"That’s some kinda gratitude. What happened to my painfully polite little brother? I get the ideal guy to take you to prom, and you act like he's not even here!"

"I doubt I’d let him take me to the hospital if I were bleeding to death."

Keiji needs a date. Bokuto needs dating lessons. Nothing could possibly go wrong.
The quiet of the room, interrupted only by the percussion of fingers on a keyboard, was humming with restrained antagonism.

"I'm occupied at the moment," it murmured.

"If you would be so kind as to leave," it muttered.

"I have little to say to you," it danced on the edge of a growl.

“Perhaps you should make intimate acquaintance with the business end of a rake,” it insisted. Mildly. And so on and so forth, conjuring a wall of gentle hostility dense enough to hang a picture frame on.

But the room’s second inhabitant was used to it.

“So like I was saying, it’s obvious what you need to do," his brother lectured, sprawled on a bed that wasn’t his. "Coincidentally it’s also what you want to do. Stay home.”

Pulling himself away from his mediocre final paper on George Bernard Shaw, Keiji delivered a dismissive glance to his own personal annoyance, then focused on the screen once more.

His brother still didn't get the hint. Or, what was more likely, ignored it. Because he was the worldly wise one. Obviously nothing could escape his notice.

“Why is it difficult to believe that I want to attend my senior prom?” Keiji sighed, finishing the sentence he’d been rewriting for what seemed like an hour. Literature was his thing, maybe, but fascist-sympathizing playwrights who opposed vaccination and supported eugenics were definitely not. He should have left the words as they were fifty minutes ago.

A cackle rose from the bed, indicating that the great Tetsurou had come up with a retort he considered clever.

“Wellll,” he drawled, "it’s mostly because you’re eighteen, genetically predisposed to hotness - considering exhibit A here..."

Keiji didn't need to look to know that Tetsurou was pointing at himself.

"...but,” his brother continued, a little more exasperated, “you sit in front of your computer writing and listening to your awful nineties rock pretty much every Saturday night. I have a pretty good
grasp on your personality after watching it develop over the past eighteen years and honestly, I don’t get why you’d wanna go.”

“I’m impressed you gained that much wisdom in the year before I was born,” Keiji said. “As I understood it you spent most of it refusing to eat anything but mashed bananas.”

“Okay,” Tetsurou was now humoring him. “So you really want to go…”

“It’s a quintessential high school experience.” Keiji had to work to maintain the thinnest veneer of composure. It was a bad sign if his brother had worn him down this quickly, but this was hardly the first time he’d grilled him on the subject.

“…but you can’t find any guy worth taking.”

Keiji sighed out his rage wearily.

Because he couldn't.

Chikara had left for New York right before the school year started. Which still hurt, if Keiji was honest with himself, but there was nothing for it. His best friend or whatever it was that they had been was gone and, based on the manner of their parting, there was no happy reunion in their future.

Scrolling through his mental contact list for other guys who liked dudes proved fruitless. Noya had a burly street artist boyfriend. All of the juniors he knew were together, and too much to handle even outside of that. Despite how many times it was suggested, Keiji refused to go as Ryuu’s pity date. Especially since that guy wanted to bring a girl more than the rest of the straight male student body combined. Kenma was obviously not an option.

“You know,” his brother began tentatively, “since we’ve already gone twice, I don’t have to go with Kenma. You two could go… together…”

“It’d be like going with you,” Keiji shut down that profoundly generous yet insanely stupid offer instantly. Because it almost definitely would, but also because it certainly wasn’t what Kenma wanted, let alone Tetsurou.

“And you can’t just go with someone you’re friends with, or just by yourself, because…”

“Overzealous classmates,” he said in a tone that was even flatter than normal. The words skidded across the floor and rattled at his brother’s feet like a loose trash can lid, making enough noise to shut him up for a few blessed moments. The computer screen held no answers, but Keiji stared holes through it searching for them anyway.

How was he the type of person people wanted to meddle with? He regretted the day he’d come out. Not because he was embarrassed, but because recently people had started treating him like the sole representative of the entire gay community. As though there weren’t – on top of the dozen gay guys he knew of – at least thirty women who loved women hanging around, ready to talk about their adorable girlfriends to anyone who would listen.

“Oh yeah, your little fanclub…” Tetsurou mused. “That’s what you get for being hot, I guess. It was the same for Tooru, but man, he eats that shit up. Think it’s worse for you though. First off, you don’t have an angry porcupine to scare them away. On top of that, you’re just a broken-hearted little nerd. A lot more approachable and a lot more in need of some charitable assistance.”

Ignoring the realities that he was nearly six feet tall and certainly past the broken-hearted stage, Keiji focused on the crux of his problem. “I told them I had already found a date in order to encourage
them to leave me alone.”

“Ohoho! So you’re fucked then?” His brother’s voice was approaching a frenzied squeak

Keiji wondered if George Bernard Shaw and his brother might get along if politics and medical science were avoided. “In so many words,” he adjusted his glasses, “yes. I also implied that the date was of a romantic nature. Unfortunately.”

Tetsurou’s feet hit the ground as he sat up. “Why the fuck would you do that, Keiji?”

He looked his brother straight in the eye. One, since the other was hidden behind his terrible hair.

“You don’t understand how tenacious they’ve been.”

There was a long, heavy pause. He’d been desperate. Mobbed at lunch and in the hallways, stripped of the quiet moments he loved. With the exception of Kenma, his closest friends had all graduated. In their absence, there had been no one to serve as a buffer between himself and the horde. Keiji could generally handle difficult people. But not for months without a break, and certainly not in such large numbers.

Also he’d overestimated his pool of available dates.

“For someone who used to plan bank robberies for fun, you're pretty dense sometimes,” his brother chuckled, scrabbling for his phone. “Never fear, little buddy,” he texted furiously as he spoke, “big brother Tetsu’s gonna take care of this for you.”

“You’re about to ruin my life.”

“If what I’ve learned from the movies of our youth counts for anything,” Tetsurou smiled airily, “I’m about to do the exact opposite.”

Keiji didn’t necessarily forget about his brother’s ominous promise. But he did try not to think about it.

The whole mess really was his fault. His "fan club” hadn't come out of nowhere. It wasn’t just like Tooru’s; it had been Tooru’s. Keiji had inherited this unexpected burden upon his graduation. And despite Tetsurou’s claims, it had little to do with his looks.

There was a prevalent delusion that, much like the great Tooru Oikawa, Keiji was well on his way to becoming a sought-after member of the entertainment industry. It was no surprise that a certain group was trying to ingratiate themselves to him - that was the way things worked in this part of California. Their ineffective methods were also not much of a shock.

No one seemed to care that Keiji’s skill set in the realm of film began and ended with writing one, and he really didn’t want to do that as a career. Maybe if Chikara had stuck around. But he hadn't. So probably not even if he had.

It had been nine months and really the sorrow was gone whenever he thought about his ex... everything. But the anger at himself, the mortification, was not. So even though there were at least two out sophomores with definite crushes on him, they were not avenues he would choose to pursue. He absolutely did not want to hurt a classmate by getting romantically entangled just for the sake of a
dance. Leading people on was absolute bullshit.

He would know.

But he wanted to go to the prom. Not for traditional reasons, admittedly, but earnestly all the same.

It was a common national experience. Being so common, it was also something he didn’t think he could duplicate through sheer imagination. He’d make too many mistakes. He wasn’t the kind of hyper-masculine elitist who was going to pretend that teenage experiences were useless. To the contrary, they were vital. But without attending, the event would be challenging to understand at best, no matter how many unnecessarily extravagant promposals he witnessed in the hallway.

This was a problem, if he wanted to write about it someday. And he wasn’t going to discount that chance.

He and Chikara hadn’t gone their junior year because they’d been far away, trembling bodies leaning against each other in a lavish ballroom, faces flushed with champagne as they slow danced awkwardly in insanely priced tuxes, the fibers of the red carpet fresh on their heels.

Keiji collected memorable experiences like his grandfather collected fruit trees, and that night had been wildly memorable for a number of reasons.

He didn't want to remember a single one.

But he was really inept at turning off his thoughts. He could either muse over the loss of his virginity, or worry over whatever nonsense his brother was about to hit him with. The latter was a lot more immediate and difficult to avoid.

Classes were over at UCLA. Tetsurou’s finals had all been lab reports and papers, so he had moved home and picked up his part time job as a pharmacy assistant at CVS. His haste was probably scenery-driven: his room was directly across the fence from their neighbor, Kenma Kozume's. Their windows had always faced each other. Whenever this was brought up, his brother blushed, then wagged his eyebrows to pretend that he hadn’t. The details of their relationship were among the few things Keiji had trained himself to ban from his mind on no uncertain terms.

Mostly.

Since Keiji was walking home with Kenma himself, Tetsurou would almost certainly be at the house when they got back.

The nice thing about walking with someone that he’d known since birth but was in no way related to was that Kenma didn't expect Keiji to talk. At all. He also wouldn't get into his business unless things were desperate. The not so nice thing was that Keiji desperately needed someone to talk to at the current moment, and getting his oldest confidante to do that meant—

"What’s wrong?"

Kenma's soft interruptions of his fretting were always eerie. Keiji probably had some kind of physical tell, but he’d never asked what it was, and Kenma had never offered. Perhaps it was the way he fidgeted with his fingers…

Looking down at his busy hands, he thrust them to his sides, clenching them into fists.

"I’m concerned that I’m an idiot for wanting to attend our prom," he announced, after a great deal of mental wordsmithing. Normally thinking about what he was going to say that much would cause
enormous difficulty. But Kenma was one of the easiest people on earth to speak to, since he was barely present to begin with.

His neighbor took a deep breath, probably more to focus on a particularly difficult point in the game he was playing than to consider Keiji's question in-depth.

"No more than normal," he dropped, as though he were talking to Tetsurou, a permanent resident of the state of idiocy.

Someday Keiji was going to give the best man speech at their wedding. It was not going to be an easy task. But he would make it absolutely scathing and deliver it perfectly if both of them kept this up.

Kenma's walk slowed to a crawl, "You don't do things recklessly. If you want to go, it's unlikely to be for idiotic reasons. But if you don’t know, there's no way for me to be sure."

They walked another block before he added with a small smile, "I doubt it though, Keiji."

Well… maybe the speech would just make his brother look bad.

The kitchen was supposed to be safe. A place where he made pizza rolls, devoured his grandmother's onigiri, and got a drink of water when he couldn’t sleep (which was nearly always). The kitchen was not a place where Keiji was accosted by his brother and enormous, weird-looking men.

"Bo, this is my little brother, Keiji Akaashi."

And yet there they were.

"Little brother, this is Bokuto: one of my best bros and, more importantly, your prom date."

Keiji spent a long moment blinking.

"Bokuto," was almost as tall as Tetsurou, and Tetsurou had been the tallest in his grade since he was seven. His hair was dyed as white as cosmetic science could get something that had almost certainly started off as black (so it was more of a dingy sun-bleached grey). Certain sections had been left his natural color, and the whole mess stood up about six inches off of his head.

His eyes were enormous and, strangely enough, amber, just like Kenma and Kuroo's. For a sixth grade science project Keiji had researched the frequency of eye colors, and that one was the rarest. All three of them having it was actively insane.

Bokuto’s eyebrows were dyed to match his hair, and they were exaggerated in both size and arch. In a mere thirty seconds he had used them to great effect while he sized Keiji up.

A cartoon character.

His brother was setting him up with a cartoon character. Well, if a cartoon character reproduced with a beefy frat guy, since that's what the biceps and pecs and very revealing tank top were announcing with no shame whatsoever.
"I'm going to Kenma's," Keiji announced just as his "date" opened his mouth.

"O-hoho no you don't," Tetsurou grabbed his arm then called over his shoulder. "Hey Bo, why don't you head into the living room and chill for a bit, eh? Sometimes Keiji here gets a little crabby if he doesn't get his snack after school. Low blood sugar, you know?"

The monstrosity of a man shrugged, looking more than a little put out. Whatever he had been about to say, he let it go. He didn’t look happy about it.

"That’s some kinda gratitude," Tetsurou drawled as soon as their visitor was out of earshot. "What happened to my painfully polite little brother? I get the ideal guy to take you to prom, and you act like he's not even here!"

"I doubt I’d let him take me to the hospital if I were bleeding to death."

"Bokuto is a starting freshman, the star of the UCLA men’s volleyball team. You know, the team ranked fourth in the country?"

"Also of interest: I stopped playing volleyball."

"Yeah, and we all know how that turned out," his brother muttered.

Keiji shook his arm free, uninterested in hearing that lecture again, "I'm going to Kenma's to finish some of the last major assignments of my high school career. Please let me know when I can come home."

But Tetsurou was immediately in front of him, long arms blocking the way, "Okay, look. Bokuto is a good friend. Do I make friends with terrible people?"

"Tooru Oikawa," Keiji responded without having to think. There were more but his brother’s first year roommate was the easiest example.

Tetsurou couldn’t counter immediately but after a moment he nodded to himself and grinned.

"That guy is like… reality television. Love him or hate him, you still watch, and he's the one who makes out in the end. Plus he worked out well enough for you didn’t he? Honestly, Keiji, have I ever introduced you to anyone who turned out to be a legitimately bad person?"

He wanted to say yes, but he couldn't. Because everyone Tetsurou met eventually became a better person for it. His brother, for all his idiocy, had inherited their mother's clever kindness and generosity, with a heaping spoonful of getting into everyone’s business by poking it with a stick.

Keiji, on the other hand, had assumed her chilly politeness, blunt honesty, and generally calculating demeanor.

Both had inherited her height.

"No," Keiji crossed his arms. "You have not."

"Alright then. Bokuto knows the drill. He gets it. You need a fake date of the romantic persuasion."

"Is he even gay?"

"I think he'd fuck pretty much anyone that'd give him consent. Oh, don’t make that face! He’s not a creep. He’s popular on campus, just terrible at taking anything past the hook-up stage. Kind of… intense. Freaks his dates out almost immediately. You’re the only person I know who could take on
that kind of energy instead of just running away or getting caught up. You’re like… a shock absorber? But instead of impact, you absorb fun."

Keiji was pretty certain that that was one of the more insulting things his brother had said since he'd learned human language, and he'd been keeping track.

But Tetsurou was trying to persuade him, and there was no stopping him once he got going. “You take Bo on six practice dates, teach him how not to scare people off, and he'll show you the time of your life at the prom. How does that sound?”

"How many heartwarming romantic comedies have this plot, exactly?"

"You tell me, Mr. Internationally-Acclaimed-Screenwriter. Since you're the expert, you can avoid that whole trope altogether. Teach Bokuto how to be a good date, then let him show you a prom worth writing about. Cause that's what you want, isn't it?"

"Kenma told you that, didn't he?"

"Have a little faith in my own power of observation!"

Keiji gave him a pointed look

"He guessed," Tetsurou admitted, "but obviously he was right! Now, are you gonna play nice?"

The only way Keiji could tell that his brother was nervous was the way his horrible crest of hair quivered. He was trying. And he'd been trying to cheer him up for the better part of a year. And this wasn’t… the worst idea he’d had. That would be the Chemistry Lab Incident in sophomore year when Tetsurou had attempted to confess his long simmering romantic feelings for Kenma with science.

Science and toxic gas.

It had somehow worked, despite the arrival of the fire department and his departure in an ambulance.

"Fine."

Tetsurou clapped his hands and rubbed them together with delight. "Bo! C'mon back! Family meeting over."

In four astoundingly loud steps, Bokuto was back in the room. He turned on Keiji like he'd been sitting quietly for hours instead of minutes, "Hey, hey, hey, Kaashi! I gotta say man, I was looking at the pictures of you in the living room and damn you are the hottest fucking guy I've ever seen! And I have seen a lot of guys! Why the hell do you need a fake date? Do you have like… a weird dick or something?"

Keiji took a deep breath and responded with composure and decorum that gently deescalated the absolutely unbearable situation. Not unlike...

…a shock absorber. But of fun.

"No, Bokuto, my penis is perfectly normal. But thank you."
Keiji’s efforts to make date number one as low-key as possible were not as effective as he hoped.

“Hey, hey, hey, Kaashi!”

Bokuto placed his iced coffee on the table Keiji had picked for them, then sat down hard in his wicker bentwood chair. The spot by the open window had been selected so that, hopefully, they could people-watch instead of talk the entire time.

That was not going to be possible.

“So… this is a normal first date, eh?” Bokuto put his hands behind his head and kicked out his feet, as though he were coming back to his own place after a long day at the office. He was wearing another loose tank top, this time under a ratty yellow cardigan over coral-colored shorts and duck taped flip flops. Why he didn’t have “brah” tattooed between his almost visible nipples was a question that Keiji really couldn’t answer.

Bokuto’s actual question, however, was one that he could address. Especially since that was his part of the deal.

“It’s generally a good idea to meet for a first date at a neutral location that allows for a flexible time commitment,” Keiji explained. “A cafe, ice cream shop or bar allows ample time to get to know each other. It’s easy to stay much longer than intended, while allowing for a quick escape if things go poorly, unlike a restaurant or movie theater.”

“Whoa, man you must have gone on a hell of a lot of first dates.”

Keiji stiffened. He had incorrectly assumed that Tetsurou had explained all this.

“Actually,” he lifted his cup of tea to cover his mouth and any flush of embarrassment that might have developed, “this is my first.”

“Wait a minute!” Bokuto’s fist hit the table, and Keiji had to catch the guy’s drink to keep it from tipping over. “How are you supposed to give me advice then? Also, you’re fucking hot. How the hell have you never gone on a first date before this? I’ve gone on like fifty!”

A fair question. While Keiji knew a lot about dating, a decent chunk of it was either thanks to the internet, or observational in nature. That didn’t make it inaccurate. Dating with this level of formality wasn’t something high schoolers could often do anyway.

All the same, this was not how he’d expected things to go.

“Never gone on a second, come to think of it,” Bokuto muttered, looking miserably down at his teetering drink. In the time it’d taken Keiji to consider his words, he’d gone from complete maniac to drenched baby bird. It was immediately obvious that letting this state of dejection go on would create more challenges than their arrangement already presented.

So Keiji found himself opening up to a complete stranger and talking about an old relationship, all in the same breath. Two terrible choices on a first date, real or otherwise. He’d have to explain that at a later time.

“My ex and I were best friends,” he sat his cup on the saucer with a wobbly clack. “Our relationship gradually evolved into romance, so there really was no first date.”
Bokuto looked up. "Well that's really cool but, I mean, wasn't there at least a minute where you were
like, 'Soo... we just put our tongues down each other's throats...?' I mean, assuming you like that
sorta thing."

Why this.

"It was very organic," Keiji was outwardly unmoved but inwardly unable to keep from wondering if
maybe there should have been.

"Well, that sounds kinda boring," the man across from him mused, not a hint of malice in his voice.
That was it.

"Bokuto, here is my first piece of advice: consider what you are saying before you say it. Your dates
may find your habit of immediately announcing whatever comes to mind profoundly offensive.
That's not what most people want out of a companion, especially a romantic one."

His date's face was unreadable at first, then teetering on a meltdown, then thoughtful.

"Huh. Nobody's ever told me that like that before. It, uh, kinda makes sense, I guess," Bokuto took a
deep, fortifying breath. "So, uh... what do you want out of a, um, romantic companion, Kaashi?"

This was not a real date. And he was not going to blush at the sudden question as though he were on
one. Even if it had been unexpected and almost the exact right thing to say, despite its invasiveness.
It still was not real, and Keiji had no idea why he even needed to consider such a thing.

"I don't trust you enough to answer that," he answered sensibly.

"Well, what do I gotta do for you to trust me then?" Bokuto persisted, putting his elbows on the table
and leaning forward.

"I..." he had absolutely no idea. The mere thought of trust brought up a chaotic mass of emotions he
had not dealt with. He took a sip of his tea and tried to figure out what to say without thinking about
it too much.

Bokuto's eyes grew soft. The exaggerated features that had previously resembled a drunkenly
assembled Mr. Potato Head eased into an interesting, even handsome face.

"I get it," he said, with a gentleness that his entire existence belied. "Somebody hurt you real bad,
didn't they Kaashi?"

This was no more a therapy session than it was an actual date. A firm redirection was necessary.

"I would appreciate it if you stopped calling me 'Kaashi.' My name is Keiji. Or Akaashi. Kashi is a
cereal brand one of my uncles likes because he mistakenly believes it is good for him. It tastes like
cardboard."

The diversion worked, because Bokuto was nodding his head enthusiastically, thrilled to be given
something practical to work on.

He was taking this a lot more seriously than Keiji had expected.

"Right. Got it, Akaashi. Sorry, I usually call everybody by their last names or like some kinda
nickname? It's been like that since, I dunno, middle school? There were two of us with the same
name in sixth grade; everybody started calling us by our last names so I thought we were supposed to
do that with everybody. Then I thought it was just cool. Kept it up even when I changed schools. Got used to nobody using mine ‘cept my family. First names got to feeling really…”

“Intimate?” Keiji offered, just on the edge of sardonic. He was fairly certain it wasn’t that. It was just a name.

He was wrong.

“Yeah! Like…” Bokuto scratched the back of his head, "more than sexy shit. I mean, not like that with my family, ugh, that’d be gross. It just feels all nice when new people say my name, like they know a secret or something. Don’t like everybody doing that to me. Know it’s weird, but I’d rather–”

“If you’re willing to entertain my preferences, I’m certainly happy to agree to yours," he felt the right corner of his lips turn up the slightest bit.

“So…” Bokuto grinned, not missing the micro smile, "do ya trust me now??"

Keiji chuckled, which he did not want to do, but stopping once he had given in would have been awkward. “A small amount more than I did before. But…”

“I gotta work at it? Okay. Can do!” Bokuto stood up and hit his own chest, gathering the attention of everyone in the cafe and on the busy sidewalk in front of them. "By the end of this prom, you’ll trust me with your life!”

A quick glance into Bokuto’s eyes said that he was dead serious. Keiji had absolutely no idea what to do with that information. He didn’t have time to come up with anything, because Bokuto was looking right back at him with an intense, feral stare. It was more overwhelming than the extreme discomfort of this happening in front of people.

What if someone recognized him? was drowned out by: What the hell is wrong with this person?

After a Much-Too-Long pause, Keiji fiddled with his teacup and cleared his throat. “Generally during first dates, the two parties get to know each other on a somewhat superficial level. Where they’re from and–”

“Moloka’i Island!” Bokuto slammed himself back into his chair excitedly. "That’s uh… part of Hawai’i, if you didn’t know. Nobody knows,” he laughed, like it was some old joke. “We don’t get many tourists and there’s only like seven thousand people on the whole island! More people go to my university! Exponentially!”

Keiji blinked, not necessarily expecting such an exotic home state, which was silly considering he had an aunt, uncle, and two cousins in Maui. But he’d just assumed Bokuto was from Gardena or something.

Also the word “exponentially” had been surprising.

His date took his surprise as an indication that he’d done something wrong.

“Ah man, sorry. I should have asked you first, right? Or waited until you asked me? Sorry, I just get real excited to talk about home. I’m kinda homesick, I guess. There’s a lot of concrete here and the water’s all gloomy and the waves are pretty small. Ugh, sorry, I’m the worst.”

Bokuto put his head in his hands, completely despondent for the second time in ten minutes. This proclivity to jump from one mood to another had to be exhausting. It certainly couldn’t be intentional. No one would willingly do such a thing to themselves.
“This misery would not go over well on an actual date, Bokuto,” Keiji said after giving his date ample chance to pull himself together. “Why not just ask me something instead?”

Bokuto took a shuddering breath and lifted his eyes, still looking defeated, though the tiniest bit less so.

“Agaaseeeee, where are you from?” he husked, looking like he wanted to roll around on the floor until his life ended.

Keiji was not about to let him mope his way through the rest of these abysmal dates. Bokuto was going to learn and improve or they were going to stay home from the prom altogether. Keiji could pick out some of the issues already. They were not unresolvable. This person could be happy. He could make someone else happy, with some hard work.

Not every romance had to end in misery.

“I grew up here, in the house where Tetsurou and I live now. We’ve been there since I was born.”

Bokuto perked up and Keiji received an unnecessarily fascinated series of nods. Considering the awed continental opinion of Bokuto’s own home state, Torrance, California was hardly a striking locale.

“So like… why do you and Kuroo have different last names?”

Keiji spilled the remainder of his tea across the table.

Wide amber eyes announced that Bokuto realized what he’d done. “Ah, shit that was really rude right?” He panicked, grabbing napkins to clean the spill. “Sorry, um… okay! I’ll just tell you my junk then. So my mom’s Hawai’ian, like, Native Hawai’ian, and my dad’s Japanese – immigrated when he was ten. And ugh, they got divorced when I was seven, and I cried every day. I stayed with my mom cause otousan moved to Tokyo, but I had to go see him in Honolulu like, once a month when he was back for work. He’s kind of a dick but my grandparents are super nice. They came to Moloka’i in the summers and hung out with all my aunties, and taught me to speak Japanese when I came home from Hawai’ian immersion school. My cousins laugh at my accent when I go to Tokyo. But I’m awesome for somebody who didn’t speak it at home, like it’s a really fucking hard language to learn to write and I can! I kinda forget kanji a lot, though.”

Interacting with this person was like trying to get a sip of water from a firehose. This was supposed to be a learning opportunity for Bokuto. Slow dances in exchange for relationship counseling. And Keiji was going to do his job.

Also did he just imply he could speak three languages?

“Bokuto, while this is very interesting information, it’s both overwhelming to the listener and leaves you very vulnerable to someone who you’ve only just started pursing romantically. Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Well, cause I asked you a super rude question, and I was just… leveling the court. You know?” As though trading embarrassment for embarrassment was an obvious thing that people just did.

Keiji pinched the bridge of his nose over his glasses and took a deep breath. “It’s not customary to make amends for intrusive questions by revealing deeply personal information. On a first date that could just cause further discomfort. And who’s to say I wouldn’t use it against you? How can you trust me so quickly?”
Seriously, how could he?

Bokuto didn’t even stop to think. “Well, like, I trust Kuroo. He wouldn’t have said I should do this if he thought you’d fuck me over. So… I trust you. What else am I gonna do, just waste my time being super careful and not trying? I’d just stay the same, man.”

Oh.

There was a tiny, shimmering moment of–

“Tetsurou and I have different fathers,” Keiji interrupted whatever small revelation had been occurring. "His died before he was born, mine is not in the picture."

Astoundingly, the next phase of the date commenced somewhat organically.

Somewhat.

"I'm gonna walk you home," Bokuto stood up and drew the last of his iced coffee out of the straw with an agonizing slurp and crunch of ice.

The cafe was a few blocks from Keiji’s house. It was late afternoon. Not only was there no element of danger necessitating an escort on such a short walk, but people might also see them walking together. Bokuto’s presence was only required for the prom. Anything further would create unwanted situations that Keiji would be forced to respond to.

"That is unnecessary," he said as they left the building.

"Akaaashi! No one ever lets me walk them home!" Bokuto whined. "Do I smell bad?"

Fearing a meltdown on a busy public thoroughfare, Keiji leaned in and sniffed Bokuto's shirt. Awkwardly, as there was only a small landing area that wasn't face to face with skin, or much too... low.

"You smell like deodorant and sunscreen."

Bokuto grabbed him by the shoulders until their faces were nearly level. "Is that a bad thing??"

"It's a neutral thing. Unless I associated it with a negative experience, or were allergic, it would not bother me. It does not bother me."

It was actually pleasant, but he wasn't about to say that.

"Okay, good, then let me walk you home! ‘Specially since I left my truck in front of your house."

Keiji tensed. "Why did you do that?"

"Well… I was kinda nervous. Figured I’d ask Kuroo for some tips on getting along with you. So I went to your house and your mom let me in. She's a real pretty lady by the way, you look at lot like her.” Now that they were away from the hum of the coffee shop, Keiji could hear the swinging lilt in Bokuto’s voice more clearly. He kept trying to deconstruct this accent, but instead he just found himself getting caught up in its rhythm. “She said Kuroo and Kozume were up in Kuroo's room. So I went up and. Shit, you probably don't wanna know this about your brother..."
Keiji hadn’t thought it were possible to get any stiffer. "No, I absolutely do not."

"Yeah, well,” Bokuto’s voice was dripping with regret, “You should know his lock is broken. And I was pretty shocked myself. Didn't expect it to be that way, exactly. I mean, didn't expect it at all, but when I did see it, it wasn't really..."

Keiji made a noise that sounded like gehhhh.

"Yeah, okay, so anyway, Kozume was just chuckling a little? Which was a little weird. And Kuroo looked pretty ready to kill me, so I just figured I’d have to wing it with you."

Taking a deep breath to force the thoughts of Kenma and Tetsurou doing whatever it was that he didn't want to think about out of his mind, Keiji realized they were halfway to his house.

"You tricked me."

"What?” Bokuto looked around, "Nah, I mean, I just started walking and you came with me and it wasn't on purpose! I can sit here and let you go on ahead. I’ll get my truck in like, half an hour. It's a nice day to relax. Kinda freezing, but nice."

"It's fifty-five degrees outside. Unseasonably chilly. A jacket is necessary but it’s hardly freezing."

"I'm not used to it,” Bokuto whined, even though he’d obviously experienced this sort of weather in the nine months he’d been in the state. Maybe if he learned to dress for anything other than a day in mid-July. Or perhaps if he were anything other than an enormous child.

"Why did you need tips on getting along with me? These are fake practice dates, not a romantic encounter. The point is to make mistakes and learn."

"Ah, well, I mean, I kinda like to do a good job at shit and… uh… you're sorta intimidating for a high schooler, Akaaaashi. Always look like you’re fed up.

Keiji was noticing the number of vowels in his last name increase every time Bokuto said it. The expansion seemed to correlate with how much the following statement would get under his skin.

"You just finished your freshman year,” Keiji deadpanned. “You're a year older than me, I'm assuming."

"Well yeah, but you'd be intimidating if I saw you at a party, even,” Bokuto leaned against one of the posts on Keiji's small porch. Because they were already back. "Like, I'd have to talk to you, couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t, but it’d be scary as shit. I'd need like three beers first cause… I mean just look at you. Like… damn, so hot."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop saying that,” Keiji stepped onto the porch. “It makes me uncomfortable."

"But why?? I mean, you are! Just like Kuroo is pretty damn suave, and fucking amazing at blocking my spikes even though he won't play on the team cause he’s 'focusing on his classes.' Just like I'm fucking amazing at volleyball in general, and like, finding stable ground on a hike, and I’m a really good dancer. I’m amazing at a shitton of other stuff. I’m the fucking best! And, you know, I've got my moments… face wise,” Bokuto waggled his eyebrows and the secondhand embarrassment was nearly unbearable.

But he didn’t seem to care, because he was trying to prove a point. “And I bet you're awesome in a ton of ways, Akaashi, not just being the sexiest person I’ve ever set my eyes on. I just gotta find out
what they are. And I mean, I want to, since we’re doing this thing. So like, I had to make sure before it happened that I didn’t offend you on our first date, but… I saw your brother getting fucked instead."

Too much at once. Keiji was completely revolted and, blushing, and a lot of other things that he really didn't want to explore. So he didn’t. Unfortunately instead of coolly ignoring what was said, he couldn't stop thinking about what would inevitably happen when he opened his mouth. After years of speech therapy, counseling, and being tormented by any bully Tetsurou and Kenma didn’t destroy, there were very few situations which could actually push Keiji into states of self-consciousness or stress so intense that he felt he couldn’t speak.

But even the mildest, not to mention most inauthentic pressure for romantic intimacy, was apparently one of them. He would absolutely need to work on that. Immediately.

There was a long pause. Bokuto fidgeted. Keiji stared at the ground and wondered idly if it might open up and swallow him.

"The overall lesson from this d.....................date,” he finally ground out, “is that you need to work on having a filter for the things you say in a romantic context. I expect improvement by our next rendezvous on Saturday. Which you are planning."

Rendezvous? Even he wasn’t that pretentious. Meet-up would have been better, he should have said that. He shouldn’t have used a different word at all. He needed to stop worrying about speaking. Looking at Bokuto, he forced himself back into the moment and the good habits he’d worked on for years.

"Got it," Bokuto nodded, seemingly unaware of Keiji’s internal struggle. He had taken the criticism unexpectedly well. It had already become noticeable that he was more stable if he was given something to work towards. But once again they were just standing there. Staring at each other wordlessly. And Keiji wasn’t silent to preserve his dignity. He was silent because he was not entirely certain he could speak.

Don’t worry about perfection. What did he need to do next?

He had never really ended a date in any sort of definitive manner. With Chikara, they had just gone their separate ways, as they had since the Ennoshita family had moved to town six years prior. Once romance entered their relationship, there had frequently been some kind of mild physical affection thrown in. Departure was subtle. Understood.

But now, in Bokuto's case, there was probably a bit of guidance needed to indicate that he should leave. And he had to leave before he said something else bizarre and gave Keiji a heart attack.

There was one failsafe solution.

"I have a history paper to write, Bokuto."

"Akaashi, can I kiss you goodnight? Er, afternoon, I guess?"

Their sentences collided explosively in midair.

After about seventeen blinks, Keiji reigned in his shock with nothing less than a will of iron. "This is a practice date. Kissing is unnecessary, as you are not actually romantically interested in me. Nor I you."

"Yeah, well I'm pretty certain I mess up the kiss part of dates too!" Bokuto defended himself angrily,
then gulped. "I mean, I wouldn't wanna pressure you to kiss me! Ahh, sorry. I just. Sorry, Akaashi. I just don't know what I'm doin' wrong."

Bokuto's shoulders sank and Keiji could see him deflating, rapidly. If for no reason other than perhaps that Keiji himself was an idiot, he felt sympathetic. It was painful to see all of this – truth be told – glorious energy burning out into despair every five minutes. All quite possibly because no one had ever seen fit to give Bokuto any sort of neutral, measured feedback on his behavior. Keiji knew from personal experience how hard it was to change. He couldn’t imagine doing it without help.

And apparently sympathy made him insane.

"You can kiss me, but I will not hold back my criticism."

Bokuto nodded nervously, then stepped up onto the porch so they were face to face. “Don’t worry, I’m a good kisser,” he muttered, maybe more to himself than his partner. His trembling hands grasped Keiji’s shoulders just a bit too tightly, and he leaned in. Keiji closed his eyes much more fearfully than the situation called for.

But instead of pressure on his lips, he felt the soft puff of a whisper against his ear.

"Hey Akaashi, even if this wasn't real, I had an awesome time."

For a brief second, dry lips pressed awkwardly against his cheek, then Bokuto was running down the sidewalk to his truck. He hopped in, started the engine, ground through the gears, then promptly turned onto the wrong street to get to the 405.

Just like that, he was gone.

It was hard to move for a very long time.

"Keiji, dear,” the most familiar of voices drifted from the screen door behind him, “I believe your cheek is secure. You can let it go.” He turned to see his mother, lips turned upwards in a soft, sly smile. “Your brother told me that ball of energy is your prom date. I'm so happy to hear it. You've been moping for far too long, little flower."

Tetsurou was going to get fucked. And not in the way in which he was apparently accustomed.

Chapter End Notes

This story is about a prom. Since proms do not exist in Japan, I had to situate it elsewhere. While I could have made a sort of “colorblind” nowhere place, where ethnicity and race did not exist, this seemed really unfair to the 1.3 million Japanese Americans who get little representation in narratives of this sort. So I chose LA County, which has the largest density of Japanese Americans in the US.

But this is a goofy romance. It is not an exploration of Japanese American or Hawai’ian (or both) identity. Those stories are not mine to write. And like any other group of humans on the planet, Japanese Americans are not a cultural monolith. I’ve attempted to reflect that while still maintaining that the characters are not white, but make no mistake: I am white. I have probably gotten some things wrong which I’m happy to correct.

Concerning Akaashi: if you think he’s going to lose his stutter through the power of
love, I’ve got bad news for you. He’s not. Adults who stutter just do. It is neither quirky nor catastrophic, nor is it an indication that they didn’t work very hard in speech therapy. While I do not have a stutter myself, I do have aphasia, which can seem similar. I apologize if there’s more of my own speech patterns than is entirely accurate.

I do not want to hurt anyone through my writing. If you notice something culturally insensitive or outright incorrect, I apologize. Please let me know so I can fix it! I’d prefer we not discuss it in the comments because I want people (including myself) to feel safe, but please feel free to send a message to my gmail or message me on tumblr – my username is the same everywhere. I’ll always keep it between us.
In the three days between their first and second practice dates, Keiji barely thought about Bokuto.

There was simply no reason to do so. Bokuto was providing a service in exchange for another service. A barter. It required no further thought. Keiji didn’t think about the woman who cut his hair. He didn’t think about his dermatologist, or the cashier at the game store that he often visited with Kenma. And he was certain that none of these individuals considered him in return. He didn’t want them to, because that would be beyond the bounds of their social contract. It would complicate things.

However.

Despite not needing or wanting to, he did think about Bokuto. Just a little. Obviously.

It was clear that Tetsurou had put them together because he felt that Keiji could teach Bokuto basic manners and decorum, which he absolutely could. But now that they’d spent some time together and Keiji had the opportunity to consider the situation, his interest had gone far beyond the implementation of simple verbal filters and social niceties. There was a lot more material to work with than he’d thought there would be. For someone who claimed to be terrible at dating, Bokuto’s parting gesture during their first date had been so authentic and earnest that it was difficult to believe he was the same person who had casually asked about a stranger’s junk.

The whisper (and the kiss) had stuck with Keiji, not because he wanted Bokuto to do it again - obviously he didn’t want that, this was all fake - but because it was clear that there was a well of untapped potential underneath that terrible hairstyle. If Bokuto really wanted to enter into a relationship with someone, he had the innate ability to do so. He had it in spades, really. It just needed to be managed. Cultivated.

To be able to watch that growth would be incredibly valuable.

All Keiji personally knew of boyfriends was how to lose one without having any idea that it was about to happen. At a glance he was not necessarily the first person you’d choose to draw out romantic potential.

But character development was something he knew just a little bit about.

“I can’t believe it! This is a nightmare!” The tiny blonde blur behind this exclamation rushed into the classroom far too quickly for seven thirty in the morning. Keiji had forgotten his coffee when he left the house and was aggressively reminded of that fact.
The human projectile launched itself past his desk to land on the lap of the person sitting two seats behind him. Luckily, Keiji had been leaning against the window instead of against the back of his chair. In this position he could see the drama behind him without appearing intrusive.

Since his homeroom rarely attracted any, he was curious.

“K-Kei, what am I gonna do? It’s in two weeks, everything is ruined forever, I have to run away and find an island to live on and I’ll never be able to see you and Tadashi or my dog agaaaaain…”

“’Toka??” another voice at the door whimpered. “Oh god, Hitoka what are we gonna do? Does this even happen in real life?”

Since he was moving a lot slower, Keiji was able to see first the flustered face of Tadashi Yamaguchi and then the rest of his body as it stumbled into a homeroom that wasn’t his.

Not that it was Hitoka Yachi’s either.

Muttering in a mixture of Spanish and English, the tall, green-haired boy bumped into four desks on his way to the one immediately behind Keiji’s, where he sat with a horrible thud. He reached out for Kei Tsukishima’s hand while clumsily stroking Hitoka’s back.

Yes. Things were like that. No matter how much everyone (especially the teachers) tried to pretend otherwise, things were definitely like that. Keiji thought they were rather cute.

“Can someone tell me what happened?” The only person in the trio not crying sighed, looking bored. “Even a hint, since I can’t see a thing worth being upset about.”

Keiji liked Kei (despite the real issue of their names sounding similar and their seats being adjacent), but there was no question that he was an ass.

“It’s Prooooooooooooom!” Hitoka wailed.

Keiji was not attracted to women - he never had been - but there was something about Hitoka’s voice, about her in general, that made him want to protect her down to the very last breath in his body.

Kei seemed to have lost that vulnerability some time ago. “You know how I love to talk about the prom. All day every day. So very interesting. Please, continue.”

Tadashi took several deep breaths before he spoke again, “Well, Tsukki, you know the... uh... venue that we hired for the dance, rented their decorations, and all of that?”

“I know more about it than I ever wanted to know.”

“Well... you know how they gave us a really good deal if we paid in advance?”

“Oh god,” Kei’s sardonic facade cracked.

“They went bankrupt!” Hitoka keened. “Mostly because the manager embezzled all of their money and ran off! So now—”

“Are you telling me that our fucking Prom is canceled?”

Tyler... Jackson? Johnson? Keiji had never been able to remember which it was: they sounded too much alike and there were upwards of thirty students with some version of the name. Regardless, Tyler the furious interrupter was a weedy-looking second string from the football team. He usually
just texted or slept through the entirety of homeroom. One memorable day his headphones had not been completely plugged in and they’d all been treated to the sounds of the porn he’d been watching. But he’d never done anything else worth noticing.

“They’re not telling you anything,” Kei took him down smoothly. “Now go back to your seat. Gay porn won’t watch itself.”

“I like chicks you fucking prick,” Tyler stomped across the room, only to recoil when Kei stood up to his full six feet, two inches, still easily holding Hitoka in his arms.

“I couldn’t care less who you find titillating. Now go away,” he smirked wolfishly. No one could pull off that particular expression quite like Kei Tsukishima.

Luckily Mr. Ukai was out in the hall, no doubt flirting with the vice principal, and hadn’t seen the exchange. Hitoka didn’t seem to notice that she’d been lifted, because she was too busy muttering frantically into Kei’s shirt. Tadashi wasn’t doing much better. As a matter of fact, he was staring at the desk like he was hoping that it might catch fire.

Keiji patted his back. It was only mildly awkward.

“How much money does the prom committee have left?” He asked as Kei sat back down.

“Sorry?” Tadashi turned around, eyes shining with anxious tears.

“Is the entire budget gone?” Keiji asked again, pulling out a notebook.

“There’s a little,” Hitoka muttered a figure into Kei’s shirt and Keiji wrote it down. “The money for the food, and the DJ. But we’d never get a venue this late for that.”

“Well then why not try something a bit more traditional?” Keiji sketched out the framework for an austerity budget. Being the managing player of the woefully underfunded volleyball team had taught him a few things about squeezing money for all it was worth.

The three blinked at him.

“You want to have it in the gym,” Kei snorted.

“I don’t particularly care where it’s held,” Keiji shrugged, “but you did say there were no other affordable venues.”

“But the theme is so expensive to decorate for! That’s why we picked that place, they already had the decorations,” Tadashi interjected. “I don’t know how we’d do that here!”

“What was it?”

“Celestial Deities. Kinda… a sun and moon thing. Everybody voted for it.”

“Oh god, that’s terrible,” Kei scoffed and Keiji did not disagree.

“There are other themes that would be much easier to decorate for,” Keiji was struck with an absurd idea. “If you chose a Nineties theme,” he couldn’t keep in a quiet chuckle as he wrote out the allocations, “you’d simply need to splash some neon colors on particleboard, and maybe commission Noya’s boyfriend to paint a large mural that glows in the dark. Not even him: Jamal Roberts is phenomenally skilled and trying to expand his portfolio before he goes to SCAD. There are more than enough twinkle lights left over from various events. Get rid of the food altogether, hire a more
affordable alumnus like Yasushi Kamasaki to DJ and you’d make your budget. Austerity Prom. Although obviously that theme would not be suitable...

But it was too late. Keiji looked up to see the wide-eyed president and vice-president of the prom committee gazing at him like he was a celestial deity himself.

“Jesus Christ,” Kei muttered into his hand. “Just because you have awful taste in music doesn’t mean that the rest of us have to suffer.”

Unfortunately, there was no stopping it. Hitoka and Tadashi were already gone.

Date number two started with an inappropriately long time in transit.

“You've brought us to Pacific Park?”

Keiji jumped down from Bokuto’s rickety pickup truck, happy to have survived the hour long drive. His name, however, had been battered beyond recognition. For whatever reason, Bokuto seemed unable to pronounce it correctly more than twice in a row. The more excited he got, the less Keiji’s last name resembled what was written on his birth certificate.

“Well not just there… but yeah!” Bokuto rounded the vehicle, oozing arrogance. His peacocking was a far cry from the eager excitement that would have been charming. “Whaddya think?”

Keiji squinted. “A touristy amusement park an hour's drive from my home?”

Gold eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong with amusement parks, Aghashee?” he demanded.

Now Bokuto was defensive. Keiji made note of the emotional progression.

“First,” he dusted off his jeans, “I get motion sick. Second: amusement parks are expensive. Third: the Santa Monica Pier is a tourist trap. Knotts Berry Farm is equally close to Torrance and much larger. Not to mention the less desirable family-friendly locale in Anaheim…”

With that, Bokuto deflated. So much so that the keys to his truck fell out of his hands as his arms slumped. “But you can’t see the ocean from there, I bet!” he protested, easing into full on sulking. “Man, Akaasee, I didn’t know any of this shit!”

“Someone with relationship experience would use the opportunity to introduce his date to something new,” Bokuto perked up considerably while Keiji leaned down to adjust his sneakers. “You being a novice, it makes sense that we just go some–”

“Akaaaashiiii,” Bokuto grabbed him by the shoulders and looked far too intensely into his eyes. “I definitely can! You’re gonna fucking love everything about this pier when I’m done! I’ve got a plan, okay?”

“Making me love this pier will be no small feat,” he attempted to deflate the stream of unbearable boasting. Even such a quiet taunt was a gamble with someone so unstable, but he’d lived with his brother long enough to appreciate the power of some expertly-placed prodding.

“This is gonna be the best date of your life, Agaasheeeeee!” Bokuto’s eyes flashed. He was still holding onto his shoulders. Since the best date of Keiji’s life was also the one he least wanted to
remember, it wasn’t going to be particularly difficult to usurp.

Having come to the conclusion that Bokuto was more than he seemed and as such was an excellent character study, Keiji had started to write down the issues that his prom-date-in-training encountered when getting along with people in a romantic context. They probably extended to a lot of other social interactions but there wasn’t time to set up the situations necessary to explore them.

First and foremost was his completely unstable self-esteem. It wasn’t what Keiji had noted immediately, but it was the well from which all other issues seemed to spring. Bokuto had no real faith in himself, and he made up for it by:

**number two** – over-celebrating victories and taking defeats too much to heart

**number three** – bouncing up and down on the scale of moods hourly

**number four** – being tied to others’ reactions

Four seemed to be absolutely crippling. The fact that Bokuto had managed to be the star spiker of one of the top NCAA volleyball teams in the country was as baffling as it was impressive.

The fifth issue: his lack of filter. Bokuto said whatever was on his mind, specifically things that related to his own sense of self. Though he did so on other topics too. For instance, his perception of Keiji’s attractiveness. He had said he was hot so many times that it was now completely meaningless. At times his comments were oblivious. Frequently they were not flattering, or downright rude, which had doubtlessly caused past difficulties.

It was just as likely that, number six, the sheer length of his flights of speech, affected his interpersonal relationships. But if one could follow along, tucked in the middle of the nonsense were often moments of pure inspiration.

