Summary

Kenma has social anxiety. Hinata is the sun. They meet at a volleyball game.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

The rain is coming down in thick rivets now, soaking the earth and the little houses and the trees that reek of pesticides. He has never much liked it outside of the city; the man back at the boating store told him, the weather's never much good like this. The boats go wild. Scares the fish away. Then he had laughed at his own joke for a good, long time, while Kenma went red in the face and tried to figure out what to say next.

On the border, the very edge of the city, the horizon flickers no matter where you look. It's because of all the lights out there, dancing in the throes of it. Especially in a storm. The train lurching under his feet like an upset stomach, Kenma clutches his phone tighter in both hands and tries to ignore the death-march pattering of the rain against the speeding windows.

"You're freaking out," observes Kuroo. He thinks he's good at observing things. Kenma side eyes him as best he can with clenched fists, feeling the drag of exhaustion on the narrow slits of his eyes.

"I'm not," he says after a moment. He looks back out the window, because there's nowhere else to look. His phone went dead ten minutes ago; he's been counting. "Please stop looking at me."

"Tch." Kuroo makes a sound of discontentment. Kenma sees him look away anyway, but it isn't without first rolling his eyes.

After a moment he seems to think better of the impassive gesture and turns his body back towards Kenma's, crossing his legs and leaning in to mutter in his ear. "It's okay, you know," he says. Kenma doesn't acknowledge him, so he tries again. "You shouldn't listen to them. You're doing fine on your own."

"I know that," Kenma answers back. The retort is too lacking in malice to get Kuroo to shut up. Barely a moment later he concedes to the answer.

"Well, sometimes you don't act like it... have you taken your meds today?"


It's not enough for his mother-hen of a best friend. As the train lurches, Kuroo lurches with it, going to touch Kenma's shoulder and instead crashing into the boy. Like the waves against the sea wall, Kenma thinks idly, remembering the trip to the beach. It was foggy, the sky dropping with the gloom of winter already. Everywhere was grey, and everything stunk of sand and fish. His father's hands, balled into fists.

Unfurling his own, Kenma swallows the lump in his throat down so that it rests in the pit of his stomach. "I ran out," he lies.

"Kenma."

"I don't like them." The train lurches again, stopping to let a bout of business men off at a mainly brick paved station. The wind whips in through the door, cold and harsh on his cheeks. "They make me feel tired."

"That's the point," says Kuroo, like it is obvious. Kenma blinks.

"Of course it is," he says. "Put me to sleep so that I can't have an anxiety attack. Clever marketing."
"You're being bitter," Kuroo simpers, only it's a tad too loud and people look at them, lots of people. Despite the exhaustion gnawing at his bones, Kenma's heartbeat picks up at twice its original speed, crippling him, paralysing him. The doors snap shut and the train lurches again, and the lump resting at the bottom of his stomach feels as though it is made of lead.

His throat is still tight when Kuroo speaks again, voice lowered significantly. "They can't be that bad." He pauses to consider. "Well, maybe you should get them to put you on something milder."

"Maybe," Kenma agrees. They both know he isn't planning on it. The only thing worse than taking medication is asking for it.

The anti-depressants were worse. They sit you down in those hard cushioned chairs, air conditioned freezing rooms reeking of antiseptics and tell you all the pretty words you want to hear. Antidepressants work by balancing, balancing, balancing. Balancing chemicals in your brain. Balancing neurotransmitters that affect the internalized emotions, the projected mood. They will help you sleep better. They will help you eat more. They will help you not choke on your own words when you try and talk to people.

What they do not tell you is that almost half the people that take the medication do not notice a change at all. They do not tell you that often the road to recovery is paved with chemicals you can't pronounce the names of, scripts so dry the edges cut your fingers while you stand waiting in yet another line to get them filled out, thinking, maybe this one will help me, maybe this one will change something. They tell you the basic side effects: headaches, agitation, nausea or vomiting. Somewhere in there they mention the morose tragedies of weight gain, a lack of sex drive, and then they throw in some comments about sleepiness and drowsiness and send you on your way with yet another reason not to want to drive a car. A built up city like Tokyo, it's not somewhere you want to drive; and anyway, everyone walks everywhere now. No one will notice if you want to take the bullet train because you're feeling a little drowsy, they tell you.

He was fifteen when he got misdiagnosed. Sixteen when it happened again. It wasn't until he was eighteen and chose his own doctor, rather than listening to the inane rambling of his parents-- the hushed *we're doing this because we care about you son please just go out and make some friends you're making your mother cry* -- that they told him he had social anxiety. And the side effects of those meds, the nausea, the sweating, the dizziness, are all just jargon.

The real side effect, they don't tell you, is the fact that you believe the pills will work in the first place.

When the train pulls up at their station, most people in the carriage get off. It's a struggle, trying to hold on to the sleeve of Kuroo's shirt whilst pressed against about a dozen other warm, loud, moving bodies, just in this general vicinity. He is thrashed about like the ocean, and then he is outside.

The open space picks up his mood immediately. It is a *shit-tastic*-- the exact word Kuroo used--shame that someone as smart as Kenma, as good looking as Kenma, has to deal with constant panic attacks at the prospect of being around too many people. He doesn't want to be smart, or good looking, he doesn't care about any of that. It is not something you say out loud.

As they walk, cool air rushing down the crowded steps, Kenma tries to listen and nod along to Kuroo's story. It's not that he's too sad, or too anxious to care, they both know; mainly he's just disinterested. He watches the shuffling feet of the people moving by him, and feels at home, utterly insignificant. The girl he met in the waiting room the last time he had to change medication, she tucked her long dyed hair behind one ear and told him, *at least you get it. Crowds*
aren't fun. Why I chose to live in Tokyo, I have no clue. But Kenma doesn't get it-- or at least he
doesn't get it in a personal way, not as anything strikingly empathetic. Kenma knows exactly why
he chose to live in Tokyo; and it is the people, their busily moving bodies and rushing breaths and
the fact that they are too busy looking down at their phones to look up at him. The outset of a
storm, the phenomenon of anxiety seeping through your skin and bleeding like ink into your vital
organs; it is not a thing that happens to him when he feels buried. For the same reason, he doesn't
travel alone any more. Isolation puts him out in the open, draws attention; crowds and people, seas
of hands and feet are there to suck him in and draw him close.

"Is that okay with you?"

Kenma's head snaps up. So Kuroo really had been expecting him to listen, he thinks-- "Is what
okay?"

"Jeez, you're a pain," the taller snarks, his lips curling with the force of a grin. "I said, I've gotta go
pick Tsuki up from his volleyball match."

"Tsuki..." he tries the name out, wondering why it tastes familiar. "Is that the guy from the party
last month? I didn't think that was anything serious."

"It's not," Kuroo rocks back on his heels a little as he shifts to let a desperate looking woman pass.
"Well, a little. We're getting lunch, and probably going out for drinks. I figured a busy club wasn't
really your scene."

You figured wrong, thinks Kenma, a little annoyed, but he says nothing. "Is this your way of
politely saying you want to get rid of me?"

"You can come. At least, to the lunch. I'm sure he won't mind."

Kenma knows he is saying it so that he won't have to be alone, won't have to walk or take a cab
back and sit in the silence of his own living room while the hours of another Saturday tick by.
That's what Kuroo thinks, anyway. How the guy's thought process works.

"Sure," says Kenma, punctuating it with a shrug. "You don't have work?"

"Let's just say I'm planning on keeping my phone switched off until word gets out that I'm back,"
he grins. Kenma looks the other way, not bothering to point out that his manager is going to kill
him.

Kuroo hit something of a big break right around the time they were coming out of high school, an
agent that thought the answer to his show-off personality was more hair products and screen time.
It worked-- a few low-production dramas and about a thousand screaming fan girls later and
Kuroo was raking in enough cash to move both he and Kenma back to the city.

City born and city raised was well enough; the real problems with his anxiety started when his
parents had thought a nice country setting would be a welcomed change for everyone. And
Kuroo, the faithful neighbour type, the doting wife he was, had taken a step back from all of his
parents' money he had been sitting on-- emancipated legally at 16, about two years after they died-
and followed Kenma. That is something he is good at.

The stadium is only a few blocks from home. Home is the name adopted for the place Kenma
bought when he first returned to the city, at 18; an apartment in the better end of town, a few doors
down from Kuroo. Balcony. Brown walls, studio apartment. It is where he'd first decided to take
up game design, where he'd first picked his college majors. Home in the form of compacted walls
and Egyptian cotton towels.

Despite the high-tech domesticity of the area, the stadium smells run down, like rubber and sweat
and old. Kenma can't help but notice it; it's not liking it, he reminds himself, it's not enjoyment so much as it is dull fascination. Kuroo talks incessantly while they walk through, avoiding eye contact with the tall, sweating people moving in and out of the courts. The one they are headed for is all the way at the back of the building.

People glance, boredly, in their direction when they walk past. He doesn't have to think of the reason why. Kenma is too short to look like he was ever designed for any kind of sport; Kuroo carries an aura about him, a white-gold impression of blinding teeth and perfect hair. Kenma tries to think of comforting things, distracting things; the striped awnings on his favourite cafe, the handheld gaming device he left at home. His palms sweat, anxiety creeps up at his throat as the stares go on. He wishes his best friend didn't draw quite so much attention-- he wishes he didn't shake when people spoke to him.

Entering the gymnasium they were apparently supposed to be meeting the elusive Tsuki at, Kenma tries to shrink into his sweater. Luckily for him, the majority of people-- most of which are sweaty, shouting men-- are too involved in their game to stare at him and Kuroo. Volleyball, from the looks of things.

"Oi, Kei," Kuroo shouts, immediately drawing the attention of the team, and there's the anxiety he was waiting for. Kenma drops his gaze and tries to focus on the floor of the gym. He thinks he remembers the face, vaguely, when it makes its way over to them; narrow build, blonde hair, glasses. He looks a little ruffled, red in the cheeks from the effort of his game, as he makes his way over to Kuroo.

"You're early," he says. He's scowling; it's not the most inviting look on him, but then again, Kuroo isn't the most inviting person. Yes, thinks Kenma, it really is the miracle of the 'bad boy' appeal that landed him his prestigious career in the first place.

"Your game is running late," Kuroo shoots back, and before the blonde can get another word in, kisses him. Kenma, used to the overbearing displays of affection the other has been known to give, looks away anyway.

"Tsukishima Kei," he announces, turning back to Kenma with a dazzling grin while his companion sways on his feet, slowly regaining sense. It's always fascinating to watch a person come back after having the life kissed out of them. There is heat flooding to their cheeks, light flooding to their eyes, and the slow sway of acceptance as they come back to their body and realise their mouth has been hanging open this whole time, like a fish.

"Kuroo," he mutters, tugging on the taller's sleeve. Some of the other teammates have stopped to look at them, and are sharing looks and murmured comments. Tsukishima turns back to them and starts shouting obscenities; no doubt scandalized about the particular shade of pink on his cheeks. "Can we go now?"

"In a minute," his friend answers back, preoccupied with grinning at the back of his date's head. "Here," he mutters, and tosses something compact and rectangular into Kenma's hands. His phone. "You can use this. Go sit on one of the benches if you'd like. I won't be long."

Grumbling, Kenma complies.

Kuroo doesn't have many games on his phone, and the ones he does have are all crap anyway; mourning the loss of power of his own phone, Kenma dejectedly selects a traffic jam app. He spares a look back up at the court while he waits for the opening screen to load. Their game has apparently broken up. A swarm of bodies is surrounding Kuroo, elbows jabbing at Tsukishima. The pang of envy only lasts half a beat; Kenma returns his attention to his own game, shutting out all surrounding noise.

One of his best assets, he believes, is his ability to concentrate even when his thoughts are
otherwise preoccupied. It's probably the train ride that did it; all those people looking at him, all 
those empty seats up the isle making the brightness of his clothes and the wideness of Kuroo's legs 
drawing too much attention. Exhaustion thrums through him, a low and steady vibration leading to 
an ache in his bones and a dampness to his palms. People are probably staring at him now. He 
shouldn't have come back here with Kuroo. He shouldn't have worn red. He should have dyed his 
hair; the roots are coming back in, he looks ridiculous, he looks--

"Wow, you're really good at that!"

Kenma's hands pause on the screen, jolting just enough to screw up a technique. He loses the 
level, but it doesn't matter. The voice is in his ear. The voice is right beside him.

Eyes like the earth after a thunderstorm, hair like sunshine; the boy is only inches from him, and 
he isn't looking away.
It is a human being, flesh and blood, bones and breath. A boy with light flooding his eyes. Kenma blinks at him.

"Seriously, I could barely get past the first level. Is there a trick or something?"

Bewildered, Kenma looks back down at the phone screen. It is going dark now with being forced to wait untouched, falling like dusk; he taps on it with his thumb and tries to force words to his throat. "Not really," he admits. "It just depends on how you play it."

He sounds like an asshole. Maybe that will get rid of the guy, at least-- he reasons this through a flood of hot blood to his cheeks, an odd pull of oxygen from his lungs. The guy doesn't leave. If anything, he leans closer.

"Really?" he muses quietly, as if he is genuinely mulling it over. Kenma bites the base of his tongue. "I guess that makes sense! Maybe I just suck really bad?"

Oh God, how is he meant to respond to that? Kenma feels words turning themselves over in his brain and anxiety like lead resting in the base of his throat, creeping up into his mouth where his teeth are weighing down his tongue. His hands sweat. Maybe he'll leave. Maybe he'll see how uninterested Kenma is and leave. Maybe he'll--

"Can I watch you?" the guy asks. He seems to think better of his words after a moment and laughs, running a hand through the back of his hair. Wild, messy. Orange. Sunshine. A cold sweat starts on the back of Kenma's neck. "Uh-- only if it's okay with you, of course! If you wouldn't mind?"

Kenma's thumbs hover over the screen of the phone. He doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know how to use his words. After a moment, he restarts the level.

It's easy enough, without the added pressure. He does that thing that he's good at and tunes out the world around him, convincing the shake in his fingers that the game is the only thing that matters. He makes it through the level unscathed this time, the tremor in his hands gone. The second he looks back up at the guy, it starts again.

"That's amazing!" the redhead gushes, and he's not even exaggerating; his eyes are wide and his mouth is open in a grin, as if he really can't believe Kenma's skill at the level. He is genuine. He is too close for comfort. He looks up at Kenma suddenly, eyes sparkling. "You really don't have a trick?"

Words get stuck in his throat again. He shakes his head.

"I'm Hinata," the boy adds, sticking out his hand as if as an after thought. Kenma glances down at it. Sensing the atmosphere, Hinata takes his hand back, nonchalantly wiping it on the leg of his shorts. But he is waiting, Kenma realises, to hear his name.

"...Kenma," he retorts finally, though without making eye contact. It doesn't seem to matter; Hinata's eyes brighten instantly, and he breaks out into one of those blinding grins.

"Awesome," he says, though Kenma can't really see what's so awesome about his name. "Awesome. Hey, are you here with the other guy? I'm on the volleyball team with his boyfriend."
Boyfriend, Kenma repeats in his head. He hadn't been aware Tsukishima was anything serious like that, to Kuroo. He glances over at them from under his lashes; Kuroo has his arm thrown around the other's shoulders, and is saying something to the rest of the team-- loudly, mind you. The blonde looks uncomfortable.

"Are you friends?" Kenma murmurs, still watching Tsukishima's shoulders hunch in on themselves. "With your... teammate?"

"With that guy? Not really," Hinata admits, apparently unscathed by Kenma's meek way of speaking. "I mean, when he first came I thought that maybe we could be friends because he's really tall--like, 6'2" or something-- and I'm really short and he's actually a really good blocker and I thought, maybe he could tell me how to get past blockers? Since that's like such a big deal for me, and I have to play the middle blocker position like all the time, and--" he stops suddenly, as if only realising for the first time how much he's been talking. "Ah-- sorry," he says, one hand going to the back of his neck in a sheepish gesture; his cheeks are kind of pink, Kenma notices, absolutely fascinated. "I talk kind of...

Fast, he thinks, watching the other.

"...A lot. Does that bother you?"

"I'm used to Kuroo," Kenma says before he can stop himself; before he can think of anything else to say. "You're fine. He never shuts up."

It comes out so much colder than expected, but a magical thing happens anyway: Hinata laughs. Kenma watches in complete bewilderment as the shorter's whole face lights up, his shoulders hunching, his hands flying to cover his mouth. Kenma doesn't know what to say. He's not one for complacency, but, well. He's not one for making jokes either. And Hinata is kind of... gorgeous?

The thought disappears as soon as Hinata stops laughing and looks at him again and he realises, abruptly, that this is all happening in real time.

"Right! What is it with tall guys and thinking everyone needs to hear their opinion all the time? I mean, Kageyama's totally like that, too! He's always interrupting me with his opinion, or to yell at me, and it's like? I don't care?"

Kenma cracks a smile. It's only slight, but: he can relate, he guesses. To the not caring thing. Hinata, seemingly encouraged by the grin, swings his legs a little. "I guess it's just his temper, though. They train us pretty hard. And he never talks about his feelings. He just gets all silent, and plays really hard, and gets all broody, and then- BAM! He yells at me! He's always like, "idiot Hinata! Everything's your fault! Go get the ball! Fix my emotional insecurity!"

Kenma laughs. It's nothing big. He just-- smiles, and then giggles a little, a breathy, nervous noise. He catches it on the back of his hand and it's gone as soon as it started, but apparently that's more than enough time for Hinata. His face lights up again. Kenma expects him to say something condescending, like, hey, I guess you do have a sense of humour. Maybe you're not a robot after all! But instead Hinata just smiles at him a moment, before averting his gaze back out to the court. Kenma doesn't follow his gaze; he keeps watching him. Maybe he's still sick, or something. From being out on the water. He's brought back to thoughts of the boat, lurching under his feet, his stomach roiling. Salt and fish, in his nose. On his tongue. The grey sky, too bright.

"So how long have you known each other?" Hinata questions, swinging his legs again. "You and... um, tall guy."

"Kuroo," Kenma supplies. Hinata snaps his fingers.
"Yeah, Kuroo."

He drags his gaze away to the rest of the court, where Kuroo is still being obnoxious. Something halfway between a grimace and a smile fight to front on his face; he settles for neither, downcasting his gaze again with an apathetic shrug. "Long time. We were childhood friends."

"Oooh," says Hinata, "romantic!" And it takes Kenma a moment to realise he's kidding. Teasing him.

Testing the waters a little, he inquires, "How long have you and Kageyama-kun known each other?"

"Ah-- high school, I guess? We were on the same team then too."

Kenma smiles. "Romantic."

"Totally," the other jokes, eventually. His grin is face-splitting. "I mean, it's kind of like an anime, but... I don't know how well Kageyama would fare with cherry blossom petals."

Kenma actually laughs this time. Breathless, shocked, and he immediately hides his face in his hands. He is distantly aware of Hinata watching him-- and what right does he have to look shocked, _bewildered_, when they've just met-- and his suspicions are confirmed as soon as he stops and pulls his hands back. Still smiling a little. Blinking; sheepish, like an animal. Hinata is _staring_ now.

"You have a nice laugh," he blurts. Kenma recoils. Before he has the chance to question Hinata, to ask what the vague wording of 'nice' even entails, they're interrupted by the obnoxious presence of Kuroo looming back over, Tsukishima in tow.

"Oi, Kenma. You ready to go?"

Kenma makes a noise of agreement, rather than answering verbally. He rises. "See you, Hinata."

"Ah-- you can call me Shouyou!" he gushes. It happens so quickly. Kenma glances at him back over his shoulder.

"...Shouyou."

His face lights up. Idiot, thinks Kenma, but his chest is warm.

The three of them-- him, Kuroo, and an angry blonde in glasses-- are barely out of the room before the middle blocker catches up with them again. "Hey, um--" he's sort of out of breath, from running, "I was about to head out anyway, just now. Where are you all going? I could give you a lift?"

"Don't need one," Tsukishima interrupts, side-eyeing him. Kuroo looks affronted.

"Huh? What are you talking about, Kei, of course we need one. I was gonna call a cab--"

The look Tsukishima gives him is meaningful enough to shut him up. Looking insulted, Hinata goes on. "I'm totally a good driver. If this is about--"
"It is," says Tsukishima, turning to address Kuroo. "Last time he was in charge of driving half the team, he almost got us all killed. He can't drive."

"Well, you drive," Hinata argues, visibly pouting. He catches Kenma watching; Kenma looks away.

"Then," continues the blonde, "there's also the fact that our date is already being interrupted by a third party member. Adding another would be like..."

"Like completing a four-wheeled vehicle, Kei, don't be rude," Kuroo reprimands him. He looks genuinely reproachful at his partner's lack of enthusiasm for their plans; shooting him one last desperate look, he throws another over his shoulder to Hinata. "Sure, shorty, we could use the ride. We were just gonna head out for lunch anyway."

"Lunch!" agrees Hinata, like it is genuinely exciting. "Lunch sounds fun."

Kenma says nothing. He doesn't know what he could say now if he tried.

Chapter End Notes

ok so like?? first of all my deep apologies for ignoring this fic for like two months. i sort of got into this habit over my summer break of doing nothing but focussing on my own (hella) love life for once and actually like, doing things with friends. im back at school now and super stressed sOOO there should be more updates of things,, but still free free to shoot me some encouraging words. never hurts.

on the subject of kenmas anxiety-- for anyone wondering the reason he expresses symptoms the way he does is because i have this awful habit of projecting on characters i love. (and characters i id with.) kenma suffers from a form of social anxiety triggered mainly by being left alone or put in social situations where he needs to be independent, accompanied by subsequent depression. (super common in extroverts with anxiety who still feel the need for connection whilst simultaneously finding they dont want to pursue it/can't bring themselves to care about it)

so yeah!

as always, hmu @ cometghost.tumblr.com
Chapter 3

They don't quite make it to lunch.

"Idiot, Hinata." Tsukishima has said it a few times now. Kenma is watching him, pacing up and down the side of the car. "I can't believe I didn't see this coming. Idiot. Should have expected it."

"I said I'm sorry," Hinata moans from his place on the floor. He has since sat down, head between his knees, sun peaking down on the back of his neck. Kuroo's bent over the hood of the car, inspecting the damage of his oil-covered hands with some irritation.

About five minutes into their drive it became apparent that Hinata's car didn't have any gas: and by apparent, Kenma means, they broke down on the side of the road and Tsukishima started complaining.

"Can't we just leave him here and call a cab? Kuroo?"

Kuroo grunts in answer, finally rounding the car to join the rest. His eyes meet Kenma's before anyone else's; Kenma has been standing against the side of the car for about ten minutes now, arms folded, alternating between watching Tsukishima pace and watching Hinata sit.

"So," he announces, swinging his arms. "I think I made it worse."

"Kuroo--"

"I think!" he repeats, throwing up his hands. Tsukishima halts in his walk over, looking like he is contemplating hitting the man. "But like, I won't be able to tell until we get someone to look at it. Which we would need gas for, obviously."

"So call someone," Tsukishima remarks. Hinata looks beyond embarrassed, practically jumping on his feet with it. Kenma wonders what that's like; experiencing abject humiliation without fear of it coming back later in the form of an anxiety attack, a deep, bleeding thing that happens when he's alone and it's quiet.

"Why would I do that? The gas station's just up the road."

"And how do you propose we get there?" the blonde questions, raising an eyebrow. "Fly? Shout into the void?"

"I'm not made of money, Kei."

"What do we dooooo," Hinata whines.

Kuroo makes a face, addressing the whole group. "I don't really know how to say this, but I think we have to push."

"I'm not pushing," Tsukishima announces, folding arms across his narrow frame and shaking his head. "You three losers can push as much as you want, but I'm not laying a single hand on this filthy vehicle."

"I can't believe I've got my hands on this thing."
Kuroo wheezes a laugh, strained with the effort he's already putting into pushing. The four of
them are lined up, hands along the back of the car and trying to force it up over the horrible incline
of the road.

"When we're... done here," Tsukishima pants, "I expect you to buy me... a really expensive drink.
And food. To... thank me... for my hard work."

"I'll do more than... buy you a drink to thank you," Kuroo wheezes back, and if it weren't for the
disgusting grunt in his tone, Kenma thinks, he might have sounded charming.

Tsukishima is blushing nonetheless, muttering something to himself with a few choice swears.

Kenma can't remember the last time he had to do something embarrassing like this. He wants to
be at home, away from prying eyes, or lost in a crowd somewhere where no one will see his face.
He knows neither are healthy; the former would leave him feeling drained and rusty, and it would
take him a whole week to figure out how to talk to waiters again. The latter, however, might just
leave him feeling with an empty accomplishment. Sure, being out in public seems like a big step to
overcoming anxiety, but what's the point if you can't be spoken to directly? He wants to disappear.
He wants to turn around right now, walk away, and disappear.

Hinata, oblivious to the internal monologue Kenma has going on, appears sanguine through the
effort of pushing. He lets out an exalted noise, something that sounds along the lines of 'pwaaaaa',
but it is not followed up by a complaint; he is grinning through his sweat. Gross, Kenma thinks,
but the word feels foreign even to him.

"Hey, I'm really, sorry for this? Again."

"Sure you are," pants Tsukishima. Hinata makes a face and tries to lean across Kenma to glare at
the blonde; the resulting movement makes their arms brush, and Kenma feels the heat of Hinata's
arm against his just for a moment, muscles trembling with the strain.

"I totally am, okay! I don't have any money, but..." he trails off, looking for all the world like he
can't remember what he was going to say. "I'll come up with something! So you have to... accept
my apology, okay!"

"Dumbass. I don't have to accept anything."

"You're just... being grouchy because you feel bad... that he feels bad," Kuroo accuses. Kenma
watches on in fascination as the blonde's face flushes even further. He has never understood the
ability of his best friend, able to dictate a person's behaviour just through the use of his own
words. Pernickety, rude Tsukishima, allowing Kuroo to speak to him that way. Kenma doesn't
know the guy, but it seems out of character all the same.

"Aw-- is that really true, Tsukki? That's really sweet!"

" Shut it," the blonde grumbles. It takes Kenma this long to realise that Hinata was being genuine;
there is no sarcasm at all in his tone, or malice in his face. In fact, he perks up a great deal after
that, pushing into the car with a new found vigor. Kenma pauses in his ministrations after a while.
Realises he's staring. He turns his face back to the bumper of the car moments before Hinata can
look up and notice he's being watched, but something tells him the guy realised it anyway.

They get there eventually, stopping the car at the gas station. People are staring at them weirdly.
Staring at Kenma weirdly. His heart hammers, anxiety creeping up his throat like a persistent,
slow-crawling insect, fighting its way like panic through his blood stream before--

"Hey, Kenma! Oil mustache."
Kenma's anxiety spikes and distracts mid-breath. He whips his head around to Hinata, and sure enough, the other is streaking his upper lip with motor oil. Tsukishima is looking on in disgust, about 2.5 seconds, it looks like, from simply turning and leaving. Hinata wipes the oil from his face, still grinning.

"Okay! Gas it up, we can get this show back on the road, like, it totally doesn't even have to be a sad thing--"

"You're a sad thing," Tsukishima says, but Kenma suspects he is too tired to come up with anything better. He hides his smile into Kuroo's shoulder. It only lasts a second, but Kenma sees. It's chaos for a minute, Hinata filling up the car and fumbling for gas money, going to pay while Kuroo fumbles around under the hood again. Kenma doesn't even realise, in all the mess of sudden production, that his rising panic attack has disappeared; they're too soon all piling into the car, Hinata cheering, Kuroo stroking his own ego, and then they're on the road again. Hinata keeps fiddling with the radio station, ignoring Kuroo's insistence that he should be watching the road.

They pull up to the restaurant noisily, techno blaring from the speakers; it's about the fourth radio station they've tried and Kenma's chest is thumping when people look at them, but again, he doesn't get a lot of time to think about it. Hinata bothers to stand around and wait for him to get out of the car when the other two start for the restaurant. Something about it spikes his bloodstream. He gets out after Hinata nonetheless, not bothering to mumble a thank you even when he closes the door behind him. Shit. Is that rude?

Hinata practically leaps into the air when they get to Kuroo and Tsukishima, jabbing a finger at the restaurant. "Alright, finally! Meat buns, yeah? Yeah, Kuroo? Hey, are you paying?"

"Why does everyone take advantage of my good looks and kind nature," Kuroo deadpans, and Kenma rolls his eyes at him.

"Pay for your own lunch," says Tsukishima.

Hinata almost stops walking. "Eh? How is that fair? Hey, I drove you guys here, so--"

"Your shitty car broke down on the side of the road. And the only reason we let you drive us is because you invited yourself."

"Don't be rude," Kuroo says, but he's laughing into his fist.

Hinata, apparently unperturbed, skips ahead. "Listen, it's fine if no one pays, but someone owes me a favour. It works that way. It totally has to, right Kenma?"

Three pairs of eyes turn on him. Panic bites at his psyche. He knows how this goes. Someone asks for his opinion, he opens his mouth and can't speak; smirks, laughter, someone mocks him, answers for him, no one wants to hear what he has to say and it's easier to just not care--

Hinata says nothing, waiting on patiently with wide, slow-blinking eyes.

Swallowing, Kenma says. "Yes, it works that way."

Tsukishima deflates. The answering cheer from Hinata is nearly deafening, but Kenma is too bewildered by the fact that the other waited for him to answer to react. Kuroo offers a shrug, and they push past the doors and into the diner. "Look, I'll buy you a drink, how's that? If Kenma says so, then it's fair."

"Huh? Really?" Hinata turns and addresses him personally. "Do you never lie, or something?"
Kuroo answers for him, cutting Kenma off before he can even open his mouth. "It's not so much that he doesn't lie that he's very blunt. If he has a problem with you, or doesn't like something, he'll say so."

Hinata makes a bewildered noise, and elbows Kenma in the ribs; he nearly jumps. "That's really cool, Kenma. More people should be like that! Hey, lying just to be polite is really boring, isn't it..."

Hinata starts ranting, and they all take their seats in a booth by a window. Kuroo shoots him a look, as if to ask if he's really comfortable being on the same side as a stranger-- Kenma dares him one back. Shrugging-- their silent conversation over-- Kuroo takes his seat next to Tsukishima, and Hinata slides in. Effectively, this traps Kenma between the wall and the other boy; panic sets in a low thrum, but remains that way, nonthreatening.

"What do I get to pick for my drink? Something really expensive?"

"Don't push your luck," Kuroo says, mumbling from behind a menu. Tsukishima has been glaring pretty openly for a while now. The look, were it directed at him, would have made Kenma sink down low in his seat, the negative feelings rolling off of the blonde and hitting him from across the table. Mostly Kenma thinks he just resents Hinata for ruining their date, but then again, what does that mean he thinks of Kenma?

"Ready to order?" their waitress is watching the group of four with an obviously staged smile, gaze flickering to where Kuroo's elbows are streaked with grease. Kenma wonders if she recognises him.

Tsukishima orders without even pausing to pick up the menu, and Kuroo does the same, offering the pamphlet in a neat pile at the centre of the table. Hinata, however, takes his time varying in 'um' and 'uh' noises, studying and squinting at the options.

"Coffee?" the woman offers, a biting tone leaking from her smile. Hinata makes a face.

"No, I hate coffee. Hey, what's sweetest?"

"Can you please," Tsukishima deadpans, staring hard at him over his glasses, "just order something."

Hinata pokes his tongue out. Turning back to the waitress with a dazzling grin-- and it really is dazzling, Kenma notices, watching on as the waitress nearly reels back from the change in mood-- and tilting his head at the menu. "Can I get a caramel shake? And two number fives!" He whips his head around to Kenma so fast that it's dizzying. "Sorry, I hope you don't mind. You totally have to try it, it's delicious!"

The waitress fumbles to scribble the order down, glancing back up at their table. "I-is that all, then?"

When she's gone, Hinata leans in to Kenma and Kenma feels his heart stop for a long, deafening moment. Like stepping on sea glass, he can't shake the feeling that he is experiencing the wrong sensation at the wrong moment; sweat beads on the back of his neck, and he flushes, too stunned to move when Hinata smiles at him.

"Sorry for ordering for you, that was really rude of me. I just got really excited and wanted to show you... well, it tastes really good, you'll see! You're not a vegetarian or anything, right?"

Kenma shakes his head no. The other's answering grin is as blinding as the sun. "Well, good!"

The meal Hinata ordered for him to turns out to be regular deep fried meat buns, of an
unidentifiable meat he doesn't bother asking about. It is good; he realises this in a moment of flush to his cheeks; Hinata both saved him from having to speak to their waitress and ordered just the right thing. He did it out of a moment of selfishness-- just wanting to show Kenma something, like he cared, like they were friends-- but Kenma can't bring himself to feel spiteful.

Hinata chews noisily and speaks over full mouthfuls twice. And not once, Kenma realises, does he voice any discomfort from having to sit with Kenma. He seems happy about it, involving the blonde in conversation whenever he can, asking his questions and waiting patiently for him to answer. He considers those answers carefully, grinning at Kenma like he cares what he has to say. He realises after their meal that he's just on the edge of comfortable, an indistinguishable warm feeling in his gut. Something about the situation is making him happy. The beach, his father's stern face, seem like distant memories now. How long ago had he been on that train?

Tsukishima has stopped scowling into his food, and Kenma knows he's rubbing his foot against Kuroo's leg under the table without even having to look; or maybe Kuroo's doing it to him, and that's why Tsukki's face is so red. Hinata has long since finished his meal and has been sipping at the dregs of his drink for some time now, chattering on about volleyball and a band Kenma's never heard of; they were on in the car, he thinks; how long has it been since he stopped paying attention to popular music? Hinata's voice is kind of high pitched, grainy and boyish. It lacks the deep appeal girls fawn over, the kind Kuroo has, the kind Kenma used to envy. Hinata's a very smiley person. He can't work out why, for the life of him, the guy is so positive. Or why it's affecting him.

Kenma doesn't exactly feel like jumping around or singing, nothing to compare to Hinata's sunny attitude, but--

"Alright," Kuroo says, in his announcer's it's-time-to-listen-to-what-I-have-to-say-or-else voice, and begins pulling his wallet out. "How are we splitting this? Kenma, do you have cash?"

"Oh-- sure." He realises in a flood of panic that he was staring at Hinata again, trying to figure him out. Fingers twitching, he reaches down to fumble with his wallet. He drops the notes twice, realises he's shaking. He slides two thousand yen across the table and hopes it's enough, because he doesn't know if he'll be able to reach into his wallet again. Shit. Is he being weird? He tries to get a feel for what expression is on his face, but his thoughts are cut off when Hinata shouts, in a flurry of emotion, "Kuroo better still be paying for my drink!"

When they leave the restaurant Kenma feels weird; strangely airy, as if he still hasn't caught up with the situation. Hinata is swinging his arms, thanking Kuroo for the drink and for letting him tag along; Kuroo is naming clubs and bars and trying to get Tsukishima to admit that he's actually excited about the prospect of either. It's weird, being around these three; like a friendship group, only Kenma's palms are sweating and he feels like they hate him for not being able to contribute to conversation. Whatever he may be thinking, Hinata ushers him into the passenger seat of the car when they get there, insisting he can be in charge of the music this time. He leaves it on the station it was already on. Hinata's face lights up like the sky.

They drop Kuroo and Tsukishima off at a noisy bar about ten minutes from his apartment complex, and it takes that long for Kenma to realise what's happening. Kuroo seems to realise it too, glancing back into the car wearily on his way out.

"Kenma, you'll be okay?"

What is he supposed to say to that? He forces a nod, trying to look noncommittal. His phone is still dead. Shit. He plays his fingers through each other, eyes cast down on his lap. He doesn't have to look to know that Kuroo is still watching him, even as the car pulls away and Hinata turns the radio down.

He knows why the radio is being turned down. Some poppy song is still blaring gently, dulcet
voice muffled beneath the thrum of the car. The bass levels on the system are weird; Kenma could probably fix it, lean forward and fiddle with Hinata's dials until it sounds better. He won't, though. He knows how it would look, knows it would start a conversation, and say he leans too far forward and brushes against Hinata and the other looks at him; then what?

That psychologist's voice echoes in his head, a soundless mirage of condescending: you catastrophize the best of situations, Kenma. Have you been remembering your breathing exercises? Don't get so mad when people look at you, they're only trying to be nice.

"Hey," Hinata says suddenly, interrupting the other's grim train of thought. "I totally forgot to ask for your number."

Kenma nearly jumps. "I-- sorry?"

"Oh-- no, oh my god, totally nothing weird, just-- so we can text and stuff! I'm going away for a tournament soon so if you wanted to, we probably couldn't hang out for a while. Ah... sorry," he glances over, even though his eyes should be on the road, big and wide and the colour of earth, "am I being too forward? It's okay if you want to say no!"

Kenma hesitates. "...Where's your phone?"

Hinata talks him through the mess that is the glove box, apologising for the endless takeout napkins and empty CD cases-- "I don't even know where half of those are, so careful you don't break any!"-- until he finds his phone, buried with a pair of keys. Kenma enters his own number into it, leaving the picture blank. Hinata is grinning when he puts the device back.

"Awesome. Hey, I'll text you later to make sure it worked, okay? If not I can ask Kei to ask Kuroo, and-- ahh, I'm rambling, again, sorry sorry."

"It's... okay," Kenma finally manages, and the feel of the words forming around the lump in his throat makes the sound come out strained. "I already said I don't mind."

"Ah-- right, you did! Hey, that Kuroo guy doesn't really talk as much as you said he does, though. Do you live together?"

"...No." They may as well. They did for about half a year, before Kuroo started bringing dates back and Kenma decided he needed his own place. A flat had opened up barely a two minute walk from Kuroo's; the guy still shows up at his door every other day asking to borrow milk, or banging his fist dressed only in a towel and claiming something's wrong with his plumbing. If he actually cared about publicity, Kenma reasons-- and he must, at least to some extent, or he wouldn't muss his hair so purposely every time he left the house-- he might actually bother to think about his public actions. Their neighbours probably know him as 'that shirtless guy'.

"Do you live with your parents?"

"I have my own place. Left up here."

"Oh, shoot, nearly missed the exit. Anyway, you're lucky! I lived with my parents for nearly a year after high school, but then my friend suggested we get a place because, like, we got drafted for the same team and we're based mainly around here, but we travel a lot for tournaments and games and even training sometimes." Kenma's head reels at the amount of information being thrown at him, but he keeps up, watching Hinata intently from under his lashes.

"And Kageyama's, like? A really irritating roommate sometimes. He's always complaining. Always. He never shuts up when he's upset with me, but then all the rest of the time he's kind of shy and standoffish so like, I don't mind, because he's a cool guy, really, and we used to hate each other I think before we really knew each other. Is it this turn up here?"
"The next one. Um. How far away do you live?"

The question makes Hinata grin. "Just up the road from you, actually, not too far from here. Oh man, I wish I wasn't going away! You're really cool, I want to hang out again. You have to teach me how to beat all the hard levels on that app."

The statement kind of annoys Kenma; he can't put his finger on why. 'Cool' might be the reason; he can't remember ever being called 'cool'. 'Rude' and 'snobby', maybe, for ignoring his peers, but not cool. The best he's ever gotten from Kuroo was tolerable.

(He's kidding, of course. The guy's a total sap once you get a drink into him, and will rant about his quote unquote undying platonic love for Kenma until the sun comes up.)

"It's just this one up here. Thank you," Kenma says, already preparing to gather his bag and leave. Hinata puts the car into park and turns to look at him, eyes all big and sparkly and genuine.

"I'll text you, yeah?"

Kenma unbuckles his seatbelt. "Sure."

"And you have to text back!"

"I will."

Hinata breathes, a long heaving sigh through his smile; like he's deflating, and Kenma notices a few things.

Firstly, his eyes crinkle at the corners when he grins. It shouldn't be so endearing but it is, and he can't help but stare at the skin there, darker than his due to exposure to the sun, freckles dotted across his nose so light you almost can't see them.

Secondly, Hinata is attractive. He knows this, and he thinks it again. Kenma is in the habit of thinking that if you think someone is attractive more than twice, you've got a problem

Thirdly, Hinata isn't fucking with him, not even slightly. There is no joking or teasing in the glint of his eyes, nor is there the hint of false politeness, of doing something out of courtesy. He thinks Kenma is 'cool'. He wants to text him, to hang out with him as friends. Why?

"I think you have to get out of the car now, Kenma!"

His face heats up. "Right," he mumbles, and slides out of the passenger seat with shame rolling off of him in waves. "See you." Hinata is still smiling, and rolls down the window so that Kenma can see him wave.

"Bye! I'll message you later!"

He pretends not to be watching out the corner of his eye for Hinata's car to drive away. When he gets inside the first thing he does is wash his face, freezing cold water so that his eyes don't feel so sallow, so that the redness in his cheeks go down. He doesn't dare look at his reflection but he takes a hot shower and towels his hair idly while searching for something good to watch on Netflix. He tries not to think about it, the chaos of all the past 24 hours of his life.

When he lies down on the couch and tries to focus on the meandering characters on screen he thinks of his dad, the tilt of his chin when he told Kenma he was too old to be hung up on such childish fantasies. The snarl, the hiss and throw of the waves. He couldn't hear the man's voice over them, but he knew his mother was watching from up the bank, wanting to go back inside and finish hanging the washing out to dry. Pick a subject to major in, don't waste our money on
therapy again. Have you been taking your meds? That must be why you're so irrational.

He's so caught up in the thoughts that he almost doesn't notice his phone has been buzzing, and swipes his hand for it, nearly knocking the device off of the table.

There is a single text message waiting for him, lighting up his screen.

*hey just wondering what kind of movies do u like??? we should go see one when i get back!*
The prescription has nearly run out. Getting them filled out is a cycle of perfunctory gestures and awkward conversations, and, when he can, he gets Kuroo to do it.

The three pills remaining are sealed beneath plastic and foil; he pops one out of the packet and stares at it in the light of his bathroom, wondering.

They make him sleepy. He knows this. For this reason he has to be careful about taking doses before class, even though he knows that this is where the majority of his panic attacks will happen. They are a nightly ritual that used to make him miss television shows before he got the hang of it, that one time made him vomit all over Kuroo's carpet because he went to bed with an empty stomach and laid down straight away.

He texts Hinata back while he downs the tablet, saying that he likes scary movies.

The reply is instant.

OMG, really?? thats a shame, i cant stand them! they totally freak me out :'(

It's so ridiculous. Kenma breathes a laugh, trying to stifle the noise behind his palm even though there is no one around to see. The emoticon only makes it so much better; Hinata's a grown guy, but of course it makes sense that he doesn't like horror movies. Even knowing him just for a few hours, Kenma could have figured this.

sorry, he sends back, returning the packet to its place in his bathroom cabinet and making a mental note to ask Kuroo about getting more, im fine with anything, really. He hesitates before pressing send, then chooses to add: what kind do you like?

It sparks a conversation. Hinata states at first that he doesn't know, and then starts spouting off the names of comedies and actions and dramas-- a lot of kids movies and Western films Kenma has never seen-- explaining their plots in the only way Hinata can.

its like this totally awesome crime drama, only? black and white?? i think thats called neo-noir. its all, BOOM, gunshots!!!! and theres a car. hey, do you know anything about cars kenma?? i think your friend did something weird to mine!

They talk for hours like that, Kenma through his own drowsiness and drooping eyelids when the meds finally start to make him tired. He considers apologising for the replies that come slower, but opts out-- what if he has to explain himself?

It's a miracle he manages a goodbye when he realises he is going to fall asleep, and passes out cold on the couch, his forgotten TV show droning on in the background.

When he wakes, it's late in the morning of the next day, and he has three unread messages.

Kenma doesn't bother reading them while he tries to gather his bearings. He's left the TV on all night again, and despairs for a second at the power bill. Then, he resigns himself to cleaning up, leaving dishes in the sink to be worried about later and then remembering that he's used that excuse three times this week already. He allows the hot, sudsy water to wake him up, yawning into the crook of his arm over his languid movements with the sponge. The traffic outside his window is particularly loud for this time of the week; he switches the TV back on to drown it out, though the faint hum of horns in the background is a little comforting. On his second cup of coffee he decides to check his messages. Two are from Hinata.
goodnight!!! sorry for keeping you up!

good morning, kenma. kageyama is complaining that i left the kitchen messy, but it's not even! look at this.

Attached is a picture of what is obviously a messy kitchen, the blur of someone in the background as if it was taken in motion; Kageyama, he assumes, yelling at Hinata for being insensitive.

He texts back immediately. was he mad at you for taking that picture?

The third message on his phone is from Kuroo, a long winded and too-complicated detail of his night with Tsukishima, ending with: He should be out of here by noon. ;); Come over then! ;)

If Kenma didn't know any better, he might think Kuroo was suggesting something with those emojis, but no, the idiot really types that way. His phone buzzes with a reply from Hinata.

he yelled at me for like ten minutes omg!!!

They text back and forth while Kenma gets ready, productivity significantly slowed by the hindrance; he pours himself another cup of coffee while Hinata complains about how intense their training regime has been lately, and how omg-i-cant-wait-til-game-season-is-over-honestly-im-sooo-tired, and by the time he's walking out the door to see Kuroo, he realises he's taken about an hour extra than he normally would. He tells Hinata where he's going so that the slowing of replies doesn't seem rude; Hinata, he notes, doesn't offer to leave him alone long enough to go and see his friend. Presumptuous. Kenma doesn't mind at any rate, and he's still looking at his phone screen when Kuroo opens the door minutes later.

"Afternoon," he greets, and the shit-eating grin on his face can't be a coincidence; he has proudly hiked down his shirt collar to show off the latest hickie.

"Hi," Kenma greets back, stepping past him and into the apartment. "Did Tsukishima leave?"

"Kei. Yeah, he has training later today, he had to go pretty early to get ready for it."

I know, Kenma almost says, but stops himself; he doesn't need the onslaught of questions. He ignores Kuroo shutting the door behind him and goes to sit on his sofa, replying to one of Hinata's texts.

"Hey, remember when we used to have sleepovers?"

Like staring into the light of a flame, Kenma senses that there is some danger here.

"Kenma?" Kuroo calls again, this time distinctively from the kitchen. The blonde grimaces.

"...Sure. Why?"

Kuroo pops his head around the corner, looking for all the world desperate. "Do you wanna, y'know, stay here tonight? We could talk about stuff. Watch some movies."

"You're suffering."

He takes in a breath. "I'm not."

"You are. You're either suffering or you have something exciting you want to talk about, but you don't want to be the only one talking about his life."

"Damn," Kuroo swears, going back into the kitchen and clambering around. "I don't know why you picked literature, when it's clear you're majoring in psychoanalyze-the-shit-out-of-your-best-
"You're in love with him."

The noise in there stops, a long moment during which Kenma takes the time to reply to another text; Kuroo hesitantly begins making noise again, albeit without saying anything. He re-emerges minutes later, carrying two steaming mugs. The scent of coffee-- good coffee, not the shitty instant Kenma buys at home-- hits him at full blast. Saying nothing, he keeps his eyes on Kuroo and reaches out to take it, sipping at the burning liquid. Kuroo collapses onto the sofa beside him and goes for the remote.

"...How long have you known?"

"I'm not. I just." He sounds pained, on the edge of something fragile. "I didn't think I would care about him this much."

"He stayed for breakfast," Kenma says. Kuroo nods. "They don't normally stay for breakfast."

"Yeah. Shit. I really like kissing him."

"You like kissing plenty of people," Kenma says, peering over the steam coming from his cup. "That doesn't mean you're in love with him."

"But that's just it-- it's not just kissing him I like, I want, shit. I like waking up next to him. And cooking him breakfast, and-- it's so gross, Kenma, I don't know what to do."

"Uh-huh," he replies easily, and for the first time, Kuroo gestures to his phone.

"Can you put that thing down? What are you even playing, Jesus--"

"Kuroo--" he doesn't get to finish the thought before the device is ripped from his hands, leaving him feeling utterly cold. He gawks at Kuroo as the other man scans his screen, going from petulant to amused quicker than Kenma has ever seen.

He looks up. "Ohoho," he deadpans.

Kenma resists the urge to rip his phone from his friend's hand. "Can I have that back?"

"I didn't realise you had that good of a time with Shouyou yesterday."

"It's not like that. Give it back."

"How long do these messages go on for?" Kuroo is grinning, swatting Kenma away with one hand as he scrolls through. Kenma, despite himself, doesn't have the height or weight on him to get it back. He huffs through Kuroo's restricting hand on his forehead and falls back against the couch.

"This is an incredible breach in privacy."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a monster. Hey, since when have you not liked music?"

He's glaring now, reaching for his phone. "Since forever? I don't know. I don't listen to it. Now--"

"Sure you do. You love that one shitty Western band, uh, what are they called..."

"Kuroo."

He gives in with a sigh, tossing the phone back. Kenma almost drops it in his scrambling attempt
to catch it, crying out.

"Anyway, you shouldn't downplay yourself. You're not a boring guy."

I am, he thinks; how could I not be? But there is no point in arguing with Kuroo, not when he's like this, so stubborn and sure of himself.

"Nice subject change," he says, and is rewarded by seeing the other's smile drop.

"I'm not trying to change the subject. I suck at talking about my feelings, I just-- wanna punch 'em when I think about it, ugh. Gotta get some liquor into me first. You should know that."

"Because you're a scorpio," Kenma teases, but Kuroo is already going on.

"Anyway, that's what we're doing tonight. Alcohol and tonnes of ice cream. For me, anyway. Do you know how boring it is being best friends with someone who doesn't drink? You're like an old man already."

"I'm not," he defends, but the words come out in a mumble while he texts Hinata back.

sorry, he writes, kuroo stole my phone.

The next message pops up and completely distracts him from whatever Kuroo was saying. tell him hes a bully!

"You're a bully," he mumbles, cutting Kuroo off mid-sentence, and goes back to texting.

Despite his earlier complaints, Kenma ends up staying over, allowing Kuroo to herd him into ordering takeout and watching movies. He texts Hinata sporadically between letting Kuroo complain and trying to eat. On the third movie, Kuroo breaks out the alcohol, setting a case of beer down between them and telling Kenma he's "missing out" on the pity party that is about to take place. Kenma sends Hinata, the idiots about to get drunk and talk about being in love with kei, and Hinata sends back, omg!! i knew it, they were totally all over each other yesterday.

"Y'know," says Kuroo, gesturing with his bottle at Kenma; some liquid sloshes over the side, wetting his jeans. Kenma resists the urge to move back. "It's not even... a big deal, that I like him so much. He's hot. Why wouldn't I like him?"

"In my experience," Kenma replies calmly, "if you're thinking of taking him to meet your parents, it's a bad sign. Or a good one, depending."

"Ha, yeah, I'll make him really uncomfortable. I'll be all, hey, Kei, my old man wants to meet you! And then I'll totally just bring him to their graves."

"Does he know they're dead?"

"Yeah. Shit. I told him. A lot of stuff." Kuroo's impishness is coming and going in waves, rolling off of him. He Breathes out, and Kenma can smell the alcohol on him. "He's really nice to talk to. I feel like I don't know much about him at all."

"You have trust issues," Kenma accuses. Kuroo shrugs, placing his bottle down.

"Maybe. Not any different to the kind you have, though."

"I don't have trust issues," he says, cheeks heating up, and Kuroo shakes his head.
"Nah, I mean, along with all the anxiety. You freak out because you think everyone's gonna look at you weird, and then you don't even bother with them. Even though you want to."

He looks at Kuroo like he wants to hit him, or maybe tell him he's wrong; but what would he say? What could he say, in response to that? Kenma shifts, breathing in like the tide, and hates when people tell him what he's like.

"So... Shouyou-kun, huh?"

"What about him?"

Kuroo grins. "You made a friend?"

"We just... we texted," Kenma defends, but his eyes dart to his phone screen and give him away. Even drunk, Kuroo can read him.

"Mhm, all night and all day. Hey, I'm not making fun of you," which is exactly what he's doing, "I think it's cool. He's a cool guy. Weird and kind of hyperactive, but cool."

Cool. Kenma thinks of Hinata yesterday, calling him cool before he left. What makes a person cool? Is it their ability to talk to others, to interact? Their sense of identity? Their likes and dislikes? He shifts again, and Kuroo notices.

"I think it's... good, y'know, that you make friends. Fuck your parents, Kenma, okay? You're healing the way you know how to."

He doesn't feel like he's 'healing', not at all. Healing suggests recovery, things changing. He's left his meds at home and is already thinking how to get out of meeting up when and if Hinata asks, of going home tomorrow and maybe even skipping class if he still feels this exhausted. It's bone deep, leeching into the marrow and settling as something cold and persistent. Then, he thinks, it will snap. Like black ice in the night.

"...Yeah," he says finally, because it's all he can say. Kuroo grins and picks his bottle back up.

"Mhm. Hey, you should come with me tomorrow. Before your afternoon class. Kei's going away on that tournament thing and I'm gonna see him off."

Kenma, again, already knows. He feels a biting sort of certainty that Hinata will be there, and that if Hinata is there he will have to go and say hello. It won't be for long, he reasons. He's leaving, after all.

"Maybe," he settles on finally, and Kuroo seems to understand that that's all he's gonna get out of the blonde. Satisfied, he turns his attention back to the movie, and Kenma picks up his phone.
"Hey, I need you to get my prescription filled later."

Kuroo looks dead inside. He lifts his head from the table, where his cheek was pressed into the wood only inches from being in the jam on his toast. "...The Solanax?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, you probably need to get that checked again soon. They might move you back on Cymbalta." Kuroo yawns, stretching obnoxiously with his hands over his head like a cat. Kenma winces. The Cymbalta. Anti-depressants.

"It's your fault you feel this way," he informs Kuroo, stepping around him to place his dishes in the sink. "If you don't like hangovers, you shouldn't drink so much."

"Mrph," Kuroo replies.

He goes home to shower and get a change of clothes, packing his books in a satchel so he can go straight to class after. Kuroo has diligently agreed to drive him this time, so as to avoid a dreaded public transport mishap. He barely ever uses the thing. It sits gleaming and expensive but untouched in a fancy parking garage, safe from the worse end of the city where people would be rearing to steal Kuroo Tetsurou's car.

There's a paparazzi member sitting on the sundeck outside, pretending to leaf through a magazine. Kenma assumes Kuroo has seen her already so says nothing, trying to hide his face from the camera's view while they leave the apartment complex. Side-eyeing her, he watches as she fiddles with her camera and tries to grab a candid shot of he and Kuroo walking together, thirsty for any scoop she can get. Kuroo spins around and looks directly at her like he is looking at the sun, a splitting grin on his face.

The motions startle the woman so much that she nearly drops her camera.

Kenma texts Hinata on the way there to tell him he's coming. Hinata's reply varies in a lot of exclamation marks and emojis, and he assumes that's positive. It's kind of grey outside, a rolling hue he stares at while they drive; hands in his lap, fingers twitching.

When they get there, Hinata is the first thing he sees. The boy is a glaringly obvious head of orange hair bouncing up and down on his feet beside the bus, engaged in some sort of conversation with another short boy. Kuroo elbows Kenma and points. "Your BFF looks engrossed."

Engrossed. That's such a Kuroo word.

They get out of the car and walk towards the group, who are still struggling to pack bags into the back. Kenma can't stop thinking of concert tour vans. He wonders if they all have to sleep together, if Hinata bunks with his roommate. Kuroo, as soon as he spots Tsukishima, takes off in his direction. Kenma doesn't have to watch to know what happens but he does it anyway, watches Kuroo invade the other's personal space and kiss him smack on the mouth in front of everyone. Then he watches Tsukishima flail and yell. He's still watching them when Hinata approaches, startling him from his daydreams with a delicate nudge to his shoulder.
"Hey!"

Kenma jumps. Shit. Panic starts to boil in his gut and threaten to overflow, up his throat, spill out, but Hinata doesn't pay any mind to the nervous reaction. He stands there. Is he waiting for a hug?

"Oh my god, Tsukishima's totally gonna kick his ass."

Kenma, heart hammering, follows the other's gaze back to his best friend. He's in hysterics as he raises both arms to protect himself from Tsukishima's swatting, drawing the attention of most of the team. Hinata steps closer to Kenma and laughs.

"Is he actually in love with him?"

"...Yeah. He said he doesn't know, but he talked about him for like an hour. Kuroo doesn't normally do that."

"Oh man, that's a relief. Everyone's been talking about how different Tsukishima seems. It's, like, team gossip now."

"Yeah." Kenma tries to think of something else to say. "Does he talk about Kuroo a lot?"

"Tries not to. But it's like, really obvious? He's always bringing him up or talking about something they did together. The only reason he avoids saying gay stuff, I think, is because he knows he's gonna get made fun of, and he's also totally a lovey-dovey guy but he's really embarrassed about it. Not good at the whole. Grasping his feelings thing."

"Kuroo's the same."

"Ah, they're perfect for each other, then, aren't they?" Hinata is grinning. After a moment, Kenma returns it; it only feels natural, not leaving the guy hanging.

"Anyway, I'm super excited to go and all, but I'm gonna be away forever. I'll miss everyone, y'know?"

"Yeah." Kenma wonders who 'everyone' is. He's still wondering when Hinata tilts his head.

"You know, you're a really interesting guy."

He pretends it's not a big deal that he starts a little. He really, truly does.

"Am I?"

"Yeah. That probably sounds mean. I don't mean, like-- like weird, like I wanna study you or anything. I think I like you a lot."

You don't know me, then, he wants to say, but he can't. He can't.

He glances over Hinata, the shorter boy's frame, perhaps a little more lean than he is. He tries to notice things so that he doesn't say something he will regret later.

When it becomes apparent to Hinata that the other isn't going to say anything, he grins. "I'm a really good judge of character. Well, most of the time. I guess I did sort of hate Kageyama before I got to know him..."

"I hated Kuroo."

Hinata stops. Shit. His heart hammers, watching the other watch him and wait for words to come
out that Kenma's not sure even exist. He takes in a breath, thinks of his dad, thinks of his mom. Growing up in the city, crossing the road with his head down while the tourists argued.

"I hated everyone. They were real city kids. Kuroo was loud and he was always wanting to sit with me. We were neighbours. One day he came over and wanted to see me and my mom let him in, and he came into my room to hang out with me because his dad was sick. I asked him why he didn't just go and hang out with someone else, one of his own friends, and he said, I'm here with you, aren't I?" Kenma grimaces. He has stopped looking at Hinata. The words pour out of him, like blood through an open wound. "I don't remember what happened, just that we were friends after that."

"Wow," says Hinata. Kenma thinks that might be the guy's favourite word. "Wow. That's a really cool story. I met Kageyama because we were on the same high school volleyball team. I think I told him his haircut was stupid."

Kenma snorts. He immediately regrets it, hand flying to cover his mouth, the noise ringing in his head. Shit.

Hinata is grinning like he won a prize, eyes all big and sparkly. Kenma begs him silently not to say anything. Please, he thinks. If there is a God.

Hinata nods his head back at the bus. "I probably have to go."

"Yeah."

"I'll text you, okay Kenma? We can still talk when I'm not playing. We can talk a lot."

He thinks, do you want to talk a lot? He tries to imagine the blurry guy in Hinata's picture sitting down for takeout with him, getting drunk with him and eating ice-cream and complaining about his love life with him. They're probably lovers. They're living together, they're on the same team. Kenma decides to try and guess which team member he is when Hinata walks away, so that he doesn't see him looking. He says none of this, and opts for a simple, "Okay."

Kuroo returns to his side when the team is piling onto the bus. He looks winded, a little like he might burst into some kind of nervous hysteria, and he waves in an over-the-top way as the bus is departing. Kenma can't see or guess who Kageyama might be, but he sees Tsukishima.

He's hiding his smile behind one hand, and flipping Kuroo off with the other.

"You seem quiet."

"Aren't I always?"

"No. What did you and Hinata talk about?"

Kenma considers lying. He wonders why he would have to lie. "You. I was telling him how we met."

That seems to surprise the taller man, and he shoots Kenma a bemused look out the corner of his eye. "Yeah? What did you tell him?"

"I said you were a dancer in a strip club and I brought you home."

"Ha-ha. You're a really sweet guy, have I ever told you that?"

Kenma smiles. He tries to hide it, to make the thing go away, but mother goose has already
spotted it.

"Ah-- ah-ha, see, look at that! You totally love me. Pretend all you want, Kozume, you couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

"Did I say I was trying?" He's smiling more now. He doesn't know why. It feels electric, sitting and humming somewhere low inside of him, crooking to travel further.

"You should skip class."

"No. I like class. I value my education."

Kuroo snorts. "Okay, I know this seems crazy, but Nicki Minaj will forgive you for missing one lesson, okay?"

Kenma ignores him. "You might be able to afford to skip." He realises what he's said as soon as he has said it. Kuroo looks pained.

"Is this about your parents?"

"Drop it, please."

"Fuck them. Fuck them. If they stop funding your education just because they're gross and bigoted I'll pay for you to keep going. And I'll kick their asses."

Kenma's smile is back, then, and he can't help it. That's his sense of humour, he thinks, unfortunately. Ridiculous things. Sarcasm that isn't sarcasm. He tries to imagine that windy hill, his mother's hard gaze as she watched her own words mix with Kenma's fathers and pour out of the man's mouth from down below. Then Kuroo, running onto the scene and threatening to fight his father. His smile is small, but it is there.

"Okay," he says. "I'll skip class. Just today."

"Just today," Kuroo agrees. He doesn't turn the car around, and Kenma realises he has been driving in the same direction for a while, not on the right route to have been planning on going to the university. He rolls his eyes at the assuming nature of his best friend. His phone buzzes with a text just as they're getting off the highway, eleven words.

**do you think we can be friends when i get back?**

.

Skipping class was more fun in high school. Not that Kenma knows a lot about that.

He was a good boy who hung onto his father's every word and just the thought of what his parents might say if he got detention was usually enough to keep him in line. But there was one time. One time, when he decided he didn't care about any of the subjects he had that day because none of them were English or Art and he hated math more than he hated his dad. One time, because Kuroo talked him into it, and he was good at that.

It was hard being a high school student and being sick in the head. No one wanted to be with you when you didn't care about anything. No one wanted to be anywhere near you if they thought you might choke and freak out and embarrass the whole group. He was comfortable being alone as long as no one looked at him, as long as no one asked him about it. Then, there was Kuroo.

"Do you actually remember how we met?"

Kenma doesn't realise he's frowning until the hurt crosses Kuroo's face. They are sitting in a
shopping complex, the steam rising from their food like clouds of cigarette smoke. He thinks of all the parties he never went to and the people on the streets outside at night who try to talk to him. He looks down again. "Of course I do. Idiot."

"Oh," says Kuroo, enlightened. He shovels rice into his mouth and then looks back up. "So like, how did we meet?"

"You're a smartass."

"You're so rude today, you're hurting my feelings! When have I ever been anything less than a delight to you?"

"You want me to name a specific time or can I just list days off of my calendar?" Kenma deadpans. His best friend is smiling. He wants to smile too, the edges of it biting his mouth, but he stops when he thinks about it. He looks back down at his food.

"It was a year before your dad died. You were always coming over, and one time you came over and made me invite you to stay for dinner. You said your mom died when you were a kid."

It had been heavy stuff, the kind of thing that made him freeze up when he realised he didn't know what to say. But Kuroo hadn't been looking for condolence. Full of empathy as he was, Kenma didn't have to worry about those emotions being pulled from him, drawn out like water like people seemed to always want to do. Kuroo just said it with a shrug and then they were friends, just like that.

"That's a nice memory to have," Kuroo says, gaze flat, "but it wasn't what I was talking about. Do you remember when we met, Kenma?"

"Did we ever meet?" Obviously, they did. Kuroo is beside himself. He shrugs, sipping belligerently at his drink and trying to convey that he doesn't know the right words for the situation.

"Incredible," says Kuroo. "Amazing. We were in art class in third grade. You were drawing a kangaroo."

"Was I?" He can't keep the surprise from his own voice; the sound of it is like something spoken through a metal tube, warped and alien to his own ears.

"Mmhmm. I'd never seen one before. I pointed at it, said I liked your drawing, you were totally rude. Didn't even look at me."

"I'm--"

"Don't apologise," says Kuroo. He wasn't going to. Kenma doesn't say so, doesn't say that he was only going to point out that he isn't the kind of person who knows how to take a compliment anyway. "I was confused about it, so I went home and asked my dad and he said maybe you were just shy. So I asked around and I was right. You didn't have any friends. You sat by yourself at lunch time."

"We were kids."

"So? You'd do it now, don't tell me you wouldn't."

He says nothing. He wants to get up and go walk around, find the busiest part of the mall and shrink himself down so that no one sees him. No one can talk to him, single him out, ask why are you sitting alone? He likes being alone. He just doesn't like being seen as lonely.

Kuroo seems to sense his discomfort, so he changes the subject somewhat, straightening his back.
"I only recognised you 'cus we were neighbours. God, what a shitty neighbourhood."

"It wasn't shitty, it was upper middle class if anything."

Kuroo screws up his nose. "Yeah, well. Could have been upper class, y'know. Not like our parents didn't have the money."

"You sound like one of those rich snobs."

He scoffs. "I'm just saying, they might as well have gone all out. You can't half-ass it if you're gonna raise a brat. I was always comfortable, never had to work for anything, but we didn't even have a swimming pool. Hey, you had one, right?"

Kenma nods. He feels tired, all of a sudden, the conversation draining him.

"Heh, of course you did. I know because I swam in it, Kenma. Remember the party? The party you actually threw?"

"The party you threw."

Kuroo scrunches his nose up. "You were fun. We had fun. Remember?"

"No." He does.

"You kissed that girl, what's her name. We listened to Fleetwood Mac. No one knew the words but you because everyone sucked at English."

"Can we go home?" He shifts in his seat when he realises he's said it a bit too loudly. He can't look up, because if he does and sees that someone has glanced at him he knows he won't be able to breathe. His hands are tight on the edge of the table. "Please, Kuroo."

Kuroo's expression has sobered when he looks up again. "How about we go for a walk. Can you do that?"

"Why are you trying to be such a therapist about this? You're an actor."

"So?"

"So, you're good at acting, not figuring me out. Knock it off. It's starting to get annoying."

"That reminds me, we'll get your prescription filled before we go home."

"I can't, I left the script in my bathroom."

Kuroo is quiet. He stands up after a moment, pushing his chair back in. "Tomorrow. I'll go tomorrow."

Kenma says nothing. He rises, a tired sun, and follows him.

He decides to text Hinata back while they're walking, a silence between them he can feel, thick and snug. He sends, sure, ignoring how much of a tool that makes him sound like. Hinata's reply is instant.

*kaGEYAMA AND NOYA ARE PLAYING CHARADES AND KAGEYAMAS TOTALLY GONNA KILL HIM OMG LOL*

Kuroo still hasn't said anything. And Kenma feels shitty, like he's ruined the nice mood between
them by opening his mouth and letting all the cruelty slip out, so he texts Hinata, *why do you call him kageyama?*

*huh? thats his name??*

*yeah, but its his last name, right? arent the two of you roommates?*

Hinata doesn't reply for a minute. Kenma thinks he must have been rude, must have upset the other, when--

*well, that's true. his first name is tobio!! but kageyama is like, a nickname i guess? we always call each other by our last names. one time i tried to call him 'tobio-chan' and he looked like he was gonna punch me.*

Kenma tucks his phone into his pocket and glances up at Kuroo. The air is crisp on his cheeks, the mall only a little behind him, and there are no people close enough to look and see his face, so he says, "I'm sorry I upset you."

"It's not you," Kuroo replies instantly. "I'm just worried. I worry."

"You're a worrier."

He breathes a laugh. He isn't looking at Kenma. "Yeah."

Kenma texts back, *ok. i'm with kuroo, i'll text you later,* and receives back a flurry of emoticons in response and an overly-enthusiastic-- even in text-- *'ROGER !!'*

It's been a really long time since Kuroo tried to get him to talk about it. His therapist tried, too, the first one he'd ever had before the wind and the sea got to him and he started skipping appointments and upsetting his dad. People are always trying to Get To The Bottom of his personality, like some deep existential pool of bullshit that needs sorting. Kuroo is his best friend; he wishes he wouldn't do it, too.

"Would you stop being worried if I talked about it? Honestly?"

Kuroo doesn't lie. That's one good thing about him. "Probably not. I'll probably always worry. You're a small guy, y'know, you're a target for assholes and you don't deal well with confrontation--"

"Please stop."

Kuroo does. His jaw is tight. Kenma thinks of the sea, the blurry sky above them when they first moved out there. After they were friends. When Kuroo's parents were dead and he emancipated himself from his uncle and he had that acting deal and they felt invincible. He was really happy for a while, right before the move. He knows Kuroo thinks it's the move that did it to him, that made him this way again, but it's not, it's not. It's not.

"Is it... I mean, you'd tell me if it was a sexuality thing, right?"

Kenma shoots him a Look. Kuroo grins; Kenma has only ever had one relationship, when he was a first year student in high school, one that was blissfully romantic and blissfully terrible. Before the move. A little after it, too. "You know it's not."

"So you don't hate yourself for being gay?"

"I think that's your deal." Kuroo grins. It's the media who shares a love-hate relationship on that topic; Kuroo has never hated himself, not a day in his life if Kenma is going to take his best guess.
"I think it'd be good, y'know, if you saw someone again. I can come with you to the referral. Throw a bit of money around make sure you get someone you can stand."

He doesn't say any of the words out loud that he wants to. It is a rolling, roiling thing inside of him, a commotion of noise he hasn't cared to listen to for a long time now. It's the trip that did it, he thinks. Seeing his parents again. He didn't think about it so much before.

"...I don't want to ask them for the money."

"So don't, you know I can afford it."

"Maybe I should get a job."  

"If you think you can." Kenma looks up at him, so Kuroo tries to re-word himself. "If you think it's something you can handle, something that would be good for you."

Kenma thinks it over and knows it isn't. Not right now, anyway. Even the thought of having to speak to his professor tomorrow, to ask for the work he missed, is setting his stomach in knots. He can't miss class again, or he'll have to ask for even more notes--

"Stop thinking, you'll give yourself wrinkles. Gross, old man wrinkles. Please look after your pretty face more."

Kenma thinks he might laugh, or smile, if he wasn't suddenly thinking about how exhausted everything is making him. The drain of life leeching away at his vital points. School, friendship, people watching. Eyes everywhere. He shifts again. "Can we go back? I'm really... not comfortable."

He knows Kuroo would never say no. That's the other good thing about him.

When he gets back to his apartment he goes in for a long, hot shower, and leaves the fan off so that he will not be able to see his reflection in the fogged up mirror. He dries his hair quickly, rushing so that he doesn't catch his own eye. He ends up tying it back while it is still damp, knowing it will set weird and stick up in the morning, knowing he will need to shower again before class. He sighs and it feels like the whole ocean is pouring out of him. Like a cascading sea wall is in his chest, breaking down to rubble, crumbling in his mouth so he can taste it.

He curls up on his couch under a blanket and forces himself to eat ramen, washing it down with his medication. Kuroo has taken the script with him, and he will have a new dose tomorrow, more tiny round tablets to falsify the thought that he might be getting better. When he is finished eating he decides to check his phone again. There are three messages from Hinata.

kageyama is totally gonna beat him up lol

HEY HAVE U HEARD THE GROUP PERFUME?? LIKE U PROBABLY HAVE EVERYONE KNOWS THEM BUT TADASHIS MAKING EVERYONE LISTEN TO THEM RN AND IM REALLY HAPPY I RLY LOVE THEIR SONGS

am i annoying ?

It's not whiny. Kenma doesn't know how he knows that, but he does. He texts back immediately, thumbs hovering for only mere seconds.

no. i dont think so. i would probably tell you if you were.

He doesn't get a reply. He wonders if he's upset Hinata by not messaging him back. That would
be just his luck, he thinks.

He gets up and washes his hands in the kitchen. The water all cold, then all hot, until steam rises from his skin. His lips part while he watches and he thinks of his and Kuroo's lunch, steaming like a geyser, like cigarette smoke and fog on the city skyline. He had felt so impish once, young and free and like he had the whole city to explore and a whole lifetime to do it. It seemed really big back then. Now Tokyo is compact, where there are too many people, too many sets of eyes to stop and look at him when he walks by, to watch his face and wonder what's missing from him that makes him less than human. Sometimes, he knows, Kuroo catches him trying to look at his own reflection when they pass store windows, for empty reassurance that he doesn't look as out of place as he feels.

Sometimes he doesn't look at all.

He turns the water off when he begins to feel embarrassed. This is not something you do when you're trying to convince people you're normal. He lies down on the couch and nurses his red flesh and thinks about Hinata. The thoughts come to him, rolling through is mind effortlessly. He thinks about the bounce in Hinata's step and his wide smile and the way his face lit up when they met like he was the whole sky. He thinks of Hinata's voice, Hinata's voice calling him "cool" and what it might have been like if he'd asked Kenma to be his friend out loud instead of over text. He doesn't know what he would have done, then. If he'd have been able to say yes while looking him in the eye.

He can't imagine what it would be like to be the guy's friend. Mostly he thinks it would be like living in the shadow while the sun is right there, one step too far out of the light. Bitter, bitter, bitter, he thinks; he is being bitter. He knows he is. He can't stop. The thoughts are pouring now, soaking the earth around him, the earth inside of him, dark brown like Hinata's eyes. Kuroo is his friend. Why is Kuroo still his friend?

He realises he is falling asleep and carries himself sluggishly to the bedroom, dread at the thought of waking up on the couch with a sore neck again. He gets the text as he is lying there, his eyes shut, and almost doesn't respond to the hum it makes pressed against his nightstand.

im really relieved you dont think so, because i wasnt lying about liking you and i want you to like me a lot too.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was a lil bit longer and i have a bunch more coming because i woke up the other day and realised i was CRAZY about this story
i just finished a book that totally destroyed me, and im back into reading and writing full time
the ever meticulous lit student, a cloud of pretentiousness and self-hate
it is a lovely frame of mind to exist in, and idk how my girlfriends gonna deal w/ me crying about Words again full time. one time i cried because i learnt the word 'scripturient' and it was 5 am and beautiful & im a libra who cant keep their emotions in check so they come out at 5 am over words
ANYWAY!!!!
i forgot how much i loved ao3 and how supportive everyone here is. i finally finished with novel editing/commissions/exams so (hopefully) ill have more free time and goxbap;dusioahpjsorge im just really excited to be back into writing casually!!!! i think writing and updating often, and talking w/ a supportive community (like the beautiful people on ao3) will be good for my badass mentally ill self.
especially in terms of practicing tone and pace a bit more which is something i think i
need to do and something im also passionate about. and about kenhina, but im always
passionate about kenhina. i dont stop. its a disease.
if i get too excited and post a chapter before its as edited as it could be, feel free to
politely point out errors ::)
and as always talk 2 me on tumblr @cloverguts, im lonely im funny and i do cheap
commissions

thank u everyone for being cool !!!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They're studying John Keats poetry at the moment. Kenma hates it. He hates romantic poetry, he hates the whole damn era, and he hates Keats.

He gets his notes from his professor the next day and goes home and looks through them, lamenting every last inch of his existence. 'This living hand, now warm and capable'. What a terrible poem. What a terrible poem. He hates that they were too lazy for titles then, that they just used the first line of the poem.

It takes him about two seconds to form his opinion on it and his opinion is that it is terrible. He knows what it's about, because it's about love. Keats loved a girl named Fanny. Kenma is sick of hearing about what straight people did historically, and he doesn't want to think about this guy Keats despairing over an oil painting of Fanny, so he screws his nose up the whole time he reads the poem. He decides that Keats can shove his warm, capable hand up his pretentious ass.

Kenma thinks of the first time he had to study poetry. John Donne. Awful, God awful John Donne. He had to write a paper on it, and he was sick at the time. Socially, emotionally sick, nothing physical; he was exhausted all the time from panic attacks and his head kept spinning when he thought how many years of school there might be ahead of him. He hadn't seen his parents in three months. He didn't sleep for three days when he was writing the analysis because he didn't care about the words but he wanted to make it seem like he did. He slept a lot, in Kuroo's apartment, because he hated the silence of his own.

He puts away the Keats poetry when he starts to think that it will rot his brain and make him sicker. He leaves his books in a pile on the kitchen bench and tries to decide how to get out of the apartment without risking a panic attack.

when do you get back? he texts Hinata. The reply is so fast he thinks Hinata must have been waiting for him.

not for like a week. im home for the weekend & then im back on the road again :")

The next messages comes only a few seconds after.

but were winning all of our games!! :D

Kenma stands in the kitchen and tries to decide. He could call Kuroo, he knows. He's at work, filming for a season of a show that's due to air in about a month, but he would lie and get off early if Kenma asked. He shakes his head at himself. He can't do that. It's an abuse of his friendship powers.

He could go down to that terrible, grey mental health care building and get a referral himself. It might only take an hour, and it would be one less thing on his to-do list. He shakes his head at that, too, and leaves his apartment with his wallet in his back pocket.

There is a cafe down the road that is almost always too busy. The drink he orders is unassuming, nothing attention drawing, and the barrister gets his name wrong. Keianna. It's a girl's name and he thinks it means bliss, or something similar. The irony doesn't escape him.

He finds a place to sit at the back of the crowded cafe and his shoulders relax when he confirms that no one is looking at him. He drinks his coffee and thinks of Keats, distracts himself by texting
Hinata and thinks of Keats some more. Keats, Keats, Keats. He knows what Kuroo would say. Bitter. Get out more. Find someone to date. His stomach turns uneasily at the idea.

*i know you said you dont like music, but do you like books??*

*yes. im majoring in literature.*

*thats so cool!!! japanese literature?? is that your only class? mom really wanted me to go to college but i hated school and i love volleyball and i wanted to do what made me happy so i think shes holding out on the hope that my sister goes now :P*

*its mixed culture literature but its mostly classic english and japanese with some post-modern stuff thrown in.*

Hinata doesn't respond for a second. He thinks he shouldn't have said 'post-modern', because it sounds pretentious and Hinata probably doesn't know what it means. He sends a follow up text.

*old stuff and new stuff. and no its not my only class, i take philosophy as well.*

*WOW. thats rly cool?? is it interesting?*

*yeah*

*nice!! i dont really like books, i get waaay too bored.*

Kenma's about to text back when the next message pops up on screen.

*but i think i might like some books if u read them to me? u have a nice voice??*

Kenma doesn't know what to say. He sits there, thumbs hovering. Finally:

*what kind of books would you want me to read?*

*hmm, i think it would have 2 be something you really liked, like something u care about???? do u only like old stuff, or do you like new stuff, too?*

Kenma thinks about it. It hurts his head.

*i dont really know what i like*

The answer is strikingly honest and he doesn't realise until he's pressed send. He panics for a second, considers turning his phone off and going home, but Hinata replies.

*do you like texting me?*

He doesn't want to lie. He thinks he does. His coffee scalds his tongue when he downs it.

*i dont know. probably. i keep doing it so thats a good sign.*

*i have the feeling ur not the kind of person who would text someone if they didnt like them. am i right??*

*probably.*

*thats good, then, im really relieved!!! nd u said we could be friends.*

*i did*

*good :)*
Kenma doesn't know what's happening to him, but he knows it's something. Something good, maybe. Something terrible. He realises his heart is thumping in his ears and he hasn't thought about the people around him for a while. Whether they might be watching. He continues not to pay it any mind, and sends Hinata, *i think i definitely dont mind talking to you. im sorry if im weird. i dont know how to talk about that.*

It's like the elephant in the room, standing directly on his shoulders for a second.

*i dont think youre weird. :) im weird.*

*youre not*

*if i was going to go to college i think id study movies and stuff. do you think that would be fun???

He sends a follow up text.

*like i wont do it lol but do u think it would be fun*

Kenma considers telling him that film study is basically the same as literature, only with moving stories instead of static ones, but he opts out.

*if you like movies, then sure. it would be fun.*

*thats good then!!! hey, we still have to see a movie when i get back, ok???

Kenma sips his coffee. He's not comfortable, but he's the closest he's been in a while.

.

He forgets about Keats. Kuroo doesn't push the issue of getting a referral to talk to somebody, but he gets the prescription filled for him. They move on to Japanese novelists again in class. It is something he is comfortable with, words that are easy to read and familiar to him.

Kenma remembers Yasunari Kawabata and Basho. Old English language was something he had to work harder for, something he at first couldn't fully grasp. Some of it doesn't translate well; the interpretation can get really skewed that way. Meaning like trying to tell apart rocks and gems in cloudy water. He read Jane Austen, Mary Shelley. He *hated* Austen. Still does; not because she's romantic; because she was rich, and she wrote like it. She died like rich people do. Glamorously, leaving behind unfinished mediocre art. He's being mean, he knows. It's integrated within him. Bone deep and marked with both of his parents' names.

*do you have a good relationship with your parents*

*sure, why? :0*

*sorry, never mind. i understand if its personal.*

*n oo its fine!! i love my mom & dad, theyre great! we used to bicker i guess but we get along really well and they love me a lot.*

Of course, thinks Kenma, how could they not?

Kuroo tries to get him to skip class again but he won't. It is something he's certain of this time, and he turns his best friend down with a vehement shake of his head both times that he asks.

He's not expecting it. It's not on his list of daily expectations. It's a Friday, and he's exhausted, dripping with it. Class has racked him. He comes home and collapses straight through the door, checking his messages. There are none. He pretends like it doesn't bother him as much as it does;
like he wasn't clinging to the hope that someone might want to talk. Committing to the full-time career of feeling sorry for himself, he tries to provide distractions, moving from room to room like a ghost. It's a weird mix of tiredness and anxiousness, biting at the very edge of him.

His first thought is that it must be Kuroo. Still in a slump, he makes his way over, barely pausing before opening the door.

It's not Kuroo. To say the least. The sight of Hinata, standing beaming and ecstatic in his doorway, is so momentarily jarring that Kenma freezes.

Hinata holds up his phone and waves it, a splitting grin on his face. "I forgot to charge it this morning, I was gonna text and say I'm back in town!"

Kenma says nothing. He continues to say nothing, and realises how that must look.

Hinata blinks owlishly. "Um. I was thinking we could go see a movie! Unless you're busy...?"

He doesn't know what to say. Panic hits him like a tonne of bricks, muted chaos, filling his lungs and his brain. He looks at Hinata's unknowing hope and faith in him. He is staring back with all the force of a thunderstorm, and the clouds are filling Kenma's lungs, so that each breath that dissipates from him feels like it belongs to the sky and the fog that falls from it.

