow!” Kisho wails.

“Hush or we’ll say goodbye to Kei-chan right now,” Kazuko admonishes.

“Let me see… if I can get Saji-kun to come back,” Kirishima says. He texts Saji, and Saji enters the
room a minute later.

Soon Saji is flipping through the photos on his phone. “And here you can see New York in the
distance,” he says as he reaches the last picture.

“That's Tokyo,” Kisho says knowingly.

“Well, it looks like Tokyo, but it's actually New York,” Saji tries to explain.

“It's Tokyo!” Kisho is adamant.

Saji looks flummoxed.

“I'll explain it to him later,” Kazuko chimes in.

“Can Saji-nii do monkeys?”

“Monkey flips,” Kirishima clarifies, adding, “You don't have to.”

Saji moves to the center of the room and does a couple of monkey flips. The room is much bigger
than the one at Kyorin University Hospital, and Saji moves on to bigger tricks.

Kisho claps and laughs. “More!” “Again!”

Soon Saji is out of breath.

“Saji-kun needs… a break now,” Kirishima says.

Kisho groans, but at a stern look from his grandmother, he sighs and says, “Okay. Thanks, Saji-nii-
chan.”

Kirishima turns his phone so he's visible to the camera again.
“Were you eating dinner when I called? You should have said something!” Kazuko exclaims.

“It's okay. It's just... a sandwich,” Kirishima says.

“How do you like it there? Is the staff nice? Did they give you enough food?” Kirishima laughs. “It's fine.” He tells her about the wheelchair fitting.

“That's great. Is this a good time to call tomorrow? I'd love to hear how that goes,” Kazuko says, covering Kisho's mouth as he keeps trying to interrupt her.

“It should be.” Kirishima remembers that Kou will be calling. “Or a little later. You don’t... need to get up... so early.”

Kazuko nods and finally uncovers Kisho's mouth.

“What's a wheelchair?” Kisho demands.

“It's a chair... with wheels,” Kirishima fumbles to explain.

Kisho still looks confused.

“Do you remember the book... Yoneda-kun brought you?”

Kisho runs out of the room. A moment later, he returns with *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*. Kazuko flips through it and shows Kisho the boy in the wheelchair.

“See? He hurt his... leg, but he can roll to where he... needs to go until his leg gets... better,” Kirishima explains.

“Did you hurted your leg, Kei-‘ji-chan?” Kisho stares at his uncle with solemn eyes.

“No, my back,” Kirishima corrects.

“But you need a wheelchair until you're all better?” Kisho asks.

“That's right.”

Kisho waves his hands back and forth as he sings, “Pain, pain, go away.” He looks at Kirishima again. “You all better yet?”

“Not all better, but you... helped me a lot. I feel much... better already,” Kirishima says.

Kisho beams proudly. “Bā-chan, did you see? I maded Kei-‘ji-chan better.”

They chat a few more minutes. When Saji excuses himself again, Kazuko barely waits until he's left the room before asking. “So how are things going with you and Saji-chan?”

Kirishima groans at the change in honorific. “Mom, I already... told you we're just... friends. Saji-kun isn't... my type, and I'm not... his, either.”

“You were glowing when you answered the phone. *Something* good happened,” Kazuko presses.

Kirishima's face burns. *Why is she so observant?*

“Well? Are you going to tell me, or will I have to guess?”
Kirishima shakes his head. “It was… nothing. I'm just… glad to finally start… working on… moving again,” he lies.

“Hm. Is it your doctor? A cute nurse? An orderly?”

“Mommmm.” Kirishima groans in frustration. He remembers how sorry he felt for his siblings when she grilled them like this, and how glad he was she'd never done it to him. Until now.

“Or maybe it really is Saji-chan,” Kazuko ponders. “Your father wasn't my usual type.”

“It's not… Saji-kun! He's just here for his… job, so please… stop,” Kirishima bursts out.

“What's Saji-nii-chan?” Kisho asks, looking back and forth from Kazuko to Kirishima.

“You know how Daddy and Mommy love each other very much? And Kumiko-'ba-chan and Manabu-'ji-san love each other very much?” Kazuko starts to explain.

“Mom. Seriously. Stop.”

Kirishima's tone makes Kazuko stop and look at him. He can detect a flash of hurt that she quickly hides.

Kirishima swallows. “Fine. I was happy… because Kou-san called. But that doesn't mean we're… getting back… together or anything! He only… called because he… heard about my… accident.”

The words taste bitter on Kirishima's tongue as he acknowledges their truth.

*Don't get your hopes up, Kei. Don't expect too much. That's how you'll get hurt.*

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from Zane Williams's "High Hopes Low Expectations."
Chapter Summary

Kirishima finds his first full day at the rehabilitation center much harder than he ever imagined. Will his video chat with Kou be just the thing to cheer him up?

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itah: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Ken(taro) Tanaka: Kirishima's physical therapist
Mystical (Mysty) Forse: Kirishima's speech therapist
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima); Megumi (Kiyoshi's wife), Kisho (Kiyoshi and Megumi's son), Manabu (Kumiko's fiance)

Note that all places and characters are fictional. Even when I base a location on a real place, it is fictionalized, and I've never been to any of the places mentioned in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The next day, Kirishima’s thoughts prove too true as he tries out the wheelchair and discovers that he gets tired from sitting after just a few minutes.

“Remember that it’s been a while since you used these muscles,” his physical therapist, Ken Tanaka, reassures Kirishima as the team helps Kirishima back into his bed. “But it hasn’t been that long, and you should get used to sitting again quickly.”

“It’s not… the neur- neur-… nerve damage?” Kirishima asks.

“No. This is typical for anyone who’s been immobile as long as you have,” Ken assures him.

“What about my… arm?” Kirishima asks, referring to the limited range of motion he discovered he has in his right arm during the exam.

“Your trapezius, rhomboid major, and pectoralis major all received significant damage from the gunshot wound. It will take time for the muscles to heal, but we’ll be able to start rehabilitating them in the next few days.”

Kirishima nods. Before they started the assessments, he’d been hopeful that he could start physical therapy today, but he’s already mentally and physically exhausted only an hour into the physical assessment.

“How often can I… sit in the chair?” Kirishima asks.

“As often as you can,” Ken says. “The more you practice, the sooner your strength will return. You can of course also practice in your bed, but the chair provides a little less support, so it’s important to spend time there as well. But remember to always ask for help from staff when transferring. Don’t let friends or family do it. And don’t try to do it yourself.”

“Of course,” Kirishima says.

“Not just now - throughout your stay here. That was part of your contract. We’ve had several patients get injured trying to spare our staff the work.”

“Okay…” Kirishima says, blushing a little. *Do I look that irresponsible?*

“It’s easy to forget once you’re capable of transferring on your own,” Ken says, “which you’ll be doing soon enough.” He gives Kirishima a reassuring smile and pats him on the shoulder.

After the physical assessment and wheelchair fitting, the doctor announces that Kirishima should go back to his room to rest and eat lunch before his neurological assessment in the afternoon.

“Can I ride in the chair?” Kirishima asks.

Ken grins at him. “That’s the attitude I like to see in my patients. We’ll have you back doing parkour in no time.”

Kirishima can’t bring himself to grin back. He doesn’t want empty promises.

Ken offers to push Kirishima to his room.

“Can I try… wheeling it myself?” Kirishima asks.

“You really shouldn’t. There are a number of safety skills we need to work on first,” Ken says.
Kirishima’s hands are already reaching for the wheels. He pulls them back guiltily.

“You’ll get there soon enough,” Ken promises.

On the way back to Kirishima’s room, Ken takes a couple of detours to give Kirishima a tour of the facility. “Here’s the dining room where you can eat with the other patients. We have a couple of other Japanese-speaking residents right now. And out here is the courtyard.”

Kirishima notices that each picnic table has an empty space on one side instead of a bench, presumably for someone in a wheelchair to sit. Everything about this place reminds me of what I can’t do.

“I know it’s not much, but there’s also a patio with gardening boxes and a basketball hoop. And there are frequent outings,” Ken says as he wheels Kirishima back inside.

“Are there any… trails nearby?” Kirishima swallows as soon as the words are out of his mouth, but the action doesn’t prevent them from reaching Ken’s ears. Stupid question, Kei. You can’t do anything on trails.

To Kirishima’s surprise, Ken grins. “Oh, I definitely have big plans for you. And yes, there’s a large park nearby with a zoo and an accessible trail around a reservoir. It’s one of the places we have outings to. If you work hard, you might be ready to go on the next one. I believe it’s in two weeks.”

“What do I… have to be… able to do?” Kirishima asks.

“At a bare minimum, operate and safely maneuver an electric wheelchair by yourself. But I think with your background, you could be using a manual wheelchair by then.”

They reach Kirishima’s room, where Saji is waiting (because of Kessler’s strict policy that no one can accompany patients to therapy unless they’re part of the lesson).

Saji quickly puts down his magazine. “Look at you! You’re sitting up!”

Kirishima rolls his eyes. “I’m not a… baby. It’s no big… deal.”

Ken exchanges a look with Saji but directs his words to Kirishima. “Let’s get you back into bed so you can rest. They’ll come get you for your cognitive assessments at one.”

Once he’s back in the bed, Kirishima closes his eyes for a moment. “Sorry, Saji-kun. I guess I really am… a baby.”

“No, you’re not,” Saji rebukes him.

“Sit… was a lot… harder than I… thought it would be,” Kirishima explains.

“That’s okay. You’ll get used to it again soon. My mother was in a car accident and spent three days in the ICU. It took her awhile to get her strength back, but you’re young and strong and healthy. You’ll be able to recover much faster.”

Kirishima snorts. “Not sure you can… call me… healthy anymore.” He chuckles.

“You’re amazing. You know that? You’ve handled this whole thing with such a great attitude, but you don’t have to force it all the time. It’s okay to be sad and disappointed sometimes, too.”
“I’m definitely… both of those,” Kirishima says. “But I… did sit up. That’s… improvement, right?”

“Of course it is!” Saji cries. “You sat up for quite a while, too, riding all the way back here. My mom was only able to sit for less than a minute the first time.”

Kirishima sighs. “Thanks, Saji.” He closes his eyes again.

“Why don’t you take a nap? I’ll wake you up when they bring your lunch,” Saji says.

The cognitive assessments are even more exhausting than the physical assessments were. The assessment with the speech pathologist is last.

“Hi, my name is Mystical Forse,” she says in English. “You can call me Mysty.”

Kirishima doesn’t wait for the translator. “I’m Kir- Kei Kirishima,” he answers in English.

“What languages do you speak?” Mysty asks.

“Japanese… English… Mandarin… Cantonese… Korean… Russian… Some Spanish and… Arabic… Portuguese and French.” Kirishima closes his eyes. *Is that everything?*

When the translator finishes translating the language names that came out in Japanese, Mysty puts her pen down and looks at Kirishima. “You’re going to be one of my toughest patients, aren’t you?”

“Am I?” Kirishima asks.

“My toughest so far was an English professor. Helping him regain his immense vocabulary - which he was of course determined to do - was difficult. He became quite effective at circumlocution.”


“It’s one of the tools to help with aphasia. It’s describing something, finding another way to say it, when a word won’t come to you.”

“Oh.”

“Recent studies have shown that for bilingual patients, practicing in their secondary language helps them make the fastest gains in both their languages. But there haven’t been any studies on polyglots.” Mysty picks up her pen again. “Which languages are you most proficient in? And which are most important for you to regain?”

They go through the languages one by one, with Kirishima giving each a rating based on his fluency and how much he’ll use it going forward.

Mysty sets her pen down next to the list and frowns at it, pondering for a long moment. She turns and types a few things on her computer, nodding her head as she reads. She picks up the pen again, jots a few notes, and then sighs and sets the pen back down. Finally, she looks at Kirishima.

“Here’s what I’m thinking. You’ve indicated it’s most important for you to recover Japanese and English, and English is one of the languages you’re most proficient in. It also happens to be the language spoken by every single staff member here. So let’s conduct as much of your interactions with staff as possible in English.”

Kirishima frowns. “But what if I can’t… understand what they’re… saying? I have… enough
trouble following things in… Japanese sometimes.”

“Try saying it in English,” Mysty encourages him.

Kirishima’s frown deepens, but after a moment, he tries. “What if I… can’t… can’t… can’t… un-
un-…” He sighs in frustration. It’s much harder in English than Japanese.

Mysty smiles at him encouragingly. “Can you think of another way to say it?” she asks after a
moment.

Kirishima shakes his head. “Un- un-”

“Try saying the word in Japanese,” Mysty suggests.

Kirishima does.

“Did that help?”

“Un- un- understand,” Kirishima finally gets out. But now he’s lost his train of thought.

Mysty says, “We’ve assigned staff members to you who speak Japanese where available, like your
physical therapist Ken. And translators will still be available if needed. It will be hard at first, but the
more you practice, the easier it will get.”

Kirishima sighs and nods.

“Does your support person…” Mysty pauses while she looks at Kirishima’s file, “Tsubasa Saji speak
English?”

“I don’t… know,” Kirishima answers in English. That was a whole sentence. Maybe I
can do this.

“What about… Japanese? And my… other… languages?”

“Working in English will help your Japanese almost as much as it will your English. As I said, they
haven’t really studied polyglots, but for people with two languages, working in their primary
language was less helpful for their secondary language than working in their secondary language
was for their primary language, but it still helped, so theoretically, working in English should also
help the languages you’re less proficient in. The more closely the languages are related, the more it
helps, but even when the languages differ, recalling a vocabulary word in one helps with recall in the
other languages. We’ll test your current proficiency in all the languages, but if we split our time
between all ten, we won’t make much progress while you’re here.”

Kirishima nods in agreement.

“Once we’ve assessed where you are in each, we can discuss further what other languages - maybe
one or two - you’d like to work on while here. The rest you can continue to work on once you’re
released, or on your own in your free time.”

Kirishima nods again - it’s easier than trying to speak.

“Your aphasia is very mild compared to most of my patients. Your starting point is most patients’
endpoint - if they’re lucky. We have aphasia support groups at our other two campuses. There’s a
shuttle that can transport you; we have a couple of other patients who also attend. Tsubasa is
welcome - and encouraged - to attend, too. It can be particularly helpful for family and friends to
listen and learn the best ways to support you, while also getting support from other caregivers.”
Kirishima swallows. *I can’t ask Saji-kun to do that.* But Kirishima can’t say it aloud. He hasn’t known what to call Saji to the staff besides friend, which is true enough, but it’s weird to have a friend fly to another country to help take care of you, and the staff have exchanged knowing glances with one another that have left Kirishima feeling uncomfortable.

Kirishima is wheeled back to his room at 4:30. While he’s still tired, he already feels like it’s a little easier to sit up.

*Or maybe that’s just wishful thinking.*

Saji is pacing in Kirishima's room. “It's about time,” he mutters. He glares at the orderly.

She shrugs. “Kei is perfectly safe in our care. I told you he wouldn't be done until at least four.” Once Kirishima is back in bed, the orderly leaves.

“How did your assessments go?” Saji asks.

“Basically the same as in… Japan. Do you speak… English?”

Saji blinks at Kirishima. “Um, yeah. That's one of the reasons I was chosen to accompany you. Do you need me to translate something for you? What happened to your translator?”

“No. It's just… they want me to speak… in English as much as… possible.”

“Okay. Then go ahead.”

Kirishima blinks at Saji.

“I mean, go ahead,” Saji-kun repeats in English.

“I don't -” Kirishima starts in Japanese but stops when Saji wags a finger at him. “I don't… have anything… in par- par-… I want… to say,” Kirishima ekes out in English.

“You look very tired,” Saji observes. “Do you want to sleep before dinner?”

Kirishima nods. “But Kou-san will be… calling. Can you… please… make sure… I wake up?”

“What time?” Saji asks.

“Four… four… four… fif-… fif-… fifteen.”

Saji glances at his phone. “It's already four thirty-five.”

Kirishima frowns. “Then I've… got… fif-… fif-… fifteen… minutes.”

“So you want me to wake you at four fifty?” Saji clarifies.

“Yes… please.” Kirishima looks confused.

Saji decides not to explain Kirishima's mistake.

At 4:50, Saji gently shakes Kirishima's shoulder. “Motomi-san will be calling soon,” Saji says in English.

Kirishima is instantly alert. “I want to… sit up.”
“Ken said you can adjust the bed as you like,” Saji says, handing Kirishima the remote control.

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up at Saji’s use of his physical therapist’s name. *He’s only twelve years younger than me, but he’s adjusted to the American custom so much more easily.*

Kirishima shoves the thought aside. “No… in the… chair.”

Saji frowns. “We have to ask for help with that.” He presses the call button.

Kirishima fidgets. After a few minutes, Saji says, “I’ll go see if someone is coming.”

Saji returns a minute later, shaking his head. “It’ll be at least ten more minutes.”

“Kou-san is… going… to call… before then,” Kirishima says.

“Why don’t you text him and ask if you can call him when you’re ready?”

Kirishima starts to type, but he gets the video chat request before he’s able to compose the message. Saji holds up the remote control for the bed.

Kirishima sighs and nods. As Saji raises him up into a sitting position, Kirishima answers the call.

“Hi, Kou-san.” Kirishima relaxes as he speaks in Japanese. *It really does seem easier after struggling in English so long.*

Kirishima is so focused on the screen, he doesn’t notice Saji tiptoeing out the door, shutting it behind him.

“Kei-san! You look… good,” Kou says, but his face is filled with a worry that belies his statement.

“I thought you didn’t like… lying,” Kirishima teases.

“I’m not lying! You always look good.” Kou blushes. “Just maybe… a little thin. And pale right now.”

“You look thin, too,” Kirishima says. “And good.” He blushes and hastily adds, “And tan.”

Kou shrugs. “I’ve been doing a lot of parkour lately. Since… you know.”

Kirishima swallows. “Yeah. Me, too. I was training for… a mud run.”

“Daiki told me about that,” Kou says. “I’m sorry. Maybe we can do it together next year.”

“Who’s… Daiki?” Kirishima asks blankly. *I thought my memory wasn’t affected - only my speech.*

“Oh. Tokawa Daiki. You were training at his gym, right?”

“Oh. Yes.” Kirishima remembers the day he and the guys had to leave Hanegi Park because Kou and Tokawa were running together. *Tokawa-san talked about Kou-san with me; I guess it makes sense he talked about me to Kou-san.*

There’s a knock on Kirishima’s door. “Just a second,” he tells Kou. “Come in.” After a second, he remembers to say it in English. “Come… in.”

An orderly opens the door. “Kei, you requested assistance to be moved to your wheelchair?”
“Yes... but... I’m... on the... phone,” Kirishima explains. “Maybe... in a... little... bit?”

“Okay. Just let me know when.” The orderly leaves, shutting the door behind him.

“Sorry,” Kirishima says to Kou.

“You were speaking English,” Kou observes.

“Yes. The speech... therapist says it will... help me... recover... my Japanese... faster,” Kirishima stammers.

“Oh. Do you want to talk to me in English then?” Kou asks.

Kirishima breathes a silent sigh of relief. He shakes his head. “No, that’s okay. My brain needs... a break.” Plus, I don’t want you to hear how bad I sound in English right now.

Kou chuckles. “I completely understand that feeling. My brain feels really tired after speaking in English all day, too. It’s nice to be able to speak Japanese.”

“Yeah.”

“They called you by your first name. Is your rehabilitation center on one of the American bases?”

Kirishima freezes. Shit. He doesn’t want to lie to Kou, but Kirishima can’t tell Kou that Kirishima is in America, too. Not when he’s so vulnerable. What if someone were to target him while Kou was visiting - as Kirishima’s sure Kou will want to do? It’s only a matter of time before it’s common knowledge among the Japanese underworld that Asami’s right-hand man is injured, and the information Kirishima has is too valuable. Someone’s bound to come knocking sooner than later, no matter how thorough Sion’s protections are.

“Kei-san?” Kou brings him back to the present moment.

“No, but most of... the workers are ... American,” Kirishima says, completely truthfully.

“Interesting. So it’s a religious institution? I want to come visit you, but it will take at least a few months for me to buy a ticket,” Kou says.

“You don’t have to... do that!” Kirishima protests.

“I know. But I want to. I hate seeing you lying in a hospital bed,” Kou says. “I need to see that you’re okay in person.”

“I’m not... lying!” Kirishima says. He holds the phone farther away and pans around the room a bit to show that he’s sitting up. “I was going to sit in... the wheelchair, but... the orderly came too late.”

“So you got the wheelchair?!” Kou asks. “That’s great!”

“It was really hard,” Kirishima confesses. “I could... barely sit for... a minute. I don't know... if I can do this.”

He suddenly finds himself blinking back tears. When did I catch Kou-san’s excessive honesty? I can't burden him with this.

Kirishima covers his face. “Sorry. I-”

Kou cuts him off. “Don't apologize. Thank you for sharing how you feel. I'm here for you. Anytime
you want to vent, I’ll listen.”

“But...”

“No buts. I’m sure this is all very scary for you. But I know you can do this. You’re the hardest worker I know. And that’s the most important thing for recovery, right? How much work you put into it?”

Kirishima shrugs. “What if… they’re wrong?” he whispers.

“Wrong about what?”

“What if I... can’t... walk again?” The words slip out despite Kirishima’s efforts to hold them in. He hasn’t really allowed himself to even think it before now. The thought makes him so miserable, his tears stop.

“That’s - what do your doctors say? They’re experts, right?” Kou fumbles.

Kirishima squeezes his eyes shut. Kou-san and his unconditional honesty. That’s probably why I told him. I couldn’t bear to be lied to. “They said… I would have a greater than... seventy-five percent chance. But that was before… they realized I hurt… my lower spine, too.”

Kou’s eyes widen. “But that’s still a really good chance, right?”

Kirishima continues, his face screwing up in concentration. “That was also before… they realized... the damage from... from... my chest injury was just... a spinal concussion. But I’ve got... the brain injury, too.” He frowns. “I... don’t know,” he concludes.

“Then it sounds like you’ve got a really good chance. I know you, Kei-san. You’re strong and brave and tough. You can do this. Maybe you should try talking to your doctors again so they can give you more clear expectations. Not just where you’ll be in the end, but what you can expect in the coming days and weeks.”

Kirishima nods. “That’s a good... idea.”

“And hey, look at you! You said you could barely sit up a minute earlier, and now you’ve been sitting up for quite a while! You’re already improving!”

“The bed is... much easier... than the chair,” Kirishima explains.

“Well, it’s still working the muscles, right? So the chair will be easier tomorrow.”

“What about you?” Kirishima asks. “How’d today go? What about your... fellowship? We didn’t talk much about you... yesterday. Or today.”

Kou smiles softly. “You’re so thoughtful. It’s okay to be a little self-centered right now, you know.”

Kirishima shrugs. “I am. I want to... hear about you. It’ll take my mind... off things.”

Kou laughs. “Okay, then. But I’m afraid I don’t have much to report on the fellowship front. There’s a big reception this weekend. I’ve got a bunch of events starting Thursday evening - meeting former recipients, mentors, big donors...” Kou frowns slightly on the last word.

“Not your thing?” Kirishima laughs.

“I’m not good at it,” Kou explains. “I do appreciate the fact that they made this opportunity possible,
“of course, but…” he shrugs. “I never know what to say to them.”

“So what did you do… today?” Kirishima asks.

“Explored the city a bit more. I rode into Manhattan and explored Central Park.” Kou looks away, a little troubled.

“Hit all the good parkour spots?” Kirishima prompts.

“Yeah.”

“You can tell me about it,” Kirishima says. “I want to… hear. I won’t get weird… like yesterday.”

“You sure?” Kou asks.

“Yeah. This room is… small. My world is small right now. Let me see yours.”

Kou smiles sadly. “I’ll try.”

Thirty minutes later, Saji knocks softly on the door, sticks his head in, sees Kirishima is still talking, and closes the door again without a word.

Seeing Saji reminds Kirishima of something he wanted to say to Kou.

“Kou-san? Remember you said… you talked about me with Tokawa-san?” Kirishima asks.

“Yeah. Did that bother you?” Kou asks.

“Not really. You… trained with him… one day… in Hanegi Park, right?”

“Yeah… Now that you mention it, I thought I saw your car as we neared the park.”

“You probably did,” Kirishima admitted. “I… knew you… were coming.”


“We… my company… had… someone watching… you,” Kirishima admits.

Kou’s eyebrows shoot up. “Why?”

“Because of… me. To… protect… company secrets.”

Kou’s face hardens. “I wouldn’t have betrayed your secrets - not that I knew any. You were always careful about that.”

“I know! I told A-… my boss… as much.”

“Why did you tell him anything at all?” Kou asks.

“I had to… after I… well, I… kind of… hit Takaba-san.”

Kou’s jaw drops open. He obviously hadn’t expected that. “You what?”

“Well… sucker-punched is… probably… more accurate,” Kirishima confesses.
“Why?”

“I didn’t… want… to accept responsibility… for the break-up,” Kirishima admits. His mouth feels dry, so he licks his lips. “I wanted… someone to blame.”

“Aki wasn’t the one who told me,” Kou reminds Kirishima.

“I know. You… told me that… when we broke up… remember? But he was the one… who brought us together… in public… where those… those…” Kirishima frowns. Be careful, Kei. You don’t want to compromise Kou’s fellowship.

“It wasn’t Aki’s fault,” Kou repeats.

“I know. I told you… I want to… be better. I… hurt you with my… deception. But I hurt… myself… just as much… as I hurt you. I need to… be better. All the time… like you said. So… I want to be… as honest as I can… with you.”

“By telling me you punched Aki?” Kou asks.

“Yes. I’m not… proud of it. To be fair… he did it once before… to me.”

“He did?” Kou’s jaw drops again.

“Yes. After… our first… break-up. But that’s… no excuse… for what I did.”

Kou shakes his head. “That Aki.”

“Anyway… company policy… required us to make sure you weren’t… a threat. Takaba-san and I both… vouched for you, but there are no… exceptions.”

“You knew I was applying for the fellowship,” Kou hisses, his eyes widening as he realizes the implications of him being followed around by a criminal organization for weeks. He looks out his window. “Are they…”

“No. They stopped… when you left Tokyo,” Kirishima explains.

Kou lets out a quick stream of air through pursed lips. “I… I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say here.”

“I know. I’m… sorry. I just… wanted to be up front… with what happened. If I’m going… to regain your trust… I need to be more… forthright, right?”

Kou sighs again. “I guess. Thanks for telling me? Is that what I’m supposed to say? Damn, now I’m paranoid. They were following me for weeks? And I never noticed?! That’s creepy as fuck!”

“I… know. It was only… one person. And they were… supposed to be as… discreet… as possible. It was… Takaba-san’s… security team. To make sure… there would be no… effect on the fellowship.”

Kou shakes his head. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “No. Actually… yes. Well… there is something… I’m not telling you… about my treatment. Because I want you… to promise me…”

“Promise you what?” Kou asks wearily. Kirishima can’t really blame him.
“Promise me… you won’t… try to visit.”

“But…” Kou starts to object.

“At least… until it’s safe,” Kirishima amends. “It’s… dangerous around me… right now.”

“What do you mean?” Kou asks, his face filled with concern.

“It just… is. I bet… you can… figure out why… if you think… about it. You’re smart. So… please. Don’t try to visit… no matter… what you hear.”

“No matter what I hear?! That makes it sound like you’re expecting me to hear something bad,” Kou objects.

Kirishima shakes his head. “Not… bad. But I know… you’ll want to come… Don’t let Takaba-san… tell you too much.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Kou is growing more frustrated.

But Kirishima is completely exhausted, between his busy day of assessments and trying to explain complicated thoughts to Kou despite his aphasia. “I’m… sorry. I can’t… really… explain.”

Kou rubs his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Okay. Thank you for your honesty, Kei-san. I appreciate that you told me even though you knew it’d make me mad. And yeah, I’m pissed and creeped out. But… I’ll try to respect what you’re asking me, okay?”

Kirishima nods.

“And I still want to talk to you. I’m really worried about you. I’m glad we can be friends. You look totally wiped out, and you’ve got a big day ahead of you. Can I call you again tomorrow?”

“I’d… like that,” Kirishima says. The word “friends” is ringing in his mind.

_I don't want to be your 'friend,' Kou-san - but I will be until you want to be more than that again._

Chapter End Notes

There's a nice Kirishima-worthy underbar at 8:46 in this video (it should be cued right to the underbar; the traceur sets up for it via a lache). When I saw it, I just had to share. As Tokawa would say, "it's textbook."

I said last time my goal was a new chapter every two weeks. I was pretty close to that this time. The next chapter will most likely be from Kou's perspective, and we'll be getting some time skips (days to weeks) soon.
What You See Depends on Where You Stand (Alabaster)

Chapter Summary

As Kou settles into his life in New York, he also reconnects with Kirishima. What will happen when Kou's local friend sees the picture of Kirishima's first excursion outside the rehabilitation center?

Chapter Notes

I've had the majority of this chapter done for at least a month. It's a bit long, and I was tempted to squeeze a few more story elements into it and split it into two, but I decided to post it as is. Hopefully the next chapter will come a bit sooner, especially since the holiday this weekend will give me more time to write.

As always, thank you for your patience. And thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in Japanese. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Ken(taro) Tanaka: Kirishima's physical therapist
Mystical (Mysty) Forse: Kirishima's speech therapist
Kou fishes through the wet laundry in the washing machine until he finds his mesh laundry bag. He pulls the bag out and stuffs the rest of the laundry inside it. He then stuffs that bag along with his detergent and bag of quarters inside a large waterproof bag with drawstring straps. He slings the bag over one shoulder as he heads for the door, but breaking news from the television in the corner stops him in his tracks.

The NHK announcer says, “Prosecutor Kuroda refused to answer any questions about the simultaneous raids on dozens of Kodama-gumi offices in Tokyo, Osaka, and across Honshu, including its headquarters in Setagaya. Police were observed removing boxes of evidence all night from the headquarters, enough to fill three vans.”

Kou stares at the screen, where dozens of police officers are carrying box after box out of a large house.

“Gomennasai,” a man says.

Kou realizes he's blocking the door. “Sorry,” he says, bowing quickly as he steps closer to the television, returning his attention to it.

“...into four waiting police transport vans, though the identities of those arrested could not be confirmed.”

The screen shows police leading men with blankets thrown over their heads into vans.

“It's about time,” Mineta, the owner of the laundromat, says. She casts a stern look at Kou. “You're not one of those young men fascinated with the yakuza, are you?”

“No, oba-san. Actually, my friend is a photojournalist. He did a big exposé on Kodama-gumi a few
weeks ago.” Kou nods at the television.

“You're friends with Takaba Akihito?” Mineta looks surprised, but not nearly as surprised as Kou is that Mineta knows who Akihito is.


Mineta waves her hand. “My son Noburu reads all the Japanese papers to compile the news for the neighborhood weekly. He was really impressed with Takaba-san’s story - especially his photographs.”

“Oh.”

Mineta pulls a piece of paper out of a drawer and holds it out to Kou. “Your next wash is on us. Thank you for your business.”

Kou accepts the coupon. Should I tell Aki about this? Or will it go to his head?

Kou glances at the television again, but NHK has gone back to airing a cooking show. He hurries out the door, grabbing one of the neighborhood papers from the basket next to the door. He pulls his phone out of his pocket as he ducks into an alley. It’s not even six a.m. in Japan, but Kou dials Akihito’s number anyway.

The phone goes straight to voicemail.

He’s probably taking pictures of the raid. With so many of Kodama-gumi’s men arrested, they’ve got bigger things to worry about than Aki. He’s probably fine.

But Kou knows the uneasy feeling in his stomach won’t go away until he’s talked to Akihito.

Kou’s feet automatically take him to the Japanese grocery store he usually goes to after doing laundry. Thomas makes fun of him for schlepping his laundry twice as far when they have six different laundromats within a block or two of the apartment, but Kou feels more relaxed hearing Japanese in the background while he’s waiting for the wash cycle. He hears enough English the rest of the time. Besides, by the time laundry day rolls around, there’s always some ingredient or another he can only get at the Japanese grocery store.

After the break-up, Kou hadn’t really cooked much. Heck, he hadn’t really eaten much, either - just enough to keep him from getting light-headed during his intense parkour sessions. But that changed when Kirishima shyly requested during their third video chat that Kou send him an occasional text about his day like he used to.

“Like pictures of your food,” Kirishima suggested. “The food here is… different than I’m used to.”

By this point, Kou was already sick of American food. The Japanese restaurants in the neighborhood have decent food, unlike the hibachi restaurant in Manhattan his mentor took Kou to during the fellowship award weekend, but Kou is trying to save every penny so he can fly back to Japan as soon as possible to visit Kirishima.

And so Kou started cooking again.

At first he worried that cooking wasn’t going to be much cheaper than eating out, given how expensive many of the Japanese ingredients were here. Kou wasn’t an experienced enough cook to
know which American vegetables were safe to substitute, but Chris - the red-headed traceur - showed Kou a cooking blog that westernized Japanese recipes. All the recipes on the site were easy, quick, nutritious, and inexpensive, and there were plenty of pictures and details for all the steps. There were even instructions on how to cook rice on the stovetop - something Kirishima had never taught Kou because even Kou owned a rice cooker in Japan.

Chris has come up in more than a few stories Kou has told Kirishima. It makes Kou’s heart flutter to see the jealousy Kirishima tries to hide - the same jealousy Kou feels when Kirishima talks about Saji, whom Kou finally deduced (from wheedling Akihito) is a bodyguard/personal assistant for Kirishima at the far-away rehabilitation center (the exact location of which Kou has been unable to extract from either Kirishima or Akihito).

Kou buys glutinous rice, azuki beans, sesame oil, wonton wrappers, fresh tofu, and some nattō. He places them in a canvas sack and finally starts for home. As he passes the Honduran restaurant on the corner, he sees an Immigration Enforcement van parked outside. Kou quickens his pace, pretending not to see the two men being escorted from the restaurant into the van.

Kou is half a block away from the restaurant when a horn sounds right next to him, causing him to nearly drop the sack of groceries. He glances over and sees a scooter pulled up to the curb.

“Want a ride, B?” the driver shouts, lifting up the visor of his helmet.

It’s Chris.

Kou’s eyebrows shoot up. “New ride?”

Chris grins broadly. “Yeah. I just got her. I told you I was offered that delivery job, right? She took half my savings, but I should make enough guap over the summer to cover tuition for next year. If I work hard enough, I might be able to cover that semester in Japan next spring.”

“That’s wavy!” Kou cries. He looks longingly at the scooter. He sold his own to his cousin when he moved here. He’s thought about getting another one, but he doesn’t need one, and now that he’s saving up for a plane ticket...

“Hop on!” Chris shouts. He hops off the scooter and pulls out a second helmet from the compartment under the seat.

“You carry a second helmet?” Kou asks, gladly accepting it and putting it on.

Chris blushes. “I was kind of heading to your place to show her off.” Chris takes the bags from Kou and stuffs them in the seat compartment. They barely fit.

Kou laughs. “I don’t blame you. I would, too.”

“You been on a bike before?” Chris asks.

“Yeah. I rode one from the time I was sixteen until I moved here.”

“Then you know what to do.” Chris climbs back onto the bike, and Kou hops on behind him.

As he takes Chris’s waist, Kou can’t help but think of riding with Kirishima. It’s been about eight years since Kou rode behind anyone else, and it’s a little nerve-racking, especially since Chris isn’t very good at handling the scooter yet.
Chris detours a little, taking them on a short ride through the neighborhood before pulling up in front of Kou’s apartment. There’s a space just big enough for the scooter right in front of the building. It takes Chris a couple of tries to maneuver the scooter into the space.

When they get inside, Kou says, “Sorry, I just have to hang my laundry up to dry.”

“That’s really a thing?” Chris asks.

“What do you mean?” Kou asks, even though Thomas has already teased him about the same thing.

“Have you tried the dryer? It’s dead ass convenient,” Chris says, following Kou into his room, where Kou grabs his drying rack before leading the way up to the roof.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Kou observes. He pins his clothes to the drying rack.

“You don’t worry about anyone stealing your skivvies?”

Kou stares at Chris. “Should I?”

Chris shrugs. “I guess if it hasn’t happened by now, you’re safe. As safe as you ever are, anyway.”

“Only people who live in this building can get on this roof,” Kou points out.

Chris eyes the roof of the house next door, only a half story shorter and with less than a half-meter gap.

“Or the neighbors,” Kou grudgingly amends, “if they know parkour.”

“Or the neighbors’ neighbors,” Chris teases, gesturing to the roof of the five-story apartment building that takes up half the block.

“Only if they’re suicidal. Even I wouldn’t take that two-story drop,” Kou says.

Chris squawks and flaps his arms. “Chicken!” But he’s laughing.

Kou laughs, too. “I mean, it’d be way easier to just scale the balconies, so you might as well include every single traceur in Queens. But if my skivvies disappear, I’ll know who to blame.” He snaps his wet towel at Chris before hanging it on the drying rack. “Besides, the dryer costs money. The sun is free,” Kou mutters.

“It’s like a quarter for eight minutes,” Chris says. “A quarter’s not going to get you back to Japan any faster.”

“Every little bit counts,” Kou says.

Chris rolls his eyes but doesn’t say anything more. He knows why Kou is so anxious to go back to Japan, even if he does think Kou’s insistence on running all over the city instead of taking the subway is taking things a bit too far. “I wish I could just lend you the money,” Chris murmurs.

“I’m thinking of asking my parents to,” Kou says quietly.

Chris looks at him. “Would they have a problem with that?”

Kou shakes his head. “It’d just be a little difficult to explain why I need to go back so soon.”

“You could say Kei-san is just a friend…” Chris suggests.
Kou shakes his head more emphatically. “They wouldn’t buy that. Maybe if it were Aki… Anyway, I wouldn’t want to lie to them about something so important.”

Chris swallows hard.

“I know it’s technically not a lie right now,” Kou says, correctly guessing what Chris wants to say, “but still…”

Chris nods. “That’s a tough one. What about Aki-san? Isn’t he a hotshot reporter?”

Kou shakes his head. “That guy never has any savings.” Although maybe he does now that he’s living with Asami-san… But there’s no way I could ask Aki. He’s living with a criminal! You saw that ICE van earlier, Kou. Be smart.

“If you would join our YouTube channel already, I bet we could get an airline to sponsor your travel to showcase your mad lit skills in exotic Japan,” Chris says in a teasing tone.

Kou doesn’t dignify that with a response. He hangs his last sock and leads the way back down to his apartment.

Chris and Slider have been trying to get Kou to appear on their YouTube channel for weeks. They’re not the first people to try, but they’ve certainly been the most persistent. Kou hasn’t minded appearing in the background of a video during a big jam, but he’s always balked at being featured.

Kou traces because he loves the freedom and the ability to express himself physically it gives him. He's already felt the effects of turning his passion for art into a career, and while he can't imagine doing anything else for a living, he still misses the freedom of doing art for art's sake alone. Even when he's doing casual sketches for fun, he can't help but view his work with the critical eye honed through years of study.

Kou doesn't want the same thing to happen to his parkour.

Once they're back in the kitchen, Kou notices the bag of groceries. “Oh, yeah. I got some nattō for you to try.”

“You didn't have to do that! I just asked where to go so I could cop some myself,” Chris protests.

“Sorry. Did you want to try it with your classmates? I only bought one.” Kou holds out the container towards Chris. “You can take it home.”

“That's not it,” Chris says. “Here you are pinching every penny. You won't even spend a quarter to dry your clothes, and yet you're throwing guap copping me nattō when you're already doing so much for me. I mean, thank you, son, but can I pay you back for it?”

Kou laughs. “It's just nattō. You bring me food all the time.” He measures out a cup of glutinous rice and washes it until the water runs clear.

“That's just leftovers from the restaurant. I don't have to buy them,” Chris protests. “You help me with Japanese, and you've taught me so much parkour, too.”

“And you and your mom helped me with all my immigration and tax paperwork,” Kou reminds Chris, whose mother is an immigration attorney. “And my lease and cell phone plan. You help me with my English as much as I help you with your Japanese.” Kou covers the rice with water and sets a timer.
“But your English is much better than my Japanese,” Chris points out.

Kou can’t deny that. “That’s what friends are for, B. Seriously, it’s just nattō. You won’t be thanking me once you try it.”


Kou shrugs. “Some do. Aki does. Me? I never really had it except when we visited my grandparents. It’s… well, I’ve had better.”

“You’re not making me want to try it.”

“I can chuck it,” Kou holds the container over the trash can.

“Don’t!” Chris lunges for it.

Kou laughs and puts it back on the counter. “So you want to try it now?”

“Uh, sure, I guess.”

Kou pulls a container of leftover brown rice from the freezer and warms it in the microwave. He puts it in a bowl and hands it to Chris.

“What do I do?” Chris asks.

Kou turns on the fan over the stove. “First of all, you keep the nattō over here, okay?”

“Does it really smell that bad?”

Kou shrugs. “I just don’t want to stink up the place. Thomas is working a double today, but still… It is smelly. If you don’t like the smell, try holding your nose while you eat it. That’s what I did. Obā-chan wouldn’t let you leave the table until you finished it, and her dog wouldn’t touch nattō.”

Chris laughs. He pulls the lid off the nattō and removes the mustard packet and another packet.

“Shiso-nori,” he reads.

Kou nods. “Now take the film off the nattō and stir it with your chopsticks. Add the mustard and nori and keep stirring.”

Chris peels back the film and leans over to take a whiff. “It doesn’t smell that bad,” he tells Kou. “It reminds me of cheese.”

“What kind of cheese do you eat here in America?!” Kou exclaims, looking at Chris in horror. Kou can smell the nattō from where he is, so he stays back.

“My grandfather is German. He likes stinky cheeses.” Chris is focused on stirring the nattō. “Is this right?” He turns the container towards Kou to show him the frothy, slimy mess.

Kou takes a half step back. “Yeah. It’s supposed to do that.”

“I heard it was slimy, but I thought it would be like gumbo. This is intense.”

“You don’t have to eat it,” Kou reminds Chris.

“Now I just pour it over the rice?”
“Yep. That’s it. Oh, wait. I forgot, you can add green onions if you’d like.” Kou pulls out a scallion from the fridge and quickly chops it. He hands the cutting board over to Chris, who sprinkles the onion on top of the nattō.

“Itadakimasu!” Chris says, clapping his hands together. He picks up his chopsticks then sets them down again. “You don’t have to grill me.”

“I know,” Kou says, not looking away.

Chris waits, but Kou still doesn’t look away.

“Remember the bagel?” Kou finally says.

“Oh, fine.” Chris picks up a small amount and tentatively puts it in his mouth. He chews and swallows, but Kou can’t tell from Chris’s face whether he likes it or not. Chris takes a second bite, frowning in concentration. Finally, Chris breaks into a broad grin. “The texture takes a little getting used to, but it’s not bad, B!”

“I made some onigiri,” Kou says. “You can have the rest of the nattō, or you can toss it and have some onigiri instead for lunch.”

“I’ll have this,” Chris holds up the nattō.

He starts heading toward the table, but Kou points at the stove. “I wasn’t kidding about keeping it over there. Here’s a chair.” Kou sets a chair next to the stove for Chris to sit on.

Chris laughs. “Dead ass, you can be dumb hilarious sometimes, B.” He sits in the chair and eats underneath the fan while Kou eats his onigiri at the table.

When Chris is done, Kou washes the dishes and takes all the nattō-related trash outside to the dumpster. “We’ll leave the fan on for a little longer,” Kou decides, sniffing the air and frowning.

Chris pulls out his Japanese book from his bag.

“Oh, I nearly forgot,” Kou says. He pulls the neighborhood weekly from his pocket.

Chris takes it eagerly. He skims the national headlines on the front before flipping it over to look at the local stories. He reads the first article slowly to himself while Kou starts preparing the ingredients for gyoza.

“Does this one say that there's a local street festival next weekend with a portable shrine, food stalls, and games?” Chris asks.

Kou takes the paper and skims the article. “Yes. Good job!”

“What's this kanji?” Chris points to a word he didn't understand.

Kou is just finishing mixing the shrimp, tofu, and vegetable gyoza filling when Chris sighs. “I'll tell my mom about Goto-san.”

Kou brings the gyoza filling, wonton wrappers, and a bowl of water over to the table. “What happened?”

He takes the paper from Chris, who points to the article. Kou reads about the young father of two, an
engineer and green card holder, who went for a meeting at the immigration office to discuss his citizenship application and didn’t come home. After several days, Goto’s wife was finally able to determine that he was being detained for deportation due to an arrest for driving on a suspended license seven years ago.

“His parents retired and moved back to Japan during Hiro’s last year of college,” his wife Anne explained, “but shortly afterward, they were in a terrible car accident. Hiro drove to the airport and flew straight to their side. He ended up not coming back for several weeks. Meanwhile, he had mailed in payment for a traffic ticket, but the payment was not properly credited, and since he didn't appear in court, his license was suspended. Notification was sent to his home, but of course Hiro didn't receive it. He was stopped while driving home from the airport. The judge reinstated his license without Hiro having to pay any additional fines since it wasn’t his fault. I don't understand why this incident would affect Hiro's immigration status.”

Kou skims the rest of the article, which talks about the healthcare needs of the Gotos’ three-month-old premature infant, which preclude Anne from working. He notes that there will be a raffle at the street festival to help cover the family’s expenses.

“Kuso. Can they do that?” Kou asks.

“They’re revoking passports of U.S. citizens just for being delivered by a midwife near the border sixty years ago, back when most people were delivered by a midwife,” Chris says with a serious expression on his face. “They can do whatever they want.” He looks up and notices the fear on Kou’s face and hurriedly adds, “But we still have laws and due process.” He taps the paper. “Goto-san has a really good chance of getting this overturned. My mom will work to get him released so he can get back to his family until his hearing.”

“She’s going to get mad at you again,” Kou warns.

Chris laughs. “Nah. It sounds like this family can actually afford to pay her fees. Besides, she never really gets mad at me. She’s mostly mad she doesn’t have the time or resources to help everyone who needs her.” His face falls. “I'll tell her about the Hondurans, too.”

Kou doesn’t like to think too hard about the current climate in the U.S. regarding immigrants. He says another silent prayer of gratitude that his own mother made sure his juvenile record had been completely expunged. Not that his record was that bad - especially compared to Akihito’s - but if Goto could be detained for a clerical error… Kou shudders. He delicately changes the topic. “You’re understanding more of the paper now.”

“Yes, thanks to your help. Since you haven’t read it yet, you want me to leave it here? I can get it next time.” Chris holds it out to Kou.

“Sure, that’d be great.”

“Speaking of my mom…” Chris starts. Kou braces himself, expecting Chris to tell him more bad news about immigrants, but Chris continues, “She wants to know when you can come over to dinner again. Her clients have given her a lot of food lately, and we can’t eat it all. We’re going to have a Latin American fiesta night.”

“Sounds fun.” Kou washes the azuki beans, puts them in a pot, and covers them with water. He turns on the heat and sets a second timer.

“What are you making?” Chris asks.
“Osekihan,” Kou answers nonchalantly. “Today’s the second Saturday, right? Kei-san has a support group meeting Tuesday, so I could come then.”

“I’ll tell Mom. What’s the occasion?” Chris asks.

“What do you mean?” Kou feigns ignorance.

“Isn’t osekihan a celebration food?”

“Not necessarily,” Kou says, but he grins and adds, “Kei-san is supposed to have his first outing today. I thought I would celebrate it.”

Chris nods at the table, where Kou has sat down and is stuffing gyoza. “Is that what the gyoza is for, too?”

Kou shrugs. “It’s for just in case. If for some reason he can’t go on the outing, I know he’ll be disappointed, and I don’t want to make it worse by showing him a special food.”

“Will the gyoza keep?” Chris asks.

“Yeah, you can freeze them. Now what did you need help with?”

Chris opens his Japanese textbook.

Fifteen minutes later, Chris closes his book with a sigh of relief. “You’re much better at explaining things than Maruyama-sensei. Thanks.” He rolls up his sleeves. “Need any help with this gyoza?”

“Sure. Have you made it before?”

“Nah, but I’ve helped my mom make pierogies for special occasions for as long as I can remember.”

“What are pierogies?” Kou asks.

“Polish potato dumplings.” Chris washes his hands, grabs a spoon, and quickly copies Kou's movements.

By his third one, Chris is already faster at stuffing the gyoza than Kou. Soon, Chris is making two gyoza to Kou's one.

“How are you making them so fast?” Kou asks.

“I told you I -”

Kou shakes his head. “No, I’m asking how. Teach me.”

Chris shrugs. “The wrappers are much easier to work with than pierogi dough.”

He slows down and shows Kou how he’s filling the dough, but Kou can’t figure out how to move his own hands that fast. Every time he tries, he ends up overstuffing the gyoza or breaking the wrapper, and Chris has to fix it.

“I think you just need practice,” Chris reassures Kou. “My old lady is way faster than me.”

“Well, thanks for your help,” Kou says. “I can bring them over Tuesday.”
“I told you we’ve already got too much food, son.”

When they’re done making the gyoza, Kou places them in the fridge. By then, the beans are done, too, so he drains them, reserving the cooking liquid. He pours the rice in a strainer and sets it over the pot to continue draining. He checks the time for the fifth time.

“I’ve got about thirty minutes before I have to cook this,” he says. “Want to jam?”

Chris checks his own watch. “I’ve got about forty-five minutes before I have to head to work. Is there somewhere close?”

Kou points at the ceiling, and soon they’re heading onto the roof.

As they head back inside, Chris quietly says, “I know I probably shouldn’t say anything, but I’m worried about you.”