Then there was the bizarre nature of his presentation. His absent sense of fashion (number seven) could be chalked up to any number of things, including being accustomed to a more relaxed way of dressing, some kind of personal discomfort with tighter clothing, lack of funds, or bizarre tastes. However, there was also the hair and the dyed eyebrows (number eight). And the wobbly pick-up truck that was probably unsafe for the highway (number nine). And the way he occupied enough space for five people (number ten).

Keiji could easily go on. Bokuto was a tornado made out of trash. There was probably an eleventh issue and a twelfth and…

He was already taking this too seriously. Six dates and the prom was the lifespan of their relationship. He would offer his measured criticism, but that was all he had been asked to do. While he did that, he would also collect bits and pieces of a character he might want to write later. That was all.

It was good that there were such limits in place, because apparently his mother had absolutely loved Bokuto before their very first date had even begun. The few minutes the two had spent chatting before Bokuto interrupted Tetsuro’s afternoon delight had been more than enough. She would have just thought he was her eldest son’s friend, but Tetsuro, in a misguided act of revenge, decided to let their mother know that Bokuto was Keiji’s prom date.

And wasn’t that adorable?

So there was no getting out of it now. Keiji was lying to his mother. A dangerous proposition at best,
but one that was unavoidable.

Even more dangerous would be lying to himself or Bokuto. Such behavior would quite possibly lead to convoluted feelings, and he had told Bokuto as much on the drive to their current location.

Honesty between them was a priority. Honesty with himself was vital.

“Okay, hold up, hold up,” Bokuto’s wide eyes darted up and down the sidewalk. They hadn’t made it far from the spot where they had parked for the moderate sum of thirty-five dollars. “Stay there, I’ll be right back.”

It was fairly impressive how fast he could run, straight into a... pharmacy? Much quicker than expected he ran out again with a cardboard and plastic package containing two bracelets.

“What are those, exactly?”

“They’re for motion sickness!” Bokuto had already grabbed his wrist and wrapped the elastic of one of the bracelets around it. “People use em on ferries. They push on your pressure points to keep you from puking, but don’t make you sleepy like drugs! Sorry they didn’t have any good colors...”

“And you believe they can compete with amusement park rides?” Keiji squinted at his own wrist.

“Well,” Bokuto snapped the elastic on the other side, “like, the merry-go-round and shit, for sure. Roller coasters? I mean, yeah! I uh... think they will, if they work for big waves! All we can do is try, right?”

Keiji held up his arms, the clinical white of the bracelets pressing against his wrists. For once ignoring the (hopefully-expired) threat of being seen, he’d dressed like he didn’t mind being noticed a little, in a lavender t-shirt with a loose neck over tight black jeans. A very flattering outfit. But now between the loose shirt and the white wrist bands he looked like he’d just escaped from a hospital.

There was a tearing sound behind him and then his arm was grabbed again.

“Here,” Bokuto wrapped a piece of black fabric over each of the monstrosities. “Now they don’t stick out!”

He was right. The fabric vaguely looked like it belonged, like cuff bracelets. The sort of thing he would never choose to wear, but they were acceptable now that he was wearing them. Looking for the source of the fabric, Keiji realized that Bokuto’s tank top had gone from being an appropriate length to baring his bellybutton if he lifted his arms. Adding to the general ridiculousness was the extra-long cardigan he was wearing. He stuck out tremendously.

Keiji added “too generous” to the list of Bokuto’s interpersonal issues as item number eleven.

“Well, you might not know any better Akaashi, but I love amusement parks,” Bokuto pulled him by the forearm through the entrance to the pier. “My grandparents take me to Japan for Obon, and we go to this one in Tokyo. It’s so cool!” He glanced over at Keiji warily, like he was trying to see if he had gotten away with talking too much. “Anyway, let’s uh, ride the carousel first to see if you’re gonna get sick. Cause uh... there’s some other stuff I wanna do before we go into the actual park.”

Keiji decided to ignore the suspicious nature of Bokuto’s last statement. But number twelve, terrible
at keeping secrets, was added to the list.

The hand that had been on his forearm slid into the crook of his elbow as they skidded to a stop in front of a classic looking carousel. Keiji let it rest there (he probably shouldn’t have). Bokuto’s fingers had thick callouses, maybe from volleyball, maybe from something else, but they caught on the inside of Keiji’s elbow. Unconsciously he was rubbing little circles into the delicate skin.

It felt prickly. Dry.

But it was also kind of nice, if Keiji was being honest with himself, which the situation absolutely required.

“Okay!” His date pulled out a wallet either completely encased in or simply made out of owl-printed purple duct tape. He yanked out a handful of disorganized bills just as Keiji pulled his arm away. The unexpected jolt knocked the cash into the air, where it caught a gust of wind that blew it in all directions.

Bokuto’s face plummeted into a look of dismay so exaggerated it would have been hilarious if Keiji hadn’t also seen the intense terror and, worse, crushing disappointment in his eyes. His tiny pupils were jumping back and forth, uncertain as to what to do and filling with panic and pain.

The money drifted through the air, spinning in the ocean breeze. An immediate problem which required an immediate solution.

**Bokuto appeared to focus best when given something specific to do.**

“Whoever catches the highest amount wins,” Keiji forced a small taunting smirk onto his face and hoped it was convincing.

It was. His date was off like a shot.

Four and a half minutes later they were back in front of the carousel, chests heaving.

“I should have the team do that,” Bokuto gasped, leaning over his knees. “This is the most worn out I’ve been in like, years. Damn, money is hard to catch.”

Keiji tried to hide how sweaty he was by wiping his face against the fabric around his wrists. Hopefully Bokuto wasn’t going to try to smell his hands at any point. Although he had no real reason to care what Bokuto thought about how he smelled.

“Hey, how much didja get? I got a hundred and fifty-three.”

“Seventy…four.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Bokuto threw his head back grinning and bouncing on his toes. “Only lost ten bucks and I won! Now let’s get on this thing, Akaashi!”

Thirteen - can’t hold onto money. Literally, but also figuratively.

The carousel at least was affordable, at only two dollars a person. But Keiji wasn’t certain if the deal was worth how awkward and out of place he felt. There were a lot of children, quite a few touristy-looking adults and teenagers, and then… them. Between Bokuto’s peeking bellybutton and the
addition to his own outfit, they looked aggressively gay. Which, being two guys on a date, they were, but still, more gay than Keiji liked to publicize. He didn’t even like strangers being able to see much of his face. One of them should have worn a snapback or something. People who stuck out were noticed. And then ogled at.

But there was nothing for it now. Instead of holding his forearm, Bokuto was holding his hand. He pulled Keiji along behind him, through the entrance and up onto the platform.

“What’s your favorite kinda horse?” he asked, squeezing Keiji’s fingers and rushing them like an impatient eight-year-old. The annoying kind.

“I’ve never considered it.”

“Okay then,” Bokuto skidded to a stop and Keiji slammed into his back, “this one!”

Before he’d recovered Bokuto’s hands were on his hips, lifting him like he was nothing and leaving him sitting sidesaddle on the back of a black carousel horse festooned with bright green ribbons.

“It’s the prettiest one, just like you,” Bokuto winked. He hauled himself onto the adjacent horse: a gold one with mad eyes, cursed to throw back its head violently for the entirety of its existence. Keiji stared blankly at the wild face of that horse, only so that he wasn’t staring off into space in shock.

Bokuto had picked him up like it was nothing. Once Keiji had grown to his full height, he’d assumed that something like that would never happen to him. And since he’d been the same height since he was fifteen, he’d had a long time to sit on that information.

“Hey Akaashi,” Bokuto leaned over and tapped his knee, “you better get on that horse right, cause it goes up and down and you might fall off.”

Not even thinking about it, Keiji swung his right leg up and over to the other side of the horse. A bit of a stretch due to the pole and his jeans, but he managed.

When he looked back at Bokuto, he wondered where the terrible smell was that had made him make that face.

“So did they work??” Bokuto bounced down from his mount, yanking Keiji down before the carousel had even stilled. The platform lurched to a stop while he was midair, and the jerk from the inertia had Keiji grabbing onto whatever was available to keep from falling.

In this case, whatever was available turned out to be Bokuto’s head.

“Ya a’right?” he asked, face smashed into Keiji’s stomach, his one visible eye making it clear that he was grinning.

“Please put me down,” Keiji sighed and loosened his hold, forcefully ignoring the continued press of Bokuto’s hands and forearms against his waist and hips. “In future, it is best to let your dates climb up and down their carousel horses themselves. Particularly the dates who are nearly six feet tall.”

“But Akaashi!” Bokuto protested, dropping him a bit more abruptly than was necessary, “I was being romantic!”
Of course he was.

“That sort of romance is based around the heteronormative, sexist concept that women are weaker, and thus they need to be taken care of. Such gendering is unnecessary in straight relationships and even more unnecessary here. Just because I’m not strong enough to carry you doesn’t mean I need you to carry me.”

Bokuto’s head dropped.

“I suspect you have the capacity for more authentic romance than that,” Keiji - who was uninterested in any more sulking - reached out, firmly took Bokuto's hand, and led them off the carousel, “the goal is to be romantic at appropriate levels and at appropriate times. Now, where are we going next? These bracelets seem to be working.”

Next turned out to be the aquarium. Where he didn't even need the damn things.

"Hey hey hey! That one looks like my roommate!" Bokuto pointed out a dopey-looking fish. It had a bright yellow spot on its head that transitioned into a trailing yellow fin. "I mean, that fish isn’t quite as crazy, but they've got the same hair."

They were standing in a small tunnel, surrounded except for the floor underneath them by plexiglass and water. Species of fish from the bay swam back and forth in the enormous tank. The air smelled of the worst the ocean had to offer. The light was dappled and uneven, streaming patterns across their skin. Children ran back and forth through the tunnel at unexpected intervals, leaving them alone, then mobbing them, then leaving them alone once more.

Because this aquarium was for children.

Ignoring them, Keiji leaned against the railing and brought his face close to the wall of the tank, watching the streaming yellow fin wave back and forth. “Fish like this are swimming under us right now, only they’re living in their natural habitat.”

“Is that the way you always think about stuff, Akaashi?” Bokuto pulled a face at his fish roommate. Keiji looked over and realized how close their bodies were. Unfortunately, pulling away would slam him into the seventeen small children that were suddenly underfoot.

“What do you mean?” he asked, focusing on roommate fish instead.

“Well,” Keiji could tell that Bokuto had turned his head by the sudden breath on his ear and neck, “it’s a pretty way. But it’s also kinda too realistic? So it’s sad? Like, ‘oh there are weird fish under us but somewhere else a fish is gettin' murdered,’ kinda thing. I mean, it’s okay to just like a weird fish, I think.”

Keiji turned his head, his nose a little over an inch away from Bokuto’s. His eyes were glowing neon green in the reflection from the tank, and his grey hair looked bright blue. Keiji realized that he was holding his breath. He still didn’t exhale because he had no interest in blowing air into Bokuto’s face.

The children ran away and he took a slight step back.

“I’d recommend not making assumptions about your date early on. It’s a very large gamble, one that you might not win.”
“AkaAaaashi!” Bokuto protested, “You say shit like that about me every five minutes!”

“That’s because we made a deal. I would teach you how to behave when on a date. I need no such instruction. I simply need you to pretend to be interested in me during the prom.”

Bokuto was beginning to sulk. Again. “Did I at least win?”

“Win what?” Keiji stood up and allowed his irritation to roll down his straightened spine. He knew very well what. But if Bokuto won, then who lost? Was it him? There was very little he hated more than losing. Especially when unwanted revelations about his personality were somehow involved.

“The gamble! That you always make things kinda sad in your head!”

“Yes. Congratulations,” he deadpanned, stuffing the bitterness of losing in the hollow underneath his tongue. “Now I’d like to drown my sorrows in the jellyfish tank.”

Bokuto laughed the entire way there.

“So which one do you like best, Akaashi?” Bokuto was bouncing up and down so closely that Keiji could feel the minute ripples of the floor, imagined or real, as his date’s feet hit the ground. “Awhhh look at your face, I knew you’d love this place.”

Keiji adjusted his glasses and relaxed his face into its default bored expression.

“So sooo c’mon!” Bokuto chuckled, shaking his crest of hair. It was purple in the light from the tanks, and his eyes looked orange. He swung his arm around Keiji’s shoulders and it was impossible to ignore how incredibly strong he was. It felt oppressive. And... nice. “Which one? We’ve been in this room for like, an hour, you can at least tell me which sack of goo ya like best.”

Pulling his phone out of his pocket to look at the time, Keiji realized that Bokuto was not exaggerating. The aquarium was on the verge of closing. No wonder the annoying children had been steadily disappearing. The jellyfish had been mesmerizing, and he had lost track of time, of everything. As though he didn’t have to think.

Blissful.

And his date: his loud, attention-starved date, had just let him.

“The pacific sea nettle,” Keiji pointed at the orange, lacy creature in the tank in front of him. It was gaudy, but he liked it regardless.

“Which do you like?” he added, feeling unexpectedly curious.

“Oh, that purple stripey guy,” Bokuto pointed to a more restrained creature in a different tank, then grabbed Keiji’s wrist and started pulling him to the exit. “Think he’s a sea nettle too, actually. Maybe they’re buddies!”

Keiji was about to tell him that, no, they most certainly weren’t, but he decided to try something different. Just to see what would happen. He was trying to capture Bokuto’s personality, after all.

But how to say it, exactly?
“What do you think they would do as fri-fri-friends?”

There was no pressure to say the right thing here. None at all. Yet he had overthought it to the point of struggling.

Bokuto didn't seem to notice his difficulties, at any rate.

“Mmmmm probably not much, cause like, jellyfish don’t really talk. Or play. Or do anything but eat. But maybe they’d hang out and eat together. Oh man that reminds me, we should go get some food before… uh, we, yeah, should just get some food, Akaashi!”

Just terrible at surprises.

“Tetsurou says you’re a math major,” Keiji said in between bites of his fourth slice of the most expensive cheap pizza he’d ever eaten. “You must have done well in high school.”

“Ah nah,” Bokuto threw his head back and laughed. "I pretty much failed math every year. At home and in Honolulu my grades in everything but Japanese and Hawai’ian sucked. I just got a bunch of offers from recruiters cause of volleyball. Went to UCLA cause it was closest to home. Well, you know, as close as you can get without staying there. Course that doesn’t matter when you can’t afford to go back.”

Keiji had never really considered how limiting life in paradise could be.

"I didn’t know what to study so I took a bunch of gen eds. One of ‘em was this math for dummies sort of thing? Didn’t even get a professor, but this grad student we had? She was awesome. Didja know that numbers are different in different cultures? Like we count to ten over and over? But other people in the past and shit counted to eight over and over cause they used their fingers, but not their thumbs! That’s why we have sixty minutes in an hour, cause the clock guys used base 60! It’s nuts! I never even got past geometry in high school, but she worked me through precalc like nothing. And then next semester, calc was crazy easy! I gotta triple up in the fall to catch up but I should be good. Math is like, a language, you know. Just get the pattern right and you can figure it out.”

Keiji wasn’t saying anything because there were no words that wouldn’t also reveal his shock. And although that was something he was required to admit to himself, there was no reason to share it with Bokuto. He had no interest in dealing with his arrogance any more than he had to.

“Pretty funny for a guy who barely graduated,” his date said nervously. As usual, Keiji’s silence had been taken as an expression of negativity. “Sorry, I, uh, sometimes talk too much when I get excited. I mean, you probably know all that stuff already,” Bokuto sheepishly inhaled two enormous slices of pizza in a row.

“No.” Keiji sat his slice on the box’s lid, “I didn’t know any of those things about mathematics. I vaguely remember base systems, but that’s all.”

“But you’re real smart, Akaaaaaaaashi!” Bokuto protested, mouth full. “Can tell jus’ by the way you talk. Bet you’re gonna be the valedictorian or somefin’.”

It was Keiji’s turn to laugh, though his was a small chuckle. “No. Well, my grades are fine, I’m probably in the top ten percent, but I’m mediocre as highly achieving students go. I’m not nearly as bright as my brother or mother.”
"Well you gotta be good at something," Bokuto put his elbow on the table and leaned in. "What do you do when you’re not in school? Play any sports?"

"I used to play volleyball, actually, but I quit."

"Why'd you quit?!? Uh. I mean, didn’t you like it?"

Bokuto was putting forth a herculean effort to keep his face free of utter horror. He was failing, but he was also trying. Trying so hard it was almost kind of, well…

None of Akaashi’s concern since this was a series of fake dates.

"I did enjoy it, but I was caught between a workaholic setter a year ahead and a prodigy a year behind. The chance to play was minimal. I decided to focus on my writing, which I preferred." His “writing” was a rather general way of saying writing and co-producing a short film with Chikara, but Keiji hoped the shreds of his high school volleyball career would cover up what he very much did not want to talk about.

"That's awesome man!" Bokuto’s efforts finally paid off and he gave Keiji a huge, authentic smile. “I mean, volleyball is pretty much the best, but like, you gotta do the thing you wanna do the most.”

There was a silence before Bokuto added in a tone that Keiji would have thought of as sly if he didn't know any better, "So... are ya any good?"

“Oh, I was better at calming down unstable players than I ever was at–”

“No, I didn’t mean that! Though, you should totally set for me sometime! I meant the whole writing thing.”

Was he serious? Bokuto seemed incapable of the level of deceit required to pretend he didn’t know something so huge, but Keiji's regrettable honors were so looming in his own life that it took constant effort to remind himself that the majority of people on earth neither knew nor cared about them.

"I have won awards for writing," he said neutrally.

Gold eyes opened wide. "Yeah? When?"

He really didn't know.

Bokuto had absolutely no idea what had happened a year ago. Tetsurou hadn’t told him. He hadn’t just googled the person he was going out with like anyone else would have. Idiotic maybe, but it meant that Keiji could talk about something that currently mattered a lot more and hurt a lot less.

And he could do it without lying.

"I’ve won several writing contests, though most recently I was awarded a short story prize from a contest at a small college. Nothing hugely significant. I did win four hundred dollars, though."

Bokuto’s eyes were enormous. "Akaashi, that's kick-ass! You've gotta be really good, writing is hard as fuck."

He wasn’t lying. He wasn’t lying, Keiji could see it in his eyes. The compliment was overwhelming, how was he supposed to respond to that? And... the bottom fell out of his throat.

"Y-you d.....don't think it's,” he swallowed over and over, trying to finish his sentence, “easy?" He took a huge bite of pizza, which would either give him time to reset or force him to speak with his
mouthful – the latter would definitely not work, despite Demosthenes’ efforts, but it was worth a try anyway.

“Ost eeple oo,” he added softly.

"Hell no,” Bokuto slapped his back, which nearly reintroduced the pizza to the light of day, “I gotta take freshman writing over the summer. Almost lost my scholarship over it. That shit is hard.”

“N-not as difficult as qua-quadratic equations,” Keiji shoved the rather enormous remainder of his pizza into his mouth in a huge roll that didn't quite fit. Not his most shining decision.

Bokuto’s pupils grew large, and he seemed unable to blink.

“I… uh… gotta piss.”

With that, he fled the table.

The way he’d left was rude and confusing, but Keiji appreciated his departure. Three times in a half hour. He had stuttered three times in a half hour, something he normally slipped into maybe twice a day, when he was overthinking his words or much too excited. He hadn’t done so this frequently since being heartbroken to the point of despair. And at that point, he’d relapsed so badly that the only person to whom he could speak fluently was Kenma.

But he was none of those things currently.

Well, he was overthinking a bit.

Bokuto found him muttering sonnets while looking into his phone’s selfie camera when he came back. “Akaashi!” he grinned, ignoring whatever was going on like it was just a normal thing. “D’ya like bumper cars?”

“How the hell are you so good at hitting people?” Bokuto demanded, standing outside of his car almost the instant the ride had stopped.

Keiji unfolded his long legs from the small compartment, and without thinking about it, grabbed Bokuto’s outstretched hand and allowed him to lift him up.

“I didn’t waste my time showboating, Bokuto,” he straightened his shirt. “You and the other children didn’t build up enough momentum; you were too busy hitting each other from the start.”

Still holding his hand Bokuto pulled him close for the sole purpose of growling in his ear. “Just you wait, Akaashi,” he muttered, “I’m gonna to win you so many stuffed animals you’ll regret saying that.”

Number fourteen: aggressively competitive.

“That makes no sense.”
It didn’t. And yet carrying around Bokuto's winnings - a plush cat, a plant, a goldfish, and a stuffed owl – had ended up being surprisingly difficult as they got on other rides. Bokuto insisted he carry the owl, which was unsurprisingly humiliating.

On the other hand, Keiji found himself enjoying an overpriced roller coaster for the first time in his life.

Dusk steadily approached, and the normally obnoxious man was growing quieter and quieter, pulling Keiji by the wrist in the general direction of the Ferris wheel. They passed a lot of rides that looked more interesting, not to mention several vendors who had shiny things that Keiji assumed would draw his attention. But Bokuto was on a mission and Keiji had a worried notion that he knew what it was.

Finally he had to say something. “There’s no way we’ll be able to see the sunset on the Ferris wheel,” his voice was almost apologetic. “The line is large enough to see from here.”

Slowing to a stop, arms full of nonsense, Bokuto turned and fixed Keiji with a look so intense he couldn’t have turned away if he tried.

“I think ya might be underestimating me, Akaashi.”

Apparently, Keiji was.

“This is my roommate, Teru,” Bokuto said, after unloading his hard-won prizes at the operator’s station of the wheel. “He owes me like thirty favors, so this counts for all of em.”

The operator of the ride, a tallish blond with an undercut (who really kind of did look like the fish they’d been staring at before) playfully stuck out his pierced tongue then held out his hand. “Yuuji Terushima, nice ta meetcha gorgeous.”

“ Aren’t you going to lose your job?” Keiji did not shake his hand.

Yuuji threw back his head and laughed, bizarrely similar to his roommate, “Nah, sweet cheeks, this wheel runs on solar energy, and there aren’t that many certified operators around who will run it for cheap. I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

Keiji touched his cheeks self-consciously while the wheel operator turned to his date.

“That means you can do whatever you want in there, Bo. If you know what I mean…”

Unexpectedly, Bokuto didn’t play along. He was maybe even blushing. It was hard to tell in the shadows.

“Alright, here it is!” Yuuji grinned. “Car number four, your lucky number buddy. Text me when you wanna get off… er… out. Otherwise you can ride as long as you and your prince wanna.”

Bokuto nearly plowed Keiji down in his urgency to get them both into the car. On the other side, people waiting in line scowled at them. A few gave them the finger. One threw something that very nearly hit Keiji in the face. If it weren’t for the sudden lurch of the car as it started to move, Keiji was certain Bokuto would have jumped out and pummeled whoever it was who had thrown it.

Instead, he banged his head against the pole in the middle of the wheel, then spun around unsteadily, landing next to Keiji so the car was tilting a lot further to the side than was entirely pleasant.
His head was resting on Keiji’s shoulder, it was large. And heavy.

But there was nothing to be done other than let him rest there.

Instead of paying attention to his surroundings as they rose and halted and rose and halted while the wheel was loading, Keiji found himself staring at Bokuto.

“Sorry Akaashi,” he whined. “I didn’t think Teru was gonna pull that shit. I told him if he did it I’d kill him…”

“That’s probably why he did it,” Keiji mused, leaning forward to check Bokuto’s head just as he opened his eyes.

“Oh. Uh. How’s it lookin there, doc?” Bokuto said after a long pause. “Am I gonna live?”

“No.”

“Akaashi!” Bokuto sat up, pouting. “You’re supposed to kiss it better!”

“Am I?”

“I dunno, maybe that’s third date material,” Bokuto waggled his eyebrows.

“Yes, the third date,” Keiji rolled his eyes. “Going all the way to forehead kisses.”

Two things happened in quick succession.

First, Bokuto put his hand over Keiji’s eyes.

Second, he wrapped his other arm around his middle, pulling him close. Keiji could feel Bokuto’s chest against his own back. He was hardly small, but his shoulders were put to shame in the broad span of Bokuto’s arms.

He’d never been held like this before. He’d always been the one doing the holding.

“Well,” Bokuto’s voice was soft, “since we gotta hold off on forehead kisses, how do ya feel abouuuuut…” he pulled his hand away dramatically, “sunsets!”

Pretty good, actually. Despite anticipating this very situation for hours, he felt quite good about sunsets. Akaashi had seen them over the ocean before. He wasn’t certain what was so different about this one. There wasn’t much sense in trying to pinpoint it in the moment. He could deconstruct it later. For once.

“I’m lucky you were so worried about my head that you weren’t looking,” Bokuto gloated into his shoulder. “Cause, I mean, I know you know the sun sets and all, but I wanted to make sure you kinda got surprised? Like… a big reveal! Boom! Here’s the sun set thanks to the amazing Boku…u…to…”

Keiji had leaned back a little. As a test. For Bokuto, to see how he’d react.

Just a test.

Bokuto leaned over his shoulder. Keiji could see the glow of the setting sun pouring over him, a river of molten gold covering his hair, his skin, his teeth. All except his eyes. They were the same. Wild and bright and too large for his face.
“You look pretty neat wearing sunset, Akaashi,” Bokuto announced, then laughed the way people do when they’re pretending their words didn’t mean anything. When they want to tell the world they’re not nervous. That everything is fine.

Keiji responded in the stupidest way possible.

But Bokuto kissed him back.

Chapter End Notes

kisses on the second chapter of a fake relationship fic?????

what the fuck.

also i apologize for the huge upgrade i gave to the aquarium on the santa monica pier. i got some pictures mixed up and... oh well, they had a nice time i think.

as always, mad props to lesetoilesfous for her majestic beta work.
could we please be objective?

Chapter Notes

this chapter includes some minor (openly acknowledged) internalized biphobia from a side character.

please listen to this chapter's song, it's literally about two dudes making out for practice.

you're kissing your elbow

thanks always to my sweetest beta, PuppyHawk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keiji Akaashi emerged from the womb a cautious bastard. The second part was quite literal. As a cautious bastard, he rarely did thoughtless things. So it was perhaps unsurprising that when he did make poor decisions, they bordered on catastrophic.

Or at least, they did in his head.

There were two disasters currently brewing, and he wasn’t sure which was worse. He was responsible for both.

The first had been pinned on someone else by the masses. This could be seen as an easy way out, but it was not. Keiji had always been aware of his own ruthless streak, but he was not the sort of person who would throw a friend under the bus for something as ridiculous as a prom theme.

He had more self-respect than that.

But the new “austerity themes” had come to an emergency senior class vote that Monday. Among them was Keiji’s purely-for-the-sake-of-example Nineties theme. Unfortunately, an entire cohort of absurdist assholes (including some of Keiji’s friends) thought one of the most visually offensive decades in recent memory would make a fine prom aesthetic. People who had fairy tale prom dreams (including some of Keiji’s other friends) were furious.

As well they should be. It was the Donald Trump of prom themes, entering the race as a joke and emerging as a menace.

An unidentified student, no doubt a member of Keiji’s homeroom, pinned the idea on “Yachi and Yam’s asshole third wheel.” The rumor had spread, and now a generally popular member of the junior class was getting hate mail stuffed in his locker.

Kei was unconcerned, going so far as to vaguely threaten that Keiji “best not even think about saying anything.” His disinterest seemed authentic, though Tadashi was more attentive than usual. There was very little to be done.

So Keiji considered that piece of idiocy dealt with, as dissatisfying as its resolution may have been. The most bitter part was that his interest in nineties music didn’t extend to the sort of things people played at proms. He generally hated pop music from that decade. No one played early Belle and Sebastian for a slow dance.
The second disaster could be pinned on no one but himself, because it was ten solid minutes of making out on an amusement park ride as the result of a kiss he had initiated.

The making out itself had not been part of the disaster. Rather, it’s execution had been far from disastrous. Though when he thought about it, it actually was part of the problem.

It was all very complicated.

During his fit of utter insanity, Keiji had turned to meet Bokuto’s lips. In any normal circumstance, it would have been a quick kiss, albeit an intense one. Keiji would have come to his senses in moments and pulled away. Anyone he had ever kissed before had always been too dumbstruck to kiss back initially, anyway. Bokuto, being infinitely more experienced, had kissed back almost immediately. Which revealed perhaps the most important piece of information about his relationship potential:

Bokuto was a phenomenal kisser.

Not that Keiji’s data pool was large. Noya had been his first kiss, during a profoundly heteronormative eighth grade game of Seven Minutes in Heaven. At the time, everyone thought they were straight (or at least pretended they were). In an effort to keep the girls from fighting over Keiji, some boys wearing too much body spray had shoved the most sought after and most ignored boys at the party into a closet together. Noya had been offended that no girls wanted to kiss him. Keiji had been annoyed that most of them did.

So they’d kissed each other instead.

The fact that their respective first kisses had been in a literal closet was something Chikara had teased them about for years. No doubt due to this doubly closeted situation, it had been as bad a kiss as anyone could imagine, though Noya had been adorably stupefied when Keiji initiated it.

Other than two miserable hook ups at one regrettable party in the past year, every kiss that followed Keiji’s first had been with Chikara himself. And though there were quite a lot of them, a number of the initial ones had been terrible. Chikara had been much too enthusiastic, Keiji too restrained. Not to mentioned the laughable height difference that had taken until the end of sophomore year to become manageable.

It had been funny once. Thinking about it now made Keiji’s heart turn inside out.

Infuriating.

That aside, when it came to kissing, Bokuto was in an entirely different league. He might have been playing a different game altogether.

He kissed like he’d been created to do nothing else. He’d held Keiji tightly, but not too tightly, at an angle that was extremely comfortable for his partner - although it required impressive strength and stamina to maintain. His lips had been much softer than Keiji had expected. Not that he had been expecting much of anything. Regardless, those lips had guided Keiji through the kiss gently but assertively until quite organically their mouths had opened and they were all but devouring each other.

And they had continued to suck face for nine solid minutes.

When they’d finally stopped for air, Keiji’s forearms had been propped against Bokuto’s chest and his legs were sprawled across the seat like a helpless heroine on the cover of a romance novel. After a few lazy blinks, Bokuto’s pupils had gone from blown wide to almost invisible in a fraction of a second. They’d jumped apart, awkwardly crossing their legs for reasons so transparent they might as
The ride home afterwards had been silent. Which for Bokuto was nearly miraculous.

“Akaashi,” he’d finally opened his mouth after he parking outside of Keiji's house, "I’m real–"

“I’ll text you regarding our plans for Wednesday,” Keiji had cut him off, grabbing the plant, the fish, the cat, and the owl. “Thank you for the date. You did well, though we'll review specific points for improvement later.”

He was not about to allow someone else to apologize for his own glaring mistake.

That night he couldn’t sleep. Instead he made a list of the issues he had discovered by the conclusion of their date, adding:

**Fifteen:** sloppy eater

**Sixteen:** reckless in his assumptions

**Seventeen:** questionable faith in others

**Eighteen:** too vulnerable

**Nineteen:** excessively applies romance at inappropriate times

Plenty of room for improvement, despite Keiji’s own blunder.

This disaster could be fixed.

Completely.

“Well have not crossed them at all.

“So, Bo’s under the impression that he needs to buy you ‘at least three fuckkin presents’ to make up for whatever he did,” Tetsurou read the text out loud, grin wide and obnoxious.

They were sitting in the food court of the only shopping center within walking distance. It was a ritual: on days that games Kenma wanted became available, they all walked to the game store after school. If the game was a handheld one, they sat in the food court. Kenma would play his new game, Keiji would watch people and take notes on their behavior, and Tetsurou would talk to everyone, since he somehow knew them all.

Keiji wished he had stayed home.

“You should have just told him it wasn’t his fault, Kuro,” Kenma muttered into his PSP.

“How do you know it wasn’t, though?” Tetsurou sucked on the straw of his bubble tea with a happy hum. “The guy messes up a lot.”

Keiji knew his brother was well aware of the answer to that question. Kenma knew Tetsurou knew
as well. These silly games had been mildly cute and fairly irritating before they’d gotten together. They were nearly unbearable now.

“You’re being more annoying than usual, Kuro,” Kenma took a sip of his enormous Mountain Dew.

Tetsurou was immediately less smug. “I told you to stop drinking that shit, kitten, it’s gonna give you cancer.”

“And I told you to stop calling me that,” Kenma responded faintly.

“Mom’s been calling you that since you were born!”

“…exactly.”

Keiji massaged the bridge of his nose. Normally he’d leave them to it and wander off to the bookstore where Yui worked to make fun of newly published embarrassments with her. But today he was stuck, because their conversation was about him.

“I don’t need any gifts,” he set down his soft pretzel. “Even if Bokuto had done something, which he hasn’t, the nature of our relationship doesn’t require that he atone for his mistakes.”

Kenma did not lift his eyes from his game.

“You don’t buy your teacher flowers when you fail a test, eh?” Tetsurou slurped up a ball of tapioca and chewed on it thoughtfully. “Though… the way Bo’s going on about it, you’d think he tried to kiss you or something.”

Keiji knew what his brother was trying to do before he’d even opened his revolting, tapioca-filled mouth, but it didn’t matter because his own face was reacting despite his best efforts.

Tetsurou smiled, crooked and huge. “So. Tell us about the kissing, lil bro.”

“I’m not particularly interested, Keiji,” Kenma murmured.

“I’d imagine you hardly need me to tell you anything,” Keiji blinked at his brother.

Tetsurou’s visible eye grew enormous, “Ohohoho you shot yourself in the foot, dude. Bokuto won’t tell me shit. But you just did.”

There was a long silence, interrupted only by the irritated drag of Kenma’s straw.

“It’s being managed,” Keiji finally admitted. “Your interest in my love life is disturbing.”

“Love you too, buddy,” Tetsurou grinned. “So, where are you taking him next?”

“I’m not particularly interested, Keiji,” Kenma tried again.

Planning their next date was Keiji’s responsibility, and he was committed to making it as mundane as possible. No excessive romance. No room for chaos.
Dinner and a movie was a classic approach. Unfortunately organizing the evening the way he wanted to required that Keiji have access to a car. Tetsurou did not own one, and their mother stayed on campus late every Wednesday night, so her car wasn’t available either. Their grandparents had a Lincoln Towncar from nineteen ninety-three but Keiji didn’t think he could drive it down the street without taking out every mailbox on his side of the road.

There was only one other option.

Tim Sakusa was probably the closest thing Keiji had to a dad. Except he was somebody else’s dad. Three somebodies: Kyoomi (who was Keiji’s age), Maggie, and Jennifer, who all lived with their mom, Lisa Akaashi, in Seattle.

The divorce had been weird. Everybody still liked everybody a lot. But apparently not enough for Uncle Tim to move his practice to Seattle when Aunt Lisa was offered a job running an entire hospital. So his cousins had left with her, and Uncle Tim had stayed. Keiji didn’t regret it much: he had never really liked Kyoomi anyway. He was a paranoid, arrogant germaphobe, and they looked too much alike. It had been confusing at school and especially playing volleyball together. Maggie and Jenny were sweet, but too young for Keiji to miss. He saw them on New Year’s, if he was lucky.

But Uncle Tim was great. He probably was a terrible father to his own children, but Keiji had no point of reference so it didn’t particularly matter. He did things a dad would theoretically do, like teach Keiji and Tetsurou to drive. Their mom was good at teaching most things, but she and her parents were too aggressive behind the wheel to teach anyone.

Uncle Tim was open-minded. Keiji had come out to him second only to Tetsurou and his mother, and his response was to give him a beer, slap his back, and tell him to “wrap it every time.” Keiji had been fifteen, and the mingled awe and awkwardness had made the experience quite memorable. When Chikara had run off, Uncle Tim had let Keiji drive one of his cars to the desert to be alone for a few hours.

He was always understanding and also very good at calming his ex-sister-in-law down when she was angry at the disappearance of her son.

As a sought-after oral surgeon Uncle Tim was notably rich in a town full of well-off people. He was generous with that wealth. But since he was pretty lonely, his generosity didn’t have much of an outlet.

So when Keiji showed up at his door to borrow one of his cars in exchange for cleaning out the garage, his uncle may have overcompensated some.

“Holy shit, is that a Maserati?” Yuuji yelled, standing in the front yard of the Culver City house that Keiji assumed to be Bokuto’s. It was a small, ramshackle place, painted bright yellow and orange, with a sprawling front yard that was about eighty percent robust but weedy drought resistant garden.

“Sweet cheeks, that’s a fancy car, but its fuel consumption’s not very good for the world at large,” Yuuji crossed the yard to meet him. Despite being dressed in ripped jeans and his “Volleyball Grandma,” t-shirt, Keiji felt overdressed. Likely due to the fact that Bokuto’s roommate was wearing nothing but tiny shorts which could very well be his actual underwear.
“Is Bokuto home?” he asked, keeping a neutral expression. He refused to apologize for his vehicle, despite it not being the well-used Honda Civic he’d all but begged to take instead.

“Course he is, darlin’, he got back from work late so he’s doing his hair. You don’t think it stands up like that on its own, do you?” His accent, something that Keiji had initially thought was an affectation, was getting thicker.

So he waited, fiddling with his fingers since he had little else to do but exchange pleasantries with a sexually aggressive half-naked Texan. At first it seemed like he’d just be left alone. Yuuji turned back to his plants and resumed pulling out the weeds in huge bunches. From a neutral perspective, he had a very nice back, and Keiji didn’t mind looking while he waited.

But nothing gold can stay.

“Bo’s been pretty upset since he came back from the park on Saturday,” Yuuji said conversationally. “Won’t say why, so I’ve been wondering.” He leaned out for a hard to reach weed. “And course, I don’t expect you to tell me either, but let me tell you this: Hana and I would hate to see him unhappy. And my sweet little girlfriend is terrifying if you get her mad. So if you even think about fuc–”

“Hey, hey, hey! Whatcha talking bout, Teru?” Bokuto leapt across half the yard to land inches away from Keiji’s toes. He was still wearing flip flops, but for once had on a pair of jeans and a UCLA t-shirt under his track jacket.

“Just giving him the standard ‘don’t hurt my son,’ spiel,” Yuuji stood up, tossed the weeds, and brushed off his hands on his bare legs, leaving a fine coating of dust on his leg hair.

“Yeah, but I told you man, this doesn’t mean anything,” Bokuto gave Yuuji a friendly punch. “It’s just practice.”

Yuuji hesitated for one second too long, then grinned. “Maybe, but it sure is funny to scare the shit out of this guy. He’s so stiff!”

Keiji smiled flatly. “It’s nice to see we’re all on the same page.”

Bokuto thumped his back. Very hard.

It knocked the breath right out of him.

His uncle’s car – a Maserati! Bokuto had said thirty-seven times – was close quarters. The console was in-between them, so that counted for something - but despite fitting comfortably, both of them were much too large for the space. It felt intimate, more intimate than Keiji wanted it to be after the Ferris wheel incident. Bokuto seemed to feel it too. After his awe over the vehicle wore off, his incessant fiddling with the satellite radio while he rambled on about nonsense was maddening.

Bokuto’s truck had been a nice, neutral place, where the lines of their relationship were clear and open to conversation. A place that did not exist anywhere else in their interactions. So now this ridiculous car was going to serve the same purpose: the space for a necessary discussion.

“You are an outstanding kisser, Bokuto,” Keiji announced, eyes on the road.

Bokuto made seven different noises at once, but not one of them was an actual word. The finger that
had been messing with the radio was left pressing a button, zipping through station after station in a blur of noise.

Ignoring the chaos, Keiji continued, “Overall your setup for the date, with a few hiccups, turned out to be excellent. So excellent that I felt compelled to kiss you, forgetting for a moment that we were only practicing.”

“I forgot too,” Bokuto rasped out, finally pulling his finger away, “completely.”

“That may continue to happen,” Keiji grasped the steering wheel firmly. For safety. This was a hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar car. “But as long as we’re honest with each other, I don’t foresee any difficulties.”

They sat in silence. No immediate rebuttals or cries of anguish. Excellent. It could not have gone any better. Nothing to be concerned about–

“You use your teeth too much!” Bokuto said with his entire body.

“Excuse me?”

“When you’re kissing? Don’t worry Akaashi, you’re not the worst I’ve ever kissed, not at all! You don’t drool a lot, or bite every two seconds like it’s a bad porno. But you use your teeth a little more than you should? And you could have been a little more creative, I guess. But!!! You got better as time went on. I was impressed, actually, you’re a real fast learner!”

“Bokuto, what are you doing?”

They were at a stoplight. It was okay to look. Or glare.

Bokuto’s eyes were pure innocence. “Bein’ honest? Like you said? I’m not saying I had a bad time. But more, cause like, cause I was kissing you, not cause you were a great kisser. Anyway, we can practice more if you wanna!”

They stopped talking about kissing long before they arrived at the restaurant because Keiji had no interest in Bokuto’s ludicrous opinions.

He was not a bad kisser! Or even a mediocre one. He was skilled enough. Chikara had certainly never complained. Of course, Chikara had left him without a word of explanation, so his forthrightness was less than reliable. But it didn’t matter, because the point of this exercise was not for Keiji to learn how to kiss. It was to explain to Bokuto that, among other things, he needed to save a date like the one they’d just had for a special occasion.

“Why though? It was awesome and super romantic! I know you had a good time, Akaashi, you fucking kissed me!”

“Let’s say I had the time of my life,” Keiji attempted to play devil’s advocate.

“Can’t you just really say it?” Bokuto demanded.

“No,” Keiji was immovable. “It wasn’t real.”

“So? It was the best date I ever had!”

“It should not have been,” Keiji tried to keep from sighing in deep irritation. “You should not allow yourself to be so emotionally vulnerable on a second date.”
Bokuto’s entire demeanor shifted. Whiny irritation gone, his voice grew dark and raspy. “Dude, I dunno if you’ve met me, but I’m always emotionally vulnerable. If my dick of a dad couldn’t teach me to turn it off, doubt you could.”

Keiji let out a sigh as he pulled into the parking lot. He’d stepped on an unexpected landmine. One that he should have been looking out for. But this vague dark backstory was potentially something he could use.

“I simply would prefer that you not get hurt…” He tried for compassion, an emotion that he sincerely felt in some form.

Unfortunately it didn’t really matter what he felt. The backstory was not forthcoming. Instead Bokuto began sulking aggressively, slumped against the side of the car. They sat in silence for an uncomfortably long time. Keiji felt responsible. Even though he had done nothing.

Number twenty: impossible when angry.

“What is this place, anyway?” Bokuto eventually shifted himself, refusing to make eye contact. “Looks like a dump.”

Keiji would have rather introduced their dinner location under more pleasant circumstances. He’d actually been looking forward to it. But this was the hand he’d been dealt.

“According to Mr. Kozume, my grandfather, and my cousin Yamato who’s lived in Maui his entire life, this dump is the best Hawaiian restaurant in California.”

Bokuto seemed to like it. Considering the fact that he’d inhaled two dishes which were not even on the menu before spending an enormous amount of time chatting with the restaurant’s owner and staff, Keiji could say with confidence that his date was having a good time.

Not really as his date, though.

Adding easily distractible (number twenty-one) to the list of Bokuto’s failings, Keiji finished up his second order of ribs. It was nice to eat such messy food free from mockery and alone with his thoughts. But since he didn’t particularly want to think, he gazed out the window at the asphalt of the parking lot and the slow trickle of assholes stopping to stare at his uncle’s car. The tenth or so had pulled in to the parking lot himself, then noticed the car for only a brief moment.

When he turned to face the restaurant, Keiji’s stomach fell.

He bit his lip before wiping off his face for the unfortunate but likely chance that the source of his dread would enter the restaurant. The door jingled much sooner than he wanted it to, followed by a pause and then the sound of footsteps in his direction.

“Hi there, AK,” Suguru Daishou crouched down and rested his elbows on the sticky table. Like any person of his temperament, he’d scanned the room before deciding where to go. Once he’d noticed Keiji, he’d made the only decision he could make.

“Dining alone this evening?”

Suguru had not been a good kisser. In fact, he’d spent most of their awkward time together crying
into Keiji’s shoulder and apologizing. Maybe he would be more competent sober, but Keiji hoped never to find out.

“Somewhat,” he answered, dabbing the last bit of sauce off his chin. “Where’s Mika?” His question was not meant to sting. Suguru’s girlfriend was a sweet young woman whom Keiji had sat next to in two art classes. She was also the key to keeping her boyfriend civil.


“Angkor Wat?” Keiji offered, despite the fact that Suguru absolutely knew the name of the location. He had definitely taken it upon himself to learn every stop Mika would make, as well as what she was most excited to see so they could talk about it when she came home. Because he missed her desperately, no matter how recent her departure.

Unfortunately, it’s possible to be an attentive, loving partner, and remain a douchebag to the human race. As far as Suguru was concerned, Keiji was currently the representative of the rest of humanity.

“Yeah,” Suguru nodded with a wide smile that was a little more authentic than usual. “That’s it. Always know everything, huh AK?” He lifted his hand and ran his thumb along Keiji’s jawline. His fingers were clammy, and a very uncomfortable temperature that was neither hot nor cold.

“How’s Chikara, by the way?” he leaned in and softly hissed. “Bet he misses a…” he looked down Keiji’s body and then back up again, his eyes lingering, “…sweetheart like you, hm?”

“Have you come out to your girlfriend yet, Suguru?” Keiji yawned. This sexually-aggressive posturing was intended to be intimidating. It might have been for someone else, but in Keiji’s estimation it was sad and pathetic. “I think it might resolve a lot of this repression-related aggression. It would also stop embarrassing bisexual men everywhere. Haven’t they been through enough?”

Suguru grabbed his jaw and gently turned his head. “I asked you a question, AK. Bet you only listen with that pretty mouth full of–”

“What the fuck do ya think you’re doin?” Bokuto’s growl rumbled through the floor. The whole restaurant really.

“Bokuto,” Keiji advised, “he’s not worth your energy.”

But Bokuto and Suguru were no longer there.

The facetime call was connecting as Keiji rounded the back of the building. His brother’s face came into blurry view as Bokuto lifted Suguru at least a foot off the ground and slammed him into the restaurant’s dumpster.

“You can’t talk to people like that, man,” he roared, huge fist pulled back and ready to cause irreparable damage to both Suguru’s face and the rest of his life.

Keiji turned his phone up as loud as it could go and held it between Suguru’s face and Bokuto’s arm.

“YOU FUCKING MORON. WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING???” Tetsurou bellowed, making the speakers crackle from the strain.
Bokuto’s red face turned pink, “I was, uh… gonna fight this guy?”

“That’s not a fight jackass, that’s a massacre. Kenma could beat up that asshole.”

“Wait just a minute…” Suguru protested.

“Shut up, dicklips,” Tetsurou shouted at no one he could see. “You wouldn’t be such an asswipe if you’d just come out to your fucking girlfriend and admit you made out with a few dudes. Which I’ve just learned includes my brother, who apparently hates himself.”

“I was not in a good place at the time,” Keiji offered.