So he doesn't think about it.

"Sure."

Being back in Hinata's car is surreal. He can't remember the last time he made a friend-- he remembers high school and Kuroo's eye on him from the back seat while they rode wherever they were going that day, long stretches of night and people whose faces he might not recognise anymore. Hinata has got a CD on of a popular group Kenma can't remember the name of. He's tapping his fingers along to the beat, thumbs against the steering wheel. Kenma watches him. He watches the smile on the other's face, ebbing in time with the music; his eyes keep lighting up, like he is remembering over and over all his favourite parts.

He notices Kenma staring right around the time Kenma realises he even staring. They meet eyes briefly, and the blonde looks at his lap; he can hear Hinata humming, his fingers tapping. "What movies are out at the moment? I haven't been watching TV to see any previews."

The alacrity in his movements doesn't help, either. Kenma keeps clutching his phone on habit.

"Should we, um. Kuroo," he says, when Hinata waits for him to fill the silence. He gets an incredulous sidelong glance in return.

"I mean... we could go see if he wants to come, but last I heard Tsukishima was talking about him the whole trip home so I guess they're... y'know?"

"Oh." Kenma doesn't particularly want to think about what his best friend is definitely doing right now, then. On impulse, he checks his phone messages again.

"Does that bother you?"

"Sorry?"

"Kuroo and Tsuki... um, being together. It didn't seem like it bothered you last time, but I know people can be good at hiding their feelings."
Instead of answering, Kenma looks at him. "Why would it bother me?"

"Well... y'know, they're gay."

"Kuroo's gay?" It takes Hinata a moment to figure out that Kenma is kidding. The small grin sits on his face, hidden behind the heel of his hand when he turns out the window. "I'm gayer than he is, if anything."

"Oh, well that's a relief! So many people here are weird about that, y'know? I mean, not so much in Tokyo, but we're still a long way from acceptance and... ah," he veers off a moment, shaking his head. "Well, that isn't the only reason to feel upset about a relationship. You could easily be in love with him."

Kenma can't help it; he splutters. Sometimes he forgets that there are people in this world with the capacity to see his and Kuroo's relationship as anything other than disgustingly platonic. "Gross," he says. It's the only word that comes out. Hinata laughs, a loud and unbidden noise that cuts straight through Kenma. He can't imagine why. The other is overcome with it, his whole frame shaking.

"You're funny," he says. Kenma blinks. "Sorry. It's just. I get it, you know?"

Kenma does know. At least, he thinks he knows. He turns back to the device in his lap, and realises that he's become used to checking for Hinata's messages. "Are you in love with your roommate?"

"Are you kidding?" Hinata's eyes are bugging out of his skull. Kenma thinks he's right, for a moment, that his assumption is correct; but then Hinata blanches. "Gross is right. Kageyama's my best friend, that would totally be weird! Besides, he's ace."

"...Like the volleyball position?"

"No, like-- wait, you know volleyball? Kageyama's asexual and aromantic, I mean. He's not interested in that kind of thing."

"...Oh." It's the only word that wants to come out. Hinata has gone all smiley, and has started tapping his fingers on the steering wheel again.

"You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"Why would I?"

"Cool," Hinata's grin is the size of the moon. He says, "cool," again to himself, and shakes his head. "I'm glad you're a cool guy, Kenma. It makes it really easy to be your friend."

He would recoil were it not for the seatbelt, he thinks. The walls of the car suddenly seem compact and metal like a cage. Hinata is looking at him. And he is not looking away.

When they pull up to the movie theatre, Kenma has to catch his breath. The crisp outside air hits his cheeks like ice, cooling the blood rushing in great waves under his skin. Is he sweating?

Hinata waits for him, fiddling with a coat on the side of the parking lot.

"You're okay?" he asks Kenma, when he comes around. Kenma pauses to consider. He considers his answer, and when the last time anybody who wasn't Kuroo asked him that question. For whatever reason his answer comes out warped sounding and more truthful than he means to give.

"Yeah. I'm okay."
Hinata grins.

They go in and pick the first movie they see the poster for, because Hinata likes the look of it. It ends up being an animated children's film about a witch. Kenma doesn't really watch it. He keeps looking at Hinata, unable to help himself. The other's face lights up every time something happens on screen and the colours flash through his eyes, a blinding myriad of blues and pinks. The colour in his irises is dark enough to reflect it back. He doesn't notice Kenma watching, and Kenma doesn't realise he hasn't stopped.

There's something intimate about the dark. There's something intimate about watching Hinata's expression change. Like he is moving in turn with the plot of the movie, his eyebrows raising with every twist, his eyes reflecting every colour. The light from the screen must be hitting Kenma, too, but he doesn't feel like it. He feels like Hinata is the only colour in the room.

When they come out of the movie he feels lucid, arms and legs too lax at the joints. Hinata talks about the film all the way back to the car, and Kenma pretends like he has any idea what happened.

When was the last time he made a friend? The concept of meeting and caring about someone is foreign to him. Even the sky is an ambiguous shade of grey.

"Hey, you don't..." Kenma pauses on the car's doorhandle, looking across at Hinata. "You don't have to... you know, go home yet, if you don't want."

Kenma looks at him. Then, he looks at him some more. "...Where would we go?"

Hinata's face lights up. "Anywhere you want! We could go hang out at a park, or get food, or--hey, do you wanna play volleyball with me?"

"Volleyball?"

Hinata watches him, expectant. There is a light in his eyes that Kenma recognises from the first time they met, one that hasn't faded yet. He must be getting tired of dealing with Kenma and his standoffish personality, the fact that he can't look anyone in the eyes for more than two seconds and he panics if he thinks anyone is looking back--

Hinata is looking back.

"Come on. I'll show you one of the first courts I ever played on."

The school is a little run down, an agrestic backbone of the typical childhood. Kenma suspects it's one of those things that was designed to be beautiful, before the elements got to it. The big gates at the front are painted a dark green, and chipping; Hinata slips through the gap in them like he has done it a million times.

"You went to school here?"

"No way," Hinata breathes; it's a whisper, only he's too loud to quite manage it. "As if I was rich enough. No, I grew up in Matsushima! Public school boy all the way." He's grinning. Kenma only remembers to grin back once he's looked away, and feels silly for doing so. "That's all the way in Miyagi prefecture, so..."

"That's kind of far away," Kenma says. As they enter the school he looks around, trying to remember his own middle school and what basketball courts are even supposed to look like.
"Why Tokyo?"

"It's only, like, three hours. Besides, this is where the team's situated. But anyway! I got to come here when I was younger. We made it to finals and got to play a team at this school. It was just a casual thing."

"Seems like a pretty far way to go for a casual thing."

Hinata grins. Kenma remembers to grin back this time, his face warm. His tongue thick.

"It's this way! I hope you're not morally against breaking into places."

Kenma follows wordlessly. He thinks that even if he was morally against breaking in anywhere, it would be too late to say; Hinata's got this look on his face like he's already made up his mind about the both of them going. He leads them around the basketball courts and across a withered looking courtyard, its red bricks and gravel worn from being stepped on. It reminds Kenma of his own school and he can't stop thinking about it. Private school with a-- heated-- indoor gym he only ever went to after hours when Kuroo wanted to go. The halls he roamed in those last months, realising he had no clue what he wanted to do now that he was finally allowed out.

"I moved from Tokyo," he says, catching his stride up alongside Hinata's. The other side-eyes him and waits for him to go on. Kenma doesn't think he can, for a second. Doesn't think he can talk about it.

He does.

"I had some mental health issues. And a falling out with my friendship group. My parents thought the solution was moving us all to Ibaraki. It wasn't that far away, but..." He trails off. Hinata seems to get it. He is watching Kenma, saying nothing for the first time, just listening. "They got a place right on the coast and I hated it. I hated that it wasn't the city I was used to but I still had to get up every morning and catch a bus just so that I could go to a decent private school. Kuroo made the move with us; he'd just emancipated himself and he could. He said it was a coincidence, that I should get off his back because 'maybe he just wanted a change of scenery, too'. When I asked him what he'd do if I moved any further he said it would have to be a coincidence if he wanted to follow me to the moon." Hinata laughs. Kenma doesn't know what to do with the noise, like something so precious being handed to him in cupped palms. He stares.

"I guess you can't blame the guy! You're totally the kind of person you would want to follow anywhere, Kenma."

He doesn't know what to do with that, either, so he ignores it. "It wasn't... I didn't know what to do with myself. I didn't make any new friends. I just wanted to get away from there."

"So what happened?" Hinata asks, swinging his arms. "You convinced them to move back?"

Kenma is overcome with the urge to laugh, but bites down on it, a bitter grin working its way onto his face. "No. I graduated. Kuroo and I left."

"Ah-- that's right, you're not close with your parents, are you? You probably have your reasons."

Kenma doesn't say anything. They have stopped in front of a tall building, a gym with too high of a roof. Hinata immediately starts climbing towards the window. "It's a loaded thing to talk about," he grunts, straining with the effort to pull himself up. Kenma watches on in a mix of abject horror and fascination while the other pushes the uneven frame of the window aside and slides it open. "I kind of got from your texts that you have a problem with them. I'm really lucky, because I have great parents. But I know yours would have had to do something really bad to make you feel like that. You don't really strike me as somebody who could just hate for the sake of hating." He's hanging over the edge now, legs dangling, and his eyes go wide when he realises what he's said.
"Ah-- I shouldn't talk about it like that."

"It's not so much what they did as it is all the things they didn't do." Staring up at Hinata he feels small, like if he reached up to touch his dangling feet the other could easily just jerk them back and away from his hands. Like he could slip inside and shut the window and Kenma could walk away like this never happened. Like meeting him never happened. But Hinata is looking at him. And he can't move.

He holds out a hand.

"You've gotta climb up," he says, when Kenma simply stares back. "It's alright. No one comes on weekends."

Kenma stares at the outstretched hand as Hinata gets into a crouch, moving so that he can pull Kenma up and slip into the gymnasium himself. Inside is dark, and already Kenma can smell rubber, can feel the cold of a room left untouched for the weekend. He could leave right now. He doesn't have to do this. He doesn't have to do this or know Hinata at all.

He reaches forward and allows himself to be pulled in.

Inside the gym is as dark and cold as Kenma remembers high school being. He is hit with the smell of rubber and sweat and cold, that unintelligible crisp edge the weather gives small spaces. In the dark Hinata reaches out for him, brushing his arm when he realises he's there. The giggle he lets out into the empty space echoes.

"Are you sure we're meant to be--"

"Hang on," Hinata whispers— or, it's the closest thing to a whisper Kenma figures he can manage. He's there one moment, the grey outline of him shouting with his breath, and then he's gone and Kenma is standing in the dark.

He doesn't quite get the chance to panic, before every light in the place is suddenly blinding him.

Kenma blinks. Hinata is standing on the other side of the gym, one hand on the power board and a shit-eating grin on his face. "Alright, found it!" he shouts, his voice bouncing back to Kenma as if transferred by the walls.

Kenma looks around. It's a gym obviously designed for volleyball, a sad hanging net separating the two halves of the court. Its ropes have gone grey over time, hanging limp rather than dead-straight across like he remembers.

"I'll see if the storage unit's open! Sometimes they leave it unlocked, and they have a few balls and stuff lying around in there..." Hinata's voice trails off. He gets distracted easily, Kenma reasons, watching the other's focus shift to the storage shed. He pretty much runs over, bending at the knees to try and heave the thing up by himself. The metal groans in protest, shuddering for a second, but ultimately gives under Hinata's ministrations; stronger than he looks, despite his size. He returns moments later with a volleyball.

"Hey, Kenma. You ever played?"

"Maybe once in high school."

Hinata tosses the ball to him, and Kenma only remembers to catch at the last second, letting it smack full force into his chest.

"Sorry," Hinata giggles— giggles, this airy and breathy noise that goes to Kenma's head. "I didn't
think about my strength. Think you can toss to me?"

"I guess."

Hinata shifts a little so that he's in position, waiting. He's got the kind of determined look in his eyes that Kenma can't place, honest passion for something-- for volleyball, obviously, but it's still something Kenma can't figure. How can Hinata have that kind of face when he's in the room? How can anyone wear that sort of expression; he doesn't recall ever caring about something enough to know what it feels like, stretching his face.

He tosses the ball. A look of shock washes over Hinata's face in the brief moment it takes for him to work out what to do. He spikes it, but it's way off, bouncing ominously in the sudden silence of the room. Hinata stares. Kenma stares back.

"You know how to set."

"Do I?" he lies.

Hinata tilts his head, a grin lighting up his face. "Like, really well! Where did you learn how to do that? I thought you said you only played once!"

"Kuroo was kind of into it in high school," Kenma says, going to retrieve the ball so that he has something to do. His face is kind of. Flushed. "It's not like it's a difficult skill. I was on a team for a while."

"Waaaah-- that's really cool, Kenma! Hey, why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugs. There's too much distance between them on the court. "You didn't ask."

"What position did you play?"

"Setter. Obviously."

"And Kuroo?"

Kenma straightens up. "I know your whole team knows the kind of movies he does now. Have you seen any of his old ones?"

"Ah-- you mean the sports ones, right?"

Yes, thinks Kenma-- straight to DVD, spectacularly B-grade "the underdog always wins" sports films; and Kuroo was always the villain.

"He did a volleyball one."

Hinata grins. "I know. I haven't seen it; we were all gonna watch it a while back-- uh, right before game season started, but Tsukishima wouldn't let us."

"He acted as a middle blocker. He played as a middle blocker. That's kind of Kuroo's thing."

Hinata picks up on what he means immediately. "He's real protective over you, huh? That's kind of sweet. The whole childhood friends thing."

"Didn't you say it was romantic?"

It takes a second for Hinata to realise he's joking. The smile that washes over his face is breathless, too bright for his eyes. He nods at the ball in Kenma's hands.
"Toss to me again?"

It's dark out when they leave, and a lot colder, and immediately Kenma regrets not bringing a jacket. Hinata can't stop talking about wishing he could have played against Kenma in high school. His words are coming out all compressed against one another, a million miles a minute. Kenma almost regrets telling him; but he's got the kind of innocent wide-blown look on his face that genuinely happy people get; that's not something you can wish away and remain a good person after. For reasons that escape Kenma, he keeps hoping, right at the back of his mind, for Hinata to offer him his jacket.

"I still can't imagine you in high school," Hinata says as they're getting back in the car. "I'm trying to picture it."

Kenma can imagine exactly what Hinata was like in high school, and it is a perfect picture of the guy standing in front of him now, bouncing on the heels of his feet. He gets in the car.

The sky is pretty this time of night; it's a dusky shade of purple and black, lit in patches by fog and cloud and the blaring city lights. He lives central; Hinata drives through the roads like he's known them his whole life, tapping his fingers in tune to the song on the radio again.

"Were you blonde?"

"I'm sorry?"

"In high school." Hinata turns to look at him, even though his eyes should be on the road. "Were you blonde then?"

Kenma raises a hand to touch his hair. His roots are coming in. He remembers being sixteen, eyeing off the purple dye at the supermarket and wanting to be interesting, wanting to try colours and pierce his face like Kuroo was doing. When he was a second-year in high school his then-boyfriend got a tattoo on his left shoulder blade. Kenma was obsessed with it, but he never touched it, not once.

"Would you ever do it again?"

"Why?" he asks, smiling a little. "Because my roots are coming in?"

Hinata isn't phased. "Nah. I think it looks cool. I mean, would you ever dye it a different colour?"

"I only dyed it blonde because I thought it might make me fit in more," he admits. He doesn't expect the statement to get Hinata's attention like it does; he takes his eyes off the road again.

"Huh? Really? That's actually kind of surprising."

His gut spikes. Something about the statement doesn't sit right with him, again. He considers just demanding that Hinata stop the whole 'you're a cool guy, Kenma' act, but he knows the words would come out cold; he can't, he can't. He can't do that to Hinata, who hasn't done anything wrong.

Ignoring his own inclining anxiety, Kenma shrugs. "I don't see why you would be surprised. I don't like to stand out, so I don't. I don't like being looked at."

"Ah--" Hinata whips his head away so fast it looks painful. Kenma can't help the full force of the grin that weaves its way onto his face. He has to cover his mouth with one hand so he doesn't outwardly laugh at Hinata. "Sorry, sorry," he admits. He doesn't expect the statement to get Hinata's attention like it does; he takes his eyes off the road again.

"Ah--" Hinata whips his head away so fast it looks painful. Kenma can't help the full force of the grin that weaves its way onto his face. He has to cover his mouth with one hand so he doesn't outwardly laugh at Hinata. "Sorry, sorry," he admits. He doesn't expect the statement to get Hinata's attention like it does; he takes his eyes off the road again.
super uncomfortable?"

"It's fine," Kenma laughs. He feels giddy. He can't remember the last time he was drunk, but he
knows he's a giggly drunk, this flushed feeling of finding everything endearing. He's getting that,
right now. "It's, um. It's okay if I'm comfortable with the person, so it's okay, you can. Look."

He expects Hinata to get excited. He expects a lot of things, he realises, and a lot of things that
aren't often met. Hinata doesn't smile, and he doesn't look at him despite Kenma's comment. If
anything, his voice comes softer than the blonde has ever heard. "I'm really glad I make you
comfortable, Kenma."

They pull up to Kenma's apartment complex not long after. It's too silent suddenly, but the air is
warm between them. Kenma hesitates with his seatbelt.

"Do you want to--"

"I'm actually really late, I was meant to meet up with some of my teammates, like, an hour ago."

Kenma's face flushes without meaning to. Of course, he thinks; embarrassment hits him; he
shouldn't have made assumptions anyway, should have just gotten out of the car--

"I mean, they'll understand, but I feel kind of bad for blowing them off to hang out with you.
They're totally not gonna let me live it down. Keep your phone on, I'll text you pictures if Noya
ends up getting drunk and dancing on the table again."

Something stills in Kenma, calms him. He can't put his finger on it or explain what.

"I think you have to get out of my car now," Hinata says, echoing the first time he was in it.
Kenma gets out of the car. Hinata rolls down his window to wave to him again, already messing
with the radio before he's out of sight.

On his way up he considers going and knocking on Kuroo's door. He wouldn't mind the
company; it's probably overdue, anyway, since he didn't get the pleasure of being annoyed by his
best friend this morning and he doesn't feel like being alone yet. He remembers only at the last
second Hinata's warning about Tsukishima's whereabouts. Since he doesn't exactly feel like
having to see his best friend open the door half-naked and smelling like sex, he goes straight to his
own apartment and locks the door.

He thinks about Hinata looking at him. He thinks about all the people who could be looking at
him but aren't, and wonders what he even wants anymore. Like a loose commotion of noise he
feels paper thin and chaotic, like the cacophonous rush is going to knock him over. How does it
even work, anyway? Hinata makes him feel like he's in the middle of a crowd; safe and sheltered,
surrounded by noise. Yet at the same time he makes him feel so isolated. Hinata looks at him.
Hinata looks at him and he does not look away, like they're on stage rather than in the middle of a
crowd.

Kenma walks through his apartment and wonders if he even minds. The question echoes in his
mind again: when was the last time he made a friend? In retrospect, Kuroo has always been there
for him. Kuroo gets his attachment to people he's comfortable with, the need to have someone to
rely on emotionally. Is Hinata someone he could rely on that way?

He still feels oddly electric, fingertips buzzing. He's not going to be able to sleep yet. He busies
himself with cleaning the kitchen, only realising when he gets there that he's hungry. He didn't
even notice. He hasn't eaten since this morning before his philosophy class; he's actually kind of
starving. He tries to remember the plot of the movie they saw as he's heating up leftovers. There
was something about a demon, and something about a young girl. There was one scene with
fireworks that reflected in Hinata's dark eyes, lighting them a thousand colours. Those same hues
in the light reflecting off of his cheeks. Kenma shakes his head and spoons carbs into his mouth. He's overthinking it. It's habit; he had a good time and now he's overthinking it, because he hasn't made a friend since high school.

At least, he reasons, the night out has left him feeling confident. It's rare that he actually feels like he can go out again after the drain of being around another person for so long. He feels like he could do something. Anything. Make changes, be productive.

The number of his old counsellor is on the refrigerator. Kuroo put it there; it's in his messy scrawl, and it's kept up by a magnet for a pizza place, its title chipped and faded so it now only reads 'tim t tokyo'. He takes the number off and places it on the bench, fingers trembling so badly he has to shake his hands out to calm the jitters. He stares at it for some time, psyching himself up. He feels silly doing so, standing there breathing just because he has to talk to someone over a receiver. Just make the call, he tells himself. One phone conversation, and you'll have it over and done with; you can go to bed.

He's just about to dial the number when his phone buzzes in his hands, startling him so badly he nearly drops it. He unlocks it; it's a message from Hinata.

_im too late- he got injured w/o me :( _

Attached is a picture of Hinata and another boy, a nasty looking scrape across his chin and what is obviously an alcohol-induced flush across his cheeks. Hinata's grin is ridiculously exaggerated to the point where his eyes are squeezed shut, hands out of frame so Kenma can't even tell if he's drinking or not. Something inside of him pinches.

He'll call in the morning, he reasons. If he wakes up tomorrow and he still feels like this, he'll make the call.

Chapter End Notes

if ur seeing those horrible links on random words then yes, im aware my computer has a virus, yes im trying to fix it, im rly sorry omg

chapters...slowly....getting longer........
im aiming for once a week or more often updates at the moment so that i can post lengthier chapters! tune in next time for (dun dun DUUUN) therapists, Kuroo Being Gay, aaaand a fight (between who? who knows?? whoaa suspense)

uuh thank u, so much to everyone who has been leaving me comments & reviews!!!! u guys are the NICEST i cannot express my gratitude more. as always, hmu on cloverguts.tumblr.com. im thirsty for mutuals & i have selfie parties sometimes
Chapter 7

shout out to scout for this (amazing???) fan art:
https://twitter.com/kageyameme/status/611656807472238592
rebloggable here: http://cloverguts.tumblr.com/post/122245862691/thank-you-so-much-punkflunked-for-this-amazing-fan
im in love !!!!! thank you so much you sweet angel

Kenma forgets to turn his alarm off; it wakes him up at 8, and it is loud enough that he nearly falls out of bed.

It's Saturday. His eyes are essentially welded shut when he reaches around on the floor for where he's knocked the device, and by the time he is finally able to silence it he's awake. His sigh is one of deep defeat. Cruel, cruel alarm. Ruining lives even when there is no class to attend.

Kenma yanks his hair back into a bun and commences his morning coffee ritual. On the second cup he's more able to move his limbs, wiggling his shoulders with some disdain. They kind of hurt; his arms, skinny on their own and used to relaxing while his fingers do all the typing and the button mashing, they're not used to strenuous exercise of any kind. The ache kind of reminds him of being on the team back in high school. All that setting. They stop hurting pretty quickly when it becomes a regular thing.

He almost forgets about the phone number on the bench, he gets so caught up watching cars pass from his window. His tired mind is milling through thoughts like water, their ends blurring together. Cars are like people. Freeways like crowds. When he finishes his second cup, he pays the phone number its due attention.

Kenma can't tell whether he feels different to last night or not. He's tired, now, and doesn't know what to do with himself without any classes to attend; he realises with some astonishment that he kind of wants to hang out with Hinata again. He can hardly call and ask, though; the guy's only back for the weekend, and Kenma doubts he wants to spend the whole time with him. Besides, there's a good chance he's hung-over. Kenma has enough trouble handling Kuroo.

He picks up the phone and dials. It rings out too long, so he busies himself with the kettle, with piling dishes. The voice that finally answers is not a familiar one.

"Good morning, Meguro Counselling Centre."

Kenma stammers. "U-um-- sorry, good morning. I'm calling for Doctor Owada?"

"Doctor Owada isn't available at the moment. Can I take a message for you?"

"It's just-- um." He feels ridiculous all of a sudden. What was he hoping to achieve? "She used to counsel me. Sorry, I'll call back--"

"May I take a message for you?"

Kenma takes a breath. You can do this, he thinks; he did it yesterday, he can do it today. People are like cars; freeways like crowds. He's driven before. He knows what roads look like.
"How would I... if I wanted to get a referral, say, to see someone--"

"We're open until 12pm today. Would you like to make an appointment?"

Kenma's head is swimming. The last time he saw a counselor, Kuroo drove him. He saw her six times over a three month period and then he got put on the medication and his parents stopped paying for therapy. His fingers are trembling again. "Yes. Please. Could I get an address?"

He gets on the Denentoshi line at 9 and is there before 10. He's still tired from yesterday, but the ache in his arms has calmed down. There are a lot of foreigners in the waiting room. He sits between a blonde girl and the wall, trying to look busy with his DS so that no one tries to talk to him.

"Kozume?"

He rises from his seat too fast. It gives him whiplash. He knows people must be staring at him as he goes in, and he does not look back.

There is a narrow-faced woman waiting for him in the office, going over paperwork. Kenma always wonders that about doctors. They always seem to be reading something, like it makes them look smarter.

She looks up when he enters the room and grins, dimples and all. "Kozume?"

*Who else?* he thinks, but only manages an uncomfortable smile as he hangs in the doorway. She gestures to two colourful chairs. "Please, take a seat."

He sits right on the edge of a neon-orange love seat. There are motivational posters all over the room like it was designed for kids. His hands twitch for his phone.

"I was just looking over your file," she explains, smiling sweetly. "You've been with us before, haven't you?"

Her voice is too sweet to be genuine; like she's just filling the gaps of an already written script. Kenma says nothing, forcing a smile onto his face.

"Yes."

"And the problem last time was... anxiety, correct?"

"Social anxiety. Yeah."

"And is that still the problem?"

He takes a breath. "Yeah. I'm on medication."

"Mhm. Cymbalta?"

"Solonax."

"How long have you been on that?"

Kenma racks his brain and panics for a second when he can't remember. His hands are sweating. He swallows. "A few months. I switched. From the Cymbalta."
"My only concern is that Solonoax can be addictive. It is usually used in the management of severe GAD. Day-to-day management, in a lot of cases, but it's not long term. Have you considered going back on Cymbalta?"

Kenma's heart is already thumping. Anti-depressants, anti-depressants. He doesn't want to go back on them. He doesn't want to look at the pills every morning, hear them mocking him in his head. Telling him to balance. Balance, balance.

He wipes his sweaty palms on his pants. "Um. I'm actually here because I wanted to talk about seeing someone again. It's not about the medication."

"Right," the woman says pleasantly, and turns to her computer. Kenma sits awkwardly while she types away, her fingernails clicking ominously on the plastic keys. She looks up. "What days work for you?"

The referral is over quickly. He's out before close and catches the subway back, the ordeal leaving him drained. The questions were basic-- questions about him, questions about his medication, his symptoms. They were all questions he has answered time and time again. He checks his phone on the train; Hinata has texted him once, a reply to his last message (ok, talk to you later!!!) and Kuroo has texted three times.

Kenma kitty doll babe come over xoxo

Where are u??? I knocked like three times?

Are you dumping me as a bff? :'(

The last message was sent twenty minutes ago; rolling his eyes, Kenma replies.

Sorry, im like fifteen minutes away. do you want me to come over when i get back?

WTF you went out without me. <:/

His phone buzzes with another message barely three seconds later.

Yeah come over though

Kuroo opens the door before he even gets the chance to knock, which makes Kenma think he was there waiting. His best friend yanks him in by the collar and shuts the door behind them.

"Listen," he says. "You know I love you. And I'm always gonna be the first person to advocate for you to branch out, be more independent, but I haven't heard from you for, what? Two days? Breaks my heart, honestly." He's got the kind of dead serious expression on his face that makes Kenma sure he's not really heartbroken. He throws himself back onto Kuroo's couch without breaking eye contact.

"Why do you care whether I check in with you or not? I assumed you were with Tsukishima, since the team's back for the weekend."

Something sparks in Kuroo's eyes. "You and shortie hung out, huh?"

Kenma regrets saying anything. He regrets opening his mouth and he regrets befriending Kuroo and he regret being born. He turns his attention to his phone, but there are no new messages to distract him.

"Kenma."

He opens a Sudoku app. That's a fair enough idea for ignoring Kuroo. Words, using language as a series of codes and puzzles, now that's something he understands--
"Kenmaaa, I'm dying." He lets his phone fall to his lap and looks up at his friend. Kuroo is slumped against the wall, the look on his face comical.

"You look like a kid who hasn't gotten his own way."

"How long have we been friends?"

"Too long." Kenma can't keep the tiny smile from his face. He pats the sofa next to him. "If you're gonna lecture me, do it now. I'm tired."

Kuroo takes the offered seat but says nothing for a moment, looking contemplative. Kenma lets him take his time. He texts Hinata to let him know he's back. Really, he could wait all day.

"So, when were you planning on telling me that you and shortie were dating?"

If Kenma had a drink, now would be the time to spit it out. As it is he splutters, overcome with a feeling like choking on sea water.

"I am not," he says measuredly, "dating Shouyou. Are you projecting your own insecurities onto me again?"

"Oooh, big talk, projecting. How come I wasn't invited yesterday, then?"

"I told you," Kenma says, annoyed, "I thought you were with Kei. You were, weren't you?"

The pout he receives tells him everything he needs to know. It only lasts a moment; Kuroo's face lights up with a grin, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Are you jealous?"

Kenma hits him with a pillow.

"Ow!"

"I'm going to do that every time, from now on."

"Every time what-- ow!"

"Every time you say something terrible," Kenma deadpans. He leans back, thumbs hovering over the screen of his phone. "Make me coffee."

"I think I like you better when you're internalising," Kuroo jokes. Kenma throws him a look anyway, pretending like the comment doesn't sting as much as it does. As soon as Kuroo leaves the room, he receives a text back.

_sorry omg i was busy_

"So what did you get up to yesterday?" Kuroo calls. Kenma leaves his phone on the sofa and joins him in the kitchen. He crosses his arms and leans against the wall next to the fridge, watching his best friend fumble with the coffee maker.

"...Did you mean that?"

"Um, yes, I would like to know what my best friend is up to now that he apparently has a social life--"

"No, I mean the thing about liking me better when I'm internalising."

Kuroo throws him a look over his shoulder, suggesting he most definitely does not think that. Kenma's stare doesn't waver.
"You know I didn't. Did you invite him out or did he invite you?"

"He showed up at my apartment. His memory is kind of creepily accurate, considering his attention span."

Kuroo snorts. It's a really gross noise. Kenma watches him spill some of the coffee he's trying to get into the cup, muttering a swear under his breath when the hot foam gets on his knuckles.

"What did you two do?" he asks as he's passing the mug to Kenma. Kenma takes it, barely pausing to acknowledge Kuroo before he's turning back for the living room.

"I don't know," he shrugs noncommittally. "We saw a movie. He got me to set for him."

"Whoa, you played volleyball?"

Kenma shrugs again. The coffee is scalding against his tongue.

"Well... I mean, I'm glad. I think it's good. I worry about you and--"

"You worry, you worry, you worry," Kenma teases. Kuroo doesn't seem like he finds it funny until the blonde elbows him in the ribs, trying to smile. "That's what you're good at, mom. How's Tsukishima?"

"Oh my God. Oh, my God, you actually want to know about my love life."

"So?"

"So, Shouyou is magic or something. I'm totally convinced."

"Shut up," Kenma mutters. He remembers to text back only at the mention of Hinata's name; he sends *dont worry, im with kuroo*, and locks his phone. "Are you going to tell me how he is?"

"He's great." Kuroo grins. Something about his grin suggests that Tsukishima is more than 'great', but Kenma doesn't ask him to elaborate. He almost mentions that he was going to come over after Hinata dropped him off, but closes his mouth at the last second for fear of hearing something along the lines of 'it's a good thing you didn't, i was balls deep around 8!' "I think he's, like... he's really in it, you know? Pretended like he didn't miss me and everything."

Kenma sips his coffee. "Are you dating him?"

Kuroo shrugs. He can tell by the look on the other's face that it isn't something he's comfortable with; despite his nonchalance, it's a touchy subject. "I don't know. I mean, labels, am I right?"

"You're scared to ask him."

"I don't know if he considers us. Like, official, I mean. Fuck. I don't wanna ask and scare him off."

"You're good at that," says Kenma. Kuroo shoots him a look. "Sorry."

"I don't wanna talk about this anymore. Where were you this morning?"

It seems like an interrogation, but Kenma knows better. It bites at him anyway. "Why?" he asks, buying time. He drinks too much coffee at once and nearly chokes.

Kuroo's expression doesn't change. "Because I care. If you're finally, y'know, becoming comfortable enough to go out on your own--"
"I had to get a referral at Meguro."

Kuroo's eyes widen comically. Kenma reaches out, smooths the crease between his eyebrows. "Stop that, you'll give yourself wrinkles. You're already too much of an old man."

"Kenma, why didn't you tell me? Did it cost you anything? I could have--"

"It was just the referral," he mumbles, suddenly uncomfortable. Kuroo is looking at him, and not in the good way; he shifts, looking elsewhere. "Can you quit that?"

"Sorry." Kuroo looks away, but he's biting his lip. "You know I'm always here, don't you? You could have come over. Kei would understand, he would--"

"I can do some things on my own. Besides," he glances up at Kuroo finally, and finds that the other has looked back at him, "I don't want to get in the way. Just because I'm... because a part of me doesn't work the way it should, doesn't mean I have to make your life any harder."

"Since when have you cared about that?" Kuroo winces as soon as he realises what he's said. "I mean-- you know I don't mean it like that. But since when has that been a problem? I care about you, I want to make sure you're okay."

"You're a worrier," Kenma murmurs, but an exhaustion is taking over full-body. He wants to go home. He wants to go home and curl up in bed and disconnect his phone so that he doesn't have to see whatever counselor they assign him. Or anyone, ever again, for that matter. He stands up. "I think I'll go home."

"Kenma--"

"I'm tired. Sorry."

Kuroo says nothing as he sets his mug back down on the coffee table and heads for the door.

He knows he's making a scene. Feels it, a bone-deep shudder of embarrassment as he shuts the front door behind him. The air eats at his bare skin the whole walk back to his apartment. He almost expects Kuroo to come after him, to make things better. He doesn't.

He realises only when he's safely inside his own apartment that he's going to cry. He stifles it, the wobbly breaths and the fragile noises into the palm of his hand, catching them like rain. His phone buzzes in the pocket of his jeans and it almost triggers him into a panic attack. Something like a sob pushes at his chest. Panic dwells in him like being a little kid, standing three feet below adults and realising life isn't fair; he leans against the wall and closes his eyes and tries to collect himself. Don't cry. Don't cry.

The message is from Hinata.

are u ok ??

Kenma takes another deep breath and straightens up. His hands are still shaking.

yes. why?

uhh no reason :O

Kuroo must have texted him. That was fast, Kenma thinks; he considers for a moment going over there and telling Kuroo to stay out of it, but the bitter feeling pulls away fast. He slumps down on the couch and texts back.
Kuroo texted you.

did something happen??

He wants to tell the truth. Knows he could just type the words out, could dial this same number and say it all into the receiver and Hinata wouldn't be here to look at him.

no.

He gets up to go to the kitchen so that he doesn't push himself into another anxiety attack. He's being rude, and spiteful, and he can't stop. On a roll, he thinks; he could call his parents and give them a piece of his mind, too. He doesn't. He makes coffee slowly, watching the afternoon traffic go by. Pours it down the sink when he's done because the smell makes him sick. When he returns to the living room, there's a message waiting for him.

you dont have 2 talk about it!! i just wanna make sure ur ok

Then, another.

can i come over?

arent you with friends

yea!! :0

Kenma sighs. He's calmed down a little, but certainly not enough to have a whole group of people in his house.

im sorry. i dont really want to be around a lot of people right now.

thats ok, i wasnt gonna bring them!!

Kenma hesitates.

youre leaving your friends to come hang out with me again

dont say it like that!! >.<

The next message comes immediately after.

but yeah, duh :)

Kenma breathes. He breathes, and breathes some more, shoulders rocking like the tide. He thinks of all the times he has hurt people by not allowing them to get close enough to do the same to him. He thinks of all the times he has let his parents, memories-- little demons sitting on his shoulders and burning the skin there-- dictate his life. The last time he had to see his parents, he brought Kuroo because he knew he couldn't do it on his own. When his dad took him down to the beach to tell him he had to start taking his life seriously, Kuroo had been there waiting, just up the hill.

It's all he can think of.

sure. you can come over.

.

He doesn't know what he's expecting. Hinata is there within twenty minutes, catching Kenma off guard while he's trying to distract himself by cleaning.

He opens the door and Hinata immediately steps into the apartment, looking around with a wide-
blown look on his face. "Whoa, this is, like, really clean. Your place is super nice, Kenma!"

Kenma steps back to let him through better, closing the door. He feels his face flushing. "Come in," he mumbles, when Hinata has already made his way to the living room.

He's wearing a striped shirt and rolled up jeans, even though it's freezing out. Does the guy have any concept of the weather? Kenma gives it serious thought. Wringing his hands, he makes his way to the thermostat. "Aren't you cold?"

"Huh-- oh, yeah, it's really chilly out today! Getting closer to Winter, huh?"

"Uh-huh," Kenma murmurs his assent, turning the heat up a few degrees. He can see goosebumps on Hinata's arms all the way across the room. "Um. So... should I... do you want anything to drink, or--"

"Sure!"

Kenma takes in a deep breath. "Right. I'll go... I'll get that."

His face screws up as soon as he's in the privacy of his own kitchen. Why did he agree to let Hinata come over? He has no idea what to do in these kinds of situations. Is he meant to entertain him? He could put a movie on. But they saw a movie yesterday, and Hinata might start thinking he has some kind of a fetish--

He shakes his head. He's overthinking it. He was on the verge of tears twenty minutes ago, and now he's freaking out because his friend is sitting in his living room. Excellent.

He feels like there's a current in his head, making his ears ring and his limbs work all on their own. He takes two soda cans and goes back out to find Hinata rifling through his games.

"What are you doing?"

He jumps so suddenly that he hits his head on Kenma's TV stand. Kenma nearly drops both drinks, rushing to place them on the coffee table and go over to Hinata, who is laughing and writhing. Kenma smacks his hands out of the way when he tries to cover his forehead.

"Let me see," he murmurs. Hinata is still laughing, choking on it.

There's a huge red mark across his forehead, pervading over the jut where his brow bone starts. He tries to hold his laugh in, little airy giggles escaping him; Kenma can't help smiling, the expression at odds with his frown.

The intimacy of the situation hits him all at once.

Kenma stands, moving back so that Hinata can get up, too. "There's--" he points to the sodas on the table, his throat tight. "I'll get you something frozen to put on it."

"Nah," says Hinata, not phased, "I'll just hold the can to my head! I'm fine, really. Sorry for looking through your stuff."

"That's--" Okay, he means to say, but the word gets stuck in his throat. Hinata watches him and raises a can to his forehead. "Do you want to play something?"

"Yes! I was going to say something, since you have so many cool games in there but I wasn't sure which one to pick and I'm not even sure which ones are multi-player. Kageyama and I have a bunch of, like, second hand fighting games, because we're totally poor but really into gaming. I'm pretty sure the only reason he likes them is so that he gets to beat me up in some way. Y'know, he can only do so much in real life, but in games he gets to hit my character heaps and take out all his anger."
"He seems like a pleasant guy." Kenma gets on his knees to rifle through his games drawer. Hinata snorts.

"'Pleasant' just isn't his thing. He's really nice, though. He's totally sappy. If he wasn't, I wouldn't live with him."

"You like sappy people?"

"Just people with good hearts." He says it with so much emotion that Kenma's hands still for a moment, hesitating on the cover of a video game. He takes it out and offers it to Hinata.

"Mario Kart?"

"Hell yes."

Hinata is weirdly insistent on being Yoshi. He goes on a spiel about it, explaining how Yoshi was his sister's favourite and he was never, ever allowed to play as him, no matter what game they were actually playing. Kenma plays as Daisy and beats Hinata in the first three rounds. Which results in a lot of yelling.

At some point they stop taking the races seriously. Kenma waits at the starting line and Hinata tries to see if he can do a whole lap backwards. He can't, and the ensuing annoyance he suffers results in him lying stretched across Kenma's lap and complaining. The weight of him there is comforting, like an anchor. Kenma doesn't even pay mind to how warm his head becomes.

Some few hours later they stop for the better task of channel surfing. They mute the infomercials and do the voices instead, Hinata laughing manically into the sofa, still draped across Kenma's lap. He doesn't even mind. It's the weirdest feeling, being okay with something and having no idea why. Kenma gets up to do the dishes eventually, bending his head so that he can see more of the sky. It is still grey, trees rocking with the sway of the wind. He realises that he doesn't want Hinata to go. He's praying for rain, for a storm, for anything to keep him here.

"The weather's been super pretty lately."

Kenma nearly jumps. He tucks his chin in close to his chest, trying to draw his attention to the dishes. Hinata patters around his kitchen with oblivious interest. "Like, for Tokyo."

"You don't normally like Tokyo's weather?"

"No, no, I do! It's just, I think I prefer the warm months. I have to get up really early most mornings when I'm training or whatever, and it sucks having to go in the cold." He's made his way over to Kenma, and leans close to peer out the window. Kenma doesn't even think he knows he's doing it. Here he is close enough for the blonde to smell his shampoo, his deodorant. Something about it strikes him as odd, but he can't put his finger on what.

"All my best memories are from the summer. Playing volleyball and getting sweaty."

"Ew."

Hinata scoffs. Kenma smiles at the soapy water, the hot sting on his hands as he scrubs a plate. Hinata is standing even closer now. He's got his head tilted to one side, watching the sky outside or the road beneath or both. "Do you stand here and look often?"

"Out the window?"
"Yeah."

Kenma lifts his gaze to follow Hinata's. It's not as busy out there, but the cars milling about are a big enough mess that it seems that way. Kenma feels himself begin to relax. Sometimes he stands and watches while it rains, watches the rush and the speed until his head feels filled with white noise and he can sleep easier. He doesn't know how to convey that to Hinata in words, so he just nods.

"Man. Your place is so nice, I could probably stay forever."

That does something to Kenma, deep in his chest. He can't place the feeling; Hinata moves and he's overcome with the smell again, something deep and heady and floral. He should ask him to stay over. That's what you do when you're friends, right; normal friends, not the kind of friendship he and Kuroo share where either one of them will just show up at a ridiculous hour to empty the other's refrigerator.

"When do you have to leave again?"

"We're back on the road tomorrow afternoon," Hinata says, screwing his face up. Kenma lifts a finger to the other's cheek.

"Why that face, then?"

"Um," Hinata stammers. His gaze zeroes in on Kenma's finger; cross-eyed, wide-eyed, ridiculous; Kenma drops his hand and gives him some space. "Um, um, I don't know, it's like--" He heaves a sigh, draping himself across the counter. "I'm excited. We're playing really well and I can't wait til we climb the ladder higher, you know! Everyone's really excited. Being on the road with all my friends is exciting, but it's tiring."

Kenma nods. It's obvious that it's more than that; it's written all over his face. Hinata seems too blunt of a person to ever had to worried about becoming good at lying. Still, he doesn't push it, turning back to his dishes.

"...You're not a very good house guest."

"Huh? What makes you say that?"

"I've been cleaning this whole time and you haven't offered to help." Kenma's mouth turns up into a lopsided smile, meeting Hinata's jarred expression. It's unbelievable, watching all that shock dissolve and melt into something else, something burning bright and fathomed of sunshine and starlight. He thinks if people had to be fixtures in space, he could be the moon; half a quarter and unnoticed in the middle of the night, sitting high on a suburban horizon. Hinata, he thinks-- his eyes graze over the other's shoulders, moving with laughter, the tilt of his grin, the glimmer of his eyes when they open-- Hinata Shouyou is the sun.

"Why are you looking at me so much, huh? Weird."

Hinata flicks him on the forehead. It happens so abruptly that Kenma doesn't have time to react, and the redhead dances out of reach, disappearing around the corner and into the living room again.

Kenma's head fills with white noise, and he blinks at the empty space left behind. Orange blossoms, he realises. Hinata smells like orange blossoms.

He doesn't know how to word that he wants Hinata to stay, so he doesn't say anything at all.
"I'll text you lots," Hinata says as he's leaving, eyes a deadly promise. "Like, pictures and stuff."

"Yeah."

"I'll make you add me on snapchat. Then you'll have to deal with all my selfies."

"I'll send you pictures of Kuroo's ugly face every morning. You can show Kei and freak him out."

Hinata scoffs. He hasn't left yet, standing in the doorway awkwardly. When Kenma stares, he raises a hand to rub the back of his neck. "I, um, think I'll miss you."

He can't help the smile that forces its way onto his face. He doesn't know where to begin. The fact that he's smiling at all; the fact that that's both discomfort and elation battling hand in hand in his gut; the warmth, sitting on his shoulders, that still hasn't gone away. "You think? That's comforting."

"Ah-- I'm sure, is what I mean," Hinata corrects. He says it too quickly, not looking at Kenma, like his mind is elsewhere. When he looks up, he does so shyly; Kenma doesn't think he's ever seen Hinata shy. "Are you and Kuroo going to come see us off again tomorrow?"

Breathe, he reminds himself. He'll see Kuroo as soon as Hinata leaves, patch things up. It's not like they haven't fought before. They're like siblings. "Yeah. I'll be there."

The grin that lights up Hinata's face is like the way the sky looks first thing in the morning. Kenma's fingers twitch. "Awesome," he breathes, like he actually believes the full extent of the word; and he says it to himself, whispered like it's a secret. His eyes meet Kenma's again and crinkle at the corners. "Well, text me your snapchat some time! I'll see you tomorrow!"

"See you," he murmurs, and only when Hinata is gone does he remember to shut the door.

A part of him expects Kuroo not to answer when he knocks. Kenma has no clue why. He's never ignored him before; the longest they've ever gone without speaking was about a week, and that was only because Kenma wasn't accepting any of his calls. He still lived with his parents then, where he could lock himself in his room and shut the world out; curtains drawn; moon included. Kuroo answers the second his knuckles touch the door, and he looks so swept and blown that any words Kenma might have had leaves him. His hands clench in and out of fists. He steps into Kuroo's arms and the other wraps them around his shoulders without a moment's hesitation.

They don't talk about it.

Kenma knows it's because they don't have to. Kuroo never makes him mention it, no matter how tired of Kenma's shit he must be getting.

He sits on the sofa while Kuroo rifles through dvds. This part is unspoken ritual, too. Kuroo has always been better than Kenma himself at recognising his moods, his symptoms, and knowing how to care for him.

"...So Shouyou was over."

"Yeah."

Kuroo looks back over his shoulder. "I won't bring it up if you don't want to--"

"We played video games. He stood there being useless while I did the dishes. I, um." He threads his fingers together. "I really like him. Being around him. I don't think it even makes me that uncomfortable anymore."
Kuroo breathes out with the force of a tornado, blowing back the bangs that have landed in his face. Without product his hair sticks up in every direction, the perfect image of domesticity. It makes Kenma's heart pang in a surge of fondness for his best friend. "That's good," he says softly. Genuinely. Kuroo, he thinks, is one of those people who would never bullshit him. So he's not at all surprised when he looks up again, eyes burning like a cat's, and says, "You think he knows about your anxiety."

"He doesn't, unless you told him," Kenma challenges, raising an eyebrow. Kuroo doesn't take the bait; he grins, breathing a laugh to himself and going back to the dvds.

"I wouldn't do that. It's a breach of your trust. Anyway, that's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant." Kenma takes a slowing, steadying breath, shoulders heaving. "Yeah. I think he knows. I don't think he cares."

"That's why you like him."

"I like him because he's him. He's like--" Kenma twists his lips, irritated. "I don't know why I like people. It's irritating to talk about."

Kuroo snorts. "You don't like people." He holds up a dvd. "Killers?"

Kenma shakes his head. "I want to watch cartoons. Also, don't tell me what I like."

"Sorry. You like me, right?"

"If I didn't," Kenma deadpans, "I wouldn't put up with your terrible cooking. Or your mothering."

"My cooking isn't terrible," Kuroo protests, but he is too busy with the dvds to dwell on it too much. "It's troubling you because you think there are words for everything, and you can't find words for this. Right?"

Kenma says nothing. Kuroo knows he's right. He hates that feeling; having something so perfectly summed up by his best friend, right after his comment about mothering. Kuroo holds up two covers and raises his eyebrows, silent asking Kenma to choose. The blonde points.

"Kimba. Can we make popcorn?"

"You can make popcorn, you lazy shit."

He gets up. It's better than nothing.

Kuroo doesn't bring up Hinata, or their fight, for the rest of the night. He doesn't bring up Kenma's anxiety or the referral or how he feels about seeing a therapist again. He does, however, talk about Tsuki-- incessantly once he gets started, speaking with some disgust about all the cute boys on the other volleyball teams.

"You're too possessive. And jealous."

"I don't care," he whines, sounding like a kid. "Kei's really pretty. You know what some of those sports professional assholes are like."

Kenma shovels popcorn into his mouth, speaking around it. "You really think he'd fall for any of
that, though? He's kind of a dick to everyone he meets."

"He's just selective."

Kenma rolls his eyes.

It's silent for a while, and Kenma tries to focus on the TV. He's seen it about a million times but it still leaves him feeling warm on the inside, weirdly fascinated. Brought back to old times and comfort.

"Are you gonna come with me to see him and shortie off tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I told Shouyou I would."

Kuroo looks smug about that, but Kenma doesn't bother asking why. It would only open up a whole other conversation, invite another rant. It's a good night. Kimba is doing things white lions do, and Kuroo is doing things Kuroos do, and all is right with the world.

He wakes up at 7 in the morning to frantic banging on his door.

At first he thinks it's a part of his dream, or just the hammering of rain on his window; then he peels his eyes open and realises someone is slamming their fist against his door in rapid succession, and he nearly falls out of bed stumbling to get there. That makes two days in a row now where he's woken up this way.

His first thought is that it's Kuroo, and something is wrong--

His second is that it's Hinata.

Kenma opens the door and glares into the cold morning. Waiting for him is neither of those two people.

"Let me in," Tsukishima hisses, rubbing his clothed arms. He's covered in a light sheen of water, the beginning of rain; it's just starting to come down heavily outside. "If he sees me he's gonna gay all over the place."

Kenma steps aside, too confused to do otherwise. Tsukishima steps into his apartment without any hesitation whatsoever.

The situation dawns on him when he's had the first cup of coffee. Tsukishima is standing awkwardly in his kitchen, looking like he wishes he wasn't there. Kenma kind of wishes he wasn't there, too, uncomfortable enough that he has no idea what to say. He gestures with his cup and almost spills the coffee. "Um. Do you want some?"

"No. Thank you."

He doesn't know how to say this. Hey, Kei, no offense, but what the hell are you doing in my apartment? He's not good at being blunt, not like Kuroo or Hinata. I didn't realise we were close enough for you to show up unannounced at 7 in the morning on a Sunday? Tsukishima would probably just yell at him.

"You're probably wondering why I'm here."

"Oh..." he says, but trails off when he realises he doesn't know how to lie convincingly in this situation. He rubs his arm. He's waking up now, enough for his anxiety to be waking up, too.
Tsukishima says nothing, so he hides his face in his coffee cup, averting his gaze.

Eventually, Tsukishima sighs. "Sorry to do this to you, but I didn't know who else to come to. He's, um." He pauses to rub the back of his neck, and Kenma realises immediately: he's embarrassed. His cheeks are flushed and everything; he keeps shifting from foot to foot.

Tsukishima meets his gaze head on, jaw clenched. "Kuroo's birthday is coming up. I'll be away for it, but, um." He looks down. "I have no idea what to get for him, first of all. I don't know what he'd like. And also, I don't trust him not to open his gift before his birthday, so I was going to ask if you would hold onto it for me."

Kenma has no idea what to say. This is the complete opposite of what he'd expected. There is no protocol for what to do when your best friend's maybe-not-official-boyfriend, who is on your other best friend's volleyball team, shows up at your door at 7 in the morning asking for shopping advice. "You want my help."

Tsukishima is flushed again. "Yeah. I was gonna-- um, ask if you'll go shopping with me."

Kenma swallows. "He has other friends, you know. Some of them are on your team."

Tsukishima rolls his eyes. "You're not that bad to be around. And you obviously know him better than anyone."

He doesn't know what to say to that, because the latter is true. The first part leaves a feeling of discomfort in his stomach. He sets his mug down with the rest of the dishes.

"Well?"

He looks at the cup in the sink. He looks at his feet. He looks at Tsukishima and repeats the whole process, his head spinning, the apartment silent.

He doesn't want to go. He's not comfortable enough around Tsukishima for it not to be really, really weird. He doesn't want to have to rush back and go straight to see Hinata off. He doesn't want Kuroo to find out he's gone out and ask where, because then he would have to lie about his present and he really doesn't have the effort in him. But Tsukishima looks so hopeful, an expression Kenma has never seen on him before.

"...I really hope you have a car, because I'm not walking in this weather."

It's too early.

Tsukishima drives them both down to the nearest mall and expects Kenma to be coherent, staring at every coffee shop they pass with unbidden lust in his eyes. Tsukishima has to have noticed by now that he's dying of a caffeine deficiency. Anxiety is gnawing at him, but he's too tired to address it properly yet. It's present enough that he doesn't know how to voice the fact that he wants coffee, though. He glowers. If it were Kuroo, he'd have bought it for him, and ten minutes ago.

"Where do we even start?" the other mutters under his breath. One good thing about Tsukishima, Kenma notes, is that he seems to be on his phone a lot. Which makes it easier to just not speak, no awkward silences in between. They seem to share the skill of being able to walk without bumping into anyone, even while immersed in their phones. Kenma's feels heavy in his pocket. He could probably get it out and play a game, but then Tsukishima might ask him a question he doesn't here and he might embarrass himself.

His throat feels tight; he wishes he was at home.
"...Cologne? Wait, no, that's way too gay. Clothes? Are clothes gay?"

"I don't think an inanimate object can be gay," Kenma mutters, and Tsukishima throws him a glare; it makes him panic, for a second, before he realises it's partially in jest. His shoulders relax but his heart is thumping. Kei is kind of... really scary.

"Food, he likes food. What food could I get him?"

"He likes this mackarel stuff, but don't get him food. That's not personal enough."

That shuts Tsukishima up for a good five seconds. He looks contemplative. "Personal..."

Kenma comes to a dead halt outside of a jewelry store. Tsukishima almost doesn't notice, and keeps walking; when he does he backtracks, looking embarrassed.

"Do you have any photos of yourself he might like?"

Tsukishima's cheeks flare red. "Th-that's... way too embarrassing, I couldn't--"

"Of the two of you?"

He swallows. Kenma knows that look in his eyes, recognises it from his own. Tsukishima quickly averts his gaze. "Isn't that... wouldn't I just look cheap?"

"Trust me," Kenma says, "he's too sentimental for his own good. He's a total dad about that stuff. You could buy him a nice frame to go with it if you feel bad." He gestures to the jewelry store. "Something fancy and silver. He'd probably appreciate that. Or you could just be the weird boyfriend who buys a gift card for fish pie."

Tsukishima flushes at the word 'boyfriend'. He still looks torn, chewing his lip and watching the jewelry store with narrowed eyes. Finally, he looks at Kenma. "You're sure?"

He shrugs. "98%.

"Ninety-eight--"

"Quickly, before you change your mind."

"Where the hell is the other two per cent--"

"Do you want him to show up and see you here? He goes to the mall to buy his weird health food sometimes."

Tsukishima snaps into action then, walking into the jewelry store without looking back. Kenma follows him wordlessly. That was easy.

When he's purchased the frame-- and gotten the picture printed from the camera roll on his phone, something he did without letting Kenma come inside-- they get breakfast from a McDonalds, sitting in the gradually filling food court to eat it. Kenma's stomach still feels tight with unease, but the rest of his body is slowing down, relaxing as it gets used to Tsukishima's company. It helps that the other keeps going on his phone. Kenma tries to peer over his hands to see what he's doing.

"...Are you texting Kuroo?"

"He thinks I'm at home. If I stop messaging him he'll get suspicious."
That makes Kenma smile into his fist. "You're going to a lot of trouble for this."

Tsukishima looks up. "Of course," he says. "He'll find out otherwise, won't he?"

Kenma scoffs. "Yeah, he's a meddler."

"He's like a detective, it's ridiculous. I sent him a picture with a guy from another team in the background, he somehow manages to find the guy's facebook."

They both laugh at that. Kenma can imagine it; actually thinks he can remember Kuroo talking about it, babbling on about some-asshole-from-some-team who he'd thought was trying to get with Tsukishima before he discovered he was, in fact, in a very committed heterosexual relationship.

"He talks about you a lot," he says. Tsukishima's cheeks flush.

"Well," he says, looking away. "Good. He should. I'm a delight."

Kenma snorts, and it makes the other look up. He's got a daring grin on his face. "Are you suggesting I'm not?"

"Not at all," Kenma says, hiding his mouth behind his hand. "Why? Do I look like I am?"

Tsukishima glowers. Somehow, in all the wonder, confusion and mystery of the world, it's a friendly moment.

It's midday when they get back, and Tsukishima goes to the length of parking a street away from Kenma's apartment just in case Kuroo is lurking about or looks through his window. He leans out the window before Kenma can leave, calling the blonde's name.

He looks uncomfortable. "Don't... um, don't open it."

"Of course."

He means don't look at the picture. His face is redder than Kenma has ever seen. He wonders for a second if it's a nude photograph, but that's so out of character it amazes him. With a huff, Tsukishima rolls the window back up and drives off. Kenma watches him go with some wonder in his eyes.

He makes it back to his apartment without Kuroo jumping out from behind any corners, so that's a good sign. He hides the gift underneath his bed and makes himself another cup of coffee.

Kuroo arrives at his door barely ten minutes later as if on cue, and it's only when he sees his best friend's perfectly styled hair that he remembers his own. He scrutinizes the messy ponytail in the hall mirror for a good five minutes, despairing at his hair.

"Are you kidding me? You're ridiculous. Why do you care what I think of your hair, just go brush it."

I went out looking like this, he almost says, but stops himself only at the last second. He glowers the whole way to his room. Why did Tsukishima have to do this to him?

He sucks at keeping secrets.

They drive down to see Tsukishima and Hinata off at 1. Kenma is exhausted again; he used up all of his social energy for the day on Tsukishima. He is thinking about the referral again, which he still hasn't spoken to anyone about. He doesn't want to mention the comments about anti-
depressants to Kuroo. But the weight of the conversation is heavy in his mind, making it hard to walk again.

Hinata meets his eyes across the parking lot and smiles so wide Kenma worries for his cheeks. He rushes over like a ray of light, stopping awkwardly in front of Kenma. In a long, deafening moment, he realises Hinata was going to hug him.

"You came!" he chirps.

"I said I would."

"You and Kuroo should come, it's not fair." He's pouting like a kid. It makes Kenma want to smile, but he covers it with a hand out of politeness.

"I have school," he reasons. Hinata groans.

"That's so boring, Kenma, honestly. Well, I guess it's not boring if you enjoy it. You have to respond to all my messages, okay? You can't ignore me!"

"I didn't ignore you last time."

Hinata looks thoughtful. "That's true. But even if you're in class, okay? My feelings are your top priority."

That makes Kenma laugh. "I'll do my best."

"Good."

They're all getting on the bus. Kenma can see his best friend kissing the living daylights out of Tsukishima, who is trying to hide the two of them behind his hand. A few other team members are laughing at them; their captain is telling everyone to leave it alone.

Hinata rubs the back of his neck. "Um. Should I hug you?"

"You could shake my hand."

It takes Hinata a second to realise he's kidding. When he does, his face lights up with a grin, and he flies into Kenma's arms, knocking the wind out of him.

His body responds the way it's used to. He stiffens, his spine going rigid like a cat's, alarm bells ringing in his head. He didn't imagine it yesterday, though; Hinata definitely smells like orange blossoms. The thought is ridiculous, and without even thinking Kenma raises his arms to hug back, feeling the other boy's body slot against his, breathing in orange blossoms. Hinata pulls away a little. And looks at him.

They pull apart right around the time Kenma realises they're too close. Hinata shouts out some flurried string of incoherence he thinks is meant to be goodbye, and rushes towards the bus, waving behind him as he goes. Kenma is too shocked to do anything but stand there.

Eventually Kuroo comes to join him, and they watch together as the bus goes. Tsukishima is watching from behind the hand he's got covering his smile, the middle finger of his other hand up. Kenma can see Hinata by the back, already engaged in a conversation with a teammate, probably speaking a million miles a minute. They stand there until the bus is gone, hands hanging limp between them.

"That was intimate of you two."

"Shut up."
"Just saying. He's kinda huggy, huh?"

Kenma's flushed, but he doesn't say so, turning to go back to the car. "You literally can't say anything right now. At all. You were making out with Kei so hard I think the whole team saw the inside of your throat."

"Tch." He's grinning, placing two hands behind his head as he walks. "You're just jealous I've got such a cute... guy in my life. You and Shouyou were shoujo as fuck."

"I didn't even realise you saw. Why were you watching me, creep?"

"Please, the whole team saw."

That shuts Kenma up. His heart thumps in his chest like an offbeat drum and he stares at the ground, hands fists in his pockets. Kuroo seems to realise what he's said.

"I mean, not the whole team... like, no one was looking at you. They were all still looking at Kei and making fun of him for blushing like a schoolboy."

"Yeah."

He can see his best friend's expression in the corner of his eye. Pained, a little. He drops his hands to his sides and swings them. "You wanna hang out today? We could go to the mall again. Please, not again. No more malls. "Or go get coffee. I'll pay."

"I've actually, um." Kenma stops at the car and tucks some hair behind one ear. "I've got therapy. Could you drive me?"

Something sobers in Kuroo's eyes. "Of course," he says, not missing a beat. Kenma climbs into the car after him. If anything, he might be able to get a free drink out of his friend later.

Kuroo sits in the waiting room while he goes in.

"Kozume."

"Yes."

The woman waiting for him is different to the one who gave him his referral. She is rounder, a softness to her face. She gestures to the vacant loveseat. "Please, sit down."

Kenma sits. He's tired, now, and the muscles in his legs go lax with relief. The weight of his day sits on his shoulders like a heavy bird, making him slump over, rubbing his eyes. The woman is peering at him from under her glasses.

"I'm Murakami; it's very nice to meet you. How has your morning been?"


"That's good," she murmurs, and she is already writing something down on her notepad. Kenma is sweating. He rubs the palms of his hands against his jeans. It's too silent in the room; he can hear the rustle of fabric.

"You can call me Amaya, if you'd like."

"Kenma."
She smiles. Her hand moves against the page. Kenma almost considers asking her what she's writing about him-- what pare of his personality has she figured out already?-- but she is already moving on.

"So, you're here because you believe you're suffering from anxiety."

"I got a diagnosis a little over a year ago. It hasn't gone away."

"Has it gotten better?"

He opens his mouth to say 'no', but hesitates. "...I don't think the anxiety is going away. But I'm getting better at dealing with it."

"Good," she murmurs, writing away, "good. What measures have you put in place to do this?"

"I have some breathing exercises. And I'm trying not to be rude to every person I meet."

He knows this part. He knows the look she will give him, the pride in her eyes as she tells him good, that's a good boy, be nicer to the people you meet. Don't be so quiet, so rude, and you'll be fine. She looks up and her eyes graze his briefly, no hint of pride there whatsoever. "You need to focus on your own comfort before anyone else's."

He looks down. The sound of pen on paper fills the room, like the deafening silence before a storm, oncoming rain on the other end of a field.

"What breathing exercises do you usually employ in times of panic?"

"In and out. I mean, 'through the stomach, not the chest' kind of deal. So that I don't hyperventilate."

"Try breathing in for four seconds, holding for seven, and exhaling for eight," Amaya says without looking up. "In through the nose and out through pursed lips. It triggers your body's natural fight or flight reaction. You'll feel yourself physically relaxing."

She looks at him. Kenma gathers the presence of mind to nod, feeling shaken at his very roots. Amaya sets her pen down then, gaze burning across the room as she folds her hands. "I'm going to take the clichéd road here and ask if you remember when all of this started."

Kenma thinks of the first time he had arrived on that beach with his parents, pretending Kuroo wasn't there in favour of going and sitting on the very edge, the line where the pale sand became dark and the tide rolled up and kissed his toes. He thinks of the hazy sky when he skipped class and sat by himself for hours, that first day of high school, of being ten years old or nine years old and having to stammer over an explanation as to why he didn't want to do club activities anymore.

"I don't know," he lies. "It's been there as long as I can remember, but it got worse once I got older."

"Has it just been steadily getting worse, or have there been times when the illness wasn't as present?"

Kenma goes still. Breathing, breathing. How did she tell him to breathe? "It got worse in my last year of high school," he says, and his voice has dropped so low that he almost doesn't recognise it. "I thought it was gone. And then it came back."

Amaya is watching him carefully from behind her glasses. She has a very bird-like look about her, he realises; he can't imagine why that would be comforting, but it is. Something about it is familiar. Maybe there is a freedom in these types of people, her dark and titled eyes watching him
from across the room. "Something triggered this?"

Kenma looks at his hands. "Yes." He doesn't dwell. She doesn't ask him to dwell.

Their session ends faster than he expects it to. Amaya spends the rest of their time going over methods for stopping panic in its tracks, asking him general questions about the people in his life. He talks mostly about Kuroo, how he has been in his life almost since he can remember. She asks about his parents and he gives short answers; his mother was hysterical. His father was judgemental and practical. She tells him she can fit him in for another appointment next Thursday or Sunday; he chooses the latter and leaves in a daze.

Kuroo doesn't mention it while they're still in the building. They walk out in silence, Kenma's eyes averted so he doesn't have to see if people are looking at him. His head feels full of something far more tangible than white noise now; something hard at the edges and expanding, reaching down through his throat and settling in his chest like something sunken and drenched. He gets in the car and draws his knees to his chest, leaning against the window.

Kuroo throws glances his way. It's too silent, so he reaches for the radio, putting it on the station he always sees Hinata going for. Kuroo says nothing. He never noticed before, but it's an indie station, streaming electronic stuff he really hasn't heard before. So it wasn't just that he didn't recognise popular music, he thinks. He's not that out of touch after all. The song they're playing now is too fast for his taste, too much like club music, but it's nice. It makes him think of Hinata.

"I'm just letting you know," Kuroo says, once they're a fair distance from Meguro, "that if you want to talk about it I'm here. If you don't... I mean if you want to start internalising things again, that's--"

"Stop," says Kenma. "It's not like that. I don't do it on purpose."

The breath expelled from Kuroo rustles his hair. Kenma can see his shoulders, the rise and fall of them like a breathing body of water, and thinks of four, seven, eight seconds to quell panic. He thinks he will try it later when he is alone, so that no one can see the relief in his eyes when he is breathing out.

"I'm sorry. Sorry. I know you don't. I just mean... it's okay if you want to keep if to yourself. If you're better dealing that way. If it bothered me, I wouldn't have stuck with you this long."


"Kenma--"

"I'm not lying. She just asked me things you already know about. Gave me breathing exercises. Preached anti-depressants."

That makes Kuroo smile. "You think they'll refer you to a psychiatrist?"

"I might quit if they do. I'm an adult, they can't force me to go on medication if I'm not a danger to myself or others."

"Of course you're not," his friend murmurs. "I mean, even if you were, that wouldn't change anything. I'd still be here for you. But you're not, and you're right. It's your choice how you deal with it."

The thing is, Kenma thinks, he doesn't feel like he's dealing. He feels like he's been living his life like this since he can first remember, like it's a daily battle not to pass out in public or lose the ability to breathe when the wrong person's eyes stray on him for too long. It's a constant feat of
am I standing out too much, what am I doing wrong, how can I get people to forget about me. Only he doesn't want to be forgotten.

"She thinks I should quit Solonax. It's addictive, isn't it?"

"Can be," Kuroo answers immediately. Then corrects himself. "I mean, I assume." Kenma catches his own expression in the window, smiling behind his hand. Kuroo is always pretending like he doesn't care as much as he does, like he doesn't spend more time researching Kenma's illness than Kenma does.

"I don't like it, anyway. Can't imagine how anyone would ever use it to get high."

"Some people like feeling exhausted," Kuroo laughs. The song on the radio finally changes. It gets Kenma's attention, his gaze turning on the speakers like there's something to be found there.

"If you think--"

"Shh," he interrupts. Kuroo looks scandalised, mouth hanging open mid-sentence. "I mean, just be quiet for a minute. I like this song."

"Oh," he says, turning back to the wheel. "Oh, yeah, this is totally your thing. It's dreamy, kinda like, uh... what's their name, from that Western band--"

"Shh," Kenma repeats. It does, he thinks, sound dreamy. He likes dreamy, like Sea Oleena. She's an artist, not a band, but he doesn't say anything to Kuroo. "Can you remind me to look this up later?"

"Thought you didn't like music," Kuroo mocks. He says it under his breath, a tone just annoying enough to make Kenma glare. He says nothing, though, and leans back in his seat, trying to memorise the beat.

"Do you want to come over?"

Kenma closes the car door softly behind him, tucking hair behind his ears. "No. I'm tired."

Kuroo strides up alongside him. "Do you want me to come over?"

"...Sure."

Kuroo makes him dinner, overcooking the vegetables and under-cooking the rice. Kenma doesn't comment on it. It's easier to smile now, laughing under his breath at his friend's terrible attempts at jokes over dinner. He knows he is trying. He is trying so, so hard to make Kenma feel better, to stop him from spiralling back into the dark place Kuroo has seen him gone so many times. He knows the feeling of being on the edge, one step before tipping point, though, and this is not it. Kenma doesn't know how to tell Kuroo that he'll be okay; he doesn't know the words for it.

Later when he is alone he remembers the song. There aren't any lyrics; he struggles with it for a bit, his search engine mocking him, but with some poking around on music sites he hasn't touched since high school he finds it. 'Us' by Meishi Smile. He listens to it two more times in the dark of his bedroom, letting the soft notes fill the silence there, letting the instruments cling to the walls and sit on his chest.

He texts Hinata the name of the song.

i dont know if this is your kind of music. but it made me think of you.
Then, he goes and finds his favourite Sea Oleena album, buried under his bed with various other things he hasn't touched in more than a year now. He falls asleep to that, thinking for the first time in weeks of nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

im kinda having an internal debate rn over the name of this fic! ive been considering renaming it 'the cat and the moon' for a while; based on the W.B.Yeats poem (which is beautiful, by the way. if you like dreamy, romantic poetry about mutability with a tonne of symbolism then its def for you). i think it would fit in just as well with the plot; partially for its romantic connotations having to do with kenma and hinata, partially for its dreamy tone, and, duh, because kenmas a lit student.
but im also sort of attached to the name the fic already has and i didnt want to confused people by suddenly changing it. let me know what you think! i will most likely decide based on majority rule :)

also, thank you so much for the lovely comments. im putting a lot of time and love into this fic right now and the people who take the time to tell me what they think are the sweetest.
When he gets back from class on Tuesday, there's a missed call waiting for him on his phone.

At first he thinks it's Hinata; he prepares a 'i was in class' message, already grinning at the thought of his friend not being able to wait to tell him something, but his smile drops almost as soon as it formed. It's a missed call from his dad.

He dials with shaking hands, giving up a total of three times before he can press the call button.

"Hello?"

He takes in a deep breath. "Dad."

"Kenma," comes the voice on the other end of the line. It has always been weird, hearing his dad through a phone line. The usual sternness of his voice is warped, sounding distant and canned and too far for him to touch. "How are you? We haven't heard from you since you left."

"I'm fine. How's... um, how's mom?"

"Your mother's fine. Have you thought about that conversation we had?"

"Sure." Four seconds, he thinks. Then seven, eight. That's nineteen in total-- is that too long to go without talking?"Well. Have you made any decisions?"

He holds his breath, eyes on the door like it's going to open, like Kuroo will come in and save him.

"Kenma?"

He lets his breath out prematurely. "Yeah. I mean, no, I haven't decided yet."

The sigh on the other end of the line is sharp as knives. "You think you're going to be able to put it off forever? See, this is what I was talking about. You're always doing this, putting off important decisions until the last second so by the time you get to them you make the wrong one. Your mother and I--"
"I think I'll pick literature." The line goes silent. His hands are trembling, and he can't change his voice, can't make it any louder. "As my major."

"...I think you should come down and visit again."

Shaking, shaking. He's definitely shaking. "Dad, it's fine--"

"I really think you should stay for longer this time. Without bringing your friend. Just you, your mother and I for a weekend, so we can talk this out."

"I already know what I want to do. It's not something we can just 'talk out'."

"I thought you hadn't decided." The man's voice has risen on the other end of the line. Kenma can imagine him standing at that kitchen window overlooking the beach, his mother pacing the kitchen. One hand over her mouth, shaking her head.

"I haven't. But I'm pretty sure--"

"You think we'll support this?"

His exhale shudders. "You don't have to. I'll get a job--"

"That's a joke. Kenma, we've always been supportive, you know that. We were supportive when you decided to go through your whole, your whole emo phase, or whatever in high school--"

"Dad--"

"We were supportive when you told us you didn't give a damn about our family heritage and went off to learn about books and poems and whatever other girly stuff you're doing in Tokyo. Don't you have one ounce of respect for how we raised you? What do you suppose you'll do with your degree, hm?"

"I could teach." His voice is on the very edge of fragile, of being lost. A crack in a room of silence. He won't teach. He knows he won't teach.

"Listen, we can find an alternative here. There's no real money in teaching. You know that, right?"

"I'm not good at handling money. I don't... I don't like business stuff."

"Calling it 'business stuff' is insulting, Kenma, really. I told you I can get you a good position at one of the newspapers, start you off as head journalist and then see...” Four seconds in. Seven seconds held. His teeth hurt from being clenched so tightly, and he messes up trying to breathe out, releasing it all too quickly. "You know we would never force you into anything. Here it comes, he thinks. He knows the line, knows the voice, and his fingers scratch uselessly on the kitchen countertop for it. "We're doing this because we love you."

"Yeah," he says. He takes in a deep breath. "Love you, too."

"If it's really what you want, I can consider it. But there's only so much of your chasing fantasies that I can fund, you know."

"Yeah. Tell mom hi."

"I don't think she'll be happy about this," he says, and the line goes dead. Kenma stands resting his weight against the wall for a long time. He keeps a hand over his mouth, so that his breaths don't turn into sobs, so that his empty apartment doesn't fill with the sound of his ragged panting. The
phone hangs limp in one dangling hand, begging to be dropped and broken. He doesn't break it.

He forces himself to sit down on the floor and texts Hinata.

*are you in a game right now?*

The reply is instant.

*noppe, but i have 2 get ready soon !!!*

*ok. can you talk now?*

*sure !! :O*

The next message comes a moment after.

*are u ok ?!!*

*im ok. i just need someone to talk to.*

*ok... if smth happened, do u wanna talk about it ??*

*no.*

*thats ok then!!! how was ur morning?*

He sits on the floor and texts Hinata for a half hour. His back begins to hurt. It's cold in the kitchen, the temperature of the tiles going straight up his legs, but he ignores it, gradually calming down. Hinata tells him about his morning, how he nearly missed early training because Kageyama took his phone and listened to his music in the middle of the night, so he didn't hear his alarm. Kenma tries to explain Keats to him, and the other poetry they're going over; he gets confused when he mentions semiotics and assonance, so he tries to explain the symbolism.

*its kind of everywhere in his poems. its annoying, because it makes them harder to translate, and even harder to understand.*

*whOAA, thats rly interesting ?!! what kind of symbolism !*

*well, keats has a lot of nature and musical symbolism. but i like the others better. birds are a really common one.*

*birds!!!!!!!*

*yeah*

*i love birds??? omg, your classes sound so coool*

*theyre ok. i think birds are just a common symbol because they usually reflect freedom.*

*r there any other animals that are like common?!!*

*cats, i guess.*

*cats and bids!!! cool!!!*

Kenma likes astrological symbolism. He likes hearing about people with planets in their veins, boys made of stars and sunshine, boys roaming the dark of the moon or smiles that have Jupiter in them. Hinata has to go eventually. He apologises, saying he can call Kenma later if he's not busy, and if he still wants someone to talk to. The way he says it makes Kenma think he knows
everything. It scares him.
yeah. ok. good luck with your game.

THANKS~!!!!

win for me ok
for u !!! :)

Kenma lets out a breath and sets his phone down on the floor beside him. He reasons that doesn't feel panicky anymore, at least. He actually feels kind of relaxed; a lot more comfortable until he thinks of his dad again, and then the anxiety, previously being quelled, is squirming up his throat.

Kuroo is at work. He could call, could ask him to leave--

All he does is affect lives. He's like the moon's pull on the ocean, forcing the tide back, forcing beautiful things left on shore to be tossed and turned until they are returned blunt-at-the-edges flotsam, a sad foamy mess of worn and dull treasure. Can he do this on his own?

He takes a breath, gauging the situation. He doesn't feel like he's going to cry anymore, but his hands are trembling.

He can do it. He'll be alright.

.

When Hinata comes back after his game, he asks if they can skype.

it totally wont be weird!!! like its ok if u dont want 2!!
i dont know...
i promise ill be fun! ill make it fun!
i dont know shouyou

ok how about this? well call, & u can decide when u see me if u wanna continue skyping. i wont even be offended if u hang up on me :D

Kenma stares at the texts and considers it. He's still dressed from class; his hair isn't too bad, he guesses, and it's just Hinata. Hinata looks at him all the time.

ok.

The sound of an impending skype call has always made him nervous. He sits and twiddles his thumbs, scrolls through Hinata's messages on his phone without really seeing any of them. The dial tone cuts off abruptly; Kenma's shoulders tense, the weight of the world, the outset of a storm, the pull of the ocean.

Hinata's-- slightly pixelated-- face is grinning back at him. He waves when Kenma looks up.

"See? This isn't bad. Totally fun, right?"

"Totally fun," Kenma murmurs back, the smallest smile on his face. Hinata has changed from his volleyball uniform into what looks like an old shirt; he's in an unfamiliar hotel room with headphones in, a cheesy grin on his face.

"...I don't really know what I'm doing."
"What do you mean?"

"Like, skype," Kenma looks away again. "I don't know. I've never been in a call by myself."

"Is it uncomfortable for you?"

"...It's intense."

"Ah." He sees Hinata's eyes light up, even with the terrible quality of the screen; all that brightness, all that life conveyed in just a few pixels. How is that fair? "Because I'm looking at you? I can look away."

"It's fine," Kenma says, rubbing at his arm so that he has something to do. Hinata got his point, dead on, without even having to ask-- that in itself is intense. But he's right, Kenma thinks. It is because he's looking at him, and because there's no one else but the two of them; Kenma is forced to look back.

"Tell me more about symbolism."

Breathe, he reminds himself. Breathe, breathe, like a living tree. Hinata is looking, but he is looking patiently, wide-blown eyes holding nothing in them to frighten. Kenma looks back. "Okay."

Something about sharing a computer screen is intimate. He can see himself in the bottom corner; his eyes keep straying there. Hinata seems to almost realise this every time and directs his attention back by speaking loudly or saying something ridiculous. They talk about symbolism and Hinata tells him about the game, recounting how they would have lost had Suga not gotten deadly serious in the last ten minutes. Kenma realises at some point that he's sharing a hotel room with others, because he hears one of them come in, and hears Hinata politely tell them to leave. This is met with an ugly string of curses followed by, 'it's my room, too, idiot.' Kenma waits for the voice to leave.

"Was that your roommate?"

"Yeah-- hey, how'd you know it was Kageyama?"

"Lucky guess. You don't have to keep skyping, you know. You can go hang out with your team."

"Nah." Hinata doesn't sound bothered. "I'd rather stay on with you. I've been with them all day, they won't mind. Hey, does Kuroo?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he was your only close friend, right? Is it making it weird... you and me, hanging out a lot--"

"Kuroo doesn't care. If he did it wouldn't be his business. I'm allowed to make friends."

Hinata grins. "I know you are, I didn't mean it like that. He's really special to you, yeah?"

"Yeah." Kenma looks down, and abruptly remembers his gift. "Oh-- I forgot to tell you. Tsukishima showed up at my door on Sunday morning and made me go with him to the mall."

"What? Why?"

"To help him find a birthday present for Kuroo."
Hinata's eyes have gone all wide. "Aaah," he breathes, clutching his chest. "That's... really romantic, actually."

"They're pretty gay, yeah."

"Is Kuroo into that? Big romantic gestures and everything."

Kenma smirks. "Exclusively."

"I totally knew it. He has the face, you know?" Kenma doesn't know, but he can imagine; he's always known Kuroo as an over-the-top flirter, aggressive and romantic as all hell. "What about you, Kenma?"

"Me?"

"Yeah." Unflinchingly, Hinata stares at him. "Are you into big, romantic gestures, or do you prefer quiet stuff? If-- ah, if you're into that at all."

Kenma has to think about it. He hasn't really been interested in anyone since high school. Even the people he did entertain fantasies about were strangers, and that only lasted four, five minutes tops while he was waiting for his train or trying to get to sleep. "I don't know," he answers honestly. "I guess I would kind of like quiet stuff. The people I've dated have always been that way. But... romance is... nice, too."

"You can't go wrong with flowers," Hinata agrees, nodding solemnly.

"Yeah. I don't think I'm on Kuroo's level. He's the kind of person who would hire an aeroplane to write his lover's name in the sky just to ask them to dinner."

Hinata laughs into the palm of his hand. "Hasn't he ever heard of texting?"

"I know. What happened to the good old box of chocolates? Everyone loves chocolates."

"I'll buy you chocolates," Hinata says. He realises what he's said a moment after and his pupils go wide. "I mean, everyone loves chocolates! S-so, you would have to buy me some too. It's friendship code."

"Friendship code," Kenma repeats, grinning. "You're sappy, Shouyou."

"Am not!"

"You are. You said it yourself, you like sappy people. That's because you love yourself so much."

"Well..." Hinata turns his chin up. "I think it's nice to love yourself! But I didn't, I said I like people with good hearts."

Kenma grins again. "Is that why you like me?"

He doesn't expect an answer. He doesn't expect Hinata's eyes to grow so serious, for the grin to disappear from his face the way it does. "Of course." He says it so unflinchingly. Kenma doesn't know what to do.