“Why?” Kou asks, surprised.

“You seem really anxious about the immigration thing. You’re here on a prestigious fellowship, right? They’re not going to want to kick someone like you out.”

“But that engineer -” Kou starts.

“I know. But he was applying for citizenship, which triggered a closer screening. You were just screened, right? So you’re good.”

“But what if I break the law?” Kou asks.

“Are you planning to, B?” Chris teases.

“Of course not. But that engineer wasn’t, either.”

“And he’ll be fine.” Chris smiles reassuringly.

“But they locked him up.”

“Technically, he’s free to leave, as long as he leaves the country. If that happened to you, you could do that. It would suck, but you’re planning to go back anyway, right? Not like Goto-san, who grew up here.”

Kou sighs. “That’s true.” He bites his lip. Kou focuses on getting the osekihan cooking so he doesn’t have to look Chris in the eye. I can’t tell Chris why I’m actually worried, but I guess he’s right - getting deported would help me see Kei-san faster. Kou shakes his head. “But I just got here.” I can’t blow this opportunity.

“Exactly. So you’re fine.” Chris studies Kou. “If there’s something you don’t feel comfortable telling me, you can talk to my mom, you know? Just do it when no one can overhear, and you’re covered by attorney-client privilege.” Kou looks confused, so Chris explains, “That means she can’t tell nobody nothing that you say to her.”

Kou nods, but he knows he won’t do that. What would Izzy think of Kou once she knew he used to date - and is still in contact with - a member of the criminal underworld? And that his best friend is living with the most feared criminal in Tokyo?
Chris refills his water bottle as Kou checks the time. A text arrives while he still has his phone out. He grins when he sees a picture of Kirishima, smiling broadly, seated in a wheelchair with a lake and bridge behind him.

“That must be from Kei-san,” Chris says.

“Yeah. He went on the outing,” Kou says. He shows Chris the picture. Chris takes the phone from Kou and looks at the picture closely. “Where’d you say he is again?”

Kou shrugs. “I don’t know exactly. He and Aki won’t tell me. I just know it’s far enough from Tokyo that his family and friends can’t visit him, and it’s run by some American religious group.”

Chris says, “New Jersey is pretty far from Tokyo.”

“New Jersey?!” Kou looks at the picture again. “You think this is New Jersey?”

Chris pulls out his own phone and opens Google maps. He quickly types in a location and pulls up a “street view” from the path around the reservoir. He rotates the picture until the bridge is in view and zooms in. “See?”

Kou looks from his phone to Chris’s. “Maybe they look similar. But I bet there are a lot of bridges that look like that. I mean, I’ve seen more than a few.”

Chris shrugs. “I’ve been there, though. I’m telling you this is the Orange Reservoir. Just ask Kei-san.” Chris nods at Kou’s phone.

“It’s early in the morning in Japan,” Kou points out.

“He just sent you a text,” Chris reminds Kou.

“Oh, right. I guess I can call now. I’ll see you later, B.”

“Dead ass, son?”

“Seriously.” Kou has picked up a lot of Chris’s and Slider’s slang, but he can’t bring himself to say “dead ass.” “Didn’t you say you have to leave, anyway?”

“At least let me meet the amazing Kei-san,” Chris says. Kou looks hesitant. “Don’t get tight. Look, I really do have to jet soon. I won’t mess with your mojo.”

Kou rolls his eyes and calls Kirishima. Chris crowds next to Kou so that he can see the screen, too. Kirishima quickly answers. “Hi, Kou-san!” His bright smile falters as he notices Chris. “And… Chris-kun?” He guesses.

“Yeah, this is Chris,” Kou says. “He’s about to head out, but he decided he wanted to meet you first.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Kei-san,” Chris says in very proper Japanese.
“You, too. Kou-san has told me a lot about you,” Kirishima answers.

“I’ve heard… a lot… about you, too,” Chris stumbles but gets the sentence out okay in the end. “Please take care of… my friend.”


“Did I say something wrong?” Chris asks.

“No,” Kou says.

“We can talk in… English if you… want,” Kirishima offers in English.

“Kou told me you went on an outing today. Was it to the Orange Reservoir?” Chris asks bluntly.

Kirishima frowns. “I don’t know… the name of it. They only told us it was… a local lake.”

“Your English sounds much better,” Kou says, desperately trying to change the subject. He hasn't heard Kirishima speak in English since their first video chat.

“Does it?” Kirishima asks. “It doesn't… feel better.”

“It's definitely better,” Kou says. “You probably don’t notice because you're speaking it every day.”

“And you're speaking it every day because you're in New Jersey?” Chris presses. “You've at least got to know that much.”

“I already explained why,” Kou says hurriedly. “Chris thought he recognized the location of your outing when I showed him the picture,” Kou explains to Kirishima.

Kirishima frowns.

Shit. I shouldn't have shown Chris the picture, Kou realizes too late.

But all Kirishima says is “I already… explained to Kou-san why I don't… want to tell him… where I am.”

“And I told Chris I didn't need to know right now.” Kou smiles reassuringly at Kirishima and elbows Chris.

“Alright. I'm sorry for butting into your business. But I think Kei-san should know that Kou is scrimping and scrounging to buy a plane ticket back to Japan as soon as possible.”

“Why?” Kirishima bursts out.

“To visit you, of course,” Chris stands up. “Well, it's between you two. I'll get out of your hair so you can talk. It was nice to meet you, Kei-san. Thanks for the help and lunch, Kou. Don't forget about Tuesday.”

Chris quickly lets himself out of the apartment. Kou locks the door as Kirishima asks, “What's on… Tuesday?"

Kou switches back to Japanese. “Chris and his mom are having me over for dinner. I'm sorry. I shouldn’t have shown Chris your photo. I was just really happy for you, and he was here...”

Kirishima sighs. “It’s okay. Just please don’t… share my photos anymore. For your… safety.”
Kou looks at Kirishima sadly. “You mean for your safety. Chris won’t tell anyone. But I won’t. Again, I’m sorry.”

“So you’re going to… Japan?” Kirishima asks.

“Eventually. It’ll take me awhile to save.”

“I told you… not to come visit me.” A furrow creases Kirishima’s brow.

“Until it’s safe,” Kou reminds Kirishima. “It has been so far, right?” Kirishima’s furrow deepens, and Kou realizes he’s probably being too frank over the telephone. “There haven’t been any more earthquakes, right? And typhoon season has been quiet?”

Kirishima shrugs. “Yeah, but you never… know when one will hit.”

“The season doesn’t last forever. It’s going to take me months to save,” Kou says stubbornly.

“Don’t… be too frugal. I don’t even know where I’ll be… in a few months,” Kirishima says.

“I can come to wherever you are.” Kou can be just as stubborn as Kirishima. Kou hasn’t told Kirishima about saving money to come visit because Kou knew Kirishima would object, but now that it’s out in the open, Kou isn’t about to back down or pretend like he’s not coming.


“I’ll want to go home by the time I save enough, anyway,” Kou explains. “I miss… everything.”

“Me, too,” Kirishima sighs. He looks at Kou. “I miss… going outside.”

“You got to today though, right? Tell me about the excursion!”

Kirishima happily regales Kou with a description of the lake. Kirishima concludes with, “There are hiking… trails, too, but I couldn’t… go on those.” He rests his head against the seat back.

Kou looks at Kirishima more closely. “You look exhausted.”

“It was really hard,” Kirishima admits. “The path was nearly… three kilometers.” He grins. “But I managed to go the whole way by myself!”

“That’s amazing,” Kou says. “I tried my buddy’s wheelchair out when he broke both ankles on a bad precision landing, and I couldn’t even go a hundred meters.”

“I’ve had more… practice,” Kirishima says quietly.

Kou’s face falls. “I’m sorry. I was being insensitive. I know it’s really hard - even though I can’t fully appreciate just how hard.”

“I understood,” Kirishima says. “You can stop… apologizing all the time.”

“Sorry.”

They both laugh before falling into a comfortable silence.
Kirishima breaks the silence with a question that makes Kou’s jaw drop. “Are you and Chris-kun dating?”

After a second Kou closes his mouth. “Of course not. He’s like a little brother.” Before Kou can stop himself, he continues, “Are you and Saji-kun dating?”

It’s Kirishima’s turn to gape fish-mouthed for a moment. He swallows. “Of course not. He’s like… a little brother to me, too. We’re just… friends.”

The next silence is less comfortable, but Kirishima breaks it quickly as he grins. “Besides… I’m pretty sure… Saji-kun likes… Tanaka-san.”

“Your physical therapist?” Kou confirms.

“Yeah. I’m trying… to set them up.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Kirishima shrugs. “It’s up to them. I’m just… creating opportunities for them to meet.”

“Like what?” Kou can’t imagine Kirishima feigning needing more help to trick both Saji and Tanaka into being in his room at the same time.

“Nancy let it slip that -”


“Yes. She said that Tanaka-san is an elite… obstacle course racer.” Kirishima switches to English for the last phrase because that’s the only language he’s ever heard it in.

Kou furrows his brow. “But what does that have to do with Saji-kun?”

Kirishima shrugs. “Remember how I told you I was planning to do that… mud run? It’s a team event. I need someone to… take my place.”

“Oh,” Kou says softly. “I’m s-”

“Don’t apologize,” Kirishima reminds Kou. “It’s not your fault. Anyway, I told Saji-kun that he has to… replace me.”

“But isn’t he helping take care of you? Isn’t the race soon?”

“It’s at the end of the… month,” Kirishima says. “I’ll be fine. I don’t need… a babysitter.”

Kou’s mouth turns down and his shoulders drop. “You need someone. Everyone else is so far away. You don’t have to go through this alone. You shouldn’t.”

“Don’t give me that look,” Kirishima pleads. “I’m not alone. I have my mom and… the rest of my family.” Kirishima licks his lips, looking like he’s about to say something else, but blushes instead.

“And me,” Kou says softly. “You have me. But that’s not the same. None of us are there the way Saji-kun is.”

“He can’t stay… forever,” Kirishima points out. “He’s got to go back to work sooner… than later, and I don’t want -” He stops talking when his voice cracks. He swallows hard, but his face remains stoic.
“I wish I could just hug you right now,” Kou whispers. “You’re not going to be there forever, either. Surely Asami-san wouldn’t take your only support away before you’re ready.” Kou tries to sound confident, but his voice falters at the end. Whenever he brings up Asami, Kirishima changes the subject. At first Kou chalked it up to Kirishima’s thoughtfulness regarding Kou’s old insecurities, but now he’s not so sure.

“Will I ever really be ready?” Kirishima retorts. “It’s better not to get too… dependent on anyone.”

“Of course you’ll be ready! You’re making great progress. You wheeled yourself three kilometers today! You’ll be going back home before you know it.”

Kirishima looks down at his lap. “It will be months,” he mutters.

“That’s not that long,” Kou says.

Kirishima sighs. He’s silent for a long moment, but Kou waits, sensing Kirishima is gathering his thoughts. Finally, Kirishima looks up. “It’s not fair to Saji-kun. His job isn’t being… a babysitter.”

Kou rolls his eyes. “Have you talked to Saji-kun about it?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “Besides, if you send Saji-kun away so soon after setting him up with Tanaka-san, isn’t that kind of cruel?” Kou asks.

Kirishima’s jaw drops. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Kou smiles sadly. Kei-san is so hard on himself. I wish he could just accept friendship for what it is. It’s sad I have to trick him into taking care of himself by pretending it’s helping others.

Kirishima yawns again.

“That outing really wiped you out, huh? You don’t have therapy today, right? You should take a nap after breakfast,” Kou says.

“Sorry,” Kirishima says.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Kou admonishes.

“Sorry,” Kirishima says, immediately blushing.

“You’re as bad as me,” Kou teases. “’d better let you go so you can get back to bed.”

“I didn’t get to hear about… your day,” Kirishima protests.

“After your nap, you can call me back when you have time,” Kou points out.

“Oh, right. I will. Goodbye, Kou-san.”

“Later, Kei-san.”

Kou hits the button to disconnect the call just as Kirishima starts to say something else. All Kou catches is “Suki.”

Was he going to say he loves me? Kou wonders. An uneasy feeling settles in Kou’s gut, one he’s tried to ignore since he started talking with Kirishima again.
Kou remembers his last conversation with Akihito.

“Kou… Do you have any intention of getting back together with Kirishima-san?”

Kou still hasn’t gotten used to Akihito talking about Kirishima with such respect. Kou sighed. “I don’t know. It’s up to him… but I doubt it.”

Akihito furrowed his brow. “Just… be careful, okay?”

“I am.”

“The way you talk about him, it sounds like you’re talking to him every single day.”

“You’re the one always asking about him,” Kou protested. “Besides, even if I talk to him every day, that doesn’t mean I’m hung up on him. He’s going through a really hard time right now.”

“I know. That’s why I’m telling you to be careful. Don’t lead him on.”

Kou frowned. “I’m not. Sheesh, Aki, what kind of guy do you take me for?”

Akihito scratched his head. “That guy… he’s really vulnerable. Sorry. I’m just worried about both of you.”

Akihito had changed the subject after that, and Kou had followed his lead. But now Kou wonders.

Am I leading Kei-san on?

The timer goes off, and Kou puts some of the osekihan in a bowl. He snaps a picture and sends it to Kirishima.

Congratulations on your first successful outing!

3km woot woot! ❣️(•﹏•)づ ✧

Kei-san on a roll! ε=ε=ε=ε=ε=ε=ε=ε=© 7˘ = ©

While Kou waits for a reply, he scrolls up and looks at the picture of Kirishima again.

Could that really be New Jersey? Chris seemed so certain.

Kou racks his brain for everything Kirishima and Akihito have told him about Kirishima’s rehabilitation center. He remembers hearing the workers speaking English to Kirishima.

Kei-san said that was for therapeutic reasons.

Kou starts to search online for aphasia therapy, but he closes the search box without even looking at the results.

This is stupid. If Kei-san won’t tell me, I’ll just have to make Aki talk.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title taken from "American Prayer" by U2. Recipes inspired by Just Hungry and Just Bento.

The stories of immigrants in this chapter, while fictionalized, are based on true experiences of immigrants in the U.S. over the past two years. A local woman was taken into custody by ICE at the funeral of her child (in front of her other six children). A father was taken into custody while driving his wife to the hospital to deliver their child. The news about American citizens born near the border having their passports revoked is true.

Kou's anxiety mirrors that expressed by all of my immigrant friends. When I started writing this story, I had no idea the atmosphere in the U.S. would change so much by the time I reached the American arc, but since it has, it had to be included, though I don't anticipate it featuring so prominently in the rest of the story.

You've probably already figured it out, but to make up for the realism, here's a mini-spoiler for the next chapter: Kou and Kirishima will finally be reunited!
Chapter Summary

What news from Japan does Kazuko bring Kirishima in the predawn hours? How are things going between Saji and Tanaka? And most importantly, what will happen when Kirishima and Kou finally reunite?!

Chapter Notes

Madison is the last character I plan to introduce, but then again, when Kazuko arrived, Kisho came along as a surprise and totally took over. Madison tried to do the same, but I promised this chapter would have the reunion, so you get a longer chapter. Hopefully I can write the next one quickly (before Christmas). I *think* I know what's going to happen in it, but these characters always take over.

There are lots of Japanese terms this time. Hopefully they're already familiar to you, or you can figure out their meaning by context clues, but I included a glossary as well. Please let me know if I left anything out. I also switched to italicizing English instead of Japanese like I did last chapter, because I thought there would be more Japanese in this chapter (though I'm not actually sure which had more...). Hopefully it's not too confusing! (And if you think I accidentally italicized something that shouldn't have been, or vice versa, please let me know. Thanks.)

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Kirishima cringes as his phone screen goes blank when Kou ends the call. *What was I about to say? Kou-san and I are just friends!*

Kirishima sighs and calls for help transferring to his bed. He probably should have just talked to Kou there, but it’s a matter of pride - Kirishima doesn’t like to remind Kou about his current limitations. Besides, Kirishima’s so exhausted from the outing, he might have dozed off during their conversation had he been in bed.

He’s just set his glasses on the nightstand in order to take a quick nap before dinner when his phone buzzes. He smiles at the picture of Kou’s osekihan.
How am I supposed to not be in love with you when you’re so thoughtful?

Kirishima’s in the middle of typing a reply when a video call comes in from his mom. His mind races as he swipes to answer it. It’s really early in Japan. Is something wrong?

Lately, he’s been chatting with Kazuko and Kisho in the mornings (evenings for them). The incentive of getting to talk to his Kei-ji-chan helps keep Kisho on his best behavior during the day, and he’s no longer waking up the household in anticipation. As a bonus, Kirishima can talk to Kou as long as he likes in the evening without being interrupted.

“Mom? Is everything… okay?” Kirishima skips the usual greetings.

“Everyone’s fine, but we just got home from the hospital with Kisho-chan.”

“What… happened?” Kirishima’s heart jumps in his throat.

“Remember how Saji-chan told Kisho-chan that he can’t try monkey flips without a teacher and something soft to learn on?”

Kirishima gulps and nods.

“Last night after we put him to bed, Kisho-chan decided that his futon would make a good crashpad. He declared his stuffed monkey his teacher.”

Kirishima puts his hand over his mouth. “But he’s okay?”

“He needed four stitches on his forehead, but he doesn’t have a concussion.”

Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have had the… guys show him any of their… tricks.”

Kazuko shrugs. “He was bound to try something at some point. You all did.”

“Still… hopefully he’s learned his… lesson?” Kirishima worries.

Kazuko sighs. “I don’t know. The way he’s talking, I don’t think so.”

“We should tell him… how I hurt my lower back… and head,” Kirishima says.

Kazuko frowns. “That might help… but I was also thinking maybe we should get him a proper teacher. Gymnastics, not parkour,” she clarifies. “If he’s going to keep trying, he might as well learn to do things correctly.”

Kirishima nods. “That’s a good idea.”

Kazuko bites her lip. “I hate to even ask when you’re so busy with your rehab and are already doing so much for the family business, but you have contacts with the gym you trained at, right? Could you help us find someplace close to the house that doesn’t cost too much?”

“Of course, no problem.” Kirishima feels his shoulders relax. It’s good to feel like there’s something he can do to help, especially since he still feels responsible for inspiring Kisho’s recklessness.

“Don’t spend too much time on it,” Kazuko says. “If you can’t find anything, Megumi-chan can ask the other moms at the nursery school.”

“I’ll ask Tokawa-san, the… owner of the parkour gym,” Kirishima says. “You look… exhausted.
Did you get any sleep?"

Kazuko shakes her head. “I went to the hospital with Megumi-chan and Kisho-chan. Kiyo-chan is helping finish up a rush order, so he couldn’t come with us. We needed to keep Kisho-chan awake until we got the all-clear from the doctor.”

“I bet that wasn’t easy. How… grumpy did he get?” Kirishima chuckles; he’s already quite familiar with how quickly Kisho’s mood can turn once he gets overtired.

Kazuko shakes her head as if trying to clear it of the memory. “Thankfully Megumi-chan thought to bring the bag of toys your friends gave Kisho-chan when we visited you. It helped.”

“Is he sleeping now?” Kirishima asks.

“Yes, he fell asleep in the car. He didn’t stir at all when we carried him inside.”

“When he wakes up, can you… call me? I’d like to talk to him,” Kirishima says.

Kazuko frowns. “I don’t want him to think that talking to you is his reward for trying the monkey flip.”

Kirishima sighs. “Mom, it’s not fair to use… not talking to me as a… punishment.”

“I would never do that!” Kazuko glances at the clock. “Well, we’ll see how late he wakes up. You had your excursion today, right? You must be exhausted. If it’s too late, he’ll just have to wait until the normal time. We won’t wake you up in the middle of the night.” She tries to hide a yawn.

“You should get some sleep,” Kirishima says. “Thanks for telling me about Kisho-chan’s… accident.”

Kazuko stifles another yawn. “I’m sorry. I’d love to hear about the excursion, but…” She yawns again.

“It’s fine. I can tell you after you sleep.” Kirishima is having trouble fighting his own desire to yawn. After saying goodbye, he sets the phone back on his nightstand and finally settles down to sleep.

Kirishima’s eyes blink open. There’s a face a few inches in front of his. He screams as he pulls away and instinctively fumbles for his glasses on the side table.

Saji bursts into the room, dropping his plastic bag as he reaches for his pocket. He sighs and picks up the takeout food again when he recognizes Madison. “You really need to stop doing that,” he chides, tapping her on the shoulder with the bag.

She rubs her bald head innocently. “Nani? I was just seeing if Kirishima-sama was awake, bakayarō.”

“You don’t have to get so… close,” Kirishima says, adjusting his bed to a sitting position.

“Nya. But you can’t see that well without your glasses, ne?” Madison folds her hands together and looks up at Kirishima. Her steroid-swollen cheeks give her a falsely angelic look that reminds Kirishima of Kisho.

“You could try knocking. If no one answers, come back later.” Saji taps Madison with the bag again.
She massages her shoulder and glares at him. “If I wait for someone to answer the door, I’ll be waiting until the shinigami comes and gets me, bakayarō.”

“Don’t… talk like that,” Kirishima chides.

“And stop calling me an asshole,” Saji mutters.

Madison’s jaw drops and her left hand flies to her hip as she rounds on Saji. “I can’t believe you cussed in front of me. I thought you didn’t want to contribute to the delinquency of a minor.”

Saji rolls his eyes. “You keep calling me ‘bakayarō.’ That’s the equivalent of ‘asshole.’”

“No, it’s not. It means ‘idiot.’”

“I know what it means. But it’s the same level of rudeness as ‘asshole,’” Saji explains.

Madison turns back towards Kirishima. “Really? I mean hontō?”

“We’re speaking… English. ‘Really’ is… fine. And yes.” Kirishima nods.

Madison’s right hand twitches by her side before her left one covers her mouth as her cheeks flush. She turns back to Saji and bows. “Sumimasen. Gomennasai, Saji-nii-chan.”

He waves her apology off. “It’s fine. But maybe you should stop trying to speak in Japanese until you actually study it.”

Madison lifts her right arm with her left and folds them across her chest while she glares at Saji. “That’s what I’m trying to do, but Kirishima-sama won’t teach me. And you won’t get me the Japanese-language manga I want, either.” She drops her arms by her side again as her lower lip juts out.

Saji sighs. “I told you I don’t sell manga to kids. If your mom places the order, I’m more than happy to sell whatever you want to her.”

Madison lets out a giant sigh of her own. “She won’t let me read yaoi yet. No way will she order it for me.”

“And no way am I going to sell it to you!” Saji splutters. “Of course she won’t let you read it. Wait until you’re older.”

“I’ll be fifteen in August,” Madison protests.

“Wait until you’re eighteen, at least,” Saji says, rolling his eyes.

“I may not live to eighteen,” Madison says quietly.

Kirishima and Saji both look at her sharply. There’s no hint of humor in her eyes like there was when she made the shinigami joke.

Kirishima clears his throat. “Your… surgery was… successful, right? And you’ve got a good p-… pro-… program… pro-… pro-…”

“Prognosis,” Madison fills in, waving her hand. “Yeah, but I’ve had one of those before.”

Kirishima and Saji both search for something to say, but before either can come up with anything, Madison laughs.
“Sheesh, no need to look so serious. Anyway, I already read yaoi online in English. How is reading it in Japanese going to be any worse for me?”

Saji rubs his forehead with both hands. “You shouldn’t be reading it in English, either.”

“But -” Madison starts but is interrupted.

“I thought I’d find you here, Madison,” Ken says from the doorway.

Madison checks her watch and gulps. “Gomennasai, sensei. I stopped by to ask Kirishima-sama when he was going to start teaching me Japanese, but he was asleep, and then Saji-nii-chan started harassing me.”

“I wasn’t -” Saji starts to explain.

“I’m sure it was more like you were harassing him.” Ken comes into the room and winks at Saji. “After you slept through our session yesterday-”

“I was sick!” Madison objects, looking down at the floor.

“You stayed up too late watching anime again, didn’t you?”

“Lie!” Madison denies it, looking Ken straight in the eye.

“Reading manga, then.”

Madison looks away.

“I’m not going to agree to another make-up session,” Ken says. “You do realize I helped on the outing today, right? Tomorrow is my only day off.”

“Gomennasai,” Madison apologizes again, bowing.

“Don’t be sorry. Just do what you’re supposed to do. Marian said you didn’t do your math assignment, and you also missed an occupational therapy session and a counseling session this week.” Ken rolls up the papers in his hand and gently taps Madison on the right shoulder with them.

She rubs her shoulder and glares at him. “Why do you and Saji-nii-chan keep doing that?”

Saji and Ken look at each other while Kirishima laughs.

“Here’s a... pro-... promise, Madison.” Kirishima frowns. “Promise” wasn’t quite the word he was looking for. He sighs and decides to continue anyway. “If you do... everything you're supposed to... next week - all your therapies and... homework.”

Madison picks up her right hand with her left and clasps them in front of her, nodding.

Kirishima closes his eyes in concentration. “And I mean... really do them with all your best... effort...” He opens his eyes again to make sure his meaning is clear.

Madison smooths her smile into a serious expression and nods more vigorously.

“And if Tanaka-san... confirms it,” Kirishima glances at Ken, who nods, “I’ll give you a Japanese lesson next... weekend.”

“Yatta!” Madison throws her left arm around Kirishima’s neck and squeezes him. “Arigatō
“gozaimashita!”

“You haven’t done it yet. And neither has Kirishima-san,” Saji says. He taps Madison on the left shoulder with the bag before finally setting it down on the nightstand.

“How?” Madison turns to shoot a blank look in Saji’s direction.

“You just said ‘I did it.’ You haven’t done it yet,” Saji says, giving Madison an equally confused look.

“Doesn’t ‘yatta’ mean ‘hooray’?” Madison asks.

Saji rolls his eyes. “Here’s your first lesson. Words don’t translate exactly from one language to another. You have to understand the literal meaning to know when to use them properly.”

Madison blinks at him.

“‘Yatta’ means ‘I did it.’ So while sometimes you can use it in place of ‘hooray’ -”

“It was really dumb of me to use it that way just now.” Madison’s cheeks flame as she stares at the ground. She looks up at Saji. “But ‘arigatō gozaimashita’ was wrong, too?”

“It’s past tense. Since Kirishima-san hasn’t taught you anything yet, you should use ‘arigatō gozaimasu’ instead.”

Madison nods slowly. “I see. I think.” She frowns. “It’s hard to wrap my brain around it, though. ‘Thank you’ doesn’t have a tense in English.”


“You should get Tsubasa to teach you instead of Kei,” Ken says. “I mean, if he’d be willing to, of course.” He shrugs sheepishly at Saji.

Saji shrugs back. “I could help.”

Madison blushes even redder but shakes her head. “No, thank you.”

Kirishima and Ken laugh as Saji’s eyebrows shoot up. “Did I do that bad explaining it?”

Madison’s entire scalp is red. “No, your explanation was really good. It’s just… Kirishima-sama understands what it’s like… You know. For your brain not to work so good.” She’s now so red, sweat is starting to bead on her forehead. She sticks out her tongue. “Besides, Kirishima-sama is nicer than you.”

“Not if he’s making you call him ‘sama’.” Saji gives Kirishima a wicked grin.

“I’m… not! I’ve asked her a… hundred times… to stop,” Kirishima objects.

Saji and Ken both crack up.

Ken shakes his head. “She won’t stop calling me ‘sensei,’ either.” He looks at Madison. “What are we going to do with you?”

She looks at the ceiling and throws her left hand in the air while her right hand flops at her side. “Teach me Japanese!”
The three men bust up laughing.

“She’s determined, I’ll give her that,” Ken says, rubbing Madison’s head, which earns him another glare.

“We’ve got a… deal, right?” Kirishima finally remembers the word he was searching for earlier. “Don’t you have some… physical therapy to do?” he reminds Madison.

She sighs loudly but nods.

“Um… Before you go, do you two want some dinner?” Saji asks, holding up the bag of food. “I got some osekihan to celebrate Kirishima-san’s first outing.”

Madison squeals. “IRL BL!” She looks excitedly back and forth from Saji to Kirishima.

Ken rests his forehead on his palm and sighs.

Saji and Kirishima both blush, but Kirishima asks, “What’s... ‘IRL’?”

Madison clamps her hand over her mouth and blushes again, but it’s clear that she’s still grinning.

“It stands for ‘in real life,’” Ken explains, blushing and determinedly not looking at Saji.

Saji clears his throat. “It’s not,” he says emphatically. “I don’t know what weird misconceptions you’ve gotten from manga and anime, but osekihan is a celebration food for any holiday or special occasion. I literally just said it’s to celebrate his first outing.” He sneaks a look at Ken. “Not that there’s anything wrong with BL. I’m just not... with Kirishima-san.”

Madison squeals again, her eyes shifting to look between Saji and Ken.

“Or with anyone else... right now,” Saji continues to clarify, stealing another glance at Ken.

By now, Saji’s face is as pink as Madison’s, with Ken’s not too far behind. Kirishima finds it strange - but not unpleasant - to be the person in the room blushing the least, but he can feel his own cheeks starting to warm from the uncomfortable atmosphere.

“Let’s eat!” he says. He takes the bag of food from Saji, pulls out the containers, and removes rubber bands from them.

“We’ll need more plates,” Saji says as he opens Kirishima’s cabinet and pulls out the two stored there.

“I’ll get some from the dining room,” Ken offers, hurrying towards the door.

“And chopsticks - or spoons, maybe,” Saji calls after him. “Thank you!”

Seeing the osekihan reminds Kirishima of Kou’s text. Did I ever finish writing my reply?

Kirishima pulls out his phone to check, excusing himself to Madison and Saji.

He takes a picture of the osekihan but then frowns at his phone.

“Is there something wrong with the food?” Saji asks.

“No. I was going to send a... picture to Kou-san, but he made me some... osekihan, too, and I don’t want to be… insensitive.” Now Kirishima is the reddest person in the room.
“I didn't make this,” Saji points out. “But I see your point. On the one hand, you could be eating the same thing, almost like you're together. On the other hand -” Saji glances at Madison and switches to Japanese. “You could actually be eating the same thing together if you weren't such a scaredy cat and would just tell him you're only a short drive away.”

“You know why I can't do… that,” Kirishima grits out.

“That's really rude, you know,” Madison objects.

They ignore her.

Saji casts a furtive glance towards the open door and leans closer, speaking in a low voice so that Kirishima also has to lean in to hear. “Look… About that… I was told not to tell you something, but I think you should know. I'll tell you… later.” Saji straightens back up as Ken jogs back into the room.

“Did I miss something?” he asks, looking between Kirishima and Saji.

“No,” they say at the same time Madison says, “Yes.”

“Saji-nii-chan and Kirishima-sama - fine, Kirishima-san - were whispering to each other in Japanese.”

“Maybe we should go -” Ken says, indicating himself and Madison. He looks down at the food. “That doesn't look like enough for four people.”

“It's fine, I ate a late lunch and am not that hungry yet,” Saji says. “Please stay. It's a celebration.”

“I've never had Japanese food before,” Madison says. She claps her hands together, says, “Itadakimasu,” and picks up her chopsticks. After five failed attempts at getting any food to her mouth with them, Saji takes them from her. “But -”

Her objection is cut off when Saji secures the ends together with a rubber band and hands them back to her. He shows her how to hold them, and soon she's taking her first bite.

“Oishii!” Madison digs in.

“Have some vegetables, too,” Saji says, passing the containers of tempura and seaweed salad to her. She looks skeptical but takes a small amount of each.

“Oishii!” she says again after a tentative bite of the seaweed salad.

When she digs into the tempura, too, Ken reaches over and checks her forehead for a fever. “Who are you, and what have you done with the real Madison Morgan?”

“Very funny, sensei - I mean, Ken-san.” Madison pushes his hand away.

Ken, who has been so busy watching Madison he hasn’t tried the food yet, scrapes most of the tempura and seaweed salad from his own plate onto Madison’s. Saji eyes him, and Ken shrugs and says, “I'm not very hungry, yet, either. Besides, this is the first time I've seen Madison actually eating instead of just picking at her food.”

Saji and Ken each pick at their miniscule helpings a single rice grain or bean at a time. Saji’s stomach growls loudly. He blushes.

Kirishima picks up his plate and tries to give Saji some of his food.
Saji pulls his plate away. “No, thank you. That was just the sound of my food digesting from my late lunch. Besides, you’re in recovery mode. I’ll eat later.”

Kirishima rolls his eyes. His eyes glitter as he switches to Japanese. “You and Tanaka-san are both… terrible liars. The two of you should go get some more… food after he finishes with… Madison-chan. My treat.”

Saji and Ken both choke. “Kirishima-san!” Saji coughs.

“What?” Kirishima asks, blinking innocently.

Madison pouts, frustrated at being left out of the conversation once again. She waits until Kirishima takes a big bite before asking, “Who is Kou-san?”

It’s Kirishima’s turn to choke. Over his coughing fit, Saji says, “The love of Kirishima’s life.”

“Saji-kun!” Kirishima splutters.

“What? It’s true, isn’t it?”

Kirishima balls up his napkin and throws it at Saji. “Bakayarō.”

As Kirishima’s face continues to work its way through hues of pink into shades of red, an uncomfortable silence settles over the foursome. Madison’s mouth grows wider and wider until she can’t hold it back anymore.

“Yatta! I spoke a whole sentence in Japanese, and you understood me!” she cheers.

The others all look at her, surprised.

She sets her chopsticks down and cups her hand with her mouth, stage-whispering, “Also, IRL BL!” She picks up her chopsticks again and says in a normal tone, “But I’m trying to be polite.”

After the meal is finished, Ken sends Madison ahead to the physical therapy room with an “I need to talk to Kirishima-san for a minute.”

As soon as she’s gone, Kirishima says, “So, what did you want to talk about… Tanaka-san?”

Ken scratches the back of his head. “Oh… I was just wondering… how you were feeling after the excursion today. Three kilometers is much farther than you’ve gone before.”

“I was pretty tired afterwards and took a nap, but I’m… better now. I think my arms are going to be sore… tomorrow.”

Ken glances at Saji but quickly returns his gaze to Kirishima. “Well, take it easy. But if you are sore, it’s better to do at least a little movement.”

“I know,” Kirishima says. Is this really all he wanted to say? He could have said that in front of Madison.

Ken steals another quick glance at Saji. “Well, I should probably get going…” He walks slowly towards the door, turning once to say, “Thanks again for dinner. And congratulations.”

Kirishima elbows Saji and nods after Ken. Saji looks confused, so Kirishima says, “Go ask him to
dinner, you idiot!”

Saji flushes and squirms for a moment before hopping out of his seat and jogging towards the door. Kirishima can hear him calling down the hall. “Uh, wait a second, Ken!”

A minute later, Saji returns, still blushing but looking happy.

“He said yes,” Kirishima observes. He reaches into his nightstand drawer and pulls out two twenty-dollar bills. “Will this be enough?”

Saji shakes his head. “I’ve got it.”

“But-” Kirishima starts to object.

“Thanks, but I’d really rather pay for it myself. You know.” Saji blushes again.

Kirishima shrugs and puts his money away. “Suit yourself. Thanks again for the… osekihan.”

Saji walks to the door, checks the hallway, and closes the door. “Um… You won’t tell Motomi-san where you are because you’re worried you’re not safe here, right?”

Kirishima resists the urge to roll his eyes, nodding instead. “I know much too much about… Asami-sama’s business. If anyone figures out where I am…”

“They won’t.” Saji says.

“You can’t know -”

“I know,” Saji says with such certainty it makes Kirishima blink for a moment.

“How?”

Saji swallows and looks away. “I was told not to tell you. They thought it might… upset you.”

“Don’t you think I can handle it?”

Saji looks back at Kirishima for a long moment. “Yeah. Probably. But I’m not a psychologist.”

“Kurebayashi-sensei made this… decision?” Kirishima can feel the anger that lately always seems to simmer just below the surface start to bubble up.

Saji looks away again. “I don’t know who, exactly. Suoh-senmu-san was the one who told me.”

“But you said you… thought you should… tell me,” Kirishima grits out.

Saji sighs. “Fine. No one is going to come looking for you because they think you’re dead.”

Kirishima blinks.

Saji sighs. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’m fine. It’s just… surprising. But it makes sense.”

Very few bosses would let someone leave their organization. And no one would let their right-hand man go so easily.

A laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep inside Kirishima.
Saji stares at him. “Should I call Kurebayashi-sensei?” He picks up his phone.

Kirishima shakes his head again as he tries to contain his laughter. “I'm fine. Really.”

And he is. He somehow feels much lighter than he has in months. Even after Asami had accepted his resignation, Kirishima had still felt like maybe he was making a mistake and wondered if he should go back.

But if he's “dead,” there's no going back now.

*I just wish I could see my path forward.*

Kirishima still has no idea what he wants to do with the rest of his life. He's been holding onto the idea of going back to Sion like a life raft.

He shakes his head. He doesn't need to think about that right now.

“Was there a… funeral?” The laughter is threatening to bubble up again.

Saji still looks concerned. “I shouldn't have told you.”

“I'm just… trying to make sure… the thing was done right.” Kirishima can't contain his laughter anymore.

Saji slaps his phone down on the nightstand and stands up. “I'm glad you find it funny. Too bad the rest of us can't.” He starts to leave the room.

“Saji-kun, wait!” Kirishima calls, pulling himself together. “I don't. I'm just… trying to… process it.”

Saji sighs and sits back down, though he's still eying Kirishima skeptically. “I know this is hardest for you, but it's not easy on the rest of us, either. You don't have to keep shutting us out.”

“Us?” Kirishima asks.

“Me. The rest of the guys. You haven't logged onto Twitter yet, right?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I just…” His eyes fill with tears that he angrily blinks back. “Can't you understand how… hard it would be… to see everyone talking about… parkour all the time?”

“Do you really think we'd be that insensitive?” Saji snaps back. “If it was just the guys planning their next jam, do you really think I'd keep telling you to check? You're our friend. We thought we were yours, too.”

Now Saji's the one blinking back tears.

“What - of course you guys are,” Kirishima says. “I'm sorry I -”

Saji shakes his head and swipes at his eyes. “Don't apologize, dummy. I'm sorry. You're going through a lot right now. I shouldn't be putting all this on you.”

Kirishima shakes his own head. “I… Asami-sama was my first… friend. And we weren't friends very long before I became his… employee. I… don't really know… how to be a good… friend.”

“That's not true,” Saji says. “You’ve been a good friend to me, helping me accept my sexuality and encouraging me about this thing with Ken. And I know you helped Yoneda and Shiharu-chan, too - you even lent them your apartment! And you showed us all those awesome parkour spots. You just
need to learn how to accept our help, too.”

“I just feel like I don’t have a lot to… offer right now. I don’t want to take… advantage of anyone.”

“That’s okay. We all go through rough patches. Sometimes you need more than you can give, but other times you can be the one with the strong shoulder. Besides, you’ve been helping me plenty with Ken even though you’re injured.”

“Not as much as you’ve been helping me,” Kirishima points out.

Saji snorts. “That’s my job. You do know that, right? Anyway, check your Twitter. And stop worrying about being found. It’s okay to tell Motomi-san where you are.”

Kirishima takes a deep breath and nods. “I’ll think about it.”

Saji sighs. “There’s something else going on. If you want to talk about it, I’m here. Otherwise…” He shrugs. “I don’t want to push you.”

Kirishima licks his lips. “I just don’t want to get… hurt again.”

“That’s fair enough. But at some point, if you want to make any progress, you’re going to have to take that leap.”

Kirishima decides it’s time for a topic change. “Speaking of Kou-san and you and Tanaka-san…” Saji’s eyebrows shoot up. Kirishima continues, “If you take my place in the… mud run, and Tanaka-san coaches you, I’ll pay for both of you to fly to… Japan for it.”

Saji rolls his eyes. “That’s not necessary. Besides, Yoneda and Sakuragi have already replaced you.”

Kirishima’s mouth drops open. He closes it and smooths his face into an indifferent expression. “I guess I should have… figured….”

Saji raps on Kirishima’s forehead gently with his knuckles. “They wanted your input, but since you wouldn’t check your Twitter… The deadline for changes was approaching.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, they asked Tokawa-san. Check your Twitter.” Saji’s phone buzzes. When he checks it, he grins broadly. “Hey! I finally heard back from one of the Youtubers! GiovanNihon said he’d love to film a kimono fitting.” Saji continues reading. “He wants to do it in collaboration with someone else…” Saji whistles. “I’ve heard of her.” He pulls up Youtube and whistles again. “She’s got over a million subscribers!”

Kirishima and Saji work on the Kirishima family business until Ken returns from his session with Madison. When they had delved into fixing the website, they quickly realized that the problems with the business could not be solved by a better website, no matter how flashy. Kirishima had convinced his family to have a conference to bring their parents into the loop. There had been tears and some shouting, but eventually their father Katsutoshi had accepted the reality that unless they made significant changes immediately, they would soon be completely bankrupt and have to close shop permanently.

Kirishima had used his skills as a negotiator to make sure that everyone’s concerns would be incorporated into the new business model. It turned out Katsutoshi’s main concerns are related to
maintaining the traditions and skills related to dying and ornamentation, along with preserving the culture and history. Kenta, who’s always been a bit of an anime otaku, is interested in incorporating technology into the business and reaching the vast international Japanophile market. Kiyoshi, on the other hand, who has always been focused more on the front of the shop, is interested in how they can make the customer’s experience better. Meanwhile, Kumiko just wants to continue to experiment and innovate, creating new patterns by integrating traditional techniques with more modern designs. Kazuko’s suggestions helped to integrate and complement the disparate goals of the others.

They spent a week brainstorming and coming up with a few different avenues to pursue. Now they’re testing each out. Saji’s programming skills will enable them to track which avenues are driving new business to the store, so they can later focus on the most productive strategies.

One of the strategies that has worked for other kimono sellers is to rent out kimonos to tourists for the day, so they can learn about kimono history and take pictures around Nihonbashi. To help get the word out to tourists, Saji suggested giving free fittings to gaijin YouTubers, whose viewers might then schedule their own fitting when they visit Japan.

And that’s what Kirishima and Saji are working on now. Kirishima has found that Kurebayashi was right - that rehabilitating his injuries is a full time job - but he works on the business at least a little every day, and for a few hours on the weekend (when he has more free time thanks to not having therapy sessions).

Saji has thrown himself into the project, and while Kirishima initially worried that Saji was doing too much and would come to resent it, Saji has insisted that he enjoys it and that it gives him something to do while waiting for Kirishima to complete his various therapies (since Kessler has continued to strictly enforce its policy that no one can accompany patients to therapy unless they’re part of the lesson).

They’re going over the list of bloggers and travel writers to invite for a fitting when Ken knocks on the door. Saji jumps up but then stands awkwardly, not sure how to greet Ken.

“You guys must be starving by now,” Kirishima says. “Have a good time!”

Once they’re gone, he logs into his Twitter account. He blinks at the number of direct messages he has.

*Two hundred fifty-three? That can’t be right.*

He scrolls through the DMs. Picture after picture appears, reminding Kirishima of his conversation with Saji on the plane recalling their favorite places in Japan: the spots he and Yoneda practiced parkour in Odaiba, Hanegi Park, Geinki, his old apartment, the boulder overlooking the beech trees in Showa Kinen Park (How did they find that?), Sion, Tokawa’s gym… Kirishima stops when he gets to the pictures of Kou’s favorite parkour spots around Musashino Art University.

*How did they figure out exactly where to go?*

There’s even a series of photos going over Motomi Pass, which isn’t that interesting a parkour challenge unless you actually needed to get from one building to another quickly, the way Kou had to back when he was a student. Kirishima continues scrolling, and some of the photos include parts of people doing parkour. There’s a neat panoramic time-lapse of someone tic-tacing their way
through Tic-Tac Alley, so all you see beneath the expanse of blue sky are ghostly feet where they slowed down bouncing off the walls.

*Only Kou-san was able to tic-tac the whole way down Tic-Tac Alley. But it can’t be him.*

Kirishima looks more closely at the shoes.

*Ah. Tokawa-san. Of course, he must have jammed there with Kou-san now and again.*

Kirishima continues to scroll through. The guys have each sent him dozens of messages, even though Kirishima hasn’t responded to any of them, and the most recent ones were sent today. It’s obvious Saji has been keeping them apprised of Kirishima’s progress, because today’s messages are all well wishes for a successful outing.

Kirishima’s heart overflows, and soon his eyes do, too. He sets the phone down and gives into the emotions for a moment. Despite having Saji, Kou, and his family, it’s been lonely. But Kirishima was the one who isolated himself. He wipes his eyes and promises he’ll respond to everyone tomorrow.

But now all the activity of the day has caught up with him, and he’s tired. He gets ready for bed and falls asleep looking at the pictures from Musashino Art University.

The next morning, he wakes up to sunshine streaming in his window.

*I slept late.*

“Kei-san?”

Kirishima wonders if he’s still dreaming. He turns his head. Kou is standing in the doorway holding a vase filled with an assortment of flowers.

“Kou-san,” Kirishima breathes. He struggles to sit up, forgetting to use the bed controls in his haste.

Kou is across the room in two quick strides, his arms wrapped around Kirishima, lifting him the rest of the way up as he hugs him tightly. And Kirishima is hugging back, feeling the warm solidness he’s missed so much.

“You’re so skinny,” Kou says, reluctantly letting Kirishima go after a minute.

Kirishima adjusts the bed to a sitting position. He suddenly becomes conscious of his morning breath and messy hair. He reaches up and tries to smooth his cowlick - the one that’s come back as his hair has grown after his injury.

“I like the longer hair,” Kou says. “And the goatee.”

Kirishima rubs his chin with his hand. Haircuts and shaving have fallen completely off his radar. He blushes.

Kou hands over the flowers. Kirishima looks at them, immediately understanding the flower language from his years of helping at his family’s shop: Chinese magnolia (love of nature), snapdragon (strength), scarlet zinnia (constancy), white hyacinth (“I’m praying for you”), lily of the valley (promise of happiness), iris (good news), peach rose (immortality), and lilac (first love). There are eight total, symbolic of growth and prosperity.
“Thank you,” Kirishima murmurs, blushing.

“Sorry if it's a little weird looking,” Kou says, blushing himself. “The florist didn't want to combine some of them, but I really wanted to pick eight. She tried to tell me to stick to only four different kinds.” Kou shudders.

“Thank you. It's beautiful,” Kirishima says. “I can tell you put a lot of… thought into it. It's like a… letter.”

Kou blushes redder. “You know flower meanings?”

Kirishima shrugs. “Well, yeah. It’s important for kimono making. There’s a… sink in the bathroom. Would you mind adding some water to the… vase, please?”

“Of course! Sorry, Chris gave me a ride on his scooter, so I had to dump out the water. But I wrapped them in damp paper towels so they wouldn't wilt.”

“It's fine,” Kirishima reassures Kou. “They're perfect. Thanks again.”

While Kou fills the vase, Kirishima tries to slick down his hair.

*I still have to do my morning routine.*

Kirishima frowns. He's already late because he slept in, and going to the bathroom really can't wait. He sighs and calls for assistance as Kou comes back into the room.

Kou looks at Kirishima questioningly.

“I'm sorry, Kou-san. I have to get… ready for the day. How long can you stay?”

Kou sets the flowers on the nightstand. “Chris has to work at two, so we should leave by noon. I'm sorry, I should have called first, but I was afraid you'd tell me not to come again. I thought you didn't have any appointments on Sunday.”

“I don't, but… everything takes… longer now.”

“Well, that's okay. I'll wait until you're ready.” Kou smiles reassuringly and squeezes Kirishima's hand.

“It could take up to an… hour,” Kirishima warns.

“It's fine. I'll wait.” Kou smiles more broadly.

The orderly comes in. Kirishima takes a deep breath and tries to make Kou understand. “I'm sorry. Can you… please wait… outside?”

Kou's face falls. “For an hour?”

“We might… finish sooner,” Kirishima says. “I can ask… Saji-kun to… show you some… parkour… spots nearby.” Kirishima feels bad about asking Kou to leave for so long, but the process of relieving his bowels is too demeaning.

Kou frowns. “I don't have to wait outside the whole time, do I?”

Kirishima blushes. “Even… Saji-kun… waits… outside.” Kirishima realizes his mistake as soon as the words are out of his mouth.
Kou sprints for the door.

“Kou-san… wait!” But by the time Kirishima gets the words out, Kou is already out the door and Saji is standing in the doorway, looking at Kirishima. Kirishima gestures after Kou, and Saji nods and quickly disappears, too.

The orderly, who hasn’t been able to understand a single thing said since he walked into the room, impatiently asks, “Are you ready for your morning routine or not?”

Kirishima sighs and says, “Yes, sorry,” steeling himself for the upcoming humiliation and trying not to think about Kou.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry. I didn't know that was going to go down like that until Kou showed up so early. It had to be done. Hopefully Saji can catch up to Kou and knock some sense into him.

I'm going to leave Kirishima his privacy regarding his routine. If you really want to know, you can research "neurogenic bowel management."
Chapter Summary

Kou thinks he's figured out where Kirishima is, but what will happen when Kou's friends decide it's time to stage an intervention and drag him to a gay bar in New York? And why is Akihito not returning Kou's calls?

Chapter Notes

I feel that I should warn you that a lot more needed to happen on Kou's end than I realized before reaching the "present" moment of him showing up to the rehabilitation center, so that won't happen until next chapter. But I hope to finish that by Christmas for you. I feel like this chapter actually answers many of the questions you guys have raised in the comments (100% Kou's decision), so hopefully you'll still enjoy it.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Ken(taro) Tanaka: Kirishima's physical therapist
Akihito’s phone goes straight to voicemail. Kou frowns, remembering the raid on Kodama-gumi. He leaves another message, then sends a text in case Akihito is on a stakeout and can’t listen to the message.