“What, you’re telling me he’s not some goddamn homophobe?” Bokuto scrunched up his nose, looking confused but also kind of cute.

Like a recently homicidal rabbit. Or a recovering murderer in a children’s cartoon.

There was a murmur off screen. “Kenma says he just needs therapy. But can we wrap this up? I was helping mom with dinner and she cannot grill fish to save her life. Don’t worry, Keiji, I told her you were panicking because you like Bokuto so much and you’re scared so you needed my advice.”

Suguru started to laugh as Bokuto dropped him in shock.

“Love you all,” Tetsurou saluted. “Except you, Daishou. You’re a sentient sack of pubes. Oh yeah… wanna get breakfast this weekend to catch up?”

“Only if you pay,” Suguru smiled horribly.

“I’ll do you one better: I’ll cook. Text you later, dickcheese.”

The call ended, and the three of them were left standing in close quarters. Suguru looked angry, relieved, and still a little terrified. Bokuto was staring at him intently, which was maybe why he was scared. No one spoke for some time.

During this interlude, Keiji considered the troubling fact that he had just walked out of a restaurant without paying his bill.

“I like both too,” Bokuto broke the silence, reaching out to straighten Suguru’s rumpled shirt. “Girls and dudes. And, I mean, I’ve never had a girlfriend, but I think if I did it’d be scary to tell her. Cause everybody thinks such shit about you, you know? It sucks, being told you’re a greedy fake.”

Keiji’s knees felt unstable. He should probably go pay that bill.

Suguru lost all of his sharpness. His voice came out hoarse and exhausted. “I don’t want her to think she can’t trust me. I don’t want her to worry that I’m going to cheat.”

He was opening up to a complete stranger. Who had been seconds away from smashing his face in. This was ridiculous.

“Considering the way you’ve been behaving, she should be more concerned that you’ll be arrested for stalking,” Keiji scrolled through his phone, seeing if there were any alternate movies showing nearby since they were going to miss theirs.

When he looked up a few moments later, Bokuto and Suguru were on the ground leaning against the dumpster, deep in conversation. Suguru was sniffling, and Bokuto was rubbing his shoulder.
He went back inside to pay the bill.

Quick to violence was number twenty-two. He didn’t know how to categorize what had happened after that.

Waiting by the car, Keiji outlined a story in his notebook.

Aggressively. Thick lines, frequent misspellings, ink soaking through the pages to the other side. He did it less out of inspiration and more so that he wouldn’t think of anything else. Also because Bokuto had been talking to Keiji’s bully for a half hour.

What he outlined ended up being some embarrassing white-boy fairy tale about a manic pixie dream date who made the protagonist’s jaded world bright again. Ignoring the obvious implications, Keiji didn’t even write that kind of thing. Chikara would have laughed him into oblivion.

But Chikara was not there.

He kept the insipid outline out of spite, stretching the elastic of his moleskine and letting it snap against the cover just as Suguru and Bokuto came out from behind the restaurant. They were slapping each other’s backs and grinning until their third wheel realized just whose car he’d been staring at.

“You’re taking someone to the movies in a fucking Maserati?” Suguru gaped.

“It’s because I’m such a baller,” Keiji deadpanned.

Bokuto hip checked his new best friend, muttering something like, “C’mon dude…”

What followed made Keiji think that maybe his outline wasn’t completely unbelievable.

“At that party back then,” Suguru announced to the sports car, “it was nice to talk to someone else who’d just got dumped, you know? And you were sassy, and elegant, and… tall. So I kissed you. I kissed a lot of dudes that month. Then I won the jackpot; Mika took me back. Then things got all fucked and… sorry for all the, uh, internalized homophobia, AK.”

“I came out when I was fifteen, Suguru. I am extremely attractive. Don’t think you’re the first closeted asshole who’s tried to make my life miserable.”

“Akaaaaashi!”

Suguru finally made eye contact and barked out a single laugh, “You’re a fucking delight.”

The resulting stare-down lasted long enough to make Suguru writhe.

It was time constraints rather than sympathy that moved Keiji to speak. “You’re the first who’s ever apologized, however, so thank you.”

Suguru grinned. “Well, you’re the most famou—”

It was nice to be able to stop people with a look. After coolly requesting that Bokuto stay where he was, Keiji guided Suguru across the parking lot by the elbow. Noiselessly slamming Suguru up
against the building behind an Escalade, Keiji pressed his forearm against his throat and leaned in.

“Violence is rarely a choice that I make, Suguru. But it is not because I lack the capacity.” In a casual voice he added, “If you breathe a word about that in front of him, I will give you a legitimate reason to be scared of gay men.”

Suguru swallowed and nodded. Keiji withdrew his arm.

“Mika is an art student,” he said. “She’ll probably be pleased you swing both ways.”

“You gotta be some kinda gem to get this guy so riled up, Bokuto!” Suguru called out as they emerged from behind the Escalade. His voice was jocular, if unsteady.

Bokuto himself was acting extremely jumpy, probably because he’d been caught picking his nose as they came into view.

“He’s a real keeper,” Keiji announced flatly.

Number twenty-three: terrible hygiene.

“So what was up with all that shit?” Bokuto stretched out in the car, his armpit nearly colliding with Keiji’s face as he turned to answer.

“Don’t ask me,” Keiji hit the starter and blasted the air conditioning. “You’re the one who escalated things.”

“Nah, I mean, first it was all like, afterschool special, you know? Starts out rough, then warms the heart a little. But then behind that SUV it was all like… Yakuza Apocalypse.”

Keiji turned his body completely. “You saw?”

“Yeah, through the windows!” Bokuto was punching the air, body language contradicting his bizarre scolding. “You aren’t very good at doing messed up things, Akaashi. You gotta at least hide a little before you beat someone up. Though, you did scare the shit outta that Daishou guy. Did he do somethin’ else?”

Honesty was necessary at all times during this arrangement. Even when the other party was being a condescending ass.

“Suguru knows things about my life that I’d prefer you not know. He was about to share. The need for him to stop was immediate, so I did what was necessary. I think that’s the first time I’ve resorted to violence since elementary school.”

Bokuto sat up and fiddled with the automatic window, making it go up and down and up and down.

“Don’t you trust me, Akaashi!?” he blurted out just as Keiji had decided it was safe to put the car in gear. They were going to miss their new viewing time if they weren’t careful.

But honesty was necessary.

“No.”
Keiji could feel Bokuto’s heart fall out of his chest as the constantly-simmering Issue Number One boiled over. Bokuto’s self-worth crashed through the floor, leaving Keiji with three choices: prepare for a miserable movie, end the date early, or return Bokuto to stability somehow.

Choosing the most onerous path, Keiji began with misdirection. “If we’re going to ask probing questions: why did you spend the entire first half of our date with other people?”

He wasn’t asking just to get what he wanted. He would have preferred Bokuto sat with him while they ate together. If he had been there, Suguru would have not approached them, Keiji would not have had to call his brother (something he was never going to hear the end of), and Bokuto would have no idea that he had some kind of deep, dark secret in his past. It also would have been nice to have some company.

Regrettably, Keiji did not have enough Bokuto-related experience to realize the consequences of his actions. His question caused his date to burst into tears.

There were some blubbered “I’m sorrys,” even more “I’m the worsts,” not to mention quite a few, “You deserve a better prom date, Akaashi you’re the coolest, smartest guy.” Snot was going to drip onto the interior of his uncle’s car.

Words were not going to be enough.

Reaching across the console, Keiji caught Bokuto’s head in his hands, tears running in between his fingers. Then he leaned in to place a whisper-soft kiss on Bokuto’s wrinkling forehead.

“Oh yeah,” Bokuto sniffed into his forearm, calming a little. “It’s the forehead kiss date.”

“I’m not angry at you,” Keiji let go. “But abandonment mid-date is unforgivable behavior for most. Perhaps we can discuss this on our way to the movie?”

“What movie is it?” Bokuto sniffed.

“It’s a surprise,” Keiji put the car in reverse, happy to finally leave the miserable parking lot.

After a quick run-down of all of Bokuto’s mistakes – mainly his ignoring Keiji completely before dragging a stranger out the back door of the restaurant to beat the shit out of him – Keiji decided that Bokuto’s quavering psyche couldn’t handle any more constructive criticism. Hygiene issues could wait for another time. So he praised him for wringing an apology out of the nastiest person Keiji had ever met. He applauded him for making friends with the people in the restaurant so they didn’t call the cops during his homicidal rage.

He squeezed his hand at a traffic light because Bokuto wasn’t the sort of person who wielded kindness strategically. He’d just… been nice.

There was silence. And then his previously weeping date smiled brightly at him. A wave of unwanted affection began to sw–

“That was a real good forehead kiss, Akaashi,” Bokuto burped. “Ten out of ten. A plus.”

The car started to smell like regurgitated loco moco.

His commitment to honesty demanded that Keiji admit to himself that there had been at least two moments during their date, one quite recent, when he had very much wanted Bokuto to kiss him again.
Since it was very difficult to remember why, they were obviously not very important.

There were seven people in the theatre. Three bros in the front who were high out of their minds. Middle-aged lesbians who were almost definitely drunk in the center. And he and Bokuto in the darkness of the back.

The seats were the kind that had armrests you could lift up to facilitate cuddling, and as soon as they sat down Bokuto unceremoniously hoisted theirs up. In response, Keiji crossed his legs and leaned against the far armrest, despite Bokuto’s slouching and pouting when he realized what that body language meant.

Keiji was not going to make this easy for him.

Although. Their dates had thus far been constructed around the supposition that Bokuto was the romantically and sexually aggressive party. But why make that assumption? He could meet a firecracker of a woman who wanted to tie him to the bed and tease him till he begged. He could meet a sly son of a bitch who twisted him around his little finger with nothing but measured, sweet words. The fact that Bokuto was physically imposing had little to do with the power structure of any future relationship he might have. It was important to see how he’d react under every contingency.

Important for Keiji to give him the opportunity to react.

So he did. Although unlike the last time, his move was calculated. Completely disconnected from emotion. There was nothing romantic or erotic about the sticky floor and gum-covered seats. Nothing alluring about his date’s desperate thirst for attention or his bad breath.

This was how this arrangement was supposed to work.

Four minutes and thirty-seven seconds into the animated film about an animal police force, Keiji shifted his body, and uncrossed his legs. Bokuto was focused on the screen, and didn’t even notice.

Six minutes and five seconds into the film Keiji yawned and stretched his arms as high as they would go.

Six minutes and ten seconds into the film, he wrapped his arm around Bokuto’s shoulders with great disinterest.

Twelve minutes and twenty-four seconds into the film, Keiji was running his fingers across Bokuto’s scalp, breaking up the gel that held up his hairstyle. Strand by strand it fell, while Bokuto cooed and nuzzled into the crook of Keiji’s arm.

Twenty minutes into the film, Bokuto was giving him a thorough refresher course on kissing. His breath wasn’t as bad as expected.

Forty minutes into the film, Keiji was pressed against the bricks that made up the exterior of the theater. One of Bokuto’s legs was slotted between his, giving him something to grind against as they made out.

For practice.
“Keiji. Lawrence. Akaashi.”

His mother was waiting by the door when he finished the walk back from his uncle’s. He was hot and exhausted. She was wearing her robe and a dour expression, her thick hair in a messy bun.

“You are an hour later than you said you’d be. On a school night.”

“Yes, but I texted so you wouldn’t worry,” he sighed, following the crook of her finger into the kitchen. He needed to get to his room as quickly as possible, but any sudden moves and he was doomed. “I’m very sorry. I lost track of time.”

“You don’t have a curfew because I trust you, but that doesn’t give you the right to just show up whenever you–” she turned and stopped mid-lecture. “Did you hurt yourself?” Her liquid black eyes were even darker with concern and suspicion. Mostly suspicion.

“Your neck looks somewhat… mottled, little flower.”

He stood up straight, sighing with a petulance that only she and Tetsurou ever got to witness. “I have three hickies, mom. I’m certain you can guess their origins.”

His mother saw no reason to speak immediately. Instead she went to the fridge and poured each of them a glass of water, her long fingers poised elegantly against the fogging glass.

“I’m certain you can guess what that means for you,” she sat a glass in front of him. He bided his time with a long drink. Because Emily Akaashi had one rule regarding her sons’ sexual activity: _bring your new partner to dinner for a Talk. Then you can do whatever you like, wherever you like. But if you don’t…_

“Grounded for a month, or take Bokuto to meet jii-chan and baa-chan.”

Keiji obviously hadn’t scheduled any discussions.

The idea of sitting with their mother and boyfriends to discuss safe sex was so off-putting that both he and Tetsurou ever got to witness. “I have three hickies, mom. I’m certain you can guess their origins.”

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“Grounded for a month, or take Bokuto to meet jii-chan and baa-chan.”

Keiji obviously hadn’t scheduled any discussions.

The idea of sitting with their mother and boyfriends to discuss safe sex was so off-putting that both he and Tetsurou had gotten caught with what she considered evidence of sexual activity (there was a fifteen item list). They had both held the futile hope that she wouldn’t find out until they were too old for it to matter.

Tetsurou had happily taken Kenma to see their grandparents (who had no idea that visiting them was a punishment). Kenma already knew them and Tetsurou, ever the romantic, insisted that he was going to marry Kenma and so the humiliation didn’t matter. But after the run-of-the-mill visit, the two of them had endured the dreaded conversation with his mother anyway.

There was no escaping it in the end. She was a force to be reckoned with.

Keiji had actually gotten caught first. And he had been stubborn.

The whole thing was private on both sides. He would have a sex talk with his mother, and one with his boyfriend. Not both at the same time. The situation had been especially frustrating because he and Chikara had not been doing anything, really. They had just turned sixteen! It was just a lot of sloppy over-the-clothes action that was embarrassing to think about now.

Now he suspected that that was the whole point. With permission, sex was a different story altogether. Like choosing a college, it was a real life decision that you were allowed to make, no one
was stopping you, but it would probably affect your life for some time to come. At least that had been what happened with him, because they hadn’t actually gotten past hand jobs for over a year afterwards.

It was almost like she knew him or something.

But for the sake of his pride, Keiji had spent three months digging holes and painting trim, seeing Chikara only at school and online, before he’d finally conceded. And he’d choose that path all over again if he were somehow thrust back two and a half years. He loved his grandparents, but they were terrifying people who either had no idea they were humiliating their grandchildren, or just didn’t care. There was no way to avoid embarrassment. There had never been anything distracting enough to keep them from pulling out Keiji’s naked baby pictures, where he looked like a beach ball and had a mouthful of dandelions.

His mother knew this. And she was gloating. But he was not going to just give in. He was halfway through these dates. If he could get her to put off this horrific discussion for a bit longer, he could just tell her that he and Bokuto had broken up. Being grounded was out of the question. He had a deal to keep. His involvement with Bokuto absolutely had to end once the prom was over. Prolonging it would be a disaster, if the bruises on his neck were any indication.

“I’ve got a lot of work that needs to be done around the house, Keiji,” she gave him an easy smile. “This really could not have come at a better time for me. Don’t worry, I’ll go easy on you. I’ll even make an exception for the pr–”

Wait just a moment.

“Mom, there’s something you don’t know.”

She gave him a flat look. “There are many things I don’t know, little flower. I wish one of those things was the more intimate details of your evening.”

She was so insufferable sometimes.

“Bokuto speaks Japanese proficiently,” his voice felt pure and crisp. Victorious. “He’s from Hawaii and he visits Japan every year. His father lives there. He’s incredibly chatty, as you probably noticed. Particularly when it comes to himself. And he’s extremely successful. I’m sure baa-chan will find him enchanting.”

The perfect distraction.

His mother blinked rapidly and Keiji had to bite his own lip to keep from smirking.

“Well,” she grinned wryly, leaning across the counter to ruffle his hair. “I might as well be proud, Keiji. I don’t think I’ve ever been beaten at my own game before.”

Very few people had ever seen him grin. Since his mother was one of those few she was not particularly shocked when he did it.

“Oh go to bed,” she rolled her eyes. “It’s a school night, and I have to teach you how to cover those things up in the morning. Unless, of course, you want everyone to see that you let somebody try to pick your adam’s apple.”

“Mom, please don’t say things like that!”

“Do you think it soothes my soul to look at my son and see suck marks on his neck? If I’ve got to be
uncomfortable, so do you. And if you’re this uncomfortable talking about it, you probably shouldn’t be doing it. And yet you are. You have no one to blame but yourself.”

She had him there.

Chapter End Notes

suguru tells mika over a fancy dinner that he cooks for her. she laughs like wind chimes and apologizes because she had just assumed he was bi all along.

he goes to therapy. but he's still kind of a dick.
i am my own worst enemy

Chapter Notes

ah sorry for the delay!

in case you need a refresher, last time keiji and bokuto made out against the back of a movie theater, keiji’s mom saw the hickies, and now there are consequences.

oh, and this chapter has a bit of water-related danger, in case that isn’t something you can stand.

also here’s a lit song

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keiji’s sheets were the color of butter and cream. Those weren’t even close to his favorite colors but since his mother had bought the sheets he hadn’t had much of a say. But he’d changed them the night before because, regardless of color, nothing felt better than waking up with the sun in his eyes on a Saturday morning with that clean, crisp feeling trailing against his skin.

And then yanking those same golden sheets over his head and falling immediately back to sleep because who got up before noon on a Saturday?

Except this Saturday was different. The night before he’d been hit with inspiration the likes of which he hadn’t felt in the better part of the year. The ideas hadn’t stopped flowing. He’d stayed up until five in the morning and only gave in to sleep because his eyes were crossing. Normally he woke at the same early hour every day out of habit (even if it was just to fall back asleep) but after a night spent awake his body didn’t care about its internal clock.

Lucky for him, the rumble of his phone against his mattress did the job.

The first call didn’t faze him. The third pushed him out of a deep sleep into more of a light doze. But by the seventh, he was ready to burn down the world. If he’d been fully awake, he would have just shut it off. Talking fluently on the phone was an enormous challenge at any point in time. But being half asleep, he wasn’t really thinking about talking on the phone.

“Who the f-fuck is this.”

“Jeeze, Akaashi, good thing I’m not your grandma or something.”

Keiji hung up.

Call number nine he answered because it was the only alternative to throwing his phone against the wall.

“wh………what.”

“Akaaaaaaashi, I’m, uh sorry but we kinda gotta reschedule our date for uh… right now.”

“There’s no one on the- on the- planet I like enough to gggget up this early for.”
The phone crackled and then a new, much angrier voice echoed in his ear.

One he was frankly sick of.

“I raised you better than this, Keiji. Get out of bed and come apologize to this boy immediately. Honestly, I thought you’d grown out of making people this upset. Oh, and Bokuto says you’re going to need to wear your contacts and something to swim in for your date.”

Being eighteen was pointless under this kind of dictatorship.

Tetsurou was generally an annoyance. But he had his moments. Specifically, the ones where he slid a cherry Pop Tart and a travel mug of coffee across the kitchen counter to keep his brother from setting the house on fire.

After a long sip and a few blinks, Keiji felt human enough to take in his surroundings. His mother and Bokuto were blessedly absent, though why they were together at all was baffling. Mostly comatose, Kenma was slowly eating a bowl of cereal. Tetsurou was making a quiche or some other nonsense for his breakfast date with Suguru because he was a traitor who both hated joy and took eating healthy seriously.

He was also dressed in an apron printed with kitty cat cupcakes.

“All are you really gonna wear those to whatever you’re doing?” the hypocrite pointed his dripping wire whisk at Keiji’s swim trunks.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” Keiji used the countertop to stay upright as he yawned. “But yes.”

Tetsurou’s eyes narrowed into slits.

“Keiji,” Kenma smacked his lips drowsily as he swallowed his corn flakes, “you can see your religion.”

A glance down was more than enough to prove his point. Keiji had bought these trunks last year. They had been intentionally snug then. Flattering. Now, they were… well, the good news was, his ass could not possibly be as flat as it had been, and even without volleyball his thighs had bulked up tremendously.

The bad news?

“And so then I told Coach that…” Bokuto had just opened the front door, “I would… uh… I told him…”

His armful of cut roses, lilac, peonies, and lilies made gentle slaps as they scattered across the floor. Behind him, Keiji’s mother began to laugh. Keiji knew this laughter would gradually escalate until she was leaning against the wall or on the floor, making braying donkey sounds.

He turned back to his coffee. There wasn’t much to be done now but embrace his suffering.

Realizing he’d dropped his burden all over the floor, Bokuto crouched down and started picking up the flowers. After a long silence, punctuated only by Keiji’s mother’s hysteria and the scrape of Tetsurou’s whisk, their guest cleared his throat and stood up again.
“Those shorts,” it was nice that he wasn’t pretending this was about anything else, “uh, will actually be real good! I mean, if you don’t mind, I guess, that is, if you’re not embarrassed, or if you are, you could wear something on top?” He dumped the flowers on the kitchen table and looked at Tetsurou for help that would never come.

Because Tetsurou was now face down on the countertop, cackling. He had managed to prop his whisk against the surface like a scepter, a deranged king of a quiche kingdom.

Keiji chose to ignore his brother, instead turning back to his date. Bokuto was dressed rather strangely himself, in a long-sleeved dive shirt with board shorts on top of some kind of black spandex leggings that went down just past his knees.

The caffeine finally jumpstarted Keiji’s exhausted brain.

“No. We are absolutely not.”

“But Akaaaaaashi, the waves are like, fu–er,” he glanced back at Keiji’s hiccupping mother, “freaking unbelievable! And I’ll teach you!”

“You’ll probably be better at it than you were when we were ten,” Kenma offered, barely audible over the horrible brays and screeches of his boyfriend and future mother-in-law. “It might wear you out. I hope your grandparents understand when you aren’t talkative later.”

Keiji’s mother made a weak noise of protest from the floor and Tetsurou laughed even harder.

Bokuto had a trump card he wasn’t even aware of (oblivious, number twenty-four). The trial of meeting Keiji’s grandparents and the horrific conversation with Keiji’s mother that was to follow was not some kind of hellish date, so not part of their deal.

But Bokuto hadn’t questioned the ordeal when it had been proposed, he just sent thirteen owl emoticons and asked what time.

And he wasn’t using the situation to his advantage now either, probably because he didn’t even realize he could.

“I want an enormous lunch,” Keiji droned. “And a beach umbrella. And I’m going to read at least eighty percent of the time.”

Bokuto agreed. He was terrible at bargaining. And that would be number twenty-five.

“So, I might suck at some date stuff, but I know how to take a guy to the beach,” Bokuto loomed over him, hands on his hips, swimming trunks and shirt discarded on the blanket. “You’re gonna fucking love today, I know it.”

Keiji wanted to go back to bed.

But since he could not, it was very difficult for to ignore the impressive, no, incredible cut of Bokuto’s thighs in the dive skins he was wearing. At some point in his writing fury, Keiji had decided he would not inspect anything related to Bokuto’s body any further since it wouldn’t be sticking around in his life much longer. But putting it out of his mind completely was a challenge, as he was only human and Bokuto’s abs could easily function as a cheese grater in times of
Keiji was in a beach chair. His book was untouched in his lap, lost in the folds of pizza-printed fabric that made up the only pair of Tetsurou’s swim trunks that had been remotely fit to borrow. Next to him was a wetsuit that Bokuto had borrowed from Terushima – *See those tiny shorts ‘ll work great cause they’re not gonna bunch up underneath it Akaaashiii* – jugs of water, and three bags of Del Taco (of which Keiji had already eaten two) all under a jaunty rainbow beach umbrella.

And you couldn’t forget the surfboards standing nearby.

“Hey, dude, do ya mind putting sunscreen on my back? Might wear a shirt but I dunno yet.” Bokuto turned and plopped himself down on the blanket at Keiji’s feet. He’d been trying to do it himself but the thick white streaks weren’t reaching past his shoulder blades, and...

Oh god he had a tattoo. How had Keiji not seen this? It was enormous, reaching far past what a tank top would typically cover, intricate geometric details spread across the broad span of his shoulders in smooth organic curves.

“Amazing,” Keiji whispered, unable to keep from tracing his fingers across the wide breadth of wings.

“Hm?” Bokuto looked over his shoulder, then his face grew serious when he realized what Keiji was talking about. “You uh, like tattoos?”

“Not generally. But I like this one. What is it?”

Bokuto blew out a heavy sigh that signaled a complicated explanation, “Um, well, it’s pueo, like um, an owl? But kinda special, see cause *pueo* is ‘aumakua for my mom’s family. Like… a god, kinda? Or like, a protector? Both I guess. It goes with your family, so not just anybody can get a *pueo uhi* er, tattoo.”

Keiji vaguely understood what he was getting at.

“My uncle took me to a *kakua* artist when I graduated. Like, a traditional tattoo guy. Cause I went to this school in Honolulu so I could play with a really good team, but nobody thought I could graduate. And then I did! Got all these recruitment offers with scholarships and stuff, but I was, um,” Bokuto grinned nervously, “a little scared to leave home? So me and that *kakua* dude sat down and talked for like, two days. Mostly in Hawai’ian and about…”

He turned around without warning, Keiji’s sunscreen covered hands slipping over his shoulder and sliding onto his pecs.

“Akaashi, is it okay if I don’t tell you about that? I trust you n’ all but I’ve never told anybody. And… people are pretty good at learning about Hawai’ian shit then taking all of the real parts away and just using what they want. And I don’t think you’d do that! But just right now…”

This was unexpected. Up until this point, Bokuto had been scattered in Keiji’s mind, a maelstrom made from fragments of potential. A concept built solely around the things he needed to improve. But Keiji couldn’t improve on what he had just learned. Which logically was nothing much. Bokuto, like many other Native people, was sensitive about the appropriation of his culture. Who wouldn’t be? But logic didn’t seem to matter.

He wanted to kiss Bokuto’s forehead again. He wanted to squeeze his hand tight.

“That’s fine,” he said neutrally.
He got a huge grin in response, as well as a thick finger leaving a dollop of sunscreen on his nose.

“Yeah, but when I actually got it? Oh man, he used this hammer instead of a machine, and it hurt so fucking bad, I cried pretty much the whole time. Which was good cause, I guess I was thinking about some heavy stuff and my head was super clear. But oh man it hurt. I could feel it in my fuckin’ nipples and like…”

Bokuto's stream of untamed speech trailed off. He was staring at Keiji's lips. Which Keiji only really noticed because he had just moved his own eyes from Bokuto’s mouth himself. It was ten in the morning on a public beach and the waves were good. The chances of someone Keiji knew passing by were very near one hundred percent.

But he wanted to kiss him so badly.

He swallowed and focused on spreading sunscreen across Bokuto’s chest. Which you'd think would intensify the desire. But Keiji didn’t want to kiss him because of his remarkable body. Or because he knew from experience that Bokuto would make every kiss more than enjoyable. Or really for any sensual reason at all.

He wanted to kiss him because Bokuto had, without warning, become a person he wanted to kiss.

Shit.

“Bokuto, we need to stop–”

“Is that Keiji?? With a new dude?? Holy hell!”

“Ahm… Noya, I’m pretty sure they don’t wanna be interrupted right now.”

“Keiji! Thought you hated surfing! BAHAHAAAAA!”

And there they were.

A very large sampling of he and Chikara’s mutual friends.

When two people break up, there’s almost always a choosing of sides. It was unavoidable. Something Keiji had gotten over rather quickly in the grand scope of things.

But that didn’t mean he loved to think about it.

Despite knowing Keiji since kindergarten, Noya was neutral. It was just his nature. When they had played volleyball together, Noya had been the sort who cheered for the opposing team when he thought they’d done something impressive. He didn’t pick sides in anything, with the apparent exception of his enormous boyfriend. Even that didn’t mean he’d stopped enthusiastically noticing girls and telling everyone about it. Including his enormous boyfriend.

Ryu was pretty good at being friends with everyone, but Keiji had the suspicion that even though he agreed with Keiji, he took Chikara’s side. Simply because he assumed no one else would. Keiji couldn’t begrudge him that, though. Ryu was a sweetie in the body of a swaggering idiot. Keiji honestly hoped a girl noticed him someday like his friend seemed to desperately want.

Hisashi and Kazuhito, who had been, and probably still were Chikara’s closest friends (and
cameramen), now seemed to hate Keiji with every bone in their bodies. Currently they were staring at him, disgusted. Possibly because he was rubbing sunscreen into a large bro’s chest.

Though he could just stop and leave him to tan with stripes like an asshole.

“Hey, hey, hey, everybody!” the asshole turned and waved, allowing Keiji to quickly finish his back. “I’m Bokuto! You guys heading in?”

Ryuu and Noya held their boards over their heads with obnoxious, triumphant cheers, Noya’s boyfriend held up a sketchbook and a beach chair and shook his head. Hisashi and Kazuhito ignored Bokuto completely in favor of pulling out their cameras. As everyone but Noya’s boyfriend headed towards the water, Bokuto turned back.

“What were you tryin ta say a minute ago, Akaashi?”

“We’ll discuss it later,” Keiji picked up his book.

“You gonna come out? Waves're gonna get mushy in like an hour, I bet. It’ll be easy~”

Kazuhito scoffed under his breath, and Keiji’s spine turned to metal. He didn’t mind. He didn’t. He hadn’t done anything; Chikara had left him. Chikara had left all of them.

“I’m feeling a b-bit cold,” he muttered. “We’ll see.”

Bokuto dropped a smelly sweatshirt in his lap.

Asahi Azumane (because that was Noya’s boyfriend’s name), was an unexpected gift.

First of all, he was nearly silent as he drew, only speaking when Keiji leaned over to comment on the elegance of his composition. After that, the long-haired man smiled gratefully, admitting that traditional drawing wasn’t really his forte so the compliment meant a lot. Ten minutes later he timidly asked if Keiji minded being drawn. Asahi wanted to try because he had “a sorta round face.” Not a beautiful face, a round one.

Keiji consented with barely concealed delight.

The second thing that was wonderful about Asahi was that he was absolutely terrifying.

Keiji had heard the sweet, high tones that belonged to a group of senior girls from his phys ed class well before they noticed him. They were nice enough, but a few were also incredibly invested in seeing him happy. Happy on their terms. He had no idea how they had recognized him, wearing his mother’s floppy hat, Kenma’s sunglasses, Bokuto’s sweatshirt, and Tetsurou’s billowing pizza shorts, but they did, and rushed over calling his name.

“Hey guys,” he said amicably, in what Tetsurou called his ‘alien-pretending-to-be-a-teenager voice.’

“Wow. Keij is that your prom date??” the ringleader demanded over a sudden cacophony of uncomfortable noises from her friends, who clearly found the question inappropriate. Her name was Alexa. They had been friends in middle school. Now they were some kind of caricature of that. She pointed at Asahi, who was lying on his stomach as he sketched. The man craned his head to see what was going on.
Immediately all sound stopped.

“We’ve gotta meet Chastity’s girlfriend over by the lifeguard station,” Alexa babbled while her friends looked at Keiji apologetically. “Nice to see you, Keij! And uh… sir!”

Keiji happily resumed his character sheet, wondering what someone like Bokuto would do in a sort of apocalypse situation.

“Sorry for scaring your friends,” Asahi sat up, arms flailing nervously as the girls rushed across the beach. “I pretty much scare everybody. They think I’m twenty-five and fresh out of prison,” he added sheepishly.

"No. Thanks. You just ended a very uncomfortable encounter.”

"Oh, yeah. That thing last year must make people tough to deal with.”

Keiji was full of instant weariness, ready to inform Asahi of just how uninterested he was in discussing last year.

"Ah sorry! Bet you hate talking about it. Noya didn't tell me! Just, my grandmother, she really wants me to be a ‘successful’ artist, so she prints out pictures of famous Asian American guys to encourage me? I guess, and, uh, you were one of them."

"Uh, sorry that's kind of awkward," Asahi added, not sure what to do about Keiji's silence. "I don't mean to be creepy. Gramma is kind of losing her mind, to be honest. And… heh… it didn't really do what she wanted. I’m still working at Home Depot."

There was a long pause and he could tell Asahi felt absolutely awful.

"Noya and I were each other's first k-kiss," Keiji found the words rolling out of his mouth with absolutely no prelude whatsoever.

Asahi’s deep, rich laugh rolled across the beach, and everyone who heard it smiled. Except Keiji, who had just traded embarrassment for embarrassment.

Like it was a thing people did.

"Okay, Akaashi, now just remember what I said, alright dude? You’re gonna be awesome because I’m awesome and I taught you!"

Keiji gave Bokuto a flat look. The feel of Yuuji's too-short wetsuit was unpleasant against his skin. The water surrounding his exposed feet felt unbearably cold. He had no idea what had possessed him to agree to this.

The last time he'd been surfing had been when he was ten. It had been Noya’s new obsession and he insisted everyone in their class come to his beach party. The party itself had been fun. Keiji had spent most of it building a sand castle with Rebecca Yao and Cindy Garcia. But eventually Noya had demanded he and Kenma join in, not realizing Kenma's desperate fear of the water. Keiji wasn't particularly fond of the water either. At least not when you couldn't see the bottom. But Tetsurou (who’d thrown a tantrum when he couldn't come along) had made Keiji swear to protect Kenma.
So he had, by going in his place and drawing all the attention away.

He ended up falling off his board and getting swept to shore in an enormous wave, spinning in surf so wild that sand was driven behind his left eardrum. He'd spent the rest of the summer with Kenma's subtle gratitude, and ear infection after ear infection.

Once again, a sense of self-sacrifice that was not a part of his personality had him paddling toward what appeared to be a smallish wave, Bokuto's instructions rolling through his head.

He made it to his feet as the wave crested around his ankles. The furthest he'd ever gotten, a glorious moment that lasted three tenths of a second before he fell face first into the water, pressed down under the waves in a flurry of bubbles and chaos. Embarrassing, but he didn't even get a noseful, so it was manageable.

He was up, ready to catch his board and perhaps even try again, when he realized the tether had slid off of his foot altogether. Seeing the quickly growing distance between himself and the surfboard, it became apparent that he was being pulled away from the shore at a rapid rate.

It took only an instant to realize that quite a few people drowned like this.

Living his entire life in a seaside city, he knew the rules. Stay calm. Swim as hard as you can horizontal to the shore. In the ideal case, he'd cross the riptide completely. But he'd lost all sense of direction, caught in the trough of the waves as the rising swells kept him from getting his bearings. He had no idea what horizontal was. Small splashes of water overwhelmed his face, and his breathing started to come faster. Uncontrolled. Panicked.

Everything was happening so fast.

There was an essay he saw every year, about the quietness of drowning. Maybe it was quiet to see, but it wasn't quiet to experience. The rush of water in his ears, the splash of his ineffective arms as he tried to lift himself up high enough to see the shore. The hacking sound of his cough as he tried to keep the water out of his nose and mouth. He was paralyzed, trapped in a cyclical motion that wasn’t doing anything at all.

He was going to die.

At this point he was supposed to think about something important, his life, maybe, his mother and Tetsurou and Kenma. His grandparents and extended family. Chikara even. Maybe wonder who his biological father had been. But all he could focus on was how this moment wasn't just going to kill him.

It was going to kill Bokuto too.

"Akaashi?? Oh god, please be okay!!"

The unfortunate thing about a stomach full of seawater was that his stomach also contained some other things. When he puked, he couldn't be selective about which came out.

And he was definitely puking.

"Give him some space, young man."
"Sorry, sorry!"

"No need to apologize, sir. He's going to be just fine. We got him quick, he wasn't even inhaling water, just got a bellyfull since he was panicking so much. All thanks to you. If you hadn't called us so quick, this might have been much worse. Lots of people try to save their friends themselves. Never ends well."

The rumble of voices let Keiji know that he had puked all over himself in front of Bokuto, a lifeguard, and the entire population of the beach.

"Sir, can you sit all the way up?"

He didn't want to open his eyes, but he also wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. He pressed his elbows into the sand and made to push up. It became apparent that he couldn't because his arms were shaking too much. Before he even began to force himself, familiar fingers wrapped themselves around his shoulder, an arm around his back. They lifted him gently.

Keiji opened his eyes.

"Akaashi!" Bokuto choked out. His wet hair was twisted into some sort of unholy sand-plastered disaster, and his cheeks were streaked with tears. "Oh god, you're okay," he choked out, fingers trembling against Keiji's shoulder.

"Mr. Akaashi, can you please tell me what day of the week it is?" the lifeguard asked, shining a flashlight in Keiji’s eyes. One of his contacts was completely missing. The other was caught under his eyelid. He was desperate to get it out but his fingers were coated in sand.

Bokuto rubbed firm circles against his back as Keiji answered question after question. He didn't stop when another lifeguard brought a bucket of water to wash away the mess. Not when Ryuu and Noya fiercely drove off the rubberneckers, or when Asahi brought Keiji’s towel and the pizza trunks. Bokuto comforted him even as Hisashi and Kazuhito gave him water and pretzels that he wasn't sure he wanted to eat.

Keiji had no idea what their expressions were like because he couldn’t see, but he thanked them, quiet and sincere.

"I'm really sorry," Bokuto muttered after the lifeguard’s final briefing and Keiji signing some forms. "God, I am so, so, sorry. I shoulda known better. I've been surfing since I was four."

"Bokuto," Keiji's voice was too hoarse to sound wry. "I'd recommend not taking your date surfing. Too much room for disaster if they’re incompeten--"

He couldn't finish his self-deprecation because he was coughing again. Although at least he wasn’t puking this time.

When he’d finally gone without dry heaving for more than five minutes, Bokuto carried him to the truck. Keiji initially argued, insisting he could walk himself. Before Bokuto could make a scene, Noya shrugged his shoulders and suggested they let him try. Keiji stubbed his toes on at least four unseen obstacles, all while trembling so much someone had to catch him to keep him from falling on his face. Ryuu had been the quickest, and pretended it had been his own fault.

“IT’s the adrenaline,” Asahi laughed awkwardly as Keiji put on his glasses. He was nervous and apologetic, as though he’d summoned the riptide himself. “You probably need to eat too. There’s this really good noodle bar that just opened up about two blocks down. You could get a good miso that wouldn’t be too heavy.”
Keiji could eat a house, but he kept it to himself.

Bokuto said nothing during the short drive to the noodle shop. The quiet wasn’t a comfortable one. When they arrived, his only words were a request for seating and then his order. He ate slowly, in complete and utter silence, eventually sitting down his chopsticks and staring flatly at the table. The obnoxious strobe light flickering inside him was completely burnt out.

This would not do.

“Bokuto,” Keiji rasped, his throat sore despite the broth from his tonkotsu ramen, “I am unhappy. Do you know why?”

“Cause I almost killed you with my stupid date,” was the dreary response.

Keiji slurped his noodles, then turned his body to face Bokuto more directly. “When you’ve made a mistake, how soon do I tell you?”

“Like, that minute,” Bokuto’s hands fidgeted under the bar.

Keiji nodded, feeling confident that this would get the point across, “Have I said anything to you that might indicate–?”

With quite the opposite reaction than Keiji wanted, Bokuto punched the counter. He did it quietly, but with enough force to make every customer’s bowl shake. No one seemed to notice except the man preparing the noodles.

“I don’t care what you think, Akaashi,” Bokkuto growled low. “You could have died. Cause I pushed you to do something. My stupid fault.”

For a long moment, there was silence except for the sounds of the kitchen and the soft conversations of other customers.

During that silence a small volcano erupted violently in Keiji’s chest.

“So what’s your next move then?” he asked lightly.

“Huh?”

“Should we call the police? Since you’re guilty of asking me to do a leisure activity that could have led to my death in a very unlikely set of circumstances. Or, since such a charge doesn’t exist, will you continue to beat yourself up over blame that you’ve decided on without speaking to me? Should I leave now? I can walk home if you’re going to wallow in this puddle of misery and insist that my opinion on something that happened to me is ir…ir…relevant.”

His voice had climbed to near-shouting levels. In a very small space. Other customers were staring. Bokuto was blinking at him, the light returned to his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Akaashi,” he grunted, picking up his chopsticks again.

Keiji sighed with barely concealed fury. “If you truly believe that an ap-apology is necessary then perhaps we should–”

“I do,” Bokuto slurped his noodles. “I’m not gonna stop feelin’ bad, but you’re kinda right too. You’re the one who coulda drowned. Not me. I’m not very good at suckin’ things up, but I can try.”

“Thank you. I will be fine. It was a panic attack in a riptide, not a near-drowning experience.”
“Mostly,” Bokuto continued, not listening at all. “I figure what I just said reminded you of the dude who hurt you. The one you’re always talkin’ around. And I really don’t wanna do that. That’s what I’m sorry for.”

He burped extremely loudly, complimented the man behind the counter on the shop’s udon quality, then challenged everyone to an eating contest.

“We are going to stop kissing.” Keiji announced, buttoning the final buttons on his jade green shirt. Changing clothes felt like he had in a small way shucked off the morning’s unpleasant experience. It wasn’t enough though. His hands shook whenever he wasn’t actively using them and he felt like he needed to eat at least four more meals for his stomach to be his again. He was trying not to think about sex, given the circumstances, but he wanted that too. More than anything, he needed to sleep in his own bed for a few days straight and remember it was his and he was alive.

On top of all this, he was exhausted from lack of sleep.

Behind him there was a yell and a crash as Bokuto landed on the floor of his bedroom, legs tangled up in… chinos? They were even more ridiculous than the Captain America boxer briefs he was wearing. It had been very difficult to miss them, though Keiji had tried.

“You should have changed in the bathroom as I suggested.”

“Yeah, but, what if somebody needs it?” Bokuto continued to struggle. It was like he’d never put on pants before.

“No one is home, but if someone needs it they’ll use one of the other two bathrooms in this house.”

Bending his back off of the floor in a rather impressive show of flexibility, Bokuto finally pulled up his pants, sucking in his stomach to button them. When he jumped to his feet, it was painfully obvious just how not his the article of clothing was. Not quite as explicit as the cursed swim trunks, they still demonstrated a certain generous flattery. Also they were capris. White capris.

“Are those Yuuji’s?” Keiji ran his fingers through his curls to get them the proper amount of disheveled. “Can you sit in them?”

“I uh, grabbed em at the thrift shop on my way over this morning. Only nice clothes I have are two suits for away games. And they’re way too fancy. But these are um… well, you can see how awesome my thighs are!” He tried to flounce and ended up falling back onto Keiji’s bed, unstyled hair framing his face, a grey and black starburst against the white comforter.

He still wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“As I said, I prefer that we not kiss anymore.”

Bokuto sat up, proving he could do so with little difficulty. Perhaps discomfort, but that was his problem.

“Guess you can only handle so many awesome makeouts, eh?” he gloated.

“I can handle as many makeouts as I see fit.”
“Oh.” Bokuto deflated, curling into himself. Still not wearing a shirt. “I guess today kinda–”

No it had not been today. Or at least not what Bokuto thought about today.

“Today is irrelevant. Further physicality could lead to complications that go beyond our agreement. At least ask before you make any attempts.”

Bokuto nodded, looking mildly relieved, although it was clear he had no idea what Keiji was talking about. As always, honesty was tantamount in this situation. That meant he needed to understand. Keiji sat down next to him on the bed because it felt like he shouldn’t admit this while he was standing up. Also it seemed gentler.

“I’m concerned we will…”

Bokuto sat up a little taller, tilted his head, and listened openly. With an inappropriate amount of trust. An issue already addressed and numbered.

And Keiji betrayed that trust, just as he’d warned that someone might.

“…have sex if we don’t control our highly charged physical interaction.”

Sliding his arms into his short sleeved button-up, Bokuto nodded thoughtfully. Uncharacteristically quiet.

He didn’t have the slightest clue that Keiji had lied.

When they arrived at the Akaashi family homestead, Keiji’s mother, brother, and Kenma were already there, his mother’s purple Honda Fit in the driveway.

“Is there anything I should know about your family?” Bokuto asked, reaching into the back of the cab and pulling out a plant with large, brilliant colored flowers before stepping out of the truck. “I mean, I’m pretty awesome with old people cause I’m super charming, but like, are they… really traditional kinda Japanese or um… I dunno how to ask this without sounding really ignorant…”

“After a few drinks, Kenma’s grandfather once described my grandparents as ‘extremely straightforward.’ Baa-chan is Nisei and was at camp until she was six, jii-chan is Issei. He managed to immigrate right after the war, somehow. They’re both strong-willed, and argue in front of people a lot. Please talk to baa-chan as much as possible. The more you keep her occupied, the better.”

“What happens if I don’t?” Bokuto stage-whispered, then knocked on the door with almost malicious intent.

Keiji didn’t get a chance to answer as the door whipped open and Tetsurou’s demonic grin loomed over them.

“Ojama shimasu!” Bokuto called while kicking off his flip flops.

And so began the third-most harrowing experience of a very trying day.
“This is embarrassing,” his mother groaned. “I should have paid attention in J-school. He’s forgotten more Japanese than I ever learned. Please don’t tell me he knows Mandarin too. At least let me have that.”

Keiji’s elegant, willowy grandmother was cooking with Bokuto. Which was phenomenal enough in and of itself: she wanted things her way and never even let Tetsurou in the kitchen. But the layout of the house meant only way his grandmother could keep talking and cooking was if Bokuto helped, which he seemed to be fairly competent at.

Before this moment, the idea of giving him a knife had seemed disastrous.

“He can barely speak English, if it helps, ma,” Tetsurou was gazing fondly at Kenma who was sitting complacently in the dining room with their tiny grandfather: one playing a game, the other reading the paper. “Anyway, Kenma doesn’t know a lick of Japanese and his parents speak it at home. Well, when they’re home, which is pretty much never. He doesn’t know French either, even though it’s his mom’s native language.”

“I’m a tenured university professor! I should at least be able to speak the language my parents sent me to school for.”

“Some people are just linguistically gifted,” Tetsurou watched Bokuto tell some kind of loud, sloppy anecdote as though he were describing a sporting event. “I was readin’ this article the other day, and you learn faster if you don’t ‘feel shy or inhibited about using the second language,’ or in Bo’s case, the third.”

“He’s trilingual?”

“Nominally. Though he certainly has no shame,” Keiji interjected. “Listen to his accent, even I can tell it’s terrible.”

“Baa-chan thinks it’s cute though,” Tetsurou snorted. “She keeps giving him treats. Like a puppy.”

“Don’t you act like you know what he’s talking about,” their grandfather’s grumbling voice called out in response to something his wife had said. “Young man, she has never left California, other than a pretty unwanted stay in the desert. Definitely never been to Japan.”

“Maybe you should have taken her, ojii-chan,” Kenma murmured over his game. Bokuto fell silent, completely shocked. Keiji’s grandmother gave a beatific smile.

“I can’t leave,” Keiji’s grandfather shook out his paper as he scoffed. “You know how much two plane tickets cost? Inns? And there’s the trees to take care of.”

“Your daughters would pay for you to go,” Kenma replied mildly. Keiji’s mother buried her face in Tetsurou’s shoulder and screamed.

A long pause. “What kind of a man takes money from his daughters?”