"I started seeing a therapist," he blurts out. His heart leaps to his throat as soon as the words are out. Why did he say it? Hinata's gonna freak out, ask him questions, want to know what's up--

"Really? That's awesome! I mean, only if you think it's awesome. What, um... how are you finding it?"
"It was... okay. I'm not used to it, because it's been a while. But the woman I got was really nice. She asked a lot about my friends."

Hinata grins. "Did I make the cut?"

"Confidential information."

His groan is a mile long. "Kenma, you're really unfair. I talk about you to lots of people!"

That piques his attention. Hinata seems to realise his mistake, when Kenma's eyebrows shoot up. "What do you say about me?"

Hinata's face goes pink. That's a first, thinks Kenma. He watches the other boy stammer over an explanation, tugging at the cord of his earphones with nervous fingers. "Th-that's... just that you're cool, and stuff. I was telling Asahi about how good you are at setting and he wanted to know stuff about you."


"Yeah, stuff."

"You suck at keeping secrets."

"It's not a secret!" He lowers his voice then, realising he's yelling. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, thinking you're being talked about and all that."

Something settles in Kenma's chest, something warm. He averts his gaze and stares at his phone screen. "I'm okay," he says honestly. "You... I told you I'm comfortable with you, so." He looks up again. Hinata is staring straight at him, enough emotion in his eyes to fill an ocean. Kenma puffs out a breath. "It's fine."

"I'm happy," Hinata manages, sounding beside himself. Kenma rolls his eyes.

"The sappiest person ever."

"Shut up!"

They skype for an hour more before Kageyama comes back into the room to tell Hinata that everyone is getting ready for dinner. It reminds Kenma of his own neglected stomach; they part ways and hang up and he makes his way over to Kuroo's, barely pausing to knock.

"Kuroo," he calls, slamming the door shut behind him. There is a swear from the other end of the house.

"Kenma-- hold on a minute."

"...Are you jerking off?"

"No. I'm just-- ugh, come here, I might be a minute."

Kenma does so nervously. It's not like it would make this the first time he's walked in-- or Kuroo has walked in-- on something neither has the business of seeing the other do, but he's actually fearful it's something worse. He finds Kuroo in the bathroom, struggling with a tin of paint and a weird plastic structure. It's shaped a little like the statue of liberty. Kenma stops at the doorway and watches.

"What's that?"
"My studio," Kuroo huffs, spinning around on one heel, "needs a scale model of some famous sculpture for the show. You know Ken's little brother?"

"...Shun?"

"Jun."

"Right." Kenma doesn't watch the show anymore.

"Well, it's meant to be like-- it's a thing my character's helping him with. They thought it would be authentic if one of us painted it."

"And you volunteered?"

"Of course not! One of my co-stars suggested I do it, since I'm artistic."

Kenma scoffs. The glare Kuroo shoots him in return is comical.

"I couldn't say no. Our producer was there and everything. Shit."

"It looks..." Kenma doesn't bother lying. "Anyway. I skyped Shouyou earlier."

"How did that go?" Kuroo gives him a sidelong glance, returning to his prop. There's paint all the way up to his elbows, coating the side of his bathtub.

"It was kind of awkward at first. We made fun of you."

"What, why?"

Kenma takes a seat on the floor of Kuroo's bathroom. "Why not?"

"You're so mean, Kenma."

He breathes a laugh. "I was just talking about how sappy you are. How you're into grand romantic gestures and all that."

"Am I?" he grunts with the effort of moving the sculpture, bending to paint a patch of white that he missed. "That's fair."

"I'm surprised you haven't scared Kei away yet."

"Hey," he warns. He's smiling, though, like the thought of Tsukishima sticking around is a nice one. He wipes his paint-covered hands on the front of his old shirt. "For Valentine's day, I'm thinking of taking him somewhere. Flying him across the country or something. He likes travelling."

"He'll get you back on White day. Kick your ass."

"With romance, hopefully." Kuroo looks somewhere far off, his eyes cast down and a dopey smile on his face. Kenma so, so badly wants to tell him about the birthday present. His tongue hurts from clamping down on it with his teeth so hard.

"Anyway. I don't know how you can stand it."

Kuroo looks surprised. "Stand what?"

"The grand romantic gestures. It's embarrassing."

Kuroo snorts unattractively. "That's because you're romantically impaired."
"I'm sorry?"

"No offense," Kuroo chooses to add, grinning at Kenma; he ushers him out of the bathroom, already taking his paint-coated shirt off over his head. "You're clueless, is all. You wouldn't recognise someone's feelings for you if they hit you in the face."

"Kuro," he says carefully, following him into his bedroom. "Could it be... are you in love with me?"

Kuroo shoves his shoulders on the way past. "You're just bitter because my life's running so smoothly. You wake up every morning, like, sigh. I wish I could be more like that Kuroo Tetsurou guy. What a hunk!"

"And then I turn off my Kuroo Tetsurou alarm, and brush my teeth with my Kuroo Tetsurou toothbrush."

Kuroo gives him a thumbs up. "Knew it. You want me to cook dinner?"

"I don't think my digestive system can take it. Can we order something Western?"

"Shit. That reminds me." Kuroo steps out of the bedroom, shrugging another shirt on over his head. "I need to talk to you."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No. Sit down."

Kenma sits. Kuroo sits beside him on the sofa and twiddles his thumbs, looking heavily distracted. Kenma has seen him get like this before; he gets like this often, in fact, when he's having trouble making a decision. Finally, he looks up.

"I got a role offer. It's a pretty big deal, but it's not going ahead until the start of next year."

Kenma stares at him, waiting for the other shoe to drop. "What's the problem?"

Kuroo sighs. "It's in L.A., Kenma."

Still, Kenma does not blink. The news weighs on him at a slow pace, settling like dust to the bottom of a pool. He blinks slowly, evenly, chatoyant gaze settling over Kuroo's. "Are you going to take it?"

"No. I don't know. That's why I'm talking to you. It's a really great opportunity, but I'd be overseas filming for a year. I mean, I could afford to take you with me, but I don't want to affect your studies like that."

"Wait, what?" It dawns on him. "You're considering saying no to this because of me."

Kuroo looks at him like that's meant to be obvious. "Of course. I'm not gonna abandon you here, but I don't think you should miss a year of school just because--"

"This is what I meant when I said I didn't want to get in the way. It's a good opportunity, so take it." He can't, he can't. He can't wait here a year alone while Kuroo goes off, he can't give up school for a year and jump back in the middle of a semester-- he can't do any of it, he can't.

"No, not until we talk about it. Look, I wasn't... it's not that great of a role anyway. But I don't care what you say, I'm not leaving you."

"What about Kei?"
Kuroo's eyes darken. "What about Kei?"

"Are you going to have this conversation with him? He's your boyfriend, you think he'd want to know if you were considering going to America for a year."

"He's not my boyfriend," Kuroo corrects, and his tone is so biting that Kenma almost jumps. "Alright? We're not... he hasn't talked about it. Even if we were official, do you think that would make one ounce of difference to how I feel about my best friend? We need to talk about this."

"We don't. We don't have to talk about anything. You want the job, you take it. I don't care."

Kuroo rakes his hands through his hair. "Is this about--"

"Don't."

"It's about Ryota. Isn't it?"

Kenma wants to stand. He wants to be dramatic and storm out of the room, slam the door on his way out and not talk to Kuroo for a long time. But he curls in on himself, hands shaking with the effort not to raise them and pull at his hair. His voice is far away, and it cracks when he tries to speak. "I said don't, Kuro."

Kuroo moves in and hugs him, so bone-crushingly that Kenma has no choice but to relax and hold him back. He feels his breath shudder out of him. He hates this. He wants to breathe fire, wants to break out his fists and stand taller than everyone and tell them to stop saying things about him, making assumptions. He hates it-- hates this, this awful look Kuroo is giving him, the pity there.

"How I feel has nothing to do with high school," he mutters into his best friend's shoulder.

"Okay."

"It has nothing to do with him."

"Yeah."

Kenma pulls away. It isn't often that he glares at Kuroo, but he can't help it; he can feel the darkness in his own eyes. "It has nothing to do with exes or my parents or anxiety, so stop it. I have feelings. You should consider them."

Kuroo lets out a long, exhausted breath, the edges of it rocking Kenma. He rests his head on the blonde's shoulder like he is the one who needs comforting. "Yeah. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said it like that. I know you don't want to feel like you're holding anyone back."

"So don't let me hold you back."

"It's not like that, alright?" Kuroo raises his head and narrows his eyes. "Have you ever considered that I like having you around? I would miss you, you know. And I'm not about to uproot both of our lives here just for some movie deal. I'll think about it, but it probably won't happen. So let me make that decision for myself."

He stares at Kenma, hard. The effort takes a lot out of him, but he manages it; he nods.

Kuroo stands from the sofa and stretches his arms above his head. "Pizza or Pasta?"

"...Pizza."
kenma, are u still up?

It's 1 in the morning. He's only up because he can't get back to sleep from his latest nightmare. He doesn't remember what the dream was about; only that Kuroo was in it, that he couldn't see him through all the trees.

yeah

aaa good

whats up?

i cant sleep, i keep thinking about stuff >:/

what kind of stuff?

just stuff!! & its rly bothering me, so can i call u?

The request takes Kenma aback. He's still half asleep, having been propped up against a pillow in bed so that he could browse the internet on his phone until he felt tired enough to go to sleep again.

isn't everyone there asleep?

i went outside!!

Kenma sighs. He really doesn't have anything to lose. It's late, and his apartment is silent, a slow-burning tunnel of dead noise and reaching shadows that have always made him nervous beyond the comfort of his bedroom. He realises abruptly how anxious he feels, how alone. The nightmare has left him feeling out in the open in the middle of a field, like his bed will rock him into oblivion any second. Rather than texting Hinata back, he calls.

The boy answers on the second ring. "Kenma."

His voice takes Kenma aback. It's soft and breathy, croaky with sleep-- or a lack of it. He can't say anything for a second, struck by the intimacy. It's like Hinata is in the room with him.

"Kenma, are you there?"

"Y-- yeah, I'm here, sorry. What's wrong?"

"I can't stop thinking about it," Hinata whispers. Kenma doesn't know what he's talking about. He doesn't want to ask and ruin this, ruin this soft spoken moment of hush they have on opposite ends of the line. He sits in silence and waits for Hinata to go on. "It's like-- you're smart, right?"

He doesn't lie. "I don't know. Probably."

"Yeah, yeah, you are, you're like--" Hinata's shuddery sigh does something to Kenma, deep in his chest. "You're really smart, Kenma. I'm not, y'know?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. What makes you say that?"
"I hated school. I only ever wanted to play volleyball. So I'm no good at that stuff."

Kenma takes in a deep breath, summoning the courage to speak. "Well, so what? I like you fine."

"Really?" He's not joking, Kenma realises. His voice has gone high with vulnerability, so easy to come across at this time of night. He makes a noise of solace, just on the edge of a whine. "That's a relief."

"What's this about, Hinata?"

"Over dinner everyone started talking about some book. Tsukishima brought it up. And then everyone was talking about that, and some other stuff I had no idea about." He sighs. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't bother you with this stuff, huh?" He laughs weakly.

Kenma has never heard him like this, and something about it gets to him. He grips the phone a little tighter and leans in, like it will make his words any less cheap. He feels so far away, so unable to help. "You're not bothering me."

"I am. It's fine! Do you want me to go so you can sleep?"

"Please don't," he says without thinking. Hinata is quiet. "I get... really bad nightmares. So I was awake anyway. Keep talking, please."

"Okay," Hinata whispers. Kenma hears shuffling, can imagine him dragging his feet, freezing cold outside in the dark so that none of his teammates hear him.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

"Um. Kind of. I've got a really big jacket on, so I'm okay. Are you?"

"I'm in bed," Kenma laughs. He can't shake the image in his mind of Hinata, hopeless in a huge coat. "Tell me more about what happened. What kind of book were they talking about?"

"Um, um. Something wood, I think--"

"Norwegian Wood. They were probably just talking about it because it had a movie adaptation."

"Yeah! That sounds familiar."

Kenma smiles. "It wasn't that good, if that makes you feel any better. The book, I mean. I found the romance really boring. Total guy stuff."

Hinata doesn't say anything for a while. Finally, "I'm not... really like the other guys, you know?"

"Sure you are." Kenma feels himself frown. "If anything, you're better. Anyway, it's overrated. The book I mean. Most of that stuff is."

"Really?" Hinata sounds honestly hopeful. It's too late; Kenma spares a glance at his digital clock. It's almost half past one in the morning and his limbs feel oddly lithe, like maybe he could fall asleep this way and not be bothered at all.

"Of course," he whispers. The line is silent for a moment, white noise between them, the gentle, slowly syncing sounds of their breathing.

"I wish I knew stuff, though. Y'know? You know stuff."

"Maybe you should download a trivia app," he suggests. Lamenting a little the fact that all of his solutions to problems chalk down to video games. "Just something simple. You might learn little
facts or pieces of information, and then you'd be able to tell people about them."

"That's... a really good idea, actually." Hinata sounds bewildered; Kenma can just imagine his face, and it kills him. "Aaah. You're so cool, Kenma."

"I'm not," he says, but he's smiling. His eyes feel heavy.

"I think I'll be okay now. Thank you for, um, talking to me so late."

"Yeah."

"...I'm really glad we're friends."

His face heats up. There's no way Hinata can see his expression, but embarrassment strikes iron hot anyway, speeding up his heart rate. It feels so intimate, having the other breathe those words in his ear. All of a sudden he realises how intimate the situation is in general; the middle of the night, speaking softly in the dark. Hinata isn't close enough to touch-- so many cities away-- but it's almost like he can feel his presence, a soft buzz in the atmosphere.

"We should have a sleepover when I get back."

Kenma laughs. It's ridiculous, he thinks. He's got a hand over his mouth and his eyes squeezed shut, the smile on his face too wide to ever be there in the light. "Sure," he says, because it doesn't matter anyway.

"Because of the nightmare thing. Maybe you won't have nightmares if I'm there."

He opens his eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"Ah-- well, I don't know," Hinata defends, sounding embarrassed. "It's just a guess. But anyway, if you have nightmares and I'm there, you can just wake me up and we'll play video games. It'll be great!"

"...Thanks, Shouyou."

"What are friends for?"

Kenma rolls his eyes. They both go to speak at the same time then, and a nervous giggle comes out instead, filling the silent space of the line.

"...I should go," Hinata complains. Kenma can hear the tiredness in his voice now; it wasn't there before. He feels a little satisfied knowing it was him that calmed that sunshine boy down, quelled that uncharacteristic anxiety he heard seeping into his voice when he first picked up the phone.

"When do you get back?"

"Next week. I'm back for the weekend again, then it's our last trip and game season is over."

"Are you excited?"

"Yeah. I love playing, but I'm excited to be home again."

Kenma makes a noise of assent, realising he's falling asleep. Hinata seems to realise at the same time he does; he laughs.

"I'll go so you can sleep, okay?"

"Okay," Kenma says. He's already lying down again.
"Goodnight, Kenma!"

"Night." The line clicks dead. He barely remembers to put his phone back on his bedside table, sleep is catching up to him so fast.

It isn't much, but when he falls asleep again, he doesn't have nightmares.

Hinata starts texting him random facts.

Kenma is confused for a while, and doesn't even remember giving the advice until Hinata explains it to him; apparently he went and downloaded the trivia app. Kenma gets countless texts in class, ranging from "did u know a rat can last longer without water than a camel" to "california is the worlds 5th largest supplier of food?? guess where im moving." A few days after the phone call--which neither of them discuss, oddly; not going out of their way to ignore it, but not going out of their way to bring it up either-- Kuroo shows up at his apartment on his way by just to tell him to get on facebook. He's been invited to a group chat with the rest of Hinata's team, and Kuroo.

**Kuroo**: I don't care if you don't think you're gonna make it right to finals?? I said I'd bake a cake and I'm gonna do it

**Daichi**: (thumbs up)

**Daichi**: No

**Daichi**: Sorry, I didn't mean that thumb

**Daichi**: Suga how do I

**Sugawara**: omfg

Kenma is taken aback by the sudden influx of messages. He nearly drops his phone when it starts vibrating.

**Tsukishima**: Hinata, shut up, I can hear you singing from the other end of the bus.

**Kuroo**: Babe~!!

**Kuroo**: <3

**Tsukishima Kei has left the chat**

**Kuroo**: </3

Kenma texts Kuroo immediately.

???
We're trying to plan a big celebration for when game season ends but everyone sucks at planning :-( :-(

...is that why you added me?

I added you because you're a part of the friendship group, brainiac.

Hinata: kenma!!!!

Kenma: do any of you actually play volleyball or is this what you do all day

Daichi: (thumbs up)

Sugawara: omgggg

Kuroo: You're all awful. I'm trying so hard here to plan something fun. We could be talking about a road trip right now. :(

Hinata Shouyou added Nishinoya Yuu

Nishinoya added Ryunosuke Tanaka

Nishinoya: the gaNG IS HERE

Tanaka: [PARTY SIRENS]

Nishinoya: WHAT ARE THOOOOOSE

Kuroo Tetsurou added Tsukishima Kei

Tsukishima: Why

Hinata: kenmaaa reply 2 my text !!!

Kenma: what text

Tanaka: gay

Hinata Shoyou has removed Rynosuke Tanaka

Nishinoya: gay

Asahi Azumane has removed Nishinoya Yuu

There is a message waiting for him; he feels embarrassed, having missed it, and replies immediately.

i think kuroo wants a bunch of us to go to an amusement park when we get back!!!!

are you gonna go

its an amusement park?? ocf?? wbu
Hinata Shouyou added Kageyama Tobio

Nishinoya: welcome 2 hell

Kageyama Tobio has left the chat

i guess so

awesome!!!! is the chat bothering u??

no. why would you say that?

i just wanted to make sure u were comfortable :0 can u stay on???

i have to go to therapy.

oooh ok!!! we should skype later :D

It's overwhelming. He's going to have to mute the chat so that it doesn't keep going off; he hasn't been in any kind of group conversation since high school. He's probably never known this many people at once, come to think of it. But the weight of it is warm in his stomach; heavy, like an anchor, and he leaves his apartment feeling happy.

sure.

The ends of the days blur together. Therapy is nothing new; just another person to reiterate to him what he already knows, to hint that he should try group therapy. She brings it up twice. The first time is just an off-the-cuff remark about how effective it apparently is; the second time she says, "I think it would be good for you, Kenma." He nods like he'll consider it.

Things are still tense between he and Kuroo from the fight about the movie deal. He's not used to having to watch what he says around his best friend; or used to thinking his best friend is watching what he's saying around Kenma. But there's a weird strain between them that drags on the day, fills it with miscommunication and awkward second glances. He doesn't know why he's not expecting it when it happens. Everything has to boil down eventually.

The Friday Hinata is supposed to get back, his dad texts him.

His dad never texts him. It's always a phone call, or on that one really cryptic occasion a letter in the mail; the words look strange on his phone screen, staring back at him as if with physical eyes.

We can organise for you to come down during Christmas break. In the mean time, please consider what we spoke about.

It's like the weight of a ship finally crashing down on him. He hasn't had time to think about it; he's been so busy with school, with therapy, with friends. Kuroo's been paying for his health treatment; he's going to have to tell his parents eventually.

Maybe he doesn't.

He hopes against all hopes that Kuroo is home. He didn't get a chance to talk to him this morning before class, rushing off with his coffee in a thermos because he woke up late. As it is now it feels
like the whole impact of his week is dawning on him. Is that just a Friday thing? He forgets his phone, going straight over to the apartment a few metres from his own. The rush of emotion that hits him when the door opens on its own is unreal.

"Kuroo," he calls. His best friend ducks his head around the corner leading to the kitchen, arching an eyebrow.

"When did chivalry die? You could knock, you know."

"I need to talk to you."

He steps into the living room, drying his hands on a dish towel. Kenma is over there cleaning so often that the sight of Kuroo attempting to do so is bizarre.

"What's up?" he asks. "Did something happen this morning?"

"Yes. No. My parents want me to stay with them over the holidays."

Kuroo's grin is wiped from his face in an instant. "Are you gonna go?" He leaves the dish towel over the arm of the sofa, approaching Kenma. He can't look Kuroo in the eyes. He regrets coming over, almost.

"I don't know. Should I?"

"I could take some time out from acting, come down with you. It doesn't have to be like last time."

"It would." The situation's all wrong, he knows. Kuroo's going to miss another movie opportunity. He's going to offer to pay Kenma's tuition; they'll have to move in together to save money, will have to start budgeting again like they did those first five months they were on their own for. "I probably won't go. Don't worry about it."

"That's a big call." Kuroo's eyes are dark. "I'll support you no matter what. You could stop taking their calls altogether."

He heaves in a breath. "I think I'm gonna get a job."

"What?" Kuroo pauses as if forgetting what he was going to say, eyes going wide. "Do you think you can?"

"I'm not useless."

"I know you're not." He squeezes the bridge of his nose, eyes screwed shut. Kenma waits for the lethargy to set in, that panic-ache in his bones. It doesn't; something hot is waiting there instead, rising up his throat like bile.

"Then why do you act like it?" he snaps. The intensity of his own voice surprises him; Kuroo's head snaps up. "You act like you know better than me what I can and can't handle."

He rakes his hands through his hair. "I just don't wanna see you going back to that dark place, Kenma. I don't want you to jump into something you're not ready for--"

"How would you know if I was ready? Stop acting like you know more about me than I do."

"I'm not trying to act that way! You're the one who says all the time that he doesn't care about anything, that he isn't interesting in anything."

"Because I'm not." His hands are in fists.
Kuroo's gaze doesn't waver, hard on his and dark with narrowed lids. "I don't think that's true," he says slowly, "and I don't think you do either."

"You have no idea what I think."

This is what he's been looking for, he thinks. This anger, pervasive and coiled tightly where purpose should be in his joints, encouraging him. Kenma turns and walks straight out the door without looking back.

It's like all this timorous tension between them has finally broken loose and snapped in the middle, setting him on fire. Stars burst behind his eyelids and Kuroo doesn't follow him. It has been building up, and yet it feels so sudden, this storm of his, this thunder in his steps and his curled fists.

He's rushed out in such a daze that he doesn't notice Hinata and almost smacks straight into him. The boy cries out. There's a moment where Kenma thinks he's going to fling his arms around him and let himself be vulnerable again, just a split second of dissolving anger. He steps back instead, averting his gaze.

"Hey, I was just coming over! You didn't reply to my text," Hinata chirps. The smile disappears from his face when Kenma's stance doesn't change. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he says; his eyes meet Hinata's and suddenly, abruptly, he doesn't want to think about it anymore. He reaches out and grabs the other's wrist. "Let's go somewhere."

Hinata drives them to the school. Kenma says nothing the whole time, pretending like he can't see the wary glances he's being thrown. He stalks straight ahead and past the gates, the same route they walked last time; he can hear Hinata struggling to keep up behind him. He's the first one up the wall and through the window this time. He waits with a hand out for Hinata, looking him dead in the eyes. Hinata's got a strange look in his own when he accepts it, allowing himself to be pulled in.

"Slow down a bit, you nearly tore my arm off," Hinata laughs nervously. It's dark; Kenma glowers as he tries to search for the light, blinking when it suddenly comes on. Hinata stares back at him from the light box, inches from where his hand was already fumbling.

"Hey," he says. He's touching Kenma's wrist. He does it tenderly, like he's afraid it might snap off if he squeezes too hard; it's a strange gesture coming from a guy who jumps into everything headfirst and with his eyes closed. Kenma wants to allow the motions to rile him up again, but Hinata's touch relaxes him for a moment. It only lasts a moment. He looks up and thinks of Kuroo and his tender stare-- just like Hinata's, like he knows Kenma at the kind of intimate depth with which he has never known himself. He lets his wrist fall back to his side, and turns for the supply shed.

"I'll toss to you."

"Um. Okay? Just like last time?"

"Sure." Kenma keeps his responses clipped, gritting his teeth. He hauls the door up-- which is harder than it looks, given his frame-- and retrieves the sad, greying ball from its depths. "We'll toss back and forth. Try not to drop it."
"Please, I'm a professional." Hinata grins. The tinge of nervousness in his tone doesn't go unnoticed. He can't be used to Kenma and his mood swings, or at least not used to the biting way his actions hit. He tosses the ball into the air, letting his palms smack straight into its centre.

He expects Hinata to miss. It was a bad set, and he knows by now that the secret to getting Hinata to spike or hit a throw is to aim for him. But Hinata leaps sideways for it, catching Kenma off guard; the return whizzes right by his ear. It stirs the hair there and he stills, utterly cold.

After a long moment of silence, he casts his eyes down and away and turns to retrieve the ball. He didn't expect Hinata to dive for it. He didn't expect Hinata to know how or where he was going to hit it, to understand how to hit back, to accept a toss like that without a word of complaint. Instead of calming him down the thought drives his anger forward, so that he curls his fingers violently inwards when he picks up the volleyball. Like curled claws or talons he wants to tear past its skin and receive the wet, warm parts from inside. He wants to open up a pit of everything that has ever meant anything and let it bleed all over the place.

His next hit is more concise. They toss to each other for a while, neither saying a word but both clearly aware of the atmosphere. You could cut the tension in the room with a knife; it's this inky thing that seeps in from the cold radiating off of the walls and the floor, like the blackest parts of a sub-zero ocean. Hinata makes the mistake of meeting his eyes. His lips twist into a smile, and even in the poorly lit space of the old gym Kenma can see everything. The halcyon earth and chocolate, those splayed and faint freckles. He lets the ball fall to the floor dramatically and runs a hand through his hair.

"Why do you like this game?"

"H-huh?" Hinata is taken aback. It pisses him off, eggs him on, and he steps forward, crowding the other's personal space.

"It's just a game, right? How can you look so happy while you're playing it? You put so much time, and effort, and love into it-- it's just a game. I don't get it, I don't get how someone can think that something is interesting enough to devote time and feeling to like that. So how come?"

His shoulders are heaving. The room has fallen into a capped silence, one he only feels the full impact of when he finally stops speaking. The backlash of his own words, echoing into the empty-- and yet somehow crowdingly full-- space around them makes him retreat a few steps backwards. Because Hinata doesn't look mad. No, not this sunshine boy, not this thing birthed so purely of light and the genuine warmth of summer wearing down on bare skin and tanned legs; not Hinata, never Hinata. He meets Kenma's eyes and he smiles.

"Because it makes me happy."

Kenma doesn't know what to say. He stares, shoulders still heaving like he is coming down from a fight.

"Ah-- I know that probably sounds silly coming from me." Hinata raises a hand to rub at the back of his neck, dropping his own gaze in order to smile at the far wall. "I'm not good with words, so I don't know how to explain it. But I guess I always felt... a little vulnerable growing up. Do you ever get that feeling like no matter what you do or where you go in the world, it's like there's just one piece of your puzzle missing and everyone can tell?" He pauses to meet Kenma's eyes, but he doesn't expect an answer. Kenma doesn't have one to give verbally, but the word is tumbling over and over in his head, a subtle mantra. Yes, yes, yes. "It might just be because I'm, like, short, y'know? I was even shorter back then. There was this one player I really liked who was just as small as me. I decided to start playing because of him and then it became my goal. Because it made me feel powerful, you know? Like, I don't know, there wasn't even a puzzle to begin with? I was just bare and all the spaces where my pieces should go, they were out on display for everyone to see, and I was okay with it. I made so many friends. It was okay when I messed up,
and it was even more okay when I did something right. That's... the thing about volleyball, I think. There's some kind of language in the way you move and make decisions that makes up for any lack of words. If that, um, makes sense."

Kenma is gawking now, and Hinata seems to realise it. The hand goes back to rubbing his neck. "Oh man, I said way too much. That was, like, word vomit."

"I'm sorry," Kenma blurts. Hinata's eyes crinkle at the corners.

"For what? It was a good question, I think."

"I just... I can't understand. I want to care about things like that. I want to love things."

That sobers Hinata up. He realises what he's said too late, the full impact of his words weighing like a miniature planet. And of all the cosmic reactions, of all the fucking astrological alignments that could guide those unnameable feelings he knows have been building up, it has to be the sun.

"I don't want it to seem like I'm telling you things about yourself you disagree with, so if you don't think I'm right, forget I said anything." His cheeks are dusted the colour of peaches. Right across the bridge of his nose, those freckles that Kenma has seen up close, in stark contrast to his jeans when Hinata lay in his lap. "But I think you care about a lot of things, and I think you have a lot of love in you. And I think it scares you a little."

It scares him because he knows he is vulnerable. Because standing here now, saying these words back and forth to each other like it's a normal thing to do: there's no coming back from that. You can't cut out a piece of yourself and pass it in cupped hands to another person and expect them to look at you, open wound and bleeding, the same again. It's asking the world; a world he doesn't understand. Hinata is waiting for his answer this time. He swallows like he's tasting knives.

"I don't know if that's true or not. I have trouble understanding anything about myself."

Hinata grins like the light. "Yeah, Kenma, you've got a really intricate brain and all that. It's probably always, like, whirring, like wwwhhiirr." He makes an exaggerated facial expression and tries to mimic the sound of a computer processing too much information and Kenma bursts out laughing so hard that tears prickle in his eyes. He tries to catch it all frantically in his hands, like rain drops, like Hinata can't see him through the gaps in his fingers and see his open wounds and love him for them. When he stops laughing, he has finally, mercilessly calmed down.

"I feel like I've known you a lot longer than I actually have."

Hinata steps back into his personal space. It doesn't choke him like he expects it to. "That makes me so happy, I really wanna hug you."

Life is about making fast decisions. Like the moon and the solar tides, pushing and pulling the ocean without time to dwell or give mercy, he has to push and pull the strings of his life. "Hug me, then."

Hinata does. It's not like the last time they embraced; it's warm and intimate, his head tucked too close to Hinata's neck for him to breathe any other air than that which surrounds Hinata. Orange blossoms and some masculine deodorant; something woody and deep, tucked neatly into the woven details of his clothing. He curls his hands in the other's sweatshirt; feels Hinata laugh musically into his hair.

When he pulls away they're so close, their noses almost brush. Something tired and almost drunken has settled over Kenma; a thick and hazy cloud, making the edges of his gestures blur and gestate. He's exhausted; his emotions are exhausted. Something hits him deep in the chest like a word balancing precariously on the tip of his tongue, and frantically he tries to name it, to
pronounce it, whatever it is. The feeling--

"We should totally have a sleepover right now and gossip about everyone we hate."

The feeling isn't important. What's important is that he's warm, and he smiles, and it feels real.

"Right now?"

"Yeah, right now. Your place is way more exciting than mine."

He thinks about it for only a moment; solar tides. "Okay," he says, "but I have an idea. I wanna show you something."

Chapter End Notes

kuroo and kenma's friendship is strained..... some stuff is definitely building up....... & hmm kenma i wonder what that feeling is, i truly do

preview for next time: late night pseudo ritual magick somewhere vast and beautiful, roller coasters, someone has #thicc thighs & it makes someone else blushu

as always hmu @ cloverguts.tumblr.com. im smol and i love attention.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

theres a haircutting scene (stares @ my bf hard)

Chapter Notes

thank you so much zad and oliver for the fan art!!!! still crying, ur both beautiful
http://ollizers.tumblr.com/post/123767883617/wow-youre-really-good-at-that-a-scene-of

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He hasn't been up on the roof of his apartment for weeks; months, probably, since it's colder now and whatever rebellious part of him fantasized about coming up here to smoke and write philosophical poetry died with the summer sun.

He and Kuroo used to come up to sit and stare over the city and talk about what to do next. It was the safest place to do that. Anywhere else and there wouldn't be noise to drown it all out, the chaotic thrum of cars beneath to distract him from the fact that his life was not a thing he could figure from a safe distance. It's something right along the edge of sonder; taking into account all the moving hands and pumping hearts down below and realising your problems must be easier to solve than they seem.

Hinata's own hands are shivering and clutching the bag he brought with him. It is despairingly empty save for a half full bottle of water, a phone, and a wallet. Kenma would give him a jacket to wear over his sweatshirt if he even had one for himself.

The wind is not roaring tonight, so he can easily speak to Hinata at a regular volume and be heard over the noise of cars below. The moment they step out onto the roof something changes in the redhead's eyes. They become lit up as if consumed by stars, reflecting the dancing lights of the city that stretch on for miles.

"Kenma, is this where you come to think and be angsty and everything?"

Kenma whacks his arm playfully and sits down. They're a fair way away from the edge, so he props his back against the door they entered through, Hinata lingering nervously.

"What?" he asks, quirking an eyebrow. The other turns his chin up.

"I'm cold. This is the weirdest hangout spot ever for this time of night. It's almost Winter." He slumps down beside Kenma nevertheless, albeit sparing a few darting glances around to judge the distance between them and the edges of the roof.

Kenma shrugs. "We can go inside if you don't like it. I just thought, since we were talking about it, I could show you something I think I care about."

That gets Hinata's attention. His lips go silent but his eyes speak monuments, whirring away with
the mirrored reflection of the city. It's enchanting, watching all those dazzling specks of brightness move like fairy lights over the horizon of the city and in the dark of Hinata's eyes. He must really be freezing; his hands haven't stopped shaking.

Kenma moves to cup them in his own. The squeak Hinata lets out is borderline hilarious. He hums softly under his breath, barely batting an eyelid as he tries to warm the icy digits in his own, moving with a languid friction that sparks more lunar coldness than it does kinetic warmth. Hinata doesn't seem to mind, though. He's enchanted by the place where they touch.

"I used to write up here, actually."

Hinata looks up. Kenma can't help his smile, nudging the other again.

"Don't look at me like that."

"S-sorry!" He turns his head away, but doesn't make any effort to pull his hands back. "I'm trying to picture you writing is all. You're, ah, good with words, so I think you would be really good at it!"

Kenma shrugs. "I'm better at analysing. I can figure things out, and make quick decisions about the meaning of something. Everyone used to call me 'brain'."

"That's kind of a cute nickname. Kageyama calls me 'asshole'."

Kenma drops his hands and gives him a serious look. "You do trash his kitchen kind of often."

"Hey! Our kitchen, and I do not! I'm making it looked lived in. I'm giving it some character."

"You destroy everything you touch."

"Touch," Hinata mimics, reaching a hand out to poke Kenma's cheek like a five-year-old. It's so childish, it's so silly, and Kenma swats his hand away and chokes on a giggle with everything he has. He simulates, under his breath, the sound of a bomb going off. His own destruction at the hands of Hinata. Then the redhead starts laughing and Kenma is gone again.

There's something about the sweetness and the crispness of the night air that he blames for how his head feels. They lean into each other and laugh manically for close to five minutes, struggling to breathe around it. They stop laughing and start talking-- pointless things, jokes, friends-- and Kenma stares at Hinata's hands. They're kind of pretty. He has long, slim fingers, bony around the knuckles, bitten and chewed nails. Kenma clips his own when he remembers; presently he wrings them, twisting digits together like he is playing an instrument.

"So you've been using that trivia app?"

"Yes, oh my God. I'm learning so much. Like, I actually went and did further reading the other day because of it."

Kenma fakes an over the top impressed expression. "Reading. Dread."

Hinata hits him. Their shoulders brush and he doesn't move away. "I was reading about, um, rituals. Like you know, symbolic stuff, witchcraft and everything, and I thought of you because hey, symbolism."

That makes Kenma feel warm for a second, but he ignores it. "What kind of rituals?"

"I forgot most of them. There were ones for 'throwing your worries to the wind', and success, money, love." He meets Kenma's eyes and grins dazzlingly. "Hey, we should do one."
"Right now?"

"Sure, why not? You don't need much. It's all about symbolism anyway."

They sit cross legged and face each other with Hinata's half empty bottle of water. They lay a hand each on either of its sides and try not to giggle when they meet eyes; Hinata rants, something about charging the water with energy.

"It's like, it symbolises, like, all of our worries or something," he says, eyes bugging wide. "Because human problems are fickle. That's what the webpage said. It was really deep."

"Do we drink it?"

"No! We've gotta, um, finish charging it. And then we scatter it to the wind."

"Scatter it. To the wind."

"Symbolism. Don't be a party pooper."

Hinata tells him to stare hard at the plastic bottle and think of all the things that have been bothering him lately. It isn't hard; images of his parents and his medication scripts and Kuroo come to mind, rolling through him in waves. It's over quickly, and he opens his eyes to watch Hinata. The guy's got his face scrunched up, his mouth a hard line, and Kenma wonders what he must be thinking about. There are things in this world ugly enough and painful enough to break through the barriers of this boy made of sunshine and starlight; there are things cold enough to quell his warmth. Kenma could easily be one of those things; they're digging themselves in too deep now, caring setting in like stone. He knows he is a shadow that covers the bigger half of a crescent and he must be freezing parts of Hinata, making them so chilly that his hands shake while he sits on a rooftop in the middle of the night. Or maybe it's not that, and he's just afraid of heights.

Hinata opens his eyes finally and grins at Kenma. They unscrew the cap of the bottle and take turns flicking droplets everywhere. Droplets of cold water, turning icy in the night air. It isn't windy enough for them to go anywhere; they disappear into the black colour of the sky, land wetly on the cement around them. He watches them form like stars, splatter dully so that they make up formless shapes. They make the tips of Kenma's fingers numb where they touch, and with some regret, he reasons that it's probably time to go inside.

He realises how cold he was only when the warm air hits him from inside. Gratefully, he sinks into it, locking the apartment door behind him once Hinata has stepped through and assaulted his sofa. He sinks into it face first and outright moans.

"Dramatic," Kenma accuses, cranking up the heating another five degrees. Hinata mutters something he doesn't quite catch into the cushions.

"What?"

"I'm hungry." He raises his head to glare at the blonde, but it has about the same effect as a puppy getting mad. Kenma grins from behind his fist.

"You're not very intimidating."

"Sure I am! Do you have food?"

"Why wouldn't I have food? I live here."

Hinata gets up and stalks off to the kitchen, making a show of stomping and sifting through the refrigerator. Kenma, unperturbed, switches on the TV. Hinata returns minutes later with a piled-high bowl of crisps and glares at the screen. "Is that a horror movie?"
"Yeah."

"Don't do this to me."

"Why not?" Kenma is grinning. "You scared?"

"Um, yes?" Hinata stares incredulously as he takes a seat on the sofa beside him. "Monsters, blood and icky stuff, dying. Like a normal person, I'm scared of that stuff."

"Pfft." Kenma laughs harder when he realises Hinata is glaring at him. "Sorry. We don't have to watch it."

The sigh that escapes him is drawn out and dramatic enough to rival Kuroo's acting skills. "It's fine, I guess. Maybe it won't be so scary with you here."

He smirks. He doesn't even need to say it. Hinata starts whining, and reaches for a pillow to cover his face with. "If you call me that word one more time!"

"What word? There's no word." Kenma takes a deliberate sip of his drink and looks away. "That's odd."

"What is?"

He grins. "This drink tastes kind of sappy."

Hinata flings the pillow at him so hard he topples into the other side of the sofa, laughing breathlessly. He still feels lithe and dreamy from before, and the laughter rolls from him nervously, as if his body is bewildered by the sound he is making. Hinata is giggling too, trying furiously to stamp it behind his fist, peering at Kenma from under his lashes. To get him back he switches the movie on, gesturing with the remote. "Y'know, there are a lot of monsters in this movie."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. They come after orange-haired volleyball players."

"You're so mean!" He whacks him in the arm this time, and then falls forward, burying his head there. Kenma twists his lips and looks down at him.

"...Are you going to stay there for the whole movie?"

Hinata's voice is muffled. "No. Maybe." He glances up. "If I have nightmares, you have to take responsibility and wait up all night with me."

It's ridiculous, but his cheeks feel warm suddenly. He glares at Hinata like it will make any difference. "In that case, I'll go to sleep now."

"You can't!"

He hums in assent, his final reply before turning his attention to the movie. The opening scene is finally coming into play, the protagonist walking with her best friend whilst foreboding music warns of the terror to come. Hinata doesn't quite move far enough away from his arm to give him his personal space back. In all the events of the night, he really doesn't mind.

"Do you know how to cut hair?"

Hinata looks up. They're on the third movie now, and there's a half-empty bowl of popcorn
teetering between them. He realises it was a weird question; he waits, blinking slowly.

"Um. I don't know? I've cut my own before. Why?"

He sets down the remote. "Never mind."

"Were you gonna ask me to cut yours?" Hinata's eyes are sparkling. Kenma realises too late that he's made a mistake when the other leans forward, closing his hands into fists on his lap. "I'm not that bad! Kageyama even let me cut his hair once!"

"It's not like I want it all cut off," Kenma mumbles. He could look at Hinata, meet his eyes, but he knows that would make it an even worse mistake. He keeps his gaze ahead at the screen without really seeing anything. "It's getting too long at the back." And I don't have the confidence to go to a hairdresser, he thinks, but chooses not to add that part out loud.

When he finally looks at Hinata, his eyes are still sparkling. "Yeah! I mean, of course. Can I do it right now?"

"...Sure."

"In the bathroom?"

They leave their movie running and go to sit in Kenma's bathroom. He checks the clock on the way past; it's a little past 1 in the morning, and he feels loose at the joints, like he might fall apart or float away or both at any given moment. He rescues the old case from the back of his cabinet, sets a pair of scissors down on the counter beside Hinata.

"Where do you want me to sit?" he asks. Hinata looks around nervously.

"Um. Should we get a chair? No, you might be too high up for me... uhh, the floor? Oh!" He turns to the bath with excited eyes, gesturing wildly. "I'm a genius. Get in the tub, I can just sit behind you!"

Kenma climbs in without arguing. He hears Hinata clamber in after him, catches his eye in the mirror briefly as they're both sitting down. Then there is the snip of scissors in bare air, and Hinata's breathless, giggly laughter. "Did you think I was gonna cut your ear off?"

He breathes in. "No. Were you?"

Defeat is evident in Hinata's tone, bleeding into it. "I was trying to scare you. How come you get to be the tough, brave one all the time?" Kenma doesn't know how to answer that question. He doesn't know how to word that he's not tough or brave at all, but suddenly Hinata's fingers are in his hair and he loses the ability to speak. He's gentler than Kenma expects. Hinata threads his fingers through the longer strands at the back, moves the pads of his fingertips across Kenma's scalp. He relaxes into the touch, shutting his eyes.

"Okay, I'm just trying to work out how I'm going to... like, I don't want to give you an uneven cut- heh. Kenma, you're kind of acting like a cat right now."

He breathes in. "No. Were you?"

"Kinda surprised you're not purring at this point."

He shrugs, eyes slipping shut. He's still leaning into the touch. "Feels nice," he murmers. Hinata plays with his hair some more, pulling his fingers through the strands.

"Alright," he says quietly, "I think I know what I'm doing. Can I...?"
Kenma only realises how tired he is when he opens his eyes. He glances back at Hinata over his shoulder, who is waiting unsurely with the scissors in his hand. "Sure."

The first snip of the scissors is dreamy, some far-away noise like warped music through a tunnel. Hinata cuts carefully, chatting lightly about the movie while he does so. At some point the sound from the TV carries to the bathroom, an abrupt scream, and they both jump so suddenly that Hinata almost cuts his finger off. He spends the next minute laughing manically into Kenma's shoulder, rocking the both of them.

Kenma cuts Hinata's hair when he's done, hands shaking. He fixes up the front and tries to tame the back. Hinata hums happily when he runs his fingers through it, trying to get a feel for its softness, to dig down to its roots. It's weird to see someone with such a nice natural colour. It's paler up close; he can see how it might have been blonde, how the vibrant orange took over. He thinks of the freckles across the bridge of his nose and whether there are any more on his shoulders; he has to have spent so long in the sun. Hinata scoots around to face him while he snips at the too-long bangs again, scattering hair across his forehead.

He stares at him while he does it. It's intense, having the other's gaze on him like that, sleepy and unyielding, half-lidded while he watches Kenma concentrate.

"Your tongue's kinda sticking out," he says.

Kenma realises it is. He has a bad habit of letting his tongue stick out from between his lips when he's really concentrating on a book, or thinking hard about an analysis. Rather than letting himself feel embarrassed about it, he gives Hinata a sleepy, albeit shy smile. "You broke my concentration. I'm gonna give you a mohawk now."

"Ahh, that would be so cool! Kenma, do you think you can really do it?"

"Tch." He goes back to cutting, unable to stifle his smile.

"So like... where am I sleeping?"

"Do you want to sleep?"

Hinata shrugs. "Maybe. I'm kinda sleepy. Do you want me to take the couch?"

Kenma shrugs. He's too tired to think, which is a first for him; he hasn't been this exhausted without medication in a long time. It's only that thought that reminds him to take it. He jerks a thumb back in the direction of his bathroom. "I'm gonna go shower," he says. "There's a spare mattress under my bed. You can..." he trails off. He could offer his bed-- it's not like it isn't big enough, and don't people do that at sleepovers? He's certainly done it with Kuroo before. For whatever reason, something about their situation feels far, far too different. Flushed, Kenma finishes, "You can put it in the living room. If you don't want to, um, sleep on the couch." He shrugs. "Yeah."

Hinata doesn't reply. He shuts the door to the bathroom behind him, unsure why he's suddenly so exhausted.

When he comes out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam, toweling his hair dry, Hinata is asleep on his bed. He doesn't know what to do. The longer he stares, the more Kenma feels his cheeks warming, panic beginning to set his heart at a steady thrum. Hinata has stolen one of his shirts. Just one of the old grey ones that are too big for him-- the ones he keeps to wear to bed himself--
but he's removed his pants in favour of boxers, too, and is sprawled across the sheets like maybe he was waiting for Kenma to get out of the shower.

The moment hits him like an exhausted tonne of bricks, and slowly, perniciously, he lowers himself to sit on the edge of his own bed, and puts his head in his hands.

It's kind of... cute.

Kind of really cute.

Hinata is breathing in and out deeply, that slow sleep cycle breath, and he sounds just like the sea. The gentle rise and fall of it, the call of the tide and the wind rocking the waves rolling up to lap at the sand like they did that day he moved. The ocean has always meant chaos and calm to him, like the sun and the moon and all the little instances of his life. He remembers deafening roars like white noise at night while he tried to sleep, awake at 4 am and imagining the creaking of their house was the creaking of a boat. He remembers a calm like nature hushing him the day he left.

Kenma peaks through his fingers and watches Hinata breathe, feeling creepy.

He's a heavy sleeper. His whole body moves with it, hair splayed across Kenma's pillow like a splash of sunlight. The movie they left on has long since finished; he can hear its title scene playing over and over in the living room, probably lighting it up blue like this room is lit up blue. Kenma doesn't know whether it's the moon, the light outside, or something deep inside of him that's turning Hinata this colour, but it's the strangest colour he's ever seen on him. It isn't exactly cold like he would have expected.

For an inextricable moment, Kenma considers lying down beside him and going to sleep. He doesn't know what would happen if he shut his eyes and thought about his feelings for more than a minute. He doesn't know what would happen if they woke up together, if Hinata looked at him and this time he had nowhere to hide in the light. Quietly, so he doesn't wake him, he tugs the mattress from under his bed and drags it to the living room. He heads back into his room for a pillow and pauses in the doorway, going back only once he's decided that he doesn't want Hinata to freeze to death. He lays the blanket over him as subtly as he can manage, watching as the edges shake.

Kenma all but collapses onto the mattress once he returns out to the living room, and once the room is in darkness, the film no longer playing, only Hinata's tide, still audible through the walls, is there to send him to sleep.

Kenma wakes up to the smell of cheap coffee.

"Shit! Shit shit shit, damn."

He lies there with his eyes half open, trying to adjust. Is someone swearing? Someone's in his kitchen.

"Okay-- ahh, shit. I can fix this. Where's the--"

Hinata is in his kitchen.

Groggily, Kenma sits up in bed, holding his head in his hand. The time...?

There's a loud bang, followed by a muffled swear from his kitchen. It doesn't exactly shoot him into action, but it's enough to wake Kenma up. He rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands and regretfully leaves the warmth of the mattress, stretching his back. "Shouyou?" he calls. His voice is raspy with sleep. The banging immediately stops.
"Uhh-- Kenma, before you ask, I *definitely* did not break an egg on your floor, and, um. Um."

He rounds the corner to the kitchen, and finds Hinata standing in a pile of mess.

Somehow. Somehow, he has managed to break Kenma's kitchen within less than one morning of being in it.

"...What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry." There's a despairing look on his face, one that is entirely genuine; his eyes are all wide and sparkly. "I thought, since you let me stay over, it would be nice of me to, like, make you breakfast? But, um, I couldn't find any of the ingredients to an omelette, since that's all I know how to make, so I went to the store, but then the store was like? Out of the brand of cheese I normally use. So I just got the regular stuff and hurried back because I didn't want you to wake up and think I ditched? Um, so I got back, and I made you coffee, because I know you drink it even though it's totally gross. I don't really know how to make coffee. And I couldn't find your pans. Also I broke some eggs." He looks down at his feet, where there are shells and goo he hasn't cleaned yet. Kenma eyes it noncommittally. It's way too early in the morning for any of this.

Saying nothing in response, he walks over and takes the coffee from Hinata, sipping at it liberally. He reels back in surprise. Or, as surprised as he can be at... he checks the microwave clock. 9 am. Jesus.

"You... how do you know how I take my coffee?"

"Huh? Oh, I think you mentioned it once." Hinata rubs the back of his head sheepishly. "Is it okay? I said I didn't know what I was doing."

"It's good," he says. As good as instant can be. Maintaining eye contact, he takes another sip just to make his point. Hinata beams like the sun, turning back to the mess of his omelette. He walks around to the other side of him, leaning against the fridge door while he wakes up. "Do you need help?"

"Ah-- nah, I think I've got it."

He definitely doesn't 'got it', whatever 'it' is, Kenma thinks. Lazily, he moves around Hinata to get to the pantry, looking for paper towels.

"You're kinda slow to start in the mornings, huh?"

"Mph," he replies. He doesn't dignify it with any other response. Leaving the paper towel roll next to Hinata, he next goes for some plates and cutlery, pausing to yawn into the crook of his arm.

"You're a morning person. You should have told me, I might not have wanted to be your friend."

Hinata laughs. It's the kind of ataraxic noise you can't complain about waking up to. "I'm a little loopy when I first wake up, I think. But mornings are great! Day time's great!"

"If you weren't here I would still be in bed."

Hinata grins. "Staying in bed all day's great too. We should do it some time!" He seems to realise what he's said a moment after. *That* wakes Kenma up for sure. Hinata starts stammering some explanation, cheeks gone red, and Kenma shoves a plate at him.

"Here. For the. Eggs."
Hinata takes it wordlessly. He's gone quiet now, apparently focused on cooking.

When the omelettes are done they sit in the living room and Kenma boots up a generic fighting game. They eat while they stare at the title screen; Kenma chews silently. Hinata speaks through his mouthfuls about how he remembers the game from childhood, how he's really sorry for falling asleep in Kenma's bed and stealing Kenma's clothes but it was all really comfortable. Kenma says nothing to that, but chews silently. He doesn't tell Hinata that it's okay, and he certainly doesn't tell Hinata that he sat there and watched him sleep for a good five minutes having a meltdown over the fact that he was actually happy and comfortable for once. They play for a while once they're finished with breakfast, Kenma winning 4 to 1; Hinata whines for a rematch and he wins 3 to 2 this time. He has to go eventually. Kenma doesn't bother thinking about why that bothers him, the fact that Hinata has to go at all. He sees him off at the door; Hinata turns around three times to wave goodbye. He makes the mistake, once the redhead has left, of turning the notifications back on his phone as he's cleaning up. He doesn't bother addressing the fact that he turned them off in the first place in favour of Hinata's attention, or what that even means; Facebook starts wailing at him.

The group name has changed so many times he doesn't even bother keeping up anymore. It still gives him a shock, seeing all those messages appear on screen.

Something must be going down for everyone to be talking at once. Sure, there are usually an influx of messages for him to go through after class; he doesn't actually bother responding to any of them, unless Hinata specifically requests his presence. (One time he had to break up an argument between him and Nishinoya on the topic of some movie. Hinata was wrong, but Kenma defended him anyway.)

Sugawara Koushi to Chris Pratt's Thighs: daichi and i won't be able to come, unfortunately! we could still...

Nishinoya Yuu to Chris Pratt's Thighs: OMG yes im up for it
Nishinoya Yuu to Chris Pratt's Thighs: like the ~big celebration~ thing i mean lol not tmrw i still cant come 2 that but...

The messages disappear down the lock screen of his phone as new ones appear. Kenma opens the actual app, trying to keep up with the conversation.

Kuroo Tetsurou: Is anyone actually coming? :'

Kageyama Tobio: Yes

Nishinoya Yuu: ummm some of us have cool guy things 2 do like browse memes al day
Nishinoya Yuu: like we cant all b rich fancy actor guys
Nishinoya Yuu: who hav enough moeny to afford 2 go to an amusement park whnvr we want
Nishinoya Yuu: money***
Kuroo Tetsurou: :'(
Sugawara Koushi: we'll still do something to celebrate at the end of game season! daichi and i are planning :) 
Daichi: Y
Daichi: Yes
Daichi: Leave it to us
Daichi Samawura has sent a sticker
Kuroo Tetsurou: :'( :'( :'(

Kenma remembers his best friend abruptly, a sick feeling flooding his stomach. He stormed out yesterday and never bothered texting him to see if he was okay. What if he tried to come over while Hinata was out, knocked and thought Kenma was ignoring him, or that something bad had happened?

What if he hadn't?

He takes a deep breath. It's his best friend. The guy he's known since elementary school. The guy he's seen in his underwear more times than he cares to count.

It's just Kuroo.

He throws on a jacket and heads over there, watching the icy pull of the wind through his kitchen window a moment before; like he's dragging strength from it with determined nails, the latter digging into the soft palms of his hands when he knocks on the door and waits. Tsukishima opens the door.

"Tsuki," he says, unable to keep the surprise from his voice; though lord knows why.

The blonde frowns, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Since when do you call me that? Does the Trash call me that behind my back or something?"

He's gesturing back into the apartment, where Kenma presumes Kuroo is sitting. He can't see over Tsukishima, and doesn't want to make it seem like he's trying. Hinata calls him Tsuki, he realises. He got it from Hinata. "No, he calls you Kei. Can I come in, or were the two of you going to have sex?"

Tsukishima scoffs. It's better than his usual angry stammering and blushing, and Kenma's too fired up to be embarrassed with himself at his brashness. He steps past the blonde and into the apartment, immediately meeting eyes with his best friend from the couch.

Who, he notes very pointedly, doesn't look away.

"Shortie was over?"

Tsukishima scoffs again when Kenma nods, removing his shoes at the door.

"That would be right. He wouldn't shut up about you the whole time we were away. You should have brought him over here, made it a double date."

Kenma doesn't bother wasting the energy to reprimand him. He goes and sits beside Kuroo on the couch, trying to be nonchalant. He grips his knees.

"Are you both going to the amusement park tomorrow?"

"He's forcing me," Tsukishima says, returning to the other side of the sofa. His brows are knit together. "I want to make that clear."

"Um, babe, just stab me in the heart next time," Kuroo deadpans. "It's gonna be fun, I don't see why everyone's sulking."
"It's the middle of Winter."

"The grey sky gives it character," Kuroo defends, pouting. "Rollercoasters are more fun when it's windy. It might start raining while we're on a ferris wheel, then I can kiss you in a thunderstorm like I bet you've always dreamed of."

"They'd shut down the rides if it was raining, asshole." It's obvious Tsukishima's thinking about it. His cheeks have gone pink.

"It's a damn shame Sugawara and Arm-Muscles aren't coming. We could have really made it a romantic thing."

Tsukishima shakes his head. "Tobio's coming too, don't forget. He would have been an unneeded wheel."

"I'm not in a couple," Kenma interjects, rolling his eyes. "Shouyou's coming, too. You guys didn't think this through."

They share a look he catches out the corner of his eye; one of those shared asshole smirks that makes him want to hit his best friend in the face.

"Whatever you say, Kenma," Kuroo says in a sing-song voice. He makes a quiet noise of affirmation, like, 'you're damn straight, whatever I say'. He tries to tune into the movie; some day-time B-grade he recognises in a hazy way. It takes about two minutes for Kuroo to come on screen.

"...Are you watching your own movies?"

"Why do artists always get judged for that?" Kuroo complains. "No one ever accuses a doctor of being self centred for checking up on his own health."

"Doctors don't sit there pointing at the screen saying I was totally cute in this scene every five minutes, though," Tsukishima points out, glaring at the horrible dialogue playing out. "You're so lucky I didn't meet you when you were first starting out, by the way. You were so embarrassing. And not cute at all."

"Aw, that means you think I'm cute now."

Tsukishima doesn't look at him. "...Shut up."

They sit together and finish watching the movie. Kenma's seen it, albeit a long time ago; it's about a struggling high school student trying to balance soccer and a new relationship, and of course, Kuroo plays the asshole captain of the team who won't give the guy a break. Tsukishima snickers at every cheesy line-- you're playing on my field now, kid being the highlight, in Kenma's opinion- and elbows Kuroo whenever he does something embarrassing, like the scene he gets knocked in the mud to show that bullies really don't win. The film closes with the protagonist winning the grand final for everyone and his bullies now suddenly his adoring fans, complete with a cheesy kiss from his sweetheart. Kuroo leans in to speak lowly in Tsukishima's ear.

"I got to kiss her too, y'know. Only not on screen."

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" Tsukishima deadpans. "I think I'd actually have to care about you for that."

"Babe."

Tsukishima leaves after the movie, and they share a somewhat private kiss in Kuroo's doorway. It
lingers too long, and Kenma can just hear them making eyes at each other, can hear that serious look settling over his asshole of a best friend as he gazes at Tsukishima like he hung the moon in the sky.

When he's gone, Kuroo shuts the door, leaving he and Kenma and the apartment alone in a terrible silence. It drones on like an empty night. They both fidget, unsure how to approach the situation. In retrospect, they've never actually had to tread lightly like this; it's been their jobs back and forth respectively for years now to destroy and fix, rampage and clean up the other's mess. Kuroo is the wild one who acts with abandon, cools down under the reasonable nature of his best friend. Kenma's the one who breaks, crumbles slowly, with Kuroo there to keep him standing every time. It's never been this, this straining breaking rope situation, walking on eggshells.

Kenma speaks first. "I don't like apologising."

Kuroo snorts. The blonde glares, choosing to go on only when he's sure his narrowed eyes have done their job. "It's only because I'm not good at it. I don't know how to... I mean, I'm not used to messing up with you. I do it a lot, but you're always there to pick up the pieces. You know how to deal with me better than I do."

"That doesn't mean I know you better than you do, though." Kuroo comes to sit beside him again, expression unreadable. He drapes one arm across the back of the couch, but the rest of his posture is anything but relaxed. "No one knows you better than you, Kenma. You have to understand that. Whatever you do, however you decide to deal with things... that's all on you. I have no right to decide any of that. I just hope I can be there every step of the way to support you."

Kenma huffs a breath. He realises with a jolt of irritation that he feels a little like crying; he refuses, averting his gaze. "You see?" he mumbles. "You're the one who's collected and good with words."

"You're good with words, too. I think you're better than I am sometimes. Even though you're quiet."

He doesn't look back up. "Sometimes I don't think I know anything about anything. Especially not about myself."

Kuroo is silent for a long moment, and it drones on like something tangible, leaking down the walls and settling. Kenma looks around and tries to recall those same feelings he had when they moved into this place. That slow stirring anticipation, childish excitement in his gut like he was a kid in a hotel. Only it was a hotel he wouldn't be leaving, a hotel with stories and other tenants and a place he would have to remember to clean all by himself. (He didn't, at first. Kuroo had to come over a few times to remind him to pick up his dirty washing, to clean his dishes.) He remembers going up on the roof with Kuroo when he still smoked. They talked about the years ahead then like they were full of these limitless possibilities. Kuroo was getting more opportunities with his acting, ones he felt would never run out. Kenma wanted to learn and learn until there was no more room in his brain for memories of his parents, of high school. It wasn't a relapse, right before they moved, though he knows Kuroo would say otherwise.

No, it wasn't a relapse. Kenma felt more like he had comfortably shifted back into old routine. "You've seemed better lately. You've seemed really happy."

Kenma shrugs.

"Do you feel happy?"

"I don't know how I feel."
Kuroo's expression turns thoughtful, and Kenma relaxes; it's better if he can read his friend, gage his emotions. "Well... you know how you feel when you get a new game, right? Like when for your seventeenth birthday I finally got you that terrible visual novel you'd been begging for?"

Kenma raises his brows. "I guess so."

"How does that feel?"

He cracks the barest of smiles, nervous. "Are you my therapist now?"

Kuroo's gaze remains strict and headlong, steady against his. "How does that feel?" he asks again.

Kenma thinks about it. He thinks about it for a while, letting the concept swarm his brain, teetering at parts of himself he doesn't normally think about. "I get excited," he says finally. "I think I do. I find them interesting, and they're exciting, even though I know I'm not the kind of guy who gets excited about anything."

"Why is it exciting?"

"Because it's new." He looks away, playing his fingers through one another. "For a while it's new, anyway. It's exciting to work out how best to play a game, all the strategies you can use. Worlds you can take your time to explore. And then after a while it becomes familiar, and comfortable, and that's a new kind of exciting."

He looks at Kuroo. His best friend is still watching him, the barest of smirks on his face. It's comfortable, being with him like this. He's still got his arm draped across the back of the couch, his spine lax, his predatory gaze pinning Kenma to the couch like he knows everything about him. And he does, Kenma realises. All these years of being friends and Kuroo has known him, had time to become familiar with all of his parts and quirks like he does with games. Gaze not letting up slightly in its intensity, mouth still curving up, Kuroo asks, "Have you felt like that lately?"

Kenma thinks of Hinata immediately, and realises he has.

"Yeah." Kuroo doesn't respond. He knows what Kenma's thinking about; he must know, for the smirk that hasn't left his face. That was his point.

"I think you know plenty about yourself. You just don't... apply it to you. You second guess yourself too often, Kenma."

"Yeah," he says again. Something's different. It feels different. He knows there's a strain between them, pulled taut still like rope and barely giving. He doesn't know why it won't go away, or why Kuroo keeps looking at him like he's waiting for him to break. He wants it to stop. He wants to know how to get better.

"I'm not... I don't get people. So it's hard for me."

Kuroo's head moves with a nod. It's a subtle gesture, his dark eyes burning into Kenma's. The blonde takes a grounding breath. "I like being around you, obviously. I like being around Shouyou. And, um, Tsuki-- Kei is alright. I want to know people. I want to know what that's like."

"Like high school," Kuroo says carefully, testing the waters. Kenma doesn't look at him.

"Yeah."

"Have you talked about it? With your therapist, or..."

"Kenma," his friend says. It's raining outside. He can hear it.

"I don't want to fight."

Kuroo deflates. "Fine," he says mildly. "We don't have to talk about it. You're coming tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he says. "Wouldn't miss it."

Kuroo grins. "You know, when we were joking about making it a date thing--"

Kenma's ringtone starts up. Kuroo's sentence cuts off abruptly, and he settles back against the couch, waving a hand in dismissal as if Kenma is sorry for answering. "Hello?"

"This is really important," says Hinata. "I have no idea what to wear tomorrow."

He stays over at Kuroo's after the other complains that he's been too busy to cook or clean lately. Work has been building up; in lieu of the LA offer, apparently, he's had a whole other assortment of opportunities. Kenma pan fries various meats and sausages while Kuroo reads his homework out loud to him, stumbling on the Keats translations over and over until Kenma laughs.

"Your English is horrible," he tells him. Kuroo grimaces from across the counter.

"You try translating this. He's talking about his hand in this one. He's, like. Grabbing-- fondling?"

"Earnest grasping," Kenma says, in English. He rolls his eyes. "Do you want me to cut them like little octopi?"

"Firmly grasp it," Kuroo deadpans. "And yes. Obviously. If you're gonna mother me, do it right."

Kenma goes on cooking silently for a while. Eventually, "If you ever quote Spongebob at me again, I'm kicking you out."

"It's my apartment."

"Then why aren't you cooking your own meals?" Kuroo says nothing. Kenma grins to himself, for a long time.

The next morning, he oversleeps. He wakes only when he hears Kuroo swearing to himself on the way out of the shower-- preceded by a sharp bang that can only mean pain-- the sound ricocheting off the walls. He runs a hand through his hair, and it takes him three tries to read the clock correctly. It's 9:50. They're meant to be leaving at 10. He doesn't tell Kuroo he's leaving, just walks across to his own apartment, still in his astroboy-print boxers; too tired still to think much of his anxiety, of the fact that anyone could see him. He gets along pretty well in the mornings, he thinks, once he has an objective. Kenma puts a coffee on and dresses quickly in the first things he finds-- he hops awkwardly around trying to get the skinny jeans on while he finishes off the coffee. The smell of caffeine wakes him up a little. He has just enough time to pull his hair up before he's going back out the door, wanting to return before Kuroo notices him gone.

On his way back into the apartment, he nearly trips over a small girl.

The noise that gets stuck in his throat is somewhere between a scream and a gasp, and he reels back, arms flying out to steady the random child from toppling to the ground.
"Oh my god!" says Hinata.

Kenma is still half asleep. It takes him a moment to process the situation, to figure out why Hinata is in Kuroo's living room, and is scooping up a smaller Hinata in his arms, or why they both have flowers in their hair.

"Natsu," he scolds the younger girl. "If you get injured, mom and dad are gonna blame me!"

"That's not my fault."

Kenma stares between them. Hinata seems to realise his presence, then; his head snaps up.

"Kenma! This is my younger sister."

He's got flowers in his hair. Kenma debates seriously for a second whether he's still asleep or not. Just moments ago he was squinting at his own reflection in the mirror, dressed all in black with under-eye circles and hair sticking up everywhere. Like someone who was meant for the night being rudely brought into the day. Hinata's orange hair is sticking up all over the place around the blue flowers; he blinks owlishly at Kenma, looking like a perfect reflection of the younger girl--his sister. Kenma looks down at his coffee, mesmerised that he hasn't spilled it yet.

"...It's way too early for this."

Hinata bursts out laughing. Natsu stares at the two of them like they're crazy, her big brother nearly doubling over from the force of his laughter. Kuroo saunters back in the room then, and there are two others in tow.

"There you are," he says, glancing Kenma up and down. "Skinny jeans. Hinata shows up in a flower crown, and you show up in skinny jeans. G--"

"There is a child in the room," Tsukishima interrupts. Natsu looks scandalised. "Besides, you're the gayest one here."

"I'm not a child," Natsu protests.

"I don't think so, either," Kuroo says, offering her a grin. Kenma recognises it; it's his photoshoot grin, the exact smile he tried using on Tsukishima before the blonde broke through his terrible outer personality. And got to his worse inner personality. "You must be, what, seventeen, soon? Almost taller than your brother."

Natsu giggles. Kenma is still having a hard time processing the situation, or even what time of morning it is.

"Oh!" Hinata springs to attention suddenly. "Kenma, this is Kageyama!" He gestures to the sixth person in the room, a tall, uncomfortable looking guy with dark hair. "My roommate."

Kenma nods in acknowledgement. He's not still so tired that anxiety refuses to bite at him; it itches along the base of his stomach, making his fingers tighten on the coffee mug.

Luckily enough for him, Kageyama doesn't appear to be a talkative kind of guy. He goes back to shifting, arms folded, looking like he'd rather be indulged in the phone he has a vice grip around.

"I hope it's okay," Hinata addresses everyone, flicking his sister on the ear when she stares up at Kenma. "My family are down for a few days, and I got stuck babysitting."

"You didn't get stuck with me," Natsu complains. "And I don't need a babysitter. I'm practically in high school!"

"She just started middle school."
"I'm not going anywhere if you're just gonna bully me all day!"

"It's alright," Kuroo says. He walks over to the smaller girl. The moment she squirms under the intimidating height, he squats down on his knees, smiling up at her. "You have a very pretty name, I don't know how you got stuck with someone like your brother."

Hinata stutters above them, and Natsu's eyes go wide, her attention caught. "Your surname means sunny place, doesn't it?"

"Y-yeah," she answers, turning her chin up.

"Well, I hope it's alright if I call you Hinata-senpai. Will you hold your brother's hands on the scarier rides today?" He nods in Kenma's direction. "You might have to hold his hand, too. He's a little shy."

Natsu giggles. Her face has gone red, Kenma notices; she tries to cover the blush behind a hand, stuttering on her reply. "N- Natsu-chan is fine, honestly."

Kuroo grins. "Natsu-chan, then." He glances up at the rest of the group. "Is everyone ready to go?"

"Does your surname really mean that?" Kenma asks on the way there. It was a hard debate between Hinata's energy-friendly, constantly-breaking-down car, Tsukishima's pick-up, and Kuroo's sleek sports car. They ended up agreeing to take Kuroo's, with Natsu on Hinata's lap. (Which is totally illegal. Kageyama says this a few times.)

Hinata glances up. He's wedged in the middle of Kageyama and Kenma. "Huh? Oh-- yeah, but it translates better to place in the sun. What does your name mean, Kenma?"

Kenma racks his brain, trying to remember what Kozume means. He shrugs, in the end. "It's something about a cat, I think."

"Lone claw," Kuroo calls from the front seat. He meets Kenma's eyes in the mirror.

"Ahh, that's super cool! Your name is, like, badass!"

"Hinata, you're screaming in my ear."

He turns to face his mouth directly into his roommates ear, repeating, in a louder voice, "Badass."

They get to the place around noon, while the sky is still white-grey and looking dangerously close to rain. Hinata and his sister spring out of the car, knocking Kageyama back against the seat. He chokes on a few choice swears as Hinata elbows him in the ribs, and Kenma can't help the laugh that springs from his chest. He brings a hand to his mouth, stifling it just in time for Kageyama to lock eyes with him and glare. There's a moment where they sort of just. Look at each other. Then Kageyama smiles, a little, climbs out of the car and leaves Kenma there. He almost forgets to exit the car with him, he's so caught up in the moment.

Hinata walks at the front of the pack, his sister hoisted up onto his shoulders. Kuroo drops back to walk with Kenma, nudging him in the shoulder.

"What?"
"I like your all black outfit, today, it's very emo chic."

"Thanks."

"Whose funeral is it?"

"Yours, if you don't shut your mouth."

Kuroo's grinning. He looks happier than normal, oddly pleased with himself. Kenma jostles him right back. "What's with you? Your face is all weird."

"I'm smiling."

"Yeah. Weird."

The smile drops into an over-dramatic pout. "Am I not allowed to be happy?"

"Well yeah, but." Kenma eyes him up and down. "This isn't happy. You're up to something."

"Am I?" Kuroo asks in a singsong voice. Kenma looks away.

"Yes. I don't care, if you're wondering. I can just ignore you."

His best friend clutches his chest. "So cold."

They enter under the arched structure of the front of the park, finally catching up to the others. Hinata slides up to Kenma's side like he belongs there; Kenma, a little more awake now thanks to the cold air on his cheeks, looks at the flower crown. The blue is really nicely juxtaposed with his hair, like the sun and the sky. "You'll go on the carousel with me, won't you Kenma?"

"The carousel is for babies," Natsu insists. "I wanna go on all the scary rides with Tobio."

"Are you sure you're tall enough?" Kageyama deadpans. Natsu sticks her tongue out at him.

They all line up for tickets. Hinata is shivering a little. Kenma considers giving him his jacket, but backs out at the last moment.

"How about we go on the rollercoaster first?" Kuroo suggests, eyeing off the group with his hands on his hips once they have bought their tickets. He had hoisted Natsu up on his shoulders once she had her wrist band on, but she's moved on to Kageyama's. "Before it rains, just in case they shut it down."

Natsu pulls at Kageyama's hair, Kuroo says something to Tsukishima about his obviously hidden fear of rollercoasters. Hinata has gone oddly quiet, Kenma realises, and doesn't call him out on it until they're in line.

He nudges the boy, watching as the motion jostles him. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah," Hinata says, sounding dazed. It's just about the least convincing thing Kenma has ever heard. Hinata blinks owlishly at him. His face has gone pale. "Um. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Kenma says, eyeing him off suspiciously. "Are you sure you're okay? Do you want to--"

"Bathroom," he announces suddenly, loudly enough to catch the attention of their whole group. It leaves everyone staring at Kenma. Hinata is long gone, already having sprinted away from the line and in the direction of the bathrooms. Kenma gestures vaguely in that direction with his thumb.

"I'm gonna-- I also have to." He almost runs into a woman and her child on his way out of the
He finds Hinata sitting on a bench outside the bathrooms with his head in his hands, looking miserable. Kenma mulls awkwardly in place for a second before taking a seat beside him, folding his hands on his lap.

"...You don't like rollercoasters?"

"I'm afraid of heights," Hinata whines. It comes out muffled between his fingers.

That gets Kenma's attention; he turns his head to look at his friend, brows drawing together. "You-- we were on the roof just last night."

"Yeah," Hinata says, like that's any answer. Kenma tries to remember it-- it was cold, he was on an adrenaline high. Could he have been too distracted to notice Hinata freaking out? He thinks of the way he'd gone quiet when they first stepped out there, the way he'd stayed right away from the edge. He'd been shaking at one point. Kenma had just assumed it was because of the cold.

"I didn't know," he says. Hinata shrugs, looking up.

"It's not a big deal. I felt safe enough with my back against the door. With you."

Kenma doesn't know what to make of that. Hinata's looking at him so seriously, eyes begging on thoughts of what soil and earth will look like later when the rain inevitably falls from the grey storm clouds. He looks out over the park, chewing his lip.

"...Do you trust me?"

"Of course." Hinata's answer is instantaneous. When Kenma looks again, his eyes are wide, like he's hanging on to Kenma's every word. It's a lot of pressure, and a lot of responsibility to be given at this time of day, with his hair this poorly done and his bones this tired. Hinata is so, so trusting, and open, and he has the thought again-- he's nice looking. Cute was the word, the one that had come to mind when he'd found this guy only a few days ago passed out above Kenma's covers in boxers and Kenma's own shirt. He's got that same level of vulnerability about him now. All the trust of someone who's never been hurt, and yet Kenma knows that he has. He has to have been.

He's reading too far into it. He looks away again. "I have an idea. But it won't work if you don't trust me, or freak out."

"I won't freak out," Hinata says. "Well, I mean, I don't think so. I trust you."

Kenma meets his eyes, smiling a little. "Why?" What have I done to earn that trust, he means to ask, but the validation comes anyway. Hinata beams back at him.

"Because you're genuine."

Kenma stares. Hinata stares back. It's cold, but the sky is lit up blinding white like the sun is trying to pull attention from them, dragging Kenma like a magnet towards things he wouldn't have the courage to do otherwise. He can't stop thinking of Hinata, now, and knows he'll think of it later, when he's alone. Because you're genuine.

"Alright," he says. "Let's go."
sorry this took so long to update!!! life is fucking me up. ill be much quicker with the next update, because im going to bully myself.

preview for next time: heights, adrenaline-possibly-bringing-up-feelings, a support group, and a party.

thank u all for ur lovely comments and reviews !!!
please send me nice messages on tumblr im very lonely. hmu @ cloverguts.tumblr.com
The moment Hinata sees the ferris wheel, his face goes pale again.

"That's.... Kenma, are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be serious?" He blinks at Hinata. The line isn't too long; there are maybe four people in front of them, and Hinata is well aware, shifting back and forth.

"Um, okay, I trust you, but. This is the highest ride in the park."

"Yes."

"Why are we going on it?"

"Kuroo and I used to come when we were younger," Kenma explains. "I want to show you something, okay? If you don't want to, we won't. But you said you trusted me."

"I do trust you." Hinata's voice has gone oddly high. His eyes dart around, just enough to give Kenma an inkling that this isn't a good idea. He takes a deep breath, steering his friend forward by the elbow.

"You'll be alright," he says, as they approach the front of the line. "I promise."

The man in charge of the ride seats them, straps them in. Hinata has fallen completely silent. Kenma wriggles in his seat just to gauge the constriction of the bars, and finds that it's fine; there is just enough room between them that, if he wanted to, he could shift across the seats and press their legs together, intertwine their fingers. The desire to be close to Hinata hits him like a tonne of bricks. That's normal, right? Friends should want to be close.

Hinata's breath catches when the ride starts up. There is a jerk, then a tremble in the metal, and the carriage starts to rise, slow as anything.

"Oh my God," he says, looking straight ahead.

Kenma takes a steadying breath. It's not weird. "Here," he says, reaching forward and pulling Hinata's hand into his. "Just... focus on me for a minute, okay?"

"I thought you didn't like being looked at." Hinata's words are grating, his posture stiff. It's such a weird look for him. Kenma's used to him being the brave one, having to coax courage from the red-head rather than the other way around. They're getting closer to the top now, the ride creaking, rising. Hinata's fingers, the ones on the hand that Kenma isn't touching, are so tight on the bar that his knuckles have gone white. It's like a fresh dose of deja-vu choking him. He needs to make a decision. He doesn't think about it. He wants Hinata to look at him.

"Just do it, okay?"

Hinata turns his head. Their eyes meet in a collision of colours, blue like the flowers in Hinata's hair, grey like the sky, red like Kenma's nerves. He says nothing and holds the other's gaze steady with his the whole way up, the carriage pausing and swaying in place each time they stop again.

"I used to be scared of heights, too," Kenma says.
Hinata's eyes are blown wide. It's so quiet up here. If he wanted to, if he looked, he could see out over the whole park, the mountains beyond, the rest of the city behind them. His vice grip on Kenma, previously crushing and grinding the bones in his hand, has relaxed. Hinata is waiting for him to speak. Bracing himself, Kenma continues.

"Because of my anxiety, I found it really confronting to be up high. When Kuroo and I played together, I noticed something about the way he jumped. It was like he was flying. It seemed really easy, so I thought, why can't I do it?" He breathes out. The sound of it is funny to him; if it were windier today, he might match the sound of the Earth, in and out, a series of breathing trees. Then again, he reasons, maybe it's a good thing it isn't windy; the carriage isn't rocking much, and he's got Hinata's attention.

"My therapist at the time suggested exposure therapy. Some people call it flooding. It's where you take the thing you're scared of the most, and you force yourself to experience it."

"Does it work?" Hinata's voice is still high and strained. Kenma doesn't break eye contact, trying to ground him.

"Sometimes. You have to be really careful when you're using it, because it works better for phobias than it does for other things. But it worked for me. I came here with with Kuroo and some of our friends. My boyfriend at the time." Something glints in Hinata's eyes. He never talks about it. He never talks about Ryota. "We got to the top, and I started crying. Kuroo was sitting next to me. Ryota was just below us, and I was really scared he'd see." Hinata won't look away, though he must feel that Kenma's fingers have started shaking. "So we got to the top, and I forced myself to look. At all the other people, and the rides, and the city, and the mountains. I thought, this must be flying. It was terrible." He smiles. "And then I wasn't scared any more."

"Kenma," Hinata says. He realises they have stopped.

Kenma holds his gaze like a caress and speaks measuredly. "Look," he says.

Slowly, so as not to frighten the other, he drops his eyes and looks out over the park. He hears the exact moment Hinata does it, too. The way his breath catches. He can feel where they're touching, just their hands, still against each other and sitting between them. Up here it's the only place they touch. The seat might as well not be there.

"Kenma," Hinata says again. Kenma, finally, dares to glance in his direction. He's got the sea in his eyes. This is the first thing he notices.

Hinata looks mesmerised.

It's funny, because from where they are, they can't see the sea. They can see mountains. They can see the pavement below, slick with rain, everything in dark blues and greys. Kenma thinks of the old Impressionist paintings they studied in his senior art history class; he thinks of the way they describe rainy days in books, like sadness you can touch, freshness you can smell, crisp and glittery. When he and Kuroo came here-- when he was here with Ryota, when he was young and didn't need medication-- it was warmer, and the air didn't glisten like this. Hinata isn't speaking. That's new.

"I haven't made a mistake, bringing you up here, have I?"

"Shh." Hinata hasn't looked away from the view. Kenma finally realises what it is, why the boy looks so strange. For once, rather than looking like he's carrying the sun on his back, he looks like night. He looks like he's got the moon in his eyes.

"I'm looking."
The moment they reach the ground, Hinata leaps off the ride. Kenma struggles to keep up with him, worried for a second that he's running because he hates Kenma for putting him through that, or is going to throw up-- before a pair of arms are flung around him, and Kenma nearly topples over.

"I did it!" Hinata shouts. He pulls away from their hug to grin at Kenma, way too close all of a sudden, suffocatingly close. Before Kenma has a chance to react he's being pulled back into the hug, so violent it knocks Hinata's flower crown askew.

He leaps away from the blonde, jumping. "Did you see! It was like-- flying, I did it, I didn't even freak out! Kenma, you're right-- it's just like spiking a ball! Who cares if it makes me nervous? I did it!"

"You did it," Kenma mumbles. His hand is cold. His cheeks are cold. Hinata springs for his hand suddenly, eyes wide.

"Holy shit, we left everyone standing there! If we hurry, we might make it on the rollercoaster in time, right?"

"You still wanna go?"

Hinata doesn't answer, just drags him along, running so fast that Kenma stumbles a few times. He can't help the smile on his face. There are goosebumps along Hinata's arm from the cold, a nervous jitter in his every step. They make it back in line just in time to make the next ride.

"Where did you two go?" Kageyama complains, socking Hinata in the arm. "I don't know why your parents even pretend that you're the one they want babysitting, since it's always me who does it."

Natsu chimes in. "Tobio, being grumpy is uncool."

"You're lucky I've known you since you were very small," he says to the girl. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be tolerable."

She sticks her tongue out. Kenma tries to picture the blurry, shouting guy from Hinata's pictures looking after children when he was in high school; he can't picture him being very good at it.

Whatever nervousness was stopping Hinata from having a good time is gone now; though his hands still shake a little, gripping hard at the bars in front of them, there's no mistaking that the little trills running through him presently are ones of excitement. He looks at Kenma the whole way up, grinning like he can't believe it. When they get to the very top, right before the drop when they are high enough to see the whole park, he goes quiet. Kenma can hear the rest of their group ahead of them. Natsu is shouting, trying to wrestle free from the bar across her lap and stand to better see. Kenma watches his eyes span over the expanse of the park. Then they're going down.