_I saw the news about Kodama-gumi. Let me know you’re okay._

Kou frowns at his phone. He checks the website of Akihito’s newspaper. Sure enough, the main page is covered with articles about the Kodama-gumi raid. Kou notices the photos aren’t that great as he skims the bylines. Most of them were taken by Mitarai, and none were taken by Akihito.

_There’s no way Aki would stay away from a story this huge - especially when he was the one to break it in the first place._

Kou texts Takato. Takato’s reply is nearly instant.

_Sorry, I haven’t heard from Aki in like a month. I’ll let you know if I do hear, but you know how he is. I wouldn’t worry too much._

Kou sighs. He never told Takato what he learned about Akihito’s disappearance to Hong Kong, and he knows Takato assumed Akihito had just gone on assignment to Okinawa and made up an interesting story about being kidnapped. _Takato doesn’t even know about Asami-san._

Kou freezes.

_Of course. Asami-san would know where Akihito is._

But Kou doesn’t have any contact information for Asami - and it’s not like he should be contacting the head of Tokyo’s underworld, anyway! Governments could be tapping known criminals’ communications.

_Which is why you shouldn’t be talking to Kei-san._

But everything Kou and Kirishima talk about is completely innocuous, so Kou _should_ be okay.
Especially since Kirishima isn’t even in Japan anymore, much less working for Asami right now - at least not that Kou knows about.

*Stop, Kou. He doesn’t have time to be working right now.*

Kou focuses his attention back on trying to reach Akihito.

*Even if I figure out how to, if I contact Asami-san about the Kodama-gumi raid, that could definitely get me noticed by the intelligence agencies.*

Kou runs his fingers through his hair. There’s got to be something he can do. He closes his eyes and thinks for a long moment.

His eyes snap open and he snatches up his phone again. He sends a text to his top contact.

> Hi, Kei-san. I’m trying to get in touch with Aki, but he’s not answering.

> If you hear from him, could you please ask him to call me?

Kou sighs. That’s the best he can do for now.

Kirishima doesn’t answer right away, but he looked so tired when they chatted earlier, Kou figures Kirishima must be napping by now.

Kou scrolls up and looks at the photo of Kirishima again.

*Is that really New Jersey? Where did Chris say it was again? The Orange Reservoir?*

He searches for it and finds the bridge in street view. He zooms in on the county seal that Chris says he recognized and sees there are words around the edges, though they’re too fuzzy to make out. Once Kou figures out that the reservoir is in Essex County, he looks up its seal. Then he looks again at Kirishima’s picture, zooming in as much as he can on the bridge. The focus of the picture was on Kirishima himself, so the emblem on the bridge is out of focus, but Kou squints and compares it to the image of the county seal.

*Those definitely look like English letters, not kanji.*

And the words are approximately the correct length and in the correct location for it to be the county seal.

*Did Kei-san lie to me again?*

Kou rubs his eyes as he remembers Kirishima telling him, “There is something I’m not telling you about my treatment because I want you to promise me you won’t try to visit… no matter what you hear.”

Kou snorts.

*I guess you can’t call it lying. How could we be in the same time zone and I not know it?*

He thinks back to all the conversations they’ve had - always in the evening for Kou, and he’d assumed in the morning for Kirishima. But just today, Kirishima had looked exhausted, as if he’d just returned from the outing, and not like he’d already had a long night’s sleep of recovery.

*I’m an idiot.*
Kou checks through the texts he’s received from Kirishima. While the vast majority were sent in the evening and most of the rest in the morning, there were a dozen sent in the middle of the day - and only one sent in the middle of the night.

Kou’s heart thrills.

*He’s in New Jersey! I could visit him now!*

Kou searches for rehabilitation centers near the reservoir. He frowns when dozens show up, many of them for drug treatment. He adds “in-patient,” and only a few results are left on the map. One of them is called Kessler, but another is all the way in Manhattan - Mount Sinai.

*I’m pretty sure I heard about that one on a TV show. Isn’t it really famous? But it’s kind of far from the reservoir - there have to be a hundred parks in between.*

Kou frowns. *If I were going to go to the other side of the world, I’d pick the best facility.*

He finds a list of the top ten physical rehabilitation centers according to a website called “Brain and Spinal Cord.” There’s Kessler again, plus one at New York University, one in Pennsylvania, and another in Boston.

He looks at Kessler’s website first since it’s closest to the reservoir. He skims the page for the Center for Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation until he sees “traumatic brain injury.” He carefully reads:

> “Many of our patients have a dual-diagnosis of spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury. For these individuals we offer a highly specialized program to treat the multiple physical, functional and cognitive challenges they face.”

*This has got to be it.*

Before he has time to think, he calls the number for the West Orange campus, the one closest to the reservoir and the only one with the “dual diagnosis” program.

> “Hello. May I please speak to Kirishima Kei? I mean Kei Kirishima?”

There’s a long pause. *“I’m sorry, there’s no one here by that name.”*

> “Um, I believe he’s a patient. Kirishima.” Kou spells out the name. He starts to spell Kirishima’s first name, but he’s interrupted.

> “I’m sorry, but there’s no one here by that name.”

> “Oh.” Kou ends the call and lays his head on the table.

> “Is something wrong?”

Kou sits up, startled. Thomas is looking down at him with concern. Kou slumps back in his chair and sighs. *“I don’t know. Chris thought he recognized the location of Kei-san’s outing today, and at first I thought he was crazy -”*

> “Chris has been to Japan?” Thomas’s eyebrows shoot up.

Kou shakes his head. *“No. He thinks it’s in New Jersey.”* Kou briefly explains how he thought he’d figured out where Kirishima was.

> “That sounds like wishful thinking,” Thomas says.
Kou shows him the photo of the bridge (Sorry, Kei-san), and the county seal. “So what do you think?”

“Girl, I think you really need to get out of the house and stop obsessing over Kei-san.” Thomas unpacks his lunch bag and starts washing his dishes. He looks over his shoulder at Kou. “Have you even eaten dinner yet?”

“Dinner? I had lunch not too long ago,” Kou says.

“It’s nine fifteen. How long have you been trying to figure out where Kei-san is?” Thomas asks.

Kou shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s fine. I got everything I needed to get done earlier.”

“Is that your laundry up on the roof?” Thomas asks.

“Shoot! I forgot!” Kou stands up.

“Wait a sec. Let’s order some food first.”

“But -” Kou starts to object.

“My treat,” Thomas insists. “I’m starving for some pizza, and I don’t want to end up eating the whole pie.”


Thomas frowns and shakes his head. “That ain’t pizza. Can we eat them tomorrow?”

Kou nods.

“You like pepperoni?”

Kou nods again.

“Want anything else?” Thomas is already dialing the pizza place.

Kou shakes his head.

“I’ll get some garlic knots,” Thomas says. He places the order.

The pizza place employee is so loud, Kou can hear the entire conversation. “We usually stop taking delivery orders at nine fifteen. Let me check with our delivery guy.” After a brief pause, the employee says, “What’s your address?”

Thomas recites it, and the employee repeats it. After another pause, he says, “We’ll do it this time. Make sure you tip him well. He’s my nephew. First day on the job.”

By the time Kou returns with his neatly folded laundry, Thomas has set the table and is popping open a beer. He looks up. “You want one?”

Kou starts to shake his head but changes his mind. “Sure. Thanks.”

Thomas’s eyebrows shoot up. Since moving in, Kou hasn’t drunk any alcohol because it’s too
expensive. Thomas wordlessly hands the beer over to Kou and opens another one.


There’s a knock on the door, and since he’s closer to it, Kou opens it. It’s Chris, holding out a box with two paper bags balanced on top.

Chris laughs. “I didn’t think I’d told you the name of my uncle’s restaurant. Judging by your face, I definitely didn’t.”

“Thomas placed the order,” Kou explains as Thomas comes to the door with his wallet.

“Wow, the mysterious, cute roommate does exist!” Chris exclaims.

Kou blushes and stammers, “I didn’t - I mean - I didn’t -”

“That’s true. I added the ‘cute’ part myself,” Chris confesses, blushing a little but grinning at Thomas.

Thomas smiles back widely. “Is this the elusive Chris? Kou didn’t mention you were cute, either.” He hands Chris a twenty-dollar bill. Chris hands the box to Kou and fumbles for his wallet, but Thomas says, “Keep the change.”

“You don’t have to tip me,” Chris protests.

Thomas wags his finger at Chris. “Nuh-uh. I wouldn’t stiff Kou’s friend. And you shouldn’t let your friends take advantage of you.”

“Well, thanks.” Chris takes one of the bags off the top of the box. “Well, have a good night.”

“See you,” Kou says. “Thanks for the pizza.”

“Wait. Is that another delivery?” Thomas asks.

Chris shakes his head. “Someone called in an order for a calzone but cancelled it after it was already in the oven. My uncle gave it to me.”

“So come on in and join us. You want to eat that while it’s hot, right?” Thomas winks at Chris.

“I don’t want to get in your way…” Chris says, looking at Kou.

Thomas snorts. “You won’t be in our way. I’m trying to cheer up this hopeless case and get his mind off Kei-san for one night. I could really use the help.”

“Hey!” Kou objects. “I’m not hopeless!” He looks at Chris. “Of course you’re welcome to join us, but don’t feel like you have to if you’ve got somewhere else to go.”

They’re soon sitting around the table. “I’ve never had a calzone before,” Kou says. “What is it?”

“Basically a pizza with the toppings on the inside and the sauce on the side to dip it,” Chris explains. “Never underestimate the number of ways we Italians have come up with to combine cheese, sauce, and carbs.”
Kou stares at him. “You’re Italian? I thought you were Polish. And German.”

Chris shrugs. “Those, too. But my Italian side is where I got my red hair.”

“Italian? Not Irish or Scottish?” Thomas raises his eyebrows.

“Nah. My mom’s dad is from Northern Italy. He was a redhead, too, before his hair turned white. As far as I know, we don’t have any Irish or Scottish blood, though we’re not sure what my dad’s mom was.”

Thomas shrugs. “I’m a mutt, too. I know I’ve got Swedish, French, English, German, and Russian, and who knows what else.”

Kou shakes his head. “That’s weird. You’re both American, right? You were born here, and your parents were born here.”

“Well, yeah,” Thomas and Chris say at the same time.

“What about you?” Chris asks. “Do you have any Korean in you? A lot of Japanese do, right?”

Kou shrugs. “Not as far as I know.”

“But if you did, your family might have some of the Korean traditions as well as Japanese ones, right? I mean, my uncle owns an Italian restaurant because he learned how to cook from his mom and nonnas, who were both born in Italy. And I like stinky cheese like my German opa and pierogies like my Polish babcia.”

Thomas shrugs. “I don’t think we have any traditions like that. None that I know of, anyway.”

Kou’s stomach rumbles. Chris cuts off a third of the calzone and places it on Kou’s plate.

Thomas jumps up and opens the fridge. He turns and looks at Chris. “You like Red Stripe? It’s all I’ve got.”

“Never tried it.”

Thomas opens the bottle and hands it to Chris.

Chris takes a swig and wipes his mouth, grinning. “That’s good. Thanks.”

As they eat, Thomas steers the conversation back towards Kou. “So what are we going to do with this guy?” he asks Chris, gesturing at Kou. “I’ve been trying to show him an American gay bar since he got here, but he keeps turning me down.”

“We should go tonight!” Chris exclaims.

Kou glares at him. “But -”

“No buts!” Chris orders. “You’ve barely been letting yourself experience anything since you got here. Everything’s about saving all your money to go visit Kei-san who’s probably in New Jersey!”

“He’s not,” Kou says quietly, with such certitude that Chris drops his slice of pizza onto his plate.

Thomas shares the short version of what he found Kou doing when he got home.

“That settles it, You’re coming out with us tonight whether you want to or not,” Chris declares. He
looks at Thomas. “Assuming tonight’s good for you?”

“What if it’s not good for me?” Kou objects.

They both wave their hands at Kou’s objections. “You’ve got nothing else to do but obsess some more over Kei-san. This is an intervention,” Thomas declares.

“So where shall we go? Hombres Lounge? Club Evolution?” Chris suggests.

Thomas wrinkles his nose. “Those are both too far. Icon is closer, and there’s no cover tonight.”

“I thought they were all about drag shows,” Chris says.

“Sometimes. But they’ve got gogo dancers and mad lit music on Saturdays. Have you seriously never been?”

Chris blushes. “Most of my friends have a thing against drag - not that I do! I’ve just never been.”

“It’s seriously easy stumbling distance away. But the drinks are kind of pricey, so we should drink before we go.”

By this point, Kou has resigned himself to being dragged out for a night of “fun,” and he’s focused on finishing his food.

Thomas pulls out his phone. “Shoot. It’s after ten. The liquor store next door is already closed.”

“Is there one near the bar?” Kou asks.

Thomas looks momentarily puzzled. “I don’t know. But there’s one a couple blocks over that’s open late, so we’ll go there.”

Kou shrugs. He hasn’t finished his beer yet, so he takes the bottle with him. They’re halfway down the stairs when Chris notices. “What are you doing, son?”

“What do you mean?” Kou looks between Chris and Thomas.

Chris takes the bottle out of Kou’s hand. “You can’t bring this with you. You have to finish it!”

Kou frowns. “I wanted to enjoy it on our walk.”

“It’s illegal,” Thomas chimes in.

Kou wrinkles his brow. “It is? Why?”

Chris explains. “It’s called an open container law. You can’t have open containers of alcohol in public. You also can’t be drunk in public, either.”

“Seriously?” Kou looks between them, sure they’re teasing him.

“Dead ass,” Chris assures him. “Right, in Japan you guys have sake at hanami in the park and shit. Remember that the U.S. completely banned alcohol less than a hundred years ago. We’ve still got some tight-ass laws.”

“But aren’t you guys planning on getting drunk on our way to the bar?” Kou asks.

Thomas and Chris exchange a look. Thomas takes a turn explaining. “We’re going to buy some
booze, come back here and drink it, and then go to the bar.”

“But then won’t you be drunk in public?” Kou worries. “Didn’t you just say that’s illegal?”

“What’s this ‘you’ business? You mean ‘we,’ right?” Chris nudges Kou. “And don’t be buggin’. It’s only a problem if you’re wilding. We ain’t planning on doing that, B. Now hurry up and finish that so we can vamoose.”

Kou slugs the rest of his beer. He wipes his mouth, muttering, “And you think I’m OD bugging about accidentally breaking the law.”

Chris tosses an arm around Kou’s shoulder. “Fair point, B. But we’ve got your back. We won’t let ya do something dumb.”

When they get to the liquor store, Chris walks quickly past the entrance. “I got to talk to you a second, Bs.”

The other two follow him down the block. Once they’re about twenty feet past the store, Chris says, “Sorry, I can’t go in with you. They took my fake and banned me last week.”

Thomas eyes him. “Your fake.”

“I’ll be twenty-one at the end of next month,” Chris explains. “Sorry.”

“We got you,” Thomas answers. He pulls his keys out of his pocket and hands them to Chris. “Wait for us back at our place. That way this one” - he jerks his head in Kou’s direction - “doesn’t have to worry about contributing to the delinquency of a minor.” Thomas smirks.

Chris shakes his head. “Aw, don’t make him more paranoid than he already is. Besides, I’m not a minor.”

“What -” Kou starts, looking worriedly between the two of them.

“I’ll explain when we get home. For now, you come with me and help me pick out some good booze,” Thomas says, steering Kou back towards the store without glancing back at Chris.

When they hand over their IDs to the clerk, he looks suspiciously between Kou and his passport. “What’s your birthday?” he asks.


The clerk grunts. “Name?”

“Uh. Motomi Kou. I mean Kou Motomi.”

The clerk squints at the document. “Registered domicile?”

“Musashino - er, actually, that’s Yokohama now.”

The clerk looks triumphant. “I can’t sell to you.”

Kou blinks and holds out his hand for his passport back, but the clerk pulls it closer to him. Thomas
steps closer to the counter. “English isn’t his first language. Of course numbers are going to be hard for him. He got everything right, right?”

“Not his domicile.”

“That’s because I’ve been living in Musashino since I went to college, but I gave up the apartment when I came here and changed it back to my hometown. I haven’t actually lived there in seven years,” Kou explains.

The clerk stares hard at Kou. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” Kou shoots back.

The clerk waves the passport in the air. “You kids need to stop thinking you can break the law.”

Kou looks confused. Thomas thinks for a moment. “Kou, do you know what today’s date is?”

It takes a moment, but Kou comes out with “June second - oh.”

“Happy belated birthday, dummy. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me when your birthday was. We would have thrown you a party.” Thomas shakes his head.

“I’m twenty-six,” Kou tells the clerk.

The clerk snorts. “Too late. You woulda thought I’d sell to any punkass dumb sus kid fronting.” He takes Kou’s passport and clips it to a wire hanging across the counter area behind his head, next to Chris’s fake ID.

“That’s my passport!” Kou objects. “Give it back!”

“Get out of here before I call the cops,” the clerk sneers.

Thomas takes another step forward. “Go ahead. You can’t take his ID.”

“Thomas,” Kou says in a shaky voice.

“What? You need to carry it with you all the time, right? We can’t just leave without it. This dumbass is the one who’s going to get in trouble for stealing it.”

“I’m allowed to confiscate fake IDs,” the clerk says stubbornly.

“This is whack! You’re not a judge, and that’s not fake. Man, you’re making me mad tight right now.” Thomas leans forward. As he says his last sentence, he punctuates each word with a double-handed slap on the counter. “Give. Us. Back. The. Passport. Now.”

“You need to back up now or I’ll have you arrested for assault.” The clerk picks up the phone, ready to dial.

“Thomas,” Kou pleads again.

Thomas sighs and takes a half-step back. He takes his own phone out of his pocket and starts typing something into it.

“Leave the store now,” the clerk says. “I have actual customers, and I’ll have you arrested for trespassing.”
Thomas slaps his phone on the counter, leaning his right elbow on it. “Kou Motomi, winner of the International Distinguished Art Fellowship. It says right here: age 25, from Musashino, Japan. Is the New York fucking Times good enough for you? Now, do you want to create an international incident with the Japanese Embassy or not?”

The clerk leans down to look at the article Thomas pulled up on his phone. While he’s preoccupied, Thomas straightens up and snatches Chris’s fake ID from the wire.

“Hey!” the clerk says, looking up sharply.

Thomas palms the ID and casually pulls his hand back down, lifting the other one to show he means no harm.

The clerk sees that Kou’s passport is still there and relaxes. He checks the article again, compares the picture of Kou to his face, and finally sighs. He takes the passport down and slides it back across the counter reluctantly. “I still ain’t selling you any booze.”

“We wouldn’t buy from you, anyway,” Thomas mutters, adding, “but an apology to my friend would be nice.”

“Don’t push it.”

Once outside, Thomas laughs and offers Kou a high-five. “Am I slick or what? Now Chris doesn’t have to worry about how he’s going to get into the club.”

Kou still looks worried.

“Look. It’s fine. You weren’t doing anything wrong. Even if the cops had shown up, they would have made him give you your passport back, and that would have been the end of it.” Thomas claps Kou on the back. Kou gives a shaky nod. “Look, how about you go back to the apartment and wait with Chris? I’ll get the booze and bring it back.”

Back at the apartment, Kou feels the need to get his nervous energy out. He and Chris head up to the roof to practice parkour. “Make sure you stay on this half of the roof,” Kou cautions. “I have a deal with the neighbors not to make too much noise over their half when they’re home.”

Kou does a few easy tricks to warm up and then does a double gainer onto the roof of the neighboring building.

“Holy shit! You wildin’, son!” Chris calls down from above. He looks at the gap between the buildings and gulps.

“You need to just do it,” Kou says. Chris hasn’t managed to jump the gap, even though it’s so narrow he could step across it, were the roofs of the same height.

“What if I trip?” Chris asks.

“You aren’t going to trip - and even if you do, you’ll just roll it out. It’s no different than any other height drop you’ve done.”

“But what if I fall into the gap?”

Kou laughs. “You know that’s completely impossible, right?” He climbs back up, steps off the roof,
and lands a full foot in from the gap, diving to absorb the impact. He looks back up at Chris. “Easy peasy.”

“Easy peasy,” Chris mutters, his eyes still focused on the gap.

“Don’t look at the drop. Look at your landing. You’ve done this a thousand times.”

Chris shakes his head and takes a step back.

Kou walks over to the gap. “Look. It’s so narrow, you’d be able to catch yourself even if you fell in.” He steps on the narrow lip edging the roof, squats down, and swings himself down into the gap. “See? All you’d have to do is put your hands out.”

“What if I got stuck?” Chris asks.

“Can’t happen. Not unless you’re built like a sumo wrestler.” Kou climbs down between the buildings, using his feet and hands to control his descent. He goes about halfway down before climbing back up. “Look, I’ll spot you. I won’t let you fall.” Kou stands across the gap, one foot resting on the wall of his building, arms outstretched, ready to guide Chris to safety.

Chris stands back up.

“Now spot your landing - no, just focus on the landing.”

Chris takes a deep breath and jumps, diving into a roll. He whoops then covers his mouth sheepishly.

“You guys are nuts,” Thomas calls down from their roof, standing well back from the edge.

“Kou is the crazy one,” Chris calls. “You should have seen the double-gainer he did across the gap!”

“Double what?”

Chris nods at Kou. “Show him.”

Kou shrugs and climbs back onto the higher roof. Chris climbs up, too. Kou spots his landing and jumps, focusing on curling into a tight ball so he can complete the two rotations in time to spot so that he can land on his feet. When he gets up from his roll, he sees Chris crouching next to him, camera in hand.

“Did you just -” Kou starts.

“Hush. Just watch it. If you don’t like it, I’ll delete it.”

They climb back up next to Thomas, who passes them each a plastic cup. “I figured I’d get sake in honor of Kou’s birthday.”

“It’s your birthday?!?” Chris asks. “You should have told me!”

“It was last week, apparently,” Kou mumbles.

“How do you miss your own birthday?” Chris asks, shaking his head. “Never mind. You were too busy thinking about Kei-san, right?”

“So this is now officially an intervention and a birthday party,” Thomas declares. “To Kou! Happy Birthday!”
Chris repeats the toast and they clink cups before drinking. Chris shows them the video of Kou’s double gainer.

“Wow, you’re really good,” Thomas says, grabbing the camera and watching it again. “I couldn’t see exactly what you did from up here.” Thomas turns to Chris. “How’d you manage to keep him in the frame while you were both jumping like that?”

Chris shrugs. “Practice. I want to be a videographer.”

“Well, you’re really good.”

Chris looks at Kou. “Do you want me to delete it?”

Kou sighs and shakes his head.

“Why don’t you want me to film you, anyway? Were you worried I’d get in your way?”

Kou shakes his head. “I just… don’t want to deal with people recognizing me. The traceurs in Japan who’ve posted stuff online get run out of places before they can even do anything. It’s hard enough already. We often only get five or ten minutes in a spot before we have to move on.”

Chris nods. “Okay. I get that. But you can’t see your face in this one. It’s too dark, and you’re moving too fast. As long as I took out the part at the beginning…”

Kou shrugs. “Also… When I started studying art, it took some of the fun out of it. I don’t want the same thing to happen to parkour.”

Chris laughs. “I’m not going to take away your fun. We shoot to capture the freedom of movement. If we were tight-asses about it, that would defeat the whole point. You didn’t even know I was filming, right?”

Kou scrunches his mouth to the side, considering. “That’s true. But you make money from Youtube, right? I don’t know if my visa would let me do that. Or the fellowship.”

Chris laughs again. “I don’t really make any money yet. Whatever I make goes back into equipment right now. But I do hope to.” He nods. “I hadn’t even thought about that. My mom will know. We can ask her Tuesday.”

Kou shrugs but nods. The video actually did look really cool, and why not? He can always stop participating if he doesn’t like the filming.

Thomas refills their sake cups. “To not killing yourselves,” he toasts.

Chris punches him lightly on the shoulder. Thomas grins and reaches across with his other hand and places it over Chris’s for a moment. Chris waits a long moment before pulling his own hand away.

Kou gets up and does a wall flip on the side of the hut encasing the stairs to the building. He watches from the corner of his eye as Thomas leans against Chris’s shoulder. They’re watching more videos on Chris’s camera. Kou does a couple more flips before Thomas calls him back over. “That’s enough parkour. It’s time to drink and be merry!”

By the time they walk over to the club, Kou’s cheeks feel warm.

Thomas reaches into his pocket and hands Chris something. “I think you’ll be needing this soon.”

Chris stares at his ID. “What? How?!”
Thomas looks at Kou. “You didn’t tell him anything?”

Kou shakes his head, so Thomas recounts what happened in the liquor store.

Chris throws his arms around Thomas. “Thanks, B! I figured I was going to have to lie low until my birthday.”

“Just be more careful with it, Chuck,” Thomas says.

“Who’s Chuck?” Chris asks blankly.

Thomas rolls his eyes. “You’re Charles Smith, aren’t you? Our good buddy Chuck. And your birthday is what?”

“August ninth, nineteen ninety-five.”

“Good boy.” Thomas pats Chris on the head.

Kou shuffles his feet, a little uncomfortable. Chris had shared that he was bi when Kou told him about Kirishima, and Kou’s known Thomas was gay since practically the beginning, and yet it never occurred to Kou that the two might be interested in each other.

I should be happy for them.

But Kou can’t help feeling like a third wheel.

Maybe I can slip away once they’re having fun in the club.

All thoughts of slipping away early leave Kou’s mind when they get in line to enter the club. The club looks tiny from the front, maybe a little smaller than Geinki, but the entire outside wall is lit up with lights that recreate the rainbow pride flag, and Kou feels a thrill of excitement at all the men blatantly checking one another - and him - out. The line isn’t too long, and it moves fast. Before he can really take in the atmosphere, they’re stepping inside, and he realizes this is nothing like Geinki. The club stretches deep into the building, belying its narrow entrance, and the majority of the space is covered by a dance floor that’s already packed with hundreds of people.

Four television screens flashing psychedelic patterns, more rainbow lights, and Christmas lights illuminate a DJ stand at one end of the room and two different bars. There are only a few tables, to make room for more dancers. A thumping beat, accentuated by the clapping of the gogo dancers on the stage next to the DJ stand, pulses through the crowd. Many of the people closest to the door eye the three of them, and a few smile or wink at Kou.

“I love this song!” Thomas cries. He grabs Kou’s and Chris’s hands and drags them both to the dance floor. Thomas threads his way to the center of the floor and the three start dancing.

Kou has always loved to dance. His group of friends would go to the clubs in Tokyo and stay for hours. He and Akihito, who their friends assumed were “late bloomers” because they never danced with any girls, would watch videos to learn the latest dance moves.

After a minute, Thomas places a hand on Kou's shoulder to start dancing with him. Kou falters. Thomas leans in and shouts, “Relax! We’re just having fun.” He reaches with his free hand and guides Kou's waist back to the rhythm.
Kou's never danced with anyone before - it's not something Kirishima was ever interested in. Thomas maintains a friendly distance, and Kou soon relaxes again as he loses himself in the pulsing beat.

The three of them dance through two songs, sometimes paired one with another, sometimes alone. Kou is dancing with Chris when Kou is nearly knocked over. He turns and sees a couple dancing drunkenly together, their gyrating bodies so close that were they not clothed, Kou would think they were having sex.

The couple is too engrossed in each other to apologize. Instead, the taller one grabs the other's face. Their tongues are out before their mouths meet, and Kou looks quickly away, blushing.

“You need more booze,” Chris shouts over the music. He takes Kou's hand, and Kou snags Thomas's as Chris leads the way through the crowd.

The crowd at the bar is ten people deep, and while they're waiting, the DJ stops the music as a tall, muscular person with red wavy hair and matching dress, heels, lips, and half-mask takes the stage.

One of the gogo dancers takes the microphone off its stand. “Hello, hello! Sorry to stop your fun, but Miss Terry S. has an important announcement.”

The redhead takes the microphone. Her voice is deep and velvety. “I know it's not drag night, but tonight is a very special night. Our very own queen, the icon of Icon, Miss Vanessa JJ, is celebrating her birthday. Va, come on out here.”

“Is she an okama?” Kou whispers to Chris and Thomas, so surprised by the redhead's deep voice and size he forgets to speak in English.

Thomas looks puzzled, but Chris answers in English. “We call them drag queens. I don't know if they're exactly the same thing, but I think they're close.”

Kou nods, already distracted by the enormous throne with purple velvet cushions being carried onstage by four of the gogo dancers. Poised on the throne is a brunette in a pink gown with a glittery tiara perched on her wig. Kou gapes at her handlebar mustache.

“Va, this song's for you. May you continue to paint with all the colors of the wind for a hundred years to come.”

Everyone cheers when Miss Terry S. says “colors of the wind.” As the music starts, people link arms, swaying in time to the music. Chris and Thomas each sling an arm over Kou's shoulders and get him swaying, too.

Kou's never heard the song before, but halfway through the first verse, Chris and Thomas join in (along with half the crowd), belting, “You think the only people who are people are the people who look and think like you, but if you walk the footsteps of a stranger, you'll learn things you never knew you never knew.”

When the refrain starts, everybody else joins in. Kou listens intently, trying to understand the words, but he's sure he must have misunderstood “blue corn moon.” He’s not sure what a bobcat is, either - maybe something like an Iriomote mountain cat? - but the question about painting with all the colors of the wind hits Kou like a punch to the gut.

Kou remembers Kirishima’s words when Kou told him about the fellowship and was worried that Kirishima would just go back to his old life and forget about Kou.
“I didn’t realize there was anything wrong with the world I was living in, but you colored my world. I can’t go back to seeing in black and white. I don’t want to.”

But Kirishima never really left his shadow world. His boundaries between right and wrong have no black and white, only a gradient of endless gray, and Kou worried about being sucked into that twilight the way Akihito was by Asami, tumbling down the nearly invisible slope.

**How does Aki do it?**

Akihito was always the guy who ran headlong into a fight without thinking about whether or not he could win it or whether or not it was even his fight. Kou was honestly a little relieved when Akihito picked up his camera and learned to wait to bring about a greater justice, but there were too many times when Akihito still couldn't help himself and rushed in to help someone, giving himself away, which is why Kou still worries about Akihito so much.

The powerful taking advantage of the weak has always been the thing that sets Akihito off the most. His career is dedicated to unveiling corruption. So how can he stand to ignore Asami's crimes and let him continue to provide the guns that facilitate others' power abuses?

Kou thinks back to the little Akihito has told him about Akihito's relationship with Asami. Kou suspects Akihito's original intentions were to expose Asami's crimes. Others have successfully thwarted or suppressed Akihito's stories, and Yoshida's dad made it clear that Asami is perhaps the best protected criminal in Japan, with so many political “friends” that when Detective Yoshida suggested to his boss they try to get Sion listed as a bōryokudan, his boss laughed in his face.

So even if Akihito had tried to publish a story against Asami at some point, Asami likely would have been able to suppress it. Still... what does Akihito do when he uncovers some criminal enterprise tied to Asami? Kou can't imagine Akihito backing down - and yet how does their relationship work? That's probably a huge part of Aki's insecurity about their relationship.

The realization strikes Kou deeply. Of course Akihito is conflicted by the difference in his and Asami's morals - and Akihito's been dealing with this alone for the past two years.

Kou feels a pang of guilt. He let the shock and hurt of finding out about Kirishima's criminal side - as well as the deception perpetrated by Kirishima and Akihito regarding it - cloud his perception of his best friend. Kou has known something's been really bothering Akihito for a long time now.

I'm a shitty friend.

Kou wishes he could talk to Akihito now, but he's still waiting to hear back from Akihito. And anyway, now that Kou is in America, they wouldn't be able to talk freely about it - not with the American National Security Agency screening random phone calls.

I'm so dumb. I might have been able to help Aki - and just maybe, he might have been able to help me figure out a way to work things out with Kei-san. Because just like Aki, I know Kei-san's a good person.

Kou is pulled out of his reverie by the jostling as the crowd builds to the final line of the song: “You can paint with all the colors of the wind.”

Kou is reminded once again of Kirishima's worry that his world would lose its color if Kou were to leave Japan.

*Based on what Daiki and Kei-san have told me, Kei-san’s world has still had plenty of color since*
Kou remembers the long dark hours... days... weeks... after their final break-up, when the only way he could sleep was to thoroughly exhaust his body with hours of hard training, when the only time he remembered to eat was when he felt light-headed, when the only way he was able to complete his assignments on time was to create reminders and imaginary deadlines on his phone for every microstep along the way, when the only people he talked to were his parkour buddies when they happened to show up at the same training location as him.

Kou sighs and tries to forget about those dark days. Things have been better since he came to New York: he's reconnected with Akihito, he's made actual friends he sees regularly, and everything is so new and different that he's been forced to live outside his own head.

"You make the most out of life. When you get to New York, your world's going to expand into a universe, and you'll explore every corner of it."

Am I? Kou wonders. I mean, sure, I've learned some of the parkour spots, and I'm making progress with my art thanks to the fellowship, but I haven't experienced anything that costs even a little money, and my days revolve around talking to Kei-san.

Kou remembers all the previous invitations from Thomas and Chris he's turned down because he wanted to be available for however long Kirishima could talk, whenever Kirishima could talk. Before he even completed the fellowship application, New York had ceased to beckon as an opportunity of a lifetime and had instead become a place to flee the memories and reminders of Kirishima.

And now the memories have chased Kou here.

I can't keep living in this limbo. Chris and Thomas are right. I can't just keep letting my world revolve around Kei-san.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from the song "Colors of the Wind" by Stephen Schwartz and Alan Menken from the Disney movie "Pocahontas" (as sung by Judy Kuhn).

The rest of this note is for those interested in the writing process; if you're not, you can feel free to ignore it. This chapter is a particularly good example of what happens when I say "I know basically everything that's going to happen in the rest of this story, but the characters keep taking over." Here's what I knew 100% would be in this chapter: how Kou was going to get to Kirishima and the title of the chapter (from a song, which will be used next chapter). I thought Kou was going to find out where Kirishima is from Akihito, but then that raid on Kodama-gumi happened a couple of chapters ago (unplanned), and Aki ended up still being MIA... so Kou had to use his detective skills.

I knew Chris would eventually film Kou doing parkour, but I didn't know when until it happened here. I knew that when they met, Chris and Thomas would flirt and hit it off, but I didn't know where that would go, nor did I know anything about Chris's fake ID, except that he was only 20 and had to be able to get into the bar somehow. I didn't even realize Thomas was ordering from Chris's restaurant until Chris's uncle mentioned his
nephew.

I also had planned that Thomas and Chris would drag Kou to a gay bar at some point, and I suspected it would happen in this chapter so Kou could hear the song that will be the title for the heading-to-the-reunion chapter. However, I didn't expect Kou to have such an extended existential crisis just from hearing the song in *this* chapter (I knew he would hear a song about "colors" but didn't know which until it happened, and I only knew he would remember that quote from Kirishima, but not where that would lead him - that's the kind of stuff I can't plan because the characters always write it themselves, and they often lead me to very unexpected places).

I actually had kept writing, determined to get to my intended stopping point, but after another 400 more words, I realized that this was a decent place to end, and at 6800 words, the chapter was already more than long enough. So of the two things I was 100% certain would be in this chapter, neither ended up being in it! But we're so much closer, I know they'll happen next chapter (along with a couple other things I have planned... :) )

(Fun fact: I actually have never seen "Pocahontas" and can't stand the song... so I have no idea why, out of all the songs about "colors," that was the one it had to be...)


Chapter Summary

What will happen when Kou meets a nice Japanese man at the club? How will Kou get to Kessler? And what does Saji have to say to Kou when they meet?

Chapter Notes

Sorry! I know I thought I’d have this ready by Christmas, but the guys were being super uncooperative. I’d work on a scene in my mind while driving home or as I fell asleep, but as soon as I started to type it, the guys would just clam up and not let it happen. And once again, they kept doing things differently than I’d planned, making the chapter go long. Hopefully the length makes up for the delay!

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it’s not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima’s high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Ken(taro) Tanaka: Kirishima's physical therapist
Mystical (Mysty) Forse: Kirishima's speech therapist
“This guy right here!” Thomas shouts, pointing at Kou.

The gogo dancer shines a spotlight on them, and Kou blinks in the bright light. He has no idea what's happening, so he lets Thomas and Chris lead him towards the stage as the crowd parts to create a path for them.

“What's going on?” Kou asks.

Miss Terry S. reaches an arm down. Kou takes it, and she hoists him onto the stage. “It's your birthday, isn't it?” she asks, a slight frown wrinkling her brow.

“No,” Kou says, shaking his head. “It was last week.”

“Sunday,” Thomas calls up. “This idiot totally didn't even realize until tonight, so we're celebrating now.”

“Awww, that's so sad. What's your name, cutie?” Miss Terry S. pats Kou on the cheek.

Soon, Kou is standing with three other guys and one woman arrayed around Va's throne, and the entire club is singing “Happy Birthday” to them. Kou's cheeks feel hot, and he knows he probably has a blush to rival Kirishima's.

You're supposed to be forgetting about Kei-san tonight.

Kou searches the crowd for Chris and Thomas. Chris waves at him, and as soon as Kou makes eye contact, Chris is snapping Kou’s picture.

When the song is over, Miss Terry S. says, “Let's all make sure these guys - and ladies - have an iconic birthday.”

The other birthday celebrants hop off the stage, and Kou is so anxious to be out of the limelight, he rolls off the stage. Instead, the action seems to bring him even more attention.

He quickly rejoins Chris and Thomas, who have managed to move closer to the bar. At the bar, a guy in pink booty shorts and a tight tie-dye muscle shirt looks over his shoulder and winks at Kou.
He turns back to the bartender to receive his drinks and then walks directly over to the trio.

“Happy Birthday,” he says, holding out one of the drinks to Kou.

Kou blinks, surprised, but reaches out a hand to take the drink. Thomas puts his hand firmly over Kou’s. “He’ll be happy to accept a drink from you from the bartender.”

“There’s nothing wrong with this one,” the guy says, holding it towards Kou again.

“Then I’m sure you’ll be happy to drink it,” Thomas says firmly. “I’m not letting him get roofied on his birthday.”

“I didn’t spike the drink!” The guy throws Thomas a dirty look.

“Again, then you’ll be happy to have him take it from the bartender.” Thomas raises his eyebrows, crossing his arms and stepping even more firmly between Kou and the guy.

“Whatever,” the guy mutters. “I’ll find someone less paranoid to drink it. It’ll get warm.”

“I’ll take it,” a guy behind them says, and the two go off together.

Thomas turns on Kou. “This is very important. Never ever take a drink from anyone but the bartender, and never take your eye off your drink.”

“Why?” Kou asks.

“Some guys will try to slip you a roofie. You can never be too careful.”

“What’s a roofie?”

Thomas looks at Chris, but Chris shrugs. That’s not the kind of vocabulary he’s taught in Japanese class.

Thomas frowns and tries to explain. “A drug that makes you pass out. And forget what happens. It’s called the date-rape drug.”

“Date-rape?” These aren’t terms Kou has learned in his English classes, either.

“Where someone forces you…” Kou still looks confused, so Thomas adds, “to have sex.”

“Oh.” Kou looks worried. “Is that common?”

Chris and Thomas shake their heads. “It’s not common, but it’s not uncommon, either.” Thomas scowls. “Someone slipped me one when I was nineteen.”

“What!” Kou cries out in surprise at the same time Chris asks “Were you -” Neither really knows what to say, so they each place a hand on Thomas’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but we’re here to listen if you do,” Chris says.

Thomas shrugs. “It’s okay. My friends were with me, so nothing happened. Other than me passing out and waking up in the hospital, I mean. It still scared the shit out of me, though.”

Chris nods. “We’ve got your back tonight.”

“Yeah,” Kou says.
They approach the bar. The bartender hands Kou a drink. “This one's called Birthday Cake. It's on the house.”

Kou doesn't have much experience with hard liquor. Thomas explains that he should suck the sugar off the lemon wedge, drink all the liquor in one gulp, and then bite the lemon. “It's supposed to taste like a piece of chocolate cake, but it doesn't really. It's still good, though.”

Kou coughs when the liquor hits the back of his mouth, but he manages to get it all down. His eyes water as he sucks on the lemon.

He places the empty glass back on the bar. When he turns around, Thomas is holding out a beer. Kou doesn't take it, instead saying, “I thought I was only supposed to accept drinks directly from the bartender.”

Thomas looks affronted. Chris cracks up as Kou laughs and takes the beer. “Thanks.”

“If I wanted to attack you, I wouldn't have to spike your drink at a bar,” Thomas mutters.

“It was a joke,” Kou says, taking a big gulp of his beer.

The three head back to the dance floor with their beers, but before Kou can take more than a sip or two, someone else has offered to buy him a drink - and this guy doesn't mind letting Kou take it from the bartender. Kou hands his beer to Chris and follows the guy to the bar.

“My name's Matt,” the blonde calls over the music.

Kou shares his own name.

Matt says, “Cocoa? Like hot chocolate?” He's grinning widely, and Kou can't tell whether or not he's joking.

“Just Kou,” Kou repeats.

They make small talk as they wait their turn at the bar. Matt orders a drink called a blowjob, served in a shot glass with a big pile of whipped cream on top. Kou goes to pick up the drink, but Matt says, “Wait! You're supposed to drink it without using your hands!”

Kou looks at Matt, confused. Kou glances at the bartender, who says, “It is traditional to pick up the glass with your mouth, but you don't have to - especially if you're worried you'll break the glass.”

Kou looks back at Thomas and Chris, but a slower song has just started, and they're engrossed in each other. Kou shrugs and turns back to the drink.

The whipped cream is piled so high, Kou decides to lick some of it off. Bending over the bar is embarrassing, and he glances around to see if anyone is watching. He's mortified to see that nearly everyone nearby is.

Kou feels Matt's intense stare. When they make eye contact, Matt licks his lips suggestively. Kou looks away quickly.

Let's just get this over with.

He stretches his mouth around the glass. It's so big, it feels uncomfortable. He tilts his head back, but he can feel the glass slipping out of his mouth.

Fuck this.
Kou grabs the glass with his hand and drinks the rest of the shot normally.

“Ah, no fun,” Matt pouts.

“It's more fun to use your hands,” Kou retorts.

For some reason Kou can't discern, everyone around them cracks up. Kou frowns. Did I mess up the English?

Matt wiggles his eyebrows and says in a low voice, “Do you want to test your theory in the bathroom?”

Kou can sense there's definitely something he's not getting, but there's nothing he would want to do in a bathroom with this guy, so Kou opts to play dumb. “I don't have to go to the bathroom.”

The guys around them crack up. One cries, “Ooh, Matt, you'd better order some aloe water for that sick burn!”

Matt seems unfazed. “You fresh off the boat or something?”

“Boat?” Kou asks blankly. “I'm from Japan. I flew here.”

“Ooh, he's definitely F.O.B.,” the same guy who teased Matt earlier says. “It looks like Matt's yellow fever is as feverish as ever.”

Kou is growing increasingly uncomfortable not understanding what these guys are saying and feeling like the butt of a joke he doesn't even understand. He shoots another desperate look towards Thomas and Chris, and this time he makes eye contact with Chris, who immediately gets Thomas's attention. As the two start working their way across the packed dance floor, Kou's attention is brought back to his immediate surroundings by Matt's hand on his waist.

“Come on. I'll show you how we say thanks for a drink in America.”

“I already know how. Thank you very much for the drink,” Kou says. He can't help but bow slightly as he says ‘thank you’; the acts are too inextricably linked in his head. He pulls away from Matt's grasp. “I'm going to go back to my friends now. Thanks again.”

Matt's smile disappears. “That's not a proper thanks.” He tries to tug Kou back towards him. “You should at least give me a dance.”

Kou tenses up. I guess I shouldn't have accepted that drink. I thought we were just being friendly.

Sensing Kou's hesitation, Matt's friend speaks up. “Don't worry. Matt's harmless. He's coming on a little strong, but that's just cause you set his yellow fever burning 'cause you're smoking.”


Thomas grabs Kou's arm and tugs, and Kou gladly lets himself follow this time.

“Thanks again for the drink,” Kou calls over his shoulder as Thomas leads the way back to the dance floor.

“You don't have to thank that asshole - that virus,” Chris tells Kou, cracking up a little at the insult Thomas used. “That dude is way too thirsty. ‘Yellow fever my ass.’” Chris chuckles again, then more soberly says, “You've got to watch out for guys like that.”
“I was being careful,” Kou says. “But thanks for coming over. I couldn’t understand anything they were saying. What’s a blowjob?”

The shock on Chris’s face tells Kou that his suspicions were correct. Chris fumbles, not knowing how to describe the act in Japanese, much less translate it literally. Kou lets him fumble for a minute until Chris gets to the word “chinchin” and Kou cracks up.

Chris scowls at him and stops talking.

Kou tries to compose himself. “Sorry. It’s just… that’s the word little kids use.”

“So what do you call it?” Chris asks.

“Chinko,” Kou says. He adds, before Chris can resume his explanation, “Is a ‘blowjob’ kōnaiseikō?”

“I don’t know that word,” Chris says.

“I hope you two aren’t talking about me,” Thomas says, looking between them.

“Of course not,” Chris says, blushing and looking away. “You tell him what a blowjob is, then. I figured if I tried to do it in Japanese, at least no one nearby would understand.”

“Is it when someone… uses their mouth?” Kou asks.

Chris rolls his eyes. “So you do - Wait, did that guy -” He turns, ready to head back to the bar.

“It was the drink he gave me,” Kou explains. “I didn’t realize right away…” He trails off, not wanting to explain what just happened.

“Did you…” Thomas starts but also trails off. He lays a sympathetic hand on Kou’s shoulder. “Sorry. We can’t take our eyes off you for one second, huh?” He pats Kou’s shoulder and maneuvers so that Kou is safely ensconced between himself and Chris.

Kou feels weird; he’s the oldest of the three, and yet they’re treating him like some naïve little brother. But soon the two shots start kicking in, and the DJ is laying down some sick beats, and Kou loses himself in the music. It’s nice to just move and not think too much for once.

A few songs later, the DJ switches to a mellower set. Kou edges himself back so that Chris and Thomas can interact more, and soon they’re dancing with each other. The music is still fast enough that Kou doesn’t mind dancing by himself.

He feels a gentle tap on his shoulder. “Want to dance?”

Hearing someone speak in Japanese makes Kou feel nostalgic. He turns and sees an older guy, probably in his mid-thirties, wearing glasses and looking like he came straight from the office in a white long-sleeved, collared shirt and black slacks. The salaryman has unbuttoned the top few buttons and rolled his sleeves up.

The guy holds his hand out, and Kou takes it. He has to reach up to place a hand on the guy’s shoulder.

He’s as tall as Kei-san.

The similarities don’t stop there, though. The man’s cologne is so familiar, Kou’s eyes water. “Sorry.
Hearing you speak Japanese made me homesick. I’m Kou,” he says, trying to cover for his emotions.

The man smiles. “I know.” Kou is confused until the man adds, “Happy Birthday. I’m Ryotaro.”

Ryotaro keeps a respectful distance, and they chat pleasantly about how long they’ve been in the country, what they’re doing there, and where they’re from in Japan. When the song ends, Kou introduces Ryotaro to Chris and Thomas.

When a slower song comes on, Kou ends up dancing with Ryotaro again. Ryotaro pulls him in close, and Kou rests his head on Ryotaro’s chest. This time, they don’t talk.

Kou lets his imagination wander. It’s easy to pretend he’s dancing with Kirishima. Kou didn’t realize how much he missed Kirishima’s scent.

“It’s sixteen miles to the promised land, and I promise you I’m doing the best I can.”

The lyrics feel like they’re coming from inside of Kou.

I really am trying, Kei-san. Will my best ever be good enough, though?

Kou squeezes his eyes shut when the song reaches a line about someone who will “probably end up dead.” Ryotaro responds by giving Kou a reassuring squeeze.

Kou focuses on the song again and lets the memories of all his dates in the woods with Kirishima wash over him as Rilo Kiley sings about visiting mountains. He remembers sitting on the boulder overlooking the lake in Showa Kinen Park on their first date.

“And if you want me, you’d better speak up; I won’t wait, so you’d better move fast.”

I said I wouldn’t wait for you, but that was a lie. But you’d better move fast anyway, Kei-san. I can’t wait.

Kou keeps his eyes closed, completely lost in the rhythmic swaying and the lyrics and his memories, anchored by the strong arms around him.

“Don’t fool yourself in thinking you’re more than you are…”

Wait. What if I’m the one fooling myself? Am I the one who needs to speak up? What if Kei-san won’t wait for me?

Kou instinctively holds tighter to the person who feels like an anchor in the storm of his emotions. He breathes Kirishima’s scent again.

I’ve missed this so much.

When Kou feels a soft hand lifting his chin, he knows he’s about to be kissed.

It’s about time, Kei-san.

But the kiss feels different. Kou opens his eyes and remembers.

Kei-san can’t even stand right now, much less dance.

Reality returns to him so quickly it feels like a slap.

What have I done?
Kou pushes Ryotaro away. There are too many people. He needs to move, to breathe, to run. He pushes through the crowds towards the exit, not even remembering that Chris and Thomas are with him.

Thomas notices Kou pushing Ryotaro away and signals to Chris, who immediately starts pushing through the crowd after Kou.

Thomas grabs Ryotaro’s shoulder. “What the hell did you do to my friend?”