A much shorter one. “The kind who raised successful ones who love him.”

Bokuto looked at Keiji, eyes big enough to fall out of his head. He probably should have warned him about Kenma and his grandfather’s relationship. But it was easy to forget; Kenma had spent almost as much time with their grandparents as he and Tetsurou had themselves.
“That doesn’t make a difference,” his grandfather huffed.

“It does.”

“Does not.”

“Does so. And Kuro would take care of your trees if you went on vacation.”

Keiji’s grandfather stood up, throwing his newspaper on the table then bracing himself with his hands as he leaned forward. “Kenma,” he rumbled, “you are the best thing that has ever happened to this family. Keeping that one in line,” he nodded towards Tetsurou, who was trying to make his hair slick back.

Kenma flushed, bending over his game even further, “…maybe.”

Pretending her husband hadn’t been speaking at all, Keiji’s grandmother turned back to Bokuto to resume their conversation. This time in English, her complete lack of an accent contrasting with her husband’s soft Japanese inflection.

Keiji’s stomach churned, and not from the leftover salt water.

“How is it that you and my grandson met, Bokuto?”

“I introduced them, obaa-chan,” Tetsurou spoke up in a clear happy, I-am-a-liar-who-isn’t-lying-right-now voice. “Thought they’d hit it right off, and whadya know? They did.”

“Well aren’t you a skilled nakōdo, Tetsu,” she cooed.

“This is the only time it’s ever worked,” Kenma murmured, earning him a chuckle from his table.

“I didn’t realize people did that for two boys,” Keiji’s grandmother mused.

“Mama!” his mother hissed, teetering on the verge of a scathing lecture. It wasn’t really necessary. She wasn’t being malicious, just indelicately curious. But he had no interest in getting in the middle of a mother-daughter argument. At least his grandparents weren’t being racist this time. Because they sometimes were, and it was a lot less based in uninformed curiosity.

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing! If it’s good enough for George Takei and that Gandalf person, it’s good enough for me.”

Her husband grunted but was once again ignored.

She turned to Bokuto and smiled, “I’m happy my Keiji has taken to someone so sweet and cultured. Speaking of sweet; Tetsu will you run and get my photo book? Bokuto, has my Emily ever showed you what a charming baby Keiji was? He used to eat flowers.”

Keiji glared at Bokuto hard enough to burn down the house.

“Agaasheeee! You looked like a beach ball!” Bokuto’s wheezy laughter had been going the entire ride home. “I’ve never seen a fatter baby in my whole life, and I’ve seen some healthy babies.”

“Yes. I was fat. I liked to eat. I still like to eat. It’s only genetics that keeps me this thin. Someday, I
am going to be fat again.”

Idling at a stop sign, Bokuto folded his arms over the steering wheel and rested his head on them, smiling at Keiji so softly that it made him want to jump out of the car.

He swallowed instead.

“But the flower thing was cute. I’d been wonderin’ why your mom called you that. What a cool first word! Mine was ‘ball’ or something.”

“I was a fourteen months old with a developing brain,” Keiji stared out the window, only to find Bokuto’s reflection looking back at him. “I can’t be held accountable for my behavior at that time. Tetsurou should be held responsible for feeding me weeds until I developed a taste for them.”

“You know I told her I didn’t want to see those naked pictures, right? In Japanese too. Really formal, even.”

“…yes. I appreciate that. Although saying you were ‘saving it for our wedding night’ did not work.”

“Sorry, dude,” Bokuto hung his head a little, though he was still chuckling. “I messed up. I was supposed to distract from that shit.”

Keiji sighed. He wasn’t angry. He didn’t want Bokuto to feel any more unnecessary guilt than he already felt.

“You did. Typically it’s immediate and endless. We didn't have to talk about our relationship or our future at all. And jii-chan got to show you his fruit trees.”

“Yeah what’s up with those? He seems kinda obsessed.”

“Another time, perhaps,” Keiji took a deep breath, seeing the lights on in the kitchen as they parked in front of the house. He jumped out of the truck as quickly as possible, then tramped up the sidewalk, eager to get things over with. He had only panicked twice at his grandparents, once in the bathroom, and once in the backyard while everyone else was distracted by the trees.

“Right now,” he said over his shoulder, “we have to have the worst conversation of our lives. Remember, talk as little as possible. And I’m sorry. But if we don’t do this, I won’t be allowed to fulfill my half of the agreement.”

“I’ve been through some pretty rough talking-tos, Akaashi,” Bokuto punched his shoulder, “don’t worry bout me.”

His mother opened the door before Keiji could even reach the knob, a glass of red wine in her hand. The crimson flush that spilled across her face indicated it was her third.

“What an ineffectual peace offering.

“I’ll have a beer, if you’ve got one,” Bokuto chirped. Keiji hadn’t anticipated this. Alcohol hadn’t been offered the last time, so he hadn’t prepped Bokuto to turn it down. Of course, if what Tetsurou and Bokuto himself had said were true, he could more than handle his alcohol. But it was the spirit of the thing.
Keiji shook his head, settling into the scowl that would dominate his face for the rest of the evening. He'd survived a riptide. He could survive this.

"When I noticed that one of my sons was developing crushes on television doctors and saw that the other had secret pictures of his best friend up in his closet, I began exploring the district’s sex ed curriculum. Keiji, I think you were in sixth grade at the time."

If she was looking for confirmation of his crush on Dr. House, she was not getting it.

"Of course, I wasn’t about to say anything to either of you. Whatever was going on was for you to figure out on your own. But I wanted to be ready."

His mother paused to drink her wine in the slow easy way that said she’d entered professor mode and they were going to be there forever. At least she was starting out with something more or less innocuous. He still had nightmares about the extreme details from the last time.

"I discovered that the only kind of sex mentioned in any detail at even the high school level was the kind that could get a girl pregnant. On top of that, consent, gender, and sexual identity were completely absent."

Neither he nor Bokuto said anything because Keiji had insisted they both say as little as possible. But she wasn’t wrong.

"This was worrisome to me," she sipped her wine, “for several reasons, including but not limited to the fact that going solely by the act itself, anal sex is more complicated and dangerous than vaginal, and yet a fair number of teenagers have it."

And there it was. Keiji wanted to die.

Bokuto on the other hand, was tilting his head in either confusion or interest. It was hard to say which, but he needed to stop.

"Though this kind of data is obviously difficult to collect, some statistics indicate that more straight couples have anal sex than gay men anyway."

Why was this necessary.

"So putting even a basic mention in the curriculum would have been in a large percentage of students’ best interests. I called, put in a formal request for some alterations, even went to the school board with Marcia Hanamaki to insist gender, consent, and sexuality be more broadly covered topics, but they did nothing except make her son's life a living hell."

"That sounds real brave to try though," Bokuto asserted. Keiji wanted to sew his lips together, permanently.

His mother chuckled indulgently, “Thank you, sweetheart.”

She seemed to expect that Keiji say something as well. But he was not going to do that. The awkward silence would be pried from his cold, dead hands.

“Anyway, these little conversations were a result. I was trying my best to educate them at home, but
if my boys weren’t being taught even the very basics of how to be safe and consensual in school, their partners certainly weren’t. I couldn’t trust other parents to do the same, especially considering the number of young men who weren’t even out to their families.”

“Wow!” his obnoxious, traitorous, fake boyfriend scratched his chin. “Y’know, I never even thought of that.” He wasn't even humoring her. That was the worst part.

She leaned forward, holding the bell of her wine glass between her palms. “I don’t want you to feel unsafe, or attacked, Bokuto. I’m not going to judge you. But this is very important, and if you can’t talk about sex, you should not be having it.”

There was another long, awkward silence, this one as enormous as her obliviousness.

“So, I could talk about anal fissures, or fecal bacteria, or the necessity of Kegels, or any number of health and safety concerns when it comes to penetrative and oral sex between two men. But Keiji already knows what he’s doing and at this point I trust him to share that information.”

“Christ, mother!”

At the exclamation Bokuto’s hand jerked, like he was going to reach out to grab his knee. Then he seemed to think the better of it, probably due to their earlier discussion. A small part of Keiji wished he would have. A larger part wished Bokuto didn’t exist.

“Bokuto, sweetheart, have you had any partners before?”

He swallowed, then started counting on his fingers. Eventually he ran out of fingers. “Um. More than ten? Girls and guys. More girls though. But, sorry, aunti– er, Dr. Akaashi, I… can’t remember, exactly, but I”

“I don’t need to know how many,” his mother cut him off apologetically. “What I need to know, or rather, what my son needs to know is the last time you’ve been tested for STIs.”

Bokuto hunched down in his chair, looking like he expected to be decapitated.

“Never?” he laughed nervously. “Always used a condom though.”

Keiji regretted refusing the alcohol. He wanted to be dancing-on-tables, ready-to-puke, calling-his-dear-mother-a-bitch-to-her-face wasted. Bokuto did not deserve this. He absolutely did not deserve this.

“That’s okay! You can go to the campus health and wellness center. Getting tested is free for students. And there’s a place Keiji can go here in town.”

That was absolutely in no world necessary, and she had crossed a line. “Mom! We were both virgins!”

What a profoundly stupid way to put all of his cards on the table.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. His mother pinned him with an icy glare. The cheerful educator mask fell away revealing the person who killed all the spiders in the house while he and Tetsurou cowered in a corner.

“Does it look like I give a fuck?”

He had pushed too far and now he was going to be obliterated.
“Listen to me, Keiji Lawrence, and listen well. This is not just idle controlling behavior of a paranoid mother.”

He knew it wasn’t, but that didn’t make it at all pleasant, or even necessary.

“Tetsu – your brother’s father, that is – and I had a dear friend when we were at Berkley together. He introduced us actually. Imagine someone as close to you as Kenma. That is how important Larry was to me.”

Her hand trembled as she finished her wine in a single swallow.

“We found out he was gay the same time we found out he was dying. And he eventually did, from a cold his immune system couldn’t fight off. It took four miserable years. Because, like a huge portion of the gay and bisexual men in the Bay Area at the time, he’d contracted AIDS.”

The moral high ground had collapsed underneath him.

“I am overjoyed that being HIV positive is less of a stigma or a death sentence for your generation, but I don’t care how much more treatable it is now. I am never, ever going to put one of my sons, or anyone my son cares about at risk for that kind of death. I don’t care how much you trusted Chikara. I do not give a damn about what he told you. You will take this seriously, or you will never bring a boyfriend into this house again.”

Their eyes locked, the quiet sound of Bokuto chugging his entire beer at once echoing in the background.

“Fine,” Keiji exhaled, feeling embarrassed, which made him unbearably angry. “But only if I never have to have one of these fucking conversations again.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” his mother smiled back, gentle, affectionate, and completely authentic. “I think you’re enough of a grown up to handle things from here. Just don’t say ‘fuck’ in front of your mother. I didn’t raise you to talk like that.”

He hated her.

“That was kinda intense considering we’re not gonna kiss anymore,” Bokuto chuckled, flopping onto the stoop and running his hands through his hair. It was almost an hour after the Talk. They’d spent the rest of the time talking about Bokuto’s college experience. Well, Bokuto and his mother had. Keiji had spent the time glowering.

He sat primly beside Bokuto, awkwardness drilling him into the ground. He didn’t want to think about the issues his mother had inadvertently brought up. She had given “that dude that hurt you” a name. A name Bokuto could say whenever he wanted. It was all well and good, mulling things over in his head. But having Chikara brought up unexpectedly? In front of someone who he—

“I will n……never ask you to do anything like that again,” he cut off his own thoughts, forcing his attention back to the situation at hand. His stutter echoed loud across the front yard. “I understand if you’d like to ca-call off our arrangement.”

“What?” Bokuto all but shouted. “Nah. I mean, nobody’s ever told me to do that shit. Or maybe they did, but like, I wasn’t paying attention! Been fooling around since I was fifteen. Should probably get
tested for my own sake. I didn’t even know the campus had a health and wellness center. Your mom did me a favor!”

Keiji stared at the ground.

“Look,” Bokuto elbowed him sort-of gently, “today you did a lot of shit you didn’t seem to like very much, all cause of me. Like almost drowning. Are you doing okay, by the way? I mean, you don’t just get over that, dude. And I feel like your mom brought up somethi–”

“I told you I wasn’t any good at surfing,” Keiji weakly chuckled in a feeble deflection.

“Yeah, well, it’s important to me, so I maybe wanted to show you how awesome I was. And I wanted you to like it too! But like, I shouldn’t have been so pushy. I probably shoulda just made you watch. Or, I dunno, waited for later. But there’s not gonna be a later, so…”

“I’m fine, Bokuto. Or, will be with a ni-night’s sleep.”

Bokuto cleared his throat as though he were about to assert some authority.

“Anyway, I think you need a hug from someone who’s not your mom. So, is that okay? One standard bro hug? Or maybe a side hug? Or like…”

“A side hug would be fine.”

He was immediately pinned between two strong arms.

“You didn’t say only one arm,” Bokuto chuckled into his shoulder. “Trapped ya.”

“You’re a diabolical mastermind.”

They sat for several quiet minutes. Keiji was tired. So tired. He wanted very much to relax into the bow of Bokuto’s arms, which was contrary to every action he’d taken since lunch.

“So, uh, do you want us to match for this prom?” Bokuto finally broke the silence, though he did not let go. “Do you want me to rent a tux? Or something else? I’ve never done this sorta thing.”

Keiji had very little interest in seeing a tuxedo ever again.

“Tux rentals are overpriced and never fit. Also, this is very last minute. I’m sure Tetsurou or your roommate would be happy to help you pull something together. Or I could.” Bokuto shook his head violently. “Regardless, anything you might buy, Kenma’s aunt can alter. He and I are going to a sample s-s-s-sale tomorrow, hopefully to find suits.”

Don’t think about stuttering. Don’t think about Chikara. Don’t think about the trainwreck that was the entire day.

“Do you want like… flowers or something?” Bokuto asked. There was a vulnerability in his voice that Keiji didn’t catch at first. He should have, but he was tangled up in his own nonsense.

Instead, he was taken aback. “Do you want me to have flowers?”

“I dunno man,” Bokuto finally released his hug and sat back, his legs fidgeting anxiously. “It’s your prom! Sorry to be so fucking… heterosexual here, but there’s no shows, or movies, or whatever to tell a guy what to do when he’s taking another dude to a dance!”

“You… researched?”
“Akaaaaaaaaashi, you’ve been telling me shit like, ‘Pay attention to your date’s interests, Bokuto,’ ‘Don’t assume things, Bokuto,’ ‘Communication is important, Bokuto,’ ‘Make special dates romantic, Bokuto.’ I did this to learn! Did you think I just wasn’t fucking listening?”

Honesty was vital in this arrangement, even if it was soaked in unexpected regret. He’d already lied once today. He couldn’t do it again.

“I suppose I did.”

Bokuto stood up abruptly. His face was full of raw, confused hurt that he was trying ineffectively to conceal with anger. Like a puppy that someone had ruthlessly kicked.

“Well maybe you should stop assuming shit, Akaashi. Now, if you don’t mind, I gotta go home so I can get up early before work. Gotta get my dick looked at for all the fake sex we’re gonna have.”

He stomped his way to his truck, then peeled away from the curb, radio blaring much louder than was entirely appropriate.

Keiji felt it would be unwise to remind him that tomorrow was Sunday.

He sat alone on the porch for a very long time.

It still felt like he was drowning.

Chapter End Notes

i imagine it's very hard to be a parent.
i want you to show me

Chapter Notes

in which keiji needs sleep and tetsurou deserves better.

(i’m sorry i updated at nine pm. i was on a date and also grading papers.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m absolutely gonna regret this, but get up, Keiji.”

A distant voice. His shoulders were shaking. No, being shaken. He swung out his arm to defend himself, lifting his head to find the source of the disturbance. His knuckles connected with soft-ish flesh that turned out to be his brother’s inner thigh.

The resulting yelp woke him up a little.

Low lamplight was illuminating the room. He could feel angular imprints on his cheek, evidence that he had somehow fallen asleep face-down on his keyboard. Squinting at the screen as he felt for his lost glasses, he noticed a series of self-incriminatory google searches open in his tabs.

benefits of trust scientific studies
 correlation between physical and romantic attraction
 preventing romantic attraction
 how to apologize
 what is officially a rebound

His late night of aggressive researching solidified in his brain, a perfect sphere of regret.

Yanking out the cable connecting the monitor to his laptop, he turned in his desk chair, hoping his brother hadn’t noticed.

Tetsurou wasn’t even paying attention. For reasons unknown, he was digging around in Keiji’s underwear drawer, scrutinizing each pair in the dim light. He decided on one he apparently liked and threw it on the pile of clothes already on the bed. Keiji smacked his lips, too tired to express his confusion and disgust. His bedside clock said it was four fifteen in the morning. The last time he’d looked at the clock it had been two.

“I just left Kenma’s,” his brother grabbed his shoulders and shook a little harder. “He and Mia are gonna be ready any minute now. You can sleep on the way to the city, alright? I’m pretty sure your fifteen minutes of fame are over, but just in case, I got out that baggy outfit that no one ever seemed to recognize you in. There’s jii-chan’s pruning hat, your prescription sunglasses, and a bag with water, a snack, and your wallet in it. Mom put some money in last night, I’m not sure how much. She was going to wake you, but I told her I’d be up anyway.”

Keiji stumbled to his feet and stripped out of his jeans from the night before.

The sample sale.
It had seemed like a smart idea a month and a half ago: Kenma’s aunt getting them tickets to an exclusive designer sale. They could each find something for the prom that was not a run-of-the-mill tux rental or an ill-fitting suit from men’s warehouse. What was the point of paying for something if it wasn’t worth wearing?

But now, getting up at four to stand in line until seven only to battle a mob to gain access to warehouse full of clothes seemed like much less of a rational, thought-out decision. Kenma’s willingness to participate, let alone invite someone along, was completely baffling.

“Why are you being so helpful?” he yawned, kicking Tetsurou so he turned and let him unsteadily change his underwear.

“In case you haven’t been paying attention all our lives, I am a very supportive, kindhearted person,” Tetsurou announced to the wall. “Also, Noya told Mori – who skyped me from Moscow last night – that you nearly drowned yesterday. I dunno what to do with that info, especially its delivery vector, but I thought making sure you made it to this nightmare sale would help me figure it out.”

“There was no need to concern anyone. Especially mom. I was fine.”

“Putting aside almost drowning, you haven’t slept for days. Something’s up, Keiji and I think you need to talk about it.”

Keiji wanted to say no. He was fine.

But he couldn’t. So he said nothing.

Since five-thirty, he, Kenma, and Kenma’s tiny aunt had been standing in line in front of a nondescript warehouse in an LA neighborhood Kejii was unfamiliar with. As fate would have it, the morning was warmer than expected. Dressed in such baggy, concealing clothing, he was sweating like a pig. His brother was probably right. No one was likely to recognize him. If they did, who cared? But the thought still made him feel overwhelmingly nervous, so he appreciated the clothes despite the temperature.

The small, gently snoring bodies leaning on each side of him were not helping. Apparently the Kozume family generated massive amounts of heat. But as they could not sit down or they’d lose their place as third, fourth, and fifth in line, Keiji was forced to keep one arm around each of them to hold them up. At least Mia was even shorter and slighter than her nephew. She weighed about as much as a baseball bat.

“Grab everything that you even remotely like. Don’t look at price or even size if there’s only one,” she had instructed in the car. “Hold onto it tight or someone might try to pull it out of your hands. As soon as you’re ready, take off your clothes in some corner, and try things on. If it’s too big? I can fix it. If it’s too small, get rid of it.”

Those had been the most words that Keiji had ever heard the tiny woman say.

But with both of them asleep he was compelled to stay awake in a dull alleyway leading to an uninteresting warehouse. There was nothing to distract him from his thoughts.

There were several current concerns.

**Number one:** Keiji had hurt Bokuto. Having upset Bokuto multiple times, he could tell the difference. In this instance he had caused him actual pain, as opposed to wounding his enormous
pride. Much of Bokuto’s pain appeared to be self-inflicted, reverberations of what seemed to be trauma from the past. Keiji suspected the main source to be his father. But Keiji had managed to create a new source of echoing hurt. Just by being honest, something they had agreed upon.

**Number two:** Keiji had broken that agreement. He had lied. His concerns regarding their physical relationship had nothing to do with sex. In fact, if he could have sex with Bokuto without repercussions he would do so. Keiji suspected he was good at it. He had suspected it enthusiastically several times in recent memory.

**Number three:** In some way, Keiji was lying to himself. But he didn’t understand exactly how. The reason he had stopped their physical interaction was because it had surpassed mere physicality. They had somehow connected intellectually as well. It was no surprise he wanted…

*That was it.*

All of this confusion was, in all likelihood, nothing but impulse. An attempt on the part of his psyche to create its version of balance. An attempt no doubt fed by his lack of sleep, recent trauma, and unresolved baggage over his past breakup.

The twinge in his heart when Bokuto smiled was mere reflex.

All around him, the people standing in line began to shift and speak to each other, instead of staring at the ground like the world’s most unmotivated zombies. He gently shook the Kozumes, hoping that they’d wake without trouble.

“It’s nearly time.”

Mia nodded and stepped apart from them, looking at her phone like someone who had important business to take care of. She had to be somewhat successful to get them three tickets to this event. It was unquestionably worthwhile for her to attend. But why her nephew wanted to go was bewildering. The crowds, the pushing, the noise, the chaos. Kenma had had panic attacks over less.

“The is going to be hell for you,” Keiji looked down. “Why are we here?”

His neighbor glanced up, eyes wide and glassy with sleep.

“I wanted to help you. And I…” he stared with deep irritation at the sidewalk, “am sick of Kuro always being the romantic one.”

Keiji didn’t have the opportunity to respond, because the doors opened, and it was either get in, or get trampled.

There were distinct benefits of being tall, and in this case, one of those allowed Keiji to keep Kenma from being crushed. His neighbor was a great deal tougher than he appeared, but he was hardly aggressive. Everyone else taking advantage of the sale seemed to be off-season rugby players desperate for something to wear. At one point, Keiji just picked Kenma up and ran to some unpopulated racks, for no other reason than to just have a space to breathe.

He must have made a good decision because at that point, Kenma took over. He tossed suits, jackets, and trousers over Keiji’s arm while simultaneously gathering things for himself, sorting efficiently through racks as though it were a game he’d played for hours. In no time at all he was grabbing Keiji by the shirt and pulling him over to a trifold mirror in the emptiest corner of the space. The situation demanded that they begin to try things on. In public.
He’d expected as much, but it was still uncomfortable.

Keiji stripped down to his underwear and “Life is Better with an Irish Setter” t-shirt, still wearing his sunglasses and hat. A quick scan of the sale told him no one seemed to be looking at him, but now that he was eighteen it wouldn’t be illegal for a photo of him in his underwear to circulate. The population was about 60/40 men to women, including personal shoppers, designers, as well as people who just wanted a good suit. Some of them were recognizably famous. None of them seemed to have the slightest interest in looking at anything but menswear.

“Decide to just wear that?” Kenma nodded at his current getup while struggling with bright blue pants that were much too large. Keiji rolled his eyes and tried to pull on some navy pinstriped trousers that already looked too short.

As he tried on several horrible jackets, he thought about his earlier conclusions. He considered all of his browser tabs. They were soaked in more desperation than he was comfortable with. His own biased logic was not enough. It was imperative to bring in a supplementary opinion.

“Kenma.”

“Eh?” Kenma was in his underwear again. Pikachu underwear, which Tetsurou had probably picked out at four o’clock that morning.

With anyone else, Keiji would have to establish context and rules for the upcoming conversation. Ask if he was allowed to ask. Luckily, Kenma wasn’t anyone else. Unluckily, Keiji was going to ask some questions not disconnected from the source of the Pikachu underwear. About things he’d rather not know.

“When did you realize you had feelings for my brother?” he asked as he slipped on an ill-fitting serge jacket. Regardless of size, he disliked it.

“When he fell down the stairs outside of Mrs. King’s classroom,” Kenma answered without a moment’s hesitation.

That was… unexpectedly certain. Also Kenma had been nine.

“What brought on that realization?” Keiji stripped down again, someone pulling the unwanted suit from his discard pile almost immediately.

“I was scared he’d die. I realized he wasn’t as annoying as I thought. But still pretty annoying.”

Keiji’s next pair of trousers were a dark, muted teal. When Kenma had grabbed them, he’d made a face. Now, away from the other suits he liked the color. It was unique.

But back to matters at hand, there was no way he was going to put Bokuto in a situation where he’d be hurt just to clarify Keiji’s own feelings. And the inverse was a non-issue since said feelings had not been altered by Keiji’s own brush with death. Anyway, weren’t feelings evoked by near-death altered by adrenaline and other hormones? That would certainly make them inauthentic.

“Why did you wait until he said something seven years later?” it was impossible to hide his curiosity as he slid the teal trousers over his legs. “You went out with Shouyou for two years. Why didn’t you just say something?”

Kenma took a long time to respond, which could be due to his bent-over struggle with his pants. But it likely wasn’t.
“I like Shouyou, and I wanted to date him. And because I didn’t want to.”

“Why?” Keiji pressed, uncharacteristically insistent.

With a bit of a hem, the trousers would fit.

“For the same reason you’re asking me, Keiji,” Kenma peeked out of the curtains of his hair.

“Huh?” Keiji slid on the teal jacket and turned to look in the mirror, switching out his sunglasses for his regular ones and taking off his hat for a quick look.

The trousers were perfect, accenting the length of his legs and the newly established curve of his ass. The cut of the jacket flattered his slender build. The color made his eyes intense and complemented his darker skin tone. With a black shirt, it would be perfect.

“My feelings were only certain in retrospect,” Kenma murmured, coming to stand beside him. “Hm. You should buy that.”

He was right.

“Are you sure that’s what you want, KenKen?” Mia’s wide dark eyes were glowing as she gazed at the three-piece Gucci suit in Kenma’s arms. “It’s very striking.”

Her nephew hummed and nodded, taking his place in the insanely long line. “It’s big. I’m not a sample size.” She nodded thoughtfully then wandered away. Keiji regretted the fact that she was going to get lost and they’d have to find her.

“People will definitely notice you in that,” Keiji said, trying to keep both of them upright with enough space to breathe.

“Maybe a little,” Kenma admitted. “But they’re going to pay more attention to you. I don’t have any scandals.”

A rich, familiar voice from behind snatched away his chance to for a snappy retort.

“Yoo~hoo, Keiji. It’s been too long.”

Or perhaps not long enough.

He turned to see the neon bright smile of Tooru Oikawa. Perhaps the second-to-last person in the world he wanted to see. Especially now.

The first year of college had not done Tooru any favors. He’d gained muscle and lost weight, but he didn’t seem healthy. In fact, he looked exhausted.

He also didn’t care about the obvious personal distance Keiji was establishing, and put his arm around his shoulders.

“A little birdie told me you’ve got a hot prom date,” he teased. “Well, actually your date told me himself. Including the hot part. Isn’t that something? What a small world. You know I’m his setter, right? Just couldn’t decide between the court and the screen.”

Keiji’s sympathy evaporated immediately.
He felt… jealous. Wildly, deeply jealous. Which made no sense at all because when he had quit volleyball it had been with no second thoughts. There was no need for any: in middle school Keiji had been the setter for the number one under sixteen spiker in the country. Their team had gone to the junior’s national tournament. They had won. Granted, that spiker had been his cousin, but he hadn’t been playing by himself.

Actually he was pretty certain Bokuto was going to hate Kyoomi when he started playing for Ohio State in the fall.

But putting that aside, if Keiji wasn’t jealous over Tooru’s position or his success in achieving it, there was only one remaining variable.

“Anyway, how are you, Keiji?” Tooru asked, both sincere and nosy. It made Keiji even less inclined to tell him. “Things going well with tall, grey, and chaotic? I’m happy to see you’re finally moving on from–”

“Hello Tooru,” Kenma said softly.

Tooru shrieked as he jumped in surprise. Fear made the pallor of his skin even more noticeable. “I’m sorry Kenma, I am just so… I didn’t even see you!”

“It’s fine.”

But he wasn’t recovering as quickly as he might have and Keiji’s low-grade concern was back. “Where’s Shorty? I’d expect him at something like this before you, Keiji.”

“Shouyou’s little sister had a soccer game,” Kenma answered, tucking away his suit behind Keiji’s back. “He’s renting a tux.”

Tooru blinked, like he knew something. “Well anyway, I’m glad I ran into you two because, Mr. Refreshing and his handsome sailor are back in town! We’re going to one of his dad’s fancy places this evening for karaoke. Apparently, Daichi is shortly off on some kind of Navy… thing for most of the summer. Or something. I don’t know how the armed forces work, I’m a pacifist. Regardless Suga wants to bid him farewell with off-key wailing.”

They all took a step as the line moved forward.

“I’m sure you’ll both hear about it when they wake up, but you should absolutely come. Keiji, bring Bokuto. I know everyone would love to meet him, especially Suga. And he’s had a hard year, you know. Winter in Maryland was just awful. He deserves to be amused.”

Kenma started learning into Keiji’s side as he tapped on his phone screen. Because he was a brat who knew how much Keiji hated it.

“I’ll text him,” Keiji said neutrally. “I’ll certainly come, as long as it’s an open invitation. And as long as no one makes me sing.”

“Kuro and I are going,” Kenma murmured into his phone, “probably.”

Tooru gave his first authentic smile of the entire encounter.

<<bokuto, do you enjoy karaoke?
>>Fck ya love to sing!!!! rlly good at it!!!
This one. Time I dd it with at this big bar in txas and they asked me to do an entour!! Oh dnd did u know that’ it’s japanese? it means open symfonie!!! I like it allot!

<<would you like to meet some of my friends?

>>!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

>>YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

>>Do we gotta practice tho wasn’t expectin nay group things??

>>Not singin like. The thing were doin.

<< you will be fine. we’ll just need to stay in character the entire time.

>>^@,@^ <<i’ve never seen that one before. it’s nice.

After his regrettable emoji compliment, Keiji typed out thirteen different apologies before he gave up and confirmed the time that they would pick Bokuto up. Though it was hard to tell via text, there didn’t seem to be any lingering bad feelings from the night before.

At least not on Bokuto’s end.

Keiji napped for the rest of the day, the two thousand dollar Prada suit he’d purchased for a small fraction of the original cost hanging triumphantly on his closet door.

The people who made Keiji’s life uncomfortable seemed to appear wherever he went.

Esther Kim was not a bad person. In fact, she was actually someone that Keiji considered a friend. She would be a close friend if Keiji hadn’t been thrust into a situation that forced him to stop trusting anyone he didn’t know well. An extremely skilled animator, Esther had more talent than he and Chikara combined. But Esther didn’t believe that. She treated Keiji like he knew much more than he did and the hero worship made him extremely uncomfortable.

She’d also tried to set him up with her cousin, the one boy in school that everyone universally believed to be more attractive than Keiji. He was. He was also as scintillating as a broken off chunk of sidewalk. But in addition to Keiji’s own disinterest, Matthew Kim really, really liked girls and only girls, though no one, not even his own family, seemed to believe him.

The two made small talk. Esther was at the karaoke center for the tail end of her cousin’s bachelorette party. She was heartwarmingly eager about the wedding. She mentioned her own girlfriend at least a dozen times, specifically how they had met when the young woman did voice acting for Esther’s most recent animation. Keiji was granted a pleasant view into a happy life.

It was only fair that Esther request he return the favor. And part of him wanted to open up. She wasn’t even part of his fan club. Just a sweet girl with vaguely mutual interests with whom he would have liked to be friends.

“Is that your prom date?” she smiled warmly, pointing at the solidly built man with close cropped hair standing outside of their private karaoke room. “I heard you’d found somebody, and it made me really happy for you.”

For once it wasn’t such a terrible question. Keiji had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. “No. That’s Daichi. He’s Koushi Sugawara’s boyfriend and completely out of my league.” He meant it.

“Koushi?” Esther looked up at the ceiling as she muttered the name a few times, trying to remember. “Who’s that?”
As if on cue, the exterior doors opened and the warm air blew in from outside.

“He is,” Keiji pointed at the silvery blonde making an unintended entrance, his hair tossing in the breeze from the air conditioning.

“Oh,” Esther swallowed. “Oh I see.”

There were a few reactions that one could have upon seeing Koushi Sugawara – Suga, as he liked to be called – for the first time. All of them involved both awe and terror. For straight men, they often involved some kind of gay crisis. Suga was kind. Suga was beautiful. Suga could gently crush you with the heel of his hand.

But Suga wouldn’t.

Unless you gave him a reason.

“Keiji!” gentle brown eyes lit up and he rushed across the lobby for a hug. Or what seemed to be a hug. At the very last instant he swerved, smacking Keiji hard upside the head. “Did you get taller? You certainly got prettier. You need to stop being so greedy. Share some with the rest of us.”

“I doubt that’s necessary for you,” Keiji glanced around for Esther as he rubbed his head, but she had scuttled away.

“No but, really,” the excited tone faded into sincerity. “I am glad to see you. How are you doing? I talked to Chikara last week and he’s–”

Keiji couldn’t help the chill that crept into his voice. “I’d rather not know how he is, thank you.”

“Oh,” Suga blinked in surprise. Which was to be expected; he and Daichi had been halfway across the country when everything had gone down. They hadn’t seen the devastation left in Chikara’s wake.

“I suppose I understand. If Daichi and I broke up, I’d pretend he was dead.”

“I have no idea if you’re joking or not,” Keiji said flatly.

“Neither do I,” Suga beamed.

“Akaashi!” Bokuto boomed from the entrance, stomping to his side, “Kuroo and Kozume are gonna be a minute. Something ‘bout Love Live combos? I dunno what they’re talkin–” he noticed Suga and stopped himself. “Oh! Hey, hey, hey! I’m Bokuto!”

Suga’s eyes narrowed momentarily as he regarded Bokuto’s eager face. “Hello,” he smiled. “I’m Suga. One of Keiji’s friends. I just got back from UMD.”

“Bokuto is a math major at UCLA,” Keiji spoke up before Bokuto could do any damage. “He’s also one of their starting wing spikers,” he continued with little fanfare. Reaching out with both hands, he touched Bokuto’s back and bicep, lightly wrapping himself around him.

“We’re da-dating.”

The sound of digging his own grave had been surprisingly quiet.

“Oh!” Suga’s eyes flashed with new life, and the thirst for gossip to feed it. “That’s just wonderful! Tooru said you had a date to the prom, but I didn’t realize you were seeing each other! How did you meet?”
Keiji’s savior was small, ginger, and generally overexcited. But he did the job.

“Oh my god, Keiji! Oh my god! Is he your new boyfriend? Really???” Shouyou’s eyes were precariously close to falling out of his head as he stared up at Bokuto. He was also bouncing and had no awareness of this fact. And though Keiji did not particularly want to answer this new question, it nevertheless got Suga off his case.

Luckily, he didn’t have to answer at all.

“Hey there, short stuff,” Bokuto grinned, unaware that he was bouncing back. “Recognize me, eh?”

“KA-GE-YA-MAAAAA!” Shouyou yelled in response, blowing the hair off of Keiji’s forehead. He should have expected this kind of chaos.

The woman behind the counter wanted to kick them out. Unfortunately, since Suga was the son of her employer, she could do very little about it. Keiji felt that perhaps being thrown out at this juncture would not be a bad thing.

Bokuto tilted his head at a sharp angle as a much taller person with black hair, responded to his summons. The new arrival jostled Shouyou with excessive violence.


“That’s me!” Bokuto cut him off. “You guys play volleyball?”

“YES! We’ve been to your matches! Like the one against Penn State when you were all WHOOOM and ZAAAAAM!” Shouyou’s bouncing had turned into full-fledged jumping as he acted out the motion of a spike. “I’m Shouyou and I’m the ace!”

“Hey!!” Tora, one of the two candidates up for that position, and Ryuu (the other) protested simultaneously.


Bokuto glanced at Keiji with very little subtlety. “So you’re the guy good enough to make Akaashi quit, ehhh?”

Tobio’s face turned white and he whirled towards Keiji with uncommon remorse. “No! What?!!? Keiji, I wanted you to stay and help me with… people! I thought you left because of Chik–”

“There were a lot of r……easons I left,” Keiji responded. “You don’t need my help. Just learn to be patient.”

“Yeah, learn to be patient, Tobiiiiiooo,” his boyfriend jibed, letting loose an argument that gave Keiji and Bokuto the opportunity to escape. Bokuto did not seem to want to escape (number twenty-six, desperate for praise), but Keiji was not giving him the choice.

“But I have so many questions!” Shouyou wailed as Tobio dragged him to the men’s room where they would fight and then kiss and then knock the towel dispenser off the wall.

“I apologize,” Keiji began. The two of them might as well have been alone, as almost everyone else around them was reuniting, oblivious to anyone else. “I should have given you some background on the people who would be here. And perhaps we should have settled on a more coherent backstory.”
Bokuto was not listening. His eyes were shining as he vibrated where he stood, “They know who I am! I’m famous, Aaaaasheee!” He focused on Keiji and grinned, bright as a lightning bolt, “They recognized me cause of volleyball!! I always feel bad cause I work my ass off but I’m not number one, but people know who I am anyway! They came to my matches!!! I bet they’re crazy impressed with my cut shots. Nobody else can do ‘em like that, not even Ushijima!”

Keiji’s own experiences with fame left him at somewhat of a loss as to how to associate any positivity with the experience. So he went with the obvious truth.

“You would be excellent whether or not people recognized you, Bokuto.”

Bokuto stopped moving altogether. Or breathing.

Keiji was supposed to be getting better at this, not worse.

“Can you say that again,” he mumbled, looking down at the floor and then back at Keiji’s face like he wasn’t allowed to do either.

“You’d be excellent whether or not people recognized you,” Keiji said again, wondering how he could soften or refine the statement for Bokuto’s delicate sensibilities. “I don’t believe there is any significance in fame, but there is no question of your ski–”

“Can I hold your hand?” Bokuto interrupted.

Saying yes immediately would imply a level of desperation that Keiji did not want to advertise, despite how much he’d been craving some kind of physical touch. “I told you in the car,” he said quietly, “mild physical affection in a group is necessary. You don’t need to ask.”

“Yeah, but…” Bokuto seemed to think the better of whatever he meant to say, and instead reached out for both of Keiji’s hands. He lifted them up and laced their fingers until their palms were squeezing together tightly. “So, I guess you already know I’m awesome, but you’re pretty great yourself, Aaaaashee,” he grinned, wide and ridiculous.

Keiji’s throat swelled up in a way he was entirely unused to, despite the embarrassing first half of the statement.

“Okay!” Tetsurou interrupted the moment, throwing himself through the front entrance. Kenma followed, face in his game, a handful of Tetsurou’s shirt keeping him from walking into walls. “What are the rules this time?”

Bokuto dropped Keiji’s hands and tilted his head.

“You karaoke with rules?”

Power ballads.

Normally Keiji had no real opinion on the decided upon genre for the evening, since in no situation would he ever sing. Any. In elementary school, when speaking without constant stammers and gaps seemed like crossing a wide barren desert on his own, his speech therapist had suggested he sing his words instead of speaking them. At the time, singing was the only thing that felt more humiliating than stuttering.

Keiji still could not carry a tune in a bucket.
He could appreciate music well enough, and he enjoyed watching his friends have fun, but participating himself was not an option. The single exception was the day in freshman year when he and Chikara had lost a bet with Kenji Futakuchi over how many Snickers bars Nobu Aone could eat in one sitting. Instead of the Justin Bieber song he’d been ordered to queue up, Chikara had “accidentally” selected “Gangsta’s Paradise.” He had sung because he could do so without awakening a long-sleeping demon. And since rapidly reciting expressive poetry was the alternative to singing that Mr. Yamiji had come up with in first grade, Keiji could rap, if necessary. So he had. Aone had even clapped.

But even for an observer, power ballads were a little much.

“Suga, is this really what you want?” Daichi sighed, running his hand through his growing out buzz cut.

“Would you like to do something else, love?” Suga smiled back. Next to him Tooru cackled unbearably until his boyfriend, Hajime, smacked him upside the head. “Rap anthems, perhaps?”

That wouldn’t be so bad, actually.

Wedged between Bokuto on one side, and Kiyoko on the other, Keiji watched impassively as Suga and Daichi continued their sexually-charged, passive-aggressive power struggle. On his left, Bokuto and his brother were muttering to each other secretively, a terrible prospect. Kiyoko was rolling her eyes and chuckling at something her girlfriend, Yui, had said. Somewhere Shouyou was babbling at Kenna, while Tobio was telling him to calm the hell down. Keiji could hear Ryuu, Noya, and Tora in the middle of some sort of man-off, though they were at too sharp an angle to see.

“Hey, Akaashi, you gonna sing?” Bokuto turned from his brother, who was grinning insufferably. “We could do somethin’ together!”

“I don’t sing.”

“Awh c’mon,” Bokuto pushed, turning on the seat and putting his arm around Keiji’s shoulders. “You don’t gotta be shy. Nobody’s gonna judge you, they’re your friends!”

Bokuto’s arm was heavy. Keiji felt smothered. Suga and Tooru were looking at him. Daichi and Hajime were trying very hard not to, which was worse.

Number twenty-seven – too pushy.

“You do not want to hear me sing,” Keiji crossed his arms, the motion bringing him closer into Bokuto’s side. Caught in such gravity, he couldn’t bring himself to move.

“Yeah I do!” he whined. “C’mon what’s your deal?”

Keiji blinked impassively.

Leaning down out of what could only be a recently developed sense of privacy, Bokuto muttered low instead of quietly, “Akaaashi, one of these days I’m gonna convince you to tell me somethin’ about yourself not by accident. It’s gonna be so awesome I’m gonna piss myself.”

Keiji looked over his shoulder, their faces close.

“You’ve got two and a half more dates to make your dreams come true.”
Keiji didn’t consider “I Want to Come Over,” to be a power ballad so much as a lesbian anthem, but that was probably his own misogyny speaking. Yui belted it at the top of her lungs either way. Kiyoko was supposed to be embarrassed and blushing when she finished, but she looked like she wanted to pin her to the wall. Moving over in the booth to clear a seat for the triumphant girlfriend, Keiji bumped into Kenma, instead of Bokuto as expected.

“Our talk didn’t help,” Kenma said into his DS, as though he had sensed Keiji’s momentary disappointment. On his other side, the man himself was gleefully describing the last match of his high school career to Shouyou – who was enraptured – and Tobio – who stopped him every few seconds to demand a description of the setter’s actions.

There was no chance to respond to Kenma immediately. Tooru had picked up the mic and dove into a particularly passionate version of “Sailing Away,” sung mostly at Hajime’s feet. His boyfriend looked ready to crush the mic with his bare hands. Eventually Tetsurou took pity on his roommate (or his roommate’s boyfriend) and pulled Tooru to his feet so they could harmonize the same line about fourteen times, much to Suga’s disappointment.

“He was doing really well, Tetsu!” he charitably insisted. He threw Daichi’s USNA hat in their general direction despite its owner’s protests.

It was impossible to avoid Kenma’s question for much longer.

“It was helpful,” Keiji vaguely insisted, knowing his neighbor wouldn’t be satisfied. But there was no follow-up. In the wake of Kenma’s silence he was left to a pleasant, perfectly normal conversation about Kiyoko’s first year at Stanford.

But the reprieve was unquestionably short-lived. This was going to become a fight, and when he fought with Kenma, very little was ever said.

He didn’t even know what he wanted him to say. Or why he was even asking. Was he not faking interest in his date well enough? Was he faking it too well? The fact that he enjoyed being physically touched by a tall, at times attractive, muscular man was not a sign of feelings. It was the sign of, at the most scandalous, sexual attraction.

Kenma was dating someone who was perfectly content to never have sex for the rest of his life. The fact that sexual attraction had nothing to do with romance should not come as a shock to him. That was probably not the issue.

Tooru’s repetitive performance finished with a flourish and he put Daichi’s hat on as though he’d earned it. Keiji was extremely grateful that the rules allowed only one song by the same artist. He couldn’t handle more Styx.

Despite merciless teasing coming from all directions, Tobio managed to pull off an awkward “All By Myself,” fairly well. Too well. Shouyou rushed forward, demanding to know what he’d done wrong before his boyfriend had even finishing the song.

Without his eager audience, Keiji anticipated Bokuto’s return, but his date wandered over to Tooru and Hajime instead. He sprawled over most of the space, eating the remainder of their cheese fries and leaving crumbs all over his shirt. They were chatting like they knew each other. Which, according to Tooru, they actually did. Even at a distance, Keiji could see Suga leaning over and trying to pry, but Daichi changed the subject as soon as he started.

Kenma was silent throughout Ryuuu, Noya, and Tora’s caterwauling rendition of “Don’t Stop
Believing.” Keiji could sense the growing pressure of his fingers on the buttons of his DS. About halfway through the song, Bokuto joined in with them, though they were raucous enough that his voice was impossible to pick out.

His neighbor began emitting radiation throughout Suga’s off-key disaster of “Alone,” then poisonous gas during, Shouyou and Daichi’s garbled performance of a song Keiji couldn’t even identify after missing the intro screen.

At some point, Tetsurou and Bokuto cordoned off a corner of the bench to themselves. They were throwing mozzarella bites into each other’s mouths, laughing obnoxiously whenever they missed. Or whenever they made it. Once again, Bokuto seemed to be unaware of Keiji’s existence whenever anyone else was around.

Inattentive, number twenty-eight.

Although, was it really? Keiji had to admit that there was a growing difficulty separating objective observation from his own confounding desire to spend these practice dates together. And not only physically together. Really together. Talking. Listening to Bokuto’s pointless prattle. Hearing him get excited over idiotic things.

Maybe it was Keiji’s perception of what was an appropriate amount of attention that was off. Maybe Bokuto was not doing what he was supposed to do. Either way, they’d have to discuss it, but if Bokuto wasn’t paying Keiji excessive attention then he was clearly uninterested in going past the bounds of their agreement.

In all reality, none of this mattered. Keiji’s own appetite for touch and attention was just an instinctual reaction. And Bokuto was doing well enough that when this was over he would easily be able to find someone if he wanted. Someone well-worth his time.

“Bokuto is taking this arrangement at face value,” he said, turning his head slightly so only Kenma could hear, “I am doing the same.”

His neighbor’s only response was to look constipated.

“Okay, everybody,” Tetsurou said into the microphone, preventing Kenma’s accusation that was Keiji lying to himself. “Now I’m pretty certain you all know how Kenma and I got together.”

“You burned off half my hair when you blew up that supply cabinet,” Daichi growled. “I had an interview with a US Senator the next day.”

“You had an interview with a US Senator the next day.” Daichi growled. “I had an interview with a US Senator the next day.”

“Yeah, but we ended up going home early, that was awesome!” Noya disputed. Bokuto shouted out his agreement, even though he hadn’t been there.

“But this song,” Tetsurou ignored them both as the synthesizer music started, “this song really captures my feelings on the subject.”