Adrenaline pools in his stomach and slowly bleeds out through the rest of him, trills and thrilling feelings moving through his veins, making his fingers jittery. Kenma doesn't know what's wrong with him. He says yes to every ride, sits beside Hinata and laughs voraciously into his shoulder when the other shrieks.

"I want to go on the bigger rides before it starts to rain," Natsu complains.

"No way." They sound just like siblings should when they argue. Kuroo was the closest Kenma had, growing up. "There's a haunted house ride! We should all go."

Kageyama rolls his eyes. "Hinata, if we go on that, you'll just scream and end up injuring
"I think you're just afraid you'll pee yourself," Hinata says, sticking his bottom lip out. "Is that it? It's okay if that's it, Kageyama, you can tell me."

"Die."

"No one's going to die," Kuroo deadpans, gazing at Tsukishima from over the top of his drink. It's kind of really obvious that he's been out-gaying himself all day. Kenma doesn't know how he does it. It's tremendous. Noticing his stare, Kuroo meets his best friend's eyes and smirks. "You're back with food, my angel and saviour."

Kenma puts the tray of fries down, rolling his eyes. The whole group looks at him like he's a hero.

Kuroo's eyes pass over his body; something flashes in them, and he meets Kenma's gaze again, his own shining like he's gotten an idea. "Say, how are your skinny jeans holding up?"

"They're okay. I guess?" He tries to search for an opening on the bench where he can seat himself. He chooses to sit on the floor instead, stretching his legs out beside Kageyama, who is shoveling fries into his mouth at warp speed.

"They're more than okay." Kuroo has raised his voice a little, and Kenma frowns. "You know... Kenma, I never noticed before, but your thighs are really thick."

Kenma blinks. In his peripheral, he sees Hinata and Tsukishima look up; though, notably, in different directions.

"Really," Kenma deadpans.

"Oh, you bet." Kuroo nods towards the denim-clad thighs. "Real nice, you know." He turns to address the group. "Natsu-chan is completely right. Big rides first, before it rains."

Kenma stares at his best friend for a really long time, trying to figure him out. Kuroo's always playing a game. Whatever this one is, he seems to have jumped into it headfirst, so he must have a goal. He lets his gaze travel to Tsukishima, who has... ah, suddenly gotten a lot closer to Kuroo. So that's it. Kenma reaches for a fry, tasting the day on his tongue. He resolves to remind Kuroo, later, that the whole making-your-boyfriend-not-boyfriend-jealous move is kind of shitty, and he never consented to being a part of it.

When they finish lunch and start to move to the new ride, Kenma realises Hinata hasn't said a word. He glances over; the red-head's face is burning.

"Shouyou," he says. Hinata nearly jumps out of his skin. "Are you nervous about the rides again?"

"That's not it," the other says, but he doesn't elaborate. Kenma meets Kuroo's eyes once more, when they're getting on the next ride, and his best friend is grinning. Grinning like he's won, like he's proven some major point. Kenma has no idea what it's all about. He resolves next to himself not to think about it. He was never good at picking up on social cues anyway.

They go on as many rides as they can. The sun has long since become trapped behind dark, grey rain clouds; the air around them smells like Earth and cold. It starts to rain as they're being strapped into a ride. It's one of those drop rides, the kind that makes your stomach leap into your throat and straight back down again. Kuroo must notice the hesitation in the employee's eyes, because he turns on the charm.

"This'll probably be the last ride, huh?"

The guy makes a face. "I should really shut it down. My boss is going to--"
"One more won't hurt, right?" Kuroo's grinning. "We won't drown. If we drown, we won't sue."

He doesn't make them get off. The rain starts bucketing down as they're being raised, Kenma's fingers slipping at the metal bar in front of him. Hinata shakes his hair out, laughing manically, feverishly. They're all getting drenched.

The ride drops and they get wetter. Kenma's stomach drops with it; it's a feeling like consternation, like hearing a sound when you're home alone or missing a step when you're going downstairs, but it's good. It's anticipation that doesn't go away, and in the throes of the rain pouring down, adrenaline in his stomach and his stomach hitting the floor, he reaches out and wrenches Hinata's hand into his own, choking. The rain chokes him. Hinata's skin chokes him. The rain gets in his eyes, until it's all he can see, and everything blurring around him is a part of the storm. Kenma tips his head back until it hits the seat, and decides to think of nothing.

"Whose idea was it to get on the ride? Hinata?"

"It wasn't mine! You can't just blame me for everything!"

"Watch me," Kageyama shrieks. They're all sitting undercover now, watching over the park with dismal amazement as all the rides are closed up for the day. The rain is bucketing down. Kageyama slipped and fell in a puddle on his way off the ride, and he has been wringing out his socks since they sat down.

"It's Kuroo's fault," Tsukishima informs him. His hair is slicked across his forehead, and he had to take his glasses off-- no fabric on him is dry enough to clean them. The rain, soaking into his skin. Kenma feels drenched from the heavens. Winter boy. That's what his dad used to call him, when he was trying to be mean. "Everything is Kuroo's fault."

"It's Kuroo's fault that Kuroo's so sexy," Kuroo says, grinning at the blonde. Hinata finally comes to sit beside Kenma. His hair is slick, clinging to his forehead. Their shoulders bump; he tilts his head to grin, white teeth like the sky. They're really close. Close enough for Kenma to see that one of his teeth is kind of pointed at the front; that the freckles across his nose are more orange than brown. He realises that he's been staring at his nose for a second too long, and to Hinata, it probably looks like he's staring at his lips.

"This is unfair!" Natsu interrupts their moment, sliding her tiny body between them. "Nee-chan sucks."

Tsukishima grins. "Did she just call you nee-chan?"

"We should go," Kageyama says. He's shoved his socks back on; it can't be comfortable. Kenma turns his head back to look at Hinata, but he's already turned around, and is following Kageyama out of his seat suddenly like it's made of hot iron.

He didn't... it wasn't him that made Hinata uncomfortable, was it?

He doesn't get a chance to ask. Hinata walks ahead of their group, shoulder to shoulder with his roommate like he needs someone to lean on.

Everyone is quiet on the drive back. Kenma's exhausted suddenly. The way the rain hits the windows reminds him of Kuroo trying to learn the drums in eighth grade. He was terrible at it. It's not a death march this time, not a marching drum played by everything dark inside of him.

Everyone is too tired to talk. Natsu passes out on Hinata's lap, and Hinata's eyes keep slipping shut like he's in danger of passing out, too.
"You should sleep," Kenma murmurs, eyes ahead like he's worried Kuroo will look back and make fun of him. "I'll wake you when we're back."

Hinata says nothing, rests his head on Kenma's shoulder, but doesn't sleep.

He closes the hand closest to the window in a fist. His nails dig into the soft, fleshy palm of his hand, like he is made up of iron claws. It's weird. He watches the sky drain, sucking life from the heavens, and breathes in, feels strong. Feels like a hurricane, something feeling and breathing, destructive and entirely himself.

Kuroo, the well-worn taxi service, drops Tsukishima off first. He says nothing when the entire car groans at his eagerly hopping out of the car and going after Tsukishima in the rain. Kenma doesn't avert his eyes when they share a kiss on the doorstep, Tsukishima's hand fist ing into the back of Kuroo's jacket; first like he is going to push him away, and then to pull him closer.

Natsu has started snoring. Kenma can't pinpoint what changed, or when exactly it changed; Kageyama's staring out the window, chin in hand. Kuroo doesn't try to turn the radio on. They ride back to Hinata's place in silence, his hair brushing Kenma's chin.

Kenma climbs over to the front seat once the other two get out. He and Kuroo watch them walk to the front door in silence, the purr of the engine like the roar of the rain from earlier.

"...I'm tired," Kuroo says.

"Yeah. Me too."

"Like, really tired. Do you think I can skip work tomorrow?"

"You're right in the middle of filming--"

Kenma cuts himself short. Ahead of them, Hinata's flaming orange hair has emerged from the dull colours of the street, and he's bounding towards their car at full speed like he wasn't falling asleep barely five minutes ago. He slams into the side like a freight train, eyes wide like the sea. Raises a hand to the window and knocks. For a second Kenma thinks he is going to place the palm of his hand on the glass.

Kenma rolls down the window and blinks at him.

"I'm leaving again on Tuesday."

"Yeah." It's Sunday.

Hinata's eyes are wide. He bites his lip. "The first game's all the way in Matsushima. So like, my family are going back."

We won't get to hang out for a while, is what he means. He's rambling. "You can call me."

Hinata breathes in. "Come with me."

Kenma blinks. He can practically hear Kuroo blinking behind him, and the rain blinking, and everyone in the world blinking. "With your family."

"Yeah, whatever. You can stay with us. Kuroo can come, so you don't have to drive back alone."

"...You're inviting me to come stay with your family."

Hinata's cheeks are pink. "And Kuroo."
Kenma stares at him. He could lie. He could lie, and say that he can't afford to miss class. He could lie and say he doesn't want to.

"...I'd have to bring homework."

Hinata's eyes light up. "Great."

"Boring homework. You'll have to hear me talk about it. I'll talk about poetry and Japanese orthodox history novels for a really long time."

"Great, perfect." His eyes are shining like the city from the rooftop, like the slick and glossy pavement from all the way up on the ferris wheel. "I don't think it's boring, anyway. Not when you talk about it."

Kuroo clears his throat. Kenma throws an irritated glance over his shoulder, knives at his best friend.

Kuroo raises his brows. "I didn't consent to this."

"Kei will be there," Kenma says incredulously. "As if you would say no."

"Everyone seems to think I like that guy," Kuroo says thoughtfully. Kenma elbows him.

Hinata's still standing there, beaming at him.

"I think you have to go now."

"Right!" He steps back from the car, a blinding smile. "I'll text you, Kenma."

"Yeah."

He walks back up the driveway. He doesn't go inside until Kuroo starts driving away, waving his hand erratically, grinning so hard his eyes crinkle at the corners.

They drive in silence for a while. The streetlights come in through the window in pieces, the sun setting ahead of them. Sleepiness is shifting through the car like fog.

"Are you sure you wanna go?"

"Where, home?"

Kuroo throws him a look. Kenma is too tired to fight back, gives him a tired smile and rests his head against the window.

"Yeah. It's Shouyou. It'll be fun."

"I'll be with Kei. You know you'll have to stay with shortie alone, right?"

"Yeah? I guessed as much." Kuroo keeps giving him sidelong glances, so Kenma shifts in his seat. "What?"

"It's just weird seeing you so comfortable with someone," Kuroo mutters. He doesn't look upset. "You make this face."

Kenma raises a hand to touch his face almost involuntarily. "What face?" Kuroo is looking ahead, but he's suppressing a grin.

"I don't know. It's a similar sort of face to the one you make when you get a new game. You look excited."
"I guess." He draws his knees to his chest. Normally Kuroo chastises him for putting his feet on the seats, but tonight he is silent. His gaze passes over the mirror, then drops to where Kenma has a hand by his own thigh. Resting like driftwood.

"Do you remember that time we went to the amusement park with Ryota and everyone?"

Kuroo exhales noisily. "Yeah," he says. "It was summer."

"I remember. You got really sweaty."

Kuroo breathes a laugh out through his nose. It's a tired noise, ichor and crippled amusement. "Did today remind you of that?"

"Only a little," he lies. The car is silent for a minute. He counts the seconds like they're ticking through his mind. "Did you know Shouyou's afraid of heights?"

"I thought he was acting strangely when we left. Something bothered him."

Kenma shakes his head. "No, I mean-- I did what you did. When we left the line this morning, I took him on the ferris wheel."

That catches Kuroo's attention. He whips his head around, staring at Kenma in that clumsy too-much-attention way. The blonde counts one, three, seven seconds before Kuroo turns back to the road, which is somewhat alarming. He shuts his eyes and breathes.

"You were really happy that day. From then on, I think."

"You were doing really well, you kept talking about the future."

"Ryota liked you."

"Yeah, Ryota liked me. No one had ever liked me before."

"That's not true," Kuroo insists, rolling his eyes. "Plenty of people have liked you, you idiot, you're gorgeous. You give off this totally, like, mysterious and intriguing vibe."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't hit on me."

"Right until you open your mouth. Then-- poof-- vibe gone."

Kenma smiles at the window. If it were darker he might be able to see Kuroo's face, bouncing back through the glass and the reaching streetlights. He can't.

"Did you tell him anything? Shouyou, I mean."

"What, my tragic backstory?" Kuroo says nothing, and Kenma rolls his eyes. "He knows I've had mental health issues. He knows I have an ex who didn't help."

Kuroo makes this noise, this tiny inflection in his breath, and Kenma's shoulders tense, waiting for the blow. "I think you should talk--"

"No."

"Kenma."

"I don't want to do this again." He casts his eyes down. Tries to memorise the floor so he can sink through it. "I'm tired."
He knows he's using excuses, and they are beating against the both of them like waves. Here is the intertidal zone, an anticipation before drowning. It either comes in and floods him, or it pulls him out and keeps him there. The waiting is what kills him. The weight of the words, cutting at him like glass, sitting perniciously on his chest.

"It's been really weird lately, between the two of us."

"Yeah."

Kenma glances over just in time to see Kuroo's nostrils flare. He hates upsetting him. If he's not bursting forth with fire and telling Kenma exactly what he thinks, he's cold, and he says things neither of them can take back later.

It's a trait they share.

"I just wish you'd talk to me about things."

They drive home in silence after that.

Exactly a week before Kuroo's birthday, and a day before Hinata's team are set to leave again, Kenma starts group therapy.

He's almost late. He has to run to catch the train after class, exhausted-- three hours, sixteen minutes since his last coffee--and watches a man in a suit subtly try to look at questionable images on his phone for the full extent of the fifteen minute ride. When he gets there, everyone else has already gone in. He has to walk to his seat in front of everyone; it makes his blood cold, but there is an air of sympathy in the room. Some of them even avert their eyes.

"Kozume-san," the psychologist greets-- she says it like a question. Kenma nods, seating himself between a guy with dark hair and a girl with her legs folded neatly.

"You got here just in time," the chirpy woman says; she does that thing that therapists are good at, and speaks like she's including everyone. "Would you like to go on?"

Oh. Kenma's heart thumps. He tries to gather his thoughts quickly, so that they don't choke him.

"My name is Kenma Kozume. Please call me Kenma."

"And why are you here, Kenma-kun?"

"Social anxiety and depression." He lists them off like ingredients to a cake, descriptors of the weather. He watches them roll over the group like they weigh nothing. That's something he forgot about group therapy; everyone knows what it's like to have someone look at you like they feel sorry for you.

The introductions don't last long. They go the rest of the way around the circle; the guy next to him is called Akaashi and he has borderline personality disorder; the boy next to him, clutching his hand, is his 'friend there for support'; there's Nametsu with general anxiety disorder; Kiyoko with social anxiety. A horrifyingly lanky guy who introduces himself as Haiba, who Kenma knows as Lev-from-his-philosophy-class, announces that he's got bi-polar, and he loves inari sushi. Kenma tries to avoid his eyes the entire time; the last thing he needs is to know someone from group therapy.

The process is pretty basic. The psychologist goes on a tangent about 'emotional healing', stresses the need to get to know one another before opening up. People volunteer their stories; Kenma remains quiet, tuning in and out of sob stories about bad medication and job interviews and good
remains quiet, tuning in and out of sob stories about bad medication and job interviews and good
days versus bad days versus worse days. He itches the whole time to blow it off and try and catch
Kuroo before his part time job; or text Hinata, for that matter. Just when it seems unbearable, the
psychologist stands up and announces that it's time to mingle.

Kenma stands in the furthest corner of the room and tries to become friends with the snacks table.
He doesn't know what the woman was expecting. Put a bunch of people with social problems in a
room together and ask them to interact with each other--

"Kenma, right?"

He jumps a mile out of his own skin. Nearly crushes the biscuit in his hand. "Um. Yes." He has to
crane his neck to meet Lev's eyes, but they sparkle.

"Lev Haiba. I knew I recognised you when you came in! We're in philosophy together, right?"

He could lie, but what would happen if they saw each other in class after this? Kenma inhales.
"Yes, that's right. You ask a lot of questions."

Lev bursts out laughing. Yes, Kenma knows exactly who he is, because he talks a lot in class and
he doesn't shut up about himself. Majors in Russian literature, always sticks his hand in the air
when their professor is speaking to ask question after question. He's the kind of weird mix
between bubbly and intense that Kenma never knows whether he's being serious or not. "Ah, I
guess I do. You're really quiet, but I guess I know why now."

He almost smiles at that. It occurs to him that the reason they've all been brought together is the
common factor of social problems, and asks Lev where his stem from. That's what they're meant
to do, right? Share experiences.

Luckily for him, Lev isn't the kind of person to beat around the bush. "Well, I make a lot of
friends when I'm experiencing a manic high, but when I hit a depressive low, I seem to lose a lot
of them! So I'm very nervous around lots of people."

"Me too. The last part."

"It's just the worst, right? When they're all looking at you, and it's like? Ugh!"

"Ugh," Kenma agrees, nodding seriously. "I wish they wouldn't. Look, I mean."

"Eyes are so intimidating. Hey, I'll tell you a secret. I've got social phobia, too."

"But you're so talkative," Kenma blurts out, and immediately regrets it. It doesn't seem to bother
Lev. He goes on, eyes still shining.

"I'm really extroverted! Extroverts can have social anxiety too, you know."

Kenma knows. It was rude of him to say it the way he did. "I'm sorry."

"Nah, it's fine. I babble when I'm nervous. I always end up insulting people, and then I get
depressed!"

"That's terrible." He hopes he sounds genuine. It is terrible. His stomach feels kind of strange.

"I guess. I'm used to it?" He says it like it's really a question. Moving so suddenly that Kenma
almost jumps back, Lev fishes his phone from his pocket. He holds it out to Kenma with one
ridiculously long arm. "Hey, you should give me your facebook or mixi or twitter or something! If
you're ever feeling too anxious to come to class I can bring you the homework."

Kenma blinks in surprise, but takes the phone nevertheless. He types out his full name so that Lev
can find him on facebook later. It's a weird gesture, being offered something out of complete kindness like this. Something about the guy is making him feel strange. Good kind of strange. Like he reminds Kenma of someone.

The group are called back together and end their session with a series of positive mantras, and then they are sent out into the cold again.

Lev doesn't have to run to catch up with Kenma. He curses his short legs.

"What other classes do you take?"

"Literature. You take Russian, right?"

"Russian literature! That's, like, nearly the same thing. You like books?"

Kenma nods. He got his hands in his pockets, one around his phone, and a nervous tension thrumming in the air; he can do this. Making friends is normal.

"Yeah. We study poetry, too."

"Poetry is cool! I mean, I suck at it, but I used to write a lot in high school, you know?" His eyes have gone wide. "Do you write any?"

Kenma considers lying. He might ask to see. He shrugs dismissively. "Sometimes."

"You totally have to show me!"

"It's nothing worth showing." He smiles a little. They come to a stop in front of the train station, and Kenma rakes his hand through the back of his hair. "I've got to catch a line back..."

"Oh, right! It was nice meeting you properly!"

"Yeah," Kenma says, dazed. "You too."

Lev skips away-- it's a literal, god-awful skip in his step, like he's a seven-hundred foot tall child--before Kenma has the chance to say anything else. It's the kind of non-awkward exit he could get used to.

On Tuesday he wakes up feeling like the sun is in his stomach. He downs two coffees, adding caffeine to the mix, to the airy feeling traipsing out through his fingertips. It's been a while since he's woken up feeling confident. He revels in it.

Hinata greets him by flying into his arms, no hesitation whatsoever. The group all huddle in far too few layers and complain about the cold.

"I'll lean out the window and wave," Hinata chirps; Kageyama punches him in the arm.

"You'll get hit by a passing car and lose your head."

"This is bullying. This is abuse."

"When's your first game?" Kenma asks.

Hinata perks up. "It's not til this afternoon. We can have fun tonight! We could go out for dinner or something."

Nishinoya, who Kenma has only just met in person-- he's not disappointed, the guy embodies his
typing style-- chimes in. "If someone's paying for my food, I am there. Is everyone going?"

"Well, I actually just meant me and--"

"Asahi!" Kenma resists the urge to cover his ears at the unnatural volume. "Did you hear that, we're getting free food!"

Kuroo drives behind their bus. For a while they try to communicate through the back window; Hinata texts Kenma then waits for his facial expression, lighting up when he sees him laughing in the car; a bunch of them line up and try charades. It stops when Kuroo claims he's being distracted from driving, and then Kenma is left to stare at the back of Hinata's head, trying to ignore Kuroo and the bad songs on the radio.

"Let's play a roadtrip game."

"No, you said you were getting distracted."

"By movement." He looks so pathetic, Kenma almost feels sorry for him. "Okay, how about this. We play a word association game."

Kenma raises an eyebrow. That gets him to look at Kuroo, if that was Kuroo's goal. "The last time we did that, you were trying to figure someone out." He was sitting in the cafe Kuroo works part-time at. He's there every day after filming-- if he even is filming at the time-- and for half the week he opens in the mornings. At first it was just a money thing. His inheritance wouldn't last him forever. Now it's a weird hobby, public image. At the time, Kuroo wanted to know whether his new coworker-- now subordinate, an international student named Lily-- was a lesbian. It was a terrible, horrible, nosy way of asking someone whether they wanted to be set up with the cute art student down the road.

"So?" Kuroo raises an eyebrow. "I did it for love."

"You ended up being wrong."

"Allegedly." He's got his gaze on Kenma, piercing him through the seat even sidelong. "So, what's the deal?"

Kenma looks at him incredulously. The deal is that Kuroo's just as weirdly perceptive as he is; if he wants to figure something out, he will. If he wants to steer the game in a particular direction, it will go in that direction. He's like a psychoanalytical major on crack.

"So," Kenma mocks, "you want to figure something out about me. It's creepy. You can just ask."

"Ah, but you don't always tell."

"You won't know until you ask, Kuro, will you?"

His best friend's grin is sharp as knives. Kenma looks ahead again, where Hinata's orange hair is bobbing up and down with the motions of the bus.

"I hate that you're so perceptive. One game?"

"Fine. Fine, one game." He wants to curl in on himself. He feels like everyone knows a big secret and is keeping it from him.

"Good." Kuroo breathes in, smiling. "Car."

"Road."
Kuroo grins at him. "Drive."

"Fast."

"Rollercoaster."

"Friends."

"Hinata."

"Sunshine."

Kuroo stops talking and whips his head around at full-force to grin at Kenma, like he's discovered a goldmine. "Sunshine?"

"His hair." Kenma's cheeks are on fire. "You lost the game, by the way."

"That's a shame." Kuroo says, drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel. "Hey, wanna go another round?"

"No."

He laughs for a while, laughs until the sound of it evaporates and all Kenma can hear is the hum of the car vibrating on his cheek.

Ignoring Kuroo turns into falling asleep against the window. When he wakes up later, everyone is piling out of the bus in front of him, and Kuroo's just about to jostle him awake.

"Hey, great timing." His face lights up. "You were out the whole time, sleeping beauty."

"Are we here?"

"Yeah. Did you know you snore, like, really loudly?"

"No I don't. Get out of my way."

Hinata's bouncing on his feet. They're all kind of bouncy, and there's a weird energy humming among the team, like they're already in the game. Hinata crosses the parking lot and bounds towards Kenma and Kuroo.

"I'm so excited for you to watch, Kemna! Ah-- it'd be really embarrassing if I lost, huh?"

Kenma shrugs. "I'll only make fun of you forever."

Hinata shoves him, making a face. It's a good face. "I won't lose, then."

"Right."

"I'll do my best and look really cool. You'll swoon."


They file into the gym and Kenma panics for a moment, just a single moment, until Kuroo arrives at his side and steers him in the right direction. It's like a maze of sweat and rubber. People file in and out of rooms, carrying sports equipment and talking like they can't hear each other unless they shout. Kenma resists the urge to clutch his best friend's arm. He's still half asleep from the trip over and the sudden influx of people is overwhelming.

Some time between wading through the sea of people and falling through the floor, they make it to
the gym. Kenma sits down, wobbling. The team erupt onto the court. It's always fascinating to him, watching people move when he's exhausted, and with relief he feels it overtake his anxiety. They're like fireworks, moving in every direction. Kenma licks his lips; he wants to write something. He hasn't written in ages.

His therapist told him he needs to start finding his own coping mechanisms. Technically, he thinks, he already has them: run to Kuroo. Or Hinata now, he guesses. Hinata has become a support of his own. He could start writing again. Kenma thinks of channelling all of his anxiety into words. It's a hard thing to do, he knows; he used to get frustrated when he couldn't find the right one, or worse, when his professor looked over his work and said, "this doesn't make sense." Because there was no way for the school board to know that by bleeding cities, rusting skies, and oceans falling to their knees, he meant, the world doesn't turn right for me sometimes.

"You okay?" Kuroo asks. As if by osmosis, Hinata glances his way across the court. Their eyebrows are furrowed in the same way. Kenma waves him off, like, it's no big deal. I just had a minor breakthrough and you and my best friend have matching 'Kenma sensors.

He doesn't think too hard about the fact that Hinata can tell from all the way across the room when his mood changes.

"I was just thinking. I might want to write again."

Something flashes in Kuroo's eyes. "Kenma, that's great. Full time?"

He shakes his head. "It's not a big deal. Maybe just some short stories."

"That's amazing. You know that's amazing, right?"

Kenma realises they're getting ready to start the actual game. He doesn't answer Kuroo. From across the court he watches Hinata bounce into position, and tries to picture how he could write him in colours.

The game doesn't go for as long as Kenma expects it to. It's pretty easy to pay attention to-- he remembers most of the positions from high school, and doesn't need the scoreboard to tell him that Hinata's team are winning by a substantial amount.

There is one moment in particular, where he's watching Hinata wait for the ball, dancing on his toes. The whole room sounds like a cacophony of feet sliding against the floor; high squeaks and low thumps. Kageyama sets it beautifully. Kenma watches and thinks, I could never set like that. Then there's a moment of panic-- it's too high for Hinata. When they were practising in that old gym, he never tossed that high. He's going to miss.

A few of the other times he's jumped, Hinata's eyes have been closed. He trusts Kageyama that much, trusts that his best friend will deliver the ball straight to his palm, trusts in his own abilities that he'll hit it in the right direction. Hinata bends his legs and flies, and from all the way across the court, he locks eyes with Kenma.

They get the point. Kenma thinks so, anyway. He looks away as soon as his gaze crashes with Hinata's, trying to convince his pulse not to deafen him. That was... intense, to say the least. Did he imagine that? It felt like the ball was coming right for him, like he was in the middle of a hurricane and Hinata was the cause; it's suddenly humid in the room. When he looks back, Hinata's watching the other team again.

They win the game. There's a lot of celebration-- like they've never done it before, or something-- and they hang back, shaking hands with the other team and talking amongst themselves. It reminds Kenma oddly of going to a high school party as he wades through the crowd. He hears Kuroo cluck his tongue behind him, like he might be thinking the same thing. Kenma remembers
going to parties with him, wandering off and getting lost and not caring. Then one day, Ryota
found him.

"Kenma!"

Hinata goes to wrap the blonde in a hug, then thinks better of it, stepping back and raising his
hand for a high five. "I'm all sweaty!" he announces.

Kenma high fives him in a daze. "You're all sweaty," he agrees. For show, he wipes his hand on
his pants.

Hinata whacks him in the shoulder. "Did you see! I told you! I told you, we're all incredible when
we work together-- Kageyama's sets the ball like it's magic, and I'm like-- pwah! You know? I'm
so much better now than when I used to play middle blocker, it's like-- bam, and I feel so good, I
feel so good right now, Kenma. Were you watching the whole time? I think I looked at you!"

"I was watching," he says. He's smiling. He can't stop smiling, like it's contagious or something.
Hinata looks like he's been tossed straight into the sun, beaming at every angle, and the room is
leaking with excitement.

Then the walls come crashing down.

The man walks in like he built the place, all folded arms and sharp smirks. Kenma only notices
him, amongst all the other people, because of his laugh. He's with friends; leaning heavily onto a
blonde guy, not in any kind of sporting uniform. The moment he spots Hinata's team, his eyes
light up. This should be Kenma's first warning.

"Hinata-chan!" he calls. Hinata whips his head around. Absolute dread, bone deep and leaking
with horror, arise on his face for a moment. Then it's like a wall slams down.

"Hagino, right?" Hinata's smiling.

"Ah." The guy approaches him leisurely. His eyes are all lit up, but it's not like the sun; it's like a
fire. "You remember. We were in English together, weren't we?"

"Japanese and math," Hinata corrects. Right-- they're in Hinata's home town. Something must go
off in Kageyama's head, some friendship alert like the one Kuroo gets when Kenma is starting to
panic. He raises his head from his conversation, then walks straight over.

"Kageyama-kun," the guy sing-songs. "You're still so scary!" He turns his gaze on Hinata again.
"I heard your team might be playing here. I'm so glad I was right!"

"Who is he?" Kenma murmurs; he says it under his breath so only Kageyama can hear, but the
taller answers him at full volume.

"Some jackass from high school. Ass-gino, don't you have somewhere better to be?"

The guy sticks his bottom lip out. "I'm catching up with an old friend. Hinata-chan was just going
to tell me about what she's been doing since high school." His eyes turn on Hinata, and Kenma's
follow them. He looks miniature all of a sudden; looks the way Kenma feels when he's about to
drop through the floor. "You're still dressing like a tomboy, huh?"

"Bathroom," Hinata says, and he rushes out of the room.

A lot happens then. Tanaka seems to notice who it is that Kageyama's standing over, and comes to
his side in an instant. Kenma doesn't catch what they're saying-- among asshole-him-here
norighttobehere the word 'creep' is thrown in a few times. He definitely hears one word.
He doesn't miss the word transphobia.
Kuroo has made his way over to their group, but Kenma's gone before then. He doesn't think about the maze he had to come through to get here. He just runs.

The room doesn't spin this time, and if it does, Kenma doesn't notice it. People are still passing through the hallways, stinking of rubber, stinking of sweat. It's maybe the first time in his life he's felt thankful for being small. He manoeuvres past them all, somehow knowing exactly where Hinata will be. Or maybe he's just really, really hoping.

It doesn't take Kenma long to find him. He can see the other's hunched shoulders, the way his bright hair hangs down, from a mile away. He slows down to a walk as he's getting closer, trying to catch his breath.

Hinata is crying.

"Kenma," he says, like he's surprised to see him. Kenma's heart takes a dramatic leap and dive all the way up to his throat. Hinata reaches up a hand to wipe at his eyes like maybe he can hide what's happening. "S-sorry, I just-- needed some air, you know, ha--"

"Shouyou."

Hinata's trembling. He can see it, his hands balled into fists. Kenma's heart surges for him.

"It's not a big deal," Kenma says, his voice soft. Apparently, it's the wrong thing to say.

"I was born a girl," Hinata blurts out. He looks humiliated about it immediately after, makes a face like he's fighting hand-in-hand with anger and fear. "I mean-- I guess I'm just used to saying that. They called it gender identity disorder when I was fourteen. I'm. I saw a few psychiatrists."

Kenma doesn't know what to say. He stands there, frozen.

Hinata stands up. "I'm going home," he says. "Ah-- if the team ask about me, tell them I'm okay. Okay?"

Kenma's heart is hammering like a kickdrum. "Shouyou," he says.

Hinata flees.

He should go after him. He knows that. But he stands there, not knowing what to do, watching Hinata until he's gone.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, scaring him half to death.

"Kuroo."

"Where did you go?" He can hear another voice in the background-- Tsukishima's, he thinks. "You missed it. Tanaka totally almost punched this guy in the face. Is Shouyou okay?"

"I let him leave," Kenma mumbles. His voice is high. He says it mostly to himself.

"What? Kenma, I can't hear--"

"I let him leave," he repeats, louder. "He was-- he told me-- I don't care. I need you to get his address. I'm out front."

Kuroo pauses for a moment. "Wait there," he says, and hangs up.

Kenma waits. The cold is biting now; a breeze has picked up, so strong it feels like it will tip him over. He hears the door open behind him and without even looking, he knows it's Kuroo.
Sometimes he thinks that he'll always know, every time.

His best friend comes to stand beside him, phone in hand. "Kageyama says he never wants to talk to anyone when he gets like this."

Kenma doesn't know what to say. "Okay." He's going to go see him anyway.

Kuroo seems to know this. "Apparently the guy, Hogino or whatever, used to hit on Hinata a lot when they were in high school. Always trying to court him."

"And he's not gay."

Kuroo laughs at this, for whatever reason. "I don't think his sexuality was the problem. Whether Hinata likes guys or not is beside the point. The way they were talking about him, the guy put him through hell, even after he... I think he came out, as a guy. I think it got worse."

Kenma nods. Since they met, he realises, Hinata has been there every single time he's needed him. He knows what being put through hell in high school is like. He can't let him do this alone now.

"Did you get his address?"

"Yeah." Kuroo holds out his phone, where he's hastily typed it in a note. "I figured you'd go anyway. Kageyama said it was your funeral."

Kenma snorts delicately. "Right. Because Shouyou's such a scary guy."

"Oh, no," Kuroo says. "It's not him you have to worry about. Kageyama said his family would be home."

Kenma hates driving. He pulls up to Hinata's house in Kuroo's car, feeling a mix of things--ridiculous, because it's the flashiest car ever, and he looks like a mess of a college student driving it. Thankful that he didn't crash. And terrified.

Kenma is terrified.

He sits in his car and it's like a balloon swells inside of him, filling up the whole space. Are they close enough for him to do something like this? He feels close to Hinata. He cares about him a lot, and he thinks Hinata would do the same.

What if his family don't let him in? What if his family don't like Kenma?

It doesn't matter. Hinata cried in front of him. It doesn't matter.

Gathering courage feels like taking steps on burning hot coals. If his therapist could see him right now, Kenma thinks bitterly, she'd have a field day. He crosses the mote and the thorns and the burning pathway to the front door and knocks, swaying on his feet. Natsu answers.

"Kenma," she says, like she's really surprised. Like she should be.

"Natsu," he answers back, because for a literature student, he's eloquent; he notes that it's weird seeing her in pajamas instead of a flower crown.

"Skinny jeans," she says seriously, nodding. "Are you here to see my brother? He got home a few minutes ago."

"No. Yes." Kenma tries to look in past her, where a part of him is worried a dungeon is waiting.
"Can I... am I allowed to come in and talk to your brother?"

"I don't think he wants to talk to anyone," she says, voice dropping to a whisper. She's not *that* much shorter than him, but Kenma leans down like she's going to tell him a secret. "He was crying when he got here. He used to do it a lot when I was a kid." She says it like she's an adult now. Kenma takes in a deep breath.

"Are your parents home?"

"Yeah! Yeah, I'll go get them."

And she leaves the door wide open. What if he was a serial killer? Kenma dawdles in the doorway awkwardly for a bit, unsure whether to step back outside or come inside completely. Luckily for him, Hinata's mom makes the decision for him. She  pops her head around the corner, takes one look at him, and waves him inside.

He shuts the door behind him. Something about being in Hinata's childhood home is *really* weird. Technically, he hasn't even been inside his current one yet. He half expects to see pictures of Hinata as a baby lining the hallway, and is disappointed for a brief moment until he spots one in the living room. He looks about twelve in the picture, and of all things, he's holding a soccer ball.

"He's not going to want you to go up," the woman tells him; it's the first thing out of her mouth. There's an older, greying man sitting on the sofa, pretending to read a book. The whole family looks very tense.

Hinata's mother, still teetering on the edge of hospitality and motherly worry, gestures to the kitchen. "Would you like me to make you a drink...?"

"Kozume. Kenma." He almost stammers.

She nods. "Kozume-san. He's talked about you."

Kenma's heart picks up. He has no idea why; it's ridiculous. He gestures to the staircase. "Can I, um."

She waves a hand. "Tobio used to try, bless his heart. When Hinata first realised he wasn't a girl... you know how teenagers can be. Cruel people."

Kenma scratches the back of his wrist anxiously. Something in the woman's eyes softens.

"Had he... come out to you? I know he doesn't like to do it. He doesn't think he needs to any more."

"He doesn't. I don't care."

That makes her laugh. "You sound like Tobio. Doesn't he sound like Tobio?"

The man puts his book down and imitates a *frighteningly* accurate portrayal of the tall setter.

"What should it matter if he's a guy or a girl? Stupid. Everyone at school is stupid."

"You're mocking someone younger than you," Natsu chastises. She doesn't seem too perturbed by it, like Kenma is. His eyes are still kind of wide.

Hinata's mother's face has gone soft again. "Are you staying with us, dear? While you're in town?"

He nods. In his peripheral, he catches a flash of movement; he looks up in time to see Hinata peeking around the end of the hallway at the top of the stairs. The red-head stares a moment,
looking petulant, and, subtle as anything, nods him up. Kenma goes without a word.

It occurs to him only when he gets there: he's in Hinata's childhood room. It's weird. It's weirdly put-together for such a messy guy; most of his stuff is there, almost like he moved out without disturbing anything. As Kenma gets further in he notices the volleyball trophies, the old pictures of friends hastily tacked to the wall. There are half-motherly touches here and there, like she was going to make it into a guest room before she chickened out. Hinata sits on his bed and draws his knees to his chest.

They say nothing for a really long time. Kenma's content with that, silently encouraging Hinata to draw whatever energy from him he can, to drain him if he needs. Eventually, he opens his mouth.

"It's okay." He feels ridiculous as soon as the words are out. Hinata seems to get it anyway.

"Yeah," he says. His weak voice kills Kenma.

"I mean, it's. You know I don't care."

"I didn't want you to know."

Kenma looks up. "Why not?"

Pain crosses Hinata's face, raw and bare and out of place on him, like a shadow overtaking the sun, so cold where all his warmth usually is. "Because it shouldn't matter, but it does. I don't want anyone to look at me and see me as a girl, or as-- you know, um, kids in high school can be creative, so it's like, freak, or whatever you wanna..." he breathes in, shutting his eyes, resting his head against his knee. He looks like an angel. Kenma has the thought all at once, like something hitting him in the head and the chest at the same time. Pain and rapture, that's what he's been seeing on this guy's face for so long. That's why he looks so sunny, why all his colours shine through like that. How could there have been a time when Kenma thought that Hinata had never been hurt before?

"I don't see you as a girl," he says. Hinata cracks one eye first to look at him, then both when he sees the expression on Kenma's face. "At all. And I never will. Do you think this changes anything?" Hinata looks like he might cry again. He shakes his head. "Good, because it doesn't. No amount of... assholes can change the person you are." It's like he's giving the advice to the both of them. "Even if you feel like you don't fit into your own skin, or no one knows what you're really like. You're you. And I really like you. You're one of my best friends."

Hinata is looking at him like he's forgotten how eyes work. He tilts his head, still resting against his knee. "I know I'm a guy," he says. "I don't get confused about that anymore. Nobody makes me feel like I'm not."

Kenma doesn't break eye contact. "Good."

"When I was in middle school, and the really early days of high school, it was hell. Everyone wanted me to be this person and I couldn't be her. I was too small for anything I wanted to be. It was like, ah, changing colour every day, you know?" He smiles. "Like blending in. Hinata Shouyou, chameleon boy."

Kenma realises he's returning his smile, and his own eyes feel sad. He wants to reach out and touch Hinata. He doesn't know why, but he wants to so badly. "I've felt like that."

For whatever reason, this makes Hinata's eyes shine with colour. "But you're so... you."

"Me?" Kenma almost chokes on a laugh. The sensation floods him so suddenly; it must be nerves, but suddenly he's laughing into his fist, and Hinata is staring. "I never feel like myself. I don't
even know who that is. My whole life has been trying to blend in."

"But you stand out so brightly," Hinata whispers. He realises what he's said a moment later, and he whips his head away, averts his eyes. "Not... ah, not if you don't want to, of course! I don't mean it in a bad way, like, strangers aren't staring at you or... you know, if it makes you uncomfortable."

Kenma's still laughing. He can't help it, and it doubles him over, crushes his insides. Hinata joins in like catching a cold. They crash together, two mountains, two colliding forces of rock, crumbling together breathlessly. Kenma shuts his eyes and breathes in orange blossoms.

It's quiet for a really long time between them after that. Hinata is a still boat, resting against him. It feels like something's changed, even though nothing has. He wants to sit here forever. He wants to say a million things he doesn't know how to put into words, but he can't. He doesn't want to speak, to shatter this moment into a thousand pieces he knows he won't be able to pick up.

"Sorry I didn't tell you."

Kenma looks at him. He can't put a number on this kind of feeling. It's not a measurable thing. He surges for Hinata, without moving a single muscle. "Don't say that. As if I care, Shouyou."

He watches all the stars fly into Hinata's eyes again, light up his face.

"Can I tell you a secret?" His voice is above a whisper, just like the volume the sea uses at low tide.

People don't come to him with secrets. Kenma nods slowly, a secret on its own.

"I hate saying 'I was born a girl'. I wasn't. I'm a boy, you know? I'm a boy."

Kenma nods. He rests all his weight against Hinata, and Hinata does the same.

"You have to tell me one of your secrets, now. Tell me the worst thing that ever happened to you. Like when you were a monster or something."

Kenma thinks about monsters and the dark and shadows and worst things. He thinks about Ryota, high school, crumbling into a million pieces on the sand and wishing the sea would take him away and beat and beat and beat him until he returned soft and dull and worn down at the edges like flotsam. He decides to tell a different story, and the words still creep out of his mouth like poison. "When I was a second year in high school, right before we moved, I had a breakdown. It got so bad that I had to tell my parents. Kuroo wanted me to get help." He looks down at the bed sheets through his lashes, black hair, blue silk. "I wanted to die. I never did, but I wanted to. When I told my mom, she cried. Like really cried, wailing and everything." Kenma clenches his hands into fists. His next words are whispered. "I hated her. It's horrible. I've never hated anybody so much in my whole life. All because she cried."

Hinata doesn't say anything. Kenma can feel him absorbing the words. Normally, silence is a toxic thing, and it chokes him. Not right now. Right now he can breathe.

"I transitioned when I was a third year about to graduate," Hinata says. His voice is quiet-- as quiet as he can manage, so strange an octave that his voice croaks-- but the words tumble out like light. "It was a really weird experience. I'd been on hormones for a while and, like, my parents were supportive, but..." He shrugs. "They were sad, too. They never said anything to me, but once I heard my mom crying and she told my dad, It's like I'm losing a daughter. That made me really mad."

Kenma smiles. "It would have made me mad, too. She already has one daughter. Why does she
need to be greedy? You're a way better son."

Hinata presses a laugh into the blonde's shoulder. "While we're telling secrets," he says, "I can't swim."

Kenma sits up. "Not even a little bit?"

"Not even a little bit."

He makes a face. "I'd save you if you were drowning, then."

"Oh?" Hinata raises his brows. "You're a good swimmer?"

"Terrible. We'd both be screwed."

They laugh with their heads pressed together. One of those gasping laughs where his stomach hurts after. His eyes flutter open and it doesn't seem to matter that they're pressed close, like anxiety was never something Kenma touched, like they're not in a room at all but actually a part of the vanishing sun shedding light through the window in the corner. "I wish I could draw," he says. "It seems like a really dignified thing to do."

Hinata grins. "If you could draw, would you draw me? Ah-- I guess you could write about me, too."

"I'd draw you with wings." He would-- will-- write about him with wings, too. That isn't the point.

Hinata's eyes are blown wide. "Really? Ahh... that's so cool, Kenma. I'd draw you with stars everywhere, all over you, even in your heart."

"You'd draw my organs?"

He shoves him. "Shut up." He's laughing. They're both laughing. They never really stop.

Eventually, it gets late, and they have to go down for dinner because Hinata's mom has called them three times. It's like stepping out of a dream. Natsu is waiting at the foot of the stairs, watching Kenma and her brother like she's vibrating with a nervous tension.

"AreyouokayIwasgonnacomeupandgiveyouahugbutmomssaidtoleaveyoualoneandanywayIdrewyouapicture" all comes out at once, hitting the both of them in the face, but Hinata seems to know how to deflect it. He wraps his arms around the girl, propping his chin on her head, and Kenma gets it. If someone were going to throw him into the sun, he'd let them. He totally sees the appeal.

They eat around the table like a real family. Kenma thinks of his own parents, and wonders why they could never be like this. Because they never had another kid? Because they're bad people, he concludes finally-- and really, it's not some big discovery. The food here tastes like family food should. They actually talk to each other around the table. And it doesn't make Kenma feel like sinking through the floor. He feels a part of it.

"Shit!" Hinata stands up from the table suddenly, ignoring the unanimous chastise for the swear. "I forgot to text Kageyama that I'm okay! He's gonna kill me!"

He rushes away from the table. As they finish their meal, the rest of them are blessed with the tiny, far off sound of Kageyama screaming at Hinata through the phone.
i should stop giving previews at the end of chapters bc like... i always get it wrong and end up giving spoilers before they happen. ive done it twice now. i split my plot into chapters rly weird and,, yeah im sorry omg. here are the #thicc thighs, among other things! tune in next week for the chapter before The Big Chapter (oooo.) also may feature an important party, tall cat boy being very important 2 my heart, kuroo's birthday, aaand someone...thinking about some feelings...that they probably should have thought about already.

on another note, thank u so much to everyone who has been supporting me!!! im going through a really rough time right now and everyone on here and on tumblr has been so supportive. thank you for all the comments, reviews, artwork and kind words. imm like constantly screaming that people could read my writing and find words as pretty as you guys do to describe it... holy shit. bless every last one of u and bless kenhina because ive made so many friends through this terrible awful No Good gay fic.

let me know what u think & as always hmu @ cloverguts.tumblr.com !!! :}

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 12

As if by some miracle of psychosomatic circumstance, Kenma starts to feel more awake.

Energy in people is like electricity. He remembers being told by his therapist that he's an introvert; he needs to recharge alone. Right now he feels charged, a series of vibrations from the sun. There's no game on Wednesday, but there is practise; Kenma goes along and sits on the sidelines with Kuroo. He doesn't ask Kenma what happened; either he knows, through association with Kageyama, or he has enough faith that Kenma worked it out himself. It's pretty obvious that he worked it out. Hinata's back to his bouncy self, like nothing at all happened. It might be because of the extra measures of security; Tanaka and Kageyama are watching everyone who enters and exits the building with a hawk-like precision. Hinata either doesn't notice or doesn't mind; he's back to sunshine again, and Kenma feels charged.

The last night before they have to leave they stay up watching movies, huddled together on Hinata's bed and clutching pillows. It's not even a very good horror movie, but Kenma jumps every time Hinata jumps. Like they're connected by electricity. Natsu stayed up with them as long as she could, but fell asleep before the first Disney movie was even over. They have long since moved her to her own room, and it's too dark now for either of them to want to risk going downstairs and getting food.

"We could get popcorn," Hinata whispers. There's no feasible reason for him to be whispering. It's not like anyone can hear them.

"Okay," Kenma agrees, also in a whisper. "I'll stay here."

"You can't make me go downstairs alone! What if I die?"

"You're right. If you leave me up here, I might die, too."

"Kenma," he hisses. Kenma's grinning, pretending like he's not thinking about it seriously.

"We could both go down together. That way I can throw you in front of me if there's a killer ghost."

"You know what I think," Hinata announces. He's trying to whisper like the ghosts will hear him,
but his voice is too loud. Kenma doesn't want to tell him. "I think you're actually really scared and you just wanna act tough."

"Totally," he deadpans. Hinata won't give up on his scrutinising stare.

"Yeah, totally! If you weren't scared, you'd go down alone."

"How about this," Kenma says, because he isn't scared, not even a little, nope. "We go down together, we get food, and we come back upstairs. Sound safe?"

Hinata makes a face like he's thinking about it. He makes the face for a really long time. Then, eventually, "Okay."

They go downstairs still huddled together in the blanket. It's freezing cold, and the stairs feel like death against the soles of Kenma's feet.

They have to stop at one point when Hinata thinks he hears a noise; he slams the both of them against the wall adjacent to the stair banister, crushing Kenma in the blanket. Then they start again, careful not to trip down the stairs in the complete blackness of the house.

"We're going to die," Hinata whispers seriously. The fear in his voice is palpable. Kenma tries to resist the urge to laugh, and gives in, snickering into Hinata's shoulder. The despairing noise that comes out of him just makes Kenma laugh harder.

"It's not funny! Do you want me to die, Kenma? Did you see the ghost in that movie?"

"No," Kenma says, "but I'm sure it saw you."

"Kenma!"

They reach the kitchen and have to stop again so that Kenma can muffle his laugh, not wanting to wake the whole house. They shuffle their way together to the cupboard, searching for food.

"Popcorn?"

"Too loud. The ghosts will hear us."

"Right," Kenma agrees gravely. He watches Hinata reach a hand out from under their blanket, and swipes a soup ladle from the kitchen counter.

"...Soup?"

"No! This is to fight the ghosts off with!"

"Oh," he says. "I don't think you can fight ghosts off with a soup ladle."

"You don't know!"

They both shut up when a noise to the left catches their attention. That's a door creaking. That's the cupboard door creaking open on its own.

Before Kenma knows what he's doing he's wrenched the ladle out of Hinata's hand, holding it out like he's trying to fend off the invisible enemy. Then they're stumbling backwards together, fleeing up the stairs-- they trip, the blanket catching between their feet, and Hinata almost screams at the top of his lungs-- before they're safely back in Hinata's bedroom, slamming the door shut behind them.

They catch their breath. The house is still silent; their pursuer, however imagined, didn't follow
them back to Hinata's room, thank God. They sit in silence, the blanket tangled between their feet and their legs and forcing them together, shoulder to shoulder on Hinata's bed, staring up at the ceiling and rejoicing in the miracle of not being dead.

"Let's watch something else," Kenma suggests.

"Please."

"...I'm still hungry."

Hinata holds up a box of chocolates. In all events of the evening, it's his biggest achievement.

"How late is it?"

"Don't check. It always feels less magical if you check."

Kenma grins, wide like the expanse of the sky he can't see. "You're a really weird guy, you know that, Shouyou?"

They're under Hinata's blankets. The light of his laptop is illuminating the both of them, but they stopped watching videos a while ago. "Yeah," Hinata breathes. His lashes flutter. It's the nicest thing. "It's your turn to tell a secret, Kenma."

"I just went."

"No, I told the one about the ice cream van." He had chased a van down the street for a solid ten minutes so that he didn't miss out on ice-cream. This happened a few months ago. "Now it's your turn."

"Right," Kenma says. They've been telling secrets for about an hour now, and something feels shifted. Like something is different. He has no idea what time it is, only that he isn't thinking of ghosts, or the time of day, or the fact that he has to go back tomorrow, or therapy or anything. "I'm bad at this game."

"You're not! Your secrets are really interesting."

"I don't think I have any more." Which is a lie. He doesn't know which secret to tell first.

"Tell me about high school," Hinata prompts. He doesn't say it carefully, or even very confidently. He just says it.

Kenma thinks really hard. Everything about high school is a secret; then again, nothing is. "Alright," he says. "I quit volleyball because of a boyfriend."

"What! That's so unfair! Did he make you?"

"No." Kenma shakes his head. "It's complicated. I moved away. I didn't want to play anymore."

"Did it remind you of him?"

"Not really." He tries to avoid Hinata's eyes, meets them anyway, then looks down again. "He used to complain that I'd play too much, or that I wanted to spend more time playing with Kuroo than being with him. So after I moved, I didn't want to play anymore."

Hinata doesn't apologise. It's like a breath of fresh air, the lack of sympathy. "I almost quit in my second year," he breathes.
Kenma doesn't miss a beat. "Because of your gender?"

"Yeah. The girls' team was supportive, but I couldn't really be on it anymore. But some members of the boys' team didn't want me. Kageyama was really, like, aggressive about it." He smiles. They're really close, Kenma realises. If he wanted to he could lean forward, rest their foreheads together. He has no idea why he wants to.

Hinata sighs breathily, pulling Kenma back in. "I can't believe we both played volleyball. We could have seen each other, you know? At some point in our childhood. How weird is that?"

"I would have remembered seeing you."

Hinata laughs. Kenma wants to tell him that he's not kidding, not one bit, but the words won't come out.

"It's your turn."

"I'm all out of secrets again," he says, making a face. Hinata thinks hard.

"It's gotta be something juicy. Do you have any weird phobias?"

"No." Hinata's looking at him, grinning; he wiggles his eyebrows.

"Any weird fetishes?"

"No. I don't think so, anyway."

That makes him laugh. When he looks back up again, his eyes are glittery, and it makes something deep inside of Kenma pang with fear. He wiggles his eyebrows again. "Do you like anyone?"

"I like plenty of people," he teases. Hinata pouts.

"Like like."

"What is this, middle school?"

"Just answer the question!"

"Fine," he says. "I like like video game characters. Are we playing truth or dare now?"

"Yes! I pick dare!"

"You have too much trust in me," Kenma laughs. "What if I made you do something really, really terrible?"

"Well, I'd do it," Hinata says, sticking out his bottom lip. "Because it's you."

"I'm going to think of the grossest thing possible, and then make you do that."

"I'll do it!"

"I could make you kiss me."

He doesn't expect Hinata to go silent, but he does. Utter stillness. Everything in the room is suddenly heavy. Kenma tastes sand and salt and sea and then Hinata is looking straight at him, his face red-- no, not at him. At his lips.

"I was kidding," he says. His voice is far away. He shouldn't have done it, shouldn't have made
the joke-- what if they're not close enough, what if Hinata thinks he's serious and is disgusted and it's just like high school--

Hinata snickers. The snicker turns into a laugh, and suddenly he's gasping for air, his face pressed against Kenma's shoulder.

"You're such a dork," Kenma gasps, bewildered, still trying to recover; Hinata grips onto him for dear life and laughs until his voice goes hoarse.

"You totally thought I was gonna do it," Hinata laughs. There are tears in his eyes. "Oh man. Your face was like, whoa."

Kenma lets his head fall to Hinata's and he laughs, too. It's late. Not that he knows, but-- he can feel it in his bones, hysteria leaking out of him. They laugh like they're dying, gasping for air like when they raced back to the room. They laugh until the blanket comes loose, and suddenly Kenma notices it, leaking in from the window by the corner, lighting up the room. It's morning.

"You had better sleep on the bus. If you pass out during the game, so help me, I will attach your arms to strings and puppet you myself."

Hinata sinks before Daichi, too tired to look terrified but just awake enough to cower. Kenma stopped feeling bad pretty quickly, and has been smiling behind his hand for a while. Kuroo jostles him in the ribs.

"Your fault."

"Hardly."

"You," Daichi turns his gaze on Kenma. He can't tell whether he's serious or not, or whether he should be scared. "It's your fault if he yawns the whole game. You kept him up all night."

For whatever reason, this makes him blush. Kuroo notices; he jostles Kenma in the ribs again, and Kenma jostles him back.

"It was my fault," Hinata defends, a whine to every word. "Don't blame Kenma. He fell under my peer pressure!"

"Peer pressure," Daichi mutters, shaking his head. "Well, that makes you the irresponsible one, doesn't it?"

"He can sleep on the bus," Suga interrupts. Over the past few days, Kenma has realised he likes the guy a lot. They turn their gaze over Hinata, smiling crookedly. "Remember that time Daichi went out drinking and showed up the next day to practise hung-over?"

"That was because of you," Daichi splutters. Suga raises a hand to their chest.

"I would never."

"Can I use Asahi for a pillow?" Hinata's words muffle around a yawn. "Or Kageyama. Where's Kageyama?"

"You touch me, I cut your hands off," Kageyama shouts from behind the bus. He's loading the bags in the back. Either his hearing is that sharp, or he has a built in Hinata detector, just like Kuroo has one for Kenma.

"You'll have to sleep eventually!" Hinata calls. He turns his attention on Kenma then, smiling
"I messed up, huh?"

"You'll be fine. You'll sleep on the bus, right?"

"Yeah."

Even half asleep, Hinata's voice has a hyperactive twinge to it. He flings his arms around Kenma, wrapping him in the most lethargic hug. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem."

"I mean it." He peaks up at Kenma, his voice like rocks. "Thank you."

It's way too intimate for some reason. Kenma swallows, and gives a single nod.

Something occurs to him in the car, once he's managed to clear his head. "Did you say goodbye to Tsuki?"

"Huh? Oh-- yeah."

He turns to Kuroo. "What's that about? I didn't see you."

"I said goodbye this morning." Something about his voice is off, but for once, it doesn't feel like territory Kenma should tread in. He turns away slowly.

He's content to sit in silence; so is Kuroo, apparently, which is new for him. He's considering just bringing something up to quell all the weird in the car. As if by miracle, his phone buzzes. He almost sighs with the relief of having something to do.

It's from Lev Haiba.

*Im boooored...Kenma, if ur free today, u have to hang out with me! Lunch!!*

There's another one before he can even reply.

*Actually u have to come even if ur not free !!*

He thinks about it. Reasonably, he knows he's exhausted. It's pretty early in the morning still, but he was planning on just going to bed when he got back. Maybe inviting Kuroo over. He glances over at his tense friend, thinking now that that's probably not the best idea.

*im not back until 1.*

*Great!!! We can get lunch!!!*

Kuroo is oblivious to the fact that Kenma's smiling at his phone a little.

*sure*

*How have u been ??*

They text most of the drive back. Lev sends him the address of the restaurant-- it's a cheap diner-type place five minutes from the college. They stop texting when he's about thirty minutes from home; then it's back to the silence in the car, Kuroo's fingers so far from the dial on the radio, just the tension to swim between them.

The tension eases a little when they get back. Kuroo throws his bag at him. "Do you want to go hang out for the rest of the day? I don't have to go into work until later."

Kenma fidgets. "I can't, I've got plans."
This makes the brunette's brows shoot up to his hairline. "Therapy thing?"

"Not really."

"Shouyou's in Matsushima. Do you even have other friends?"

Kenma shoots him a look over his shoulder. "Yes, I have other friends."

"Right, of course. You're suddenly pretty popular, hey Kenma? Make sure you're at least free for my birthday on Monday."

"You're in a bad mood. Don't take it out on me."

"I'm not, I'm--" Kuroo rakes his hand through his hair, clenching and unclenching his jaw. "I'm not." It's clear that he is, and it's clear that he isn't happy about it. Kenma takes his bag, hoisting it up in his arms-- they shake from the effort.

"It's fine," he says. "I'll call later."

"Kenma."

"I'll have my phone if you need me," he says, and turns to go inside. Kuroo doesn't follow.

It isn't until he's in his own apartment, fussing over his hair in the hallway mirror, that he realises he's going to be late. He makes it on the subway and to the restaurant only five minutes late. He only has to look around for Lev for a second, because all of a sudden the guy's grabbing him by the arm and steering him away.

"Uh-- sorry I'm--"

"I'm glad you showed up, Kenma, but we absolutely have to go right now."

Lev lets go of him, expecting him to keep up. He seems to underestimate the difference in size of their legs. Kenma struggles to keep up, cursing the ridiculous size of Lev's legs-- really, of anyone's legs that aren't his own, because what the Hell.

"I don't have time for lunch," Lev explains. As if that actually explains anything. Kenma tries to speed up, but just manages to stop short of a jog. Lev looks back again.

"I'm totally an airhead. I realised, like, twenty minutes ago that I have an assignment that's due tomorrow and I haven't even started! So I hope you don't mind, but I need to pick up a bunch of books."

"You could have just cancelled," Kenma calls, a million paces behind.

"Huh? No way, that's totally rude! Besides, I suck at studying alone."

"So you're dragging me along." Kenma regrets it as soon as it's out of his mouth-- they're not close enough for him to be rude, what was he thinking-- but Lev just laughs it off, notices Kenma's falling behind, and drops back to a slower pace.

"Sorry, I walk kinda fast, huh? Anyway. We'll stop and get take-out on the way to my place."

On the way to my place. Kenma's going to his house. He definitely never consented to going to Lev's home, but now that he's presented with the situation, he finds he doesn't really mind all that much.

The library he picks isn't the school library. It's only a five minute walk out of their way, and it's
big enough-- and empty enough-- that Kenma immediately shuts up. Lev, however, feels the need to blabber on at the top of his lungs, even despite the librarian's judgemental stare. He chatters on about what books he needs, and how there are specific books just explaining other books, and how he had to buy a couple online because they didn't stock them in regular libraries or book stores. Kenma tries to keep up as he's handed book after book, until there is a large enough stack in his arms that he feels kind of wobbly.

"It's like, there's so much to do at the moment, you know? End of years are coming up. Worse than midterms, if you ask me."

He throws another book onto Book Summit. If it weren't so close to his face, he wouldn't be able to read it, but this one is right in his line of sight.

"...Is this Keats?"

"Huh? Oh-- yeah!"

"Keats wasn't Russian."

"That one's not for class, I just really like his stuff," Lev admits, grinning sheepishly. Kenma raises his brows.

"Oh."

"Oh? You don't like him?"

"Not really," he says, shrugging-- or shrugging as best as he can with a thousand tonne pile of books in his arms, which Lev hasn't apologised for once. "We have to study him for literature. I think his work is kind of boring."

"Boring?" Lev spins around on his heel to survey Kenma. The far-blown look in his eyes is startling, like he's got stars instead of pupils. "No way! It's so complex, especially after he found out he was dying. This living hand, now warm and--"

"Warm and capable, yeah. It's about his relationship with Fanny Brawne."

"Fanny? No way!"

That catches Kenma's attention. He peers over the books at Lev, frowning. "What are you talking about?"

"Just give it another read," Lev laughs, adding another book to the pile so Kenma loses sight of him. "It's way more dimensional than that, I promise."

They check out the books, so that Kenma finally gets a chance to stretch his arms and roll his shoulders. Lev mercilessly carries them home. He talks, and doesn't really shut up, but Kenma can't stop thinking about the poem. Of course it's about Fanny-- it's meant to be a romantic poem, isn't it? But what was Lev saying, about Keats' work getting more complex after he found out he was dying? When had that particular poem even been written? He's usually so good at interpreting things--

"Hey, Kenma, you still want takeout? Let's get meat buns."

It cuts into his daydream. And Kenma can't help it; he laughs. Something about the childlike eagerness and brashness is familiar to him, and it's like all of his exhaustion is catching up to him. He laughs hard enough for his stomach to ache, laughs so hard he nearly doubles over. Lev, thankfully, just laughs back, a bewildered look to his eyes.
"So you can laugh!"

It just makes Kenma laugh harder. He doesn't know what's wrong with him. He feels electrified, suddenly, like running on little to no sleep is embedding him with shock waves where once he had flowing blood. He squints up at Lev, thinking it's too bright outside, thinking it's easy to make friends-- why has he never tried it?

"Come on," Lev says, still beaming at Kenma like he's the only source of light. "I'll pay for lunch."

Lev calls him on his way into his apartment, even though they've only been apart for a half hour. Apparently he's decided to take a break from his homework, and wants to discuss books with Kenma.

Kuroo's had enough time to cool down when he comes over later, barely pausing to knock before he's hauling a bag of groceries onto the kitchen counter. He must have gotten Kenma's text; Kenma, still on the phone with Lev, gives him a thankful wave when he comes in, attempting to sift through ingredients whilst balancing the phone. Kuroo shoulders past him. It's good, this silent communication system they've always had; Kuroo offers to take over cooking without even mentioning it out loud, and Kenma communicates his thanks with a simple raise of the brows. Lev hears the flick of the stove in the background and pauses in his rant about some Russian novel called Dead Souls. "Are you cooking?"

"I was. My friend came over to help."

"Ah, Kuroo, right? You mentioned him."

"Yeah, him."

"Hey, are you doing anything on Monday night?"

Kenma looks up. There's no way Kuroo can hear what Lev's saying on the other end of the line, but he expects his friend to look upset anyway; affronted even. Since the strain that's been growing between them, Kenma feels like there's an edge of resentment to the thought of either of their separate lives.

"Why?"

"Ah-- I'm hosting a party then, and I thought you might want to come. It's super late, but it's Halloween themed. Not that you have to wear a costume or anything! I'm not wearing a costume. Actually, that's a lie, I'm going to wear a costume. Or a lion, I haven't decided."

"Sorry, but it's Kuroo's birthday on Monday," Kenma says. He sees Kuroo's head whip up, and pointedly doesn't meet his eye. "I hope the party goes well."

"Ah-- Kuroo can come too, if he wants!"

"I doubt he'll want to spend his birthday at a stranger's party. No offense."

"None taken--"

Kuroo chimes in. "What are you talking about, Kenma? Of course we can go."

They meet eyes across the counter, Kuroo's gaze burning into his. It's like standing a ways across a large body of water-- no, worse than that. Kuroo has started calculating something, like he's
putting up a guard. Things haven't been this tense since high school.

Kenma puts the phone back to his ear. "Did you hear that, Lev?"

"Yes! Awesome! It starts around 7, but I can give you better details by text. Oh, and I'll invite you to the facebook group!"

Lev goes back to chattering away in his ear, and Kenma pretends not to notice the tense air.

When he hangs up, he turns to Kuroo.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I've got it."

Kenma looks down at the peppers he's left scattered across the bench. Like a rainbow of mistakes. Wordlessly, he goes over to them and cuts them properly, scooping them into a neat pile so that Kuroo can add them to his pan. "Thanks," he murmurs, pretending like he's more focussed on cooking than Kenma knows he is.

There's an elephant in the room, but he doesn't want to address it. The walls could come crashing down.

"How come you said no to the party, at first?"

Kenma looks up. His friend has his head down, staring at the stove, but Kenma knows he's watching him from the corner of his eye.

"It's your birthday."

"So? You haven't been invited to a party since high school."

"That's not true."

Kuroo grins. "Being invited as my plus one doesn't count. Are you gonna be okay? Crowds aren't really your thing."

"Crowds are completely my thing," he answers, pushing past Kuroo to clean up the other side of the bench. "How come you want to go?"

Kuroo shrugs. "I didn't have plans, anyway."

He narrows his eyes. "It's not just so that I can go, is it?"

"Hell, no." Kuroo shoulders him playfully, handing him a plate to hold steady while he serves up dinner. "You know I'd tell you to your ugly face if that was it."

Kenma grins. He suspects there's more to it, but says nothing; he doesn't want to spoil the peace between them lest it go away again.

Skyping Hinata has become a regular thing. He does it after class on Friday, and he does it all weekend-- before and after therapy, speaking in whispers like if he raises his voice the things he's saying will become more serious. Hinata asks him how he feels with complete abandon. Kenma doesn't know what to do, having someone look at him like that. It's dangerous; he could tell Hinata anything.
He struggles through homework all weekend, and the first signs of exam stress start to rear their ugly heads. He sits with that damn Keats poem for longer than he'd care to, but can't for the life of him figure out what possible greater meaning it could hold. He was dying, right. He didn't want to lose Fanny. He was giving her his heart. What more to it was there?

**mooorning, kenma~**

*its the middle of the night. youre not even in a different timezone.*

*haha, i thought i could trick u :P what did u do today?*

It's Sunday night. He's spent all day being useless around his apartment; studying, video games. He's procrastinated more than he's gotten anything done.

*homework. i tried writing poetry but i gave up.*

*aaaaAAA u write poetry???
  i used to.*

*i wanna read ur poetry! i bet its super cool omg
  i dont really write anything like that anymore, it was just high school
  still, i bet it was good !!!
  not really. thank you, though.*

*like u would know the formula right ?? isnt poetry about formulas ???
  sort of.
  like math !!!
  its not like math at all
  aaa well, whatever !! i wanna see u write something & im totally convinced ur the best writer ever
  now i definitely cant show you anything
  what! why!!
  wouldnt want to disappoint.*

**Kenma~ :) :) :)**

**shouyou~**

**hehe**

Kenma smiles, like even the typed laugh is contagious. His phone lights up with another message immediately.

*but seriously!! do u have anything like lying around??*

Kenma knows he does. He hasn't touched that notebook since about six months after moving back to Tokyo with Kuroo; it started as a journal, before he got sick of talking about his life in plot points. He stopped writing for a while when things with Ryota got bad because he couldn't stand to see himself whine. It's probably just because he's a writer; he's used to seeing his style depicting
fiction, so reading about his own life in that same style seems cheap. Poetry is easier. You don't really have to say what you mean, with poetry.

*i found some, but im warning you, its angst central.*

*high school?? :O*

*yeah. senior year. when i moved to ibaraki.*

*show me !!*

Kenma opens the book without checking which page. He spots the angst immediately, types it out. The words feel familiar under his fingertips.

*ghost in the*

*waves. grey sky like a trap.*

*the cold sand here is already glass.*

*and even the seabirds know its time to leave.*

He waits for Hinata's reply. It shouldn't take this long. Why is it taking this long?

*whoa*

He backtracks immediately

*its angsty. i know. i was a great teenager. it was right after the move so everything i wrote then was like that but im probably better now*

*no i mean like... its pretty?? like rly dreamy idk. idk anything about poetry but ur really good, kenma!!!*

Kenma smiles. It starts small, then grows and swells and before long he has to put down his phone, is covering his face with both hands. He can feel how hot his cheeks are, and the back of his neck.

*do u wanna skype ??*

*yeah*

.

He's early to group therapy on Monday; he stayed up too late on Skype with Hinata, and to account for his exhaustion, he tries to rush through the morning, downing only his second coffee on the subway. It's like riding through a tunnel of light at warp speed; all those people around him, peak hour traffic, bodies bumping bodies as he hurries to get off. The pull under his eyes is kind of pleasant, because he doesn't stop to wonder if anyone has noticed them.

When he gets there and checks the time, he realises that there are a solid twenty minutes before he's even meant to be inside. He bends down to re-tie his shoe, beats his high score on an app. When Lev shows up behind him with no warning whatsoever, he jumps a mile out of his skin.

*"Kenma, holy shit, you're like a cat."*

*I didn't see you," he mutters, still kind of recovering. Lev takes a step towards him, closing the distance to something friendlier, and pats him on the back.*
"You're, like, the first person in history I've ever snuck up on."

"Are you joking? You definitely look sneaky."

Lev grimaces. "Yeah, but I always hit my head." Kenma can't tell whether he's joking or not. Does Lev ever joke? Is he ever serious?

The taller boy takes his wrist and leads him into the building. Kenma blanches. "There are still like ten minutes--"

"If you get here early enough, they let you stand around the snacks table. I want snacks!"

They do, in fact, let them file into the room early; the only other two there are the borderline guy--Kenma can't remember his name---and his friend, the latter very pointedly stuffing his face while the former stands on, mortified. Lev marches to the table in barely two strides. When Kenma gets there several hours later, cursing his shorter legs, he takes a cookie to nibble on. Lev is throwing back sweets fast enough that it's a miracle he isn't choking.

"So," he says around a mouthful of food, in what Kenma has discovered is his I'm-going-to-ask-a-serious-question-yes-even-in-front-of-these-two-other-people voice, "you gonna open up about stuff today?"

"What stuff?" Kenma asks, and immediately regrets it. Lev doesn't take the bait.

"Stuff, stuff. Your deep, dark secrets." He winks. Did Kenma imagine that? Lev brushes past him, giving him a backhanded tap on the hip. "Come sit with me, everyone will be here soon!"

It's not too different from last week. They go around and introduce themselves again. The borderline guy's name is Akaashi, Kenma re-discovers, and his friend is definitely not his friend. Or at least, not just his friend. There's no way two people can be that close, share looks like that and have it be entirely platonic. They keep looking at each other like they're squinting into the sun, staring at the moon.

Despite Lev's prompt, Kenma doesn't choose today to 'open up about stuff'. When it comes to his turn to share his experience, he shrugs it off, says his week was fine: the usual, he calls it, which gets a round of sympathetic murmurs and nods.

Here is something he's learning: when you're mentally ill, you're admitted to a club you didn't even sign up for.

The room is full of deafening shouts when everyone closes their mouths; the group all holds their breath together like a machine, waiting for another speaker to be done. Like a great swaying, mechanical tree; when it gets to Lev's turn he stands up, which you don't need to do, pauses to think about it, and sits back down.

"I made progress!" he announces to the room full of metal parts.

Everyone murmurs their congrats, but Lev isn't done.

"I have problems with social stuff, because of my disorder, and it's really hard for me to make friends. But I made a friend!" Kenma begins to sweat. If he calls on him, he'll kill Lev. He'll do it, in front of all these people. Luckily, Lev isn't that insensitive. "Also, I caught the train a bunch of times without feeling that nervous, and I thought a lot about my romantic feelings for someone!"

Romantic feelings for someone?

The group applauds. It's like a sad round of electricity, little flicks here and there, and then it's Nametsu's turn to speak and the group moves on.
When it's time to mingle, Lev goes straight to Kenma, sticking to his side like glue. He wonders for all the length of their silence if Lev is going to talk more about his social anxiety, but the first thing out of his mouth is, "Kenma I am so freaked for the party."

Kenma blinks. "Because of anxiety stuff?"

"Yes. No-- no, like, I'm not sure if I'm gonna get everything done in time." Frantically, he fishes his phone out of his pocket to check the time. They're meant to switch them off when they come in. "Argh, I'm totally freaking out. I was gonna skip today, you know, but I didn't wanna leave you hanging."

Kenma doesn't know why that makes him feel so warm. "I would have been fine."

"Well, anyway, it's too late for that! I said BYO but I still have to pick up drinks, obviously, or I'm an awful host-- there's also food, I didn't even think of food until now. And decorations! Yaku and I are setting them up together, and he said he'd make a start without me, but I'm worried he's gonna make poor choices and I'll just have to take it down and redo it all myself."

Kenma smiles. "Yaku?"

"Ah-- roommate." His cheeks are kind of pink when he says it, like he's flushing with pride. He clears his throat immediately. "You're still coming, right? I'm really excited. And nervous. Like I might throw up?"

"Please don't."

Lev grins. "As if I'm that uncool. I've gotta make sure the party's a success. You probably go to tonnes of parties, huh?"

And Kenma has no idea why, but that's the thing that sets him off. Like a tidal wave that has been slowly making its way towards him, he's pulled under, mouth filled with salt water, and he chokes. Visibly.

Or maybe not as visibly as he thinks-- no one else looks at him, but Lev's smile disappears with a tilt of his head. "Kenma?"

"I don't. Go to parties." He sucks in a breath. "I just. Don't. Not since high school."

Eyes steady on him like a hawk, Lev stares, and Kenma waits for the fine string between them to snap. Kenma hasn't thought about it-- he's been forcing himself not to think about it, not to talk about it, so why now--

Lev gets it. "Outside," he says. His voice is so sober that Kenma doesn't know what to do with himself.

So he goes.

For some reason, it feels like skipping school. They walk a ways away from the clinic, to a little row of stores that's mostly abandoned. That's normal for a Monday afternoon. Kenma spots a convenience store and a laundromat, with colours spinning through the windows. Peoples' intimate lives spelled out in soaking fabric. Lev sits down on the curb and motions for the blonde to join him.

"I didn't mean to, um..." Lev hesitates, which is weird for him. Kenma knows he has trouble socially, but that's usually translated through talking fast and stammering on occasions. Lev hardly
strikes him as the kind of person to be at loss for words. "Y'know. Trigger you, or anything."

You didn't, Kenma starts to say, but he closes his mouth. Is that what this is? "I haven't talked
about it in a really long time."

"It's okay," Lev says, but he doesn't say it like, it's okay. There's nothing condescending there. He
isn't pretending to get it, or expecting anything. Kenma looks up at him and meets his eyes, feeling
something hot like embers bloom in his chest. Why does he want to talk about it now? And to
Lev, of all people?

"I got over my anxiety for a while in high school, and I had this really big friendship group. They
were okay. I don't... I find it hard to be around some types of people, but they were alright. I liked
most of them, and I had a lot of fun."

"Dickhead teenagers," Lev nods gravely. "We've all been there, right?"

"Yeah," Kenma says, breathing out, a great gust of wind; nothing at all like the mechanical
breathing back in the building. "Yeah," he repeats. "I liked this person... this guy I was friends
with, Ryota. I was pretty obvious about it and he asked me out eventually. But he was..." Kenma
grimaces. He doesn't talk about it. He really doesn't talk about it. "He drank a lot and he went
around kissing a lot of other people. He wasn't... he didn't treat me well, I guess. I mean, I know
he didn't. He would tell me all the time that I was a burden, that I was too clingy."

"No way!" Lev looks disgusted. "Being told you're clingy really messes a person up! You'd
worry about it all the time."

"I did," Kenma says, looking at the laundromat again. "He got violent when he was drinking or
when I confronted him about it and it didn't... I mean, I already had problems with anxiety, and it
didn't help. And then when I was anxious, he was just angrier. Because it made me more of a
burden." He breathes, breathes. In for four seconds, then he gives up, rushing the words out like a
helpless flood.

"We threw a lot of parties. It was great, I was a second year, and I loved that sort of thing. Kuroo
and I had a lot of fun. I even threw one myself once." He laughs like he can't believe it-- and he
can't, he still can't. He threw a party, he remembers, after months of Kuroo pestering, for his
sixteenth birthday. Ryota kissed him and kissed him in front of all their friends; he complained
when Kenma put on Fleetwood Mac, because seriously, what is this Western shit? but it didn't
matter, he was having so much fun. He remembers feeling drunk before he even took his first sip.

"Towards the end of our second year, Ryota threw a party. I showed up late-- he was really
drunk... he was making out with this girl. One of our friends was in the room with us, and she just
looked at me. So I got upset. I yelled at him. I don't normally do that." He doesn't want to look at
Lev, because he's terrified of what he'll see. "It's not like me at all. Even without anxiety, I'm not--
I don't like to get angry like that. But I did. I got so angry." He blinks dry eyes, furiously, and it
hurts. "He said we could go upstairs and talk about it. Said he was sorry. I calmed down enough
to go up there with him, but as soon as we were alone..." Kenma pauses, thinking maybe he really
can't finish the thought. Then he looks at Lev, and Lev is looking at him. Right at him, like there's
nowhere else to look. Kenma swallows and finishes his story. "He got really violent. Hands
around my throat violent. I thought I was going to... I couldn't breathe." He shrugs, but the motion
is like trying to shift gravity away. It clings and it clings and it weighs him down. Ryota is an
anchor-- no. He's the anchor. His memories are the anchor. "He broke up with me, anyway. The
damage wasn't that bad, but Kuroo took me to the emergency room anyway. I didn't press any
charges because I didn't want anyone to know about it. And then, about a week later, I had the
worst breakdown of my life, told my parents I wanted to see a therapist, and they moved us to
Ibaraki."

Like all of the information has physically drained from him, like blood or water now pooled
around his feet-- or breath sucked from his lungs and sitting in the air between them-- Kenma feels deflated. When he's emotionally ready, he dares a look up at Lev. Lev is blinking at him, wide-eyed.

"They just moved you, like that? Did you stay in touch with Kuroo?"

"He moved with us. It's kind of a long story with him."

"Eh? Really? That's pretty cool, then... ah, no, it's not cool. I mean, the move wasn't. The fact that anyone thought they had the right to treat you like that isn't. You should have seriously kicked his ass, Kenma!"

"Kuroo tried to."

"And your other friends?"

He shrugs. "They didn't know about it. I didn't want to tell anyone. Kuroo's the only other person who knows, apart from you." Hinata doesn't know. He hasn't told Hinata. Why has he told Lev, and not Hinata?

Lev smiles. "Thank you for telling me. Hey, that's more than you've said in group therapy for two weeks now."

He knows it's a jab at his quiet demeanor, but Kenma smiles back anyway. He feels light all of a sudden. He could go to a party. He could definitely go to a party right now, with the effervescence that's suddenly bubbling inside of him. He props his chin in his hand and directs his smile at Lev. "I can't believe I told you all that. I never talk about it."

"You're laughing," Lev points out, and it's only then that Kenma realises he is.

"Am I?"

"You're so weird, Kenma!"

"No," he says, "I just have really deep seated emotional problems. But it was nice. Talking about it."

They're quiet for a while. It's rare with Lev, he's slowly discovering, to find this kind of silence. It sits between them now as comfortable as an ice berg, like there's more depth to it. Kenma watches the spinning colours and looks for himself there, for every shade of blue amongst the yellow that makes up Hinata. Like maybe in that there will be an answer as to where he's meant to go now.

"Do you think it affects it?" Lev asks, breaking the silence. "Your anxiety and stuff."

Kenma shakes his head. "Not as much. Kuroo thinks it does, but... it's more the fact that it happened. It affected me then, and it's like I got stunted. I'm stuck in the way I felt when I was on the beach. After we moved." He looks away. "Sometimes I think it's Ryota's fault that I have trouble becoming close with people. But I hate that. I don't want to let any boy control my life like that."

"Hell yeah, preach it."

"But it's not really something you can help. Even if I really, really don't want to let it affect me. Sometimes I'm so scared he'll affect my life, even now, that I just avoid doing things." His eyes widen as soon as he realises what he's said. He didn't know he felt that way. It's the first time he's admitted it, even to himself. Lev nods soberly. Then it's like a switch is flipped. He rips his phone out of his pocket, checks the time, and flies to his feet.
"Ahh-- I've gotta--"

"Go, go, don't let me stop you!"

Lev smiles. "You're still coming?"

Breathe in a thousand colours. Not just blue this time; blue, yellow, red like the feelings inside of him. Kenma nods. "Yeah. Definitely."

Lev's eyes light up with a thousand constellations. He shouts, even though they're less than a metre away, "See you tonight, Kenma!" and then he's gone, racing down the road with his gigantic legs so quickly that it's like he was never there at all.

Kenma feels oddly light by the time he gets home.

He dances in the door so quickly that he smacks straight into Kuroo's chest. Kuroo, who he hasn't seen all morning; he steadies himself by his best friend's shoulders and beams up at him. "Happy birthday!"

"Whoa," Kuroo says. "Don't make that face, you'll kill a guy."

"What do you mean?" he says, losing his smile. Kuroo tsks and shakes his head.

"That's better. You're gorgeous, Kenma, you have to ration an expression like that. Us mere mortals can't stare at angels for too long or we'll die."

"If you're hitting on me, you must feel better," he remarks stoically, jabbing his friend in the ribs on the way past. "You didn't forget about the party, right?"

"Of course not. Are we heading down early, or are you planning on being fashionably late?"

"I didn't even consider being fashionably late. Is that what you're supposed to do?"

"Smartass." He walks over to the refrigerator, pulls out a grocery store cheap cake, and sets it down on the counter. It's the saddest shade of chocolate Kenma has ever seen in his life.