“Nothing! We were dancing together, and we really seemed to be hitting it off, and then we kissed, and he suddenly freaked out.” Ryotaro shrugs.

Thomas hurries after Chris and Kou. By the time Thomas reaches the door, Chris is thirty feet away, and Kou is another sixty feet beyond him. Thomas starts running after them. Since he started his Ph.D. program, he hasn’t had as much time to run as he’d like, but it wasn’t for nothing that he got a full ride to college on a cross-country scholarship. He catches up to Chris in half a block.

“Keep up… with Kou… if you can,” Chris gasps. “He’s… mad… fast.”

Thomas nods, not wasting any breath to respond. Kou reaches the end of the block and turns left. “Kou!” Thomas shouts as loud as he can, but Kou doesn’t seem to hear.

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“Which way?” Chris shouts.

“Left!” Thomas calls over his shoulder. When he reaches the corner, he looks back to see how far behind Chris is, but there’s no sign of Chris anywhere. Thomas doesn’t have time to worry about that, though. Kou is already turning right down another street. “Right!” Thomas shouts, hoping that Chris can hear him or keep up.

I don’t even have his number. Well, I’ve just got to keep up with Kou. He can contact Chris once he calms down.

Thomas wonders how much farther Kou can run at this pace. He looks down the street Kou turned into and curses. There’s no sign of Kou. The next side street is too far away for Kou to have reached it, which means he must have gone into a shop or an alley.

“Up!” Chris’s voice calls from behind him.

Thomas looks up at Chris as he gestures from the roof of a shop that he’s clearly taken a shortcut across. Thomas turns back around and scans the side of the large apartment building Chris pointed at. Finally, he sees a figure in a light-colored tank top scaling the fire escape.

“Come on!” Chris shouts as he jogs past Thomas.

Thomas starts running again, letting Chris lead this time. Thomas pulls up short when he realizes the fire escape doesn’t reach anywhere near the ground. “How did he get up there?”

“Come on!” Chris urges again. He looks at the fire escape ladder. “I’m going to bring it down, but we need to make sure it lands quietly. I’ll hang from the bottom, but when I land on the ground, I’m going to need your help to make sure it doesn’t go flying back up or thunk me on the head.”

Thomas nods. He readies himself to grab the ladder as Chris tic-tacs off the wall and jumps, catching the ladder on his first try and quickly releasing the latch. The two are able to slow the ladder down so
it only makes a small noise when it contacts the ground.

“You go first,” Chris urges.

Thomas climbs the ladder and then starts zigzagging his way up towards the top of the fire escape. He tries not to look down through the holes in the grate as he climbs five stories. “Now what are we supposed to do?” he whispers on the top landing.

The roof is definitely not reachable from the landing. Thomas doesn’t even think it’s reachable from the railing of the landing, not that he would ever consider climbing onto a railing so high off the ground.

“This way,” Chris says, taking the lead again. He climbs onto the railing, holding onto the top of the bricks above the window. He backs his body away from the building. Thomas can’t figure out why until Chris whispers, “Now you climb up here. I’ll give you a boost, and you’ll put your feet on this ledge above the window and reach up for the roof. Then you just have to pull yourself up.”

“That’s not a ledge!” Thomas hisses back. “Anyway, how the hell am I supposed to reach the roof and not fall backwards?”

“You use the little arches above the windows,” Chris explains. “Here, I’ll show you, and then I’ll help you from above.”

Thomas watches in disbelief as Chris manages to climb onto the slivers of bricks jutting out above the window, somehow using the side of the lacuna to keep in close to the wall as he lunges for the roof.

Chris shifts over into the neighboring archway and reaches down with one hand for Thomas’s.

“There’s no way I can do that!” Thomas whispers, shaking his head vehemently.

“It’s okay, I won’t let you fall.”

“I mean, I can’t do it!” Thomas tries to explain. “It’s not even about the height; if we were on the ground, I’m still not strong enough.”

Chris seems to think for a moment. “Fair enough. I’ll get Kou and bring him back here. You can wait down on the street if you’d like.”

Thomas holds his breath as he watches Chris finish climbing onto the roof. As he pulls himself up, Chris’s foot accidentally swings back and kicks into the wall. A light goes on in the window Thomas is directly next to.

He gasps and edges towards the stairs as quickly and quietly as he can, waiting just out of sight. He can see the curtains move aside. When they fall back into place, Thomas resumes his descent.

When he reaches the bottom landing, he realizes he can’t get down without crashing the ladder and making a ruckus. He would be able to get away before anyone could stop him, but he doesn’t want to get Chris and Kou stranded on the roof.

He decides to sit as quietly as possible on the landing in the shadows and wait. He pulls out his phone and sends a quick text to Kou informing him of his predicament.

The next three minutes feel like hours until he finally gets a reply.
We're coming down the other fire escape. We'll help you down. But if you need to get out of there sooner, don't worry about us. We'll find another way. Sorry.

Thomas holds his breath as a couple walking arm in arm pause underneath his fire escape. A minute later, the girl enters the building, and the guy continues down the street. Thirty seconds later, Thomas can just pick out the sounds of Kou and Chris descending the adjacent fire escape. They swing themselves easily over the side of the first floor railing, lower themselves to the bottom, and drop down to the concrete, Chris rolling to absorb the impact.

They hurry over to Thomas. Chris climbs up to help Thomas over the railing. Thomas finds it terrifying to step back off the railing, even though Chris has a firm hold on his hands. Thomas follows their instructions, letting his legs dangle straight down, until he feels Kou’s shoulders underneath. When Kou’s strong hands wrap around his ankles, Thomas lets go of Chris’s hands and firmly holds the railing.

Thomas holds his breath as Chris scrambles down. Once Chris is down, he helps Kou lower Thomas to the ground.

Thomas takes a shaky breath. “You guys really are nuts!”

“Sorry. Let’s go home,” Kou says.

Thomas notices that Kou’s face is tear-streaked and remembers what started this whole adventure in the first place. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Kou shakes his head. Thomas exchanges a look with Chris, who shakes his own head.

They walk in silence, letting Kou set the pace, for half a block before Kou sighs and says, “I’m really sorry. I just…” Kou looks down at the ground again.

Thomas says, “I asked Ryotaro what happened as we left. He said things seemed to be going well, but then you guys kissed, and that’s what set you off. Did you not want him to kiss you?”

Kou wipes at his eyes. “Of course I didn’t want him to kiss me!” he snaps. But he immediately seems to deflate. “That’s not really fair to Ryotaro. I got lost in that song, and I let myself… imagine I was dancing with Kei-san.” Kou’s voice has grown so small, Chris and Thomas have to strain to hear the last few words.

“Ho-ney,” Thomas says softly, dragging out the first syllable of the word.

“It’s not my fault! Ryotaro is a lot like Kei-san. I swear they even use the same cologne. Besides, that song was about being sixteen miles away. Isn’t New Jersey really close, too?”

Thomas cups his forehead with his palm. He casts a sideway glance at Chris. “Why did you put that into his head?”

Chris shrugs. “It really does look like the place I know. You’ve got to understand I’ve spent every single summer there since I was ten - until this one.”

Thomas turns back to Kou. “But you said you called, right? And they said he wasn’t a patient there?”

“Well, yeah… But what if he told them to say that?”

Chris furrows his brow. “Why would he do that?”
Kou freezes. There’s no way he can explain that.

But thankfully Thomas unwittingly rescues him. “He might not have done it intentionally. Some healthcare providers have an opt-in system instead of an opt-out system for patient privacy.” Thomas frowns. “Still, there are a lot of rehabilitation centers in the Tri-State Area. Maybe he’s really not there.”

“But it’s the only one that specializes in dual diagnoses of spinal cord and brain injury,” Kou explains. “And it’s one of the best in the world. And it’s just a couple of miles from the reservoir where the outing was.”

“Well, you’ll just have to ask Kei-san about it. If he keeps lying to you, that means he doesn’t want you to visit,” Thomas concludes. “There’s no sense stressing about it.”

Kou scrunches up his mouth but can’t contradict what Thomas has said.

Kei-san said he didn’t want me to know because it’s too dangerous - but maybe he really just doesn’t want me to visit and is using that as an excuse.

Out loud, Kou says, “But if he doesn’t want me to visit, why would he talk to me for so long every single day?”

Thomas and Chris exchange a look. Thomas sighs and says, “Those could be unrelated. I’ve heard of patients who don’t even want their wife of fifty years visiting them. They don’t like for people to see them when they’re vulnerable.”

“I see him on video chat,” Kou says stubbornly.

“But we gave Kei-san an opportunity to admit where he was, and he doubled down on the pretense, right?” Chris reminds Kou. “He’s got to have a reason for that.”

“He does,” Kou admits.

Thomas and Chris exchange another look. “If he has a reason, you’ve got to respect that,” Thomas says. “Even if you guys are talking every day, he broke up with you, right? Maybe this is Kei-san’s way of keeping a clear boundary - though he really is kind of leading you on with the long daily video chats. I know he’s injured, but…” Thomas trails off.

Kou shakes his head. “Actually, I was the one who broke up with Kei-san.”

Chris and Thomas both gape at him. “You were?”

“Is it really that surprising?”

“Yes!” They blurt out at the same time.

Chris tries to explain. “It’s just… you’re so hung up - I mean, you obviously still care about him a lot. Was it because you were coming here?”

Kou shakes his head. “No. I found out about the fellowship after the break-up.”

Neither Thomas nor Chris pushes the issue as the three make the final turn towards home, but Kou feels like he ought to give them some explanation after all he’s put them through, especially after tonight.

He sighs and says, “It’s just… Kei-san was keeping a pretty big secret from me. When I found out, I
realized I didn’t really know him after all, so…” Kou shrugs.

Thomas and Chris have another brief conversation with their eyes. This time, Chris speaks. “So you’re… getting to know Kei-san better so you can decide whether to get back together? Or are you just feeling sorry for him because of his injury?”

“No!” Kou protests. “I mean… I contacted him because I was worried about him, and then…” he trails off as they head into their building.

No one speaks again until they’re inside the apartment with the door firmly closed.

“Be careful you’re not the one leading him on,” Thomas says softly. “If you’re just feeling sorry for him, it will be even more difficult for you both later.”

“That’s not it,” Kou says, shaking his head. “I didn’t want to break up with him, but I couldn’t not. It seemed like the right thing to do. But Kei-san… he’s really trying to regain my trust. I just…” He trails off again, shrugging. “I don’t know what the right thing to do is anymore.”

Chris claps a hand on Kou’s shoulder. “Follow your heart, kid, and you’ll never go wrong.”


Kou shrugs. “The problem is I don’t know what my heart’s telling me.”

“Well, that’s okay. Just make sure you’re not leading Kei-san on while you figure it out. And don’t let him lead you on, either.” Thomas opens the refrigerator. He pulls out a beer. “Does anyone else want one?”

Chris takes one, but Kou shakes his head. His stomach rumbles.

“You hungry? What’s this stuff?” Thomas asks, pulling out the gyoza Kou made earlier.

Soon, Kou is steam-frying the gyoza in a pan. He opens the second bottle of sake Thomas brought home and places the sizzling plate of gyoza on the table. As the three dive in, Kou listens as Thomas and Chris banter about the movie The Sandlot.

When they realize Kou’s never seen it, Chris says, “We’ve got to watch it together! It’s so good!”

Thomas pulls out his phone. “I’m gone next weekend, but I don’t have to work Thursday evening.”

Chris checks his own calendar. “Neither do I.”

“I can make Thursday work,” Kou says, not bothering to get up to retrieve his phone from the counter next to the stove to check his own schedule, which is largely self-determined.

I might not be able to talk to Kei-san that night, but that’s okay. We talk just about every single day, and I can still text him.

Kou tries to push thoughts of Kirishima aside again, but it’s hard to follow the conversation as Thomas and Chris continue to recite lines from the movie.
“I had such a crush on Benny,” Thomas confesses.

“Who didn’t?” Chris says. “You know, you kind of look like him. A grown-up version, I mean - or what I imagined he’d look like grown-up, anyway…”

Kou takes their flirting as his cue to go to bed.

“Don’t go,” Chris protests. “I feel like we haven’t done enough to celebrate your birthday.”

“We danced for a long time, and you guys have been watching out for me all night. Thanks. But it’s been a long day, and I’m tired now.”

Kou heads into the bathroom for a quick shower then settles into bed. After fifteen minutes of tossing and turning, he reaches for his phone to play some music to help him fall asleep, but it’s not in its usual place.

Right, I left it in the kitchen.

Kou navigates the apartment in the darkness (apparently Chris left and Thomas went to bed while he was tossing and turning). He fumbles on the counter, but his phone isn’t there. He turns on the kitchen light, blinking while his eyes adjust. He sees his phone on the table.

Kou heads back to his room. Back on his bed, he can hear faint murmuring coming through the wall. Apparently Chris didn’t leave after all.

Kou puts on his noise-cancelling headphones and starts Spotify. The music drowns out the sound of voices, but his bed starts shaking slightly.

It’s probably the train.

But Kou feels weird being so close to his friends doing whatever they’re doing on the other side of the wall, so he heads back into the kitchen.

Now that he has no distraction, his mind wanders back to Kirishima. Kou remembers the song that made him get so lost in his memories.

How did it go again? Sixteen miles to the… something land.

Kou searches and finds “With Arms Outstretched” by Rilo Kiley and downloads it. He sets it to replay and lets the music take him to happier times. He rests his head on the table, and he drifts in and out, not quite sure if he’s dreaming or just remembering. He loses track of the time, until he starts wondering whether Kirishima is in New Jersey again. Kou sits up and starts researching rehabilitation centers again, remembering what Thomas said about the large number around, but Kou comes to the same conclusion: the only place that makes sense is Kessler.

Maybe I should just go there. They wouldn’t turn me away in person, right?

Kou starts researching how he can get there without a car. It would take over two hours and involve a train, two buses, and over a mile of walking.

And I’d have to leave at 5:30 in the morning to get there when it opens.

Kou frowns. That’s a long way to go if he’s wrong - and that’s assuming he doesn’t make any mistakes in transit. The last time he went to Pennsylvania Station, it took forty-five minutes for his fellowship mentor to help him figure out where he’d gone wrong and get him out of the maze of
tunnels to the correct concourse.

Maybe I should try again to confirm that Kei-san is there first.

Kou calls, and a sleepy voice answers.

“Um, yes, I have a message for a patient,” he says.

“Visiting hours are from eight a.m. to eight-thirty p.m.,” the receptionist says, stifling a yawn.

“I just have a message. Sorry for calling so late,” Kou says.

“What’s the message?” The receptionist yawns audibly again.

“Uh, yeah... Just... that Motomi Kou - I mean Kou Motomi - called and hopes he’s doing well.” Kou spells his name.

“Who did you say the message is for again?”


“I’m sorry, but there’s no one here by that name.” The receptionist’s voice holds no trace of emotion.

“Well, just in case there is, can you please give it to him?” Kou asks, but the call has already been disconnected.

He sighs.

“Who are you calling in the middle of the night?”

Kou looks up as Chris comes into the room wearing nothing but boxers. Kou glances quickly away, but Chris seems unfazed as he heads to the fridge, pulling out the water pitcher. He takes three glasses from the cabinet and fills them.

Kou swallows when Chris sets a glass in front of him and pulls out a chair. Chris perches on the chair and looks at Kou.

“I was hoping you were going to say family or friends back in Japan, but you were speaking English. This is about Kei-san, isn’t it?” Chris asks.

Kou gives a small shrug.

Chris covers his face with his hand. “It’s two-thirty in the morning. Please tell me you have not been calling every single rehab center in New Jersey.”

“I only called one,” Kou says defensively.

Chris grabs one of the other glasses from the counter and takes a big swig. “That Keebler place?”

“Kessler,” Kou confirms. “I asked them to give Kei-san a message.”

“The place that already said he wasn’t there.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“He has to be!” Kou cries. “I compared the pictures, and you’re right about it being the same bridge. It’s the only place that makes sense.”
“Shh. Thomas is sleeping,” Chris whispers.

Kou claps his hand over his mouth. “Sorry.”

Chris sighs. “Like Thomas said earlier, even if he is, they can’t tell you if he hasn’t given them permission. It’s the law.”

Kou shrugs. “I know. But if I showed up there, Kei-san wouldn’t send me away without seeing me.”

Chris rubs his temples with both hands. “What kind of logic is that?”

Kou feels tears prick his eyes. “He almost died. He’s still really hurt. I know I’ve video-chatted with him, but I just need to really see him. Make sure he’s really okay.”

Chris lets his hands and shoulders drop. “I get it.”

Kou breathes a sigh of relief, and the emotions he’s been holding back since he got the news from Akihito overwhelm him. Kou starts crying in earnest. For the first time in a long time, he doesn’t try to run away from the feelings.

Chris reaches out and hugs Kou, and Kou lets himself cry on Chris’s shoulder. After a minute, Kou pulls himself together. He sits back in his chair. “Thanks. I’m okay now,” he says shakily. He picks up his phone, searching for something to distract himself from the awkwardness. “Do you know how to navigate Penn Station?”

He shows Chris the directions to the rehab center.

Chris skims them. “You don’t want to take public transit. It’s only forty minutes if you drive.”

“I don’t have wheels,” Kou says, frowning. “Besides, I only have my motorcycle license. Can you even rent one here?”

“Probably, but hello! B, I totally have one now, remember?”

“I couldn’t ask to borrow your bike,” Kou says.

“You’re not asking; I’m offering. I would worry the whole time you were gone that you’d get lost or taken advantage of, anyway,” Chris says.

“You know I’m a grown man,” Kou says, trying not to sound petulant. “I’m pretty sure if I could navigate Tokyo’s system, I can handle New York’s.”

“You were the one who just asked for help figuring out Penn Station, son. And Tokyo’s way safer than New York. How many times did you get in trouble tonight?”

Kou groans. “Don’t remind me. But I could have handled it myself if I’d had to.”

“Look, I haven’t been to see my old man yet this summer, anyway. He’s been mad bugging about it. And if I take you, I’ll have a good excuse to leave again after a nice, short visit.”

“Wouldn’t you want a longer visit?” Kou wonders.

Chris shakes his head. “Nah. Me and my pops haven’t been getting along so great lately. Not since I let slip I’m bi. This way, I’ll show my face and get him off my back, but I won’t have to sit through hella awkwardness and the silent treatment.”
“I’m sorry,” Kou murmurs.

Chris shrugs. “It is what it is. So, when do you want to go, B?”

“Visiting hours start at eight,” Kou says.

“What day?” Chris asks.

Kou hesitates. He knows Chris is busy with his summer school class and his new job. Kou’s mouth feels dry. He takes a small sip of water, clears his throat, and says, “Whenever works for you.”

Chris pulls out his phone and frowns at it. “I’ve got a test Thursday, and I’m working a double Saturday. How about Friday morning?”

Kou clears his throat. “Kei-san has therapy every weekday. I was thinking of going… tomorrow. Well, today.”

Chris stares at Kou for a moment.

“It’s fine. I’ll just take public transportation. I’m sure someone at the station will be able to help me.” Kou stands up.

“No, I can make today work. I’ve got to be at work at two, though, so we’ll have to leave there at noon.” Chris checks the time again as he stands up. “If we’re leaving in four hours, we’d better get some sleep.” He picks up his water glass and the extra one from the counter. He nods at Kou’s. “You’d better drink all of that before going to sleep, though. You’ll feel much better in the morning.”

Kou sleeps only lightly, but he awakens to his alarm ready and alert. He quickly pulls on clothes and heads to the kitchen to make some breakfast.

He turns from the stove when he hears someone in the doorway. Thomas blinks in the light as he stumble towards the fridge, taking out the water pitcher.

“Do you want some eggs and toast?” Kou asks. “I can put more on.”

Thomas groans, fills up his glass, and heads back towards the door, which Kou takes to mean ‘no.’

Thomas turns in the doorway. “Chris told me your plans. There are laws against stalking, you know.”

Kou gapes at him. “If he turns me away, I’ll leave. I don’t think he will, but if I’m wrong…” Kou shrugs helplessly. “I’m not trying to stalk him.”

Thomas had continued to shuffle into the relative darkness of the hallway. He turns again, shielding his eyes as he looks back at the bright kitchen. “Okay. Just… don’t expect too much. The hospital may not even tell him you’re there, if he’s asked for privacy.”

“That’s fine. If that happens, I’ll just trace in a nearby park until Chris is ready to come back,” Kou says, not mentioning that the park he has in mind is the one with the bridge… and that if he sees anyone to talk to, he’ll ask which rehab centers have brought patients there recently.

Thomas nods and turns around. “Good luck,” he mumbles, heading back to his room.

A couple minutes later, Chris comes out, wearing a t-shirt that’s very tight on him.
Isn’t that Thomas’s?

Kou turns his attention back to the eggs. “You hungry?” he asks the pan.

When they’re outside by the bike, Chris clears his throat. “You said you rode a bike for a long time, right?”

Kou nods.

“Are you a better rider than me? I’m not that good yet…” Chris stares at the optometrist’s office across the street.

A laugh bubbles out of Kou. He tries to turn it into a cough. “A little,” he says politely. Chris levels a look at him that makes Kou admit the full truth. “A lot. You just need practice.”

“I know. But I don’t really feel like practicing on the Jersey Turnpike yet, even on a Sunday morning.” Chris holds out his keys. “You mind driving, son?”

Kou breathes a silent sigh of relief.

When they reach West Orange, Kou pulls into a shopping center. “Thanks, B. I can walk the rest of the way from here.”

Chris furrows his brow. “Why you stopping here? It’s not like I’m expecting you to introduce me to Kei-san.”

Kou blushes. “I wanted to buy him flowers,” he mumbles. “The store doesn’t open for another fifteen minutes, so I don’t want to make you wait.”

Chris looks at the florist window, where someone is arranging fresh vases. He strides over and knocks on the window. “Hey! My friend’s visiting someone in the hospital and is in a hurry. Is there any way we can come in now?”

The florist opens the door. “Kessler?” Kou nods. “I should just open at seven-thirty officially,” she grumbles.

Kou watches Chris drive away from the Kessler parking lot before steeling himself to enter the building. If Kou gets kicked out, he doesn’t want to ruin Chris’s visit with his dad.

Before Kou reaches the door, a voice says from behind him, “Motomi Kou. You’re very persistent.”

Kou turns around and sees a guy around his own age, dressed casually, but with a clear air of authority. “Saji-kun?” he guesses. “I mean, Saji-san? I’m sorry.” Kou gulps and bows. He unthinkingly used the honorific Kirishima always does, but if Kou wants to see Kirishima, he should be ingratiating himself to Saji, not offending him.

The guy doesn’t answer, acting as if Kou didn’t even speak. “How many times did you call yesterday?”

“Twice,” Kou says. “Well, once was technically early this morning.”
The guy sighs. “Did you tell anyone else where you think he is?”

Kou shakes his head. His throat suddenly feels dry.

*Where I think he is? So Kei-san’s not here.*

Kou tries not to let the disappointment show on his face.

The guy narrows his eyes. “I wasn’t aware that Uber allowed motorcyclists to be drivers now.”

Kou gulps. “That was my friend. I mean, yeah, I told him I thought Kei-san might be here, but he doesn’t know Kei-san, so…” Kou shrugs.

The guy jerks his head away from the entry. Kou follows him a half-dozen paces down the sidewalk. “Did you mention any names?” the guy asks quietly, checking quickly to make sure no one’s nearby.

Kou frowns, trying to think. Finally, he shakes his head. “They only know him as ‘Kei-san.’ That’s it.”

“They?” The guy pinches the bridge of his nose as if he feels a headache coming on.

“Uh… my friend who gave me a ride. And my… roommate.” Remembering who this guy must work for, Kou suddenly doesn’t want to mention any names, either.

*Though if they wanted to find out, it wouldn’t be hard. Kei-san already knows their first names.*

Kou frowns. This interrogation is like a cold dose of reality. Even though Kirishima is here in America at a hospital, he’s still a member of a criminal enterprise.

*Of course he would need bodyguards. With how much he knows about Asami-san’s organization, there must be any number of groups who would be happy to find him when he’s so vulnerable.*

Kou shudders, finally understanding the danger Kirishima is still in.

*I shouldn’t have come.*

Kou’s interrogator still hasn’t said anything, his face creased in indecision. His eyes travel to the vase in Kou’s hand and his face clears. Obviously a decision has been made. Kou can’t help but hold his breath.

“Follow me.”

Kou almost doesn’t recognize Kirishima’s sleeping face. Between the longer hair, the nascent goatee, and the gauntness that the graininess of video hid, Kirishima looks almost like a different person. Kou had understood intellectually how injured Kirishima is, but actually seeing him makes it really hit home. Before Kou realizes it, he’s across the room, his arms wrapped around Kirishima. Kou doesn’t want to upset Kirishima by letting him see how distraught Kou is by the changes in Kirishima, so Kou strives to master his emotions, focusing his attention on the fact that Kirishima is back in his arms.

*This feels so right. How could I ever let this go?*

Over Kirishima’s shoulder, Kou sees Saji shift uneasily and is reminded why. Kou wants to kiss Kirishima, but Thomas’s admonition not to lead Kirishima on echoes in his mind.
I already broke up with him twice. I can’t do anything like that unless I’m completely sure.

And Kou’s not sure. He’s not sure about anything.

The next thing Kou knows, Kirishima is kicking him out. And now Chris’s and Thomas’s repeated admonitions that Kou should stay away until Kirishima invites him come rushing back.

I guess he really didn’t want me to come. It’s not just a safety thing.

Kirishima blushes as he says, “Even Saji-kun waits outside.”

It feels like a slap.

If anyone were going to stay in the room, it would be Saji, not Kou? And why is Kirishima blushing?

I thought he said he didn’t like Saji-kun that way.

Kou feels completely mortified.

Thomas and Chris were right. I shouldn’t have come.

Kou races out of the room before his face can reveal the extent of his humiliation.

He navigates back through the halls to the entrance of the hospital, nearly knocking over a middle-aged man and woman on the walkway just outside the door.

“Sorry,” Kou calls without looking back. He turns right, remembering from the map that the rehabilitation center is north of the big park with the reservoir, but he just as quickly realizes his mistake when he sees the end of the parking lot.

Oh, right. The driveway wrapped around. I should have turned left.

But Kou doesn’t really care where he goes, and he can hear someone running behind him now. He sees a narrow trail through the woods beyond the parking lot and heads for it.

“Motomi… Kou… stop!” his pursuer shouts between breaths.

Kou ignores him.

“Damnit! I didn’t… let you… see him… so you… could be… an asshole!”

Kou wheels around. The anger has eclipsed his embarrassment now, and he no longer worries he’ll start crying. “Me?! He asked me to leave! So I did! And I’m the asshole?!”


Kou gulps. “I’m not fighting,” he says wearily. He turns and starts running again, but this time at a much easier pace. Saji falls into step beside him.

“You’re running,” Saji observes. “I realize seeing him like this may have been a shock, but if you were going to come, you should have prepared yourself.”

“I thought I did,” Kou mutters. “Anyway, he obviously didn’t want me to come. I’m just trying to
respect his wishes.”

Saji smacks Kou on the back of the head hard enough that it makes his eyes smart.

Kou is momentarily thrown off balance and bumps roughly into a tree with his right shoulder. He glares at Saji. “What was that for?”

Saji shrugs. “I can’t smack him on the head, and I feel like knocking some sense into someone.”

“So he wanted me to come?” Kou asks.

“This way,” Saji says, leading Kou onto a slightly wider trail. “Deep down… I mean deep, deep down, I think he did.”

“Oh. Great. Thanks. That makes me feel much better,” Kou says. He glances at Saji and notices a giant red blotch on his neck where his t-shirt has slid down his right shoulder. “So he can tell me about you two in person?”

Saji trips on a root but just manages to stay on his feet. Kou pauses, waiting for Saji to catch up, but Saji stops, too. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Kou turns and starts running again. “Nice kissmark.”

Saji hurries to keep up, slapping a hand over his neck. “That’s not from Kir- him.”

Kou’s eyebrows shoot up. “So it’s from Tanaka-san?”

Saji blushes but removes his hand from his neck. “He told you about that? He sure likes to tell you everything, doesn’t he?”

“Except the important things,” Kou says with more bitterness than he meant to let slip.

Saji doesn’t reply. They continue in silence for a few minutes before Saji finally asks, “So will you come back with me once he’s ready?”

Kou focuses on the trail. He already feels like an idiot for his tantrum. “Of course,” he mutters, trying to keep his face impassive.

“Hold on a sec. Let me send him a message then,” Saji says. He composes a quick text and stashes his phone again as he sets the pace.

“Should we head back? What if he’s ready early?” Kou asks.

“He won’t be. I doubt he can shit while he’s worried about you,” Saji says.

Kou stops again, staring at Saji.

“That’s what he’s doing,” Saji explains. “You don’t seem to have fully grasped the severity of his injuries.”

Kou’s mouth opens and closes several times. He looks away and mutters, “How can I if he doesn’t tell me?” Kou blinks back tears.

“Would you tell the guy you like - someone who’s already dumped you twice?” Saji retorts.

“If he doesn’t want me to know, then why are you telling me?” Kou doesn’t have a good defense, so
he opts for a good offense instead.

Saji rolls his eyes. “I’m not giving you any details - not that I know any. But that guy… he has no confidence right now. I need you to be sensitive to that.”

It feels like a jab, like Saji is implying that Kou is the reason for Kirishima’s current lack of confidence. “He’s never had any - not as long as I’ve known him,” Kou says quietly as he resumes running.

Saji falls into step beside him. “I only got to know him afterwards, so I wouldn’t know. But it doesn’t really surprise me. That’s all the more reason to be careful.”

“I am,” Kou says, adding brittly, “but he wasn’t the only one hurt by the break-up, you know. I really -” Kou’s voice catches, and he stops speaking.

What’s the point? This guy’s not going to understand. How could he possibly understand my issues with Kei-san’s job when he’s in the same business?

Neither of them speaks for a few minutes until Saji says, “We have time for a loop around the lake.” He leads the way through a park and across a road.

As they round the corner, Kou sees the bridge. “It really is the county seal,” he says.

“I told him not to send you that picture. He said you couldn’t read it, but I think he was secretly hoping you could.”

Kou clears his throat. “Is my coming here really putting him in more danger?”

Saji looks at Kou for a long moment. “No. I don’t think any other organizations ever had the slightest clue about you. As long as you don’t mention his name to anyone, especially where you might be overheard, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I haven’t noticed anyone following me, but I didn’t notice when your people were, so I’ve been a little paranoid.”

Saji laughs softly. “Would you notice me at Musashino Art University?”

“ You were the one following me?!” Kou exclaims.

Saji shrugs. “Sometimes. Or one of the other guys on my team. It was only ever one or two of us. We’re on Takaba-san’s team, and he doesn’t like being protected, so we’re used to blending in.”

“So you’re one of Aki’s bodyguards?” Kou asks.

“Yes. Or at least I was.” Saji abruptly changes the subject. “What are your intentions towards my friend?”

The question is so unexpected Kou lets out a short laugh before realizing Saji is serious. Kou swallows. “I don’t know. I guess I want to… support him.”

“Support.”

Kou shrugs. “Yeah. I mean, that’s all I can say for now. The rest is up to him. I told him that when we broke up.”

“You told him he has to be a better person,” Saji says.
“No!” Kou protests.

“Really?” Saji asks.

“Really.” Kou frowns. “I told him I needed him to be the same person whether he was around me or not. That’s all.”

“He’s only one person,” Saji says.

“You know what I mean,” Kou mutters.

“I do. And I meant what I said. He’s always been the same person, at the gym or in the rehab center.”

“What about his job?” Kou presses.

“His job?” Saji sounds confused.

“Don’t play dumb. You work for the same organization. You must know what his job entails. Otherwise, why would you need to protect him?”

Saji opens his mouth but closes it again after a moment. He does this three more times on their way back to Kessler.

Finally, Kou bursts out, “If you have something to say, just say it!”

“It’s not for me to say,” Saji says.

Kou lets out a big huff, but it’s clear Saji has made up his mind. They collapse on the grass next to the entrance, catching their breath in the sticky air. It starts sprinkling. As they stand up, Saji’s phone buzzes.

“He’s ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is taken from "With Arms Outstretched" by Rilo Kiley. I knew I needed a good song for Kou to listen to in his mind during his trip to see Kirishima, and when I found this one, it instantly became Kou and Kei's theme for me. I've been listening to it a lot as I've written the last few chapters, so if you don't know it, give it a listen.

I'm not going to make any promises about when I'll have the next chapter finished. I know I said we'd reach the scene where Kou and Kirishima reunite this chapter - and technically we did! We just didn't get to go any farther than that because Saji decided to play gatekeeper. But Kou is going back inside now, so they *have* to actually talk next chapter!
Kirishima and Kou are finally reunited at long last! What will happen now that they're face to face?

There was a lot that happened in this chapter that surprised me. Hopefully you enjoy the long-awaited moment!

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's neurosurgeon
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Ken(taro) Tanaka: Kirishima's physical therapist
Mystical (Mysty) Forse: Kirishima's speech therapist
Madison Morgan: a 14-year-old weeboo fellow patient at Kessler
Kirishima family: Katsutoshi (dad), Kazuko (mom), Kiyoshi (oldest brother), Kenta (second oldest brother), Kumiko (older sister), Kei ("the" Kirishima); Megumi
Kirishima hears the incoming message chime on his phone, but he’s still in the bathroom, so he has to wait another twenty agonizing minutes to find out whether Saji managed to catch up with Kou. When Kirishima finally checks, he sees several missed messages from Kou. The first couple are asking whether Kirishima has heard from Akihito.

Why would Takaba-san contact me but ignore Kou-san? Are they fighting again? Or is it related to Takaba-san’s work? Or to Sion?

Kirishima frowns. He has no way to contact Akihito directly. At some point, Akihito obviously had Kirishima’s contact information to pass it along to Kou, but given Akihito’s personality, the fact that he hasn’t used it to contact Kirishima himself means that someone removed that information from Akihito’s phone not long after he got it.

I’ll just have to ask Saji-kun if he knows what’s going on, and to pass the message along to Takaba-san.

The next message from Kou is a picture of Kou on a stage with several scantily-clad men, a flannel-clad woman, and a couple of okamas. Beneath the stage is a huge crowd, many of whose eyes seem to be focused on Kou.

Jealousy instantly burns deep in Kirishima’s chest.

The texts underneath the picture are in English.

Hi. This is Kou’s friend, Chris.

We staged an intervention tonight to get Kou’s mind off you.

It didn’t work.

Anyway, he says he’s working hard to regain his trust.
If you hurt my fri

Sorry, this is Thomas. Chris is a little drunk right now. Please ignore him.

I was just telling him about Kou’s birthday in case he didn’t know.

This is Thomas again. That was Chris. Like I said… please ignore him.

But Kou’s birthday was Sunday. He forgot himself… which means all his friends and family forgot, too.

Anyway, we just wanted to let you know… in case you wanted to know.

Again, my apologies for the idiot Chris’s babbling above. I’m going to delete this whole conversation from Kou’s phone. Please feel free to do the same and pretend it never happened.

Kirishima gulps. He knows Kou’s birthday is May twenty-seventh, but how could that have been Sunday? That means it’s June already.

Kirishima is stirred from his reverie by the orderly. “Are you done yet?” the man asks impatiently.

“Yes, sorry.” Kirishima sets his phone back on the bedside table. He wheels over to the wardrobe and frowns at his choices. He wore the yukata Kou gave him on the outing yesterday, knowing that he’d send Kou a picture. The sakura-blossom t-shirt Kou gave him is also dirty. Besides, the weekends are the only days Kirishima can wear his yukata because he has to wear athletic clothing to physical therapy on weekdays. Kirishima scans the yukata and makes his selection.

When he’s finally ready, Kirishima takes a deep breath and texts Saji back. Kirishima’s morning routine took longer than usual because he’s sore from the outing yesterday. He glances at his clock. It’s already 9:30.

Kou-san said he had to leave by noon.

Kirishima remembers the weird texts from Kou’s friends, but before he has time to re-read them, Saji and Kou return to the room. Their t-shirts are both sweat-soaked.

“We went for a run,” Saji explains without really explaining anything.

Kirishima knows just how much conversation can happen in an hour-long run. He wonders what Saji said to Kou.

Kou draws close to Kirishima and fingers the sleeve of his yukata. “Wow,” Kou breathes.

Kirishima can’t help but smile at Kou in “art mode.” Kirishima has only seen it a couple of times before, because the one time they went to a gallery together, they kept getting weird stares, and Kirishima felt too uncomfortable.

“Kumiko-nee designed it,” Kirishima explains. “I would have worn the one you… gave me, but I wore it… yesterday.”

Kou blushes. “I wasn’t thinking when I gave you that. You had already told me your family makes kimonos. I’m embarrassed to have given you such a cheap thing.”

“It was a very… thoughtful gift,” Kirishima protests. “And I appreciated it very much. I didn’t have
any… yukata when you gave it to me.”

“Your sister is very talented,” Kou says, standing a little farther back to take in the overall pattern, then leaning close again to examine the intricacies of the dragonflies and irises. “Can I -?” Kou hesitates with his hand a fraction of an inch above the fabric, apparently not realizing he already touched it.

Kirishima nods.

“It’s… cotton?” Kou asks.

Kirishima nods again. “It’s a print based on a… hand-dyed fabric Kumiko-nee made.”

“Well, it’s very beautiful. This is the one you were telling me about? Her limited edition fabric for this summer?”

“Yes, this is the one. If you can… believe it, Kumiko-nee is… disappointed with how the print came out.”

Kou nods. “I could see that. It would add more depth if it were woven instead of printed, but I’m sure that would drive the cost up significantly. Unless…”

“Unless what?”

“Never mind. I just read about using 3D printing to make woven fabrics, but I don’t actually know if it’s cheaper than traditional weaving techniques. The article didn't really talk about the costs.”

“Oh.”

Saji clears his throat. “Can I get you guys anything before I leave?”

Kirishima’s phone rings before he can reply. “Sorry… it’s my mom. I need to find out… how Kisho-chan’s doing after his… accident.”

“Kisho-chan had an accident?!?” Saji and Kou say at the same time.

Neither moves as Kirishima answers the request for a video chat.

“Kei-ji-chan!” Kisho squeals. “Kisho tried to do monkeys but falled and cutted his head. There was a lot of blood. A lot!” Kisho’s eyes are wide.

“Pain, pain go away,” Kirishima croons, waving his hands the way Kisho did for him when Kisho found out Kirishima was injured and needed a wheelchair. “Does it feel… better?” Kirishima asks.

Kisho nods solemnly. “It does. A lot! Thanks, Kei-ji-chan! Bā-chan, Kei-ji-chan sang ‘pain, pain go away’ and made Kisho’s head feeled better!”

“I heard,” Kazuko says, appearing next to Kisho. “You look refreshed compared to last evening,” she tells Kirishima.

“So do you,” he replies. “Is he going to be able to sleep tonight?”

“I think so. We woke him at noon. He was pretty grouchy, but his afternoon nap was normal. His father gave him some ice cream, but when the sugar wears off, I think he’ll sleep.” There’s a strong note of disapproval in her last sentence, heightened by her refusal to call Kiyoshi by his name.
“Is Saji-nii-chan there?” Kisho demands.

“Of course he is,” Kirishima answers as his eyes flick towards Saji and Kou.

Saji goes over next to the chair where Kirishima is sitting, and Kou squeezes himself into the corner next to Kirishima’s wardrobe.

_I want to meet Kisho-chan, but it’d be way too presumptuous of me to say anything._

“Hi, Kisho-chan. How did you hurt your head?” Saji asks.

“Kisho was trying to do monkeys like Saji-nii-chan,” Kisho explains.

Saji’s jaw drops. “I told you that you needed someone to teach you in a safe place!”

“Monkey-chan teached me,” Kisho explains. He runs off and quickly returns with a stuffed monkey. “He didn’t doed a very good job.” Kisho pouts.

Saji frowns. “I told you you needed to learn in a gym.”

“Saji-nii-chan sayed Kisho needs a soft place to land. Kisho’s bed is soft!”

Saji’s face grows sterner. “I also said you needed a big open space where you wouldn’t bump into anyone, a place designed for that, and that there were other things you need to learn first, so monkeys would take a long time to learn. And I said your teacher should be someone who knows how to do monkeys safely.”

“But Monkey-chan is a monkey! He knows how to do monkeys!” Kisho objects.

Kazuko adjusts the phone so that she appears again. “We’re not blaming you, Saji-kun. All two-year-olds end up doing something like this. We thought he’d fallen asleep for his nap. Can you help us find a place where he can take lessons? In gymnastics, not parkour.”

Saji nods. “Of course. I’ll ask Tokawa-san if he knows a place.”

“Thank you.”

“Saji-nii-chan, can you do a monkey?” Kisho asks.

Saji’s expression grows stern again. “I think you’ve done enough monkeys for both of us. Not today. But I can sing you a song.”

Kisho’s lower lip quivers when Saji says no, but at the mention of a song, Kisho brightens again.

Saji starts singing, “Five little monkeys jumping on the bed…” in English while bouncing a hand with open fingers on his other hand.

Kisho interrupts. “What’s Saji-nii-chan singing? Kisho don’t understand.”

Saji stops and frowns in concentration. “I don’t know it in Japanese,” he says. He looks at Kirishima.

Kirishima shrugs. “I’ve never heard that before.”

Kazuko says, “Me neither.”

Kou can’t help whispering, “Gohiki no chibizaru beddo de pyon…”
Saji and Kirishima look at him, but it doesn’t jog their memories.

“Who else is there?” Kazuko asks.

Kou grimaces and mouths, “Sorry.”

“Uh… um… a friend… surprised me today,” Kirishima says, instantly turning tomato-red.

“Is it Kou-chan!?” Kazuko bursts out with such enthusiasm that Kirishima starts progressing into shades of purple. He glances back and forth from the phone to Kou.

*Kou wonders.

Kei-san told his mom about me?! How much did he tell her?* Kazuko asks.

“Let me meet him!” Kazuko squeals.

Kirishima grimaces. He looks at Kou, “You don’t have to if you don’t… want to.”

“It’s okay,” Kou says awkwardly. He runs his fingers through his hair and wishes he hadn’t gone on that run with Saji, but Kou steps closer to the chair, anyway. “Hello, Kirishima-san. It’s nice to meet you.” He bows.

Kazuko laughs. “No need to be so formal. You can call me Kazuko. Otherwise it’ll be confusing since Kei-chan is Kirishima, too.”

“Yes, Ki-Kazuko-san.”

“Oh, you’re very cute,” Kazuko says.

Kou’s face flushes nearly as dark as Kirishima’s.

“Mom!” Kirishima protests.

“What? You think so, too, right?”

“Mom! Seriously, you -” Kirishima starts.

“Sing the song!” Kisho interrupts.

Kirishima has never been so grateful for his nephew’s self-centeredness.

Kou sings the Japanese version of “Five Little Monkeys,” complete with hand gestures. When he’s done, Kisho claps and squeals, “Again!”

“How do you ask?” Kazuko chides.

“Please!”

After two more times, Kazuko cuts Kisho off. “What do you say to Kou-nii-chan?”

“Thank you! Can Kou-nii-chan do monkeys?”

Kou glances at Kirishima uncertainly.

“No one’s going to show you monkey flips… today,” Kirishima admonishes Kisho.

Kisho huffs.
“But…” Kirishima glances sidelong at Kou as if he's calculating something. “Kou-san will show you something else as long as you… promise not to try any other… trick you've been shown.”

“Kisho promise!” Kisho says, nodding solemnly.

“What should I show him?” Kou asks, moving to the center of the room.

“Whatever you want,” Kirishima says. “He'll be happy with whatever you… choose.”

Kou thinks for a moment and then does a double cork.

“Again!” Kisho demands.

After a couple more doubles, Kou feels warmed enough that he tries for a triple. He lands it smoothly.

“Was that a triple cork?!” Saji asks incredulously.

“Yeah,” Kou answers, shrugging a little.

“You weren't even warmed up,” Saji says in disbelief.

“I warmed up on the doubles,” Kou explains.

Saji shakes his head. “I mean, I knew you were good, but dang. Can you throw a quadruple?”

“That's -” Kirishima starts, looking alarmed, but Kou says, “I don't know. I've never tried, but I would only try it in a gym with a mat and a spotter.”

Kirishima redirects his attention to the screen. “See, Kisho-chan? Even big boys learn their tricks from a… coach in a safe gym.”

Kisho stifles a yawn, and Kazuko announces, “It's time to say night-night now. We've got to let Kei-chan enjoy his visit with Kou-chan.”

After they hang up, Kirishima turns to Saji. “Why do you know that song in English but not Japanese?”

Saji’s eyebrows shoot up. “I was born here. I lived in Georgia until I was ten.”

“How did I not know that?” Kirishima asks.

Saji shrugs. “I was bullied as a returnee, so I learned not to talk about it, and then it became habit.”

“Oh.”

“It can be helpful. As a dual citizen, I didn't have to worry about getting a visa to come here.”

Kou chimes in. “I thought Japan didn't allow dual citizenship.”

“Technically, I was supposed to go to the consulate office and give one up. But unless they summon you, they don't really enforce it. In the meantime, I'm going to enjoy it while I have it.”

Kou shrugs. “Sounds cool. I won't rat you out.” He laughs, but Kirishima and Saji exchange a look.
“I should get going. Do you guys need anything before I take off?” Saji asks.

After Saji’s gone, Kou says, “You told your mom about me?”

Kirishima blushes. “She’s… a little… persistent. And perceptive. I didn’t really have a… choice.”

“What did you tell her?” Kou asks, feeling a little nervous. Kazuko had been kind enough, but she also seemed to imply that she knew about their relationship.

Kirishima shrugs. “She asked if I’d… dated anyone. When I told her I had, she wanted to know your name. But I told her… we’d broken up.”

“Oh.” Kou fights to keep his face blank. Why am I so upset? I’m the one who broke up with Kei-san. It’s not like he’d tell her we’re still together when we’re not.

Kou’s mind is distracted by a sudden realization. “Wait. Your mom knows you’re gay?”

Kirishima blushes. “She… implied as much.” He decides to skirt the topic of just who Kazuko thought he was in love with for years. “I told her about your… fellowship, too, and you’ve come up in a few… conversations since we started talking again.”

“Oh.” Kou blinks. “Still… I can’t believe you just came out to your mom like that! That’s really brave. I haven’t thought about when - or if - I’ll ever tell my parents. I’m still getting used to my friends knowing.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “It wasn’t… brave. Like I said, she’s… persistent. She’d already decided I was, so…” Kirishima shrugs. His phone buzzes, alerting him that he’s got a new Twitter DM. It gives him a great idea for a change of topic. “My friends sent me some… pictures. Want to see?”

Kou squats down next to Kirishima’s chair as Kirishima scrolls through the album he made last night of his favorite memory spots with Kou.

“That’s Motomi Pass,” Kou says. “Did you go there with -”

“No,” Kirishima answers firmly. “I never went to any of your… spots. You didn’t want me to… compromise the fellowship, and I… respected that. But Saji-kun asked me what I would… miss, and he told the guys.”

“And they went to Motomi Pass?” Kou looks skeptical.

“I assume they asked… Takaba-san. Or maybe Tokawa-san. I think these are his… shoes.”

“Oh.” Kou settles back and looks at the rest of the pictures, sometimes commenting.

“Wow, that’s the actual table where we had our first kiss.”

Kirishima blushes. “They took pictures of all the… tables. I didn’t tell them… which one.”

Kou laughs. “They were very thorough.”

When Kirishima gets to the picture of Kou’s secret spot in Showa Kinen Park, Kirishima clears his throat. “I didn’t tell them… where it was. I didn’t even know what they were… planning. I just said it was a… rock overlooking the… beech trees by the lake. They said it took… four hours to find your rock…” Kirishima trails off, realizing Kou isn’t bothered by someone taking a picture of his secret spot.
“I heard a song last night that reminded me of that day,” Kou says.

Kirishima remembers the picture Chris sent of Kou in the gay club but doesn't say anything as Kou fumbles with his phone and starts playing “With Arms Outstretched.”

Before the lyrics start, Kou says, “When I heard it, I was pretty sure you were in New Jersey instead of Japan - much closer to sixteen miles than eleven thousand kilometers.”

Rilo Kiley starts singing. “It's sixteen miles to the promised land…”

Kirishima blushes. *I'm the 'promised land'?*

But when Kiley sings “you’ll probably end up dead,” Kirishima glances worriedly at Kou. Kou’s face is clouded over. Kirishima wraps an arm around Kou’s shoulder and gives a gentle squeeze. Kou rests his head on Kirishima’s arm and closes his eyes. Kirishima watches the various emotions flit over Kou’s face.

First, there’s a faint smile as Kiley sings about mountains and a day by the lake. Kirishima smiles, too, remembering all their hikes, especially that first date in Showa Kinen Park.

Kou’s face becomes uncertain when Kiley sings, “I won’t wait.” Kirishima closes his own eyes at “Don’t fool yourself in thinking you’re more than you are.”

*Kou-san said he wouldn’t wait. And no matter how much we talk now, I have to remember that we’ve broken up. But wait… Does “so you’d better move fast” mean I still have a chance?*

Kirishima smooths the hair on Kou’s forehead with his free hand.

After the song’s over, they sit together for another long moment before Kou sits back up and Kirishima's left hand drops.

“I know it’s not exactly like our situation, but what did you think?” Kou asks.

“It’s a good song,” Kirishima says quietly. “You already said you won’t… wait. I’m…”

“I -” Kou starts.