Only two chords of “I Can’t Fight this Feeling,” had sounded but Kenma was already halfway across the room. He would have escaped completely, but Tora caught him with a flying tackle. Shouyou threw himself between Kenma’s head and the floor to keep him from getting knocked out. After that, Kenma crept under the hem of Shouyou’s baggy hoodie. He refused to leave until a waitress brought in a cinnamon apple crumble that Tetsurou had ordered for him before the song even started.

Kenma ate it angrily under the table at Shouyou and Keiji’s feet.
Tetsurou sat on the very same table as he serenaded him.

The men in the Akaashi family were not talented singers as a rule, and REO Speedwagon’s vocalist had an impossible range. But Tetsurou cracked and creaked his way through the emotional turmoil of falling in love with your best friend to the uproarious applause of the rest of their friends. Shouyou (who should have known better) cheered loudest, until Kenma pinched him enough to make him stop.

Leaning back, Keiji peeked under the table, looking for signs that Kenma needed to really escape. With the exception of Bokuto, Kenma considered everyone here a friend, or at least so desperately in love with a friend that it didn’t matter. That put his brother’s current stunt well within the parameters of what was considered allowable embarrassment.

Not that it was necessary for Keiji to keep track. Kenma was generally the one who hurt Tetsurou’s feelings. Not the other way around. But in this case, Kenma’s face was beet red, and Shouyou was laughing at him. Everything was fine.

Tetsurou draped himself across the table, and leaned his head over the side. He sang even worse upside down.

And he sang exponentially worse with a face full of ice cream.

The song played on as Tetsurou lifted his head. Ice cream was dripping out of his nose, pieces of apple leisurely coasting down his cheeks. Whipped cream was in his hair.

Keiji started to laugh. He couldn’t help it.

“Oh my god he’s doing it, turn off the music,” Tooru yelled in a tone typically reserved to alert an entire neighborhood that someone was dying.


“Keiji’s laughing!” Suga shouted, laughing himself. Keiji tried to stop, but cinnamon sugar chunks were stuck in his brother’s eyelashes.

Bokuto jumped completely over the table, forcing Kiyoko to throw herself on top of Yui as he landed where she had been sitting. He turned Keiji around and listened, a manic grin on his face. Keiji tried to cover his mouth with his hands, but Bokuto grabbed them with his own and leaned forward.

Keiji held his breath.

“This is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” Tooru pouted. “It pisses me off. Iwa, why don’t you want to listen to me laugh?”

“Listen to yourself laugh, then tell me.”

“Iwaaaaaaaa.”

Keiji sucked in air in a futile attempted to say quiet, then exploded in a burst of cackles.

Bokuto’s jaw dropped.

“Can someone get me like, a napkin or something?” Tetsurou whined.

Keiji laughed even harder.
“Bokuto your song’s coming on,” Tooru trilled.

“Somebody else sing it,” Bokuto yelled over his shoulder to various assenting voices.

In the background, nearly everyone was trying to sing together, though all they were doing was making a terrible discordant noise. Keiji was too busy trying to calm down to care about what they were singing, anyway. Across from him, Bokuto was smiling in this restrained way as though this restraint was the only thing keeping Keiji from stopping. Despite his efforts, humongous, thrilled grins kept bursting across his face and then skittering away.

“Akaashi you’ve got the worst laugh in the world,” he leaned forward to announce, chuckling then swallowing down his own delighted laughter. His thumbs were coasting up and down the edge of Keiji’s clasped hands.

He pulled back and the atmosphere was decidedly less funny.

They were staring at each other, despite the fact that it was a stupid decision. Bokuto looked like the best version of himself, happy and nervous and glowing with life. His eyes were wide and smiling and he was gnawing his lip through his grin. They stared for three beats too long, when Bokuto finally opened his mouth to speak.

Just in time for the entire room to belt out the song they’d been trying to sing all along.

“I wanna know what love iiiiiiiiiis… I want you to show meeeeeeееееее.”

Bokuto dropped Keiji’s hands like they were on fire. He stood on the table, then caught the microphone that Noya had tossed.

Maybe it should have been expected from someone so loud and dramatic. Someone who had managed to motivate an entire chorus to sing along. But Bokuto belted out the song like it had been written for him.

Tora couldn’t go home with Ryuu and Noya. He needed alternative transportation for a complicated, secret reason that only Tetsurou knew. Which was fine, Keiji didn’t care about their business as long as it didn’t concern him. But what was less fine was that their passenger was under the impression that Tetsurou and Kenma were fighting. Clearly not understanding the Kuroo/Kozume dynamic, he insisted Kenma sit in front so he and Tetsurou could “work things out.” He probably thought he was being polite.

This ignorance and his own politeness led to Keiji sitting in the middle of the backseat, with nowhere to put his legs, head, or arms. He held himself up with sheer core strength for five solid minutes, until Bokuto put his arm around him and yanked him into his side. Tora had been staying awake out of a misguided sense of honor, but he relaxed and started snoring the instant he saw Keiji’s head rest on Bokuto’s shoulder. Kenma was unsurprisingly asleep and Tetsurou was listening to some science program on NPR while he drove, which meant he was paying attention to nothing else.

“I’m sorry for grabbin’ ya back there without askin’,” Bokuto tried and failed to be quiet, a hint of misery lingering in his tone. “I just really wanted to hear you laugh.”

“I told you that you didn’t have to ask in a group situation,” Keiji responded in a near whisper. He refused to comment on his own laughter. “You won’t have to at the prom either. People who are dating touch each other. It would be abnormal if we didn’t.”
“What’d it look like if we didn’t?”

Keiji turned his body to get into a more comfortable position where Bokuto could hear him clearly, but no one else would. Bokuto’s hand moved from his shoulder to his waist to adjust.

“It would either seem that we were disinterested in each other, or that we had so much sexual tension that we couldn’t bear to touch. Either would attract questions.”

Bokuto chuckled to himself.

“What?”

“I don’t really know what sexual tension feels like. Cause like, you’ve gotta not do it in order for it to happen, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve always just kinda, gone for it. So I’m guessin’ step one is you don’t… then what?”

“You very much want to have sex.”

How was this not obvious? Number twenty-nine, dense; something Keiji should have cataloged some time ago.

“That’s it?”

“The longer you don’t, the worse it gets, as I’m given to understand.”

Given. Hah. He was throwing his commitment to honestly, even his own personality, out the window. Keiji Akaashi did not dance around important issues. He did not sloppily do the limbo under necessary conversations. He was going to have to address this. But not right now. Not before he had time to process exactly what was going on in Bokuto’s head. In his own head.

His date took a long time to respond.

“…oh. That’s kinda funny cause you’re the only person who I–”

No. Keiji and sexual tension were not going to be part of the same conversation while cuddled up in the back of a car full of friends and family. And not while Bokuto’s hand was still moving. As usual, the movement lacked any awareness. But it still felt wonderful. He needed to stop, but Keiji was not going to stop him.

“Bokuto, I need to apologize for yesterday evening.”

“Nah,” Bokuto leaned back, letting his head rest on the back of the seat, “you were just bein’ honest like always.”

Like always indeed.

“Even so, I was mistaken. As I considered your actions since we began this arrangement, I realized I had made an inappropriate assumption. Just as you said. Honest or not, it was wrong. And it caused you pain, which I regret.”

“Well I’m glad to hear you say that, Akaaseeee.” He could feel Bokuto’s chest puff up beneath him. “You really hurt my feelings,” he added with a whine of questionable authenticity. Keiji supposed he deserved the sharp pain in his chest. It seemed impossible to drive away, despite the clear reality that
Bokuto was hamming it up. “But it’d be alright even if you still thought it. I know I got upset, but like, it was different than usual.”

“Different?”

“Well, ever since we’ve been hangin’ out, it’s kinda that you tell me how I fuck up all the time. And it’s real annoying, because I don’t mess up that much. You’re really picky! Anyway, after that first date, I sat in my room and stared at the wall for like, four hours, feeling like shit. I almost quit. But when I came back you kept on criticizing, no matter how I reacted. People usually just give up on me the minute I can’t calm down.”

This was not the sad backstory he had been expecting, though it was no less intimate.

“I figured I couldn’t be that pissed, cause you only wanted to help. I asked you to help, even. When I think about that, it makes it easier, you know? Like I’m running my brain, and my brain’s not running me. So I don’t get pissed for so long and it doesn’t feel like the worst thing ever when I do.”

Keiji was outwardly unmoved, “You might want to reword the brain portion, Bokuto.”

“Ahh, you know what I mean, Akaaaashi! Anyway, that’s why tonight I tried real hard to talk to all your friends, cause that’s what this date was, right? Meet your friends? I wrote on my hand to listen instead of talk about me all the time,” he held up his ink smudged palm, “but sometimes I couldn’t. Shorty and that Suga were just really interested! Like Tooru was when I told him we were going to the prom together. Guess I’m a pretty prime date, eh?” He innocently fluttered his fingers across Keiji’s shirt, as though he didn’t have the slightest clue what it felt like to have such a gentle touch coasting across his ribs. “Anyway, you’ve got some really nice friends. Yui and Kiyoko are funny as hell especially. They remind me of some of my friends back home.”

He’d been ignoring Keiji on purpose, thinking that was what was expected of him.

Number thirty – needs to ask questions before he acts.

Keiji was wondering if he needed to create a list for himself.

“But, since we’re s’posed to be honest,” Bokuto added, “I uh, kinda wanted to talk to you more in there. And,” he swallowed and Keiji’s body lifted with the strength of his core muscles, “I um–”

“I missed your c-c…………ompany as well,” Keiji interrupted him for the second time that evening, reveling in his own cowardice. “For the future, meeting your date’s friends does not mean avoiding your date.”

Bokuto pulled him in tight, and Keiji could feel him smile without even looking.

“We’re a bunch of dumbasses, eh Akaashi? It’s gonna be great when we’re friends after this, right? We can hang out all the time, and everything’ll just be awesome.”

Sure it would. Of course. Absolutely.

“I can’t wait.”

Chapter End Notes
okay so the song for this chapter (bokuto's karaoke song) is from the eighties but since it was an integral part of my nineties childhood, it COUNTS. also billboard lists it as one of the greatest songs of all time. and SOMEHOW this song came in 85th on billboard's hot r&b chart in 1984. it is a miracle.

karaoke songs

Yui: i want to come over
Tooru: come sail away
Tobio: all by myself
Suga: alone
Tora, Ryuu, Noya: don't stop believin
Tetsurou: can't fight this feeling
Bokuto: i want to know what love is
if anything could ever feel this real forever

Chapter Notes

in which bokuto graduates

hello, i've waited here for you (oh my god this video)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Psssssst!”

There was only one person insane enough to follow Keiji and Kenma to school. And although that person was someone Keiji regretfully found himself unable to stop thinking about, Keiji also needed him to leave immediately. He had a lot to sort out and he didn't want to do it at seven in the morning.

“Are you kidding me?” A familiar, if entirely unexpected, voice made a liar out of him. “Keiji, we just drove down the whole damn state, the least we can get is a hello.”

He turned and hidden halfway behind the Kozume’s hedge were his friends.

His friends.

It wasn’t so much a question of how many friends he had. He had plenty. Unfortunately, most came with caveats. Friends he’d shared with Chikara. Friends he met through the volleyball team. Friends of Tetsurou’s who had let him tag along until he was no longer just a little brother. It wasn't that he was doubting their affection; more that the ties that bound them were just a bit too situational. After Chikara left, he began to wonder what might happen when that situation was nothing but a distant memory.

But some people were just unequivocally his.

“Holy shit Haruki, he’s smiling. Must’ve really missed us, eh?”

“Either that or he’s drunk,” the smallest member of the group jumped out from behind the hedge. "Keiji only smiles when his enemies are defeated! Right Tatsuki?"

“Knock it off,” the tallest of the three grunted.

Akinori Konoha. Haruki Komi. Tatsuki Washio. Sophomores on the track team whose prank intended for a baseball player had been executed in the wrong locker room. A bookish freshman volleyball player had stepped out of the shower to find no towel. Or any clothing whatsoever. Luckily they’d left his glasses, though the same could not be said for his phone. At the time it was the most humiliating moment of Keiji’s life.

Despite all that, they ended up becoming his closest friends. His people. They hadn't really clicked with Chikara, though they’d gotten along well enough. Their relationship with Tetsurou was fondly adversarial. Kenma found them exhausting.

All Keiji's.
“By the way,” Akinori dragged out an even more unexpected visitor, "we brought your cousin. Didn’t know he was your cousin till San Francisco, though. So a surprise for everybody.”

Well. Maybe not all his.

Yamato shrugged good naturedly. “Hey Keiji. Wanna get breakfast? We’re going to Mexico later, I guess. I’ve never been.”

“I am still a high school student,” Keiji crossed his arms and glanced back at Kenma who was fiddling with his phone.

“You can finish high school any old time," Akinori smirked. "We’re a once in a summer break opportunity.”

Keiji glanced casually at his house, only to see his mother standing in the window, giving him a begrudging go-ahead with a roll of her eyes and a wave of her hand. It wasn’t like he had anything to do in class anyway.

“Would you like to come, Kenma?” he asked, only out of politeness.

“No thank you,” Kenma said into his phone. “Have fun, Keiji,” he added with a distracted half wave.

“So who knew that Haruki’s roommate would end up being your cousin? Small world…” Akinori’s incessant smirk was just a little wider than usual as they sat in the long curved booth in the back of the IHOP.

Yamato rushed to explain. “It was actually kind of funny the way they found out. You know, I do talk about you sometimes. And no offense, Keiji, but I generally refer to you as, ‘my hot gay cousin.’ Which could be any of my male cousins, really. Well, not Kyoomi. But you know. He and I are the only straight ones.”

“None taken,” Keiji shoveled chocolate chip pancakes into his mouth. “Though not Tetsurou, either. Asexuality is not the same thing.”

Yamato grinned, or winced, it was hard to tell sometimes, "Ah yeah. Sorry, I forgot. So anyway, I was telling these guys, very vaguely, about your troubles last year as part of this longer criticism of celebrity culture—"

"It was embarrassingly long," Haruki chimed in.

"I'd just met the guy, but I wanted to unmeet him," Akinori added.

"It was bullshit," Tatsuki grunted through his eggs.

Yamato was unfazed, "Well, of course not everyone has to agree. But anyway as soon as I brought you up, they knew exactly who you were. I felt bad for a while but in the end we just decided we had to stop in Torrance and kidnap you. Also see jii-chan and baa-chan because I haven't seen them in a year and a half."

"And sleep," Tatsuki added, as someone who clearly seemed to need it.

"He’s been doing all of the driving since we picked him up in San Francisco, this warrior," Akinori
reached up to pat Tatsuki's spiked hair until his hand was smacked away.

Keiji wondered how they would react to Bokuto's ridiculous hairstyle. Then he wondered why he had wondered something so utterly pointless, until he decided he was uninterested in an actual answer.

Conversation bounced among the four of them, starting with road trip inside jokes that Keiji didn't understand or particularly care about. There was a brief discussion of Keiji's unfortunate fanclub and their current lull in behavior. Then they moved on to updates from Yamato on Haruki's ineffectual attempts to romance his bio TA. The conversation demonstrated a definite gap in Keiji's knowledge of his friends' social lives. But he was happy to just be in the same room with them again. His cousin was a welcome addition, strangely enough. His dopey, optimistic snark filled a gap in the group Keiji hadn't even realized existed.

He ate his pancakes, and he was content.

"So how have you been?" Haruki all but bounced onto the table. "Did that professor you like let you register for his class without the prereqs?"

Yamato leaned forward, "Wait a sec Keiji, fill me in. Mom never told me where you were headed in the fall."

"UC Irvine. And yes he did, Haruki. Though I don’t register yet for a few weeks. Hopefully it doesn’t fill up."

"I still say that place is too close!" Haruki scowled. "Don't you wanna go somewhere with seasons or something? Portland is great!"

"Seattle is nice too," Akinori drawled. "Rain sure is something."

Keiji toyed with the rim of his coffee mug. "Most other writing programs are in the middle of nowhere. And I dislike being constantly wet and cold."

"Wait. Is this cause of your new boyfriend?" Yamato’s mouth was full of homefries and his eyes were full of suspicion.

Washio scowled, "That's not his style."

"Additionally, I don't have a b…….oyfriend."

There really was no way to say it without sounding extremely suspicious.

Yamato’s eyes got big. "Oh. Mom told me Aunt Emily’d said you had one. Sorry dude, she must have gotten confused. You know how she is." His cousin’s eagerness to apologize left Keiji with small flecks of egg all over his face.

Halfway through a sigh, he realized that he didn’t actually have to hide anything. He trusted that his friends wouldn’t get involved. They’d let him figure things out. And they couldn’t meddle even if they wanted to, since they were on their way to another country.

"I have some- have someone I'm going to the prom with," he told them as neutrally as possible. “We have an arrangement. It’s not remotely romantic, though my mother doesn’t know."

"Oh my god, don't tell me you got mixed up in some weird sex thing!" Haruki leaned over the table.
"Keiji is not that stupid," Akinori pulled him back down. "Not like some people we know."

Tatsuki grunted in agreement and Haruki pulled a face.

"Wow. Keiji this doesn't seem like you at all," Yamato’s default state of mildly amused was shaken. “And I think most people would consider a fake date stupid, actually.”

During the resulting silence, Keiji wished his cousin was some version of chaotic neutral like the rest of them.

“He’s right.” Lawful neutral didn’t seem to be helping either.

“It- it was,” Keiji admitted. For the first time. To anyone, including himself.

“Holy shit,” Akinori cocked his head. “You’ve gotta be deep in it man.”

Haruki, for once, had nothing to say.

Tatsuki slid his extra bacon across the table. “Want to talk?”

Keiji took a piece and then exhaled heavily.

“Y-yeah.”

There was silence for a long moment.

“So?” Haruki leaned on the table. “Tell us then.”

"My emotions on the subject are ch……aos. I told him from the start we had to- had to be honest but how can I ac-accomplish that if I’m confused by my own feelings?”

“See,” Yamato spoke up, “this is why you don’t get a fake boyfriend.”

Akinori smacked him in the back of the head. “Don’t be an asshole, man. We’ll kick you out of the crew.”

“I’m part of the crew?” Yamato murmured to himself in awe.

Keiji chuckled quietly, bitterly. “I was pla-planning on using him as a character, eventually. I took a lot of notes. He was fascinating at first, in a trainwreck sort of way. The arrangement was that I teach him how to d-d-date, he take me to the prom and pretend to be in…..terested in me so I was left alone. It’s going well, he’s learning quickly. To say he’s changed seems arro-arrogant, but it does appear that he can manage himself better. He’d be more than ssssssuitable to date anyone at this point. But now…”

Haruki changed the subject out of nowhere. “Didja ever read Pygmalion?”

“Didn’t think you knew how to read,” Akinori delivered the burn with casual precision.

“You know what, fuck you.”

“I wrote a paper on it at the beginning of the month,” Keiji had a sick feeling that he knew the direction the conversation was headed.

“Me too! Well, heh, I kinda just watched My Fair Lady, since I didn’t have the time to read it for class…”
“See, I told you,” Akinori smirked. “Cannot actually read.”

“But anyway,” Haruki ignored him, “it reminds me of all this. A guy makes this girl into something awesome and he realizes at the end that he’s super into her. But like, does he love what he did? Does he love what she turned into? Is she a project that he doesn’t wanna be done with? Or a cool person who did a bunch of hard work that he just kinda noticed at the end?”

“And?” Tatsuki asked.

“I said he was a dick and got a D on the paper, so don’t ask me,” Haruki shrugged.

Keiji didn’t.

“Welcome back, my darling truant,” his mother smiled at him over the pile of papers she’d scattered all over the coffee table. She had her own office, both at home and on campus, but she always seemed to work from the living room floor.

“How was breakfast with your friends?”

“Thank you for letting me go.” He was sincere but he was also dodging the question.

“Of course,” she stood up, dusting off her legs for no reason. “We need to go to the clinic today anyway. Might as well take the whole morning off. Let’s get lunch at that new panini place, hm? It’s right next door to where we’re going.”

Some people were better suited for a life of crime and manipulation and his mother was one of them.

“Wouldn’t you prefer I edit your manuscript?” he offered, knowing it was pointless to bargain because he’d just end up doing it anyway.

“Nope. You’re going to pee in a cup, my precious son.”

Not just that. A nurse stuck a cotton swab up his dick. Not too far, but anything was too far where objects inserted into his penis were concerned. She used another swab on the inside of his mouth, and after a brief wait shared his predictably negative HIV status. She also took some blood, which he didn’t mind, and gave him a lot of condoms and lube in a brown paper bag. On one hand, free condoms. On the other, he disliked the brand. They had never fit right. Which was probably why they were free.

At least his mother had the decency to wait in the car.

Over paninis, he dangled his results in front of her face, lifting his eyebrows in anticipation of her apology.

“Keiji, I’m not going to apologize for insisting you go. You shouldn’t trust something like this to anyone.” She sipped her iced tea. “But I don’t want you to think I don’t trust you. Either of you. I knew that boy for six years before he ran off. If it weren’t my own son he’d hurt, I’d probably be first in the Chikara Ennoshita line of defense. He’d been through too much for any seventeen-year-old to handle maturely. Both of you had.”

“Mom, can we not t-t-talk about him? Or that?”
“Sorry. What I am trying to say is I apologize for bringing him up in front of your new boyfriend. And in such an angry way. I lost control. I am truly sorry if I shared things you weren’t ready to discuss.”

“Bokuto isn’t my boyfriend,” he insisted. “We’re just dating.”

“Oh?” She did not believe him. “Far be it from me to tell you to rush into anything, but what are you waiting for, little flower? You go on dates, and he comes over almost every afternoon, even if your brother’s not home.”

He wanted to tell her. As bothersome as she was, she was also probably the one person who had anything useful to say after the rogue bomb that Haruki had dropped. But she’d lecture him even more than Yamato had. There had to be something else he could ask that would give him equally useful information.

Well, there was something.

“I don’t want you to tell me who my dad is.”

She dropped her sandwich on the plate with a splat.

He didn’t know what else to call the man. He wasn’t his father in any stretch of the imagination. But “bio dad” sounded like some kind of science experiment. “Sperm donor” felt loaded, full of anger and spite he simply didn’t feel. He didn’t want a dad. He didn’t need one. He honestly didn’t care.

“I don’t think I ever want to know,” he continued. “But I would like to know the difference between him and Tetsurou. How you felt about them.”

If Keiji knew anything, it was that his mother had loved his brother’s father with everything she had. It had destroyed her when he died, to the point of ignoring Tetsurou when he was born and almost destroying her own career. She had not loved Keiji’s father. Not even a little. It had likely been a brief infatuation during her own self-destruction. Maybe even a one-night stand.

A bad decision.

His mother looked hurt. “Darling, Tetsu would have been your father, even if he knew you weren’t his. Even if I’d cheated on him and came crawling back pregnant, he still would have raised you as his own. In the abstract, you are both his children to me. The only reason you don’t have his name is because I never took it.”

She sighed as she realized how pointless, maybe even hurtful, that was for him to hear.

“I’m sorry. That’s not what you asked,” she bit her lip. “Are you certain you want to know, darling? You’ve never even let me mention him before.”

It was hard to explain aggressive disinterest, so he just nodded his head.

“The person you’re asking about,” it seemed she didn’t know what to call him either, “helped me run away, if only briefly, from the nightmare my life became after the car accident. He unknowingly left me the most precious gift in the process. But we were running away all the same.”

Reaching out, she took Keiji’s hand and idly played with his knuckles. He strongly suspected it was a gesture that hadn’t originated with her.

“Tetsu and I stayed put, even when it meant confronting things we did not want to address. He made
me want to be the best version of myself. For myself. He gave me the space to do so. We made each other better people without even realizing it. That’s the sort of man you fall in love with.”

There was a long, heavy pause. He pretended not to notice that he had made her cry, because it would only make her cry more. So he just put his free hand over both of hers. They were so small.

“Thanks mom,” he murmured, feeling sick for a number of reasons.

His mother, insightful as she was, misinterpreted his discomfort. No surprise since no one expects their child to engage in a pointless fake relationship.

“You don’t have to decide the rest of your life right now, Keiji,” she said softly. “But it’s okay to take risks. I know what it feels like to be hurt and I truly don’t want you to rush, but you also can’t hold off on real intimacy for fear that one of you might be hurt. What else are you going to do? Shut down your feelings? Run? No one learns anything that way.”

Great minds think alike, apparently.

Bokuto had pulled up to his house just before dinnertime for their “surprise final date.” This cemented his practice of giving Keiji next to no information on what to expect, other than “wear pants and bring a hoodie.” Kicking off his flip flops as he came in the door, Bokuto nervously glanced between Keiji’s mother and Keiji himself, as though he was required to do something but wasn’t allowed to do it.

Keiji resolved the issue by lifting his head and giving Bokuto a rather uninspired peck on the cheek. The action suggested he was trying to hide while doing the exact opposite. Bokuto stiffened, which made him feel terrible. Immediately after that Keiji was disgusted with himself for caring about such reactions. This sequence of disappointment and then disgust was becoming such a part of his life that he should have been used to it by now.

“Bokuto, sweetheart,” his mother’s voice broke through Keiji’s mental chaos, “would you like to stay for dinner? I’m frying some pork chops.”

“Ah, thanks Dr. Akaashi, but we’ve gotta head out if we’re gonna there on time. We might be pretty late though. Or maybe…” he winced, “not back till the morning?”

She raised her eyebrow dangerously. “Just where are you taking my son?”

“Can I whisper it to you? It’s a surprise.”

Keiji glowered as Bokuto dipped down to tell his mother whatever it was that they were doing. Watching her face gradually light up filled him with dread.

“A grocery store? Pure romance.”

“Akaaseee!” Bokuto’s whine was inappropriately loud for a public space. “You don’t think I’d spend my graduation date someplace so dumb, do you?”

“Difficult to say. Last week you and Tetsurou made pizza flavored donuts.”

“Alright mister smart ass, first of all, it was an experiment. Second of all, if Kuroo had just listened to
me and put tomatoes in the dough they would’ve been awesome. Anyway, just pick out what you want to eat tonight. Sky’s the limit, as long as we don’t gotta cook it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been granted such an elegant meal,” Keiji blithely scanned the breakfast aisle. However, his foray into the world of carbs was cut short.

With a single touch, Bokuto pinned him against the shelves. His hands on the metal under the cereal boxes on each side of Keiji’s head and his entire body was very much in his space.

“Can you be nice for a single second, Agaashi?” he asked low and soft while he gave a sideways grin. Nothing was truly threatening about his body language. Keiji could probably gently nudge him away.

But that would reveal the fact that he was trembling.

“A single second is not ve-very long.” he responded with as much disinterest as possible. He could feel the tension between them in his bones.

Then Bokuto squinted over his shoulder at the shelves behind him.

“You know, I don’t think Lucky Charms has real marshmallows in it. Like, they’re small and crunchy and crumbly and not like puffy and shit. Unless they cooked them. Do ya think they cooked them, Akaashi?”

Neither Keiji nor his raging hormones were well-versed in cereal ingredients.

They drove. And drove and drove until all that was left of the city was the orange glow in the sky behind them. And then they drove some more. Keiji put his window down when they were away from the exhaust of the highway. A blue tarp on the back of Bokuto’s truck flapped noisily in the wind. The sound was irritating and soothing all at once.

There was no way Bokuto could know about Keiji’s love for long drives in the middle of nowhere. Of his affinity for the desert. But there was no other place they could be headed. Keiji had driven these roads dozens of times, first with his family, then with Chikara and their friends, now alone.

A particularly obnoxious part of the country song (number thirty-one – abysmal tastes in music) Bokuto was humming along with reminded Keiji that he wasn’t actually alone at all.

Eventually they turned onto a scrubby road in the middle of nowhere. It was dusk, the last fingers of the cloudless sunset dragging across the scrubbly ground. Bokuto had lost radio reception at least a half hour previous. Keiji’d felt him begin to speak over and over again, only to stop after a single syllable. He wasn’t certain why he fell silent but if this was an advanced-level date, it was important for Bokuto to navigate things himself.

Also he had found this rare silence in Bokuto’s company to be blissful beyond what he was comfortable to acknowledge.

They rolled to a stop as the road ended. Bokuto jumped out of the truck, flashlight in hand, even though the dusk was still fairly illuminated. A gate was blocking the way to what looked like a parking lot situated next to a small, squat building, the type used as a visitor’s center. Bokuto jogged to the tapered end of the triangular gate and began to fiddle with the lock, his flashlight beam waving unsteadily from its place under his arm. After some time, he swore under his breath, threw something at the ground, and pouted. A minute later, he scrambled to pick it back up.
Keiji wanted to help him. Of course he always felt that Bokuto was in some way his responsibility. But this wasn’t that.

He just wanted to.

But help was unnecessary since the gate swung open with a screaming groan. Bokuto rushed back to the truck celebrating loudly. He hoisted himself in, starting the engine then drove into the parking lot. Looking at the gate as they passed, Keiji realized that in all likelihood, Bokuto had just picked a lock.

“If you don’t tell me what we’re doing, I’m going to assume you’re going to murder me and wrap me in that tarp.”

Bokuto somehow grinned and bit his lip nervously all at once.

“So, I had all these plans for like, taking you to the Getty and then having a picnic somewhere pretty. I was gonna cook your favorite foods and stuff. A really awesome date! But I kinda missed home a lot last night. Especially seein’ the stars. I couldn’t sleep, or get out of bed, or anything. And then I had and even awesomer idea! I figured we could look at stars together, and have a night picnic. There’s no moon or clouds. I looked it up like twenty times, and even asked Teru and Kuroo to double check in case I read it wrong.”

Oh.

“A night picnic sounds messy.” Keiji found it very difficult not to smile as he exited the truck. “Not to mention breaking and entering this parking lot.”

“Nah, Akaashi don’t worry,” Bokuto reached into the back for their bags. “The rangers aren’t gonna come back till the morning, I got this.”

“I believe you,” Keiji murmured, surprising himself.

Bokuto shot him a cocky grin that made his heart ache.

“But that still doesn’t tell me how we’re going to eat.”

But Bokuto wasn’t listening. He bustled around the back of the truck, lowered the tailgate, and then stared noisily at Keiji until he came to stand at his side.

“Wah-la!” he ripped off the tarp, revealing what appeared to be a double mattress covered in a horrible floral-printed sheet. A few immediate concerns jumped to mind: 1. Bedbugs? 2. Was this Bokuto’s actual mattress? 3. Was this a mattress Bokuto had gotten off the street? 4. Bodily fluids? 5. It was voilá, not wah-la.

“Bet you’re wondering where I managed to snag such an awesome thing for us to lie on, eh?”

“I was, actually.”

“So, Teru’s girlfriend is moving in, and they needed a bigger bed. He was gonna throw this one out, but I figured if I wrapped it in plastic and put it under the tarp, we could use it. I double-bagged it, in case of, you know…”

Yes. Number four.

“We can eat here on the back, but wanna test it out?” Bokuto hopped onto the tailgate, sat down the grocery bags, then extended his hand.
Keiji took it.

“I got a question,” Bokuto squirmed next to him on the mattress like he was trying to get comfortable even though they’d been lying side by side for several minutes. “Feel pretty weird asking it, but like, you already know that I fooled around a bunch but never had a lot of girlfriends. Or boyfriends.”

“You haven’t had any, Bokuto.”

“Let me have a little dignity, Agaaaaashee!”

“It’s not a competition,” he stared up at the darkening sky. “I’ve only had one.”

“Yeah, but you only ever slept with him right? I’ve slept with too many people to fucking count. Your mom probably thinks I’m a slut after that talk thing.”

Keiji tried to stay composed, but it was impossible. He skipped chuckling altogether and burst into a full-fledged cackle.

“What’s so fucking funny?” Bokuto sat up on his elbows and looked down, shining the cheap LED lamp he’d brought in Keiji’s face.

“It’s just that,” Keiji took deep gasping breaths to try to calm himself down, “no one but my mother knows who my father is. Out of anyone in the world, she’d be the last person to slut-shame you.”

“Oh, god, Akaashi, I didn’t mean to like bring up any bad stuff… shit…” Bokuto wasn’t comprehending that the gravity of the situation was absolutely zero, “…can you stop laughing for a minute?”

“I can’t,” Keiji wheezed, “it’s too absurd.”

Bokuto started to laugh too. The hand holding him up slipped on the sheet-covered plastic and he landed on Keiji’s shoulder, his chest rumbling against Keiji’s side. They laughed together for at least five minutes, bursting into hysterics every time it seemed they might stop. Keiji’s ribs ached from the strain.

It felt delicious.

“You alright down there?” Bokuto lifted himself up again, looking everywhere but at Keiji’s face. He was winded and his eyes were still crinkled up, smile lines even more visible in the deep shadows of the fading light.

“Why do you always act like I’m so delicate?” Keiji panted.

“Ah, well,” Bokuto scratched his head. “Sorry, like, I’ve been trying not to after you said all that heterobormative stuff at the pier, but it’s just I guess that uh… I look at you and I think you’re someone who should uh… be treated real soft.”

Keiji swallowed.

“But,” Bokuto babbled on, “I think you could do pretty well in a fight, maybe even against me! Cause you’re real sneaky and being tough isn’t all about having perfect, amazing muscles like this,” he flexed and lost his balance, falling on Keiji again, this time across his chest.

Keiji’s gasped for breath, though he was no longer laughing. Bokuto wasn’t either, he was just lying
there like an extremely heavy dead fish.

“What was it you wanted to know before?” Keiji’s voice was a mortifying croak.

“Ohoho, I don’t think we gotta talk about that anymore,” Bokuto scrambled up until he was sitting cross legged on the mattress. Even without the pressure against his chest, Keiji still found breathing a challenge.

“Bokuto you promised to be honest with me,” Keiji scolded as he sat up, wrapped in hypocrisy.

Biting his lip, Bokuto made an uncomfortable face, which shifted to a wry grin after a few seconds. “Okay, but if I tell you, you gotta play a game with me.”

“A game?”

“A question game. I ask you a question, and you gotta answer, and we keep going.”

“What if I don’t want to answer?”

“You get three passes.”

“And if I use them all?”

“I guess the game’s over, cause like, you’ll probably be pretty pissed at me if I ask you three questions that you don’t wanna talk about.”

“Is this a Hawaiian game?” It had to be regional, otherwise Keiji would have played something like it at some point. Or at least refused to play it.

“Well, a Hawai’ian guy made it up just now, so, yeah. C’mon Akaaaaaashi, the stakes are super low.”

“Alright. But we should eat dinner while we talk, before it’s completely dark.”

Bokuto unfurled another sheet to put on the tailgate, and they sat there, feet dangling, eating meat buns, doritos, cookies and the small grocery store platter of cut vegetables that Keiji insisted they buy. Bokuto slathered his carrots in so much ranch dressing Keiji was certain they no longer counted as vegetables anymore.

“So, what was your question?”

“Okay, well, how long are you supposed to wait to… you know? Cause on movies and shit it’s the third date but like…”

“The reason they wait until the third date is due to story structure. Not because sex is a wise, or unwise choice for the individuals involved.”

“So then when is?” was barely audible over the crunch of carrot.

“I don’t know,” Keiji said honestly.

“You don’t know?” Bokuto’s voice and body language was plummeting to dangerous levels.

“I waited a year and a half,” he admitted before he could stop himself. “But I was a virgin. I was nervous, so sex didn’t seem particularly urgent. I think things would be di-different with another partner and my current ma-maturity level.”
That was so much more than he’d planned on sharing. He waited for the pangs of misery to explode in his chest. But they didn’t come. Just a vague memory of how goofy Chikara had been as they lay next to each other afterwards. The grin on his own face. The recollection wasn’t ringed in razor wire. It was strangely pleasant with a sharp tinge of sadness.

He missed his best friend in a way that felt something other than terrible for the first time since Chikara had left his life.

“Oh,” Bokuto muttered, head hanging down to his chest.

“It’s pointless to think that because you’ve had any amount of casual sex that you won’t be able to read the atmosphere in a more romantic situation. You had to read the atmosphere when you had sex before.”

“Ehhh, I was usually drunk. I know that’s no good but I promise I asked like thirty times, till they said it was annoying and just do it already.”

“In high school?”

“Well, kinda drunk. On horniness. Akaashi, I don’t think there’s much of an atmosphere when you both just wanna fuck.”

Keiji really didn’t know how to respond, so he stuck to what he knew for certain.

“In all of our physical interactions, you never pushed things beyond what I was comfortable with. You take consent extremely seriously. Given the nature of our arrangement and its inherent complexities, I’m more than confident in your ability to read the atmosphere. There was nothing wrong with the choices you’ve made in the past. There would be nothing wrong if you continued to make them, as long as it is your choice.”

Bokuto’s mouth flapped open like he wanted to say something, then he closed it.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable giving you some kind of number,” Keiji concluded. “The first date to years in the future could be appropriate, depending on who you were with.”

His own words were a kick to the kidneys. With them came the unsaid acknowledgement that the “who” would not be him. And since when had he expected otherwise? Not until now, when the situation that had brought their relationship into existence was nearly expired.

“Okay!” Bokuto turned to him, focused and eager, “Now I get to go. Right? That answered your question?”

Keiji took a bite of his meat bun and readied himself for the worst. “Fine.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

That was it?

“Periwinkle,” Keiji answered flatly, then waited for Bokuto to ask him something else or demand he explain want the color was. But Bokuto was swinging his legs and vibrating on the tailgate. Keiji realized he had to ask him something now. This “game” had not been well-explained.

“What’s, um, your favorite color?” He might as well know.

“Light pink. Especially in the sky, but anywhere really. Makes me look real sick, otherwise I’d wear
it every day. Okay! Now, next question: Who’s your favorite, uh, writer?”

“Octavia Butler.” Keiji had no idea what to ask next but Bokuto was impatient. “What do you want to do after college?”

“Volleyball player, of course!” his date scoffed. “Maybe play for Japan or something professionally – it’s a big deal over there. Or just focus on the national team here. I’ve already been scouted; did I tell you that?”

“You did. About forty times. Each more exciting than the last.”

He had actually been thrilled to hear it.

“Akaaaasheee! Anyways, I’ll probably be a math teacher when I retire, I guess. Gotta pay the bills. I don’t like analyzing shit or the other stuff you can do with math. It’s prolly gonna take like six years to graduate with all the teacher classes,” he looked at the ground, suddenly glum. “Dunno where I’ll get the money for that… or even if I can teach at all…”

“Bokuto,” Keiji interrupted him before the mood turned sour, “it’s your turn.”

“Oh! Yeah! Well, I already know you wanna be a writer, cause I’m insightful as hell.” Keiji did not roll his eyes, remarkably. “Okay, um, well you were giggling a bunch before when I was worried about your mom thinking bad about me. So like…” he paused and his voice was a lot quieter. Tentative, even, which seemed impossible for him to pull off, “do you mind, not having a dad? Cause you don’t seem to and I just…”

Although Bokuto was anticipating it, there was no need to pass here. Keiji figured the reason for his question had more to do with Bokuto’s home life than his curiosity about Keiji’s parentage. So it was a question he didn’t mind answering.

“No. If he’s alive, he has no idea I exist. I have a large family. Growing up, Tetsurou was very protective. Kenma was there to talk to. My mother, as you experienced, gave me multiple sex talks and was an extremely good p-parent overall. My aunts, uncles, and grandparents have always filled in the few gaps. Perhaps if I hadn’t had them, I would want my father around. I know Tetsurou does, but that’s likely because his father would have- would have cared.”

He pulled his legs up onto the tailgate and pressed his chin into his knees.

“I s……uppose it does bother me a small amount,” he said. As though it were anything else he might say. As though it weren’t more than he’d ever said to anyone on the subject. Including his elementary school therapist. Including himself.

Bokuto addressed the situation by shoving chocolate in Keiji’s mouth.

“My parents got divorced cause of me,” he announced unasked, though Bokuto’s relationship with his own father was a question Keiji had been considering. “I was a rotten kid, always in trouble. And mom’s job, she’s a translator for folks who collect old stories and junk… Oh, hey! The stars are gonna come out soon, we should lie down so we can see em.”

He stood and yanked Keiji up to him where they both wobbled unstably, too close together in too small a space. Bokuto lifted his foot just as Keiji turned, and they ended up flopping onto the mattress. The shocks, springs, and plastic all complained loudly, but weren’t loud enough to drown out Bokuto’s whining as he realized he’d dumped the remainder of his soda all over himself.

Dismissing the ruckus and untangling their legs, Keiji rolled onto his back and looked up at the sky.
On the western horizon, the finest line of slate blue and glowing pink remained. Despite the remaining light, brighter stars began to emerge overhead. Next to him Bokuto was wiggling out of his wet shirt. Keiji could see the muscles of his back brought into high relief as they flexed and relaxed with the mundane movement.

He tried to think of what kind of failing of Bokuto’s this was, so he could catalog it. He couldn’t. The weakness was his.

“So anyway,” Bokuto pulled on a hoodie and fell back down onto the mattress, “mom was away a lot. She’d go on trips to other islands and work with people to keep old stories from getting’ lost. And my dad was working with his company on this development project so he stayed on Molok’ai with me. I’d get in trouble in school and one of my aunties would come to get me. He’d just yell and yell when he got home. I never quite got why he yelled so much. My gramma and grandpa, you know his parents, are real gentle people.”

He took several long breaths.

“But mom would come back and her and otousan would fight. It was mostly about me and a little about his company messing up the island. I tried not to be bad. I tried really hard. Even though I was little I could tell I was stressing their relationship a bunch, but I couldn’t stop getting in trouble. I just got really upset all the time, you know? At school especially when I couldn’t understand something the first time. Anyway, I fucked things up. But Akaashi I bet your dad would care about you if you met him. Be super proud, even, cause you’re not a fuckup at all.”

Keiji rolled onto his side. Bokuto was still on his back, staring at the stars. His eyes were shining for all the wrong reasons.

Number thirty-two, needs to address childhood issues.

“You are the complete opposite of a fuckup.”

Overhead, the stars splashed across the sky like drops of rain on the sidewalk.

“Would now be good?” Bokuto asked so softly that Keiji wondered if he actually wanted to be heard.

They were still on their backs, side-by-side, arms between them. Their pinkies had been touching for quite some time but Keiji couldn’t bring himself to move his hand. He clung to the pathetic point of contact as though it was anything more than accidental.

But Bokuto hadn’t moved either. And his question indicated that the game hadn’t come to an end once the stars had come out.

Keiji had never seen so many before, not even on trips to the country. A brilliant light behind the paper thin darkness was pushing its way through millions of pinpricks. Their number seemed to increase by the second. Soon enough the blackness of the sky would shred into nothing. He could see star clusters, galaxies, stars in colors other than white. Meteorites fell so often he couldn’t keep track.

“Now?” he asked, too enamored of the sky to make sense of what Bokuto was referring to.

“If, like, this were real, you know. And we…”
“Are you asking me if I would have sex with you in the back of your truck?”

“No!” Bokuto exploded. “Well, kinda! I mean… the situation? Would it be?”

Keiji could do this. It was his job. His part of the arrangement. After working so hard to take him somewhere so wonderful, Bokuto deserved an honest answer to his nearly incomprehensible question.

“It would entirely depend on what you did,” he took a deep breath to center himself. “The situation is appropriate. We’re isolated, this mattress is comfortable and surprisingly sanitary. The stars provide an element of romance, but are distracting enough to not demand it. In terms of context, there’s been a certain amount of physical intimacy in our past. Assuming we had connected romantically, then…” Keiji paused in such a way that looked like he was deeply considering the situation.

He was not.

Whether it was from an unintentional twitch, or a planned move, Bokuto’s pinkie grazed against his.

“Akaashi…” Bokuto’s voice was gravely enough to make his toes curl, “what do you mean what I did?”

Clearing his throat kept his voice from cracking. “If you pinned me to this mattress and bragged about how good you were in bed I would not be particularly receptive. I would send you to the hospital.”

This time, it was his own pinkie brushing against Bokuto’s. Accidentally.

“Well, what if I uh, kissed ya?”

“That’s generally a precursor to sex.”

“C’mon Akaashi, throw me a bone here.”

“Not with those moves.”

Bokuto’s pinkie hooked around Keiji’s and squeezed tight. His breath hitched, then sped up to make pace again.

“I’d stand behind you,” his head has turned, and his breath caressed the shell of Keiji’s ear, “or sit I guess, so you’d have to turn your head. Then I’d find that spot where your hair hits your neck and there’s all those tiny little curls. And I’d kiss you there, till you’d make those little noises I’m pretty sure ya don’t know you make.”

Keiji made one of those noises, then coughed to cover it up. Their hooked fingers slid against one another while the rest of their bodies stayed completely still. This was going too far and they weren’t even moving.

“I don’t think you’re used to being smaller than anybody, so I’d pull you tight so you’d think about it a little,” their pinkies tangled, slow and languorous. Keiji was beyond grateful for the complete darkness because he was getting hard embarrassingly quick.

“And I’d uh,” an awkward laugh, “probably just say something then?”

“What kind of something?” Keiji asked just a little too breathlessly as he wiggled on the mattress. Bokuto’s pinkie squeezed tight.
“Um,” Bokuto laughed nervously, “do ya really want me to say?”

His mind caught up with his raging hormones, “Oh. I… uh, that is to say, I wasn’t trying to m-make you uncomfortable.”

“I’m really hard,” Bokuto announced matter-of-factly. It was impossible to tell if he was speaking hypothetically or otherwise.

Keiji – whose situation was not hypothetical in the slightest – swallowed, a nightmarish mix of turned on, terrified, and amused.

“I mean,” Bokuto continued sheepishly, “I kinda don’t know what else I would say? Ya gotta ask somehow, though. Havin a lot of sex doesn’t mean you’re good at being like, seductive about it.”

“If someone doesn’t know you well enough to laugh at a line like that, you’re just having a prolonged one-night stand, anyway.”

You’re fine the way you are, Bokuto.

You make me laugh.

“Oh, uh,” their pinkies relaxed until they were gently hooked, “it’s your turn, Akaashi. Too bad this is just practice,” he added. “We’re missin’ a good chance.”

He guffawed, and there was nothing tentative in the sound. Their fingers slid apart completely.

Number thirty-three – ruins the moment. If he even realized there was a moment to begin with. Perhaps he couldn’t read the atmosphere after all.

The crushing disappointment in Keiji’s chest was just referred pain from his testicles.

Ignoring his discomfort, Keiji though about his question. Anything he wanted to know about Bokuto, now was the time to ask. Previous conversation apparently forgotten, he was giddy, pointing out stars and giving them names. “Akaaashi” was an entire cluster on the very edge of the Milky Way. “Kozume” was tiny, bright, and solitary. “Kuroo” was an arrangement that looked like a butt. But despite this frenetic activity, Bokuto was vibrating with the excitement of being asked something.