"What is that?"

"My birthday cake," Kuroo remarks, offended. "I had to pick it up myself, I didn't have time to make one."

"You didn't even ask me."

Kuroo shrugs, but moves out of the way nonetheless when Kenma shoulders past him again. He takes out the biggest knife he can find and starts to cut it into quarters.

"It's my birthday, I'm meant to cut it!"

Kenma throws the knife down on the counter, exasperated. "Cut it, then. I need to shower anyway."

So that's what they do. Kenma aims to take the quickest shower in the history of man, but gets kind of distracted with the new coconut body wash he's just bought. He takes his time conditioning his hair, and when he finally emerges in sweatpants and an old shirt with a towel around his neck, Kuroo is stabbing candle after candle into the base of the cake.
"I can't leave you alone for five minutes."

"That was nearly ten."

The cake tastes like candles and processed sugar, and instead of singing Kenma attempts to give him forty punches in the arm, "cause that's how old you are now, old man".

They get ready together, Kuroo talking through Kenma's bedroom door. He felt kind of silly when they went out on Saturday and bought the costumes, but it's exciting now, looking at himself in the mirror. Halloween was like a month ago, and he's wearing cat ears. The second he steps out of his room, Kuroo doubles over with laughter.

"What," Kenma deadpans, willing away his self consciousness.

"I just thought..." his best friend is gasping with laughter, choking on it. "Just now, I had this thought... 'you look like a furry, only hot'."

"You're an idiot," Kenma articulates, and then he's laughing too. He can't help it. He doesn't know what's wrong with him today. He gestures with a shaky hand at Kuroo's costume, which is, appropriately, the cheapest form of 'demon' he's ever seen. "You're just wearing devil horns. What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Means I'm fashionable," Kuroo snarks. He gives Kenma a once over. "You look adorable, but for the love of God, let me straighten your hair."

They show up to the party around 8, just when it's getting started. It isn't that hard to spot Lev's unit again, even in the dark; Kenma can hear the music all the way down the street. It's just on the edge of central Tokyo, and he's decorated his mailbox with balloons. Like he's a child.

Techno hits him in the face and tears all the skin off there. He feels fresh and awake with exposed bones. There aren't any lyrics, and he doesn't recognise the artist, and it's amazing. He's thankful to have Kuroo there, a calming presence to saunter the two of them in so that Kenma doesn't go racing the halls in search of a drink like some over-excited teenager.

Kenma takes a colourful bottle from the first table he sees. Kuroo tries to shout something over the music, but all he hears is 'drink'.

"What?" he shouts back. "You want one?"

Kuroo leans down to speak in his ear. "I said, you don't drink."

Kenma frowns up at him. He wants to tell him not to be a downer so early into the night, but that would require shouting again. His first thought is: if I shout too much, Shouyou won't be able to understand what I'm saying on skype. And then he tries to take the thought back, because it's embarrassing.

About ten minutes into their first loop of the house, it occurs to Kenma that he's being mothered. Normally he wouldn't mind; it's true that he's uncomfortable being left alone but right now he feels like he's vibrating. It's probably the drink. It's not the drink. The house is crowded, and he can get lost in it. And here's Kuroo, putting aside everything to take care of Kenma again, just like he's a kid.

"Hey," he calls, "you don't have to breathe down my neck! Go and have fun, I know you hate to stay in one place at a party, mom!"

"Are you sure!" Kuroo calls back. He can't have heard everything Kenma said, or he'd be a lot
more offended. Kenma nods fervently.

"Yeah! I was gonna go find Lev anyway!"

"I'll catch up with you later! My phone's on vibrate!"

"Mom, you're embarrassing me."

Kuroo doesn't hear the last part, so Kenma gives him a last, playful shrug before turning on his heel. He takes a massive sip of his drink before the stone can sink in his belly. He walks around on his own for a while and just drinks it all in. There are haphazard Halloween decorations strewn everywhere; they're definitely not tasteful, so they must be Lev's. The song changes a few times. It's all heavy techno, the kind he feels in his toes. He walks alone and remains alone and doesn't mind, switches his empty bottle for another he finds unopened in the kitchen. He's fine, fine. He's actually fine. Could cough up glitter and steam if he wanted, can feel it boiling in his chest.

"Kenma!"

Lev runs into him at full speed, but instead of pulling back, wraps Kenma in a gigantic bear hug. He's such a skinny guy—it's the sheer length of his limbs that encompasses Kenma, and that's a bizarre thought. Lev pulls back grinning at full mast. He's wearing the floppiest witch hat Kenma has ever seen, and it frames his whole face, makes his eyes pop. "You came!" he shouts, like he thought Kenma wouldn't.

"Yeah!" Kenma shouts back, feeling his throat rasp; he takes another sip of his drink, and Lev laughs.

"Did you just take that? So rude, you didn't even bring your own!" He turns for the stairs and motions Kenma up.

When they reach the top of the staircase Lev leads him to a smaller bedroom at the end, where there is already a group of people waiting. It's a little quieter in there; quiet enough that Kenma can hear Lev speak this time. The music is a dull roar through the walls. Lev offers him a wine cooler from a case of them on the floor, by the foot of a girl dressed like a wolf. She bats her eyes at Kenma, grits out a very low "meow", and the rest of the group laughs. Kenma flushes, self-consciousness draining him for a second.

Lev kicks her in the thigh as he passes.

"Where'd you find this one, Haiba-chan."

"I didn't find him, he found me," Lev breathes dramatically, batting his eyelashes right back at the girl. "He's an angel."

"Why is he dressed as a cat, then?"

"Here." There's a smaller guy leaning into Lev's pillows, with light hair and a plastic halo. He takes the halo off, tosses it to Kenma. Kenma tosses it back, trying to smile in a way he hopes is friendly.

"No way," he says. "As if I could take a halo from an actual angel." He turns to Lev. "And you, you're way more angelic than me."

Lev snorts. Something kind of explodes in Kenma. Did he say that? Did he actually say that? The music gets loud all of a sudden and he laughs, furiously, into the back of his hand, when angel boy just stares on in a mix of disbelief and awe.

"He's drunk," Lev explains, and Kenma doesn't even get a chance to defend himself.
The group is pretty easy to get along with, he finds. Lev and the angel guy-- Yaku, his roommate, as it turns out-- are the only two not drinking, and they're the funniest ones there. Their banter reminds Kenma vaguely of Hinata's and Kageyama's. He wonders what Hinata's doing, why he's not here enjoying this music with Kenma. It's so loud. Like the walls are going to fall down.

He doesn't know what's happened to the vibe between him and Lev, but something sure has happened. He wouldn't call it flirty, but there comes a point in the night where he stops leaning away from Lev's touches and starts teasing him more, until Yaku jokes bitterly that they should "just kiss already". Kenma flushes at that, but he's too drunk for his mind not to jump to conclusions. He thinks of a mouth, hot against his, of threading his fingers through hair. He's not sure which mouth or whose hair, just that it's happening in his mind, and it's happening at an alarming ferocity.

He stops downing drinks after that, thinking it reasonable. He goes back to wondering what Hinata's doing. The group he's found himself in are somehow the weirdest people in all of Tokyo, and yes, he's managed to find them; they're a mix of art and lit majors, he discovers, which probably explains it. Also, they're Lev's friends, and how normal can they really be if that's the case?

After a long time it occurs to him that he left Kuroo well over three hours ago. On his birthday. Which is, on the list of shitty things to do, considerably shitty. "Hey," he says to Lev, and tries to stand up; he staggers, which is more to do with general balance than it is to do with alcohol, but it makes Lev's brows knit together anyway. "I gotta... I left Kuroo, and I should probably go anyway. I have class tomorrow." He's considering skipping, but Lev doesn't need to know that.

"Kenma, your blood alcohol content is probably still super high. How did you get here?"

"...Subway," he admits, thinking only now that that was probably a bad idea. Kuroo usually cabs home.

Lev scoops his keys up from the bedside table, shooting an apologetic look to the group. "I'll drive you home."

"Kuroo--"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll drive him, too. He's probably drunk, huh?"

Kenma laughs at the idea. There's no probably. It's a party, and he's Kuroo.

He receives a round of goodbyes from the group that lights up the blood in his veins; one of the girls slurs that she'll have to find him on facebook later, and the rest join in, a drunken chortled chorus of praise and promise on his way out. Kenma's still smiling to himself when he descends the stairs with Lev. And then he gets to the bottom of the staircase, rounds the corner, and finds Kuroo.

He's grinding on a blonde girl. Not dancing-- there's no way Kenma's going to call it dancing, because there's no way you can touch a person that much and still have it classified as dancing. He's grabby, touchy, and obviously drunk, and all Kenma can think is, *Tsukishima. You're doing this to Kei, not to yourself.*

He turns and heads for the front door without stopping to see if Lev's caught up. He has, he notices, but only when he's choking on all the fresh air. He's pissed. He's beyond pissed, about the way Kuroo has been acting lately, the fact that he hasn't heard a word about Kei lately but his best friend suddenly thinks he has the right to dance so closely to some random girl--

"Kenma, are you okay?"
He breathes in. "Yeah," he says, turning around on his heel. "Yeah, I'm fine. Leave Kuroo. He'll just end up calling for a cab, I don't think he's ready to go home yet."

Lev can obviously tell that Kenma's not telling the truth; it's written all over his face. He walks him to his car nonetheless, trying to brush it off with a smile once they're inside. "How are you handling sobering up?"

"I don't think alcohol lasts very long in me," Kenma admits sheepishly. He still feels a little giddy- an odd mix in his belly swirling with rage now-- but his head has cleared up enough to allow him to make rational decisions. With some regret, he thinks that he probably could have taken the subway or called a cab without being such a burden on Lev.

"Sorry I made you drive me," he mumbles. Lev shakes his head and switches on the radio.

"Nah, you just gotta direct me where I'm going, yeah? You can be in charge of the radio."

He fiddles until he finds the station he likes; it's streaming some Western band he can't sing along to, but he recognises the tune. He hums along, sinking into the seat. He knows Lev's watching him from the corner of his eye. Neither of them says anything the whole ride home, bar when Kenma needs to give a direction. It's strange, whatever mood has settled over them. Like gradually approaching the edge of a cliff or waiting for the other shoe to drop. They pull up out the front of Kenma's apartment complex, and Lev switches off the engine, cutting the song short. The streetlamps don't flood the windows so much as paint them, lighting the two of them a dull orange. The silence drones on and neither of them moves. Then, Kenma realises what the mood is.

He's not sure who leans in first. His seat belt catches just in time to stop him from doing much but brush his lips against Lev's; they sit there a moment, hesitant, before Lev moves in. The kiss deepens itself naturally, a pace like slow dancing. Lev's mouth is warm against his own and his lips are chapped. Kenma shifts forward, shifting his hand against the seatbelt, Lev's tongue brushing his lower lip--

They both pull away at the same time and like a light has been turned off, Kenma hisses out a laugh.

"Sorry," he breathes, reaching a hand to touch his mouth. "That was weird. I haven't kissed anyone in forever."

"You're not into me, Kenma."

Kenma looks up. "Are you into me?"

Lev smiles. "No. Even if I was, I wouldn't have a chance. It's really clear you're in love with someone else."

"What?" Kenma's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "No, I'm--"

"It's just a hunch. I don't think it's Kuroo or anything, but... it's a close friend to you, right? I know because I'm in love with a close friend of mine."

Kenma just stares at him. He has no idea what to say.

"Ah," Lev rubs the back of his neck, grinning. "I was thinking about it, and I have a theory. I think the reason that you told me all of that personal stuff today is because it doesn't mean as much with me. Not that you're not a nice guy, and not that you don't care about me! I probably remind you of your friend, right? You remind me of Yaku sometimes, so I like being around you. But I think that's a bad reason to kiss somebody."
"It is," he agrees, slowly, but his mind is racing. He's in love with someone? Who does Lev think he's in love with?

"It's easy to tell me the things that you can't tell your friend, because with me, you don't have as much to lose." He shakes his head. "Ahh, sorry, I got carried away. We're friends, right?"

Kenma's mouth tilts into a smile. His cheeks are still flushed, and he assumes he'll be mortified about this in the morning. "Of course."

Lev smiles. "That's a relief. Go inside and drink some coffee for me, okay? Ah, and water! Otherwise you'll have a really terrible hangover."

"Right," Kenma says, climbing out of the car, and hey, it's not even awkward! What a strange thought. He just kissed his friend, decided he didn't like it, and it wasn't weird. No anxiety. He breathes in the night air. "Enjoy the rest of your party, Lev."

"Yeah! Night, Kenma!"

He waves him off.

It's only once he's inside that he remembers Kuroo again, and it's like a bucket of ice water. All the warmth he felt in the car with Lev is frozen over; now all he can see are his best friend's hands, clutching that woman's hips. Kei's face. What would he do if he knew?

He paces for a while, trying to dissipate the anger into something more reasonable. It doesn't work. It builds and builds and builds inside of him like a storm, colouring the room in dark tones, leaking from his veins like ink and ichor. He doesn't know how long he walks around the apartment trying to decide what to do, but when he's done, he takes out his phone and punches in Kuroo's number.

He hears the ringtone come muffled from the hallway. Kenma drops his phone and throws open the apartment door.

Kuroo is standing in front of the elevators at the end of the hall, phone in hand and brow furrowed. He grins when he sees Kenma, but it only lasts a second; one proper glance at the look on Kenma's face, and his smile is gone.

"You left without me," Kuroo says, and something inside of Kenma implodes.

He storms back inside, leaving the front door open. He knows what Kuroo will do. He doesn't have to look back, just goes straight for his room, reaches under the bed, and wrenches the gift from its depths. Kuroo is hanging in front of the door just like Kenma knew he would be, having shut it behind him like he lives here. Kenma shoves the gift right into his chest.

"From Kei," he says. He hasn't been this angry in a long time. It's swelling inside of him, welding together the imploded parts in a burning pile.

Kuroo's eyes flit down to the gift, his brows drawing together and his whole face softening. The vulnerability there is almost enough to dissipate Kenma's anger. It slams back into place, hardening his expression.

Kuroo unwraps the gift with deft and gentle fingers, his face going soft when he sees what's in it. It occurs to Kenma that he hasn't even seen what it is yet.

Tsukishima took his advice and framed a picture of the two of them. It looks like something taken in a cab in the middle of the night-- on the way home from a club, probably, or someplace similar. Kuroo's drunkenly thrown an arm around the blonde and has knocked his glasses askew, half-grinning, half-kissing his face. Tsukishima is actually smiling.
grinning, half-kissing his face. Tsukishima is actually smiling. Kenma's eyes shift from the photographed Kuroo's face to the real Kuroo's face, and the different is stifling. It's like a cement wall has come crashing down. Kuroo looks up and meets the shorter's eyes, his own flat and empty.

"It's more complicated than that, okay? He told me when we started this thing that he didn't want a relationship. Is this about you, did something happen?"

"No," Kenma says. His chest is tight.

"You're angry."

"I kissed Lev tonight." Kuroo's eyes go wide. Kenma stares him down, his hands balled into fists at his sides, wishing his best friend just wouldn't look at him. A furious ocean is becoming him. Formless thoughts he has tried to push away for so long are melding themselves into steel fists.

"Do you like him?"

"No. He thinks I like someone else, anyway."

Kuroo's eyes darken even more. "And do you?"

"I think I just did it because I was angry."

"Why were you angry?"

"I came downstairs to ask if you wanted a lift home with Lev and me," Kenma says, hearing his own voice waver. It's not fear; he doesn't want Kuroo to think it's fear. For some reason, he wants his best friend to know that for once, he's mad at him. "Saw you dancing with that girl. What the hell would Kei think?"

"I said, it's more complicated than that--"

"You have no idea. You didn't see him, he-- he came to me and asked for advice about this. You didn't see his face when he was talking about you."

Fury flares in the other's eyes, finally. "I didn't see his face? As long as we're on the topic of understanding the feelings of others, have you considered Shouyou lately?"

"What does that even mean? And don't try to change the subject. Acting like you have no idea that Kei's in l--"

"Stop." Kuroo looks lost, unable now to bite back on the frantic look in his eyes. Like a cornered animal, expression screaming run, run, run. "It's--"

"If you tell me it's complicated one more time, Kuroo!"

Kuroo shuts up. The two of them stand there, the sudden silence in the room crushing them like the roof has crumbled in. And all at once, Kenma's anger flees from him. Exhaustion takes over. He doesn't know what to feel anymore, only that there's so much, so much inside of him. He reaches out for Kuroo.

Kuroo steps away. "I'm going home," he says, sounding all sobered up. Kenma reaches out for him again.

"Kuroo--"

"I'm not mad," he breathes, taking Kenma's hand-- ever so gently, so gently that it hurts, and
guiding it away from his own. "Please don't think that I'm mad. I just need to be alone."

Kuroo turns away and heads for the door. All the light is draining from the room and replacing it with fog, thick and heavy like it sits above the city in the Fall, blocking the tops of the skyscrapers from view. Kuroo wades through it, pushing it aside like water.

"Happy birthday," Kenma says, and he shuts the door.

Kenma slides the lock into place. Something in the room has changed, left behind by Kuroo. He's not upset. No, that's not what Kenma's feeling right now-- he's more confused, and he has no idea why. A freight train of exhaustion slams into him. He takes out his phone, and checks his messages for the first time since he left the party.

i miss u.

It's from Hinata. He sent it about an hour ago, when Kenma was leaving-- when he was walking down the stairs with absolutely no idea that he'd find Kuroo doing something so awful, that he'd get in Lev's car and kiss Lev out the front of his own apartment complex. Hinata was last online 2 minutes ago; he hopes against all hopes that he's still up. It's like balancing precariously on a rock overlooking the ocean. What's the difference between liking a person and needing them? Enjoying their company and depending on it?

are you here?

The reply is instant. The rock cuts deep into his bare feet.

yes! hi!! how are u!!

do you want to skype?

It's different now. He takes a step from that rock and dips his foot in the ocean, lets the whole damn thing lift him up, and swallow him.

yes.

"I'm going to fall asleep," he warns. Hinata's sleepy laugh leaks right into his ear. It's like he's right here beside him, instead of staring back at him from a laptop screen, too far away to touch.

"Stay up with me," Hinata whispers. He's grinning. He's been grinning the whole time.

"No way, you're gonna fall asleep too," Kenma warns. His eyes feel heavier each time he blinks.

"I'm not!"

He's lying on his side, and Hinata keeps trailing off. It's like slowly transcending into a pool together, wavering just on the edge of sleep.

"I missed you," Hinata says for the fourth time. He keeps saying it. It rises up Kenma's throat and fills all of him, until the border between sleep and elation is just a coalesced space.

"Missed you, too," he murmurs, blinking slowly. Kenma remembers reading that when cats blink slowly, it's a sign of love. That they trust you enough to shut their eyes. They trust you enough to be vulnerable. He feels like the sea, like the whole sky above it, and wonders if he might still be drunk. "I'm warm," he says, realising only then that he's said it out loud.

Hinata cat blinks. "Yeah, me too." He says it like he means something else. Kenma watches him,
the both of them cat blinking together, as they slowly descend underwater.

"Tell me a story," Hinata says suddenly. Kenma giggles. "About the party. Something that happened."

"I'll tell you about Lev and his weird friends," he offers, and it makes Hinata laugh. It forces something boiling hot and liquid to move through Kenma's veins. Hinata's laugh has never affected him like this before. Then again, maybe it has, and he just hasn't noticed.

He tells Hinata about Lev's friends. He tells him about Yaku dressed as an angel, the girl who tried to hit on him, the bird-eyed girl who kept telling knock knock jokes every time she took a shot. Then he tells Hinata about the Keats Dilemma, Lev's interpretation versus his, the everlasting crisis of Fanny-versus-existential-dread. He goes off on a tangent, trying to move the thoughts around with his words.

"I mean, it's like..." he's slurring, now, he knows he is. His eyes have gone wild and far cast and he is staring at his black roof, picturing the dark nights that Keats described, picturing the stars he probably sat under when he was writing. "It's like, if it's not about her, then who? He was dying, and the poem's about..." he trails off. "Unless... unless he's talking about connecting with everyone else. The icy silence of the tomb was referring to his impending death, so... maybe the 'heart' he's holding is his mortality. Like he's been through something, he's going through something... and he can't connect with other people because they don't understand. Even though he really, really wants them to," Kenma breathes. He breathes and breathes. "You pull all of yourself out, you cut yourself open and expose every little thing, wear your literal heart on your sleeve and, and, it's like... people don't want to look."

He turns back to look at Hinata, grinning manically like he never has. "Hey, that's it! I think that's..." He trails off as soon as he notices it. Hinata has fallen asleep. Kenma can't help the dopey, sleepy smile that emerges on his own face at the sight of the other, his gradually rising and falling chest, his shoulders shifting and ebbing like he's being carried on a wave. Kenma shifts so that he's lying on his side, cat blinking and falling asleep watching him. It's so overwhelmingly intimate. It's intimate and his face feels hot and he doesn't want to turn away and--

He realises what Lev was talking about. Holy shit.

He's in love with Hinata.

Chapter End Notes

i wont give spoilers this time. stay tuned next time for more gay shit and nail biting plot developments that will leave you Hating Me™.

hmu @ cloverguts.tumblr.com, i love to scream and im probably even friendlier than i seem.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kenma has no idea what to do.

He's never been in this situation. Well, any situation where he's been in love with one of his best friends. When he wakes up the next morning, with a headache the size of the moon, he takes one look at his messages and gets right out of bed.

It's a decidedly 'nope' action. He just needs to. Shower. He'll be fine.

He spends so long in there, begging on a cure from the hot water, that he's almost late for class. Solicitude sets in on the subway. He texts Hinata back; he is in love with the guy, after all. One thought of him waking up and wondering why Kenma is ignoring him is enough for him to shoot a message back, worrying his lower lip. He needs to talk to someone about this. Kuroo, clearly, is out of the question. He didn't come over this morning, letalone answer when Kenma knocked. He has since convinced himself that Kuroo had to go into work early. It's easier to think about, rather than the other thing.

He runs into Lev on his way into the lecture hall. "Kenma!" he says, sounding way too loud and chipper for this time of morning. "I was gonna look for you, ask you to sit with my friends and me, but--"

"I need to talk to you," he interrupts. Lev looks shocked at the lack of meekness. "After class."

"Of course," he nods. That's about all for the exchange. Barely two weeks of knowing each other, and they have this understanding. All Kenma can think is that it's taken this long for him and Kuroo, and they still worry about miscommunication.

Kenma sits with Lev and his friendship group. It turns out that Yaku has been in his philosophy class this whole time; he almost can't believe it, but then again, Lev's personality is pretty distracting. He hardly noticed any of his classmates before now. The class is pretty standard. Kenma's phone buzzes twice before he has to turn it off, saving his nerves--just barely-- from frying. Lev notices, and shoots him a quizzical glance. Kenma pretends not to see. He's been pretending a lot lately, apparently, and tries instead to focus his attention on Inoue's Christian-shit-talking. He used to find this class so interesting.

"Hey," Lev murmurs, leaning over to speak. Kenma can't believe he never noticed before how closely parts of the man remind him of Hinata; the 'being unable to keep this voice down' thing in particular. "You seem really jittery."

"Do I?" Kenma's voice rockets sky high and gives him away. Lev quirks an eyebrow.

"A little. Your leg keeps jumping."

Kenma realises it is. He stops squirming, face hot. "Sorry."

"Wanna take a break?"

"No." He's been letting his personal life get in the way of school for way too long now. Exams are so soon-- there's no way he's going to pass if he keeps doing that.

Lev shrugs, leaning back in his seat. "Okay. We'll talk after--"
"If you don't shut up," Yaku warns. He doesn't finish the thought, but Kenma can only imagine.

As soon as class is out, Lev apologises and follows Kenma out of the building, walking silently--silently! it's a miracle--behind him. They get to one of the grassier areas outside, covered now in rain drops like tiny diamonds. Lev takes his jacket off and lies it across the bench seat. If it were anyone else, Kenma might think they were trying to be a gentleman; but it's Lev, so he doesn't. Most likely he's just looking out for his own best interest. He pats the seat beside Kenma, beaming up at him. Kenma still feels jittery, like he woke up attached to a burning hot electrical wire and is still buzzing with the energy left behind. He takes a seat, but his hands squirm in his lap.

"You know, um, last night," he tries, and Lev begins to make a face. "After... you know."

"We kissed." Lev's frowning. "You're not a blackout drunk, are you?"

"No. I was thinking. You said I was in love with one of my friends."

"Oh my God," Lev says. "Is it me? Look, Kenma, you're great, but--"

"Shut up." He's smiling now, nervous electricity making his blood sing. "I was thinking about it last night. I think you might be right."

"It's Shouyou, right?"

"Is it obvious?" Blood rushes to Kenma's face. The rest of him feels woozy, like there isn't enough blood left to support his legs.

Lev shakes his head. "Not really. I mean, it might be obvious to someone who knows you really well. Or someone who is also in love with a close friend."

They sit in silence for a while. It's liberating, trying the words out aloud, letting them roll off of his tongue. In love with Hinata. He's in love with Hinata.

"Have you ever thought about telling Yaku how you feel?"

Lev doesn't hesitate. "Yeah. Every time I go to do it, though, I have to stop myself. I don't wanna ruin our friendship with something like that."

Kenma hadn't even thought about ruining their friendship. Something in his gut turns cold. "If you really love the person, then it shouldn't matter."

"If we broke up--"

"Who says you have to break up?" Lev's looking at him like he just grew a second head. Kenma's averts his eyes. "Anyway, I don't think it works that way. If you're both gay--"

"How rude," Lev says. "I'm bisexual."

"If you're both interested in other men. You should go for it."

Lev's giving him this irritated look, like he can't believe Kema's right. He rests his cheek on the palm of his hand and lets out a hair-stirring sigh. "What about you, then? Are you going to tell Shouyou how you feel?"

Blood rushes North again. "That's different."

"Huh? How is that different?"

Because with Hinata it matters. I'll drain him like a battery, Kenma thinks. He can see it now, all
that sunshine sapping from the boy, Kenma taking all of his colours and replacing them with blue, blue, blue. How could he put him through that?

"It just is, okay?" He knows he's mumbling. Lev doesn't look like he buys it.

"If you're not emotionally ready--"

"It's not that."

"Sure." He hates the way Lev stares at him, through his lashes and iron hard. Like he knows him. It reminds him of Kuroo, and that's a thought to set his blood on fire. "Like I was saying. If you're not emotionally ready, Kenma, that's fine, but you can't wait around forever."

"Not forever." Maybe not forever. "I only realised I like him yesterday. And you're not listening to my advice, so why should I listen to yours?"

"You're being such a kid about this." Lev laughs. "Who says I'm not listening to your advice? Listen, I'll take yours on board if you take mine."

"Fine." He has no idea why he's agreeing to this. Or even what he's agreeing to in the first place. Only that Lev's eyes are shining now, like he knows everything and Kenma knows nothing. He leans back, satisfied, and Kenma gets the feeling that he's made a very, very bad mistake.

.Have u slept together yet?? :P

It's been ten days since he told Lev, and he's really starting to regret it.

no. hes still touring with his volleyball team.

Oooh so thats the only thing stopping u LOL

It's like having another Kuroo around. Speaking of which: they haven't been actively ignoring each other, but they haven't exactly spoken since the party, either. Occasionally they pass each other in the hall. Once they got stuck in the elevator together, the whole way down, twelve floors. Kenma wanted so badly to ask him what was happening with Kei, but nothing came out; they rode all the way to the ground floor together, and walked their separate ways.

Whens he getting back? ??

tomorrow. im doing homework, leave me alone.

Rude :'( :'(  

He sets down his pen and heaves a sigh. Ten days. Avoiding Hinata didn't last for very long, and soon they were back to talking every day and night. They haven't skyped since the night of Lev's party, otherwise known as The Incident. Kenma keeps making up excuses, doesn't think he could handle it right now. He's still trying to decide on how to act when he inevitably sees Hinata again. It isn't like him to fail so tremendously at being impervious to feelings-- actually, that's a lie. More so it's the fact that he can hardly remember the last time he had trouble dancing around feelings like this.

He misses his best friend. He could go talk to Kuroo-- knows he could-- but somehow, it feels like admitting a cheap loss. Kuroo could come and talk to him just as easily. Admittedly, he knows the brunette hasn't stepped too far out of his life. He catches him watching as Kenma leaves or enters the apartment every now and again, and he knows he's been asked about. Both Lev and Hinata have brought up the fact of Kuroo's concern.
He doesn't know what he'll do when Hinata gets here, but he knows what he'd like to do. Since the realisation he's been having dreams. Colourful ones where he wakes up staring at his own ceiling and wondering at the lack of stars there, catching his breath and reveling in the absence of sea water flooding his lungs. In some dreams he places both hands on Hinata's waist and takes all the light from him, draining him until he is a thing of darkness and Kenma's blood glows underneath his skin. In others they're kissing in a pitch black room. Kenma wakes up from those dreams sweating, pawing at his skin to remove tar and blackdamp. He wishes Hinata would just figure it out. Either that, or the feelings have to go away.

They're meant to be meeting at midday tomorrow. He's going to ignore Kuroo, take the train down to meet Hinata's team when they arrive and suggest they hang out. If he's not busy, of course-- the plan is not to look too desperate, not to look like he cares too much. Not to let any foible of emotion weigh down what he has going for himself. He'll just greet Hinata, act like he hasn't been daydreaming about kissing him, and--

The knock at the door is so sudden that he almost falls from his seat. By the time he's regained footing, whoever is there is knocking again, and in a fit of emotion he realises exactly who it is. Kuroo, with the nerve to show up here angry, maybe, or emotional-- Kemna's blood turns to ice and then fire in the same moment. He marches to the front of the apartment, ready to finally give his best friend a piece of his mind.

Hinata falls straight into his arms with all the force of a freight train.

"Kenma, thank God you're home, I was starting to freak out that you were in class even though I know you don't have class today and I was thinking how I'd have to wait out in the hall for you to come home and it's freezing and I was totally gonna eat this even though I bought it for you, and--" He cuts off like a chord has been torn from him, and hurriedly shoves the crepe at Kenma. It's leaking cream through the paper and berries are overflowing from the top. Kenma realises it's almost 5 o'clock and he hasn't eaten since this morning. He salivates. "I thought, um, you said you liked these, liked sweets, so." Hinata stares up at him, out of breath from the mile-a-minute explanation. His eyes are sparkling. "Hi," he breathes.

Kenma stares back. "Hi."

"So I'm back."

"Yeah. I thought you were getting back tomorrow."

"We were meant to be!" Hinata complains, brows drawing together. "But something happened to the bus and everyone's stuck in Nagoya for another three days. A week, tops."

Kenma quirks an eyebrow. "Not you?"

The grin that arises on Hinata's face is brilliant. It makes Kenma think of staring directly into the sun and risking losing his eyesight to something even diamonds shy from. "I caught an express train."

"Shit. Was that expensive?"

"I wanted to see you," he blurs out. When he notices the look on Kenma's face, he backtracks, grinning through the flush on his cheeks. "I mean, it's not just me. Noya threw some money in 'cus he didn't want to stay either. It wasn't that expensive."

"Tsuki?"

Hinata makes a face. "I don't think he and Kuroo are talking. I mean, they are, I guess, I've seen them texting. But not as much. Tsuki hasn't been talking about him."
Kenma knew. He should have said something earlier.

Hinata's face lights up again as if remembering something. He gestures to the crepe in Kenma's hands. "Take that with you. I've decided we're going out tonight."

"What? Where to?"

"Doesn't matter." Hinata shakes his head. "All night city adventure! I wanna see the city. It'll be fun, let's go!"

"I don't even have a coat--"

"Here." Hinata whips his off so quickly it stirs the air near Kenma's face, and before he can even comprehend what's happening, the shorter is leaning up, and wrapping the yellow fabric around his shoulders. "Good thing you're short, too," Hinata says, peering at him. "It suits you!"

"Shut up." He doesn't know what to do. He can't move, for a second, wrapped in the smell of orange blossoms and deodorant and Hinata. As if reading his mind, the redhead, now dressed in a blue sweater and dirty jeans and nothing else, grins bigger than the sun and the moon and the whole sky, and reaches up to drag his fingers through Kenma's hair. Kenma has to hide a shudder. "Get your keys, I'm serious."

"You're serious."

Hinata is staring at him. "Yes."

A city adventure. Kenma stares another moment, thinks, what the hell, and rushes back inside to grab his keys. He moves so fast he almost drops the crepe, and Hinata loops an arm through his and tugs him back down the hall to make up for it.

He's so busy trying to keep up, he realises he's forgotten his whole plan. He didn't even think about how to act around Hinata. He just did it.

They get on the Ginza line right before peak hour hits, securing seats at the back. As more people pile in they get closer to each other, and it doesn't take long for Kenma's thrumming nervousness to turn into confusion.

"...Are we heading towards the Taitou ward?"

"Yeah, I thought we could go to Ueno!"

Kenma stares at him. "...Why Ueno?"

"Ah," Hinata pauses for thought, looking sheepish. "There are a few art museums there I wanted to see. I thought, Kenma's totally an arty guy! So I figured you would want to go. I probably should have asked."

"I don't know anything about art," he admits. If they weren't so close, Hinata might not be able to hear his mumble above the noise of the train. Bodies are pressed together standing at every angle. "I'm good with books. That's all."

"I'm not really good with it either, like," Kenma definitely doesn't miss the way Hinata's tongue darts out to wet his lips, "Suga is, that's their thing. They talk about it sometimes. They know a lot of Western artists. Ah, apparently the Bordeaux exhibition is on, so..."
Kenma doesn't know any French, but he's about 90% sure that Hinata pronounced that wrong. It's cute. For whatever reason. He smiles, and then, because he's feeling reckless and brave, he tries to make out like he's giving the other passengers more room, and moves his body closer to Hinata's. "Sounds like fun."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I want to go."

Hinata's face lights up, encouraged. "Great! Hey, we can get dinner whenever, and I've been doing research to find out, um, what kinds of places are open past 1, since that's when the metro system stops. We could head back and get my car before then so that we don't get stranded."

Kenma's eyes bulge out of his head. "You really weren't kidding. You want us to stay out all night."

"Maybe not all night," Hinata says sheepishly. "It's just in case. I don't wanna have to leave at, like, 11, just so that we don't get stuck in the red light district or something." His neck is flushed, Kenma realises. He averts his eyes.

"Some of us have been out all day," he mumbles, aiming to hide the fact that he isn't exactly opposed to being in the city with Hinata all night. His friend beams at him.

"Yeah, I guess that's fair. I slept the whole train ride back!"

"Oh, I forgot to ask." Kenma sits up in his seat, trying to ignore the fact that the subway is getting cramped. Not the good kind of cramped where he feels lost in the crowd, either. He moves closer to Hinata again. "Did you guys win? Are you going through to finals?"

"No. No," Hinata looks down, making an irritated face. "We lost in the last half. It's fine, anyway. Finals would have been in a week's time, and I'm exhausted!"

"Any chance you could still play?" Panic is making his heart thump harder. He knows reasonably that it can't be his fault, that his influence shouldn't have any effect on Hinata's playing; it's way too early for him to be draining his friend, right?

Hinata meets his gaze, and there's no malice there. "I guess if Kitagawa opts out. Or if pigs fly." He's grinning. It sets Kenma's heart back at ease, and gradually, it slows down. "Seriously, Kenma, it's no big deal. It was stressful! Now all I want to do is wind down and have fun, so let's have fun tonight, yeah?"

Kenma's heartbeat picks right back up again. He's almost sure Hinata can see it, his pulse jumping through his neck. His skin feels like paper. "Yeah," he says, and although his voice is weak, Hinata grins like the sky. It's enough to set Kenma back at ease.

It's enough to do a lot of things.

They cross over Ueno park and head for the NMWA, shoulders bumping in the dim evening light. It's barely night time. The sun is low, lighting up the edges of everywhere they walk.

"The sky's really dark."

"Yeah, it's nighttime," Kenma points out. Hinata elbows him.

"No, I mean, like, dark orange. Doesn't that mean it'll be warm tomorrow?"
"I thought that was an old wive's tale." Kenma smiles. Hinata seems so animated about the issue, staring up at the sky hard.

"Well, if it's warm tomorrow, you owe me money."

A laugh escapes him forcefully. He tries to cover it up with his hand, pretending like he doesn't notice the way Hinata's head whips around in utter joy. "You're on," he mumbles, smiling at the ground. The ground doesn't smile back. It doesn't matter. The sky is doing enough smiling for all of them.

Hinata clearly has no idea what he's doing when they get there. They mill about the first floor for a while, trying to figure out which exhibition is where. Neither of them can read a map, so the crude one they're given in a pamphlet really is of little use. They end up in a sculpture section for a dead French guy named Rodin. They look for shapes and meaning in the twisted iron figures, argue over it until one of the employees approaches them. The woman working down there tells them about his other work, the more romantic stuff; the way figures seemed to melt together, like two people becoming one. They all three stand huddled around her phone and look at a sculpture called 'The Kiss', and it really does look like two people becoming one. It's intimate. Kenma has to look away.

They stumble their way to the second floor, feeling electric. The security guards are watching them. It should make him nervous, but it doesn't; Kenma blood vibrates beneath his skin. Hinata drags him around by the sleeve-- the sleeve of Hinata's own jacket, which is a shade nicer against Kenma's skin than he would have guessed-- as people file out past them. The floors are starting to clear out for the end of the day. Kenma keeps wondering what kind of people come to look at art after the sun sets on a Saturday night. He wants to meet them. He's been going to college for this long and he's never bothered to make friends with an art student, has never bothered to speak to a biology major. The colours jump out from their canvases and Kenma's head spins. There are so many people he could know, people who are breathing and moving and thinking just like he is, people with their own lives and their own worries. Their own social problems, maybe, like Lev. Their own backstories like Hinata.

Kenma doesn't know much about Western art, but he knows enough to see the value in Monet paintings. Hinata seems bewildered by it, walking around the room like he wants to touch the canvases. Kenma wants to tell him that this is the way he feels when he looks at Hinata, but he keeps his mouth shut.

"Real water lilies don't look like that," Hinata says, coming to stand beside Kenma. He's never had the urge to paint before, unless painting colours with words count. Right now he wants to find the right words to paint this image of Hinata and himself, standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the gold frame, yellow and blue, hair mussed and it's only 6 o'clock at night.

"They kind of do. I don't think that's the point."

"No, I mean, they don't look like that when you're just walking past them in the middle of the day. Like, no one looks at them and thinks, wow! Water lilies! Art!"

Kenma shrugs. "This guy did."

"I want to."

Kenma side-eyes him, grinning like art. "You do that kind of thing already, don't you? Look for the beauty in everything."

"Ah, I guess you're right." Hinata looks so happy. Kenma can't help but tease him a little, averting his gaze again.
"Obviously, or you wouldn't be able to stand to look at me."

"As if I have to look for it in you!" Hinata scoffs; he squirms. "You're, like, totally beautiful, you know?"

Kenma doesn't say anything, because his own heartbeat is killing him. He brings a hand to his mouth and nibbles on the edge of his thumb. "You too." Even from the corner of his eye, he sees Hinata light up. It makes him quake.

The sun has gone all the way down when they make their way back through Ueno park. There are lovers out at this time, Kenma notes; they walk in pairs, hands melded together like Rodin statues. Hinata goes on and on about how in the Winter, all the trees they walk through look like they're covered in white blossoms instead of pink ones because of all the snow; Kenma pretends not to know, because he wants Hinata to keep talking. He's got one arm across his body, cradling his left arm like it will drop off. Half crossed arms.

"Clear moon," Hinata says, looking up. "You know the saying. Clear moon, frost soon."

"That sounds like another old wive's tale."

"How about double or nothing if there's frost within a week?"

"Why," Kenma questions, staring ahead, "do you keep trying to take my money?"

Hinata swings his arms. He's nervous, Kenma realises. He turns his head to look at his friend. "You okay?"

"Did you like it? It wasn't, um, boring or anything, right?"

Kenma's mouth turns up into a grin. "It was horrible."

It takes a second for him to get it, but eventually Hinata grins back. "It was either that or Leisureland."

"Where to now?"

Hinata almost stops walking. Kenma catches the gesture, the obvious jolt in his walk. He damn near starts skipping after that. "Really? You trust me?"

"Of course." It surprises even Kenma how fervently that comes out. All of a sudden he isn't tired. He's heard stories about the full moon doing weird things to people, but he never really paid it any thought until now. He can feel it lighting him up with all the energy he thought it was the sun's job to possess. Maybe it's the cold night air, or the fact that Hinata keeps looking at him and he looks back, without even thinking about it, without even worrying about what he's gonna do the next time his best friend gets too close and all he can smell is orange blossoms, all he wants to do is grab him and press the two of them together.

"Do you trust me enough to come to Kabukicho?"

"What if it goes past 1 and we get stranded?" Kenma asks, but he's nodding, nodding, and it's like his head isn't a part of the rest of him but a sentient force on its own, capable of making decisions for him. Hinata side-steps and their shoulders bump.

"It won't. We'll go back and get my car if it gets too late. Do you trust me?"

And it's funny, the way he answers without thinking. Like it's something he's been saying his whole life.
When Kenma was in high school, his parents hated to let him out on school nights. In retrospect, it was a fair enough concern. He was a hellion on the court and a hellion with a pen in his hand; all that pent up rebellion contained in one socially anxious teenager. When he first started hanging out with Ryota and the crew it was like something was lit with gasoline inside of him. Apathy was an easy cover for nerves, and when the nerves weren't there, an easy cover for zeal. Anyone could say "yeah, sure" and agree to do something wild, to do something ridiculous, with barely a shrug of their shoulders. A fire burning so hot and brilliant behind his eyelids that only Kuroo could see.

Once they went out in the middle of the night on the last night of a school camp when they were meant to be in their tents, and went skinny dipping in the grounds pool. Kenma remembers Kuroo thinking he had at least three accounts of frostbite afterwards, but more than anything: Ryota staring him down in the water, Ama's bare chest and shrill laugh, the way he coughed up water and everyone laughed, and he tasted chlorine for days.

The sky was like an open blanket, this nebulous expanse of stars he couldn't remember ever seeing back home. Kuroo named constellations. Ryota came and pressed up against him in the pool, and everyone had to pretend like he wasn't half-hard in the pool. Or that Kenma kept laughing and choking up chlorine. His dad, the charming guy he was, had once referred to teenagers (and foreigners, and "the homosexuals", later) as animals; so that's what they had been. All of them, animals, naked in the water and howling at the moon. Kenma howled bloody murder. The thing about laughing hysterically is that it forces noises from you that you didn't know were contained in your belly, great roars and rasps that make people stare. All he could look at was the sky. It was so big and clear. He felt like it had to mean something.

He wanted an adventure then. He remembers it. Remembers feeling it avidly, this thick and acidic thing always coating his teeth, begging him to say words he didn't know how the flavour of yet. Because maybe it wasn't an adventure he wanted, or anything dangerous, but just the feeling that came with it. Like a whole year of trying to re-capture the way his stomach flipped on the Ferris wheel, or the way his heart plummeted when Kuroo told him to open his eyes and look down.

The thing about the night they went skinny dipping is that the next day, the whole way home, it rained.

So they go. Ueno station all the way to the Golden Gai district, where lights are coming up like masts on a ship, painting the cityscape like a painting. Kenma wonders what Monet would have done if someone asked him to paint this, Tokyo, in the 21st Century, or what he would do if someone asked him to write about it. They're not all that different, painting and writing. Kenma can imagine twisting words into the slopes of skyscrapers, inflections to capture the bouncing lights.

"I'm hungry," Hinata says. "Are you hungry?"

Kenma considers lying, for some reason. Politeness? "Yeah."

"Yeah, good. Good. Cool. Where do you wanna eat? It's your pick!"

It's like tossing him in the middle of a map and asking him to pick a point. It's like everywhere he looks there are restaurants and bars, groups passing through them like ghosts through walls, the full mood dragging waves of people. "You pick."

"If you're sure."
There's a flood of relief that he doesn't have to make a decision, but it only eases his nerves for a second; Hinata grabs his hand and it all starts up again.

"So you don't get lost," the other says, as if he can read the expression on Kenma's face-- which he probably can, Kenma realises, willing his eyes to go back to their normal size. His shoulders drop and then hunch. Hinata can probably feel him sweating. Jesus. "You looked kind of out of it."

"It's a good 'out of it'," he blurts, feeling ridiculous immediately. "Promise." He opts for a sheepish grin, hopes that will set Hinata straight.

But the boy looks wide-blown and absurdly pleased with himself, staring up at Kenma; like he looked at the art, for God's sake. "Heh." The laugh comes out through a grin; from here, this angle, Kenma can see where the corner of one tooth is chipped. "Distracted by my suave gentlemanly behaviour, obviously."

"That's completely it."

"Knew it!" Hinata cheers. Kenma wants to ask the story behind the tooth-- and the freckles, and where his family got their hair colour from. He's suddenly overcome, overwhelmed with the desire to lie down with Hinata and talk for hours, learn every little thing about him. He follows him down the rows of restaurants with verbatim feeling.

On his first night back in Tokyo, he told Kuroo he was going to bed early, and instead, got on a train and went to Central Park by himself. He wanted to see if he could. He did his hair in front of the hallway mirror for the first time, which Kuroo had just helped him put up. He blew out the candles they'd lit, turned on an album so it would sound like he was home. He choked in front of a group of tourists and burst into tears on a park bench. When he called Kuroo to pick him up it was clear he was hurt, but neither of them said anything, not for the whole drive back.

"I have no idea what kind of fish this is," Hinata admits, squinting at the image on the menu. "Kenma, any idea?"

"Do I look like a fisherman?" Hinata raises his eyebrows suggestively. "Wow. If I'm a fisherman, you're the fish. You know that, right?"

"Are you gonna catch me?"


"I'm not going to drink, because I might be driving later," Hinata explains. "But I won't stop you, if you want to!"

"I don't really drink."

"Ah, but Lev's party, right?"

Kenma smiles into the hand he's got supporting his chin. "I didn't drink a lot. And I sobered up pretty quickly."

"You still seemed tipsy when we were skyping! I mean, you were rambling on about this poem, I think, when I was falling asleep, or maybe I dreamt that--"
It's like someone's picked Kenma up and transported him right back to that night, thrown him in the midst of emotion. Kenma is suddenly ultimately aware of the fact that he's got Hinata's jacket around his shoulders, hanging from the chair behind him. He brings a chopstick to his lips and mouths it absently. Hinata's still talking. Oblivious to the miniature freak out that's going on in front of him.

"Anyway, when I woke up later, you were pretty out. Ah, it was totally cute! You were snoring and everything."

"No I wasn't." Kenma's face is heating up. "You're lying."

Hinata crosses his heart. "Honest. Hey-- don't look like that, it was fine. I do it too! And not even when I'm drinking. Alcohol makes people snore, right?"

"I guess." Kenma attempts to direct his stare-down at the mahogany surface of the table. "God. I'm never drinking again."

"So not tonight...?"

Kenma looks up. "You pick a drink. From the kid's menu, I don't care. Just make sure it isn't expensive because I don't have a lot of money on me."

"You get a student discount, right?" Hinata squirms in his seat. "I was, um, going to pay anyway."

"What? Why would you do something like that? It's not..." It's not like we're on a date. He was going to say the words. Brilliant, verbose, English-student Kenma was going to say those words out loud and found nothing wrong with them in his current predicament.

"It's fine." Hinata waves him off. "I don't mind."

"I can pay you back." It's not an offer, it's a promise, but Hinata has the audacity to shake his head.

"Nah. Just let me use your student ID, and we're even."

"Shouldn't I pay, since it's my face on the ID?"

"Ah-- you're right, Kenma. I'll give you the money before we have to leave, and you can use your ID. Unless you're uncomfortable. Then I totally don't mind missing the discount!"

It's not a guilt trap like he's used to being set in, but rather an honest offer. He heaves a breath, the weight of it moving his shoulders. He wants to touch Hinata. He has no idea where the urge came from-- maybe it's always been there, lurking like a predator, and his body is taking this sudden acknowledgement of feelings as permission to go into thirst overdrive. Kenma scolds himself for wanting to lean across a table in a crowded restaurant and caress his best friend's face, tries to summon horror at himself for wanting fingers to sink into flesh like a Rodin sculpture.

"Kenma?"

He snaps back into reality. Holy shit. This is a real thing that is happening, tuning out for the better task of daydreaming about the guy he's in love with. Is his life a terrible shoujo anime now?

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Man, I bet you were thinking about video games," Hinata complains. Kenma doesn't bother correcting him. Honestly, he'll let this one slide. "I was saying how when my family called the other night Natsu wouldn't shut up about you. She kept asking me if I was gonna marry you."
"What did you say?" Kenma asks. Carefully. He mouths at his chopstick again.

"I said, 'not any time soon', and then she asked if she could marry you. She's really getting to that age where she's boy crazy. I think she has a crush on Kuroo, too."

Kenma's trying to listen, but all he can hear is not any time soon. It shouldn't matter like it does, but it so does. Not any time soon like never? Not any time soon like 'maybe we have to date first'? It's not like he wants to get married, but--

"How are you both tonight? Can I start you off with some drinks?"

Kenma thanks the saviour angel that is their waiter, and lets Hinata pick his drink without a second thought. It's only when she's gone that he realises Hinata actually has ordered from the kids' menu, and almost regrets giving him the power.

"The tiniest soda for the tiniest guy."

"You're shorter than me. You're literally the tiniest guy at this table."

"Not in heart," Hinata defends, clutching his chest. It makes Kenma choke on a laugh. "Besides, I'm not that much shorter than you. You should have seen me in high school. Like, whoaa. Way worse."

"Kageyama said you haven't grown since high school. He said if anything, you've gotten shorter."

"Well maybe if bakageyama would stop talking about me behind my back, his heart would grow to be the same size as mine."

Kenma raises an eyebrow. "I think it would be dangerous if his heart shrunk, you know."

"Mean!"

Instead of the strange fish, Hinata orders a rice dish and the kind of meat buns he could get from any normal takeout store, and much the same for Kenma. The real feat is dessert. The guilt he feels about letting Hinata pay pretty much goes away as soon as he's had his first bite. It doesn't even occur to him that Hinata spent so much money because he knows Kenma likes sweets, not until the frenzy wears off. He's like a shark that's tasted blood.

"My parents have been calling a lot. They want me to come down and see them before Christmas."

"About classes?"

"Yeah."

"So don't go," Hinata says. He says it bravely and proudly, like there's no other option. "I mean, you shouldn't have to see them, right? You're an adult."

"They'd stop paying for things. I would be very poor."

"It could be like one of those movies! You could get a job. I could busk for spare change. Well, I can't really play any instruments. But maybe Kuroo? Hey, Kuroo's pretty rich anyway, isn't he? Being famous and all."

"I wouldn't call him famous." Kenma wonders what he's doing right now. They haven't spoken in ten days-- a record since high school-- so for all Kenma knows, he's joined a circus or given up on working for a collective Capitalist society altogether. "I guess he's got money. I don't want to go to him, though. He shouldn't have to pay just so I can go to school and keep living in my apartment."
"Have you thought about getting a job?" He says it through a mouthful of food, but it still manages to spike Kenma's pulse.

"Yes."

"Do you --" Hinata pauses to swallow. "Do you think, like, it would be something you want to do? Not that you have to. Or, I mean, you don't have to work somewhere you don't like, I could probably find you something part-time to do with the team if it made you more comfortable--"

"It's fine," Kenma says. The conversation turned from terrifying to breezy again like a switch was flicked. "I don't know if I can right now, but I'm working on. Y'know, anxiety stuff. I could probably do it soon. Or I could just go see my parents."

"They want you to major in journalism, right? But you like creative stuff?"

"I like to analyse." He runs his finger around the rim of his glass. "Creative stuff too, I guess. Dad originally wanted me to get a degree in business."

"Yuck. Who even hates themselves enough to study something like that?"

"Me. For my last two years of high school."

Hinata grins sheepishly from behind one hand. "Oops."

"No, you're right. Utter self-hatred."

"I, for one, love myself."

"That's nice."

"I'm serious! There's enough love in my heart for both of us, you know, you don't need to get jealous."

"Is that what I am?" He raises his eyebrows. Is this-- is this flirting? Kenma has no idea what he's doing, only that he's going at a million miles per hour, like a speeding bullet train, and he can't seem to stop it. His mouth has run away without him.

"Completely," Hinata says, without an ounce of joking in his voice.

"Ah."

"It's all over your face."

"It must be," Kenma agrees. Their bemused stare off only lasts a few more seconds, but it feels like centuries.

"We should go," Hinata says, standing up from his seat. "If we wanna look around a bit before we catch the train back. Otherwise, like you said, we'll get stranded."

*I wouldn't mind getting stranded with you.* He repeats it in his head over and over, like one line of a song stuck there. Even after they've paid and left the restaurant, it's all he can think. There are so many emotions battling hand in hand inside of him that he can't seem to tell them apart. He wants to be touching Hinata so badly he can't stand it. Just their hands again, or maybe their hips this time, pressed sideways together on the train. He's got all this anger inside of him, too. He has no idea what for.
Fire boy. That's what Ryota used to call him when he got worked up.

The day Kenma lost his virginity, it rained, just like on the bus the way back from camp.

The sun was nowhere to be seen. It didn't matter. It was the middle of the day. The clouds made him feel safer.

He wasn't dating Ryota then. The guy he slept with was the only openly gay guy in their whole school; he mouthed Kenma's name into the side of his neck and made these awful animal noises the whole time. They were in calculus together; he'd gone to his sixteenth birthday party a month before, and it was like everyone expected him to do it. Ryota, just a friend at that point, certainly had; and bragged about it too. Kenma went in hoping for a quick and meaningless fuck that would warrant him the same title as anyone else. But he got nervous halfway through and started to paw at the guy's face, to make these pitiful little sounds.

They had to stop and watch a movie for him to calm down. But the guy was nice about it. As nice as teenage boys could be, Kenma figured. He didn't mind the feeling of it. It was nice. That was the problem, apparently, because afterwards, when the guy-- and to this day he can't remember his first name, which should embarrass him more than it does-- asked him how it was, and Kenma said "it was nice", he got yelled at. "You have no feelings" and "what are you, a robot?" He didn't know how to respond. Probably because robots don't pick up on social situations like those pretty well, but. It was nice. What was wrong with nice?

The second time was a lot scarier. It was with Ryota. Scary in the good way. He remembers breathing so hard he was scared he'd lose his breath, or wheeze, and then he'd really be embarrassed. Ryota asked him twice if he wanted to. Two times to say no and he said yes because he meant it. When Kuroo found out he was adamant that Ryota had pressured him in some way, that he'd taken advantage of Kenma's anxiety, and Kenma couldn't get him to figure out that he'd wanted it. Wanted it when it had hurt and wanted it when Ryota stared him down like he was something to eat. He remembers that then was the first time he ever felt like an animal, or wanted to howl at the moon. He remembers feeling angry, then elated, then humiliated; like he wanted to claw and scratch and tear lines down Ryota's back until he had blood underneath his fingernails.

It hadn't been about Ryota. He doesn't even think the sex was about Ryota.

"Hey, what's the date today?"

"The 27th, I think." He knows, but he doesn't say so because he doesn't want Hinata to know that he knows it's been exactly ten days since they last video chatted. Since he last saw Hinata-- minus tonight-- and realised his feelings might veer just a little to the left of platonic. What happened to all that self-assurance that he wouldn't let his own feelings choke him like this, because it would lead him somewhere he didn't want to go? Draining Hinata. Drying out a whole riverbed, emptying a battery. Either way, it isn't somewhere he wants to go. But Hinata keeps looking at him. Fire boy, indeed. Kenma suspects he'll need about a thousand years of sleep to recover from all this.

"Oh," Hinata says, perking up. "You have exams soon, right?"

"Not serious ones. Midterms aren't until March."

"Ah, but Winter break, right?" All of a sudden his face falls. "Please tell me they let you out for Winter break. College isn't prison, is it?"

"They let us out for Winter break," Kenma reassures him, amused. "I don't really celebrate Christmas, though. New Year's is alright."
"What? How come?"

"It's more of a Western holiday, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but it's fun. Presents! Who doesn't love presents, Kemna? Ah, and then you get mistletoe, and all that other fun stuff." Kemna's head is seriously messing with him, because he swears the look Hinata throws him goes on way longer than it actually does. He shakes it off, willing on the cold to clear his jumbled thoughts.

"What if I bought you a really cool game?" Hinata suggests. Kenma tilts his head.

"Huh?"

"For Christmas! Then you'd have to love it, right?"

"Why are you bringing this up, all of a sudden?"

"I wanna know what I should get you," Hinata sing-songs, and then cuts off like a light has been flipped, because he's spotted a music store. Without another word he grabs Kenma by the sleeve and drags him inside, heading straight for the sampling section.

Kenma hasn't hung out in a music store since high school. Which is a funny thought, because he hasn't done a lot of things since high school, when it comes down to it. He used to hang out in the indie section, try to convince Kuroo that the Western stuff neither of them could translate well wasn't just noise and garbage. Now, he and Hinata go through isles and collect cases in their hands, punching in their respective numbers to listen to them back as samples. It's like coming in and out of a wave. Hinata reaches down and places the headphones over Kenma's ears, and they lock eyes, as all of the colours of the song race from Kenma's ears to Hinata's eyes. Hinata lifts it off, and Kenma watches the reverse happen. Then they swap a third time.

By the time they've left the music store Hinata is complaining about how they're going to miss the train if they don't hurry, but all Kenma's thinking is I wouldn't mind being stranded with you, I wouldn't mind being stranded with you. It's freezing cold the whole way back. That's reason enough to thread their fingers together, and if Kenma wanted-- which he does, he really, really does-- he could reach out, just like that, and they'd be joined at the hands like all the sculpture couples they saw walking through Ueno park. Instead he wraps Hinata's coat firmly against his sides and tries to subtly breathe him in. If he can get away with it, he's going to steal this coat. He doesn't care if that's creepy.

They make it to the station with plenty of time to spare in an empty carriage with swaying seats. It must be opposite day, because it's 12:30 at night and Kenma feels the opposite of tired. Rather he is waking up more and more with each passing hour, like the city is getting to him.

He and Hinata sit up on the seats with their knees and watch the city slide by, and Kenma thinks, I'm going to live here forever. I'm going to see every city like this one. Then, because it's 12:30 and he can do whatever he wants, he decides he's going to get a tattoo, and he's going to dye his hair purple, just like all these city lights. Just like he wanted to do in high school. He'll dye himself colours he can't put into words, both literally and metaphorically, morph into the night sky. Or maybe it's just the sky in general, now, like there really isn't a distinction between night and day.

Halfway to their stop, he and Hinata do this thing where they stand up and pretend like the carriage is crowded. "Sorry, excuse me," Hinata says, with so much fervency and dedication to character that Kenma has to laugh into his shoulder, even as Hinata grips the handle swinging from the roof and presses their bodies closer together. "Really crowded today, isn't it? Sorry, sir--watch that gentleman over there, sorry, my bad." Eventually they stop laughing and joking and just stand there, far too long for either of them to use the joke as an excuse. Kenma's hands are pressed against Hinata's shoulder blades, on either side of his chest and soft against rough fabric.
He stares at the blue in front of him and pretends not to notice that Hinata is looking at him, even though he's got the whole carriage to look at, pretends not to notice the fact that the whole lengths of their bodies are touching and the train's swaying reminds him of lying on his back in the ocean.

He remembers countless hours of staring up at the white sky and hoping it would storm and a strike of lightening would take him out, some pathetic pseudo burial at sea he could blame on circumstance rather than mental health. But this kind of ebbing, this kind of gentle rocking reminds him instead of being on a boat, some dreamy place where the sea and the sky are the same thing, where his eyes don't feel like they've got suitcases under them from being out all night and running through Tokyo, where his bones don't feel electrified from the full moon or Hinata or both, definitely both. Because they both just keep standing there, swaying together.

Eventually, it all feels like one movement.

"It's freezing," Kenma whispers, crossing his arms. "Hurry up."

"What was that? Go slower?" Hinata doesn't whisper back, even though it's past 1 now and they could wake any of his neighbours. He's got his sleeves pushed up to his elbows, pale skin peaking out from blue.

"You're crazy." Kenma tries to lean into the warmth of his yellow coat, almost pulls away when Hinata's smell hits him square in the face. Ends up leaning into it. "Aren't you freezing?"

"No. Ah!" He holds the key up from his bag triumphantly, grin lighting up the night. "Found it."

The first thing Kenma does when he's in the car is turn the heat up all the way, so that hot air blasts him in the face. Hinata laughs. They cruise the streets around Central, like watching a sleeping giant wake up. The expanse of the sleepy city stretches out, pinks and blues and white hot lights, people's faces, all lit up and fragmented like smashed mirrors. Bad luck, for at least a billion years. Kenma tries to count them all but it feels like flying, even though Hinata isn't going very fast.

"We're getting out up here."

"No."

"Yes."

"I'm not."

"You have to, Kenma, you'll see!"

He smiles into the back of his hand, climbs out when Hinata pulls over. Of course he's getting out. Hinata could tell him to jump off a building and he'd do it, because he trusts there to be a net at the bottom.

Hinata pulls him by the sleeve of his coat into a 100 yen store. The isles have more colours in them than the lights outside; it makes Kenma laugh. The man behind the counter doesn't look happy to see them, and it just makes Kenma laugh harder.

"What are we here for? Candles? Plastic spoons? Crockery?"

"Crocker-what? Ah-- here!" Hinata plucks a packet of sparklers from the shelf, tossing the handheld fireworks to Kenma. He struggles for purchase, but manages to catch them eventually. Then, without a second of warning, Hinata is gripping both of Kenma's hands in his and the sparklers have fallen to the floor.
"We are going to light these," Hinata says, eyes alight, "and it is going to be the most beautiful and fantastic thing. Fireworks in our hands."

"I feel like a kid," Kenma admits, laughing, though only because he's nervous. He wants to tear away and pick the packet up from the floor. He wants to hold Hinata's hands back and tell him he's got fireworks in his eyes. He wants to kiss him. He wants to die.

Hinata grins. "Because you are!" He scoops the packet back up from the floor, and then he's whisking the both of them out of the isle.

They find party poppers, latex balloons. They traipse among the other isles until the employee looks dangerously close to kicking them out. Kenma takes two plastic crowns and adds them to their haul on the way to the counter, and they leave with a plastic bag swinging between their bodies, as thin and as flimsy as if there was just air there, begging Kenma to walk towards the heat he knows is settled right underneath Hinata's skin. All that gushing blood and pumping heart and years of emotion, that he could touch or drain, add to or take from.

They stop at a crossing, waiting for the pedestrian lights to flash, and it overtakes him like a wave. He wants to kiss Hinata so badly he can't stand it. He's just standing there unguarded, letting the moon do what it will to his hair and the shadows on his face. Kenma could kiss him in front of these people, right in the middle of the street, with all the lights bounding off of them. His hand twitches in place. It's only then that he realises Hinata's eyes have locked with his; he feels like he's been caught in the act of doing something he shouldn't.

"Where to now? We can go anywhere."

There's so much of the city. Kenma knows they could go anywhere, they really could.

So he says nothing. That's always how he's been best at making decisions.

"I don't know what it is about you," Hinata says, looking at him, "but you make me so nervous. Even though I'm so comfortable around you."

"Yes," Kenma says. "That made complete sense."

"No, it did! You know what I mean? This is so silly, but I want to impress you. Even though I feel like I could sit here forever."

Kenma's mouth goes dry. Both their voices are rasping, coming out croaked and warped. Hinata grins and nods at the packet between them like he didn't just say those words.

"Another one?"

"Sure."

They light the sparklers together, leaning in like they're sharing a flame for cigarettes. Their fingers touching, melting together. Kenma watches the fire explode and send off sparks everywhere. It's like a meteor shower. All these speeding comet trails flicking like ash onto the city skyline, brilliant white against black, orange against blue, as they wave them like wands in the air and spell out their names. Kenma writes his name then Hinata's, Keats' name, Kuroo's name, then love me, love me, love me back over and over until his sparkler has gone out and Hinata's laughing about winning the race they were apparently racing.

He lies down on his back again, crossing both hands behind his head and directing his gaze to the blackness of the sky. "It's a shame we got all of our secrets out that night in your room."
"I bet we didn't." Hinata lies down with him. They're so close that their shoulders are touching. Kenma can see his breath like incense smoke. "How did you feel when you first met me?"


"Was that all?"

He braves a sidelong look at Hinata, then back again. "No." The truth comes out without him meaning for it to. "I was surprised that I didn't want to get away from you. I normally want to get away from people pretty fast if I don't know them."

"Hmm, something tells me you're not like that." That makes Kenma look at Hinata. He's got his arms behind his own head, too, and one leg slung over the other. It's this crazy confidence, the kind Kenma has never had but has always wanted. Hinata looks like a prince or a King; he looks like he owns not only the hill they're parked on but the whole city below it, and the whole sky above him. The stars bow down to him. If he wanted, Kenma bets, he could just reach up and scoop a handful of them down, like tiny little diamonds. Or part the blackness like curtains, trace his fingers over their watery surface. "I mean, you are, obviously. But you don't hate people. I think you're really good with them."

That makes Kenma laugh. But Hinata isn't joking. He's got these galaxies in his eyes. And Kenma just knows.

Hinata knows about his anxiety without even having to ask, to delve into why. It's like someone has cut him open and left everything exposed. Open to disease, but also to sunlight. Hinata is staring at him so intensely, albeit sidelong, that Kenma has to resist the urge to squirm under the ministrations. Hinata understands. That's what frightens him. He understands.

"I'm this really terrible mess," he says, to Hinata or the sky or both. "I want you to know that about me."

"I don't care. I mean, who isn't?"

"You." The word comes out as a whisper. He doesn't mean for it to.

"Sure I'm a mess. I'm like, kaboom, like someone took a mess and blew it up and made it even messier."

"But you're a good mess. You're a good mess."

"Nuh-uh, not if you're not. If you're a mess, I don't wanna ever see you clean."

Kenma smiles at the sky. "What if therapy works?"

"That's not what I meant. I want you to be happy. But being a mess and being sad aren't the same thing. Humans aren't put together, and if they seem like it, I think, someone really has to be lying to you, y'know? I mean really fucking with you. Probably because they want something."

The laugh started to bubble inside of him around the time Hinata opened his mouth, but now it escapes him in frantic bursts, stealing the breath from his lungs. "I'm a chemical mess," he gasps out between laughs, knowing he's crazy, knowing Hinata must be watching him and thinking so too. "I'm going to cause a heart attack at any moment."

"Your heart or mine?"

"Both?"
"Well, Kenma!" Hinata announces it, goddamn proclaims it to the whole city below. He sits up and opens his arms wide, tips his head back and grins. "It is an honour to have my heart destroyed by you."

"That's so lame." He hits him, which makes him sit up too, and before he knows it Hinata has wrapped both arms around his shoulders and they're facing the city, the two of them, arms out like they're flying. The lights and the sleeping bodies and the walking, restless monsters and people all stare back, up, triumphant, like they're reveling in this moment alongside Kenma. Like they get it. Like they understand, too.

"We have to do this thing," Hinata whispers, when the city has stopped staring back, "um, right now, before the sun comes up. It's another ritual."

"Okay," Kenma says, trusting him. "Let's do it."

"We write our worries on the balloons. And then we let them go. I just realised that here is the perfect place to do it, right here, because we're up so high."

"Just the other day you were telling me that plastic and everything disrupts the 'properties' in spells."

Hinata pouts. "Well, this is another metaphor." He elbows Kenma. "You should write a poem."

"Okay." He breathes the word. The dragon-breath hits Hinata, he sees it do so. Hinata's breath meets his halfway.

"I won't read it. So pour your heart out."

"Who says I care if you read it?"

"I still won't read it. You can't read mine either, okay?"

Kenma nods solemnly. "Okay."

Hinata finds two black markers in the glove-box of his car, tears open the packet of balloons so suddenly that a bunch fall out and stick to the hood of his car between them. Kenma empties the air from his lungs to blow the orange balloon up in his hands, ties it, and begins to write.

The squeak of marker on latex goes on and on like a sentient creature. Hinata presses the pen too hard and has to restart, twice. Neither of them speaks. It's oddly quiet, save for the sounds of their pens going. Kenma doesn't know where the words are coming from, only that they're there suddenly, and they're vicious, bleeding in ink and stretched across the balloon. Ryota's name. The colour of his dad's eyes, the red shingles on their house. Then he is writing about the sun, and love me, I adore you, angry black slashes he didn't know he had inside of him. Then, they let the balloons go.

It occurs to Kenma only on their way back down the hill, keys dangling from Hinata's pinky, that that was the best he's written in years, and he'll never see it again. Something about it is comforting to him.

They make their way down the steep sloping hill, veering from the sidewalk and in the middle of the road, to get breakfast. It's 5:30 in the morning; the sky is lighter now, an ashy grey around them, like they're trapped in a dome in a room full of smokers. Kenma has never bothered to watch early morning smog start to form around the tops of the buildings, or to wonder at the clouds and their slowly increasing visibility. "There's this place I know. We go after games sometimes, Kageyama and I. We used to pull a lot of all-nighters when we first in training frenzy, you know?"
"It's your all-nighter diner. I have one of those. Literature, thesis prep, y'know. Coffee becomes your best friend."

"I will never understand you coffee drinkers," Hinata breathes harshly, shaking his head. "God. What happened to, like, hot chocolate and apple juice?"

"Puberty happened. I guess."

"I had two puberties, technically, and I'd much rather drink something with sugar in it than punish my taste buds with coffee."

"So try it with cream and caramel." Kenma gives him a sidelong grin. Once they're inside the diner he picks the carb-heaviest thing he can see, bread and all, and a steaming hot coffee. Hinata's indecision, contrary to his worries, doesn't weigh them down. He orders the same without even pausing to think about it. To go. He looks at Kenma as he says this, like it's an inside joke, their own little secret. We stayed out all night. This city is ours. The sky above us is ours. Kenma dumps six packets of sugar into Hinata's coffee and re-lids it, and they're back out the door and ascending the hill again.

The plastic crown is slipping down his forehead. He has to push it up again a few times, legs sore from walking all night, cheeks numb from the cold. Once they make it back to the hood of Hinata's car the sun is rising for real. Kenma drinks the scalding hot coffee and watches it in silence. All this time he's been under the impression that the sun rises over everything else. He watches it now creep soundlessly, pushing night underneath it and gliding up through space, and he realises that night doesn't go anywhere at all. They're both still there, pressed together, melded into one another like a Rodin sculpture. He watches all that black turn orange and remain the same scape of sky, all those stars lit up with brilliance and covered by clouds. It's no silent thing, either, he realises. The whole city sings.

"Come back to my place," Hinata says. He sounds in awe too, but his voice is too powerful, like it's not even an offer; he knows Kenma will say yes before the word even has time to come out of his mouth.

And it does, of course.

"It's so much quieter when Kageyama isn't home. I mean, that sounds terrible, but like, he's a noisy guy I guess. It's not even like he speaks a lot or anything. He just crashes around, swears when he stubs his toe. Which is a lot."

"I think that's a tall person thing," Kenma offers. He still feels electrified. He hasn't shaken the night off of him yet.

"Hm." Hinata hums in thought. "Yeah, I guess that's true." He finally gets the key to work in the lock, and the two of them push through, sealing the cold out behind them.

"Are you still hungry?" Hinata starts to meddle with the heating system on the wall. Kenma shakes his head. "I'd offer you coffee, but, um, obviously I don't have any. Kageyama doesn't drink it either. I think we have tea?"

"I'll be fine," Kenma murmurs. He's busy, suddenly, looking at the pictures on Hinata's fridge. There are maybe one or two high school photos, but most of them are of the team, a little heart-decorated school picture of Natsu.

"Alright. Um. I'm gonna shower." Hinata ushers him through the next room, to a bedroom at the end of the hall. "You can just. Wait here." He gathers clothes in his arms, turns for the hall, but
Kenma isn't paying attention, now moving on to surveying Hinata's bedroom. It's different from his high school bedroom, because this one is lived in, and current; Kenma can smell him as soon as he walks in, that overwhelming scent of orange blossom and deodorant, something musky. Incense, he realises. He finds the packet and burst out laughing, because it's orange blossom incense. That's why Hinata always smells like orange blossoms. It's the incense. He fishes a stick out from its packet, lights it and hopes Hinata won't mind. Then, because Hinata is taking forever in the shower, he lies down on the bed and starts looking over the rest of the room, all the photographs in it. He's never brought anyone back to his room. Unless Hinata counts, but he was hardly invited that time.

Kenma notices more pictures of team members, Hinata posing with people he's never met. It's like he's been hit in the face with it all. All these people and memories. All that depth to Hinata that he hasn't explored yet, feelings and opinions and memories and relationships he could hear about. It makes a shiver of excitement roll through him. He could be in one of these pictures, maybe. There could be pictures of him and Hinata in this room someday, other memories like tonight, more times to come that they could spend together.

It's that thought that makes him shut his eyes, and although he tells himself it's just for a second, before he knows it he's asleep. He's not sure if he dreams hearing the shower turn off, or the soft pad of Hinata's feet coming back to his bedroom. He doesn't care. Orange blossoms and soft cotton and the whole night has caught up with him.

When he wakes up, Hinata is asleep beside him.

He has no idea what time it is. Only that he wakes slowly, like stepping out of a body of water. They must have forgotten to shut the curtains before they both passed out, because morning light is coming in and hitting one side of Kenma's face. And Hinata's, for that matter, lighting the tips of his hair golden. But that's not the important part. The important part is that he's facing Kenma, and they're in bed together, close enough that he can feel the warmth of Hinata's legs against his own.

He stirs. Kenma watches it happen, the light shifting across his face, the freckles on his nose scrunching. He's got a mad case of bed hair. His eyelids start to flutter, lashes parting for deep brown eyes like the Earth, all the thunderstorms inside of Kenma and their aftermath.

It happens so quickly it's terrifying. He's always hated the idea of someone watching him wake up, because it's so intimate. Light flooding to his eyes, then colour, registering shapes around him. Hinata's lips part and his lashes flutter some more and then his gaze settles on Kenma, ever so slowly, as he registers that he isn't alone. Intimate. It's intimate. Kenma is so overcome with feeling that he doesn't know what to do.

So he kisses him.

It's like he's still dreaming. Hinata's eyes slip shut again, moments before his, and the brush of their lips part. Then, they're slotting their bodies together. Hinata's neck, warm, still warm from sleep, brushes his, and Kenma raises a hand to touch the other's cheek. Hinata's fingers run across his in the same spot, the small, helpless noise he makes lighting up the whole room and all the brightness in Kenma's chest. It's so tender he can't breathe. He can feel it spilling from him, pouring from his mouth and into Hinata's, but they kiss languidly, their legs sliding together. Something sparks in him. He presses forward, deepening the kiss. Hinata's breath hitches, right against his lips. God. Kenma presses forward, kisses him so hard he goes blind. He tilts his head, fingers moving up to tangle in the hair at the back of Hinata's neck, their chests pressed so close together it's like he's trying to become a part of Hinata, trying to surge forward and melt right into him, hard bones and fingers and nails and then teeth--

And then Hinata's hand is on his face. Just the back of his hand, brushing ever so gently against
Kenma's cheek. His chest starts to ache.

"Kenma," Hinata whispers, pulling back to look at him in the eyes. Kenma leaps out of bed.

"Fuck," he says. He walks towards the window, then stops, trying to slow his breathing. He takes one look at Hinata and starts to panic again. "Fuck."

"Kenma, it's fine." He can feel the intensity of Hinata's gaze, doesn't doubt it's directed at him; that hot ember stare.

"I shouldn't have done that."

"Are you kidding me? I'm glad. Hey, Kenma, look at me. I'm glad you did it. I've wanted to, ever since, like, ever since I met you--"

"I can't get into this." He can feel that his eyes are wild, knows they're spinning over the whole room like he's in the middle of a tornado. Panic is tumbling wild and unbidden inside of him. The ocean inside of him breaks loose. Panic isn't creeping up his chest, this time, it's racing up. And out, quickly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Kenma-- calm down, come sit here, we can talk about it--"

"Why do you even like me?" It feels like it explodes from him. Like it's been ripped from his chest. But he just says it, plain as anything, and watches the ships crash on Hinata's face. So he repeats himself. "Why would you want me like that? You have no idea. I'm damaged, you know, I'm not- - I don't work right, my head, and I can't care about anybody. I don't. You don't want to be with somebody like that. It's pathetic."

"That's not true." Hinata's voice shakes. Kenma doesn't think he's ever heard it do that. "You're not. You're not like that at all. You're incredible, and you're talented and funny and you care about so much, it's like--"

"I'm not, I'm not." He raise s a hand to cover his mouth. He's paralysed with fear; he can taste it. His whole body goes on high alert as he sees Hinata stand from the bed, and slowly make his way towards him.

"You are," he says gently. His feet make a soft noise on the carpet. He starts to walk his way over to the window, where Kenma is frozen. "You mean everything to me. You're caring, and you think everything is beautiful. You're incredible. You're brave."

"Don't call me that!" Like a spell is broken, he breaks away from Hinata again, backing up so there's a room of distance between them. "You have no idea. Don't you dare call me brave. You don't know."

Hinata's gaze doesn't waver. "Tell me, Kenma."

"There's nothing to tell! I'm not brave, I'm scared all the time. And I'm weak. Don't call me brave, because you have no idea."

"So let me protect you," Hinata says. Something inside of Kenma snaps.

"Don't, you-- I don't need protecting, okay?" And he know sit contradicts everything he just said, but he doesn't care; there is a storm inside of him now, beating its fists against the sides of his rib-cage, forcing toxic breath from his lungs and poisoning everything in the room.

"That's right," Hinata says, "you don't. But I want to do it anyway. Because I care about you, and- -"
"Please stop talking. Stop." He backs up towards the door like a frightened animal, eyes wide. Hinata steps towards him.

"You don't need protecting because you're brave."

"You don't know," he repeats, voice snapping in the middle like driftwood, like the cold of night and black ice and everything associated with water and night and dark and fickle.

"Tell me," Hinata repeats. This time, Kenma turns and flees. He gets out of Hinata's house, down the street, and halfway to the station before he realises he's crying. He's still wearing Hinata's jacket. He only realises because his phone starts buzzing, the weight of it in his pocket like a tonne of bricks. Someone stares at him on their way to cross the street. He declines the call from Hinata, shaking so badly that he almost drops the phone. He stands there in the far-too-bright morning light until his breathing calms down, until his chest loosens and he can think straight again. Then, when he can move again, he unlocks his phone.

The battery is almost completely drained, and it makes him think of power sockets, Hinata, all the light and brightness he has the ability to use and suck from the world. He considers for a brief moment calling Hinata back, or simply turning around and going back. He's trembling too hard to get on a train; if he tries to walk he doesn't trust his legs not to stumble, the thought of it making his heart thump. He can't go anywhere like this. He can't do this alone.

So he calls Kuroo.

They say nothing the whole drive home. Kuroo takes one look at him, his ruffled clothes, his mussed hair, the tear tracks on his face, and opens the door. The only question he asks when Kenma is in the car is: "Do I have to hurt anybody?"

"No," he says. "This time it's my fault." Neither of them says anything else. They don't have to. It's like that's all he needs to fill Kuroo in on the situation.

Kuroo takes him up to his own apartment without either of them discussing it. The familiar smell of his best friend's laundry detergent fills his whole head. He thinks he's going to cry again but he doesn't, just mumbles and excuses himself for a shower. He tries to examine his face in the mirror, to see where the differences are; something has to be different, something has to have changed now. He looks for traces of Hinata on his mouth, on his cheeks, his right cheekbone where the back of Hinata's hand brushed and lit up like the sky.

Everything smells like incense, he realises. That's what's clouding his head. He stands under the steam of the shower and scrubs, tries to wash the smell of incense from his hair, the smell of orange blossom from his skin. He scrubs until his skin is raw and he's having trouble breathing, then turns the shower off and sits on the rim of Kuroo's bath tub with his head in his hands. He has no idea what to do now. He's never been in a situation like this, where he's done something like kiss the only person in the world he wants to kiss and then regretted it instantly. But then again, he's never cared about someone the way he cares about Hinata. Which means he can't do it again. There's no way.

That's the promise he makes himself. As long as he stays away, there's no way he can hurt Hinata.

Chapter End Notes

for the record, i hate rodin. highly appreciate his work but hate his guts. and 'the kiss'
can be fairly attributed to Camille Claudel, and *should* be, for the effort she put into ~eerily similar~ works that never got published due to the plain and simple fact that works like 'the kiss' are provocative, and she was a woman. but anyway.

That said, the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo is super cool and if you're ever in Japan you should give it a visit! (After the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, ofc. why go to Japan if you're not gonna look at Japanese art??)

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! As always the next one should be up in 1-2 weeks. Please feel free to message me @ cloverguts.tumblr.com!

Shout out to the albums I was listening to when I wrote this chapter for ultimately influencing its outcome:
outdoor activities (cyberbully mom club)
glitterbug (the wombats)
sleep (flatsound)
shadow (sea oleena)
the execution of all things (rilo kiley)
the wild youth (daughter)
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

thank you to alienbunnybot for this amazing art:
http://alienbunnybot.tumblr.com/post/127293487097/everyone-yall-need-to-read-this-
kenhina-fic-its
and to dew-button my absolute hero for these: http://dew-
button.tumblr.com/post/126823255435/theres-something-about-chameleon-boy-that-
is-so
http://dew-button.tumblr.com/post/127518938670/another-one-inspired-by-the-most-
woonderful-story

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He starts having dreams again.

In most of them he's standing on the ledge of a cliff. He knows the water is down there, because he can hear it. There is a swirling trap of ocean, a lady of salt and black ice beating her fists against the rocks below. He hesitates on the ledge, wonders at the bank where he knows he should be; it's this terrible feeling. Like running but moving in slow motion. The salt fills his nostrils. Then, he steps from the ledge.

"You're moping."

"I'm not," Kuroo is clambering around the kitchen, crashing dishes together like cymbals. He's back to putting up a front for Kenma, this tremendously big act so that they don't have to talk about their feelings. "I'm just stressed. Because of exams."