Kirishima holds up his hand, and Kou waits for Kirishima to finish. “I really am moving… as fast as I can, but I… understand if it’s not… fast enough for you.”

“It is,” Kou says. “I… I was unfair to you.”

Kirishima shakes his head, but Kou continues.

“I know you're a good person. I let someone else's opinion taint what I knew. I mean, obviously I still disagree with some of your choices, but I know that you have your own reasons for making them.”

“What are you… saying?” Kirishima asks, holding his breath.

Kou sighs. “I don’t know. I know that I rushed into getting back together with you last time without really thinking things through, and that wasn’t fair to you.”

“You didn’t know… you’d be getting… certain information… so soon afterwards,” Kirishima points out.

Kou nods. “That’s true. I just… I’m still really confused. I guess the song made me realize that
maybe you’re the one who won’t wait. Just look at how many close friends you have that I never met.” Kou nods at Kirishima’s phone.

Kirishima takes a moment to process Kou's words. *Does that mean I still have a chance?*

Out loud, Kirishima says, “I met them after we broke up, at… Tokawa-san’s gym. I told you… Asami-san was my… first friend. If you don't count Kazu-nii, he was my… only friend. Being with you made me realize… I'm not the man I thought I was.”

Kou's stomach twists. Kirishima has revealed fleeting glimpses into his insecurities since they first met. *How much worse did I make it with my sanctimony?*

Before Kou can gather his thoughts to speak aloud, Kirishima continues. “Even after the… break-up, I was so… selfish. I thought I was… getting better, but really… I just focused on… parkour and training for the… mud run.”

“Where is this coming from?” Kou asks. “You're one of the least selfish people I've ever met.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “Kisho-chan is nearly… two and a half. Did you know the first time I ever met him was in the… hospital? Nihonbashi is less than… thirty minutes from… Shinjuku.”

“You were busy,” Kou reminds Kirishima.

“Two and a half years.”

“I didn't go home that often, either,” Kou says. “I think sometimes it's harder when you live that close, because you're always thinking you can go anytime. Besides, it's clear Kisho-chan adores his 'Kei-ji-chan' now.”

Kirishima sighs. “I guess.”

“Look. When we met, you helped a complete stranger get up the nerve to go to Ni-chōme when…”

“I had an… ulterior motive.”

“Well… but I told you early on I wasn't interested in Aki.”

Kirishima smiles. “That's not the… motive I was thinking of.”

Kou blushes. “You couldn't even decide what you wanted to order because you were so used to putting yourself second.”

Kirishima doesn't have a response to this.

“And who carries around extra water and lozenges in case someone else needs them?” Kou remembers their argument over Kirishima carrying supplies for Asami in Kirishima's own gym bag. It seems so petty now.

Kirishima steals a hurried glance at Kou, but Kou looks like he's not bothered by the memory. “That was my job.”

Kou shakes his head. “I'm sure Asami-san never told you to do that. Right?”

“He didn't have to… but that was still… part of my job. I was a… yes-man.”

Kou sighs. “You realize that *everything* that anyone does has at least *some* benefit to themselves,
even if it's just making them feel good. You're the type of person who's always thinking of others so much that if you ever think of yourself at all, you beat yourself up for being selfish.”

“And you're not?” Kirishima asks Kou.

Kou shrugs. “Applying for and accepting the fellowship was pretty selfish.”

“That wasn’t something you'd have… thought to do on your own. Besides… it made your professor happy. And I'm sure… your parents.”

Kou chuckles. “See? Nothing can ever be truly altruistic - or truly selfish.”

“I've had a lot of… time to think since my… injury,” Kirishima reflects. “And I'm… trying to be… better. Less selfish.”

“Like I said, I don't think that's something you ever had to worry about,” Kou says. Kirishima opens his mouth, but Kou holds up a hand. “But there's nothing wrong with trying to grow. I'm rooting for you. Just make sure you celebrate your successes, okay? And don't beat yourself up too much if you fall short of your incredibly high standards.”

Kirishima nods. “Thanks.” He closes the photo album on his phone and realizes he left his messages open. “Oh, right. Happy belated Birthday! I'm sorry, I lose track of the days here.”


“August eleventh,” Kirishima says.

“Good. I haven't missed it.”

Kirishima blushes. “Just make me feel worse…”

Kou blushes, too. “Sorry. It's completely understandable. Besides, I even forgot myself.”

“I still want to make it up to you. Next time you visit,” Kirishima says.

Kou smiles at the idea of “next time,” but Kirishima doesn't seem to realize what he's implied.

“August eleventh, huh? That'll be easy to remember. Mountain Day. It suits you.”

“Kirishima-san, play with me!”

Madison bursts into the room with her usual enthusiasm. She pulls up short when she sees Kou standing next to Kirishima.

“Stupid Saji-kun and his big mouth.”

Kou takes it in stride. “No. I'm Kou Motomi. You must be Madison.”

Madison squeals. “You're Kou-san?!” She beams as she looks back and forth between the two men.

Kirishima blushes. Stupid Saji-kun and his big mouth.

Madison shuffles her feet nervously. “I guess… I should go…” She looks down at the floor but keeps her expression impassive.
“You can come back after… lunch,” Kirishima says. She instantly brightens, and he hastily adds, “After normal lunch… hour.”

Madison nods. “Arigatō gozaimasu, Kirishima-san. I got that right, right? Because I haven't come back yet.”

Kirishima smiles. “Yes. That's right. Sorry, I haven’t had… time to find Japanese resources for you yet.”

Kou looks up. “You’re learning Japanese?”

“Kirishima-san is going to teach me. I don’t even know the alphabet yet.”

“My friend is learning. I can ask him what he uses. I think he said there’s a site - maybe Real Kana? - that helped him learn hiragana and katakana.” Kou pulls out his phone and sends a quick text.

Madison pulls out her own phone. “I found it! Thanks, Kou-nii-chan!”

Kirishima says, “Don't forget you have to… complete all your work this… week. And make up what you missed… last week.”

Madison grins. “I already did it last night.” She gives Kirishima a quick hug with her left arm before heading back to the door. Before leaving, she throws out, “It was nice to meet you, Kou-nii-chan. You're cute! Right, Kirishima-san?”

“Madison!” Kirishima splutters, but she's already gone, her happy giggle echoing down the hall.

“So that's Madison-chan,” Kou says.

“Saji-kun has a big mouth,” Kirishima explains.

Kou sees that Kirishima’s face is already purple and decides to take pity on him by changing the topic. “Saji-kun is nice. He seems like someone I could be friends with.”

Kirishima smiles. “He is. All the guys on Takaba's team are like that. They remind me of you.”

“Saji-kun mentioned he was one of the ones who followed me around,” Kou says solemnly.

He's still hung up about that. I can't really blame him.

“I'm sorry. I really did try… to get them to not do that. I did at least… convince them to use Takaba-san's team. They're a… separate unit. They don't know anything about… normal operations. It keeps them and Takaba-san… safer. The police wouldn't be… aware of them.”

“If I went back to Japan, would they follow me again?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shakes his head. “No. It's done. Forever… regardless of what happens between us from… now on.”

Kou nods. “Okay.” After a second, he asks, “How did you convince them to take the resources away from Aki? He was working on the Kodama-gumi investigation then, right?”

“It was only ever one or two guys at a… time. He was still safe. I reminded them how good you are at… parkour. They were the only team… capable of keeping up with you.” Kirishima chuckles, and Kou laughs, too, but quickly soberes.
“Speaking of Aki, have you heard from him? He's not returning my texts and calls, and I'm worried.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “I'll see what I can… find out, though, and let you know.”

Kou nods. “Thanks. So things are going well between Saji-kun and Tanaka-san?”

Kirishima shrugs. “They went to dinner together… last night. I guess that was their… first date. I haven't gotten a chance to ask if it went well.”

Kou smirks. “I think it's safe to assume it did. He has a giant kissmark on his collarbone.” Kou indicates the spot. Kirishima looks at him quizzically, and Kou explains, “His shirt slipped down a bit while we were running.”

Kirishima's phone buzzes. “If you speak a rumor…” he mutters as he reads the message. “Saji-kun wants to know if he can bring us… lunch from a local Japanese place. You have to leave by… noon, right?”

Kou nods.

“Do you want to eat… before you go?”

Kou shrugs. “I ate breakfast early. I could go for an early lunch.”

“Okay.” Kirishima types a long reply, pausing intermittently to ask Kou questions. “You like… agedashi tofu, right? It's really good here.” “What kind of… vegetables do you want?” and finally “You know it's my… treat, right? You don't have to be… frugal.”

“But you're -” Kou stops at the look Kirishima gives him.

“You know I was injured on the… job, right? They're paying for all of… this.” Kirishima waves a hand to indicate the entire Kessler facility.

“But you're not…” Kou starts uncertainly but trails off. From what Kirishima has told him, it doesn't sound like Kirishima has time to work for Asami right now, but Kou doesn't want to know if his assumption is incorrect.

“I have no expenses,” Kirishima says. “No rent, no car, no… insurance. I don't even have to pay for… most of my food. You came all the way here to… visit me. The least you can let me do is… treat you to lunch.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Kou finally acquiesces.

As Kirishima finishes his text, his stomach growls loudly. “Sorry, I didn't get a chance to eat… breakfast.”

*Of course he didn't. I woke him up.* “I'm so sorry! I should have come later!” Kou says. “Is there something you can eat now?”

Kirishima chuckles. “I'm not one to… oversleep, but somehow you always seem to… show up when I do.”

Kou blushes. “You didn't know I was coming, and I knew how exhausted you were after the outing. I was thoughtless.”
Kirishima shakes his head. “I got plenty of sleep. I’m glad we can spend… more time together.” He rings for assistance to transfer to his wheelchair. “I’ll give you a… tour of the place on the way to the… cafeteria.”

“You know, you’re really not that far from me. I’ll be able to visit again,” Kou says. “The bus takes a couple of hours and is kind of complicated, but now that I don’t need to save up for a plane ticket to Japan, I should be able to buy a scooter in the next few months.”

“I can help pay for it,” Kirishima offers.

“i can’t let you do that!” Kou bursts out.

“It’s for… selfish reasons,” Kirishima says, grinning. “It means I’ll get to see you more… often, right? I already told you, I’m not… hurting for… money.”

“Still…” Kou says, trailing off as a staff member enters the room.

“A loan, then,” Kirishima says as he’s transferred to his wheelchair. “Don’t say no… right away. At least think about it.”

Kou nods. Kirishima starts wheeling his chair but stops.

“What's wrong?” Kou asks.

Kirishima tries to turn his grimace into a grin. “DOMS. I think I overdid it… yesterday at the reservoir. I really wanted to do the… whole loop by myself.” He starts wheeling slowly down the hall, Kou walking beside him.

*Kei-san looks so small in the wheelchair.*

“Saji-kun and I ran it. That was really far!” Kou remembers.

“The… farthest I’d gone by myself… before was about… five hundred meters,” Kirishima confesses. “Here’s where Tanaka-san tortures me… And this is the patio. It's too bad it's raining. We could have… sat out there.”

Kirishima gets a muffin for himself while Kou gets them both coffees. Because there are so many visitors and it's pouring down rain, the cafeteria is crowded, and there are no empty tables. Kirishima sees Madison sitting alone at a small table overlooking the courtyard.

“Can we sit with you?”

“You can have the table,” Madison says. “I was just about to go back to my room.” She steals a glance at a girl with an auburn pixie cut laughing with her parents.

“You don't have to go. Please stay,” Kirishima says.

“Yes, please,” Kou echoes. “How’s the kana practice going? Do you still want to learn Japanese?”

Madison launches into a long explanation of her favorite manga (including a detailed plot summary) and why she wants to read the light novels it's based on. “All I know is that at some point Taiga-nii ends up chasing Ryu-chan with a chainsaw. How could I not read that?! So I have to learn Japanese!”

“I'm sorry,” Kirishima mouths to Kou.

Kou hastily hides his smile by taking a large sip of coffee, scalding his tongue.
“I’ve already learned my first five hiragana,” Madison finally finishes.

“That’s good,” Kou says. “I’ll let Kei-san know as soon as I hear back from my friend, and he can pass his recommendations along to you.”

Madison blushed. “Thanks. That'd be awesome.” She stands up. “Thanks for listening. I'm going to go learn the rest of the hiragana letters.”

Once she’s gone, Kirishima says in a low voice, “Sorry, I know she can be a bit much, but she's really… lonely. Her family lives… five hundred miles away. She’s got… two younger… siblings. It's just the mom, and she's working… three jobs to cover the medical bills. She can only visit… once every other month.”

“That's terrible,” Kou says. “And she has a crush on Saji-kun?”


While Kirishima eats his muffin, Kou gets out his sketchbook. As Kou pulls Kirishima into conversation about his routine at the rehab center, Kirishima slowly relaxes and forgets about the pencil in Kou’s hand. If it weren't for the buzz of the other patients and their families, Kirishima could almost close his eyes and think that they were back in his apartment in Tokyo.

When Kirishima has finished his muffin and both coffee cups are empty, they head back to Kirishima’s room. On the way, Kou receives a text from Chris.

I'm done. I'll kill time until you're ready. Just shoot me a text.

“Do you have to go?” Kirishima guesses, trying to read Kou’s expression.

“I don't know.” Kou explains Chris's situation with his dad. “Apparently his dad can't handle the fact that Chris is bi. I guess their meeting didn’t go well.”

Kirishima checks the time. “I don’t think Saji-kun has gotten the food yet. Invite… Chris-kun to join us. We’ll get more food. Does he like Japanese?”

Kou wrinkles his nose. “He even likes nattō. But are you sure that’s okay?”

Kirishima nods. “I like that you met my… family and Saji-kun. I feel like when we were dating, we kept that… separate from the rest of our lives. I want to… know your friends.”

Kou blushes. “When you put it like that… I’m glad to get to know your friends and family, too. It’s just…”

“You're going to visit again… soon, right?” Kirishima asks.

Kou’s face clears. He nods and sends a reply to Chris. “Actually, something weird happened last night. Thomas and Chris met for the first time, and they hit it off.”

“Hit it… off?” Kirishima asks uncertainly.

“To put it bluntly, Chris stayed the night in Thomas’s room. He came out in his boxer shorts.”

“And that’s weird?”
Kou shrugs. “I guess not. I mean, I already knew they were both into guys, I just never thought they’d be into each other, you know? And to sleep together a few hours after they met…”

“You don’t know that they did,” Kirishima points out.

“I didn’t think either was the kind to move that fast,” Kou says.

“You ended up staying in my bed the… night we met,” Kirishima reminds him.

Kou blushes. “You’re right. I’m being stupid. I need to get over it, don’t I? I should be happy for them. I am happy for them.”

Kirishima laughs. “That was quick. Are you worried you’ll lose your two best… local friends?”

Kou nods. “Yeah. I think that’s it. They’re both so busy, and now when they’ll be in the apartment, they’ll want to be with each other, not me.”

“Don’t jump… ahead,” Kirishima advises. “You don’t even know whether… there’s anything to worry about… yet.”

Chris and Saji arrive around the same time, with Chris entering the room right after Saji. Saji looks at Chris suspiciously.

“Are you following me?”

“That’s my friend Chris,” Kou explains to Saji in Japanese. He remembers that Chris is still learning and starts to translate, but Chris interrupts.

“I understood. Please speak Japanese and feel… comfortable. I’ll do my best.” Chris frowns in concentration and sighs in relief when he manages to get his thoughts out mostly in Japanese.

The conversation focuses on the food for the next few minutes, until Kou turns to Chris and asks, “How’d things go with your dad?”

Chris’s face clouds over. “Not good.” He frowns in concentration.

“You can talk in English,” Kou reminds him.

Chris sighs and says, “Thanks. Talking in Japanese for so long hurts my head. I don’t know how you talk in English all day and not get tired.”

“It’s exhausting,” Kou admits.

Chris laughs but quickly sobers. “I should have gone home to change. As soon as I showed up, my pops asked when I started dressing like a… like a faggot.” Chris grimaces as he glances around to see whether the rest understood the term.

Kirishima looks confused, so Saji whispers the Japanese equivalent. Kirishima clenches his jaw.

“I’m sorry,” Kou says, giving Chris’s shoulder a quick pat.

“So I stupidly told him that I stayed at a friend’s house last night and had to borrow a shirt. He went ballistic.”

None of the Japanese men understand that word, but its meaning is clear when Chris pushes up his left sleeve and reveals the bruises shaped like fingers that are starting to blossom on his upper arm.
Tears roll down Chris’s face, and he swipes at them angrily. “He said I better not d- dare to disrespect him by showing up at his house smelling like sex and dressed like a fairy again. Thomas and I didn’t even have sex - not that that’s relevant at all.”

Kou places an arm across Chris’s shoulder. Kou doesn’t know what to say, so he just gives a gentle squeeze.

“That’s bullshit,” Saji says. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Chris shrugs. “He was right in my face, and I could smell the booze on his breath. That’s why my parents split up when I was little. I don’t even remember what he was like back then. He’s been sober for fifteen years. Did he start drinking again because I told him I was bi?”

Kirishima clears his throat. “He started drinking… because he wanted to. It was his… choice. His… alone. Anything he says… differently is just… an excuse.”

Chris wipes his eyes again. “He said that me being bi is selfish. I tried to explain that I still want to fall in love with just one person, I just don’t care if it’s a man or a woman, but he said if I have a choice, I should just be n- normal. If he’s normal, maybe I don’t want to be normal.”

“Normal is overrated,” Kou mutters. “You should talk to Izzy about this.”

Chris shakes his head, but then he shrugs. “I might have to. Izzy’s my mom,” he explains to Kirishima and Saji. “He threatened to stop helping to pay for my school. He wasn’t helping much, but still…”

Chris shrugs again. “We’ll figure it out. Scholarships cover most of it. Thanks for listening. I’m sorry to unload all this on you guys, especially when I just met you. This food is really good!” He switches back to Japanese, but his attempt to change the topic back to food falls flat.

They eat in silence for a moment until Chris says, “Oh! I received Kou’s text. A friend is learning Japanese?” He looks at Kirishima and Saji.

Saji looks confused, so Kirishima says, “Madison.”

“Oh, right.”

Chris continues. “Here are some things I use.” He pulls out his phone and shows them a few apps.

Kirishima jots the names down. “What about books?”

“My class uses Genki, and I think it’s good. How old is the student?”

“Fourteen,” Kirishima says, glancing at Saji, who nods in agreement.

“I think Genki will work. It’s for university students, but I heard that some high schools use it. There are workbooks and CDs, too.”

“Thanks. This will be very… helpful,” Kirishima says.

“Um, Kei-san, can I use your bathroom?” Kou asks, blushing a little.

“Please use the… visitor’s restroom.” Kirishima points to the door. “It’s down the hall to the… left. It will be on the… right.”

“Uh…” Saji says, stopping at a look from Kirishima. Saji hastily shovels a large helping of tofu into
his mouth.

Kou glances between Saji and Kirishima for a second before shrugging and heading down the hall to the left.

“The bathroom to the right is much closer,” Saji points out.

“Did you get it?” Kirishima asks.

“Oh! Yes.” Saji grabs the paper bag he'd stowed behind the bed after pulling out the takeout. “I got a card, too. I wasn't sure what you'd want to say, so I just got a generic one.”

Saji hands Kirishima a card and a pen, then pulls out a pastry box, a box of birthday candles, and a box of chocolates.

“You said he likes dark chocolate. I got an assortment.”

“Kou's birthday?” Chris asks.

“Yes. Thank you for… reminding me,” Kirishima says. “About your messages…” He switches to English to make sure Chris will understand. “I'm working to regain Kou-san's... trust. He really values honesty, and I don't want to keep... secrets from him.”

Chris looks confused.

“You and Thomas messaged me... last night,” Kirishima reminds Chris.

“Oh right.” Chris blushes. “I don't really remember what I said. Sorry if it was anything weird. Or rude.”

Kirishima shows Chris his phone. “I just want to tell Kou-san you were the one to remind me of his... birthday.”


“You should finish writing the card,” Saji warns Kirishima.

Kirishima hurriedly starts writing, but he soon pauses. His face flushes. “I can't... remember... the kanji,” he mutters.

“Calm down and take a deep breath,” Saji says.

“I should be... able to... write a... birthday card.” Kirishima's jaw is tightly clenched.

Saji glances at Chris. Chris pretends like he doesn't understand what they've said and focuses his attention on the cake, placing candles on it. “How old is Kou?” he asks.

“Twen... twen... twenty-... six,” Kirishima says.

“Oh, right.” Chris frowns. “There aren't enough. I'll just use a few. It's a small cake.” He finishes arranging the candles. “Do you have matches?”

Saji claps a hand over his mouth. “I forgot.”

“That's okay.” Chris stands up. “I'll go... borrow some and find Kou. Give him a text when we can return.”
“Thanks,” Saji says gratefully. “See, Kirishima-san? You have plenty of time.”

Kirishima lets out a slow breath as Chris leaves the room.

Chris sees Kou at the end of the hall, peeking around the corner uncertainly. As soon as Kou sees Chris, Kou starts hurrying towards him. “Thank goodness. I was in such a hurry to get to the bathroom, I didn't pay attention to where I came from.” Kou blushes a little.

Chris says, “Before we go back, I've got to get something.” He walks past Kou into the cafeteria, which is even more full of people.

Kou follows him curiously. “What?”

“Umm… On my way back, there was something wrong with the bike. Saji-kun thinks he can fix it with matches.”

“What happened?” Kou asks.

Chris holds up a hand, his face knitted in concentration as he walks slowly through the crowd, his nose occasionally twitching.

“What are you doing?” Kou asks.

“Trying to find a smoker.” Chris turns his head when he hears a long, hacking cough. The source is a middle-aged man with a yellowish-grayish mustache. Chris makes a beeline for the man. “Excuse me, do you have any matches I can borrow?”

The man pulls out a fancy lighter, fingering it for a moment before holding it out to Chris. “Here. You can have this.”

“I'll bring it back in a few minutes,” Chris says.

“No, you can keep it. My daughter asked me to stop smoking, so I don’t need it anymore.” He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tosses it into the trashcan as a girl with a pixie cut bursts out, “Daddy!”

“Well, thank you,” Chris mumbles. He wonders how much more time Kirishima needs, but just then, Kou receives a text. “Who's that from?”


“Well, let's head back,” Chris says. He leads the way back to Kirishima’s room, pausing in the doorway to make sure everything’s ready. Saji flashes him a thumbs-up, and Chris tossing him the lighter.

As Saji lights the candles, Chris steps aside and starts singing “Otanjōbi omedetō” but stops when the others just stare at him.

“Um… Isn't that ‘Happy Birthday’ in Japanese?” he asks, his face flushing.

“Those are the right words…” Saji says, “but my family has always just sung the English version. Maybe it's because we lived here for so long?” He looks questioningly at Kirishima and Kou.

“We never really… celebrated birthdays,” Kirishima confesses.
“We always did the English one, too,” Kou says.

The candles are burning down quickly. “Let's sing in English!” Chris says.

By the time they're done, Kou's cheeks are pink with embarrassment. He quickly blows out the candles as Chris shouts, “Make a wish!”

A wish? All I've been wishing for lately is to see Kei-san again. I've already gotten my wish. But... I wish for Kei-san to be healthy and happy.

“What did you wish for?” Chris asks.

Kou pinkens and steals a quick glance at Kirishima.

“He's not supposed to say or it might not come true,” Saji says, and Kou casts him a grateful look.

“You didn't even know I was coming,” Kou says in wonder, looking from the cake, candy, and card to Kirishima. “How -?”

“Saji-kun picked up... everything for me,” Kirishima explains. “He would have had to... regardless, whether I knew you were coming or not.”

Kou's face falls slightly. Kirishima distracts him by handing him the card.

“Thanks,” Kou says. “Can I read it now?”

Kirishima shrugs, and Kou carefully tears open the envelope.

Kou-san, thank you for being born. You have brought color to this world - to my world. I hope you find everything you came to New York to find: success, artistic growth, wonderful experiences, and happiness. With gratitude and fondness, Kei

Kou throws his arms around Kirishima, nearly toppling the wheelchair. Saji, who's on the other side of the chair, manages to catch it and keep everyone upright.

“Sorry,” Kou says, running a hand through his hair to hide his embarrassment. “Can we eat the cake now?”

As Kou and Chris prepare to leave, Kirishima tries to give them the rest of the cake. “It wouldn’t keep,” Kou points out. “You should give some to Madison-chan. Isn’t she stopping by soon?” Kou grins at Saji. “And maybe Tanaka-san would like a piece, too.”

Saji elbows Kou. “I’ll go help Chris with his bike.” He walks down the hall with Chris.

Kou looks at Kirishima. “I thought that was just an excuse for Chris to ask for the matches without me wondering why he needed them.”

Kirishima looks confused. “I have no... idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh. Oh!” Kou blushes, suddenly realizing they’re alone. “I- I’m glad I could finally see you. Video chat just isn’t the same.”

“No, it’s not,” Kirishima says quietly, his own cheeks starting to burn.
“When can I come back to see you again?” Kou asks hesitantly. “I’m not sure about this week…”

“No one’s allowed to come to my… appointments with me, so the… weekend is probably better,” Kirishima says.

“Then Saturday?” Kou asks.

Kirishima licks his lips. “I’d like that.”

“Can I still call you tonight?” Kou asks.

“Of course!” It hadn’t even occurred to Kirishima that they wouldn’t talk tonight.

“Can I hug you?” Kou asks, his face reddening further.

“Of course,” Kirishima says softly.

This hug is different than the desperate greeting they gave one another a few hours earlier. Though it’s made awkward by the angle necessitated by Kirishima’s wheelchair, it somehow feels more intimate.

*I’ve missed this so much.*

They breathe in each other’s scent for a long moment. Kirishima can feel a part of his body waking up that hasn’t since his injury. He squirms uncomfortably, and Kou reluctantly pulls away. His face is angled down, and the source of Kirishima’s discomfort is obvious.

Kirishima’s face is scarlet as he tries to cover his lap with his hands.

“I’m glad to see that part still works,” Kou jokes feebly.

Kirishima’s face falls.

“I’m sorry,” Kou says. “That was insensitive of me.”

Kirishima glances out the window. “It’s really… coming down now. Be safe on your way home.”

“I’ll see you Saturday,” Kou says.

In the lobby, Chris is telling Saji, “… is a little far, but there are three rock climbing gyms within twenty minutes. There are several amazing parkour and Sasuke gyms within an hour.”

“Thanks,” Saji says.

“I’ll message you the details when I get home from work tonight.”

Kou feels uneasy. Kirishima all but said that Akihito’s bodyguards are kept separate from the illegal side of Asami’s business, but does that really matter? Surely they would have to be at least somewhat aware of the risks and dangers Akihito faces from Asami’s business dealings.

*Saji-kun is on the other side of the world from all that. Chris is just giving him advice on where to train. It’s not like they’re going to become best buddies.*

Kou nods at Saji. “It was nice to meet you, Saji-kun.”
As Saji heads back towards Kirishima’s room, Chris stares out at the pounding rain. “It’s going to be a fun ride home.”

“Yeah. We should go.”

Chris checks the time. “Before we do, can I talk to you for a sec, B?”

Kou nods, bracing himself. Does he want to say something about Kei-san?

“It’s about Thomas,” Chris says.

Kou feels his shoulders relax. “Whatever you two do is up to you.” He smiles.

Chris checks his head. “Look. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t really have that many friends. Slider’s been my best friend since we were ten years old. I hang with other people, but he was the only one I was really close to, you know?”

Kou’s eyebrows shoot up at Chris’s use of the past tense. He’d noticed that Slider had only trained with them a few times, and not at all in the past couple of weeks, but Kou had assumed it was because his own and Slider’s schedules were so different, and that Chris was still hanging out with Slider when Kou wasn’t around.

“Did something happen?” Kou asks.

Chris shrugs. “I don’t know. I told him I was bi around Christmas, and he seemed cool with it. But then once I started actually… exploring that side of me this summer, he’s all of a sudden stopped having time to trace with us - even though I clearly see by his Insta feed that he has plenty of time for training.” Chris looks like he wants to say more but shifts uncomfortably.

“Maybe he just doesn’t like me,” Kou says.

Chris shakes his head. “No. I’m sure that’s not it.”

“He seems like the kind of guy who would say something if he was pissed off,” Kou points out.

“That’s true,” Chris says, frowning. “But if he’s not tight, why is he avoiding me?”

Kou shrugs. “I think you’ve got to ask him that. Maybe try inviting him to something other than a jam. What about fiesta night?”

Chris’s face clears. “Thanks. I think I will, son. But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Chris checks his watch again. “I know I’ve only known you a short time, B, but you’re already one of my best friends. If you don’t want me to see Thomas again -”

Kou interrupts. “That’s up to you, B.”

Chris shakes his head. “That’s what I’m saying, B. If for any reason you don’t want me to see him, or if you think things could get weird between us if things went south, tell me and I’ll back off.”

Kou shakes his head. “That’s between you guys. Just… he’s my roommate, so as long as you don’t expect me to take sides or stop talking to him or something…”

“Of course not,” Chris says, sighing in relief. “Thanks, B. We’d better hit the road.” He hands Kou the keys, and they race out to the bike.
Kirishima and Saji watch from the window as the motorcycle heads down the drive, Kirishima's hands carefully arranged on his lap.

Saji heads over to Kirishima's wardrobe and pulls out a small cardboard box from the back. Saji clears his throat. “Asami-sama told me to give this to you when you met Motomi-san again. He said you should open it alone.” Saji keeps his eyes averted from Kirishima's lap.

“Thanks,” Kirishima says uncertainly, wondering what could possibly be in the box.

Saji stares out the window again. “You didn't tell him you quit your job.”

“I… can't,” Kirishima says. “Not until I figure out… what I'll do with the… rest of my life.”

Saji leans over and flicks Kirishima in the forehead. “Idiot.” Saji straightens. “Text or call if you need anything.” He waves as he heads for the door, leaving Kirishima alone to take care of his predicament.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from the song "Fading Like a Flower" by Roxette.

Yeah... I'm not sure whether you guys picked up on that little fact Saji dropped in the last scene. Kirishima has his reasons! There will be a little bit of a time skip in either the next chapter or the following one. (Probably the following one, so we can find out what's up with Aki and Slider. And what's in the box!)
What Real Life Tastes Like (Brass)

Chapter Summary

What's in the box from Asami? Where is Akihito? How's Kou's fellowship going? And what news does Kirishima's neurologist have for him? All this and more will be answered in this chapter!

Chapter Notes

The characters continue to run this story. Once again this chapter went places I wasn't expecting, but I feel like the plot's really moving along. Only a handful of chapters left, maybe? (I know, I know, famous last words!)

Warning: the beginning of this chapter is a bit explicit.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's Japanese neurosurgeon
Brittany Bryant: Kirishima's neurologist at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler
Kirishima briefly contemplates asking for help to transfer to his bed, but the thought of the staff noticing his predicament is unbearable. He wheels over to the door and locks it before examining the box in his lap.

What could Asami-sama have given me?

Kirishima gingerly removes the green tape that says “Examined by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.” Inside the box is a small lockbox with the key in the lock.

What the hell?

Kirishima turns the key. When he lifts the lid, he sees a flash of what’s inside and lets the lid drop closed again.

Gingerly, he lifts it again, checking to make sure it’s all there: a small bottle of liquid, little foil-wrapped squares, an oblong silicone shape, and a book with a naked man on the cover.

The items do nothing to help distract Kirishima from his predicament.

Shit. Does Saji-kun know what’s in here?

Kirishima ponders it for a moment.

No. This is quintessential Ryuichi. He knew I’d be embarrassed if anyone else found these. I didn’t even remember they were in my apartment. Thank goodness Mom didn’t help pack up my stuff!

Kirishima briefly contemplates using some of the items to help with his predicament but quickly dismisses the idea. First of all, the only place he could feasibly use the items is in his bed, and he’s supposed to ask for staff’s help to transfer. And then even if he managed to use the items, what would happen if he made a mess? He’s not capable of cleaning himself independently right now, much less cleaning a bed.
Kirishima sighs. He’ll just have to wait for things to calm down naturally. He closes the lockbox and sticks it back in the bottom of the closet, placing the key in his wallet. He picks up his tablet and tries to distract himself with the family business.

Before he has time to do more than open the website, though, someone knocks on his door. “Kirishima-san! Are you ready to play with me?”

Kirishima glances down at his lap. His predicament is still too obvious. Even more disturbing, if anything, it seems to be getting worse with the fear that he’ll be discovered.

Madison-chan is just a kid. Just relax already, body!

But his body doesn’t seem to be listening to his brain.

“Uh, can you come back in… twenty minutes?” Kirishima calls through the door.

“Fine. You did say after lunch, though!” Madison calls back.

Kirishima breathes a sigh of relief at the sound of her retreating footsteps. He picks up his tablet again, but after five minutes, he sighs and sets it down again. Distraction is obviously not working.

Kirishima decides to take care of business.

After a moment, he realizes it will be impossible in the wheelchair. He’ll have to move to the bed. Kirishima eyes the bed. He’s made the transfer by himself in occupational therapy several times already.

If I don’t make it, it will be no more embarrassing than my current state - and perhaps even less so, if it helps things settle down.

He takes a deep breath and sets the anchors so that his chair is secured directly adjacent to the bed. Once his legs are on the bed, Kirishima uses his arms to lift his body, sliding sideways in short bursts until he’s finally on the bed.

Easy peasy.

Kirishima unfastens his obi. His hand slides inside his boxer-briefs. The sensation is weird; his hand is signaling that it's holding something, but Kirishima's brain is receiving no signal from the body part his hand is holding. He groans in frustration.

Kirishima tries again, gripping firmly as he slides his hand down slowly. He feels a small jolt, almost like a shock, on the right side of his shaft.

A small moan escapes his lips. He closes his eyes and focuses on his body’s response. Feeling any sensation there is definitely new. He explores how far the sensory area extends. An image of Kou in his damp t-shirt, hair messily swept back from his run, flashes in Kirishima’s mind.

Thirty seconds later, Kirishima is wiping himself down with a tissue. He rearranges his clothes and transfers back to the wheelchair. He flushes the evidence down the toilet, washes his hands, and double-checks his clothes before opening his door.

I shouldn’t have done that. Kou-san broke up with me. I shouldn’t use him.

He wheels back to his bed and picks up his tablet, checking the statistics on the family website. He
notes which campaigns have actually led to increased traffic. He’s about to check the document Kenta sent him with plans for reaching the Japanophile market when Madison bursts into the room.

“It’s been less than twenty minutes, but you opened the door. Does that mean I can come in, Kirishima-san?”

“You already are,” Kirishima points out, but he sets his tablet aside, anyway.

*I hope the room doesn’t smell weird.*

But Madison is her usual oblivious self. “*So… that was Kou-nii-chan, huh. He’s very cute. Nearly as cute as -*” She claps her left hand over her mouth.

“As Saji-kun?” Kirishima guesses with a mischievous smile.

Madison glares at him without answering, but her scarlet cheeks give her away. “*But Ken-san likes him…*” she mutters then lets out a huge sigh. “*Why are the cute guys always gay?*”

Kirishima chuckles. “*Are they?*”

Madison rolls her eyes. “*Duh. I mean there's Ken-san, Saji-nii-chan, Drew-kun -*”

“*Wait. Drew told you he's... gay? I thought he wouldn't... talk to you,*” Kirishima interrupts. He's never met Drew, but Madison has pointed him out to Kirishima, and Kirishima is often in therapy at the same time as the brooding sixteen-year-old. Kirishima's never heard the young man talk, not even at the aphasia support group. Kirishima doesn't know if Drew can talk, but he doesn't feel it's his place to share what amounts to gossip about the young man's medical condition to Madison.

Madison shakes her head. “*He won't talk to me or Kara. If it was just me, I'd understand, but everybody talks to cute Miss Pixie Cut.*”

“*That doesn't mean he's gay,*” Kirishima says.

Madison waves her left hand dismissively. “*Whatever. And now there's Kou-nii-chan. All the cute guys around this place. All gay.*” She sighs dramatically.

“I see,” Kirishima says, not sure how else to respond. He'd thought it would get easier to talk to teen girls the more he interacted with Madison, but it still feels as difficult as their first conversation.

Madison claps her left hand over her mouth. “*Oh. I mean, I'm sure you were cute when you were younger, Kirishima-san. You're just kind of old now, if you know what I mean.*”

Kirishima opens his mouth to protest but closes it again. There's no point. Even though the others are nearly twice Madison's age, he's closer to three times her age.

*Anything over thirty seemed ancient to me when I was fourteen, too.*

“I mean, you're not old-old, you're just... You've got a beard, you know?” Madison reaches up and rubs Kirishima's chin.

He absentmindedly strokes it himself once Madison's hand drops away. He hasn't really looked at himself in a mirror since his injury. There's one over the sink in the bathroom, but he avoids looking at it. During the weeks he was completely bedridden, he got used to brushing his teeth and hair without a mirror.

*Would I even recognize myself? Kou-san didn't sound sure it was me when he first arrived.*
Kirishima shrugs. “It’s fine. To you I am ... old.”

“Anyway... Tell me about Kou-san. Is he an artist? I saw his sketchbook when you guys came to the cafeteria.”

Before Kirishima realizes what's happening, Madison's relentless questioning has drawn him into telling her nearly everything about his relationship with Kou (except for the parts related to Kirishima's job).

When he's done, she sighs and says, “It’s like a manga. You just have to get back together with him.”

“That's up to him,” Kirishima says. “And real life doesn’t always have... neat endings like stories do.”

Madison rolls her eyes. “I know that. Besides, mangas have all kinds of endings. Some happy, some sad, some ambiguous, some open-ended. Anyway, you just have to get back together. You were obviously made for each other. You only get one true love.”

Kirishima frowns. “I don’t think that’s... true. I think there are a... number of people you could be happy with, and it’s up to the... two of you to make it work if that’s what you... both want.”

Madison sighs. “You’re so not romantic. Anyway, you clearly still want it, and obviously Kou-nii-chan does, too. I could tell by the way he looked at you.”

Kirishima sighs. “That doesn't mean he'll take me back. I'm not the... same person I was when we were together.”

Madison's face falls, and Kirishima remembers the fears she's confessed that she'll always be viewed as a freak and no boy will ever want to date her.

“It was my fault we... broke up in the... first place,” Kirishima says. “I'm trying to learn to be a... better person.”

Madison considers that. “You're always nice to me.”

Kirishima shrugs.

“Did you say you're sorry?” Madison asks.

Kirishima looks at her in surprise. “I did. More than once.”

“Well, keep doing what you're doing. It's working.”

Kirishima realizes there's no point in arguing any further.

“You know what you need? You need to watch a romantic comedy,” Madison announces.

Kirishima tries not to roll his eyes. Every weekend, Madison comes up with some excuse for them to watch a movie together. It's always some cheesy romantic comedy or shoujo anime. Usually he ends up working on the family business, barely registering her ongoing commentary, but she doesn't seem to mind.

“You really need to watch this one. It's relevant to your situation,” she explains as she starts the
movie.

But Kirishima can’t help sneaking peeks at his tablet. Soon he’s fully immersed in his work.

“You’re not watching.” Madison pouts. “See? She has to deceive him from the very beginning of their relationship.”

Kirishima looks up, startled.

I didn’t tell Madison that part.

“Why is she deceiving him?” he asks.

“Pay attention,” Madison grouses as she rewinds a bit.

Kirishima soon finds his attention divided between the movie and his tablet again until Madison squeals, “This is my favorite scene.”

Kirishima watches as the female lead is offered “anything [she] can carry” and hoists the prince on her back.

“I can’t carry Kou-san,” he says absentmindedly.

Madison squeals. “You’re the neko, Kirishima-san?”

Kirishima fights the blush creeping over his face. “I was just pointing out the… obvious.”

Madison’s face grows serious. “Is that why you think Kou-nii-chan won’t date you again?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “But…” he starts but trails off. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Madison huffs but returns her attention to the movie. Kirishima refocuses on Kenta’s document while half-listening to the movie. When the resolution happens, Kirishima feels disappointed.

She lied to him the whole time, and then he was the one to apologize? Well, she had a good reason to lie, unlike me. And she tried to tell him the truth before he heard it from someone else.

“So? What’d you think?” Madison asks.

“It was good,” Kirishima says.

Madison sighs. “It was. See? Leonardo da Vinci says everyone gets one true match, and he was like the smartest man ever.”

“You know that part was… fiction, right? Leonardo da Vinci was… never married or even in a… relationship.” Kirishima says.

“Ugh! You’re ruining my favorite movie! I should have watched it with Saji-nii-chan!” Madison exclaims.

“What about me?” Saji asks from the door.

After Madison finally leaves, Saji asks, “What did you think of Kenta-san’s document?”

“Before that… Kou-san asked me about… Takaba-san. What’s going on?”
Saji looks away. “I’m not supposed to tell you.”

Kirishima snorts. “I think I know… enough already. Just because I’m no longer… working for Asami-sama -”

“It’s not that,” Saji says hurriedly. “Obviously. It’s for your sake. It’s better to make a clean break. Besides, you’ve got enough to worry about.”

“I’m already worrying. Don’t you think telling me would make me worry… less?” Saji doesn’t respond. Kirishima studies his face. “Or is it that bad?”

Saji sighs. “Well, now you are worrying more than you should.”

Kirishima waits for a long moment. “You’re still not telling me… anything.”

“Yesterday morning, the government raided Kodama-gumi headquarters, making several arrests and confiscating truckloads of evidence.”

“Kuroda-… sensei?” Kirishima asks.

Saji nods.

Kirishima contemplates the implications of the raid. Obviously Asami wasn’t going to take the targeting of Akihito and Asami himself by Kodama-gumi lying down. And allowing law enforcement to clean up is often far less messy than dismantling an organization himself. Still… The third-largest yakuza group is quite the enemy to take on so directly, and there will be waves rippling across the underworld throughout all of Japan and East Asia.

*I never thought to ask even once what was going on after I woke up from my injuries. That should have been my first thought. Asami-sama was right to fire me.*

Saji is studying Kirishima carefully. “What the hell is going through your head? Are you blaming yourself again?”

Kirishima shakes his head. “No. But maybe Asami-sama would have made a more… prudent decision had I been there.”

Saji looks skeptical. “Everything’s under control. I’ve been put on high alert, but only Motomi-san has figured out you’re here, and that’s because you sent him that picture with the bridge behind it. He hasn’t told anyone except his local friends, and I reminded him not to use your last name with them.”

Kirishima frowns.

*Like Kou-san needed a reminder of how dangerous my job is.*

“It’s still my job to protect you, even if I am your friend,” Saji says.

Kirishima sighs. “I know. So Takaba-san is…”

“Safe,” Saji says.

Kirishima grimaces. “Can you pass along a message for him to contact Kou-san?”

“He’s not in a position to contact anyone right now,” Saji demurs.

Kirishima blinks several times. “Locking Takaba-san up doesn’t… work.”
Saji shifts his eyes. “He’s not locked up. He’s pursuing another case - somewhere he can’t easily get Japanese news.”

Kirishima’s eyes widen. “You… executed… Operation… Nerima?”

Saji shrugs. “Takaba-san is safe. That's all I know.”

Kirishima sighs. He’d come up with the idea of creating a diversion tactic using fake leads on a cold case involving the murder of an entire family in Nerima twenty-five years ago. The killer hadn’t removed their shoes, and traces of sand had been found where they had struggled with the father of the family. That sand had been traced to a desert in South America, where no one in the family had ever been.

There hadn’t been time to finish planning Operation Nerima before the fateful Kodama-gumi meeting at Sion, but even if there had been, the situation hadn’t been considered dangerous enough to warrant wasting a scheme that would probably only work once or twice before Takaba recognized Asami’s hand.

*And that was before they started counseling. I wonder how their relationship is going.*

Guilt churns Kirishima's stomach. Takaba has always been a bit reckless, but Asami has also always kept Takaba at arm's length so that he couldn't properly assess the danger. After his injuries, Kirishima learned only too well what it felt like for people to withhold information concerning him, when both Asami and Suoh would talk to the doctors and make decisions behind his back.

Kirishima remembers fruitlessly trying to convince Takaba that Asami was safe in Sion’s records room. The repeated violations of Takaba's trust by Asami and his men - especially Kirishima - over the years had understandably affected Takaba’s decision-making process and interactions with them. How much would Operation Nerima hurt Asami's and Takaba's relationship once Takaba realized he'd been sent on a wild goose chase to keep him from the largest story of his career?

*I really am an arrogant asshole.*

Saji is still eying Kirishima. “It was a good idea. Our job is to keep him safe.”

“Arrogant… manipulation… didn't work so well… last time,” Kirishima says, gesturing down at his wheelchair.

Saji raises his eyebrows. “Like reasoning with Takaba-sama has ever worked, either.”

Kirishima chuckles, his expression clearing a bit. “That’s true,” he agrees.

He still desperately wants to contact Asami and ask how things are going for him and Takaba, but leaving the underworld means a complete severing of Kirishima's relationship with Asami. Even though Suoh said Kirishima could keep in touch with him, Kirishima would never put Suoh in a position where he’d have to choose between his loyalty to family and to Asami. Kirishima did what he could for Asami and Takaba by convincing them to talk to Kurebayashi-sensei. The rest is up to them.

Kirishima pulls out his phone and texts Kou the little he knows about Takaba’s whereabouts.

Kirishima heads to the cafeteria alone for dinner. At four o’clock, Saji had received a call from Tanaka inviting him to eat out. Kirishima had overheard Saji politely declining and snatched his
phone away.

“Saji-kun would be happy to go to dinner with you, Tanaka-san. He’s actually not … busy.”

Saji lunged for his phone, but Kirishima kept a firm grip.

“Yes… Seven should be just fine…. No, you should pick him up at his… apartment. Do you have the… address? I’ll make sure he’s ready. See you… tomorrow, Tanaka-san.” Kirishima hung up and handed Saji back his phone.

“We’ve got to finish analyzing the data from the various advertising campaigns,” Saji protested.

“We have an… hour and a half together, and I can finish up after you leave,” Kirishima said.

Saji scowled. “There was a security breach last night,” he muttered. “I really shouldn’t leave you alone…”

Kirishima laughed. “You mean Kou-san? He said he was the one who made… both calls, right?”

Saji’s scowl didn’t fade.

“The other guys are still outside,” Kirishima noted. “You deserve a night off.”

“I had last night off,” Saji pointed out.

Kirishima shrugged. “Well, you deserve… two nights off.”

“I have all the time you’re in therapy off,” Saji reminded Kirishima.

“And you spend… half of that time working for my family’s company, even though we can’t even… pay you right now.” Kirishima nodded at Saji’s phone. “But if for some… reason you really don’t want to see Tanaka-san… tonight, you can call him back and tell him I have an… emergency.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to go,” Saji said, blushing. “I just feel like I’m not doing enough here.”

“You’re doing… plenty. I wouldn’t be able to get through this… without you.”

Saji snorted. “You’d be fine. Between your family and Motomi-san, you’ve got plenty of support.”

“They’re not… here. You’ve seen… the worst of it. The worst of… me. I’m sorry for all the times I’ve… snapped at you.”

Saji chuckled softly. “You’re incredible, you know that? I don’t think I could do what you’re doing. You do all your exercises without complaint, even getting extra practice in each day, and you use what little spare time you have to help others. I’d be bitching and moaning all the time. And yet you only rarely break down, and when you do, you pull yourself out of it so quickly.”

Kirishima blushed, shaking his head. “I still shouldn’t take my… frustrations out on you.”

Saji shrugged. “That’s literally what I’m here for. I’m glad you think I’m helping.”

Kirishima pulled the tablet back towards him. “Well, I guess we should get back to work again if you’re going to… clean up before your date. Thanks again for all your help.”
And so now Kirishima is heading to dinner alone. He usually doesn’t mind eating alone in the cafeteria, but the place is still packed with families visiting. He wheels around the tables, his tray in his lap, searching for Madison, knowing that she’ll probably be eating alone, too.

Kirishima’s way is suddenly blocked by a woman who pushes her chair back and stands up.

“Look, you’re the one who rode your skateboard without your helmet like a dumbass. Don’t you want to get better? The doctors say you’re not even trying. I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

Kirishima glances at the boy she’s addressing. Drew’s eyes are downcast, but besides a slight tightening of a muscle at the base of his jaw, there’s no indication that the woman’s words have registered.

“I’m sorry.” The woman chokes back a sob. “Please just… try, okay? That’s all we’re asking. The work you do now is the most important. It could affect the rest of your life. I’ll see you Wednesday at the support group.” She leans over and kisses Drew on the top of his head, but he jerks away. She wipes her eyes and turns around, already bolting for the door.

She nearly topples over Kirishima in her haste, but Kirishima manages to back up and keep his tray of food from sliding off his lap.

“Sorry,” the woman mutters, not even looking at Kirishima.

Kirishima wheels closer to the table. “Mind if I sit here?” he asks.

Drew shrugs, so Kirishima sets his tray on the table and pushes the cafeteria chair slightly to the side so he can pull his wheelchair underneath.

“Are you okay?” Kirishima asks after a minute.

Drew shrugs again.

He seems to understand what I’m saying.

Kirishima has learned a lot about the different kinds of aphasia. Many patients have as much difficulty understanding language as they do speaking it.

Maybe he can talk.

Kirishima takes a few bites of food before saying, “Was that your mom?”

Drew blinks a few times before nodding.

“That’s rough.” Kirishima doesn’t know what else to say. After another minute, he asks, “So you… skateboard?”

Drew goes back to shrugging.