There were two things Keiji wanted to know. One would develop Bokuto’s character profile to the fullest extent possible. He’d decided halfway through the process that the real thing would be better than anything he could come up with, but there were some things that just didn’t come up in conversation. This would be the perfect time to ask.

The other was useless beyond his own curiosity.

Bokuto was still laughing to himself. He was happy. Happy with the way things were. Keiji… didn’t need to know.

“Has anyone ever broken your heart?”

Tell me your name. I know how to find it, but I want you to tell me.

“Nah. Never had the chance, y’know? Had some pretty disappointing crushes, but Mom was always around to cheer me up. If she was away I always managed to find other good friends to help out. Like your brother! And like you, Akaaaaaasseeeee.”
Keiji had made the right decision.

“How about you?”

Actually, it had been a terrible decision.

“Pass.”

“Oh! Okay, so… ugh…” Bokuto was very bad at hiding his frustration, “why do strangers sometimes recognize you? Like, when we go out, they stare? Teru knew who you were, and he moved here when I did. I told him not to tell me cause I figured you’d have said something if you wanted—”

“Pass.”

“Why don’t you trust me, Akaashi?” he whined. The grating soh dear barely covered up the very real hurt beneath. Keiji wasn’t even certain it was a real question. But he wasn’t going to answer anyway.

“Pass.”

Game over.

He woke up the next morning covered in a blanket, curled into Bokuto’s side with his arms wrapped around his middle. Bokuto’s arm was around his shoulders, but he was awake. Keiji could tell, because he was eating something very loudly.

“Hey, hey, hey there Akhashi. Sorry, I know it’s way early, but I’ve got a lot of stuff I gotta do before we go to this prom. And we gotta get out of here before the rangers show up. Don’t wanna get arrested~.”

Keiji squeezed him tighter. Because Bokuto was warm and the desert air was cold.

“Never woulda took you for a cuddler,” Bokuto chuckled. Keiji could feel the laugh reverberate through his ribs. “Don’t think you’re allowed to cuddle in jail, though, so get up sleepyhead.”

The haze of the city came into view, inevitable. They’d ridden in silence most of the way. The sleepy, intimate silence of two people very familiar with each other. Or, rather, a remarkable replica.

“Hey, Akaashi,” Bokuto’s false confidence was broke the spell. "Can I ask you something? And I mean, you can say no! But, like, these dates have been super great for learning. I’ve practiced a ton, and I’m an expert and all now that I’ve graduated!”

Keiji was not about to agree on the expert aspect but he’d definitely improved.

“But practice dates are kinda confusing, you know? What’s real and shit? Thought about it a lot last night. When we’re around other people you know it’s really hard to fake being on a date. I get really focused on what I need to do to make everybody else think we’re real and I can't remember how to do anything else. Like, uh… faking it.”

The fact that such a rambling explanation made sense was indicative of just how far Keiji had delved into Bokuto’s personality.
“So uh…” Bokuto squeezed the steering wheel until his fingers squeaked against the vinyl, “if you want a real-looking prom date so everybody thinks you’ve got one, then like… can it just not be fake? Don’t worry! I’ll just leave when it’s over. After all this we can be friends and it won’t be weird! Cause I dunno how I could pull this off otherwise, after all these dates, asking you if I’m doing shit right, and worried that somebody’s gonna figure us out. I gotta just do it, you know.”

They rolled to a stop at a red light. Bokuto was gnawing at his lip. Keiji’s stomach was a tempest of emotions and logic.

He just doesn’t have the capacity to balance practice and presentation on this scale. That’s it. Bokuto would just say if he liked you. You’re graduating in less than a month, what does it matter what people think? You can say no. Go to the prom alone. Just say no.

“Okay,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

jesus fucking christ keiji.

sure hope you guys are ready for a prom night that lasts three chapters
the person falling here is me

Chapter Notes

in which keiji cannot pin a boutonniere to save his life.

oh my mind is changing every day, in every possible way

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keiji had broken the terms of the arrangement he had designed himself. He had broken them thoroughly with Bokuto, and with his own conscience. From all perspectives, logical, emotional, even in terms of clichéd storytelling, he had seen this coming, yet he had lied to himself again and again and again. There was nowhere else to run. He had to admit what he’d most denied.

He didn’t want this to end.

The most sensible path would be to simply confess. Tell Bokuto how he felt. That was why these situations happened to begin with: because someone kept important information to himself. He had seen this trope enough times to be able to tell. He had even written it anonymously to much internet acclaim. If he told the truth, he’d save them a world of difficulty.

But what a tepid confession.

“I don’t know how I feel about you, but I want to see you more. Not just as a friend. But not as anything else at this point, either.”

“At first you were unpleasant. Now I have no idea what you are but I think of you constantly.”

“You annoy me, though I seem to enjoy it.”

“The thought of you with anyone else makes me sick, but I don’t know what that means.”

Bokuto deserved unbridled passion. He undoubtedly wanted the sort of love confession that would knock down walls. But passion was not something that Keiji demonstrated in outward ways. Or perhaps at all. Stating matter-of-factly, “I’d like to date to understand my attraction for you,” would not be what Bokuto would want. Or perhaps even understand.

Especially since his interest in Keiji was just as likely to be platonic as romantic.

Someone who hadn’t been observing Bokuto for weeks might find that assertion ridiculous. Bokuto’s attentive behavior was obvious! He was at the very least attracted to Keiji, if not outright infatuated with him.

Unfortunately, that didn’t mean much of anything, considering Bokuto was infatuated with the world.

Kissing, hand holding, and all the other forms of physical affection didn’t stand as evidence: sexual intimacy was something Bokuto seemed to engage in solely for pleasure, at least historically. He was a physical person who kissed Keiji’s mother on the cheek multiple times when visiting, carried Kenma around the house when he got excited, and would cuddle with Tetsurou for the entire
duration of feature films. During karaoke he had spent several minutes in Tooru’s lap, oblivious to Hajime’s growing irritation.

There really was no definite way to tell what Bokuto’s touch indicated. Not to mention the rest of his behavior. Keiji could guess, certainly. But his observation and analysis had proven themselves woefully ineffective when it came to the feelings and actions of someone he’d known for years. To apply those same skills to someone he’d known for weeks was insane.

It would take him down a path he refused to follow ever again.

All this, on top of the number of times Bokuto had mentioned his excitement at being friends when *all this was over*.

What it boiled down to was this: Keiji had made his own bed. It was luxurious and comfortable with an unexpectedly pleasant sleeping companion waiting for him. But since he was unsure as to how long that companion would stay, he wouldn’t allow himself to climb in. He had to stand up all night and stare at it.

At least it was only one night more.

When he staggered through the door at six thirty in the morning, his mother was already awake, kneeling over her laptop and the pile of papers strewn across the coffee table. They gave each other identical looks.

“Go to bed,” they echoed each other.

She unsteadily stood up, which made him nervous. “Did you stay up because you were worried?”

“I have a deadline. And Bokuto texted me many times to let me know you were okay. A little too many, but his enthusiasm was admirable.”

“I did that two weeks ago, and you got angry!”

“Bokuto is an earnest young man who does his best to be reliable. You, on the other hand, are conniving and subtle, just like I raised you.”

“How much coffee have you had?” he grumbled, heading to his room and leaving her to trip over her slippers.

“Keiji,” she called over her shoulder, “unless you want to go to the prom tonight looking like someone punched you in the nose, you need to take out that mask I keep in the fridge, put it on your eyes, and sleep till lunch.”

He was planning on sleeping anyway.

Given the opportunity, Tetsurou was the whiniest person on earth. Usually Kenma was the one who had to put up with it, but Kenma was currently playing Pokémon while his mother did his hair. Without this buffer, Tetsurou woke Keiji up at three in the afternoon. He was griping loudly in the bathroom that connected their rooms. Uninterested in talking, Keiji banged on the wall, only for his brother to open the door to his room and step right in.
“Get out,” Keiji muttered, still wearing the squishy bead mask that his mother insisted he put on. He might buy one of his own. It had felt quite nice.

Tetsurou pulled it off.

“Why does my skin do this?” he pulled back the wet hair plastered across his forehead to reveal an upside-down triangle of acne. Well, Keiji just assumed that was what he was referring to, since he wasn’t wearing his glasses.

“Don’t ask me questions you know the answer to. If you don’t want it to break out you’ve got to pull back your hair, or cut it short.”

“It won’t stay back and I like it longer!”

Keiji settled back down under the covers with an angry sigh. “Are you honestly going to complain to me about acne? The one who was on Accutane?”

“Well, you were…” Tetsurou fiddled with his skin which he knew would just make it worse, “but no one could see your bacne.”

“GET OUT.”

“Keiji, I need help.”

And there it was. His patient voice. He was serious. Completely serious.

“Mom went to the store and it’s going to take me three hours to blow dry my hair back by myself.”

“Leave it how it is,” Keiji growled into the pillow. “Or take a nap so you look like a rooster as usual.”

“I’m the reason you have a prom date at all,” Tetsurou kicked him then crossed his arms. He wasn’t going to leave. He was the most stubborn, persistent, irritating person on the planet. And he always got what he wanted.

“I don’t have a clue how to use a hair dryer,” Keiji sat up, his own hair in a mushy cloud. “But if it will shut you up I will try, you pain in the ass.”

As it turned out, Tetsurou had a method. It consisted of him sitting on the toilet and leaning back against the sink while Keiji directed a constant stream of air across the crown of his head. It wasn’t particularly effective, at least in Keiji’s mind, but maybe the gel Bokuto had suggested would add some kind of volume once it was finished drying.

Tetsurou spent the half-hour messaging every single person he knew, including sending a snap to Bokuto. The reason Keiji knew Bokuto was the recipient was because he’d been unwillingly included, floofy hair topped with an unwanted crown of stars. Afterwards Tetsurou saw fit to tease him about it until Keiji directed hot air at his eyes.

The whole process made him wonder if he should do something different with his own hair, maybe a side part, or… something? But without any length, his hair really only did one thing. Bokuto would have to be satisfied with its current status. That is, if he cared at all, which Keiji doubted.

Their mother returned just as Tetsurou was dragging unnecessarily large globs of gel through his warped mass of black. She caught his wrist before he wasted half the jar, scolding both of them as she sat a plastic bag full of concealer and powder on the bathroom counter.
“Your skin looks fine, darling,” she told her oldest son as he continued the struggle to shape the thick black mass into something sophisticated. “But if you insist on covering it up, please let me do it. Unless you have hidden talents I’m unaware of.”

“She’s very good at covering up hickies,” Keiji volunteered in a dead voice from his seat on the wobbly toilet cover. “Now can I go back to bed?”

“You can get a shower. You smell,” Tetsurou distractedly grumbled as he looked in the mirror. “Or maybe not, I gotta get back in there, cause this is a mess.” Then with a squeak of the shower knob and an unwanted glimpse of his brother’s ass, all Keiji’s help was for nothing.

“What time is it?” he blearily asked his mother after they’d escaped Tetsurou’s terrible shower singing.

“Four. So you have two hours.” She stood on her tiptoes and squinted at his face. “Hmm. Your eye bags are much less balloon-like than they were.”

“Why do you c-care so much about this?” he yawned.

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “Because you got up at four in the morning to buy a suit. Your brother’s been taking the shifts no one else wants just to have today and tomorrow off. You’re both excited, despite how much you’re trying to hide it. I’d rather not have you realize you need to deal with dark circles five minutes before your date arrives. Especially since you have no idea how to deal with them. Now does your shirt need ironed?”

“I haven’t touched it since you ironed it two days ago. But perhaps it needs ironed again; I have no idea how such delicate processes work.”

“Alright, dial back the sass, Keiji,” she grabbed his chin and cheeks and shook his head lightly. “I’ll take your brother over to my bathroom when he’s done so you can have the shower. He needs desperate help.”

“Thanks mom,” he leaned down and pecked her on the cheek. “I appreciate it.”

He really truly did.

“I’m hardly prepared for this level of affection, darling, please calm down,” she deadpanned.

Keiji rolled his eyes and shut the door to his room behind him.

He spent the remainder of Tetsurou’s shower sitting on his bed in his underwear, looking at Bokuto’s Facebook page. Despite his name written in kanji, he’d been easy to find: Bokuto had commented multiple times on every single post Tetsurou and Tooru had ever made. It didn’t even matter that he and Keiji weren’t friends, since his privacy settings were almost nonexistent.

He scrolled through old profile pictures, until he got to Bokuto’s middle school days. He had chubby cheeks and black hair that was just a little too close to a bowl cut. A lot of the pictures were with a stunning Hawaiian woman with familiar eyebrows. She looked like she could tear a person in half without losing her poise. Others were with an elderly JA couple in downtown Tokyo, shrines, or even just a blanket on the beach. Both sides of his family seemed to love him deeply, if the hugs and smiles were any indication.

His cover photo had only ever been one thing, huge, rounded green cliffs overlooking a blue ocean. Thanks to his prior investigations, Keiji knew what they were: the highest sea cliffs in the world.
And Bokuto’s home.

When Tetsurou knocked on his door with a cheery, “All yours!” Keiji made to sit his phone on the bed, only to realize he’d accidentally sent Bokuto a friend request. It didn’t seem necessary to take it back. There was no reason they couldn’t be Facebook friends. Friendship was what Bokuto wanted most after all. Keiji didn’t have much of a use for Facebook, anyway. It wasn’t like Bokuto could haunt him on something he didn’t use.

Leaving the phone on the bed, he headed into the bathroom to take a shower of unprecedented length.

Finally deciding on contacts instead of glasses, he was standing in the nicest underwear he owned, black socks halfway up to his calves, staring at the assemblage of tailored cloth that he was supposed to put on.

The suit stared back at him, hanging on his closet door. He’d liked it when he bought it. He still liked it. And he suspected that everyone else would like it too, including his date. But putting it on would start the clock that led to a place called “just friends.”

_Just?_ Was he seriously upset about getting friendzoned? No. He was not.

Still procrastinating, he picked up his phone to see two Facebook alerts. Normally, he ignored them. But considering his recent error, he checked. The first was, unsurprisingly, Bokuto accepting Keiji’s accidental friend request.

The second was Bokuto tagging Keiji in a status that upon further investigation had been liked by every single member of his family and at least fifty of his classmates.

“gettin ready for my first prom. cant wait to see Keiji Akaashi all dolled up!”

Number thirty-four – does not understand social media etiquette and privacy settings.

But he’d used his first name, albeit only because he didn’t know how to link to his profile otherwise. And, he hadn’t mentioned Tetsurou or Kenma at all. Just Keiji.

This was ridiculous, he couldn’t believe he had fallen so low as to agonize over social media updates for hidden meaning.

Keiji looked up at his suit with renewed commitment. He reminded himself why he was doing this in the first place. He’d graduate in a few weeks, spend the summer writing and working at Starbucks, then he’d be off to college, where none of this would matter. He and Bokuto would become great friends, and he could channel the feelings from this bizarre experience into his writing, just like he’d planned from the start.

It would all be fine.

“Hey, hey, hey Dr. Akaashi!”

“Hello yourself, Bokuto. Did you get a haircut?”

“Yeah, uh, my new roommate did it for me. She kinda held me down. Said it was too heavy up top
for a formal thing.”

“Well, it looks wonderful. So do you. If you don’t mind me saying so, you clean up quite nicely.”

Keiji could hear Bokuto puffing up in pride from the other side of the house where he was sitting on the couch. Clenching and unclenching his fists he lightly bounced the small plastic box sitting on his knees. Tetsuro was gone, picking up Kenma next door. Alone as he was, Keiji felt overwhelmingly nervous, with no real understanding as to why.

He was sick to death of not knowing himself.

“Well, it looks wonderful. So do you. If you don’t mind me saying so, you clean up quite nicely.”

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“Come on back, sweetheart,” his mother’s voice sounded like smiles. “I’m pretty certain my son is shaking himself to pieces.”

Forget about the sweetness earlier. He hated her.

Bokuto was loud enough that Keiji could tell he’d come into the room without actually looking at him. He sat the box on the couch, took a deep breath and stood up, hands pushing against his thighs because he didn’t know what to do with them. He kept his eyes on his feet.

“Holy balls, Akaashi.”

His mother snorted.

“You look, really… I mean… super… wow.” Bokuto crossed the room to get closer. Keiji could hear him holding his breath. He was standing right there, they both knew it, but neither seemed able to move.

“You look like the ocean,” Bokuto exhaled, words soft and wistful.

Keiji lifted his head.

Bokuto had indeed cut his hair, a shaved undercut that was swept back on top, though still maintaining the crested appearance of his previous style. In some ways it was the same haircut his roommate had, but Yujii couldn’t pull it off like this. Whatever product that kept Bokuto’s hair in check had put a silvery sheen on the dull grey. The shining black of his natural color added intense contrast. He was wearing a navy jacket over a white shirt and greyish bird’s eye trousers. They were relaxed with no crisp newness, but looked more than appropriate for the occasion. Around his neck was a red bow tie, and in his hand was a long jewelry box.

“That’s a ve-ve-very nice look, Bokuto,” Keiji was having difficulty focusing. “I’m impressed.”

This was a real date. Should he say anything else? It wasn’t a matter of should; did he want to? He tried to decide and couldn’t, his mind was going blank, his mouth dry.

“I don’t think people are gonna believe we’re going together,” Bokuto gaped at him until a hand smacked the back of his head.

“I will have none of that self-deprecation in my house, young man. I know your mother is far away so I’ll say what she would: you look beautiful.”

Keiji clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Dr. Akaashi, don’t worry! I know that I’m a really good lookin’ guy, but like… have you seen your kid?”
“Yes, at all phases of his life, and you both look wonderful.”

It was hard to decide whether to be embarrassed for himself or happy for his date.

Bokuto swallowed and held out the box, “I uh, didn’t think you’d like flowers, but I saw this and I thought maybe it’d look cool. I mean I think it’s awesome, so if you don’t want it, give it back, but I hope you like it cause its awesome and…”

Worried that Bokuto would talk himself into an early grave if he wasn’t interrupted, Keiji lifted the spring-loaded lid to find himself with no words readily available.

“I… can’t believe it,” he gawked after a wide-eyed pause.

“Akaashi! You don’t gotta like it, but I mean, c’mon,” Bokuto’s pathetic whine bounced off the walls.

“No,” Keiji held up his hand then turned back to the couch, scooping up the plastic box he’d been holding for at least fifteen minutes. He held it towards Bokuto’s face with as much dignity as was possible.

Bokuto took it as though it were made of crystal.

“Oh, you both bought each other feathers. How adorable,” Keiji’s mother said as she left the room.

“Quick.” Keiji sat down the jewelry box and popped open the plastic in Bokuto’s hands. “She’s going to want to take a picture of us putting these on each other.”

“We match by accident,” Bokuto was still stunned. “And you got me plumeria.”

Keiji pulled out the boutonniere, a variety of black white and grey feathers fanned behind two almost cartoonish white flowers with gold centers.

“I looked up flowers on Mo- Molokai and this was what was most associated with the island,” he said as he picked it up and readied the pin. “But I realized after my order that you actually have a large pl-plumeria farm, and I couldn’t find who ran it and how much the workers were paid and… I don’t know much about Hawai’i but I do know that dev- developers and tourists cause problems, so I apologize if this was a t-t-touristy, offensive choice of flower.”

“Akaashi.” Bokuto grabbed his shoulders to stop his out of character babbling. “I mean, sure, it’s complicated. There’s a lot of shit going on with that kinda thing but, nah. This just reminds me of home.” Keiji looked at him for too long, and Bokuto pulled away. “Why feathers, though?” he laughed nervously.

Keiji reached for Bokuto’s right lapel but was directed to the other side. “Your hair reminds me of a pissed off horned owl,” he said flatly, feeling more like himself.

His laugh easing into something more natural, Bokuto’s head dropped on Keiji’s shoulder, jostling him as he tried to pin the boutonniere. He should have let his mother handle the process, but the embarrassment would have been too much.

“Does that mean you like feathers then?”

“If you’re asking if I like that pin, the answer is yes.”

Deciding that he couldn’t get the boutonniere to look any better, Keiji stepped back. He took the
stick pin out of its box, careful not to jostle the long brown and white striped feather that would lie perfectly against his lapel. He attempted to put it on himself, but Bokuto grabbed his wrists and pouted.

“Agaaashi, you gotta let me do it too! Are you worried I’m gonna mess up your fancy suit??”

“No,” Keiji blinked. “I just thought you weren’t interested.”

They took pictures.

Many, many pictures, especially when Tetsurou and Kenma came back with Kenma’s mother and father in tow. It had never really become normal, seeing the tall, redhead French woman with the small round half Japanese man. Less due to their wildly contrasting body types and more because Keiji rarely saw them together at all. At least one of them was at their restaurant nearly all the time. Kenma saw them together less than a child whose parents were divorced might.

As they crossed the lawn, Tetsurou was staring at Kenma openly. But then, everyone was.

He was wearing a striking damask three-piece suit, a repetitive pattern of red roses on a black background. The boldest thing Keiji had ever seen a normal person wear, on the person who wanted most to blend into the background. If Kenma had been any taller, any larger, it would have been too much, but as it was, he looked perfect. The front of his hair was braided and pinned in the back, with an actual red rose held in the twists. It matched the one in Tetsurou’s buttonhole.

And the reason he was wearing such a daring suit is because Kenma had found a loophole. A way to wear something he really liked without being noticed. Because he was right. No one would pay any attention to him. He didn’t have any scandals.

But Keiji did.

Their mother was crying, and pretending she wasn’t, which was such a normal state of affairs that only Bokuto and Kenma’s father seemed concerned.

“It fits well,” she exhaled, looking her oldest son up and down. “I suppose it’s been out of style so long that it’s back in fashion.”

Tetsurou was thrifty. He’d been saving to buy a car for years and refused any help from their mother, insisting she was living on a single (six figure) income, and Keiji was going to be part of the “creative class,” so he and Kenma would have to take care of them someday. This absurd frugality extended to spending money on a tux, so he had decided to wear the suit his father had gotten married in. And he looked good. Keiji couldn’t deny that his older brother was attractive to begin with, and the suit was fitted for someone with his exact body type.

But the entire spectacle seemed extremely private. It was not one Keiji wanted anyone but his mother and brother to see. He felt like an outsider himself, realizing just how irrationally jealous he was that Tetsurou had a father worth missing. It was a bitter, shriveled up feeling that only Bokuto had managed to accidentally excavate.

Unfortunately he couldn’t escape because there were even more pictures, which felt ridiculous beyond all comprehension. When he’d considered the prom experience, he’d excluded this from his calculations like some kind of complete idiot. He hadn’t thought about people watching him, taking photos, forcing their attentions on him and demanding his response as though it were something they were owed. It made Keiji’s spine stiff and his hands worry. His nightmare with the press was likely
over, but the instinct to run at a camera flash was not.

When Tetsurou and Kenma were finally the sole focus (Kenma grimacing the entire time), Bokuto yanked Keiji to a far corner of the yard and held up his phone, a puppy dog look in his eyes.

“Can I take a picture of us to send to my mom?” he asked.

_Asked._ Unlike everyone else who had demanded.

“If you want.”

Two seconds of hovering camera, two and one eighths smiles, and it was over.

“I’m gonna send it to you too, Akaashi,” Bokuto typed out a message on his beat up iPhone 4 then thrust it into his pocket. “Oi! Kuroo! Lemme get a picture with you! You too Kozume!”

Keiji’s phone buzzed against his thigh, but he decided it would be best not to look.

“So,” Bokuto ground his truck into neutral as he parked, “what kinda place is Kozume’s? It sounds uh, kinda… um fancy?”

“It’s a Japanese/French fusion restaurant. Extremely fancy, though I’ve only gone once. Glenn and Elodie insisted we come tonight and they would take care of us.”

“That mean it’s free?” Bokuto nearly shattered the windows with the shrill tone of his question.

Keiji looked over in disgust, only to see that Bokuto squeezing the steering wheel with white knuckles. Almost terrifyingly nervous, all the color drained from his face. It was similar to when he’d dropped all his money at the pier, but much, much worse. Keiji had always been somewhat aware that his family was quite a bit more well-off than Tadashi’s, Yui’s, Kenji’s, Tatsuki’s and quite a few others, but despite small pieces of evidence indicating a somewhat disadvantaged background, Keiji had assumed that Bokuto was just bad with money himself.

That assumption needed some adjustment.

“We should still leave a generous tip,” was his modified reply.

As they parked, Keiji pulled out his phone to find a flurry of messages from his brother.

>>moms car broke down
>>uncle tims coming over with something else but dunno how long so just eat without us
>>guess we’ll see you at the prom, keiji

“Tetsurou’s not coming, apparently.” “Kuroo’s not gonna make it, I guess…” They both announced as their feet hit the ground.

Keiji adjusted his jacket as he rounded the vehicle, only to walk straight into Bokuto’s chest. He’d clearly been gearing up to say something, but with Keiji so close he just smacked his lips a lot and looked in random directions.

_Number thirty-five – lacks initiative._

No. This was a real date. Keiji’s list was no longer necessary. Or was it? He was still trying to catalog Bokuto’s traits to build a convincingly complicated character, wasn’t he? Going to the prom
remained part of their original arrangement: no amount of Bokuto earnestly asking him to the prom could make their situation into anything authentic.

Could it? Could a relationship ever be real when there was some kind of underlying deal, funded or otherwise, behind it?

What a surprise. Keiji had no idea what was real anymore.

“What’s wrong?” Bokuto tipped his head to the side. “You’re makin a scowly-face.”

Keiji was so ethically exhausted from lying that he tried being vague instead, “I was attempting to fi-
figure something out.”

“You wanna talk it out? I give great advice!”

“It’s personal, but I appreciate the offer,” Keiji grabbed Bokuto’s hand to center himself and to keep his date from whining about trust again. “Shall we go in?”

Bokuto squeezed his fingers too hard.

Kozume’s had been moved since Keiji’s last visit, when his entire family had gone to celebrate his mother’s fortieth birthday. At the time, the novelty of Yamato and his sister Priscilla’s rare continental presence had made it difficult to pay attention to their surroundings. Also Keiji had been nine, and cared more about getting home to show his cousins how to play Portal than noticing the décor.

But now, as the host led them to their table, he had motivation to observe.

The restaurant was on the second floor of a recently-built, LEED certified complex. It surrounded a central garden of tall flowering trees that had been growing long before the building was raised. Within the restaurant, the simple black tables were arranged next to eight-foot, white-framed windows that overlooked the cultivated space. The open windows let the subtle fragrance from blossoming orange flowers fill the air. Overall, the embellishments were minimal, but the constantly-visible garden was decoration enough.

“This is the fanciest place I’ve ever been in my life,” Bokuto muttered.

Keiji was about to agree, but then he realized that no, it wasn’t. So he said nothing, which was fine because Bokuto was too awed to expect an answer.

But the memory triggered a panic response. He ducked down, chin close to his neck, pulling up his collar to make himself less recognizable. He tried to calm down. Tetsurou was right. His half-hour of fame was over. He could just breathe, slow and steady. Slow and steady.

Bokuto’s hand found its way to his shoulder, thumb rubbing firm circles into the material of his jacket. He was walking closer, almost as though he was shielding him from the people at the tables. Like he understood that Keiji was terrified of them.

“Still figuring stuff out, eh?” He sounded knowing, but only a little sad.

Keiji gave a wobbly exhale then a sharp nod, easing himself back into the collar of his jacket. Bokuto did not remove his hand.
The host took them past the tables, turned the corner, walked past several round booths, then pulled back a screen to reveal a private room. It jutted over the garden, surrounded on two sides almost completely by open, breezy windows.

There were only two table settings which meant one of two things: A) Kenma had called his father to let him know, or B) the two of them had never planned on coming in the first place.

His phone buzzed with a final text from Tetsurou. A selfie of him and Kenma, riding in their mother’s car.

>>have fun lover boy

He knew. How did he know? Had he told anyone? Had Kenma said something? What was he--?

“Whoa…” Bokuto was standing by the windows talking to himself, “It’s like bein in a tree. But a fancy tree where there’s food and a real beautiful person.”

Probably sick of waiting for them to sit down, the host bowed and closed the screen behind him.

_Fucking hot. A sexy dude. Damn fine. Gorgeous guy. Do you have a weird dick or something?_

It had never been, “a real beautiful person.”

“Where do you wanna sit, Akaashi?” Bokuto spun around and hovered from one chair to the other, his intent to push Keiji in so blindingly apparent that Keiji had to bite his lip to keep from smiling.

“There somethin’ on my face?” Bokuto rubbed his large hand across his mouth. It was a pointless motion that would have just smeared something from cheek to cheek, had there been something to smear. It was also infuriatingly adorable.

Keiji made his way to the seat with his back facing the screen.

“I believe I’ll sit here, Bokuto,” he rested his hand on the back of the chair, as though he were going to pull it out. Bokuto almost knocked him on his ass in his haste to do it for him, starting out dragging the chair, then lifting it up sloppily to stop the loud shrieking noise it made against the floor, finally sitting it down in an uneven clatter of metal legs. Keiji sat and Bokuto pushed him in with a long, painful screech. His own attempt to sit made just as much of a racket, though it took less time.

In front of them was an elaborate table set with silverware, chopsticks, and a variety of black, white, and grey flatware. But there was no menu, so they were left with little to do until their server arrived.

Keiji, deciding that Tetsurou’s “lover boy” was just to provoke him, spent the time planning what he was going to say to his brother the next time he saw him. Bokuto spent the time spreading all the plates across his side of the table, trying to figure out their individual purpose.

“Whadya think this one is for, Akaashi? It looks like it’s for a cat.” Bokuto held up a two-sided item that was probably for some kind of sauce. In the process he knocked a teacup off the edge of the table, which Keiji caught at the very last minute.

“I’m not an expert in table-setting, Bokuto.”

“Yeah, but just guess!” he whined.

Their waiter arrived at just that moment, interrupting what was bound to be a very one sided lecture on expensive plates. The man had a very familiar smile that had suspicious written all over it.
“Hello, I’m Kai and I’ll be your server this evening.”

One of his brother’s friends. Of course. How lovely.

Keiji liked Kai, though they’d never moved beyond acquaintances. But despite these fond feelings, his presence was even more reason to feel like they were being spied on.

“Hey, hey, hey, Kai!” Bokuto waved like a child.

The server smiled serenely. “As I understand it, the chef has prepared a special four course meal for the two of you, on the house.”

“No, don’t worry, we’re gonna tip ya, buddy,” Bokuto grinned.

Keiji kicked him under the table, but the server’s expression stayed the same.

“Chef Glenn hoped you wouldn’t mind the courses be revealed as they arrive?” Kai asked, sitting a carafe of water on the table. “Although we do have a menu listed for your perusal if you so desire. As I understand it, there’s no food allergies at the table?”

“Nah, I’m only allergic to penicillin,” Bokuto laughed for no apparent reason.

“Not know what’s coming is fine,” Keiji bit the inside of his mouth, hard. “And if you could please extend our thanks.”

“Of course. Although that’s not really necessary, as the chef will be out to speak to you at some point. Now, can I pour you some tea? Would you like anything else to drink?”

Keiji ordered a Coke. Bokuto ordered a limeade and asked for extra sugar packets. A lot of them.

Kai left the room with the same serene expression he’d had when he came in.

The first course was sushi but it wasn’t really like any sushi Keiji had ever tasted. Probably France’s fault. It was brought out on a piece of beautifully polished slate, with the ingredients for each item described in small precise lettering that seemed impossible to achieve with chalk.

While reaching for a piece of salmon, Bokuto managed to wipe all the relevant information off on his jacket.

Keiji’s eye twitched.

The nonsense coming out of Bokuto’s mouth had tripled. He was somewhat idiotic as a rule, but flatware discourse was taking things a step quite outside of his repertoire. Probing, inappropriate questions and observations were closer to the mark. But instead of doing that, he was rapid fire asking silly questions about literally everything in the room until the food arrived and he stopped talking completely.

Completely. If the babbling had been weird, the quiet was unsettling.

“Are you… enjoying the appetizer?” Keiji asked after an extended, awkward silence. His words were stiff, the way he’d probably address a stranger on a first date. Actually, since Bokuto had decided this one “counted” it was their first date. By the same logic, it was the first first date Keiji had ever gone on.
Semantics, but no less distressing.

Bokuto’s eyes twitched. And then his mouth twitched. And then he dropped his chopsticks haphazardly into his chopstick rest and put his head in his hands.

“Awh mannn,” he groaned into his plate, “Agaasee I don’t think I can do this.” He was for some reason defeated and since Keiji wasn’t supposed to give him feedback on his behavior, he didn’t know what to do other than be facetious.

“Finish the appetizer? I’ll take anything you don’t want.” Actually, it wasn’t really facetious if you meant it.

“No!” Bokuto lifted his head miserably. “But you can have mine if you want, cause that’s not the thing! I’m tryin’ to say, like…” he looked everywhere but Keiji’s face, finally settling on the window, “you’re outta my league, Akaashi. Way outta my league, and I gotta tell you I didn’t think that was possible before I met you.”

Restraint be damned. This was ridiculous. “I would advise you to not tell your dates or yourself such nonsense in the future. You’re shooting yourself in the foot no matter the situation. There’s no such thing as leagues.”

“Hey!” Bokuto protested for no clear reason. “I thought you said you weren’t gonna do this tonight! That it was a real date!”

“You broke the fourth wall first, Bokuto,” Keiji put his hands on his lap to keep from fiddling with them. Or maybe from throwing tuna in Bokuto’s face.

“Well, I dunno what that is! It doesn’t matter, just… this is real confusing now!” He repeatedly tried to put his hands in his hair, realizing at the last moment that he’d ruin it, so he stopped, fingers hovering near his temples. Up and down, over and over, a series of futile gestures.

"I’ve never even had to see if somebody was down! We’d just flirt and drink until we were makin’ out or we were buddies. I dunno know how to tell if somebody likes me!”

“You’ll never know if someone’s interested unless you try,” Keiji leaned across the table, furious for reasons he barely comprehended. “What would you tell a new member of your team if he felt overwhelmed by an opponent?”

Bokuto leaned back and made a face he probably thought was inspiring. “I’d tell him, ‘You can’t win unless you give 120% and go for it!’” he declared proudly.

“So.” Keiji took a shuddering breath to calm himself, then peacefully sat back. He sipped his soda. He had no idea what he was doing.

“Go for it.”

Bokuto put his hands on the table. He was staring straight through the place setting in front of him. He stared for a very long time. Then he lifted his head and his eyes were glowing.

“Y’know what, Akaashi?” his mouth lifted into a feral half-smile. “Think I just might.”

The frisson that rolled up Keiji’s spine nearly knocked him out of his chair.
Out of nowhere, Bokuto had anecdotes.

Perhaps not out of nowhere. But if they had existed he’d just bragged through them so much that the actual stories had been completely obscured. They were certainly still boastful, but they were also hilarious. His volleyball career was full of outrageous mishaps that a former player could easily relate to. His life on a small island had involved a variety of comedic situations as well. Keiji’s favorite was the one in which five-year-old Bokuto managed to “run away” by stowing away on the Maui ferry. He was made an official member of the crew when he was discovered, a status the local newspaper insisted he still held. Keiji tried not to think about the reason such a small child would want to run away. He laughed since Bokuto found it funny now.

Throughout it all, his date was charming, albeit sloppy, whiny, and ridiculously emotional. Of course if he hadn’t been those things, he wouldn’t be Bokuto anymore. But he was something else, too.

He was so present that Keiji found it hard to believe that this was anything less than completely real.

Keiji found himself telling stories of his own. Stories about his family, the way his grandfather had grown dozens of fruit tree saplings to impress his grandmother. The time when Tetsurou had hidden Kenma and wouldn’t tell anyone where he’d put him. Stories about his friends, including the locker room clothing incident. Many involved Chikara, but his identity was easy to talk around, and somehow it didn’t hurt so much to bring him up. They were good stories, hilarious ones, things he had nearly forgotten.

It felt so good to talk. So many of Keiji’s own memories, the things that made him who he was, had been clenched inside of him for months. He’d been a little boy gripping his skinned knee so hard that no one could bandage it. Letting go meant it could get better. Or in this case, letting go allowed the realization that he had healed quite some time ago.

When Kai brought out the second course – a lobster bisque infused with miso – the exchange of stories came to an organic end.

Since Keiji’s mother and brother both carried EpiPens for their extreme shellfish allergies, lobster, shrimp, and all other crustaceans had not been allowed in the Akaashi home. Even his grandparents, who considered such things an integral part of one’s diet, only ate shellfish on special occasions. They were probably scarred from watching their eldest daughter almost die during a family meal. Keiji only knew he wasn’t allergic himself because he’d eaten shrimp onigiri by accident once.

He’d never had lobster of any sort before, so he had no idea what to expect when he brought the spoon to his mouth.

*Holy fucking fuck.*

“Ya like that soup, Akaashi?” Bokuto’s sideways grin was even more overconfident than usual.

“Delicious,” he mumbled. He did not have time to answer questions because he needed to eat it as fast as humanly possible.

Bokuto’s tongue darted out to lick his top lip. Whether it was because there was soup there or he was just being bizarre was hard to discern. It was weirdly arousing either way. But Keiji was not particularly affected by such concerns, because he was eating the best thing he’d ever eaten in his life. Bokuto could oil himself up and dance naked on the table for all he cared.

“Holy shit, I never thought I’d see ya make a face like that!” Bokuto had taken out his phone and was poised to take a picture. “Or like, anybody! Akaaaashi you gotta see yourself, it’s how people
eat in cartoons! Can I take a picture? Please.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Keiji muttered through the soup. “And I don’t care.”

He was nearing the bottom of his bowl, a tremendous and dreadful experience. Bokuto continued to chortle unhelpfully in the background. His unmuted camera phone sounded again and again, until Keiji’s spoon clattered against the ceramic, and he looked at the empty dish before him.

“You’re always so pretty, but you’re really cute too, you know? Like, kinda dorky…” Bokuto mused, looking at his screen and not really paying attention to what he was saying. “Want the rest of mine?” he slid his soup across the table.

Keiji wanted it so bad.

Bokuto was still laughing when Kai and four other servers brought out the main course. The extra manpower was needed to carry a large stone, shimmering with heat, and four platters: one with raw beef, one with raw seafood, one with raw vegetables, and the last with a variety of sauces.

The laughter stopped immediately. Bokuto jumped out of his chair. “A fuckin’ ishiyaki?!? Akaashi did you tell them to do this?”

It was occasionally difficult to tell if Bokuto were enraptured or furious.

“No. Is it not acceptable?”

“Dude, it’s one of my favorite things in the world!” Bokuto rapidly arranged the tabletop, pulling meat off the platter as fast it could be put down. He set the pieces on a long thin plate in a strict order based on size and thickness. “Haven’t you ever had it?”

“No. I have no idea how long we need to cook any of these things for.”

“Can I, um, do it for you then? Please, Akaashi? I’ve grilled so much fish at home, and like, my grandparents always take me to a place that has this, or yakiniku, for my birthday. Well, not last year cause I couldn’t go home cause of school, but every other year!”

“Please, go ahead. I’m fairly certain I’d give myself food poisoning.”

Bokuto was focused, draping the thin cuts of meat across the center of the stone, then surrounded that section with the rest of the food: scallops and shrimp on one side, vegetables on the other. In the silence borne of single-mindedness, Keiji just observed golden eyes narrow as they watched the edges of the meat darken. Bokuto flipped everything so quickly the action was completed in almost a single moment and then he sat back, listening to the sizzle of the meat until it was time to focus again.

“I’m real glad we can do this together, Akaashi!” his eyes flicked up, earnest and soft and happy. “Try it,” he held out a small piece on his chopsticks, “Dip it in one of those sauces. You can’t go wrong with this when I’m doing it!”

It was absolutely delicious.

And at that moment Keiji wanted to kiss him so desperately it hurt.

Only a small portion of that want was because of the food.

Bokuto had no idea, he just happily distributed the first round, humming some terrible country song
to himself. He had no idea that something had just snapped.

Was this how feelings worked? That over a small slice of meat you look at someone but, for whatever reason, this time you’re really looking at him and everything goes from annoying to well, still almost impossibly annoying but equally if not more delightful? Wasn’t something supposed to happen to bring such a thing about? Something beyond a slice of steak. Something enormous, dramatic…

Something?

It didn’t matter. Keiji couldn’t stop looking at him. His mind was full of stories he wanted to write. About Bokuto. This Bokuto the real Bokuto, not the sloppy character he’d scratched into his notebooks. As though he could boil down the essence of a person into a list of traits and choices. No. That was bad writing. Keiji wanted to write Bokuto the messy, disastrous, wonderful way he really was, and then he wanted to keep every single word to himself.

Everything he’d written for the past nine months had been reactionary: anger at situations, but more than anything anger at himself for letting things happen. People claimed painful experiences made it easier to create, but that had not been his experience. Keiji would be the first to admit to his own stunted emotional intelligence. Too many feelings at once shut him down. And he had shut down completely, artistically and emotionally, spending months alone and broken.

And then something.

His attempt to turn an unbearable meathead into someone else and to absorb the ugliness of who he had been in the process had gone wrong. Keiji had exposed himself to something unexpected. To someone else’s monuments of pain. He’d familiarized himself with the ridges and curves that sadness had ripped into Bokuto’s personality. They were brutal and beautiful, wind sculptures in the desert. This pain had created the only version of Bokuto that Keiji had known. The only one he wanted to know. The one full of delight and wonder and the bravery to be so vulnerable.

Assuming that meeting Bokuto had changed Keiji’s heart would be an easy way to look at things. But it would be wrong. People didn’t fix other people. This wasn’t some dumb white boy romcom. Bokuto had been offensive, bizarre, thoughtful, attractive, and just… different. But he hadn’t done any sort of magic. Just… a small something.

It was their arrangement, Tetsurou’s arrangement, that had brought about the change. It had given Keiji a focus beyond his own self-centered melancholy. Distracted, he had relaxed. He’d remembered things he’d forced himself to banish from his mind. And he realized, realized right now, that the pain he was guarding himself from was only a shadow of its former self. He hadn’t let himself discover what he’d grown into on the other side of his own small tragedy. He’d been too weak, too terrified to experience the hurt again.

He was terrified now, in fact.

But running from his fear had turned him into selfish asshole who had forgotten how to trust. He’d treated people abysmally thinking he was keeping himself safe. Bokuto included. Even especially.

With that in mind, it was perhaps time to open up, even just a little.

Bokuto was sitting back in his chair, finished with his distribution of their dinner, face glowing with the intent to dig in when Keiji interrupted him.

“I’d like to answer your second question from l-l-last night.”
Inquiring eyes looked up at him, wide and gold and profoundly confused.

For good reason. A person shouldn’t talk about his ex on the first date. But Keiji was about to break that rule a second time with the same person.

“I think in the process it might also answer the third.”

Bokuto leaned back even further, leaving his food untouched in front of him. He crossed his arms, and tilted his head in an oddly encouraging gesture.

Breathe. Exhale.

Breathe. Exhale.

“I have had my heart broken.” Breathe. Exhale. “As I told you on our first date, my only relationship was with my best friend.”

“Chikara, right?” the question was tentative. Delicate. A first name, because he hadn’t been told anything else.


Gratefulness flowed over him at Bokuto’s unintentional gesture. Now Keiji didn’t have to say his name if he didn’t want to.

“A lot of things hap-penned at the end of our junior year. Some very g………ood, some quite terrible. He and I were to-together through all of them. Even before that, he was my per-person. The only one who I trusted to read my wr………iting for years. Chikara was my first everything, save for an awkward fi-first kiss in a closet. He was frank with a razor sharp wit, but he was ki-kind. Encouraging. Reliable, if a little lazy.”

He took a deep breath.

“I am sure he’s still those things. I knew him for too- too long to believe otherwise.”

Bokuto’s food still sat untouched.

“Eat,” Keiji couldn’t say please because he was certain he’d get stuck on the word. “It will get cold.” His date slowly brought his chopsticks to his mouth, as though he was only doing so out of obligation. Of course he missed and had to scramble to pick up the fallen food.

“At the start of this school year, after a very ccccccchallenging summer, I waited in front of my house to meet him, as was routine. He never showed. After school, I texted, then tried his phone, then his house phone. I never call anyone, but I was frantic. No one answered. I walked to his house, and knocked on- knocked on the door. Nothing. For a week it was empty.”

Bokuto reached across the table and wrapped his hands around Keiji’s fingers. They had been rapidly twisting around each other and he hadn’t even noticed.

“His phone was discon- discon- disconnected. He’d vanished.” He was running out of sounds that cooperated. He was running out of synonyms for the words he couldn’t force out of his mouth.

“Did he ever tell ya where he went?”

Bokuto was supposed to be angry. Irrational, hard to deal with. Calming him was supposed be a distraction from the pain of recalling this nightmare. But he didn’t need calmed. He just separated
Keiji’s hands and held each of them tightly. His hands were broader but shorter than Keiji’s long fingers. They could each hold each other if they wanted.

He had to finish.

“No,” Keiji shook his head. “The Enno-ennoshitas returned. They ignored my calls, or when I knocked. You know Noya and Ryuu, from the day we surfed? They told me, a month later. He’d gone to college a year early, in New York City, where he was from. He wanted nothing to d-d-d-d-do with me.”

An angry squeeze briefly crushed Keiji’s hands but was gone as quickly as it had come. Bokuto let go.

“You should have some water. And we better eat this before it gets cold! I didn’t make it real awesome for nothing, you know Agaasee?”

Keiji drank his entire glass, then picked at the slightly warm steak. Even at less than the perfect temperature, it was one of the more delicious things he’d had in his life. He drank sips of tea between bites of scallop and peppers and shrimp. He looked at the feathers on Bokuto’s lapel. He touched the pin on his own.

He felt wrung out. Lighter, freer, but battered and exhausted from the process.

They ate wordlessly, time he knew Bokutou would have rather spent raving about the meal and his prowess at cooking it.

“I wanna be mad,” Bokuto said after sitting quietly for several minutes. “I mean, I am mad. Really fucking pissed. But do you want me to be? Cause, I’ve gotten better. Been practicing. I think I can hold it in if it’ll help. At least this time, maybe.”

Lowering his cup of tea, Keiji heard it delicately chime against the frosted glass top of the table.

“It would help immensely.”

Dessert came in the form of a tray stacked with mochi, crème brulée, dango, jellied cakes with actual flowers in the jelly, flaky croissants and some other French-looking pastries all surrounding a wobbly thing that looked like an enormous drop of water that rest in the dip of the platter.

Kenma’s father was the one who brought it out.

“Hey there Keiji, Bokuto!” he waved with one hand without disturbing the platter in the slightest. “Heard you got stood up!”

“Wait. I thought their car broke down!” Bokuto sat up angrily. “Are you saying they didn’t they wanna eat with us?”

“My kid said you and Tetsu would just talk the whole time. Ignore your dates. And you know? Kenma’s usually right. Takes after his mother!” his shortle competed with Bokuto’s for obnoxiousness. “They’re in the room like this at the other end of the restaurant. You could go see em, but half these things are gonna melt if you do. What’d ya think so far, by the way?”