"Bullshit," Kuroo murmurs. When he sees the look on Kenma's face he grimaces. "Sorry. It's just, you're good at school. You know why you're really moping."

"If you tell me to call him again, I'll kick you." That makes Kuroo smile. "You know I can't. I told you what happened, Kuro--"

"Yeah, yeah, you told me. I wasn't going to say that. It's just, have you been out at all? It's almost been a week."

"I've been to school."

"You know what I mean."

He huffs a sigh. It's been five days-- not that he's counting. His anxiety is back with the full force of a kick to the sternum, winding him every time he considers doing anything. He didn't realise how much he'd become accustomed to having Hinata as a support system before now, but without him, it's like trying to walk under water. He's never sure whether his foot will touch the ground when he puts it in front of his other one. He's never sure he's going to wake up from a nightmare.

"You're handling it pretty well," Kuroo says, speaking around a mouthful of cooking he's 'testing for poison'. "I mean, you haven't cracked yet."
"I don't crack." He doesn't mean for it to come out so harshly. Kuroo reaches forward and smooths out the crease in Kenma's brow.

"Right. You're a tough guy." He says it softly. It sounds like it should be sarcastic, but it doesn't come out that way.

Kenma averts his gaze. "Thank you," he says uncomfortably, "for taking care of me. Even though I--"

"Even though you don't need to be taken care of, yeah, I know." Kuroo ruffles his hair.

Kenma pulls a face. "I was going to say, even though I don't deserve it. I absolutely need taking care of."

"Since when? You're pretty self-sufficient, Kenma. It's like having a cat for a pet instead of a dog. I just have to remember to feed you sometimes."

He scoffs delicately. "Yeah, well. Something tells me I put more of a strain on people than I take off. You should have known that when you decided to become friends with someone who has anxiety, I guess."

"Hey." Kuroo sets his spatula down, turning his gaze on Kenma, who pretends not to notice. "I've never thought that about you. You're not a burden."

Kenma knows this isn't the first time he's heard it from him, but maybe it's the first time he's listening. The words sit weirdly. He shifts in his seat.

"Anyway. My parents are calling again."

"They want you to come down and see them?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"I was thinking of going the day after tomorrow," he says. Kuroo's head jerks up.

"Want me to come?"

"No. I mean, no offense. They really want me to come alone this time."

"I don't know," Kuroo shakes his head. "I don't know how I feel about letting you do that. I mean, not letting you, but--"

"You're right, not letting me. It's my decision."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." Kuroo locks eyes with him. God. Kenma feels terrible. He's trying so hard here, grasping straws; ten seconds from walking on egg shells, which is the last thing Kenma wants. "You're sure?"

"No. But I have to. If I don't do it now, I'll just keep dragging things on like this."

"I'll leave my phone on," Kuroo says, squeezing the blonde's shoulder on his way past. And just like that, he's back to lifting the mood. "Did you see the previews for the new season last night? They used the worst shot of me. Everyone keeps making jokes."

So his week goes nowhere. He keeps having the cliff's edge dream, and others, where he's fumbling around in a dark room and he can hear that Hinata is on the other side. In some dreams
he can hear him breathing; just that little hitch in his breath, the same one he let out when Kenma kissed him. Kissing him. That's. Another thing he's been thinking about.

On Monday, about an hour after the support group-- which he didn't go to-- ends, Lev shows up knocking on his apartment door.

"Can I come in?" he asks after coming in.

Kenma shuts the door. "No, get out."

"Cool. You have food?"

"No."

"Why weren't you at therapy?"

Kenma eyes him from the couch. Lev isn't hanging in the doorway, comfortable enough to make himself feel at home, but he still looks out of place. Everything has looked out of place lately. "I didn't feel like going."

"Didn't feel like it, okay." Lev nods, heading towards the kitchen. Kenma makes an irritated face and gets up to follow him. Lev goes on, "I'm starting to worry. I mean, like, normally with your whole anxiety thing, you're not like this, you're not-- you know? You're gonna study yourself to death. Something obviously happened with Shouyou--"

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"Yeah. But you're going to." Lev's eyes burn into his. "You can't just let this eat you. So, if you're not gonna bother to show up to group therapy..." He fishes leftovers from Kenma's fridge, stacking the food-- without permission-- high in his arms. He grins. "I'll be your therapist."

"You're the worst therapist ever."

They've been sitting for about ten minutes now, Lev's stare like steel against his own across the table. He ate the leftovers, then got up and made himself more food, and now they're sipping at tea and dancing around the issue and doing anything but talking.

"No, I'm a great therapist! I just don't wanna, like, um, rush you into it..."

They both go quiet again. It was a little funny before, but whatever impish air to their conversation was in the room is gone now, replaced with something heavy and sticky and dark hanging over Kenma's head, like a rain cloud dripping tar.

"I kissed Shouyou," he says. Lev is quiet. Kenma doesn't bother looking up to check his expression, but it's almost like he can hear it, this cicada shock beyond the drip of his tar rain.

"...Have you spoken to him since it happened?"

"No. Sorry for not answering your calls, if you called. My phone's off."


"I know he's texting me. I can't-- if I turn it on and see the messages. I messed up."

"Well, how did you mess up?"
Kenma looks at his hands. "We spent all night together in the city. Even when the sun was rising. We were on the hood of his car and I was tired but I felt so happy, like... it didn't even matter that I was going to drain the life from him. It was selfish. I was so happy."

"That sounds so cute!" Then, Lev leans across and punches him in the arm.

"Ouch?"

"That's for saying something so stupid. It's not selfish to feel happy. Anyway, go on. Did you kiss him while the sun was rising? I'll totally die."

Kenma shakes his head. "No, it was-- we went back to his place after that, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, he was next to me, and then he woke up too and it was... I don't know why. I kissed him."

Lev hits him again.

"Ow, what!"

"That's adorable," Lev says, brows together. "You probably should have asked before kissing him, though."

Kenma didn't even think of that. Cold dread spikes in his gut. Is he some kind of monster? He was so angry, or happy, or selfish, or however it was he was feeling-- he never even bothered to ask Hinata how he felt, or if it was even okay to kiss him. He's just deciding to exile himself from the natural world when Lev speaks up again.

"It's not a big deal, considering how in love with you he was. I'm sure he didn't mind. But in future, check with people, you know? Tell me what happened next."

Still feeling a little like a monster, Kenma goes on. "I freaked out. He tried to talk to me about it, but I had to leave. I had to-- I couldn't stay there and listen to him."

"Why not?"

Kenma breathes in. He feels like someone has tied him to a block of wood and left him at high tide. "If he had have kept talking, I would have stayed."

It feels good to say it out loud. Then, something like a cold gush of guilt washes over him, rising slowly from his feet. Hinata doesn't deserve to have someone like Kenma in his life, someone so selfish that they would disregard the happiness of the person they love in order to maintain their own happiness--

Lev flicks him on the forehead.

"Ow. Why do you keep doing that?"

"I can hear you hating yourself from all the way over here. Kenma, the problem isn't that you wanted to stay, or that you kissed him; the problem is that you left. You seriously think Shouyou didn't want you to stay?"

"It doesn't matter if he wanted me to. He doesn't know--"

"Bullshit, he knows enough. Why did you leave? Why couldn't you stay?"

He squirms under the gaze. "I don't know."

Lev stares at him. He hates this, not knowing whether he's joking or not. "Yes, you do."
"Because I don't want to drag him into my life."

"That's not all," Lev says, carefully placing his palms on the table, "is it?"

Kenma stares at him. Lev stares back. He wants to leave, escape out of a window, maybe. That's not all. That's not all.

He realises it isn't. He doesn't want to drag Hinata into his life, but he doesn't want to let him in, either. He doesn't know if he can handle it. He doesn't want what happened with Ryota to have an effect on him, but it does. He doesn't want to remember Ryota, his parents, high school, but he does. It's the fact that he was angry and emotional and he let all of that bleed into Ryota and Ryota bled straight back, kept bleeding, until Kenma couldn't go to class because he shook when people looked at him, until Kenma couldn't talk to his parents because he was terrified about the future, until Ryota's hands were wrapped around his neck and he could feel the ghost of them for days after, until, until, until. If he lets Hinata in, Hinata will find out about everything. Every piece and part of him, all the ugly hidden parts. He's scared to trust people, to let them in. He doesn't want Hinata to feel sorry for him. So it's easier not to give him any reason to.

"Think about it," Lev says, pulling him back to reality. There's no way he knows what is crashing through Kenma's mind at top speed, but he looks like he does, anyway. Then the spell breaks; he grins. "Hey, I'm really good at this! I should be a therapist or something. What do you think, Kenma?"

"I think you should stop eating my food."

"Huh? No way." Lev doesn't stop on his way back to the fridge. "Anyway, unlike some of us, I have to study or I'll fail the philosophy exam." He heads for the door-- with Kenma's food in his hands-- before hesitating at the last second and drawing back. "I'm here if you need me, okay? Like, call any time. We can totally hang out, it doesn't have to be just in class or in therapy."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Lev goes.

.

He goes back to doing nothing. Kuroo comes over again to ask about his parents, tells him he doesn't have to go. He does. If he doesn't, they'll just call again. If he ignores them, they'll stop paying for school. The thought is exhausting.

He can't stop thinking that he's brave. He's too tired not to be, donning his overnight bag like a weapon and coffee on his breath like war paint and boarding the bullet train too early in the morning. The thought beats in his head again and again like a rhythm. He's brave. He's doing this alone. He yelled at Hinata for saying that, and now here he is, doing it anyway. How could he have treated him like that? He hates himself.

Every time he thinks of calling him, he thinks of Hinata's face when they stopped kissing. The way he had expected his eyes to be wide but they had been lidded, for moments, these honey-thick and tangible moments that Kenma remembers like softness under his fingertips. He thinks of Hinata's breath stirring his and the trusting way he chose to sleep facing Kenma instead of with his back to the blonde. He thinks of how much he could hurt him-- of how much he could be hurt by him-- and he puts the phone down.

"Kenma! Come in, honey, don't stand in the cold. Hurry up with your shoes."

He wasn't expecting the weather. The walk from the train station leaves his fingers numb, so he fumbles with his shoes at the door, his mother standing over him. It's like being beneath a gaping
"Hi, mom."

"Sweetie." She kisses him on the cheek. She's a strange woman, his mom. She's all five feet and seven inches of professionalism and diligence, and she has enough emotion rocking her bones to take down an army. The rock wall and the flood, all in one. He's terrified of her. "Your father's waiting inside. We're going out for dinner; is Kuroo not with you?"

"No, just me," he mumbles. He shuts the door, and all the cold out behind him. It's as if the world is moping with him, and has been since it officially turned to Winter. Kuroo keeps mentioning how he can't wait for snow, but all Kenma wants is rain. He wants it to pour down for weeks.

"Honey," his mom calls out down the hall, deafening the picture frames, "Kenma's here! He didn't bring his friend!"

Kenma remembers Hinata's house in one abrupt memory. All the picture frames lining the wall of he and Natsu as children, the silly ones from high school graduations and the family portraits. Here the walls are bare and white, modestly styled, the furniture in blocky colours. The only pictures of him are professionally taken ones; high school portraits or commissioned photographs where his mother and father stand on either side of him. Not an angel and a devil. More like scales, he thinks.

His father only ever walks one way: viciously and with decided intent. Like soldiers, Kenma's mother marches to meet him halfway. Kenma traipses behind, the out-of-combat son, M.I.A and finally returned. His dad takes one look at him and makes a noise of disapproval.

"Did you think to bring a coat?"

"I have one. In my bag."

"A cheap jacket, I'll bet. Come on, you'll have to borrow something from my wardrobe if we're to go anywhere with you."

"I have my own clothes," he defends, insulted. The feeling bites away at him through a cloud of exhaustion. The tsk noise comes again from the twisted mouth of his father, and he bristles.

"Try to dress up a little. We don't have to leave until-- when were the reservations?"

"Six," his mother answers, looking between them like she's trying to assess the situation.

"We don't have to leave until six. We can talk about your pathway choices then, hm? Don't hang in the doorway. You act like your own home is a prison, Kenma."

This house is a prison. Every time he's here he remembers it; the exact feeling of walking up their old driveway at 2 in the morning. Throwing up in the garden. Tripping at the front door and getting two splinters-- one in his thumb, and one in the heel of his left hand. He remembers this specifically because when Kuroo came over to comfort him, he picked them out with tweezers, right before Kenma broke the news that he was moving. He remembers the grainy picture of this place his parents had showed him. He remembers that night being all he could think about for months and months after they moved out here. "You can finish high school without any distractions. No more of this 'anxiety' fiasco." No son of mine. No son of mine.

The beach. He wasn't expecting it to scream at him. He screamed back, at the top of his lungs. For months it felt like there were seabirds at his window nightly watching him sleep, reminding him that he wasn't home anymore, that he didn't have anywhere of worth to call home. Home was nowhere.
He follows his mother to the kitchen, trailing behind her like air and dust. She motions for him to sit down. Kenma feels oddly like he's waiting in a chair at the dentist's, Hell looming over him. "Do you want something to drink?" She doesn't look like she's going to give him a choice. He nods, sits there for a moment awkwardly, then gets on his feet to help with the tea.

"Thank you," she murmurs, happily working around him. When Kenma was a lot younger, he was his mother's favourite. She loved him even more than she loved his dad. Back then she was always fussing over his hair, whereas his dad wanted him to cut it all off; she was always telling him how smart he was, buying him books when he asked for them. He can't remember when she stopped; only that it was a while before high school, before Ryota, before any of that. Both of his parents started looking at him differently. He wasn't making friends. He still got nervous in front of people. He was getting too old to rely on them for everything.

"Watch your hand on the stove," his mother says presently, drawing his attention away from his thoughts. Kenma recoils his wrist, and reaches around instead to help with the kettle.

"Sorry."

"It's not my hand that was going to be burnt," she chastises. She frowns at the tea. Sakie Kozume always looks stern. She has an angular face, where her husband's is rounder and softer. She and Kenma have the same eyes, the same hair. Kenma was the spitting image of her when he was younger. She was a lot gentler with him then. He used to think, when he was about fourteen, that she only married his father for the money, and it's all because of her hands. She's got artist's fingers. It took him sixteen years to figure out that she's got an accountant's heart.

"Finals are coming up, huh?"

"Not finals," he says. "Just end of years. Midterms are scarier."

"Well, how scary can it be," she says, mostly to herself. "It's only literature."

"And philosophy," he says, well aware of the blow.

She shoots him an incredulous look. She used to wear her hair down a lot more when he was younger. It was cropped just below her chin then, and she liked to let it get messy and wild on its own. She's gotten over that now. Even in casual clothing, she looks like she's been pulled from an office.

"Sorry. I cried when I woke up from a dream, a few nights ago, you know."

This is not a surprise. She is always crying. "What was your dream about?"

"You." She turns her gaze on him. "Refusing to do anything worthwhile with your future. It's been... very stressful."

Something inside of Kenma bristles and arches its back. Is this the only reason they ever want to see him? To convince him to drop out of his classes at school? He's known for some time that they were disappointed about his lack of business skills (she cried then, too-- cried that her only son was atrocious at mathematics), but he's been hanging onto the hope that they'll get over the journalism thing, too. He has no interest in politics or business-- all that's left to write about, in his eyes, is propaganda.

"Sorry," he murmurs.

"You won't ever make a living being a student your whole life, I can tell you that."

"Well, I won't be a student my whole life. I'll get a job after college."
"A job," she mutters, that emotional edge to her voice finally emerging. "I make myself sick wondering which job."

His face goes red. "Maybe I'll go into publishing."

"Something you need business skills in?" She snorts delicately. Everything is delicate about her, even the way she cries; even through the hardness of her, there's this flooding, pliable emotion. Then her face turns, and she looks at him. "I wanted to talk to you. I've been thinking--"

He's just about to interrupt and defend himself when his dad marches in, stealing their mostly boiled water and pouring himself some premature tea.

"So," he says. He exhales at the end of a sip. He's everything Kenma's mom isn't, except despairing of his son. "Have you thought a little more about the last chat we had?"

"What chat?" Kenma says, to be difficult.

His dad narrows his eyes. "Don't joke. It's time you took your future more seriously."

"Of course I am."

"Uh-huh. If we could figure that, son, you see, we wouldn't be so concerned--"

"Enough of this," his mom says, pulling them from their conversation before it can get too heated. Kenma's eyebrows shoot up; did she just save him? "You had better go get dressed. If we leave it until the last minute, we might end up having to leave in inappropriate attire."

He doesn't care that it's a stab at him and his clothes. He's happy just to be able to leave the room.

The restaurant they pick is one of the fancier beach-side ones that Kenma remembers from high school.

"We can finally continue off where we left in the kitchen," his dad says suddenly. Kenma's shoulders hunch together. "You were saying about publishing."

"I don't know about that," he admits. His father's stern gaze meets his. The shape, Kenma thinks. They have the same shape of eyes, that dangerous, chatoyant slope. If it weren't for that, people might think that he was only related to his mother. They're both such dark and sculpted people. Kenma has no idea where he came from. Even his natural hair colour is a little lighter than theirs.

"Because it requires business skills," the man says around a mouthful of food. That's the thing about Kenma's dad. As classy as his money may make him look, he has no sense of table manners whatsoever. It used to make Kenma shrink in his seat. "Business skills that you don't have anymore," he continues, gesturing with a utensil.

"That's why I said I wasn't sure. I'm thinking about other options."

It's the right thing to say. Both of his parents nod, turning their attentions on their own meals for a moment. It gives Kenma some time to gather his bearings, remembering only at the last minute that he has to eat or they'll accuse him of being ungrateful.

When he was a lot smaller they'd go out like this all the time, just the three of them. Kenma was excelling in school back then, his very young years. They didn't mind that he was shy. There was a time they equated it to the fact that he didn't have any siblings. Then there was the miscarriage. Then it was Kenma's fault that he wasn't making any friends.
But God, there had been a time when he was the light of their life. It was easier to force himself into social situations when he was getting attention at home. For a little while when he was fourteen, and again when he was dating Ryota. If he wasn't going out on weekends, his dad wouldn't even look at him.

It's always been this weird balance between social life and academic achievement. It's still not something he entirely understands. He's asked *what do you want from me* more times than he can count-- it's a different answer every time. *We want what's best for you. We want you to continue on at least some semblance of the family business. We don't want you to embarrass us anymore.*

*We want you to be happy.*

"I've been thinking about journalism," he blurts out. Both of his parents' heads whip up from their meals.

His mother's voice is just an inkling of the storm of emotion he knows it can and will reach. "Really?"

Alarms are screeching in his head. "Yeah."

She claps her hands together. It's like a clap of thunder. All the walls seem to fall down, the restaurant crumbling to nothing around them. "Kenma, that's great!"

"Finally making some good decisions," his father adds. Kenma meets his eyes, worrying for a second-- but there's delight there. It makes all the heat inside of him flood to his chest, then his cheeks. Proud. They're proud. In the middle of the busy restaurant, right where people could look and see, his father leans in and claps Kenma across the back. "I knew you'd come around. You could even start soon. Degrees aren't tricky to work around if you know someone in power." He gestures to himself proudly. "We could have you writing for a newspaper in no time, a steady office gig. Paid overtime and everything, those places. Well, for my son."

"That sounds great." He smiles. Alarms are still ringing in his head, but they're weirdly muted now. Like someone has found white noise to play over the top of everything else, and his ears are responding in kind. People are looking at him. Him, the journalist with the proud parents, not Kenma the college student who's in love with someone who doesn't know he's a lost cause. As if all at once in a flood, thoughts of Hinata come rushing to him, and his phone weighs down his pocket like a *brick*. He fucked up. He's going to be a journalist and his parents are looking at him like he's a person but he fucked up with Hinata and how can anything matter when he's done something like that?

He pushes the thoughts out of his head. Dessert comes soon enough, and neither of his parents say anything as he eats it. It feels liberating. He indulges himself in that cake like he hasn't in what feels like forever. (Don't think about Hinata. Don't think about that night.) They drink tea before they go, and his dad talks on and on about the newspaper he can get Kenma a job at, about all the kinds of articles he would get to write. Kenma nods along and tries to ignore the fact that his heart is thumping in his chest. It feels like it's going to break right out and spill from his throat. The whole restaurant must be looking at him, seeing it rising and collapsing in his chest rapidly like moth's wings. He can hear a sea of people all holding their breaths collectively, waiting for him to snap.

As he sits in the car and rocks like he's in a boat he thinks of the word again. Brave. Is what he's doing brave? His mother is fiddling with the radio dial, switching it to something gentle and classical. It was rock music when he was a kid. The real old stuff. He can hear the low murmur of their voices over the softer notes and feels like a child again. In the backseat of an expensive car, listening to his parents murmur white noise like sea birds do at first light in the morning when he's trying to sleep. This graceless screech disguised by propriety.
It all builds up again and again, crashing against the impenetrable sea wall and crushing him, the thought that he's lying-- the thought of *I can't do this*, again and again. When they pull up to the driveway he gets out in a daze. This isn't his house. It's like he has no memories here at all, and it really is the empty shell of a place he moved into when his insides felt the same.

"Shoot," his dad says, pausing at the door. He spins around; he addresses them like he'd address a client, all broad gestures and deep inflections in voice. "I still have to pick some things up from the store. You two go in, I won't be long."

Kenma goes in with his mom. The house is so silent. Hinata's house, he thinks, wasn't like this at all. Noise seemed to seep from the walls there, from the picture frames. Tacky disposable-camera shots stuck to the fridge; none of this professional and white, seashell walls and tangerine feature furniture and whatever else is meant to be going on in this empty, silent house. He walks a few steps behind the woman who raised him, both their steps in the silent hallway, Kenma's hand along one wall. It takes him that long to realise that something is wrong. She's walking slowly.

She stops at the end of the hall. Instead of turning for the kitchen, she turns for him.

"There's something you're not telling me."

He freezes. There's nowhere for him to escape right now. He tries to hone in on the situation through all the haziness that followed him from the restaurant; he can hear the ocean, beating its fists below their house. Something about the way it tears up all the noise out there makes him think it's going to start raining soon. His dad will get stuck in it.

He realises she's still staring him down. All the rain in her eyes, all the rain in his. She turns around again. "Come and sit down. Do you want me to make more tea?"

He shakes his head no. When she glances back over her shoulder, and he realises she didn't see, he says, so quiet it's barely a whisper, "No, thank you."

He sits at the table. She brews some tea anyway, taking her time moving about the kitchen like a piece of jetsam worn down and ebbing. Kenma folds his hands on the table.

"I'm seeing a therapist again."

"Mhm." She doesn't sound surprised. He realises why, when a moment later, she says, "Kuroo called."

"Why would he do that?" Kenma can't keep the hurt from his voice, but trepidation bleeds into it too. He's scared. He realises his hands are shaking.

"Don't be so quick to judge him. He's been having a hard time financially. Told me all about his extra shifts at the cafe, bless his soul."

Kenma tries to backtrack, to think; and Kuroo really *has* been working at the cafe more often. Kenma figured that, even though he wasn't getting that many more movie deals, the TV show was paying well. He never even stopped to consider that Kuroo needed extra help.

"He asked me not to tell your father. He doesn't know."

That makes Kenma look up. He's never seen her look like this; like she's pinning him with her gaze, and he has no idea what she's thinking.

He swallows. "Why?"

"Why, what?"
"Why didn't you tell dad?"

She stares at him incredulously. "I think it's up to you if you want to tell him. Kuroo only called me to see if I would be willing to help pay for your therapy. I agreed."

"Dad really doesn't know?"

She shakes her head. Finished with her tea, she moves the cup to the table, lowering herself to sit across from Kenma. Her hair has fallen out a little since dinner, strands here and there splayed around her face; she doesn't bother correcting it. "Kenma," she says, staring back at him with his own eyes. "Do you need to talk about it?"

He stares down at his hands hard. "It's been... forever. But since high school especially."

"Are you depressed?" He looks up. He realises he doesn't know how to answer that question. He never thinks of himself as happy or unhappy; he just is.

"Maybe," he admits, looking down again. "I don't like being around people. I'm anxious."

"Is that why you don't want to work for a newspaper?"

It makes his pulse jump. She knows. She knows he doesn't really want to, that he's just saying it to--

The room isn't quiet anymore. The ocean is slowly filling them up, like salt water flooding into the mouth and making his throat raw with the salt of words he's been holding in since he was 16. "No," he admits. "I don't want to do that because I don't like it."

It's not enough, and he knows there are more words, trapped inside of him; but for now, she accepts it with a nod. They sit in silence with the shouting sea and his mother, sipping at the hot tea in her hands.

Finally, "What do you want to do?"

He looks at her, even though it makes his chest tighten. "I don't know," he admits, the most honest thing he's said all night, "but I know I want to write. I don't know what else. I might help other people with their writing, help them analyse. But I don't want to decide now." It's like all the water is draining from him, but instead of flattening: he feels lifted up, dowsed in air. It's liberating to say it out loud. Because he doesn't know. He's never thought about it before, all the people he has supporting him, how it's that support that makes him brave. He doesn't need protecting: but he has it anyway.

"I'll support you," his mom says, startling him to reality. He stares at her, wondering if he heard right. She says it again. "I'll support you. I can't understand why you-- well, I don't understand a lot of the choices you make. But if you think you need to see a therapist, I will support you. If you want to write, I will support you."

Everything is happening at once. The sea bursting in his ears, suns bursting behind his eyes. She'll support him. He can write. He can keep going to school and stay in his apartment and write and she'll support him. "What about dad?" he says, voice weak and giddy.

She glances away. "I still don't agree with your choices. And we'll have to tell him eventually." We. She'll help. They're both in this together. "But..." a smile crosses her face, tired and so, so much like how he remembers it from childhood; like there's a part of her spirit that never got broken down or polished by the shifting tides, the part of her that moved to Tokyo to start a family because she loved the fashion there, and all the people on the subway. "I won't push you into something you're not ready for."
Kenma can't believe it. He doesn't know what to say, so he doesn't. He nods.

They sit there and talk-- well, she talks, letting her hair loose and drinking her tea-- about co-workers she's had to deal with since they last spoke, about previous colleagues she knows of who could help jump-start him into a creative writing career any time he was ready. He doesn't know how long they sit there, only that it does start raining, just like he thought it would. When his dad comes home, however, he's completely dry.

It's been too long a day, and he's too worn out from all the events of it to stay awake any longer. He starts to make his way down the hall to his room-- the guest room, really-- when the worst happens. His dad blocks his path, the sturdy sea wall he is. Kenma blinks up at him.

The last words he expects to hear come from the man's mouth are, "I'm proud of you," and yet they come out anyway, forcing all the air from Kenma's lungs in one blow. He stands there frozen. Something icy has slithered into the hall with them, and it's all noise, noise, noise, leaking and dripping past the carpets and away from him at light speed. His father's gaze darkens. "I mean it. More proud of you than I've ever been."

He's never said that before.

Then he turns and disappears down the hall, leaving the dagger in Kenma's chest, leaving all of him to bleed out on the floor in a puddle of indecision, for the whole night through.

He can't sleep. He thinks of Hinata calling him brave over and over as he drifts in and around consciousness. His warping voice, telling Kenma that he doesn't need protecting. That he's not pathetic; you're not like that. You're incredible.

His head spins and a few times he thinks he might be awake, that he might be sick, before he realises he's just standing on that cliff's edge again. Sometimes when he's having a nightmare he thinks he is going to be pushed.

When he wakes up the next morning, albeit without much sleep, it's to the smell of coffee. He emerges from his room, looking around like he expects a monster to jump out. Down the hall he finds his mother in the kitchen, her hair tied up on top of her head. Her voice cuts through the sense of unreality that has been following him since leaving the restaurant last night.

"Good morning, Kenma."

He sits at the table. "Morning." She always looks so prim. Kenma can only imagine what his hair looks like; she's already had time to get dressed, to smooth down her face with expensive cosmetics that promise to get rid of the wrinkles his father must hate the look of on her. She ties her hair back impossibly tight these days.

She places a mug down in front of him, startling him from his daydream. "I made coffee. Do you still take it the same?"

"Oh-- yeah." It's surprising that she even remembers he drinks coffee, letalone how he takes it. These past two days have just been a blur of bizarre. He doesn't know how to bring up what happened with his dad last night, only that he knows it's going to eat at him if he doesn't. It feels strange. He hasn't felt like he can talk to his mom since he was about 11 years old; even now, there's still that strain between them, this inkling of uncertainty about what she will support and what she won't.

"What time are you leaving?"
" Soon," he says, blowing to cool his coffee; it scalds his tongue when he sips it, numbing his taste buds. "I actually, um... I have a job interview."

She perks right up. "That's great! At the cafe?"

Kuroo must have told her. "Yeah." He doesn't know how he feels; just yesterday he still saw his mother as the one-dimensional carbon-copy of his dad-- only vividly emotional and often manipulative-- that she had been when he was a teenager. The thought of his best friend conspiring with her is a little chilling, and he decides to bring it up later. "I don't know how well I'll go. I've never been to a job interview."

"Nonsense, you'll be fine." She's turned the strict and brisk air back on, and flits to the other side of the kitchen with whatever ingredients she's trying to form into an omelette for his dad. "You're my son, aren't you?"

"Yeah." He has no idea what that's supposed to mean.

His dad knocks the walls down and steps into the room, boot-crashing with bare feet on the tiles. "Son," he greets. In that loud voice. Like he's channeling a tsunami of pride; it makes Kenma's bones rattle. "Sweetheart." He plants the most professional kiss Kenma has ever seen on his mother's cheek. "Smells good. What time are you leaving, Kenma? I'll drive you to the station."

"He's got a job interview just past noon."

"A job interview! You're really getting your feet on the right track."

He can't hear anything past the sound of blood roaring in his ears. All of this pride is building up in front of him to the likes of a wall he can't scale. He looks at his mom-- how can she just sit there? Surely she knows what dad is thinking, how if he lets it go on any longer it'll just be worse. He jumps when the man claps him on the back, like being shot from a rocket. He's shaking. His palms are sweating.

"You go ahead and get dressed, and I'll take you down to the station."

Kenma complies. He doesn't know what else to do. He half expects his mom to pick up on the situation and follow him in, but of course she doesn't. She's still the same woman she was yesterday, and she stays out in the kitchen with his father while he tugs a shirt on over his head and tries to decide what to do. The vatic voice in his head is telling him to get out the door and run. He just knows that the walls of this house are so close together, squeezing in on him, crushing.

When he makes his way back into the kitchen, his dad is nowhere to be seen. His mom has started cleaning, and she's got both shoulders bent over and stiff, her usual working pose. He moves to stand awkwardly beside her.

"You call me if anything changes, alright? Or... if you need me." She looks up from the stove. Kenma sees her pink-gloved hand pause on the stove top, the squeak of the sponge stilling. She grimaces. "I worry. You're my only son, you know? I worry."

"Yeah," he says.

"Promise you'll call."

"I promise." She doesn't apologise for high school or the way she's treated him all these years or even for their strained relationship, which really is neither of their faults. She just looks back at him like a human, not like the bustle of the city, or the starkness of standing before the ocean at 17 years old; his mother, and every part of her. He stares back.
A smile fits its way onto her face; it looks odd there, squeezing in between the amber, calculating eyes and the sculpted jaw. "Great," she says, and like a spell has been broken, turns back to her cleaning. "Make sure you call when you get back, or after your interview so I know you're home safe. I think having a part-time job will be really good for you. Oh, but working after class would be stressful. What did you say your availability is like? Mondays, when you don't have class, maybe."

"I do group therapy on Mondays," he starts to say, laughing at the idea of her being eager and motherly and worrying over when he's going to get time to work, when the worst happens. He sees it in her eyes.

His dad has walked into the room.

"Therapy?" he says, brows drawing together the way great heaps of driftwood find each other on the shore. Kenma doesn't move. The man behind the driftwood steps towards him. "You're seeing someone again?"

"I'm not," he says. "It's not like that." Something softens on his father's face-- confusion, maybe-- and all at once, it hits Kenma like a tidal wave, this blatant and choking realisation. His father's pride isn't for him. It has nothing to do with Kenma being himself. His father is only proud when he sees in his son the fantasy of what he wishes he had raised him like; never for his son, never just for him. Kenma snaps. "Actually, I am. I don't know why I said that."

The man splutters. He can see his mother frantically trying to assess the situation beside him, looking between the two and wringing the sponge in her hands. He continues, "I need it. I need to talk about what happened."

"What happened," his dad finally gets out. He shakes his head. "What happened was you were a nightmare of a teenager. Are you trying to blame it on us now? We weren't the ones who encouraged you to partake in a culture that was well beyond your age group-- fooling around with other boys and all this anxiety nonsense while you should have been worrying about your future--"

"I'm getting better, and I don't care what you think about it."

His father is silent. Kenma doesn't drop his gaze, or look anywhere else in the room except for in front of him. Like staring right into a fire; it fuels him, charring his insides, breathing smoke directly from his lungs. He feels vivid. "I want to drop philosophy, and take up creative writing next semester. Maybe even poetry. It depends on how exams go."

Still the man says nothing. Kenma's taken all of the words from him. He feels powerful, charged. Numb to all other feeling he goes on. "I should have told you, but I didn't. I wanted you to be proud of me. But I hate journalism, and I don't want to work for a newspaper or anywhere else you can offer me. I don't know what I'm going to do. But right now, I want to study."

Silence. The ocean beats at the rocks outside. Something inside of Kenma shifts, and releases, and suddenly his shoulders are able to collapse, then rest, under the airy lack of weight. "I'm going to be late," he says, turning for the first time to his mother. The vacant look on her face blurs with an instance of worry.

"I'll drive you," she says. Kenma's dad speaks up then, for the first time, a commotion of noise in four words.

"I won't support this."

Kenma swallows his fear. "Good."
The man storms out of the room, blowing the roof out with him, and slams the door shut to a room at the other end of the house.

Kenma's mom won't look at him in the car. They drive for a while past their own long street and to town, where the station waits on the other side. Kenma counts all five minutes of it in his head, though instead of holding his breath he breathes deeply, evenly, and lets everything wash over him before the anxiety can hit.

She parks her car across the street from the station, and rakes two hands through her hair.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"You said to tell him."

"Not like that. You know him." She glances over at Kenma. "You're a very brave boy, Kenma. He'll cool down eventually."

"I don't care if he ever cools down," he says, even though he knows he does. His mom knows, too. Her face softens towards him. "Why are you married to him?" he blurts out. He immediately wishes he could take it back. The surprise only lasts on the woman's face for a moment, before a wave of sternness washes the expression away.

"I love him," she says simply, truthfully. "He's a good man. He wants what he thinks is best for his family."

Kenma wants to laugh just as much as he wants to cry, and scream at the top of his lungs. He hasn't felt this out of control in a long time, mad with it, wanting to run up to the top of his own apartment complex and scream until his throat is raw. Animal. Animal. He isn't scared of the word. He feels like someone has set him on fire.

Instead of doing any of this, he slumps down in the car seat, defeated. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he murmurs.

"You're angry."

"All the time."

"But you don't show it?" she doesn't say it meanly. Like she's trying the concept out on him, or presenting the idea calmly. He nods.

"Why?"

She doesn't know the answer. Neither does he. So neither of them answer at all.

He catches his mom making a face, then, trying to keep it to herself. "What?"

"This... therapy thing. It's not because... well, it's not because of your sexuality?"

"Mom, no," he says, frowning. "No. Why would you think that?"

"I just think sometimes, after high school..."

"It has nothing to do with that. Nothing does, it's-- how could you think that?"

"Calm down," she says, even though he is calm. He bristles.

"It's not..." he clenches his hands in and out of fists. Breathes out. Calm, he reminds himself. Brave and calm. He looks at her. "It's not that. Okay? I don't expect you to accept me."
"Just because I don't understand," she mutters, examining the back of her hand, "doesn't mean I can't accept you. Honestly, Kenma."

That relaxes him. He sits back against the seat again, twiddling his thumbs. He catches his mother side-eyeing him.

"What?"

"Is there..." she bites her lip. "Are you seeing someone?"

Immediately he thinks of Hinata, and his face heats up. His mom takes it the wrong way-- she smiles, unaware of the fear coursing through him, the way his heartbeat has picked up with anxiety.

Eventually he gets out of the car, and lugs his overnight bag back up to the platform. He catches the express back home and gets there within an hour of his interview; just enough time to drop his things off at home and visit Kuroo at work, the front of the cafe where he waits to be interviewed. He doesn't bring up what happened with his parents, or what he now knows Kuroo told his mom. He's so tired from everything that's happened that he doesn't even give his anxiety time to materialise before he's being called to the back of the store, following a manager down a dimly lit and stylish hallway to the interview room.

The questions are standard, all ones that Kuroo had him practise. He lies about his skills and exaggerates on a sense of balance and organisation he doesn't really have, expresses a false interest in hospitality. His interviewer is fair. She bows and thanks him afterwards, he bows back, and then he's back out in the bustle of the cafe like it never even happened.

"Kenma!" Kuroo calls from behind one of the monstrous espresso machines. They're so intimidating to Kenma; if he gets the job, he has no idea how he'll navigate his height under them. "How'd it go?"

He shrugs. "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Yeah, it went well." He doesn't know what to say. It feels like the interview all went in fast forward; like his whole life is on fast forward at the moment. Kuroo is one of the only baristas on shift, but the cafe is empty enough that Kenma doesn't feel bad about sitting down to have a conversation. Kuroo starts to make him a coffee he didn't order.

"Your parents?" He bites his lip. Kuroo notices immediately, concern bursting apart the features on his face. "What happened?"

"I don't know," he admits. "It was weird. I lied and said I'd do journalism, but then my mom said I didn't have to. She said she'd support me if I kept studying literature, or if I want to be a writer."

"Kenma, that's great!" Kuroo's face lights up. "It is great, isn't it? What did your dad say?"

"He wasn't happy. He said he wouldn't support it and then he just sort of. Left."

Kuroo makes a disapproving noise. They used to communicate like this a lot; non-committal noises that led the conversation. "At least your mom supports it. You're holding up well."

"Yeah, actually, I--" he exhales. "I'm doing better. I think." He knows that Kuroo knows exactly what he's talking about. The Hinata thing. He can't stop picturing the way his face looked, the way he said the word brave. Something has changed for sure, but there's something else. This weight. Kenma tries to shift beneath it and his chest feels constricted.
"Do you want to do something later? We can go out, celebrate you getting this job--"

Kenma stops listening. It's like all the lights in the room turn off, the walls come crashing down. There's a guy in the corner. There's a guy in the corner with dark hair and tilted eyes and it's Ryota and Ryota is sitting in the corner of the room.

"Hey," Kuroo says, following Kenma's gaze, "that guy kind of looks like..." He takes one look at Kenma and catches on. "Kenma, it's not--"

He's already out of his seat. The whole world stares at him and the scrape of his chair. He can't breathe, everything is happening at once and he has to get out of here--

Kuroo says, "Kenma, it's not him," and he runs for the door.

His head hurts. He focused on this as he runs. There's a pounding headache forcing its way against the walls of his skull, his temples, a drumbeat of pain that traipses all the way down to his toes. He can feel the breath constricting, expanding against his chest like something won't let it escape-- people must be looking at him. He can feel their eyes pinning him down. He can feel the toxic grey sky against his neck. He's crying by the time he makes it back to his apartment, bowing his head to hide it from the woman who walks by, glancing his way. His hands shake, and he drops his keys twice. As soon as he's inside he lets the floodgates drop, and the full weight of a sob launches from him, blowing his world apart.

He takes a pillow from the couch and throws it to the floor. It feels good. Like something made of lightning striking him. So he does it again.

He trashes the room, throwing things and kicking things and finally collapsing on the sofa and crumpling in on himself, letting the trembles course through him like a detox. Expelling poison from his body in shudders. Everything has built up so high and here it is, crashing down with the force and the weight of a train, forcing sobs from him that tear through his throat. He feels wild and out of control in a way he never is. He has no idea how long he sits there choking on breath. Pulling at his hair, panicking, panicking. Then, there's a knock at the door.

His first thought is: Kuroo left work for me. But there's no way. He'd be fired.

His second is that he texted the first person he thought could help.

"Kenma, is this open? I'm coming in," Hinata calls, and Kenma's blood goes cold. He's got tears all over his face and he's a mess and his apartment is a mess--

Hinata inches his way through the door, narrowly dodging some broken and unintelligible pile on the floor. His eyes are wide. Kenma wants to curl up into a ball and disappear, to sink through the floor and never be seen again--

"Don't," he says, surprised at the way his own voice breaks.

Hinata's brows bunch together. Another pang of regret hits Kenma in the chest, the thought that he keeps hurting him--

"What happened?" Hinata asks.

It's sobering. The sun is kneeling in front of him and peering up at his face-- his disgusting, tear-covered face-- all this brightness, all this light, all this love. And all Kenma has to give back is dark, dark, dark, leaking out of him in rivulets, running down his face. He can't tell him or it's real. He can't tell him, or what happened in high school hasn't gone away.

He shakes his head. Something in Hinata's eyes snaps, breaks, and he raises himself up onto the couch. Kenma doesn't have time to think about what's happening. One second he's sitting there
shaking his head and crying and the next Hinata is holding him, their arms thrown around each other, Kenma's head buried in his chest.

He wants to get the hell away from Hinata.

He wants to pull him closer.

He sinks into it, crying into Hinata's chest. He's so embarrassed he wants to die. He's never cried in front of Hinata before; he's never cried in front of most people, and even Kuroo's only seen him do it a handful of times. It feels like letting loose everything in his chest he keeps under lock and key. He feels wild and unbidden, out of control in a way that makes him feel lost. Like someone's shoved him off of a ledge. His sobs rack the both of them, everything happening at once, Ryota and his parents and high school and loving Hinata and anxiety anxiety anxiety--

"This is stupid to say, but I think you're really brave right now," Hinata murmurs into his hair. Kenma stops crying, heaving breaths like waves. He wants to hear it again. He wants to feel Hinata's voice, vibrating through him.

"Even if you don't want to hear it. You're incredible, Kenma."

"I'm not," he says. It's the first thing he's managed to get out this whole time. His voice comes out broken, raspy, and it makes Hinata giggle. His lips are still pressed into Kenma's ear. The feeling of it lights him up, his whole body.

"You're having a panic attack and you just spoke to me. That's brave. It's, like, incredible. I don't know much about this stuff-- I mean, I've been researching, you know, seeing how I can help, but-- even without that, anyone could see how amazing you are. It must be scary. And you pull through every time."

Kenma pulls away to look at him. There's nothing pretty about this at all. He must look awful, puffy eyes, mussed hair, blotchy cheeks covered in tear tracks. Hinata's shirt has a big patch of wetness where he's cried on him. Gross. He must even smell bad, having been out all day, in the cafe, having run home.

He's never wanted to kiss anyone so badly in his life.

He just wants to be close to Hinata. Pressed against him. Maybe in his arms again, with Hinata's lips in his hair, his words vibrating Kenma, rocking him to safety. Love swells in his chest so tightly he feels like he's going to come apart but it's not bright, it's not freeing. It's terrifying. He wants to run.

Pulse thrumming, Kenma doesn't move as Hinata reaches for him. He lets the redhead touch his face, even though it burns. His hand drops to Kenma's neck, and then--

He jerks away.

And Kenma just knows.

He thinks of the smell of beer and the stickiness of vodka on his hands, Ryota breathing over him. The ghost of those hands later around him, on him, suffocating. Hinata is staring at him with wide eyes like he was there, like he knows each and every thing Kenma has been through.

"Kuro told you," he says.

"It's not like that--"

"It is." He breathes in. It hurts. As calmly as he's ever said anything in his life, he says, "Shouyou. Please leave."
He can't look at him. He knows if he does, he'll see Hinata's face, all the hurt there, and suddenly, Kenma is exhausted.

"Kenma," he says; gently, like he's pleading.

Kenma looks right at him. "Get out," he says. He's not angry. He just says it, letting the natural weight of the words do what they will. He's tired, and there's nothing he can do now to take back the look on Hinata's face. All that fire has left him. This time he's just tired.

Hinata leaves.

He takes some time to calm down on his own, breathing deeply into his own hands. Ryota's hands mean nothing to him. He means that, truly, the ghosts of them long gone from his neck. It wasn't even that he was scared when he thought he saw Ryota in the cafe-- it was just the weight of everything catching up with him, choking him on their own accord. His parents, his future. Anxiety and loving Hinata more than he knows how to handle. All that love, and he has no idea what to do with it. He can't get the thought of Hinata's face out of his head. The look in his eyes when Kenma told him to leave. There's no coming back from that. This isn't something he can just fix. This time, he's the one who messed up. He can't be with someone if he's just going to hurt them by pushing them away.

When he's calmed down enough, he gets up and takes a shower. He cleans his apartment slowly, toweling his hair, letting water drip down his neck. The feeling is cooling on his skin in a good way, even though it's freezing outside. It makes cleaning feel more liberating, like he's picking up the pieces of his life.

There's a knock on the door.

It's Hinata, he thinks. His pulse spikes. He freezes up, unsure whether to answer the door or hide and pretend he's not home anymore--

There's another knock on the door, furious this time, and he knows it's not Hinata. It can't be. Hinata would never knock like that, and whoever's out there is angry.

He thinks it might be Kuroo back from his shift, but when he opens the door, it's Tsukishima he finds waiting for him. And he's furious.

Chapter End Notes

thank you to everyone who's been sticking by me lately! thank you especially to all the wonderful comments, supportive messages, and fan art. :) everyone has been so kind to me and it's pulling me through some seriously tough times. sorry for the prolonged update! something happened to really screw up my week and i was left on my feet with little to no support from anyone around me, but i've gotten a LOT of support from friends lately, and people who want me back on my feet in a way i haven't been in a while. i'll try to get the next chapter up in a week like normal! thanks again to everyone for being so nice and patient with me!! i wish you all the best.
Tsukishima storms into the apartment like he's parting a sea. Kenma barely has time to register who it is stepping over the threshold into his home, before the blonde is shrieking, kicking at his wall, and spinning around on his heel to shout at Kenma.

"How could he do this? Does he have any idea?"

Kenma says nothing. He's never seen the guy like this; he figured they were alike in the sense that they stewed quietly, that they brooded. The worst he's seen so far are muttered under-breath comments and the occasional snap at Hinata or Kuroo. But right now he's furious, red in the face, and brandishing fists like iron weapons.

Kenma, the diligent, placid mediator he is, sort of just. Stands there.

"How could he say that? You're supposed to be his best friend, you should know!"

He's turned the anger on Kenma, now. He has no idea what to do; he feels miniature under Tsukishima's height, cowering under a gaping tower.

"Me?" he asks, because he's stupid.

"Yes, you. He had to talk to you about this. Fuck. Fuck. I don't understand."

He sits down on Kenma's couch, rakes his hands through his short hair. Kenma continues to hang awkwardly by the door, even when Tsukishima takes his glasses off to rub at puffy eyes. He must have been crying, Kenma realises. He looks about ten seconds from crying again, come to think of it; panic swells in Kenma's bloodstream and, hesitantly, he steps forward.

"...Can I get you something to drink?"

"Only if you have something hard," Tsukishima mutters.

Kenma's glad to be able to escape to the kitchen, taking his time rummaging through the back of his pantry for the good stuff. There's sweet sake back there that he's never opened, and about a three quarter full bottle of Shochu Vodka. He takes the latter and pours a liberal glass for Tsukishima, only half aware of how people drink the stuff. He used to drown it with anything sweet and carbonated when he was in high school; Kuroo used to down the stuff in big gulps, claiming that drinking was only fun if you were doing it to get drunk. He returns the glass to Tsukishima, who looks glad for it. He screws his eyes shut and swallows a mouthful, grimacing. He doesn't look like the kind of guy who drinks often.

He splutters. "God. Ew."

Or at all, Kenma thinks. Still, he says nothing while Tsukishima drowns himself in the glass, swallowing mouthfuls and scowling in tandem. He waits for a long time while the blonde drinks himself to death, finishing the glass before he even decides to utter another word. "Sorry for barging in like this."

"It's fine," Kenma says, a little unsure whether it is fine. His brain is still trying to catch up. Barely an hour ago he was crying into Hinata's chest, and now Tsukishima, his best friend's maybe-boyfriend-maybe-not-boyfriend is crying over his rationed stash of vodka. "What, um..." he tries to build up to it, to approach the subject without seeming too nosy. "What happened?"
"Kuroo happened," the other scowls, jumping back to life immediately. The anger flares back on his face, which is now appropriately flushed where the alcohol is starting to take affect. So he's a lightweight, like Kenma. This ought to be fun. Kenma takes a swig from the bottle himself. There's no way he's going to be able to deal with this entirely sober.

"Tell me about it," he murmurs, wincing at the taste. "He's been so weird lately."

"So weird. He's being pathetic."

"He told my mom I was seeing a therapist. Behind my back." Tsukishima blinks at him. Kenma has no idea why he's telling him this, just that it seems right, all of a sudden. He takes a longer, slow burning drink from the bottle. "I don't know what happened. It's different between us. Something's really strained."

"I didn't even know about the job offer," Tsukishima scowls. "Like, in LA. I had to find out through the media."

"That's rough."

"Yeah. Pass me the bottle."

They pass the bottle back and forth, sipping liberally for a while. It should strike Kenma as strange, he thinks, but it doesn't; here he is an hour after the worst breakdown he's had in a while and he's drinking on the floor of his apartment, slowly getting drunker with the last person he ever thought he'd drink with.

"Do you know why I was so pissed? No, I'm still pissed. He's such an asshole."

"Why are you so pissed?" Kenma asks. Slurs. Just a little. His eyelids feel heavier than they were before, which should be embarrassing since it's only-- he checks the clock on the wall, grimacing-- 4 in the afternoon.

"Well," Tsukishima slurs back, "I was having an okay week, and by that I mean a fucking terrible week; getting stuck in Nagoya was great. And then I get back, and all over the internet everyone's talking about the interview where heartthrob Kuroo Tetsurou tells everyone how single he is."

"Wait, what?"

"I'll show you," Tsukishima says, fired up. He gets up to retrieve Kenma's laptop from across the room without asking. It doesn't matter. Kenma types in the password, lets Tsukishima find the video.

It's an interview he didn't even know Kuroo had done, but vaguely remembers hearing about. It opens with a few pointless questions that Tsukishima skip's over, and then veers to relationship talk. The interviewer slyly asks Kuroo if there's "anyone special in his life", to which he replies, "No, not right now. I'm single."

Tsukishima slams the laptop closed, then reaches for the bottle. It takes Kenma a second. Then, rage flares in him like a fire.

"How can he do that to you? How can he say that?"

"Right? Right?"

"No, that's-- fuck it, you know, let's go over there right now."

"When does his shift end?" Tsukishima stands up, wobbling a little. Despite this, he swipes for the
bottle, taking another swig. Kenma takes one after him. "I'm gonna kick his ass."

"Yeah. Yeah, let's both kick his ass." Kenma wobbles, which is probably a good sign that he should put the bottle away. He does, returning moments later to find Tsukishima standing by the door, texting furiously.

"You texting him?"

"Yeah. I'll, um, tell him I need to talk to him-- haha, fuck, I'm gonna lose it. Let's go crazy on him."

His phone buzzes in his hands. Both of them, drunkenly, look down at it in tandem. It's actually kind of incredible how coordinated the moment is. Kenma sidles up to Tsukishima with no self-consciousness and peers over his shoulder to read the text.

*I won't be free until later. Something happened with Kenma. I'm on my way back but I have to make sure he's ok.*

A pang of guilt hits Kenma's chest, but it's immediately washed away by the warmth of the vodka and of Tsukishima's glance his way.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," he lies. Then he backtracks. "I mean, sort of. I had a breakdown in front of Kuroo and freaked him out because he couldn't leave work to come after me."

"Hm," Tsukishima says. "Probably serves him right."

"Yeah."

"What'd you break down over?"

"Just. A thing." Tsukishima is staring him down. He almost regrets putting the alcohol away, but another spin from his head sets him straight. This is why he never drinks. He returns to the couch in an effort to stop the spinning. Tsukishima comes to sit beside him after a moment, and something has changed between them, some of their anger faded.

"What happened between you two?" Kenma asks.

Tsukishima glances up slowly, the graceless, tired movement of a drunk. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were going so well. You and Kuroo. I'd never seen him like that with anyone."

"Do you think he stopped loving me?"

Kenma shakes his head. "No. I mean, like I said, he's never been like this. He's in love with you."

Tsukishima grimaces. "Feelings change--"

"Not when they're like this. There's no way he can love you this much and then just-- what, stop loving you? People aren't like that. That's not it."

Tsukishima hesitates for a moment, looking at his hands. "He got... distant," he says finally. "I mean, figures. I wouldn't care, only he still says things, you know, says how much he loves me all the time. Says he wants a future with me and he's scared of me and he wants me with him when I'm not, and wants to be close to me all the time, but then backs off and does things like this." He's babbling, Kenma thinks, his mouth going a million miles a minute like he doesn't even know what he's saying. "I love him," he says, sucking in a breath. "That's so gross. I don't want to love him.
He's the worst."

"He is the worst," Kenma agrees. "But loveable."

"Ultimately loveable."

They sit there in silence a while, flickering on the border of something. Kenma thinks of Lev's party and gets angry again.

"How can he do this to you?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"We should storm his place. Like, I have spare keys--"

They both go silent. Out in the hall is the distinct noise of someone's keys jingling, close enough to Kenma's door to make his shoulders stiffen. They nearly fall over each other trying to get to the door, and one look through the peephole confirms it: there's Kuroo, flushed in the face from work, looking worried as he hurries to open his own apartment door. They watch him disappear into the apartment. They wait.

"Let's just storm in," Kenma says, "before he can come over here."

Tsukishima looks at him. "Okay."

So they just. Storm into Kuroo's apartment.

He's already by the door again, halfway through taking a sip from a bottle of water. One look at the two of them and he lowers the bottle. But he doesn't get a chance to say anything, because Tsukishima starts.

"You have so much explaining to do, asshole. The interview? Are you kidding me? It was bad enough to ignore me, I don't care if you don't want me back or if you were just fucking with me but-- to go and say all those things you did, and then to turn around and say on TV that you're not seeing anyone--"

Kenma stands there and eggs him on, this awkward little backup. Kuroo keeps looking back and forth between the two of them and he lowers the bottle. But he doesn't get a chance to say anything, because Tsukishima starts.

"You have so much explaining to do, asshole. The interview? Are you kidding me? It was bad enough to ignore me, I can handle that, I don't care if you don't want me back or if you were just fucking with me but-- to go and say all those things you did, and then to turn around and say on TV that you're not seeing anyone--"

Kuroo stands there and eggs him on, this awkward little backup. Kuroo keeps looking back and forth between the two of them, like he's trying to catch up with the situation. Or maybe like he's trying to figure out if they're actually as drunk as they seem. Tsukishima goes on, red in the face and ranting like he's making up for years of being silent and brooding. He talks and talks until he doesn't have anything left to say, worn out, breathing hard. Kuroo waits a second. Then, because he's Kuroo, he steps forward and wraps his arms around Tsukishima.

The blonde struggles for a minute, looking torn between escaping Kuroo's grip and sinking into it. Kenma continues to stand there uselessly.

"Kei," Kuroo says, and, "Kei."

The blonde stops struggling. He trembles, just once.

Kuroo pulls away to look at him. "When we first started this, you said, 'I don't do boyfriends.' You asked me if I was okay with that. I said I was." Tsukishima blinks a few times, in rapid succession. He's either going to cry or puke up the vodka all over Kuroo's shoes. Jesus. "You said you didn't want a relationship. I haven't wanted to pressure you, or scare you off, because I love you, Kei. I love you and I love being with you and the last thing I want to do is make you feel trapped."

"You're an idiot," Tsukishima says, voice cracking.
And it works just like that. One second Tsukishima looks like he's going to punch the guy in the face, and the next they're melting into each other, kissing right there in the living room in front of Kenma while he stands there gaping. When they're done, and Kuroo pulls away-- Tsukishima's eyes blown and gaze kind of glassy-- Kuroo turns to Kenma.

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes," he answers, swaying on his feet a little.

Kuroo shakes his head. "Why, Kenma? I was worried about you."

"I'm fine," he says, gesturing to the blonde. "Your boyfriend isn't. You fucked up with that interview."

"You want me to stop saying I'm single, I'll do it," Kuroo murmurs, looking back to Tsukishima and brushing a thumb across his chin. It's an absurdly intimate gesture, more so than the kiss; Kenma almost feels like he has to look away. "Because I'm not. As if there's anyone else for me."

"Idiot," Tsukishima says again, but they haven't let go of each other.

So they all calm down, eventually, and Kuroo makes coffee to sober them up. It's weirdly liberating drinking the stuff with other people who appreciate it, but not the same as having Hinata throw glances his way and comment on the bitterness. He asked to taste it once, and Kenma had to stand there and watch as he sipped from the same cup; an indirect kiss. It was something so childish to get worked up over, but he couldn't help thinking that, if Hinata really wanted, he could have just chased the flavour from Kenma's lips. Presently he feels himself start to flush both with desire and guilt. He'd almost forgotten how badly he fucked up today.

Just as he's starting to get restless with the thought of dinner, there's a knock on the door, and Suga and Daichi waltz in with Kuroo's blessing like they come here all the time. Suga takes one look at Kenma moping over his coffee and starts to unravel their scarf.

"Oh, are you drunk? You look miserable. No one told me there would be drinks."

"Stop mothering everybody," Daichi says, hanging up their jackets. Kuroo catches him looking between the two new guests and slugs him on the shoulder, nearly spilling the coffee. "I have friends too, you weirdo."

Kenma goes back over to his apartment to retrieve the bottle of vodka, and he, Tsukishima, and Suga mix a jug of soda and orange juice with the stuff while father's club burn barbecued meat in the kitchen. It's kind of like a holiday, and Kenma keeps thinking about his own Summer memories with his parents, watching his dad turn meat while sweating under the sun's ministrations. Now instead he's got Kuroo, in an apron that says 'Kiss the cook' with a suggestive arrow pointing downwards; and Daichi, who insisted he take the thing off at least five times before giving in and borrowing a plain white one. Suga sips dreamily at their homemade cocktail, watching their boyfriend over the rim of the glass and making comments about the state the kitchen will be in later.

"He can't cook," they say, sighing deeply.

In perfect harmony, Kenma and Tsukishima say, "Neither can Kuroo," and then, maybe either because of all the stress of their day or the alcohol or both, double over with laughter. Suga watches on from behind their glass, grinning.

Eventually Daichi and Kuroo finish cooking dinner, and they all gather around Kuroo's dining table-- Kenma cleaning it quickly, sweeping papers and old cups and the likes to the side or bench-- and eat the burnt meat, laughing and joking. Kenma is drinking much slower now, and
rather than swaying on his feet he feels comfortably tipsy, and warm, like if he focusses on their conversation enough he doesn't have to think about what he said to Hinata. The way he told him to leave, the coldness of just kicking him out like that. Kenma's never thought of himself as a cold person, but maybe that's just because he's never thought of himself as any kind of person at all. He doesn't want to be cold.

The alcohol is buzzing through his system and turning his thoughts over like water. He thinks of Tsukishima sitting nervously in his apartment and wondering whether Kuroo stopped loving him. *Whether Kuroo stopped loving him:* that was only a few hours ago, and now they're sitting so close their legs are touching, a nervous flush on Tsukishima's neck and Kuroo's arm slung around his shoulders. He's never really thought about it before, but he wants what they have. When you love someone-- when you really love them, and you're in love with every part of them-- those feelings don't just go away. You don't just get bored. Kenma watches them across the table and thinks of Hinata, can't stop, the thoughts pounding his head until his temples vibrate. There's so much love inside of him for that boy that he doesn't know what to do. He wants to claw into his own chest and tear them out, somehow, or in the very least see what they look like. Because everyone says it's bright, and it's warm, this kind of love, but all Kenma feels is a bone deep fear that he's going to ruin things. That he has ruined things. It's not like his feelings are just going to go away, either. No, he can feel that. Everything hurts.

Kuroo, eventually, brings up the whole camping thing again. Kenma had forgotten about it entirely. His exams start tomorrow-- he's only got two to worry about, but then he has to deal with subject changes until the end of the week.

"The whole team has to come. No one's skipping out. This isn't gonna be like that time with Highland, okay? This time everyone has to go."

"It's Winter," Daichi says.

Kuroo makes a face. "Yeah? That's the best time to go."

Daichi starts to protest, or in the very least make some disapproving comment, but Suga lights up, swinging an arm around their boyfriend's shoulders. "That sounds kind of fun, Daichi. If you get cold, I'll warm you up."

"Alright I'll go."

"Right," Kuroo announces, ignoring the exhibitionism that's going on in the middle of the table, "so we're all in. Tents! We need to organise tents."

"Hey, I think, um, I'll miss out on this one," Kenma says before it can go any further. Everyone at the table looks at him. Kuroo's heart visibly breaks in his eyes.

"What, Kenma, no. You have to come."

"I'm going," Tsukishima says. "Why should you get to miss out on the suffering?"

"Suffering," Kuroo splutters. "This trip is going to be *perfect*. I've already made a playlist, you know."

"Guys, lay off," Suga says, surprising Kenma. The ever graceful angel waves the topic off, though not without catching Kenma's eye across the table with a sympathetic smile. "Kuroo, tell us about this playlist."

After dinner, while the other three are doing the dishes, Suga nonchalantly walks to join Kenma in the living room, patting a space down for him on the sofa.
It's casual, the way they smile and don't ask Kenma to talk about what happened at the table, even though this is clearly an invitation to do so. When it gets too much, and the noise in his ears is deafening, Kenma asks how Hinata is.

Something washes over Suga's face. "I won't lie," they say neatly, tracing a finger around the rim of their glass. "No one exactly knows what happened, but we can figure. He's been a bit rough lately."

Kenma visibly winces. He can't force the thought away, the thought of how much worse it'll be now that he's gone and said those things today. Get out. As if that has ever been what he wants from Hinata. As if he's the kind of person who deserves to be pushed away.

"He's in love with you," Suga says, very gently. Testing the waters.

Kenma doesn't look up. "Yeah."

"You knew, huh?"

"I kissed him."

"Shit." Suga takes a sip of their drink, genuinely surprised to hear this information. "What happened?"

"Personal stuff," Kenma admits. "I said some things I shouldn't have. I pushed him away."

He can hear everyone clambering around the kitchen, Kuroo deadpanning some joke that makes Daichi groan and Tsukishima deadpan something ten times more cruel back. He can hear the laughing and the clashing of dishes like they're coming from another planet.

Suga lays a hand on Kenma's arm carefully, easing the words out of their mouth. "Do you know why you're pushing him away?"

"Because I love him." Kenma realises how awful that sounds. "I mean, not that. Because I don't want to drain him. I'm a really... I wouldn't say high-maintenance, but I'm hard to be around. Anxiety and all that."

"Kenma," Suga says. They sound serious, not so sympathetic that it comes out fake, and Kenma likes that. They don't remove their hand from Kenma's arm. "No one ever thinks that about you. I know I don't. I certainly know Shouyou doesn't. You have no idea, the way he looks at you. I don't think you could ever drain him. That's ridiculous."

Kenma feels a mix of warmth and trepidation, squeezing his gut. He has no idea what to do now. The thought of how to move forward is suffocating. "It's not just that," he manages, the words tightening his throat. "I... the last time I was in a relationship was high school. I never let anyone get close enough to hurt me. I'm over it now, but when people find out the way my last boyfriend treated me, they get this look on their faces. Like they're sorry for me. And I keep thinking... I can't stop thinking, if I let Shouyou in, he's gonna look at me that way. Today he came over, because I was having a panic attack and Kuroo texted him to come help me. He came right over. And it was fine, and I calmed down, but then-- he touched my neck accidentally. Kuroo must have told him about Ryota, about that night-- I'm over it now, but-- Shouyou drew back, and I just knew. He feels sorry for me. I don't want him to be scared to hurt me. It makes me feel like I have to watch what I'm doing all the time." Kenma's breath shudders on the way in, the way out. "I didn't want him to know. I can't be with him because I don't want to be pitied or seen as the guy who's gone through all that."

"It's not my place to say," Suga begins, moving their hand to Kenma's shoulder, giving it a squeeze, "but I've never seen Shouyou look at anybody the way he looks at you, and it definitely
isn't with pity. He looks at you like you hung the moon in the sky. He admires you, Kenma."

Kenma thinks of being called brave again, and for the first time, realises Hinata meant it. It never even occurred to him before that the word meant something— that it could mean something to Hinata. Hinata, who has his own problems; Hinata who spent all of high school trying to convince everyone that he was in the right body, that he was a boy worthy of respect, that he was this child made of sunshine and how brave he would have had to have been to get through that. Kenma never thought about it, but maybe he felt weak, too. Maybe he was scared to get close to Kenma for the same reasons. Maybe he didn't want to tell Kenma that he was trans for the same reasons that Kenma didn't want to tell him about his anxiety-- it's too much. To have someone know you like that, past years you can't escape. Hinata really thinks he's brave. Brave enough for the both of them.

He feels awful for not thinking of it like that.

"You should talk to him," Suga suggests, smiling sympathetically. Kenma attempts to shrink into himself.

"I can't," he says, and before Suga can argue, "You didn't see his face. The way I spoke to him today... I can't just call him. I messed up."

Suga gives his shoulder one last squeeze, then stands up. "Just think about it," they say, eyeing him on their way out of the room. "Think about what I said."

Everyone goes home, leaving just him and Kuroo to clean. He watches, pretending like he's not, as Kuroo and Tsukishima share the most intimate kiss at the door. Something about it is wildly intense, tender, without either of them trying to deepen it. Kuroo looks at him like he's the world, his hand still on Tsukishima's neck, and then lets him go.

Kenma has to take a minute to calm down.

They clean together almost in silence, all the events of the day catching up with Kenma. And Kuroo must notice he's still pissed, or that there's some element of anger to him, because midway into cleaning the living room he says, "Okay, I've done something. Spill."

"Why did you tell my mom I'm seeing a therapist?"

Kuroo's brows shoot up to his hairline. "She told you?"

"Yes. Why did you tell her?"

"I didn't know if I would have the money," Kuroo says casually, turning to collect glasses. "She's a really supportive lady. I knew she'd be okay with it."

"But you didn't tell me." This makes Kuroo turn to him, this tone in his voice. Kenma steps forward. "You didn't tell me you were having trouble with money. Why? I could have gotten a job."

"You have Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Kenma. I'd never ask you to do something like that."

He's being fair. And Kenma's face is heating up. So he says, "Why did you tell Shouyou about Ryota?"

Kuroo stops cleaning. "Huh? I didn't do that."

"You're the only one who knows," Kenma grits out. His face is so hot he can't stand it. He presses the back of one hand to his cheek, turning so he doesn't have to look at his best friend. "I know you texted him to come talk to me today."
"That," Kuroo says pointedly, "I did. He showed up?"

"Of course. Only at one point, he touched my neck, and jerked his hand back. He looked at me like he thought I was going to break."

"Kenma," he says, standing there until Kenma looks at him. When he does, its to crash his gaze with a darker one, held stiff to the spot. "I would never, ever tell anyone about that without your consent. What happened in high school is up to you to talk about. If you think it's a big deal, it's a big deal. If you don't, then it's not. But it's not my place to tell anyone."

Kenma's shoulders sag; he steps forward and into his best friend's arms, thunking his head down on the taller's chest. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"It's fine," Kuroo says back, genuine. He squeezes Kenma's shoulders. "I can see why you would have thought... anyway. Who else could have told him? Maybe it was just a coincidence."

Kenma shakes his head. "You didn't see him. He knew. It was all over his face."

"You're angry," Kuroo observers. He is angry. There is so much anger inside of him, and lately everyone's been sifting through it, alleviating it, forming it into something he can handle. He doesn't know what to do with it all. He's never been in control like this. He's never felt like he understands himself, or like he was wrong about the people around him.

But he was wrong.

About everything.

"Not at you," Kenma says, only then realising it's a lie. Because maybe he is angry, and maybe that's okay. Maybe he's angry at his best friend, and maybe he resents him for knowing what happened in high school. Maybe he's always going to be angry at his mom for leaving him alone all those years, to fend for himself in a world he didn't understand. He's angry at Ryota for all that time he took away from Kenma, for all that stress he didn't need.

He's angry at himself for suffering.

"It's okay to be angry," Kuroo says.

"Yeah."

His best friend looks at him. "I mean it."

"Me, too. I mean it too."

And as if he's read his mind, as if he knows exactly what's bothering him and how to fix it, Kuroo says, "I don't even think of you as the same person I knew in high school. I mean, all the good parts, maybe. Even some of the bad parts. But I never associate you with Ryota, or think of you as the guy who was with him. I think of you as Kenma, the guy who cried when I moved all the way out to TOWN to stay with him." Kenma smiles. Kuroo isn't done, grinning down at him, that wicked grin that made them friends in the first place. "I think of you as the sarcastic asshole in third grade English who read better than everyone and said he didn't like people. Seriously, what was up with that? I'm people. I think of you, as, like, this really powerful guy, you know? Everyone looks up to you."

"Down," Kenma murmurs, grinning. Kuroo looks down at him as if on cue, and they both laugh. Then because the timing is right, Kuroo ruffles his hair and steps away.

"I'm here if you want to talk about it. If you can't talk to your therapist, or whatever. I'm always
"I think I do. Want to talk about it, I mean."

Kuroo's eyes light up. "Now?"

"Sure." Kenma shrugs. "Now."

They stay up on Kuroo's couch with the rest of the cocktail jug, talking about high school. Kuroo talks about being a middle school student without parents, then a first year high schooler without anyone. He talks about how scary it was living by himself for the first time, even though everyone thought he was so grown up and independent.

Kenma talks about Ryota, what he was like. Just some asshole, he decides, who Kenma shouldn't have let step on him like that. Some manipulative teenage boy angry at himself, at the world, over his sexuality or whatever else-- someone who didn't deserve Kenma, someone who didn't deserve anything he got in life. He saw that Kenma was angry-- about being held back by anxiety, about his parents, at the world, too-- and he let him channel that rage into a relationship when he shouldn't have.

"Did you love him?" Kuroo asks, setting the question out like it weighs nothing. And it doesn't. Kenma takes a sip.

"Yeah. Not like now. Not like... how I feel about Shouyou."

"Shit," Kuroo drawls, finishing off his glass. He smirks at Kenma. "This is the real deal, huh? You love the guy?"

"Yeah." He does. He does. He doesn't want to go to sleep because he'll think about it, then, about how much he screwed up. He looks at Kuroo, trying to convey all of this. "I don't want to talk about it. When you see him, on the camping trip... don't bring it up. I really hurt him today."

"I won't get involved," Kuroo promises, rising from the couch. And for whatever reason, Kenma believes him.

During exam week, he throws himself into his school work. He stays up studying and crams on the subway, eats proper meals and everything. It's "intense", as Kuroo calls it, to see him dedicating himself so fully to something. Like he's in a frenzy. He strolls into his literature exam and doesn't hesitate on the Keats part, writes a confident essay about the struggles of connecting with the world around you. He thinks, for the first time, that maybe he doesn't hate Keats so much. Maybe he actually kind of gets it.

Philosophy is harder, but he comes out of the exam feeling like he's at least achieved something. Lev body slams him, a full strength thing that almost knocks him over. He and Yaku invite him out for drinks after. He goes along just for the one, but he's too anxious about subject changes to sit still, so he calls Kuroo-- who's just gotten back from another one of his shifts-- and asks him to come down to the school with Kenma.

He's been researching it, so he has a fair enough idea of what to do, but he speaks with his coordinator just to be sure. She finds a creative writing class he can transfer too. And then, because he's on a high from exams, he asks about poetry. Everything in the room vibrates. He even calls his mom to tell her about it.

It occurs to him midway through the week that there's one other person who could have told
It occurs to him midway through the week that there's one other person who could have told Hinata about what happened in high school. Lev. He's not angry about it any more, but he invites his friend over anyway, needing to get to the bottom of it. He asks him straight up about it once he's gotten food into him; Lev doesn't hesitate.

"Yes," he says, grimacing. "I'm so sorry, I should have said something to you. But I only told him because he asked me."

"What do you mean?" Kenma asks.

Lev makes a weird hand gesture. "It's not like we talk a lot, but like, we did this time, because he was asking about you. I don't know why he came to me. I guess it just sort of came up?"

"What came up?"

"Well, he didn't ask me what happened to you in high school. He didn't try to pry into any of that. But he asked me, if like, if I knew of anything bad that had happened to you that might come up now. Like, triggers or whatever, I guess. So I told him I didn't know, but I made a guess. I told him there was something that happened in high school, with a boyfriend, and that there was an incident where you fought and he hurt you, choked you."

"That's why the neck thing," Kenma says, weirdly not angry at all. He can't image Hinata asking around about him; caring enough to want to make sure that he doesn't hurt Kenma, but not asking Kenma so as not to make it seem like a big deal. His chest tightens.

"The neck thing?"

Kenma tells him what happened that day Hinata last came over. He tells him about what Suga said, what he's figured out since then. Lev leans back in his seat when he's done, exhaling noisily.

"That's pretty complicated. But they're right, you know. Shouyou wouldn't think of you like that. I don't think anyone could think about you like that, man."

"Everyone keeps talking about me like I'm so incredible," he says, rolling his eyes. Lev shoves him playfully.

"Nah, not everyone. Just the really, really cool people, 'cus like, we have good taste."

Kenma shoves him back. It turns into a kind of shoving war, until he can't hide his smile any more.

"I don't mind," he says, realising only as he says it that it's true, "if Shouyou knows. I think... I kind of want him to?"

"It's nothing you should hide, you know. Your anxiety. You're still you."

"I'm still me," Kenma echoes, a little quietly. Then, even quieter, "I think I'm getting better. I don't know what to do about that."

"Scary?"

"Yeah."

"Well, think of it this way." He straightens up in his seat, Lev's classic 'Pre-Lecture' pose. "You wouldn't know, since some of us have been skipping group therapy lately," he makes a face, "but that guy, Akaashi, and the owl-looking guy who's totally gay for him. They're actually really nice. I mean, Akaashi even sort of reminds me of you?" Kenma tries to remember him. Dark hair, he thinks, kind of quiet and standoffish. That's fair. "He's got borderline, that guy. But lately he's been getting really better. Like, they've got him on some medication, and he takes behavioural
therapy. But the way he was talking about everything made me feel better about my own disorder. He said, 'I don't mind if it's always here, or here for a long time. I don't mind if it's a part of me. I'm not going to hate myself for something I can't control. But if I'm going to get better, and things are going to change, then that's okay, too. I need to let go of the idea that being mentally ill is me, when really it's just a part of me. And parts of people change all the time.'"

"Wow," Kenma says, grinning a little at how serious Lev got. Excited, the other's eyes sparkle.

"Right? He's totally a cool guy."

"I guess I sort of know what he's talking about," he says, propping his hand on his chin. "I kind of get it now. If I get better, the people who really matter will still love me. Because they stuck by me. I think that's important, at least."

"Of course it is," Lev agrees. He's got the most genuine smile on his face. Kenma thinks it's nice; he should wear it more often. "You should call Shouyou, you know."

"Not gonna happen."

"You're being such a baby," Lev whines, in, ironically, a completely infantile tone. "Moping around and stuff. Like, he's probably sitting at a window, looking up at the moon and thinking of you right now."

"It's daytime."

"Kenma, you're ruining the Jane Austen fantasy!"

"Haruki Murakami would have been a better comparison," Kenma says, smirking into his hand. Lev whacks his arm again.

"Seriously. You've got, like, a once in a lifetime chance at romance, like passionate, blissful, perfect romance. Do you know what I'd do to get a chance at going on a romantic camping trip with Yaku?"

"You guys can come," Kenma offers, raising his eyebrow.

"That's not what I meant. And anyway, I can't, I told you! It's just--" he groans, running a hand through his hair. "I meant, like, this is the perfect opportunity to make things right with him. Take him into the woods, you know, light some candles..."

"This kind of sounds like a horror movie."

"Kenma. Confess to him under the stars. It'll be romantic."

"Should you really confess to a guy who you've already kissed?" he says, but he's all out of clever retorts. His sarcasm is such a flimsy cover, he despairs, and Lev knows it. He gives Kenma a condescending glare.

"I can't believe you're not going. Seriously. Go get your guy, for those who can't."

"You could always confess to Yaku," he points out, examining his nails. "Just a thought."

"This isn't about me. You're being an ass on purpose."

He is. He smiles weakly at Lev, knowing neither of them are going to budge. "I'll think about it," he offers, even though he won't. It's apparently enough for Lev. His eyes light up.

"You promise?"
"Yeah, of course."

"Great, Kenma. That's awesome. You really won't regret it if you go, I promise. But you have to call me as soon as he sticks his tongue down your throat."

"Gross."

But he's laughing. They're both laughing. It's easier to pretend like he's solved all of his problems that way.

He goes into school at the end of the week, even though there are no classes, to get his results before they're posted online. He's been anxious about it all morning and all of last night, realising only for the first time that there's a chance he didn't pass. Kuroo isn't leaving for the camp grounds until a lot later in the day, so there will still be time for them to celebrate if Kenma did well-- or time to drink if he didn't. He gets on the subway with a scalding coffee and only feels a little ill under the gaze of everyone else, the anxiety nibbling but not biting at him. It's kind of nice. He makes it to campus before the rush at lunch, and heads straight for the hall where the results have been hung on little sheets of paper, so unassuming you wouldn't even know that they held the difference between life or death for some people. He gets through the Ks, trying to find his name-- Kaneda, Kishimoto, Koda. Kozume.

He got an 87 on his philosophy and a 98 on his literature.

It feels like something has burst in his chest. There's no way they can deny him class changes, now, and no way they can deny him sitting at the top of his class for literature. He feels elated. He wants to rush home and tell Kuroo. So that's what he does.

He catches the next line back, not even stopping for another coffee like he wants to. Everything seems bright and sunny, even though it's Winter now. It's a few weeks off from snowing, everyone guesses; right now it's rainy, pretty-- perfect camping weather according to Kuroo, who deeply favours layering coats and scarves and sitting on a log around a fire in the middle of a chilly evening. Kenma almost regrets not agreeing to going, since it means he won't see Kuroo for a few days. But he'll be fine on his own, he reasons. More time to think things through, about school, about Hinata.

He should notice that something's up as soon as he gets to their apartment complex. It's in the air. When he gets up to his floor, it's deadly silent, Kuroo's door seeming even more firmly shut than normal. Did he leave already? Kenma's stomach flips with the thought that his best friend has skipped out on him early without waiting around to hear about his exam scores.

He opens the door to his own apartment, and again, that strange air hits him. Then he realises what it is.

His bags are packed.

Kenma stands in the doorway. There's a bag on the floor of his living room, undeniably his. He gets down on his knees to rummage through it; clothes, coats, warm hats and toiletries. He realises what's going on as soon as Kuroo realises he's back, appearing at the door suddenly, and looming over him.

"Hey," he says casually. "How did you go?"

"I'm not coming," Kenma deadpans.

"Oh," says Kuroo, "that. Yeah, you're coming. You don't really have a choice."
"This is kidnapping. You're kidnapping me."

"Hardly. Do most kidnappers go to the trouble of so kindly packing your bags for you?"

"I like how you say 'most'," Kenma says, looking at him, "implying that there are some kidnappers courteous enough to do just that. Like you, for one."

"It's gonna be so fun. And I can tell from the look on your face already that you did really well on exams, and that you wanna go celebrate. Daichi's bringing this really expensive bottle of Whisky. There's gonna be so much beer. So much."

"I really don't want to go into the woods with you idiots," Kenma continues to deadpan, "and get drunk, just so that I can pretend not to be in love with one of the people who are there."

Kuroo raises a hand to his chest. "Kenma, I didn't know you felt this way about me--"

"Shut up. You can't just pack my things like this and expect me to go."

"That," Kuroo says, grinning like the predator Kenma forgot he was, "is exactly what I intend to do."

Kuroo tells him to come downstairs. It very seriously begins to dawn on Kenma exactly what is happening, and the crux of it is: Kuroo expects him to get in some car, with no warning whatsoever, in like, the least thought-out outfit he could have possibly worn, with Hinata, and go camping. Literally uprooting his life, bags already packed. He stopped being a teenager and saying he wanted an adventure ages ago. This is ridiculous.

He goes downstairs, albeit warily, watching every shadow and corner like Hinata's going to jump out with that look on his face.

They get to the ground floor. Before they can even exit the building, Kenma catches sight of the van. It's the same van the team have been using to tour for games, painted off-white and scratched along the sides from careless driving, but he's not looking at the exterior of the car. Hell, no. Because he can see Hinata. He can see him from here, sitting by the front, and staring down at his phone.

Kenma turns to look Kuroo in the eye. "No," he says, and turns around to leave.

Kuroo barely catches him before he's fled back to the elevator, spinning him by the crook of his elbow. He's laughing, the asshole.

"This isn't funny," Kenma insists, trying to look as despairing as he feels. "I can't do this. You have no idea. The look on his face--"

"Doesn't matter, you idiot, the guy's clearly in love with you. And anyway, this trip isn't about you and Shouyou, you know? We all want you there because it's gonna be fun. Kenma. So much beer."

He looks unsure. "...What kind of beer?" he asks, finally.

Kuroo just grins.

They load his things into the van, and then he makes for the doors, pointedly not looking Hinata's way when he gets in. He can feel Hinata watching him, this entirely innocuous and vulnerable
look. The walk down the isle of the vehicle only lasts a few seconds, but it feels like he's there for hours, trying not to notice Hinata out the corner of his eye. But he does, he so does. Hinata probably doesn't even know what his face looks like right now. The expression. But it's something that Kenma's going to think about the whole ride there, he can already tell.

He sits at the back, as far away from Hinata as humanly possible, with Kuroo sliding into the seat in front of him beside Tsukishima.

"I swear to God," Tsukishima mutters, looking ahead, "if you do anything gay, you can sit with Kenma."

"I'm gonna totally kiss your neck in front of everyone," Kuroo says. Tsukishima hits him.

Kenma settles back in his seat as the van starts up. The engine revs beneath them, vibrating the seats, and Kenma's own chest starts to thump in tune. He's terrified. He's excited. And he should feel more guilty about that excitement, probably, or at least about how giddy he feels at being in the same room as Hinata again. Even as he feels him throwing glances back Kenma's way, and he remembers the look on his face last time he saw him, he's excited.