“Is that what you’re… working towards? Getting back on your… board?”

Drew looks up in surprise. He shrugs again as he quickly lowers his gaze.

“I know the… feeling,” Kirishima says.

“You board?” is Kirishima’s best guess at what comes out of Drew’s mouth, though it sounds more
like “Yah boah?” Drew quickly slaps a hand over his mouth and looks back down at his half-eaten dinner, blushing.

Kirishima shakes his head. “I do parkour. That’s how I... messed up my head and back.” He gestures to his wheelchair. “No one ever told me I should wear a... helmet.”

Drew laughs. “I -” He covers his mouth again.

“It’s okay. I had a lot of trouble talking... when I... first... first... after my... accident, too,” Kirishima says.

Drew looks skeptical.

“I’ve made a lot of... progress already,” Kirishima says, “though I still have my... moments. Like just... now. It’s worse when I get... frustrated.”

Drew nods. “Me d-d-doo.”

“Do you do parkour too?” Kirishima asks.

Drew nods. He glances down again, blushing as he says, “Oah I did.”

Kirishima sighs. “I can’t wait to get back to it. I’ve got a... long way to go.”

Drew nods again.

“You’re a lot... closer than me,” Kirishima says. “We’re in PT at the... same time, right?”

Drew nods. “Bud yah -” He gestures to his mouth and stops again, frowning.

“Yeah.” Kirishima nods. “I got... lucky. My brain injury wasn’t as bad as my... spinal injury. We all have our own... challenges.” He reaches out a hand across the table. “I’m Kirishima Kei. You can call me Kei.”

“Kay, Kei,” Drew says. He shakes Kirishima’s hand as he giggles, and Kirishima joins in. Drew points to his chest and says, “Dwoo.”

“Nice to meet you, Drew.”

They eat in silence for a few minutes, Drew occasionally glancing at Kirishima. When Drew finishes, he sets his fork down and leans closer, whispering, “Ah yah ebah... thcawed, Kei?”

“Shitless,” Kirishima whispers back. He quickly covers his mouth, blushing. “Sorry. Ever since the accident... cuss words just... slip out.”

Drew laughs. “Id nod wike I nebbuh hud da wahd befoah.”

Kirishima notices that the rain has finally stopped. He grins at Drew. “Do you want to play some... basketball?”

They’ve been out on the court for only a few minutes when Madison shows up. “Konbanwa, Kirishima-san. Hi, Drew. Can I play, too?”

Kirishima looks at Drew, who shrugs. Kirishima tosses the ball towards Madison, who clumsily tries
to catch it with her left hand. It ends up bouncing off her hand and rolling away. “Sorry,” Kirishima and Madison say at the same time.

Drew trots after the ball. He tosses it to Kirishima, gesturing that Kirishima should toss it back to Drew. Kirishima does so, and Drew taps it up with his left hand and then bounces it to the ground and starts dribbling. After a few bounces, he balances it on his left hand and holds it in Madison’s direction. She nods, and he tosses it gently. Madison manages to knock it down, but it bounces off her foot and rolls away.

They practice a few more times before Madison is able to catch and dribble the ball. “I’m doing it!” she cries excitedly.

Drew points at the basket. Madison tries to catch the ball on her hand, but it keeps falling off. After several tries, she knocks it into the air and then tries to bat it towards the basket. It hits the pole three feet off the ground and ricochets, rolling away. She hurriedly runs after it, scoops it up, and runs it back to Drew, her face aflame.

Drew demonstrates how to balance it on one hand again. Madison watches him closely and tries a few more times. Finally, she stops and grabs his left hand, holding her own palm up next to his. Drew looks confused but unfurls his fingers.

“No wonder! Your hand is way bigger than mine. There’s no way I can hold the ball like that.” Madison puts the ball on the ground and tries to pick it up, demonstrating the impossibility of the task.

Drew frowns. He tries tossing the ball up and pushing it towards the basket, the way Madison had attempted. His shots are closer, but only one of them even touches the rim. He screws up his face in concentration. Suddenly his face clears. He stands behind Madison and holds the ball up in front of her. “Dogebba,” Drew says.

“What?” Madison asks, turning to look at Drew. He quickly turns away, striding to the edge of the court and staring across the drive as if there’s something interesting in the woods on the other side.

Kirishima clears his throat, but Madison is already walking over. She stops behind Drew, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay. I had the same problem after my brain tumor was removed. It’ll get better.”

Drew turns and glares at her. “Don wie!” Madison furrows her brow in confusion. “Yah dahk duth fine.”

“Oh! I meant after my first tumor,” Madison explains. “I call this one my tumorette. The first one was a lot bigger so it affected me more. This time it mostly only affected my arm, but it’s taking a lot longer to get better.” She frowns down at her right hand, which flops weakly against her leg.

“Yah been dwoo dith befoah?” Drew asks incredulously.

Madison nods. “Yeah. So I get it. You don’t have to feel embarrassed around me. I know it sucks, but practicing is really the only way to get better.”


“Oh! Together! Yeah, let’s try that.” Madison stands in front of Drew, who holds the ball in front of her balanced on one hand.

Drew guides Madison’s hand and tugs it gently through the movement she’ll do when it’s time to

It takes several tries, but soon they’re hitting the rim more often than they’re missing, and they finally sink their first basketball after a few dozen tries. “Yay!” Madison throws her left hand up and jumps in the air.

Drew grins and holds out his hand for a fist bump.

“Great job,” Kirishima says.

“Sorry, we’ve kind of been hogging the ball,” Madison says, remembering that Kirishima is there.

Kirishima chuckles. “It’s fine. I think I’ll head back in.”

“Dond gah!” Drew says, a look of wide-eyed panic setting on his face.

Kirishima raises his eyebrows. “Okay… I’ll just get us some… waters then.”

Drew glances at Kirishima’s wheelchair and points to himself. “I’ww gah.”

As soon as the door closes behind Drew, Madison squeals. “How did you get him to talk?!”

Kirishima shrugs.

“Oh my gosh, Kirishima-san, I -” Madison stops talking when Drew jogs back through the door. He hands Kirishima a water and then takes off the lid from another before handing it to Madison. “Thanks,” she says, her eyes shining brightly.

They sit down at one of the tables, drinking in silence for a few minutes, but not surprisingly, Madison breaks it. “So… how’d you…” she breaks off, her face reddening. “Never mind. Sorry.”

Drew shrugs. “Th- th- th-...” He glances at Kirishima, mouthing “help me.”

“Skateboarding accident,” Kirishima fills in for Drew.

“Oh. You skateboard? That’s so cool! Do you have any videos?”

Madison gushes over Drew’s videos for the next few minutes. Kirishima can’t help being impressed, too, watching Drew fly through a challenging course of ramps, rails, and stairs. Drew stops in front of the camera, taking off his helmet and running a hand through his thick, shoulder-length auburn hair.

“Was this a competition?” Madison asks, noticing the announcer’s voice in the background.

Drew nods.

“How’d you do?”

Drew blushes and holds up two fingers.

“Nice. I bet you can’t wait to get back on your board. When did Tanaka-san say you can try?”


“Are you scared?” Madison asks with her usual tact.

Drew shakes his head. “Id wath a fweak - fweak - fweak - athuhdun. A cad… I jummed… hid a
“Ow!” Madison rubs his head, gently tracing a finger along his surgical scar. “They shaved your beautiful hair, too. It’s already growing back, though.”

“Whad uhbound yah?” Drew rubs Madison’s own head.

She blushes and pulls out her phone, showing them pictures from her Instagram. “This was Christmas,” she says. “My hair was almost down to my shoulders again.” She sighs. “And this was me pre-C. It was my twelfth birthday.”

Drew takes in the picture. “Yah wuh - ah - cood.” He blushes, focusing on the picture once more and noticing the skateboard in Madison’s hand. “Yah boah?”

Madison looks confused. Drew taps the skateboard. “Oh! No, I never really got a chance to learn. I got the diagnosis the next week, and it’s been in and out of the hospital since.”

“They shaved your beautiful hair, too. It’s already growing back, though.”

“Yah wuh - ah - cood.” He blushes, focusing on the picture once more and noticing the skateboard in Madison’s hand. “Yah boah?”

“Me, too,” Madison whispers. She clears her throat. “Okay. You have to ask Tanaka-san when you can board again, so you can teach me. Deal?”

Drew hesitates for a moment before smiling. “Deew.”

“And you’ve got to practice talking more. Don’t be embarrassed,” Madison says sternly.

Drew looks away and shrugs.

“We’re all… working on… something here,” Kirishima says. “It’s the best place to… practice, don’t you… think?”

Drew thinks about that for a moment. He slowly nods.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Kirishima says. “I’ve been putting off my… vo- vo- vocational… ass- ass- assessment. I’ll… schedule that this… week, too.”

He holds up his hand, and Drew locks pinkies with him. Kirishima looks confused, so Madison explains, “It’s a pinky promise.”

“And you, Madison -” Kirishima starts.

Madison holds her hands up defensively. “Hey, I already agreed to do all my therapy and homework so you’d teach me Japanese, remember?” She holds her arms wide in a “What more do you want from me” gesture.

Kirishima sighs. “I know. But that’s the… bare minimum, don’t you think? You said it yourself… Practicing is the only way we’ll get… better.”


Kirishima wags a finger at her. “It won’t with that… attitude. You said you could move it more… yesterday than… last week, right?”

Madison’s face brightens. “That’s true.”
“Yah deachin Mad- Mad- Maddie Jabanith?” Drew asks.

Kirishima nods. “Do you want to learn, too?”

Drew lets out a huge sigh of relief. “If yah don mine… I fawen behine in aw my cwatheth.”


He nods. “Segun yeeah. Yah too?”

Madison shakes her head. “My school doesn’t offer it. You’re so lucky!”

Over the next few days, Kirishima realizes how much easier it is now that he doesn’t have to pretend to be halfway around the world from Kou. Kirishima is able to check his phone between therapy appointments and text Kou back. Tanaka even offers to take a video during Kirishima’s physical therapy session. Kou’s enthusiastic kaomoji-filled response keeps Kirishima motivated throughout his battery of vocational aptitude tests that afternoon. When he gets out, he finds another text waiting for him.

_How’d the tests go? I’m sure you did great! ♥(•^•o)⌢|

Kirishima hesitates for a moment before replying.

\_/ | × ← × | /\ It’s over.

_That bad? ( .. ) But you did your best! That’s all you can do. (˘ʃƪ˘)_

_When do you find out the results?_

I don’t know. They said it could take up to a week.

_That stinks. But shō ga nai._

_I’m going over to Chris’s for dinner tonight. Do you want to chat before or after?_

I have time now if you want.

▽(.Expressions)▽ Sounds perfect. Just give me ten minutes to shower.

I don’t mind if you’re sweaty. You’re cute after tracing.

Kirishima hastily deletes the second half of the message before sending the text, blushing.

_I’m not just sweaty; I’m painty. \_/ ✓ ∞ r 卯 ~ < ((((

I don’t want to get it on the furniture._

Oh. Are you ever going to tell me about this mysterious project?

Yes. After I shower. \_/ \_/ \_/ \_/ (* o -*)>

You really have a kaomoji for everything. Talk to you soon.
When Kou calls, Kirishima discovers that freshly showered Kou is just as cute as post-workout Kou.

*Calm down, body.*

Now that Kirishima’s brain is communicating with certain parts of his anatomy again, it’s almost like a second adolescence.

*I’ll have to start carrying a book around. At least it’s easier to hide things when I’m sitting down.*

“You alright?” Kou asks.

“I’m fine,” Kirishima says, blushing. “You have paint above your… eyebrow.” He gestures to the area on his own head, and Kou wipes fruitlessly at his forehead.

“Did I get it?”

“Kind of,” Kirishima lies. “So… what’s the big project?”

Kou grins. “Remember how I told you about the neighborhood with all the murals? I found out they repaint them once a year, so I asked if I could be considered for next year. They said if I had a plan, I could actually have a small space for this year. I sent in my plan last week, and they called me yesterday to say that one of their invited artists couldn’t make it, so I can have a big wall!”

Kirishima’s eyebrows shoot up. “You told me about applying… last week. Isn’t the… festival really soon?”

Kou nods. “This weekend. I’m kind of freaking out a bit, but some of the local parkour kids are my models, and they’re going to help fill in the big areas.”

“That’s amazing! It sounds like you’ve got everything… under control.”

Kou snorts. “Hardly. We managed to paint the background yesterday, but I only have a little rough-sketch onto the wall. I have to finish the rough sketch before I can start outlining the stuff the guys can fill in, and there’s this one tricky bit I’ll have to do completely by myself if I have time.”

“Well, good luck,” Kirishima says. “I wish I could… help. Or at least come… see it.”

Kou smiles softly. “It’ll be up for a year. There will be plenty of time for you to see it.”

“Oh. Right.” Kirishima blinks. The idea of visiting Kou in the city hadn’t actually seriously occurred to him as a real possibility before, but Kou will be here for several years.

*What am I going to do when I leave Kessler?*

The thought sends a wave of panic lapping at Kirishima’s brain. As he tries to fight it, as if reading his mind, Kou asks, “So how’d your tests go today?”

Kirishima nods and shrugs at the same time. “They were… okay.”

“What are they supposed to test?” Kou asks.

Kirishima takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, willing himself to stay calm as he jokes, “To see how…stupid I’ve become.”

Kirishima’s voice breaks on the last word.
Kou doesn’t laugh. “Kei-san,” he says in a voice so full of empathy tinged with reproach that it makes Kirishima’s chest clench even tighter.

Kirishima shakes his head and laughs brittle. “Well, it’s true,” he manages. “I mean, I’m still recovering, but…” he trails off.

“It’s still really early,” Kou says, “and you’re not stupid, whatever that stupid test says.”

“I know,” Kirishima says, sighing. “And I shouldn’t say it like that, anyway. I’m really… fortunate compared to a lot of people here.”

He thinks about Drew and Madison, having to negotiate these challenges while in school, when kids are at their cruelest - and Madison having to go through it twice. He shudders.

“Want to talk about it?” Kou asks.

“It’s just… hard to watch. Especially the kids,” Kirishima explains. “One of them they thought was like me with… a- a- aphasia. Except he wasn’t talking… at all. It turns out he was just… scared people would make fun of him.”

Kou frowns. “That’s horrible. But that also means he’s not as hurt as they thought, right? So that’s a good thing?”

“Madison-chan’s been dealing with this for… nearly three years,” Kirishima says. “She was nearly… recovered when her… tumor came back.”

“Is that why you’re so nice to her?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shrugs. “I’m just… thinking about how I’d want someone to… treat me at that age if I were in their… situation. Besides, they’re… a thousand times tougher than I was at their age. That means they’ll probably become… great adults, right?”

The corners of Kou’s mouth turn up, but the conversation has obviously depressed him.

“Sorry,” Kirishima says hurriedly. “Hey, can I at least see the plan for your… mural?”

Kou looks away. “Sorry, I don’t really like anyone to see my works in progress.”

Kou continues, “To me, it would feel like someone watching me trying to take a dump. Like you felt Sunday morning when I showed up.”

Kirishima feels like his body has been frozen by some frost giant as his blood pounds in his ears. Belatedly, Kou adds, “When you were getting ready.”

But it's too late. Kirishima’s thoughts have already raced ahead.

What the hell did Saji-kun say to Kou-san while they were running Sunday? And just how much does Saji-kun know?

“Kei-san? Are you okay?” Kou’s voice sounds like it's coming from a long way away.

Kirishima forces himself to return to the present. He closes his eyes, takes a long, deep breath, releases it, and opens his eyes again. “Yeah. I’m fine. It’s just… the hardest part of dealing with all
Kou's mouth opens and closes several times as he processes what Kirishima said. Finally, Kou swallows and says, “I was really insensitive. I'm sorry. For what it's worth, Saji-kun didn't tell me much, but you're right. We shouldn't have talked about you at all.” Kou hangs his head. “I'm really sorry, and I'll try to be more sensitive and respectful in the future.”

Kirishima blushes. “It's fine. I'm sorry I'm being so... sensitive. I -”

Kou interrupts. “There's nothing for you to apologize for.”

Kirishima grins ruefully. “We ended up talking about me... again. If I can't see your... plans, do you want to tell me about your... project?”

Kou considers for a moment before shaking his head. “If I tell people what I'm trying to convey, it will color their vision, and I won't know how effective I was in executing my own vision. I want to know what messages others take from my work, and your opinion is the one I'm most interested in hearing.”

Kirishima's face flushes scarlet, and his shorts suddenly feel tight against his groin. “Fair enough,” he murmurs.

Kou seems to catch Kirishima's embarrassment as his own face starts reddening. He casts wildly for a change in topic. “Uh... didn't you say Kisho-chan was starting his gymnastics class today?”

“Yes. He started learning how to do... somersaults and practiced walking on a low... balance beam.”

They chat for the next thirty minutes. When they hang up, Kirishima's body is still aroused.

This is the second time I've responded to Kou-san. The doctor said it would happen sometimes by chance, but this isn't random.

Kirishima frowns. He's found the American doctors’ frankness about private matters embarrassing, but at the same time, if he can't talk about it with his doctors, how will that part of him get better?

He resolves to make an appointment with his urologist as soon as possible. After he takes care of business, he calls the front desk, and the appointment is scheduled for the next morning.

Thursday afternoon, Kirishima finds himself inside an MRI scanner listening to the jackhammering of the machine and trying to remain perfectly still as his lower spine is scanned.

Friday finds Kirishima in the office of his neurologist, Dr. Brittany Bryant, along with his case manager Nancy Smith, Saji, and a Japanese interpreter. The very presence of the interpreter indicates that the meeting is serious, because Kirishima has been conducting all his other meetings and appointments in English for the past few weeks.

Even with the interpreter's help, Kirishima leaves the meeting confused and conflicted. It's not that he
had trouble understanding anything that was said. It's that the risks and uncertainties are much harder to weigh against each other when the consequences affect his own body and not just financial profits and losses that Sion could easily weather even in the worst case scenario.

Right before he left the meeting, Kirishima asked Dr. Bryant, “What would you do if you were in my… situation?”

Dr. Bryant shook her head slowly. “I can't honestly answer that. What I think I might do could be completely different from what I actually would end up choosing if it were me. I might even choose differently from one day to another. There's no clear-cut answer here. The surgery does carry significant risks, but there's also the potential for significant improvement. While it's hard to predict how much more improvement you'll experience without the surgery, it seems certain you'll have lingering deficits affecting your urogenital and colorectal systems, as well as certain muscles in your lower extremities.”

“I'll - I'll have to think about it,” Kirishima faltered.

Dr. Bryant smiled. “Take your time. Talk it over with your loved ones. If you have any other questions, let me know.”

“How long do I have to decide?” Kirishima asked.

“We'll want to monitor you for the next couple of weeks regardless of your decision, but after that, your prognosis will be better the sooner you have the surgery. Six months after the initial injury, the surgery is found to have limited benefit.”

Kirishima nodded and headed back to his room, lost in thought.

“Kirishima-san? Are you okay?” Saji asks hesitantly.

“I… don't know. It's a lot to… think about.” Kirishima leans back in his wheelchair with a heavy sigh.

“You should talk to Motomi-san about it,” Saji suggests.

Kirishima shakes his head. “We're not even… dating. I can't burden him with… this. Besides, he's busy finishing his… mural for… tomorrow.”

“So talk to him Sunday. Or talk to your family,” Saji presses. “You have time.”

“Thanks, Saji-kun.” Kirishima notes that Saji hasn't offered to talk about it himself.

As if sensing Kirishima's thoughts, Saji says, “If you want to talk to me about it, I'm willing to listen, you know. I just sensed that you don't really feel comfortable with me.”

“That's -” Kirishima starts, but he can't honestly say it's not true.

Saji holds up his hands. “It's okay. I get it. I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about it, either. But it doesn't have to be awkward.”

Kirishima chuckles. “Yeah, it kind of does. I'm not… comfortable talking about it with anyone. But thanks, Saji-kun. That means a lot to me.”

After Saji leaves to head to the parkour gym with Tanaka, Kirishima closes his eyes and sighs.
There's just too much to think about. He wishes he could have a break from this new reality he's stuck in filled with constant therapy, struggles, challenges, and (re)learning, if even just for a moment.

If wishes were fishes, I'd have an oceanful…

The greatest wish of Kirishima's heart comes floating up in his mind: Kou standing in his boxer-briefs, with tousled hair, pink cheeks, and swollen lips, right before they both thought they were going to go all the way for the first time. It's not even the physical intimacy that Kirishima longs for; what he wants most is that feeling of someone accepting and loving him completely.

It was only minutes later that everything fell apart, when Kou realized that Kirishima is deeply flawed.

Kirishima chuckles darkly to himself.

Deeply flawed? That's highly euphemistic.

A few hours later, Kou asked Kirishima “How many people have you killed?” Kirishima had blustered about trying to escape and not sticking around to see whether your shots had struck anyone, but in reality, he's never once thought about the people he's aimed his gun at - not after the first one.

He wonders how many of them ended up in the hospital like him, with a long road to recovery and acceptance of new limitations. He remembers how hard it was for Suoh, his mom, and his dad. He thinks of Kisho and how awful it would have been for him if Kirishima were his father instead of some uncle he'd never met before. And how much worse it'd have been for all of them had Kirishima not survived.

How many families have I torn apart? How many lives have I taken or destroyed forever? How many children have I left fatherless, lovers bereft, mothers mourning?

Kirishima gulps as hot tears of remorse trickle down his face. Even if none of his bullets found the home he'd intended for them, he was a critical cog in the underworld of gun trafficking. He’s culpable in countless deaths and injuries.

I had so much ability, so much intelligence, and what did I use them for? To make sure we'd earn that much more money and have that much more power? What a waste! And now those abilities could be gone forever. I could have done so much more - so much better - with them.

Kirishima feels a burning desire to somehow atone for his past.

But where to start?

It's not like Kirishima has any idea who he's harmed or where they and their families are now. His thoughts drift to the people here at Kessler. Most of their injuries were not sustained through violence, but still… Perhaps the universe will accept him helping others with similar injuries as expiation for the injuries he's caused.

But what can I do here?
Note: In the previous chapter, Madison’s favorite manga is “Hanaya no Nikai de” by Sugano Akira and Ninomiya Etsumi. (I haven't read the light novels that the manga is based on, but a description of the chainsaw scene is almost enough to inspire me to learn Japanese so I can read them...) The movie Kirishima watches with Madison is “Ever After.” The chapter title is from the song “Taste of Regret” by In Fear and Faith.

I know I said Madison was the last character I was going to introduce, but then she had to mention Drew... I won't say that he's the last character, either, because technically we haven't met Izzy (Chris's mom yet), and the next chapter will pick up with Kou at his dinner at Chris's house. I don't know if that will be half or a whole chapter, but from there we'll do a bit of a time-skip. My best guess is that we have about four or five chapters left. I know I've said that before, but there are only about four scenes left that I know of, and I've been managing to fit one expected scene in most chapters, so... that's my best guess. (I also have some ideas for omakes, mostly a lot of fluff, but those will be easy to write and post as I feel the urge/need to write them.)
Kaleidoscopes Present and Free (Kaleidoscope)

Chapter Summary

Why has Slider been avoiding Chris and Kou? Will Kou really be able to finish his mural in a week? And how will Kirishima break the news about the surgery to Kou?

Chapter Notes

Confession: I know next to nothing about painting. Hopefully my research paid off, and what's going on in this chapter is at least plausible. I usually make notes as I write when there's a Japanese term or parkour term I want to define for you guys. This chapter had no notes, but if I overlooked something you think I should have included a note for, let me know, please!

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa: one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's Japanese neurosurgeon
Brittany Bryant: Kirishima's neurologist at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler
Ken(taro) Tanaka: Kirishima's physical therapist
Kou locks Thomas’s bike to the railing on Chris’s front stoop. Kou has to knock twice on the basement apartment door before Izzy finally opens it, wispy blond strands escaping her messy ponytail.

“Come on in,” Izzy says, hugging Kou and giving him a kiss on the cheek. Kou walks into chaos: the contents of the kitchen scattered across the living room floor among tangles of clothes and flattened boxes.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“I found the perfect place today!” Izzy squeals. When Chris moved into the dorm his first year of college, Izzy moved to a one-bedroom apartment, but Chris’s scholarship only covers the dorm for the first two years, and Izzy has been desperately trying to find an affordable two-bedroom place so Chris can stop sleeping in the living room before his third year begins.

Izzy whips out her phone and shows Kou pictures. “It’s on the first floor, so every single room has windows, and one of the bedrooms is east-facing,” she practically sings. “And it’ll shave over two miles off both our commutes.” Until Chris got his scooter, neither he nor Izzy had a vehicle, and they typically commute by bicycle as long as the weather is good.

“That’s great,” Kou says. He looks at the mess again. “You’re really excited about it, huh? I thought you had another two months in this place.”

Izzy holds the sides of her head. “I thought we did, too, but the new lease starts on Thursday, and when I talked to the landlord about maybe getting out of this one early, he said he would return my security deposit in full if I could be out before Saturday. His daughter’s getting married next weekend, and he wants to use the place for her bridesmaids who forgot to book a hotel.”

“That’s really soon! Are you going to be able to pack everything in time?”

“We’ve got tonight and tomorrow to pack, and then we can move Thursday and clean this place Friday.” Izzy ticks off her list on her fingers. “Even with my work and Chris’s school, I think we can make it happen.”

Kou gulps. “Um, Chris has a test on Thursday. I don’t know how much he’ll be able to help before
“Shit!” Izzy stares at Kou wide-eyed. “I totally forgot. I’m a terrible mother. Well…” She pauses to gather her thoughts. “Well, I’ll just have to pack it all myself. I can do it.” She grabs her phone and adds another item to her ever-evolving to-do list - or “putting out the fires” list, as Izzy calls it.

“I’d offer to help, but I’ll be lucky to finish my mural before Saturday,” Kou says. “But I can help some now if you’d like.”

“You’re so sweet.” Izzy pats Kou on the cheek. She glances at her phone again to check the time. “Chris texted that he was staying late for office hours. He’s supposed to let me know when he’s on his way. Let’s pack until we hear from him, and then I’ll heat the food.”

Kou starts assembling a box, using the packing tape lying next to the pile to secure it.

Izzy shuffles a few items to make a clear dividing line. “This giant pile is going to the new place. The stuff in this corner is going to be donated. We can put it in boxes, but we’ll leave them unsealed, and we don’t have to wrap the glass items for them.”

Kou looks around. “Do you have papers for me to wrap the glass stuff in?”

“That’s what the clothes and towels are for. You can stuff socks and washcloths inside the glasses, and then wrap them in the bigger items. Just pad the box with a towel on the bottom and top, and fill in any gaps with more clothes packed loosely.”

They soon fall into an easy rhythm, quickly packing up two boxes of kitchenware before Izzy suddenly says, “Oh, I almost forgot. Happy belated Birthday!” She gives Kou a mock-stern look. “Did you really forget?”

Kou shrugs. “Everything’s been so hectic here.”

“Oh, sweetie.” She gives his shoulders a squeeze and kisses him on the cheek again. “Well, I’m glad you were able to finally celebrate. I’ll get you a present once we’re settled in the new place.”

“You don’t have to do that!” Kou protests. “You guys have already done so much for me.”

“And you’ve done so much for us. That’s what family is for.”

Kou’s eyes fill at the idea that Izzy considers him part of her tribe, and he ducks his head, focusing on taping up a box to hide his embarrassment. “Do you have stickers to label where each box goes? And to say that there’s - there’s stuff that might break?”

Izzy shakes her head. “I’ll have Chris get some on his way home. For now just write ‘F’ for fragile.” At Kou’s confused look, she clarifies, “It means breakable. Everything’s for the kitchen, anyway, so we just need to label the general contents for now. That one’s bakeware, right?”

Kou shrugs but writes it on the box. There’s another minute of companionable quiet before Izzy says, “So, Kou… Tell me about Thomas. I’ve never seen Chris so excited about someone before.”

Kou’s cheeks flush a little. “He’s my roommate. He’s a really nice guy. We don’t really see each other much because he’s so busy working and going to school. He’s a Ph.D. student at Cornell in - in - micro-something patho-something. He studies viruses. He just finished his first year.”

Izzy nods, smiling. “It all sounds good. My brother Paolo met him when he came to the restaurant yesterday. Paolo only talked to him for a few minutes, but he said he was a real sweetheart. And
Chris says he doesn’t have that New York edge, even though he’s lived in the city most of his life.”

“New York edge?” Kou asks.

Izzy shrugs. “That toughness we all have so we don’t get walked over. Surely you’ve noticed.” Kou stares at her blankly. “Have you ever been anywhere in the U.S. besides New York?”

Kou shakes his head but then remembers. “Well, I stopped in L.A. for a few days on my way here.”

Izzy clears her throat. “Well, a lot of people from the rest of the country think New Yorkers are rude. It’s just different here. Apparently Thomas doesn’t have that.”

Kou remembers how differently Thomas suddenly acted when the liquor store worker tried to confiscate Kou’s passport. “I think he has it when he needs it,” he says.

“Oh?”

Kou realizes he won’t get away without telling the story. Izzy seems amused, so Kou relaxes and gives all the details. He finishes with “And Thomas grabbed Chris’s fake right in front of the guy, but the guy was so focused on my passport he didn’t even notice.”

He glances at Izzy and stops when he notices her face has suddenly grown serious. “Excuse me, Chris’s what?”

Shit. Did I say too much? Kou wildly tries to cover his slip-up. “Anyway, the New York Times article convinced the guy, and he gave me my passport back. As we walked home, Thomas turned back into his usual mild-mannered Clark Kent.”

Izzy stares at Kou with her no-nonsense look he’s only ever seen directed at Chris before.

Kou gulps.

“Kou… I’ll ask you again. What did you say Thomas grabbed of Chris’s at the liquor store?”

Kou tries to swallow again, but his throat is suddenly dry. “I plead the fourth,” he says.

“You mean the fifth. And this isn’t a court of law, so your right against self-incrimination does not apply here.”

“I think it does. Don’t I get to talk to my lawyer?” Kou jokes feebly.

“I am your attorney,” Izzy reminds Kou.

Kou squirms uncomfortably.

Izzy stares at him for another few seconds before relaxing and sighing. “Fine. Just tell me, where did you guys go again on Saturday night?”

Kou feels like the question is a trap, but he can see no good reason not to answer it, so he says, “A gay club.”

“What was the name of the club?”

“Icon,” Kou mutters, looking away.

“Thank you.”
Izzy resumes packing, and Kou does, too. He’s relieved when there’s a knock at the door, and he jumps up to answer it.

When Kou opens the door, Slider blinks at him a few times.

“Hi,” Kou says, opening the door wider and stepping back. “Come on in.”

“Hey, B! How’s it going?” Slider smiles at Kou and holds up his hand for a fist bump.

Kou grins back, relaxing slightly. After Chris’s concerns about Slider, Kou had started to worry that Slider just didn’t like him. “Long time, no see,” Kou says.

“Oh, that’s what the hell happened in here?” Slider asks.

Kou lets Izzy explain. Soon, Slider is helping to pack, taking care of Izzy’s bookcases in her bedroom. “Please pack all the law books and label them,” Izzy instructs. “Leave everything else; I have to decide which I’m getting rid of.”

Izzy finally gets the text that Chris is on his way, and she heads to the kitchen to heat up the food. While the dishes clatter, Kou can hear snippets of conversations as she talks on her phone. At first he can’t make out anything she’s saying; he thinks she’s talking in Spanish but isn’t sure. Then he hears “check everyone’s ID?... Uh-huh... any specials where you allow... No? You’re sure?... Yes, thanks.”

Slider comes into the living room to get more boxes. “Ten bucks says Izzy hasn’t told Chris about the move yet. We’re about to see the shit hit the fan.”

Kou’s never heard that expression before, but his imagination illustrates the meaning perfectly. “You have no idea,” he murmurs, wanting to share his uneasy feeling with someone.

He briefly explains his conversation with Izzy. Slider’s face gets deadly serious as he whispers, “Wait. So you’re saying Izzy just found out about Chris’s fake ID?”

Kou nods, his stomach sinking even further. “I really screwed up, huh?”

Slider pats Kou on the shoulder. “It’ll be alright, B. You didn’t realize. But I’d better warn Chris.”

Slider hastily types out a text.

“Both Chris and Thomas acted like it’s no big deal,” Kou moans, rubbing his face with both hands.

“It’s not, really,” Slider says. “I know a lot of people who have fakes. I had one until my birthday. The problem is... do you know about Chris’s pops?”

Kou nods. “He’s told me a little bit.”

Slider makes a drinking gesture, and Kou nods again. “Plus, Izzy’s a lawyer, so she gets OD tight about shit that’s technically illegal, even if it’s no big deal.”

“What’s no big deal?” Izzy asks from the kitchen doorway.

“Nothing,” Slider says. “Just wondering about...” He trails off, obviously at a loss for words.

Kou fills in with the first thing that comes to mind. “Chris asked to use a video of me on his Youtube channel, but I wasn’t sure if that’s allowed under my visa.”

Izzy frowns. “I’m not sure,” she says after a moment’s deliberation. “I don’t deal with arts and
entertainment visas much. I’ll have to ask someone and get back to you.”

Chris finally arrives home a few minutes later, and they’re soon sitting around the table, eating vegetable soup, tamales, pupusas, baleadas, and fried plantains. Kou notices a vein pulsing at Chris’s temple, though Chris is trying to act light-hearted.

“How’s the studying going?” Kou asks.

“It’s been going well so far, though I don’t know how I’m expected to study tonight and tomorrow when the house is in chaos,” Chris says, an edge to his tone.

“Here we go,” Slider mutters to Kou.

“You managed just fine when your room was a perpetual mess in high school,” Izzy says. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. I already said I’d make sure to keep the noise down when you’re home.”

“How are you going to manage that?! Especially when you’re not even planning to take time off work.” He scowls and stabs at his tamale with his fork.

“What would you have me do?” Izzy snaps back. “It was either that or pay double rent for two months. You gonna spring for that? I can call the landlord back right now and tell him we’re staying until the end of the lease.”

Chris stares off across the room, his jaw clenched. “You know I can’t afford to do that.”

“You know I can’t, either. Not if we’re going to send you to Japan next year,” Izzy says in a softer tone.

“But if I fail this test, I’ll lose my scholarship and won’t be able to afford college at all, much less Japan,” Chris says, pulling at his hair with his hands.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Izzy says, picking up the fried plantains and dishing some on Chris’s plate.

“Don’t act like I’m the unreasonable one here. Who the hell signs a new lease and schedules a move in three days without even checking with the person they’re living with?!”

Izzy lets out a huge sigh. “I already explained that there was someone scheduled to look at the place fifteen minutes after me. If I didn’t decide right then, we wouldn't have gotten it. But I know you'll like it.”

“When I signed up for summer school, you said we wouldn't move until the session was over.”

“That's what I thought at the time. Things change,” Izzy says.

“Yeah, ’cause you're a flake,” Chris mutters.

“Christ!” Kou gasps, unable to help himself. Sure, he occasionally talked back to his own parents, but that level of rudeness is unthinkable in Japan.

Izzy blinks several times. Her phone rings, and she snatches it up and heads to her bedroom, closing the door loudly.

Chris resolutely stares down at his plate, pushing his food around.
“B,” Kou says, but Chris pretends not to hear.

Izzy returns a few minutes later and sighs as she sits down. She looks considerably more relaxed. “Some of the señoras are going to help us pack and clean. They'll work during the day while we're gone.”

“I -” Chris and Kou start at the same time. Kou gestures for Chris to go first.

Chris takes a deep breath. “I'm sorry. I'm seriously stressed out about this test.”

“B,” Kou starts again, but Chris continues.

“I don't have time to go through my stuff before the test.”

“That's okay. We'll work around your things and pack up your stuff together after the test,” Izzy says, ruffling Chris's hair. “And I'm sorry about flaking about your test.”

Chris shakes his head. “Don't apologize for that. I'll camp out at the library tomorrow until it closes, and then after that, I'll...” He trails off uncertainly.

“That's what I'm trying to say, B,” Kou says. “You can stay at my place until your test. Thomas and I won't be home much, and even when we are, it's pretty quiet.”

Chris leans over and gives Kou a quick hug. “That would help so much. Thanks, son!”

“Speaking of Thomas, when am I going to meet him?” Izzy asks. “It's not fair that Paolo got to meet him before me.”

Chris's face instantly matches his hair and beard. “Mom! We haven't even gone on a date yet! Besides, I didn't exactly introduce Thomas to Paolo. He just happened to stop by the restaurant. I only got to see him for like five minutes.”

Slider looks between Izzy and Chris. “Who's Thomas?”

“My roommate,” Kou explains.

Slider shifts his gaze between Chris and Kou. Slider's mouth opens and closes a couple of times until he finally says, “Are you guys poly?”

“What's -” Kou starts but is quickly drowned out by Chris.

“What?! Where on earth did you get that idea?”

“Aren't you two -” Slider starts. “I thought that's why you invited me here tonight with both of you.” No one else says anything, and after another pause, Slider clarifies, “To celebrate you two getting together.”

Chris facepalms. “Please tell me this is not why you've been avoiding me for the past few weeks.”

Slider looks uncomfortable. “I wasn't avoiding you. I was just making sure I didn't mess up your game.”

Chris groans. “I thought you realized you weren't actually okay with me being bi after all.”

“What?! Son, why would that matter? I mean obviously, it's important to you and I'm happy you figured it out...” Slider trails off. “So this means you guys aren't together?”
Chris facepalms again. "Dude. I love you, but you're a real idiot sometimes. You've missed out on getting to know Kou. He's still hung up on Kei-san."

"Who's Kei-san? And tell me more about Thomas!"

Over the next hour, they fill Slider in on everything he's missed the past few weeks, and Kou learns more about Chris and Slider's friendship.

"How did you get the name Slider?" Kou asks at one point. "Is it from when you skateboarded?"

Chris, Slider, and Izzy all laugh, and it's Izzy who answers. "These two met at the playground when they were three. The slide was Slider's favorite, and he would go down it constantly: normally, on his stomach, head first, sometimes even on his side. Chris couldn't pronounce Slider's real name, so he just called him 'the slider,' which eventually got shortened to 'Slider.'"

"It's a hell of a lot better than my real name," Slider declares.

"What is your real name?" Kou asks.

"Guillermo," Slider says, "but don't you dare start calling me that."

"I don't think I could say it," Kou says. "What is it again? Gui- gui- mo?"

Slider refuses to say it again.

A little later, Izzy asks Kou to take down a box from the top shelf of her closet. Kou blinks at her for a few seconds, wondering if she's making fun of his height. Izzy has a good two inches on him - when she's barefoot and he's in sneakers.

"It's got papers in it, so it's heavy," Izzy explains.

Kou is still skeptical. Just last weekend, he saw Izzy scoop up a ten-year-old kid and carry him down four flights of stairs from the roof to her apartment. It was a new kid to Chris's weekly jam, and he had rolled his ankle trying to land a precision that was too far for him.

Izzy gets her desk chair and sets it up for Kou to climb on.

"You can hand it down to me," Izzy says.

Kou is surprised by the weight of the box. "Are you sure it's just papers in here?" he asks, grunting as he lifts it off the shelf.

Izzy takes it with a grunt of her own. She sets it on the floor and reads the label. "Oh, right. It's got my mom's coin collection in it." She frowns. "I should get rid of that. I've moved it too many times."

"Shouldn't you keep it in a bank?" Kou asks.

Izzy snorts. "Paolo's friend appraised it for us after she died. It's a good thing he didn't charge us. The entire collection is worth nearly as much as his fee. Only a few are worth more than their cash value."

"Oh."
“What's taking you guys so long?” Chris calls from the kitchen.

When they return, Chris and Slider break out into “Happy Birthday” - but a funny version about living in a zoo. Kou laughs, though his cheeks are pink.

“You didn't have to,” he protests before blowing out the candles.

“It's not for you. It's Mom's birthday,” Chris says with a serious expression.

Kou is instantly mortified. He starts bowing and apologizing profusely in Japanese, not even realizing he's reverted to his native tongue.

Izzy hits Chris lightly on the shoulder. “That was mean. Happy Birthday, Kou. Chris told me you already celebrated with Kei-san, but I still wanted to celebrate with you.”

Chris and Slider are laughing now. “B, that was hilarious.” Slider mimics Kou's apology, complete with fake Japanese.

Chris hits him on the shoulder. “Dude! Not cool.”

“Sorry. Was that kind of racist?” Slider asks, his face growing serious again.

“Not 'kind of,'” Chris says.

Slider blushes. “I'm sorry,” he says to Kou with a slight bow. “I know what it feels like to have your culture and language mocked. I shouldn't have done that.”

“No worries,” Kou says. “Can we eat the cake now? It looks amazing!”

Chris doles out slices of flan to everyone while Slider spoons caramel sauce on top. “It's my mom's recipe,” Slider announces, turning to Izzy. “Right?”

She nods.

The three guys head out together after Chris packs his overnight bag. As they're leaving, Chris heads back inside for a second.

When he comes back out, Slider asks, “Forget something?”

“I gave her my fake and asked if we could talk about it after my test.”

“Brave man.” Slider claps Chris on the shoulder. “Or should I say smart man?”

Chris shrugs. “Not really. This way she knows I really am focused on the test and not trying to get out of the conversation. But she must have figured you guys would warn me, so I'm not exactly earning brownie points.”

“Brownie points? Like points to get a free dessert?” Kou asks.

Chris wrinkles his brow. “Maybe. I never really thought about it before.”

“I thought it had something to do with the Brownies - you know, like Girl Scouts?” Slider chimes in.

“I really am sorry,” Kou says, bowing. “It just came out. I wasn't thinking.”
Chris shrugs. “It's cool, B. I didn’t ask you to keep it a secret. You didn't know.”

“It sucks you got busted right before your twenty-first birthday,” Slider says.

Kou unlocks Thomas's bike as Chris says, “At least I don't have to go that long without it. And at least it's just my mom. I deadass nearly shit myself at that store last week. I'm not sure how much more I would have used it, anyway.”

“So you're in purgatory?” Slider asks.

“You've got a walking Japanese dictionary right here,” Slider says, gesturing at Kou.

“Breaks are just as important as the actual studying,” Kou adds.

“I just had like a two-hour break,” Chris points out.

“So I'll quiz you. Change of location is helpful for studying, too.”

“Are you just making that shit up?” Slider asks.

Kou shrugs. “I'm not actually sure how much of it is real. One of my high school friends was always sharing studying tips. We thought he was just joking around until he got into Todai's medical department.”

Chris whistles. “Todai is the hardest university to get into in Japan, and it's all based on one big test,” he explains to Slider.

“I started using my friend's tips in college, and I did better than in high school, so I guess they work,” Kou finishes explaining. “I used all the ones I could remember, though, so I don't know if they all work or just some of them. And I might have remembered them wrong.”

“Didn’t you go to an art college, though?” Slider asks. “Maybe you just didn’t need to memorize as much stuff, or maybe it's because you found your classes more interesting.”

Kou shrugs. “That’s true, but the techniques helped me with English and accounting, which were boring, and art history, which had a lot of memorizing.”

“You've got to see Kou's mural,” Chris tells Slider.

With Kou on Thomas’s bicycle and Chris and Slider on their scooters, the guys head to Kou’s place to drop off Chris’s stuff.

“Son, why are you so worried about your test, anyway?” Kou asks Chris as they climb the stairs. “You’ve been studying so hard. How’d you do on your practice test?”

“I haven’t taken it yet,” Chris confesses. “But I just realized I have to get an A in the class to keep my scholarship because it’s a 4-credit course.”

“Why don’t you take your practice test and see where you are? I think you’re freaking out over nothing,” Slider suggests.
“I thought we were going to see Kou’s mural,” Chris says.

Kou looks at Slider. “Do you have time?”

Slider shrugs. “I’ve got nothing else to do tonight.”

While Chris takes his practice test, Kou works on the design of the trickiest part of his mural. Slider ends up helping for a little while by researching the flags of various countries from Kou’s list, but after about fifteen minutes, Slider becomes absorbed in his phone.

Kou is about halfway through the first draft of his design when Chris finally sets his pencil down. He checks his phone. “Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” Kou and Slider ask at the same time.

“We only get an hour to take the test. I forgot to set a timer. I went over by fifteen minutes.”

“Okay… so you need to work on your speed,” Kou says. “How’d you do besides that?”

Chris shrugs. “I don’t even want to know,” he says miserably. “It was really hard.” He shoves the paper away and rests his head on his arms.

Kou gently picks up the test paper and the answer key and starts grading it. While he’s focused on that, Slider shows Chris his phone. “Kou was right about changing locations and taking breaks. Check out this article. Have you ever heard of spaced repetition systems?”

Kou becomes too absorbed in the grading to really follow their discussion of study techniques after that. When he finishes allocating the points based on the answer key, he sets the pen down.

“How’d I do?” Chris asks, holding his breath.

Kou raises his eyebrows. “What’s an A?”

Chris shrugs. “It depends on how everyone else does. Abe-sensei said she might curve it if everyone does bad. Otherwise 90 percent is an A.”

Kou grins. “You got a 93.”

Chris sighs, his face relaxing for a moment before falling again. “Except I took way too much time. I would have only gotten through like… eighty percent of the test in an hour.”

“What took you so long?” Kou asks. “Was it understanding the questions? Thinking of the answers?”

Chris shakes his head. “I’m really slow at writing. I suck at remembering kanji. I can read it, but to write it, I basically have to search the page, find it, and copy it.”

“What if it’s not on the page?” Slider asks.

“Then I’m screwed,” Chris says.

Kou nods. “Okay. Then you should focus on writing kanji.”
“But what about all the other stuff I need to know?”

“You’ll have to practice it anyway while you’re writing, but you know it. Except for the difference between ageru and kureru. We’ll go over them again.”

Chris groans. “That’s what I went to office hours for! I thought I finally understood it.”

“And…” Kou flips Chris’s test paper over. “Just a couple of the irregular verbs. You’ve got this, B.”

Chris nods. He pulls out his kanji practice sheets. “I guess I won’t be going to the mural with you guys, then. Sorry for keeping you.”

“No, you’re coming,” Kou says. “Change of location, remember, B?”

Chris gathers his materials and shoves them in his messenger bag. They ride over to Welling Court on the scooters, Kou behind Chris and his art supplies safely stowed in the seats.

Once they’re at the wall, Slider pulls out the cardboard box stowed in his seat. “Now are you finally going to tell me what the hell this is for?” he asks, looking at the magnifying glass lens taped to the front.

“It’s my projector,” Kou says. He pulls up a photo on his phone and props the phone on the binder clips inside the box, aiming the lens towards the wall. He slides the phone forward until the image is in focus, and then he adjusts the angle and distance of the box to make sure the image is the correct size and in the correct location on the wall.

“That’s cool,” Slider says.

“Can you help trace it?” Kou asks.

Slider shrugs. “I think so. But I don’t want to mess up your art, B!”

Kou laughs. “It’s just paint. Mistakes are easy to fix. You can’t read Japanese, right?”

Slider slowly reaches over and takes the brush. “Just the outline. Like this.” Kou demonstrates. “What do you think?”

Slider raises his eyebrows. “I think I can manage.”

Kou glances over at Chris, who’s sitting in the middle of the sidewalk pulling his books out of his bag. “What are you doing, son?”

“You said change of location, right?”

Kou takes Chris’s worksheets from his hands. “You won’t learn them if you just keep copying them. You have to copy them from here.” Kou taps Chris’s head.

Chris scowls. “If they were in my head, I wouldn’t need to practice them.”

“You said you can read them, right? If you can read them, they’re in there.” Kou looks down at Chris’s list. “Okay, I’m going to give you sentences. Write them down on the wall.”

“On the wall?!”

Kou hands Chris a brush. “Just stay within the lines. It’s a huge area. You should have plenty of
space.”

Over the next couple of hours, Kou and Slider trace images onto the wall while Chris practices kanji. After every fifteen minutes, the guys take a five-minute parkour break, and Kou adds in some verb practice.

“You’re doing that spaced repetition thing,” Slider observes, noticing that Kou keeps returning to some of the words again and again.

Kou shrugs. “Every time you have to remember something, it strengthens the memory. If it’s already strong, you don’t need to work too hard at it, but if it’s hard for you, you need to practice it a lot.”

When Kou’s phone battery is running low, the guys call it quits for the night.

“My brain kind of hurts, but why do I feel like I’ve learned more kanji in the past two hours than I did in my first two semesters of Japanese?” Chris asks.

“You can’t learn by copying,” Kou says. “You have to learn by remembering. I know that sounds weird, but it’s true. If you’re looking at the answer, your brain doesn’t have to work as hard.”

Chris nods. “That makes sense.” He sighs. “I wish I’d known this last year. I feel like I’m already so far behind everyone else in the class. Thanks, B. I think if I can just stay focused tomorrow, I might be able to do okay.”

Slider decides to head home, but he promises to stop by and help Kou with the mural again tomorrow after work. “I can’t wait to see it when it’s finished, B. It’s really cool. Todos somos americanos.”

Kou blinks at Slider.

“We’re all American,” Slider translates.

Kou nods.

When he and Chris get back to Kou’s place, Thomas is in the kitchen. “Uh, sorry… I should have checked with you first,” Kou says. He explains Chris’s situation, finishing with, “so I ended up inviting him to stay for the next two nights until his test is over.”

“That’s fine. I mean, in general, it’d be nice if you checked with me first, but I get that this was an emergency. This is your place, too.” Thomas smiles at Chris. “Hi.”

Chris beams back. “Hi.”