“It was delicious, Mr. Kozume.”
“So good! How’dya know I liked ishiyaki, Chef?”

“Well, who doesn’t?” the small man grinned.

“Thank you for the food, sir. It was very generous.”

“Generous? Keiji, your mom and grandparents have been watching Kenma since he was a year old. You will never pay a dollar in our restaurant. I’ve already tipped all the waiters too. Next time, leave your wallet at home.”

Bokuto sniffled in weepy gratitude, but controlled himself.

With a goofy, exaggerated bow, then a squeeze of Keiji’s shoulder, the chef headed back to the kitchen.

The silence that enveloped them as they reached for the desserts was neither heavy nor light.

“I kinda cut you off before, but if you wanna keep talkin you should,” Bokuto poked at the transparent bubble with his spoon until it pierced the surface. “I was just worried you were gonna have a panic attack,” he lifted the spoon to his lips then made a face. “Damn, this weird mochi is just like… a water explosion? Am I eating it wrong?”

“I think you should put the brown sugar and sauce on it. Or, whatever that surrounding substance is,” Keiji was holding a violet cake, ready to put it in his mouth. “I believe I said enough, but thank you…”

Well, there was another thing. He could just let it go, or he could…

“Actually. When I stutter,” he exhaled, “it doesn’t necessarily mean I’m nervous. The situations that make me lose fluency are complicated. Other people addressing my stuttering for me is unhelpful. Please don’t stop the conversation because–”

Bokuto’s eyes opened wide as he did just that. “No, no, it wasn’t like that, Akaashiii! It was how you were breathing! Like real fast n quick. And that’s a sign sometimes! My mom started gettin em when my dad left and I learned how to help… and I mean, I don’t, cause…” he trailed off, looking miserable. Teetering on the edge of despair.

Then he took a deep breath. He calmed himself down. And he tried again.

“I mean I notice the stutter a bit, but it’s just how you talk? Like, I think it’s cute. But not cause… shit what’s the word? Ah whatever… I think it’s cute cause I think everything you do is cute. Not because I have like, a stuttering fetish. I mean, it’s just a thing some people do! I can’t think of anything to compare, cause I don’t want you to think I think it’s gross, cause like, burping and stuttering aren’t even kinda the same, but it’s…”

The violet cake slid out of Keiji’s fingers and dropped his plate with a splat.

Bokuto exhaled shakily. “Gaahhh! I said it all wrong. Akaashi, you’re real articulate, but like, I forget words a lot. Doesn’t matter how many languages I know, I’m kinda not good at saying shit, better at doing things. So what I’m tryin’ ta say is–”

“Burping is not cute, Bokuto,” Keiji sighed. “No matter who does it.”

“–I really like you, Akaashi.”
poor sweet keiji. he's so scared

the wonderful Bee made some phenomenal art. honestly exactly how i imagined them
Keiji had no problem with extended eye contact. He was extremely confident in almost all facets of his life. Some called it arrogance, but they were mistaken. The confidence of a fatherless child with a stutter was hard-won: a gift Keiji shared only with himself. And though he had no interest in shoving his self-worth in anyone’s face, its mere existence meant he had little issue looking people in the eye.

Except for now. He was looking at Bokuto and Bokuto was looking back, nervous and hopeful. Keiji wanted to keep on looking and stop immediately. The recently arrived swarm of butterflies in his stomach was growing thicker by the second and they were going to escape out of his mouth if he didn’t say something first.

He had to say something. He wanted to say something. But he wasn’t saying anything. The irony that, for once, his unwilling silence had absolutely nothing to do with his stutter would be hilarious if the situation were pretty much anything else.

The screen flapped open with a tremendous clack before he could pull himself together. Tetsurou leaned into the room, leering like he’d heard what had just happened. Keiji assumed that he hadn’t out of sheer force of will.

“Who’s ready for Prom, kids?” his brother waggled his eyebrows. “Wanna be late.”

Bokuto seemed to have developed an interest in what Tetsurou looked like on fire. He dealt with this curiosity by shoving an entire mochi ice cream in his mouth. “Finished already?” Keiji cut up his smashed cake with a fork. Or, he attempted to. In actuality it was mushed into an unappetizing goo which he was then forced to put in his mouth.

His brother leaned against the window frame, a gesture he probably considered both easygoing and cool. “We had to leave or Kenma was going to eat an entire apple pie in one sitting,” he drawled.

“No I wasn’t,” Kenma squirmed under his boyfriend’s arm to get in the room.

“Yeah you were.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were.”
“FUCK, I got the worst brainfreeze.” Bokuto knocked his head on the table and groaned, slamming his hand against the glass. Keiji reached for another pastry, hands lightly shaking. The tremor of his fingers against the platter jiggled the water cake apart, leaving nothing but a puddle as evidence of its existence.

Like nothing had been there at all.

Bokuto sang in the truck, radio turned to his favorite country station. Keiji hated country music with a passion that knowing Bokuto had exponentially increased. But his voice was so pleasant to listen to that Keiji’s time in the passenger seat was usually spent burning with frustration with his own weakness. He’d never be able to hear these songs with the same level of disgust again.

But the music and the singing were much louder than normal, evidence of Bokuto’s avoidance of the previous conversation. Or, perhaps it could be called a confession? Maybe? Keiji didn’t know what to say, regardless. You don’t get over a year’s worth of misery and distrust in five minutes, no matter how much someone may or may not like you. Hopefully the… well, it wasn’t important because, romance aside, it’s difficult to know what to do with yourself when you realize you’ve been over a heartbreak and riding on nothing but bitterness for quite a long time.

Luckily the ride to the school was only five minutes long. Bokuto’s vocal chords and Keiji’s psyche could only handle being abused for so long.

They pulled into an empty spot a few away from Tetsurou, in the shadow of the football stadium. The sound of a middle school game echoed across the vast auxiliary parking lot. All around them, students in elaborate dresses and tuxes were exiting unnecessary limos and trudging towards the school. They looked profoundly out of place. Anyone in heels seemed to struggle walking on the uneven parking lot, and a large portion of the guys seemed content to have the exact same terrible hairstyles they wore every day. The lack of concern clashed terribly with their formal attire.

Keiji wondered for the second time if he should have tried to give himself a side part.

He reached for the door handle, but was stopped by the pressure of Bokuto’s hand on his. Their eyes met, much closer than they had been in the restaurant. There was no more air in the cab of the truck. Keiji was going to drown, though it was less frightening than it had been the last time.

“I…” Bokuto swallowed about thirty times, voice husky, “I… uh… yeah, um, I… so… I think there’s gonna be a lot of people taking pictures, Akaashi. Dunno why, but I know you hate that. Is there like a back way we can go in or somethin’? And maybe somewhere where we can—”

The sound of a knock on the window and they were flying to opposite ends of the truck. Keiji cracked his hand against the glass of the window and Bokuto’s elbow landed on the horn, letting out a long sharp blast.

“The fuck are you doing?” Bokuto swung open his door to reveal a crowd of Keiji and Tetsurou’s friends, mostly old teammates including some people Keiji was nothing but casual acquaintances with.

“So isn’t it obvious?”

He had not expected him, but Tooru was among the party wearing a jaunty serge suit with a teal tie. He waved his hands in some kind of ridiculous fanfare, as though they should be delighted at his presence. Next to him, in a basic black tux, Hajime rolled his eyes. Their presence actually did make
sense: with Tooru’s collapse two years ago and the trip last year, he hadn’t ever been able to attend the prom either. Without him, Hajime had likely not gone.

Keiji was somewhat uncertain how they were planning on getting in now.

“I have no idea what you’re doing,” he answered as he slid across the seat, getting himself tangled in the gear shifter in the process.

“We’re here,” Tooru gestured to everyone, “as your honor guard, Keiji!”

Inside a huddle of tall suited friends, Keiji slowly made his way toward the gym entrance. His emotions waffled between moved and mortified. He decided about halfway there that either was better than strange parents squealing when they recognized him, taking his picture until he was surrounded. It wasn’t the first time it had happened. You’d think people with children of their own would understand.

He could hear Bokuto and his brother talking loudly on the outside of the circle, too loud for a construction site, let alone the line for a formal high school dance. The sound was strangely reassuring, but also more than a little embarrassing. Especially since he just hadn’t anticipated any of this. Maybe because he’d never expected the entrance of a prom to be the same as the red carpet.

Or maybe he’d just been really distracted.

“Ugh,” Kenma vocalized Keiji’s own thoughts as he tucked his DS inside his jacket pocket and pulled out his Vita and his phone from somewhere else.

“Just how many pockets does that have?” Keiji had his suspicions.

“Seven,” Kenma murmured as he entered a code from the phone into the device. “That’s why I bought it, mostly. The pattern was okay, but maybe a little much.”

About twenty feet from the entrance the circle fell apart, forming an actual line. With no more eager parents, there was no need to be hidden anymore. Keiji was about to reach forward to ask why Tooru and Hajime were there and how they were planning on getting in, when two hands wrapped around his waist.

“Yes, Bokuto?” he sighed, swallowing what might have been a small smile.

A head of bright pink hair appeared on his right side, dark curls on his left.

“Keiji, I can’t believe it.”

“A few months on the east coast and you’ve forgotten us already!”

“After these eighteen years, don’t even remember your own flesh and blood.”

“And your flesh and blood’s side piece.”

“You’re not my side piece, baby, you’re my front piece.”

Deciding not to comment on whatever that was, Keiji gave each of them a look. “You’re not in high school anymore, either.”

“Oh, we know.”
“Philly’s been amazing.”

“Keiji, have you ever seen a leaf change color?”

“But we never got to go to the prom when we were here because the superintendent wanted to make Makki wear a dress.”

“Gross,” Makki scrunched up his nose. His ruffled pale blue tux was probably from 1977, though it was surprisingly flattering.

“That entire situation was disgusting,” Keiji grit his teeth.

“Things weren’t all bad. There were some real nice people. Mr. Takeda offered to let Makki in anyway, even though he would have lost his job,” Issei shrugged.

“Yeah, and I remember your mom got everybody to call our senator and the governor too. Man, Keiji, she is always ready to fuck shit up. She’s the best,” Makki slapped his back.

“Takahiro, my mom represented you when you sued the school district.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t know Kanye West.”

“Anyway, we decided we were going to come to Prom,” his cousin brought them back on topic. “And unlike some people we know, we didn’t strong-arm old teammates into taking us as decoy dates. We’re going to get in with the power of love. And making Yutaro feel guilty.”

Ahead of them, Tooru turned around and stuck out his tongue. He should have appreciated the distraction more since his “date,” had not stopped asking him questions about college setting technique since the line had formed. Hajime didn’t look much better off: his “date” would not stop jumping around.

The group of them had reached the door where Yutaro and Akira were collecting tickets. They eyed Tooru and Kageyama with more than a little distrust.

“He’s my date,” Kageyama grunted, grabbing Tooru’s hand.

Both of them looked ready to puke.

Hajime put Shouyou in a headlock to keep him still.

Bored of that spectacle, Makki grabbed Keiji’s hand and pressed it against his chest.

“Gahh!” he grit his teeth immediately after the contact. “Not quite healed yet, ugh, feels so numb and weird. Anyway, Keiji whadya think?”

Keiji gave a rare full smile. “If you intend on beating Hajime at any kind of physical contest, you need to work out your pectoral muscles. As it stands your chest is completely flat.”

He didn’t anticipate Makki grabbing him by his ears and kissing him on the mouth, but he figured he deserved it.

“Hey, hey, hey what’s going on?!” Bokuto surged up the line. Reaching Keiji’s side, he put his arm around his shoulders. It was much gentler than a protective gesture needed to be.

Keiji found himself liking it and then found himself hating himself.
“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Issei tipped his head.

Makki moved to his boyfriend’s side. “Well, I’d say that’s one hundred percent grass-fed American beef.”

Bokuto was confused, “I dunno, we mostly ate tuna, pork, and SPAM at home. I do really like steak though! I think it’s my favorite!”

On the other side of the open gym doors, Tooru cackled and Hajime let out an enormous snort.

After showing their tickets to an impassive Akira, Keiji led Bokuto down the short hallway to the first gym. His friends had all dissipated in the chaos and he had to hold Bokuto’s hand to keep from getting separated in the crowd. The going was a lot slower than he would have preferred, since there was something he desperately hoped to avoid.

“KEIJI!” about a dozen girls squealed.

There was no question this had been coming, but Keiji still felt like throwing up.

He hated that they were girls. It felt really misogynistic to acknowledge that a group of girls were doing stereotypical shallow girl things. But they were. He reminded himself of Esther, Hitoka, Yui, Kiyoko, his cousins, and his mother, all the other women who didn’t act like this. It wasn’t like men weren’t starfuckers too. They just went about it differently, and when they did, people ended up dead.

The completely non-lethal nuisance surrounded him and Bokuto almost instantly, a wave of pastel and jewel tones. Bokuto’s immediate reaction was to take a step back, cross his arms across Keiji’s chest, and pull him into his own. It was sweet of him, but the wrong move altogether. He could see hearts form in most of their eyes and could imagine the questions already.

“Hello,” he dipped his head slightly, “as I m-m-mentioned, this is Bokuto, my uh…”

“His boyfriend.”

The voice behind him did not sound like any version of Bokuto’s voice he’d heard before. Friendly, but with an ironclad confidence. Confidence without a single ounce of that desperate need for affirmation that permeated nearly everything he said.

The girls oooohed as one. Or nearly. A single outlier stepped forward, a small, pale girl with curly brown hair and a poufy purple dress. Each member of Keiji’s fan club had certain behaviors that had made his school life unbearable but this one, Casey, was the most troublesome. She was possessive, as though Keiji’s life was hers to manage. It wasn’t even sexual or romantic.

Just a sheer need for control.

“Hi there, Bokuto, was it? I’m Casey!” she gave a small wave. “So how did you and Keiji meet?”

Still after all this time their backstory was pathetic. Bokuto could never remember, so Keiji had to go along with whatever he made up. He had no idea what Bokuto might possibly say this time. But he was squeezed tighter, which kept him from speaking up.

“Ah, his brother introduced us at one of my games.”
She smiled with half of her face and twirled at her skirt, “Oh! What do you play? And where? You’re in college right?”

“Volleyball. I play wing spiker at UCLA.”

What’d been a fantastic opportunity for bragging was just ignored.

“You must feel pretty lucky then,” she took another step forward, as though Keiji’s space were hers, “dating someone so accomplished. You know, I…”

His entire body stiffened. It would be so easy for her to say something more. Things he didn’t want Bokuto to know. It was beyond trust at this point. His relationship with Bokuto was the only one that wasn’t tainted by the past. He wanted it to stay that way.

Bokuto must have felt his tension, because he interrupted her.

“Damn right, I do,” he slid to the side and put his arm around Keiji’s shoulder. “But I’ll just bring him a gold medal to even things out.”

Her jaw dropped.

“Hey hey, yeah guess he didn’t tell you?” Bokuto looked at him fondly. “He’s never mentioned you before, so, didn’t really know if you were close.”

Was he… being catty?

Keiji wrapped his arm around Bokuto’s waist, a wide, authentic, spiteful smile on his face. “Bokuto’s starting on the National Team soon, and he’s set to be on the next US Olympic Volleyball team, Casey. I hope you cheer him on.”

The other girls were delighted. They shook Bokuto’s hand and fawned over him. He sucked up every last bit of praise and paid them back in excited bragging. They told him to take good care of Keiji, and said they didn’t have to worry about him anymore. Eventually they left for the gym, though Casey stayed behind. She smiled at the two of them like a knife had slit her face in half, then stormed away, ploughing through her happy friends, who really hadn’t been as bad as Keiji thought.

Nice kill, Bokuto.

The walk to the gym was short. Too short. But they immediately started heading in that direction when Casey was gone. There was no room to talk, especially as the music grew louder with every step they took.

Keiji’s hand slid from Bokuto’s waist, only to find their fingers interlocking. He focused on the way their hands were tangled together, tried to memorize the weight and feel of Bokuto’s shorter, thicker fingers. He wasn’t certain if they’d ever hold hands again, and he didn’t want to forget. Maybe he could write about it, at least.

The thought was cold and unpleasant.

But Bokuto had said he liked him. Then he’d completely unraveled those girls with something that sounded like jealousy. Keiji’s cold, logical mind felt confident in exactly what was happening, but the horrible experience that had warped his instincts screamed that something was terribly, terribly wrong.
“Ya know, I’ve never been to a prom before,” Bokuto half-yelled over the sound of the music spilling out of the gym. “Always had volleyball tournaments. So uh, is it okay if I dance with other people too? I don’t really know the rules.”

Keiji’s heart sank, but he nodded, “I believe so. I’ve never been to a prom before either.”

His voice was drowned out as they entered the gym. And then he stopped talking altogether. But Bokuto happened to be a lot louder than he was.

“Holy fuck this is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen!”

When Keiji had jokingly recommended the Nineties as a prom theme, he’d never, ever expected they’d use it. And when they’d decided to use it, he’d never expected it to look good.

Thousands of old CDs hung from the ceiling in curtains, ropes, and mobile sculptures. They were all designed in such a way that only the side that reflected silver and rainbows was visible, though a few had twisted around. Almost exclusively they said AOL on the back. The CDs in turn, shattered the light from the DJ’s table, casting it on the spiraling neon ribbon that seemed to be hanging everywhere. At the far end of the room, Yasushi Kamasaki, a recent graduate, was surrounded by a wall of the streamers as he controlled the music from the DJ’s table. Black lights lit up neon murals on the walls.

It wasn’t a fairy tale prom by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, it kind of looked like a silvery rainbow threw up all over a room full of velvet paintings.

But it was kind of cool too.

They found their friends thanks to Kei, who towered over everyone, and Noya, who was louder than the music. Dozens of students Keiji barely knew were surrounding Kei. Dressed to the nines in a grey three-piece suit, he looked like an irritated businessman surrounded by his eager administrative staff. What was actually happening was repeated slaps on the back for his amazing theme idea.

When he saw Keiji, he lifted his eyebrow, as though offering the idea back, but Keiji let it go. Kei had won his accolades through public humiliation and he deserved to keep them.

He turned to introduce Bokuto to Hitoka, who looked like a fairy princess in her enormously puffy red gown, and Tadashi, who had on a pair of brown trousers and a “Black Lives Matter” T-shirt under a well-worn green blazer.

But Bokuto was busy.

When he had asked if could dance with other people, Keiji hadn’t expected that he’d do so immediately. He had, however, expected the first person he’d dance with would be Tetsurou. Bokuto was swinging his brother around to a pop song that Keiji had never even heard, spinning and dipping him like they’d coordinated whatever was happening. A circle immediately formed around them. Keiji could see students he barely knew whispering, wondering who Bokuto even was.

“I thought you wanted to stay under the radar,” Tooru murmured into his ear. “But then again, I was pretty sure you wanted to actually dance with him too. Guess you can’t do both.”

Keiji didn’t say anything.

Bokuto did not stop moving. He danced with Shouyou, who he threw high enough to touch the basketball hoop. He danced with Issei and Makki, even though he’d met them less than thirty
minutes ago. He and Noya attempted to breakdance, and failed gloriously. He danced with Tooru and Hitoka to those half-slow dances that no one knows how to deal with.

He even danced with *Kenma*, though it was for one third of a song and Kenma spent the entire time whispering in Bokuto’s ear.

Keiji hadn’t even told him he didn’t like to dance.

Makki and Issei had just finished rapping “Regulate” in the middle of a cheering crowd when an actual slow song started. Immediately couples started forming all around Keiji’s seat where he was surrounded by jackets, phones, purses, and Hitoka’s shoes. He scanned the crowd for Bokuto and instantly felt pathetic about it. But he was his date, after all. He was supposed to dance with him. Not that anyone really seemed to notice they were together at this point.

But Bokuto had said that he liked him.

Kenma was also at the table, fiddling with his phone, not perturbed in the slightest that he was alone. Tetsurou was nowhere to be found, so it was pretty likely he was with Bokuto, wherever that was. A girl from his calculus class asked Keiji if he wanted to dance, but he turned her down, saying his date was on his way.

There was still a chance he would show, after all.

He didn’t, although he appeared a few moments after the slow song was over, pulling Keiji out of his seat and dragging him across the floor before he even knew what song was about to play.

The music turned to something Keiji had heard a few times in high end clothing stores. It wasn’t particularly fast or slow, but it was impossible to ignore the smoldering undertones. The groups of friends had yet to reform; instead there was a mass of bodies, anonymous couples writhing against each in a sea of their peers, all under Mr. Ukai and Ms. Tanaka’s watchful gaze. As the head chaperone, Ryuu’s older sister didn’t seem to care very much about things getting too steamy. Instead of paying attention she looked like she was trying to tell Keiji’s homeroom teacher a funny story. Unfortunately, he’d had laryngitis on Friday. He probably couldn’t tell her to shut up because he’d lost his voice.

Keiji was jostled by someone unseen, knocking him forward. With the disruption Bokuto ended up immediately behind him in the pressing crowd. Keiji could feel his breath on his neck. Then it stopped. Then there was a shaky exhale as hands very lightly rested on his hips.

“Is this okay?” Bokuto asked, his voice hoarse in Keiji’s ear.

Keiji craned back and told him that he’d never danced like this before, so he had no idea. But Bokuto couldn’t hear him so he just nodded.

And then Bokuto rolled his hips.

They had made out for an hour against the back of a movie theater. Keiji had ground his crotch against Bokuto’s thigh for most of that time. But that entire experience didn’t hold a candle to the terrifying arousal of that single hip roll.

Keiji didn’t know what to do with his hands. They were in fists at his side so he didn’t worry his fingers. He was trembling and Bokuto must have noticed, because he began to pull away.
Keiji responded in the stupidest way possible.

One hand reached around to rest on the back Bokuto’s neck. The other gently covered the hand on his hip. He exhaled, then shifted the weight on his legs, rolling his hips backward. Bokuto shuddered for an instant, and then they were moving together. The hands on his hips guided Keiji’s movements, and his hand on Bokuto’s neck pulled him close.

Despite being in a crowd, it was easy to believe they were alone.

The lights from the DJ flickered across his skin. Bokuto’s breath danced across the curls at the nape of his neck. Keiji leaned back, pressing his shoulders into Bokuto’s chest. They rolled together, slow gentle gyrations that did not look as sexual as they felt.

He felt small, something he wasn’t used to.

“God, you’re so perfect,” Bokuto whispered into his neck, just as there was a lull in the music. Nothing about his behavior indicated that he knew that Keiji had heard him. And Keiji couldn’t respond without turning around completely.

So he didn’t.

Much too soon, the song ended, leading into a ridiculous nineties pop song, the ridiculously grating one describing life as a Barbie doll. The difference in atmosphere was jarring and probably intentional. Glancing at the DJ for some sort of explanation, Keiji saw Kenji Futakuchi leaning on the table and grinning at Yasushi. There was no question he’d requested the song – Keiji should have just assumed that from the start. Kenji grinned back at his date, a tall blonde girl with glasses in a poufy sunset-colored dress. She was laughing like it was the best thing that had ever happened in her life.

He didn’t get to watch the much else because Bokuto grabbed his hand and spun him around. While his date’s ability to switch gears was impressive, Keiji felt like he’d been thrown into a cold shower.

“You should dance!” he leaned down to yell in his ear. “I’ve been waiting for you to dance with me.”

“I thought you wanted to dance with other people,” Keiji yelled back.

“Really I only wanted to dance with Kuroo for that one song. It just ended up bein’ the first one.”

“And then?”

“I got distracted,” he was contrite but whiny as he pulled Keiji close so they didn’t have to yell anymore. “You have really cool friends, Akaaaaaashi! And, you know, I’m used to bouncing around. But then I miss you.”

“Do you now?” Keiji asked mildly.

Bokuto took a step forward and spun him around so they were eye to eye.

“I can show ya how much if ya want...”

Instead of blushing, instead of dropping his gaze, Keiji responded in kind. “You’re going to have to work very hard.”
“I didn’t make the top five spikers in the NCAA by sittin’ on my ass, Akaaashee,” Bokuto grinned, just as Asahi backed into him, destroying the moment with his three thousand apologies.

Dancing to pop songs was an absurdist act. As the two of them had been… aggressively flirting, their friends had formed a circle to watch Tobio, of all people, do the moonwalk. Everyone was trying to out dance each other in the most ridiculous way possible. That, or jump up and down on their toes while singing at the top of their lungs. Hitoka was particularly interesting to watch, as she looked like a cupcake whenever she came back down to earth. Bokuto spent most of the time with his arm around Keiji’s waist, swinging him back and forth in time with some terrible boy band, trying to get him to come into the center to “try something” with him.

Keiji refused. But he was having fun. However, after learning that Hajime and Tadashi could breakdance, it struck him that an important person was missing.

“So, where’s Ryuu?” he asked when the song died down. “Did he decide not to come?”

His friend looked profoundly uncomfortable, like he might wiggle out of his mandarin collared shirt and oversized black jacket at any moment. “Ah, nah, he’s with his date’s friends and Tora.”

He’d found a date after all. “That’s wonderful,” Keiji said more earnestly than he’d said anything in months. “Who is she?”

“Wellllll,” Noya bounced up on his toes, only to have Asahi press him back down to the ground. “Yuu…” he growled in the menacing tone that Keiji had suspected was in him all along.

Noya cleared his throat and looked at the ground, “I dunno, he says it’s a secret or something. I don’t get it, but you know how he gets sometimes. I can’t break a man’s trust.”

The entire statement was baffling, but Keiji didn’t pry. And he didn’t have time to, since Bokuto’s hands wrapped around him again, chin on his shoulder, demanding his attention.

“You ever go to a school dance before this?” Bokuto inquired.

Keiji tried to turn his head so they could see each other, but it didn’t work particularly well. “In junior high, but the kind where no one but girls danced. There was a notable instance where most of the boys wore dresses because the principal tried to make Makki wear one.”

“I bet you looked cute in a dress,” Bokuto was teasing, but it also sounded like he meant it.

Keiji was unmoved. “I was the same height I am now. I towered over everyone. I also had very severe acne on my back. No dress that fit my shoulders could hide it, so I wore a t-shirt underneath. I don’t think I’ve ever looked worse. Chikara looked much better, but of course he can pull off anything.”

It had slipped out. Just like that. Just like he was a normal person to talk about.

“Ah man dude, I had that shit real bad on my face for a while in high school. Super fucking embarrassing.”

“No one could see usually. I just bled through my undershirts and had to change them in the bathroom during lunch. And it hurt to lean back when I sat. Though I have phenomenal posture as a result.”

“Shit, Akaaaashi, that’s way worse than me.”
He hadn’t even asked about Chikara. Just moved on into the natural progression of the conversation, gross and… well, it wasn’t embarrassing at all to talk about actually, considering the way Bokuto was reacting.

Really they only stopped talking because they came to the realization that no music was playing anymore.

The vice principal, Mr. Takeda, gave a short speech, calling up Hitoka and Tadashi to thank them for their herculean efforts in the face of such a trying planning process. They looked adorably mismatched on the stage: Tadashi like he was heading to a protest, and Hitoka like more of a Disney princess than usual.

They also looked like they were going to rattle apart.

“Make the most anxious people on the planet give a speech together. Good move,” Kei announced, annoyance barely concealing his real concern.

Tetsurou leered at him until Kenma kicked him in the shin.

Hitoka took the mic, which she dropped almost immediately. Tadashi caught it, but in the process it made a series of horrible thumping sounds. He blushed and waved nervously then gave the mic back to his girlfriend.

“Ahhh… um, hi, everybody,” she smiled, voice shaking. “I don’t have much to say, just to thank our boyfriend Kei for all his support.”

Silence fell.

“Holy shit!” Noya yelled, the only voice in the entire space. As though he hadn’t already known. There was a long beat of silence, then a female voice yelled, “Damn girl, get it!”

The idea that Hitoka had snagged two attractive men for herself seemed to relax everyone, and there was a general laugh. Keiji, who constantly ran from those who took him too seriously, wondered if it would be worse to not be taken seriously at all.

Hitoka blushed and Tadashi took the mike.

“Yeah, thanks Tsukki,” he choked out.

Kei had no visible reaction to the crowd’s stares, although his cheeks were flaming red to anyone standing nearby.

Tadashi handed the mic back to Hitoka.

“Anyway,” she began in a voice that was almost painfully rehearsed, “this year’s Prom Royalty was a very close contest. But I am happy to announce this year’s winners, our first Prom Kings: Kentarou Kyotani and student body present, Shigeru Yahaba!”

The applause was deafening, though most of it seemed to be coming from Tooru, Hajime, Makki, and Issei. The actual reward recipients, who Keiji didn’t know very well (he had actually thought they hated each other) approached the stage in profoundly different manners. Kentarou was slouching, his hands in his pockets as far as they would go. His jacket was gone, shirt unbuttoned, and his tie hung loose over his undershirt. Shigeru, who was still completely put together in a sharp
black suit, was smiling pleasantly in a way Keiji immediately identified as respectably dangerous.

He watched Tadashi crown both of them, since Hitoka couldn’t reach, then they descended the stage to dance. Under a spotlight and surrounded by so many people, Kentarou looked ready to punch a hole through the floor to make his escape. Shigeru seemed to be hissing into his ear to prevent that from happening. But they were holding on to each other much too tightly for Keiji to assume anything other than real intimacy.

A minute into the song, everyone around him paired off again, more interested in dancing themselves than watching Shigeru steadily tame his furiously nervous boyfriend.

He turned to Bokuto, who had been standing behind him, but once again, he was gone.

So when Noya unexpectedly asked him to dance, he said yes.

The spiky hair of a dance partner he’d known since they were five was tickling his chin. He’d asked Noya to turn his head twice but his requests were ignored. Probably because Noya was scanning the dance floor, looking extremely distracted. Keiji had no idea why he’d asked him to dance at all. But considering Noya’s behavior it seemed more than appropriate for him to get lost in his own thoughts. So he allowed himself to consider exactly what was happening to his evening. First, the facts were necessary:

- Keiji had told Bokuto about Chikara.
- Bokuto had told him that he “really liked him.”
- Bokuto had disbanded his fan club.
- Bokuto had really only danced with him once, but it had been extremely sensual.
- Bokuto had said he was perfect, not realizing Keiji could hear him.
- They had definitely flirted then exchanged embarrassing information.
- But Bokuto disappeared during every slow song with no explanation at all.

With that in mind, several things could be happening:

1. Bokuto wanted to show him a good time because he was a nice person and because he’d agreed to. He liked him as a friend (though didn’t get time to explain that), and was happy to drive away irritating girls. But he couldn’t slow dance with him because he didn’t want to lead him on.
2. Bokuto felt bad for him after the Chikara conversation and was trying to use compliments to build him up. But he couldn’t slow dance with him for the same reasons as A.
3. Occam’s razor. A and B were stupid. Too simple to be doing anything else, Bokuto was being honest with him. No one says that someone is perfect into their neck without romance involved. So Bokuto couldn’t dance with him because… well…

“I think Bokuto’s scared of ya, Keiji,” Noya pulled back and looked up at him. His eyes were sparkling in the scattered light from the CD curtains. It made him look like an alien, both fascinating and terrifying

“Every time there’s a slow dance, he runs out to the water fountain and paces. I’d say he’s talkin’ to himself, but he’s half-yelling.”

Keiji blinked.

“I don’t think anybody’s gonna tell you this cause they feel bad for you,” he looked from one side to
the other as though he might get caught, “but you need to put that poor guy out of his misery one way or the other.”

Yasushi had been plunging the depths of terrible nineties dance music throughout the evening, but the next song went too far.

The Cha Cha Slide.

It could have been worse, that one song with the hand flipping and… Keiji refused to acknowledge what it was called on principle. He spent the duration of the song sitting with Kei and Kenma, making fun of Tetsurou who was really into it. It would have been even more hilarious if Ryuu had been around. He and Noya would have made a spectacle of themselves trying to make things more intense.

Bokuto was still missing. Keiji had reached the point where he unabashedly looking around the room for him. In the background, Kenma explained the logistics of the musical puzzle game he was playing to Kei. It was unsurprising, but strange that they’d never really spoken before. They seemed like the type of people who would get along if someone could get them to talk.

After an indeterminable time of such torture, the final notes of the horrible song faded away, replaced by the first three chords of Pachelbel’s Canon.

Pop music was so predictable.

All the same, this was a slow song that Keiji had heard a million times before. And by the looks of the people around him, so had everyone else. There were some wry groans, a few outright grins, and Noya audibly cheered. It was so overwhelmingly obvious that this song was a cheesy crowd favorite that Yasushi was actually chuckling behind his turntable as he announced this was one of the last slow songs of the evening.

He turned off his mic with a thump and the atmosphere abruptly shifted, as though it had been poised at the edge of a precipice and the sound pushed it off. The moment felt infinite and fleeting all at once.

This was what Keiji had gone through such a ridiculous arrangement to see.

As the vocalist began singing about dreams and wishes and fantasies, Keiji watched his brother pull Kenma close into the convoluted formation necessary for a couple with a seven-inch height difference to slow dance. Kenma resisted at first, squirming until he finally settled, burying his cheek into Tetsurou’s shoulder. Even in the low light, Keiji could see the soft blush and even softer smile on his face. He refused to look at his brother but he could easily imagine the soppy look in Tetsurou’s eyes.

A few steps over, his cousin and Makki were sucking face. Which was profoundly disgusting, but at the same time they kept pulling apart, knocking foreheads, and laughing while looking in each other’s eyes. They were certainly drunk. And although witnessing them came at a pretty high price, the moments when their tongues weren’t down each other’s throats were almost painfully sweet.

Tobio and Shouyou were having a physical fight over whose hands went where, which he could have predicted. Directly next to them Tadashi and Hitoka were giggling as they swayed, tipsy in their relief to be off stage. Every few seconds they turned to Kei, who was still sitting at the table. They made puppy dog faces asking him to join them. He refused, but he was also smiling, such a
complete rarity that Keiji turned around to give them space.

Even then he couldn’t escape things that felt too private to witness. On his other side, was one of the purest sights he’d ever seen. Tooru’s head was on Hajime’s shoulder, face buried in his neck. He was clutching his shorter boyfriend awkwardly, with none of his showy finesse, nothing but desperation. Hajime’s eyes were soft and his hands were tight around Tooru’s waist as they shuffled gracelessly, completely off beat, as though there weren’t any music at all.

Keiji’s heart ached. At the center of that pain was something new and unfamiliar. The sting of fresh skin when you pick a scab off before it’s ready.

Turning to the right to catch a glimpse of Noya and Asahi, his heart jumped into his throat then fell down to his toes. His mind had to be playing tricks on him because there was no way that was who he thought it was. He was in the process of turning completely around just to be certain, when a large hand wrapped around his, and he was skillfully spun into a strong, firm chest.

“Hey there,” Bokuto’s face was much closer than either of them had expected.

Like he was opening a complex mechanism, Bokuto’s hand slid around his waist, while the other clasped Keiji’s, extending their arms, and then folding their hands close between them. Keiji lifted his free arm around Bokuto’s neck because it was either that, or let it hang like a dead thing.

“Sorry I was a little late,” Bokuto said softly. “I really like this song and I uh, wanted to dance with you to it. I wanted to dance with you like this a while back, but I kept chickening out.”

At that moment, the freshly healed section of Keiji’s heart took definable shape.

He couldn’t look into Bokuto’s eyes for too long, so he tipped his head forward until it was resting on his shoulder, his face dangerously close to Bokuto’s neck. Unfortunately, Bokuto took this as a sign to put his own head on top of Keiji’s so they were squashed against each other like baby birds. He smelled like new cologne, and his laundry detergent and sweat, the latter two so unexpectedly familiar they set off a Pavlovian response that tingled the back of Keiji’s neck.

For the first verse of the song, they just danced, Bokuto moving his feet with an easy confidence that put them a step above the various forms of shuffling going on around them. He hadn’t been bragging when he said he was a good dancer. Well, he had, but he hadn’t been wrong.

Keiji’s body relaxed into him, despite what might have been his own best interests. He could feel the spots on his undershirt that were soaked in sweat, and he wondered how much of it had been a very recent addition.

The hand on his waist started to shake.

“I’m havin a really good time you know?” Bokuto murmured into his hair during the second verse, the easy swing of his words more pronounced than normal. “Thanks for bringin’ me. I didn’t think I cared about not having a prom but I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

Not giving him a chance to respond, Bokuto spun him out and then pulled him back. As though such an advanced move was something anyone but theatre kids did at a school dance. At any dance.

Keiji’s heart was slamming into his ribcage and he buried himself into the closest available surface: Bokuto’s neck.

“I am glad you ca-came too.”
His heart had reached thrashing levels.

“Um… about that… and like, the stuff in the restaurant,” Bokuto said into his now-exposed hairline. “I mean, we’ve been through a lot, kinda, for two strangers in two weeks.” His breath danced across the tiny hairs and it felt so unbearably pleasant Keiji didn’t know what to do. “And I know it’s weird, but I feel like you know me better than anybody ever has.”

“Only because they haven’t taken the time to know you,” he interrupted angrily, lifting his head so they were facing each other. “You’re a profoundly easy person to know. Six dates is not very many but it was more than enough.”

“Ha, yeah, well, I guess,” Bokuto averted his eyes, though they flickered back despite his efforts. “I dunno, but I feel a lot better about myself whenever I’m with you, even if you’re telling me I’m doing stuff wrong. Even when we’re not together, just rememberin’ the things you’ve said helps me calm down. And you know, I miss you on days when we don’t have dates. I’ve really liked gettin’ to know you, the pieces that you’d let me see. So like… you’re special, you know?”

Keiji cleared his throat, “You’re singular to me as well.” It was a political answer. It was not what he wanted to say.

“So then I guess,” gravel had crept into Bokuto’s voice, “well, maybe you should call me Koutarou when it’s just us. It’s my first name and shit. Is that okay… Keiji?”

Koutarou.

“It’s a very… strong name,” his voice cracked making his pathetic response even more humiliating.

But that didn’t seem to matter because after two ragged breaths, Bokutou had leaned forward and his lips were on his.

The kiss was more intense than behind the movie theater, more tender than on the Ferris wheel, more gentle than Bokuto’s first kiss on Keiji’s cheek, somehow combining all of them into a chaotic, glorious mess of unbridled physical affection. Bokuto edged his lips open, gently easing his tongue against the softness of Keiji’s mouth, pressing their lips further together with every tilt of his head. Keiji could hear his own blood roaring in his ears. He could feel Bokuto’s hands shaking on his waist.

His own name sounded so sweet on Bokuto’s lips. Without Keiji even asking, Bokuto had given over one of the few shreds of vulnerability he kept for himself. A gift he couldn’t ever take back.

Now they were making out in front of the entire school. His deepest nightmare. And Keiji realized he didn’t fucking care if everyone in the room took a picture.

But Bokuto did.

He pulled back, pupils huge, cheeks covered with a bronzy flush.

“I didn’t ask. I’m so sorry. I didn’t ask, Akaashi, and I just jumped in there like that oh god I’m so sorry oh god. I’m the worst.”

Keiji leaned forward, eyes hooded, panting to catch the breaths that Bokuto had stolen away.

“I thought you said you were going to call me Keiji, Koutarou.”

Bokuto’s eyes were larger than usual, and his entire body was now trembling.
The full scope of Keiji’s profound denial had become immediately clear and impossible to maintain. This was real. Bokuto had meant everything. The words at the restaurant, the words he didn’t think Keiji had heard. The words in the truck, on his porch, Keiji didn’t even know where his feelings had started but he was going to find out.

He could ask.

He trusted him.

And he needed to let him know.

“N-now,” Keiji tipped their foreheads together, “if you are going to ask someone for a kiss, someone with whom you’ve established a certain amount of intimacy, it’s best that you be a little gentler about it. For instance:” he leaned in towards Bokuto’s ear. His voice dropped a register, quite without his permission.

“I’ve been having the time of my life. I can’t remember a better- a better night. I want to kiss you desperately. Can I do that, Koutarou?”

“Yeah,” Bokuto responded hoarsely, eyes flickering from Keiji’s mouth to his eyes like he was trying to look at both at the same time.

“I’m glad,” Keiji stood on the balls of his feet, extended his arms behind Bokuto’s neck, then twined his fingers together. He leaned in, pressing their foreheads so close that Bokuto couldn’t look away.

“Because I plan on kissing you until you can’t remember what ki-kissing anyone else feels like.”

In actuality Keiji had no control over Bokuto’s memory.

But he did his best.

They stumbled through the hallways, clumsy with hormones and feelings. Every secluded corner was stamped with their handprints, Bokuto holding himself over Keiji as he kissed him, Keiji propping himself against the painted concrete as he pressed their bodies together. Bokuto’s lips on his neck, Keiji’s hands on those thick thighs. Things escalated with every new hiding spot, until Keiji was ready to drop to his knees to hear Bokuto pray.

When they finally made it to their original destination of the men’s room, Bokuto stood outside of the door and insisted that Keiji go in alone. It was sweet and silly and so thoughtful, but mostly just insanely frustrating because Keiji wanted to pull him along and do things to him.

But maybe that was not the best idea on school grounds.

After he’d managed to calm down enough to piss, Keiji stood in front of the sink washing his hands for an inappropriate length of time.

Something had changed and he wasn’t certain what. A switch had flipped, and this whole thing, this whole charade… it just wasn’t anymore. Not just for him but for both of them. Bokuto had been shaking himself nearly to bits when they’d kissed, though they’d kissed dozens of times before. And Keiji hadn’t worried that others were watching, he hadn’t concerned himself with the fact that, once again, the entire student body could make comments on his relationship. All he cared about was wrapping Bokuto in his arms until they were completely tied up in each other.
Whatever that something was, he wasn’t going to question it.

It was laughable now, how completely transparent his denial had been. Bokuto had been obvious for ages.

But as a defense mechanism denial wasn’t quite so laughable. Keiji had lost faith his own ability to observe and decide on the best course of action. He’d lost the ability to trust himself and others. He was just now getting it back.

He didn’t want to think about it too much, fearing the fragile new arch holding open the entrance to his heart could easily collapse.

But he smiled, knowing it was there.

Realizing his fingers were starting to prune, Keiji turned off the water. He left the bathroom after a quick glance in the mirror at his swollen lips and blown pupils. No one was waiting for him in the hallway. The water fountains were around the corner, he assumed Bokuto was there or perhaps he had wandered back into the gym to find Tetsurou. It was hard to say, but Bokuto was still easily distracted after all.

He walked happily down the hall embarrassingly close to skipping when he heard a guy speaking furtively, as though he was trying to get someone else to be quiet.

“So where’s the guy?” he could hear a girl’s voice clearly as he approached the corner. She was too loud to be sober, but too coherent to be completely drunk.

“I dunno what you’re talking about, Yukie.”

The guy’s voice was Bokuto’s. And he sounded even more uncomfortable than he had the moment prior. Keiji quietly approached the corner, not wanting to draw attention or cause a scene. It was undignified, but he hid most of himself behind a giant sign painted in neon splatters.

Bokuto was talking to a smaller woman with cherry colored hair. Yukie, he had called her. She was holding on to Kaori Suzumeda, a junior, maybe? The freckled girl was giggling and he thought she was probably as tipsy as her date.

“Oh, you know!” ‘Yukie’ was speaking much too loudly. “The pathetic stick-up-his-ass whose brother paid you to bring him here? The one you told me about like a month ago!”

Keiji didn’t realize he had knocked over the sign until it was clattering loudly on the ground, gathering the attention of the small crowd standing in front of the gym. Maybe his stomach had knocked it over when it fell into his feet.

“Is that him?” Yukie tried – and failed – to whisper. “Man, Bo you didn’t tell me he was fucking gorgeous! You should have hit that for free! You know that guy’s really famous, right?”

His heart was ice. His veins, arteries, every part of him touched by the blood that flowed from his chest was beginning to freeze.

Refusing to communicate is an ineffective way to solve problems. Keiji could have stopped and asked what was going on. Confronted Bokuto, perhaps. That would be the logical choice.

But it wasn’t logic, it wasn’t even emotion that sent him running.

It was self-preservation in its most visceral form.
If Bokuto said something, he didn’t hear it.

There was a set of stairs, one that he knew well. It went nowhere. Well, not completely nowhere, but it was a design flaw: there was always a more efficient way to get around the school. The administration was required to keep it, due to fire code, so it was always open when the building was available. But no one ever used it for its intended purpose.

It was dusty and smelled odd, so students used it to make out only occasionally. It was the place where couples went to break up, more often than not, something that happened less frequently than you might think. Due to its almost constant privacy Keiji had always gone there when he needed to be alone in the past year.

Now it was a place where Bokuto couldn’t follow him even if he tried. Despite his athleticism, he wasn’t nearly as fast in an unfamiliar building as Keiji was in a place he spent forty hours a week.

So he was alone. Completely alone.

He slid down the wall at the top of the stairs until he was sitting on the dusty landing. With trembling hands he covered his face. Hot, humiliated tears slid down his cheeks. He’d fought them the whole way and won, but he couldn’t anymore.

Curling his knees to his chest he hiccupped tiny sobs, hoping the smaller the sounds were, the easier it would be to pretend that he wasn’t crying again, crying in this same stairwell over another boy, this one markedly stupid and… much more enchanting than the last.

This is what his life had become. Falling for people and then realizing that their relationship was some kind of a misunderstanding. Or an outright lie. He was supposed to be observant, strategic, clever. That was the heart of his personality. He was supposed to notice these things, and he just… hadn’t.

He wanted to go home and lock himself in his room. He wanted his mother to come in through the bathroom, stroke his hair, and leave him a glass of water. She understood loss, no matter what form it took. She knew what to say, which was nothing. She knew how to be quiet. Tetsurou would come back eventually and apologize over and over and then they would watch a movie with Kenma in their pajamas. A drill he knew very well.

He’d get over this. It was only six dates and the prom. He didn’t even love Bokuto.

*Not yet…* the raw, fresh newness in his heart screamed.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, a burst of cool, fresh air brushing the hair from his forehead and chilling his tears. He looked up, mortified to be caught crying…

…and then wished the entire building would collapse around him.

“Oh… hey Kaashi. You look great.”

There really wasn't any way this night could get worse.

“Chikara?”

Chapter End Notes
go home ennoshita.

(i'm gonna do the final update on sunday) (oh, and sayuri updates on monday)
“Yeah. Hey. It’s uh… been awhile.”

His voice was the same. Gentle, earnest, and sharp as a knife underneath. His face, his sleepy eyes, his stupid side part were all the same. He was still the most understated person Keiji had ever met. Knowing how attractive he was had been like holding a secret over everyone else’s heads. Including Chikara’s. Dressed in a very familiar, very expensive tux with an orange rose in the lapel, he still had no idea how good he looked in it.

So predictable.

“My name is Keiji Akaashi. I’d appreciate it if you’d go. This may come as a shock, but I don’t have anything to say to you.”

What else were you supposed tell to someone you didn’t want to talk to?