The feeling won't go away.

Chapter End Notes

two updates in two days?? incredible???
hmu @cloverguts.tumblr

brace urselves for the next chapter. thats all i can say
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

thank you to kitasmeow for the amazing fan art!!
http://cloverguts.tumblr.com/post/128977684961/kitasmeow-inspired-by-chameleon-boy-by
everyone has been so supportive. thank you for your continuing comments and asks on tumblr and everything else, aaaa. you guys r the best.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last to join them are Tanaka and Noya, who ride a few metres behind the van in Tanaka's faded--and notably Western, much to Daichi's next-three-hours-of-muddled-questions-to-Suga confusion and curiosity--pickup, waning blue down its sides. Kenma spends a good portion of the trip wishing he was in said pickup, instead of in the haphazard bus backseat trying to pretend like he can't feel Hinata's gaze burning into his skull. It comes in waves--he can feel it, every time the other looks at him. It's something hot, burning on his cheek or the back of his neck, depending on which way he's facing. To Hell with all the people who say you can't feel it when someone is staring at you; Kenma can feel it like knives.

Still, the trip is fine, playing card games with Kuroo and Tsukishima, then resigning to his gameboy when that gets boring. Kageyama falls asleep and they draw on his face: big, thick eyebrows and wonky cat whiskers. Asahi, who was waning in his seat a little, shoots upright and looks more awake than Kenma has ever seen anyone look. Suga defends that they were only going to braid his hair if he fell asleep.

It's about an hour's drive, because they keep stopping for bathroom breaks (Nishinoya) and snack breaks (Hinata), taking their time filling up gas and sitting in parking lots, humming along to songs on the radio while Suga pours over the map to make sure they aren't getting themselves lost. The last thing Kenma needs is to be stuck in the wilderness with Hinata. Freezing cold, in the middle of the winter, with nothing to warm them up--

He shakes the thoughts from his head. Great, he thinks, perfect--he's going to jump out the window and roll downhill all the way back to Central Tokyo. One minute he's lamenting that his guilt won't let him be in the same room as Hinata, and the next he's entertaining illicit thoughts about him. He's going to Hell. He's going to Hell, and Satan is going to already have a welcome party waiting for him, throne and all.

"We're approaching the woods," Daichi announces, in that booming captain voice of his; Kuroo snickers, repeats it--along with some things Kenma wishes he hadn't heard--to Tsukishima. Without even sparing a glance at his boyfriend, Tsukishima rises from his seat and joins Kenma.

The road is bumpy from there on out, literally; Daichi mutters swears and attempts to navigate the suddenly off-road area, as they approach the mountainous areas necessary to drive through in order to get to the camping grounds. Which, Kenma finds out pretty quickly, isn't going to be legal.

"This is illegal," Tsukishima mutters, climbing from the van. He swats Kuroo's hand away when he tries to help. "We're all gonna die out here. I'm gonna die surrounded by dumbasses."
"Not all dumbasses," Yamaguchi, appearing at his side, chimes in. Tsukishima ignores him, too.

"So," Daichi announces, addressing the group. Tanaka and Noya have since climbed from the pickup, parking it a little ahead of the van, under the 'protection' of a few trees; Kenma doesn't bother pointing out that if it storms there's a good chance the car will be crushed. "Kuroo and I found some grounds a little off-road when we were planning this all out, but the cars won't drive up there. Too dangerous. So we'll have to hike from here."

"I'm going home," Kageyama announces. Hinata catches him by the back of the collar before he can make an escape, already begging him to stay.

"This is probably super illegal," Suga observes, brow furrowing. They start to unload the van nonetheless. "We're up in the Okutama mountains, aren't we? There are legal camping grounds not far from here."

"Au contraire," Kuroo drawls. "There's a valley," he points, far off into the rocky and wooded area ahead of them, "up through here, and we can hike to get to it. Not far at all. Maybe an hour at most."

"What if it storms, and we have to leave suddenly?"

"You gotta risk it," he says, deadpan, "for the biscuit." Tsukishima hits him. Kenma hits him, too. Apparently that's that settled, though, because as soon as they're done beating Kuroo up the group start to collate supplies from the van, assigning each member a different supply. Tanaka and Asahi both get landed the majority of the tent gear, and Hinata--who Kenma's definitely not watching, not one bit--slings the cooking gear over his shoulder, right on top of his own backpack. It's not, Kenma notes pointedly, the actual food, which is safely placed in the care of Suga and Daichi. Kenma gets landed with his own bag and someone else's-- he doesn't bother checking whose.

They hike. Kuroo and Daichi chatter on like two dads about how beautiful it will be, just like Akigawa valley, how weather-protected the areas beyond this are, if only we hike a little longer.

Kenma is a little hesitant about having fun. It's easy. Too easy, in fact, to settle into the warm mood of everyone else, speeding up a little to catch up so he doesn't lag at the back of the group. Kuroo sings at the top of his lungs for a while, the screech of it bounding off of the mountains.

"Shut up, idiot, you're going to attract predators," Tsukishima mutters.

"Oh, Kei." Kuroo sweeps the blonde into his arms, ignoring the way his boyfriend outright flails. "I'll protect you with all of my heart, I swear it."

The first half of their journey is a mix of downhill and flat ground, bringing them into the valley. There's a particularly steep area where they all stumble, gripping onto trees for support-- the bark is cool and damp against the palms of Kenma's hands, rubbing instead of scraping-- and he watches Hinata crash face first into a Birch, so hard he worries for a second that the redhead is going to come away with a bloodied nose.

He doesn't, thankfully. He does, however, notice Kenma staring, and Kenma has to look away then, at his feet, letting the concern he knows is painting his features dissolve into something hard like embarrassment. He has no right, he reminds himself, to be staring at Hinata, pining or whatever, when just days ago he broke the guy's heart.

That doesn't stop Hinata from staring back. He can feel the stare even as they tumble down the hill and into more trees, even when Tanaka catches up with Nishinoya on his shoulders, the two of them rhythmically chanting some succession of "bro dude man bro" as they risk life itself, stumbling past the trees in a blur of limbs and no-homo. Hinata stares, the weight of his gaze
pinnning Kenma to the damp earth.

"Hey, Kuro," Suga questions when they've reached flat ground again-- Kenma doesn't miss the nickname, the air of fondness that seems to be surrounding both he and Kuroo these days. "Why couldn't we just camp in Kanotoen? We could have pooled the money."

Kuroo snorts. There's nothing delicate about it. "Could you trump this view?" They're too low, currently, for any kind of view; all Kenma can see is dirt. As if realising this, Kuroo adds, albeit petulantly, "Well, it'll be better, once we're up high. But trust me. Kanotoen is the most commercial campgrounds Tokyo has; would you rather spend your time at some expensive onsen, or breathe in all the splendor of nature like we're doing right now?"

"Kanotoen has an onsen?" Noya whines. The rest of the team start to chime in, complaints surrounding them. Kenma fights the urge to laugh or join in.

"Hey! Hey! Yes, Kanotoen has an onsen, but you know what it doesn't have? Magic. This is going to be magic, guys."

"Maybe we should camp a little closer to the cars after tonight," Asahi suggests, tugging at a loose tassel hanging from one of the bags. "In case someone gets injured and we have to leave suddenly."

"Yeah," Nishinoya adds. "Hey, Hinata, try not to throw up, alright? If you get sick, there won't be any doctors. We'll have to rely on nature to cure you, like, witchcraft or something."

Kenma's stomach pangs. He remembers that night immediately, sitting on the rooftop with Hinata, unaware at the time that he had been afraid of heights. He hadn't even known he'd liked Hinata then; but maybe he had always known. Maybe those feelings had always been there, begging him to shift a little closer so that their legs were touching, under the guise of being cold; or letting his fingers linger just a little too long to be entirely platonic when they were passing the water bottle. He remembers the chill against his fingers as he scattered it to the wind, feeling like something had changed. They were trying to throw their problems away, then, to incite positive change. Kenma can't help thinking it was already there.

When he looks up, Hinata is looking at him, too. His gaze is intense. He drops it as soon as the blonde notices, something like shame on his face. It makes Kenma's stomach turn. Hinata shouldn't have to be considerate about him, not after what he said. The way he told Hinata to get out. God. He can't stop thinking about it.

"Anyway, we could have just stayed at that seaside park. That's pretty cheap. And you can't argue that the ocean isn't pretty."

"It's too cold for the ocean," Yamaguchi reasons.

Tsukishima rolls his eyes. "Duh."

It's the first time he's backed Kuroo up, their whole trip. Kenma watches his best friend sling an arm around the blonde's shoulders, swaying him even though the uneven ground has left everyone tipsy on their feet. "That's more like it," he says. "Finally, some people with sense. Stop complaining, though. It will be worth it."

Kenma waits for it to be worth it. They hike for what feels like approximately years, time especially dragging on when their path starts to head uphill. Kuroo seems convinced of the fact that they're going the right way, even though it feels sketchy to Kenma. The path is at times so narrow that they have to split into a single file, all gripping the shirt of the person in front so that they don't tumble to their deaths. It's an innate ache on his legs, going this steep uphill, and even in the chill of the afternoon he feels himself start to sweat with the effort. Like, a lot. It's pretty gross,
and he begins to feel self conscious when the path narrows again and they all have to bunch together to get up it.

"You smell terrible," Tsukishima observes, making Kenma's pulse spike; but no, he's talking to Kuroo. Kuroo, who throws a glance backwards, raising both brows.

"Oh? I forgot to tell you, I stole your deoderant this morning. So that's why..."

Tsukishima hits him. The sounds resonates throughout the whole forest. "Moron."

Kuroo's grinning. Tsukishima's grinning, a little; Kenma doesn't have to look to know that. Something has shifted in the air of the whole group, he knows, and has been following them since they parked. It doesn't matter that the bags are weighing down his arms, or that sweat is pouring down his neck, or that his ass is going to kill him later. He feels giddier than he has in forever, all too aware, even despite the guilt that follows, of Hinata's presence a few people behind him, the sound of his footsteps, his breaths.

At one point, when they're navigating uphill again, Kenma loses footing on his way up a particularly mud-slicked area. He's just about to grab onto a tree-- and he would have been fine, really, no mortal danger-- but Hinata is suddenly in front of him, grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him up.

It sends shivers of electricity through Kenma. He hadn't even known that Hinata was close, let alone close enough to save him from slipping down the path.

"Thanks," he mumbles.

"Ah-- be more careful, okay?" Hinata pulls away and tries not to look too eager to race ahead. It's the most they've spoken since Kenma kicked him out of his apartment. His wrist burns, where Hinata touched.

Worse than the tension between them is the fact that everyone seems to know about. Suga throws glances between the two like a concerned mother; Asahi, too, murmuring things to Noya when he gets the chance; even Kageyama seems concerned, or as concerned as he can be. Mostly he just seems annoyed, elbowing Hinata back to animation when the redhead starts to mope. Kenma knows he's being spoken about even when they're too far ahead to be overheard, because of the obvious way Kageyama throws glares back. Or, not glares. That might just be how his face looks. Kenma feels himself flush with shame under the ministrations, anyway, wondering what Hinata's best friend must think of him now. He probably hates him. Kenma probably deserves to be hated, just a little.

Despite the depressing thoughts, he moves with a lightness in his step, pulling himself up the steep trail. He's happy, despite all this. It should feel selfish-- it does, a little, gnawing at his gut-- but mostly it's drowned out by this shivering anticipation. He wants to be upset at himself for all this, to be hopeless and broody and self-deprecating like one of his book characters (like a Jane Austen character, he thinks regretfully, cursing Lev in his absense) but all he feels is excitement. He wants that moment on the slope again, Hinata's hand a vice around his wrist. What would he have done if Kenma had stepped forward, closer to him? He'd ask this time, before he kissed him. Maybe it wouldn't matter that he'd kicked Hinata out that day; maybe the other would just sense that Kenma was ready to let him in.

There's a chance Hinata doesn't want to be let in, now. After what happened. Maybe Kenma was cold enough to ruin any of his chances at that.

Nishinoya almost loses his foot in a gully, filled to the brim with sticky, thick mud from last night's rain. He shrieks, various octaves of It's quicksand it's quicksand I'm gonna die in the wilderness before Daichi and Suga pull him out, telling him no, Noya, it's not quicksand, and this
isn't even the wilderness, and no one's gonna die right after finals. Their trek continues steeply uphill, Kenma reverting to using Kuroo (without his consent at all) to help pull him up.

"An escalator wouldn't hurt," Asahi jokes, trying to remain cheerful despite the sweat gathering on his forehead.

"An escalator? Have a sense of adventure!" Tanaka took his shirt off a while ago. He's been fluctuating between periods of this ridiculous macho bravado act and absolute death, running one moment and panting and hobbling the next.

They stop every now and again to rest, but the time it matters is the time they're actually high enough to see over the valleys and the ranges, the mountains and hilly areas around them seeming tiny now. Kenma thinks of that night with Hinata again, how different the view is from the roof of his apartment complex. He thinks of all those whirring lights and how the city seems caught in the throes of something. Like some wicked dance. Here, everything is still; there's nowhere to hide when he's looking out over the wide, wide area, and a few months ago, that would have terrified him.

He doesn't want to, but he looks Hinata's way. There are only a few metres distance between them, but the team are still scattered around, a safety blanket. Kenma dares another peak in the redhead's direction as he drinks from his water bottle. Hinata must be thinking about it, too. He's selfish enough to entertain the hope that he is.

One moment he's standing there, surrounded by everyone else like they are a wading sea, and the next, he's not. He's still staring at the view. And he can feel Hinata, metres away still, staring at the view with him. It's this particular moment, when they're the only two left standing by the edge, that gets to Kenma. He feels his fingers start to ache. He could just walk over there, say something. Anything. The distance between them feels like nothing all of a sudden, the air between them tangible. It's like he's watching the moment play out on a screen, like it isn't real life, and dazedly, he thinks he begins to move with the pull in the other's direction.

But he doesn't. He turns to leave instead, feeling like a coward. For the rest of the walk he can't stop thinking about the details. Hinata's mussed hair, the sweat on his forehead. His wide eyes overlooking the mountains below. They were both doing it, looking, like this was their own city to take; like they could rest here and watch the sunset, too.

He feels like the sparklers from that night are in his fingertips, now. Maybe they have been since it happened, since he dropped the box, even, in that hundred yen store. Little pieces of Hinata, bright sparks like sunshine and electricity, now a part of him. And maybe that's why Hinata's eyes look so much like the moon, lately, why the delicate shadows that stretched over his face the morning they woke up facing each other didn't look as scary as Kenma worried they would. They looked like they belonged there.

They get to the camping grounds late in the afternoon, everyone exhausted from the steep pull up the trail. One look at the expanse of land around them-- land that's theirs, in fact, all this space to start a fire and dance around like idiots-- and they perk up, Tanaka springing back to bravado. "Alright," he calls, shoving friends out of the way; Noya goes flying. "Time to get the tents set up! Who needs help? You see, I'm sort of an expert at this kind of thing..."

"As if," Kuroo snorts. "Kenma and I used to go camping all the time, right Kenma?"

"Listen, city boy..."

"I guess we did," Kenma allows, placing his bags down. He doesn't even need to wait for everyone else to do it, for approval. His arms hurt.

He says it loud enough to get everyone's attention. People murmur comments, ask him to
elaborate, and even though Kuroo answers for him, Kenma can't help but think he could have answered himself. It doesn't make him as nervous anymore. These people all around him are almost like family now.

Hinata especially. He can feel the boy's hard gaze on him; maybe wondering where he went camping, what he did. Kenma thinks about it while he helps with the tents. He remembers going out to spots like Kanotoen, just him and Kuroo, sitting under all those trees and all those peaks in the mountainsides. It wasn't the city; Kenma's never much liked it outside of the city, but back then it was necessary, to get away from all of the noise. Especially after his parents stopped tagging along. They could just go, just leave like that for long weekends, right after new year's, or something like Sea day weekend if they were lucky. They would drive down to wherever they could get away from everyone else, set up their tent and lie there under the stars. If they were really far out, camping illegally like they are now, Kuroo would walk them down the trail until they found a lake to go swimming in, or to wade through like Kenma would. They screamed at the stars, shouted fuck you to the gaping rock towers that reminded Kenma of the ocean even back then. It didn't matter who the 'fuck you's were really directed at back then, either. Maybe everyone.

"You can hardly call it camping," Kuroo observes, lugging a tarp over to where Daichi is setting up the communal row of tents. "We hardly ever stayed longer than two days. Kenma gets bored pretty much as soon as his gameboy runs out of power."

"We have rechargeable batteries, now. The future is beautiful," Kenma says in a flat, nonchalant tone. Groans are passed around, and he can't help the grin that rises on his face. He knows he's not going to bury his face in his games the whole time he's out here. For the first time in his life, he knows that.

There's a lot of struggle to get the tents up. The taller guys are put in charge of worming the poles into them, propping the sides, and working the huge tarps in between the trees to protect them from the cold. It hardly seems fair that Kenma just stands there while it all happens, so he tries to be useful, passing pegs when he can. There's this big deal about setting up a large metallic tarp for shade, which is so big they need three of them to position it. Kuroo craps on about the particular slope it needs to sit at so that it won't get weighed down if it rains, and crush one of them to death.

"I hope it's you," Tsukishima says.

"Babe. That makes no sense. If you're in my tent, won't you die, too?"

"Ugh," Kageyama says. Just 'ugh' for a moment, letting that sentiment sit there before he decides to add to the thought. "Who's unlucky enough to share a tent with you two? Not me, I hope. I'd rather sleep in the van."

"Shut up," Tsukishima says.

Kuroo slings an arm around the blonde's shoulders. He almost falls into one of the tents. "No one's sharing a tent with us, anyway. There's three tents of three, and one tent of two."

"How is that fair?" Nishinoya complains. Kuroo turns on his deadpan.

"Tsukki wants the D."

"Shut up, or I'm going home."

Once they have the tents set up, Kuroo announces how the sleeping arrangements are going to work. He and Tsukishima are sharing the smallest tent on the far West side of their Tent Village—he actually calls it Tent Village, in a straight-faced way only Kuroo can. Then it goes as follows: Suga, Daichi, and Yamaguchi-- Kageyama, Tanaka, and Asahi-- and Kenma, Hinata, and Noya.
Kenma suspects-- highly suspects, as in, there's no question about it-- that he's been put in a tent with Hinata on purpose. He supposes it doesn't matter, as long as Nishinoya is there. The thought is still irritating. He tries to meet Kuroo's eye when he's announcing the names, but the taller is skillfully avoiding his gaze. Then, because Kenma loves to torture himself, he spares a glance at Hinata. His face is beet red. God. He must hate the thought of sharing a tent that much.

With the tents set up, they resign themselves to resting the climb out of their bodies. The clouds have parted just enough to let a little sun through, and Kenma lies in it thankfully, absorbing it the way a cat or lizard would try to. He watches the mood of the trip envelop before him. Suga sets up a radio so that they can play music, a borderline-annoying cheerful mix Kuroo must have made. Daichi is put in charge of guarding the food from the likes of Noya and Hinata and every other squirrel trying to get into it. It's kind of nice, seeing everyone horse around. Like school, his parents, his guilt: none of that matters.

"Hey."

Kenma whips his head to the side at breakneck speed.

"Ow. Oh my God."

Kuroo chuckles. He crouches to join him, moving down so that he's lying comfortably on his back. The sun covers one side of his face and blocks a little from Kenma's body. He shuts his eyes, turns his head back to the sky.

"It's gonna get cold tonight," he observes.

Kuroo grunts in assent. "Mm. That's why I packed sweaters for you."

It's quiet for a while between them. Kenma listens to the song that's playing, pop and electronia, and the buzz of the campsite around him. He can hear Kageyama and Hinata bickering by the tents, Tanaka complaining that he wants to open the beer.

"...Are you mad at me for forcing you to come?"

"Nah." It's an honest answer. Kuroo seems to realise that, turning on his side and propping his head up in his hand.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm having fun."

His best friend grins, this horrible, dorky grin. Kenma hits him in the chest and tries to stifle his laugh by turning his head.

"So much beer, man. Believe me."

"I don't even drink beer," he says, rolling his eyes; as if alcohol was actually the reason he agreed to come. Because he did agree, didn't he? He could have shut the door in Kuroo's face, told him no when they were downstairs and he was staring at Hinata through the window. But he didn't. He got on the bus.

"And ghost stories! Oh, man. Kei's gonna get so spooked. He goes totally wild when he's drunk, y'know? Like a teenager."

"Gross. I don't want to know what your boyfriend's like when he's drunk."

"Only 'cause your boyfriend isn't," Kuroo challenges, wiggling his eyebrows. It's meant to make Kenma laugh, but it doesn't. He drops his gaze and thinks of Hinata.
Kuroo nudges him. "Hey, don't brood. I put you in a tent with him, didn't I?"

"I knew that was on purpose."

Kuroo's grinning like a jackass. Kenma starts to get up to leave.

"Wait, wait," his best friend begs, choking on his own laughter. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I can totally make your life like a BL game, you know. The romantic camping trip in the middle of nowhere. Maybe a blizzard will hit and you'll need to keep each other warm." He wiggles his brows again; this time it has the desired effect on Kenma.

"That doesn't make sense," he says, still laughing. "Wouldn't everyone else need body warmth, too?"

"Yeah. Hey, do you think people have orgies in situations like those?"

"Oh my God, Kuro."

"Because they probably do. No offense, but I don't think I'd have sex with you, like, even if I was freezing to death."

"I'm not appealing?" He's pouting. Kuroo shakes his head.

"No, you totally are. But I mean, if you didn't ask me to?"

"Kuro," Kenma says, blinking slowly. "Your boyfriend is right over there."

They both laugh. It's kind of hysterical, after a moment, all that tension leeching up and out Kenma's throat. He feels Hinata's eyes on him again; passing over, for a second. When he raises his head to check, the redhead is heavily involved in his own conversation.

He turns back to Kuroo. His friend is wearing a sympathetic look, brows drawn together the way they are when he's trying to be more sincere and less of a jackass. "Talk to him," he offers.

Kenma shakes his head. "He's scared of me now. Or something."

"He's not. He's been undressing you with his eyes all day."

"He has not," Kenma defends, cheeks going pink. Kuroo notices and ruffles his hair.

"Aw, cute. You've been doing it to him too, huh?"

"Knock it off."

"Okay, but really, you won't regret it if you talk to him. It can be like in one of your shitty romance novels."

"Have you been talking to Lev?" Kenma accuses, scowling. Kuroo raises his eyebrows for a second, and then laughs. Like, viciously. Into Kenma's shoulders.

"You're heavy, get off."

"Oh man. It's not just me, see? Everyone knows. Everyone. You have to kiss the guy."

"I'm not going to kiss him. Do you know what happened last time I kissed him?"

But Kuroo isn't listening, already having broken into a version of Kiss the Girl from The Little Mermaid. His English is atrocious.
When Kenma's finally stopped laughing, and complaining, and trying to push Kuroo off of him, he gets back up to help with the campsite activities. Suga has joined their boyfriend at the food-manning station, and Asahi is nervously on guard to the side. This is probably to do with the fact that Nishinoya is eyeing all three of them off like he has a master plan to get to all the hot dogs and ramen and sweets Kenma knows they have with them.

"We should go explore," Tanaka is saying, having taken his shirt off again. Some of the guys are gathering nearby bits of wood around a makeshift indent in the ground Kenma assumes is going to be used as a fire pit; they've brought their own kindling, too, and the area smells overwhelmingly of it, thick in the air.

"Someone has to man the site, then," Kuroo contends, stretching. His gaze turns back to Suga and Daichi. "Can I trust you not to christen the fire pit if we take a hike a little down the trail?"

"As if we would do that outdoors," Suga says, but their grin says otherwise. It occurs to Kenma for the first time that his best friend isn't the only adult with a horrifyingly public sex life to worry about.

Suga and Daichi agree to hang back and man the campsite while the rest of their group explores the surrounding area, minus Asahi, who offers to stay and protect the sanctity of the unsoiled (un-sexed-upon) site, and Kageyama, who is napping under one of the metallic tarps. The area around their site is mostly flat, with low-sloping trails they navigate around. Kenma regrets his choice of footwear-- sneakers that do nothing to protect him from the uneven ground and littered sticks and rocks, letalone the mud-- once Kuroo starts to lead their search party down one of the narrower pathways, a steep hill that leads to a bank.

There's a small body of water at the end of it, caked in mud around its mouth.

"Is this the Akigawa river?" Nishinoya is bouncing around the edges like he's going to dive in.

"No way," Tanaka scolds. "Too small. Besides, we went off track."

"Oh, right. Do you think we can swim in it?"

"It's Winter," Kuroo says, watching the morons skirt the rim of the lake. The rocks gathered around it look slippery, covered in moss here and there. Since the group appears to be stopping, Kenma takes a seat and perches on the brim of one of the higher points in the rocks, letting his legs dangle until they sit just above the water.

He gets kind of lost in it. The water is really pretty, clear in patches and white in others where the liquid has rushed and streamed. He imagines falling straight into it and floating down on his back, down the mountainous areas, ending up somewhere peaceful and forgotten down the bottom. Maybe being here is just another version of being in the city. The rocks like people, the trees like skyscrapers. Dreamily he considers becoming a part of it, either the throes of bounding lights or the reflections off of a lake like this one. He stretches his foot out, dips just the side of it along the crystalline water's surface.

He looks up when he realises he's being watched. There's Kuroo and Hinata, side by side and staring at him like he's grown another head. He blinks at them, pulling his mind from the daze like water.

Hinata spins away, though not fast enough for Kenma to miss his flushed face. He glances questioningly at Kuroo, who only shakes his head with a fond smile. A kind of look that says, 'you have no idea, do you, idiot?' Kenma really doesn't have any idea. Was he making a weird face? Is it weird to dip your shoe in the water? He climbs back up the rock, wobbling a little, and starts to make his way up the bank with the others.
The rest of their exploration is mainly to collect firewood, Kenma making comments that driftwood would burn better, if only they’d camped near the ocean. Everyone’s on board with that idea, now, even though it’s Winter. They resolve to camp there "next time". Next time. It makes Kenma’s chest warm.

"So," Kuroo says, sidling up to Kemna when they're trekking through flat ground again. "Shouyou's about five minutes from throwing you against a tree."

"He wants to hurt me?" Kuroo gives him a really disapproving look; he knows what he means. "Don't make it weird."

"How am I making it weird? Honestly, he's so in love, it's starting to make me sick."

Kenma scoffs delicately, but keeps an eye out for Hinata anyway. He's way at the front of their group, in no danger of overhearing. "Keep your voice down," he says anyway. "As if romance has ever made you sick. You're sappy."

"I'm not."

"You make out with Kei in front of me all the time. All the time." Besides, he thinks, sparing another glance at Hinata; if he wanted to kiss him, he would. Kenma's hurt him. It isn't something you just fix by making out against a tree, as much as it hurts to admit.

"You're being such a baby." Kuroo sniffs. "This is your first love, so you're being dramatic about it."

"This isn't my first love."

"But it's the first one that matters to you. When you actually want something, Kenma, you're the worst. You go into full analyse-and-plot mode. You ought to loosen up, just let things happen."

The last time he 'just let things happen', he ended up pacing around Hinata's apartment and making an idiot of himself. No. No way he's gonna jump into this thing headfirst and without regard for Hinata's feelings; what kind of friend would that make him, letalone what kind of--boyfriend, or whatever--

"You're that scared of losing him that you're willing to risk not having him at all."


"I'm trying to help you, here. When have my impressions ever been wrong?"

Kenma tries to think of a time, to use as some clever remark, but comes up blank. "Regardless," he says, hating to admit when his friend is right, "you're wrong about this. You have to be. You weren't there. You didn't see his face."

Kuroo makes a groaning, protesting noise, something like 'auugh'. "You're still on that? Move on, Kenma. Jesus."

Kenma knows he's right. That's the worst part. But he has moved on, kind of. It's not that he's scared of letting Hinata in any more. That's what the excitement is, he realises; that selfish part of him that really, really wants this to work. He's selfish enough to want to corner Hinata, get him alone, and just tell him everything. Kuroo might be partially right; even if it isn't his first love, it's the first in a while, and it's intense. His whole body shakes with it, this need to be closer to Hinata. He feels like a teenager again. Flushed with the thought of it, being close to Hinata, maybe while no one is around-- and maybe they could kiss against a tree, Hinata's hands on his waist, all the city and the sea and the mountains in their lips--
He shakes himself out of the thought, remembering very pointedly where he is, and how close he was to running into a tree. Kuroo is smirking like he knows exactly what's going through Kenma's head. It feels kind of like an invasion of privacy, and he has to remind himself that no one can read his thoughts. Still. He glances ahead at Hinata, feeling the back of his neck heat up.

He's doomed.

By the time they get back, the sun is pretty low in the sky. All the clouds are darkening the scenery early, and they're quick to get the fire going. Kenma changes into warmer pants and slips a sweater over his head. He realises only as he's going through his bag that one of the sweaters in there is Hinata's-- there's no way Kuroo would have known, would have done it on purpose, but it feels like it anyway. He shoves it to the bottom of his bag, feeling red all over. Then, to make a point, he pushes his sleeping bag as close to the wall of the tent as possible, checking twice that Nishinoya is in the middle. There. Now he can't embarrass himself any more.

Daichi and Asahi are trying to cook frankfurts over the fire when Kenma emerges from the tent, and Suga is switching up the music to something slower. It's right on the border of something Kenma recognises, some indie band with thrown in English lyrics he can actually pick up on. The mood is going from all the buzz of the day to the calm of night, a warmth settling over their site even as the temperature drops.

Some of the guys have dragged bigger heaps of wood, logs and felled trees, to form a makeshift row of seats around their fire. Some people are just sitting on the ground; Nishinoya is propped up against Asahi's leg, chattering a million miles a minute about how he's going to resort to cannibalism if the food isn't ready soon. Some of the others are trying to boil water for ramen, hands shaking with the effort of holding pans of water over the top of the flames, high enough that the smoke won't turn the metal completely black.

Kenma makes his way to sit beside Kuroo on one of the logs; there's an obvious indent in the dirt where it's been dragged. Suga sits beside him, after a moment, and suddenly Kenma feels warm again. Surrounded by people he cares about, for once; he feels like he's known everyone here for years. He wishes belatedly that Lev had have come, maybe brought Yaku; those other friends from the party, too. There are people from support group he could have invited. Friends. People who enjoy his company.

Kenma feels that little bit of inkling guilt again, when Hinata sits down on the other side of the campfire. It's not so pointedly far away from him, but the distance is obviously with purpose. He makes a show of keeping his eyes anywhere but on Kenma, or even on the people surrounding him. Kenma begins to regret the loosening feeling in his chest, that craving to have a good time. Kuroo pulls him out of it, passing him a hot dog haphazardly skewered and burnt at the edges.

"This had better be cooked in the middle," Kenma says, taking a bite. "If I get food poisoning, I'll make sure to throw up on your tent."

"No faith," Kuroo scoffs, offended.

They break out the beers, finally, Suga warning everyone to drink in moderation if they're going to be getting up early to move the campsite. Tsukishima suggests they just don't move, in that case, and it starts an argument; half their group wants to stay, and drink, and the other half wants to be mature about it and trek back first thing in the morning. Kenma remains impartial, chewing silently and watching it like a show. And maybe he is a little guilty of watching Hinata, but who can blame him? He loosens up and joins in on the shouting, and for once Kenma feels that tension, stretching all the way across the fire, dissipate.

Then Hinata catches him staring, Kenma looks away, and the tension is back.
Even as they all drink and relax, it's this unspoken thing that everybody is aware of. Kageyama continues to throw not-so-secretive glances Kenma's way, whispering to Hinata as he does. Suga pats his leg occasionally. It's a big game of looking between the two of them, everyone wanting to do something but not knowing what to do. So Kuroo, diligently, just keeps passing him drinks.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to get me drunk," Kenma teases, taking the third beer. If everyone didn't know he was a lightweight before, they certainly know now; two beers down and he's already wary of the fact that he'll wobble on his feet if he tries to stand.

"Your cheeks are all flushed," Kuroo says, dragging his gaze elsewhere a moment. "You're cute like this."

"Don't cheat on me," Tsukishima jokes in a flat tone. Kenma chokes on his drink trying to stifle a laugh.

"I'm just saying," Kuroo insists, and then he does that thing with his eyes again; Kenma follows them this time, and his own eyes crash with two the colour of earth, all the way across the fire. Hinata looks away immediately.

Kuroo is already grinning smugly by the time Kenma looks back. "Don't," he warns tightly, taking perhaps too big a sip of his drink, "say anything."

"Of course," Kuroo murmurs, but he's still grinning. Kenma guesses he kind of is, too.

After dinner, when they break out the marshmallows (Kageyama fails spectacularly at making a s'more, and Hinata gratefully eats the mess) Suga suggests they start telling ghost stories. They're all pretty pathetic, at first; Nishinoya tries to recount some story about a dog, only then it's a cat, and there's a haunted doll in there somewhere, too. Kuroo just re-tells the plot of 'The Ring'. Then it gets to Suga, however, who is apparently versed in the art of scaring the shit out of their teammates; Kenma should realise it's going to be frightening as soon as Daichi starts to protest against them telling it.

"Hush," Suga scolds, pulling a face; they're kind of a lightweight too, but Kenma knew that already. They straighten up, positioning themselves very carefully so that the crackling fire throws shadows over their face. It's all pretty sinister.

"So once, there was a group who wanted to go camping, just like us." They let their eyes pass over the crowd until everyone is silent and listening. "They wanted to really enhance their camping experience, so they went offroad. They went deep into the forest, even though the ranger told them not to-- they wanted to be far from the commercial campsites, and thought it would be more authentic that way."

"Just like us," Kuroo adds, using a spooky tone. Suga throws him a look Kenma has never seen before; it makes his stomach flip with the beginnings of fear.

"So they were sitting around the campfire, this group. One of them thought that they heard a noise in the bushes. It wasn't unusual for raccoons to be around these parts, and they didn't want their food to be eaten, so a few-- maybe three or four-- of their group decided to go check it out. They split off into two groups. In one of the groups was two childhood friends, who weren't able to locate the animal. One of the men turned his back so he could shine his flashlight on the bushes, but could still hear his friend beside him, breathing. Then, all of a sudden: he hears his friend call his name, all the way back at the campsite."

There's an audible murmur that weaves through their group. It would be funny to Kenma, writing material, maybe, if there wasn't an inkling of fear worming into his gut.

Suga continues, gaze dark. "He went back to the campsite, and sure enough, his friend was there
waiting for him. 'Where did you go?' he asked. 'None of us could find you.' The man was so sure
that his friend had been right beside him, breathing, but he dropped it and went on with his night.

"Everything was fine for a while, the incident forgotten. Then, it was time for bed... they never
had found what made those noises, but the man forgot about it, soon falling asleep. He woke in
the middle of the night, and found his friend sleeping peacefully beside him. He could hear his
friend breathing, see the rise and fall of his chest underneath his sleeping bag. He started to fall
back to sleep, when suddenly, he heard a noise outside..."

Asahi whimpers. Actually whispers. Daichi looks mildly disapproving, but the fear on his face is
obvious, too. Grinning wickedly, Suga continues. "The man began to get up, to get out of bed,
when the tent suddenly unzipped... and it was his childhood friend. He said, 'Oh, you're awake. I
just wanted to tell you I'm sleeping in another tent, so you'll have to bear being alone.' He left the
tent, and zipped it back up, leaving his friend in the darkness; and it's then the man realised. He
could still hear breathing from the sleeping bag beside him."

Someone shrieks. It strikes Kenma as a noise that ought to be fake, but with the pounding of his
own heart, there's no way it can be. Their whole group is spooked.

"What happened next?" Nishinoya prompts, brows drawn together.

Suga shrugs, sipping at their beer. "That's it."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"How do we know if he's dead?" Noya's voice is wrought with worry. "What was the thing in his
tent? What happens?"

"He dies, probably," Kageyama observes. He's shaking. Everyone is shaking.

Kenma's gaze finds Hinata, and sees that he's grabbed his roommate's arm in his fright. It's childish-
- majorly-- and he shouldn't think it, but the thought comes anyway: that should be me. It's absurd
to want to protect Hinata from a scary story, but his chest swells with the immature desire to go
over there and hold him. And the sight of him all shaky and worked up is... kind of cute.
Regretfully.

Kuroo nudges him. "You look pretty pale. Did the story scare you that much?"

"No." He glares into his beer can.

Kuroo scoffs. "Hey, maybe Shouyou will get so scared that he'll cuddle up to you tonight. Keep
me safe, Kenma-chan."

"Shh," he hisses, well aware how loud Kuroo gets when he's drunk. He looks up; it doesn't seem
as though Hinata heard. Good. "Besides," he whispers, still in that hissing tone, "there's no way. I
made sure our beds were as far apart as possible."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Kuroo seems genuinely insulted. "After I went to all that
effort to make sure you were in the same tent."

"This is sabotage. You're trying to push me into a trap."

"A love trap."

"Shh!"
They get over the story eventually, calming back down, but still present is a kind of riled up fear among the group. It especially elevates itself when they realise they're starting to get low on firewood.

"I'm not going," Daichi announces. "I don't deserve to die."

"I'll go," Tanaka offers, a bravado grin. "You'll come, right, Asahi?"

"M-me?"

"Hey, no fair, Asahi gets to die but Daichi doesn't have to?"

"How about I go with you," Nishinoya offers. "We can have a code word."

"Why do we need a code word?"

"So that ghosts can't trick us, of course." He looks at his friend like he's stupid. "You'll know if it's not me, because I won't say the word, um... pork bun, or something."

Tanaka scrunches up his nose. "Dude, why would you bring pork buns up now? I'm still hungry. Also, what if the ghosts know our codeword?"

"I hadn't really thought about that..."

"Bro, if we die, I want you to know you're my one and only. Like, if you were a girl, I would have married you by now."

"I'm not good enough to marry as a guy...?"

"Well, I mean...bro..."

"If you two don't go already," Suga says, "I'll invite the ghosts into your tent myself."

That's enough to prompt them into leaving. And Kenma's secretly, selfishly glad, even though he knows Suga was joking; Noya's in his tent, and he doesn't particularly want any ghosts there. He reasons that it's probably time to stop drinking, then, and resigns himself to the antics of the group, settling back into the atmosphere.

That is, until Tanaka and Noya come back screaming.

"A bear!" Tanaka shrieks, almost running into the fire. "There's a-- and there was--"

"We almost died," Nishinoya moans, basically crawling up his friend's body. They break into a fit of babbling and shouting, and it takes that long for the group to realise what they're talking about.

"You saw a bear?"

"Kuro, you idiot, why are we camping in the middle of nowhere?"

"What if it was a demon bear?"

"We're going to be eaten. We're going to die."

"Feed it Kageyama! Appease the demon, give it an offering!"

"I didn't know we had bears in Tokyo."

"If you try and feed me to a bear, I'll piss in your sleeping bag, Hinata."
"Well, black bears... we have those, I think. Was it a black bear?"

"It had demon eyes," Tanaka insists, his own eyes wide and frantic. He and Nishinoya are both still babbling like idiots. Finally, Suga stands up.

"It won't be any good if there's a bear hanging around the campsite. If we all go in a group, maybe we can scare it off."

It's probably a really bad idea. But drunk ideas are as good as anything when the alcohol is still in your system, so the group stands up, already chanting in agreement.

It happens like that. They all head off in the direction the two guys came from, with them both hanging nervously by the back of the group and giving vague directions. All the bravado within the group is enough to keep Kenma from feeling scared; at least for a while. They march through the flat ground, flashlights spinning wildly from the front and back of their marching group, determined to find and scare off the bear.

"It was probably just a squirrel," Tsukishima observes blandly. He's gripping onto Kuroo's sleeve hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

Something changes, some of the insane masculinity dissipating the further they get. Suddenly no one is talking. The night is deadly silent.

"Huddle together," Daichi whispers, falling back in his speed so that they're all closer. The light on Kenma's phone goes out with the battery. He relies on the people around him, bodies pressing and digging, to lead him down the path.

It's not really the danger that occurs to him, but stupidly, it's Sugawara's story. Even though there's a good chance one of them could find themself too close to the edge and go tumbling down a bank, all Kenma can think is: what if somebody isn't real? Somebody here could be a ghost. It seems to be a sentiment shared by the group, who are creeping near-silently along the track.

Suddenly, they stop. There are a few hushed whispers passed around, but mostly just breaths, as everyone strains to see.

"Is that...?"

"Just ahead there..."

Kenma's eyes adjust. And he sees it immediately.

A pair of eyes, glowing in the dark.

Without another moment's notice, the group are falling back. Kenma stumbles to keep up with it, people pushing him like a wave, sprinting back down the track even after they hear Suga shout, "Wait, it's just a deer!"

Kenma runs, not thinking where he's going or even looking back. Everything is a blur of stumbling feet and wildly roaming flashlights, fingers digging into his skin and bodies hitting bodies. He darts wildly through the trees, thinking only that he's going to die, that this will be the end for sure--

Someone to his right crashes into him, almost sending the both of them spiraling over a precarious looking jagged edge of path. Kenma regains his footing just in time to see the person go down, hitting the floor of the path with a muffled noise. He doesn't even think, just reaches down and pulls them to their feet. And then they're holding hands and running. And then it's Hinata.

Kenma doesn't even think about it, not until they're back at the campsite. Everyone is gathering,
collapsing around the fire with breathed sighs of relief. Daichi starts to count to make sure everyone got back alive.

Hinata's still holding his hand. He can feel it, the callouses of his fingers and the warmth of his palm, gripping his like they might both die if he lets go. Kenma steps towards him inadvertently, and their arms brush; he shivers. Then, without even looking at each other, they let go. Kenma doesn't look back. He can't. He can hear Hinata panting harshly, still calming down from running, and he knows if he looks now he'll do something stupid. It's all that adrenaline.

So he just walks off.

Everyone calms down eventually, and, after Suga's lecture about how dangerous it is to run in the dark, and it was only a deer, seriously, they decide to go to bed.

All the exhaustion is catching up with Kenma anyway, like just touching Hinata drained all the energy from him. He can still feel it, the ghost of the other's fingers, pressing into his. The concomitant pressure of their arms brushing like they were going to burn into each other. The worst part is that he isn't even cold where they were touching, sprinting through the woods together: he feels hot all over.

He digs the first sweater he finds out of his bag once he's in the safety of the tent, taking the brief moments he's alone to calm his breathing and his heart rate down. Warmed, layered up, he crawls into his sleeping bag and shuts his eyes before the other two can join him. It's easier if he just pretends to be asleep, so that he doesn't have to look at Hinata again. His body shakes with the memory. Like it's betraying him; he can't lie still.

Eventually, he hears Nishinoya and Hinata unzip the side of the tent and climb in. His whole body stiffens. Shit, how does he normally sleep? He tries to keep his breathing even, not wanting either of them to suspect he's still up and try to start a conversation with him. He wills his body to stop twitching like it's trying to move across to the other side of the tent and crash into Hinata. God. He deserves death. He deserves to die right now.

"I can't believe we almost died," Hinata whispers harshly, out of breath with giggles. Kenma's heart thumps.

"Idiot, we didn't. Tanaka and I did. You only saw a deer."

"Yeah, but if we didn't find a bear, doesn't that mean that you only saw a deer too...?"

"No way, it was a demon bear or something. Tanaka and I saw it. Man, I seriously thought I was gonna die."

They chatter on noisily-- in what are meant to be whispers, Kenma figures-- but even despite that, due to the alcohol or the hiking or whatever else, Kenma doesn't find it hard to go to sleep. In fact, before he knows it, he's slipping into the blackness, only Hinata's voice clinging to the edges of his consciousness.

He wakes up twice.

The first time can't be too long after he passed out. The campsite is silent outside, an exhausted swell of stillness and nature, the quiet chirp of insects. Kenma thinks at first that the noise he hears is the murmur of the wind, before it occurs to him that there aren't any leaves or branches blowing. Then he starts to form words out of it.

"--just saying, man, if you have something like that, you go for it."

"It's kind of complicated. Like-- pwaah, I'm all confused, complicated, y'know?"
"Yeah, I guess..."

The noise veers off again. Kenma thinks he must be dreaming. Then, clear as day, he hears Hinata whisper, "Is he still asleep?"

His pulse spikes. He wills himself to calm down, focusing on his deep breathing. The whole tent seems to hold its breath for as long as it takes to convince the two of them that they haven't woken Kenma up.

"...Yeah," Noya whispers eventually. "You should just tell him how you feel, you know."

"What, now?"

"No, idiot, when he wakes up!"

"I don't know... like, he might be uncomfortable. I don't want to upset him; I really care about him."

Kenma's stomach flips. They're talking about him. They're talking about him.

"Pfft," Noya sniggers, the sound muffled like he's covering his mouth. "Gay, dude."

"Hey!"

"Sorry, sorry. But for real, man. You have to say something. You gotta."

There's a pause. "...Maybe," Hinata supplies eventually. There's a breathy sigh, and then Noya laughs again.

"Man. Your face is so gross and lovesick right now, you should see yourself."

"Shut up!"

"I mean it. What if he wakes up and sees you staring? He's gonna think you're a stalker."

They both laugh then, a breathy and nervous noise, Noya wheezing with the effort to keep silent, and Kenma drifts off to sleep again, wondering if he dreamed that whole thing after all.

His dreams don't make sense at all. It's like moving through a room where the air is water, wading in slow motion with heavy limbs. Sometimes his head surfaces enough to pick up on noise; muffled fragments of conversations, or Hinata breathing as they ran. His dreams are a hazy mess of feet against the forest floor, saltwater pouring down his throat, and then--

Hands on his. Hands on his neck, but tender, now, brushing the underside of his chin. Lips on his chin, lips on his stomach, lips everywhere. He thinks Hinata's name in quick succession, the feel of it on dream-Kenma's tongue as heavy as a tsunami and as calm as low tide.

He wakes up to the sound of Nishinoya snoring. It's still pitch black, so he keeps his eyes closed. He waits for all of his senses to come back; the cold, first, though with all the layers he's wearing it isn't as intense as he thought it would be. He focuses on the light sway of the wind, now, the brush of leaves hitting wood outside. The sour smell of campfire smoke has followed them into the tent, filling it to the brim like an opium den.

He realises it abruptly, like walking into a wall.

Hinata is awake.

He doesn't know how he knows, but suddenly he's more sure than ever. Nishinoya's loud
breathing between them doesn’t disguise from the sound of Hinata's breaths: and they're shallow. It's stifling, the air in the tent all of a sudden, and in an abrupt rush of desire he realises that he's never wanted to be touching a person so badly in his life. It chokes him, this craven, shivering need. He feels it like a fever, and he knows, immediately, that Hinata knows he's awake.

They lie there not even two whole metres apart, breathing together in the cramped space of the tent, both aware that the other is awake but unwilling to do anything, say anything. The intimacy bricks them in, traps them, weighs the air down until neither of them can breathe.

Kenma falls asleep again to the thought of what would happen if he just got up, and walked over to where Hinata is lying. This time, he sleeps through the night.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter Coming Soon, brought to you by: stargazing, lake adventures, and Kenma's Indubitably Gay Ass

thanks for all your continuing support folks!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

warnings for drinking and mentions of recreational drug use (that dank kush)

also thank you so so so much to kitasmeow, beeframes and reraimu for the (ff uckin incredible??) fan art inspired by this fic!!! please go follow these 3, they're amazing.
http://cloverguts.tumblr.com/post/129642613726/kitasmeow-life-is-strange-when-im-next-to-you
http://reraimu.tumblr.com/post/129244480141/i-was-reading-chapter-16-of-chameleon-boy

if anyones interested in the songs that got me through this edit:
Jack Garratt- Weathered
The 1975- Undo
Shura- Touch
Tycho- Montana

as always hmu @ cloverguts.tumblr.com. come talk to me about kenhina, gay shit, or wish me a happy birthday! (its my birthday tomorrow & i love attention)

enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kenma is the last one in his tent to wake up.

It happens slowly, sunlight filtering in and registering through his glued shut eyes. He wakes up with his head buried firmly against the pillow, a patch of drool surrounding him. God. It's the alcohol, he knows, but his stomach flips with embarrassment at the thought of Hinata seeing. He's a mess.

As if to compensate, he crawls from the tent quickly, emerging to a biting and chilly morning. The sun is only just starting to actually rear its head from behind a valley of clouds, warming one portion of the campsite where Noya and others are gathered to catch its rays. He doesn't see Hinata right away, so he steps out.

Their gazes crash, even metres away. No one else has seemed to notice Kenma's presence yet; it's almost ridiculous, the way Hinata's eyes find his. Then they flick down once, and stay there. Even from far away, Kenma can see his face reddening.

He looks down, and sure enough, he's wearing Hinata's sweater. One more look back up at Hinata's face confirms it: he's red, looking about two seconds from either racing over to Kenma or running away from him. Does he want it back? No. No way. It would be majorly weird, not to mention embarrassing as Hell to go over there in front of everyone and hand it back. He wouldn't ever live it down. He wouldn't live, for that matter. Taking a deep breath, Kenma spins on his heel and crawls back into the tent.
Once he's appropriately changed— and by appropriately, he means not wearing the sweater of the guy he's in love with—he chances his escape and emerges again. Hinata isn't in sight this time, most likely having gone across to the other side of Tent Village to avoid him. Good. He ignores the way his chest clenches at that, instead resolving to find Kuroo and pester him about breakfast.

There's a big commotion going on around the food as Kenma approaches it, Noya trapped between Kuroo and Daichi like some Lord of the Flies scene. Kenma sees it as he gets a little closer: food packages, scattered around as if a tornado has hit.

"I'm not an animal." Noya is scowling. "I didn't even leave my tent last night. I have an alibi!"

"Hinata is hardly an alibi, considering the fact that there's a high chance he was in on it," Daichi says disapprovingly. Suga's soothing voice breaks through the chaos.

"I'd be quick to blame them both, too, if this wasn't obviously an animal attack. There are a lot of raccoons up here, and deer, as we saw last night. Nishinoya isn't stupid enough to leave this much of a mess."


"Alright," Daichi rumbles, still looking over the mess. "That's true, I guess... in that case, shouldn't we do something? We can't have it happen again. We're lucky they only got into one of the boxes."

"I guess that settles it," says Suga, stretching their arms up to the sky. "We'll have to move the tents."

"What, you mean, hike back down?"

"Closer to the cars. We can store our food in there, and other things, so that they aren't just lying around the campsite."

"I'm too hung over for this," Tanaka groans. Kenma hadn't even seen him, crumpled on the ground with his head in his hands. Kuroo decides to notice Kenma's presence then, spinning around and slugging him on the shoulder. "Hey, there you are. How's your head?"

"Fine," he answers.

"You hungry?"

"Yes. Please." He's never been so thankful for food in his life.

After breakfast (and Daichi's weird, aggressive yoga routine, which Suga watches dreamily) they start to pack up the tents, gathering their things and distributing them amongst people to carry like yesterday. It's later in the morning, so once they have all their equipment ready to go they make the hike back to their parking spot. Noya and Tanaka immediately start their spiel that they're going to find bigfoot.

It's all blissfully downhill for a while, varying between that and flat ground before Kenma realises that a great deal of their walk is still going to be up. He dreads it; everyone dreads it, you can see it on their faces when you look, this insurmountable tension and terror. And Kenma's not even one of the hung over ones.

Speaking of hung over: the drinkers seem to be back to their peppy selves, Tanaka racing around with his shirt off again. Kageyama, who Kenma caught throwing up in a bush this morning while he was trying to eat breakfast-- gross-- looks a little dark around the eyes, but other than that he's
fine. He and Hinata race up the path a few times, crashing into trees and tumbling down.

"As your captain," Daichi begins to call.

"Not our captain if we aren't training!"

"As your captain," he repeats, "I have to remind you not to kill yourselves out here. I won't be responsible for the bodies."

"We'll leave you for the ghosts to peck at," Suga says with a grin, but then everyone remembers the ghost stories and shut up again.

Mostly, Kenma thinks, looking around, it's a reminder of terror; for him it's a reminder of the way Hinata's body crashed into his from the side while they were running. He came out of nowhere, like gravity suddenly switched off and forced the two of them together. He remembers breathing him in but not thinking about it, finding his hand in the dark and running. Just like that time at his house, when they went downstairs after the horror movie. That fear racing through them. Maybe it wasn't all to do with the ghosts. The way his pulse thumped.

Kenma keeps finding himself gravitating back towards Hinata, either walking close to him or trying to catch his eye across the group. He looks away as soon as he catches himself doing it, every time; but still he can feel the warm pressure of Hinata's gaze. He keeps watching him.

"Hey, Kuroo," he says, finally catching up to his best friend. He and Tsukishima have been attached at the hip all morning; all lovey-dovey, like all it takes to loosen the blonde up is some alcohol and the smell of nature. Gross. "Can I talk to you?"

"Is it a secret, or can I hear?" Tsukishima questions, raising his brows. Kenma considers this seriously for a few moments.

"You can hear. Don't say anything to anyone, obviously."

"If it's about Hinata," he says, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "everyone already knows. Trust me."

That makes his face feel hot. He clears his throat. "Last night I woke up and he was talking to Nishinoya. About me, I think. It's... he said he had to tell me something."

"That he likes you, maybe." Kuroo smacks him on the back of the head. "Genius."

"What if it's something else?"

Both of them groan. It's amazingly coordinated; like a married couple. Kenma tells them this, and Tsukishima looks like he's going to hit him.

"It won't be anything else," Kuroo says reassuringly. "He keeps looking at you like he wants to make out with you until you tumble down the mystical brook together." He sighs dreamily. "So romantic. My son, finding his prince."

"There are no mystical brooks here. We're in Tokyo."

"Well, the wild and romantic wilderness, then."

"Still in Tokyo. Like, barely an hour from the city."

"Guys," Noya shrieks suddenly, pulling the group's attention. He is somewhere in the middle of the pack, and turning to look at him results in facing Hinata, their eyes meeting briefly. Kenma feels lightheaded for a moment.
"Bigfoot," he's babbling, jumping up and down. "We found bigfoot, he's here!"

"Bigfoot!" Tanaka shouts in agreement; barely a moment later and they're both surrounding Asahi, who looks mortified.

"Guys, enough," Daichi scolds.

"Bigfoot's hot."

"Please," Asahi says, even as Nishinoya repeats himself and starts to climb the older boy like a tree.

The incident results in the two of them being split up. Really, it should be funny, that Suga and Daichi spring into this sense of authority and banish their volleyball children to opposite ends of the walking group. But Kenma isn't laughing, because the way the group shifts—Tanaka back, Nishinoya forward, Asahi safe in the centre—puts Hinata barely two paces in front of Kenma. And he's just as aware of this as Kenma is. He can tell, from the way his shoulders bunch in, his steps falter from quickened and feverish to slow and faltering. Like he's not sure whether he wants to run to Kenma or away from him.

The tension is undeniable, building up like a fire in Kenma's chest, begging on any kind of fuel. He wants to step forward; he wants to fall back, run away, tumble down the side of the mountain. He can feel Hinata in the air in a way he can't describe, this gently thrumming thing, this pull and tremor.

He wants to surge forward and just-- touch him, at least, even if it's just the backs of their hands.

The worst part of this is that he doesn't have to imagine; he knows what it feels like. His body against Hinata's, Hinata's warm hand in his. Hinata's lips, slow moving and groggy first thing in the morning, parting so that his breath can stutter against Kenma's. They could have kept kissing. If Kenma hadn't gotten up— they could have slotted their bodies together, pulled the sheet back so that it wasn't between them, so that their thighs touched. What would Hinata have done if Kenma had touched his waist, maybe dipped his hand beneath the fabric? Would his breath have caught again? God--

"Kenma," Kuroo says suddenly, drawing his attention. He waves a hand in front of his friend's face the way he knows Kenma hates. "You look out of it. I don't want you to run into a tree or anything. What's on your mind?"

He's grinning, the jackass. He knows exactly why Kenma's distracted, or what could possibly be 'on his mind'. He knows Hinata's just a few steps ahead of them, too. Kenma glowers.

"Hm?" Kuroo says, leaning in; Kenma wants to hit him. He tries to meet Tsukishima's eye, hoping he'll at least share that sentiment. "You're blushing, Kenma."

"Enough," he says, turning his gaze down, but it's too late. He knows Hinata has thrown a glance over his shoulder, whipped it back quick as lightning. He shoots a glare at Kuroo, hating him with every inch of his body.

Kuroo just grins back.

By the time they're most of the way back down the mountain, everyone is sweating. It's a constant battle of uphill and downhill, the path switching in quick succession; the sun has actually decided to rear its head for once, shining so insistently that it's hard to believe it's Winter. It seems natural, expected, almost, that the group should essentially collapse at the first lake they see.

"Absolutely not, we still have all the gear," Daichi scolds, watching in abject disgust as Tanaka
tries to roll out of his shirt.

Yamaguchi and Hinata, who have been walking together for a while-- a distraction, Kenma figures, so that he doesn't have to pretend not to notice the blonde-- wait with wobbly legs for the okay to dive in. Everyone is staring at the shimmery surface of the water like it's a haven.

"How about this," Suga suggests, just as ready to dive in. "We'll go set up camp, and then if we all still want to go swimming, we'll come back."

"I didn't bring a bathing suit," Kageyama says, looking between the lake and Suga. "Were we supposed to?"

"I didn't bring one either," Hinata chimes in, and then everyone is shouting, taking their turns to affirm the lack of bathing suit situation, panic rising at the possibility of no lake.

Suga holds their hands up like a mediator. "Hold on, hold on. I didn't bring mine either. We'll just hang around the lake, then, okay? It's probably cold anyway."

That apparently decides it. Kenma can't explain it, that authoritarian, parental voice Suga uses, but it seems to do the trick. They all start for camp again, this time with an added vigor to their steps, and they're there in no time.

Setting up camp is faster than it was yesterday, too. Kenma knows a little better what to do this time, tries to avoid Hinata's eye while he does it. He passes Noya pegs and pretends like he doesn't even notice Hinata, walking by him fast. On one way past their arms brush, and Kenma doesn't have to look; he feels the way Hinata draws back, shivers, all that tension leaking out of the both of them in unwanted waves. He keeps walking, and doesn't look back.

Once they're all set up again they head back to the lake. The agreement that they're just going to 'hang around' doesn't last long. All self consciousness is thrown out the window; they strip down, bringing the volleyball and net with them (they had originally planned to play on dry ground) and begging Noya, appropriately, to leave his underwear on.

Kenma wades in slowly, pretending like his body isn't freezing. The water bites at the skin it touches, stopping just before his thighs do. He's self conscious in boxers and a t-shirt, but even that feels like too little. It becomes worse when Hinata looks. He practically dives into the freezing cold water to escape him. It's a good way to cool down from the hike, even if it embarrasses the hell out of him; Hinata looks away, and Kuroo laughs manically, already on his third joke about how clumsy Kenma is when he finally resurfaces.

"It's kind of freezing," Yamaguchi observes, wading over by the side of the lake Kenma is trying to drift to. There's an obvious divide in their group between who wants to swim and who is trying not to freeze to death.

"Gotcha," Kuroo says, as he absolutely does not 'got' Kenma. He loses his footing trying to tackle the blonde-- or God knows what joke he was trying to pull-- and ends up body slamming the surface of the water.

"You got me," Kenma deadpans.

He leaps away when his friend takes another swipe at him, more out of self preservation than anything. Kuroo dives again, and this time manages to tackle Kenma further into the body of the lake. Then it's like a game of Who Can Be The Bigger Asshole, with Kenma holding the taller's head underwater and Noya already scrambling onto Tanaka's shoulders to join in the mayhem.

"Someone is going to get killed," Daichi says, not without disapproval. He is going to say something next, but no one gets to hear it, because Suga's already spear tackling him below the
surface of the water.

Everyone is messing around then; whether it's the adrenaline or the relief from the hike, Kenma doesn't know, just that suddenly everyone is jumping and tackling and there are hands pushing him all over. Once upon a time this would have scared the shit out of him. All these people, all this space in the water. It's an anxiety attack waiting to happen. But here and now is just as cool and calm as the water itself, a slow moving thing that doesn't make his chest ache so tightly anymore. The heat of the Winter sky on the back of his neck is actually pleasant, the feeling of laughter bubbling in his chest carrying him through.

And then he smacks chest-first into Hinata.

It's like one of those movie moments, where everything slows down. He is eminently aware of the press of Hinata's skin, their wet shirts; all the droplets of water on Hinata's hand when it flies to catch Kenma's wrist in surprise. He's going to kiss Hinata, he realises, in front of all these people. He doesn't even care. It's just happening, suddenly, like a gravitational pull to the redhead's wide-open shocked mouth.

Then Hinata rises up about six feet in the air.

Tanaka laughs triumphantly, swinging the boy around in a circle and charging for Nishinoya, who has since moved to Asahi's shoulders. Kenma doesn't have time to register his shock or Hinata's, which is just as transient, because everyone is rushing around again like it never even happened.

Kenma feels caught in the middle of a constant shudder. It's too much and not enough all at the same time. The tension is going to choke him.

They continue to splash around like idiots, Kenma hanging by the side with some of the other reasonable people—see: Tsukishima, Asahi, and Suga—and it isn't until his body has gotten used to the temperature, and the water starts to feel like a good escape from the sun, that someone brings up volleyball.

It's a bad idea from the start. Kenma doesn't know how he knows this, just that he does, suddenly, and it is an all-consuming feeling. Despite this, he agrees to play. They split into two teams, divvy up the roles. Kenma will play first as a blocker, then as a setter. This is after Suga asks if he can play any positions, and both Kuroo and Hinata chime in before he has the chance to. No one comments on Hinata's blaringly obvious red face afterwards. Noya elbows him.

Kenma's whole body still feels hot from being so close to Hinata, wanting to touch him more. He just wants contact, like standing side by side in the lake with just their hands touching. He gets distracted about a billion times by this thought while they're playing.

"You're never usually this out of it," Kuroo observes, covered in sweat and water. "Come on, you're meant to be our brains."

"Thinking," he mumbles, pretending to focus.

Kuroo doesn't fall for it. He's just beginning to think this, to turn his head and reprimand his friend further, when they all start planning again. Hinata's team try for a quick; he's seen them do it before, knows how fast Hinata's hand can go, and he's barely prepared. Damn it. When he used to play in high school, it was elation before he even knew the word.

Not the actual act of playing. He was never interested, to the point where his teammates were always asking why he even played. He just shrugged it off back then: he played because Kuroo did. He played because that's what he did, what he was good at.

It wasn't even until recently that he realised he even enjoyed the sport, and that was because of
Hinata, tossing to him, watching his team play and remembering how to analyse their techniques in a second. Presently, a shiver rolls through him, slipping into the game in that easy way like one slips into water.

"Kenma--" Kuroo starts to say, but he's already there; it's his turn to set anyway, he remembers the motion like a second language and despite himself, a grin lights up his face. It's all elation now. Like writing. It isn't just a formula; he gets that. It's something you have to feel, as well.

"Kenma..."

He goes cold all over. Then, like a switch is flipped: red, burning hot.

Hinata is staring at him from the other side of the net like he's seeing the moon for the first time. He doesn't look away immediately, not like they've both been doing lately; almost like he's stuck in a daze watching Kenma. By the time he realises what he's doing, Kenma has locked eyes with him, trapping him there like a stunned animal. The game starts up around them again. They keep staring.

That's about all Kenma remembers, before it all turns upside down. One moment he's standing there, disbelievingly, watching Hinata's palm smack into the ball and his eyes stay locked with Kenma's; the next he's falling underwater.

Kuroo pulls him up before he has the chance to regain his senses. He's babbling; some weird mix of concern and hilarity, choking on his laughs so hard his face is red. The rest of the world tunes into Kenma's ears like a bad radio frequency, the group shouting and laughing. Hinata is screaming. Briefly, it occurs to Kenma that his face hurts. He raises a hand to his tender nose, and it comes away bloody.

"Ow," he says.

Kuroo ushers him out of the water and mutters something about a first aid kit, still wheezing. Kenma doesn't bother waiting for him, just starts down the track in a blur, still trying to figure out what happened in the time between staring at Hinata and Hinata spiking a ball straight into his face. He pauses just around the corner from the lake, swaying on his feet and pinching the bridge of his nose to try and quell the bleeding. It's kind of-- a throb now, just a distant ache, but really persistent. Where is--

He hears footsteps coming up the track behind him. Finally. He turns to greet Kuroo, ready to reprimand him for laughing.

Hinata thrusts a first aid kit at him and bows zealously. "I'm so sorry!"

Kenma blinks. And then blinks again. For good measure, he blinks a third time, standing there with blood dripping from his nose like a faucet as Hinata remains in his bow, shoulders locked, trembling.

Kenma laughs.

This gets Hinata's attention. He snaps back upright, brows knit together; as soon as Kenma sees the look on his face, his laughter dies off. Hinata looks so concerned. It's real concern, too, the despairing look he gets when he's genuinely upset about something. The look he had when he was nervous to take Kenma around the city, the look he had when he cried in front of him the first time. Kenma has no idea what to say in this situation.

"I'm fine," he comes up with, eventually.

"Ah," Hinata warbles piteously, "are you sure? I really... spiked the ball hard, y'know. I'm sorry. I
didn't hold back at all."

That makes him laugh again. He has no idea what's wrong with himself. Maybe, he thinks, Hinata really did hit the ball too hard, and it gave him some minor form of brain damage where he thinks everything is funny, because it's bubbling in him like some effervescent poison, and he has to cover his mouth with a hand. "Were you trying to hit me?" he jokes.

"No!" Hinata's hands fly out in front of him, waving in a wild gesture of disagreement. Kenma's never seen his eyes quite this wild, and that look is back again, utter despair and concern. It makes something far inside of him tighten. "Kenma, I would never do that. Like, ever! I wasn't trying to hit you! I got, um, distracted, like-- uwaah, you know? My head was just! So I wasn't thinking! Um." He bows again, so quickly that Kenma jumps. "I'm very sorry!"

"You don't have to do that," Kenma says weakly. He feels like an idiot for not having anything else to say, but he's shocked silent, unable to comprehend the fact that Hinata is standing in front of him and bowing, for Christ's sake. Some blood from his nose drips onto his hand, reminding him of his injury. His noise of surprise catches Hinata's attention, his spine straightening again. "Ah-- let me see," he says, and before Kenma has a chance to protest, they're inches away.

His whole body stiffens up. Hinata must feel it happen, but he says nothing. He keeps his eyes cast down on the first aid kit with the kind of determination he gets when he's watching Kageyama for signals in a game. He finally comes up with some tissues and a little white packet, scanning over the instructions on the front. Kenma can't tear his eyes away. Hinata's looking down through his lashes, and there's a crease between his brows from where they're furrowed. Hinata looks back up, now focused on the blood gathering under Kenma's nose. He should be embarrassed. Distantly, he kind of is, but Hinata doesn't give him any chance to act on his bashfulness before he's raising one of the tissues to Kenma's face. He pulls his hand back, still frowning.

"You should sit down," he suggests.

Kenma apparently does, stuck somewhere far out of his body as all of this is happening. Only minutes before an entire lake was separating them, and it seemed like it might be that way forever. Now he feels Hinata's legs bump against his knees when he moves to sit on a rock, his breath stirring Kenma's hair when he crouches in front of him and reaches the tissue out again.

He's not looking at his eyes. He's too consumed with the current task for that, like he's forgotten who Kenma even is or what happened between them. He mops the blood up almost clinically, more gentle than Kenma knew he could be. He doesn't even have the presence of mind to take the tissue and do it himself. He just watches Hinata.

Once he's apparently satisfied with that, he turns back to the package-- an instant cold pack, Kenma realises distantly-- and gives it another shake, tossing it between his hands to gage the temperature. Satisfied, he raises the pack to Kenma's nose, instructing him to hold it there and pinch the bridge with his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" he asks. His brows are still pulled together, that little crease in his skin still there. Before he knows what he's doing, Kenma reaches out and smoothes it away with his thumb.

Hinata's eyes meet his. His hand is still resting by the cold pack; he could remove it from Kenma's face, but he doesn't. He keeps it there. And Kenma lets him.

For the first time, Hinata begins to show a reaction, like he's just now realising what happened. His breath shudders on the exhale, almost in tandem with Kenma's. Hinata's hand is shaking.
Kenma's mouth is dry; he swallows, feeling a lump in his throat the size of Jupiter. His eyes flicker downwards when Hinata's tongue darts out, bright pink against all these dull greens, and licks his lips; and then they stay there, fixated on Hinata's mouth like he doesn't know where else to look.

Hinata opens his mouth to speak. "Kenma-- I wanted to talk to you--"

"Aaay, Kozune. You're not dead after all!"

Kenma is going to kill him. He's going to kill Kuroo, and everyone around him.

"How does it look?" Suga asks, pushing past Kuroo with their hands on their hips. "Is there any permanent damage? Has the bleeding stopped?"

Most of the group are coming down the trail now, dripping wet. Some of them are wielding towels over their shoulders; Nishinoya has the ball, so Kenma guesses his injury was a sign for everyone that it's time to pack up and head back to camp. He only absently remembers to nod in response to Suga's question, and it's then he realises Hinata has moved away from him, and is too far for Kenma to ask him to finish his sentence. He watches him go like the sun fleeting at the end of the day, feeling stuck to the spot, stuck to that rock. They were so close. Inches apart, close enough to feel Hinata breathing and swaying like a living tree, close enough to have moved in and kissed him, or touched his bare arm, or anything--

"Hey, now," Suga says, pulling him straight out of his daydream. "Was that nod a yes to the permanent damage, or to the bleeding stopping? Ah-- who gave you a cold pack, let me see."

They make their way back to the site, the group back to its usual sunny demeanor. Yamaguchi is going on to Tsukishima about some new game tactic he allegedly thought of on accident while they were playing just now, Tanaka is screaming about bigfoot again, and Kenma is staring at Hinata. His heart is going a million miles an hour in his throat.

It feels a lot earlier in the day than it actually is when they find the site again. Kenma feels like he's had caffeine, his veins thrumming with it, but the sky is darkening overhead and everyone is already talking about dinner. He tries to catch sight of Hinata again but he's already disappeared to the other side of the site, and Kenma is being ushered to help Suga and Kuroo get food from the van.

"How's your nose?" Kuroo asks.

"It's fine. Doesn't even hurt anymore." He glances back over his shoulder briefly, checking for who could be within hearing range. He turns back to his best friend with a dark look. "Did you send him after me on purpose?"

"Who, Shouyou? Nah. He ran after you, none of us could stop him."

That shuts Kenma up. Suga seems to notice his reaction, laughing a little into the back of their hand.

"See, Koushi finds it funny."

"I remember acting like this, is all. Daichi and I were so crass with each other. Kids are funny about being in love."

"Ah, youth," Kuroo sighs.

"Neither of you are old," Kenma scolds, but they both know it's because he has nothing to say in response to Hinata running after him. He turns his attention down to their dinner ratios, looking for a distraction. Kuroo doesn't let up.
"Soo, what happened?"

"What do you mean, what happened?"

"Did you kiss? Make out in the bushes like the great prince-in-distress and knight-in-shining-armour you are?"

"Yes, Kuro," he says, arching his eyebrows, "Shouyou followed me into the bushes so that he could kiss me. He especially loved choking on all of the blood on my face."

Kuroo screws his face up. "Gross."

"Young love," Suga says, like they're stating a fact.

"Did it taste like metal?"

"I was kidding, if you picked up on that."

"Un fortunately." Kuroo shakes his head like he can't believe it, like Kenma is being stubborn and has actually done something wrong by bleeding from his nose. He sniffs petulantly. "No heart for romance."

"I'm fine, by the way. Really. All of me."

"I asked if you were fine," Kuroo reminds him, pouting, and it only takes a shove on the shoulder for Kenma to sigh and give up on the whole irritated act. "Like, twice. I'm a very caring friend."

"That you are," Suga agrees, nodding solemnly. A grin breaks out over their face as they reach for the cooler, which most definitely does not have dinner in it. "Is it too early to break out the beer? I want to relax already."

"Kei bought weed."

"He did not," Kenma says, disapprovingly, disbelievingly, "bring weed."

Kuroo nods. "Yep."

"Why?"

"Because I want to have fun. You never let me have fun." Kuroo is mock pouting again, somewhere along that line he favours of child and grown man. Kenma lets it go again with another sag of his shoulders, because what the hell, recreational drug use in the middle of nowhere is apparently something his best friend does now.

The three of them work in silence, sorting the dinner foods out and working out what they can ration for the group. They head back to the the campsite, Suga swaying happily like just the thought of the day winding down is pleasant, Kenma lost in thought about Hinata, replaying the moments in his head like a movie. He thinks of Hinata's hand on his face, and the moment he realised it was trembling; just the moment he took in a breath, to be exact, and the moment he realised he wanted to kiss Hinata. His whole body surging with it. Kuroo leans into his ear just as they're approaching the campsite again.

"We can share. The weed, I mean."

"Shut up."

The sun starts to set when they're cooking the food, the group all gathered around the fire again like last night. Kenma tells himself he's not going to look, but he looks at least three times to check
where Hinata is sitting; across from him again, doing the same and conspicuously throwing glances. It doesn't feel as tense as last night, or at least not in the depressing sense that Kenma feels like he's staring at the biggest loss of his life. Now it feels like waiting, vibrations, all and everything on Earth pulling him into the other's motions. He wants to move across and be with him so badly it stings. Just sit beside him, ease the tension a little; talk to him and touch him like expelling a breath he's been holding for weeks now.

"I think it's going to storm later," Asahi observes, head tilted to the sky.

"How do you know?" Tanaka asks suspiciously. Noya whacks him on the arm.

"Idiot, Asahi knows everything. He's wise."

"I can check the weather on my phone," Suga offers. Daichi shrugs, and like a firework going off, cracks open the first beer of the night.

"Everything's in the van anyway, and we have tarps set up over the tents. We'll be fine, nothing will get damaged."

"In that case," Nishinoya announces, "I'm sleeping in Asahi's tent. Storms totally spook me, and Shouyou won't be any help."

"Hey! How is that fair?" Hinata complains, but Kenma doesn't miss the way his eyes flicker in the blonde's direction. "Besides, I bet I'm a great help. Like, if you got scared or something."

"No way," Noya argues, shaking his head. "You'd just get scared too. Neither of us would get any sleep."

"Well-- you're worse than I am, probably. Asahi's not gonna get any sleep."

"Nah. Asahi's like a big ol' teddy bear. Lulls me right to sleep, can't be afraid of anything that way."

Asahi is blushing pretty fiercely, but Kenma keeps his eyes on Hinata now; it would feel wrong not to. He turns down a beer when it's offered to him. Something feels like it's changed. Something in the air. He turns back to his conversation with Kuroo, more than aware of the exact moment Hinata glances back.

He knows it's a long shot. Whatever this is. For all he knows, Hinata was going to say that he wanted to talk to him about the end of their friendship. Maybe he really was upset that Kenma kissed him, despite what everyone is saying. That's still a possibility.

He tries to shake himself out of it, turning his attention on food and friends and ignoring the piercing feeling of being watched. Is he being irrational? It's all those years of doubting himself, little anxious tremors even now still in his fingers. It's going to choke him, spring up out of nowhere, all that fear--

He's halfway through his ramen when Hinata approaches him.

It feels like the whole ocean pouring from his veins; relief or exhausting dread, he has no idea.

"Can we talk?"

Kenma knows that Kuroo is staring at the both of them, and that he's pretty much just dropped his chopsticks in the bowl. Hinata is looking at him, fierce sun in his eyes. Hands curled into fists.

"Please, Kenma."
He stands silently, and follows Hinata away from the campsite.

They walk down the trail together, saying nothing the whole time. Kenma doesn't know whether to look at the stars or Hinata, so he opts for both, whilst Hinata keeps his gaze cast on the sky, his head tilted back. Whatever nerve he had built up in himself for this conversation is fleeting now. His hands are starting to twitch at his sides. It's way too silent, bugs chirping around them, the soft pads of their feet on grass and dirt.

The sky is really clear, tonight. Kenma figures that should be odd for Winter, but maybe that's just because he's used to the city. He's used to everything thrashing and growing, noise and tenor in ebbing colour, like the vibrations of humans. Maybe that's why it felt the way he did, standing on the rooftop of his apartment with Hinata and feeling miles above everything. Or on the hood of his car with the sun and the moon in the sky at the same time, towering over a sleeping Tokyo. Being out here is the same. Nothing seems so wild and chaotic anymore.

When they reach the end of the trail, Hinata clambers into the back of the pickup, and Kenma wordlessly follows. The stars are blinding like a thousand tiny suns. And Hinata's impression is bleeding into him, as silent as it is. That's what's strange, Kenma realises: Hinata has never been this quiet before.

They lie there like two sparrows, tiny things with shivering wings. They're so close that their shoulders are almost touching. Side by side, Hinata's chest rising and falling with each skittish breath he takes; Kenma knows this, because he is watching him. He is watching him so closely, every move he makes, and wondering how he could notice so much for so long and at the same time notice nothing at all.

Noticing Hinata feels like all he ever does, but every time he looks at him it's like he starts noticing all over again. Maybe he doesn't know as much as he thought he did; the thought makes him shiver. Maybe it's okay just to lie against the back windshield, shoulders inches apart, and breathe like this with the night air and all the stars. Even if he's terrified he could break this peace like glass with his fists.

Then Hinata turns to look at him, and he realises it all at once, like coming up for air.

Kenma doesn't want to be ten seconds of crashing oceanic noise, or just some tidal phase. No, that's what scares him, more than the gnashing ghosts of thoughts, like teeth colliding and sneers rising and hearts hurting. He doesn't care about his heart being broken; he cares about too soon, too much, and not enough at all. All of this being over. But Hinata isn't looking at him like he wants it to end, any of it. It's this hard, determined gaze, and it takes Kenma a while to realise why he recognises it: it's the face Hinata makes when he's playing volleyball. The "I'm not gonna give up" face. The "I'm in this for the long haul" face. The fear is still there, this shivering thing as hazy and fleeting as city lights. But he isn't holding back from it anymore. He's walking straight through.

He's doomed, Kenma realises. He waxes tender for this boy, black and blue all over.

"I'm sorry," Hinata says.

It hits Kenma in the chest with the full force of a train. "What?" he says weakly, and then--bravely, licking his lips, because it's Hinata--"What do you mean?"

Hinata takes the harshest, most shuddering breath, and reaches up to run a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not telling you I knew, when-- when I should have. I messed up. To betray your trust like that."

But Kenma can't hear him, not over the sudden pounding in his head, a repetition of he's sorry--he's sorry. Hinata, who did nothing wrong, is sorry.
"A-and, like, I'm sorry for not saying anything before now, I just didn't know if you wanted me to talk to you, and I didn't want to talk to you if you didn't. But I think... hey, Kenma, you want me to talk to you, yeah? You care about me, too?"

Kenma doesn't say anything. He can't. He knows it's all over his face, can feel how red it is.

"Good," he whispers, looking down at his hands. "I was really scared... but-- um, there are things I need to say. To you. I want you to know that I don't see you any differently, like-- I could never see you as anything else, you know? Because when I look at you I think-- wow, that's Kenma, and he's so strong, and so brave, and it just-- makes me really happy."

"You think I'm brave," Kenma says, trying the word out like maybe it will fit. "I never felt brave.
Before this. Before you. Before I took a look at myself and the people I love. He feels trapped with the weight of words inside of him, wanting to get them all out at once, but Hinata knows. He knows. He shakes his head.

"You have no idea, Kenma. You think I'd want to be around you so much if you weren't incredible? Ah-- so I'm sorry, but I don't think I could ever feel sorry for you. You're not the kind of person who has to be pitied, you know? You're too-- ah." He makes a noise of ebullience, raking his hands through his hair. Maybe it's the circumstances, or the fact that Hinata's so serious when normally it's the other way around, but Kenma laughs. He can't stop, and this time instead of covering it up with his hands he just lets it happen, burying his face in Hinata's shoulders even as he feels his friend stiffen at the contact. Only he would think to call Kenma 'ah', of all possible words. When he pulls away, Hinata looks delighted. His smile melts, softens, when Kenma sees.

"You're Kenma," he settles upon finally. Then he looks him in the eyes again, and there's gravity, pulling them together, some personal caprice begging Kenma to move closer until there's no distance at all. He's not asking for an apology for the way Kenma reacted. And he's no longer offering one, for all the time they've spent saying everything but what they mean. Kenma's ears feel deaf with it, all the screams he wants to let out, all the times he's wanted to move forward and into the other's space.

Hinata does not break eye contact. "If you're happy dealing with it the way you are, then that's okay. If you want help then that's okay too. I'm here with you every step of the way, no matter what. And I know... I know it isn't something that you fix with a kiss-- that's not what I'm trying to do-- like, I'd love you anyway." He must hear the way Kenma's breath catches, lightning in his belly, because he pauses then, something darkening in his eyes. "I'd love you anyway," he says again, slower, "because I mean it, I'm in love with you. There's no other way to say it, so that's just how it is. I don't mind if you just want to be friends but I wanted you to know."

Kenma is shaking. A tremor that started in his hands has spread full body now, shaking him on an earthquake's path towards this sunshine boy. There's all of him, bared for Hinata to see, wrung out like a towel or the clouds. Everything held back now causelessly like water, too fickle to lock in his fists again.

"I would..." Hinata starts, gets embarrassed, and then forces himself through it, determinedly locking eyes with Kenma. "I would do anything to make you happy. Whatever you wanted."

"Anything?" he repeats, knowing his voice will come out hoarse before it does. Hinata nods firmly. Everything is pulsing. "Kiss me."

Hinata does.

First it's just the feeling of their mouths touching, like they're both afraid to move. Hinata brushes
Kenma's cheek with the back of one shaking hand, and then he pulls back, looking up through his lashes; sunshine through tree branches. Something inside of Kenma snaps, or comes loose, and then all of him is tumbling towards Hinata.

He presses their foreheads together and kisses like he's in a dream. There's his hand, sliding slowly into Hinata's hair. Hinata makes this helpless noise against his lips and then kisses deeper, feverishly, like he can't stop. Kenma doesn't even realise he's closed his eyes. He can feel everything, his body gone hypersensitive, from the way Hinata's fingers catch his wrist and then curl tighter, to the way their teeth bump before they tilt their heads. It only makes the kiss that much deeper, and Kenma feels the pressure in his chest bloom into an outright ache. He reaches for Hinata with his other hand, and when he finds fingers, smooth and warm against his own, they break for air.