“You hungry? Do you want something to drink?” Thomas opens the fridge.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though.” Chris stands there awkwardly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“I’m going to clean out my brushes,” Kou says, leaving Chris and Thomas to their flirting.

The next couple of days fly by for Kou. He gets up at two a.m. Wednesday to complete more of the
outlining before the sky is too bright for his phone-projector, borrowing Thomas’s portable charger
to give himself four hours to work.

As the sun rises above the roof of the building, Kou steps back and looks at his work. He’s managed
to finish outlining all the people, both the Queensboro and Roosevelt Island Bridges, and most of the
Smallpox Memorial Hospital. He still needs to fill in some detail on the hospital and block off the
area for the flag, but the hardest part is done. He sighs.

*You’ve still got three days left, Kou. You can do this.*

Right now, though, Kou can’t do much more until the paint dries. He packs up his things and jogs
home, taking a small detour to run along the river for a block before heading back inland towards
home.

After quietly washing his brushes, Kou stumbles to bed, passing a bleary-eyed Thomas who’s just
rising to get ready for school. When Kou reemerges four hours later, Chris is working diligently at
the kitchen table. When he notices Kou, Chris takes off his headphones.

*“Good morning, sleepyhead. I got some bagels if you’re hungry.”*

*“Thanks, B. What are you working on?”* Kou grabs a poppy seed bagel and smears it with a thick
layer of cream cheese.

*“Kanji. I’m listening to the CD for my textbook, and I can almost write down what they’re saying as
they’re saying it.”*

*“That’s great. Have you taken a break yet?”* Chris nudges the bag of bagels. *“Plus I’ve changed locations four times.”*

*“Four?!”* Kou asks, surprised.

*“Thomas’s room, then the living room, then the bagel shop, now here.”* Chris ticks them off on his
fingers.

Kou blushes slightly. When he came in this morning, he’d noticed Chris wasn’t asleep on the couch,
but Kou had tried not to think too hard about it. *“You didn’t take a very long break then,”* Kou
observes.

Chris shrugs. *“It’s fine. I have to go to school in a bit, and I can’t study while I’m on my bike,
anyway.”*

Kou takes a glass out of the cabinet. *“Do you want some juice?”* he offers, not realizing he’s slipped
back into Japanese.

*“Um… yes, please, thank you,”* Chris answers in very polite Japanese.

Kou holds the fridge open, reverting to English to make sure Chris understands. *“Anything on this
shelf is mine. The condiments are shared. And this is my food cabinet. Help yourself to anything in
there. Ask Thomas if you want anything else.”*

*“You don’t have to -”* Chris starts, but Kou cuts him off.

*“Half the stuff in there is from your house, B. Seriously.”*

Chris nods. *“Okay, thanks. And thanks again for helping me out. Your place is so peaceful.”*
“Except for the N train every three minutes,” Kou says.

Chris shrugs. “We’ve always lived near the subway. I guess I’m just used to it.”

Kou snorts. “I always lived near trains, too, but they never sounded like… like a dying whale.”

Chris eyes him. “How do you know what a dying whale sounds like?”

“What? I don’t. It was just the biggest thing I could think of that dies.”

“Oh.”

“What?”

Chris looks down at his book, embarrassed. “One of my classmates did a presentation on whaling in Japan. Sorry, it was stupid of me.”

Kou stares at Chris. “I would never eat a whale, much less hunt one. Japan is a big country.”

“I figured. Sorry, B. But I wouldn’t exactly call Japan big. It’s like the size of California.”

“But it also has many more people. And a lot of ocean separating the islands from one another.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Chris grins. “What about blowfish?”

“What?”

“Oh… um… I think it’s… fugu?”

“A flood of memories washes over Kou: stepping hand-in-hand with Kirishima into Ni-chôme for the first time, feeding each other fugu, their first date in Showa Kinen park, and a thousand other moments leading to that moment on the rooftop when Kou learned just how much love can hurt - and then that terrible phone call from Akihito that revealed that breaking up does not make your heart stop loving.

“Oh. Sorry. Did someone you know die from eating fugu?” Chris asks.

Kou laughs and shakes his head. “No. I had it for the first time the first night I went to Ni-chôme. For five years, I’d go to a bar just outside the district, trying to work up the courage to finish the walk down the alley. Kei-san came into the bar and gave me that courage, and he took me to my first gay bar, where we both tried fugu for the first time. It was really good.” Kou smiles fondly at the memory.


Kou looks confused for a moment before giving a short laugh. “Not really. Fugu is only dangerous if it’s prepared by someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing.”

“Does it really make your mouth numb and tingly? Does it make kissing better?” Chris asks.

Kou furrows his brow and shakes his head. “No. It’s seriously just fish.”

“Oh.”

Kou pulls out his tablet and examines the rough draft of his mural. “I think the flag is too much,” he mutters.
He heads to his room and edits the image on his computer, removing the flag.

*It still needs something…*

There's a little too much empty space between the hospital and the Queensboro Bridge. Kou frowns.

*Someone doing an underbar out of the hospital window would be perfect, but the only model I'd want to use for an underbar would be Kei-san.*

Kou knows Kirishima wouldn't like to be used as a model, even if he weren't recognizable, but once Kou's thought of it, he can't shake the idea.

He scrolls through his pictures and videos until he finds one at the perfect angle.

*It wouldn't hurt just to see what it would look like…*

An hour later, Kou is back at the mural with his painting supplies. A couple of the parkour kids are tracing on the curb in front of Kou’s wall.

“*Took you long enough!*” nine-year-old Sammie cries, running up to Kou as soon as she sees him.

“Yeah. You’d think we have nothing better to do than wait all day,” Sammie’s older brother Manny says, crossing his arms.

Kou grins. “Sorry. I was here earlier.”

Sammie stands next to him and stares at the wall. “You sure you gonna finish by Saturday?”

“Yeah. The hard part’s just about done. You want to paint yourself?”

Sammie eagerly grabs a roller.

“*Hang on a second,*” Kou says. He gives them a short painting lesson.

Manny quickly catches on, but Sammie keeps loading too much paint onto her roller. Kou ends up having to monitor her so closely, he doesn’t have time to focus on painting the Queensboro Bridge like he’d hoped. He’s grateful when several of the older parkour kids show up.

Olivia, who’s a sophomore at Frank Sinatra School of the Arts, notices Kou’s predicament. “*Hey, Sams, can I work with you?*” she asks, winking at Sammie. Olivia has Sammie fill in the middles of their outlines while Olivia fills in the areas near the borders.

“*Oops,*” Sammie says.

Kou braces himself, but when he looks, she’s only covered up some of Chris’s kanji practice from the night before. “That’s okay. That all needs to be covered up anyway.”

“*Phew,*” Sammie breathes. “*Painting is hard.*”

Kou sighs with relief when Sammie and Manny’s grandmother shows up with snacks for everyone. He stretches his arms overhead and gratefully accepts a torta. He crosses the street to see how the mural looks from farther away, and Olivia crosses with him.

“*It’s looking good,*” she says.
“Yeah.” Kou frowns. “It’s going a lot slower than I thought. Thanks for helping with Sammie.”

“No problem. Could I…” Olivia trails off and bites her lip.

“What’s up?” Kou asks.

“I applied for a wall space this year, but they didn’t approve my application.”

“I’m sorry,” Kou says. He remembers when he first started entering art shows and how personal every rejection felt. “Maybe next year?”

“Yes, I’m going to keep trying. So I was wondering… if I helped you on yours, would it be okay if I used the part I helped with as part of my portfolio? I’d obviously make it very clear that I was only helping… and obviously if I’m not good enough, just tell me and I’ll stop. I don’t want to mess up your mural…”

Once Olivia starts, she doesn’t seem able to stop. Kou waits for her to wind down, considering. “Do you think you could do the details on the Roosevelt Island Bridge? I’ve got a reference photo. Do you know how to do shading?”

“Yeah, I’m going to keep trying. So I was wondering… if I helped you on yours, would it be okay if I used the part I helped with as part of my portfolio? I’d obviously make it very clear that I was only helping… and obviously if I’m not good enough, just tell me and I’ll stop. I don’t want to mess up your mural…”

Olivia bites her lip again. “You’re using acrylics, right? I’m not very good at mixing my own colors yet. My shading looks a bit chunky.”

“Have you ever worked with glazes?” Kou asks.

Olivia shakes her head.

“I’ll teach you. They’re really fun and easy to learn. You can practice on…” Kou frowns, searching the area for something paintable.

“I’ll run home and grab my sketchpad!” Olivia says.

Kou paints the rest of the afternoon, making steady progress. Olivia works slowly, but she’s very careful, and while Kou focuses on the more difficult Queensboro Bridge, Roosevelt Island, and the hospital, Olivia slowly brings the Roosevelt Island Bridge to life.

“This is really hard. I’m kind of glad I wasn’t given a space. How do you paint so fast?” she asks, stepping back and stretching her arms.

Kou laughs. “Have you ever watched a little kid tie their shoes? It takes fifteen minutes. How fast can you tie your shoes?”

Olivia pouts. “Are you saying I’m like a little kid?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying that the more you practice, the faster you’ll get. I was always one of the slowest in my class. Maybe in a few years you’ll be faster than me.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Olivia says. “I just hope I can finish before sundown.”

“It’s okay if you don’t,” Kou says. “The bridge won’t take as many layers for the shading as some of the other features, and if the weather’s good, we’ll only have to wait twenty minutes between layers. We’ve still got two days.”

“Why are you leaving part of the hospital undone?” Olivia asks as she steps back to look at the
painting.

“I’m adding another person there. I have to trace it onto the wall tonight.”

“Trace? How do you do that?”

Kou sets his own brush down and stretches his arms. “How late can you stay out? I’ll show you.”

“Are you guys hungry?” Chris calls out. He’s got a couple of pizzas from his uncle’s restaurant.

Kou wipes his hands on a rag and gratefully takes a slice. “How’s the studying going?” he asks Chris.

Chris shrugs. “I’m not freaking out anymore, but I’m still going to study as hard as I can. I’m going to take the practice test again. Obviously I’ll improve just from having seen the questions already, but hopefully I’ll learn how to pace myself better.”

Kou nods. “Do you need my key? Sorry, I should have given you an extra, but I don’t have one.”

Chris takes the key. “Thanks, B. And no worries.” He grabs a slice of pizza for himself and looks around. “I thought there’d be way more kids around. I copped too much pizza.”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “Trust me, we don’t want any more of Sammie’s help. And the others were hardly better.”

“Hey, they got their shadows filled in - at least the middles,” Kou says.

“Do you know how many times I had to keep them from painting outside the lines - or worse, dripping paint down the entire mural?” Olivia heaves her shoulders as she lets out a huge sigh. “Next time, you should give them a basic coloring test before you let them help.”

Kou smiles. “Thanks for keeping them in line.”

Chris looks at the mural. “It’s really coming along. Hey! That’s the Queens skyline, not Manhattan.” He nudges Kou with his elbow. “You’re becoming a real Astorian, huh?”

Kou shrugs. “I feel like the Manhattan skyline is way overdone.”

“That’s facts.” Olivia scarfs down the rest of her piece of pizza and picks up her brush again.

Kou texts Kirishima. It’s only the second text he’s managed to send today. Kirishima only sent one himself, at lunchtime - a picture of his sandwich and salad.

Hi! Sorry I haven’t had time to text in a while.

Since you asked to see my plans, here’s a sneak preview.

Kou snaps a close-up that shows part of Sammie’s shadow, her pigtails flying, with a sliver of skyline and stars behind her. Kou slips his phone back in his pocket and goes back to his pizza, but he’s only managed a couple of bites before an incoming message chimes.

It’s looking good. I can’t wait to see the rest.
Oh, hey! Do you want to chat soon? I can’t chat long, but I want to see you. (U・_・U)

…

Sorry. I don’t really feel up to chatting. It was a long day.

(U・_・U) I understand. Hopefully we can talk tomorrow.

Maybe. I know you’re busy.

Not that busy! I always have time for you. (*^_^*)

Well, hopefully we can chat. Goodnight!

Kou frowns at his phone. He sends a quick “goodnight” message back and sticks it back in his pocket.

“Is something wrong?” Chris asks.

Kou shrugs. “Probably not. Kei-san was super chatty the last couple of days, but today he’s barely texted, and he doesn’t want to chat.”

“Maybe he’s busy,” Chris says.

“That’s what he says,” Kou says. “Or maybe he’s trying to be considerate because he knows I’m busy right now. Or…” Kou smacks his forehead. “I told him about the mural last night. We made plans for me to visit again Saturday, and I totally forgot.”

“I’m sure he understands. You’re thinking too much. Again.” Chris pats Kou on the shoulder. “He’s in the hospital. He’s going to have good days and bad days.”

Kou’s forehead creases.

Chris rolls his eyes. “I don’t mean he’s gotten worse or anything. Just give him some space, okay? I’m sure you guys will talk tomorrow, and you can work out some other day to visit him then, B.”

Kou nods and tries to push thoughts of Kirishima out of his mind.

The next day, Kou finally finishes the base layer of painting for the mural and moves on to adding depth and shading. In the afternoon, Slider stops by before work. “Wow. It slays.” He furrows his brow. “Where’s the flag going? I thought it was going to be on top of the hospital.”

Kou shrugs. “I decided to go in a different direction. I think I was trying too hard with the flag.”

Slider raises his shoulders. “I thought it was a great idea. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Kou wipes his hands and stands back to examine his progress. “Thanks. Well, I might still use it at some point. Maybe by itself.”

A man taps Kou on the shoulder. “Excuse me. I’m Wallace Wilson with the Astoria Story, and I’m writing an article about the mural project. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”
Kou answers the reporter’s questions for a few minutes. He concludes with, “The parkour community is like a family. No matter your age or ability or experience, if you show up at a jam, you’re welcome. We’re all always learning and trying to improve. It doesn’t matter where in the world you are, the local traceurs will welcome you and show you the hidden jewels of their neighborhood. I wanted to honor the traceurs in Queens who have welcomed me with open arms.”

“Thanks for your help. I’m going to take a few pictures now,” Wallace says. “Whenever you’re ready, get back to painting like you normally would, and don’t worry about the camera. I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Um… That’s fine. Just please don’t take a picture of the figure in the center,” Kou answers. “I promised my models that they would not be recognizable, and I haven’t started the shading of that one yet.”

Kou looks apprehensively at the figure of Kirishima underbarring through the window of the hospital. Kou couldn’t resist including Kirishima’s image, after all - and worse, he’d ended up painting him in full color instead of shadow, with the rationalization that after he added the shading, no one would be able to recognize him because the image would be so dark. Kou forgot that he’s painting in broad daylight where anyone could walk by and take a picture at any moment.

“No problem,” Wallace says. “I’ll shoot whatever you’re working on.”

Kou decides to focus on the reflection of the moon on the water. He introduces Olivia to Wallace. Olivia blushes and stammers for a minute before Wallace puts her at ease.

Slider looks back at the painting. “I get it. You’re right, the flag doesn’t really belong here. I really like it. Did I say that yet?”

Kou grins. “You did. Yesterday and today. Thanks.”

“Oh, and I don’t need my scooter at all Sunday, so you can borrow it to go visit your friend,” Slider says.

“You sure?” Kou asks, moved by Slider’s generosity. Last night, Slider had turned up while Kou was talking to Chris about the logistics of taking public transportation to visit Kirishima, and Slider had generously offered to lend his scooter on days he didn’t need it until Kou could buy his own.

Kou hasn’t heard much from Kirishima so far today, either, beyond Kirishima saying he’s been busy with new treatments, but he quickly texts back agreeing to a Sunday visit.

Kou finds himself adding another layer to Kirishima’s face. He catches himself and goes back to the moon’s reflection.

When Olivia showed up this morning, she’d taken one look at Kirishima’s image and said, “That’s not you.”

Kou had left Kirishima’s glasses off, so he was surprised that Olivia had realized it was a different Japanese man - especially since the details hadn’t fully emerged yet. “No, it’s not,” he acknowledged.

“Who is it? Your boyfriend?”

Kou was startled. “Ex,” he corrected.
“Oh. You still love him, don’t you.” It wasn’t a question, so Kou didn’t bother to answer.

Once Wallace finishes taking his pictures, Kou returns once more to Kirishima’s image. He adds some highlights to the metal object behind him in the window, and Olivia softly says, “Oh. It’s a wheelchair.”

Kou raises his eyebrows. Only one of the handles on the back of the chair is really visible in the dark window. “You’re very observant. That’s the most important skill for becoming a good artist.”

“Is he -” Olivia starts.

Kou shrugs. “He’s in a rehabilitation facility. The doctors think he’ll be able to walk again. Beyond that…” He shrugs again.

“Is he back in Japan?” Olivia asks softly. “It must be hard to be so far away from him.”

Kou laughs. “Actually, he’s in New Jersey. He came here for treatment.” Sometimes Kou still can’t wrap his mind around the idea that Kirishima is so close.

“Oh.” Olivia pauses for a moment. “I’m sorry about his injury.”

Kou snaps a photo of Kirishima’s image before moving on to highlighting and shading the Queensboro Bridge. When he returns to Kirishima’s image, it’s with a dark glaze that quickly obscures most of Kirishima’s features.

“What are you doing?!” Olivia cries. “You spent so much time on all that detail!”

“It’s still there,” Kou says. “But no matter how bright the moon is, you’d never see that much of him.”

Olivia bites her lip. She steps back and looks at the mural as a whole once again. “I guess that’s true. If you kept it that light, you’d have to add more light to everyone else, too - and you deadass don’t have time for that!”

Kou laughs. He definitely doesn’t have time to paint the details on a dozen more faces.

“Why aren’t you on the wall?” Olivia asks. “I just realized… You’ve got Manny, Sammie, me, Dizzy, Jayco, Gato, Rondadada, Chris, and Slider. And your… friend.” Olivia ticks off the traceurs on her fingers as she names them. “That’s everyone.”

Kou steps back and looks. “Huh. I guess I forgot. Well, I think it’s too late now. Where would I put myself?”

Olivia thinks for a moment. “You could be flipping off one of the bridges, but you don’t want them to think we wilding.”

“The perspective would be weird, too,” Kou says.

“You could be in midair, coming out of one of the hospital windows,” Slider suggests.

Kou frowns. Kirishima is already underbarring out of one of the windows, and Slider is sliding down a column supporting one of the balconies, while Chris is back-flipping off one of the other balconies.

“Or maybe you could do something on the copula?” Olivia points to the top of the structure.
Kou snorts. “I’m not turning this into a self-portrait that screams ‘Look at me.’”

“You are the slayingest traceur around,” Olivia says.

Kou shakes his head. “There are plenty of really great guys around. It’s a big city.”

“Not in the neighborhood,” Olivia presses.

“It’s not a competition,” Kou retorts.

“Geez, just take the compliment, dummy.” Olivia pushes Kou’s shoulder.

“Regardless, I’m not putting myself on top of the - on the top,” Kou says, having already forgotten the name Olivia used for the architectural feature.

Olivia rolls her eyes. “Fine. Then make yourself do something cool over on this side of the hospital. There’s room.”

Kou eyes the space. He looks through his Instagram feed to see if he has any pictures that will work.

“Do a kick-the-moon,” Slider says, holding up his phone.

Kou nods. Slider starts recording, and Kou does a couple of flips. Afterwards, they look through the videos until they find a frame that has the perfect silhouette at a good angle. Slider takes a screenshot and sends it to Kou.

“Do you need help tracing it onto the wall tonight and filling it in?” Slider asks.

“That would be awesome.”

Friday, Kou continues to add depth to the mural through layer after layer of glazing. The mural is so big that by the time he finishes working his way across the different features, the first is ready for another layer. He helps Olivia mix the colors for her highlights and shading and gives her occasional guidance, and by the end of the day, her bridge is integrated with the rest of the painting.

Olivia sets down her brush and steps back, swiping her hair out of her face with her forearm as she scrutinizes her work.

“I think I’m done?” she says.

Kou stands at her side. “It looks good. Thanks for your help. Now you just have to sign it once it’s dry.”

“I couldn’t do that! It’s your painting!” Olivia protests.

“But it’s your bridge,” Kou says.

Olivia bites her lip. “Are you saying that because you’re embarrassed by how it turned out? I told you, I won’t be offended if you think it looks bad and want to fix it.”

Kou shakes his head. “I don’t think you’re looking with your real eyes. It’s very good. You slayed it. So take the credit you deserve.”
Olivia signs her name along a column supporting one of the two towers of the bridge in neat, small white lettering. She stands back to look at the mural again. “I still can’t believe how amazing it’s become. I thought it was good Wednesday before you started glazing, but now…” She trails off, shaking her head. “I always assumed I just wasn’t that good at art yet - and I know I’m not - but now I realize that I’ve been quitting on my pieces before they were really done. The final effect is in the details.”

Kou nods. “When I worked as a graphic designer, the client and I would usually agree on the basic concept of a logo fairly quickly, but getting every curve and the perfect shade of each color just right took the bulk of the time - sometimes a hundred hours or more.”

“Thanks again, Kou!” Olivia gives him a quick peck on the cheek before racing off. “I’ve got to meet Rondadada.”

Kou finishes the mural just as the sun is setting. He stretches his arms and surveys his work.

Not bad.

During school and his career as a graphic designer, there had always been some sort of assignment to guide Kou’s creative process, though he had the luxury as a freelancer to choose projects that allowed him maximal independence, such as the Uniqlo project. The art he’d managed to create for himself had always been fitted into the time and energy he had left outside of school or work, and he’d never had a canvas remotely this big for a completely self-directed project before.

Halfway through the week, he’d started doubting whether he was really capable of this kind of art. Kou’s eyes drift to the figure at the focus of the painting. Once he’d allowed himself to paint what - or rather, who - had been on his mind since he first started imagining the painting, the whole thing had quickly come together, as if all along his subconscious had been designing the rest of the mural with that focal point in mind.

If I hurry home, I can talk to Kei-san.

But when Kou finally calls Kirishima, Kirishima doesn’t accept the video chat.

A few minutes later, Kou gets a text.

Sorry. I’m not up for chatting tonight. I’ve got too much on my mind. Let’s talk Sunday.

Kou stares at his phone. After several minutes of typing and erasing, he finally sends back:

Okay. Is it alright if I send pictures of the festival tomorrow?

Of course. I just meant I’m not up for video chatting. We can still text.

Kou frowns. He’s the only one who’s really been texting the last few days. Something must seriously be up with Kirishima. Could he have had some kind of relapse or setback? He seemed so healthy last weekend, going on the outing. But maybe it was too much?

Kou focuses on the fact that he’ll be able to see Kirishima in a day and a half. Give him some space, Kou. The self-advice comes out in Chris’s voice. Kou sends one final text and resolves not to send another until the festival tomorrow.

Alright. I miss seeing your face, but goodnight, Kei-san.
The chapter title is from the song “Ambivalent Peaks” by Bad Books.

Well, this one also went a little long, but when I reread it, there wasn't anything I wanted to cut. And Aki hasn't bothered returning Kou's call yet, so I guess we've got to wait until the next chapter to find out what he's really up to. I think the next chapter will have a short time skip and Kirishima's decision, and it should mostly be the two of them together in the same place!
Chapter Summary

A little bit of a time-skip, and this chapter is all Kirishima and Kou interacting with each other! How will Kou react to the news of Kirishima's surgery? What will happen on their first outing together? How will Kirishima react to Kou's mural? And if that's not enough, we finally hear from Akihito!

Chapter Notes

I've been sick, which means lots of time in bed. I was excited to write this chapter, because there have been a few scenes that I've known were coming for a really long time, and I got to write one of them in this chapter.

Special thanks to Keono for suggesting I include a detailed description of the mural.

I'd like to reiterate that all places and people in this story are fictionalized, especially in this chapter.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa (Yokun): one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Kou grins as he pulls off the interstate onto the now-familiar ramp leading to Kessler. While he was grateful to borrow Chris’s or Slider’s bike the last few weeks, nothing compares to the feeling of riding his own motorcycle.

Izzy helped him deal with the paperwork required to get his license and registration, and she’d even sprung a deal with her insurance company to add him to her policy to make his insurance fees more reasonable until he established a driving record in the U.S. She’d insisted on paying for his registration for his birthday, and over the past couple of weeks, Slider and Chris had helped him fix up the old bike Slider managed to find through friends of friends.

While Kou had depleted most of his savings, he still had $500 left to last until his next stipend check, so he’d turned down Kirishima’s offer to loan him money for the bike. Kou is continuing his frugal lifestyle, and Thomas had some friends stay last weekend who gave them $100 towards the rent as thanks for saving on a hotel room.
Kou pulls into the flower shop. “I’m here to pick up a special order. Kou Motomi.”

“Ah, yes. The Brahmi plant.” The florist ducks into the side room and returns with a potted bright green plant with delicate, pale purple flowers. “This was an unusual request. You were here a couple of weeks ago, right? You have a friend at Kessler.”

Kou blushes, wondering whether the florist remembers him because Chris was so insistent she open early. “That’s right. This plant is supposed to improve memory.”

The florist raises her eyebrows. “I hadn’t heard of that before. It doesn’t have a strong fragrance.”

“You’re supposed to eat it. My roommate’s a scientist, and he said the evidence is stronger for this plant compared to other traditional herbs.”

The florist laughs. “So that’s why you asked for the biggest plant I could find. Well, it’s supposed to grow fast. I hope it helps your friend. It’s a very thoughtful gift.” She looks down at the plant. “Maybe I should carry more of these. We get a lot of business for Kessler.”

Kou takes his backpack out of his seat and carefully stows the plant. He smiles as he slides the backpack onto his shoulders. Kirishima invited him to spend the night tonight - not at Kessler, of course, but on Saji’s couch. Tanaka told Kirishima that he could bring two people to his physical therapy appointment tomorrow, and Kirishima invited Kou. It doesn’t make sense for Kou to drive all the way home to Queens and back.

Since Kou’s mural, Kirishima has been distant. At Kou’s visit the day after the mural festival, it was obvious Kirishima was preoccupied with something, but he wouldn’t talk about it, and Kou had been reluctant to push too hard. Since then, Kirishima has tried to pretend that everything is fine, but he often gets lost in thought, and sometimes the lightheartedness of his texts feels forced.

Kou was beginning to wonder whether their reunion had made Kirishima realize that he no longer feels the same way about Kou but didn’t know how to tell him, so the invitation to Kirishima’s therapy appointment has brought a needed boost to Kou’s confidence.

Kou pays careful attention to the right side of the road for the few blocks it takes until he sees Kessler’s sign and turns up the long drive. When he pulls up, Kirishima and Saji are sitting outside the door, Kirishima in his wheelchair and Saji on a bench. As Kou pulls into a parking space, Kirishima wheels over.

“Nice bike!” Kirishima says.

“Thanks. I’ll take you for a ride as soon as Tanaka-san says you can.” Kou grins, but Kirishima’s face falls.

“I don’t know if I’ll be… able to do that,” Kirishima says quietly.

Kou’s face falls, too.

“We’ll ask Ken,” Saji says. “You’ll never know until you try, right?”

Kirishima’s face remains impassive, and Kou decides to change the subject. “Were you waiting for me? Sorry, traffic was a little heavy. And I stopped to get you this.” He opens his bag and hands
Kirishima the Brahmi plant, explaining what it’s used for. “You’re supposed to take seven hundred fifty to one thousand milligrams of the leaves each day.”

“Thank you,” Kirishima says, accepting the plant. “That’s very… kind of you. And we were just enjoying the nice… weather.”

Kou grins. “It’s a beautiful day. And I had an idea. Let’s go somewhere for lunch.”

Kirishima frowns. “But I can’t ride on your bike.”

Kou’s grin widens. “That’s okay. I checked on my way here, and there are sidewalks the whole way back to the shopping center. It’s only about a kilometer away, and there are a few different restaurants: a pizza parlor, a Peruvian barbecue place, and a Chinese restaurant.”

Kirishima looks uncertain. “I don’t know if I’m… allowed to leave,” he says.

“It’s not like you’re in jail. And you’ve gone on several outings already, right?” Kou presses.

“Let’s go ask,” Saji says. “I think it’ll be good for you.”

The case manager working that day says, “For your safety, we’d prefer that you stay on campus. You’re free to go wherever you’d like on the grounds, and you can order takeout, but for safety reasons, you agreed not to travel anywhere without a staff member during your stay here.”

Kirishima shrugs and starts to wheel away, but Saji says, “What if I ask Ken? We’re supposed to meet for lunch, anyway. We don’t have to sit at the same table if you guys want privacy.”

Kirishima looks over his shoulder, but the case manager has already walked down the hall to talk to someone else. “I don’t think that’s what he… meant.”

Saji shrugs. “You asked. We’d be following the rules.”

Kirishima frowns. “But…”

Three hours later, they’re heading out the door. Once they’re on the street, Tanaka tells Saji, “Sorry I didn’t tell him we’re dating. It’s not technically against company policy, but it’s a gray area.”

“I understand. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t realize I could have gotten you in trouble.”

Tanaka shrugs. “It’s fine.”

Kirishima and Kou walk in front, with Kirishima setting the pace.

“If you get tired, Kei-san, please let me know, and I’ll push you,” Kou offers.

“I can manage a… kilometer,” Kirishima says.

“I know you can. But I was just looking for a change of scenery. I wasn’t trying to make you exercise.”

“Exercise is… good for me. Right, Tanaka-san?” Kirishima says.

“Kirishima-san, I really wish you’d call me Ken, at least when I’m off duty,” Tanaka says.
“Good luck with that,” Saji says. “I think Kou-kun is the only person Kirishima calls by his first name outside of his family.”

“That’s not -” Kirishima starts before realizing that the only other person he ever addressed that way is someone he no longer speaks to. “Yeah, I guess that is … true. Besides the… kids.”

“You know, all of my other patients call me Ken, even while I’m working,” Tanaka says. “You’re in America now. Yokun calls me Ken.”

“Yokun?” Kou mouths at Kirishima.

Kirishima says, “Saji-kun grew up in… America. He doesn’t count.”

“Kou-kun calls his friends by his first name, too,” Saji pipes up.

“Fine. I’m just a… stodgy old man. I’m okay with that,” Kirishima says, grinning at Kou, remembering the conversation they had the night they met.

“I like that Kei-san is so polite,” Kou says, grinning back.

By the time they arrive at the shopping center, they’re dripping with sweat. “I didn’t realize it was so hot,” Kou says. “What do you feel like? Pizza, Chinese, or Peruvian barbecue?”

“I’ve never had… Pe- Pe- Peruvian barbecue,” Kirishima says.

“Me neither. You guys up for trying it?” Kou looks at Tanaka and Saji.

They shrug. Kou leads the way. The sidewalk ends at the Italian restaurant, and there’s a curb and strip of grass between its parking lot and that of the other restaurants.

“Shit, I didn’t realize,” Kou says frowning.

“I think I can make it over this little… section of grass near the road,” Kirishima says.

“You shouldn’t have to,” Tanaka says, frowning. “If it were muddy…”

“Good thing it’s not,” Kirishima says, leading the way. He has to wheel behind all the cars in the parking lot before having enough room to navigate to the sidewalk. Thankfully the curb isn’t too high, and he shows off his maneuvering skills for Kou.

Kou holds the door open for Kirishima. It’s barely wide enough for the chair, and once they’re inside, Kirishima takes up most of the narrow aisle next to the tables. They order, and the four of them crowd around the only vacant table in the restaurant. The staff acts annoyed that they have to figure out where to stow the chair Kirishima won’t be using, but they find a place for it in the corner by the kitchen.

Kirishima tries to wheel under the table, but the two legs are located along the midline of the narrow table. Kou stands up. “I’ve got an idea. Let me out for a second.”

Kirishima backs up his chair so that Kou can get out from the corner by the drink cooler. Kou lifts his chair out, temporarily placing it in the aisle.

“Can you fit between the legs?”

Kirishima struggles to navigate his chair between the cooler and the table leg.
“You can’t be in the aisle,” the harried cashier tells Kou. “It’s a fire code violation.”

“This restaurant is one giant ADA violation,” Tanaka retorts. “If you had accessible tables, we wouldn’t have this issue.”

“I’ll move as soon as my friend gets situated,” Kou says.

Kirishima finally manages to finagle his chair under the middle of the table between the legs. Kou pulls his chair right beside Kirishima’s.

“Sorry for crowding you,” Kou whispers.

“I don’t mind,” Kirishima says in a low tone.

The four of them chat over their meal for the next hour until Kirishima says, “Sorry, I have to go…”

The others look at him expectantly until he explains, “to the bathroom.”

“Oh!” Kou jumps up and moves his chair out of the way.

Maneuvering out of the space is even more difficult than getting into it was, until Tanaka and Saji get up and slide the table towards the neighboring one. “We should have thought of that sooner,” Saji mutters.

Kirishima wheels over to the counter to ask where the bathroom is, but the cashier ignores him.

Tanaka strides over and asks.

“Sorry, we don’t have a public restroom,” the cashier says.

“Can my friend use it anyway? It’s an emergency,” Tanaka says.

The cashier shakes his head. “I don’t think he’d be able to get to it. Sorry.”

“Can you make it back to Kessler?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shakes his head.

“What if I push you and run as fast as I can?”

“I don’t think so,” Kirishima says, his face coloring.

“Well, we’ll ask next door then,” Kou says. He bypasses the Chinese restaurant that looks equally cramped and leads the way to the pizza parlor, which has a zebra-striped walkway, wide door, and zero-step entry.

“Can you guys wait out here?” Kirishima asks Saji and Tanaka.

Saji takes the door from Kou, holding it for Kirishima while Kou goes in first. Kou walks up to the hostess. “I’m sorry, is it alright if my friend uses your bathroom?”

The hostess starts with her rehearsed spiel, changing course in the middle when she looks at Kirishima. “I’m sorry, but bathrooms are for paying - oh, um, actually, yes, go ahead.”

“Do you need me to come in with you?” Kou offers.
“Of course not,” Kirishima says, his face reddening further. He hastily wheels into the bathroom.

Kou waits awkwardly outside the door for a minute before realizing he actually needs to use the bathroom, too. Just as he enters, he hears a crash from the accessible stall. “Kei-san! Are you alright?!” Kou cries.

“I’m… fine,” Kirishima grunts, his voice obviously coming from the floor.

Kou’s body reacts without thinking. He launches himself over the top of the stall’s privacy wall, pausing just long enough at the top to make sure he won’t land on top of Kirishima.


“But you need help,” Kou says.

“I can get up… by myself,” Kirishima says.

“Even if you can, I’m right here. I’m here to help. Let me help,” Kou says, reaching down.

“Please,” Kirishima almost sobs.

“Don’t be silly,” Kou says, grasping Kirishima under his shoulders. “Is this okay?” Kou notices the large wet spot on Kirishima’s yukata but steadfastly pretends he doesn’t see it. “Are we moving you to the toilet or your chair?”

“The toilet,” Kirishima grunts.

“Okay,” Kou says. “Do we need to take off your yukata first?”

“I'll… do it. Don't… look,” Kirishima says.

Kou closes his eyes. “Tell me when you're ready.”

After a moment, Kirishima says, “Ready.”

“How are we going to do this?” Kou asks.

“Just lift me...straight up. Once I can reach the… handrail, I'll take my… yukata off. I'll let you know when I'm… ready to sit down.”

Once Kirishima has one hand on the handrail, he's surprisingly sturdy, and Kou only has to support him with one hand, enabling Kou to help slide the yukata off Kirishima's shoulder with his free hand, then switch hands and repeat the movement.

“Okay. Now if you can… support me with… both hands for a moment, I'll let you know when I'm… ready to move again.”

Kirishima’s weight seems to fluctuate as Kou presumes he slips his underwear down.

“Okay. Now just let me down… slowly so I can sit.”

Once Kirishima is on the toilet, Kou asks, “Do you need me to do anything else for you?”

“Um… can you hand me my… bag on the back of my chair, please?”

Kou turns his back to Kirishima and opens his eyes. He detaches the bag and hands it behind to
Kirishima. “I’ll get some paper towels to clean up the floor.”

“You don’t… I mean… thanks,” Kirishima says, realizing he can’t clean the floor himself. “Just… wait… until…” He sounds on the verge of tears again.

“It’s okay, Kei-san,” Kou says softly.

“It’s… not okay!” Kirishima bursts out, and this time he really is crying.

“Kei-san,” Kou breathes. He feels helpless. He has no idea how to help Kirishima feel better about what just happened. Kou reaches out with his eyes closed again and tries to wrap his arms around Kirishima, but Kirishima stiffens.

“Please. Just… give me some… privacy.”

Kou reluctantly lets go. “Alright. I’ll be right outside the door until you need me again. Or if you’d rather I get Tsubasa-kun or Tanaka-san…”

“No!” Kirishima bursts out. “Sorry… I just…”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Kou murmurs. “I’ll be right outside.” He opens the stall door and swings it closed behind him, holding it closed as he figures out whether he can lock it from the outside. There’s an indentation in the disk on the outside of the lock, so Kou pulls out a quarter from his pocket and locks the stall door.

The door to the restroom opens and Tanaka peeks his head in. “Sorry, I realized I should have helped Kirishima-san transfer to the toilet.”

“We already managed,” Kou says quickly.

Tanaka starts to enter the room. “Well, I should help him transfer back to his chair.”

“Can you wait outside?” Kou asks. “I’ll come get you when he’s ready.”

Tanaka looks puzzled but says “Okay” and heads back out.

Muffled sounds of Kirishima trying to control his crying come from the other side of the door.

“Kei-san, did I ever tell you that my grandmother lived with us for six years after her stroke? I used to help take care of her. It’s really nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not… an old… lady!” Kirishima chokes out.

Kou squeezes his eyes shut. “I know, but you’re hurt. You still can’t help it.”

“It’s bad… enough… having to let… strangers see my… indignity. But I… never wanted… you…” Kirishima trails off. He’s so upset, words are too difficult right now.

“Is this why you’ve been avoiding me for the last couple of weeks?” Kou asks.

Kirishima says nothing.

“Kei-san, if you only let me see the good sides of you, I won’t get to know the real you. I want to know all of you. Otherwise, it’s just like before.”

Kirishima lets out a choking sob.
Kou hastens to clarify. “Sorry. I - I know it’s different. You do have a right to privacy. It’s just… I wish you would let me in. That’s all.”

The only sounds for the next few moments are those of Kirishima weeping and trying to pull himself together.

“I… I’ve had… night… nightmares… every… night… since… since… since I got… injured,” Kirishima starts.

Kou holds his breath as he listens. “About what happened? That’s understandable.”

“No. About… about you… rejecting… me,” Kirishima clarifies.

Kou gulps but continues to listen.

“Sometimes… it’s on the rooftop… of Motomi Pass… Sometimes… the rooftop… of my high school… Did I… ever… tell you… I was… bullied?”

“No.” Kou feels like there’s a crushing weight on his chest. “Kei-san, I would never -” he starts but stops, realizing he already has rejected Kirishima - twice.

What can Kou say to make Kirishima believe that Kou is here for good this time? Kou considers asking Kirishima to go out with him again, but Kou knows Kirishima would just interpret that as pity.

Kou clears his throat. “Kei-san, I still think you're the most beautiful person I've ever met. That would be true even if you were toothless and hairless and wrinkled and - you get my point. But you're not beautiful despite the changes the accident has wrought. This vulnerable, raw you is precious. And I know you don't let many people see it, so it's even more precious to me.”

Kirishima has stopped crying. After a long moment, he says, “Words are… easy.”

Kou sighs. “That's true, but I mean them. There's something I want to show you when we get back.”

“I'm ready to… have you… come back in,” Kirishima says. “But don't… look!”

Kou uses the coin to unlock the door again. “Do you need me to help move you back to the chair?” he asks with his eyes closed.

“Yes, but… first I need to get my… shorts on. I'll need you to… help lift my… feet off the floor. It's my… thigh muscles that don't… work so well.”

“Can I open my eyes then? I don't want either of us or your clothes to get wet.”

Kirishima sighs so loudly it reminds Kou of Akihito. “Fine. Just please… don't look.”

“I'll keep my eyes on the floor,” Kou promises. But he can't help seeing Kirishima's lower legs as he pulls the fresh underwear and shorts over Kirishima's ankles. Kou doesn't allow to show on his face even the faintest hint of shock at how atrophied Kirishima's leg muscles are. Kou wonders if that's why Kirishima always wears yukata now.

Once Kirishima is able to reach the underwear and shorts, Kou closes his eyes and lifts Kirishima while Kirishima pulls up his clothes the rest of the way.

“Let me know when you’re ready to move,” Kou says.
The bathroom door opens. “Are you guys doing the transfer by yourselves?” Tanaka-san calls.

“We’re almost done,” Kou answers quickly.

Tanaka tries to pull the stall door open. Kou is grateful that he had the foresight to lock it.

“I’m responsible if anything happens to KirISHIMA-san,” Tanaka calls through the door.

“We’re being… careful,” Kirishima grits out.

“Motomi-san hasn’t been trained in how to assist you,” Tanaka points out.

“Ready,” Kirishima says.

Kou lifts Kirishima a little higher as Kirishima grasps the handrail.

“Oh, I didn’t put the… brake on the chair,” Kirishima says. “So be… careful as I sit.”

Tanaka peeks under the door. “Why is your chair so far away? Are you even using a gait belt?”

“I didn’t bring… a gait belt,” Kirishima retorts.

“Sheesh. Please stop! Let me help Kirishima-san, Motomi-san,” Tanaka appeals to Kou.

But Kou doesn’t know how to stop when Kirishima keeps going. Kirishima is so strong, Kou is barely doing anything, anyway, and he’s not going to step away from Kirishima mid-transfer.


Kirishima sits in the chair. He pulls out a large plastic bag and hands it to Kou. “Could you please… pick up the… clothes? You don’t have to… touch them.”

Kou scoops up the yukata and soiled underwear and places them in the plastic bag, stowing that inside the bag on the back of Kirishima’s chair. Then he unlocks the door to grab some paper towels to clean the floor.

“Sheesh, you guys. Kirishima-san could have fallen. He’s a spinal cord patient. What if he’d gotten hurt?”

“I didn’t fall,” Kirishima says, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, you did, Kei-san,” Kou says quietly.

“What?!” Tanaka looks back and forth between them. “When? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Kirishima says.

“We’ll have to do an assessment when you get back,” Tanaka frets. “And fill out an incident report.”

“I’m fine,” Kirishima repeats. “I just… forgot to lock my chair and lost my… balance a bit. I was holding onto the… rail, so I didn’t really… fall. It was more like… gliding.”

“Gliding,” Tanaka repeats. “We still need to make sure you didn’t hurt yourself. How are your arms? Shoulders?” Tanaka starts assessing Kirishima’s upper body while Kou cleans the floor.

When Tanaka is satisfied that Kirishima didn’t pull anything by holding on while he fell, they leave the bathroom. Saji is standing by the hostess stand holding a white paper bag. “Cannolis,” he
The whole walk back to Kessler, Tanaka berates himself for not accompanying Kirishima into the bathroom from the start. “Yokun and I were looking at the dessert case. You’re one of my more independent patients, but I still should have known. That wasn’t the first time you’ve transferred by yourself.”

It’s a statement, not a question, but Kirishima answers anyway. “Only… sometimes. In my room.”

“You’re supposed to have help every time,” Tanaka chides. “I know we’re teaching you how to do it yourself in therapy, but there are safeguards in case things go wrong.”

“It’s fine. I’m strong… enough. I only fell because I forgot to set my… brake and wasn’t… expecting the chair to move.”

“And that’s the kind of thing we need to practice! How to safely recover when you overbalance, or when the floor is slippery or uneven…”

“The floor isn’t uneven or… slippery in my room,” Kirishima retorts.

Tanaka rolls his eyes. “Young men make the worst patients.”

“You’re a young man yourself,” Saji teases, trying to lighten the mood.

“I know. And believe me, I’m a terrible patient. Well, we’ll make sure to do a thorough assessment when we get back. And I’ll have to fill out an incident report. And I’ll probably have a disciplinary mark in my personnel file…” Tanaka ticks off what he needs to do. “We may not make that movie,” he tells Saji.

“Wait, disciplinary mark?” Saji says.

“Yes. I deserve it.”

“That’s… ridiculous,” Kirishima says.

“I let you go to the bathroom without me. Of course you were going to attempt a transfer,” Tanaka says. “It’s what I deserve.”

“Stop… blaming yourself,” Kirishima says. “It was my… decision. I was… alone in the stall. I’ll… tell them.”

“It won’t matter,” Tanaka says.

“Then we won’t… do the… incident report,” Kirishima says.

Tanaka frowns. “That’s not a good idea. You just had that scan for the surgery. If anything shifted, they need to know.”

Kirishima rolls his eyes. “Nothing… shifted. I barely fell.”

“It sounded kind of loud,” Kou says.

“That was my… chair bouncing off the… door,” Kirishima says. “I promise, I’m really… okay. I won’t even have a… bruise. I caught myself.”

Tanaka still looks worried. “We really should let your team know what happened. You don’t have to
Kirishima sighs. “How about you do the… assessment when we get back. Then I’ll show you how I… fell, and you can… decide if we need to tell anyone else.”

“Wait, what surgery?” Kou asks.

Kou has to wait until they get back to hear the answer to that question - and then he has to wait for Tanaka to assess Kirishima, too. Kou offers to step out of the room during the assessment. As soon as he’s in the hallway, his phone buzzes with an incoming text.

*Hey, Kou! Sorry I haven’t answered - my phone wasn’t working. Is now a good time to talk?*

Kou heads to the courtyard and initiates a video chat with Akihito.

“Hey, Kou! What’s up!”

Akihito’s screen is a mass of whirling sky, trees, and water as he presumably does a backflip. Once he lands, Kou thinks he recognizes the giant monument across the water.

“Are you in Washington?!”

“Right in one.”

“I thought you were in South America.”

Akihito wrinkles his brow. “What gave you that idea? I’ve been tracking down Kodama-gumi’s American activities. I just didn’t know I could buy a cheap sim card here.”

A guilty look slides over Akihito’s face. He’s always been bad at lying.

Kou sighs. “Tell me what you’ve really been doing, Aki.”

“I just did! Well, I was actually just deep undercover, so I couldn’t use my phone. But everything’s good now! I just sent the story to the editor!”

“And you’ll be gone before it’s published?” Where can Aki go, though? Kodama-gumi probably has people everywhere.

“Oh, of course. What made you think I’m in South America?” As always, Akihito is keen to change the topic from his investigation.

Kou sighs but allows the subject change. “Kei-san told me that’s where you were.”

Akihito looks momentarily confused. “That’s right - I got your messages. So you figured out where he was, huh? Have you seen him yet?”

“I’m visiting him right now,” Kou says.

“That’s great! How is he? I lost some of my contacts when my phone stopped working, including his. Can you send it to me again?”

“Uh, sure,” Kou says, confused. That’s three different stories Akihito has told about his phone now, and the only one he’s repeated.
“And hey, I’m all done here, and Washington is just a short train ride from New York. I don’t have to go back to Japan until tomorrow, so I was thinking maybe I can visit you!”

“I’m actually going to be staying where Kei-san is until tomorrow,” Kou says, taking care not to reveal Kirishima’s exact location on the phone.

“Well that’s even better! I want to visit him, too!” Akihito beams at Kou.

Kou’s mind races. If what Akihito told him is true - and given how evasive Akihito is being, Kou has every reason to believe it is - Akihito is just coming from a dangerous assignment infiltrating the very group that shot Kirishima a couple of months ago. Saji’s words of warning ring in Kou’s ears. “Aki…” Kou begins slowly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Akihito’s face falls. “Why?”

“Think about it for a second. Where are you coming from? How do you know you’re not being followed?”

The background shifts as Akihito looks all around him. “I’m not.”

He looks doubtful.

“How can you be completely sure? There’s a reason Kei-san came… here.” Kou gestures vaguely around him.

“So… what? We can’t ever see each other again?” Akihito asks.

“Of course not. Don’t be so dramatic. I’m just saying not tomorrow, okay? I’ll come back to visit… well, it’ll be a while, because I just bought a bike and used up all my savings.”

“Oh.” Akihito looks downcast but tries to hide it. “Well, tell Kiri-”

“Don’t say his name!” Kou barks out.

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Fine. Tell Megane-san I said hi and I’m still rooting for him. And to text me so I can have his contact info again.”

“Sure, no problem,” Kou says.

Through the window, Kou sees Saji enter the cafeteria, apparently looking for him.

“Hey, Aki, I’ve got to go. It was good to hear from you. Next time at least send a text, okay?”

“Sorry,” Akihito says sheepishly.

Tanaka has determined that Kirishima did no additional injury to himself in his fall. “Apparently it really was more of a glide,” he says, chuckling a little as he tells Kou. “I should still fill out an incident report…” He looks down at Kirishima.

“If you do, I’ll… lie and say you’re… confused,” Kirishima says. He looks at Kou. “I know you value… honesty, and I do, too, but there are some things more… important.”

Kou shrugs. “I’m with you. Not everyone needs to know everything.”
“Well, Ken and I are heading to the movies. I’ll be back at eight-thirty to take you to my place,” Saji says, directing the latter half to Kou.

“Thanks. I hope you make… your movie,” Kirishima says.

“Oh, and you’ve been ignoring Twitter again,” Saji says. Kirishima averts his eyes.

“I know you’re bummed about the mud run, but seriously, everyone’s been wondering if they offended you. At least look .”


As soon as Tanaka and Saji are gone, Kou wheels on Kirishima. “Now will you please tell me about the surgery Tanaka mentioned?”