“Look,” Chikara dropped any pretense of this being an accidental meeting, “I know I don’t deserve a minute of your time. I’m here because I can help.”

Where had this starry-eyed optimism come from?

“Help?” the word came out with a mortifying sniff. “If you think giving me unrequested assistance is going to affect some rec-rec-reconciliation–”

“Kaash er… Akaashi,” Chikara took a few steps closer, “I know. I ran away. I was a coward. I ruined everything because I couldn’t be honest with you.”

“Perhaps you should run away again. Permanently.”

The nice thing about this sort of anger was it drove away tears fairly quickly. His voice was back to its cold, emotionless self.

But Chikara didn’t leave.

“Can I sit down?” he all but begged. “I’m not tough enough to tell you all this while I’m standing.”

Keiji took a dozen breaths of the dusty, stale air.

“F………fine,” he dropped his legs to the step below him and turned his back away from the wall. Chikara slid into the empty spot, the thud of his chucks reverberating down the stairwell. There was a long pause allowing the short distance between them to grow into some kind of windswept chasm.

“I sometimes think winning might have been the worst thing that ever happened to us.”
But they had so what was the point of bringing it up?

“It’s like,” he continued, accurately not expecting a response, “when a company just starting out suddenly gets tons and tons of business. Then they collapse under the weight of their own success. That’s what happened to us.”

Keiji… couldn’t argue with that clearly rehearsed speech. He turned his head, and glanced at his former best friend out of the corner of his eye. Contradicting his pulled together entrance, Chikara’s hands were shaking terribly, his face was white, and he looked like he was going to cry. It made Keiji feel better about the knowledge that his stuttering was going to get worse. In fact, he seemed to be the more collected of the two of them.

“My mom’s a finance pr-pr-professor,” and there it was. Self-fulfilling prophecy. “I’m familiar with enterprise m……..aturity.” He sighed, “Additionally, I was also present.”

“I know you were!” Chikara turned and waved his hand over his head in little circles, the way he always had when he thought something was obvious. A small gesture originally created to make fun of their sixth grade teacher that had remained a secret between them. “And you know, winning was… well, it was unbelievable and then the after party and then…” his face flushed.

“And then we had sex,” Keiji deadpanned, looking straight ahead.

“Yes. We did, and it was perfect. Everything was perfect… especially you.”

Keiji turned to tell him that no, he had been fumbling and awkward in very typical losing one’s virginity fashion. He was certain that, despite all his research and trembling efforts, he’d hurt Chikara during the process.

He didn’t get the chance.

“God, Keiji, it meant so much to me,” Chikara said with a distant sadness. “I hope you at least know that. But everything was overwhelming. I couldn’t process that much good at once. Then after…”

“It was hell,” Keiji gave him the gift of brief eye contact, though he immediately regretted it because Chikara was crying. Tears dripped sloppily down his face, and his eyes were scrunched up beyond recognition.

“It was,” he managed to keep his voice even despite his tears. “No one cared about our film, they just wanted to talk about us being gay, in love, and winning with something we’d made when we were sixteen.”

Keiji had never really stopped to think about how, in the ensuing chaos, their film itself had been ignored. How that had cut into Chikara’s soul. Keiji had cared about the process, the experience. Working together. He hadn’t cared about the product in the same way. The film Chikara had wanted to create just wasn’t Keiji’s medium.

“I know,” he gave in. “I have a restraining order on several members of the p-pap-p-aparazzi.” He tried for a bit of sour jocularity, “It was funny at times. Mom did spend that night in jail for kneecapping that photographer with a tire iron. It was pretty heartwarming when Kanye West paid her bail and sent us that Edible Arrangement.”

Chikara chuckled bitterly. “It was endless. But beyond that… I knew that if I didn’t do something, we’d be stuck together. Romantically, creatively, probably legally. Eventually you’d hate me because if my life came together the way I wanted, I could never give you the quiet life you want.”
“So instead of informing me of these very long-term concerns about our r-relationship, you got a GED in secret over the summer. Then you ran off to NYU without telling anyone, refusing to communicate. Do you know how many times I called? But there was nothing, as though you’d been ki- kidnapped. I had to find out the truth second- secondhand.”

“I know,” he croaked, not trying to defend his choices at all.

“I’m not certain if you’ve realized this yet or not, but that is an effective way to make not just me, but everyone we know, despise you.”

Chikara didn’t say anything for a long time.

“No one knows that more than I do,” his voice was low. “Forget about friendship; I have to work my ass off if I want anyone to even look at me without punching me in the balls. Half of our friends want to kill me, let alone your family. And when it comes down to it, I’m not even scared of your brother so much as I’m scared of Kenma and your mom.”

He took a few shuddery breaths.

“And you, Akaashi. I’m terrified of you.”

They could not keep this up. Keiji knew what had happened. It was over, he no longer wanted to discuss it. Especially since, despite all this, the only thing on his mind was Bokuto. Bokuto, even though the object of nearly a year’s worth of angst was right there, his very skin coated in desperate apologies and explanations.

“If you believe giving me closure through relived m…….emories is going to make us okay, you’re not nearly as insightful as I thought you were,” he said even, but not flat.

He didn’t know where the gentleness came from. Chikara did not deserve it.

“So why are you here?”

“Two things,” Chikara held up his fingers with conviction. “First, and less important: I am so, so sorry, Kaashi,” he rested his hands on his lap and his voice slid into a resigned, calm tone. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but I loved you and–”

“If you can’t apologize without bringing that into it, keep it to yourself.” Keiji stuttered so much through the sentence, it was hard to tell where the words began and the nonsensical repetitions and pauses ended. He wished he had been angry enough to shout. He had been once.

But it was no matter because Chikara understood every word.

“You know,” he looked at him sleepily, for once like himself, “for someone so composed, you have a real flair for the dramatic.”

Keiji’s jaw dropped at his sheer gall.

His ex was still facing forward, but his hands were shaking even more than before, his entire body, even. This whole situation was absurd; two people who missed their junior prom missing their senior one because they were having a months-postponed breakup on a set of stairs that went nowhere.

A bark of laughter forced its way out of Keiji’s throat. Then another and another. At the sound, Chikara slid into a fit of very nervous giggles. It only took an instant for them to dissolve into earnest, if frenzied, laughter. But their hysterics eventually gave way to a hovering uneasiness that left the
stairwell silent beyond the sound of their rapid breathing.

The situation was wrong, a shoe on backwards. They had been so important to each other for years. No one else knew so much about who he was. Keiji wasn’t supposed to hate him. But he didn’t know how to stop, and he didn’t know if he wanted to.

Chikara might as well have been reading his mind. “Right now I don’t deserve forgiveness. If you give it to me, I’ll be angry.”

“I didn’t know what to do, and I was in over my head,” he continued, more sure of himself. “The NYU opportunity came up, they pushed, and I ran away. I was afraid to talk to you because I knew I’d run right back if I did. I don’t…” he bent over forcing himself to breathe deeply. “I’m telling you all this not because my affection is significant now, but because you deserved to know what was going on in my head before I left. What I should have told you in the first place.”

He turned and faced him, looked him in the eyes, a sad half smile on his face.

“I don’t think we would have been good together, Kaash, not forever. I didn’t want to be your boyfriend anymore and… that didn’t make me a bad person. But I’m so sorry, because in the process of figuring that out I hurt someone dear to me, I was unforgivably cruel to my best friend. And now I’ve hurt myself too, because even though I don’t deserve anything of the sort, god, I want him back.”

Keiji’s blinked.

“I don’t think you have the capacity for that kind of work.”

He had never considered actual reconciliation as a possibility. To be friends again. He didn’t know how to think about it. But lying to himself had not been panning out lately, and it would be massively untrue to say he hadn’t missed the part of their relationship that had nothing to do with romance. Ironically, the more his feelings had gotten tied up in someone else, the more he’d wished despite himself that Chikara had been there to talk to about it.

“Well,” Chikara’s smile was floppy and nervous and that, out of everything, was what pulled at Keiji’s heart, “I’ve always been a pretty hard worker at the last minute. A product of having big dreams but being mediocre and lazy most of the time.”

He reached into the bag he’d brought along and pulled out a small but very high end camera.

“So. That’s that. And this is the second thing,” he muttered, turning it on then scanning through clips. Keiji could tell they were from the prom just by the lighting. “A lot more important. And lucky for both of us, it has nothing to do with me.”

“You managed to get footage in a dark room lit with twinkle lights? And how did you even get in? I can’t think of anyone who’d smuggle you…”

“I am going to film school, you know. And I, um, came as Ryuu’s date,” he said to the camera with a forced casual tone that Keiji immediately picked up on. “Other than Kazohito, and Hisashi, he’s the only one who would talk to me for months. I wasn’t going to come but he… asked. I figured I could practice getting shots in this kind of lighti–”

“He is the straightest person in California, Ennoshita.”

“I… know,” he was trying to convince himself more than Keiji. “But, you know, feelings… happen… sometimes… ah! Here it is. Speaking of feelings.”
He thrust the camera into Keiji’s lap.

“So, Ryuu overheard the conversation your beefcake date had with Kaori’s girlfriend. Did you seriously bring a fake date to the prom? I know you know what always happens...”

“Are you jealous?” Keiji asked point blank, uninterested in a lecture.

“I said that we wouldn’t have worked out long-term,” Chikara was unpredictably matter-of-fact. “That doesn’t mean you’re not the most gorgeous, brilliant person I’ve ever met, six-years of intimate friendship aside. It also doesn’t negate the fact that I thought about you every day since I left. It doesn’t mean that I don’t have residual feelings for you.”

Keiji did not think knowing this information was a good use of his limited emotional resources, but he had asked, so it was his fault. But he was still angry.

“So yes, I am jealous of this tall, attractive, muscular person. I hope someday you too get to agonize over your feelings until you hate yourself.”

Now he was angrier still.

“Well don’t try to get over me with a straight guy,” he delivered his rage in a precise blow. “That’s not going to end well.”

“You set up a fake date, Kaashi!” Chikara lifted his eyebrows at the hypocrisy.

“Actually that would be my brother. He was fairly insistent.”

“How did you not realize he was setting you up?” he had the nerve to laugh. “This is Tetsuro! He tricked Tora into doing his chores for a year. Are you sure you just didn’t go along with it to see what happened?”

That was a question that he didn’t want to think about.

“Anyway, Ryuu said things went sour. Money was exchanged for enduring your company. You found out, and you were,” his voice deviated from his normal mild, sensible tone, “really sad when I found you. My guess is you thought this fake arrangement had turned into something real, while in reality it was faker than you ever realized.”

“Please don’t deconstruct my prom night.”

“Just watch the damn video, Kaashi,” Chikara reached over and pressed play.

It was hard to tell what anything was at first. Just people in the darkness while whoever was behind the camera made adjustments. Then the scene lightened, and Keiji realized the lens was focusing on himself, in conversation with Noya and Hitoka. He was laughing and looked ridiculous. The joke had been completely stupid, but it had seemed funny in the moment.

“This is invasive,” he glared.

“It was accidental... at first. I was trying to film Noya and Asahi because Noya begged me to. He wanted to make sure he looked manly when he was dancing or some other lunacy.” Keiji snorted despite himself. “Just wait for it.” The camera began to pan, stopping at someone impossible to mistake for anyone else.

“What his name, Kaashi?” Chikara asked as he came into focus.
“Bokuto,” Keiji muttered, throat tight. Bokuto’s first name trembled on his lips, but he left it there.

“She’s looking at you, you know.”

Keiji knew.

Bokuto was ignoring Shouyou, who was bouncing at his side. His eyes were soft, almost stunned, and he swallowed hard, like he’d seen something unforgettable.

The camera panned back to Keiji’s laughter.

“I don’t blame him,” Chikara said. “That smile is something else.”

“Are you trying to show me something, or hit on me?”

The camera panned back but Bokuto looked sad more than anything else. Like…

“It looks like he’s seen something he thinks he can’t have,” Chikara offered, pulling the camera away.

“Or he feels guilty,” Keiji grumbled.

“Kaashi, you sit in cafes for hours spying on people so you can write about them. I don’t know how much time you spent with this guy, but I suspect you can read him like a book. So is that really what you think? I’ll defer to your judgement, but you probably want to watch this other clip first.”

So you can write about them…

Oh.

Oh no.

Have you ever read *Pygmalion*?

Chikara tugged at his sleeve then thrust the camera back in his lap.

This time it was Bokuto the camera was focused on. He was thrilled with himself, telling what had to be a volleyball story to Tetsurou and Noya, while Asahi shook his head. His hands were flying, and his bowtie was hanging untied around his neck. Keiji wanted to roll his eyes at whatever he was saying.

He wanted to hear whatever he was saying.

The camera panned, this time to a very familiar teal suit, its owner sitting at a table. Kenma sat next to him, glancing over and shaking his head before returning to his game. And for good reason, because Keiji looked…

“I’ve never seen that look on your face before. I’m certain you never had it when you looked at me,” the words were blunt and painful. For both of them. “That might be why I felt like leaving was a good idea. Though it didn’t make the way I left okay.”

“Why are you doing this?” Keiji turned and looked his ex in the eye.

Chikara didn’t expect to be looked at. He took a deep breath then he smiled that sad, earnest smile again. “It’s what best friends do. Even though I shouldn’t, I am very unsubtly trying to be yours.”
“A person shouldn’t make faces like that after six and a half dates,” Keiji insisted. “I barely know him.”

“You could bottle your feelings up, since that’s always worked well for you,” Chikara hummed. “Or you could act like yourself and address the problem head on.”

“I can’t believe you have the balls to say that.”

“Breaking your heart didn’t destroy my sense of irony. In fact, I’d like to think it’s been refined by fire.”

“Heavy-handed as usual.”

“Well, I did literally move across the country to keep from having to cut things off in person. But enough about that. You do know there’s only about fifteen minutes of prom left? You wouldn’t deprive a poor, friendless ex-boyfriend the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to say…”

“Chikara, do not.”

“…go get em, Tiger.”

Profound insight from someone you had committed to hate was painfully difficult to swallow. But Keiji was desperate, so it didn’t matter. Chikara’s words ran through his head as he dashed through the corridors, trying to find someone who had seen Bokuto. Luckily Bokuto stood out, so everyone seemed to have some vague idea of who he was. But not where he’d gone.

He felt lighter, a little, with all the questions of what had happened in September now gone from his mind. But that didn’t make the experience less painful. It actually made him both need and hate Chikara more. He desperately needed his best friend, but he couldn’t be called that after what he’d done.

The videos had provided incontestable evidence of Keiji’s own feelings, which he had been trying to reabsorb into some kind of new and exciting form of denial. They also made it somewhat impossible to believe that Bokuto had just been in it for the money.

But there had been one statement that was more important than anything else, really. And Chikara hadn’t had a clue about its impact.

“Spying on people so you can write about them…”

It was also the issue that Haruki had inadvertently touched upon when he brought up a somewhat toxic narrative about a man who makes a woman “worthwhile” and then falls in love with his own work. Or the mere idea of his success. Or just… with her.

Something Keiji had not allowed himself to think about.

He had made Bokuto into something, or at least helped Bokuto incite some personal change. Now what was he going to do with him? Leave him, earnest and excited, to try to make his way in a dating world that followed very few of the rules Keiji had established? What was he supposed to do now that Keiji had gotten what he wanted.

If Bokuto had been secretly paid to romance him in some way, well, that was terrible.
But… there had been another under-the-table transaction. One even more secret. Tetsurou had no idea about it and Bokuto certainly didn’t suspect anything. But this operation had one deliverable.

A list that Keiji knew by heart.

1. completely unstable self-esteem
2. over-celebrating victories and taking defeats too much to heart
3. bouncing up and down on the scale of moods hourly
4. being tied to others’ reactions
5. lack of filter
6. long flights of speech
7. completely absent sense of fashion
8. ridiculous hair and eyebrows
9. dangerous vehicle
10. occupies too much space
11. too generous
12. terrible at keeping secrets
13. can’t hold on to money
14. aggressively competitive
15. sloppy eater
16. reckless in his assumptions
17. questionable faith in others
18. too vulnerable
19. no understanding of situationally appropriate romance levels
20. impossible when angry
21. easily distractible
22. quick to violence
23. terrible hygiene
24. oblivious
25. terrible at bargaining
26. desperate for praise
27. too pushy
28. inattentive
29. dense
30. needs to ask questions before he acts
31. abysmal tastes in music
32. needs to address childhood issues
33. ruins the moment, if he even realizes there is a moment to begin with
34. does not understand social media etiquette and privacy settings
35. lacks initiative

There were ridiculous and contradictory and there were bound to be more.

The two of them had used each other.

Of course the idea that Bokuto had been paid to be his date was heart-wrenchingly painful. But how much more disgraceful was spending intimate moments with someone, paying attention to his wants and needs and dreams all for the primary goal of copying down his personality? To do so during a vulnerable moment of growth and change. All to develop a character.

It was the most despicable thing that Keiji had ever done.

Worse than the act itself was that it had been done to Bokuto specifically, who trusted without worry,
who gave affection easily and happily without a thought of being hurt. Whose every weakness had a corresponding strength that Keiji hadn’t even bothered to record. Because apparently that wasn’t interesting or useful. Such lack of foresight was both an ethical and an authorial weakness.

But far worse than any in his long line of mistakes was that during the entire process Keiji hadn’t ever stopped to wonder if he’d been doing something wrong.

“Where’s Bokuto, Tetsurou?”

The locker rattled against the scrape of a dress shoe heel.

Other than his mother, his brother was the most important person in Keiji’s life. He knew the feeling was mutual, though his lead over Kenma was infinitesimal at this point. They didn’t get along perfectly. In fact, they argued a lot. Even with those quarrels, the brothers didn’t fight much.

But when they did...

To call Tetsurou frantic would be an understatement. There was no question he was convinced he’d caused some kind of disaster. He was desperate to explain, hands in his hair, cracking the gel that held down the slicked back style he’d been so obsessed with maintaining.

…when they did fight, Keiji lost his otherwise placid temper, and Tetsurou always lost because, despite his swagger, he didn’t know how to fight against someone who fought tooth and nail.

Because Keiji did not like to lose.

“He’s poor, Keiji,” he exhaled. “The only reason I offered him money was because he’d gotten laid off this catering job. His new one didn’t start right away but he’d just moved out of the dorms and his truck was in the shop. He needed it. I’m pretty sure he didn’t ask his family cause they don’t have a lot themselves. And he refused to borrow it from Tooru, even though he’s loaded, or just take it as a gift.”

What an idiot.

“Keiji, he couldn’t pay his rent! There was nowhere for him to go! So Tooru gave me the money, and I set up a situation where Bokuto would take it. Like a job. Figured I’d kill two birds with one stone, y’know? God knows learning how to date’s done him a world of good, but it wasn’t just about him! I didn’t know how else to help you, and I was so damn sick of seeing you so closed off and just… miserable. Did you even notice what it was doing to Mom?”

It wasn’t about any that anymore but there wasn’t time to explain. Bokuto was probably driving away by now.

“Just tell me where he is!” Keiji slammed his much larger brother against the line of lockers behind him.

They’d run into each other in the hallway next to the third gym. It was where they’d played volleyball together. The smell of the air was nostalgic, although not enough to affect their moods. Next to them, Kenma sighed into his game, as though he’d expected this to happen but was disgusted anyway. He made no move to stop either of them.

“Look, Keiji, I’m sorry,” Tetsurou’s hair was now a catastrophe, crest creeping back into its default shape. “I didn’t expect things would turn out like this. I figured he’d tell you! I mean, his third
sentence was asking about your dick! Bokuto is not exactly a secretive guy.”

If his brother refused to answer the one question he wanted to know, then Keiji was going to push back.

“You’re endlessly meddling. Sticking your nose in everything, then stepping back to watch,” he said grimly, the rage at being so stupid as to not suspect the money rising to the surface and overcoming his good sense. “You thrive on provoking people into doing what you want. As though it’s for the greater good. How do you get to decide what’s good for anyone?!”

He didn’t even realize he’d pulled back his fist until someone grabbed it.

“Cute as you look angry, it’s time to calm down there, buddy,” Makki’s fingers were closed tightly around his wrist. “Fall into the strong arms of your cousin. There’s no better embrace, I can promise you.”

“There, there,” Issei looped his arms under Keiji’s armpits then pulled him into a somewhat unwanted hug that moved him out of punching distance. “God, I can’t believe we’re breaking up the fight we’ve all waited years to see. But, c’mon Keiji. You know Tets wouldn’t fuck with anybody just to hurt them. Everybody knows that. He’s just a sweet gangly nerd trying to help by blowing up school property and such.”

“Hey!” Tetsurou protested.

“He’s left, hasn’t he?” Keiji scowled ferociously. He could either be angry, or he could cry. He’d almost punched his brother without realizing he was doing it, and he wanted to puke.

“Yeah,” Tetsurou sagged against the metal, Kenma at his side. “I’m a pretty big guy, but I don’t think anybody but Iwazumi could make Bokuto stay put if he wanted to go. Even then it’d be one hell of a struggle.”

“What about me?” Hajime came around the corner, his shirt untucked, belt undone, and his hair a mess.

“You’re tough and manly and the rest of us will never be enough,” Issei said over Keiji’s shoulder.

“We’re spending the summer together at the gym,” Makki added.

“Bokuto ran off, and you’re the only one who could have stopped him,” Tooru appeared around the same corner, looking like he’d put his finger in a light socket.

A light socket that gave out enormous hickeys.

“He isn’t gone.”

From the other corner of the hallway, Tobio lead a pack who had all apparently been eavesdropping instead providing any actual help. Keiji felt a deep sense of disgrace. He’d rarely raised his hand against anyone, let alone his own brother. But now, nearly all of his friends had witnessed his lapse in sanity. Somewhere out there Suguru Daishou was smiling like a snake.

“Yeah,” Shouyou bounced, “Dunno how far he’s getting without his keys!” He swung the keyring around his fingers with a jaunty twinkle, pleased enough to indicate that he’d never successfully pickpocketed a person before in his life.

“Heh, or his wallet,” Noya flipped the duck taped square over and over in his hand. Once again, the
item had been in Bokuto’s jacket, which had probably been hanging over a chair.

“Who even told you he was trying to leave?” Keiji grabbed the keys and wallet before they even realized he’d moved. He slid the keys in his pocket and ran his hands over the smooth surface of the purple owl duck tape over and over.

“Suga!” the thieves smiled.

Noya went on to give a smug explanation. “He texted us and told us to help before Bokuto left. So we stole his stuff from his jacket while he was crying.”

It was no real surprise that Bokuto would cry in this situation, but it still hit Keiji like a punch to the gut. Seeing his reaction, Shouyou’s face dropped.

“On second thought, that was, uh, kind of mean. I bet he feels worse. I dunno what you guys are fighting about, though. Did your brother… um… kiss him or something? Kenma, are you okay???”

“I’m fine,” Kenma murmured. “And that’s not what happened.”

Noya made a slow, uncomfortable chewing motion as he dealt with the information. Asahi sighed somewhere in the distance.

“Yes but how did Suga know?” Tooru’s need for information was almost comedic, but they were all wasting time. Keiji didn’t care who told them, he just needed to leave.

“Yeah, I’m pretty certain he’s in bed with Daichi at the moment.” Tetsurou pushed himself away from the lockers, still eyeing Keiji with remorseful wariness.

At that moment, Ryuu thrust himself into the crowd, muttering as he dragged a mildly resisting individual behind him. He sat his burden on his feet, turned him around, and there he was. Again.

“Hello. Deus ex boyfriend here.” Chikara waved awkwardly.

Chaos erupted. The invisible lines in the sand that had been drawn when he’d disappeared lit up with neon lights. More people had opinions than expected. Although Keiji should have expected that.

“You know he’s only doing this so we’ll forgive him,” Tooru called in a sing-song voice.

“What’s wrong with wanting forgiveness?” Hajime countered. “Remember that time you stopped talking to me for a month because I said your hair looked weird?”

“That was not the same, Iwa!”

“Okay good because it looked weird as hell.”

“Rude!”

“Sometimes people are confusing about… things,” Tobio added out of the blue, only for Shouyou to jump on his back and start yammering in his ear.

Makki and Issei were taking pictures.

As the arguments went on, no one noticed Kenma struggling through the crowd. He stopped right in front of Chikara. His hair, unraveled from its braids, hung like a curtain as he titled his head at a disturbing angle.
Despite what movies would have you believe, the sound of a punch is fairly quiet, especially a blow to soft tissue. So no one noticed that Chikara had been punched in the balls until he squeaked, “Knew it!” and fell to the ground in a heap.

“Way to take it like a man, Chikara!” Ryuu yelled unhelpfully as he crouched down and slapped his back.

“It’s over,” Kenma announced softly. “Keiji’s the only one who should be mad.”

Or that’s what Keiji imagined happened. He couldn’t be certain because he’d started racing to the auxiliary parking lot the instant Chikara arrived.

Bokuto’s truck was empty. Keiji even lifted the tarp and looked underneath, since Bokuto was the sort of person who would cower in misery under a tarp. But the bed of the truck was uninhabited. So was the ground underneath the vehicle itself. With that established, the glowing lights of the vacant football field gave Keiji a pretty good idea of where his date had gone.

Assuming that he hadn’t run away completely.

He found Bokuto sitting near the bottom of the bleachers. His hair was sticking through the gaps in his fingers as he clutched his head in one hand, his slightly crushed boutonniere in the other.

And he shook, because he was weeping pitifully.

His sobs were loud enough that he didn’t hear Keiji approach, even when his shoes clanged against the metal of the bleachers. When he finally stood in front of him, Keiji tried to get his attention by mere presence alone. But that didn’t work. It likely wasn’t that he couldn’t hear; he was just too upset to notice or care.

“Koutarou…”

“Koutarou.”

“Koutarou!”

Bokuto’s face was a mess of tears and snot, his eyes rubbed red, his hair in all directions. A white dusting of crushed gel was scattered on the navy shoulders of his jacket. As though it took everything he had, he took a deep breath to speak.

“Look, Akaashi, you shouldn’t fucking be around me, since I,” he swallowed back a sob, “used you like that. Just… I’m sorry. Your brother gave me a grand to do this before I even met you. Spent it before then too. And I… I can’t pay it back yet, maybe not for years, I’m a piece of trash, but I’ll do it, I promise~”

“My na-name is Keiji, Koutarou,” he interrupted.

Bokuto made a very miserable noise. “Just stop, alright? Please.” He put his head back in his hand, still clutching the feathered flower like it would turn to dust with the slightest wrong move.

Keiji only knew one way to stop him from shutting down.

Conveniently, it was also the one thing he most had to do.
“Do you want know why I was happy with our arrangement?”

“Sure, whatever,” Bokuto sniffled into his palm. “S’not gonna change my mind.”

He took a deep breath, and put his hands behind his back. He’d decided on the run over he had to do this. But that did not mean he wanted to.

“You’ve called me a writer.” It felt strange using the term to refer to himself. He didn’t feel like one, not yet. He was just someone who liked to write. Apparently with very little ethics involved. “People who write often collect things they might write about someday: experiences, feelings, sensations. Like this prom, for instance.”

“Yeah, okay, so?” Extreme-misery-Bokuto was also somewhat petulant.

Number thirty-six.

“Writers also collect characters, Koutarou, and I was collecting you. You were a concept I felt might be useful. Upon meeting you, I became deeply invested in our arrangement, not out of my original interest to experience a prom, but because I wanted your personality, likely to create some hackneyed fictional character.”

He paused to collect himself and to allow Bokuto to blow his nose into his sleeve. This moment was also necessary because saying what he truly had to say was mortifying, intensely painful, and above all, cruel.

“While the money you took had nothing to do with me, your personality is intimately connected to you. I took it without asking. Without… caring to ask. To use however I wished.”

Bokuto made a terrible choking sound and it took a long time for him to speak.

“Oh. Well. Good, I guess, that we’re both dicks.”

Big words made out of spun glass.

Keiji couldn’t cause any more chaos. He had to fix things. It was the only way to have Bokuto in his life in any future capacity. What came next had to be said perfectly.

Which meant it was going to be a battle to get every syllable out of his mouth.

“I’m s……..orry. I was v-v-very wrong.”

Bokuto lifted his head halfway, still heartbroken, but also confused.

“I was a com- com- com-\textit{fucking} idiot.” The words were stuck and he wasn’t supposed to switch to a synonym mid-stutter – he’d learned that when he was ten, damn it – but he \textit{had to say this}. “Y-you are so much more of a p-p-p-per-----” he shook his head and spat out a quiet \textit{damn it} to the metal walkway, “an \textit{individual} than I could ever capture in words. Even if I wrote about you every day until I died.”

Bokuto drew a quavery breath.

“You have gr…….own so real to me that I’m ter-terrified that after tonight I will see you on the street, nod my head, and go about my b-b-business. That will be all I’m allowed to do since we will be nothing to each other. I can’t do that. You could never be nothing to me, Koutarou. Even if that’s what you want.”
Bokuto was looking at his hand. He was crying on it.

“You were right from the start,” Keiji forced out the words. “Chik-chik-chikara hurt me p………..ast what I thought I could take, and I have been terrified to have feelings of any sort since. But, I don’t think there’s anyone on earth who wouldn’t develop feelings for you, given the opportunity. And I don’t care if our situation began on prrrrretense, I was given that chance.”

But you don’t trust me!” Bokuto protested. “You shouldn’t! I could’ve told you, I was gonna tell you on the way to the desert but I couldn’t! I couldn’t even do it on the way here! I’m a fucking coward! I didn’t deserve any of the good times we’ve had, or how much you helped me, or any of it. I didn’t!” He slid into weeping again.

Keiji exhaled, then thumped himself down onto the seat in front of Bokuto, fists clutched on either side of his body so he didn’t worry his fingers.

It was time to taint something pure.

“Here is the answer to your second question from last night. I did not want you to know about it, and you have been c-c-c-courteous enough not to pry. But I need you to know how much I trust you. But in the process, you have to trust me, because what I’m about to tell you is not going to sound plausible.”

He took a breath, thinking of the soothing rhythm of well-spoken words. He began a quiet, steady beat on his thigh, like he was giving a presentation in front of a crowded classroom. He imagined Kenma in the near vicinity, playing his Vita. Hardly there.

“A bit less than two years ago, Chikara and I made a short film. We’d been making them since we were twelve. His father has industry connections, so we had quality equipment, a great crew, and our actors, Tooru and Kiyoko, worked well together. For this film, we even joined the necessary unions to make our production legitimate. Chikara’s family lives a modest life, but they are very wealthy.”

Gold, teary eyes connected with his and then looked back at the ground.

“We took this project more seriously than we ever had before. I made the decision to quit volleyball to focus on the story, script and production. Chikara normally wrote and I did camera work, but he wanted this one to have a different feel. It was… a huge symbol of his trust in me.”

Oh god why did that hurt so much? It was over, he’d moved on.

He took a slow breath and maintained the beat on his thigh. “Tooru stayed on the team, but he ended up in the ER from overwork when the film was finished. Kiyoko’s parents are strict, and she had to sneak out of her house most nights we were filming. Chikara lost at least fifteen pounds because he never gave himself any time to eat. But we finished it…” he smiled bitterly, “only not in time for any film festival deadlines.”

He lifted his hands and sat them on his thighs, feeling the smooth fabric catch on the setting callouses that had never gone away.

“All but one.”

Bokuto sniffed and wiped at his cheeks, his nose. He lifted his head, and their eyes met for much longer. This time Keiji refused to let him drop his gaze.

“The Cannes Film Festival accepts submissions from anyone. Truly anyone. We thought it would be entertaining to submit there as high schoolers.”
They’d spent the night giggling over the application. Well, Chikara had giggled, Keiji had smirked, writing ridiculous descriptions of the film that would never, ever see the light of day.

“We never dreamed we’d get in.”

It was almost funny, the way Bokuto’s face contorted in a sort of informed confusion. “I… dunno what that means, exactly, but–”

Keiji smiled gently. “The Palme d’Or, the highest prize of the festival, is arguably a small step down from winning an Academy award.”

He swallowed hard.

“The film I wrote won the Palme d’Or for short films last May.”

“Holy shit,” Bokuto whispered. “You really are famous.”

“Yes. I am, he gave a bitter half-smile. “Or at least, I was for a time. I suppose I’ll always be known in certain circles. But that’s not really the issue.”

“Completely unexpectedly, a certain type of people went crazy over us, winning with a film we’d made when we were so young. We were pretty, gay, and, most importantly, Chikara and I had a romantic narrative. It was as though through supporting us, people could ignore the real live queer people around them. Of course that white suburban woman who hates her black lesbian neighbors couldn’t be homophobic or racist! Look at how much she just adores Troye Sivan and those charming little Asian boys! What was the pretty one? Katie?”

If he didn’t stop to breathe, he was going to start stuttering again.

“That was bad enough. Beyond legitimate film journalism who interviewed us with respect, unidentified photographers started following us. We were on gossip websites despite doing nothing worth gossiping about. It got worse and worse. We were asked to interview for a variety of nighttime talk shows and prominent YouTube channels. Though Chikara had accepted the award, they explicitly demanded both of us. They ignored Kiyoko and Tooru completely.”

Bokuto’s eyes were enormously wide, but he kept his mouth closed.

“I knew it would be difficult, but I also knew Chikara would benefit from the exposure. So I agreed. I should have told him I didn’t think they would go well. But I didn’t. So now I know there are two situations when I cannot control my stutter. One is on the phone. The other is during live television interviews”

He paused to breathe. The hand tapping on his thigh was beginning to shake.

“How’d he not know?” Bokuto demanded. “Or ask?”

He hadn’t expected such an insightful, painful question. But then, he also didn’t expect to have an answer come to him so quickly, so obviously.

“He was overwhelmed,” the words brought the reality to life. “Imagine if in high school you won an Olympic gold out of the blue. Something that you didn’t think was possible for years. Everything you’d dreamed of but before you were ready. That’s what happened to him.”

The compassion that grew in Keiji’s heart as he spoke was almost impossible to handle.
“Oh.”

“The interviews were disasters. The hosts were patronizing. Telling me to slow down, that it was okay, to breathe, they’d chuckle. Their interruptions made fluency completely impossible. Chikara tried to answer everything himself; he wouldn’t let them ask me questions if he could help it. But there was only so much he could do. They wanted me to talk.”

Bokuto stood up and took a step down so that they were sitting next to each other.

“I was mortified without a single bit of mockery. Just the opposite: my stutter became an inspiration,” he spat. “Infinitely worse.”

The heat radiating from Bokuto’s body felt reassuring, even though there was at least a hand’s breadth between them.

“It was the icing on the cake, really. I don’t understand why, maybe it was a slow gossip cycle that summer, but the media wouldn’t let go of us. Their attention went well beyond the minimal publicity that short film award winners receive. We became personalities. Photographers followed us. Students at school started caring about both of us in ways they never had before, as though we could help them. They asked for love advice, and all sorts of other things we knew nothing about.”

“Star-chasing speech therapists around the country sent me letters. It was profoundly insulting because there is nothing wrong with how I communicate, and I have had the same speech therapist for thirteen years. At the same time, PR managers and film schools wouldn’t leave Chikara alone. We couldn’t go anywhere, we couldn’t do anything, and the end of the school year was wonderful because at least we could stay inside all the time.”

He could feel Bokuto’s hand hover indecisively over his thigh. There was a long silence, the distant sound of giggles, whoops, and slamming car doors echoing through the stadium.

Keiji cleared his throat. “And, as I told you, when it was time to face the world again, Chikara left. Although he’s here tonight. He found me, after I found out about the money. And he apologized. It gave me a lot to think about that I hadn’t considered.”

All breathing next to him stopped. Keiji turned his head. There was already so much misery on Bokuto’s face, it was hard to pick out the added anxiety. But Keiji had looked at Bokuto’s face a lot.

“He told me to chase you, Koutarou.”

Bokuto was shaking so hard, the bleachers sounded like a wind chime. Keiji took his hand to hold him steady.

To hold both of them steady.

“Thanks for trustin’ me...” Bokuto murmured after a long time.

“Don’t you remember what you yelled in the coffee shop? By the end of this prom, I’d trust you with my life.”

The burst of laughter was more like crying than anything.

“I don’t care if my brother gave you five thousand dollars to take me to the prom, and you blew it all on surfboard wax,” Keiji said gravely. “I am very happy to have spent this time with you. I am very lucky to have spent this time with you. I… cherish it.”
The cars had left. There was silence, save for the buzz of the stadium’s enormous fluorescent lights. Keiji stared across the field.

“Aka- er… Keiji,” they both turned and their eyes met, “I said it in the restaurant, and then things got crazy. I want to say it again cause I don’t think you got it. I don’t think you’ve ever got it. I really, really, really like you. You know, like you, like you.”

Even though Keiji already knew this without a shadow of a doubt, the words filled his body with waves of tingling electricity.

“I don’t want to stop seeing you,” Bokuto’s voice jumped from yelling to whispering with every few words, “but I don’t know how to ask without being a dick, or makin’ you uncomfortable. Especially after the money thing.”

This was when they were supposed to kiss. Fling themselves into each other and while a romantic summer top forty hit played in the background. But, they couldn’t quite yet, for a million reasons or, maybe, just one. There was a single variable yet to be considered.

“There is something that worries me, I suppose,” Keiji admitted after some time for reflection.

“Yeah?” Bokuto’s voice cracked. There was a light ping of the boutonniere’s pin as he carefully sat it on the bench.

“I expect that in a relatively short span of time, I’m going to fall in love with you. If that’s going to be a problem, we need to di-discuss it. We will still need to be honest with each other in this extended dating arrangement. Perhaps more honest than we have been.”

His hand fell to the cold aluminum as his prom date emeritus spun himself around to straddle the bench so that he was facing Keiji directly.

Bokuto’s fingers were not soft. And he was not a particularly gentle person. But the tenderness of his fingertips as they skidded up the back of Keiji’s neck to cradle his head made up for any lack of smooth skin or soft movements.

Bokuto’s face was blotchy from crying, half wiped-away trails of tears, snot smeared in multiple directions its main decoration. Keiji could see axe pick scars sprinkled across his cheeks as their foreheads tipped together. But he could also see the happy crinkles at the corners of shining golden eyes.

Bokuto’s lips were chapped. His breath still smelled of their dinner a bit. But he was smiling so soft and so sweet.

“Spose I’ll hafta learn to live with it,” he whispered, just before their lips met.

And they kissed.

And they kissed.

And they kissed.

Hajime Iwazumi was appealing enough when he was sober. He ran his ailing father’s general
contracting operation during the day and took business classes at night in preparation for the day he’d take over. He kept Tooru from working himself to death from a city away, which was nearly a miracle. He had a lot of other phenomenal qualities which he kept to himself, though his boyfriend did not.

But when Hajime was just a little bit high, he relaxed and those more guarded skills fluttered into the open. And sitting around the bonfire at Suga’s post-prom/farewell-Daichi beach party, Hajime was quite relaxed. A happily sober Tooru was behind him and Hajime leaned back lazily into his boyfriend’s chest. Guitar in hand, he played and sang Magnetic Fields songs in his rocky, soulful baritone. Because Hajime was extremely musical, but only high Hajime would let anyone listen.

“I think I might be in love with Iwazumi,” Bokuto hummed as Keiji combed his fingers through his hair, breaking up the remaining gel until the strands hung soft and pliant. “Dude’s got pipes. And have you seen those arms?”

They were in sweatpants and hoodies thanks to a bag of Bokuto’s laundry that had never made its way from the laundromat to his house. In the cab of the truck, Keiji’s suit was hanging neat and clean from the ceiling hook while Bokuto’s was in a crumpled pile on the driver’s seat.

“I have. I really can’t blame you.” Keiji replied, looking across the beach.

Around the nearby bonfire was a variety of their friends. Tetsurou was exhausted, but refused to pass out because Kenma was asleep, curled up on his lap. Makki and Issei, who had revealed jackets full of airplane liquor bottles, drunkenly cuddled, telling each other terrible jokes. Noya was braiding Asahi’s hair. Suga’s face was drawn as he clung tightly to Daichi, who had probably kissed his head a hundred times. Kiyoko and Yui, the purveyors of the weed, lay side by side on a blanket, holding hands and staring wide-eyed at the sky. Hitoka, Kei, and Tadashi were asleep in an actual pile, Kei more on top than was necessary for someone his size. Somewhere, Shouyou and Tobio were either arguing or making out.

Everyone else had found a quiet corner of their own that Keiji was uninterested in locating.

“I really like it when you do that,” Bokuto leaned into Keiji’s chest and tried to nuzzle deeper than was possible, given Keiji’s slender frame. Underneath them, the mattress’ springs and truck’s shocks complained angrily.

“Bow out of our relationship generously?”

“No!” Bokuto pouted. “I mean when you scratch my head like that. And wait… we’re in a relationship?!”

“I suppose not officially,” Keiji twisted strands of gray and black around his fingers. “Our situation is… unique, but it’d say we’re dating as of this point.”

Bokuto craned his head, “If we were officially, would you be my boyfriend?”

“Yes, Koutarou. We would be each other’s boyfriends.”

“Then yeah!” he punched the mattress to the truck’s great distress. “I want to be in a relationship right fuckin now. Uh… please.”

“I suppose that’s alright,” Keiji smiled wide into the neck of his hoodie, knowing no one could see him.

Bokuto’s fingers toyed with the strings of the same piece of UCLA Volleyball merchandise. “Don’t
we gotta like, do something to make it official?"

“I’ll prepare a goat for sacrifice,” Keiji deadpanned.

“You are such,” Bokuto flipped himself over and pressed Keiji into the mattress, “a fuckin’ minx, Keiji Akaashi.”

“Where did you learn that word?” Keiji raised his eyebrow suspiciously.

The hairs on the back of Keiji’s neck stood on end as Bokuto pinned his wrists over his head with one hand. He ran the other up Keiji’s side, forcing out an undignified squeal before he kissed him insistently.

“Gah!”

Ryyu was quite possibly unhappier at interrupting their pleasant moment than they were to have it interrupted.

“Why do I always catch people in the middle of shit? Man, Keiji, sorry I uh…”

Bokuto lifted himself up and they both peered down the end of the truck bed to see Ryuu looking very, very uncomfortable.

And Chikara, looking nonplussed.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said mildly. “I just wanted to–”

Bokuto vaulted off the back of the truck. He landed in-between Ryuu and Chikara, looming over the latter.

“Hey, hey, hey! I’m Bokuto, Akaashi’s boyfriend! Nice ta meetcha, new guy.”

Keiji had no idea how he knew who he was. But he did. The posturing was so painfully obvious that he flopped back onto the mattress so no one could see him laugh. Although Chikara probably knew damn well that he was.

“You’re a lucky man, Bokuto. I’m Chikara Ennoshita, an old acquaintance of Keiji’s. Actually, do you mind?” There was an uncomfortably long pause. “I hope someday to keep in touch with him. Only if he wants. So there’s my New York number, my email, my blog, and my Skype. No hard feelings if he doesn’t want them or if I don’t hear from him for a long time.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell him,” Bokuto grunted as though Keiji wasn’t there.

“By the way, I saw video of UCLA/BYU game. Impressive straights, but against someone like Ushijima the team needed a better setter to take full advantage of your spiking flexibility.”

“You play??” Bokuto’s demeanor changed completely. “And we do have a better one, Oikawa over there, he’d just messed up his knee and was off for two weeks!”

“Ah, that makes sense. And no, I have never played. But I have watched a lot of volleyball in my life. I’m particularly familiar with what makes a good setter.”

Keiji sat up on his elbows, wondering if he wanted to say anything. But Bokuto and Chikara were smiling at each other, albeit awkwardly, so there seemed no need.

“Keep up the good work, number four,” Chikara saluted, like an absolute nerd.
“C’mon dude,” Ryuu slipped his arm around Chikara’s waist. “Let’s go like, listen to the water and watch the sun rise. Something romantic and shit.”

“How do you plan on graduating if you don’t know which direction the sun rises? And did you finish that lab report? I told you I was only coming if you got it done.”

Ryuu’s defensive sputtering when on for about thirty seconds, until it abruptly stopped. Keiji decided he was going to think about the lifespan of the truck instead of considering what the silence meant.

“Wow. Never figured that Tanaka guy was gay,” Bokuto scratched the back of his head after he climbed into the back of the truck. “Think my gaydar’s busted.”

“I had no idea he also liked men and I’ve known him for years.”

“Your ex is kinda nice. I was gonna punch him, but then it kinda seemed like he’d punched himself plenty. Plus I guess Kozume bashed him in the nuts at the school? Anyway, you want these?” he held up the lines of Chikara’s angular handwriting. “He wrote em on my hand.”

Keiji took a picture with his phone and checked to make sure the image was readable.

“I don’t want them now. But perhaps someday I will.”

“Now where were we?” Bokuto rolled onto the mattress and pulled Keiji to him just as Hajime began to play something new.

“Hush,” Keiji braced himself on Bokuto’s chest. “I’ve always liked this song.”

“Ah… yeah!” Bokuto whispered loudly after listening for a few moments. “They used to play it at weddings a lot when I worked for that catering company. The one that fired me. Actually… that’s kinda why we met, I guess.”

“Hmm.”

“C’mon,” he pulled him close, “get over here.” In no time at all, Bokuto’s tenor joined Hajime’s baritone, but only one was softly singing into Keiji’s neck.

“Tell me again, what you said,” he whispered in the quiet that followed the last lingering chord.

“I’ve said a lot of things, Koutarou. Please be more specific.”

“Keiiiiiiii, you know what I mean…” Bokuto whined. “On the bleachers!”

He rolled on top of his newly acquired boyfriend, crossed his arms on Bokuto’s chest, then rested his head on his forearms. Gold eyes looked up at him with an expression Keiji was finally willing to acknowledge as complete and utter adoration.

“I’m going to fall in love with you someday, Koutarou,” he said in the same level way he said most everything. “Unfortunately there’s nothing you can do to stop it, as I believe the process has already started. You should prepare yourself.”

“Well that’s pretty fucking great,” Koutarou reached up and slid his thumb across his cheek, “cause I think maybe I’ve been in love with you forever.”

It was perhaps the stupidest thing Bokuto had said to date.

And Keiji loved every word.
The book of love is long and boring. No one can lift the damn thing.

It's full of charts and facts and figures and instructions for dancing.

But I love it when you read to me. And you can read me anything.

Chapter End Notes

some of it's just transcendental, some of it's just really dumb.

so, this is the end of the story. it always feels weird to finish. i hope you all liked it. lots of people helped, including ella, kristen, fightchat, rt, pd, my dog, and everyone who left encouraging comments, shared the story, and left kudos (kudos are actually the reason stories get read, half the time. which is weird). thank you very very much. maybe someday i'll write a sexy sequel, but i've got like six other stories to write first. i gotta treat chikara right for once.

sayuri should update tomorrow, but if not it's only because i need to edit it fifty more times. i'm sorry if it doesn't, but i don't want to let you down with shoddy writing.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!