Their foreheads are still pressed together. He's waiting for the world to stop spinning, but it hasn't yet, so he rasps, "Shouyou," and then, "kiss me again."

Hinata shivers, then slides forward and kisses him and kisses him. All he tastes is sunshine and campfire, and the scent fills up his head, makes him dizzy. It doesn't feel like he's drowning this time, but more so like they've found the rhythm of things, moving together effortlessly. Kenma remembers hearing that when you kiss the right person the whole world stops, but it isn't true. The world is coming to life underneath his palms. It's all in Hinata's skin, in the way they touch.

Kenma pulls away again. "How many favours do I get, exactly?"

Hinata laughs. It's the brightest noise Kenma has heard all night.

They make their way back to the site eventually, fingers brushing the whole way down the path. It takes a while to occur to him-- he's that focused on Hinata, the precious way he's smiling to himself-- but that's definitely music he hears, and it's getting louder. Apparently, they were gone long enough for everyone to have started the party without them.

He and Hinata split ways once they enter the campgrounds again; Hinata's fingers trail his, and when Kenma looks up fleetingly, the redhead is smiling still. It makes Kenma want to follow him to the end of the earth.

Suga's fiddling with the music, Daichi swaying happily beside him. Kuroo's offering weed to everyone. Weed. Kenma had forgotten about that, in all the haze of his evening. The first thing his friend does when he notices he's back is offer him some; he turns it down vehemently, only noticing later that he and Tsukishima are the only two really hitting it; shotgunning and everything, and it's totally gross and they're all over each other but Kenma is having too much fun to care.

The group have set up Christmas lights, the cheap battery operated ones that flash in unflattering colours and patterns. He moves through the somnolent flashing to stand with friends again, even as he catches Hinata's eye across the campfire.

Everything feels lighter now, electrified. Some part of him realises that he's made a big mistake kissing Hinata like that: because now it's the only thing he wants to do. How did he ever stand to not be touching him, before? Seriously, he thinks, how do people do this? The whole not being all over each other thing. Distantly, he feels some sympathy for Kuroo and Tsuki.

Hinata finds him again soon enough and asks him to come dance. Kenma's thought is approximately somewhere on the line of 'what the hell', and he goes, ignoring the nervous tremors. Hinata's a bad dancer, to his utmost relief. He doesn't know how long they dance for, but he gets sweaty; Hinata's hands are around his waist, on his hips, and every time he catches sight of him
grinning wickedly under the lights he feels like he's going to pass out.

He realises that everyone can tell that they're finally talking, touching, whatever, and it's clear Suga's picked up on it before anyone; they keep grinning in Kenma's direction, nodding promptly at Hinata as if Kenma can get any closer.

He's kind of embarrassed-- or flushed, is the word, giddy-- but mostly he's just happy. Insanely, ridiculously happy.

Everything is hazy lights and sleepy movements. Everything is hands touching skin and Hinata's eyes on his. That lightness in his chest like he is going to burst.

Nishinoya is the among the first to announce that he's going to bed. He does this when Kenma is standing by a happy and tipsy Daichi and Suga, Hinata close enough beside him that he can feel the warmth of his skin.

"Careful not to keep Asahi up," Suga warns.

Daichi asks if he was serious about switching tents, a thought which he then announces he thinks is a very bad and disruptive idea.

"Loosen up, Daichi."

"Smoke a little."

Kenma's first thought is that he's noticed something going on with him and Hinata; though there's a good chance he just wants to be in the other tent for genuine reasons. He's an idiot. Kenma shrugs it off, happy to be alone with Hinata.

Alone with Hinata.

The implications of that finally hit him.

He tries to fit back into the sway of the night, but it's different now. Nerves are pulling at him like strings. He feels stretched out and achey, on edge. By the time bed time rolls around, he's so nervous he's shaking.

Suga turns the music off. People head for their tents, clearing out the campsite rapidly until Kenma feels all alone, trapped with silence and Hinata. He makes for their own tent, not looking back to see if Hinata is following yet. He changes quickly; the last thing he needs is for Hinata to come in and see, and just the thought has his hands shaking, moving faster, with no idea what to do when the other does come in.

Hinata raps his knuckles gently against the mesh of the tent before entering. He looks so genuine, eyes wide and questioning, unsure, that Kenma doesn't know what to do with himself. The sound of the tent zipping back up is deafening.

They crawl into their sleeping bags and lie side by side, not touching. Kenma can hear the shudder of Hinata's breath, in, out, the rise and fall of his chest moving the shiny material of the sleeping bag. They lie like there for what feels like forever, unsure whether to move, neither of them willing to speak up.

"Come here," Hinata whispers finally, and Kenma nearly trips over himself moving. They unzip their bags and slot the two together and move in and it's the most natural thing Kenma's ever felt, wrapping himself up in Hinata.

He breathes him in. The feeling is rhapsodic, deep and buried with its heels into the ground.
"You're shaking," he murmurs.

"Yeah? Yeah, sorry."

Kenma shifts. Their legs brush, slide together just like that, and-- oh. He hadn't known anything could feel like that. "Hm," he hums. "S'okay."

"You sound tired," Hinata breathes, laughing nervously. Kenma nuzzles the underside of his chin, too exhausted to feel embarrassed about it.

"Yeah."

"Go to sleep," Hinata whispers.

"Okay."

He tries to-- it's easy enough, sleep winding him like slowly moving water-- but Hinata pulls him back out of it, with the realisation that he's still stiff. Kenma opens his eyes and blinks up at him in the dark, and finds two thunderstorm eyes staring back at him, so serious it's like a bullet to the head.

Before he knows what he's doing, he's leaning up to plant a soft kiss at the corner of Hinata's mouth. The redhead's breath shakes on an exhale with a laugh. "Sorry," he whispers.

"Don't be. Relax."

"Mm," Hinata replies, and this time, he does. Kenma feels it when he goes lax beneath him, almost like they're melting together. As if in one last act of defense, Hinata slots his arms around the blonde's waist, and pulls their bodies together.

He falls asleep like that in Hinata's arms, the swaying of the tent to lull him like a ship on the sea.

When he wakes up in the middle of the night it's freezing cold and the wind sounds like gunfire. A few things occur to him, sleep still biting at the edges of his psyche and slowing his judgement. It's pouring with rain outside; the tent is shaking wildly like the wind is going to pick it up off the ground and spin them away; and Hinata is in his arms, shivering violently.

Kenma says nothing, but Hinata must realise he's awake, because he gasps on a breath, pressing himself closer. Kenma's arms tighten before he even knows what he's doing. They're wrapped around each other, shivering in each other's arms, and it's really intimate.

Kenma buries his head in Hinata's neck and tries to ride the cold out. The shadow across their tent is gone, meaning the tarp has most likely fallen or blown away. The sound of the rain hitting the roof makes it too loud almost to hear his own breathing, but he certainly hears Hinata, puffed out against his ear and all the way down his neck. He shudders deeply, unsure whether from the cold or the feeling of Hinata's breath.

Finally, after what feels like the longest time, Hinata says, "It's a little cold."

Kenma bursts out laughing. It's a combination of hysteria and giddiness, puffing out against Hinata's chest as his body shakes more violently. Hinata tightens his arms around the blonde, laughing with him.

It isn't until they stop laughing that Kenma registers some of the noise outside. He can hear people shouting over the rain, and what sounds like Nishinoya screaming. They both come to a silent agreement that staying in the ice cold tent is useless, and emerge from their sleeping bags; the air
on their skin is like a sharp blow. Everything is wet, the edges of their tent dangerously close to
flooding.

Kenma unzips the tent and is immediately hit in the face by a blast of sideways rain, hard enough
to feel like rocks. Hinata pushes insistently to get them both through, and then they're standing out
in the pouring rain, soaked instantly.

Kuroo and some of the others are hauling packed up tents into a pile.

"That's it," Daichi is shouting, "we're going, we're leaving, that's it."

Kenma gets a look at Kuroo's tent in all the rain and chaos, and sees that the tarp has fallen and
caved the roof in. They must have been crushed and soaked in the middle of the storm, Kenma
thinks, unable to hide his laughter.

Kuroo catches sight of him and rushes over. "We're leaving!" he announces, shouting through the
rain.

Kenma finally wakes up. "What, now?"

"Yes! Unless you want to sleep in the rain?"

Kenma doesn't have a good answer to that. Wordlessly he and Hinata help to take their tent down,
as if in a fast forwarded daze, and then everyone is running back down the track to the cars.

Kenma doesn't have time to protest before he's ushered towards the nearest vehicle, losing grip of
Hinata's hand in the process. He practically flies into the backseat of the pickup, breathing out in
relief when the doors shut and it seals him in warmth.

Hinata's hand finds his again. They're both soaking wet, drenched from the rain, and before
Kenma knows what's happening he's being yanked forward and into a kiss. He pulls away feeling
dizzy.

"Sorry," Hinata mumbles, grinning and shaking and drenched and perfect. "I couldn't help
myself."

It occurs to Kenma, through the cloud of disbelief swarming his head, that there are other people
in the car. One look up confirms that everyone is staring right at them; Suga and Tsuki in the front
seat, and Kuroo in the back, wedged between Hinata and the door and immensely, spectacularly
high.

"Oh my god," he says. "Shorty and brain are totally doin' it... nice."

"We're gonna drive back as close to the city as we can and pool the money for a cheap motel,"
Suga says, politely averting their eyes when they notice how red Kenma's face has gone.

"A motel," Tsukishima repeats, words swaying. "Kuroo, did you hear... a motel, Kuroo."

Now-- thankfully-- everyone is staring at Tsukishima. There's no mistaking it: he's high, too.

Suga starts the pickup, muttering something about "kids these days", and then they're on the road.

The van, driven by Daichi, follows closely behind, and Kenma watches all the greenery disappear
behind them in the blur of their taillights and the still pouring rain. He feels contently tired, resting
his head on Hinata's shoulder and watching the idle rain running down the windows. Kuroo sings
the whole way there, even after Suga switches the radio off; he and Tsukishima lean across the
seats and try to make out at one point, before Suga swats them apart. Kenma must be delusional
from exhaustion or something, because he keeps laughing. And he hasn't let go of Hinata. Not
once.

When he first starts to see the blur of city lights he thinks he's dreaming. The clock on the dashboard reads 4:41. Everything outside their windows is hazy; they've driven out of the crux of the storm, and now a light rain like mist and fog is coming down against the windows, blurring the blues and purples. Hinata's thumb is moving in slow circles against the back of Kenma's hand, his chin warm on top of the blonde's head.

"Food," Kuroo moans, leaning forward to swipe Suga's shoulder. "Food, Suga, please. There's gotta be a diner around here somewhere."

"Food," Tsukishima agrees.

"Food."

Suga looks helpless. Then devious.

When they stop and meet up with the others, Daichi wants to know what's going on. Suga shuts him up with a kiss; and because it's 5 in the morning, and Kenma is exhausted, he laughs at that, too. He feels electric. Hinata takes him by the hand and he doesn't know if the group notices or not, can't remember the next morning whether they said anything when the readhead crept up on his toes to peck the top of Kenma's head, where his hair dried and matted with the rain. He remembers going inside the 24-hour diner and ordering the tallest stack of pancakes on the menu, everyone squished around the booth. He may remember Hinata's hand on his between their thighs, or he maybe not. Sleepless, he doesn't remember; but he knows one thing.

It's the best meal Kenma has ever eaten.

Chapter End Notes

im back, im alive! sorry for the wait for this chapter! next chapter should be up sometime next week, but as a warning... this fic only has like 2 chapters left. thank you everyone for your continuing support!
When he wakes up in the motel, everyone around him is still asleep.

He blinks groggily and tries to make sense of his surroundings. In a way, it’s like waking up in a boat; things rocking around him, sea sickness pulling at his gut so that he has to lean over into his stomach to quell it. He briefly remembers eating pancakes, an argument over what they could afford in terms of a motel. He remembers being carried through the motions as if on a wave, finding that warmth of sleep and curling up and listening to Hinata breathe—

Hinata. He’s lying on the floor next to Hinata.

Kenma registers the conspicuous weight of an arm slung over his middle, the hardness of the floor beneath him, and the musty smell of the motel all at once. Looking around—and it’s difficult, straining his neck in the confined position—he tries to catch sight of the rest of their group. From where he lies he can see the top of Suga’s head, one arm dangling precariously from the bed. He can see a pair of feet, but there’s no telling who they belong to.

Trying to remain as quiet as possible, Kenma removes the arm from his body and sits up. He rubs his eyes. His vision swims and warps like looking underwater.

Shifting through the seamless tide of exhaustion, he stands and hobbles his way to the bathroom, feeling very much like a cat who’s woken up in the middle of the day bristled and grouchy. It’s freezing in here. His feet very well feel like they’ve been frozen numb and solid, the whole space of the room smelling of wet clothes and mothballs and cold. That distinct smell of Winter clinging sharply.

Nishinoya is passed out in the bathtub. It doesn’t look comfortable, but Kenma certainly isn’t here to judge or disturb him. He closes the shower curtain awkwardly, politely, and turns to the basin to splash water on his face.

“Hey,” someone whispers.

Kenma jumps a mile into the air. Spinning around on his heel, he turns to glare at Kuroo, who is holding both hands up in surrender… or possibly just to protect himself from the water Kenma is spraying everywhere.

“Sorry,” the other whispers, grinning like he isn’t at all. “I thought I heard you get up. Wanna come downstairs and get coffee?”

Cruel, cruel manipulator. He knows Kenma like the back of his hand.

Nodding in consent, Kenma follows him out of the bathroom and the motel room, like a zombie
moving in a daze for the sweet release of caffeine.

On their way across the rows of rooms, both of them creeping silently so as not to disturb the sleepers there, memories of last night start to come back to Kenma. Everything seems like it happened a year ago, months of hazy passing coloured city skylines and rain through the fog of headlights. Hinata’s hand in his, his hand in Kenma’s hair, his lips on Kenma’s forehead. Holy shit. He kissed Hinata.

Like, multiple times. This isn’t a one off “could have been an accident” thing like the time in Hinata’s bedroom, unless one off accidents can come in the form of activities that preoccupy… more than a suitable amount of time.

A shiver rolls through him, Winter settling on the surface of his skin. He kissed Hinata. And he could probably do it again.

“I’m so hungry,” Kuroo says once they’re out of the way of rooms, which Kenma thinks translates to ‘I’m so hungover.’

“I thought you were going to eat your weight in rice and shredded hash browns last night,” he observes sarcastically, side-eyeing his friend. “How could you possibly still be hungry?”

“Fair,” Kuroo admits, grinning. “Hey, not my fault you didn’t want to join in on the festivities.”

“You were singing the whole drive back. Quite loudly, for that matter.”

“Huh. Props to me. Did Tsuki join in, or did I dream that?”

“Well, let’s see,” Kenma says impishly, pretending to think about it. “He may have joined in at one point. He also may have leaned across the seat at one point and tried to make out with you while Suga was driving.”

Kuroo’s grin widens. “Nice.”

“Everyone was so done with the both of you. We were debating whether to leave you on the side of the road, especially after you both started babbling about camping or dinosaurs or whatever the Hell else.”

“God,” Kuroo sighs, looking absolutely beside himself, “I’m so in love with him.”

Kenma wants to screw up his nose and make fun of him—’gross’ would suffice, and is what he aims for—but a smile forms on his face, cheesy and happy and embarrassing. Kuroo nudges his shoulder, grinning back, something radiating and precious that doesn’t belong to Winter.

“Can’t wait for breakfast,” he says, instead of making fun of Kenma for looking so happy. As they round the corner to the diner, it becomes pretty damn apparent that breakfast isn’t anywhere in the near future. It’s already midday, and they’re bringing out the lunch foods.

They sit in a booth by the back and Kuroo waits patiently for Kenma to medicate himself on the java. He sips slowly, coolly, allowing the liquid to burn his tongue and warm up his body from the cold outside. It feels like the rain got into his skin, like he soaked it right up and the storm too; maybe they didn’t really drive back, and Kenma just rode back on a raincloud. It makes sense. His bones feel different, electrified by lightning or the kinetic energy of touching Hinata, like something pulled free from the ocean and charged with everything the moon controls in pulling the tide.

Everything is electricity, he figures. How he couldn’t figure that before doesn’t matter anymore.
“So,” Kuroo says, when he’s satisfied with the degree Kenma’s eyes have finally pried open to. “What happened with you and Shouyou?”

Ah. He wasn’t so high that he failed to notice that, apparently. Kenma can’t bring himself to feel as disappointed as he thinks he’s going to be, and hides his smile in his second cup of coffee.

“What do you mean?” he asks coyly.

Kuroo looks like he’s going to hit him. “Don’t do this whole playing dumb thing. You promised details. Actually, you should text Lev, tell him I won. He and I had a little bet going.”

“A bet,” Kenma says disbelievingly, nearly choking on his coffee. The waitress arrives with their food; it’s a feat that Kenma manages to take it, feeling pulled out of the conversation with Kuroo too abruptly.

“Yeah, a bet.” Kuroo shovels food into his mouth hungrily, ignoring the look the blonde is giving him. “He bet you’d be making out within the first few nights. I said it would take you until at least the end of the trip.”

“Technically,” Kenma points out, “Lev was right, since it happened before we left last night.”

Kuroo’s eyes light up. Shit. And he had planned to omit details about this.

“Alright,” he resigns, smiling into his hand and feeling silly and not being able to help it. “We went to talk while you were—”

“Becoming close to the real greens of nature,” Kuroo says seriously.

Kenma rolls his eyes. “Right. We didn’t say anything, but he walked and I followed, down the track to the cars.”

“Romantic,” Kuroo nods approvingly. “Were the stars out?”

“I guess?”

“Don’t give me that, I know you know. You’re a sap when it comes down to it, huh? Totally worse than me.”

Kenma considers arguing, but drops it. “Regardless,” he mumbles. “Yes, the stars were out, sure. I kept thinking I wanted to hold his hand, or... something.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Make a move, man. That’s another bet Lev and I had going. He said you’d wait for Shouyou to do something about it and I said I had more faith in you than that.”

“No,” he says curtly, ignoring Kuroo’s hurt expression, “I didn’t. I hate that you two talk about me, by the way.”

“Hey, that’s what you get for having amazing taste in friends.” He’s grinning. It’s contagious; as much as he doesn’t want to, Kenma grins back, even though it feels florid and revealing and silly. He shakes his head.

“We, um. We climbed into the back of the pickup and talked. He said... he said that he was sorry, about what happened. Even though he didn’t do anything. I think he expected me to freak or something, because he was ready with all these things to say.”
“Like what?”

Kenma feels his face turn red. “Just stuff.” That, he knows at least, is way too personal to share with Kuroo; he can’t imagine talking about it with a straight face, anyway.

“Okay, okay, go on,” Kuroo prompts, leaning forward on his elbows and grinning like a predator. “What happened next?”

“We kissed.”

His expression falls. “That’s it? No fireworks or heart-breaking love confessions or epic plot twists?”

“You met Kei in a club.”

“I’m actually sort of disappointed, Kenma.”

“And then slept with him. That was the foundation of your entire relationship. You hit on him in the first place because he had glasses.”

“Looked like a sexy nerd,” Kuroo grins wickedly, leaning back in his seat again to attack the food. “But I’m happy for you. So, who asked who out?”

And then Kenma freezes.

“Kenma?”

Oh my God, he thinks.

“Dude,” Kuroo frowns, “please don’t tell me you got to mack on the guy you’ve been pining after for the past half a year and you didn’t even think to ask him out.”

“I mean…” his voice comes out squeaky, “sort of? He didn’t ask. I didn’t… ask.”

Kuroo just stares at him. “Dude.”

“I don’t know, okay? It’s not like… I mean... we went back to the tent, and we slept together—”

“Kenma you cannot fuck a guy you have feelings for without knowing where you stand oh my God—”

“Not like that, Kuro, oh my God. No. I mean we literally slept together. As in, sleeping and nothing else.”

Kuroo doesn’t even try not to look disappointed. “Go on,” he sighs dramatically.

“So it’s not like we separated or anything. In fact, I don’t think we’ve been apart since it happened… er, before right now.” He glances away from the pressing judgement of Kuroo’s stare. “Can you not look at me like that?”

“I can’t believe this,” Kuroo says, but shifts his gaze away anyway. “You have to ask him.”

And that’s the end of the conversation. They both turn their attention to their meals, eating like it’s the apocalypse. Only Kenma’s mind won’t stop racing now, an on-and-off pressure like an alarm blazing in his skull. Are they dating? Does Hinata want to date him? He assumes, after all that happened last night, that Hinata does; he can’t help but second guess himself. What if he’s wrong? What if Hinata’s actually a ‘no strings attached’ kind of guy, and Kenma has to watch him fall in love again and again with different people while standing on the sidelines, forever only a cog in
Okay, so he’s being a little ridiculous. It’s all this nature that’s gotten into him, greenery where his better judgement used to be. He feels like everything has been turned upside on its head lately and covered in sea water. He used to be so good at figuring people out, and now he doesn’t even know where he stands with the one person who counts.

“You know,” Kuroo says, like he’s read Kenma’s thoughts, “for a guy who’s so good at reading people, you’re really bad at reading those you’re closest to. You totally overlook anyone you care about.”

“I guess it’s because I’m comfortable with them,” Kenma says, realising it for the first time himself. “Think about how much I’ve missed with you.”

“Aw.” Kuroo grins at him. Then the grin disappears, as quickly as it rose on his face, and he shifts. Uncomfortably. “I, um… actually have to tell you something.”

Kenma waits. He stares across at his best friend like an island, heart beating in tempo with the wind and the sea. Kuroo meets his eyes.

“I’m taking the acting deal.”

Kenma waits. And waits. He expects for there to be more, some underlying tragedy Kuroo is going to spring on him, like your parents are dead, or you’ve been kicked out of the apartment. Then his words register, and Kenma blinks. “The overseas one?”

“Yes.” Kuroo is being very cautious. He’s gaging Kenma’s reaction, his own expression unreadable.

“Kuroo, that’s great.”

Relief breaking the tide of his features. He looks like he’s going to cry, all of it springing forth. “Are you sure?”

“Are you kidding?” Surprisingly both of them, he jumps from his seat and leans across the table to pull his best friend into a hug. “Kuro, yes, go for it. I’m happy for you.”

“It’s only for a year,” Kuroo says, muffled and surprised into Kenma’s shoulder. The blonde pulls back to study his expression, a grin breaking out over his own face. Kuroo grimaces. “You’re fine with it?”

“I’m not your kid,” he says, rolling his eyes, and Kuroo burst out laughing. He laughs for a while, unable to stop a few times when he tries.

“Sorry,” he says finally, still barking out laughter. “It’s just—you’ve changed, you know? It’s amazing. I’m really, really proud of you.”

They’re both grinning at each other; it’s ridiculous, this absurdly cheesy moment, like the archetypal turning point in a book when Kenma knows everything is going to be alright.

“I’ll call you a lot. It’s gonna get hella annoying.”

“You actually just said hella. Jesus, go, you’re gonna fit in so well overseas.”

Kuroo grins. Kenma almost can’t believe he said it, that this is happening; he’s been with Kuroo for as long as he can remember, never more than a city separating them. Kuroo’s going to go to America. And he’s okay with it.
“I’ll visit,” Kuroo promises, eyes lighting up. “You have to promise to visit me, too.”

Kenma rolls his eyes. “Oh yeah, I totally will. When I win the lottery.” He reconsiders, shaking his head. “Actually, mom would probably pay for it if I asked. She loves you.”

Kuroo takes a long sip of his drink and looks pleased. “Can’t argue with that.”

They’re silent for a while, and it’s comfortable. It doesn’t make him feel like he’s choking.

“Does Kei know?”

“Yeah,” Kuroo says, playing with his food. “I told him right before we went camping. I was scared he wouldn’t want to continue the relationship, you know? I think that’s another reason I said we weren’t dating in that interview.”

“But he took it well?”

Kuroo smiles. “He yelled. But only because I didn’t tell him. He’s fine with it, as long as I call him every day. He’s actually a huge sap, despite how he acts.”

Kenma won’t argue with him on that. He’s seen Tsukishima in action before; when he wants to be, he’s worse than the both of them combined.

When they’re finished eating, they get breakfast for the rest of the group and head back up to the room. Kenma can hear everyone starting to wake up before they’ve even at the door; the groaning and complaining, Nishinoya yelling. Kuroo steps through and announces that they’re back with coffee like he’s Jesus addressing the disciples.

“Kenma!”

Kenma barely has a chance to put down the bags of food before Hinata is flying into his arms, nearly knocking the both of them over.

He pulls back, giggling fiercely, looking more like the sun than ever and nearly beating the breath from Kenma’s lungs. “Sorry,” he says, smiling like a dork.

Kenma’s heart is going to explode. He has to will himself to calm down, remembering the whole ‘not dating’ thing. There’s no reason for his hands to be sweating and shaking, or for him to feel like he’s going to combust when Hinata looks at him.

He’s being ridiculous. He needs to figure things out first.

They all eat breakfast in the motel room together, talking about the camping trip.

“I am wrecked,” Tanaka keeps saying, like everyone is meant to know what “wrecked” implies. Nishinoya does. He just keeps nodding solemnly, a wordless agreement to just how wrecked they all are.

The inevitable comes eventually, and they move to get dressed and check out of the motel. Kenma boards the bus feeling exhausted and content, gravitating towards where Hinata is already sitting without a word. He puts his head on the redhead’s shoulder and the next thing he knows he’s being shaken away, groggy and dead to the world and staring at his own apartment complex through the window.

“Did I sleep the whole way?” His voice is scratchy. Hinata laughs, the noise stirring and gentle by his ear. Something warm brushes his hand, and then he’s being pulled up.

“I’ll help with your bags,” he says. Kenma allows himself to be pulled along, waking up in a
slow-hazy way that feels like swimming.

Hinata stops at the door to his apartment and waits while Kenma fishes for his keys. He would be embarrassed under other circumstances that he’s fumbling for his keys while his not-boyfriend stands there struggling with his heavy duffel bag in the awkward silence of the hallway. He will be, he figures, when he wakes up properly.

“I’ll call you, okay?” Hinata says it pressingly, like he isn’t sure himself. Kenma gets the key in the lock and turns to look at him.

“Oh man,” Hinata laughs, desperately trying to stop himself. “You look absolutely destroyed. You’re always like this when you wake up, huh? No idea what you’re doing.”

“I know what I’m doing,” he answers, trying to convey the meaning behind that in his gaze. Hinata gets it. He swallows.

“Um. I’ll… yeah. Get some rest, Kenma.”

“You too,” Kenma says. There’s a moment where they both hover in his doorway, unsure that this is actually how they’re going to part ways. It feels anti-climatic now; instead of riding off into the sunset he’s going inside his crappy Tokyo apartment alone to pass out on the couch. The air between he and Hinata is palpable. They’re both nervous. (It’s weird. It makes Kenma lightheaded with giddiness.)

Hinata pecks him on the cheek as quick as lightning and turns to flee back down the stairs.

Kenma lets him. He shuts his apartment door and leans against it heavily, letting the weight of the weekend slip from his shoulders.

Or, at least, he tries to. Some things won’t budge. Like the suck, cling, and roar of the ocean, imprints of Hinata stay stuck to him like grains of sand underneath fingernails, glistening sea grass wrapping around ankles and tugging him down. Hinata is this new place to call home and worry over, he just knows it. He needs to do something about it.

He has already bothered Kuroo enough for today, and doubts he’ll want to come home from his boyfriend’s place to talk about Kenma’s weird love life. There’s Lev, but Lev won’t be any help. Who else does he go to when he needs advice?

He goes to Hinata, but asking Hinata about Hinata is out of the question. He has no doubt Suga will be asleep after the way he looked in the van.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, scaring him out of his brooding thoughts. Jittery, he fumbles with it, gathering his bearings a moment against the wall.

In the Tokyo area if you want to have lunch.

Kenma braces. He knows exactly who he’s going to have to talk to.

It’s weird before he even gets there. His mother stands to greet him, wrapping her thin arms around his shoulders and flooding him with the smell of overpriced perfume. The place she picked is too bright and the kind of people that flood the floor area make him dizzy. She’s made a half hearted effort in picking a semi-private table by the back, where there’s a plastic potted plant in between Kenma and the bustle of the restaurant. At least she thought of his anxiety.

“Kenma, I didn’t get a chance to tell you on the phone how proud I am of your exam results. Really. It helped your father come to terms with things. He’s been looking into publishers and
agents.”

“Whoa,” he says nervously, sitting down when she does. “Slow down. I haven’t written anything yet. And I’m still in school.”

“Oh, please.” She rolls her eyes. “All the best authors get a head start. Now, we’ve been looking at coaches… well, advisors really, should you choose to market your novel towards a specific audience. These people specialise in directing the writer towards a marketable plot and writing style, as well as—”

“Mom,” he interrupts, overwhelmed. She has the audacity to look offended, so he backtracks a little, offering up a sheepish smile. “Thank you. It means a lot that you and dad are actually backing me on this. But I mean… yeah. I’ll talk to you when I finish something.”

When he starts something. His head still feels like it’s reeling at the prospect of taking up writing again, let alone being good enough to get published. There were people, literature teachers, who said he was good enough once upon a time. Hinata certainly seems to think so.

He remembers Hinata all at once, biting his lip with the urgency to talk about him. His mom must sense it, because she takes a sip of her tea and lifts one eyebrow delicately.

“You want something,” she observes.

“What? I mean, no. I don’t want something. Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re my son,” she says, “and you wouldn’t meet me for lunch if there wasn’t something you specifically needed. It’s not money, is it?”

“Mom, please.”

“Right.” She smiles, waving a waiter over. “Just checking.”

Once they’ve ordered—and Kenma just lets her order for him, having given up on trying to change her ways after all these years—she turns to him again, a kind of ‘eye of the tiger’ readiness in her eyes.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

It’s weird, considering they haven’t been close since before high school. Back then he would have considered going to her about something like this, but now it seems strange.

“You know,” she says, “you remind me of myself when I was your age. Don’t give me that look. I know teenagers hate to hear that.”

“I’m not a teenager.”

She laughs at that. Actually laughs. “Right. Well, I’ll start calling you an adult when you act like one. Which probably won’t be until your thirties, if we’re anything alike. And we are.” She eyes him hard at this, impishly enough that he eventually smiles back.

“Alright,” he concedes. “I guess I have to get my lack of social skills from somewhere.”

“Kenma,” she gasps, hitting him on the shoulder like he’s eluded to a drug problem. She shakes her head, styled curls bouncing. “I was talking about your clever brain, you monster of a child. You’re very good at figuring things out and reading between the lines. You certainly don’t get that from your father.”

“Do I get anything from him?” He means it sarcastically, but her expression turns serious.
“You’re both very courageous and honorable. You would do anything for the people you love. Am I wrong?”

Kenma looks down at his hands. He’s never wanted a waiter to appear so badly in his life.

His mom reaches across the table and places a hand on his. He thinks she’s going to ask him to bring up what he’s here for again, but when he looks at her, she’s just staring at the table, where their two hands join, skin tones identical.

“I was very careless about love when I was a teenager, so when I finally entered my twenties, I became cautious. It was very crass of me. When I met your father, he was an absolute moron. Overexcited about everything, wanting to jump in headfirst. Of course, I wore him down eventually, when it was clear I knew what I wanted and that neither of us were playing games, but…” she sighs, waving a hand in dismissal. “Actually, Kuroo used to remind me of him. I used to think the two of you would get together.”

“Kuro?” he can’t help but splutter the word out, because the thought is so ridiculous.

His mom lifts an eyebrow. “Why is that so surprising?”

“Well, you’ve been adverse to my sexuality for as long as I can remember. That’s one reason. Among many others.”

She waves a hand. “Adverse is the wrong word. I’m your mother, what do you want from me? But speaking of relationships.” Her eyes darken. Seismic waves hit the table. Uh-oh. “Is that what this is about?”

He considers lying. He could back out now, and then he wouldn’t have to sit through this awkward lunch wondering how to ask the normal way people figure out whether they’re dating each other. She’s looking at him like she’s already figured it out, though, and the only way to escape it would be to run; even that way she might catch him.

“Yeah,” he admits finally, looking down at his hands. He doesn’t expect her to clap like a schoolgirl.

“I knew there was someone. Alright, tell me about him. It is a him, right?”

“Yes, mom,” he says, mortified. Why isn’t their waiter back yet? “His name is Shouyou.”

“A gorgeous name.” She nods approvingly, like he was looking for her approval. “Where did you meet?”

“Um.” He thinks about it, remembering the depression that carried with him when he got off the train, trudging along behind Kuroo and wanting to go anywhere but home. “We met at a volleyball game. He offered to drive me and my friends to lunch, but his car broke down and we all had to get out and push.”

Her face actually changes then, like she’s mulling over whether Hinata is responsible enough to date her boy. She nods decisively. “Alright. And then what?”

“And then… I don’t know. He drove me home, and we became friends. Started texting.”

“Was there any face to face contact involved at all?”

He tries his best to glare. It doesn’t really suit his face; she laughs.

“I kind of messed up, and… um, long story short, we worked it all out, and I think we’re together.
But Kuro pointed out that neither of us have actually. Like. Asked.”

She stares at him blankly.

“To date. Neither of us asked the other if we're dating.”

“Kenma,” she says.

“I mean, I thought it was obvious. I didn’t even think about it at all, whether or not we were dating. I certainly wasn’t thinking about it while we were kissing, or—”

“Okay, I didn’t need specific details.” She’s grinning despite herself, a movement of pleasure carried about by a wave. Their food arrives then, and Kenma thanks the well-needed distraction. He tries to bury the conversation in the absurd gourmet salad his mother has ordered for him, suddenly embarrassed.

“You know,” she says, when she’s swallowed her first mouthful of food, “when I first met your father, he was very macho. The kind to crap on about how marriage is a pointless waste of time unless you meet the ‘perfect woman’, and how all he was interested in until then was casual dating.” She laughs into the heel of her hand, like she’s reliving a fond memory. “A real heart-breaker type of guy. I knew a few girls who went out with him; rarely ever more than one date. But God, I saw right through it. I was determined to be the girl to conquer him.” She sips her tea again, looking pleased. “And I was. Obviously. But I wouldn’t have been if I hadn’t confronted him after the first date and told him exactly what I wanted.”

“What does this have to do with Shouyou?” Kenma asks, but he already knows.

Her gaze turns hard. “You need to be honest with this boy. Communicate, for goodness’ sake. You can’t have a relationship without communication. How do you think you achieve trust, or the benefit of the doubt, or… heaven knows what else? Talk to each other.”

Kenma knows she’s right. He doesn’t know what else to say, turning his attention to his food. After what feels like a lifetime, when the salad is waning and his mom’s on her second drink, he asks, “Is dad really okay with me being a writer?”

“We spoke about it. As long as you get consistent results, I don’t see why we can’t fund it. He’s still a little sore, but he’ll get over it. He’s just being a baby.” She smiles. “Plenty of people have lousy parents, Kenma. You’re not special.”

Oddly enough, this feels like closure. He knows he doesn’t have to forgive either of them for being so distant during high school, or for trying to decide his life, just like they don’t have to “forgive” him for the life choices they don’t understand.

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Oh, any time. It’s nice having lunch with you again.”

He starts to smile, but a thought occurs. “Hey, why are you in Tokyo anyway? I thought dad doesn’t do business trips up here anymore.”

“Your father’s not the only one with a job, young man,” she chastises, looking pleased anyway. “I had a transfer offer up here that the firm wanted me to come and look at.”

“Oh, mom, you don’t mean—”

“Thank you,” she says, “for looking so disappointed. No, I’m not taking it. The pay is hardly worth the move.”
Kenma tries to look sorry, but he knows his relief is palpable. It’s bad enough being in his twenties and still having to make phone calls to his parents every time he wants to make a decision.

He walks her back to her car after lunch, where she hugs him the only way Mrs Kozume knows how; briskly, one-armed, the way you’d hug somebody at a funeral. She pulls back to study him afterwards, searching for something in his face.

“You’ll do well,” she says. He has no idea what that means; he doesn’t ask.

By the time he gets back to his apartment, he’s freaking out again.

He has to come up with a plan to ask Hinata. He can’t just... say it, or he’ll never live it down. What if Hinata says no? What if he wants to keep things casual? Or worse, what if he words the question wrong and Hinata thinks that he wants that?

It’s 5 now. He’s probably sleeping, so it’s a better idea if Kenma waits until tomorrow to ask him about it. He’ll get up early—no, at a reasonable time, to make things look more casual—and ask Hinata if he wants to hang out. What is he going to say? It can’t sound stupid, or else—

His phone buzzes in his back pocket. This is the second time today it’s almost scared him to death. Heart hammering, he opens the text, mind still running with what he could possibly say to Hinata.

can I come over????

It’s like relief and fear wash over him at once, sending his body into overdrive. Hinata wants come over. He hasn’t had nearly enough time to think about this, he’s going to have a heart attack—

please its rly important

His heart slows down. He’s being ridiculous. He’s loved Hinata for this long, and he can’t put aside his own selfish worries for five minutes to help him out?

yeah, of course, he sends back, pausing a moment to consider. He adds, are you ok?

Hinata doesn’t reply.

Kenma starts to worry after the first five minutes, pacing his apartment. He considers putting on music twice, but chickens out both times. What have Western romance movies taught him? Maybe he should cook something, so that he doesn’t look like he’s just been waiting around this whole time. Then again, if he burns it it’ll look even worse. Maybe—

The knock at the door scares him half out of his mind. He can feel his palms sweating already, pulse jumping in his throat. Battle plan, he reminds himself, trying to act casual and not let his anxiety send him into an overdrive. He’ll just answer the door, invite Hinata in, and ask the question when the time feels right.

He opens the door to the sight of Hinata standing with a wilting bouquet of sunflowers. The second he sees Kenma his face turns red; he bows so suddenly that Kenma jumps, and then stays in the bow, shaking slightly with the effort.

“Um,” Kenma says.

Hinata straightens. His face is flaming, like he’s never been more embarrassed in his life. “Please let me come in,” he says weakly, sounding like he’s minutes away from death.

Kenma figures he looks about the same.
“Come in?”

He shuts the door behind Hinata. The situation has totally turned itself upside on its head now, and he has no idea what to do about it. Clearly, the flowers are for him. Should he have gotten Hinata something too? He hadn’t known they were meant to do a gift exchange. He turns to Hinata, who is still vibrating, and awkwardly gestures at the couch.

“Would you like to sit d—”

“Kenmapleasegooutwithme.”

Kenma goes silent. Hinata goes silent.

“…On a date?”

“Yes.” Hinata sounds breathless, all the blood having gone to his face. It’s kind of hilarious, or would be if Kenma wasn’t just as freaked out. “Yes,” Hinata says again, curling his hands into fists. “As my boyfriend. Please be my boyfriend.”

Kenma’s silent for a few moments longer, just watching HInata stand there staring and shaking. Then, he sags with relief. “Thank god you asked,” he says, breathing a sigh. “I had no idea how to bring it up.”

“Um,” Hinata squeaks, still looking moments from combusting.

“I was wondering all day how to word it,” Kenma admits, leaning forward to peck the redhead’s lips; they’re stiff with shock, so he pulls back. “Do you mind if we stay in, though? I’m still exhausted from camping. We can play games or watch movies or something… is that an acceptable thing to do on a date?”

Before he gets a chance to wait for Hinata’s response, he’s being yanked forward, until they’re inches away and he can’t see anything but the other’s parted lips, shaking breath puffing out and the very faint pink of his tongue from between his teeth.

“Can I—”

“You don’t have to ask,” he laughs, and then he is being kissed.

Looping his arms around Hinata’s neck still feels like dreaming, but it’s the most grounding thing he’s ever experienced. He wonders if he’ll ever get used to it. The honey-languid way Hinata kisses, tongue brushing his bottom lip like he’s still not sure whether it’s okay. When he yanks the redhead closer, he breathes out a melodic hum that vibrates Kenma’s lips, just shy of perfect, so good it makes all the blood rush to Kenma’s head.

“Is this—” Hinata gasps, “are we—”

“Mm, yeah,” Kenma sighs, blinking at him sleepily, dreamily. “Think so. My answer was a yes, obviously.”

“Awesome,” Hinata squeaks. It’s the most ridiculous thing ever. Kenma can’t not kiss him.

He lies down when Hinata pushes, gentle and insistent. He moves them both so that they’re lying on the couch, the change in angles making everything different, more sudden, more new. Kenma shifts his hips to accommodate for Hinata’s body, moving his legs so that they’re intertwined; it’s so good he could cry. He can’t believe they weren’t doing this before; seriously, how much time did they waste? Kissing Hinata might be his new favourite thing ever.

So understandably, that’s an activity that goes on for a while.
Hinata pulls away at some point just to look at Kenma, and it’s so intimate and his stare is so serious that Kenma wants to hide. He doesn’t, though; there’s something languid about everything that’s happening, like his life has been turned on slow motion. Or like the waves have finally stopped beating against him and thrashing him around and everything is just sea foam now, evanescent fog.

“You know, we could have been doing this a long time ago,” he muses thoughtfully, threading his legs behind Hinata’s waist. It makes the other blush, for whatever reason; taking it as a challenge, he ducks his head to press kisses to Kenma’s neck, drawing out all the breath from his lungs.

“Could have—ah, told me sooner, you know.”

“Don’t blame me.” Hinata looks impressed with himself, clearly having found a weak spot for Kenma. He can’t keep the blush from his cheeks, and it only gets worse when Hinata ducks his head back down to nose the underside of Kenma’s chin.

“You’re annoying,” he muses, slurs, something along those lines; he doesn’t mean it.

“You don’t mean it.” Hinata is smiling into his skin; he can feel the imprint of the other’s teeth against his throat. Kenma swallows.

“I thought you’d be more overwhelmed,” Hinata admits sheepishly, glancing up at him. Kenma can only blink narrowly down at him, staring over the edge of the universe and into the sun.

“Nah,” he says, running his fingers through the sun’s hair. “I’m happy.”

“You look relaxed.”

“Mm. Kiss me?”

“Super relaxed,” Hinata concedes, grinning wildly. He inches his way high enough again to kiss Kenma’s lips, this time, an amorphous stretch of time between them. Kenma thinks he could die like this, if he wasn’t looking forward to doing more of it in the future.

"Wait," Hinata says, pulling away and interrupting the kiss again, and when he sees Kenma’s irritation, waves a hand. "I have one more question. Is volleyball a date? That's a date, right?"

Kenma just kisses him.

Chapter End Notes

the next and final chapter will be up some time next week. its been a good ride, guys. thank you so much for your continuing support, fanart, and comments. you have no idea how much it means to me.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

this is it! the last and final chapter ever.
warnings for sappy kuroo stuff. also warnings for nsfw stuff; if sex bothers you, skip
about a third of this chapter.
thanks to everyone for being supportive!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kuroo leaves for the US on new year’s eve.

Four of them go to see him off at the airport: Kenma, because he’s Kuroo’s best friend, and he
almost doesn’t come just to avoid seeing the stupid actor tear up like he knows he will; Hinata,
because for about a month now he’s been following Kenma everywhere; Tsukishima, who also
almost doesn’t come and actually does cry before they leave the house; and Lev, because he’s
Lev.

There’s a pretty somber mood that moves with their group, a dark cloud that settles itself over the
Tokyo skyline. Kuroo is as cheerful as the mood will allow, trying to counteract the sulkiness of
everyone else. Kenma’s excited for him, but it’s going to be a whole year before he’s back. That’s
a whole year of awkward phone calls and skyping his best friend where before he could just walk
over next door and see him. He’s got an entire empty apartment to care for while Kuroo’s gone.
(Though Tsukishima has said a number of times that he’ll be over there to help clean, Kenma
suspects it’s really just to lie on the bare bed and feel sorry for himself.)

Lev is pouting, a look that doesn’t suit him. He’s always either too serious or too playful; like with
Kuroo, Kenma is only starting to tell the difference. Lev and Kuroo have become friends over the
past few months, too. Kenma feels like a current, pushing everybody together. Even Hinata looks
genuinely sad for his own reasons.

No one’s going to be okay without him, but maybe everyone is going to be, too.

“Don’t look like I’ve died,” Kuroo complains, as they’re coming around the corner that leads to
the walkway before his gate. He’s been in this weird state of conviviality all morning, like maybe
forcing a smile on his face will counteract all the sadness. “It’s a year. I’m gonna be way famous
when I come back, and then you’ll all want my autograph.”

“You’re ‘way famous’ already,” Lev disagrees, resting his arm—annoyingly—on top of Kenma’s
head as they walk. “Dude, if you get any more famous, we won’t be able to go for fro-yo
anymore. All the girls will want your autograph. Like, who is there left for me to court?”

Kenma snorts. Lev knows it’s a silent jab, what Kenma isn’t saying—Yaku, maybe?—but says
nothing, too absorbed in hiding his dour state. He’s glowering.

“Whatever,” Kuroo says, waving a hand. “You all have to visit anyway. Or I’ll come here,
probably. There’s going to be so much downtime from filming that I won’t know what to do with
myself.”

“Call us, maybe,” Kenma says in a deadpan, but his voice comes out weak and Hinata squeezes
his hand. An anchor. He breathes in, out, trying to keep steady.
They reach the gate. Kuroo stops and stands there with his back to his friends, shoulders stiff for a moment in a subtle way no one but Kenma notices. He stiffens up as if by osmosis, absorbing the tension.

“Well,” Kuroo says, spinning back around like he didn’t just have a moment, “my flight isn’t for another twenty minutes. Wait here, I’ll buy you all food.”

“Kuro,” Lev says, wiping away a tear from the corner of his eye. “Even in his last moments, he was so kind.”

“I’m not dying.”

“I’ll go with you,” Kenma says, glancing sideways at Hinata when he feels him peek over. He squeezes his boyfriend’s hand, trying to convey everything that’s going through his head. “You won’t know what to get, you’re an idiot.”

No one protests at that, and the two of them go off together, the remaining three standing grumbling and brooding in front of the gate.

It’s the most silent between Kenma and Kuroo that it’s ever been as they start for the small takeout kiosk awaiting by the entry of another gate. Kuroo’s got a stiffness in his walk that almost isn’t detectable to the naked eye, but Kenma notices. He watches the way his steps falter, the way his fingers twitch inwards like they want to form fists.

He waits until they get in line, where Kuroo can stand still and breathe in deeply so that his chest rises like a wave.

“You can cry, you know. I won’t judge you.”

Kuroo whips his head around. He’s being very careful, Kenma knows, or he’d have made a sarcastic remark already; something like I won’t miss you that much or you’re the one who’s going to cry. But he doesn’t. He watches Kenma carefully, trying to decide something as he swallows a visible lump in his throat.

Kenma turns his head and looks back. ”You make this face when you’re going to cry. It’s really ugly.”

Kuroo bursts out laughing. It’s uglier than the face he was making, a truly hysterical scrunch of his features as desperate, nervous laughs huff out, disguising themselves as joy even when the tears start falling. Kenma expected this, so he pulls him down for a hug wordlessly, ignoring the glances of passersby and others in line; they’re probably used to this kind of thing, anyway. It’s an airport.

“I’m going to miss you,” Kuroo gasps, between laughs and sobs, “so damn much.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be here when you get back.”

“I’ll visit.” He pulls back to look at Kenma seriously. “You’re the first person I’ll come to see. Well, unless Kei picks me up wearing lingerie, then I might—”

“You’re disgusting,” Kenma says, hitting him, but he feels like he’s going to cry now, too. They haven’t been apart since they were children. Even when Kenma’s parents were going to take him away from Tokyo and everything he knew, Kuroo followed.

Kuroo puts a hand on his shoulder like he’s about to give him a pep talk. “I really love you,” he says.

“Gross.”
“Kenma, I’m crying here. There are real, salty tears coming from my eyes. I’m crying the whole damn ocean for you.”

“Actually,” Kenma says, “you’re crying about 60% of the ocean. Way less, if you take into account how many more times you’re gonna cry like a baby.”

“You’re the baby,” Kuroo say eloquently, and then they’re hugging again.

Kenma puts his head down on his best friend’s chest and lets a few tears slip out. It feels silly, standing in the middle of a moderately busy airport and crying and hugging like he’s in a shoujo manga. Eventually they pull apart, and it’s messy, Kuroo’s face red and wet with tears.

“Do I look okay?” he asks. Kenma reaches a hand to wipe one of his tears and just ends up smearing more, recoiling in abject disgust.

“Sure,” he lies. “We should get the food and go back. Your boyfriend’s going to think you’ve run away.”

Kuroo barks out a laugh.

They get the food then, and Kenma despairingly thinks that this is the last time Kuroo’s going to be shouting him for a while, which is absurd, because there are way more important reasons to miss your best friend than eating their food all the time. They cross back over to Kuroo’s gate, where the others are waiting in a dismal and huddled group. Lev perks up at the sight of the food.

“This will only quell some of the heartbreak,” he says.

“Oh, God,” Tsukishima grates, when he see Kuroo’s face. He turns to Kenma accusingly. “What did you do to him?”

“I just said goodbye,” Kenma says, his hand finding Hinata’s like a concomitant shift from low tide to hide.

Kuroo flies into Tsukishima’s arms and nearly bowls both of them over. Kenma feels the need to turn away, politely, even as he hears the blonde’s muffled cries for help.

“He’ll probably be back tomorrow,” Hinata suggests, making a face. “He’ll miss you way too much, Kenma.”

“Yeah,” Kenma says. He peaks back over his shoulder at his best friend, who is still hugging Tsukishima. He’s stopped struggling, and is hugging back. “They’re being so gross right now. People are staring.”

“Do you wanna be gross, too?”

Kenma side-eyes him. He’s grinning, the jackass, and he knows exactly what Kenma is thinking. He ducks his head. “Later,” he mumbles.

It gets to the time where Kuroo has to go through the gate, or he’ll miss his plane. Lev balances towers of food in his arms that Kenma doesn’t feel like eating. He thought he’d be more bitter than this, and distantly feels just a little fucked up for smiling. But Kuroo’s smiling, too. He waves them off as he enters the gate, that usual brave stride back. And then he’s gone.
Kenma sighs into Hinata’s lips, letting the pull of it guide him. They’ve barely been back at his apartment for an hour and already he’s pinned under the redhead, trying to keep up.

It didn’t take very long for Hinata to get comfortable about kissing him. That’s something Kenma likes about his boyfriend; he’s positively resilient when it comes to something he wants. Hinata has no trouble now in prodding at Kenma’s shoulders until the blonde complies, falling down so that his back is against the sofa and shifting his hips to accommodate for Hinata. The redhead straddles him, which is just about the best feeling ever.

Kenma’s lazy. Not so lazy that he doesn’t want to make out, because that’s a whole other class of want on its own, but lazy enough that he really doesn’t mind Hinata taking control. In fact, he likes it a whole lot. It gets his pulse thrumming, blood teeming languidly up to form a blush in his cheeks and chest and then—down. Appropriately.

Hinata shifts his hips against Kenma and then goes still.

This happens sometimes. Kenma takes the opportunity of their broken kiss to nuzzle at the underside of the other’s chin and throat, pressing listless, wet kisses against the skin there. He likes when it’s clear Hinata can’t get enough of it, and tries to tilt his head back in a way that’s not obvious. It is. Obvious, that is. Hinata swallows, the lines of his throat shifting under Kenma’s mouth, and tentatively, suggestively, Kenma places his hands on Hinata’s hips.

“Bathroom,” Hinata squeaks, and he’s off of Kenma and out of the room in a flash.

Kenma sighs.

He’s been doing this for a while now, too. Just when they’re getting into it—and Kenma means into it—Hinata will find some excuse to leave the room, most commonly to lock himself in that bathroom for God knows how long doing God knows what. It’s not like it’s a big deal, anyway. Kenma rolls over and fishes for the remote, channel surfing while he waits for Hinata to calm down and come back.

It isn’t like he’s not— like, hard, beneath Kenma, because he definitely is. There’s no mistaking the feeling of Hinata pressed against his thigh, or the way his pulse flutters in his throat and his cheeks start to warm up. Kenma doesn’t deny that it does things to him, spikes his heart-rate when he’s meant to be focusing on work or school or any other situation where it’s inappropriate to be thinking of your boyfriend in bed, but Hinata doesn’t seem interested. Aside from the obvious interest. His body certainly doesn’t take a meek approach in showing it.

Kenma has figured for a while now that Hinata just isn’t interested in that kind of thing. Every time he brings it up, however, Hinata’s already racing out of the room. It’s not like he minds. He’s fine with just the kissing, the touching, even though he would be just as fine with things going further. Hinata swallows. He really has to stop letting his imagination run off on him like that.

Kind of like Hinata runs off on him. Kenma definitely wishes he wouldn’t do that, for one thing.

Kageyama comes home around 6, carrying drinks in his arms and muttering about the weather. It’s been freezing lately, and the heavy winds yesterday were enough for everyone to agree that a stay-at-home new year’s eve is the best approach.

They’re friends now, Kenma figures, by proxy. He nods at the setter when he stalks past, and Kageyama nods back. Hinata hangs around the kitchen with the both of them, seeming thankful for the distraction, as if Kenma is some insatiable sex maniac who’s going to try to jump him if they’re alone. He rolls his eyes.
“Koushi’s snowed in,” Kageyema says, shaking some of the excess snow from his hair and the shoulders of his coat.

“Is Daichi with them?”

“Obviously.”

“I’m sure they’re just devastated about that,” Hinata jokes, grinning; he tries to pick at one of the beers and Kageyama swats his hand away.

“Hey!”

“If you drink them all now, dumbass, you’re gonna get wasted and pass out before midnight. Neither of us wants to deal with you when you’re like that.”

“Kenma does, Kenma cares about me,” Hinata defends, but he backs off, albeit rubbing his wrist with a sulky expression. Kenma rounds the bench to bump hips with him playfully, moving him out of the way to help with the groceries.

They’re not exactly living together, but sometimes it feels like it. Kageyama doesn’t mind the alone time when Hinata’s staying with Kenma, and doesn’t appear to mind when Kenma’s over. He says he likes him better than Hinata, because at least Kenma has the common courtesy to clean his own dishes, to do his own laundry. He helps with dinner while Hinata sits at the bench, swinging around boredly on one of the chairs and complaining about the lack of takeout places willing to deliver in a snowstorm.

“Idiot, it’s new year’s eve, too,” Kageyama scolds, looking unimpressed.

“I know that, but I really felt like pizza. Don’t you feel like pizza?”

“No.”

“Lies. Everyone feels like pizza, all the time. Isn’t that right, Kenma?”

“Probably not,” Kenma says, glancing up bemusedly at Hinata’s petulant expression. “I mean, scientifically.”

“But that’s the thing,” Hinata pouts, sticking his tongue out, “you’re a writer, not a scientist. Aren’t you supposed to care about feelings?”

“No. I think writers are very methodical, actually.”

“It’s like setting,” Kageyama mumbles. “It’s pretty much science.”

“But you’re both saps,” Hinata points out, and they throw flour on him on cue.

Once dinner is done and the sun has set, they all three gather in the living room to watch new year’s specials on TV. The music is pretty bad, and they’re on their phones more than they’re watching the actual programs, but Kenma loosens up, enjoying the awful music and the good company and the growing sense of midnight.

“Waaah,” Hinata cries, exactly like that. Kenma rolls his head lazily to see what he’s shouting about, and Hinata is waving his phone around. “Look at this! Kenma, there’s this new exhibit I really wanna see. You know this poet, right?”

He reads Hinata a lot of poetry these days, and recognises her straight away: Hayashi Fumiko. He’s actually kind of amazed that Hinata knows who she is, a warmth settling over his chest when it occurs to him that his boyfriend actually enjoys learning about the writers Kenma reads to him.
“Sure,” he answers, thinking nothing of the people that are going to be there, the social setting, the possibilities of anxiety creeping in. “When is it?”

“Um, um, hold on—ah, it starts tomorrow. That’s like, fate! We have to go. Can we go, Kenma?”

“We can go,” he says, not pointing out that Hinata’s tipsy, not saying anything when his boyfriend leans in to plant a sunny kiss on his cheek.

“Gross,” Kageyama grouses.

When it gets close to midnight they all count down together, the canned and echoey cheers from the crowds on television feeling warped, like sound travelling through a tunnel. Kenma feels distantly, dreamily overwhelmed with the thought of an entire new year ahead of him. Hinata kisses him when the countdown reaches 0, the distorted, bending voices moving murkily around them like shots fired through water, and it feels right. Kageyama is complaining when they pull away, some jumbled concoction of gross disgusting do you guys really have to do that here you guys are so gay holy shit. The television is flashing with neon lights, little pixels representing fireworks and confetti and so many other things that are far away and yet feel present in the same room as Kenma.

They all go to bed soon after that, no one game enough to fight their growing exhaustion. Kenma follows Hinata down the familiar hallway to his room and lets himself be guided down to the bed, remembering blearily the first night he came here. There’s no apprehension now; he’s woken up here more times than he can count, both facing Hinata and not. They have kissed in this bed and he hasn’t gotten up and paced the room. He feels himself drifting with his head on Hinata’s chest, slotted together like they’ve been dulled and welded with the waves.

“Do you really want to go tomorrow? I like poetry.” Hinata murmurs into his hair. Half asleep and unaware of what he’s saying, probably.

“I like poetry, too.”

“I know. Are you working?”

“Yeah.” Kenma tries to remember his schedule, a schedule of an entirely new year, new months ahead, more school. “I finish at 5.”

“I’ll pick you up.” It feels normal, Kenma thinks. It feels like this is how things have been all along, like this is how they’re supposed to be. He and Hinata against the world; he and Hinata taking things smoothly like this, like being together is the natural turn of the tide.

He falls asleep to the sound of Hinata’s neighbours cheering and celebrating, and thinks that for once he doesn’t mind what the year ahead holds for him.

Hinata picks him up after work just like he said. It’s been busier without Kuroo, who took leave almost as soon as he found out he was going overseas. Kenma has this weird level of respect that follows him around from his colleagues, who all know him as the kind-of-quiet kind-of-clever friend of Kuroo’s, who has been talked up enough to last a lifetime. Sometimes Tsukishima comes in during the day to visit. On the first of January he doesn’t, and Kenma imagines it must have to do with Kuroo’s promised phone call.

There are still Christmas decorations up everywhere.

“It’s January,” Kenma complains, running his hand along some dusty tinsel that still adorns the doorway of the exhibition building. “Seriously.”
“I’d like it if Christmas was every day,” Hinata says, bunching his coat closer around his arms. Kenma reflects the sentiment. It’s cold out, more freezing than usual, and he wastes no time in moving closer to Hinata so that they can press close and hold hands. He’s hit with a blissfully warm blast of air upon entering the building.

Being at the exhibition building reminds Kenma of visiting the art gallery with Hinata. They pace the halls and try to keep their faces serious, feeling it inappropriate to laugh when they’re meant to be looking at poems about absent fathers and revolutions. He feels giddy with the new year, like January is setting into his skin already.

It snows on their way back to the station. Kenma watches from the corner of his eye as snow collects in his boyfriend’s incandescent hair, and smiles as the fire refuses to be put out. Hinata’s nose slowly turns red with the cold. While they’re waiting for their train Kenma leans in under the pretense of kissing him and rubs their noses together instead, pulling apart to laugh hysterically at the way Hinata’s eyes bug out of his skull.

“Do that again,” he commands, pulling Kenma back to him. Kenma laughs. They eskimo kiss again, in front of all those people.

When they get home Kenma puts on one of the mixes Hinata made him: Sea Oleena and the Mirraz and other bands they both love. They listen to it for a while, trying to pick out a good movie to watch from Kenma’s elaborate collection kept in a drawer beneath the living room TV. When they decide on one—a cheesy indie romance—they turn the music off and turn the film on in Kenma’s room. They cuddle on his bed for a while, fitting together.

“What did you think of the exhibition?” Hinata murmurs, toying his fingers through Kenma’s hair.

“It was good. Good start to the year.”

“How about work? Did I ask how work was?”

“You did,” Kenma says, nuzzling into the contact at his hair. “Hisae was kind of rude. A customer tried to order from a secret menu we don’t have again.”

“Is it hard making coffee?” Hinata props himself up on an elbow, looking at Kenma. “I mean, I’m short, so I can’t imagine it being easy. Can you reach the big machine?”

“Sort of,” Kenma admits. “I mean, I’m short too.”

“Yeah. Hey, I’m lucky I found you to date, huh? If you were super tall, it would be hard for me to kiss you.”

“And push me around,” Kenma jokes, but then his words register with the both of them and they go quiet. There’s too much distance between them on the bed. “Come here,” Kenma murmurs.

Hinata does. Their bodies fit together like always, Hinata slotting out a place for himself between Kenma’s legs. He makes no protest other than a surprised noise when Kenma tugs him down, so that they are flatly pressed together; the skin of Hinata’s stomach brushes his where their shirts have ridden up. God. Kenma shivers.

He might never get used to this. It’s overwhelming in a slow way, like heat builds up in him again and again, lighting the two of them and the room on fire. Kenma might never get used to the way that noises are pulled from his throat like water, breath hitching without his consent. He rests both hands on Hinata’s hips, kissing him deeper when they twitch. They’re sensitive. Kenma grins into the kiss. If Hinata gets to suck and bite at his throat—and he’s left marks before, ugly purple and red things that Kenma had to go to Suga for advice about hiding—then Kenma should be able to run his fingers along the curve of Hinata’s hips, dig his thumbs into the bones until Hinata
shudders above him. The feeling is wildly emboldening; Hinata, brave, excitable Hinata, shivering in his arms like that. Like he’s something both delicate and thrumming with energy, an explosion waiting to happen.

The movie’s probably ended by now. Kenma chases Hinata’s tongue with his own and, when their stomachs brush again, rolls his hips.

Hinata goes still. Kenma braces himself for it, for the cold feeling of Hinata leaving or pulling away or coming up with a whole new excuse altogether. Instead of doing any of those things, Hinata presses back.

The noise that comes from Kenma’s mouth surprises even him. It’s too much for Hinata all of a sudden, who pulls away with cheeks the colour of crimson and a harsh panting breath. He stares down at Kenma so seriously it’s like a bullet to the head. For just one, elongated moment, he gawks at Kenma, pupils blown so wide that the brown in his eyes is almost entirely swallowed up by them. The look is… it’s… hungry, Kenma thinks.

Then Hinata comes to his senses.

“Bathroom,” he squeaks, but before he can flee Kenma tightens his legs around the other’s back and holds him in place.

“Wait,” he says, when Hinata continues to squirm away. He’s hard against Kenma’s hip, the weight of it pressing into the blonde and making him lightheaded. Hinata is panting harshly, the heat of his breath puffing out against Kenma’s collarbone.

“It’s okay,” Kenma says. “You don’t need to run.” I don’t mind, he means to say, but it doesn’t come out.

“Aah,” Hinata articulates, the desperation of the noise dropping straight through Kenma’s stomach, “I really do. Um… sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Kenma says. How can he convey to Hinata that he both wants this and doesn’t mind if they don’t? That he wants Hinata but doesn’t mind if not in that way? “What’s wrong?”

Hinata whines against Kenma’s throat, and the blonde’s blood drops straight through his body. “If I stay, I’ll wanna touch you more.”

His heart starts up at a hundred times the capacity. He doesn’t have the ability to think for a moment, just lying there stiff and still under Hinata. His head is pressed firmly underneath the column of Kenma’s throat, and Kenma can feel his heartbeat, hard and persistent like a drum.

“…I thought you didn’t want to.”

“Me?” Hinata looks up at him. His pupils are a little less wide now, but there’s no mistaking the feeling of him, still hard and shivering above Kenma. “I thought you didn’t want to. That’s why I wasn’t…”

“Shouyou,” Kenma deadpans. “You didn’t even ask me.”

“You didn’t ask me.”

“Oh my God.”

“How was I supposed to know that—”

Kenma shuts him up with a kiss, too deep too fast and hot enough to steal all the coherent thoughts from his brain. Hinata opens his mouth willingly, taking over the control of the kiss
pretty quickly. This time, when they pull away, he’s panting like he’s run a marathon.

“Do you, um.” Hinata is shaking again; this time, Kenma’s pretty sure it isn’t fear. “Do you want to?”

“Yeah.” He says it too quickly. Kenma’s heart is going really fast, pounding in his ears and making his body tremble. They start kissing again and Hinata’s hands are shaking when they dip under Kenma’s shirt; he pulls away to look at the blonde, gauging his reactions to the cool hands pressed against his bare skin.

“Is this okay?”

Kenma nods.

He’s nervous. They both are. It occurs to Kenma how much he really wants this; he didn’t realise how much, his whole body trembling like something is trying to escape him, his movements feverish.

Hinata runs the tips of his fingers along Kenma's ribcage; the blonde shudders. It's not like they haven't done this before, this kind of touching, but now it's full of other implications; the hot drag of Hinata's hands feels so much more personal, like he's mapping Kenma's body out. He mouths hotly along Kenma's throat, drawing tentative sighs. Kenma lifts his hips again, wanting more--not knowing what he wants, but knowing he wants it. Knowing he wants more of Hinata, wants him closer.

Hinata huffs out a laugh, the sound mere inches from the shell of Kenma's ear; he shudders again. Clawing with the pads of his fingers, he tries to translate that he needs Hinata's shirt off, and he needs it off now.

Hinata gets the memo. He pulls away to tug it off, stopping to laugh when it gets stuck on his arms and musses his hair. Kenma reaches up to tug him back down for a kiss, immediately placing shaky hands on the redhead's now exposed hips. It feels really intimate. The movie has definitely finished, and the whole room's in silence; an ambient cave allowing every one of their noises to ricochet from wall to wall. Kenma's harsh breathing feels amplified, the sound of his heartbeat wildly conspicuous. A sort of self consciousness takes over and he licks into Hinata's mouth, attempting to deflect attention.

"Kenma," Hinata sighs dreamily. He settles back against the blonde's thighs, looking down at his boyfriend like he's trying to decide what to do. Kenma takes the few short moments to memorise the sight of him, sitting up there like a dream. He wishes he had a photographic memory, because oh. Hinata's eyes have gone all glossy and hazy, the way they get when he's really into a volleyball match. There are the hard lines of his body, the soft curve where his ribcage meets the edge of his stomach. Velvety scars, the colour of pallid strawberries, decorate the underside of his chest in delicate crescents; Kenma reaches up and draws his thumb across the edge of one, watches Hinata's eyes flutter. He's being kissed again then, the image embedded somewhere in his mind for later like a memory of art.

"Kenma," Hinata says into their kiss, and "Kenma" again. He'll never get used to hearing his name like that, whispered breathily as if it's a secret. It makes him want to cease using it altogether, not wanting to hear it from anyone else in any other context; just Hinata's, just his, this secret, intensely intimate formation of noise. His hands find Hinata's sides and trace all the way up, and back down again. Hinata's stomach flutters beneath his palms, dancing away from the contact; emboldened, Kenma presses more firmly, allowing the blunt edges of his nails to chase Hinata's skin until he's able to draw more sighs out.

Kenma complies, albeit grinning. It's kind of nice to see Hinata lose control like this. Not that he's ever been a very reserved or in-control person in the first place. Once it's off he's about to complain about the state of his hair, but he catches sight of Hinata staring down at him, lips parted and pupils blown wide. Kenma squirms under the stare.

"What, like--" Hinata licks his lips, sending motions like tiny electric currents down Kenma's spine, "what do you-- what can I do, what do you want, Kenma? I want to... you know, make you feel really good." He mouths at the curve and dip of Kenma's collarbone, as if completely unaware that his boyfriend's face has just caught fire. He lies there trying to keep up as Hinata cups his sides, feels the soft curve of his stomach and the flatness of his chest. The palm of his hand catches over a nipple-- it draws a sound from Kenma, and he makes a face like he's filing away information for later use-- and then his hands are going down, down too quickly, and before Kenma gets a chance to say anything they're resting against his thighs.

"Uh," Hinata says, eyes cast down, and Kenma's face is burning now. "Um. N-nice."

"Oh my God, Shouyou." Both hands fly to cover his face. Hinata's probably still looking. He doesn't want to see. God. He's never going to live this down.

"No, like," he peeks from between his fingers, Hinata licks his lips. "Just. Your thighs. They're really nice."

Kenma lowers one of his hands, unsure whether he wants to glare or grin or what. His thighs? His thighs, of all things. Unbelievably, he has a flashback to that day at the amusement park when Kuroo was being a jackass and talking about the size of his thighs in front of everyone. At the time he thought he was trying to make Tsukishima jealous, but-- oh. Oh, it kind of makes sense now.

As if sensing his thoughts, Hinata ducks his head sheepishly, though makes no effort to move his hands from where they're languidly working up the length of Kenma's legs. They're getting too close to the sensitive parts of his inner-thighs for comfort; he should warn Hinata about this, but he stays silent, lips clamped shut with embarrassment.

"I really like them, Kenma. I was worried you'd catch me staring at them, like, a lot."

"Pervert," he says, because it's the only word he can squeak out. Hinata grins.

"Yeah. Hey, I kind of am, right? Can I touch them?"

"You already are."

"Yeah, but like, properly."

He does it anyway, catching the slightest of nods-- Kenma could be bowing his head, he tells himself, nothing too eager about it. He holds his breath as Hinata runs his hands across the fabric of his pants, looking entirely perplexed. Then he looks back up, and his eyes are ablaze.

"I want to take these off."

Kenma's head falls back and he throws an arm up to cover his eyes. "Do what you want," he murmurs, more embarrassed than he's ever been in his life. He doesn't know why he was so cool about this earlier; how is he ever going to get used to Hinata looking at him like this? It's exciting; his heart is still going wild, whole body flushed. The sound of his zipper sounds way too loud in the silence of the room.

"You, too," he says quickly, before he can forget, before Hinata has his jeans all the way down. The other grins like this is a challenge. Kenma attempts to turn his chin up, but most of his
bravado vanishes at the sight of Hinata rolling his hips to get the fabric over them, and his boxers, and God he's going to come in his pants and they haven't even done anything yet.

"Hey, Kenma," Hinata says softly, moving back to work his jeans off once his own legs are bare. He works his way down Kenma's body, and Kenma pretends not to be putting his full effort into not wheezing, eyes probably bugging way out of his skull by now. "You look really good right now. Ah... it's super unfair, because it makes me really wanna touch you. H-how is that... fair..." He's babbling. Kenma hopes he's too far gone to notice his embarrassment, but that's wishful thinking; if there's one thing he values in Hinata, it's his attentiveness. Because when Hinata wants something, he dedicates everything he has to said thing. Kenma has his full attention, thunderstorm eyes staring up at him through a forest of lashes. And he has no idea what to do with it.

The pants come off. With no warning, Hinata ducks his head and presses a hot, wet kiss to Kenma's inner thigh. He's not expecting the contact. He's not expecting the feeling. Neither of them are expecting Kenma to make the kind of noise he does.

He slaps a hand over his mouth and Hinata looks up at him, bewildered, scrambling back up Kenma's body to try and remove the sound barrier. They're both laughing as he tries, which quickly turns to kissing, which quickly turns to moving again. Hinata, the pervert, keeps his hands alternately running up Kenma's sides and feeling up the insides of his thighs, warming nerve endings he didn't even know existed.

It must still be cold outside. Kenma thinks he can hear it beginning to rain; maybe it's just the light drop of snow against the roof, and he's imagining things. He feels like he's underwater, the slide of Hinata's bare legs against his dreamy and ethereal. He rolls his hips up, meaning only to coax Hinata into pressing back against him; he doesn't mean to misjudge the angle, but the motion presses their hips flush together. Hinata, with his mouth right by Kenma's ear, outright moans.

Kenma feels like he's caught fire. Suddenly they're moving, Hinata's mouth on his and the whole room heating rapidly. He presses up and Hinata presses back, and suddenly his legs are wrapped around the other's waist, their movements speeding up. He bounces a little with every push. Worming a hand between them, he sticks it down Hinata's pants.

His boyfriend squeaks and then cries out. It's absurdly empowering, the noise. Kenma wraps a hand around him; the angle is awkward, but within seconds Hinata is shaking, frantically trying to find his way into Kenma's boxers, too.

He can hear himself breathing. Distantly he thinks he should be embarrassed, panting into Hinata's mouth, tinny noises and mewls being drawn from him; noises he didn't even know he could make, let alone ones he's heard from himself before. Hinata eventually ducks his head to mouth at his throat again, and a thought occurs, as ridiculous as it is, seeming brilliant in the clouded haze of his arousal.

"H-hey," Kenma husks, trying to get the words out, trying to get his brain working, "do you want-- nn-- to do it?"

"Ha, aren't we already... kind of doing it?"

"I mean, do you want to put it in?"

Hinata's hips stutter and he cries out, muffled, against Kenma's throat. It takes him a good few seconds to figure out what's happened. Gradually, it dawns on him.

"Did you just-- oh." The thought cuts off abruptly as soon as Hinata's hand starts moving again.

It's way too good, way too much-- Kenma's head clouds over and distantly, blearily, he recognises
the noises just outside his consciousness to be his own. Hips stuttering up into Hinata's hand, he comes.

"-enma. Hey, Kenma. You have to move."

Kenma slowly allows himself to return to reality. Hinata is moving him over to his side, trying to pull the blankets over both of them. Kenma wiggles his toes, registering that they have gotten kind of cold. The haze washes over him like seawater. "...Did I fall asleep?"

Hinata laughs. He sounds just as sated, Kenma notes; a rasp has taken over his voice. He leans down and presses his lips to Kenma's temple. "No. I was worried, though. You looked like you might pass out. But your face was all-- whoa. I wish I could have taken a picture."

"Don't make fun of me." He nuzzles into Hinata's shoulder, overwhelmed with affection.

"m'not. It was beautiful, Kenma. You're beautiful. Made me, like, miss you."

"That's ridiculous," he says, "I'm right here."

Hinata smiles crookedly. It's like looking at an angel, looking into the sun. He's so tired all of a sudden that he almost can't keep his eyes open. "I really want to kiss you."

"So kiss me."

He does. It tastes sweet, somehow, the feeling of their tongues brushing like it's a dance they've practised for years. He allows himself to move heavily with the feeling of sleep, rolling into Hinata's side when he shifts to accommodate.

He thinks he might hear Hinata ask him if he's falling asleep. He tries to answer, but the feeling is just too much, and gratefully, he lets himself become swept under.

The last thing he thinks before he's really under is that Hinata says "I love you." Maybe he dreams it. It doesn't matter. Kenma's out like a light, and he doesn't stir until morning.

Six months later

"We're gonna be late if you don't get up eventually, you know."

"Mph." Kenma presses his head into the pillow, trying to drown out the alarm clock of a boy.

"Come on." The hiss of curtains. Sunlight streams into the room. Kenma lifts his head timidly, trying to check the time; it's 8:30 in the morning. God. He's going to kill everyone and everything, tear down the walls of his place and slaughter a good few people on the subway if it means getting five more minutes of blissful sleep--

His eyes settle on Hinata, who is standing in front of the window, framed in gold and smiling like he's looking down at something precious. "He lives," he jokes, the grin scrunching the corners of his eyes. "I made coffee."
Kenma follows the scent of it out of the room like a lighthouse beacon. By the time he makes it out there, messy hair and boxers and nothing else, Hinata is back to work in the kitchen, serving up some fancy egg dish on a serving plate.

"Hey," he says, pecking Kenma on the cheek. He must be making a face, because Hinata laughs when he looks at him, handing over a mug of deliciously steaming, deliciously black coffee.

"Mm," Kenma retorts, taking a huge sip even though it burns his mouth. He starts to wake up slowly, allowing the morning to register in his muscles.

It's a miracle Hinata hasn't burned the kitchen down. He's made a considerable mess of the frying pan, however, and Kenma steps around him to finish off the vegetables he's about to burn. They're a weird pair at 8:30 in the morning, he thinks. Hinata fully dressed, hair half dried from a shower. Kenma in boxers with eyes half shut. Hinata comes up to stand behind him, wrapping his arms around Kenma's middle.

"Sorry, I know you hate waking up this early," he mumbles; Kenma can feel the grin against his shoulder, the smug bastard.

"Breakfast kind of makes it better."

"I just didn't want us to be late. Tsuki's gonna be here with the car at 9."

"It's just Kuro," Kenma says, but he's smiling, and Hinata is smiling.

He scrutinizes his expression in the bathroom. His roots are coming in again; he dyed his hair purple about a month back, straight from a bottle on the floor of his bathroom with Hinata above him. He needs another haircut. He ties it up, thinking he doesn't mind the look of it long. So different from a year ago.

He's dressed and ready to go in the better portion of half an hour, and Tsukishima picks them up. The ride to the airport fills Kenma with the weirdest sense of deja-vu. Only now everyone is in a much better mood, pumped for Kuroo's week-long return.

Seeing him run into Tsukishima's arms makes Kenma both want to applaud and cringe away. It's so ridiculous, the way the blonde flails and the way Kuroo clings on tighter, jetlagged and bedraggled and clutching his boyfriend for dear life.

"They're cute, in a sickly way," Hinata says, watching them with folded arms and a bemused smile. Kenma knows he's kidding. Hinata's the sappiest person on the planet when he really wants to be; there's no doubt that if their positions were reversed, he'd be bowling Kenma over in front of everyone.

"I missed you," Kuroo is mumbling, in this gruff dramatic way that captures the attention of surrounding passersby. And then: "I love you."

Kenma hopes Hinata misses the way he stiffens.

They've been dating for a little over half a year now. It's not that he doesn't feel the words; he feels the impact of them every night, in the way that Hinata's hand feels coming naturally to rest beside his, in the way he looks at midnight. He's never felt something so strongly in his life.

Hinata hasn't said it since he confessed back in December on that camping trip. Or at least, not when he thinks Kenma is awake. Kenma knows he's just being patient, not wanting to push Kenma or rush into things. And it's not like he doesn't want to say it, either. It's just that the word feels weighted, like it's something he won't be able to come back from.
He's a little scared.

Once they've picked Kuroo up they go back to Kenma's for dinner, gathering around in the living room while he cooks dinner. He assumes he'll spend the night next door with Tsukishima. The atmosphere in the apartment is light, everyone sipping cold drinks and complaining about the heat outside.

Kenma mulls over the situation with Hinata while he cuts vegetables. They're pretty much living together, too, they're at each others' apartments so often. Kenma's got his own drawer in Hinata's bedroom; Hinata keeps his food in Kenma's fridge. He can feel the words on his tongue, this formless thing that needs to be released. He knows he could say it, could just-- sit him down and say it, no games, all that bravery he's apparently got inside of him--

"Ow, shit." He jerks his hand away from the knife; there's a clean little nick on the edge of his finger, blood beading in a perfect crimson pearl, and before he has the chance to do anything about it, Hinata materializes as if from thin air.

"Let me see," he says, smiling like the whole universe. Before Kenma has the chance to react he's putting the finger in his mouth, sucking the blood away.

It's an insanely cute thing to do. Hinata looks so determined, too, like he's a doctor administering important surgery. Kenma doesn't know what happens. As soon as he pulls away it just blurs out, hitting both of them like a tidal wave.

"I love you."

Hinata's eyes bug out of his head. He looks bewildered, absolutely beside himself with shock and amazement. Gradually, Kenma's face begins to catch fire.

"I know you say it a lot," he mutters, spinning back around to face the vegetables. "So like... me too, okay? I'm not the best at talking about feelings."

Hinata is still silent. Kenma braces himself for whatever is coming, working his wrist at twice the speed with the knife. Hinata almost topples him over.

"Say it again," he breathes, eyes sparkling. Kenma stares back at him, hanging midair where Hinata has him, securely in his arms.

"I didn't think you heard me," Kenma says, burying his head in Kenma's shoulder like he's trying to burrow a home for himself there. Kenma's body is still trying to catch up with his brain, and slowly he raises a hand to Hinata's back. Stroking the length of it, listening to the murmur of his boyfriend's words. "When you were asleep."

"I wasn't."

"Well, yeah. Clearly."

Kenma smiles. He's still smiling when Hinata looks back up, and there must be something in that, something in his expression, because Hinata's expression changes too; it is the moon staring at the sun, centuries of camouflage fading, the whole universe set out before him.

"Did you really think I didn't?" he asks. He tucks a strand of hair behind his ear and meets Hinata's eyes. "This whole time, Shouyou. Maybe since we met."

"Good," Hinata says, turning his chin up, determined. "Me, too."
"Prove it, then, tough guy."

They kiss in the middle of the kitchen, the afternoon light streaming in like water. Kenma lets himself get lost in it, the feeling of his arms threading around Hinata's neck, the gentle thrum of warmth from the sunlight on the back of his neck. He should pull away and finish preparing dinner, but he doesn't. He stays there with Hinata, the weight of all their words and the weight of all their feelings pressing down on him in the easiest way imaginable. He's got time, anyway. The sun won't go down for another few hours.

The days are going to be a little longer, now; summer is here.

Chapter End Notes

thank you to everyone who has stuck by me while i've written this, and continues to stick by me both in my writing pursuits and my personal life. i'm thankful, and i've made a lot of friends, especially through this fic.

thank you for your continuing comments and messages, fan art and support.

my commission info is here: http://cloverguts.tumblr.com/post/129385688821/andys-emergency-commissions-please-take-2
and as always, contact me @ cloverguts.tumblr. it's been a great ride, guys! thank you for reading. :)

End Notes

this is actually my first time writing proper kenhina (or really any hq in the first place). wish me luck i guess???

old readers hey. new readers hello. i apologise in advance for the bleak elements to this fic- - i have this atrocious habit of projecting my own gender, sexuality, habits and mental illness onto characters i love and feel like i can relate to. (see: my kins.)

that said, this fic isnt a sad one.!! this fic is about overcoming anxiety, late night city adventures, and falling in love with a boy who has hair like sunshine. its gonna be blunt and beautiful. (like me, tbh.)

i cant say how often i'll update this but hopefully it will be often-- ive just gone on summer break and im (relatively) on top of this whole homework fiasco. twice weekly updates or more if i can help it!!

as always, feel free to contact me over @ cloverguts.tumblr.com.!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!