Kirishima briefly explains. He can feel the warmth rise in his cheeks as he talks, but compared to what Kou saw in the bathroom, this is really nothing.

“What are you going to do?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shrugs. “I don’t know. There’s a… chance the surgery… will help, but there’s also a… chance it will make things… worse. And even if it makes things better… eventually, it will… definitely make them worse in the… short term. I’ve already… worked so hard just to get… where I am… now.”

Kou nods. “You said you only have a short amount of time to decide. How long have you known about this?”

Kirishima looks down at his lap. “A… couple of… weeks.”

Kou gasps. “Is this why you’ve been avoiding me? Did you think I was going to pressure you into making a certain decision?”

“Of course… not,” Kirishima says. “It’s… embarrassing . And you were… busy with your… mural.”

“Oh,” Kou says. “I still would have made time to listen to you.”

“You were… already so busy you were painting in the… middle of the night,” Kirishima says. “That’s dangerous. Anyway, if it were you… what would you do?”

“About the surgery? That’s up to you to decide, Kei-san. I can’t pretend-” Kou starts.

“I know. I just want to… know what you… think you would do.”

Kou contemplates for a moment. “Well, first I’d ask the questions my doctor friend always told me to ask: How many of these surgeries have you personally done, and what’s your own success rate and complication rate? But assuming the answers were similar to what you already told me, I think… I would have the surgery,” he says finally. “I would want the best chance of getting better, and I’d want to know that I did everything possible within my power to do that.”

“And if it made you worse?” Kirishima prompts.
Kou shrugs. “Then I’d have to live with that. At that point, I’d have to accept it as fate. But at least I wouldn’t have to wonder if there’s something more I could have done.”


“That’s just the way I am. If you decide differently, I’ll completely support you. Speaking hypothetically is very different from actually being in the situation.”

“I know,” Kirishima says. “But you’re… braver than me.”

Kou snorts. “Five years sitting outside Ni-chôme. I’d probably still be there if you hadn’t lent me your bravery.”

Kirishima shakes his head. “You at least had the courage to know… where you wanted to go. I never realized I should be… sitting outside Ni-chôme.”

Kou’s jaw drops. “What do you mean?”

“I said you… colored my world, right?” Kirishima says. “Before I met you, my world was… very small. I made it that way. If I kept it to just a… few people, I couldn’t get hurt. But when I met you… I realized… that if I kept my world so small, I couldn’t… experience life’s joys, either. I don’t… regret loving you, even though I ended up getting hurt… in the end.”

Kou’s eyes glisten with tears. “I never wanted to hurt you, Kei-san,” he whispers.

Kirishima cups Kou’s cheek and brushes a tear away with his thumb. “I never wanted to hurt you, either,” Kirishima whispers back.

Kou leans in for a kiss, but Kirishima turns his head at the last second, and the kiss lands on his cheek instead.

“Don’t. Please,” Kirishima says, sounding on the verge of tears himself, though his eyes remain clear. “Reconnecting with you… again is one of the only… good things to come from my injury. I don’t want to… compromise that.”

Kou closes his eyes. *If what Kei-san needs is a friend right now, then I have to be that. If I can’t be his friend, I can’t expect to ever be more.*

“Okay,” Kou breathes, opening his eyes slowly. “I said I wanted to show you something, remember? Can I use your tablet for a second?”

Kou logs into his photo storage account and opens a picture of his completed mural.

“I know you’ve already seen this, but you overlooked something really important to me in it. Do you recognize any of the figures?”

Kirishima looks at the picture. It still takes his breath away, and knowing that Kou is the one who brought the image to life from inside his own head makes it even more special.

In the center of the picture are the ruins of Roosevelt Island’s Smallpox Memorial Hospital, with its ivy-covered stone façade appearing to glow. Coming out of the windows, bouncing off the sides, and flipping off the low walls protecting the island from the river are eleven shadowy figures. Behind the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial to the right of the hospital, the Queens skyline glitters, office towers illuminated by the full moon and the occasional lights from within. Stretching into the sky on the right is the Queensboro bridge, while the smaller Roosevelt Island Bridge stretches across the left
side. The sky still holds the last colors of twilight, and the reflections of sky and building and island on the rippling water are breathtaking.

Kirishima focuses on the figures. On the left side is someone jumping impossibly high, one foot extended as if trying to kick the moon. “That’s you,” he says, pointing.

“Yes. You noticed that before. Recognize anyone else?”

Kirishima frowns. After a second, he points to the smallest girl. “Is that… Sammie-chan?”

“It is, but why would I expect you to recognize her?”

“And this must be… Ronda… da-chan and… Olivia-chan?” Kou taps the two remaining girls.

Kou grins. “Close. This one is Olivia. That one’s actually Dizzy. She’s constantly flipping. Rondadada is over here.” Kou taps a short-haired break-dancing figure.

“Ah.”

Kou doesn’t say anything else, so Kirishima continues to try to guess. “Manny-kun? And the one doing a… cat pass is… Gato-kun?”

“Yes and yep.”

“Oh, Chris-kun must be the one with the… beard.” Kou taps the figure back-flipping off one of the hospital balconies. His eyes slide over to the other balcony. He grins at the figure sliding down the column. “And… Slider-kun is the one sliding?”

“Yes. You’ve really listened to my stories,” Kou says, impressed.

“Well, the sizes helped. And Olivia’s… crazy hair. I don’t have any idea about the other two.”

Kou taps the figure speed-vaulting over one of the seawalls. “This is Jayco. But you should be able to recognize this person.” Kou points to the figure underbarring out of one of the highest windows.


Kou shakes his head.

“Tokawa-san?”

Kou rolls his eyes.

“You again?”

“It’s you, Kei-san!”

“Oh.” Kirishima studies the figure for a moment. “It doesn’t look… anything like me.”

“Yes, it does!” Kou objects. “I told you that I traced each component of the mural from photographs I had taken. That looks exactly like you.” Kou opens up his reference photo and places it on the mural next to Kirishima’s figure. “See?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I guess it looks… similar.”

Kou snorts. “You insulting my art?” But his eyes are twinkling.
Kirishima remembers Tokawa asking Kirishima to demonstrate for the other guys during his first gym session. “Textbook… underbar,” Kirishima murmurs.

“What?” Kou asks.

Kirishima blushes. “Nothing. Just something… Tokawa-san said.”

“He’s not wrong,” Kou says. He changes to a close-up photo of Kirishima’s image. “Notice anything else?”

Kirishima looks at the figure again and notices that the features are distinct behind the dark shadows. “He’s got a… face. But it still looks… nothing like me,” Kirishima says.

“Hm.” Kou says noncommittally. “We’ll get to that in a second. Notice anything near the figure?”

Kirishima notices something glinting in the window. “Is that my… wheelchair?”

Kou nods. “Yeah.”

Kirishima lets out a slow breath.

“What are you thinking?” Kou asks, watching Kirishima’s face closely.

“I… don’t know.” Kirishima reaches out and traces his figure with a gentle finger. “I guess… I just want to… feel that again. That… freedom.”

Kou smiles softly. “And you’re working incredibly hard every single day trying to get there. You’ve made incredible progress in just the few weeks since I started visiting. Heck, the first time we chatted, you had just started sitting up for the first time.”

Kirishima remembers. It really wasn’t that long ago.

“So this is a… talisman for me?” He asks, gesturing to the tablet once again.

“It’s your future.” Kou smiles at Kirishima. “You are going to do parkour again.” Kou takes the tablet. “Since you didn’t believe me, here’s what the painting looked like before I added the shading.”

Kirishima looks at the gaunt, goateed face and scruffy hair. “It still doesn’t look anything like me,” he says, smiling.

Kou rolls his eyes. “Do you have a mirror?” He looks around for a second, then opens the camera app on the tablet and puts it in selfie mode. “See?” It looks just like you. The you you are now. Like I said, more beautiful than ever.”

All Kirishima notices are his flaws: his cowlick sticking up again, the varying length of his goatee hairs, and the sleep-crust in the corner of his left eye.

“You seriously don’t see it?” Kou sighs and takes the tablet from Kirishima again. He snaps a picture of Kirishima’s face and juxtaposes it with the painting.

Kirishima looks back and forth between the two images a few times before shrugging. “I guess that is… what I look like now. Huh.”

“You should look in a mirror more,” Kou says. “Anyway, thanks for telling me about the surgery. I’m sorry for giving you a hard time about not telling me sooner. I just wish you’d let me see all of
you - the sad parts as well as the good parts. I want to be here for you.”

“It’s not like you let me see… your bad parts, either,” Kirishima retorts.

“What do you mean?” Kou asks.

“Like the mural. You… pretended like everything was fine, but you were painting in the… middle of the night.”

“That was just to do the tracing,” Kou says.

“But there must be… hard parts to… adjusting to life in a new… country. You… never let me see that, either.”

“You have enou -” Kou starts but stops when he notices the look on Kirishima’s face. Kou heaves his shoulders as he sighs. “I guess you’re right. There actually is something that’s been bothering me. It’s an article about my mural.”

“I thought all the… reviews were really good,” Kirishima says, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. All the ones he’d managed to find online had been, anyway.

“It wasn’t a review,” Kou says. He searches on the tablet and pulls up the opinion piece from the *Roosevelt Island Roster*.

Kirishima stares at the headline. “‘Parkour Menace Haunts Renwick Memorial Hospital.’ Are they… serious?”

“Judging by the article, I think so,” Kou says gloomily. “Of course we’d never actually trace on the building. I mean, it’d be suicidal, for one thing. Besides, it’s behind a huge fence, and it’s a historic landmark.”

“Those things don’t… always stop traceurs,” Kirishima points out.

“I know. The point of having us on the building was that it was somewhere we never could actually trace. A fantasy.”

“Does the article… imply you trace there?”

Kou shrugs. “They say they’ve never seen anyone tracing there, but that my mural is giving people ideas, and now it’s only a matter of time. And then they blamed the traceurs for littering and vandalism. I’ve never really even seen vandalism or graffiti on the island.”

“Hm.” Kirishima is thoughtful.

“The author ends the article by calling for a ban on parkour on the island. And half the comments agree with him,” Kou finishes gloomily.

“It’s a… small island, right?” Kirishima asks.

Kou nods.

“So you just have to get to know the… community. Maybe… host a park… clean-up day. If you’re seen… cleaning it up, they won’t think you’re the ones… messing it up.”

“That’s - that’s brilliant!” Kou throws his arms around Kirishima before quickly pulling back, but Kirishima doesn’t seem to mind. *I guess that falls under the realm of friendship.*
Kou notices a silent notification from Twitter pop up on the tablet. “Um, Tsubasa-kun said you should check that. Are you sad about the mud run?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I’m a little… disappointed, yeah. But they got… Tokawa-san to replace me, so they’ll… probably do better with him.”

“Kei-san,” Kou says. “You know it wasn’t about that. I’m sure they were all thinking of you and missing you the whole day.”

Kirishima shrugs.

“Shall I open it so you can find out?” Kou’s finger hovers over the notification flag.

Kirishima nods, and Kou taps the screen.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is from Coldplay's "Fix You."

The bathroom scene was the one I've had planned for a long time now. I'm sorry to put Kirishima through that, but he's so stubborn and proud, it really felt like it would take something extreme to get him to finally break down his barriers. The next chapter will pick up with another scene I've had planned (and include *another*). We're really nearing the end now.
This chapter picks up where the last one left off. How will Kirishima react to the pictures and videos of the mud run? What the heck has Akihito been up to in America? Who is the "teen whisperer"? And why did Ken invite Kou to Kirishima's physical therapy appointment?

This chapter gave me the opportunity to write two scenes I've really wanted to for a long time (the beginning and end scenes). I originally thought the beginning scene was going to be an omake, but it felt like it needed to be in the main story. And by popular request, Aki featured much more prominently in this chapter than planned.

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and/or leaves kudos. Your support helps motivate me to write.

Note: Italics are used to indicate that someone is speaking in English. (They are also used to indicate someone is thinking or texting, but hopefully it's not too confusing - speech has quotation marks, while texting is indicated by indentation.)

Characters:
Motomi Kou: Kou, Akihito's friend (I had to give him a last name)
Morita: Kirishima's assistant
Suzuki: president of Z Corporation (later called Suzuki), has a business relationship with Sion
Kodama: a yakuza group that tried to secretly attack Asami while framing the Suzuki Corporation
Yamazaki: Kodama's mole in the Suzuki Corporation
Tanihara: has a business relationship with Sion
Kurebayashi: a psychiatrist employed by Sion
Yabu: a physician employed by Sion
Itoh: gay manager of a Uniqlo branch who has worked with Kou in the past
Yoshizuki: one of Kou's college professors
Yoneda Takuya: the head of Akihito's guards
Kato Shiharu: Yoneda's long-distance girlfriend
Saji Tsubasa (Yokun): one of Akihito's guards
Sakuragi: another of Akihito's guards
Saijo: another of Akihito's guards
Tokawa Daiki: the owner and trainer of a parkour gym
Yoshida Misaki: Akihito and Kou's friend from the manga (I had to give him a first name); his dad is a cop who investigated Asami
Togawa and Yamaguchi: two of Kirishima's high school classmates who bullied him
Yamamoto: Kirishima's Japanese neurosurgeon
Brittany Bryant: Kirishima's neurologist at Kessler Rehabilitation Center
Nancy Smith: Kirishima's case manager at Kessler
There are dozens of unread notifications. “Where do you want to start?” Kou asks, handing the tablet back to Kirishima. “Do you mind if I look over your shoulder?”

Kirishima scrolls down to the oldest notifications. “Saijo-kun said he was the… official videographer.” He clicks on a message that helpfully says “Start here.”

Kou chuckles. “They know you well, huh?”


Kou squeezes Kirishima’s shoulder. “It’s okay.”

The first few pictures are of Tokawa, Sakuragi, and Yoneda warming up. Next is a photo of them in the starting corral, holding up a straw totem.

“What is that?” Kou asks.

Kirishima shrugs. “Sometimes you have to… carry things in the race, but no one else has… one.”

Next is a video with a closer view of the totem. Kirishima clicks “play.”

Yoneda explains. “Our friend was supposed to do this race with us today, but…” Yoneda clears his throat as his voice breaks. “He can’t. We’re carrying Kirishima-san with us in spirit, both in this totem and in our hearts.” Yoneda taps his chest as the camera zooms in on the totem. There’s a black headband with Kirishima’s name on it.

Kirishima gasps. Kou surreptitiously takes a photo of Kirishima’s expression, wanting to remember how moved he was by his friends’ gesture.

Kirishima wipes his eyes. “They’re idiots. That thing’s going to… slow them down.”

“I don’t think they care,” Kou says.
The teammates circle up, hands in the middle. “For Kirishima-san!” they shout. The cheer is echoed by a half-dozen other voices, and the camera flashes to several of the other guys from Takaba’s team.

Next are clips of the guys conquering various obstacles, crawling under barbed wire, wading through hip-deep mud, climbing walls and ropes, carrying sandbags and logs over and under barriers, and traversing various types of hanging obstacles. They carefully protect the totem through it all. Someone fixed it with straps like a backpack to facilitate carrying it, though they still have to push it under the low barbed-wire crawls.

Despite the additional handicap, they’re neck-and-neck for first place, getting narrowly beaten out on the final obstacle, a massive slanted wall rising out of a deep mud pit. The totem on Tokawa’s back makes it harder for the other guys to crawl over him, until finally Yoneda manages to reach the top, and Tokawa ascends last, catching Sakuragi’s feet and crawling over him, then helping him up.

“Idiots. They would have… won if they hadn’t carried that… stupid thing,” Kirishima says, but he’s smiling.

When the teams ascend the podium, the guys raise the Kirishima totem over their heads. Afterwards, the Sion guys and Tokawa circle up, and Yoneda opens up a hidden seam in the totem. He pulls out a bottle of Kirishima sake, still perfectly intact despite all the bumps and jolts of the race.

“Kirishima-san, we miss you. You’re going to be out here in the mud and muck and obstacles before you know it.”

“We want pictures!” Sakuragi shouts over Yoneda’s shoulder. “We can’t wait to see your face in the mud!”

Yoneda elbows him as Kou and Kirishima laugh. Yoneda clears his throat, reaching inside and pulling something else out of the totem. “This is an omamori from the Goou Jinja Shrine in Kyoto. It’s supposed to offer special protection for your legs and lower back. We’ve blessed it with our mud, sweat, tears, and blood. We’ll be sending it to you soon.”

Tokawa holds up his right arm where there’s a huge scrape from slipping on the slanted wall. “This was worth it if it helps you heal, Kirishima-san. Get well soon.”

The guys crack open the sake and toast Kirishima’s health. Afterwards, there’s a montage of well wishes and greetings from all the guys.

Kirishima sets the tablet aside and covers his face, completely overwhelmed. “I don’t… deserve all that,” he says.

“Your friends obviously think you do,” Kou says, quietly recording a video. “Is there anything you want to say to them?”

Kirishima doesn’t look up. He wipes at his eyes and sniffs. “What could I… possibly say? I wouldn’t have the words even… before my injury. They’re… too kind.”

Kou stops recording and puts his arms around Kirishima. “Everyone’s rooting for you. You can do this, Kei-san.”

Kirishima nods. After a moment, he pulls back, laughing a little. “I still can’t believe they hid a… sake bottle in there!”

Kou pops out his SD card and inserts it in Kirishima’s tablet.
“What are you doing?” Kirishima asks.

“Letting them know you got their message,” Kou says. He replies to Saijo, captioning it, “You guys temporarily broke Kei-san.”

“You… recorded me? Don’t send that!” Kirishima shouts, embarrassed.

“Too late,” Kou answers. “They deserve to know how touched you were by their gesture.”

A reply pops up. Saji, you finally got him to look? It’s about time.

Kou types back. Actually, it’s Motomi Kou. Nice to meet you.

Oh, hey! Are you on Twitter?

Kou quickly exchanges contact information with Saijo, who types, Saji sucks at letting us know how Kirishima-san is doing. And Kirishima-san is even worse. Feel free to send more pics and videos.

“What are you doing?” Kirishima asks, trying to peer over Kou’s shoulder.

“Just adding all your friends to my Twitter,” Kou says.

“Huh.” Kirishima considers it for a moment and shrugs. “Well, I always thought you guys would… get along.”

“We should do one of these races together,” Kou says. “When you’re better, I mean. They have them in America, too, right?”

Kirishima nods. “Tanaka-san does them. He’s… really good. He’s training Saji-kun for one. You should… join them.”

Kou looks at Kirishima. “I want to do it with you, Kei-san.”

“We will. But you shouldn’t… wait. Life’s too… short.” Kou starts to object, but Kirishima adds, “Besides, that way… you’ll be able to teach me all the… secrets.”

Kou doesn’t look convinced.

“I want to… watch you do one,” Kirishima says. “I think you’d be really good at it. And I think you’d really… enjoy it.”

“You’ll get a better view when we do it together,” Kou says, grinning.

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’ll just… slow you down.” Kou starts to object again, but Kirishima gives him a stern look. “Don’t even pretend that’s not… true,” Kirishima says. “I want to see you do your best.”

Kou’s face is still resolute.

“Don’t… pretend like you don’t want to do it,” Kirishima says. “I saw your face… while we were watching.”

Kou finally grins and shrugs. “I mean, it does look like fun…”
They continue to look at all the videos and pictures from the race on Kirishima’s tablet. Eventually, Kou’s phone buzzes. There’s a text from Akihito, followed rapidly by several more.

_Kou, I’m on the train. I already bought my ticket to fly out of New York before I talked to you.

I just found out my flight is cancelled because of the hurricane, so I’ll be in New York for at least a couple days.

Call me when you’ve got a chance so we can make plans._

_Also... I don’t have anywhere to stay… (*l *ω*)_

Kou chuckles. He’s been feeling bad about cutting his conversation with Akihito short earlier.

“Good news?” Kirishima asks.

Kou shrugs. “Apparently Aki is in the U.S. I talked to him while Tanaka-san was figuring out whether you have any injuries.”

“Oh.” Kirishima blinks a few times. “I thought…” he trails off, trying to remember his conversation with Saji. “Huh. Saji-kun never… actually said yes when I asked him whether Takaba-san was in… South America. Saji-kun just let me… assume.” Kirishima frowns. “But he can’t… have been in the U.S. for… that long. He taps his tablet. “There’s no way Yoneda-kun wouldn’t have… come with him.”

“The race was yesterday?” Kou asks. “And why would Yoneda-kun have - oh, he’s Aki’s bodyguard, right?”

“His… head bodyguard,” Kirishima confirms. “The race was… last weekend, though.”

“So where was Aki three weeks ago? And why did he wait so long to contact me when he knew I was seriously worried?” Kou wonders.

Kirishima sighs. “We’d have to ask Saji-kun. He won’t be back until… later, but now that you’ve heard from Takaba-san…”

Kou snorts. “That guy won’t tell me anything.” He gestures to his phone. “He’s on his way to New York. He was supposed to fly out tomorrow, but he’ll be around a couple of days.” Kou clears his throat. “When I told him I was visiting you, he wanted to come here. I kind of told him that wasn’t a good idea.”

Kirishima blinks. “Why?”

“He said he’s been investigating Kodama-gumi’s American activities. I thought it could be dangerous if anyone were following him.”

Kirishima nods. “That’s true. We don’t want anyone thinking he’s a… courier for Asami-s...an.”

Kou’s eyes widen. “I hadn’t thought of that. But maybe we could video-chat with him at some point?”

Kirishima smiles. “I would like that.”

Kou is startled by Kirishima’s reaction. Neither Akihito nor Kirishima has ever given Kou the
impression that they like the other very much. But as Kou imagines how Akihito would have acted after Kirishima was injured protecting him, Kou realizes that Akihito might finally have worn Kirishima down. And if Kirishima ever let his guard down around Akihito, of course Akihito would warm up to him.

Kou sends a quick text.

_I have to check with Thomas first, but you can probably crash with us tomorrow night until you leave._

_Kei-san wants to video-chat with you. When would be a good time?_

Kou is typing his message to Thomas when Akihito’s call starts ringing. Kou quickly finishes his message and opens the video chat.

“That was quick.”

“Well, I’m just sitting on a train. I’m bored.”

Kou frowns. He shifts his phone to make sure Kirishima is not in view on the camera. “So you’re in _public_?”

Akihito laughs. “Kind of? It’s a train. It’s not like anyone else is listening in.”

“What’s wrong?” Kirishima asks as Kou pinches his nose in concentration.

“Aki, is that guy Yoneda-san there? Can I talk to him for a second?”

Akihito looks taken aback. “Why do _you_ want to talk to _him_? How do you even know who _he_ is, anyway?”

“He’s… Kei-san’s friend,” Kou says, deciding it’s worth the risk to say Kirishima’s first name. “Just for a second, okay?”

Akihito grumbles, but the video shifts, indicating he’s handing his phone over.

“Motomi-san? Nice to meet you,” Yoneda says, bowing slightly.

“Nice to meet you,” Kou replies, bowing automatically in reply. “Is your location private? Aki wants to talk about something… sensitive, and I just want to make sure it’s… safe.” Kou jerks his head to the side, hoping that Yoneda will understand without any eavesdroppers doing so.

Yoneda frowns. “It’s really not. There’s something we haven’t told Takaba-san. I’ll make him understand.” Yoneda hands the phone back to Akihito.

“Kou? What was that about?” Akihito asks.

“Aki, we’ll talk later, okay? After you’re in your hotel room.”

“I don’t have a hotel room. Can’t I stay at your place?”

Kou rubs his forehead. “Aki, I told you I won’t be home tonight. I can’t ask Thomas to let in some guy he’s never met before.”

“But I haven’t been able to find a hotel room,” Aki whines. “New York is really expensive.”
“Then maybe you should have stayed in Washington,” Kou says. “You should have checked with me first. I’ll be home tomorrow around lunchtime. You can stay with me once I’m home.”

“I had to make a decision before your mom sent me your contact information,” Akihito explains.

Kou blinks. So Aki’s phone really was damaged.

“Well, I’m sorry about that, but there’s nothing I can do about it,” Kou says. “Does the train make any stops before New York? Maybe you can find a cheap hotel on the way and go to New York tomorrow.”

“I wanted to see New York at night,” Akihito says, “but you’re right… I can do that tomorrow night. Thanks, Kou!” Akihito glances out the window. “I should probably go figure that out…”

Kou chuckles. “Okay. Call me once you’re in your hotel room, okay? Before eight-thirty. That’s when I have to leave… where I am.”

Kou hangs up and looks at Kirishima. “I guess we’ll talk to him later. Sorry. Am I being too paranoid?”

Kirishima hesitates for a brief moment. I guess Takaba-san doesn’t know I’m supposed to be dead. Surely Yoneda-kun will explain it to him now. Should I tell Kou-san? If he’s going to find out, it’d be better to hear it from me… But I’d rather he not find out. He won’t take it well.


After they finish looking at Kirishima’s Twitter feed, they hang out in the shade in the courtyard, Kou drawing while Kirishima works on the family business, but the heat soon drives them back to Kirishima’s room.

Drew stops by around five.

“Did your family… leave?” Kirishima asks.

Drew nods.

“Is your mom giving you a… hard time again?”

Drew shakes his head. “She’s just happy I’m talking again.” All trace of embarrassment seems to have left Drew, and his speech has already improved remarkably.

“How’s the Japanese going?” Kou asks.

“Bedduh. Dell yoah fwend thankth foah the appth and thtuff, please.”

Kou smiles. “He’ll be happy to hear that. He was struggling in his Japanese class, too, until he found them recently.”

Chris had ended up breaking the curve for his classmates on his midterm. His teacher had been so impressed with his improvement, she’d called him into her office to find out what had caused his
breakthrough. She’d ended up offering to adjust his grade for his spring semester Japanese class if he did some extra credit compiling an updated list of resources for Japanese learners, including detailed reviews of their relative strengths and weaknesses. In addition, he’d been offered a position as a teaching assistant in the beginner Japanese classes in the fall. Chris had asked some of his classmates to help review the apps and websites to provide a more well-rounded assessment of them, and now Madison and Drew are testing them out, too.

Drew pulls out one of the camp chairs stashed next to Kirishima’s wardrobe. When Drew tries to open the chair, he nearly loses his balance. Kou rushes to help him, earning a glare from the teen.

Drew turns on the television, which is set to a Japanese station. The news is on. Drew concentrates, but after a minute, he shakes his head. “I thtill don’t unduhhtand a wahd they'uh thaying.”


“Yeah, but my teachuh thaid anime ith a howwible way to leahn. I jutht wish I could unduhhtand anything in Japanethe bethideth ‘Itadakimathu.’”

“You just did,” Kou says, laughing.

Drew blinks at him.

“I just said the news is hard in Japanese. You understood, right?”


Kou thinks for a moment. “What did you eat for lunch today?”


Kou interrupts. “In Japanese, please. You can do it.”

Drew frowns. “I eat - ate - rice… and vegetableth and… beef.”

Kirishima sets down his tablet. “Did you really? I thought you were a vegetarian.”


Five minutes later, Madison bursts into the room. “Are you studying Japanese without me?”

Drew rolls his eyes. “You wuh thtill vithiting with yoah mom.”

Madison smiles. “Yeah. She finally had a weekend off, but she had to catch the bus back home. She told me what you did for her, Kirishima-san. Thank you.” She throws both arms around Kirishima’s neck.

Both Kou and Drew look confused. Kirishima doesn’t offer an explanation, so after a second, Madison explains, “Kirishima-san offered my mom a job! One that pays twice what she’s making at the grocery store, and she can do it from home!”
“Or from the bus,” Kirishima says.

“Is it in your family’s company?” Kou asks, completely surprised by the news. The last he heard, Kirishima was fretting that his family couldn’t yet afford to pay Saji for all the work he was doing for their business.

Kirishima shakes his head. “I’ll tell you about it later. Right now it’s just… temporary, so I don’t want to make… too big a deal out of it.”

Madison grabs the other camp chair and tries to open it, but her right hand still isn’t strong enough to hold onto it. Kou hurries to help her. She smiles gratefully at him.

She looks at the TV. “A cooking show?”

“It wath the newth,” Drew explains.

Madison wrinkles her nose.

Drew hands her the remote. “You can change it to whatevuh you want.”

“Arigatō gozaimasu.” Madison starts flipping through the channels. After a minute she sighs and hands the remote back to Drew, who turns the TV off.

Madison looks around. “What are you drawing, Kou-nii-san?”

Kou blushes but shows her. “Kei-san doesn’t know what he looks like, so I’m going to leave this for him.”

“I know what I look like!” Kirishima protests. “That painting just didn’t look that… much like me.”

Kou snorts.

“What painting?” Drew and Madison say together.

Kou shows them the image from the mural of Kirishima’s unshaded face.

“That looks exactly like you!” Madison exclaims. She looks more closely at the picture. “This is incredible. Did you paint it?”

Kou shrugs, blushing. “Yeah.”

“Show them the finished one,” Kirishima urges.


“I didn’t know you were so talented,” Madison says. “Is this in Tokyo?”

Kou shakes his head. “Queens.”

“Kou-san is here on an art fellowship,” Kirishima says.

Kou blushes again. Thomas and Chris both keep telling people, too, but Kou still feels like a poser who got the fellowship as a fluke. Compared to the other recipients, he has little experience doing non-commissioned work.

“Can you teach me to draw?” Madison asks. “I completely suck at art.”
Drew elbows her. “Kou ith heuh to withit Kei.”

“The best way to learn is by practicing,” Kou says, “but I can give you some tips if you get stuck.”

Madison's roommate Kara walks by for the third time. She hovers indecisively in the doorway for a moment.

“Come in, Ka- kay?” Drew says, blushing slightly as he tries to cover the fact that he doesn’t want to mispronounce Kara's name.

Madison looks annoyed but quickly hides it with a smile. Kou gets out of the visitor's chair.

“That's okay,” Kara says.

“I need to stretch my legs anyway.” Kou stands near the window and stretches his arms overhead, then leans down and touches his toes.

“I'm Kara. You're Mr. Kirishima, right? Maddie talks about you a lot.” Kara holds out her hand to Kirishima.

“No, I don't. And don't call me Maddie,” Madison mutters.

“She’s… mentioned you, too,” Kirishima says, shaking Kara's hand. “You can call me Kei if you want.” He only told Drew that he could call Kirishima by his first name because of Drew's speaking difficulties, but now that Drew does, Kirishima would feel rude not offering the same courtesy to the other teens, though Madison hadn't taken him up on it.

“Nice to meet you, Kei,” Kara says. She looks around. “What are you guys doing?”


“Did your boyfriend leave?” Madison asks.

Kara clears her throat. “Yeah. But he's not my boyfriend.” She glances down at the floor.

“Oh. Sorry.” Madison doesn’t sound remotely apologetic.

Kara shrugs. “He told me he went to prom with Mikka.”

“Pwom? Yoah thchool hath pwom now?” Drew asks, too surprised to remember to avoid words that reveal his speech impediment.

Kara shakes her head. “It was two months ago. I know I shouldn't care. There's no way I could have gone. It's just - why did he wait so long to tell me? And why didn't she? She's been lying to me all this time.”

“I'm sorry,” Madison says again, sounding like she means it this time. “That sucks.”

“Ith Mikka yoah fwiend with the puwple haeh?” Drew asks.

Kara nods. “She's my best friend. Or she was. At least I thought she was.”

Kou glances at Kirishima, who seems to be focused on his tablet. Kou listens to the teenagers go back and forth for a while until Kirishima says, “Why don’t you try talking to… Mikka? You won’t know what she was thinking… until you ask her.”
Kara bites her lip. “I suppose you’re right. Thanks.”

When she notices Kou sketching, Kara swings by her room and grabs her own art supplies, lending Madison a sketchpad. “Start with this plant,” Kara says, gesturing to the Brahmi plant Kou gave Kirishima this morning.

After a few minutes, Madison sneaks a peek at Kara’s drawing. “Why are you so much better than me at everything?” Madison grumbles, setting her pencil down in disgust.

“I’m not,” Kara says calmly. “I’ve just been taking art lessons since I was in elementary school.”

“Must be nice,” Madison mutters.

Kara shrugs. “It is nice. On the other hand, I hated piano lessons, but my parents let me give those up when I started high school.”

Madison rolls her eyes. “You probably went to summer camp, too, didn’t you?”

Kara sets her pencil down and stares at Madison. “Yes, I did. Mostly the ‘camps’ were just glorified daycare while my parents worked, but I did get to go to sleepaway camp for one week every summer. And I spent the last three summers as a counselor there. I’m not going to sit here feeling guilty because you didn’t have the same opportunities. I’m sorry, but I can’t help it any more than you can.”

“Were there horses?” Madison asks gruffly.

“Yeah,” Kara says, cringing a little, obviously feeling a little guilty in spite of herself. “But they were old and slow, and one of them was always trying to bite the campers.”

Madison laughs. “Can you show me pictures sometime?”

“Sure. Have you ever been riding?”

Madison shakes her head. “Well, once we rode trail horses with my dad, but they just followed the horse in front of them, so I don’t count it.”

“Let’s go riding together when we get out of here. You’d love it,” Kara says.

“Thanks,” Madison says. “You’re actually really nice, aren’t you?” She covers her mouth as soon as the words slip out.

Kara shrugs. “I find you make more friends that way.”

“Sorry I’m a jealous bitch,” Madison says.

“I never said that!” Kara looks shocked.

“You didn’t have to. I know how I’ve been acting. It’s just been hard, seeing all your friends stop by all the time.”

“I’m sorry your friends and family are so far away. And I’m sorry my friends haven’t been nicer to you,” Kara says.

Madison shrugs. “It’s not like I have any friends, anyway. I’ve spent more time in the hospital than I
have at school for the past three years.”

“That must have been hard. But you’re getting out of here soon, and then you’ll be able to have a normal high school life.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Madison says doubtfully. “I’m not sure I know what that is, though.”

Saji and Tanaka enter the room. Kara looks between them in surprise. “What are you doing here, Ken?”

Ken and Saji both manage not to blush. Ken glances at Madison, but she keeps a straight face. She was the one who revealed their relationship to Drew by asking loudly how their date was two weeks ago. Drew thankfully has shown considerably more discretion.

Ken clears his throat. “Yokun - I mean Tsubasa - and I are friends. We’re training for an obstacle course race together. We just stopped by to see how Mr. Kirishima is doing, since Tsubasa is Mr. Kirishima’s friend.”

“Oh.” Kara accepts the explanation readily. She starts collecting her art supplies. “We should probably get going. We’ve taken up enough of Kei’s time with his visitors.”

Drew and Madison blush a little and follow her out the door.

“You’ve collected another one,” Ken teases Kirishima once the teens have left. “The teen whisperer strikes again. Not that Kara really needs whispering.”


Ken switches to Japanese, too. “Kirishima-san has managed to tame two of our most difficult patients and somehow convinced them to cooperate with their treatment plans.”

Kirishima blushes. “How was the movie?” he asks, desperate to change the subject.

Before Saji or Ken can answer, Akihito calls. Saji heads out to say goodnight to Ken, leaving Kirishima and Kou alone to talk to Akihito.


Kirishima shrugs, but Kou knows that Akihito won’t tell them until one of them guesses. “Um… um…” Kou can’t think of anything in Philadelphia. He glances at Kirishima.

Kirishima finally offers, “The… Liberty Bell?”

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Of course not. Think of something cooler.”

“Shopping? A restaurant?” Kou asks.

“I mean, I did try a Philly cheesesteak. It was okay,” Akihito says. “But I’m talking about the Rocky steps!”

“The what?” Kirishima asks.

Kou looks equally confused for a moment, and then he remembers. “You mean that movie about the boxer?”
“Yeah!” Akihito grins.

“So you ran up them?” Kou asks.

“Of course not! I mean, yeah, I did that, too, but I did them parkour-style. I put it up on my Insta.”

“We’ll check it out later. Now stop stalling and tell me where the hell you’ve been for the last month,” Kou says.

Akihito blushes. “Well, I told you I’ve been in America for the last five days, right?”

“Aki…” Kou grits out. “I messaged you weeks ago. Did you go into hiding after the Kodama-gumi police raid?”

“A little before that, actually,” Akihito says, scratching the back of his head. “I’m bummed I missed that, but considering I got the exposé and this current story, I guess I can let Mitarai have that one.”

“If it was that dangerous, why are you still pursuing Kodama-gumi?!” Kou bursts out.

Akihito shrugs. “Well, now they’re more worried about the cops who actually busted them than my story. And I didn’t know the story here would involve them when I came here.” Akihito glances to the side.

Kou sighs. “Aki, what am I going to do with you?”

“Were you really in hiding?” Kirishima asks, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Kou glances over at Kirishima, realizing for the first time that Akihito glossed over that part of the story. *No wonder Aki didn’t like Kei-san at first. Kei-san can see right through him.*

Akihito blushes again. “Not by choice! I mean… Yeah.” He blushes even redder.


Akihito’s face turns purple. “I- I- I’d rather not talk about it. I mean…” He looks at Kirishima. “I wanted to call and check to see how you were doing in America, but I didn’t have cell service, and then when I had to do the factory reset, I lost several of my numbers, and Asami wouldn’t give me yours. How have you been?”

Kirishima fills Akihito in on his progress. Kou notices that Kirishima deliberately minimizes his difficulties, and he doesn’t mention the pending surgery at all.

“When do they think you’ll walk again?” Akihito asks.

“I don’t know. I’ve got to work on standing up first,” Kirishima says.

“How’s Kisho-chan doing?” Akihito asks.

Kou realizes he has to go to the restroom, so he excuses himself, heading to the one down the hall. He discreetly closes the door behind him.

As soon as he’s left the room, Akihito says, “So… that guy Yoneda told me something today. Is Kou really gone?”

Kirishima glances at the door. “Yes.”
“Apparently you’re supposed to be dead?!” Akihito whispers, his eyes wide. “And you quit your job?!”

Kirishima shrugs. “Basically… yes.”

“And you haven’t told Kou any of that?”

Kirishima shrugs again. “I will. Well… about my job. Not the… other thing.”

Akihito frowns. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“You won’t… tell him, will you?”

“Of course not!” Akihito furrows his brow for a moment. “I don’t get it, though. Why won’t you? Didn’t you quit so you could get back together with him?”

“No,” Kirishima says. “I mean… I hope that… someday he’ll take me back, but… that wasn’t my only reason.”

“Oh.” Surprisingly, Akihito doesn’t press the issue. “So when are you going to tell Kou?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I don’t know. When it seems like… the right time. When I know what I’m… going to do when I leave here.”

“Kou doesn’t care about that kind of shit,” Akihito says. “As long as you’re not going back into the same kind of business,” he adds vaguely.

“Of course I’m not,” Kirishima avers. “But I don’t want him getting back together with me… out of pity.”

Akihito rolls his eyes. “Kou would never do that. He loves you.”

“I’m not the same… person he fell in love with. I… never will be.”

“Of course you are,” Akihito says. “Just because you can’t do some things as easily as you could before - yet - you’re still you.”

“Even my… personality has changed,” Kirishima points out. “But… fundamentally I still want… the same thing: someone to stand on… equal ground with, someone I can… support as much as they support me. I can’t… offer that right… now.”

Akihito’s eyes fill with tears. He brushes them away and grins. “But you’ll get there one day - sooner rather than later.”

Kirishima squares his shoulders. “I know. And then I’ll… see what Kou-san has to say. Even… before my injuries… I wasn’t… good enough for him, but I’ve been… trying.”

Akihito heaves a big sigh. He doesn’t know what he can possibly say to Kirishima to make Kou’s feelings clear if Kou himself isn’t able to convey them. “So that Yoneda guy also told me it’s not a good idea for me to talk to you anymore, much less see you.”

Kirishima shrugs. “That’s probably true. It could put us both in… danger.”

“I don’t want to do that to you again,” Akihito says. “You’re where you are because of me. Can I still ask Kou how you’re doing?”
Kirishima ponders for a moment. “I think that would be okay. Just don’t use my… family name.”

Akihito grins. “I’ll go back to Megane-san, then. Just know I’ll always be rooting for you, and I’ll always remember and be grateful for what you did for me. For everything.” Akihito’s voice breaks on the last word.

“How are things going with you and Asami-san?” Kirishima asks as Kou knocks on the door and peeks his head in. Kirishima waves him to come back into the room. “Welcome back.” Kirishima automatically gives the usual greeting one family member says to another on their return home.

Akihito grins but answers Kirishima’s question. “Really good. Thank you for that.”

“What?” Kou asks, glancing quizzically at Kirishima.

“I… convinced Asami-san and Takaba-san to talk to… a counselor,” Kirishima says.

Kou’s mouth drops open.

“I’m not saying everything’s one hundred percent peachy now,” Akihito says. “My phone didn’t get reset by accident - and while I think I understand why Asami did that now, still… he could have just talked to me.”

Kirishima snorts, causing Akihito and Kou both to stare at him. “Kurebayashi-sensei isn’t a… miracle worker,” he says. “Asami-san will… always be Asami-san.”

Akihito sighs. “I know. He is being a little more respectful, though. And I’m starting to understand why he acts the way he does. I’m trying not to just assume the worst, and we’re both trying to talk to each other more. At least sometimes. Or I thought we were…” Akihito frowns.

“Does he know why you came here?” Kirishima asks, pushing his glasses up.

Akihito glances away, then looks back and sighs. “I wasn’t a hundred percent sure this story would involve Kodama-gumi when I came here —”

“How sure were you?” Kirishima presses.

Akihito grimaces. “Fifty-fifty?” He hastens to continue. “But Yoneda has convinced me to talk to Asami before I go to print with the story. I had actually hoped to maybe talk to the New York Times about it while I was in town… So hopefully I can talk to Asami sooner than later.”

“What the hell?! Aki, are you trying to get yourself killed? If Kodama-gumi thinks you’re tracking them down across continents, they’re going to really target you even more than they have been. No amount of hiding would be able to protect you,” Kou bursts out.

“I know,” Akihito says, scratching the back of his head. “Apparently the police raid was based on an undercover investigation that had been going on for years, and my story wasn’t responsible for that at all, but still…”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Kou says, breathing a slight sigh of relief before growing stern again. “But my point still stands.”

“I know. They’re not really the focus of this story, but the company I investigated laundered money for several criminal organizations, and Kodama-gumi was the biggest. And Kodama-gumi was the only organization they smuggled drugs for.”
Kirishima frowns. “How did you even… start… pursuing this story?”

“That’s the weird thing. A friend from high school contacted me after reading my exposé on Kodama-gumi. He works for the company’s IT department, and he said he’d uncovered some anomalies in the accounting software while trying to fix a bug. He’d traced the changes in the software to a Japanese employee working in the Washington office. My friend was thinking about contacting the police, but he received a threatening e-mail that he traced back to Kodama-gumi headquarters. My friend wasn’t sure whether Kodama-gumi was directly involved or just hired to intimidate him.”

“If you publish, won’t your friend get in trouble? Who is it? Is it Reo?” Kou asks.

Akihito nods and starts to speak, but Kirishima holds up his hand, and Akihito falls silent.

“It’s probably better you don’t tell us… much more. We don’t have the necessary information to help you… assess the risks. You really need to talk about this with Asami-san.”

Akihito nods. “I suppose so. At least…” He trails off, looking a bit sheepish.

“At least what?” Kou asks.

“Nothing. Just… I think Asami will be able to advise me… objectively. This time, at least.”

Kirishima seems to understand, and when Akihito changes the topic to Kisho, Kirishima readily goes along.

*Didn’t they already talk about Kisho-chan? And what did Aki mean by Asami-san advising him objectively?* Kou wonders.

He has to wait until the call ends to ask Kirishima.

Kirishima explains, “It means… Takaba-san didn’t find any… evidence connecting… Asami-san to his investigation.”

“Oh.” Kou blinks. It’s the closest Kirishima has come to stating out loud the nature of Asami’s business - not that it really stated anything. Kou remembers his recent realization about the internal conflict Akihito must have faced for the past couple of years due to his and Asami’s jobs and differing morals. Kou resolves to have a deep conversation with Akihito tomorrow to give him space to talk about it. *I just have to remember to shut up and listen. Aki doesn’t need advice unless he asks for it.*

Kirishima and Kou chat with Kazuko and Kisho-chan until Saji returns to bring Kou to his place at the end of visiting hours.

“I’ll wait for you in the lobby,” Saji says, giving Kou and Kirishima a moment to say goodbye in private.

As Saji’s leaving, Kirishima says, “See you tomorrow… Tsubasa-kun.”

Saji turns bright red and turns and stares at Kirishima.

Kirishima starts to blush, too. “You were the one giving me a… hard time about not calling you by
“Yeah, but I didn’t think you’d be so weird about it,” Saji retorts.

“I told you it’d be… weird, Saji-kun,” Kirishima says.

Saji rolls his eyes. “It’s fine. Call me whatever you want.”

“I will, Tsubasa-kun,” Kirishima says, grinning.

The next morning, Kirishima, Kou, and Tsubasa find Drew waiting outside the physical therapy room.

Ken comes out to talk to them. “I’m so sorry. We had a pair of new patients arrive, and their assessments are taking longer than expected. It’ll be another fifteen minutes for both of you.”

They head out to the courtyard.

“Um, guyth? Can I athk you thomething?” Drew says. He blushes a little and continues once they’ve nodded. “I think Madithon liketh me.”

“What makes you say that?” Tsubasa deadpans. When Drew’s blush deepens, Tsubasa says, “Kidding. Do you want advice on how to ask her out? Or how to let her down easy?”

Drew looks pained. “She’th a weally cool giwl - and a weally nice giwl, but…” He shrugs. “I don’t want to lead heuh on. She’th a yeah younguh than me, but thometimes it feelth like a lot moah than a yeah. She’th like a little thither.”

The guys all grimace at that.

“Well, for starters, don’t tell her that,” Kou says. “A couple of my friends were dating, and the older one told the younger one it wasn’t going to work because he wasn’t a ‘real adult’ yet. Chris was really crushed by that. They only went on a couple of dates, and they’re still friendly, but Chris is still dealing with the blow.”

“Should I tell heuh I alweady have a giwlfriend? Oh that I like thomeone else?”

“It depends. Do you want to be friends with her?” Kirishima asks.

“Of couwth! She’th helped me tho much heah, and she ither cool. I want to keep in touch with heuh even aftuh I leave heah.”

“Then don’t lie to her,” Kirishima says. “If someone made up an… ongoing story to… continuously deceive you, would you want to… remain friends with them?”

“No…” Drew admits. He frowns. “But you thaid not to tell heuh the twuth eithuh.”

“You can be truthful without telling her the whole truth,” Tsubasa explains. “Is there anyone else you might consider dating while you’re here?”

Drew shakes his head. “No way. I can’t even imagine. I’m too buthy with thewapy and catching up with thchool.”

“So maybe casually mention that. And stop flirting with her,” Tsubasa says.
“I don’t fli-” Drew starts but is interrupted by a chorus of “Yes, you do.”

After the fifteen minutes are up, they head back inside. Ken directs Kou and Tsubasa to two chairs he’s placed at the end of a pair of long, parallel railings. Ken winks at Tsubasa, and Tsubasa pulls out his phone.

There’s a peppy song playing. Kou only catches the first line, “There was a time just the other day,” before Ken starts talking.

Kirishima wheels between the railings and pulls himself up at Ken’s command.

“Now let go,” Ken says.

Kirishima’s eyes widen. “I can’t. I’ll fall.”

Kou is momentarily startled, but he remembers how in the bathroom yesterday, Kirishima seemed to be supporting himself, and Kou was only helping him balance.

“You’re strong, Kei-san. You can do it,” Kou urges.

Kirishima locks eyes with Kou as if searching for the truth there.

Kou smiles. “You can do this. I believe in you. Ganbatte.”

Kirishima takes a deep breath and nods. He looks back at Ken.

“Remember all those core exercises you’ve been doing. On the count of three, engage those muscles and let go. You can keep your hands right above the rail, and I’ve got your gait belt. I won’t let you fall.”

Kirishima nods, and Ken counts off.

And then Kirishima is standing on his own two feet.

The song swells with the chorus: “Standing, I’m still standing. Standing, I’m still standing…” as Kirishima wobbles but manages to keep his balance.

Then Kou bursts into tears.

Kirishima immediately loses concentration and has to grab onto the rails again. He sits back down in his chair, panting.

“Sorry. I messed you up,” Kou says, wiping at his cheeks and laughing.

“It’s okay. I was… ready to sit again anyway,” Kirishima says.

Kou flies at him and throws his arms around Kirishima’s neck. “But you did it, Kei-san! I’m so proud of you. All your hard work is paying off.”

Ken gives them a moment to celebrate before clearing his throat. “We’ve got a lot more work to do, Kirishima-san. I want to teach Kou some assisting techniques while he’s here, and then you’ve got a lot more strengthening to do so we can get you walking.”

Kirishima grins, addressing Ken but his eyes focused on Kou. “That’s fine. You won’t be able to
torture me for... a while after much longer, Ken-san. I'm going to... have that surgery.”

Kou throws his arms around Kirishima again as Ken says, “Is that so? Then I've got to work you even harder. You want to go into surgery as strong as possible.”

Saji finishes posting a video to Twitter and stands and congratulates Kirishima. Drew shoots a double thumbs up from across the room. Kirishima hardly notices; he only has eyes for Kou's beaming face.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is from "Still Standing" by Michael Franti & Spearhead. (This is also the song Ken had cued for the final scene.)

There will be another time skip before the next chapter. I think it might be the last - but of course I won't know for sure until I write it! I have a ton of omakes in my head, but I plan to return to the Checklist Universe (which will involve re-reading everything before starting to write), and only write the omakes for this as I need fluff.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!